REFERENCES


INTERESTS AND COMMITMENTS:

REPLIES TO ETZIONI, DOLFSMA AND VAN STAVEREN

I appreciate the comments of Amitai Etzioni (1998) and Wilfred Dolfsm and Irene van Staveren (1998) on my essay (Khalil (1997b)). The comments give me the opportunity to clarify some points and even extend my argument. What I find inviting in the amoralist position of Becker is the systematic treatment of human
action. But it fails to account for empirical anomalies such as shame and embarrassment: If choices are rational, why do agents sometimes feel shameful or awkward while undertaking the act (which differs from *ex post* regret)? What I find inviting in the moralist position of Etzioni is its ability to explain shame and embarrassment. But it fails to relate the origin of moral sentiments to interest and, hence, fails to provide a systematic treatment of human action.

In my essay I tried to locate exactly the origin of the disagreement between the moralist and the amoralist position and, consequently, the scope of economics. I argued that the bone of contention is not that the neo-classical paradigm does not recognize moral sentiments, which it clearly does. It is rather about how to model such sentiments. For the amoralist agenda, commitments are no different from ordinary tastes and, hence, both are smoothly substitutable at the margin. For the moralist position, commitments are some kind of pre-given precepts according to which human behavior must be judged. I suggested how to supersede, while retaining the positive elements of both positions. It is possible to avoid the implication of the moralist position — viz., moral norms are metaphysically given — without falling into the flat world of the amoralist view which cannot account for some empirical anomalies.

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Etzioni finds faults in the definition of moral ‘commitments’ as tastes. But this is a linguistic issue because what matters is how one models such commitments. In fact, in his celebrated article, Etzioni (1986) calls moral commitment ‘utility,’ which he radically distinguishes from pleasure utility.

Etzioni argues that tastes enhance pleasure, while moral commitments usually (‘with extremely rare exceptions’) negate pleasure as the case with fasting. However, there is probably a confusion between ends and means in this case. Similar to how labor input stands *vis-à-vis* the product, fasting stands *vis-à-vis* the output of religious experience. No one suggests that since work is painful it cannot be handled within the neo-classical framework. The neo-classical framework is not solely about the objective function (tastes), but also about the feasibility constraint (the means). So, the issue is rather about how to compare the desire for pork or museum exhibitions with the desire for religious experiences.

While the thrust of theorizing is to unify diverse phenomena (Ockham’s razor), I concur with Etzioni that not all reductions should be welcomed without examination. One testing ground is whether the proposed unified approach is less burdened with empirical anomalies than alternative ones. It would be counterproductive to reduce the variance to the mean — and in fact it would amount to utter nonsense at even the theoretical level. But still the question remains as to why moral commitments cannot be related or, as Becker’s approach suggests, reduced to a unified utility function.