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Taboo Trade-Offs: Constitutive Prerequisites for Political and Social Life

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To be eligible for participation in any relationship, group or institution, people must show that they abide by the constitutive rules for its fundamental forms of interaction. If someone invites you to dinner at their home and then seriously tries to make you pay for the meal, you are unlikely to continue to be friends. If a politician proposed setting up a state bureaucracy to maximize aggregate well-being by determining who would be required to marry whom, the politician would not be re-elected. How long would a Marine volunteer last in boot camp, or a novice in a monastery, if he tried to organize a vote about when to get up in the morning? People very rarely do such things, but if they do, others generally assume that they must be joking, or insane, or from another very different culture. Actions like these terminate relationships because we cannot sustain relationships with people unless they adhere to the cultural rules for constituting those relationships.

Behavior of this kind shows a lack of commitment to the fundamental nature of these relationships: a person who acts like this shows that they do not know or care what this kind of relationship is. We regard such a person as lacking basic moral and social sensibilities, and we do not want to have anything to do with them: how could you relate to such a person? We regard such actions and their perpetrators as bizarre, disgusting, horrifying or evil.

As these examples suggest, many violations of the constitutive rules of any culture consist of misuse of relational principles that would be perfectly valid in another context. In these examples, people are presenting a bill for payment, voting, or using cost–benefit analysis. These are ordinary actions, but entirely inappropriate to the relational context in which they are performed. What this shows is that sociality is organized with implicit reference to domains; different modes of interaction are required in different domains. To function in any given culture, people have to recognize the way domains are socially defined and organize their action with reference to the relational structures that are culturally appropriate in each respective domain. Violation of the distinctions between forms of relationship that operate in
different domains is violation of the constitutive rules that define what is going on at any given time and place. Such violations evoke strong aversive responses because they disrupt the cultural presuppositions that permit predictably coherent, meaningfully coordinated interaction.

From this theory of sociality we can deduce several hypotheses:

1. Relational models – including principles of exchange – that people take for granted in one domains may be morally and politically unacceptable in another domain.

2. A person who attempts to use an inappropriate relational model is thenceforth suspect and considered morally dangerous, in general: they cannot be counted on to do what is required in any relationship, and we tend to ostracize them.

3. Cultures differ in their delineation of domains and in their paradigms for implementing relational models in these respective domains. People more or less understand that these cultural differences exist, and sometimes this mitigates the above attributions and evaluations. However, these differences commonly produce misunderstandings and friction, usually resulting in negative emotions and evaluations about people from contrasting cultures.

4. People learn these cultural paradigms for assigning models to domains primarily by observation and imitation, with little or no explanation. Consequently, people will generally be hard pressed to articulate why a model is appropriate or inappropriate in any given domain. To the extent that they can give reasons, they will offer analogies: they will explain that this case is similar to some standard prototype domain in which people use this relational model.

5. However, as cultures change, ambiguities arise which often bring these cultural paradigms into question. This may result in articulate debate that amounts to strong ideological controversy about which models are appropriate in novel or refigured domains.

**Trade-offs**

In contrast to the relational models framework sketched above, the standard micro-economic perspective assumes that all values can ultimately be reduced to a single utility metric. Economists stress that people live in a world of scarce resources. Rational decision-makers appreciate that they must make painful trade-offs, even if it requires attaching monetary values to things that we prefer to think of as priceless, such as children, body organs, endangered species, and basic rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship. In this spirit, many behavioral theories of decision-making assume that there are compensatory relationships among values, and that trade-offs among values can be captured through mathematical