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## Social Justice, Individualism, and Cooperation: Integrating Political Philosophy and Cognitive Sciences

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### 1. *Introduction*

It is an undeniable fact that, in many of their expressions, both political philosophy (modern and contemporary) and economics (think of Adam Smith, J.S. Mill, and the marginalist school) rest on individualistic anthropological underpinnings. The *homo oeconomicus* model presupposed by mainstream economic theory is a perfect illustration of that: according to the standard definition, this is a rational and self-interested agent who, when choosing, always pursues the maximization of his/her own well-being (generally understood in terms of utility): and, because of his/her calculating and self-centered qualities, the *homo oeconomicus* has traditionally been intended as a very good economic agent – and, actually, as the *best* economic agent.

As to political philosophy, a clear example of the individualistic orientation is offered by the extremely influential Hobbesian metaphor of the *homo homini lupus* (“the human is a wolf to his fellow human”). Such metaphor perfectly expresses a conception of human nature that underlays many political views according to which, first, individuality is prior to sociality and, second, sociality is a cultural product generated by the necessity to live together in order to avoid a *bellum omnium contra omnes*<sup>1</sup>. From this perspective, even sovereignty as such rests on individualistic underpinnings, since it is the instrument that allows self-interested individuals preoccupied with their own well-being to live together. Thus, from

<sup>1</sup> Y. Evrigenis, *Images of Anarchy: The Rhetoric and Science in Hobbes’s State of Nature*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2014.

this point of view humans are not naturally altruistic, civilization is established through the repression and control of instincts, and cooperation can only work at a local level, but not at a general one (for example, there will always be wars between different States).

It is important to notice that, because of the way in which they are defined, the *homo oeconomicus* and the *homo homini lupus* represent anthropological types constitutively unable to engage in authentic interpersonal relationships – individuals who, as it has been ironically noted, nobody would like a child of theirs to be married to<sup>2</sup>. For this reason, in recent years more than a doubt has been raised regarding the epistemological appropriateness and fecundity of these anthropological types. However, while the models based on the idea of the *homo oeconomicus* have been criticized both at the theoretical and the empirical level (by appealing to the findings of cognitive sciences)<sup>3</sup>, the models based on the idea of the *homo homini lupus* have mainly been contrasted at the level of “pure” (i.e. theoretical) philosophical investigation, as done by the advocates of communitarianism and of recently revitalized cosmopolitanism, who characterize human nature in terms of a strong natural predisposition to pro-sociality and cooperation (which may sometimes be spoilt by society’s historical and cultural needs).

Yet, since cognitive sciences have offered new significant contributions for understanding the attitudes and motivations of human action, it is very plausible that potentially they are also of use in the field of political philosophy. In particular, those sciences have significantly improved our knowledge of the psycho-biological roots of competition and cooperation in the human world, thereby offering us the opportunity to rethink the feasibility of the many political views that assume that self-assertiveness, egoism, and competition are natural human tendencies genetically and conceptually prior to pro-sociality and cooperation (which indeed are taken as merely culturally constructed attitudes).

<sup>2</sup> R.H. Frank, *Microeconomics and Behavior*, McGraw-Hill, New York 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Some of these critical investigations have underlined the cognitive biases at stake in economic choices and have pointed out the need both to abandon the “folk psychology” on which the standard notion of economic rationality relies (cf. D. Kahneman-A. Tversky, *Prospect Theory: an Analysis of Decision Under Risk*, in «Econometrica», 47 (1979), pp. 263-291; D. Kahneman-A. Tversky (eds.), *Choices, Values and Frames*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2000), and to highlight how the one-sidedness of the *homo oeconomicus* model is not true to the psychological complexity of human choices. See P. Slovic *et al.*, *The Affect Heuristic*, in T. Gilovich-D. Griffin-D. Kahneman (eds.), *Heuristic and Biases: The Psychology of Intuitive Thought*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2002.

In order to illustrate this point, let's consider the discussion on social justice. In this field liberal theories are generally taken to presuppose individualistic views of the person and of cooperation (namely, cooperation just for mutual advantage, as conveyed by the appeal to the social contract)<sup>4</sup>. As we will show, nowadays there are good empirical reasons for thinking that these views are empirically inadequate. However, there are also good reasons for thinking that equally empirically inadequate are the communitarian and cosmopolitan views that, vice versa, give absolute priority to pro-sociality, altruism and cooperation (taken as natural tendencies) over self-assertiveness and competition (taken as culturally generated tendencies).

In our view, in order to make the reflection on social justice more reliable and effective, it is time to develop a sounder anthropological model, more aligned with the findings of cognitive sciences.

## 2. Individuality and cooperation in the theories of justice

Most contemporary theories of justice that have developed in the framework of liberalism, particularly under the influence of John Rawls's (1971) seminal work, can be seen as attempts to reflect on how different individuals can cooperate with one another in society, so as to shape it in ways that are fair and advantageous for everyone. From the Rawlsian perspective, society is taken as a "cooperative venture for mutual advantage"<sup>5</sup>. Cooperation produces a better life for all; however, individuals tend to compete for larger shares of the benefits coming from cooperation. Therefore "a set

<sup>4</sup> This is the standard view (which will be questioned in this article) and it is usually attributed to almost all liberal theories, including contemporary or "new" liberalism and liberal theories of social justice (such as J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard UP, Cambridge (MA) 1971; W. Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1989; R. Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, Harvard UP, Cambridge (MA) 2000). In our view, individualistic conceptions of the person and of cooperation should rather be looked for in classical liberalism, which establishes an intimate relation between liberty and private property (for a discussion of these issues, cf. G.F. Gaus, *Property, Rights, and Freedom*, in «Social Philosophy and Policy», 11 (1994), pp. 209-240; and H. Steiner, *An Essay on Rights*, Blackwell, Oxford 1994), as well as in contemporary liberalism (F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1960) and libertarianism (R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Basic Books, New York 1974). In fact, in the latter cases, the centrality attributed to individual freedom has led to the vindication of a decentralized market based on private property (F.A. Hayek, *op. cit.*) and, in the case of Nozick (*op. cit.*), to a complete rejection of all redistributive demands.

<sup>5</sup> J. Rawls, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

of principles is required for choosing among the various social arrangements which determine the division of advantages and for underwriting an agreement on the proper distributive shares” (*ibidem*). The “original agreement”, as is well-known, takes the form of an ideal social contract that makes it possible to choose principles of justice that all “free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept”, when put in an initial position of equality, conveyed by the original position and the veil of ignorance (*ivi*, p. 10). The original agreement is therefore conceived as a device that guarantees the fostering of social cooperation on the one hand, and the free pursuit of individual interests, provided an initial situation of equality, on the other hand.

In criticizing Rawls’s and the other liberal political views, communitarians tend to focus precisely on the centrality they attribute to the individual and on their conception of it. Michael Sandel, for example, famously criticized the appeal of those views to an abstract conception of individuals as pure autonomous choosers, whose commitments, values and concerns are possessions of the self, but never constitute the self itself, and might therefore be rejected. According to Sandel<sup>6</sup>, this is a barren and “disencumbered” conception of the self, and in order to get a more adequate one, we would need to understand the social pre-conditions of self-determination.

In the communitarian perspective, the self is the outcome of a discovery rather than of an autonomous choice – since every person discovers who they are through their belonging to a community. Therefore the self is best expressed through a narrative conception<sup>7</sup>, as the story of one person’s life is embedded in the story of the communities from which she derives her identity. At last, communities – including the obligations of membership and solidarity they bring about – are prior to individuals, and pro-sociality and cooperation for the common good are prior to the appeal to individual freedom.

Summarizing, most contemporary views of social justice are based on either of two alternative couples of anthropological presuppositions. On the one side, the liberals who advocate the theory of justice assume that (i) individuals are naturally self-interested beings and (ii) cooperation is a social construct aimed at fostering individual interests. On the other side, communitarians assume that (i) individuals are naturally cooperative, as

<sup>6</sup> M. Sandel, *Liberalism and The Limits of Justice*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge-New York 1982, ch. 1.

<sup>7</sup> A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame (IN) 1981.

they jointly pursue the common good of their community, and (ii) they derive their identity from their belonging to that community<sup>8</sup>.

That said, in our view it is time to carry out the discussion on social justice, and on the anthropological presupposition of the different views, in the context of a sounder and empirically more reliable framework. In this way, one can realize that both sets of anthropological assumptions rely on oversimplifications and have been falsified in recent years. In particular, research in cognitive psychobiological sciences has shown that human beings are complex entities that behave in ways that cannot be described as purely competitive or purely cooperative: rather, in their behavior competition and cooperation *naturally* coexist<sup>9</sup>. For this reason, in order to be empirically adequate, theories of social justice should account for both the pursuit of self-interest and the forms of pro-sociality and cooperation that jointly characterize human beings.

### 3. *Individuality and cooperation in the light of cognitive sciences*

In the last couple of decades investigations of cognitive sciences (especially, in biology, sociology, behavioral economics and psychology) have made clear that sociality does not originate only from culture; rather, it is a dimension that belongs to the definition of the human individual itself. In fact, an impressive amount of empirical data has proven beyond reason-

<sup>8</sup> It may be noted that the advocates of cosmopolitanism – even if they generally endorse liberal principles and consider the individual person (rather than the government) as the main unit of concern – agree, at least partially, with communitarianism in regard to the anthropological underpinning of their views: in fact, also the cosmopolitan perspective is intrinsically social rather than merely self-interested and embedded in the community. However, the community at stake in cosmopolitanism is the whole humankind (cf. T. Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2002; and S. Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*, Princeton UP, Princeton 2002), and this lets cosmopolitans depart from the communitarian focus on local communities.

<sup>9</sup> S. Bowles-H. Gintis, *The evolution of Strong Reciprocity: Cooperation in Heterogeneous Populations*, in «Theoretical Population Biology», 65 (2004), n. 1, pp. 17-28; R. Boyd-H. Gintis-S. Bowles-P.J. Richerson, *The Evolution of Altruistic Punishment*, in «Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. Usa», 100 (2003), pp. 3531-3535; J. Henrich-R. Boyd-S. Bowles-C. Camerer-E. Fehr-H. Gintis, *Foundations of Human Sociality: Economic Experiments and Ethnographic Evidence from Fifteen Small-Scale Societies*, Oxford UP, Oxford 2004; M. De Caro-M. Marraffa, *Bacon against Descartes. Emotions, Rationality, Defenses*, in G. de Anna-R. Martinelli (eds.), *Moral Realism and Political Decisions. Practical Rationality in Contemporary Public Contexts*, University of Bamberg Press, Bamberg 2015, pp. 63-80.

able doubt that individuals come to the world already endowed with the tendency to sociality, cooperation and even altruism. Excellent examples in this sense have been offered by Warneken and Tomasello<sup>10</sup>, who have carried out some groundbreaking experiments showing that, since a very early age, humans are endowed with natural predispositions to cooperative and altruistic tendencies. Moreover, and even more surprisingly, those tendencies are present also in chimpanzees, our closest evolutionary relatives. The abstract of Warneken and Tomasello's article reads:

Human infants as young as 14 to 18 months of age help others to attain their goals, for example, by helping them to fetch out-of-reach objects or opening cabinets for them. They do this irrespective of any rewards from adults (indeed external rewards undermine the tendency), and very likely with no concern for such things as reciprocation and reputation, which serve to maintain altruism in other children and adults. Humans' nearest primate relatives, chimpanzees, also help others instrumentally without concrete rewards. These results suggest that human infants are naturally altruistic, and as ontogeny proceeds and they must deal more independently with a wider range of social contexts, socialization and feedback from social interactions with others become important mediators of these initial altruistic tendencies<sup>11</sup>.

Many other studies have confirmed that fairness, altruism and cooperative attitudes are very common in the animal world, especially but by no means only, among the primates<sup>12</sup>. Another important branch of research concerns the relevance of empathy, taken as a fundamental condition of prosocial attitudes and behavior, and of moral life<sup>13</sup>. Not less important are the investigations on the so-called "ultimatum game", which show that individuals tend to sanction other people's behavior when this is perceived as unfair, even though these individuals pay a price in terms of personal

<sup>10</sup> F. Warneken-M. Tomasello, *The Roots of Human Altruism*, in «British Journal of Psychology», 100 (2008), pp. 455-471.

<sup>11</sup> *Ivi*, p. 455.

<sup>12</sup> F. De Waal, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*, Princeton UP, Princeton 2006; Id., *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society*, Harmony Books, New York 2009; Id., *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates*, W.W. Norton, New York 2013; J.M. Burkart *et al.*, *Nature Communications* 5, Article number: 4747 (2014), doi:10.1038/ncomms5747; S. Yamamoto-R. Humle-M. Tanaka, *Chimpanzee Help Each Other Upon Request*, in «PLoS One», 4 (2014), n. 10, p. e7416.

<sup>13</sup> A. Coplan-P. Goldie (eds.), *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, Oxford UP, Oxford 2011; K. Stueber, *Empathy*, in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, URL=<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/empathy/>>.

utility for the sanctioning action (and there is no maximization of general utility either). Moreover, convincing data suggest that genetic factors play an important role in the shaping of human sensibility to fairness<sup>14</sup>.

There is no doubt then that humans are naturally endowed with cooperative and altruistic tendencies. It would be wrong, however, to take the extreme stance – as communitarian and cosmopolitan thinkers often do – that human nature is one-sidedly cooperative and altruistic and that the individualistic and competitive behaviors only have a cultural and social origin. As a matter of fact, many investigations confirm that we are also naturally endowed with individualistic tendencies, which potentially produce conflicts (sometimes very destructive ones) with other individuals<sup>15</sup>.

Taken together, all these findings show that human sociality complies with very complex natural predispositions and that individuals are bearers of a very complex suite of motivations (both individualistic and altruistic)<sup>16</sup>. Such motivations are intrinsically relational and they give place to complex situations of compromise between two motivational systems: the first committed to self-assertiveness and competition, the second aimed to pro-sociality and cooperation<sup>17</sup>. The specific equilibrium between these two motivational systems at which, within a particular situation, individuals arrive depend on their personal upbringing, social interactions, environmental influences and capacity of rationally controlling their own choices and actions.

The most important moral that follows from what precedes is that – whereas most Western conceptions take competition as natural and cooperation as a culturally-built device – according to this new bio-psychologically-informed anthropological paradigm, human beings are naturally inclined both to competition (sometimes even destructivity) and to several forms of sociality, cooperation, and even altruism. Moreover, once competition and cooperation are seen in this dialectic relationship, the new paradigm parts company also from the communitarian and cosmopolitan frameworks, which build on an excessively optimistic anthropology, according to

<sup>14</sup> B. Wallace *et al.*, *Heritability of Ultimatum Game Responder Behavior*, in «Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences», 104 (2007), n. 40, pp. 1561-1564.

<sup>15</sup> N. Augoustinos-I. Walker-N. Donaghue, *Social Cognition: An Integrated Introduction*, Sage, London 2014.

<sup>16</sup> J.K. Murnighan-L. Wang, *The Social World as an experimental game*, in «Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes», 136 (2016), pp. 80-94.

<sup>17</sup> See M. Di Francesco-M. Marraffa-A. Paternoster, *The Self and Its Defences*, Palgrave-Macmillan, London 2016, pp. 47-48.

which there is nothing natural in competition and conflicts, since they only derive from cultural factors. In brief, neither of the two motivational systems is prior to the other and none can definitely prevail. On the contrary, the constant concurrence of the competitive motivational system and the cooperative one plays a crucial role in the human mind<sup>18</sup>.

In the background of this dynamic, a complex interaction between our emotional system and rational reasoning is at work, in which neither has priority over the other. And also in this regard important work has been developed at the intersection of cognitive moral psychology and philosophy of mind, which should be taken into account if one wants to develop an empirically informed and nuanced enough new anthropological perspective<sup>19</sup>.

#### 4. *Social justice revised: integrating individualism and cooperation*

According to the data offered by cognitive sciences, individuals are bearers of a very complex suite of motivations. More specifically they (i) are naturally inclined to both competition and cooperation, (ii) have a natural tendency to fairness, (iii) are innately endowed with aversion to inequity.

The contribution that today cognitive sciences offer to the theories of justice is very relevant. Since cognitive sciences have shown that humans have a *natural* tendency to *cooperation*, the original agreement (or social contract) should not be conceived of as a mere social construct that safeguards individuals from the possible negative outcomes of the natural tendency to competition. Instead, the original agreement is rather to be seen as the social expression of a human natural need or desire to cooperate.

Moreover, our natural tendency to *fairness* provides reasons for explaining why the members of a society ought to agree on the fundamental principles that can foster a just society. They are willing to agree on the fundamental principles of justice, not only because they seek to pursue their own interests (which they think can be best secured through an agreement on the fundamental principles), but also because the search for justice is an innate constituent of human beings as such. In other words, appealing

<sup>18</sup> It is worth noticing that at the epistemological level, the dialectic between cooperation and competition can only be approached by multi-level explanations, which aim at capturing the connections between innate inclinations, formal relational invariants, and cultural conventions. See G. Jervis, *Individualismo e cooperazione*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2002, pp. 167-170.

<sup>19</sup> M. De Caro-M. Marraffa, *Debunking the Pyramidal Mind: A Plea for Synergy Between Reason and Emotion*, in «Journal of Comparative Neurology», 524 (2015), n. 8, pp. 1695-1698.



to the individuals' natural predispositions, features and motivations to fairness helps to tackle the problem of justifying the social contract. Thus the interaction between philosophical inquiry and cognitive sciences can produce an empirically informed, and much more reliable, anthropological framework for the reflection on justice. In this perspective, individuals are not conceived of as motivated only by the pursuit of their own interest or advantage, but also by the pursuit of justice, taken as a value in itself.

It should be clear, however, that these findings are not at odds with the empirical commitments of Rawls's theory of justice. Rather, they are consistent with it; and actually they show a way for solving the impression of a tension intrinsic to that theory. In fact, at a closer scrutiny, the anthropological underpinnings of Rawls's theory are not exhausted by the notion of self-interested individuals (as in the passage mentioned above, he writes that «free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept [the social contract]»). Rawls explicitly vindicates a conception of persons as moral entities that are moved by the highest-order interests to realize the two powers of moral personality, which are indispensable for a person to flourish: «the capacity for a sense of right and justice» and «the capacity to decide upon, to revise, and rationally to pursue a conception of the good»<sup>20</sup>. It is evident that these two moral powers presuppose the idea that humans are endowed with the capacity of being sociable and cooperative.

Even more clearly, Rawls claims that engaging in many forms of cooperation and being member of a community are conditions of human life<sup>21</sup> and that only in a social union is the individual complete<sup>22</sup>. In this perspective, the idea of social union opposes the notion of a private society, where individuals or associations «have their own private ends which are either competing or independent, but not in any case complementary»<sup>23</sup>. Contrary to private society, the idea of social union conveys the importance of complementarity and interdependency, which are in turn based on the social nature of humankind<sup>24</sup>. In other words, Rawls recognizes that «we need one another as partners in ways of life that are engaged in for

<sup>20</sup> J. Rawls, *Social Unity and Primary Goods* (1985), in S. Freeman (ed.), *Collected Papers*, Harvard UP, Cambridge (MA) 1999, pp. 359-387, p. 365; see also J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, cit., p. 376.

<sup>21</sup> *Ivi*, p. 384.

<sup>22</sup> *Ivi*, p. 460, footnote 459.

<sup>23</sup> *Ivi*, p. 457.

<sup>24</sup> *Ivi*, p. 458.

their own sake, and the success and enjoyment of others are necessary for and complementary to our own good» (*ibidem*). And the idea of social union leads to the notion of «the community of humankind the members of which enjoy one another's excellences and individuality», and «they recognize the good of each as an element in the complete activity the whole scheme of which is consented to and gives pleasure to all» (*ibidem*)<sup>25</sup>.

It seems, then, that the appeal to the social nature of humankind goes beyond a merely individualistic anthropological understanding. However, at the same time the problem arises of whether, and in case how, it can be reconciled with the idea of self-interested individuals who compete and cooperate just because they want to secure their own interests. And, as we have seen, the idea of such reconciliation is extraneous to both the liberal and the communitarian paradigms, which respectively prioritize individualism and cooperative attitudes.

However, few decades after Rawls developed his theoretical proposal, we have found evidence that, far from being a suspicious philosophical construction at odds with the main traditional proposals, it is empirically well-grounded. In particular the apparent tension between its social, altruistic, and cooperative components, on the one side, and its individualistic dimension, on the other side, is confirmed by the data that come from cognitive sciences.

On the one hand, as said, overwhelming experimental data show that human beings actually display a natural inclination to fairness and cooperation. On the other hand, we also have very good empirical reasons for believing that cooperation requires a certain kind of individualism, to be understood in terms of the individuals' capacity to be autonomous, to discover and actualize their unique potentials and talents and form their own identity – that is, to realize themselves<sup>26</sup>. Thus, both the social and the individualistic components of Rawls's theory of justice appear to be empirically confirmed by scientific findings and its anthropological underpin-

<sup>25</sup> Also other advocates of liberalism, besides Rawls, have tried to complement the individualism that characterizes that view starting with its founding fathers such as Locke and Mill. Therefore, besides claiming that we are autonomous choosers who employ liberty to construct our own lives, they have insisted that we also are social creatures: cf. W. Kymlicka (*op. cit.*) for an interesting attempt to advocate a theory of the self that finds room for both cultural membership and various attachments and commitments which at least partially constitute the self. Generally, however, these kinds of proposals are only supported by theoretical arguments: in our view they could benefit from also referring to the empirical findings we mention here.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. R. Guerini-M. Marraffa, *this volume*.

nings are enriched and made more consistent. Moreover, in this way one can also avoid the oversimplification of the communitarian perspective, according to which the very notion of the self rests on that of community and the individuals are supposed to have a sense of justice because they share common values with the community they belong to (and discover who they are through such a belonging) (De Caro, Giovanola and Marraffa, in preparation).

To sum up, by putting the findings of cognitive sciences in a dialogue with the philosophical inquiries regarding social justice, the theory of justice can be based on an anthropological model that is much sounder and much more reliable than those presupposed by the individualistic, on the one hand, and the communitarian and cosmopolitan models, on the other hand<sup>27</sup>.

## Abstract

*The authors explore the contribution that this literature can offer to the field of political philosophy. In particular, the authors argue that, in order to make the reflection on social justice more reliable and effective, political philosophers must take into account the anthropological model emerging from what cognitive sciences tell us about self-assertiveness, egoism, competition, pro-sociality, cooperation and altruism.*

**Keywords:** cognitive sciences; competition; cooperation; individualism; political philosophy; pro-sociality; social justice; self-assertiveness.

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