

Johannes Hirata

Was Mother Teresa an Egoist?

This article appeared in *Eloquent* 8(1), 2001, the
magazine of Maastricht University's Faculty of
Economics and Business Administration.

Was Mother Teresa an Egoist?

“Mother Teresa acts out of egoistic motives as well. She helps the poor in order to ease her conscience. If she didn’t help, she would simply be less happy.” These words (taken from the movie *Nell*) reflect a view of human behavior that has wide currency among those who have been under the influence of the forceful logic of economic theory. Indeed, once you start thinking about this way of reasoning, it becomes more and more compelling. So, was mother Teresa really as egoistic as anybody else? Is there anything else than the pursuit of self-interest after all?

In economics one of the most fundamental assumptions about human behavior is that people aim at maximizing their utility. An individual’s utility, in turn, is the degree to which her preferences are satisfied, where these preferences can be self-regarding or other-regarding preferences (in colloquial language “egoistic” and “altruistic”, respectively), or even preferences for rather abstract ideas (e.g., honesty, an ideological cause). In effect, it is assumed that, everything you do you do because you expect that it will result in higher utility for you than every alternative you could envision. Utility therefore is the ultimate criterion of rational choice.

This utility maximization view of human behavior owes a lot to a deterministic worldview that had and still has a strong influence on modern science. It basically says that there is nothing in the universe (including the human mind) that happens without being causally determined, each and everything is just a part in a causal chain governed by universal laws. Determinism turned out to be an extremely powerful paradigm that has been central to the realization of unprecedented advances of knowledge. However, it has also become a mental corset that makes non-causation virtually inconceivable: we can hardly imagine that something is not strictly determined by causes (is there anything truly random in throwing dice? Or is that what we call “random” not simply a lack of data and difficulty of doing the calculations?). However, this deterministic worldview is in stark contrast with the conviction of most people (at least in most Western cultures) that we are endowed with a free will.

What a free will would be is not evident, and less so the more you think about it. Immanuel Kant put it in very general terms: a free will, and only a free will, is the beginning of a new causal chain. I would suggest that in terms of the utility view a free will is best understood as indeterminacy of preferences (i.e. incom-

plete preferences). An individual with incomplete preferences might then encounter a situation in which he cannot decide between two alternatives, but not because he is indifferent in the conventional sense (i.e., he considers the expected utility to be the same for both options), nor because he lacks information or is unaware of his true preferences, but because the expected utilities are not defined for him at that moment. He is then truly undecided, and the free will can be imagined as an evaluative faculty that breaks the deadlock by a judicious judgment. What characterizes this evaluative faculty is that the way it arrives at a judgment cannot be reduced to preferences. Indeed, demanding that the free will be reducible to a single higher-order criterion would run counter to the very idea of its being free. It is rather the other way round: preferences would be the result of the free will (besides other determinants like genetic disposition etc.). I admit that this still doesn’t make it very clear how the free will would actually work. To make things worse, random wouldn’t be an option either, for random would rule out the idea of intention that seems to be constitutive of a will, free or not.

To sum up, there are basically two alternatives how the world can work: either the world is deterministic. Then somewhere in heaven there is a book in which history is written from the big bang until hell freezes over, and nothing you do will change what is written in that book. Where you will spend Christmas 2031 is already written some pages ahead, and free will is nothing more than a good illusion. Or, the second alternative, the world is not deterministic. Then it is uncertain, in the fundamental meaning of the word, how the world will look tomorrow, because at some point things happen without a deterministic cause, and there is the possibility of a free will¹.

It would be a waste of time to try to find evidence for either the existence or the absence of a free will.

¹ It’s only a possibility: the world can be uncertain (i.e., non-deterministic), but from that it does not automatically follow that a free will exists. The discovery of fundamental uncertainty in quantum physics by Werner Heisenberg (the “Heisenberg indeterminacy principle”, though some philosophers contend the conclusion of true randomness) seems to make the world truly uncertain, but as far as I can see, by itself this doesn’t do anything to support the existence of a free will. At most it provides a scientific entry port for a free will, but, again, randomness alone doesn’t make my will free, it would rather make it arbitrary.

Philosophers have discussed this for centuries, but the only reasonable conclusion is that this is a metaphysical question and therefore beyond proof. However, one should note that the absence of a free will would be in contradiction with common use of language. Without a free will, words like “merit” and “guilt” would be void of any meaning. Saying that Mother Teresa merits praise for her charity would be the same as saying that the sun merits praise for shining on the earth. Both would simply be mechanic devices in the cosmic clockwork of history, obeying natural laws. The fact that our use of language assumes the existence of a free will does of course not lend it additional support. But it should make us careful to be consistent: as soon as we argue in deterministic terms, as in the quotation in the beginning, we implicitly deny the existence of a free will, and thereby render meaningless most evaluative expressions. Note also that when a court assesses in how far a guilty party can be held responsible for crimes he committed (considering drunkenness, mental impairment, age etc.) it is making an assessment about the extent of that person’s free will. In the same way we also make daily assessments of the extent of people’s free will for example when we say that someone who has been spoiled as a child should not be blamed for his lack of discipline as much as he otherwise should. But in most cases we do grant some free will.

Let’s come back to Mother Teresa. For the sake of clarity I will accept for the time being the argument that when she helped the miserable she did so ultimately in order to ease her conscience. In other words, she was on the whole happier (experienced higher utility) helping than not helping. But this doesn’t yet allow calling Mother Teresa purely self-interested!

The crucial question is whether we grant that she had some free will in opting for the particular values that constituted her conscience. If so, her “easing her conscience” means that she lived up to values that she had been free to choose, i.e., she could as well have chosen more egoistic values. In terms of the utility view, when she chose her values, she freely specified her still incompletely defined utility function. But since at that point her utility function was not sufficiently defined, it is strictly impossible that her choice was guided by utility maximization. On the other hand, if we do not grant that she had some free will, the deterministic explanation extends also to her choice of values: we would then say that she had these high ideals because she was genetically predisposed to compassion, in her childhood she had some particular experiences etc. Then we say that her very choice of values

was already a matter of utility maximization along preferences that were completely defined from the outset (i.e. the big bang). It just happened that her preferences were heavily dependent on the utility of others.

Once the existence of a free will is assumed, however, the argument of “easing one’s conscience”, that I accepted above only with reservations, is no longer appropriate. As long as I retain some freedom in choosing (a subset of) my values, this freedom also transpires to my everyday efforts to live up to these values because in principle every day anew I make a free judgment for or against them. Even if her living up to her values made Mother Teresa happy, this would do nothing to support the assumption of utility maximization. Of course it should not surprise if her successfully living up to her values resulted, *ex post*, in happiness, whether these values were freely chosen or not. But with a free will she wouldn’t have been able to maximize her utility because she didn’t have completely established preferences that would have told her where she would get most happiness from. I suggest that if a free will is acknowledged, happiness should rather be understood as a byproduct and not as the objective, or at least not the *sole* objective, of rational decisions. To put it a little philosophically, freedom of will means the ability to choose freely what one wants to desire, what one wants to derive happiness from.

So what about Mother Teresa? Whether she was egoistic or not is not a matter of proof, but of consistency. One can be perfectly consistent in arguing that she was just maximizing utility in a deterministic way, as anybody else. One can be equally consistent in arguing that she freely chose her values, and that her free choice of values was not egoistic. One should only be aware that the utility view precludes the existence of a free will and makes us all passive devices in a cosmic clockwork.

This article was inspired by discussions at meetings of the student forum [Criticonomics](#) as well as by the following literature:

- Ulrich, P. (1998). *Integrative Wirtschaftsethik: Grundlagen einer lebensdienlichen Ökonomie*. 2nd ed., Haupt, Bern.
- Sen, A. K. (1983). *Choice, Welfare and Measurement*. Basil Blackwell Publisher, Oxford.
- Kant, I. (1993) *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können*. 7th ed., Felix Meiner, Hamburg.

Thanks go to Verena Klippert and Michael Hirata for valuable comments on a first draft.