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The altruism of psychopaths

The true-crime book *Wiseguy*, on which the movie *Goodfellas* is based, vividly portrays the Brooklyn Mafia’s social world in the 1950s-70s. A main player in this world, Jimmy “the Gent” Burke, was renowned for his spectacular generosity:

“(Jimmy would) walk in the door (of the makeshift casino) and everybody... would go wild. He’d give the doorman a hundred just for opening the door. He shoved hundreds in the pockets of the guys who ran the games. The bartender got a hundred just for keeping the ice cubes cold. I mean, the guy was a sport...”

Sounds like a great guy, right? Except that besides being extremely generous, Jimmy was also more than just a little psychopathic, known for his joyful indulgence in murder and larceny:

“He seemed to possess a bizarre combination of generosity and enthusiasm for homicide... Jimmy could plant you just as fast as shake your hand. It didn’t matter to him. At dinner he could be the nicest guy in the world but then he could blow you away for desert. He was very scary and he scared some very scary fellows... He loved to steal. He ate and breathed it. I think if you ever offered Jimmy a billion dollars not to steal, he’d turn you down and then try to figure out how to steal it from you”.

Jimmy, unusual in both generosity and viciousness, is not a typical human. But he nicely exemplifies how seemingly altruistic behaviour can be motivated by brutally selfish concerns. People can boost their own social status through their abilities to benefit and/or harm others, and Jimmy used both generosity and violence to get ahead. In giving money so freely to everyone around him, he bought their respect and dependence on him; he implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) bribed them to stay on his side and never double-cross him. And if he couldn’t buy their loyalty with these positive incentives, he was always happy to coerce it instead, via his terrifying personality and enthusiasm for killing.

So generosity doesn’t have to be selfless, and can in fact be as used for the same basic purpose—status striving—as clearly ungenerous acts like murder and theft. Even if generosity can often be selfish, however, it doesn’t have to be as brazenly selfish as buying

people off. Evolutionarily, there were much subtler ways in which generous acts could have enabled ancestral individuals to increase their social status and popularity (and thereby increase their reproductive fitness). Such an act could have signaled, for example, one's own access to resources or empathy, and thus one's attractiveness as a mate, ally, friend or cooperative partner.

Just as humans often use generosity in self-serving ways, they also scrutinize the generous acts of others for underlying selfish motives. When a corporation donates to charity, for instance, we may wonder whether it's just an effort to generate governmental or public goodwill, to avoid regulation or to drum up business. To assess a generous act in this way, however, is not necessarily to disparage the act's moral value. Even if the act benefits the giver substantially, it may still be highly commendable and beneficial for the recipient; there's nothing wrong with win-win situations. Still, people reserve a special place in their heart for acts that seem to be true cases of self-sacrificial altruism: the less we can discern self-serving motives for a generous act, the more we extol the act.

Why do we praise generous acts more when they seem more selfless? It may seem slightly ironic, but we probably do so out of self-interest: as beneficiaries of such acts, we aren't expected to provide anything in return, so we gain bigger net benefits than we would from acts that obligated us to reciprocate. Here's an illustration: in a published study I conducted among members of a work team in an indigenous Amazonian society, I asked respondents to make moral judgments about members of another (fictional) work team who were portrayed as varying in the extent to which they (a) contributed to a group project and (b) benefited from this project. Respondents overwhelmingly favored a member who worked hard for low benefit—an altruist—over one who worked hard for high benefit. (They also overwhelmingly *disfavored* one who worked little for high benefit—a free rider—compared to one who worked little for low benefit). In other words, indigenous team members preferred the actor who would produce higher net benefits for them, were they on the same team; as in our own culture, *selfless* generosity was praised more than *selfish* generosity. But as praiseworthy as many acts of self-sacrificial generosity may be, we should remember that praising others for these acts is itself probably selfish.