**'Natural Law' column number thirteen, by Michael E. Price (uncorrected proof)**
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## Self-Interest as God's Interest

In November 2009, Goldman Sachs CEO Lloyd Blankfein attracted scorn for remarking to a London *Times* interviewer that he was just a banker "doing God's work". Although he would later claim to have intended this remark as a joke, he made it in the context of putting forward a larger and seemingly sincere case for the vital social importance of investment banks. And he has since expressed similar sentiments, as in March 2011 when Bloomberg News quoted him as saying that his bank's work is "a service we do for the world".

Why do such remarks rub people the wrong way? First, they seem grandiose and arrogant. It's one thing to claim that your business serves an important economic function, but another to portray this contribution as a divinely inspired gift to humanity. Second, Blankfein portrayed his work as saintly and heroic at a time when most people thought he should be grovelling for forgiveness for the damage his industry had caused. Third, the idea that bankers are in it for the altruism—that they are primarily motivated by a desire to serve God and man, and that the vast rewards they happen to acquire along the way are pretty much an afterthought—strikes people as absurd. Everyone understands that self-interest is a reasonable and sufficient explanation for the motivation of bankers, and therefore that higher-level, good of the community/society/planet/deity explanations are not required.

Blankfein's comments exemplify how even the most clear-cut cases of self-interest can be spun as the noblest forms of altruism. And to be fair, although his efforts to portray self-interest as the opposite of itself have been unusually audacious and unconvincing, these efforts represent a basic rhetorical strategy that all kinds of people use, all the time. The strategy is: if X is consistent with your own interests, then when discussing X with an audience, portray X as being consistent with the interests of some larger group to which your audience belongs. Politicians refer to the "national interest", social activists promote the "good of the community", moralists speak of "benefits to society", scientists advocate the "good of science", and so on. Everybody does it.

The reason this strategy is so common may well be that human nature is adapted to employ it. Evolution sculpted humans into a highly coalitional species, because individuals are often best able to promote their own survival and reproduction by banding together with those who share their goals. In competitions for social and political dominance, there is strength in numbers, and individuals prosper if they can convince others to join their cause. The

tendency to represent one's self-interest as the interests of some larger group or entity, then, is probably best seen as a "coalitional recruitment device".

None of this is to cynically imply that "the good of the group" is usually an illusion, or that good-of-the-group arguments are usually deceptive. People often do, of course, have genuine interests in common with other people, and often can further these interests by forming coalitions. To the extent that a good-of-the-group argument helps them to accurately identify their shared interests, then it benefits speakers to make this argument, and it benefits their audiences to be persuaded by it. Nevertheless, if we recognize this kind of argument for what it is—a coalitional recruitment device—then it sheds light on why these arguments sometimes backfire, and on the tactics that speakers use to avoid such failure.

When these arguments do fail, it's generally because the audience doesn't perceive that any genuine shared interest actually exists. In the case of Blankfein, for example, people didn't believe that bankers were motivated by any cause larger than self-interest, and given the recent social damage inflicted by the banking industry, they had a hard time accepting that the contributions of bankers could represent a net gain for any social group beyond bankers themselves. A lack of shared interests will also be perceived if the rhetoric appeals only to a narrow segment of society (e.g., a particular religious group) to which the audience does not belong. To avoid alienating their audience through too narrow an appeal, speakers often evoke higher-order interests that are maximally abstract—and that therefore seem minimally exclusive—such as the interests of society, humanity, or God (in general, not any particular god). Appealing to the interests of an abstraction creates a new problem, however: because the interests of an abstraction are often difficult to ascertain, it is often difficult to estimate the truth of a claim that some course of action would benefit that abstraction. Such appeals, therefore, often come across as vapid cheap talk, which is another reason why few were persuaded by Blankfein's evocations of "God's work" and the good of "the world".