

# The volunteer's folly and socio-economic man: some thoughts on altruism, rationality, and community

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## Abstract

Altruistic volunteers are either not truly altruistic or not rational, according to traditional economic analysis. They are not altruistic if they volunteer to receive a utility benefit, and they are not rational if they choose to volunteer when monetary contribution would be more efficient. Economic man is a fool to volunteer. However, socio-economic man is shrewder. Socio-economic man is moderately deontological, path-dependent, nonmonetary, nonrationally motivated, and community-minded. This paper explores corresponding elements of socio-economic rationality that allow for rational, altruistic volunteers. The five elements around which I structure this paper are: 1) nonconsequentialist reasons; 2) constitutive choices; 3) pricelessness; 4) nonrational motivation; and 5) community preference production. © 2000 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

Why do altruistic, part-time volunteers donate time and effort to a project, when that project could be more efficiently completed by full-time specialists paid out of monetary contributions from the would-be volunteers?

This question emerges from the observation that some white-collar professionals work weekends for organizations like Habitat for Humanity, which builds homes for low-income families. Suppose one asks such an altruist, “Why do you volunteer?” The answer normally follows from the type of service organization, and in this case might be, “Because I want to

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help provide housing for the needy.” An economist may cynically retort, “If your real objective is to provide housing, then you should work more at your profession and pay a carpenter to build the houses.” That is what specialization and exchange tells us. If a lawyer’s services are valued at \$200 per hour by the market, then he or she shouldn’t spend time driving in nails, an activity valued at only \$50 per hour. Using these prices, the lawyer could work for eight hours in the office and generate enough income to donate thirty-two hours of expert home-building. Instead, the hypothetical lawyer works those eight hours on the construction site, providing just eight hours of amateur home-building.<sup>1</sup> Because of this inefficiency, I call the decision to contribute time and effort rather than money the “volunteer’s folly.” I use the terms “volunteer” and “personal altruist,” as opposed to “money altruist,” interchangeably.

My framing of this scenario clearly implies that the increase in others’ welfare those altruists create depends exclusively on the physical product of their volunteer efforts. Less restrictive conceptions of welfare restore rationality to personal altruism. Daly and Cobb (1994) address the interaction of economic and noneconomic welfare in constituting total welfare (p. 146). Noneconomic welfare includes so-called “quality-of-life” matters that are not reflected in production statistics. Among these could be “community spirit” or even volunteerism itself; so such redefinitions of welfare could explain the apparent irrationality.

But inclusion of these matters makes a liar out of the altruist who maintains that the objective for volunteering is, in fact, the physical product. The volunteer’s lie can be understood, and perhaps excused. For economists habitually evaluate the rationality of actions, even actions having merely incidental economic aspects, according to their “economic efficiency.” (Unfortunately, the efficiency bias has been adopted outside the economics profession by those who want similarly to endow their judgments with an air of scientific objectivity.) Aware of this bias, an altruist is likely to give the inquisitor the only answer he or she is likely to appreciate, that is, one that relies on observable productivity. Still, the lie is a lie. There are no valid altruistic reasons for preferring to donate time rather than money, according to neoclassical economic analysis. Those volunteers who justify their actions solely by reference to the physical product are irrational because they could provide more with less by subcontracting.

People who claim that they volunteer to achieve some outcome may be simply mistaken. One can uphold the rationality of altruists in general by arguing that people often do not know exactly why they do what they do. From this standpoint, the truth or falsity of altruists’ stated reasons is simply irrelevant to the rationality of their acts. Neither utility maximization nor pure altruism need be construed as cognitive processes; indeed, utility maximization seldom is. On this count, the volunteers could be engaged in something like building community spirit, a tacit goal that could not be achieved through monetary contributions. If noncognitive utility maximization can underlie revealed preference theory, then community building can certainly underlie volunteer house-building.

But to conclude that the volunteer is mistaken or is a liar when he or she contends that the goal is simply “to build a house” strikes me as an ungracious way of preserving his or her rationality. Only egoistically motivated persons who admit that they volunteer because of the utility benefit they receive are both rational and truthful, according to economists. I suspect most volunteers would rather be portrayed as irrational liars than as exclusively self-

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