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FABLE OF THE BEES OR TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS: Reflections on selfishness, morality, and social cooperation

*Matheus Kremer
Mateus Flores*

Abstract: This work aims to reflect on the philosophical coherence of ethical egoism using Mandeville's fable of the bees as an argumentative reference to discuss the idea that the exclusive search for the maximization of individual self-interest would lead to better collective results. Through the critical analysis of this proposition, we present as a counterpoint to this normative theory, the argument of the tragedy of the commons elaborated by several authors, where they demonstrate that, in a situation where resources are scarce, if each one privileges only his interest, there would be a lack of resources for all. This would generate social chaos, thus dismantling the main premises of ethical selfishness. However, following the

reflections proposed by Joshua Greene, morality emerged in the human species precisely to put a brake on overly selfish behavior, which allowed human beings to get together in groups and cooperate with each other, thus increasing their chances of survival. However, such biological mechanisms that allowed the development of morality would have the scope of interaction with a limited number of people, not being efficient for larger groups existing today, thus allowing the existence of several groups that compete with each other, putting their interests and gains above any cooperation, generating more social chaos. As a solution to this problem, we propose an argument that emphasizes the distancing of ethical selfishness and pays attention to the formulation of fairer institutional norms and the moral quality of individuals.

Keywords: Morality; Moral Tribes; Egoism; Social cooperation.

1. Introduction

The question of how we should live, or how we should act morally, has always been one of the main themes of moral philosophy (CASSTRO, 2024, p. 144-145). According to Rachels (2013, p.17) moral philosophy is the study of what morality is, and what it requires of us. Seeking to justify the reasons that make our actions morally correct from the due use of solid foundations and rational arguments. Throughout the history of philosophy, several ethical theories have been developed that, among other things, sought to ground the foundations of morality as well as to defend the priority of certain ethical behaviors over others.

From positions focused on Moral Duty (such as Kant), through consequentialist positions (as found in Stuart Mill), to defenders of a virtue ethic (such as Aristotle

and Adam Smith), the moral theory of ethical egoism is a perspective that draws attention. Basically, this theory intends to sustain the position that self-interested action, that is, acting seeking one's own benefit, as a priority and morally correct attitude to follow (Lopes, 2017. 174-175).

Unlike psychological egoism, which describes human behavior as being inherently motivated by the pursuit of personal satisfaction, ethical egoism is characterized as a normative theory, which defends the pursuit of selfish goal satisfaction and the maximization of self-interest as a priority ethical behavior, and therefore egoism is a valid moral principle of paramount importance (Rachels, 2013, p.200). As expected, by giving such relevance to self-interest, this theory ends up questioning more traditional positions that defend ethical values such as altruism and benevolence, proposing individual well-being as something that should always be in the first place in our ethical deliberations, even if this may, in some cases, not benefit the moral collectivity.

Philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and Ayn Rand (1905-1982) developed a series of arguments relating and justifying selfishness as some kind of moral foundation. For example, in the classic *Leviathan* (1651) Hobbes argues that human beings have a selfish nature and that they prioritize their survival and the satisfaction of their individual well-being. However, since humans are creatures endowed with reason, the pursuit of self-interest would take people out of the state of nature, which is characterized in a situation of "all against all" to create a social contract based on laws, commanded by a sovereign who will guarantee people's safety. In other words, within this political theory, it is not benevolence, or concern for others that underlies the social contract, but rather the selfish

motivations of surviving and desiring the maximization of one's well-being (Hobbes, 2000, p.141-144).

element. Ayn Rand, in works such as *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964), argues that an ethic based on altruism is destructive since the altruistic foundation requires the act of sacrificing one's interests in favor of other people, leaving aside many of one's desires and goals that one values what would limit one's own happiness. On the other hand, by focusing on the pursuit and satisfaction of your own desires, your level of happiness and well-being would increase. In other words, if people are destined to pursue their own happiness, they should not be responsible for the happiness of others (Rachels, 2013, 222-223)

According to Senfa (2011. p. 592-593) this normative theory defends the resumption of self-esteem, returning to focus on its own interests guided by rational selfishness, that is, that our rational dispositions are the guide in the pursuit of our own interests. Also according to Senfa (p. 593-594), selfishness as an ethical foundation is only rational to the extent that it puts one's own life first. In this sense, within this perspective, altruism, by putting the lives of others before ours, would be irrational. Which does not mean that people should not worry about each other, but that love for others and exaggerated concern for others should not be greater than self-love and our personal satisfaction.

Some advantages of this position is to make us reflect on old traditional dogmas that reject any and all self-interest without considering what it generates in our lives. For example, there are many cases where thinking too much about others can

bring us various damages to our physical and mental health, harming our quality of life and well-being. In addition, ethical positions that condemn the pursuit of self-interest can only provide stimuli for a life with low self-esteem and little self-love, and may even increase situations of self-contempt. Therefore, when we evoke the Socratic question of how we should live, which is a basic question of moral philosophy, it would be appropriate to question how a theory that tends to lead agents to despise themselves, whenever they think of their own interests, would in fact be a valid one to prescribe the way we should live our lives morally.

On the other hand, such a normative perspective is not exempt from criticism. To illustrate, a possible objection that can be made in relation to ethical egoism refers to the fact of social harmony. We can formulate the question as follows. Given that proponents of this position elaborate an objective argument to defend the primacy of the pursuit of self-interest with reason as a guide, and that self-love would always be ahead of love for others, how would such moral behavior affect social harmony and social relations?

For example, if we suppose the existence of an entire society where moral agents take ethical selfishness too seriously and act only for the maximization of their self-interest. One possibility would be that such an attitude would tend to destroy the social order, generating serious damage to the well-being of all. Or still, one could question whether such generalized moral behavior would not lead society to privilege some and exclude others, generating a series of injustices and inequalities, in addition to the creation of a moral culture governed by the "law

of the strongest" or "justice of the fishes" (where the greater eats the smallest). Or still, consider the possibility of leading us to some kind of undesirable social chaos in which society does not want in any way.

These questions are important not only because a philosophical theory should not be accepted uncritically, but also because the objections raised can call into question the foundations of this normative theory. If the application of the principles of ethical egoism – such as acting in a self-interested manner and maximizing our well-being first and foremost – by the moral agents of a given community results in situations that diminish or even destroy our well-being and our freedom to maximize our interests, we have good reason not to regard such normative theory as a reasonable position.

In other words, by creating an insurmountable conflict between individual well-being and collective well-being, encouraging people to only care about themselves and ignoring the public good and social harmony. A problem that can be pointed out in this position is that in organized and civilized societies, marked by the reasonable pluralism of comprehensive doctrines, the lack of adequate public goods and stable social harmony leads to great losses to individual well-being and to our quality of private life, creating a series of obstacles to the satisfaction of individual interests.

For example, a society where everyone only acts out of selfishness, ignoring other behaviors considered moral, such as respect, justice and prudence can increase the number of frauds and false and misleading statements in the contracting of all types of services. In this chaotic situation, where one

always tries to take advantage of the other without any scruples, the one who deceived to maximize his financial gain, runs the risk of also being deceived in other circumstances where he ends up not having his interests minimized. This generates an important contradiction between the objective of ethical selfishness and what it actually causes.

However, some strands of this theory end up disagreeing with the above objection, arguing that in reality, the search for the maximization of our interests would end up leading to social harmony while acting altruistically, no matter how noble and well-intentioned, would only lead society to stop producing goods and services, leading us to a situation of poverty and misery. diminishing our well-being in the name of an anti-pragmatic moralism that hinders our lives and the pursuit of our goals while ending society. Such a position is very well expressed by Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733) in his essay known as the *fable of the bees* where he elaborates a rational argument that aims to show that it is selfish action that would lead organized societies to have more wealth and prosperity that could be converted into greater social prosperity.

And here we find the heart of the question that we intend to analyze and reflect on. For, if Mandevilli's argument is correct, implying that selfish action is what underlies social harmony, it means that many of our ethical perceptions based on non-selfish moral values, such as benevolence, charity, altruism and justice, as well as political and economic measures based on these values, would be wrong. And so, a whole review of our moral culture and our perceptions of ethics should be undertaken or set aside. On the other hand, such a position is

wrong, that is, prioritizing selfish action only leads to social chaos and the vilification of society, so what are the moral actions that would lead to the maximization of social well-being? In this sense, it is clear that in order to understand which path is more reasonable, it is necessary to analyze other positions that make important counterpoints to the position defended by Mandeville and the other theorists of ethical egoism.

A perspective that points to an important counterpoint, based on solid arguments, is the theory of the *tragedy of the commons*, first elaborated by the British economist William Forster Lloyd (1884), and then developed by Hardin (1968) and John Greene (2013), who contributed with the concept of *moral tribes* to refine the discussion (a concept that will be worked on throughout this work).

In a nutshell, this argument is based on a thought experiment (such as the fable of the bees) where there would be a certain amount of public goods within a small society. In this case, if all the members of this community act only out of selfishness, aiming only to maximize self-interest, ignoring the well-being of others, soon the public goods have been exhausted, given the existing quantitative limit, and there is nothing left for anyone, generating a situation of scarcity and generalized misery. And what would lead to this situation would be precisely the primacy of self-interested action. Which goes against the position of ethical egoists.

In this sense, the objective of this essay is to explore the strength of the premises of ethical egoism, focusing on the argumentation elaborated by the fable of bees by Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733). After this analysis, we will explore

other arguments that refute the Mandevilian idea by showing that if taken seriously, the excess of behaviors that care only about maximizing their own interests would only lead to social corrosion. Finally, we will explore how selfish behavior is not limited only to private individuals, but also extends to groups and communities in which they aim to act in order to maximize the interests of groups, seeking advantages and benefits in relation to others, encouraging conflicts and prejudices. As a solution to this problem, we propose an argument that emphasizes the distancing of ethical selfishness and pays attention to the formulation of fairer institutional norms and the moral quality of individuals.

2. Ethical selfishness and the Mandeville argument

Among the existing theories and ideas that defend the compatibility between selfishness and social harmony, one of the most famous, and even influential, was formulated by the physician and philosopher Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733) who defends private vice, the satisfaction of self-interest as the engine of morality and the source of public good (Simões, 2022. p. 184-185).

In his famous Fable of the Bees, published in 1705, this author describes a hive with high levels of wealth and prosperity where the bees of such a community are all guided by greed, pride, lust and other selfish feelings and motivations. These same moral motivations that tend to be seen as reprehensible within most normative ethics, would be, within Mandeville's thought, what drives productivity, innovation,

and the creation of wealth and prosperity within the hive. This would happen precisely because each bee acted seeking to satisfy its own interests and thus contributed, even if involuntarily, to the general well-being of the hive (Giannetti, 1993, p.136)

At a certain point, all bees gave up their vices and acting for the self-interested and would start to have an absolutely virtuous moral behavior. Based on values of benevolence, generosity and selflessness. However, for this philosopher, by doing so, bees would no longer have incentives to produce and expand wealth, causing the hive to decline and misery and hunger to be generalized (Giannetti, 1993, p. 137-138)). The moral of the story is that behavior motivated to satisfy one's own interests tends to produce good results for the collectivity.

That is, when people strive to meet their selfish demands, such as demands for luxury, status, prestige, they generate demand for goods and services, stimulating the economy and creating new opportunities for third parties. Whereas when they decide to act for the virtues, they would end up not having this stimulus for wealth, which would only generate more poverty despite good intentions. (Simões, 2022, p. 186-188). Therefore, in this perspective presented by Mandeville, egoism is not only inevitable but is also the necessary foundation for social progress. In other words, within this thought, the more people act only for the satisfaction of their self-interest, the greater the benefits for the community and for social harmony.

But is this argument really valid? If it is, it seems that we will have good reasons to prioritize selfish behavior in our lives, not paying as much attention to other moral behaviors understood as virtuous, such as benevolence, loyalty, compassion, and honesty. As well as not giving so much importance, or even setting aside, any and all behavioral patterns of cooperation that do not bring any benefit to the maximization of our self-interest. Which would also imply a paradigm shift in our cultural, religious, economic, political and social customs.

On the other hand, if the argument is not consistent, having weak premises that do not support the conclusion, we will have good reasons to abandon this position and thus not meet the requirements of ethical egoism. Another way to refute a position would be to present arguments that present opposite conclusions, with very well-founded premises. It is in this sense that in the next topic we will explore an entire interdisciplinary argumentation that shakes the foundations of the argument of the fable of the bees.

3. The problem of the Tragedy of the Commons

As stated before, both the position defended by Mandeville and the other authors who defend some form of ethical egoism, despite having some influence in this debate, are not free from objections. On the contrary, one of the most common criticisms of the argument that *private vices* generate *public benefits* is precisely its neglect of broader

moral values in which there are reasonable grounds to believe that they are essential to the social order.

For example, in the Smithian system, economic agents do tend to act to satisfy their own interests, but they do not act only motivated by selfishness, but also weave broader ethical and moral considerations. This happens, because, within this perspective, selfish action is limited both by a legal minimum. That is, the existence of normative legislation that regulates economic activities in order to protect the basic rights of economic agents (such as protection against fraud and guarantees of transparency) and a system of moral values shared by the community such as the virtues of justice, prudence and honesty, which would help ensure safer exchanges and transactions for all. In this sense, what would guarantee economic prosperity would not be selfish action per se, but rather a fair and effective legal system and a set of shared moral virtues that would guarantee mutual benefits for all parties (Creder, 2013, p.104-105).

In addition to the Smithian critique, this work will focus on another important argument to counter the assumptions of De Mandeville and the other ethical egoists. In 1833, the British economist William Forster Lloyd (1794-1852) developed in his famous pamphlet called *Two Lectures on the Checks to Population* (1883), the concept that became known as *The Tragedy of the Commons*. This conception aimed to defend the idea that the unbridled exploitation of common resources by individuals who seek to maximize their personal interests tends to bring strong losses to the collectivity. That is, just the opposite of the conclusion of Mandeville's position.

Lloyd's position (1883, p.37) is based on the argument of community pasture, where the author elaborates a narrative where several shepherds shared the pasture, thus enabling each shepherd to be able to feed his flocks. At first glance, the idea of sharing resources seems to be rational and efficient, which would allow me to have a certain stability.

However, given the fact that each shepherd had an interest in increasing his own profits, having reasonable grounds for wanting such a thing, he would end up encouraging each of them to increase the number of animals in his flock. But given the fact that the more animals there are in the herds, the more pastures will be consumed and given the fact that pasture is a limited resource, if all the herders of that shared land will increase more and more the number of animals they have.

Soon, the pasture will end and there will be no more resources to maintain the herds, which would lead to a situation of scarcity, both for the land and for the animals and the shepherds. In other words, the search for the satisfaction of personal interests in an exacerbated way did not bring any collective gain. On the contrary, it has only caused the destruction of resources essential for the common good.

Obviously, such an argument is not only about pasture and shared lands, but mainly draws our attention to the behavioral patterns that make the tragedy happen. If, on the one hand, the maximization of self-interest can be considered a rational attitude, on the other hand, such strictly individual rationality can be extremely harmful in collective contexts. Basically, the argument states that as much as it is in the interest

of each herder to limit the number of animals to preserve the pasture, no one wants to be the first to sacrifice their individual earnings. Even more so when there are no guarantees that others will also sacrifice their gains for the sake of the community.

In other words, the lack of coordination, of incentives for cooperation, together with excessively selfish behavior, only tends to create a vicious cycle that corrodes existing resources, leading everyone to the tragedy of the common good that only harms the quality of life of an entire population (Lloyd, 1884, p.39-40). A very different result from that defended by ethical selfishness.

In addition, more than a century after Lloyd's publication, the American biologist and ecologist Garrett Hardin (1915-2003) wrote an article published in the journal *Science* in 1968 called "The Tragedy of the Commons" where he resumes this same concept and makes new contributions, expanding the argument to broader issues that mainly involved environmental pollution and the indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources (Hardin, 1968, p.1244). Using the same logic presented in the pasture argument, the biologist states that in a society where population growth and exacerbated individual consumption are increasingly encouraged, the tragedy of the common is increasingly inevitable:

Each man is trapped in a system that compels him to increase his herd without limits—in a world that is finite. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own interest in a society that believes in the freedom of common

goods. Freedom in the commons brings ruin to all. (Hardin, 1968 p.1249)

Given that each individual seeks to maximize their gains without taking into account the costs to others, it ends up generating an unsustainable cycle of degradation and exploitation of natural resources that increasingly harms the planet as a whole. In other words, overly selfish behavior where each one seeks only their own interest above all else, not only harms the community in which one lives, but also tends to bring harm to the world as a whole.

One possible solution described by Hardin (1968. p.1254-1256) in his article is the notion of *mutually agreed coercion* as a viable alternative to the tragedy of the commons. Basically, the central idea is that in order to protect shared assets, it would be necessary to establish certain restrictions that all members would agree to follow. Such restrictions could take the form of laws, taxes, limits imposed on the use of resources, and other fundamental measures to prevent tragedy and uncontrolled exploitation. As much as these restrictions may limit certain gains in the short term, in the long term they would allow consistent gains to exist, maintaining the stability of existing resources without degrading the planet and the environment. In other words, the biologist offers an important argumentative basis to show that cooperative and responsible behavior generates more individual and collective gains than selfish behavior.

4. Tragedy of the Commons in Modern Times and the Prisoner's Dilemma



Decades after the article written by Hardin in the 1960s, decades later, neuroscientist Joshua Greene (1974-...) takes up the argument of the tragedy of the commons in his book *Moral Tribes: Human Nature and Modern Conflict* (2013), giving new contours and contributions to the issue. For this author, a fundamental point is that humans do indeed have selfish characteristics and that they come together in groups in order to maximize their interest (GREENE, 2013, p.21). However, given the characteristic of seeking their interest to be present, it means that the exploitative behavior of resources persists in influencing the members of the groups, thus leading to the fatality of the tragedy of the commons.

However, if we look at history, we realize that the formation of local groups by human beings is something recurrent and that, even so, the tragedy of the commons did not occur in such a generalized way as one might think. Since the existence of humans and their groups are still a reality. But if the tragedy of the commons happens due to the excess of self-interested behavior of people who abuse the resources of a given locality, the fact that this did not happen means that most of the groups did not act in this way, having, in some way, curbed the selfish behavior of their members by ensuring some kind of mutual cooperation.

According to Greene (2013, p. 31-32), the way in which human selfishness was curbed in order to prevent the chaotic situation described by Lloyd and Hardin, was nothing less than

morality. In this context, the author is not understanding morality as a given normative theory as many philosophers understand it, but rather, above all, as a biological mechanism that evolved with the intention of precisely containing the excesses of human selfishness:

As with the evolution of faster carnivores, competition is essential to the evolution of cooperation. Suppose that the two groups of shepherds possess a magical pasture capable of supporting an infinite number of animals. In these magical conditions, the non-cooperative group is not at a disadvantage. Selfish herders can add more and more animals to their flocks and they will simply keep growing. Cooperation evolves only if individuals willing to do so compete with those who are not (or are less willing). Thus, if morality is a set of adaptations for cooperation, today we are moral beings only because our morality-prone ancestors overcame their less likely neighbors. And consequently, insofar as morality is a biological adaptation, it has evolved as a mechanism not only to put the "we" in front of the "I", but also to put the "we" in front of the "them" (Greene, 2013, p.30)

That is, based on the assumption that human beings have a propensity to act selfishly, that joining groups can maximize their interests, but that, due to their own selfishness, they can lose all benefits (as the argument of the tragedy of the commons shows), harming their quality of life and survival, To

ensure these things, evolution would have developed moral instincts that help to curb self-interest and help in cooperative relationships in small groups.

However, perhaps one of Greene's (2013) greatest contributions to this subject refers to the concept of the fact that he argues that today's society has brought a new version of the problem. If, on the one hand, the evolutionary mechanism of morality was designed to curb selfishness and make people cooperate in certain groups, and thus prevent the tragedy of the commons, on the other hand, this same mechanism was not programmed to deal with the problems of a globalized world where there is a diversity of groups with divergent values and interests vying with each other for the dominance of political spaces, social, economic and cultural (Greene, 2013, p. 69-70).

Basically, morality was developed to deal with problems of cooperation within specific groups, having serious limitations in dealing with other "tribes" which could explain a series of prejudices and "tribalisms" where each group tries to impose its values on the groups of the others leading to a series of social conflicts where each group wants to put the interest of its group before the others not caring about the cost that this can generate for the other groups. In this sense, in order to have any reasonable solution to this problem, it would be necessary to better understand the mechanisms that can make people cooperate.

To do this, the author uses the prisoner's dilemma, a thought experiment that is part of game theory, first presented

by two mathematicians in 1950. In its classic version (Epstein, 1995, p. 150), this dilemma refers to two individuals who are arrested for committing a crime and placed in separate rooms. Each has the choice of betraying the other (giving up the partner) or cooperating with the other (not giving up the partner). If one cheats and the other does not, the one who betrayed goes free (or gets a much lighter penalty) while the one who was loyal gets a heavy penalty. If the two betray, both get heavy penalties. But if the two cooperate, they get reasonably light penalties.

In other words, if one is selfish and the other is not, the one who cooperated had a great loss because of the partner who did not help him. But if both are selfish, and only think about maximizing their well-being, they both end up getting along badly for not cooperating with each other. However, if both cooperate, they can at least reduce their losses (by getting lighter sentences) as well as the chance of maximizing their well-being in the long term (in this case, continuing to have a partner who helps in crimes after serving their sentence).

In this sense, this more classic model of the prisoner's dilemma is shown to have a good argumentative structure to support the position that morality has a series of mechanisms to curb selfishness and encourage cooperation. this is because, as very well shown by the dilemma, groups that cooperate end up having more benefits and less losses than groups that do not cooperate, which gives a great competitive advantage for the survival and perpetuation of the group (Greene, 2013, p. 72-73). However, within current contexts, the prisoner's dilemma can manifest itself in more complex ways. In a global society, where interactions between individuals are less frequent and more

anonymous, the same evolutionary forces that encouraged cooperation in smaller groups lose much of their effectiveness.

. In the same way, a country with a tax system that grants subsidies to various interest groups. To compensate for this loss of revenue, the State increases taxes on consumption tax, making the price of goods more expensive and penalizing the entire population. In this situation, it is in everyone's interest that goods and consumer goods, as well as food, are more accessible, including the groups that receive subsidies. However, none of the groups wants to give up the tax benefits they receive so as not to lose their competitive advantage, making it easier to fight for an increase in the value of subsidies to guarantee their private interests at the expense of public welfare.

In this sense, it seems increasingly clear that we have good reasons to abandon the theory of ethical egoism and rejects the argument that if all people seek only their own interest, they end up contributing to the collectivity and that the fable of the bees, in fact, is nothing more than a fable. If in fact human morality was developed to curb people's selfishness, and if in fact the need to curb such behavior refers to avoiding losses and gaining evolutionary advantages, a given position that deifies self-interest above all else could not be considered viable. However, other experiments and arguments before reaching any specific conclusion.

5. The Game of Public Goods, Rules and Moral Behavior

As we have seen above, the tragedy of the commons provides a solid argumentative basis that refutes the Mandevillian idea that the pursuit of generalized self-interest would tend to maximize the well-being of the collectivity. However, Greene (Greene, 2013, p. 61-68) elucidates us about a type of tragedy of the commons that is even more complex in which the biological mechanism of morality, which has evolved to generate cooperation between certain moral tribes characterized by smaller groups, cannot cope. Unlike the previous situation, this, in some way, exacerbated selfishness still seems to be the cause of this problem. But in this case, it is no longer that type of selfishness that aims only at their own interest, but rather, a more complex type that aims to maximize the interests and benefits of the moral tribes to which they belong. Even if such interests are costly to society as a whole.

To understand this new problem, the author develops the concept of *moral tribes*, which is based on the assumption that human beings evolved in such a way as to operate in small and medium-sized cohesive groups where cooperation and loyalty, along with shared moral norms that generate mutual trust, were essential. They can also lead to conflicts that have divergent moral systems. Given that some values of one group do not necessarily align with those of another, which can generate prejudice and hostility.

In other words, *moral tribes* refers precisely to the formation of certain groups that share a complex system of beliefs and moral values that tend to generate intimacy and cohesion among the members of the groups. And as society became more complex, the formation of these moral tribes also

became more complex, as well as the various frictions that they usually have with other groups. The question addressed by is precisely how to resolve this tension between parochial morality, which benefits the in-group, and an ethic with more comprehensive and universal parameters applicable to all regardless of the group to which they belong. This reveals to us a new type of selfish behavior, which is group selfishness, which aims to obtain advantages for one's group at the expense of others. And just as before, if all these groups have the same behavior, then the social consequences seem to become even more serious.

For example, a given social group that for centuries had the monopoly of cultural spaces, spreading their interests and values, would tend to have an unfriendly attitude in having to share these spaces with other social groups that defend opposing interests and values, being able to take all kinds of attitudes such as protests, direct criticism and even appeal to politicians to create bills to prevent the sharing of public cultural space, even though free cultural expression is a guaranteed right of these other groups. But, if, in addition to this tribe, the other groups start to have the same attitude of believing that only they should have a monopoly on these spaces, the places where cultures and dialogues should be disseminated would become almost a war field where culture is the least learned.

In other words, these tribes, aiming only at the satisfaction of the interests of their group, are capable of trampling on the rights of others in favor of their own. In this sense, it is also clear that the cause of the problem is the

expansion of individual egoism to parochial egoism. But if our moral machinery is programmed to solve the problems of the first kind, how could the problem of the second kind be solved? A possible solution can be found in the experiment that became known as the "game of public goods", a milestone in studies on behavior and social cooperation. Conducted by researchers Ernest Fehr (1956 -...) and Simon Gächter (1965-...), this experiment explored how individuals tend to face the dilemma between acting selfishly, maximizing their personal gains, or cooperating and contributing to collective gain.

In this experiment, participants receive an initial amount of tokens that can be invested in a public fund or held for their own use. The tokens invested in the public fund are multiplied by a fixed amount, which is intended to simulate the collective benefit generated by the cooperation, and then such multiplied tokens are multiplied equally among all participants, regardless of their contribution. But given that maximizing the collective benefit depends directly on the contributions of the participants, the amount of tokens received would vary with the amount of contributions made by the individuals. There may always be individuals who do not contribute. Therefore, when the game started and continued without any type of punishment mechanism, it was observed that in the first plays, the initial contributions were initially high, but they began to decrease gradually. The reason for these decreases was due to the perception of what the authors called "hitchhikers" (Ferreira, 2022, p. 3-4).

According to Andreoni (1988, p.292-293) hitchhikers or (free riders) are understood as those members who did not

make contributions, or did much less than the others, but even so, due to the structure of the game, received the collective benefit of the distribution of notes, thus increasing their "wealth" within the game more than the others. That is, it is the individual who does not contribute but "piggybacks" on the laurels received. As the other participants realized the hitchhiker's scheme, they stopped making high contributions and decreased until they stopped contributing. However, when the possibility of punishing hitchhikers was added, making them receive fewer and fewer benefits than others, things were reversed. That is, as hitchhikers were punished and realized that they earned less and less by being more and more left out of the collective benefits, they stopped acting selfishly and making more contributions to the same extent as the other participants.

In this sense, it is clear that Greene (2013-,p.61-68) uses the same experiment to support his view of morality and human cooperation, presenting it as an empirical proof of the psychological and social mechanisms that sustain collective behavior. For the neuroscientist, the game of public goods reveals a central dilemma of human cooperation: the tension between individual and collective interests. Morality, in his conception, is an evolutionary mechanism that has emerged to deal with this tension, helping to solve the hitchhiker problem through moral emotions, social norms, and, crucially, punishment. (Greene, 2013, p.64)

This author also argues that the willingness to punish hitchhikers, even when it involves a personal cost, is a clear example of how moral emotions have evolved to underpin

cooperation in social groups. In small ancestral groups, where interactions were frequent and members knew each other well, strong altruism played an essential role in maintaining collective norms. Individuals who punished hitchhikers earned the respect of the group and contributed to its cohesion, even if this punishment was costly in the short term. These dynamics helped shape the moral instincts that today regulate human behavior, such as indignation at injustice and satisfaction at seeing norms respected:

There is a vigorous debate about why we are pro-social punishers. Some say that prosocial punishment is just a byproduct of the tendency toward reciprocity and reputation management:⁷⁸ we punish people with whom we have no cooperative futures because our brains automatically assume that everyone is a cooperative partner and someone is always watching. In the lives of a small group of hunter-gatherers, these are not foolish assumptions. Others think that prosocial punishment evolved through biological or cultural selection at the group level:⁷⁹ Prosocial punishment is good for the group, and by punishing prosocially, we help our group beat others. It's a fascinating debate, but we don't need to take a stand. What matters for our purposes is that prosocial punishment happens and adapts to a now familiar psychological profile (Greene, 2013, p. 62).

However, as stated before, within today's societies, such evolutionary mechanisms do not always work effectively. On the contrary, instinctual morality, which is based on

emotions and automatic reactions, was shaped to solve problems of cooperation in small, homogeneous groups, rather than for larger, more complex social contexts. However, going beyond the interpretations proposed by Greene (2013), this work, in the rest of this part, aims to reflect on how the structure of the experiment of the game of public goods can help solve the problem of the commons of modernity. By analyzing the main characteristics of the study, we can perceive some patterns that contribute to the best result achieved, that is, the situation where all participants contribute and maximize social benefits.

5.1 - Norms, Institutions and the rules of the game

The first way of solution that I highlight refers to the rules that govern the experiment. The entire dynamics of the experiment is based on a certain set of rules that, in one way or another, regulate the actions of the experiment and influence the result. A good example of this is the fact that, at first, the rules of the game did not allow the punishment of hitchhikers and, as a result, the number of contributions only dropped. On the other hand, by adding the rule that allowed punishment, hitchhikers abandoned such behavior, becoming more cooperative and, thus, increasing the number of contributions.

In other words, the current competition between the various moral tribes does not take place in a lawless land, but rather in a world with rules, institutional norms, and moral structures that have a great influence on the social order. According to economist Douglas North (1990, p.21) institutions can be understood as those that define "the rules of the game". Whether in economics, politics, or moral relations, they all work within a normative parameter created and developed by

human relationships and interactions. Whether these are structured in formal or informal rules, the intention here is to reduce the uncertainties that exist in social relations and facilitate cooperation between the different members of society.

However, the effectiveness of these norms in promoting cooperation depends on their ability to align individual and collective interests, which implies institutions based on inclusive and equitable rules, which can give different groups the proper spaces and opportunities to pursue their reasonable interests without harming others. At the same time, they should also contain rules that encourage cooperation and punish those who cheat or who do not cooperate but still enjoy the benefits without contributing. Otherwise, without an adequate normative structure, social harmony and cohesion can be impaired.

To better understand this issue, let's start from the concepts of inclusive and extractive institutions formulated by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson in the book *How Nations Fail* (2012). According to these authors, inclusive institutions are those that have a normative structure that encourages free participation and equal opportunities, tending to promote cooperation, which leads to economic growth, political stability and other social benefits, which are distributed and shared in a fairer way (Acemoglu, 2012, p. 121-150).

Extractive institutions, on the other hand, are characterized by structures that concentrate power and resources in the hands of specific groups, which benefit from the fruits of the efforts of the whole society, but capture a large part of the resources for themselves, at the expense of others.

This often undermines cooperation, as the normative framework encourages the idea that cooperating is much more costly than simply seeking to maximize the interests of the dominant group. A historical example cited by economists is that of colonization, which was based on a system that extracted income and resources from the colonies at the expense of the inhabitants of that land, who did not benefit from the profits acquired by their labor. (Acemoglu, 2012, p. 184-190).

In other words, this distinction between inclusive and extractive institutions helps to understand how norms can influence cooperation between groups or the lack thereof. Basically, when rules are perceived as fair, being applied consistently, they help create an environment of mutual trust essential for social harmony and cohesion. But when the rules and norms that regulate institutions are perceived as being unjust and arbitrary, they tend to lead to resistance to cooperative behavior, generating social fragmentation and stimulating group selfishness.

Therefore, analyzing the dynamics of the game of public goods, under this theoretical framework, we could understand that the first version of the experiment, that is, the version where there are no mechanisms to punish the hitchhiker, presents institutional rules that allow the same not only to exist, but to have advantages over others. In other words, the cunning behavior of this profiteer can only be effective because the very institutional rules that regulate all interaction not only allow it to exist, but also end up giving incentives that encourage such behavior.

At the same time, we can also say that the second version of this experiment, where the mechanism of punishment for this behavior comes into existence, thus increasing the levels of cooperation, ends up presenting a new structure of rules that regulate the interaction that discourage this abusive behavior, making it too risky, while increasing the benefits of those who cooperate.

As we reflect on the new complexities of the tragedy of the commons, as presented by Greene (2013), we should also think about how social rules, norms, and institutions also influence and discourage cooperation, and also about which ones could help and stimulate cooperation. For example, in a society where those who circumvent the rules to increase their benefits usually get away with it, while those who have a huge amount of bureaucratic obstacles and abusive fees for those who cooperate, it is a society where the institutional structure encourages the tragedy of the commons, because it makes cooperation very costly while maximizing the interests of the group less risky and more advantageous.

In the same way, in a society where those who circumvent the rules to obtain benefits and maximize the interests of their groups, while those who cooperate, have a system of clear and objective rules where the commitment to cooperation brings several collective benefits. In such a society, the acts of circumventing the rules to maximize benefits are very risky, and therefore, the institutional structure provides various incentives for cooperation.

5.2 Real behavior and the quality of the players

Despite the importance of the rules of the game, Giannetti (1993, p.127-139) argues that they are not sufficient by themselves to guarantee cooperation and the development of a society. For him, the quality of the players is equally crucial. Basically, it points out that, even in contexts where institutions are well designed and theoretically functional, results can be impaired if individuals do not have the moral and ethical qualities necessary to act cooperatively and productively. In other words, the character of the participants in the social game is decisive for the rules to be effective in promoting prosperity and collective harmony. (Giannetti, 1993, p.132)

A practical example to be thought of to illustrate the relationship between the rules of the game and the quality of the players would be societies structured in fair and robust laws, but which would not be effective because of public agents who fail to comply with the rules motivated to maximize their interests and avoid damages, failing to bring several benefits to society. In other words, even with fairer rules, if those responsible for ensuring that the rules are complied with, do not do what they should, or do not know how to execute the rules properly, society will not be able to reap the fruits of fair rules or mitigate existing injustices. (Giannetti, 1993, p.145-146)

In this sense, this idea of also focusing on the quality of the players and not only on the rules of the game, can indicate an important warning about the problem of the tragedy of the commons in modernity. As important as the institutional rules that regulate group interactions and establish rules that stimulate and encourage cooperation are, all this institutional effort can be broken by behavioral failures. According to Sen

(2009, p.105) many of the problems related to justice within societies do not come only from failures in institutional arrangements, but also from failures in the actual actions of moral agents.

For example, imagine a new experiment in the game of public goods where it has even more sophisticated rules that encourage cooperation and punish hitchhikers even more rigorously. But, despite such characteristics, imagine that none of the members is willing to contribute or be part of the cooperation. Or even, that in this version, there are participants with hitchhiker behavior, but there is no interest of the other participants in punishing them. In both cases, even though there were clear rules and incentives, the expected results of the experiment did not happen precisely because the participants, for various reasons, decided not to follow or apply these rules. In other words, social rules and norms only have an effect if people follow them. Without human action, rules are nothing more than empty words with no practical effects.

Therefore, it is necessary to understand that agents are not passive beings in the face of reality, waiting for or following rules imposed in a dogmatic way. On the contrary, each group interacts with such norms in its own way, according to its interests, characteristics and values. And depending on how such tribes perceive the norms, they may simply not follow them, even if they somehow tend to bring several benefits that they do not have by closing in on themselves. In this case, it should be clear that social institutions should not only focus on establishing rules and norms, but also on encouraging practices that encourage certain shared values that inspire tolerance and

respect and help cooperative behavior among the different existing moral tribes.

Final considerations

Throughout this article, we have examined how different theories and perspectives analyze cooperation, ethical selfishness, and the challenges of the "tragedies of the commons" that emerge in contemporary societies marked by moral divisions and conflicting interests. Based on Bernard Mandeville's fable of bees and its implications on selfishness as an engine of social progress, we argue that the exclusive pursuit of self-interest does not necessarily result in collective benefits, especially in contexts where resources are finite and coordination between agents is essential.

The critique of the model of ethical selfishness gains even more strength when confronted with historical and contemporary examples of tragedies of the commons, phenomena where the uncontrolled use of shared resources leads to their exhaustion. In such scenarios, the absence of clear boundaries and institutional incentives that promote cooperative behaviors highlights the need for intervention, both in the form of formal rules and cultural norms, to overcome the tendency to conflict and degradation.

The theoretical contributions of neo-institutionalist authors such as Douglass North and Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson can generate central reflections to understand the role of institutions in this process. North (1990) emphasizes the evolution of formal and informal rules and their influence on incentives and behaviors, while Acemoglu (2012) and

Robinson (2012) alert us to the difference between inclusive institutions, which promote cooperation and growth, and extractive institutions, which perpetuate inequalities and conflicts. Both perspectives highlight that it is not only the existence of rules that matters, but also their quality and enforcement. Combining this theoretical source to make more in-depth analyses of the problems brought by Greene can bring new insights and perspectives.

At the same time, Giannetti's (1993) argument that broadens the discussion by emphasizing that institutions, although crucial, do not operate in a vacuum. They depend on the moral and ethical quality of the players to reach their full potential. Without agents committed to values such as fairness, honesty, and empathy, rules, no matter how good they are, fail to promote positive results. Giannetti also highlights that the ethical and educational formation of individuals is an essential component to solve the tragedies of the commons and foster genuine cooperation in divided societies.

Therefore, the resolution of the tragedies of the commons and the challenges of the "moral tribes" requires a more comprehensive analysis, which goes beyond the mere conception of rules and norms. A concerted effort is needed to build inclusive institutions and form conscious and virtuous citizens, capable of prioritizing the collective good without sacrificing their legitimate interests. This integrated approach not only responds to the limitations of ethical egoism as a social model, but also offers a solid basis for addressing the ethical and institutional dilemmas of contemporary societies.

However, being able to apply these solutions can be extremely complicated. This happens because both fairer institutional arrangements and more virtuous and cooperative moral behaviors start from the need for people and groups to give up a good part of their selfishness and start considering the interests of others. Something that can be very complicated to accomplish. The search for the satisfaction of one's own interests is something that is part of human life. It is very difficult to give up what you want to cooperate with people you sometimes don't know or trust. Basically, the act of cooperating is extremely dependent on the ability to trust. If there is no trust, mutual collaboration becomes difficult.

Obviously, we have good reason to think that open and transparent dialogue between people can help people to talk to each other, to get to know each other, and from the clarification of confusion and prejudices, an environment of greater trust can emerge that helps to generate certain levels of mutual collaboration. At the same time, the effectiveness of open discussions will depend a lot on the number of liars in them. For if people start telling lies in order to gain an advantage over others, such dialogues will only worsen social distrust and encourage mostly selfish action. In addition, it is also necessary that people are willing to talk to others and that the groups have a genuine interest in talking to other groups.

Therefore, it is clear that the path to social harmony is not easy at all. On the contrary, it involves the need for a profound transformation of the moral culture of societies. It is necessary for people and groups to really want to change and cooperate with each other without taking any kind of

advantage. Despite the difficulties presented here, this article helped, even if briefly, to reflect on which paths not to follow (ethical selfishness) and which paths to follow if we want to reach advanced and stable stages of social harmony.

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