

These points have simple implications at the level of whole societies. Societies composed of closed groups, interacting mainly within themselves, will have more normative behaviour than societies where groups are more open and more interactions occur across group boundaries. The most interesting point is about social inequality, though. Suppose that all groups are equal: roughly speaking, it is as desirable being in one group as in any other. Then, no group can enforce good behaviour by social exclusion, because no individual loses anything by being excluded. Now make society unequal: give some groups more resources, wealth or power than others. As society gets more unequal, the difference between each group and the next-best one increases. If people excluded from one group move into the next-best one, all groups become better able to sanction good behaviour, because exclusion is a more powerful punishment. In short, groups in more unequal societies will be better at norm enforcement.

That sounds as if social inequality is beneficial. But nothing guarantees that these groups will enforce norms that benefit the whole society. They are just as likely to help themselves. There may be a trade-off: groups in more equal societies have weaker power to punish rule violators, but their rules are more beneficial to the whole community, because in equal societies the conflict of interest between rich and poor is less stark. The same applies to the open/closed distinction. Strong, closed groups can enforce norms, but those norms may benefit themselves not the whole society. Think of the Sicilian Mafia and its code of *omertà*.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Homo economicus versus homo culturalis***

To recap: humans need to learn from each other, and this lets moral rules spread by hitch-hiking on other knowledge. Rules of behaviour typically both encourage good behaviour to others, and help teach young people their long-run self-interest. A collection of moral rules makes up a moral culture. Moral culture is transmitted both by specific teaching institutions which exist for the purpose, and by “natural” processes

of social learning and copying. In a great society, teaching institutions must coexist with the countervailing force of material success. Material success and intellectual influence give groups hegemony, influence over the larger society's culture. Rules can be effective in changing social behaviour, because much social action requires different people to work together, and rules help them form expectations about how others will act. Moral rules also require enforcement by sanctioning. In great societies, like modern nations, the central mechanism of enforcement is social exclusion. Powerful, closed, regularly interacting and ideologically unified groups are better able to enforce moral rules on their members.

We now have the theory to guide our historical analysis, but before that, I want to compare this theory with a well-known rival. Much of social science, in particular economics, works with a model of human behaviour known as *homo economicus*. Both *homo economicus*, and humans in my theory – call them *homo culturalis* – exhibit behaviour that is well-adapted to its environment. But they achieve this in different ways. *Homo culturalis* does it by learning rules from other people around him. *Homo economicus* does it by making optimal choices given a well-defined set of preferences, often assumed to be self-interested.

Models based on *homo economicus* have been the source of huge insight over the past century. *Homo economicus* gets one thing right: humans are good at pursuing their self-interest. Any social theory that cannot explain this truth will be born refuted, by the evidence you can find in any issue of an economics journal – or just look around you. But if *homo culturalis* and *homo economicus* both make this same prediction, then what is the substantive difference between them? And is there any point in *homo culturalis*?

I believe there is. First, the two theories treat other-regarding behaviour very differently. *Homo economicus* itself comes in a narrow and a broad version. The narrow version assumes that *homo economicus* optimally pursues *his own material self-interest*.

	Rational	Cooperative
<i>homo economicus</i>	Always	Never
<i>homo culturalis</i>	Depends on cultural transmission	Depends on cultural transmission

*Homo economicus versus homo culturalis*

That makes it impossible to explain altruistic acts, like the billions given to charity each year. The broader version of the theory says that *homo economicus* optimally pursues *his goals, whatever they may be*. Nothing in economics stops you writing down a model of an altruistic person, and indeed many economists have done that. However, this broader theory runs a different risk: of being so vague that it can “explain” any behaviour at all. (Just plug in the right goals.) In practice, the majority of economic models assume material self-interest.<sup>35</sup>

*Homo culturalis* does not differentiate between self- and other-regarding behaviour. Both emerge from the same mechanism – culturally transmitted rules. The moral rules which encourage altruism piggy-back on the “prudential rules” which encourage long-term self-interest. The idea of cultural transmission allows us to understand human altruism without assuming that “anything goes”. In particular, we can make prediction about the kind of altruism which moral rules will encourage: it will be the kind that benefits the group. Indeed, almost all societies throughout history have endorsed within-group altruism, but been much less positive towards outsiders.<sup>36</sup>

We can sum up the differences between the two theories as follows. Culturally transmitted rules passes on two important traits: enlightened self-interest, and altruism. The first lets individuals exhibit long-term rationality. The second helps human groups to cooperate successfully. Economic theory takes a different view. *Homo economicus* is automatically endowed with perfect rationality (though he may be very short-term oriented, preferring a penny today to a pound tomorrow – economic models do not count this as irrational). On the other hand, in the absence of incentives he is completely unwilling to cooperate. The table shows these contrasts.

*Homo culturalis* can also explain some forms of behaviour which *homo economicus* cannot. The anthropologist Joe Henrich, in his book *The Secret of Our Success*, describes how South American tribes process manioc for eating. The process is slow, complex, counter-intuitive, and prevents the chronic cyanide poisoning that you can get from eating manioc raw. Here, behaviour is well-adapted to its environment, but not because anyone in these tribes knows the science and consciously believes “processing manioc reduces its cyanogenic content”. Processing is a tradition, an adaptive rule that has emerged and been passed down.<sup>37</sup>

Correspondingly, the *homo culturalis* theory predicts that in some cases, adaptive behaviour will fail. For example, manioc became a staple in West Africa when the Portuguese transported it there. But the West Africans who ate it did not know the rules for processing it, and cyanide poisoning became a problem there. In other words, cultural transmission is the mechanism that enables well-adapted behaviour. When cultural transmission is interrupted, behaviour becomes less well-adapted.

Later on, I will argue that Western societies have gone through just such a cultural break. Traditional transmission mechanisms were interrupted by the arrival of the culture industry and the replacement of the book by the screen. As a result, there was a large increase in various forms of ill-adapted behaviour which harm the actor or others around him. We are living through the consequences of this break. But to get there, I must first tell the story of where Western cultures came from. The next chapter focuses on the moral framework that shaped all Western societies: religion.