

SEVEN

# The Moral Foundations of Politics

How much would someone have to pay you to perform each of these actions? Assume that you'd be paid secretly and that there would be no social, legal, or other harmful consequences to you afterward. Answer by writing a number from 0 to 4 after each action, where:

- 0 = \$0, I'd do it for free
- 1 = \$100
- 2 = \$10,000
- 3 = \$1,000,000
- 4 = I would not do this for any amount of money

Column A	Column B
1a. Stick a sterile hypodermic needle into your arm. _____	1b. Stick a sterile hypodermic needle into the arm of a child you don't know. _____
2a. Accept a plasma-screen television that a friend of yours wants to give you. You know that the friend got the TV a year ago when the company that made it sent it to your friend, by mistake and at no charge. _____	2b. Accept a plasma-screen television that a friend of yours wants to give you. You know that your friend bought the TV a year ago from a thief who had stolen it from a wealthy family. _____
3a. Say something critical about your nation (which you believe to be true) while calling in, anonymously, to a talk-radio show in your nation. _____	3b. Say something critical about your nation (which you believe to be true) while calling in, anonymously, to a talk-radio show in a foreign nation. _____
4a. Slap a male friend in the face (with his permission) as part of a comedy skit. _____	4b. Slap your father in the face (with his permission) as part of a comedy skit. _____
5a. Attend a short avant-garde play in which the actors act like fools for thirty minutes, including failing to solve simple problems and falling down repeatedly onstage. _____	5b. Attend a short avant-garde play in which the actors act like animals for 30 minutes, including crawling around naked and grunting like chimpanzees. _____
Total for Column A: _____	Total for Column B: _____

FIGURE 7.1. What's your price?

Behind every act of altruism, heroism, and human decency you'll find either selfishness or stupidity. That, at least, is the view long held by many social scientists who accepted the idea that *Homo sapiens* is really *Homo economicus*.<sup>1</sup> "Economic man" is a simple creature who makes all of life's choices like a shopper in a supermarket with plenty of time to compare jars of applesauce. If that's your view of human nature, then it's easy to create mathematical models of behavior because there's really just one principle at work: self-interest. People do whatever gets them the most benefit for the lowest cost.

To see how wrong this view is, answer the ten questions in figure 7.1. *Homo economicus* would put a price on sticking a needle into his own arm, and a lower price—perhaps zero—on the other nine actions, none of which hurts him directly or costs him anything.

More important than the numbers you wrote are the comparisons between columns. *Homo economicus* would find the actions in column B no more aversive than those in column A. If you found any of the actions in column B worse than their counterparts in column A, then congratulations, you are a human being, not an economist's fantasy. You have concerns beyond narrow self-interest. You have a working set of moral foundations.