

(Courtesy of Chris Lebron. Used with permission.)

Christopher J. Lebron
Jon Elster - *The Cement of Society*

Jon Elster's main concern in *The Cement of Society* is to understand "what is it that glues societies together and prevents them from disintegrating" into substantial disorder (1995, 1). While he believes rational choice theory provides important insights into this problem, a substantial thesis is "social norms provide an important kind of motivation for action that is irreducible to rationality or indeed to any other form of optimizing mechanism" (*ibid.* 16). In this paper I first provide accounts of the following concepts key to Elster's approach: collective action, social norms, the norm of fairness, and everyday Kantianism. Second, I engage Elster's assertion that the interaction of everyday Kantianism with the norm of fairness provides a greater amount of cooperation than possible as stand alone motivations to collective action.

Collective action results from the cooperation of multiple agents and "is defined by the feature that contributions have diffuse benefits and precise costs" (191). On this view, a main problem of collective action is the following: if A 's participation is calculated to cost X , with a result R that has benefit Y not easily calculable by A , then A may not be rationally motivated to cooperate. Elster invokes the theory of social norms to provide a way of understanding why cooperation occurs in those instances rational choice theory fails to understand an agent's motivation.

Elster's idea of social norms distinguishes social actors from the individuals that populate classical economics. He contends that behavior influenced by social norms is "'pushed' from behind by quasi-internal forces." Moreover, agents acting on this family of norms are indifferent to circumstances even if better ones make themselves available. The last component to this idea is that social norms coordinate expectation but do not guarantee the cooperation of agents (97). The force behind social norms is that "they must be shared by other people and [are] partly

sustained by their approval or disapproval” (99). Because our adherence to these norms are in part sustained by feelings of guilt or embarrassment, Elster claims that they “have a *grip on the mind*” (100 [emphasis in original]). With respect to the problem of collective action he believes that since “contributions are easily identifiable...they can become the object of a social norm to cooperate” (191-192).

The norm of fairness “tells an individual to cooperate if and only if everybody else, or at least a substantial number of others, cooperate” (187). Individuals operating by these parameters will have different thresholds of cooperation as each person will have their own idea as to what constitutes ‘substantial’. The various thresholds of cooperation indicate a sensitivity to costs; it also impels us to follow the majority. Because this norm is predicated on the number of people actually participating, agents are motivated “to defect when there are few cooperators, even if [they] are on an increasing stretch of the average-benefit curve” - the inverse is also true (189).

Everyday Kantianism states: “one should cooperate if and only if universal cooperation is better for everybody than universal defection” (192). The everyday Kantian first identifies where her duty lies - the categorical imperative is likely invoked. As an everyday Kantian she is sensitive to benefits (outcomes), but in reality she calculates next whether the costs are prohibitive. Elster asserts that the Kantian is somewhat sensitive to the benefits, but it seems that this consideration is based not necessarily on benefits that would accrue to her, but she is instead preoccupied with the question “What if everyone did that?” (193). The categorical imperative, as a moral doctrine initially, then, seems to motivate a consequentialist perspective, but strictly within the realm of conceiving of oneself as a co-actor whose actions when universalized have (possibly serious) implications for all involved.

Since the results of collective action are diffuse benefits with precise costs, a

comprehensive account of substantial cooperation needs to consider mixed motives to accommodate these conditions. On Elster's view, the interaction of everyday Kantianism with the norm of fairness gets us to this goal. In figure 5.1 - representing the relationship between average utility and number of actors - we are asked to consider a situation in which the average utility of an action collectively taken first declines slightly (actually resulting in negative utility), and then recrosses the zero-sum threshold, peaks after a more or less gentle positive slope, and then gradually declines. Here we see the impact of their interaction.

Elster states that everyday Kantianism embraces a form of magical thinking - "the belief that by acting on the symptoms one can also change the cause" (196). In the scenario above, the negative utility at a certain point in the function invites Kantians (with elite participationists) to take collective action since they are concerned about the benefits that accrue to all (diffuse benefits). Because they ask themselves "what would *happen* if everyone acted in a certain way", and negative utility for the broader population is supposedly something to be corrected for, if possible, they are among the first to try and reverse the negative trend (192 [emphasis in original]). This is supported by their magical thinking since this influences them to believe that to have others act as they do, they should do so first, thus changing the cause.

At some point, as the number of participants and utility increases (though not yet at its peak), those subscribing to the norms of fairness begin to take part in the given action. This is because they witness a good deal of people *actually* cooperating (after the addition of the utilitarian and mass participationists, who are themselves, we are to understand, actuated by the early action of the everyday Kantians). Their norm, which stipulates action under these circumstances (it should be noted, regardless of the cause) is also cost sensitive, further signaling their opportunity given the reduced costs given the number of cooperating participants. The

gradual addition of those acting on the norm of fairness, even with the elite participationists and most everyday Kantians dropping out, gets us to or close to the maximum utility.

Everyday Kantianism alone is insufficient to produce substantial cooperation upon the realization that at some point a large number of cooperators would adversely affect utility. Not wanting everyone else to act in this manner (magical thinking + ‘universalizability’) those employing this norm would likely cease cooperating before the peak of the utility curve was reached. The norm of fairness is insufficient to get us to significant levels of cooperation since initially there are few cooperators and the norm tells us to defect under these conditions. Elster’s consideration of mixed motives is especially important here since “cooperation could never arise in a population in which everybody was motivated by the norm of fairness” (187). While both social norms are requisite for reconciling the tensions between cost-sensitivity and consequentialism in situations calling for collective action, the heavy work is done not only by the idea of mixed motives, but also presumably by the *proper* mix of motives since we can imagine a society maybe sufficiently populated by everyday Kantians but under populated by those motivated by the norm of fairness.

Elster, Jon. *The Cement of Society*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995