

PRAXEOLOGY OF COERCION: CATALLACTICS VS. CRATICS

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ABSTRACT: Ludwig von Mises's most important legacy is the foundation and analysis of catallactics, i.e. the economics of interpersonal exchange, as a sub-discipline of praxeology, the science of human action. In this paper, based both on Mises's methodical framework and on insights by Tadeusz Kotarbinski and Max Weber, a "praxeology of coercion," or, more precisely, an analysis of interpersonal actions involving threats, is developed. Our investigation yields both a reviewed taxonomy of human action and a first analysis of the elements of this theory, which we term *cratics*. This shall establish the basis for adjacent studies, furthering Mises's project regarding the science of human action.

KEYWORDS: Austrian school, praxeology, catallactics, coercion

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INTRODUCTION

The Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises intended to re-establish economics on a deductive basis, with the subjective valuations, expectations, and goals of acting humans at the center, following the tradition of the “Austrian School” (see Mises, 1940 and 1962). He interpreted economics as a branch of the broader study of human action, which he named *praxeology*. Nonetheless, most of his praxeological analyses focused on *catallactics*, i.e. the economics of interpersonal exchange, which lies within the established boundaries of economics. Mises himself wrote, “Up to now, the only part of praxeology that has been developed into a scientific system is economics” (Mises, 1962, p. 42). He thereby implied that a furthering of praxeology into the study of non-economic, precisely: non-catallactic, actions would be necessary and desirable.

Following the cited sentence, he pointed to the Polish philosopher Tadeusz Kotarbinski, who intended to develop a praxeology of conflicts, however, with a differing understanding of “praxeology” and of the required scientific approach. In his “general theory of conflict,” an important precursor to modern game theory, Kotarbinski identified humans’ differing subjective goals as the origin of potential conflict. Namely, “subject *A* finds himself in conflict (or competition) with subject *B*, if (1) *A* aims at a certain state of affairs, while *B* aims at a state of affairs differing from this one, whereby these targeted states of affairs cannot be reconciled; and (2) *A* and *B* are aware of this, therefore both making an effort to adjust their own actions to the other party’s (intended) actions. In short: *A* and *B* find themselves in conflict (or competition) with one another when they seek contradicting objectives, and they both anticipate the other party’s actions.” (Kotarbinski, 1938, p. 68, own translation). With his analysis remaining on this quite general level, however, he does not go on to analyze the resolution of such contradicting objectives. This leads to an untenable equalization of peaceful and constructive actions (such as card games, barter deals, or economic competition in general) with destructive actions (such as warfare). Kotarbinski merely contrasts “positive” and “negative cooperation.” The former refers to *shared* goals (he gives the example of an orchestra), the latter to *conflicting* goals (he gives the example of a duel). For human interaction with contradicting

objectives, he suggests the term “agonistic,” naming the chess player and philosopher Emanuel Lasker as the originator of this “theory of conflict” (Kotarbinski, 1970, p. 321). This is surprising, since the discipline of economics precisely shows how the resolution of conflicting objectives can form the core of peaceful coexistence and society. Nonetheless, what Kotarbinski rightly points out is the fact that conflicting objectives can definitely be resolved in a different way, namely, involving violence.

Acknowledging that non-catalactic interpersonal actions play an important role, Murray Rothbard defined praxeology as a general formal theory of human action and divided it as follows (Rothbard, 1951, pp. 945–946):

1. The Theory of the Isolated Individual (“Crusoe Economics”)
2. The Theory of Voluntary Interpersonal Exchange (Catalactics, or the Economics of the Market)
3. The Theory of War (Hostile Action)
4. The Theory of Games
5. Unknown

As we understand them, both Mises and Rothbard explicitly invite their readers to perform further analyses in this area—an invitation that we are delighted to accept. With these important works towards a “praxeology of coercion” in mind, our present work pursues two objectives:

- a) To review the taxonomy of human action, thereby specifying the definition of a “praxeology of coercion”, and
- b) To investigate basic elements of such a theory, drawing on analogies to catalactics.

TOWARDS A REVIEWED TAXONOMY OF HUMAN ACTION

According to the well-established definition, human action—in the sense of an active, initiating, consciously chosen action—requires the mental vision of an alternative condition of the world, which the acting subject prefers over the current condition. As the human mind can envision a large set of alternative conditions, the

subject's preference includes a choice. While the theoretical investigation of natural processes, including physiological processes of the human organism, enables a coarse classification of human preferences, it cannot achieve their deterministic forecasting. The human as an acting subject is capable of choosing against his nature and his physiological needs. This is a necessary side effect of the unique human ability to contemplate the world and to choose. Moreover, due to uncertainty about the consequences of actions and the dynamics of the world, conditions can unfold that do not match the initial vision, such that the subject might, *ex post*, even prefer the initial situation. Hence, continual analysis of the changing situation and continual action are required in order to reach a preferred condition.

Following these introductory remarks, let us specify a set of constituting elements of human action. Carl Menger (1871, pp. 2–3) defined four such constituting requirements for goods, i.e. for a certain category of actions or things: a human need or objective, the capability of the action or thing to fulfill the objective, knowledge of this capability, and the availability of the action or thing. In analogy to Carl Menger, we state: That every human action is based 1) on the realization that a condition of the world is possible which the subject prefers over the condition that is expected without his acting (purpose); 2) on the assumption of a possibility to causally bring about this condition through action (means); 3) on the factual capability to perform this action.

Starting from this definition, we can now introduce our reviewed taxonomy of human action.¹ Herein, we follow the classification implicit to the structure of academic disciplines. Namely, at the lowest level, we distinguish between *social action*, a constituting element of social science, and non-social, or, interpreting Mises,² *autistic action* (Mises, 1940, p. 180), which the psychological discipline investigates: According to Max Weber, humans can vary their actions according to social contexts and how they will affect

¹ Such a taxonomy, modeling a complex real world of human action, benefits from a certain level of simplification. In particular, we abstain from considering “hybrid” actions, i.e. those actions that are comprised of two or more “sub-actions”—which might fall into different categories.

² We will come back to Mises's classification in more detail at the end of this section.

other people; whenever they do, they act socially (Weber, [1922] 2006)³. This very basic insight—that either human action can be social or non-social—has only rarely been questioned.

In specifying it, we can employ elements of our above definition: A human performing a social action can consider the other person⁴ as either a purpose or a means.⁵ This directly brings about our second bifurcation: A social action with the other person as the purpose always constitutes a *unilateral action*, more precisely, a *unilateral benefit or harm*. Herein, *unilateral* refers to the relationship between actor and acted-upon, rather than excluding the possibility that the acted-upon may very well react as a consequence.⁶

For those social actions where the actor considers the other person as a means, we need to take into account the important fact that this other person himself is a potential actor. Indeed, not only the other person's inactive body and belongings, but also his actions, can serve as a means of one's own action (Menger, 1871, p. 7): In particular, those actions by other subjects (external actions), which are perceived as relevant to achieve one's own purposes, are useful, scarce, and therefore valuable. For the case where the actor intends the other person to act, we consequently suggest the term "*bilateral (social) action*."⁷ In order to make him act, the actor⁸ needs

³ While we follow Weber's basic distinction, we would like to deviate from his further classification of social action, which focuses on the actor's rationality and contemplation – an investigation we believe belongs to the psychological, rather than the social, discipline.

⁴ Or persons, but for the sake of simplicity let us move forward with the singular.

⁵ Or both—a hybrid case, which, again for simplicity reasons, we shall neglect.

⁶ The latter case, iterative action, can easily be dissected into a sequence of single actions. In this work, we have only considered single actions, either bilateral or unilateral, as opposed to sequences of actions. A bilateral action differs from a two-step "loose sequence of actions" precisely therein that *ex ante* the mutual behavior was promised (by the initiator), and accepted or rejected (by the counterparty). In effect, a sequence of actions is possible, in which the actors have coordinated their future behavior (implicitly or explicitly). On the contrary, in iterative actions, we face the unpredictability of free will—in every step of the sequence, one can choose from a multitude of alternatives, without breaking one's word. Iterative actions should therefore not be part of a basic taxonomy of individual actions, for which we are striving here.

⁷ Or, *multilateral social action* for the case where more than one person is addressed.

⁸ Or initial actor, or initiator.

to influence the other person. This influencing taking part *ex ante* the actual action, we speak of a *promise regarding the ensuing action*.⁹

On the other hand, the actor might intend the other person to remain inactive vis-à-vis his action, and rather utilize the other's property to attain his purpose. Such utilization amounts to an expropriation, or, prosaically, a transfer. We therefore propose the term of "*unilateral transfer*" for this domain of actions.

These two domains of actions, *bilateral actions* and *unilateral transfers*, are the most important domains for our present-day societies that employ a wide-ranging division of labor. They can very well occur among complete strangers,¹⁰ whereas *unilateral benefit or harm* typically only occurs among persons "who mean a lot to each other," either in the positive or negative sense, restricting the range of such actions significantly.

Now, we need to take one final step, recognizing that a bilateral action can either be symmetric in the sense that the initiator meets the other person at eye level, allowing the latter to reject the former's initiative without having to suffer any damage, or more broadly, without having to incur any costs. In this case, the promise regarding the ensuing action is, more precisely, an *offer*. Or, alternatively, that the actor can deny him that option, revealing that he evaluates the other person's dignity as inferior to his own (asymmetric dignity), with the promise being specified as a *threat*. The philosopher Hillel Steiner points out, importantly, that the distinction between offers and threats presupposes a *norm*, which amounts to the status *ex ante* the action—or, in his terms, intervention (Steiner, 1974).¹¹ Namely, without such a norm, we cannot

⁹ It is important to notice that we do not employ the term "promise" in its moral sense. A neutral phrase, such as "prediction regarding the actor's ensuing action," would avoid this ambiguity, however, would complicate further reading. And the term "prediction" itself, in turn, lacks the essential element of the actor predicting his or her own actions.

¹⁰ In many cases, strangers are humans that are not part of our order of preferences, i.e. their well-being does not constitute a purpose in itself, from our perspective. Of course, there are (religious) beliefs that promote all strangers as brothers and their well-being as a purpose in itself, such as the Christian, however, their practical impact is usually limited.

¹¹ In his considerations, Steiner correctly distinguishes threats and offers by *desirability*. However, we consider his central remark that a threat does not constitute

judge whether the action imposes costs on the counterparty. Human actions that start with offers that can be rejected free of cost¹² by the counterparty belong, according to F.A. Hayek, to the area of catallaxy (Hayek, 1969, p. 112); the study of this area according to Richard Whately and Ludwig von Mises (1940, p. 3) being termed catallactics.

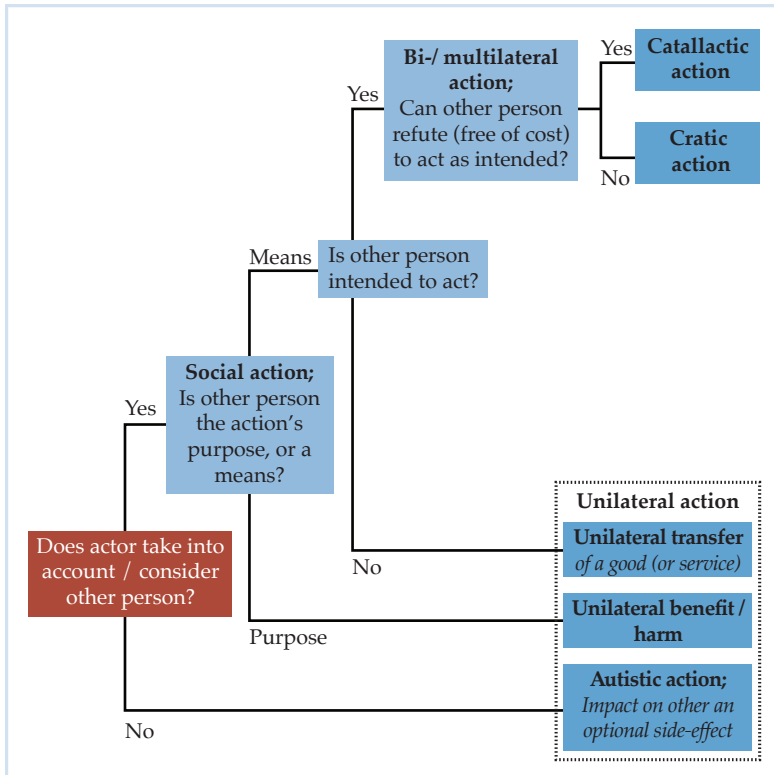
On the other hand, the area of actions based on threats has not yet been named, to our knowledge, in unambiguous terms. We choose the term of *cratics*—from the Greek *kratein*, which approximately means, “to rule violently.”¹³ Figure 1 visualizes the resulting taxonomy.

a reduction in *individual liberty* as secondary. Or, to be more precise, our concept of *liberty* is fundamentally different from Steiner’s, reconciling (relative) *liberty* with (relative) *absence of threats*. But the present consideration does not endeavor to do justice to this comprehensive topic, primarily for the reason that we believe a discussion of *liberty*, due to its connotations, falls into the discipline of *ethics*—an area that we envisage to cover in future works, as outlined in the last chapter.

¹² In the following, for the sake of simplicity, we might neglect the element “free of cost” and simply speak of offers that can—or cannot—be rejected.

¹³ This is not an unconsidered choice; a couple of terms lend themselves for this task, such as Kotarbinski’s term *agonistics*, or *theory of violence / coercion / force*. There are three reasons not to employ Kotarbinski’s term *agonistics*: Firstly, this term has already been employed in 1979 by Jean-François Lyotard in a completely different context (Lyotard, 1979, p. 99). While Kotarbinski has largely been forgotten, Lyotard is quite present as a famous philosopher of “postmodernism.” Secondly, Kotarbinski’s term includes a distinction based on interpretable motives and therefore assumes knowledge of the actor’s psychology. Thirdly, and most importantly, Kotarbinski’s term mixes two disparate categories of action. The situation of two humans promising a utility increase to a third human fundamentally differs from the endeavor to destroy another human. Focusing on the similarities of these types of competition leads to untenable ethical implications. On the other hand, both *violence* and *force* carry unnecessary physical connotations. Finally, even *coercion*—our second-best candidate—suffers from sometimes unspecified use in “everyday-language.”

Figure 1: Taxonomy of human action

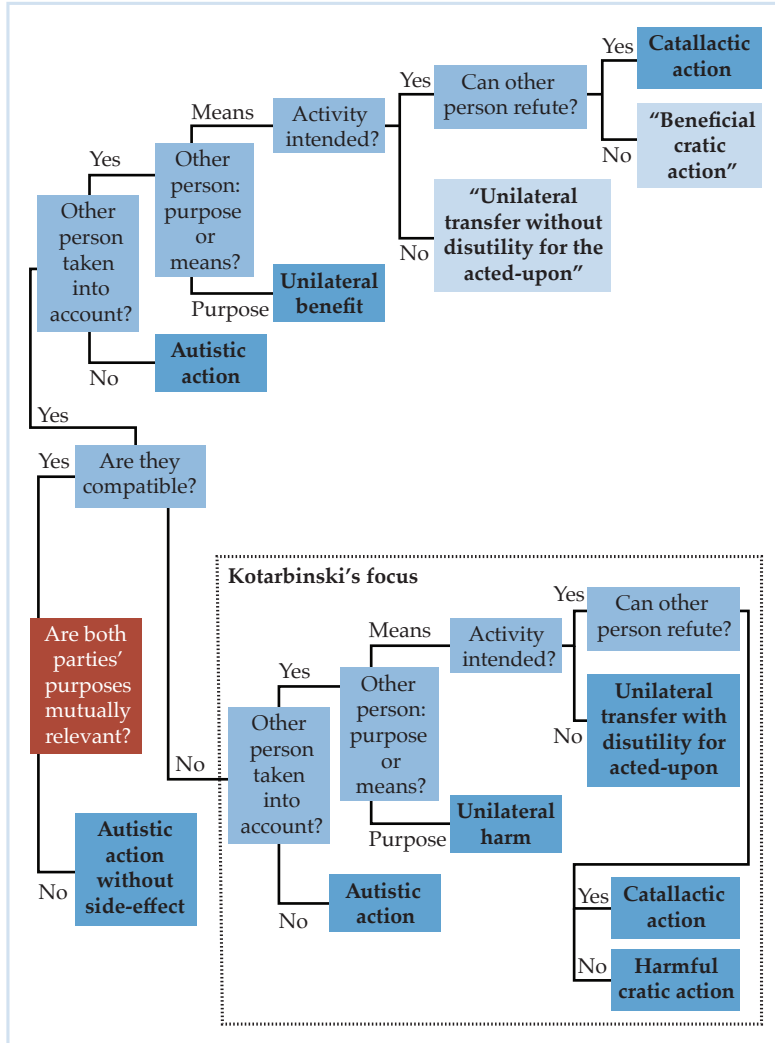


In summary, the first bifurcation accounts for differing academic approaches, the second one distinguishes between the core elements of the definition of human action, the third one takes into account a person’s unique characteristics, and the fourth one introduces the question of symmetry between the involved persons. Obviously, further distinctions are possible (e.g., beneficial vs. harmful unilateral actions, etc.)—from which we abstain, having crystallized our field of interest.

For illustration, in the following, we will try to reconcile this classification with the above-mentioned philosophers’ approaches. Kotarbinski’s “conflicting objectives” or, in other words, “incompatible purposes,” shall be the first candidate. In contrast to our focus on the actor, his approach presupposes (at least) two acting

persons, which requires us to add an additional step in our classification tree, as shown in the resulting Figure 2.¹⁴

Figure 2: Reconciliation with Kotarbinski’s approach



¹⁴ For completeness, we have put in front the additional question whether the parties' purposes have any mutual relevance at all.

The chart indicates both our concept's applicability to other approaches, and how the question of "purpose compatibility" alters the quality of the resulting alternative types of action (e.g., unilateral benefit vs. harm)—in all the cases apart from cataclastic action. This, once more, points to the beneficial power of catallaxy: Greek *katallasso* doesn't only mean "to exchange," "trade," but also "to be accepted into a community" and "to turn a foe into a friend." On the other hand, "violent rule" is the exact opposite, a form of action with all the potential to turn a friend into a foe, and to undermine a community. We'll come back to this mirror-inverted analogy between the two forms of bilateral social action.

A remark regarding the "*beneficial cratic action*" is required: In fact, the promise of a condition of the world that one can only avoid via a non-preferred action, could very well bring forth an objectively better situation for the recipient. However, praxeology strives for definitions that are correct for all humans, without assuming any specific individual preference system. Both realism and humility urge us to trust the subjective judgment of the person receiving the offer. If he cannot reject the offer without incurring costs (Your money or your life?—Thank you, but I do not wish to lose either one!), we can confidently assume that such an "offer" does not intend any creation of counterparty utility. Which, in turn, exposes the category of "*beneficial cratic actions*" as a praxeologically irrelevant exceptional case.¹⁵

Taking our leave of Tadeusz Kotarbinski, let us travel on to Murray Rothbard. His first category relates to autistic action with no side effect, the second one is cataclastic action. War, if following a (sequence of mutual) threat(s), falls into the category of cratic action—but might, at least in theory and propaganda, also result from a purely unilateral attack, i.e. harm. Games typically exhibit iterative human action, where each step amounts to a bilateral social action.¹⁶

¹⁵ This assessment also applies to the case of the "*unilateral transfer without disutility on the part of the acted-upon.*"

¹⁶ From our perspective, both the concepts "war" and "game" have been employed in quite broad terms, impeding their unequivocal classification—of course, a common problem of social science.

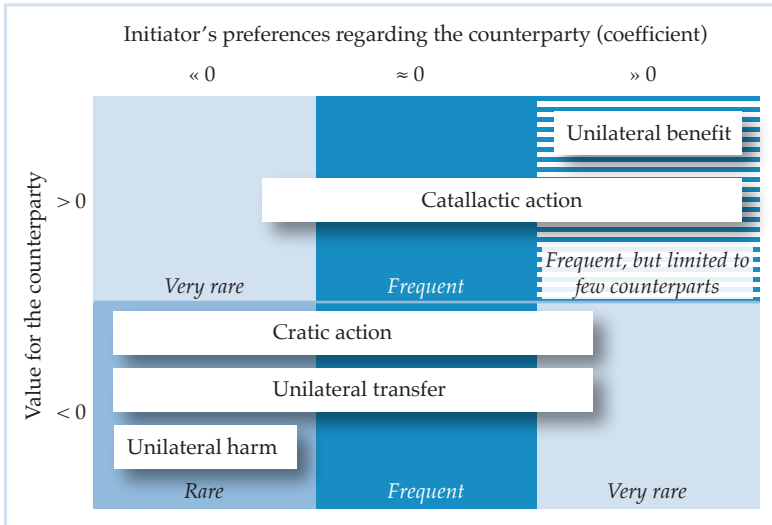
The third illustration refers to the term of “autistic exchange” as introduced by Ludwig von Mises (Mises, 1940, p. 180). He differentiated this from interpersonal exchange (or action) in the following way: “Where there is no intentional mutuality, where an action is performed without any design of being benefited by a concomitant action of other men, there is no interpersonal exchange, but autistic exchange. [...] In the same way, the boundaries between autistic exchange and interpersonal exchange are sharply distinct. Making one-sided gifts without the aim of being rewarded by any conduct on the part of the receiver or of third persons is autistic exchange. The donor acquires the satisfaction, which the better condition of the receiver gives to him. The receiver gets the present as a God-sent gift. But if presents are given in order to influence some people’s conduct, they are no longer one-sided, but a variety of interpersonal exchange between the donor and the man whose conduct they are designed to influence.” (Mises, [1949] 1963, pp. 229–230) In conclusion, Mises’s “autistic exchange” can be reconciled with our “unilateral action.”¹⁷

The fourth—and final—illustration ties in with the above notion that bilateral action and unilateral transfer are of foremost importance since they can systematically occur among persons who are indifferent vis-à-vis each other. Re-formulating, these are persons regarding whom we have no or negligible *other-regarding preferences*.¹⁸ Coming from a different angle, our taxonomy can also serve to distinguish actions according to their counterparty impact (marginal utility / value). Employing ORPs and counterparty value as orthogonal dimensions yields a framework into which we can map our social action categories (Figure 3). For the benefit of conciseness, we refrain from further explanations and let the chart speak for itself:

¹⁷ “Autistic” being an adjective with mainly psychological/psychopathological connotations, we prefer “unilateral” for reasons of precision.

¹⁸ We argue that a major share of inter-human relationships fall into this category. In particular, humans we do not know in person, i.e., the vast majority of all humans, are typically not represented specifically in our preference system, since we have no concept of their individual preferences.

Figure 3: Social action categories in ORP-vs-counterparty-value framework, including estimates of interaction frequency



Further illustrations promise to yield further insight. In the last section of this paper, we point to potentially attractive investigative lines of attack. However, at this point, we prefer starting to build the framework for the newly specified scientific field of cratics.

BASIC ELEMENTS OF CRATICS—ANALOGIES TO CATALACTICS

A newborn child looks up to his elder sibling with love and admiration, intending to learn as much as possible in, seemingly, very scarce time. In much the same fashion, we intend to bring up our infant science of cratics, letting her benefit from her superiorly situated sister, catalactics.

We already identified an inverted-mirror analogy between the two. In the following, as a starting point for our framework, we will expand on these analogies.

- 1) Catallactic *offers* promise actions or goods, which might induce an increase or decrease in *utility* for the recipient. Since humans are diverse, these actions and goods cannot be

generalized—for one likes and finds useful what the other does not. We tend, through our actions, to avoid displeasing conditions of the world. Since we can avoid “rejectable” offers, their marginal utility is greater than or equal to zero, but never negative. “Non-rejectable” offers, however, include the *threat* of a *marginal disutility*—i.e., a reduction of utility. The actions of other human beings can either be influenced through the promise of marginal utility or the threat of marginal disutility. No real-life society is completely free from cratic actions, as they constantly compete with catalactic actions for being chosen by the initiators of bilateral social actions.

- 2) Mirroring the catalactic *good*, an action or object that causes marginal disutility can be called a *bad*. In an analogy to Menger’s above-mentioned definition of goods (Menger, 1871, pp. 2–3), an action or thing constitutes a *bad* to a person when: 1) A condition of the world with reduced utility for the person is conceivable; 2) the action or thing can actually bring about that condition, i.e. impose an expected marginal disutility on the person, 3) the person realizes this, and 4) someone actually has the bad at their disposal or is able to perform the respective action.
- 3) Obviously, a promise can only constitute an *ex ante* prospect of a utility or disutility. Due to the uncertainty of the future, our actions are always based on estimations. *Ex post*—after the interaction—expectations of utility and disutility can turn out to have been unfounded. In general, an interaction will not be regretted in retrospect when the subjective value lies above the cost, viz. when the realized marginal utility outweighs the expended costs. In this case, the condition of the world after the interaction is preferred over the condition of the world before the interaction. We can then say that the *offer* was *backed*. Knowingly making promises that are *unbacked* is a *bluff* (and is usually considered fraud).

Just as catalactic promises can turn out to be unbacked, so can cratic promises or threats. We identify a *threat* as *backed* when the realized marginal disutility lies above the “price,” i.e. the costs that the threatening party intends the threatened party to accept (the “money” in “your money or your life”). Revealing that a threat is not (fully) backed is equivalent to

showing that the threatening party is not capable or willing to cause a harm that is greater than the price requested for refraining from the harm's execution. If the promise "your money or your life" is lacking the capability and will to take the life of the victim, it is *unbacked* or, at most, *partly backed* (if a greater damage can be inflicted than the loss of the money). So the victim possibly makes a choice that makes him worse off, namely to give up more than would be justified in the light of the potential harm (which in this example might amount to continual psychic pressure, possibly due to vigorous gesticulation with the loaded gun). Again, such a threat is a *bluff*.

Subjective expectations are the decisive cause of action, both in the areas of catallactics and cratics. Consequently, the evaluation of the capability and willingness to comply with a cratic promise is core regarding the further development of the interaction. Void threats that lack any capability can be equally successful, in terms of their potential to influence actions, as void promises to ultimately worthless goods.

- 4) Let us note a specific but relevant difference: An *insufficient backing* of catallactic offers remains *unrevealed when rejected*; and only in the case of acceptance, i.e. in a truly reciprocal action, the counterpart can directly realize the insufficient backing of the promise of utility (i.e. insufficient liquid wealth on the initiator's part). However, an *insufficient backing* of cratic threats is *revealed when rejected*. Only if the other party accepts the "offer," i.e., acts according to the terms of the threatening party (e.g. gives money in order to save his life), then the threat remains untested.
- 5) The ability to give backed catallactic promises can be called *wealth*. In a society with a division of labor, most catallactic interactions are performed involving a generally accepted ("liquid") medium of value and exchange: money. It also serves as a standard in estimating the opportunity costs of exchanges. Money is not only a medium for promises of value but is itself a promise of value. The purchasing power of money depends on the valuation of its quality. Quality in relation to money primarily means *liquidity*, viz. the ability to exchange it for other goods or actions at any desired point in time and in any desired quantity.

In naming the ability to give backed promises of disutility, we need look no further than to the term *power*—the mirror-inverted analogy to wealth. According to Max Weber, power denotes the expected capability to establish conditions of the world against the will of other humans (Weber, [1922] 2006, ch.1, § 16). As with wealth and money, the quality of power is determined by the degree to which it is backed. Unbacked power, lacking the capability or will of enforcement, will collapse once it is uncovered (“The emperor has no clothes!”). In general, power exhibits a greater backing when its utilization is more “liquid,” meaning the more it can be enforced at any point in time and against any number of people. E.g., *highly illiquid* power would rely on the physical strength of a single person, but would not be used in threatening a large number of individuals. As long as it is challenged only by a single and weaker individual, it can be maintained, however, as soon as a larger number of threats are “uncovered” (their “backing” being tested), the power will be untenable.

We herewith conclude the introduction to elements of cratic action, explicitly inviting the reader to further investigations. In the following, we lay out a program for areas we consider of high importance and fertility.

OUTLOOK—FURTHERING THE SCIENCE OF CRATICS

Based on this first illustration of cratics, many applications are possible, promising a better understanding of violence, coercion, and their dynamics. As one example, a *theory of power cycles* shall help to give a better understanding of historical processes as well as to draw conclusions for possible future developments.

We also envision an empirical investigation of the *history of cratic action*, taking into account both technological and purely intellectual developments.

We have already pointed to an important feature of bilateral social action: Namely, the initiator can choose whether he wants to make the rejection of his initiative costless for the fellow man. This option opens the possibility—or the necessity—of an *ethical study*. Whenever there is choice, the basic question of ethics arises:

What must be done? From the golden rule to Kant's categorical imperative, ethical principles typically employ some kind of symmetry. As noted above, the question of whether the initiator grants symmetric dignity to the acted-upon is central to the distinction between catallactic and cratic actions. In short, we consider the relating of "catallactic ~ ethically good" and "cratic ~ ethically bad" to be a very defensible position. In this realm, we envision reviewing Murray Rothbard's *Ethics of Liberty*, as well as benchmarking such an ethical position against the existing other candidates. Adjacent to this, an alignment with predominant concepts in the discipline of the philosophy of law should serve to further strengthen and refine our concept.

Last but not least, what follows from the fundamental possibility to choose is that cratic actions will appear in any society (except, maybe, in the improbable case of a perfect balance of power between all its members). This brings us to the important—potentially the most important—question for human coexistence and the social sciences: how a catallactic arrangement could be designed which effectively minimizes the impact of cratic actions (and of unilateral transfers), and whether such an arrangement is possible and stable in practice. Concretely, we aim at *reviving liberal constitutionalism*, reinforcing it by utilizing the sobering experience gained throughout its history.

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