Why Attitude to Good People Is Not Always Positive: Explanation Based on Decision Theory

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Formulation of the problem. There are very good people in this world, people who empathize with others, people who actively help others. Based on all the nice and helpful things that these good people do, one would expect that other people would appreciate them, cherish them, and that, in general, their attitude towards these good people would be positive. However, in real life, the attitude is often neutral or even negative. Why? Is there a rational explanation for this?

Towards explanation. Each person's happiness is determined not only by this person's satisfaction with life, but also by other people's happiness: it is difficult to enjoy good life if many people around you suffer. Let us denote the Person i's satisfaction with life by s_i, and this person's level of happiness by h_i. Then, h_i depends on s_i and on h_j for all other j.

In the first approximation, we can assume that this dependence is linear: $h_i = s_i + \sum\limits_{j \neq i} a_{ij} \cdot h_j$. A very good person v is very happy when others are happy and suffers when others suffer, i.e., $a_{gj} \approx 1$ for all j.

Let us consider a simplified model in which everyone's satisfaction is the same $s_i = s > 0$, everyone's attitude to v is the same: $a_{jv} = a$, and we ignore attitude towards everyone else. Then, $h_v = s + n \cdot h_j$, where n is the number of people except for v, and $h_j = s + a \cdot h_v$. Substituting the above expression for h_v into this formula, we get $h_j = s + a \cdot s + a \cdot n \cdot h_j$, so $h_j = (a + a \cdot s)/(1 - a \cdot n)$. If a is reasonably positive, i.e., if $a > 1/n$, then $h_j < 0$ – i.e., everyone will be unhappy. Thus, the desire to be happy implies that $a < 1/n$. With n in billions, this explains why on average, the attitude should be either neutral or negative.

Commonsense explanation. From the common sense viewpoint, the above mathematics makes perfect sense: A very good person is unhappy if other people are unhappy. If we empathize with this person, we become unhappy too, and since people do not want to be unhappy, they prefer (at best) to ignore others' unhappiness – or even blame them for their own unhappiness.