The Concept of Altruism

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A dialogue such as the following is familiar to many teachers of philosophy:

Professor: Psychological egoism is false because there are many people who behave unselfishly.
Student: These people are not behaving unselfishly. They help others in order to get into heaven and to avoid hell, which means that they don’t really care for other people, but only for themselves.
Professor: Let us then consider examples of atheists who help others. They provide us with unproblematic counterexamples to psychological egoism.

The purpose of this paper is to show that the student’s objection is unfounded, and that therefore counterexamples to psychological egoism can be found among religious people. More broadly, I want to show that a person can be unselfish, or altruistic, in offering help to others even if he believes that it is in his own best interest to offer the help in question. He may believe this on religious grounds, which is the case with the person who is afraid that he will not go to heaven when he dies unless he helps others, or he may base his belief upon nonreligious grounds, which is the case with someone who believes simply that a life devoted to helping others is the best sort of life he can live.

The concept of altruism is usually understood by philosophers to be tied essentially to the concept of self-sacrifice. Nicholas Rescher’s definition is typical:

A person is altruistic (rather than egoistic) if he gives such weight to the welfare of others that he is prepared in principle to subordinate his own welfare to that of others, setting his own welfare aside in the interest of theirs in certain circumstances.¹

According to this definition, the kind of person I have described in the previous paragraph is not altruistic. In order for him to be prepared to subordinate his own welfare to that of others, he would need to believe that helping others (in any of the ways that he ever intends to help others) could in some cases hurt him. But the kind of person I am describing does not believe this.
If he is religious, he probably believes that the most important thing in his present life and his life to come is God's approval of his actions, which he can receive only through caring for and helping others. Mother Teresa, who was written about a lot in recent years for her work in India and elsewhere, seems to be an example of this kind of person. There are also nonreligious examples, although they are harder to find. They may be people who believe that friendship is very important in their lives, and that friendship requires sincerity in caring for others. This means that they must want to help others gladly and cheerfully, and not begrudgingly, since otherwise they could not claim to really care for their friends.

The sort of person I am describing may go so far as to believe that it would be impossible for her to sacrifice her own interests by helping other people, or she may believe simply that she never will sacrifice her own interests in looking out for the interests of others. Such a person may believe that her short term interests sometimes need to be sacrificed when she helps others; but she will not believe that her long term interests are sacrificed when she helps others.

We could say that the kind of person described above is not altruistic. But that seems to me to be the wrong thing to do since there is no reason to doubt that the sort of person I am describing is sincerely concerned for other people's welfare. Such a person can be counted on to do all of the things that would normally be expected of someone who "really cares for" someone else: expending large amounts of time, money, or emotional energy, and enduring pain and deprivation.

What I have described are people who do not meet Rescher's criterion for being altruistic, but who nevertheless should, it seems, be called altruistic. There is another sort of person who does meet Rescher's criterion, but who, it seems, should not be called altruistic. Such a person is prepared to subordinate his own welfare to that of others. The problem is that he is completely self-centered in his perception of his own interests and the interests of others. He is someone who believes that he has the complete and final answers to all questions about human welfare. As a consequence, he totally disregards the beliefs and aspirations of the people whom he intends to help, and runs roughshod over the protestations of those who want no part of the "help" which is being forced upon them. Fortunately, people such as this are rare, but some do exist.

A defender of Rescher's definition of the word "altruistic" could say that such people are altruists, only very misguided ones. However, I believe that it is best to say that they are not altruists since they do not appear to care for others as autonomous agents who are capable of giving some direction to their own lives. Such a person as I am describing appears to view only himself as autonomous; and thus, since to be human in the full sense is to be autonomous, it would appear that such a person is capable of caring only for himself as a human being.
in the full sense. That is a sufficient reason for calling him selfish. Probably what he really wants in life—though he may not admit this even to himself—is to control other people, rather than to promote their welfare.

II

If Rescher's definition of "altruistic" is rejected, then what should we put in its place? Should we say that an altruistic person is, essentially, someone who is made happy by the happiness of others and unhappy by their unhappiness? This definition would rule out the fanatic who disregards the beliefs and desires of other people in his zeal to impose upon them his own ideas about happiness. He is someone who is not moved at all by the actual happiness or unhappiness of the people he is trying to help. This definition also may seem to encompass the first class of counterexamples to Rescher's definition of "altruistic." Religious, "saintly" people and those who believe very strongly in the value of sincere friendship appear to be people who are made happy by the happiness of others and sad by their sadness.

The drawback is that this need not be so. There may not be many actual examples, but surely a person can be an altruist even if he himself has little or no capacity for happiness in his own life. And temporarily many people are incapable of happiness—as a consequence of any number of different kinds of personal problems and pressures upon them. But this does not prevent them from performing altruistic acts. Hence, we must look for another definition of "altruistic."

In order to formulate a new definition, which is what I propose to do, we need first to decide what the basic altruistic category is. It is not actions since a person can be altruistic even though his actions are blocked by illness or other circumstances. The basic category cannot be persons since someone who is not an altruistic person can do something which is altruistic. He would be someone who is acting out of character. The basic category cannot be reasons for acting since people don't always have reasons for performing altruistic acts (or, equally, for performing nonaltruistic acts). They can be done on impulse or simply because the person feels that he ought to do them—in which case his "reason" for acting would simply be his desire or inclination to act, and would not be that for the sake of which, or on account of which, he was acting.

It may be argued that the basic altruistic category is intentions. A person can have an altruistic intention even if he does not act upon it and even if he is not an altruistic person. The problem with this answer is that what makes a person's intention to act altruistic is the reason which he has for acting. An intention understood in terms of a description of the kind of act intended (for example if I were to say, "his intention is to buy his aunt a birthday present") would be
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neither altruistic nor nonaltruistic. We need to know why, in the example, the person intends to buy his aunt a birthday present. ("His intention is to make his aunt happy.") However, as has already been pointed out, people don’t always have reasons for altruistic acts.

What is left, as I see it, is the general category of motivations for acting. I shall defend the position that the basic altruistic category is that of wants or desires. Without question, wants or desires are the most common motivations for acting. Whether or not they are the only basic motivations is controversial and is a question which I shall leave open. What I wish to argue for is the claim that every altruistic act must be motivated by a certain kind of desire which in itself is altruistic. The desire is altruistic even if no act results from it, and, when an act does result from it, it is the desire which makes the act altruistic. The possession of a sufficient quantity of such desires in sufficient strength is what makes a person altruistic.

Human desires can be divided into two basic classes, which I shall call first order desires and second order desires. A person has a second order desire when he desires that the desire of someone else be fulfilled. Every other desire that anyone may have is a first order desire. To illustrate: my desire to own a larger house is a first order desire; my desire that a friend’s desire to own a larger house be fulfilled is a second order desire.

Altruistic desires are always second order desires. However, not all second order desires are altruistic since the objects of some of them are desired only as a means to fulfill a person’s own first order desires. If I desire that my friend get the house which he wants solely because this will then make it possible for me to fulfill my desire to visit him often, then my desire is not altruistic. My desire is altruistic when I desire that the desires of others be satisfied and when my desire that this be so is not solely for the sake of my own first order desires, but at least in part is desired for itself.

It seems to me that most people have a great many such desires. If you doubt that this is so, then perhaps you do not see that the claim I am making is rather modest. First, I am not saying that most people are altruistic. (Later on in the paper I will discuss conditions requisite for a person to be altruistic.) Second, I am not saying that most people perform a great many altruistic acts. (I will discuss the issue of what makes an act altruistic later also.) A person can have an altruistic desire even if he never does anything which is altruistic. He may have nonaltruistic desires which are stronger and which always outweigh the altruistic desire. It seems to me that most people have a great many altruistic desires because it seems to me that I myself have a great many such desires, and I have no reason to believe that I am unique in this respect.

As an example, over the years I have received many solicitations from the March of Dimes. Sometimes but not always I have given them a small donation.
But even on those occasions when I have not given a donation I have had altruistic desires regarding the crippled children who are helped by the March of Dimes. I have wanted them to have the kinds of lives which they themselves would like to have—lives which are free of the pain and deprivations caused by being crippled. Moreover, my desire for the improved well-being of these children is independent of all of my other desires, such as my desire to feel a sense of satisfaction when I make a donation. If I could receive the same feeling of satisfaction by doing something else which would cost me nothing, I would still want the crippled children to be better off. My desire for this is independent of my desire for any "reward" I might get from donating to the March of Dimes. If I could be convinced that people would think just as well of me even if I never gave to charity, I would still want the crippled children to be better off. If I could be convinced even that the most appealing description of heaven were true, and that I did not need to give to charity in order to go there for eternity, I would still want the crippled children to be helped. I am not saying that my desire that they be helped is very strong, but only that it is an altruistic desire. It seems to me that desires such as mine are commonplace.

Now, a person's motivation for acting is often a complex matter. Hence, we cannot say that an act is altruistic if it is motivated by an altruistic desire, but otherwise is not altruistic. Most often, the things people do are motivated by a combination of altruistic and nonaltruistic desires. Let us say that an act is altruistic if it is motivated by an altruistic desire or, when it is motivated by more than one desire, by a predominance of altruistic over nonaltruistic desires. If I loan my friend money in order to help him buy a house, then my act is altruistic if my desire that he get for himself the house he wants is stronger than my desire to be able to visit him often once he has bought the house. It may be that I would loan the money even if I were to learn that I would not be able to visit my friend at all in his new house. Without question, my act would be altruistic. There is another sort of case that is not as clear. It may be that, although my altruistic desire in the matter outweighs my nonaltruistic desire, I would not loan my friend any money to buy a house unless I were to anticipate visiting him once he buys the house. We may be tempted to say that, assuming this to be the case, my lending the money is not altruistic since it is not something I am prepared to do as the consequence of an altruistic desire alone. I believe that we probably should resist the temptation to say this since it would reduce very dramatically the number of acts that we could properly call altruistic. Many helpful things that people do they would perhaps not do if they did not, in doing them, receive some satisfaction of first order desires.

To consider an example that parents are familiar with, it is much easier for an adult to help a child to do something which the child wants to do if the child shows just a little bit of gratitude—a smile, a thank you, an increased disposition
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to be cheerful and enjoyable company. This satisfaction of an adult’s first order desire can often make the difference as to whether or not he provides the help in question. I think that we would want to say that the help which the adult gives in such a case is altruistic as long as the altruistic desire motivating it is stronger than any other desires motivating it.

Let us consider next what makes a person altruistic. There are many sorts of troublesome borderline cases which I want to sidestep in this paper for the sake of brevity. Generally, what I want to say is that a person is altruistic if his altruistic desires outweigh his nonaltruistic desires. He need not have only altruistic desires. The possession of altruistic desires exclusively cannot be defended even as part of a moral ideal since second order desires could not exist unless there were first order desires. Someone must have first order desires if someone else is to have second order desires. Indeed, there is something prima facie blameworthy in the behavior of a person who deliberately attempts to reduce his own first order desires to a minimum since he thereby makes it much more difficult for others to have second order desires in regard to him. If it is a good thing to have second order desires, then it is a good thing to do whatever can be done to make it easier for people to have second order desires, unless doing so has some greater consequence that is objectionable.

III

The way in which I have defined the word “altruistic” is, I believe, in accord with our intuitions regarding its usage. Moreover, it is not open to the objections which I have raised against the other two definitions of “altruistic.” These are Rescher’s definition, which is in terms of the subordination of one person’s welfare to that of another person, and the definition of “altruistic” in terms of happiness. Regarding the latter, I am not claiming that a person must be made happy by the happiness of others in order to be altruistic. All that is required is that, to a sufficient degree, he desires for its own sake that other people get what they desire. Whether or not any actions which are motivated by his desire make him or anyone else happy is left an open question.

My definition of “altruistic” is not open to the two objections which I raised against Rescher’s definition. Let us consider the second of them first. It has to do with the example of a person who intends to subordinate his own welfare to that of others, but who pays no attention to what other people actually want. Given my definition of “altruistic,” a person who is altruistic must pay a great deal of attention to what other people want.

Let us now consider the first objection which I raised against Rescher’s definition—having to do with a certain class of religious and nonreligious people who do not meet Rescher’s criterion for being altruists. They are people who
help others a great deal but who believe that they will never sacrifice their own
welfare to the welfare of others in giving to them any of the kinds of help which
they intend to give to them. In terms of my definition of "altruistic," a religious,
"saintly" person, such as I am supposing Mother Teresa as an example to be,
can be called altruistic. It is safe to assume that in devoting her life to helping
others her altruistic desires have predominated over her nonaltruistic desires. It
is of course possible for this not to be so; but from what has been written about
Mother Teresa there is no reason for us to believe that it is not so.

In particular, the fact that a person is religious and believes that helping others
is a necessary condition for getting into heaven is not a sufficient ground for
saying that the person is not altruistic. Given my definition of the term "altruistic,"
there would be no point at all in arguing that a "saintly" religious person cannot
be altruistic just because that person believes that he will provide for his own
long-term welfare best through wanting to help other people.

IV

I will now discuss possible objections:

(1) A desire can be altruistic even when its object is not the satisfaction of
someone else's desire; all that is needed is that the desire have as its object the
welfare of someone else.

My response is that it would not be possible for me to desire what I believe
will promote your welfare as an autonomous individual unless I desire the satis­
faction of desires which you now have or which I believe you are likely to have in the future. For purposes of simp licity earlier in the paper I have been referring
only to the desires of other people which they have at present. But all of the
points made above can equally well be made in terms of expected future desires.
Parents and teachers are sometimes good examples of altruists who want primarily
to satisfy the expected future desires of children when they grow up, while
clergymen sometimes are altruists who want primarily to satisfy expected desires
of people in the next life.

In the preceding paragraph I am supposing that there is an essential tie at some
point in the conscious existence of a person between the person's welfare and
the satisfaction of the person's desires. My reason for supposing this is that it
seems to me that a person could not truly be concerned about the welfare of
another person (P) as an autonomous individual if (a) he believed that P would
absolutely never—in this life or the next—desire X; and (b) he set out to do X
and only X on behalf of P. But what should we say if it is the case that X really
is good and if it is also the case that X stands in the way of all the things P
wants or ever will want? Then, it seems to me that the conclusion to be drawn
is not that it is possible for me to desire the welfare of P even when I entirely
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ignore P’s own desires, but rather that P’s welfare as an autonomous individual is simply not compatible with the good.

(Needless to say, that would be a very unfortunate state of affairs for P. It may be that it never occurs. In certain theological traditions it would be both necessary and sufficient to justify eternal damnation for P. According to Dante, for example, from a certain point of view those in hell really want to be there.)

(2) This objection is the other side of the coin from the first objection. It may be argued that altruism should not be defined in terms of second order desires just because the other person’s desire could be evil, and that it is wrong to desire that an evil desire be fulfilled.

A possible response would be to say that altruism is not always good. However, it seems to me that, as I have defined it, altruism always is good since it seems to me that altruistic desires are always a good thing to have and that this is so even in cases where the other person’s desire is evil. Of course, in such cases it would be wrong to act upon the desire that the other person’s evil desire be fulfilled. Also, it goes without saying that it is bad for someone to have an evil desire; and therefore it would be wrong for me to desire that someone else have an evil desire. Furthermore, it would be a bad thing if I desired that the other person’s evil desire be fulfilled for its own sake and also did not have a stronger desire that it not be fulfilled for its own sake since in such a case I would in effect share the other person’s evil outlook on life. But it is possible both to have a desire that X obtain and to have a desire that X not obtain.

The reason that it is a good thing for me to desire that someone else’s desire be fulfilled for its own sake—regardless of the content of the desire—is that my having such a desire is a way for me to be sympathetic toward the other person, and sympathy is a good thing. Suppose that the other person suffers from severe psychological and spiritual limitations (whether or not these are his own fault we may leave an open question), and consequently is capable of having only evil desires. Suppose further that there is no reason to believe that the person will ever change. Then the only way that I could have sympathy for that person as the person that he is, an autonomous human being, would be to have the desire that some of the person’s evil desires be fulfilled for their own sake—that is, be fulfilled just because the person in question wants them to be fulfilled and would derive some happiness from their fulfillment. It seems to me that I can have such sympathy while at the same time be strongly repulsed by the kind of life the person wants for himself, and in addition do everything in my power to ensure that none of the person’s desires will ever be fulfilled.

It seems to me that people do, at least in a modest way, quite often have the sort of second order desire which is discussed in the last two paragraphs. An example would be the parent who wishes that somehow it could be morally permissible for his wayward child to be allowed the satisfaction he gets from,
say, teasing his playmates in a mildly malicious way. Of course, the parent does not really, on balance, want his child to enjoy himself in this way.

(3) It may be argued that, given my definition of "altruistic," a "saintly" person such as Mother Teresa could be altruistic, but still is likely not to be. In support of this objection, it may be argued that a person is never, or just about never, born "saintly." Rather, she is converted to her strong religious convictions at some point in her life, prior to which she may have lived an ordinary life or even a very immoral life. (I do not mean to suggest that this was the case with Mother Teresa, whose early biography I know little about.) Isn't it reasonable to suppose, then, that the person changed her attitudes and life style because she was afraid that otherwise she would suffer in hell, or at least be denied some of the blessings of heaven? Doesn't this tell us that her nonaltruistic desires outweigh her altruistic desires?

The above objection presupposes that the question of what caused a person to have second order desires is relevant to the question of whether or not those desires are altruistic. However, as I am using the term "altruistic," that is not the case at all. As long as a person genuinely desires for its own sake that the desire of someone else be fulfilled, that person's desire is altruistic; and the person is then altruistic if she has a predominance of such desires. She may have had selfish reasons for becoming altruistic; but if she really has become altruistic, why should that matter? She has, so to speak, left her selfish reasons behind.

At the risk of belaboring the point at issue, let me distinguish explicitly between the following two kinds of cases:

(1) The kind of case where a person helps others only as (he believes) a means to get into heaven. He is a person who would not help others if there were some other way to get into heaven. He is, of course, not an altruist. (And, incidentally, in terms of traditional Christian views he will not succeed in getting into heaven.)

(2) The kind of case where a person has acquired the desire to help others for its own sake from his fear that unless he were to want to help others he would not get into heaven. He is a person who, at some earlier time in his life, would not have helped others if there had been some other way for him to get into heaven; but now that he has acquired the second order desire to help others for its own sake, he would still want to help them even if he believed that he could get into heaven by some other means. He is an altruist if his altruistic desires are sufficient strong.

An objection similar to the one I have been discussing might be raised against the purported nonreligious altruist who believes that a sincere desire to help others is requisite for his living the kind of life he believes is best. It could be argued that he desires to help others because he wants to be admired, or to ease
his conscience, and so on. Again, two kinds of possible cases would need to be distinguished: In the first, the person is not an altruist at all because the objects of his second order desires are seen by him to be means only to satisfying first order desires. In the second, the person is an altruist since he does to a sufficient degree desire for its own sake that the desires of others be satisfied.

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NOTE