

IS COMMUNITARIAN THINKING ALTRUISTIC?

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to expose the problematic nature of claims concerning the altruistic or egoistic foundations of popular theories of political philosophy. Altruism and egoism are complex psychological and ethical concepts, which cannot be straightforwardly employed to defend or to attack equally complex doctrines like communitarianism and liberalism.

Keywords: altruism, egoism, communitarian, liberal, ethics, politics

1. Introduction

It is a common belief among contemporary ethicists that community-oriented, or “communitarian”, thinking is more naturally *altruistic* than its rivals – especially the most common strands of “liberal” thought. The idea is, roughly, that liberals emphasise the significance of individuals, and are therefore likely to stress personal, egoistic concerns, while communitarians call attention to groups and societies, and are hence more amenable to the ideas of social or communal dependence and mutual help.

Our aim in this paper is to examine whether or not this belief is justified and, if it is, in what sense. Since communitarian thinking comes in a variety of packages, we shall start by briefly defining what we mean by it in our considerations. Because altruism, too, can mean different things in different contexts, we shall also quickly outline the two main senses in which we talk about it. After these preliminaries, our examination will proceed in two stages. The first is to show that communitarian thinking, as such, is not necessarily altruistic, or at least that there is no conceptual reason to hold that it is. The second is to further demonstrate that, even in comparison, communitarian thinking is not necessarily more altruistic than the main versions of individual-based, or liberal thought.

If both our arguments are valid, then community-oriented ideologies and policies cannot, without strict specifications, be supported by claiming that they

are altruistic, or more altruistic than their rivals. This does not, of course, show that there is anything wrong with these ideologies or policies. Egoism may be a better alternative than altruism. And some forms of communitarianism may well be more altruistic than some forms of liberalism. But if we are right, a stock defence of community-based ethics in terms of altruism is unfounded.

2. Philosophical and political communitarianism

For the purposes of our analysis, it is useful to make the distinction between philosophical and political versions of communitarianism.

Communitarian thinking in its contemporary *philosophical* form was originally a reaction to John Rawls's contractarian political doctrine in his influential book *A Theory of Justice* (1972). Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), Michael Sandel (1981), Charles Taylor (1985), and Michael Walzer (1983) all questioned some liberal tenets that Rawls held, and although they did not label themselves as "communitarian", their work gave rise to the philosophical movement of communitarianism. Within this movement, it is generally held that liberalism is based on a skewed notion of human personhood; an over-emphasis of individuality; and an impossible commitment to universality and neutrality. The communitarian alternatives to these are a notion of human persons and selves as socially constructed entities; a view of communities as important sources of value; and a conviction that traditions should play a considerable part in moral and political reasoning.¹

Communitarianism in its recent *political* form is a more complex phenomenon. As presented by one of its main champions, Amitai Etzioni, it is an attempt to restore moral order and to consolidate common goals with individual self-interest by emphasising traditional concepts of education, family, and values (Etzioni 1995, 1997, cf. Frazer 1999, Putnam 2000).² Whatever the moral and political strengths or weaknesses of this doctrine, which has some links with the Third Way Socialism of Anthony Giddens and Tony Blair in the United Kingdom, the philosophical assessment of altruism within it is very difficult (Giddens 1998). Etzioni seems to dislike the term "altruism" in the first place, and he asserts that "the pursuit of self-interest can be balanced by a commitment to the community, without requiring us to lead a life of austerity, altruism, or self-sacrifice" (Giddens 1985). In Giddens and Blair, it is not too easy to see if altruism in the sense of caring for others is a means to a thriving communal life, or communal life a means to increasing altruism. Due to these conceptual difficulties, we shall mainly concentrate on the philosophical version of communitarianism, and add just occasional comments concerning the political form.

¹ A very useful and accessible account of philosophical communitarianism can be found in Bell (2001).

² A useful brief introduction to political communitarianism and further links can be found in: <<http://www.infed.org/biblio/communitarianism.htm>> (Accessed 7 February 2004.)

3. Descriptive and normative altruism

Altruism can in philosophical, moral, and political discourses mean something psychological, or descriptive, and something normative, or ethical (see, e.g. Häyry 1994).

Descriptively, altruism can be defined as a tendency to perform acts or to promote attitudes that are not solely or primarily motivated by the agent's own self-interest, but, instead, by concern for the well-being of others. People and societies who are given to altruism in this sense can be seen as unselfish, and they are normally not purely egoistic in their behaviour or thinking.

Normatively, altruism assigns to individuals and groups an obligation to perform acts which are not motivated only by the agent's or the community's own self interest. People who assume this obligation can be seen as beneficent, as opposed to being maleficent or indifferent to the plight of others.

Incidentally, what Etzioni says above in the quotation concerning commitment without self-sacrifice shows that he has at least four views when it comes to altruism. He denounces normative altruism in a general sense that he does not specify. He embraces normative altruism in a limited form, a form in which commitment to the common good is paramount. He seems to say that descriptive altruism can be achieved, and would be desirable in his limited, communitarian sense. But he also seems to imply that descriptive altruism in a more universal sense is either impossible or undesirable.

4. Communitarian thinking is not necessarily altruistic

Would communitarian thinking in its more philosophical form be altruistic as such? Not necessarily. This can be seen by considering, one by one, the main tenets of the creed, namely the value of communities, the constructed nature of the self, and the significance of tradition.

If communities are valuable, then there are probably normative reasons to prompt people to forgo, at least in some situations, their pursuit of self-interest, and to act with a view to promoting the well-being of others. On the face of it, this seems to support the idea that communitarianism is altruistic.

But the question is, who are the "others" who would benefit from the other-regarding obligations? To cite a distinction drawn by Engelhardt, H. Tristram, Jr. the ones who would fare better in this situation would all be members of a "community of moral friends" (1996). But, in an important sense, this is not the issue in debates about altruism. A community of moral friends, a group that shares a set of values and norms, is, almost by definition, a set of people who find it natural to help each other. It is, in a manner of speaking, an extended family, and some of the most important considerations of morality do not enter this sphere.³

³ Cf. David Hume, who thought that in families or societies created in the image of families justice is not needed, because mutual benevolence guarantees that everybody's needs and interests will be taken adequately into account (1998).

And this is arguably not a comprehensive picture of the moral reality in which we actually live. We live in a world of “moral strangers”, where people hold a variety of competing and clashing values and beliefs. In order to address properly the questions of “otherness” and well-being in a world like this, normative altruism should probably be extended beyond group boundaries. Commitment to the value of communities is unlikely to promote this extension.

Would a view of the human self as a communally or socially constructed entity make people more altruistic? Possibly yes, since people who recognise their “relational” nature can also realise that by hurting others they may hurt themselves, and that by advancing the good of others they often advance, in effect, their own good.⁴

But all this is conceptually awkward and confusing. If we help others because we know that we thereby help ourselves, then we are acting in our own self-interest. This is what is called “rational egoism” rather than altruism. And how can we benefit our own selves, or the selves of others, if people do not, strictly speaking, have selves? If we exist primarily as holders of social roles and communal values, then all we can do is to shake or support the net of relationships that defines us. This leaves no conceptual room for egoism or altruism as distinct phenomena.

Finally, if the net of relations that we uphold is traditional, would that make our actions and commitments altruistic? Communitarians like to cite in this context cultural differences, and empirical studies which seem to show that in more traditional ethnic groups people more spontaneously take care of their children and parents (e.g. Bell 2001).⁵

The problem, however, is that traditions can develop in harmful and egoistic as well as beneficial and altruistic directions. It has been argued, for instance, that the Japanese communitarian tradition to work hard has been detrimental to family life and hence to naturally altruistic relationships between people (Inoue 1993: 534). And it should be noted that the liberal ways often criticised by community-minded ethicists are part and parcel of the Western tradition of our current societies. If there is an oversupply of egoism, it has probably been produced simply by upholding what is traditional.

To recapitulate, there are three main conceptual reasons to think that communitarian types of thinking are not unequivocally altruistic. First, when people value communities, they value themselves as a group, not others. Secondly, relational selves are not separate entities, and cannot therefore treat other relational selves as “others”. And thirdly, traditions can be egoistic or dangerous.

5. Other types of thinking can be altruistic

Granted that there are conceptual problems in reconciling communitarianism with altruistic ideas, it is still possible that other moral and political theories would fare even worse in this respect. Let us see if this is the case by examining four

⁴ Cf. Earl Shaftesbury’s views as described, e.g., in Häyry (1994: 16).

⁵ On similar empirical claims, see, e.g. Waite (1996) and Reid (1999).

competing doctrines – John Rawls’s Kantian liberalism, John Stuart Mill’s utilitarian liberalism, Robert Nozick’s libertarianism, and a non-utilitarian version of consequentialism.

The first of these creeds, Rawls’s view on “justice as fairness”, is definitely not antagonistic to altruism (Rawls 1972). According to him, the norms to be legitimately enforced in a just society can be derived from certain laws concerning human nature, with the help of the theoretical device he called the “veil of ignorance”. He referred to four specific features in (or laws of) *rational* human nature. These are that people are naturally inclined to act according to their own long-term interests; that they have sufficient knowledge concerning psychology, sociology and politics to understand the implications of their own political choices; that they do not take any considerable risks; and that they are not envious. By the veil of ignorance Rawls meant that when people decide about the arrangement of their society, they should not know who or what they are, or what their place in society is. The normative conclusions he reached by thinking what people like that would prefer were liberal and moderately egalitarian. He argued that freedom should not be limited except for the equal freedom of others; that everybody should have an equal opportunity to make their way in the world; and that economic inequalities can be accepted only if they serve the best interest of those who are worst off.

The Rawlsian model may not be *descriptively* as altruistic as some other moral theories. It starts from the view that people are rational egoists, who think primarily about their own long-term self-interest. But *normatively* the model makes people “lose” their egoistic concerns in the process, and prompts them to act altruistically. The proponents of the theory might say that this, in a moral and political theory, is more important than speculation about the facts of egoism and altruism in human nature.

Mill’s utilitarianism is not antagonistic to altruism, either (Mill 1975, 1987). He believed that all human activities should be aimed at the good of our fellow beings: in fact, at the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Mill’s general justification for his view proceeded in three stages. We all think that *our* own happiness is important to *us* (this is a mark of our rational self-interest and hedonism). But we also know that others are like us, and that *their* happiness is important to *them* (we know this because we are capable of making universalised judgements). Therefore, if we want to set aims together as a society (just as individuals can set aims for themselves), our common primary aim will (or should) be the good, or happiness, of *all* (and failing that the good of as many as possible).

Again, this is not a *descriptively* altruistic view. Mill did not believe that people necessarily *are* altruistic to each other. But *normatively* he argued that people *ought to be* universally altruistic, or at least perform acts which are.

The libertarian view summarised by Nozick and characterised by the notion of justice as protection of rights (or entitlements) is a more likely candidate when it comes to finding egoistic moral and political theories (Nozick 1974). According to this doctrine, individuals are fundamentally entitled to certain things, and these

entitlements give rise to rights which should not be violated. We have, Nozick argued, an absolute right to everything that is not somebody else's when we take it; or is somebody else's, but we pay the market price for it; or we get it as a gift. The things we have acquired, bought or received in these ways are, by right, *ours*, and nobody else's.

If this view is applied to laws and social policy, the *normative* result is not very altruistic, at least not at the national and international levels. The state will not encourage people to benefit others through taxation, and the global community does not prompt affluent countries to support the less affluent. In a sense, everybody is on their own. Paradoxically, however, defenders of this view seem to rely on altruism as a *descriptive*, or factual, principle. This becomes visible when they are asked about the fate of those who cannot economically make it in the libertarian society. Their reply often is that *charity* and charitable organizations will take care of those who cannot take care of themselves – which seems to mean that they believe in the fundamental altruism of individuals (and communities), after all.

Non-utilitarian consequentialism is another good candidate for the anti-altruistic camp.⁶ The disagreement that prevails between Rawls and Nozick shows that “deontological liberalism” (which they represent) can come in both altruistic and egoistic packages. The same is true of consequentialism (as a branch of liberalism). The altruistic form is Mill's utilitarianism. The egoistic form would be a specific type of *consequentialism with side constraints*, where the aim of action could be the greatest happiness of the greatest number; but where a sharp moral distinction would be drawn between *acts* and *omissions*. The main norms derived from this view would be that we should not *act* in ways which would reduce the happiness of others; but that it is quite all right *not to help* others in the pursuit of their happiness, since *omissions* are not subject to moral condemnation.

It is probably fair to say that this type of qualified consequentialism is egoistic both descriptively and normatively. The act-omission gap is probably assumed in this model, because it is felt that the altruism of the genuinely utilitarian doctrine would otherwise be too much for people to agree to. And the legal and social norms flowing from the model would not be overly altruistic, either.

6. Communitarians are not necessarily more altruistic than liberals

So where does all this leave us with the claim that communitarian thinking could be more altruistic than other types of moral and political thought? The answer is different in the normative and the descriptive cases.

Normatively speaking, it is difficult to imagine political theories which would demand more concern for the well-being of others than utilitarianism. The

⁶ We are not quite sure that anybody would actually hold this view – we have added it to show the symmetry between deontological and consequentialist theories in their attitudes towards altruism. Jan Narveson might be a contender: see, e.g., Narveson (1967, 1988).

Rawlsian theory of justice does not come too far behind. If community-based thinking respects prevailing, traditional patterns of distribution, as it conceptually should, it could not possibly outshine these political doctrines in terms of economic altruism. At least in Europe and the United States, governments based on Millian and Rawlsian ideals would move laws and social policies to an entirely different level of concern for others.

Communitarian thinking may be normatively more altruistic than libertarianism and the type of consequentialism with side constraints described in the above. But that is not much of a victory. These views are very low on the scale of altruism, and comparisons to them do not support any significant claims regarding altruism and community thinking.

Descriptively speaking, things look different. Only the libertarian model advocated by Nozick seems to assume that people are in fact concerned about the well-being of others. The other liberal theories all start from the assumption that people can be naturally egoistic, and must therefore be persuaded or coerced into doing deeds that benefit other human beings as well as themselves.

Even in this case, however, it is not possible to conclude that community-based thinking would be intrinsically more altruistic than individualistic views. To claim that it is, in the light of our observations in this paper, is rather like claiming that all animals are cute. There are, of course, cute animals, but there are also ones that people find disgusting. Similarly, there are altruistic communities, and communitarian ways of thinking that are concerned about the well-being of others. But there are also egoistic communities, and egoistic ways of valuing relations and traditions. Therefore, stock defences of community-based thinking in terms of concern for others are erroneous and misleading.

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