Altruism as self-interest

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Abstract:
The paper discusses the notion of altruism in philosophy. It ignores similar debates in economics and biology, where 'altruism' is often used for costly behaviour. I raise doubts regarding a common criterion that focuses on ultimate aims or desires and then develop a positive interpretation of altruism that allows for self-interested action to be altruistic. When a person identifies with a desire to help others it is her own happiness she is pursuing in virtue of realising the kind of person she wants to be. If a person identifies with characteristics of herself that lead her to benefit others, the resulting behaviour is in a sense self-interested, but nevertheless altruistic.

Are we egoistic or altruistic? As often, much depends on how we understand the terms that are at issue, in this case how we define "egoism" and "altruism". I wish to defend an account of altruism that focuses on the motives of the agent but in a slightly different way than we often find in the literature. I claim that people act altruistically if they identify with their behaviour, i.e. if they want to be moved by a desire that includes the welfare of others. We will see that this allows for altruistic behaviour to be self-interested. It is, in a way, a more lenient approach than the received view that demands concern for others to be the ultimate goal of one's actions.

The so-called psychological account of altruism considers benefit to others as a decisive element but it is less the actual result – a benefit – that counts, than the intent or motive of an agent to benefit someone else. Altruism here means to do something because of a concern for other's welfare. There is often an addition that the aim of benefiting someone else ought to be pursued for its own sake (Frankena 1963, 21). This is because we can benefit other people by our actions without really having a concern for their welfare. It might simply happen that to benefit others is the road to take when we pursue our own well-being, for instance when someone helps a fragile granny across the street only because he happens to know that she gives everyone who does so a bottle of wine. To be sure, it might be allowed to gain something as a kind of by-product from acting to the benefit of someone else, for instance the proverbial "warm glow" of such an action. But the ultimate aim, as it is regularly called, needs to be the welfare of someone else. I will criticize this account of psychological altruism by challenging the notion of an ultimate aim of benefiting others.

I believe that the reference to ultimate goals (Batson 2011, 20; Feinberg 2007, 190) or ultimate desires (Stich et al. 2010), which I will use interchangeably here, is potentially causing confusion. The idea of ultimate goals in psychology, and philosophy for that matter, is based on the idea of instrumental action. It is assumed that ultimate goals are the final ends of actions that other goals of actions serve, hence it is instrumental goals that are opposed to ultimate ones. So in terms of the
mentioned example a person might not help an old lady across the street because he ultimately aims at benefiting her, but because he wants a reward, so her welfare is not his ultimate aim.

It is often assumed that all human actions follow that kind of pattern, where we can distinguish instrumental aspects, usually called means, from final ones, usually called ends. Since ends can be means to other ends we get a picture of action where we assume a final end, something that is done "for its own sake". Altruism, it is said, is something that is done for the sake of benefiting others. That's why it is usually referred to motives instead of the actual behaviour. According to the psychological account, which can be identified with the philosophical point of view, we need to know what the agent aims at in order to find out whether he acts altruistically.

I must admit that I have problems with this description. This is because it is not easy to grasp what it means to do something only for its own sake. To be sure, there are certain activities humans do, say dancing, playing football, or having sex, which do not seem to aim at any further result, i.e. an instrumental aspect, such as esteem, monetary gain, or improved health dispositions. However, this is a highly stylized picture of human action. Fairly often, maybe always, we do something because we value it intrinsically and see an instrumental value in it, i.e. do it as a means to some more ultimate end. To define altruism as being based on an ultimate goal or desire therefore does not seem to help to distinguish real altruism from fake altruism. This is not only a problem of actually finding out about the psychological states of agents, but a deeper problem of modelling altruism. The model used here asks for a kind of purity which is simply not existent in the real world.

I tend to think that the main problem with the psychological account as we know it is its tendency to rule out self-interested desires to benefit others as proper cases of altruism. This tendency, again, seems to be due to the reference to ultimate goals, which allegedly have to be self-denying, so to speak. But it seems plausible to me that a case of helping behaviour, which has self-interested aims in mind, can count as altruism under the right circumstances. If I help my friend to move house I might do this at the same time because I love my friend and want him to be happy and because I want him to help me in the future, too, and because I believe it makes me happy if I can help someone else, since I want to be a person who is helpful. We usually act on the basis of such various motives. Now, one might want to say that in the example I have just given there is at least one motive that ultimately aims at the welfare of my friend, namely that I want to make him happy. But I wonder why not the last motive I mentioned before would be sufficient: Isn't it still a real case of altruism if I help someone simply because I want to be a person who is disposed to help others? This motive can be completely focused on me. The helping act is then simply a means to bear evidence of my character trait – being a helping kind of person. Being helpful is what I identify with; I want to be that kind of person. Since I identify with being helpful, actually helping others makes me happy. So when I help someone because of that motive, I merely aim – ultimately – at my own happiness. But I would nevertheless insist that it can be a case of altruistic behaviour, and I would also assume that others whom I would explain my motives would not doubt that it was altruistic.

So a general criterion of altruism I would like to suggest is that the benefactor identifies with the beneficial action. Identification is more than simply wanting or
intending to do something. Surely I can want to help someone only to avoid a penalty, and we would not normally call this behaviour altruistic. Here, the driving factor is outside of me, it is the avoidance of sanction. As a thought experiment, we might therefore assume that someone has the ring of Gyges at hand, which would make him invisible. If he nevertheless does something beneficial to others, he seems to be acting out of altruistic concern.

Identification is the endorsement of a desire on a higher level, something that Harry Frankfurt has discussed extensively (Frankfurt 1988). In virtue of making the desire effective that I indentify with I am pursuing my own good – on a higher level. Even where I do something that harms me physically it might be something I endorse psychologically and therefore benefits me in terms of doing what I identify with, or being the kind of person I want to be. Still, an altruistic pursuit of the "dear self" (Frankfurt 2000) needs to be aimed at the good of others. So we might want to say that altruism might not be substantively in one's self-interest but always formally, because it needs to be something we identify with.

I believe that one criterion we find in all accounts is on the right track: Altruism has to aim at the benefit or welfare of others, though it would be enough to aim at it, not necessarily to achieve it. If I fail to actually benefit someone my act can still be altruistic, indeed occasionally the entire value of altruistic behaviour is in the practice and not the outcome (Kitcher 2012, 135). But if I don't aim at their welfare it cannot be altruistic. Another criterion, which is often mentioned in economic and biological contexts, i.e. an overall cost to the agent, is unconvincing. It is unnecessary and leads to unwanted results. In addition, one problem with the psychological account is its reference to ultimate goals or desires. We need to give up that criterion as well. Indeed, we don't need to generally refer to motives at all, we merely need an account of higher-order volitions. So altogether, altruism to my mind is – loosely described and not formally defined – an intentional behaviour the agent identifies with, aiming at the good of others. This account of altruism has advantages over more demanding psychological theories.

The argument I have developed in this paper suggests that altruism should be contrasted with egoism but not with self-interest. Often, the latter two are identified, but they need not; and there have been philosophers in the past who did draw a distinction between egoism and self-interest, for instance Rousseau who distinguished *amour-propre*, what we might want to call egoism, and *amour de soi*, which is a kind of concern for one’s self. Motivated altruism is actually in the altruist's interest, because it pursues his identity. So we shouldn't contrast altruism with self-interest (cf. Badhwar 1993). Egoism or selfishness implies not taking others into account (Feinberg 2007, 192). But altruism does not require not to take oneself into account. Since altruism – at least in the sense that is of interest in philosophy – is related to what kind of person we want to be, we can always tell a self-interested story about why we are altruistically motivated. This does not undermine altruism but actually founds it; where we grudgingly do something that is beneficial to others, we are indeed not really altruists, though we might behave altruistically.

The main difference between psychological altruism and behavioural and biological accounts, which I have ignored for the purposes of my paper, is that it focuses on the psychological basis of overt behaviour. Surely we can be interested in behaviour only, simply because we have other scientific purposes in mind. The target of
explanation in economy and biology is cooperation; in philosophy it is an aspect of morality. There is a connection between the two, but they are not the same. Still, the two kinds of explanation are not in competition either. There is nothing in the word "altruism" that prevents one from using it in either discipline. However, we need to be cautious of the context. In this paper, my main aim was to highlight certain distinctions we need in order to get a clear grasp of altruism within philosophical debars and to pinpoint particular problems in using the terminology.

References