

11 The future of altruism

Having explored the consequences of altruism in private, social and political life, we shall now tie our arguments together. Altruism experiences striking problems in coexisting with three strong systems of ideas - Darwinism, capitalism and democracy. The first section will make overall judgements of two central issues: are altruistic actions valuable; would morality be better off without altruism? Which sort of values could replace altruism is discussed in the second section. Finally, we venture an assessment of altruism's vitality and the shadow it casts, not least over mankind's future.

11.1 A normative analysis

In the preceding evaluations of altruism from various points of view, comparisons have been made with other approaches to morality. Our conclusions can be summarized in terms of the five categories of human action (see Chapter 2). What proportion of actions in each category is interpretable as good or bad? The following figure gives a rough answer.

To begin with a commentary on this picture, we think it is proper to attribute a very low proportion of bad actions to kin selection and reciprocity. These categories do include certain bad actions, as of individuals stultified by family tradition, nepotism, criminal obligation and the like. Moreover, one of the great changes in human social development has been the shift in behavior from kin selection to reciprocity. But the shift is due to living in ever larger communities, and does not depend on a moral effort as such.

A higher share of bad actions is seen in the case of egoism, and of group egoism. There can be no controversy about the frequency of bad egoism, although many people believe that group egoism is better. Plausibly enough, some traits such as personal self-pity, paranoia, and intellectual extremism are found in individuals but less often accepted by entire groups. However, besides this refining potential, group egoism has at times a negative amplifying effect. Examples abound of the fact that an individual often behaves worse in a group than he does in isolation. Football hooligans are not model citizens in privacy either, yet in mutual company they create dangerous group dynamics and overcome inhibitions, so that a collection of individuals becomes a mob with little sense of responsibility for its actions.

Both democracy and capitalism have had much success in handling group-egoistic conflicts. Capitalism has done so mainly through self-regulation, since a substantial group-egoistic success can subvert

one's own position in the long run. If capitalists can increase their profitability by forming a cartel, it tends to inspire new actors and thus an expansion of capacity, which soon makes the competition even stronger than before the cartel. A union that manages to raise wages without self-regulation may put its members out of work as their customers are lost to cheaper foreign sources of labor.

Democracy's solution to group-egoistic antagonism is greatly influenced by the criterion of majority rule. To gain approval, a program must be appealing for a large group of people. Pathetic, indignant, or myopic presentations are always possible, but ultimately a group's desires need moderation in order to become parts of a package that can win over most of the electorate. Conventional democratic methods have been less successful when it comes to ethnic conflicts, an area with many negative group-egoistic features that commonly result in war (see Chapter 7). For serious conflicts, group egoism is a far worse problem than egoism.

Group egoism is generally justified by the thesis that "unity gives strength". This increase of a group's strength with its size implies a greater power to do both good and evil. Alongside its quantitative significance, too, it has qualitative consequences: some unsuitable ideas are eliminated and other aspects are aggravated. Hence, we have shown the same proportion of bad actions here as for egoism.

The highest level of bad actions has been ascribed to altruism. This judgement disagrees with the traditional view of altruistic actions - as quantitatively weak but qualitatively superior. Two chief factors motivate a skeptical evaluation of altruism. One is its considerable propensity for moral crusading. Most of us sympathize with the brave struggles of freedom-fighters; yet those who are freedom-fighters in some people's eyes are merely armed bandits and terrorists for others. To assess such a propensity on the whole requires a survey of idealistic militancy, not only selected instances. The usual inference, we expect, would be negative.

The other factor is altruism's uneconomical attitude: it promotes sacrifices without regard to their utility, often yielding a rational deficit. Publicly, everything from pyramids to prayer-houses is built by somebody's decision and at somebody else's expense. In private affairs, irrational decisions create similar deficits. On top of that, our self-respect is damaged by feelings of uselessness and dependence on charity. Nobody is so strong that he never needs help which cannot immediately be repaid - but this is reciprocity, not altruism. While friends are essential, alms from an altruist are hardly preferable.

Looking at the five categories of action in this light, there appears to be no advantage in avoiding self-interested behavior and stimulating altruistic behavior. Any change of that kind would be a counterproductive project. The opposite effort, however, has definite attractions, since one could very well do without the category of altruism. Again, it should be emphasized that nothing is wrong with altruistic actions which are good. But these must be judged as parts of a package, not in isolation. If one can keep the good parts and

discard only the bad, so much the better; yet if necessary, one should refuse the good in order to get rid of the bad. What does not make sense is to accept the bad because some good effects occur. For instance, an authoritarian society tends to have a strong police corps and maintain control over criminals, whereas liberalization engenders not just more freedom but also further criminality. We must distinguish side-effects from primary effects in reaching an assessment. Altruism has too long been evaluated on the basis of minor side-effects and its supposedly good intentions.

The origins of altruism are mostly traceable to two types of actions. First, complex group-egoistic projects were gradually turned into grandiose schemes manipulated by leaders' interests; a vague group interest became high-flown altruism. Secondly, what began as reciprocal actions - in particular, conspicuous mutual initiatives - have been reinterpreted and misunderstood, resulting in various altruistic habits. Still, unless such aberrant behavior continues to enjoy ideological encouragement in the future, it should be able to rejoin those original types through the modification of ideas.

The altruistic sphere

Even people who share this criticism of the altruistic category of action may argue in favor of altruistic morality, which is widely believed to have positive effects beyond its primary task - the inspiration of altruistic actions. For example, does altruistic morality foster a more considerate egoism, or lay a solid foundation for reciprocal cooperation?

One objection to the latter view is that a double standard of morality would then be obvious: an approach is advocated without being pursued practically. In addition, its long-term effectiveness is questionable. A double standard demands that the moralist have an excellent memory, and an ability to make inconsistencies seem straightforward. By the same token, it calls for a fair amount of stupidity among those who embrace it.

A common justification of a double standard is the claim that a desperate situation has arisen. Necessity obeys no laws. The tiny David of altruism stands alone against the Goliath of egoism. But our earlier functional analysis urges a change in this picture, since more than two actors are involved. Kin selection, group egoism, and reciprocity are not frail teenagers - they have survived for millions of years. Goliath has not disposed of them, nor is he likely to do so even if David leaves the arena. Human society does not stand or fall with altruism.

Reciprocity is constantly battling attempts by egoists to manipulate the system for their benefit. Many of these attacks are disguised because the egoist lacks an argument that can attract public approval. A bank robber often has poor reasons for his moral right to the bank's money. Altruistic morality advances a similar anti-reciprocal ideology to undermine the right and control which

reciprocity defends against egoistic abuse. Just as it is sometimes said that the Pope and the prostitute join hands in criticizing free love, the altruist's notion of generous giving attaches to the parasite's taste for taking without any return service. Altruism's main effect is scarcely that it counteracts harmful egoism, but that it harms reciprocal morality.

If we see all this from an evolutionary perspective, it is clear that altruism can never threaten egoism. Altruism is not a stable strategy. What might happen is that a strong reciprocal system can develop towards an altruistic one - but without the control by return services that is implicit in the reciprocal system, an altruistic system rapidly degenerates into an egoistic one. That the process can be reversed by rebuilding an equally strong reciprocal system is in no way clear; hence, the reciprocal system must be protected from such a decline.

Altruism's ability to bring about improvements in the egoistic category of action is also dubious, since another effect is its weighty support for the interests of leaders. People seek power even without altruistic influence, but altruism endows a leader with much greater authority. He is to carry out the Perfect Program for which sacrifices are required; everyone else is to strive for the same goal, a duty and a favor which few would deny themselves. A principal interest of the leader is to find a method of manipulating his subjects so that they let their egoism be further subordinated to his own egoism. It is difficult to imagine a totalitarian state that does not propagate an altruistic philosophy.

There are many motives for war, but altruism is a recurrent and important component. Repulsive means need an appealing end in order to fascinate the participants. If a warrior has limited opportunities, yet faces unusual risks, his rationality must be equipped with an arsenal of fictitious advantages. Compulsion is a frequent tool for recruitment, and a complement - not an alternative - to ideological zeal. With a combination of threats and prayers, the soldiers always march. In civilian life as well, numerous altruistic projects have unfolded ever since pyramids arose from group-egoistically rational irrigation schemes. Through the centuries, aided by altruistic ideas, high priests have driven helpless populations to engage in pyramidal "progress" as a moral and legal obligation.

Apart from leaders' interests, an additional reason why altruistic morality exists at all is that, by advertising its attractive values, the common man can manipulate his surroundings. To represent himself as good and generous is a fine way of winning popularity: it appeals to the selfishness in others. The presumed altruist does not address their altruistic feelings, but primarily their egoistic proclivities. Cheating on a reciprocal cooperation is invariably tempting, and the possibility of exaggerating one's reciprocal sacrifices is a plausible source of the advertising moral. The step is short from sentimental talk about reciprocity to sentimental talk about altruism.

A more private effect is what we have called subegoism. This low-quality behavior occurs when the reciprocal system is experienced as

too unreliable and treacherous. Altruistic propaganda lends a lofty and self-sacrificing glow to many aspects of society, but the subegoist is repelled by self-sacrifice. As a result, he exhibits narrow-minded egoism, and is the first to suffer from it. Such behavior could be changed with a strong reciprocal morality, but an altruistic one simply reinforces it, despite contrary intentions.

Thus, the view that altruistic morality has positive side-effects on other action is not easy to substantiate. It seems well worth doubting the justification, not only of altruistic actions, but also of the underlying morals.

11.2 What next?

An inevitable question, after criticizing altruistic morality, is what should be its successor. Let us look at the consequences on the levels examined previously, from the private to the international.

Decent behavior at the outset of a relationship is ordinarily attributed to the influence of altruism. However, few attitudes yield so immediate a reward. We are all sometimes absorbed by our personal problems and uninterested in society. The response is unambiguous - a sour expression is rarely met with smiles, but a welcoming and engaged demeanor is repaid in kind. These reactions are definitely reciprocal.

It is also argued that, without a rule of "turning the other cheek", there would be ever more egoistic conflicts. Yet normal social skills advise that we refrain from wildly revenging injustices, whether real or imagined; reciprocal cooperation presupposes a degree of broadmindedness. Conversely, we have no reason to preserve a one-sided relationship which holds no potential for us. To "love thine enemy" cannot be regarded as laudable. Instead, it might be best to forget a transgression and go further, not in a spirit of sweetness but with the aim of saving ourselves negative feelings and focusing our mental energy on more constructive goals.

Two foundations for morality - consistency and honesty - were stressed earlier (see Section 10.3). In private life, it must be up to each individual how he builds relationships. People may meet to do nothing better than sharing a bottle of booze, yet this is acceptable if they wish to do so. Most of us have social ties at different levels with different people. Our duties and expectations are rather small in many cases, and extensive in others where the relationships are elaborate. One is wise to maintain a broad range of types of relationships, so the ambition is not to issue strict commandments and demand adherence to them. Everybody should be a leading decision-maker about his own morality.

Altruistic gratitude has a bitter taste of impotence. Even when an altruistic relationship is not one-sided, it is often based on a false public image: both parties cloak themselves as Good Samaritans. There is greater honesty and dignity in reciprocal gratitude which rests upon long-term equality, even if one party is unable to be more than a beneficiary for the moment. "Thanks, I'll remember that" is a

sign not only of preference for reciprocal friendship over altruistic receiving, but also of assuming more moral responsibility.

Many altruistic claims are not critically evaluated. Their limits are set by the fact that they must have a certain probability to prevent the listener from perceiving them as attempts at fraud and, therefore, as personal provocations. A moralist of the altruistic school is, in effect, preaching water and drinking wine. Far from being a moral beacon, he sabotages serious morality. The death of altruism would be a step forward for sincerity and openness. In the private sphere, altruism has chiefly contributed to erecting false facades between people. A reciprocal morality, on the other hand, is fully capable of motivating people to be mutually considerate.

Social relations in general would become more simple and straightforward in the absence of altruism, and with reciprocity as the dominant principle. A crucial aspect, about which we have said little, is the distinction between individual and state powers. Our critique of altruism could be combined with a libertarian outlook. Very strong guarantees of integrity and free choice might be desired in almost all situations amenable to reciprocity. This is neither inconsistent in itself, nor contradictory to the foregoing assessment of altruism.

It is, however, not a necessary outcome or one that the present authors propose. We believe in a strong reciprocal sphere, which may lead to enforced decisions with rights and duties for individuals in collective contexts - such as compulsory public education, taxes to finance pensions, and so on. A decision for the individual's benefit is not, we think, a fundamental violation of rights, but a disadvantage that can be outweighed by advantages. As social animals, people are continually influenced by each other's decisions and actions. This is sometimes an extremely close connection, requiring public unity in order to function. While compulsion is nominally a drawback, it can be practically justified if there really are benefits in a collective rather than voluntary choice. The great threat, which can render collective solutions quite negative, arises when they need not live up to any reciprocal rationality, being supported and excused by an altruistic ambition.

Reciprocity, like democracy and the market economy, is able to serve as a supreme ideology that sharply reduces human conflicts by employing a shared perspective. Antagonisms exist among both individuals and groups, but there is a limit to how far some people can be pushed into adapting to others' preferences. The line between allowed and forbidden demands is drawn partly by tradition. A degree of control by the conventional majority does not seem to us a dire threat against individual integrity. For a majority, the appeal of oppressing a smaller group is restricted by everyone's awareness that he, too, belongs in certain respects to a small group which might be oppressed. It is better to mind one's own business, live and let live.

At times, a popular majority holds that a collective interest should be imposed universally in a given issue. To interfere with such an effort would be to pit individualism against democracy. In our opinion, this is a risk not worth taking, and minorities should argue

for a more liberal policy instead of asserting rights superior to the majority decision. Still more wrong are attempts to portray some collective solutions as "rights" with special moral dignity. Granted, the majority does not define what is right - but an alternative to the democratic pragmatism of accepting the majority approach is hard to find. Although political rules that are consistent and farsighted offer enormous advantages, it is a mistake to try turning central political decisions into jurisprudence. A long list of rights will not provide effective or justified protection against a majority; on the contrary, a negative effect is to dilute the importance and clarity of the basic rules which deserve to be called human and democratic rights.

Yet the gravest danger in human society is not that a majority may oppress a minority. Such oppression is easy to execute in view of the unequal powers involved, but the majority's profit is marginal, whereas the minority's suffering or loss is very significant. Much more attractive is the opportunity for a minority to benefit itself at the majority's expense. Even without democracy, some acceptance of a majority is essential, so there is always a need for manipulation. How can a minority persuade the majority to go along with its projects? Almost invariably, the search for an appealing motive results in an altruistic goal which agrees with the minority's special interest.

Lacking a general reverence for altruistic goals, the citizenry is less likely to be lured into destructive behavior by a minority. The majority may, and will, decide wrongly on occasion; but that risk decreases when the possibilities of duping the majority with lofty aims are diminished. Discussion can then focus more upon the expected real effects of various decisions, and less upon presumed good intentions and peculiar duties. This ought to entail a great boost in the quality of public debate.

We believe that group-egoistic ambitions will remain a leading factor in liberal societies. They will pursue special interests when they have a chance, but the mere knowledge that they represent special interests can be sobering. Conflicts in society become extreme only if a special interest sees itself as the agent of a higher goal. The most hateful antagonisms occur in confrontations between altruistic ideals, whose Ultimate Truth is seldom tolerant of alternatives with the same claims.

A special interest does not capture the majority's attention unless one finds issues in which it can be argued to coincide with the public interest. Such ambitions and arguments are not inconsistent with a rational and democratic debate. Every decision in the public interest has the consequence of favoring certain special interests and, at least in relative terms, inhibiting others. If, for example, one expands education and decreases pollution, some groups will benefit while others suffer. The public interest is never separable from, or neutral to, special interests. What can be dispensed with, and what the debate is better off without, are people who supposedly stand for a higher moral right and demand that others submit to it: those who need not appeal to a majority's self-interest, since the majority has a moral duty to exalt the ideal above its own interest. Once agitators

get an audience for this priority, society takes a giant leap from liberalism toward dictatorship.

Sound morality is not characterized by a large number of self-sacrificing rules, but by a few truthful and realistic rules. Today's morality exhibits too much crowding of pretentious imperatives. The departure of altruism will leave less crowding, not a vacuum.

The egoism of low motives should be recognized for its social achievements. Adam Smith was the first to understand self-interest and its effects on society: "By promoting his own interests, he often benefits society more effectively than if he had actually intended to do so. I do not know that so much good has been done by those who have influenced commerce for the public's best."<1>

Neither will altruism be missed in the realm of pure politics. Democracy displays clear revolutionary strength in comparison with dictatorships. It resembles less a delicate rose that dies after a night's frost, than a tough weed which struggles onward under the worst conditions and survives bestial attempts at extermination. Throughout the world, liberal society is an attractive option, for no societies are so hermetically sealed that their citizens are completely ignorant of the option. Its seeds are in the wind, ready to take root.

The influential forces have not been democratic exhortation, foreign aid to deserving projects, and fraternizing among leaders. It is the liberal society's power of attraction that counts: people everywhere are striving for better material circumstances, freedom from despotism, and a right to control their own lives. Democracies are probably endangered most by assuming tasks without critically judging whether they are really qualified for the democratic agenda. This is definitely a context in which to avoid the unwarranted desires arising from altruistic visions.

Now that the world's population is seeking democracy and capitalism, it would be sad if the leaders of liberal countries were to continue entangling themselves in dubious altruistic projects with polished despots. Confusion is created when democrats begin to feel guilt for democracy's successes, beg forgiveness for capitalism, and coax at democracy to merge with undemocratic ideas and rules. A program of intellectual enlightenment is needed not least in the democracies. The liberal strategy must be to consolidate its gains and give all support to those societies which have already taken its path, not to look for common denominators in altruistic ideals.

Democracy has the capacity to establish a military hegemony that rules out disastrous attacks against democratic countries. This is a vast improvement over past threats from national socialism and communism. But international cooperation and armed strength are no protection from internal decay, as in Germany and Spain during the 1930s. A democratic political philosophy would be stronger if supported by a coherent moral philosophy. Today we stand on moral grounds that are better suited to other structures.

The implications for what can be regarded as just are also important. By banishing God and solidarity from the table of honor, we focus attention on justice. Is it true, as many philosophers think, that no justice exists without suprahuman authority - or can justice be defined in secular terms?

One proposal is to see equality as a form of justice. While justice demands similar rewards or punishments for similar actions, it adds that actions of different value should lead to different results. This is obvious where it concerns retributive justice: few of us would expect car theft to receive the same punishment as murder.

When justice is made identical to equality, a suspicion arises that the cause lies in careless study of the Bible. Wise King Solomon is familiar for his administration of justice. He found an egalitarian answer to an argument between two women, who each claimed to be the mother of a baby - cut it in two, and give each woman half. Some people have stopped reading at this point, and concluded that this was the famous Solomonic solution. But the story went on: the false mother exposed herself by accepting the egalitarian idea, so Solomon gave the whole baby to the other woman. The proposal that justice amounted to an equal distribution was only a trick to reveal destructive envy.

If equality is a deficient candidate for justice, and valid only under certain conditions, some other rule is required to judge actions that are unequal. The classic image of Justice is a goddess with a blindfold, symbolizing impartiality. She listens to relevant reasoning, but must not see the faces of the accused and the accuser. Even if one of them is a favorite of the gods, she has to remain unmoved. When this metaphysical arbiter is retired, the question becomes whether impartial justice has done so as well. We believe, however, that a citizen has a considerable ability to play an equivalent role.

John Rawls is popular in philosophical circles for an effort to discover norms for right and wrong in his book, "A Theory of Justice". Both his premises and conclusions should nonetheless, in our view, be criticized. Rawls' search for a fixed point or "original position", from which inferences can be drawn, has the same weakness as that of the old social-contract philosophers. His central thesis, the principle of difference, is a distributive condition: a new solution must be an improvement for the group which is worst off. In many cases, this principle is either insufficient or unnecessary. Nothing indicates that people must voluntarily choose a "maximin" strategy of making the worst possible outcome as good as possible. People usually adopt a strategy that can pay off well if they are lucky.

Any theory of justice should build on a very strong processual outlook - the action comes first, and it determines what will be a just result. Rawls is aware of this, and tries to create a processual theory, but his principle of difference opposes it. To clarify the fact, one might test the principle on retributive justice. As a general rule of priority in humanizing punishment, should the longest prison sentences be shortened, or are short sentences for small crimes perhaps the hardest of all? Rawls erects an ambitious structure, but

on shaky foundations. Thus we return to the classic blindfold.

The saying that "where you stand in a question depends on where you sit" is appropriate indeed. As a party in a conflict, one leans on all supporting arguments and lightly dismisses all counterarguments, which means that one is a quite unreliable judge. Our approach, though, is to pass legislation instead of judgement. By definition, a good moral rule should be universalizable - valid across both space and time. In a liberal society, the legal system meets this criterion nicely enough, and a law lives up pretty well to the demand for consistent usage. Nor does the citizen have any reasonable hope of influencing laws so that they are constantly adapted to his shifting needs. It is wise to approve of laws that are good in the long run.

Often a person is a potential holder of both sides in a conflict of interests. A businessman is by turns a seller and buyer, and a law that can satisfy his requirements from both viewpoints may be called just. It places sensible demands on both parties, and can therefore be said to meet the norm for reciprocal morality. Businessmen do, to be sure, frequently fight in court about individual transactions - but one may argue that, on a general level, they agree to a great extent about what constitutes a just law of purchase. As long as it is possible to put oneself in both positions, there is a chance of making a balanced judgement.

A different situation occurs with rules that, for example, invariably award custody to the mother in a divorce case, or declare the husband to be the head of the household. Each person is locked by his or her gender into one side of a conflict. Does an advantage for that gender imply an advantage for the person? In many such cases, the lock is opened by kin selection. Men have sisters and daughters, while women have brothers and sons. These are powerful incentives to strive for a balanced solution which does not mistreat the other gender. Even a loaded issue like rape need not be partial to one sex: a fair balance between the length of punishment and the criteria of evidence is what can be accepted by a citizen who does not know whether the rules will be used in a trial with his son as the accused or his daughter as the victim.

To discover just rules, a reciprocal morality is required that has, as its highest principle, the resolution of such bilateral judgements. It is an attitude that calls for broad-minded empathy, since problems must be seen from diverse perspectives. The cornerstones of liberal society - capitalism and democracy - have greater resources for enlightened empathy. Although conflicts are unavoidable, the public can understand different views because they are not alien. It is also less locked into fixed points of view, for change has become a part of society; to hope for support from a partial rule is less wise than trying to eliminate partial rules that may prove disadvantageous for oneself. Hence the opportunities grow for reaching substantial agreement as to what is just. Perfectionism will never be attained by the legal system, any more than the economic or political systems, but the overall unity can be enough to provide a well-working system. There are grounds for confidence in the citizenry's design of guidelines for

justice.

It is a natural reflex to think in one's own terms, but reflection and empathy widen one's horizons. This is notably difficult for two groups of people, as they are locked into a one-sided perspective. First, those who are personally involved in a conflict from the outset have a real partial interest, overshadowing the opponent's hypothetical interest. Secondly, a just assessment is also hard for people who are not affected by the law in question, but regard their view as a public profile - showing them to be tough, sympathetic, loyal or the like. These tend to be the lawyers, politicians, representatives and advertisers, who profit by playing wholehearted spokesmen for a partial interest. If such agitators become decision-makers instead of advisers, the scales of justice turn into sticky leverage.

Frequently there are several solutions to a problem, each offering some balance between rights and duties for both parties. Marriage rules and employment contracts can be made strongly binding, or easy to annul; benefits are accompanied by drawbacks, and nobody can enjoy security as well as freedom at the same time. A slanted relationship, which breaks the norm of justice, will often lead to worse cooperation. In a society with many freedoms of action, slanted rules are not easy to uphold without being avoided or circumvented, which has negative effects on the favored party too.

An alternative to justice based on the individual citizen is the justice built upon an organization of experts, who stand for an aggregate interest or even the public interest. Such a candidate is the judicial system. In the United States, compared to the rest of the Western world, this system in practice exerts a greater legislative power by reinterpreting the Constitution. What have the results been?

A special form of distribution policy is pursued. Victims of various sorts are awarded lavish damages. This compensation is paid by the overwhelming majority of citizens through insurance premiums, prices and taxes. As one effect, many playgrounds have been closed because their municipalities cannot afford to pay so much compensation for children who hurt themselves. Calculations show that legally justified examinations and medication cost an extra 5-6 billion dollars per year.<2> This policy is certainly beneficial to the happy - or less unhappy - people who are compensated. But whether it represents the aggregate interest of pedestrians, parents and patients is disputable. The motive is less plausibly the redistribution itself, than the huge average profit which these transactions bring to individuals in the legal system. With 250 lawyers per 100,000 inhabitants, the United States has more and better-paid lawyers than do other countries.<3>

The union's claims are, at all events, counteracted by those of corporate interests. Yet when an organized special interest can appear to be, not only an aggregate interest, but actually a public interest, its opportunities to profit will increase. Even a lawyer who consistently defends playgrounds against damage claims must be tempted to join in. A more complex situation with new obligations can bring him more clients, while a definite stop to these cases would throw him out of work.

What seems wrong is not that nobles, union leaders, and lawyers try to motivate their attitude with the public interest - and, in fact, are sometimes motivated by it. The mistake is to credit them with any more enlightened ability. For their choice essentially represents the interests of a guild, not justice. It is difficult to see any other basis for justice than the individual citizen - not because he is more honest or morally elevated, but because he has less opportunity to become a favorite of the system. The citizen has stronger reasons for endeavoring chiefly to avoid being exploited instead of hoping to exploit others. He must, so to speak, pay much more for liability insurance than what he earns in damages. If he wants a chance to make a real profit, it is better to buy a plain lottery ticket than to include this function in the legal system. Again, justice is soundly anchored in democracy. As the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr put it: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."<4>

The strength of empathy-based justice can be gauged by its view of security before the law. For a totalitarian government, to condemn innocent people is a weakness, but a minor one. The main point is commonly to display the leader's intention of stiffly punishing certain behavior. Fresh bodies of people convicted for heresy convey a clear message, even if the victims never had a heretical thought. Such a state readily arrives at judgements like: "It's better to kill ten innocents than to let one crook get away." In a democratic society, the judgement is so different as nearly to reverse the proportion between the two types of error. The citizens dislike permitting unpunished murderers to circulate freely, yet a condemned innocent is still worse. The role of a condemned innocent can easily be assumed. Justice will not only aim to make as many correct decisions as possible, but also ensure that any mistakes are unbalanced according to the rule "innocent until proven guilty". This view of security is a more plausible index of our degree of "civilization" than the occurrence of mild punishments.

Thus, the goddess' impartial empathy, combined with reciprocal morality, is an attractive recommendation. Opposing it is a notion of justice where sympathy for one of the parties is central to judgement. The object of sympathy varies - from the poor to the plutocrat - but the advocates' speeches resemble each other to the verge of being interchangeable. This approach finds it hard to give a consistent, serious proposal about justice; yet clients are inspired by the speeches, and sympathy is constantly argued to be decisive for both creating and applying laws. In spite of that, the feverish whimpering and exaggerated indignation may be calmly ignored by Justice, who resists taking off her blindfold to wipe away a sentimental tear.

A similar focal role for the ordinary citizen was envisaged by Adam Smith. He held that a fundamental human trait is the ability to place oneself in others' position and see the world through their eyes. However, this inclination operates in both directions: the actor also has a tendency to perceive himself from the viewpoint of an

"impartial spectator". The latter perspective exerts a strong moral force upon how he judges his own behavior.<5>

11.3 Altruism's shadow

The evaluation of altruism versus egoism is seldom a primary topic in political debate, so there is a risk of underestimating its practical significance. Many other philosophical issues occupy the limelight, such as that of individualism versus collectivism, or of idealism versus materialism. But one's attitude toward altruism is a basic ingredient in other questions. Unfortunately, the agitation for altruism has been a negative influence.

People have different opinions of how to choose sensibly between individualism and collectivism. To what extent should solidarity and equality be given priority, rather than individual choice? Altruistic assumptions enter this question with the judgement - explicit or tacit - that collective solutions are most to be admired, resulting in moralistic influence that distorts the debate. Collectivism is supported not only by its possible advantages for some groups, but also by the virtue of self-denial and of refusing advantages. One freely preaches the virtues of sacrifice on behalf of those who lose, while reaping egoistic advantages for oneself.

Altruism makes an analogous appearance in discussions of idealism and materialism. Man does not live by bread alone: thus far, most people would agree. Yet this is a long way from attributing high morals to a person who shouts that other people have too much bread. In addition, the idea that money corrupts is seemingly expressed most often by the loudest shakers of collection-cans. A more balanced treatment of different components' importance for human happiness is disrupted by altruistic values, and tolerance and reason are pushed back to accommodate pretentious prejudice. How can we debate the methods of increasing man's well-being, when one party has only paradoxical claims and theories? His mantle, a burden to his own shoulders, spreads joy upon another's: the road to welfare runs through privation. But such welfare is a suspicious goal. Welfare according to a nonmaterialistic choice casts a shadow over the privation. It has to cause suffering and happiness at the same time.

As an ultimate, inherent principle, altruism affects a number of other issues that are more directly coupled to political debate and decision. Some comments on these are now in order.

The many masks of altruism

Christianity has waged a continual campaign against individualism and capitalism. A main document in this respect is the Vatican encyclical "Populorum Progressio", a moralizing epic of individual and national self-sacrifice. Opposing individualism, independence, pride and materialism, it does not support capitalism or democracy, but

criticizes them for having succeeded better than other systems. Here we see abundant evidence that Christianity is indeed the slave morality which Nietzsche accused it of being. Whoever has something material should feel guilty, and dependence becomes a virtue.

A Jesuit theologian, John Murray, wrote appreciatively: "The Marxists have proposed one way, and in pursuing their program they rely on man alone. Now Pope Paul VI has issued a detailed plan to accomplish the same goal on the basis of true humanism - humanism that recognizes man's religious nature." In defense of Marxism, however, it must be said to have sought a different moral basis, namely in the right to one's own work. The encyclical is no "detailed plan" but a collection of sententious remarks that consistently build on a moral and social principle of begging. In its economic analysis, the Church inhabits the Garden of Eden with manna raining from heaven. Anybody is entitled to request manna from others if he happens to have an empty bowl; no work is done, and begging is a suitable economic model. In this regard, the Church cannot be accused of hypocrisy, having constantly used begging for centuries as a principle of its operations.

Influence does not flow chiefly from socialism to Christianity, though, but in the reverse direction. Marxism at first took a liberal stance on the essential question of the right attaching to work. A cornerstone of nineteenth-century Marxism was the doctrine of surplus value - that the worker's demands rested upon a right to the fruits of his work. This doctrine was not a Marxist invention; David Ricardo, the liberal political economist, constructed it. Liberals and socialists agreed that the right was created by work, while disagreeing on how rights were to be calculated. Since then, the Left has generally abandoned this moral foundation and adopted the Christian view. The fruits of work belong not to the worker but to the needy; that is, production conveys not rights, but primarily obligations.

The Left still backs the worker when he clashes with the employer or better-paid employees. Yet he is no longer a central figure with any moral right to speak of. His priority is rather low on the ladder of needs - unless he is injured, becomes unemployed, or strikes. The main norm and priority is to benefit people who do not produce. And when the producer ceases to hold the right to the fruits of work, his significance sinks in other ways. A worker is to be glad that he has any work. The distributor of resources, the good shepherd, emerges as the hero of the new age.

In further respects, too, Marxism has lost its material ambition and developed toward idealism. The strongest element of dialectical materialism was always the metaphysics of dialectical thinking. It is striking how the trend in philosophy as a whole has diverged from previous centuries. Great minds whom we link with clear ideas about successful systems have lost popularity - such as John Locke, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill and, not least, Charles Darwin. Instead the stage is dominated by relative mediocrities: the German trio of Kant, Hegel and Marx, the more modern French duo of Sartre and Levi-Strauss, who distinguished themselves through imaginative speculation with no

proven value. Philosophy scarcely shows signs of proceeding from nonsense to clarity, but continues its tireless voyage into the intellectual fog.

Not long ago, a report was heard of how imprisoned soldiers from the Maoist guerrillas of the Sendero Luminoso spent their free time. One project was to learn together the text of the song "The East is Red".<7> Curiously, it had not been translated, so these Peruvian communists memorized it in Chinese syllables which were meaningless to them. This may seem only a bizarre anecdote, but contains a deeper and unpleasant parallel. People retreat from a language with personal messages into learning by mechanical repetition and mimicry. That they might represent only the last phase of an untypical group is not comforting, as the same behavior occurs elsewhere. For centuries, other peasants have mechanically memorized syllables, such as the Latin liturgy in the Catholic Church.

An additional likeness between normal Christian and totalitarian behavior is their concept of the visionary leader. Hermann Göring made a telling observation: "Just as the Roman Catholic considers the Pope infallible in all matters concerning religion and morals, so do we National Socialists believe, with the same inner conviction, that for us the Leader is, in all political and other matters concerning the national and social interests of the people, simply infallible."<8>

Totalitarian ideas about pure blood, party perfection, and so forth, may be seen as sober stories in comparison with Christianity's immaculate conception and theodicy. What unites them is not only the psychological approach, but also much of the moral: human egoism must be subordinated to an ideal. It is fair to recognize that the Church has become a great deal more tolerant in recent centuries. Still, the Islamic fundamentalists are a reminder that time does not necessarily broaden the religious mind.

We are not persuaded, therefore, that totalitarian movements in our century are a contrast to the heritage of religion. Rather, these are new variants of venerable recipes. If their repetition is to be prevented, one should look for an alternative basis which differs sharply from that of altruism.

Christians and socialists tend to congratulate themselves for having a positive view of mankind and believing in the species' innate goodness. Such a statement is of very doubtful substance. All smart advertisers stroke the customer's hair: "Today's quality-conscious, well-informed consumers certainly demand..." The content lies in the nature of the system, not in its formal publicity. What characterize socialism and Christianity is hardly a faith in man's strength and goodness, but faith in a good shepherd, who will lead his confused sheep along the right path. This view does not fit easily into a democracy.

The strange thing is that altruism has managed to flourish in spite of its opposition to democracy, capitalism and Darwinism. One can interpret it as an odd tradition, but this would not clarify its danger. Values that essentially conflict with the new systems weaken them. Democracy is hailed at the same time as voters are instructed to rise above their self-interest. Capitalism is accepted as a matter of

necessity, yet its simple-mindedness is stressed and, ideally, its mongers should be cast out of the temple. On purely moral grounds, other models are depicted as somewhat finer, if also a little less effective. As for Darwinism, it has to be barred from the staterooms, since its implications fail to follow the norms of Paradise.

This metaphysical resistance to the consequences of democracy, capitalism and Darwinism is quite understandable. But why their own "new Trinity" has not mounted a more massive attack upon altruism, the altar of metaphysics, remains a mystery. Despite the setbacks suffered in recent times by worldly spokesmen of metaphysics and its political philosophy, nothing has been done to dislodge its moral philosophy.

We see here an ominous passiveness that undermines important values. As Ayn Rand wrote: "Altruism is incompatible with freedom, with capitalism and with individual rights. One cannot combine the pursuit of happiness with the moral status of a sacrificial animal." <9> Lofty morality and its effects have been summed up in judgements that, while perhaps severe, ring no less true. Karl Popper concluded: "The attempt to make heaven on earth invariably produces hell." <10>

An historical perspective was given by Arthur Koestler: "It is not the murderers, the criminals, the delinquents and the wildly nonconformist who have embarked on the really significant rampages of killing, torture and mayhem. Rather it is the conformist, virtuous citizens, acting in the name of righteous causes and intensely held beliefs, who throughout history have perpetrated the fiery holocausts of war, the religious persecutions, the sacks of cities, the wholesale rape of women, the dismemberment of the old and the young and the other unspeakable horrors... The crimes of violence committed for selfish, personal motives are historically insignificant compared to those committed 'ad majorem gloriam Dei', out of a self-sacrificing devotion to a flag, a leader, a religious faith, or a political conviction." <11>

Our alarm is only increased, however, by the fact that fanatics are not alone in promoting altruism. Many who have realized the wreckage spread by utopian thinking are nonetheless willing to try it again. For example, the evolutionary biologist George C. Williams has written: "People can now espouse remote and inclusive ideals far removed from the selfishness that gave rise to the power to do so. It was inevitable that people in the novel civic environments of the last few millennia would develop aspirations for such things as the dictatorship of the proletariat, or the triumph of the master race, or the savings of souls. Because such strivings are beyond the direct action of natural selection, I have some hope that some such cause can provide the human artifice that can save humanity from human nature." <12>

These sentences should be scrutinized. He makes no bones about reality, yet he sees no option except to repeat the same eternally compromised experiments. The option, of course, is to stop calling mankind's worst side its best side. Its weakness for great illusions, offering a different solution to human dilemmas than what can really be achieved, enabling fantasy to triumph over reason and experience, is surely a sufficient cause for worry. Altruism ought to be shamed in

public, instead of posing as an innocent intention with a streak of astonishingly bad luck.

Altruism's survival is an obvious threat. In our opinion, though, another outcome is likelier. Actions based on more acceptable morals occur in society; modern culture grew up in spite of a lofty morality's inflexibility, and could not be arrested by it. Democracy, capitalism and Darwinism are all principles rooted in individual self-interest, a point that is often disputed. Cultural growth is strong confirmation of the moral values harmonizing with these pragmatically and intellectually dominant systems. In particular, the morality of integrity has emerged powerfully since the Enlightenment. From the humble subject whose task was to serve in the sweat of his brow, a much more willful citizen has evolved. Reciprocity is an operational morality with wide influence, even if unacknowledged in moral sermons. Darwinism has filled the void of knowledge that various religions attempted to provide, and which gave them moral authority.

Self-interest is not as narrow and myopic as altruistic critics suppose. Genetic self-interest is evidently farsighted; the consumer and voter maximize not only welfare grants and potato chips, but also pensions and educations. One need not believe in an afterlife to think about tomorrow: a plain concern for the future of one's children is enough. Morality does nicely without an altruist in the driver's seat, for all his insistence on being the only responsible, long-term judge. The Pope, Big Brother, and the Führer require superhuman ability or inspiration to maintain their systems, whereas democracy and capitalism perform well even in the absence of heroic leaders. If one is skeptical about the existence of supermen, they ought not to be the kingpins of one's culture.

Our prognosis is that altruism will fade away and become a kind of legends, resembling the old myths of creation. Pictures still recognized by some as the unvarnished truth, but no more playing a central role in serious social discussion. Around the middle of the next century - two hundred years since Darwin wrote "The Origin of Species" - the death of altruism is a possibility.

11 Summary

In reflecting upon morality, one is soon struck by a vast discrepancy between altruism's all-embracing values and the fewness of resultant actions. Further consideration of the altruistic category of behavior reveals that it contains a greater proportion of deplorable actions than do other categories. That the world can improve through more altruistic actions is thus implausible. When the norms of altruism are assessed, their main effect is found to be not a reduction of egoism, but a subversion of reciprocal moral norms, an indirect encouragement of unbridled egoism and group egoism.

Justice seems to consist primarily of reciprocal morality. One might complain about too little idealism or personal liberty, yet

indignation over injustice is due to faults of reciprocity. Altruism has virtually no significance for justice. While life is full of injustices, the need for a god or an afterlife to attain ultimate justice - as concluded by Kant and others - is superfluous. For a more prosaic form of justice, we think, the ordinary citizen is a good lawgiver. His small chances of bending the law for his shifting benefit means that he has strong motives for contributing to legislation that favors a reciprocal balance. He cannot know whether he, or his nearest kin, will become the next criminals or victims, sellers or buyers. He may feel distant from certain minorities, such as homosexuals or stockbrokers. But tolerance is well equipped to overcome antipathy, as long as one upholds a reciprocal morality of "live and let live" when one's own rights are not challenged. By contrast, altruistic morality entails norms that demand general allegiance, regardless of whether they afflict a minority or a majority.

Preachers of altruism were originally chieftains and shamans, but they have multiplied enormously. The egocentric ambitions of a leader's interest acquire more elbow-room if an altruistic goal imbues his followers with a moral duty to participate, though getting nothing directly in return. Altruistic actions arose at an early date through "development" of actions from other categories. Group egoism is simply the coordinated egoism of many individuals, able to beautify itself with ideas such as those of "chosen peoples" and solidarity. Manipulation by a leading class may twist group egoism into altruism.

Altruism probably also derives from the reinterpretation, and assiduous marketing, of actions that once were reciprocal. An altruistic image is advantageous even to the common man: he can attract others who egoistically hope to win his favor, but who thus become so careless that they let themselves be cheated. As an altruist, he presents a fictitious model and benefits when others follow it. Indeed, a small altruistic gesture may add to his credibility. This swindling exploitation of human hopes and wishful thinking can easily turn into self-deception, by blurring the line between true and false altruism.

Despite the destructiveness of altruism, its opportunities for manipulation dissuade most people from criticizing it. A better procedure is to present one's own group as the true altruists, and accuse one's enemies of betraying altruism. All agree that altruism is excellent, and nobody should be surprised that altruism endures as a coolly coercive strategy.

The problem is what it leaves in its wake. Among the gloomiest consequences is that moral philosophy has become a suspect fringe activity, instead of an intellectual aid to the development of better social rules. A double standard of promise and despair is always an obstacle to honest rules and open intercourse. If altruism persists as a respectable morality, it will presumably go on closing doors to mankind as it has so often done in the past. Many of its slogans and flags are ragged, but fresh ones are readily created, to be praised by martyrs with hopes of freeing us from our lowly nature.

Notes chapter 11. The future of altruism

1. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*.
2. *Newsweek*, April 5 1993.
3. *The Economist*, March 5 1994.
4. Reinhol Niebuhr *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 1944, forewords
5. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.
6. Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, p. 315.
7. *Newsweek*, September 28, 1992.
8. Goering, in Schmandt, *A History of Political Philosophy*, p. 467.
9. Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 95.
10. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Vol II, p. 237.
11. Koestler, *The Gost in the Machine*, via van der Molen (1990), p. 85.
12. Williams (1989), p. 212.