

Should the Altruist Stay at Home?

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DOI: 10.17421/2498-9746-11-07

Abstract

We consider altruism as a core characteristic of human beings, grounded on an awareness of our interdependence. We address some of the difficulties that an altruist might encounter when promoting the well-being of those who are different from himself. In cases like this we can find that: the beneficiaries disagree with the altruist about what is good for them, what will benefit them or improve their well-being; and/or the ‘goods’ or benefits that the beneficiaries want the altruist to promote may actually conflict with the altruist’s values. We will discuss whether or not the altruist should ‘stay home’ and refrain from exercising altruism with those who are different from him. We will offer (tentative) solutions that allow (at least in some instances) altruism to be promoted in cases in which the altruist and the beneficiaries have a different understanding of what would promote the well-being of the beneficiaries.

Keywords: Altruism, Well-being, Intersubjectivity, Otherness

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1 INTRODUCTION

Altruism is, for some philosophers such as Thomas Nagel, a core characteristic of human beings. He considers that altruism is a rational requirement for action¹ that relies in the recognition of the reality of others and the realization that we are just “merely an individual among many”.² We agree that altruism is a core characteristic of human beings and in addition, as we will all need to rely on others at some critical moment of our life, we believe that the recognition of our interdependence is central to what is to be human.

In this article, we explore the tension between this idea of kinship that grounds altruism—presupposing certain homogeneity (or commonalities) on human beings—and the importance of addressing and responding to the differences between those human beings. In particular, we will discuss the dilemmas that the altruist has to face when acknowledging the needs of others that are humans ‘like him’, while being aware that they might have a different approach to his own regarding their well-being and how to promote it.

We will explore different solutions to this dilemma and will conclude by favouring a view that acknowledges commonalities of needs between humans but that respects their differences.

2 ALTRUISM AS PROMOTING THE WELL-BEING OF THE OTHER

Kraut’s discussion of altruism as promoting the well-being of other is useful to address the dilemmas that an altruist might face regarding difference. According to Kraut, “Altruists do not aim only at the relief of suffering or the avoidance of harm—they also try to provide positive benefits to others for their sake”.³ He also considers that “altruistic acts are guided by assumptions made by the agent about the well-being of some other individual or group”.⁴ Characterizing altruists as grounding their acts in “making assumptions about the well-being of others” while accepting that “well-being is a disputed matter” opens up questions related to the appropriateness of altruism when directed to others whom, being very

¹T. NAGEL, *The Possibility of Altruism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1970, p. 3.

²*Ibidem*.

³R. KRAUT, *Altruism*, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), ed. by E. N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/altruism/> (accessed 16/07/2025).

⁴*Ibidem*.

different from the altruist, might have a different approach to what would be a desirable intervention to improve their well-being.

3 SHOULD THE ALTRUIST STAY AT HOME?

If the altruist promotes what she thinks is good for others that are very different from herself, we might find that: the beneficiaries disagree with the altruist on what it is good for them, what will benefit them or improve their well-being; and/or that the ‘goods’ or benefits that the beneficiaries would like the altruist to promote might actually conflict with the values of the altruist.

We will discuss whether or not the altruist should ‘stay’ at home, that is, whether the altruist should benefit or do good only to others who are like her and share her values and beliefs about what constitute ‘well-being’.

Let’s discuss these possibilities in more detail. The experiences of British philosopher Anne Sellers⁵ when she visited the Mother Teresa Women’s University (MTWU thereafter) in India can illustrate some of the experiences that an altruist might encounter when engaging with those different from herself.

Before Sellers arrived at India, as a supporter of ‘epistemic democracy’, she expected to have a fruitful conversation with the female students and colleagues at the Indian institution and exchange/debate their views on different topics. Furthermore, she was visiting a Women’s university whose motto is ‘towards equality’ and being herself a feminist, she expected to have many things in common with her hosts which will help them in learning from one another and in their mutual growth.

However, once she arrived MTWU she found that her two presuppositions were challenged. First, she noticed that her expectations of how universities work and what they are for, clashed with the realities of India and that her efforts to make the classes more ‘democratic’ were not welcomed. For instance, they clashed with the hierarchical structure of MTWU, and they did not empower students, but made them more vulnerable. The free, critical communication that she was expecting did not happen in the class and her efforts to promote it inhibited their communication further. Second, it was not only the ‘form’ of the exchanges that were problematic, but also their subject matter: for example, Sellers supported *autonomy* as a desirable trait, and she discussed it in relation to the role of women in society, but her hosts believed her views (representative of a western way of life) were egoistic as their own focus (as Indian women) was

⁵A. SELLER, *Should the Feminist Philosopher Stay at Home*, in K. Lennon, M. Whitford (eds.), *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology*, Routledge, London 1994, pp. 230-248.

not on their individual autonomy but on their role as part of a family that they supported. The disagreements between Sellers and the students/colleagues in the Indian university were relative to values and worldviews and there was a clear dissonance between what Sellers believed it was a desirable way of conducting her work as a lecturer and her life as a woman, and the expectations and values of her students and colleagues at the Indian university.

Sellers reflected on their differences and the best way of addressing them, and, while some of them were surmountable, and they were able to find an agreement while acknowledging their differences, others remained unsurmountable and constituted a real challenge. Regarding the former, they discussed the commonalities between the concept of *autonomy* that Sellers argued for, and a related one, well regarded in the context of MTWU, the concept of that *Swarej* or self-rule that relates to being *autonomous from the colonizer*. Sellers pointed out that her concept of autonomy was linked to that of mutual dependency and the desire of not let others govern yourself, and her colleagues and students in MTWU accepted that it was possible to be altruistic within the family and egoistic with those outside the family and that to respond to the needs of the former the needs of the later were often ignored.

4 DILEMMAS FOR THE ALTRUIST

Seller's focus was not altruism, but rather how to understand and enter into a dialogue with those who are different from us. However, we can see how altruists can face the same kind of challenges when engaging with others that are different to themselves as Sellers did, as promoting the well-being of the beneficiaries might challenge their values and what the beneficiaries consider to be desirable ways of being.

Let's consider different alternatives:

(i) An altruist might believe, as Sellers did before she arrived at MTWU, in the universality of her own experience, on 'seeing the other as herself'. In Sellers' own example, she believed that her commonalities with the women at the Indian university—both in terms of what universities are for, and in terms of values and beliefs—were such that the engagement will be efficient and positive. These pre-suppositions can work when the altruist engages with others who are like him, but they are less likely to work with those who are different from himself: an altruist might provide the beneficiaries with the means of promoting their autonomy, for instance, and might find that his understanding of 'autonomy' is different from the one they embrace, and that his efforts are rejected/unsuccessful. The altruist does not need to stay at home, when engaging with those who are

different from himself, but he needs to be aware of the limitations of this approach. For instance, he must be aware that in some circumstances the altruist might damage the beneficiaries while trying to exercise altruism, in these circumstances the altruist should refrain from exercising his altruism.

(ii) An altruist might see the other as ‘different from himself’, and consider that these differences are such that she should not engage with the other and promote their well-being, as this interaction might be damaging for the other or undesired by them. This position is respectful of the difference of the other and, in some instances, is the best possible result. For instance, there are some Amazonian communities that resist engagement with others, the country where they live (Colombia) respects and promote their isolation as it preserves their way of life and their survival. The altruist should therefore ‘stay at home’ in this case as this is the best way of benefiting these communities. However, this is an extreme example, and we would like to consider cases in which the acceptance of the difference of the other does not imply inaction. There is a third option in which altruist and beneficiaries interact, for the benefit of the later, despite their differences.

(iii) An altruist might see the ‘other as myself and different from myself’ as ‘other as myself’. There will be an acknowledgement of the differences (of needs/well-being) between human beings, but also the possibility of reaching an agreement about how to promote the well-being of the beneficiaries, although it might not be the preferred approach for the altruist.

Regarding Seller’s example, an altruist that finds himself in the circumstances in which Seller was at MTWU would try to enculturate himself and understand the values of the beneficiaries. He will try to understand the concept of ‘autonomy’ of the beneficiaries establishing a dialogue with them and looking for commonalities in their use of the concept. In this particular case, searching a concept of autonomy that can be used by individuals that feel part of a community, while reflecting on how the community and its preferred concept of autonomy can disfavour other communities that are different from them (not family members, for instance).

5 THE BENEFICIARY OF ALTRUISM AS AN OTHER SELF: THE IMPORTANCE OF RESPECTING DIFFERENCES

We have seen how there are three possible way of addressing the differences between the altruist and the beneficiaries of altruism: seeing the other as oneself, seeing the other as different and seeing the other as myself but different from myself (‘other as myself’).

When the altruist sees the beneficiary of altruism as himself (the altruist), he can become trapped in his own worldview and try to impose it on the beneficiary (even if not consciously). A relationship is established between them that is co-subjective but reductive.⁶ This approach works well if beneficiaries share the altruist's concept of well-being and his values, but if they do not, then the intervention of the altruist might not be effective in promoting the well-being of the beneficiary or that might even damage the beneficiary (as he is not perceived in his difference). Seeing the other as different, when the difference is radical, can bring about inaction, and even if this can be appropriate for the altruist and the beneficiary it can also (in most cases) not be appropriate.

Considering the other as different but also, in as sense, as oneself, implies to open up a space in which the other, as similar but different to myself, develops on his own terms. This perspective safeguards the originality of the other, his difference, but acknowledges also that human beings have common needs and vulnerabilities, it implies is a recognition of kinship.

Altruists that acknowledge beneficiaries as 'other as myself' and want to promote their well-being need to: understand how the beneficiaries live and what they consider to be beneficial for their own well-being; understand what their values are; understand how the beneficiaries see the altruist and finally understand what role he (the altruist) plays in their life (and this might have historical implications, such as colonialism). Sellers shares important insights on how to understand across differences that can be applicable to the altruist.

Firstly, she acknowledged the importance of building personal relations, as engaging personally with others allowed her to understand them better. For Sellers the relationships outside the classroom were useful to build trust and understanding. Visiting Gandhigram, an institution related to MTWU and seeing their values 'in action' she understood better their way of life and how the Indian students and colleagues saw the world.

Secondly, she acknowledged that this relationship changed her and made her reflect on her own values so, she saw that, in the eyes of her hosts, she was pitied because she had not built her own family, while for Seller this was a very conscious and valuable choice. She understood the point of view of her colleagues in MTWU, given their context. If there was to be understanding, she needed to become aware of how the others were 'seeing' her. She noticed that this awareness might help her/the other to reconsider/revalue her own/their own values.

Thirdly, the history and context of their 'communities' needed to be acknowledged, Sellers felt that she could not criticize certain aspects of the culture as a colonizer would, but she felt she need to address certain other aspects of the Indian culture that clashed with her own values.

⁶G. CICCHESE, *I percorsi dell'altro: antropologia e storia*, Città Nuova, Roma 1999.

We promote a process of ‘understanding across differences’ in altruism that generates knowledge (about the altruist, the beneficiary and the context shared by both) that is positive for the beneficiaries but that is also valuable in itself. However, it could be the case that an altruist could value this knowledge about anything else, to the point that he might subordinate all his actions to seek this objective.⁷ In our framework this person could not be an altruist as, in promoting the well-being of others, he would obtain this knowledge that he values above everything else: by promoting the well-being of others as he would be foremost promoting his own.

There are two alternative ways of acknowledging the beneficiary as different and, at the same time, as the same as the altruist that are compatible with our belief that the altruist should perceive the beneficiary as ‘other as myself’:

a) Recognizing the other as ‘myself’ (even if also different) motivates some altruist to act.

There are altruist that help others in recognition of their kinship, accepting a collective identification, or a certain feeling of social empathy, that is to say, they feel they are in ‘the same boat’ as the beneficiaries. This recognition might arise from motivations that are connatural to our human nature. According to Laura Boella there are laws of identification and communication that cause the pain or happiness of a person to be transmitted to those who are close to them, as a psychical contagion that is not neutral.⁸ This would allow the altruist to go from merely understanding the beneficiary to acting on this understanding, via solidarity or care for the other. In order to do this is required the perception of the other (beneficiaries) as closely linked to one self (altruist), despite the differences. If the perception of the other is based on indifference or distrust it would be difficult to commit to helping them. From this perspective, altruism is a form of unconditional cordiality towards others without expecting anything in return⁹ that originates with the understanding of difference. Moreover, in order for the altruist to act in solidarity with the beneficiary it is necessary a commitment that arises from the perception of the altruist as inextricably linked to the beneficiary, a perception that arises from social responsibility. How else could the altruist felt responsible for another different from myself?

According to Simone Weil, this commitment towards the other is an unconditional obligation: “There exists an obligation towards every human being for the sole reason that he or she is a human being, without any other condition requir-

⁷D. JARCZEWSKI, *For the Sake of Knowledge: The Epistemic Value of Other-Regarding Epistemic Virtues*, «Acta Analytica», (2024), pp. 1-19.

⁸L. BOELLA, *Neuroetica. La morale prima della morale*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2008.

⁹W. W. MA, A. CHAN, *Knowledge Sharing and Social Media: Altruism, Perceived Online Attachment Motivation, and Perceived Online Relationship Commitment*, «Computers in Human Behaviour», 39 (2014), pp. 51-58.

ing to be fulfilled, and even without any recognition of such obligation on the part of the individual concerned.[...] This obligation is an unconditional one.”¹⁰

b) Alternatively, altruists can focus on what is different in others that are like themselves. We can illustrate this possibility by reference to the context of human rights where there are philosophers that, to justify the universality of human rights, underline the commonalities between human beings—as in (a) above—and others that underline their differences.¹¹ Hannah Arendt is one of the later; she considers that “We are not born equal; we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights”¹² According to Atrey “for Arendt ‘we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live’. On this view, the claim about universality is one about the equality of difference. Thus, universal human rights matter because they affirm both the differences in humans and the equality in the fact of such difference”.¹³

In the approach to altruism that we have been arguing for (b) illustrates how the altruist does not need to focus merely on his commonalities ‘as human beings’ with the beneficiaries in order to promote their well-being, rather, he can focus on their differences as this is also what makes them human.

6 CONCLUSION

In this article we have explored some of the difficulties that the altruist has to address when he wants to engage with beneficiaries that are very different from himself and hold different ideas and beliefs about what will promote their well-being.

We have concluded: first, that there are situations in which the differences between altruist and beneficiaries are so radical and fundamental that the altruist should refrain from engaging in exercising his altruism as he will either fail in his attempts to promote the well-being of the beneficiaries or damage them. Second, that there are other situations in which the altruist can engage with beneficiaries that are very different to himself, but he must promote their well-being

¹⁰S. WEIL, *An Anthology*, ed. by S. Miles, Penguin Classics, London 2005, pp. 107-108. For Levinas, ethics precedes ontology; an ethics where altruism supersedes selfish interest is “total altruism” (E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity* [1961], Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh [PA] 1969, p. 43).

¹¹S. ATREY, *Beyond Universality. An Intersectional Justification of Human Rights*, in S. Atrey, P. Dunne (eds.), *Intersectionality and Human Rights Law*, Hart Publishing, Oxford 2020, pp. 17-38.

¹²Arendt, in *ibidem*, p. 21.

¹³*Ibidem*, p. 22.

by making an effort to understand the values and perspective of the beneficiaries, reaching an agreement with them on what are the desirable interventions and outcomes of his altruism. In this way the well-being of the beneficiaries will be promoted by actions that are harmonious with the values (and worldview) of the altruist and the beneficiaries. This option is compatible with two different interpretations of the beneficiaries are 'others as myself' in relation to the altruist, one that focuses on the common characteristics of human beings (acknowledging their differences) and another one that underlines that what makes us human are our differences.

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Supplement to Acta Philosophica



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