

## *Self and Others: the Inadequacy of Utilitarianism*

RICHARD NORMAN, University of Kent

### I

The dominance of the utilitarian tradition has given a particular prominence to the problem of egoism and altruism in Anglo-American moral philosophy. For, if actions are to be justified by their capacity to satisfy desires and interests, we are bound to confront the question: whose interests? Many philosophers would say that morality is, almost by definition, tied to altruism, to the idea that any moral agent's pursuit of his own interests ought to be qualified by a recognition of the interests of others. It has, however, appeared notoriously difficult to provide any rational argument as to why someone not already committed to a recognition of others' interests should take any account of them.<sup>1</sup> Hence the persistence of the problem of

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- 1 On the various attempts to provide such arguments within the utilitarian tradition, see chapter 2 of my *Reasons for Actions* (Blackwell, 1971). A valuable discussion of the problem without particular reference to utilitarianism is Bernard Williams: "Egoism and Altruism", in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge University Press, 1973).



egoism and altruism. In this paper I want to consider the suggestion characteristic of a different moral tradition: that the dichotomy of egoism and altruism is in fact a false dichotomy. Erich Fromm, for example, in his book *Man for Himself*, writes:

...the logical fallacy in the notion that love for others and love for oneself are mutually exclusive should be stressed... Love of others and love of ourselves are not alternatives.<sup>2</sup>

Though he distinguishes between the terms 'self-love' and 'self-interest', Fromm claims that a person's true self-interest is identifiable with that self-love which transcends the 'false dichotomy' between self-love and love of others.

Although the philosophical thesis advanced here is by no means unique to Erich Fromm, I shall, for convenience, refer to it as 'the Fromm thesis'. I shall, in this paper, consider possible ways in which the thesis could be understood. I shall aim to identify a philosophically substantial sense which can be given to it, and to provide some support for it.

We should first note just how radically the claim seems to run counter to the facts of experience. There seem to be innumerable situations, in everyday life, where people are faced with choices between their own interests and the interests of others. Consider the following examples.

1. Anne has an opportunity for promotion in her career. It is the sort of opportunity which occurs rarely. She would love to have both the increased responsibilities and the higher salary. But a close friend of hers also intends to apply for the post, has set her heart on it, has been counting on it for years, and will be shattered if she does not get it. It has been intimated to Anne that the post is hers if she wants it. If she does not apply, her friend will get it.
2. Beatrice's marriage has been a mistake. Her relationship with her husband is not actively hostile or destructive, but neither is it at all fulfilling. Husband and wife simply co-exist. Beatrice has a lover. If she leaves her husband for her lover, her own life will blossom, she will have a real companionship, and her own interests and enthusiasms will be

encouraged. But she knows that it would be a terrible blow to her husband, and very disturbing for her children, to whom she is very close.

3. Charles has been an active member of a political group for several years. Now he wants a break from the routines of addressing envelopes, canvassing, selling newspapers, and so forth. He remains as committed to the political cause, and still believes that its success would improve immeasurably the lives of future generations. It is just that he wants to start living his own life, living for himself instead of for the future well-being of humanity.
4. David has lost his job as a bank manager. He is well into middleage and it is too late for him to start again. His prospects of finding similar employment now are bleak. He can survive on the dole, but his aspirations for himself and his family are now in ruins. He is then offered a well-paid job by an old acquaintance on condition that he reveal certain confidential information to which he had access in his former position in the bank. He is not told what the information will be used for, but knows that his acquaintance operates on the borders of legality, and guesses that the information will be used to defraud some of the wealthier clients of the bank. But the job he is being offered is itself a respectable one, and would mean a lot to him.

These are real dilemmas. I shall return later to specific features of the examples. For the moment I offer them as general reminders. In each case the choice, though complicated, seems at least to include a tension between the person's own interests and the interests of others. And any claim that the dichotomy of egoism and altruism is a false dichotomy will have to be treated with scepticism unless it can cope effectively with such apparent counter-examples.

Within the utilitarian tradition there are two ways in which something like the Fromm thesis might be asserted. First it might be claimed, on Benthamite grounds, that egoism and altruism are, as it were, extensionally equivalent. There are two components to this idea: the suggestion that the general interest will most effectively be promoted if each individual pursues his or her private interest;<sup>3</sup> and

3 I know of no solution to the problem of pronouns and gender. 'He' alone is sexist; 'he or she' is ponderous; and neologisms are ugly. I shall simply be inconsistent.

2 Erich Fromm: *Man for Himself* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1947) pp.128f.



the suggestion that in pursuing this private interest the individual would, in virtue of the operation of physical, political, moral and religious sanctions, be well advised to take into account the interests of others. On these grounds a Benthamite could claim that one who rationally pursues his own interest, and one who rationally pursues the general interest, are likely to end up performing the same actions; and that in this sense egoism and altruism are not opposed alternatives.

The claim is hardly plausible. The former of its two components depends too much on a naive *laissez-faire* economics to be at all convincing. As for the second component, it simply does not take us far enough. It may be that one who disregards totally the interests of others is likely to suffer for it. But the consistent egoist who protects his reputation, and is uninhibited by fears of hell or a guilty conscience, need make only minimal concessions in the direction of altruism. It is a long way from this to the claim that enlightened egoism and enlightened altruism coincide. My four examples are a sufficient reminder of the implausibility of that stronger Benthamite claim.

The second claim possible from within classical utilitarianism can be looked for from the partisans of Mill rather than of Bentham. Utilitarianism, it may be said, requires neither pure egoism nor pure altruism. It does justice to the claims of each. The individual agent is not to abandon his concern for his own interests. He is simply to give them equal weight with the interests of each other person affected by his actions — no more and no less. Thus egoism and altruism are not exclusive alternatives. The demands of self-interest and the demands of the interests of others, just insofar as they are interests, are all to be entered into the calculation.

What we are offered here, then, is a sort of mathematical compromise. Later in the paper I want to go a bit more deeply into what I see as the inadequacies of this conception. For the moment I simply want to note that it is not what we are looking for. It does not in any fundamental sense show the egoism/altruism dichotomy to be a false dichotomy. It does not go beyond the opposition between self-interest and the interests of others. It still sees these as at least potentially in conflict and simply provides a procedure for adjudicating between them.

In saying this, I can begin to give some indication of what a philosophically more substantial version of the Fromm thesis would look like. Unlike the utilitarian version, it would attempt to identify some one or more ethical concepts more fundamental than either 'self-interest' or 'altruism'. Although, of course, any system of ethical concepts must incorporate some reference to self-interest and to altruistic concern for others' interests, the suggestion would be that

these are in some way derivative from, or secondary to, more fundamental concepts, which are not themselves couched in terms of 'interests' at all. Clearly this would be a non-utilitarian version of the Fromm thesis, and a more radical version. The question is: can any such thesis be formulated and defended?

## II

Despite my dismissal of Benthamite utilitarianism, it may provide us with a starting-point. It may serve to remind us of the presentation of essentially the same view in Plato's *Republic*, by Glaucon and Adeimantus, and the Platonic Socrates' advocacy of a view which is superficially similar but which he is at pains to distinguish. Glaucon and Adeimantus, it will be remembered, put before Socrates the popularly held view that justice — moral rectitude — is an unfortunate necessity. Ideally each person would like to pursue his own interests uninhibited by any regard for others, and if he possessed the mythical Ring of Gyges, he would do so. But since none of us can in fact render ourselves invisible to our fellows, we risk their retaliation whenever we treat them unjustly in our own interest. We therefore make a compact with one another, setting up laws and conventions to prevent us mistreating one another, and from this we all benefit. To live justly, then, is not advantageous *in itself*, but it does have desirable *consequences* for the agent, since he earns the goodwill of others (not to mention that of the gods). This, then, is the popular view, but Glaucon and Adeimantus are dissatisfied with it. They ask Socrates to demonstrate that justice is a good to the just person, not simply in virtue of its consequences, but in its very nature. And the remainder of the *Republic* is devoted to showing this.

I want to consider whether the Platonic account developed in the *Republic* might provide us with a more satisfactory version of the Fromm thesis. And we must first ask whether it really is significantly distinct from the position presented by Glaucon and Adeimantus, as it is claimed to be by the Platonic Socrates.<sup>4</sup> This has been denied. In his lecture "Duty and Interest", H.A. Prichard accuses Plato of accept-

4 Whom I shall from now on refer to as 'Plato'. For simplicity's sake, too, I shall refer to the view presented by Glaucon and Adeimantus as 'Glaucon's view', although in the *Republic* he does not himself advocate it but only report it.



ing the essential premise of the Glauconian position: that one has good reason to be just only if it can be shown to be in one's own interest. Whether justice is held to be advantageous because of its consequences, or by its very nature, makes no essential difference. The crucial point is that if justice is advocated on either ground, it is reduced to a form of self-interest. Prichard's central argument is this: if we advocate justice on such grounds, then it will not really be *justice* that we are advocating. The just person — the morally good person as conventionally understood — is someone who keeps his promise simply because he has promised, who pays his debt simply because he owes it, who refrains from lying simply because it would be dishonest. He is essentially different from someone who does these things because it will make him happier or better off. Therefore if Plato were to succeed in persuading someone to be 'just' because he would thereby be happier, he might induce him to perform the appropriate actions, but would not really have made him into a morally good and just person.<sup>5</sup>

There is, I think, a real problem here. I see it as a genuine dilemma, one which is all the more perplexing if couched in terms of 'altruism' rather than 'justice'. If I act so as to help and care for other people, and if I do so because I think that it will make my own life happier and more satisfying, then it would seem that it is not really a concern for others which motivates me, but a concern for myself. In the terms of this paper, I am not going beyond the opposition between egoism and altruism, but reducing altruism to egoism. This is one side of the dilemma. But there is another side which seems equally compelling. For surely it just is the case that a life lived in harmony and cooperation with others, sharing sympathetically in their hopes and sorrows, is the best kind of life for human beings, the most fulfilling and rewarding. A simple truth can be simply stated:

... That's not life for men and women, insult and hatred. And everybody knows that it's the very opposite of that that is really life.

— What?, says Alf.

— Love, says Bloom. I mean the opposite of hatred.<sup>6</sup>

5 See H.A. Prichard: "Duty and Interest" p.214 (in *Moral Obligation and Duty and Interest* (Oxford University Press, 1968)).

6 James Joyce: *Ulysses* (Bodley Head, 1960) p.432.

Norman, R., 1979: *Self and Others: The Inadequacy of Utilitarianism*, In: *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary Volume V, Edmonton 1979, pp. 181-201.

There may be problems about the philosophical formulation of this, but is it not a basic fact of human experience that a life of mutual aid and consideration is more satisfying than one of hostility and enmity? And if so, is this not as good a reason as one could require for living such a life? Yet to say so appears to contradict the earlier assertion derived from Prichard. Can the two ideas be reconciled?

Let us consider more closely how Plato himself differentiates his own position from Glaucon's. According to Glaucon, justice is a good to the just man because if you act justly towards others they will act justly towards you, and so you will be better off. According to Plato, justice does not simply have advantageous consequences, it is *itself* the greatest benefit. For Glaucon justice is an *instrumental* good; it enables you to get what you need in order to live well. For Plato justice is an *intrinsic* good; it is living well. According to Glaucon, then, there is an *external* relation between justice and benefit. According to Plato the relation is an *internal* one.

A further important difference follows. In Glaucon's account, justice is recommended in the light of a preconceived idea of what happiness consists in, what the agent's proper interests are. We are presumed already to have an idea of what happiness is — it is, perhaps, the acquisition of wealth and the wielding of power, and the like — and the argument proceeds on that assumption. In Plato's account, no such idea of happiness, of the agent's interests, is assumed. On the contrary, happiness is itself redefined in the course of the argument. If we are convinced by Plato's account, then, in the light of our understanding of justice, we are brought to change our idea of what happiness consists in. Thus for Glaucon we first know what our interests are and then come to see how justice contributes to them. For Plato we must first understand what justice is, and only then can we come to see what our true interests are.

The point must not be overstated. It is, I think, overstated by D.Z. Phillips and H.O. Mounce in their book *Moral Practices*. Their discussion is not of the *Republic* but of the argument between Socrates and Polus in Plato's *Gorgias*. They write:

When Socrates says that the right act is the advantageous act, he is insisting that you cannot understand what is to your advantage until you understand what rightness is. Similarly, when he says that the good man is the happy man he is saying that you do not understand what happiness is until you understand what goodness is.<sup>7</sup>

7 D.Z. Phillips and H.O. Mounce: *Moral Practices* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970) p.31. The chapter derives from Phillips' article "Does it Pay to be Good?" in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 65 (1964-5).



So far I have concurred with their formulation. But they continue:

For Polus, what is good and right is determined by what popular consent decrees to be advantageous. For Socrates what is advantageous is determined by what is good and right.... Socrates is denying that one can give an account of morality in non-moral terms.

And this last remark is illuminated by an earlier passage on the same page where they say that

... the dispute between Polus and Socrates is not a dispute about the facts [their emphasis]. It is as if Socrates said, 'Yes, Polus, I know all about the tyrant of Macedonia. I know all the facts about his crimes that you know, but I do not call that happiness.' The dispute between Socrates and Polus cannot be resolved by appealing to the facts.

Now there may be some basis for reading the *Gorgias* in this way — but not the *Republic*. In the *Republic* Plato certainly does 'appeal to the facts'. He appeals to *psychological* facts. He appeals to his analysis of justice in terms of psychic harmony and health (and this does make a tentative appearance even in the *Gorgias*). The psychological analysis carries the weight of the argument. In the *Republic* Plato is not, as Phillips and Mounce might seem to suggest, simply saying: 'Justice consists in not cheating or lying or murdering, and if you come to accept that you ought not to do these things, you will, by that very fact, have come to recognise where true happiness lies.' Plato is also saying that a certain state of the soul is what links justice and happiness. Phillips and Mounce seem content to claim: virtue is its own reward, and that is *all* that can be said. Plato would also say that virtue is its own reward — that is, it is not to be valued primarily for any *external* reward that it may bring. But Plato does not stop there. He also tries to show what it is about virtue that makes it rewarding.

This brings me, at length, to my first positive suggestion for a philosophically substantial interpretation of the Fromm thesis. The Platonic concept of 'psychic harmony and health' is one that goes beyond the opposition of egoism and altruism. It is more fundamental than either, according to Plato, because only in the light of an understanding of such a state of personality can we properly understand what both self-interest and altruism consist in, and what makes them possible. In the case of self-interest, Plato shows that one who has achieved the right balance between reason, spirit and desire will not be at war with himself, will not be dominated by irrational and obsessive desires, and will enjoy a happiness not dependent on illusions and fantasy. He claims that such a person will also, quite naturally, exhibit a concern for the rights and needs of others. He will

not cheat or steal or lie or betray, because he is not at the mercy of obsessive impulses which would lead him in that direction (*Republic* 443).

We may be unhappy with Plato's particular version of the idea of psychic health. Our post-Freudian awareness of the 'return of the repressed' may lead us to doubt the possibility of a healthy personality where all but the most essential physical desires are firmly inhibited by the alliance of reason and spirit. But to me, Plato's general perspective seems right. And, returning now to Fromm, the latter's position is within this same tradition stemming from Plato — the tradition of morality as psychic health. The great virtue of this tradition is that it takes seriously the question: how is altruistic behaviour psychologically possible? It recognises the abstract irrelevance of a moral system which takes no account of psychological facts. It recognises that a full and open responsiveness to the needs of others can not be produced simply by the exercise of Kantian will, or by utilitarian sanctions. Fromm puts it thus (op. cit., p. 126):

Love is a phenomenon of abundance; its premise is the strength of the individual who can give.

There are, in other words, certain emotional prerequisites, without which I shall be unable to see clearly, or respond fully to, other people's situation. If, in my dealings with others, I am constantly influenced by my own unsatisfied yearnings for affection or recognition, I am likely to see others in terms of what they can do for (or to) me rather than in terms of what I can do for them. My picture of them will be distorted by my own needs, and so I shall be that much less able to respond to them as people in their own right, with needs and aspirations of their own.

This way of putting the point is not Platonic — but the general philosophical perspective is. It is a perspective which goes beneath particular actions, whether self-interested or altruistic, to the personality structure from which they flow. In this sense it goes 'beyond egoism and altruism'.

There nevertheless remain difficulties with the Platonic perspective, and Prichard's objections have not yet been fully dealt with. To exhibit the difficulties that remain, I want to return to the comparison of Plato's and Glaucon's views, and to consider an example. Suppose that someone, perhaps a neighbour of mine, is in trouble and needs help; he needs, perhaps, someone to talk to, with whom to share his troubles and from whom to ask advice. Suppose now that I put to myself the question: why should I help him? The Glauconian answer would be: 'By helping him, you will put him in your debt and increase



the chances that he may help you some day, and you will improve your reputation in the eyes of others so that they too will be well disposed towards you.' Such an answer exhibits a purely instrumental attitude to the other person. It is not an attitude of genuine concern for *him*, but one which regards him simply as a means to one's own benefit. The Platonic answer would be: 'I should help him because a life of sympathetic concern for others, a readiness to help, is the most rewarding and fulfilling kind of life.' This, as I have been stressing, is an importantly different answer. It does not represent, in the same kind of way, an instrumental attitude to the other person. But now contrast it with a third possible answer: 'Because he needs help'. This answer is different again. And when we compare it with the second answer we must surely agree that it is this, the third answer, that represents most fully the attitude of genuine concern, of genuine responsiveness to the other's needs. As such, it suggests that there is still something unsatisfactory about the Platonic answer. And so we seem to be still left with the unresolved tension mentioned above.

One way in which we might try to resolve it is by distinguishing between two levels of reason-giving, and locating the second and third answers at different levels. We could perhaps distinguish between the question 'What action should I perform (here and now)?' and the question 'What kind of life should I lead?' What makes these distinct? Consider the circumstances in which I might put the second question to myself. I might come to be struck by the narrowness of my life, by the extent to which I am preoccupied with myself and to which my experience is thereby impoverished. I might decide that I need to think consciously about being more attentive to others, and giving more play to my own sympathetic responses. My reason for trying to change my life in this way might be that my life would thereby be enriched. But the change might involve precisely the cultivation of habits of thinking about others' needs as such, rather than about how my helping them can enrich my own life. In other words, I might become more the sort of person who, on particular occasions, helps others just because they need help.

Whether this distinction between two levels of reasoning can be sustained, I am not sure. Perhaps in the end the two collapse into one another. But perhaps it is of some help. It may take us some way towards resolving the conflict with which we are concerned. But it cannot take us all the way. And I want now to suggest that so long as we remain within a Platonic perspective we shall find no fully adequate solution. We shall not do so, because that perspective is essentially an individualistic one.

This may seem an extraordinary thing to say about Plato's moral philosophy. Is it not a philosophy which is preoccupied with the place of human beings in society? Is not the *Republic* built around the relationship between justice in the individual and justice in society? Of course it is. Nevertheless, that relationship, between the individual and society, remains in the end simply one of analogy. The tripartite city-state mirrors the tripartite soul, and justice has the same form in each. But we are given no concrete account of how the life of the just individual is influenced by his social relations. Indeed, Plato seems to suggest that such a life can be lived in any society or in none. Book IX concludes with Glaucon suggesting that the good man is unlikely to enter politics, to which Socrates replies:

'Oh yes, he will, very much so, in the society where he really belongs; but not, I think, in the society where he's born, unless something very extraordinary happens.'

'I see what you mean,' he said. 'You mean that he will do so in the society which we have been describing and which we have theoretically founded; but I doubt if it will ever exist on earth.'

'Perhaps,' I said, 'it is laid up as a pattern in heaven, where those who wish can see it and found it in their own hearts. But it doesn't matter whether it exists or ever will exist; it's the only state in whose politics he can take part.' (*Republic* 592 a-b, Lee's translation).

### III

My suggestion now is that to go beyond the dichotomy of egoism and altruism, we have to go beyond the dichotomy of the individual and society. We have to do justice to the way in which social relations are internal to, and constitutive of, the individual. Such ideas are especially associated with the Hegelian tradition, and find a classic formulation in Bradley's essay "My Station and its Duties."

[The child] does not even think of his separate self; he grows with his world, his mind fills and orders itself; and when he can separate himself from that world, and know himself apart from it, then by that time his self, the object of his self-consciousness, is penetrated, infected, characterized by the existence of others. Its content implies in every fibre relations of community.<sup>8</sup>

8 F.H. Bradley: *Ethical Studies* (Clarendon Press, 1927) p.172.



The trouble with the Hegelian tradition, however, is that it focuses almost exclusively on *institutionalised* social relations. For Hegel, these are the family, civil society, and the state. Bradley alludes briefly to the first two, but they are quickly forgotten and his essay eventually becomes a eulogy of the state and an expression of patriotic fervour.

The non-theoretical person... sees in the hour of need what are called "rights" laughed at, "freedom", the liberty to do what one pleases, tramped on, the claims of the individual trodden under foot, and theories burst like cobwebs. And he sees, as of old, the heart of a nation rise high and beat in the breast of each one of her citizens till her safety and her honour are dearer to each than life, till to those who live her shame and sorrow, if such is allotted, outweigh their loss, and death seems a little thing to those who go for her to their common and nameless grave.<sup>9</sup>

The broader position, however, does not have to take this form. It can be reformulated in terms of other kinds of social institutions, or of non-institutionalised social relations. Consider a simple case — the relationship of friendship.

My first example, that of Anne and her opportunity for promotion, was such a case. Suppose that she decides to forego the opportunity out of consideration for her friend. And suppose that the fact of the friendship is decisive — she would not have done it for anyone else. Now clearly, in one sense, she has sacrificed her own interests. But I also want to say that, in an important sense, she has not sacrificed herself to something *external* to herself, for the friendship is a part of her own life.

What sense can we give to this idea? Certainly I do not mean: by taking the job she risks losing the friendship, and her turning down the job is therefore in her own interests. This would be a possible case, but it is not what I have in mind. I envisage that her reason for giving the job to her friend is properly expressed not as 'Because I don't want to lose the friendship', but as 'Because she's my friend'. In what sense, then, can we say that this reason does not represent a sacrificing of herself to something external?

We might talk of 'identification' here — she identifies with her friend. And one way of explicating this would be via the notion of 'extended interests'. The notion has been defined as follows:<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 184.

<sup>10</sup> By Richard Kraut, "Egoism, Love, and Political Office in Plato", *Philosophical Review*, 82 (1973), p.333.

Consider a man who loves his child. His feeling for it may be such that he regards it as an extension of himself, so that anything that benefits the child *ipso facto* benefits him. And if anything happens that is to the disadvantage of the child, then it is also to the man's disadvantage, whether he knows about the event or not. Such a person, when he considers his interests, takes into account the things that profit the child, not because whatever profits it *ultimately* affects him, but because the child's profiting is his profiting... Let us say that when such a person considers the child's interest, he is consulting his own *extended* interest....

So, in our example, we might say: she identifies with her friend, and thus she comes to see her friend's interests as a part of her own interests. This way of putting it has its uses, but it is also misleading. It still suggests that another person's interests can matter to me only if they can somehow masquerade as my own interests. Concern for my own interests remains the norm, and a concern for others' interests has to be assimilated to it. Therefore, with the formulation in terms of 'extended interests', we are, despite the differences, still too close to the Benthamite project of reducing altruism to a form of egoism.

So if the idea of 'identification' with another person is to do any of the work here, it must mean something other than merely assimilating the other person's interests to one's own. It would have to convey the idea that 'identifying' with others is part of the process of creating one's own 'identity' (rather than presupposing a pre-given self to which others are then related). This is a difficult idea to elucidate; indeed, I would want to say that it is a primitive feature of human experience which cannot be analysed in terms of anything more basic. Nevertheless, even if it cannot be further analysed, we can at least say something about the conceptual milieu in which it belongs. One important idea here is that of *commitment*. Any person's life involves commitments to other individuals, or to human groups, causes and institutions. Who one is, is in part a matter of who or what one belongs to, what ties one has. And friendship, in particular, involves a commitment of this kind. Hence, also, it carries with it the idea of *loyalties*. An ethical theory which takes no account of how commitments such as friendships are a part of a person's life, can give no account of how we come to have loyalties to other persons, and hence how other persons come to have special claims on us. Finally I want to introduce the idea that commitments such as friendships are part of what gives *meaning* to a person's life. The existence of particular ties, commitments and loyalties in a person's life is a necessary condition of his having any sense of belonging in a world, a world in which things matter to him. Durkheim's account of '*anomie*' provides an empirical illustration of how, when one single relationship plays this role in a person's life, and when that relationship is then severed



by bereavement, the person's life may be felt to have lost its meaning altogether. And so, when we say that a person who sacrifices something for her friend is not sacrificing herself to something external, part of what we are saying is that the sacrifice is an expression of a relationship, a commitment, built into the very meaning of her life (which is not to say that she does it *in order to* give her life meaning, *in order to* retain its meaningful character).

So, though I do not think we can go any deeper, we can at any rate indicate a set of interlocking concepts — 'identification', 'commitment', 'loyalty', 'meaning' — which help to spell out what is involved in the idea of a friendship being a part of one's life. And I think we can then extend the idea to wider and larger-scale relationships. We might proceed to offer a similar account of the Hegelian triad — the family, civil society, and the state. For a person's relationships to parents and to children, to the institution for which he or she works, and to the country in which he or she lives, can all have this character, that of being the locus of attachments and loyalties which are partially constitutive of the person's own identity. We still have to remember, however, that the Hegelian favoured three are a very incomplete list. There are other, and very different, relationships, and indeed these may sometimes conflict with or replace those of family, civil society and state. Take the sphere of civil society, for example — the sphere of work relations. Here it may well happen that one's loyalties to the institution are non-existent and one's loyalties to one's fellow-workers are all-important. Strikes and other actions of a trade-union kind are built on the possibility. They cannot be comprehended in terms of a straightforward egoism. It is sometimes said that workers have to combine, to engage in cooperative struggle, because their solidarity is the only weapon available to them, the only way in which they can promote their interests. Understood literally, this is surely false. The individual worker may well promote his individual interests most effectively by relying on the struggles of others, giving them only a minimal allegiance while taking care to stay on good terms with his employer and doing nothing that might lose him his job. The difference between him and the employee who is fully committed to acting in solidarity with his fellow-workers lies in their differing conceptions of their identity. The latter person identifies himself primarily as a worker. His relations to his fellow-workers provide him with his understanding of where he belongs and who he is. He sees his predicament as a shared predicament.

What goes for the identification of the worker with his or her fellow-workers is repeated on a wider scale in the relations of the individual to his or her class. There is, as we well know, a politics of class which comes into conflict with the politics of the nation. If

Bradley's patriotic martyr who lays down his life for his country can be comprehended only in terms of the internality of social relations, the same goes for the commitment to class struggle. Those who devote their lives to the political struggle to end the oppression of their class may be well aware that they will not live to enjoy the benefits of success. Here too we have to talk about their *identification* with their class, and with the shared struggles and aspirations of that class.

I have been arguing that a Hegelian stress on the internality of social relations need not commit us to an automatic endorsement of Hegel's own examples, of loyalty to family, job, and state. To bring out the critical potentialities of the Hegelian position there are two further points that can be made. First, insofar as ethical decisions may require an assessment of the real nature of one's social relationships and commitments, the assessment may go either way. Take my example of Beatrice trying to decide whether to leave her husband. She may decide that her marriage remains a living and vital commitment, that it is still a part of her life at a quite basic level and that she cannot detach herself from it. But she may decide that the marriage is dead, or perhaps that it has never been a real marriage. Her experience may be like that of Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, who, when her husband fails her, comes to realise that, as she says, "for eight years I'd been living here with a strange man, and that I'd borne him three children."<sup>11</sup> With her new insight into the nature of her marriage, she tells her husband:

You've never loved me, you've only found it pleasant to be in love with me.... Now that I come to look at it, I've lived here like a pauper — simply from hand to mouth. I've lived by performing tricks for you, Torvald.... And you've always been so kind to me. But our home has been nothing but a play-room. I've been your doll-wife here, just as at home I was Papa's doll-child.... That's what our marriage has been, Torvald. (op. cit. 225-6)

And so, when her husband tries to impress on her that her 'most sacred duties' are her duties to her husband and children, and that before everything else she is a wife and mother, she is forced to reply:

I don't believe that any longer. I believe that before everything else I am a human being. (p.228)

Here, then, we have a marvellous example of a person's ethical decision stemming from an insight into the real nature of her rela-

11 Henrik Ibsen: *A Doll's House and Other Plays* (Penguin, 1975) p.230.

tions to others, and thus an insight into who she herself really is. It illustrates not only the fact that social relations carry ethical implications, but also that in other cases the relationships may turn out to be empty and unreal, alien to the person, and that when they do so the ethical ties also lose their force. And again, we can apply the point to other cases, for example to the case of one's relation to one's country. Take the case of soldiers in the First World War, joining up full of patriotic fervour, and coming to realize that they were simply being used as cannon fodder. From a belief that 'we're all in this together' they might move to the view that talk of 'the nation' was a sham, concealing the real relations between exploiters and exploited, and that the ethics of sacrifice for one's country was nothing but 'the old lie'.

There is a second respect in which we can indicate the critical potentialities of the Hegelian position. I have said that the possibility of identifying oneself with one's relations to others can make unreal the opposition of egoism and altruism. But of course this does not magically eliminate all conflicts of interests. In fact, if some social relations go deeper than the division of self and others, there are other kinds of social relations which open up the gap between the interests of different individuals. This can be made apparent from my initial examples. It is most immediately apparent, perhaps, in the first example, where a hierarchical and competitive career structure means that Anne's fulfilment in her work can be obtained only at the expense of her friend. Similar considerations apply to the fourth example; in virtue of the market relations that allot employment, David's search for a job may require him to harm others. Again, the kind of fraud envisaged in that example presupposes relationships of private property (which is not to say that the elimination of private property would not leave room for other kinds of fraud). The second and third examples illustrate my point less obviously. But in the case of Beatrice and her marriage, it could be argued that the institutions of monogamous marriage and the nuclear family function to constrict the emotions, so that the forming of emotional attachments outside those limits comes to be read as 'selfish'. And in the case of the third example, we could point to the privatisation of life in a certain kind of society, where personal satisfaction belongs in the sphere of private life, and political involvement requires deliberate effort and the sacrifice of personal interests; and we could contrast this with a society so organized as to encourage the active participation of all its members in working out the future development of the society.

Now I am not proposing any Utopian ideal of a set of social relations which could eliminate all conflicts of interest. That would be absurdly unreal. All the same, there are choices to be made. There are

social relations which create conflicts of interest, and there are others which elicit actions not properly describable as either self-interested or altruistic. We can argue about which of the various possibilities are in fact desirable. The competitive and acquisitive society does not lack advocates. And therefore, if we want other kinds of social relations, we have to recognise that these are indeed *alternatives*. The mere fact that human beings are social beings does not, as Bradley might suggest, automatically guarantee that the opposition of egoism and altruism becomes unreal. We have to *create* 'an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all'.

## IV

To sum up my positive suggestions: I have been considering two main kinds of ethical concept which could be said to go beyond the opposition of egoism and altruism. The first was the Platonic idea of psychic health and harmony. I tried to exhibit the attractions of this idea, but also indicated its limitations, and suggested that it needed to be complemented by the idea of social relations being constitutive of the self. I then proposed that these social relations provide us with the second kind of ethical concept worth considering; that to act out of friendship, or out of loyalty to one's class, or whatever, may be to act in a way which is neither egoistic nor yet straightforwardly altruistic, even if at one level it may require the sacrificing of one's own interests. For one's 'interests', as generally understood, are not the only things that may matter to one. One's commitments to individuals and to groups may have an importance in one's life which goes at least as deep as one's own individual interests.

It would be tempting, at this point, to try to sum up both themes in the concept of 'self-realisation'. This of course is what the British Hegelians did. In their use of the term 'self-realisation' they hoped to do justice both to the Platonic notion of the perfection of the self as the *summum bonum*, and to the Hegelian insistence on the social character of the self. There are, nevertheless, very real difficulties with the concept.<sup>12</sup> In particular, in the present context, one should

12 See Kai Nielsen: "Alienation and Self-Realization", in *Philosophy*, 48 (1973), 21-33.



not allow talk of 'self-realization' to suggest the existence of some kind of pre-established harmony which eliminates all ethical conflicts. Although I have been supporting the claim that the opposition of egoism and altruism is in some sense a false dichotomy, the fact remains that at the level of experience conflicts of interest do occur. I have argued that where other people's interests take precedence over one's own, this may be because one's relationship to the other people gives their interests a certain kind of importance. But there will be other cases where the interests of others do not have this kind of significance, and where one will, quite straightforwardly, and with good reason, need to assert one's own interests against others. Moreover, as I have also emphasised, one's social relations do not automatically form a harmonious whole. There are conflicts within and between them, and it would be a mistake to employ the concept of 'self-realisation' in a way which glossed over these conflicts by incorporating all aims and commitments into a supposedly unitary goal. All the same, I do think that self-realizationist theories are worth re-examining, and can contribute to our understanding of the issues I have been discussing.

I return, finally, to the question of utilitarianism. Insofar as I have been championing the insights of the self-realizationist tradition, I want to counterpose them primarily to the inadequacies of the utilitarian tradition. What, then, is wrong with utilitarianism? In brief, it cannot take sufficient account of the *specificity* of social relations.

Take the case of one of the more impressive and neglected of the utilitarians, William Godwin. In the first edition of his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* he outraged all respectable and right-thinking citizens by proposing that, faced with the choice between saving one's mother or the writer Fenelon from a burning building, one should save Fenelon, since, unless one's mother were very remarkable, she would be unlikely to contribute as much to the well-being of humanity. In the second edition, Godwin changed the word 'mother' to 'father'. This was sufficient to appease the outraged British public, but it does nothing to meet the philosophical point. Whether the relationship is to mother, father, lover, spouse, comrade, fellow-citizen or whatever, Godwin cannot allow it to have any ethical significance. 'What magic is there', he asks, 'in the pronoun "my", that should justify us in overturning the decisions of impartial truth?'<sup>13</sup> This indeed is one of the things that makes Godwin impres-

sive, that he is a thorough-going utilitarian who does not balk at the implications. But the price he pays is too high. For, if he refuses to allow that a particular relationship, such as friendship, has any special ethical significance, then it follows that he cannot give any account of what friendship *is*. For friendship just *is* a relationship which involves one in special ties and loyalties to one's friend. If I call someone my friend, yet do not see that fact as involving me in any special concern for his needs and aspirations, if I never do anything for him which I would not do for anyone else, then it is no true friendship. The same goes for any other specific relationship. Its significance would be eliminated. And the upshot is that utilitarianism would regard me as standing in exactly the same relationship to every other human being.<sup>14</sup>

But still, it may be said, is that not an admirable ideal? Does it not remind us that utilitarianism represents a protest against all narrow parochialisms, in the name of a generalised humanitarianism? That, in place of the sectionalised interests of a particular group or class or nation, it stands for the unity of mankind and the interests of a common humanity? That it goes hand in hand with the ideals of equality and internationalism?

There are genuine problems here, and certainly, if I thought that my criticisms of utilitarianism did commit me to a rejection of these egalitarian ideals, then I would revise my position. What I do have to accept is that an ethical theory which focussed entirely on specific social relations would be radically incomplete. I suggest, however, that an ethic of generalised humanitarianism should properly be seen not as *replacing* an ethic of specific social relations, but as *building on* the latter. It is because we have specific commitments to specific individuals and groups that we can then go on to recognise the claims of all human beings. Therefore some, at least, of the specific com-

14 At this point the utilitarian might take refuge in some kind of rule-utilitarianism. It is, he might say, one of the rules of the institution of friendship that one should give one's friend special treatment, but this is justified because the observance of the rule, or the maintenance of the institution, contributes to the general happiness. I can deal only briefly with this possibility. First, I am not sure that I know what it would mean to assess friendship in this *external* way, standing outside it and asking whether its existence helps to maximize the general happiness. Second, friendship is not an 'institution' or 'practice' constituted by 'rules'. But third, even if we were to accept such a framework, the attempt to work out an adequate ethical account of the social institutions and relationships which contribute to the general happiness would take us way beyond the confines of any traditional utilitarian theory.

13 William Godwin: *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. K. Codell Carter (Clarendon Press, 1971) Book II, ch. II, p.71.



mitments will remain intact. It may be that the mere fact that another human being is in need, and that I am in a position to help, is a reason for me to do so; but I can recognise this while still insisting that I have stronger loyalties of a special kind to friends, comrades, or whoever.

The claim that the ethic of generalised humanitarianism builds on the ethic of specific social relations can be defended as a historical, a psychological, and a logical claim. Historically, the idea of a common humanity has been articulated by taking a particular relationship and showing how it can be extended. The Stoics asserted that the whole world is a *polis*, a community in which every human being is a citizen. In Christian ethics the question 'Who is my neighbour?' is answered by showing how anyone can, in principle, stand in that relation to me; or again, it is asserted that all human beings are children of the same divine father. The same idea of universal brotherhood and sisterhood is taken up by working-class, feminist, and socialist movements, and within those traditions we also find the idea of class solidarity extended into a basis for internationalism, since 'the work- ingmen have no country'.

Similar extensions are identifiable in the psychological develop- ment of the individual. It is because we first form ties with parents, siblings and friends that we are subsequently able to extend our sympathies to other human beings with whom we are less closely connected. Piaget, for example, has claimed that an authentic under- standing of justice is acquired by the child not through the inculca- tion of generalised principles, but through the child's experience of the associations formed with his or her peers.

As to the logical point, Bernard Williams makes the following suggestion:

No purely rational process can require a man to move from I-desires to non-I desires; nor from particular benevolent non-I desires to more general al- truitistic dispositions. What we can say, however, is that so far as the logical structure of these attitudes are concerned, there is a bigger difference involved in the first step than in the second. Between the second and third of these attitudes there is a basic similarity in the motivating thought. (op. cit. p.265)

If I understand this properly, I would re-phrase it as follows. As we have seen, someone who adopts an attitude of pure egoism cannot be given any reason why he should exhibit any concern for others in their own right, since necessarily any reasons will appeal to him only insofar as they show him the way to satisfy his own interests. But if someone has specific attachments to other people, then, though he cannot be given any logically compelling reasons why he should

extend his concern to all human beings, there is at any rate something for new kinds of reasons to get a grip on. What those reasons might be, is another question.<sup>15</sup>

15 I should like to thank the TIP group at the University of Utah, with whom I discussed some of these ideas; and colleagues at the University of Kent with whom I have talked about the problems over the past few years, especially Chris Cherry, Sean Sayers and Tony Skillen.