

Describe the structure of the 'dialectic of self-assertion and self-sacrifice'. Can the dialectic be resolved?

"To challenge my students to think about the ethics of what we owe to people in need, I ask them to imagine that their route to the university takes them past a shallow pond. One morning, I say to them, you notice a child has fallen in and appears to be drowning. To wade in and pull the child out would be easy but it will mean that you get your clothes wet and muddy, and by the time you go home and change you will have missed your first class." (Singer, *New Internationalist* 1997)

Do we have any obligation to the child? Does our concern for our clothes and meeting our appointments count for anything? Most people will have no hesitation in saying that the obligation to the child trumps our self interest. The situation is immediate, and it would be monstrous to put our self interest before the child.

However, think of another situation. We could make a payment of (say) £100 to Oxfam, in response to a recent appeal, or we could spend it on a discounted designer jacket we have spotted in a department store. What do we do in this instance?

We could take the view of an ethical egoist. The world would be a better place if we pursued our own agent –relative self interest. We have a right to spend our money as we wish, and if we wish to spend it on a new garment, then that action can be justified by an appeal to ethical egoism. However, the self-interested response seems to fail when we move from the case of the charitable donation to the case of the drowning child; it just seems plainly wrong to put our own interest before the safety of the child.

What about the altruistic approach? This approach would tell us that we are morally obliged to make the charitable donation, and ignore our self interest. We do not have to work overtime to discover arguments for the beneficial effects of the £100: the richest 15% of the world's population control 80% of the world's product, while the poorest 17% together control 0.3%. The top fifth of the world's population is 300 times richer than the bottom fifth. (Unesco Data) We also know the arguments in economics, which say that the marginal utility of an added £1 to me is far less than the same amount given to an occupant of a third world country.

On a strictly consequentialist argument, say a utilitarian one, the above arguments point to our reacting in an altruistic manner. We will create more good if we donate the £100 to Oxfam. But is this all that is to be said? Sidgwick, writing in his "Methods of Ethics" in the late 19th century noticed the tension between altruism and egoism. Sidgwick's argues the superiority of utilitarianism over intuitionism.

His denial of a moral sense leads him to compare egoism and utilitarianism, which tell us to either maximise the general happiness or to maximise our own happiness. Each method is an independent first principle of reason. Neither takes precedence over the other, they will often conflict in practice. Sidgwick thus finds an irresolvable dualism at the heart of human reason, a contradiction in practical reason, not just a moral difficulty. Putting my own interests first is not just psychologically natural; it is also completely rational and unobjectionable. A selfish person commits no rational error.

For Sidgwick, this "dualism of practical reason" signalled the failure of ethical theory. Moral philosophy had to reconcile the individual with the universal, for the contradiction could only be avoided if every person's happiness always coincided exactly with the general happiness.

In Sidgwick we have a very clear statement of the dialectic of self assertion and self sacrifice. On the one hand, an ethic based on complete self assertion falls apart when considering the case of the drowning child. On the other hand, complete altruism seems impossible to achieve. If everyone were to practice complete self denial and always put the other person first, society would fall apart. Even the early Christian church fathers, for all their piety did not encourage pure altruism. Many acts were "supererogatory"; praiseworthy but not necessary in order to achieve moral goodness. Rather more cynically, they also had a practical eye on the consequences of complete altruism; no congregations able to fill the collecting plates and thus support a church bureaucracy.

To use language more recent than that of Sidgwick, it seems that we are at a point where our own interests – the agent relative aims – cannot be ignored; they must count for something. There is no reason why we should not pursue our personal desires to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, or to become a good flute player or buy a new designer jacket. There is no reason why we should demand that others help us with our aims, or, for that matter, feel obliged to help others with their aims. However, we might well feel a sense of obligation, even duty, to assist in agent neutral aims. Are there any rational principles to help us decide where we should position ourselves on the scale between altruism and self interest? At what point do acts performed for others, or the general good become supererogatory?

This question arises whether or not we are realist or non-realist about morals, and we are offered no solution by Kantians or consequentialists. Even if we re-examine the nature of altruism, and question whether philanthropic acts are always beneficial, or whether they might, at bottom, be really self-satisfying after all, we are still faced with the problem of resolving the dialectic.

Is there any way in which egoism and altruism can be merged? As far as I am aware, the only comprehensive attempt to do this is in Plato, in the Symposium and the Republic. Socrates relate how the priestess Diotima taught him that the key to human happiness was to make the good ones own for ever. In the ideal state there is no distinction between agent neutral and agent relative desires; egoism is extended to cover the general good. My good is the general good. However, Plato does this only at the cost of eliminating family life for his guardians, and even then, this extended egoism is limited by the walls of the polis.

It seems as if Sidgwick was right to assume that there is no principled way of resolving the egoism – altruism dialectic. People will differ in the position they adopt, because they will always take different attitudes towards prioritising their own agent relative desires. However, we need not despair at this situation, for different responses to events may still reflect morality. For example, one person may react to a problem mentioned earlier by donating the £100 to Oxfam, and forgoing the new designer garment she has her eye on. Another person may purchase the garment and not make the donation to Oxfam, but as she has a standing order to contribute a portion of her salary to charity, she could still be acting morally. What seems to be important is that we can enter into debate about our and other's actions, and evaluate the extent to which they promote the good. We can always listen to each other.