

PHIL 480: Seminar in the History of Philosophy
Building Moral Character: Neo-Confucianism and Moral Psychology

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[Handout #18]

Bill Puka, “Altruism and Character”

§ Altruism in Psychology

[Altruism] = a prosocial and other-directed orientation, spanning from fledgling attempts to do small favors or show consideration and sympathy to ultimate self-sacrifice.

1. Altruism's typical emphasis on self-sacrifice raises moral suspicions as well, especially when the concept is defined as self-sacrificial.
2. Even altruism's full focus on other-directedness can seem suspicious: why shouldn't one's own interest matter? Why deprive anyone, including oneself, to advance welfare? Is it not puzzling to place strict prohibitions on depriving others of their wellbeing but consider no holds barred when sacrificing our own? Selves are people too after all.
3. Character simply cannot show the ultimate altruism of besmirching itself – willingly sacrificing its most sacred principle, its sense of identity and reputation – for a needing friend.

Two Views on the Motivational Factor for Altruism

(1) Daniel Batson: (sentimentalist approach) emotional empathy → altruistic action

___ **The agent has a situationally aroused sense of empathy, evoked by the perceived need or suffering of others**

(2) Augusto Blasi: (cognitivist approach) moral identity and self-consistency → altruistic action

___ **The agent perceives altruism to be good and intends to do the good thing.**

§ Batson's Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis

1. Batson conceived empathy as a purely situational emotion, evoked by the perceived need or suffering of others.
2. When we perceive another's distress, we feel distress ourselves. Then we either move to decrease our distress directly or to ease theirs.
3. The first option can appear altruistic when we mitigate their distress to ease our own. But this is an instrumental form of egoism.
4. Only the latter alternative of helping others out of felt concern for their welfare represents genuine altruism. This is a pure form of altruism.

§ Blasi's characterization of Batson's empathy-altruism hypothesis

1. **Isolationist:** Batson's theory isolates empathy from personality factors. We do not feel empathy because we have a helping disposition or altruistic nature.
2. **Not tied to the Self:** Under his conception, empathy is not motivated by a desire to be consistent with our beliefs or sense of ourselves as giving persons.
3. **Purely non-egoistic:** According to his theory, empathy is purely other-directed. We follow social norms and duties to avoid censure and win approval. We follow empathy, by contrast, because it moves us emotionally.
4. **Reflex-like:** Batson's theory cuts altruism off from agency and personal self-expression. Altruism is dependent on the immediacy of an emotional response. It is without intention and purpose, much like a kind of complex reflex.

Conclusion: Altruism becomes a kind of automatic behavior, propelled by empathic arousal toward a prosocial movement of body parts.

§ Blasi's View on Altruism

1. Altruism is governed and assessed by social norms – norms of altruism, kindness, generosity, and the like. The relevant social norms and conventions actually determine for us how to act in a contextually appropriate manner for any particular situation. Without them, we would not know how to act without serious deliberation.
2. We also feel pride in acting altruistically and in feeling appropriately empathetic. To feel apathetic and unfeeling, by contrast, might make us feel guilty or ashamed.
3. Research shows that moral identity and self-consistency motivates one to act altruistically.

§ Egoistic Skepticism

Questions: Why do people act? To get something they desire? What do they desire?

Answer: A positively reinforcing experience. They wish to attain sources of pleasure and satisfaction in certain objects.

Q: Why would people act to serve the interests if it was not to serve themselves in return? If there was no reward in those efforts it would be like investing in nothing - with no hope of return. Why would they act for the inherent sake of something such as some impersonal good or ideal except to experience the pleasure accordant with it or to feel ennobled by its pursuit?

* Puka's Argument against the Egoistic Skeptic

1. Our interest in being a moral person itself is not an egoistic one. It is not a way to add yet another notch to the holster that is our self.

2. Being moral does not necessarily increase self-interest: Although being moral brings some rewards, its costs are obviously greater.
3. To be moral is to be indifferent to many of our personal interests for the sake of equality. It is to override self-interest for the greater good, as well as for principle and justice.
4. It is through the use of moral norms and obligations in society that we typically figure out what is legitimately expected of us, how to fulfill that expectation, and how to adapt that fulfillment to a variety of social contexts.
5. Therefore, being moral is largely an other-directed and altruistic enterprise.

§ Altruistic Motivation

Following altruistic moral norms \neq altruistic motivation

1. There is a vast range of motivations toward people that are neither “me” nor “them.” They are personally disinterested interests (such as states of affairs, wild animals, etc.)
2. We may desire some states of affairs (e.g. blue sky) without being personally invested in such ends.
3. Our wanting that we do our social part is enough to keep our desires in conformance with social norms. But it does not mean we would *want to* do it.
4. Therefore, having a disinterested desire (valuing a state of affairs) \neq desiring to act on that desire.

Q: What does motivate altruistic behavior then?

§ From Amoral Altruism to Moral Altruism

Blasi: To make altruism moral simply requires that the agent “perceive and intend this behavior to be morally good.”

→ **moral subjectivism**

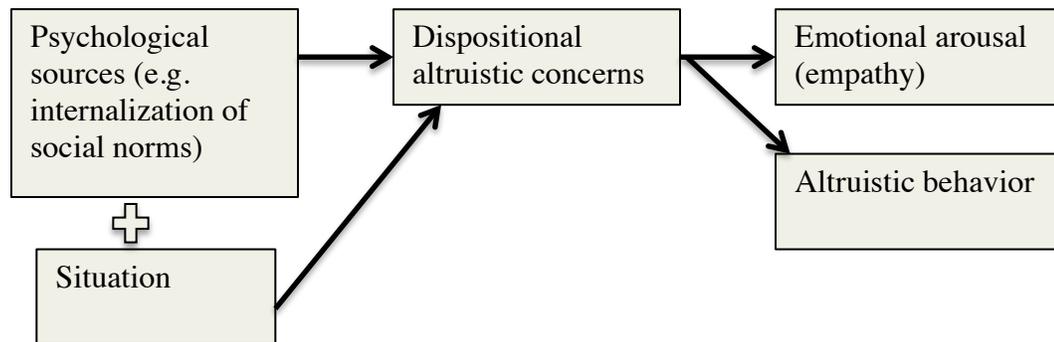
Q: Is it what separates animal altruism from human altruism?

§ Puka’s Alternative Model of Altruism

[A Combined Baston-Blasi Model]

1. An emotional arousal can be called “empathy” only when it is originated from and reflected enduring altruistic concerns (namely, altruistic motives and concerns in the form of stable disposition).
2. These altruistic concerns are likely to have different psychological sources such as personal attachment and identification or the internalization of social norms.
3. Such dispositions sensitize people to situations calling for compassionate and helpful responses, direct the cognitive interpretations of them, and generate appropriate emotional reactions and support helping actions.

4. Empathy is not an immediate or direct result of perceiving someone in need. The situation must be cognitively structured in an appropriate way for empathy.
5. Altruistic dispositions are sufficient to cause helping behaviors. Empathetic emotions and intense arousal are not required.
6. The connection between the situation and altruistic concerns can be established on cognitive grounds by understanding that the person is suffering and that there are certain personally appropriate and socially expected things to do.



§ The puzzle: Character and altruism seem separate and on a par.

1. Despite our thinking that virtues make up character, we do not commonly view the virtues of loving kindness or generosity as expressing good character.
2. There are people of good character, and there are altruists – they seem to capture separate traits.
3. Character brings organization and good order; character is the manger and disciplinarian. On the other hand, altruism neither gets us organized nor keeps us on the straight and narrow.
4. Altruism seems like a “gushing forth of goodness.” Character, on the other hand, is associated with resistance of temptation and self-discipline.
5. Character is associated with deontological ethics. A person of character is usually upright and just, rendering to each his or her due. Altruism is associated with the pull of feelings and aspirations, raising toward the ideals. [So, altruism may be associated with care ethics?]

Puka’s view: character is a myth.

___ It might be a mistake to focus on character study. In existing research, as soon as character is targeted for discussion, all eyes turn to virtues. And they stay there. Is *character* simply meant to designate the collection of virtues or is character like a shelf that holds virtues?

___ No one has actually researched character in a whole-system sense, independent of virtues. There is no solid empirical confirmation of character’s existence.

___ Character and virtue are pre-empirical categories, fashioned during times of fantastical superstition.

___ Evidence that confirms personality seems to cast character in totally psychological terms, leaving out the moral dimension.

Possible topics for term paper:

- 1. Can empathy be socially inculcated? Can altruism be socially enhanced? How do we explain the emergence of this sentiment and the realization of the behavior?**
- 2. Is there any form of altruism that is totally non-egoistic? How do we define the necessary and sufficient conditions for pure altruism?**
- 3. What is the key difference between animal altruism and moral altruism? What psychological or social factors are needed to turn an amoral prosocial behavior into a moral act?**