

Moral Psychology // Spring 2021

Handout 10

Altruism and empathy: Batson and Shaw

EGOISM AND ALTRUISM. Altruism is defined as a motivational state with the ultimate goal to increase others' welfare. Egoism is a motivational state with the ultimate goal to increase the agent's own welfare. 108c2

From the notion of ultimate goal it follows that altruism and egoism are incompatible. Importantly, it also follows that altruism doesn't entail self-sacrifice. This is because an action aiming at the increase of others' welfare may lead, as a matter of fact, to an increase of your welfare. It's not clear to me, however, whether an incidental increase in the agent's welfare should count. Mustn't we look only at the intended goals? Also, it's not clear whether we should look at the net increase of welfare, and not also at the opportunity costs. 109c1

UNDERSTANDING ULTIMATE GOALS. Batson and Shaw stress the indirect route by which we can learn other people's motivations. Since we can't observe them directly, we have to use inferences. There are two steps in this inference, conceptual and empirical. Conceptually, we explore the set of possible ultimate goals. Empirically, we observe agents' behaviour in different circumstances. This is the strategy that can uncover the nature of prosocial motivation.

HELP AND ALTRUISM. There are three models of helping actions: helping for the sake of punishment avoidance and rewards gainig, helping for the sake of suppressing aversive arousal, and empathy. The first two are quite straightforward and familiar. They buttress the argument for an egoistic explanation of help. But some theorists based the case of altruism on empathy. So, what is empathy? 110 112c1

The instigating situation for empathy is attachment where we form a disposition 'toward another person'. Hence we develop caring, bonding, and love. According to Batson and Shaw, attachment is affective, rather than cognitive. 113c1

The internal response of empathy is usually understood as perspective-taking. But you may also think of it as experience of an emotion that is similar to the emotion of the person in need, even if not identical to it. Then we may forge a plausible path to egoism by appealing to the first two models. A person likely to help the people he cares about is likely to reap rewards. Similarly, he is likely to have a negative emotion (empathy itself!) that helping helps to alleviate. 113c2 114c1

Batson and Shaw argue that empathy may be confirmed in the experiments, or at least better confirmed than its rivals. Let's consider one such experiment designed to undermine Mandeville's position. Participants were asked to help a person in the knowledge that their help would either remain anonymous or public. The experiment by Fultz et al. found no tendency to help on the condition of publicity. It would be interesting to examine this experiment in detail. But on the face of it, there is room for scepticism. For it may be that the participants couldn't quite bring themselves to confess that publicity must play a role in their decisions. Another factor to consider is the costs that the participants had to bear with their helping action (this relates to the earlier discussion of self-sacrifice). Consider donations. It's certainly possible for many people to donate small amounts in secret. But would they donate huge amounts in secret? This is unlikely, witness the very public procedure of endowments. 115c2

CODA. Batson and Shaw conclude that empathy-based altruism is a live possibility. But their other remark seems more apt. They say that the reasons behind our helping actions are 'not at all clear'. 119c2