Altruism / Egoism

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A *goal* of a person is *altruistic* iff the goal is to promote the welfare of another living being. Someone acts (among other things) from an *altruistic motive* iff 1. he assumes that (at least) one of the implications of his action is the promotion of the welfare of other living beings, and 2. he evaluates this promotion of welfare as good for his own sake (i.e. intrinsically good) in a way that influences decisions. Someone can have an altruistic goal, e.g. to help a customer through good advice, without having altruistic motives – the salesperson may be interested only in customer loyalty, his income and ultimately the enjoyment he can afford with it.

Unfortunately, 'egoistic goal' or 'egoistic motive' cannot be defined analogously without further ado, i.e. by promoting one's own well-being. Because according to today's common theories of utility, the 'utility' of a person is defined purely formally by his preferences: If the person prefers a consequence p of action to the consequence q (and is coherent), then p has a higher benefit for this person than q – completely independent of the content of p or q, thus even if e.g. p = 'my child is satisfied' and q = 'I enjoy my peace'. An exactly analogous definition would lead to any coherent decision being egoistic for analytical reasons. (Christoph Lumer, *Rationaler Altruismus*, 2000, 50 f.) In order to obtain a more useful term, the "well-being" must be determined in terms of content. And if one wants to avoid a hasty fixation, for instance on a hedonistic conception of personal well-being, only a vague definition remains, namely that egoism aims at *subject-centric* states of affairs: feelings of the subject, his prestige with others, his power, etc. Hence the following holds: A *goal* of a person is *egoistic* if this goal is subject-centric; someone acts from an *egoistic motive* if the state of affairs intrinsically evaluated in this motive is subject-centric. According to these definitions, there are goals and motives that are neither altruistic nor egoistic, e.g. the rescue of the Alpine glaciers / Venice.

The terms "egoism" and "altruism" denote attitudes on the one hand, and certain theories on the other. In philosophy they are not used in a completely intersubjectively uniform way. The following definitions are conceived in such a way that they make fruitful differentiations, i.e. in particular do not define theories which nobody advocates or which are trivial. Therefore the given extension of the altruistic and/or egoistic motives and goals varies in the individual definitions.

Someone *acts altruistically in the strong sense* if the motives of his action are predominantly altruistic (according to strength, not number); and he *acts altruistically in the weak sense* if the goals of his action are predominantly altruistic. In this case it is also said that the person concerned is *acting out of altruism*, i.e. out of an altruistic attitude, i.e. out of goals or motives that motivate him to altruistic action. '*Egoistic action*', '*egoistic attitude*' and '*action out of egoism*' are defined analogously in philosophy. (In everyday language, however, 'egoism' is understood more narrowly, namely as the ruthless pursuit of egoistic goals (*Duden, Deutsches Universalwörterbuch*, [2]1989, 388).

Psychological altruism is the empirical theory that (normally developed adult) humans have altruistic motives and occasionally act out of them. Psychological egoism, on the other hand, claims that people always act out of egoistic motives. Historical representatives of *psychological egoism* include Machiavelli, Hobbes, Mandeville and Freud. What we think of as altruism is, after them, always only hidden egoism. A psychological altruism, which besides egoistic motives also assumes a genuine altruistic benevolence or compassion leading to altruistic action, is represented by Hutcheson, Shaftesbury, Butler, Hume, Adam Smith and Schopenhauer. Now pity is an unpleasant feeling (see: emotion), which disappears through the improvement of the situation of the other. This arouses the suspicion of psychological egoists that the allegedly altruistic motive of benevolence induced by compassion is ultimately hedonically and thus egoistically motivated: The compassionate ultimately wants to improve his own emotional state. This suspicion is difficult to dispel. But present social psychologists have tried exactly this in tricky experiments - with success: The experimental situation is designed in such a way that subjects cannot hope to derive hedonic benefit from their compassion-induced help for others; they have nevertheless helped, but only if they had compassion. (Overview: Heinz Heckhausen, *Motivation and Action*, [2]1989, Chapter 9). A puzzle for evolutionary biology, however, is why altruistic motives could be selected evolutionarily (Dawkins) (see: Evolution).

Ethical altruism (see: morality and ethics) is any normative-ethical theory according to which in certain situations it is required to pursue altruistic goals, or according to which it belongs to the moral ideal of subjects to have altruistic motives or goals. *Ethical egoism*, on the other hand, demands that we always have only egoistic goals and motives. Most ethicists are ethical altruists; Nietzsche, on the other hand, is an ethical egoist. A purely rationally founded contractualism of mutual cooperation (Hobbes, David Gauthier) is at least close to ethical egoism.

Rational or *prudential altruism* is a theory according to which it is rational or prudent to pursue (also) altruistic goals (see: reason). *Rational or prudential egoism*, by contrast, considers only the pursuit of egoistic goals to be rational or prudent. Rational altruism is a strong form of justification of morality. Some important approaches to this are: 1. Ethics of benevolence or compassion rely on the altruistic motives established by psychological altruism (Schopenhauer, Richard Brandt). However, these motives are relatively weak, so that normative additions are necessary to enforce a stronger morality (Christoph Lumer). 2. Approaches, especially from humanistic psychology, point out, among other things, that egoism does not make people happy,

but that it is precisely altruists who stand up for others who are happier (hedonic paradox) (see: happiness), and that genuine self-acceptance as well as deep interpersonal relationships automatically include a considerable degree of altruism (Erich Fromm, Überblick: Lumer, op.cit., chapter 6). 3. Certain theories of practical reasons claim that our own future preferences are not closer to us than the preferences of others. If it is rational to take the former into account, then this also applies to the latter (Thomas Nagel, John Broome).

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