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COMMENT

BEYOND SELF-INTEREST AND ALTRUISM:
CARE AS MUTUAL NOURISHMENT

Paul G. Schervish

In “Philanthropy and Human Action,” Steven Grosby succeeds in his effort to explain the coexistence of “self-interest and self-sacrifice” within the theory of rational choice. My question is whether his case for “an interest in acting disinterestedly” (what I will call an interested disinterestedness), as an amendment to the theory of rational choice, contributes substantially enough to our understanding of what mobilizes our care for others. Grosby clearly recognizes the shortcomings of rational choice theory in explaining what many self-conscious, sensitive, and discerning individuals describe as sacrificial, generous, or philanthropic human behavior. In order to capture such beneficent orientations of individuals, Grosby tends to speak of these orientations as “disinterestedness” and of the individuals and behaviors reflecting such orientations as “disinterested.” These terms work just fine for his purposes, which are (1) to contrast disinterestedness with self-interest, (2) to reconcile rational choice with his belief that altruistic orientations truly exist, and (3) to do this without abandoning the initial principle of rational choice theory, namely that self-interest remains the ultimate impetus for all behavior.

It is also possible that Grosby frames the central question of his essay by citing a duality in Adam Smith. Smith emphasizes how market relations guided by individual self-interest will accrue to the benefit of all. This dispensation, Smith recognized, provides society with a lower bound of welfare and civility. But Grosby also points to Smith’s high regard for beneficence and fellow-feeling as the source of a more pleasant and salutary society well above that provided by self-regard.

My favorite sections in which Smith frames the duality of rational choice and choice from affective are in his Theory of Moral Sentiments. On the one hand, Smith sees relations based on a sense of utility as the fundamental glue of society:
Society may subsist among different men, as among different merchants, from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love or affection; and though no man in it should owe any obligation, or be bound in gratitude to any other, it may still be upheld by a mercenary exchange of good offices according to an agreed valuation (2000 [1759], 124).

The dilemma is that Smith, the seeming champion of rational choice, goes on to say, “Society may subsist, though not in the most comfortable state, without beneficence”:

All the members of human society stand in need of each other’s assistance, and are likewise exposed to mutual injuries. Where necessary assistance is reciprocally afforded from love, from gratitude, from friendship, and esteem, the society flourishes and is happy. All the different members of it are bound together by the agreeable bands of love and affection, and are, as it were, drawn to one common centre of mutual good offices (125).

The question is how to reconcile Smith’s thinking about society resting on reciprocal “bonds of love” deriving from gratitude and friendship with his position that society is held together by choices derived from a “sense of . . . utility.”

Grosby does not view Smith’s notions of beneficence as naïve or misguided. But his own response to the Smith conundrum leads him to incorporate theories of beneficence into rational choice theory rather than vice versa. As he says, the actions that Smith points to as benefiting others “do not invalidate an economic or rational choice theory of action but do require an additional, different explanation” (2009, 2).

Grosby’s carefully argued “additional, different explanation” to complement rational choice theory is as good a job as I have seen. Few economic theorists countenance any intrusion by today’s more culturally based behavioral economics. But for those who do, such as Grosby, it is not easy to reconcile rational choice theory with what religions, spiritualities, and humanisms present as motivations for care that run far deeper than even a modified notion of self-interest. Grosby’s wrestling with the issues is instructive. But in the end his efforts leave us with less value than if he had tried a different tack: either abandon rational choice altogether, or embed rational choice theory into theories of care, affinity, love, gratitude, and empathy—those deeply seated motivations of affection that Smith recognizes as animating moral sentiments.

Several years ago I went through a parallel mental conversation with Gary Becker who likewise seeks to account for “altruism” within the rational choice model. Becker’s case against altruism is that it is a merely apparent epiphenomenon that can be “explained away” by a deeper understanding of rational choice theory. What first appears as a preference for non-self-interested altruism is actually a more complex or composite preference, one in which the self-interest of individuals is to meet the needs of others. What may appear to be selflessness is better understood as “multiperson altruism” carried out as a rational choice. For Becker, even sociobiological “models of group selection are unnecessary since altruistic behavior can be selected as a consequence of individual rationality” (1976, 284).

Imperialistic Theory

So where does all this leave me? In the debate between self-interested choice and selfless altruism, I judge rational self-interested choice the easy winner. Rational choice theory is imperialistic—it can devour any counterargument by saying that if somebody does something it must entail a self-interested utility. For instance, a mother dives into a frozen pond to save her child who has broken through the ice. She may have been brave; she may not have stopped to think about her action. But did she do it without being coerced? Did she choose to do it? Yes. Well then, by definition it was self-interested. And this holds true even if she makes mistakes and does not do what is objectively effective, such as lying on the ice and casting her jacket forward so that her child can clutch it. Rational choice theory explains her actions as self-interested, or at best, as interested disinterestedness.

Dante’s “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here” (Inferno, Canto III, line 9) should be heeded by anyone who dares to enter the cave going down to the Inferno of a reductionist theory. Head to head, there is no vanquishing rational choice theory. As I will explain, this surrender to rational choice theory does not mean that I agree with it. It is simply that I will offer a wholly different approach, one that neither accepts nor directly disputes rational choice theory on its own turf. My point is that once we pit the theory of self-interested rational choice against theories of selflessness or altruism, rational choice theory always wins. As an ultimately reductionist argument, rational choice theory will always prevail simply (as we have seen) by taking one step back and crafting an amendment to rational choice theory that sees care for others as a self-interested utility. Generating such a hybrid conception is as close as it is possible to come to “saving” caring behavior within rational choice explanations of care.
Even though rational choice theory can defeat altruism in its many terminological manifestations (selflessness, disinterestedness, other-directedness, etc.) if they go head to head, it is important to take a moment to explore altruism in its own right as an alternative explanation of caring behavior. For the moment let us circumvent the insurmountable regime of self-interest and examine the modern conception of altruism as selflessness. It appears that the first use of the term altruism was by Auguste Comte, defining the term as the impetus “to live for others” (1973 [1851], 565). He used the term as the opposite of egoism, which he understood as the baser impetus to pursue self-interest for survival. Altruism was the natural outgrowth of human development, he argued. Teaching and even imposing it was necessary to overcome self-interest in order to institute “the religion of humanity,” where religion is “that state of complete harmony peculiar to human life” (Comte 2009 [1852], 8). The notion of altruistic selflessness suggested by Comte comes down to self-interest subordinated to altruism instead of altruism subordinated to self-interest. But just how is it possible to explain activities in which a person is thoroughly engaged as selfless? As I will explain in the next section, altruism as an antidote to self-interest is theologically, spiritually, philosophically, and phenomenologically inadequate. Selflessness simply is not what people experience when they engage in caring behavior, and a theory of selflessness is thus no more convincing than rational choice theory.

**Dialectical Approach**

I do not agree that we must accept either the elegant framework of rational choice theory or the civilized framework of altruism. I suggest a third option. This *tertium quid* is not a middle, gray position seeking a balance between rational choice theory and altruism theory. I do not seek to bring together as closely as possible some version of interested disinterestedness or its kissing cousin, disinterestedness. Just as it is inadequate to understand care as mobilized by a calculating rational self, it is also inadequate to understand it as mobilized by the absence of self-regard. My alternative approach results from a dialectical synthesis of rational choice and altruism. From rational choice theory I garner the presence of self; from altruism theory I acquire the reality of authentic care that regards others as worthy of my efforts. My *tertium quid* is not a gray middle ground, but, if you will, a new pink or chartreuse alternative. Consider the affirmation to be the existence of a self rationally calculating one’s interest, as the utilitarians would have it. The negation of the affirmation is the absence of self as a prerequisite for heartfelt care of others, as the altruists would have it. My synthetic negation of the negation points to the existence of a certain *kind* of self. It is not the absence of a self but the quality of a self that mobilizes care. This quality is one of identification, mutual nourishment, and connectedness—in other words, love in action. I call the framework surrounding my approach, the “identification theory.”

Now, I am well aware that people may understand and describe their orientations within the framework of self-interest. altruism, or some hybrid of the two. However, I do not believe that their choice of language does justice to their actual experiences. In fact, my interview research and interaction with participants at workshops have taught me that when given the opportunity for deeper reflection, individuals invariably narrate a version of an identified self. They experience and come to enunciate how their philanthropy as well as the personal assistance they provide family, friends, and others is an inseparable unity of love of neighbor and love of self. They explain that empathy with the fate of others is what motivates them to care for others. It is identification with the fortunes of others, even strangers in distant lands, as if those others were themselves, their parents, children, friends, or other loved ones. As one progressive respondent said, “Liberals do things in order to help someone else; radicals do things in order to help others and themselves at the same time.” When it comes to care, I believe we are all “radicals” who get to the root of things in this way.

I draw on several sources in elaborating the meaning and practice of the identification theory. The theory derives from the Western philosophical and religious tradition as formulated by Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle as well as contemporary thinkers who seek to locate identification as the generative disposition for care and philanthropy. Aquinas views people’s truer self as extending to others rather than curtailing their love of self. Clearly Aquinas did not anticipate our modern notion of identity as a social-psychological aspect of an individuated personality. He did, however, advance the notion of identification as an experience and an ideal. Aquinas writes, “by the fact that love transforms the lover into the beloved, it makes the lover enter inside the beloved, and conversely, so that there is nothing of the beloved that is not united to the lover” (cited in Gillemian 1950, 126). Aquinas recognizes and even extols this seemingly paradoxical unity of self-orientation and other-orientation. As Gerard Gillemian writes, “For St. Thomas there is no place in a morally good act of will for an absolute disjunction between love referred to self and love referred to another. The
proper effect of love is to associate self with the other” (125). Indeed, for Aquinas there is no place for disjunction not only between love of self and love of neighbor, but also between them and love of God. So, in the end, Aquinas essentially asks, Which is most important, love of self, love of neighbor, or love of God? Aquinas goes to lengths to emphasize that these three pillars of love are a unity and that the absence of any one undercuts the fulfillment of the remaining two.

Although he uses the phrase “self-interest properly understood,” Alexis de Tocqueville’s cultural analysis of Americans’ mutual care is more akin to Aquinas and (as we will see) Aristotle than to Grosby’s “interested disinterestedness.” For Tocqueville the regular confluence of love of self and love of neighbor that he finds in the United States is not the priority of self-interest but the simultaneity of love of self and love of neighbor. Americans, he writes, “enjoy explaining almost every act of their lives on the principle of self-interest properly understood. It gives them great pleasure to point out how an enlightened self-love continually leads them to help one another and disposes them freely to give part of their time and wealth for the good of the state” [1966 [1835], 526).

Our identification model, while independently developed, does not stand alone in the theoretical and empirical research on giving. The most nearly congruent theoretical statement is provided by Mike Martin in his truly insightful exposition of the fundamental motivations for caring expressed in the form of philanthropic giving and voluntary service. “At its best,” writes Martin, “philanthropy unites individuals in caring relationships that enrich giver and receiver alike” (1994, 1). As a relationship, philanthropy, while “uncoerced,” is not “morally optional or nonobligatory” (2-3). It entails entering into a relationship of responsibility in which the prototype is face-to-face interactions with family, friends, and others (24). Finally, as a relationship, philanthropy is generated most saliently by participation in a community, which Martin defines as “any group of people joined by shared caring” (26). In addition, Jackson, Bachmeier, Wood, and Craft cite various researchers (such as Piliavin, Doob, Dovidio, Gaertner, and Clark 1981; Eucken 1990; Coleman 1990; Hornstein 1972, 1976; and Staub 1978) who have incorporated the notion of identification, or a sense of “we-ness,” as the specific mobilizing impetus that spurs the caring orientation of which Martin speaks. They argue that this we-ness, “the sense of being connected with another or categorizing another as a member of one’s own group,” is a central determinant of helping and results from the combination of personal beliefs and associational ties that bring the needs of others into one’s purview (Jackson et al. 1995, 74).

**The Moral Biography of Wealth**

The framework undergirding the identification theory is moral biography. The moral calling for all people is to advance their own moral biography and that of others at the same time. The term moral biography refers to the way individuals conscientiously combine in daily life two elements: personal capacity and moral compass. It is the way individuals combine their resources with moral purpose to implement a practice of care. All capacities—spiritual, material, associational, intellectual, and physical—are latent. They remain so until activated by purposes, values, aspirations, desires, or moral bearings. The question now becomes how to define the way we human beings experience and carry out the disposition to care, without resorting to the polar positions of self-interest and altruism, and in a way that is more authentically representative of human experience and intent than even the hybrid of interested disinterestedness.

**Love, Care, and Friendship**

Care as the Implementation of Love. There are several ways to deepen our understanding of identification theory as the explanation for caring behavior. One approach is to consider care as an expression of love. According to the Jesuit philosopher Jules Toner (1968), love is the regard of another as an unconditional end, as someone categorically valuable and never to be abused as a means to an unworthy end. Care, in turn, is the implemental or instrumental aspect of love.

Toner says that care is that activity directed toward attending to others as unconditional ends in their true needs. Care means loving others through practical actions that meet their true needs. Figuring out the true needs of others is never simple, but it is always the right question. From this important philosophical truth, we all need to learn and enunciate the many ways we carry out care in our daily lives: care for family, care for friends, care for others across the globe, and, yes, care for ourselves—all at the same time, as Aquinas insists. Importantly, in this model care is not to be equated only with formal philanthropy. Care is broader; it includes all the ways people implement love in ordinary and extraordinary personal relationships. As such, formal philanthropy is one expression of care, not its only or necessarily major expression.

Friendship Love as Mutual Nourishment. In addition to Toner’s philosophy of care, there is another path to the deeper meaning of the identification theory. This second approach focuses on the mutuality of care as described by Aristotle in his Nicomachean Ethics. The root meaning of philanthropy comes from the Greek
Philia and Anthropos. Philanthropeia existed as a beneficial relationship long before the world had any notion that doing good or being financially virtuous was tied to what today we call the nonprofit sector. The two terms in combination are almost always translated simply as love of humankind. No special attention is given to the particular kind of love connoted by philia, although we get a hint of the root meaning when we call Philadelphia the City of Brotherly Love. According to Aristotle, philia, or friendship love, extends out in concentric circles from the family to the entire species. Philia originates in the parent-child bond and becomes expanded to the species in philanthropeia. Friendship love is a relation of mutual nourishment that leads to the virtuous flourishing of both parties, without priority to either. Because philia is connected in origin to the term species, this friendship love implies that this mutual nourishment extends, as people mature, to mutual nourishment for the entire species.

“A friend is another self.” “Friends share one soul in two bodies.” “One friend loves the other for the other’s own sake.” Aristotle coined these well-known phrases when speaking of the kind of friendship that brings individuals together for mutual benefit. The best friendship is the friendship that inspires us and our friends to develop all our virtues and by doing so become, both together, more fully our true selves through the mutual nourishment of friendship love.

**Philia and Philanthropy**

Once we have rooted philanthropy in care and friendship love (philia), we can see that philia is more fundamental than formal philanthropy. The latter is nested in the former. Recognizing the deeper roots of philanthropy guides us past the conventional notion that formal philanthropy is the major expression of generosity and financial care. This latter, prevailing view tends to equate generosity and care with tax-deductible philanthropic donations made to those organizations that meet the tax code’s definition of a charitable entity. In addition, philanthropic volunteering does not include the myriad acts of personal assistance that people carry out in their daily round. Researchers and those commenting on the dearth of mutual care in our society limit their idea of volunteering to the donation of time and effort in or through legally defined charitable organizations.

Although these conventional understandings have their place, I advocate a more accurate, more profound, and more compelling understanding of philanthropy as an expression of philia. This is to understand philanthropy as including all relations in which individuals turn their attention to allocating their resources for the care of others. Formal giving and volunteering are included in this broader definition, but they remain just one way people act with generous care by providing financial or physical assistance for others. Going further, our financial and physical assistance is but one part of the myriad ways we put love into practice, for those both close at hand and at a distance. We need to recognize explicitly that formal charitable giving is the sectoral, institutional, and legal expression of forms of care (including financial care) that individuals carry out daily. Philanthropy is nested in financial care, and financial care is nested in care. Generosity, care, and friendship love are biographical virtues, ways of being and acting in every sphere, not just in formal philanthropy.

**Conclusion**

Grosby and Becker both correctly locate the elements of human preferences that most strain the theory of rational choice. They both endeavor to incorporate those apparent aspects of altruism into rational choice theory in order to rescue it. The problem is that their syntheses are not as robust in capturing the reality of human experience as identification theory is. If one’s preference is rational choice theory, there is nothing that cannot be explained as self-interest—ever altruism and disinterestedness. I believe that we need a different starting point, one that is also empirically founded and philosophically coherent. Identification theory is in my view a better account than rational choice theory for two reasons: it can explain what rational choice theory tries to explain, and it can explain additional factors that rational choice theory cannot explain.

First, by emphasizing the inherent mutuality of care and friendship love, identification theory leaves room for—and indeed requires—the notions of self and self-interest. As noted earlier, identification theory does not remove the self. It does not posit the absence of self but instead the inherent connectedness of self. Under identification theory, it isn’t the rational calculation of self-interest that defines relationships of care. Instead it is a self-interest of a different quality, one attentive to how by the very nature of things self-regard and self-love always and necessarily accompany care of others. In identification theory, care does not lose its moral and phenomenological equality with self-interest. Care does not get subordinated by dint of a theoretical stranglehold, as in the phrase “self-interested disinterestedness.” Identification theory recognizes that identification with the fate
of another, not self-interested rational choice, is the objectively observable and theoretically meaningful way to explain care. Thus care is not something to be fit into a grander theory of rational choice. It is to be examined and understood for what it is: an act of mutual nourishment, of friendship love (philia) in practice. Likewise, pro-social care is not based on an absence of self but on the presence of a quality of self. And that quality of self is one of identification with the condition of others as if they were myself or others I cherish. Care meets my and another’s true needs simultaneously; it is an engagement of philia’s mutual nourishment, and it is the ontologically natural generation of happiness for myself and others at the same time.

Second, identification theory can incorporate other affective and cognitive factors that rational choice theory does not and cannot include. These factors are the mobilizing foundations of care that rational choice theory considers to be aspects of a selfless “altruism” and then easily and correctly debunks. If altruism is viewed not as a selfless activity but as the disposition of a self toward mutual nourishment and identification with others, then we can seek to identify the positive elements that altruism elevates. One such factor is gratitude. I hope to be enlightened if I am wrong, but I do not see how rational choice theory can handle gratitude as a mobilizing force for care. Within identification theory, gratitude is the cousin of identification. Gratitude derives from blessings, luck, grace, or breaks we recognize as coming from those who in the past identified with and cared for us. Such gratitude leads us to care for others with whom we identify in order to provide the blessings or opportunities they do not yet enjoy. When I locate the source of my gratitude, I also locate those with whom I identify and for whom I wish to provide a blessing in the form of nourishing care.

Similarly, it is difficult to understand how rational choice theory could explain the experience of indissoluble bonds of friendship love between a mother and child. The mutual nourishment that occurs is not selfless on behalf of the mother. She would die for her child not because she is selfless, but because her self is connected to another. The child is she; the child is bone of her bone, flesh of her flesh, and blood of her blood. If ever necessary, the mother would dive into a fast-moving fire to save her babe, but neither because she is self-interested nor because she is without a self. She goes after her babe because the babe is she and she is the babe. They are connected. It is the nature, source, and practice of self-identification, rather than of rationally chosen self-interest or morally advocated selflessness, that leads to the most robust understanding of why we care for others.

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