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Anarchism and Selfishness

Donald Room

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1987

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Responding to natural emotion, an unashamedly selfish person might die trying to save another individual, but I cannot see a loyally selfish person risking life for the benefit of a category. If everyone were unashamedly selfish, war would be impossible.

Acknowledgements and plea

Readers will have noticed ideas and phrases taken from Michael Bakunin, Tony Gibson, John Hick, Jack Kennedy, Errico Malatesta, Tom Muff, P. H. Nowell-Smith, Sid Parker, Bertrand Russell, Eddie Shaw, Max Stirner, Bonar Thompson, and others.

The most influential source is Max Stirner. I am happy to be called a Stirnerite anarchist, provided 'Stirnerite' means one who agrees with Stirner's general drift, not one who agrees with Stirner's every word. Please judge my arguments on their merits, not on the merits of Stirner's arguments, and not by the test of whether I conform to Stirner.

Governments cannot survive long by coercion alone. They need a measure of acceptance. To this end people in governed societies are encouraged to believe that government is for the benefit of everyone, that nature is controlled by supernatural forces (God, Karma, Historical Necessity, or whatever), and that people should be ashamed of their selfishness.

Early opponents of government believed in supernatural control. Some of them denounced earthly rulers as usurpers of power belonging to God, as if to suggest (which they did not intend at all) that if God were a fiction, earthly rulers would be acceptable. Since the eighteenth century, however, both supporters and opponents have recognised the usefulness of God to the state. There are anarchists who believe in God, but their concept of God is different from that of Top Boss. Anarchists agree that the best excuse for a tyrant on earth is a tyrant in heaven.

Yet it is still not thought strange to denounce bosses for pursuing their own selfish advantage, as if to suggest that they would be acceptable, if only they were all incorruptible idealists. It has become obvious that bending the knee to a god and touching the forelock to a boss are mutually reinforcing activities, but it is still not clear to everyone that calling shame on selfishness is another activity of the same kind. I hope this essay may help to make perception clearer.

Ethical doctrines

Ethical doctrines are guides for intentional behaviour. They may be classified into regulatory, idealistic, and selfish. I learned this classification from a Sunday school teacher when I was eleven or twelve years old.

Regulatory doctrines say we should behave by strict rules. My Sunday school teacher gave as an example his aunt, who would not let him trim a broken fingernail with scissors on a Sunday. When

he pointed out that she was knitting she grew indignant. If she came to a point in her knitting, she said angrily, where the use of scissors was unavoidable, she would put her knitting away until Monday. She resented the imputation that she would commit the sin of using scissors on a Sunday.

Idealistic doctrines say we should serve ideals, not sticking to strict rules but modifying our behaviour according to our perception of what will serve the ideals best. My Sunday school teacher was himself a devout idealist, in the service of Peace and Love. I like peace and love as occurrences, but as ideals they are not incompatible with conflict.

Selfish doctrines say we should only seek to satisfy our individual desires, 'looking after Number One'. My Sunday school teacher believed that unashamedly selfish persons existed, but claimed at the time that he was not personally acquainted with any. At other times, however, he claimed personal acquaintance with God.

All accounts of God portray Him as totally selfish. He acts only on His Own behalf, worshipping no other god, and acknowledging no government over Himself. His entire creation exists only to fulfill His Own purposes. I say we should all live according to the ethical code which God Himself follows. What is good enough for my Father is good enough for me.

By all ethical doctrines, virtue is its own reward. Advocates of regulatory doctrines may talk of propitiating deities, but their basic impulse is a gut feeling that the rules and tabus are right, not to observe them is wrong, and there is an end of the matter. Advocates of idealistic doctrines may talk of heavenly reward, but they would disapprove of serving the ideal just to get the reward, for that would be not really serving the ideal, but using the ideal for selfish ends. Advocates of selfish doctrines promise nothing except freedom from the shame of selfishness.

Ethical doctrines describe how people intend to behave, not how they behave in practice. People seldom, if ever, behave as they think they should. For predicting what someone will do, the record

weapons exist which are capable of destroying governments along with subjects, those governments which have them are careful not to declare war on each other, but equally careful to stay always on the brink of war.

The idealistic solution to war, the one advocated by my old Sunday school teacher, is that everyone should feel the highest group loyalty to the highest possible number, the entire human species. I do not deny that my Sunday school teacher felt such a loyalty, and I know some anarchists who feel the same. But Humanity cannot attract the same passion as its sub-categories, because it is an 'us' without a hostile 'them'. Group loyalty to Humanity can never be as emotionally satisfying as, say, patriotism, unless there is an attack from space. Those who hold that we are all children of God are organised in bickering factions, and it is not unknown to declare war on other humans, 'on behalf of the Human Race'.

A more realistic counter to war is that everyone should feel their highest group loyalty to the lowest possible number, 'Number One'. An individual is not a group, but neither is an abstract category. I know from personal experience that 'loyal selfishness' is feasible, and I suspect it is easier to feel than patriotism. No one can ever know all the members of a country, but I already know all the members of me. The reason patriotism is so much more common than 'loyal selfishness' is that it is dinned into every one of us, from early childhood onwards, that we should be proud of our country and ashamed of our selfishness.

It seems to be a genetic feature of human behaviour that 'us and them' will be felt among groups of people who know each other. If this is so, it will occur among groups of unashamedly selfish people as it occurs among patriotic and religious people. People acting as groups experience passions which they do not experience individually. Groups of idealists urge themselves into battle with cries of 'Holy! Holy! Holy!', or 'God bless America', or 'Get the Bastards'. I like to imagine a group of anarchists urging themselves to safety with cries of 'Self first, Self last, and if any left, Self again!'

Us and them

Humans have a strong sense of group identity. Solidarity within groups is reinforced by antagonism between groups. A large group is likely to divide if it has no enemies, but small groups may unite against a common adversary.

Most animals with an 'us and them' sense know only one 'us', a family group which together exploits a territory and keeps 'them' other groups out. Modern humans inhabit a number of overlapping family, neighbourhood, working and friendship groups, any of which may be felt as 'us' against 'them', with varying degrees of loyalty. Fighting gangs exist, whose only purpose is to experience the intense comradeship which comes of group conflict.

Humans also have the imaginative capacity to develop feelings of group loyalty to divisions of humanity which are not groups at all, but categories: the British Nation, the Catholic Church, the Master Race, the Working Class. Such categories can never come together as groups because, besides being very numerous, most of their members are dead. A face-to-face group 'us' may be maintained by love, but a category 'us' cannot easily exist without a continuous, hostile 'them'.

Category loyalties are essential if governments are to be considered beneficial. Patriotism, the most common form of category loyalty, makes a national government seem like leaders within the group, rather than a particular group invading everybody else. When rulers say things like 'My country may she always be right, but my country right or wrong', or 'Ask not what can my country do for me but what can I do for my country', they can judge from the applause how well the swindle is working. I do not say all rulers are hypocrites; some, no doubt, are as patriotic as the most gullible of their subjects. But the 'my country' speeches are so blatant that they must be conscious claptrap.

Governments need war, since they depend on patriotism or something similar, and patriotism depends on hostility. Now that

of their past behaviour is a far better guide than an account of their sincere ethical convictions.

Selfishness defined

Every anarchist has met the difficulty that the word 'anarchy' is used in senses which anarchists do not intend. For instance, in the United States it is called 'anarchy' if the Executive Arm acts contrary to the decisions of the Legislative Arm. For another instance, if a civil war fizzles out with no contender completely successful and the population subject to competing gangs, that also is called 'anarchy'. Dictionaries (which record how words are used as distinct from dictating how they should be used) include among the definition of anarchy, 'capricious or disorderly government', 'want of settled government', and 'chaos'. Nobody wants anarchy in any of these senses.

When we say anarchism means striving towards anarchy, we have to make it clear we mean anarchy only in the sense of a society with no government at all.

The word 'selfishness' is also used with a variety of meanings, most of which I do not intend. I have heard the Nazis described as selfish, though no one denies that they advocated and practised individual self-denial. Perhaps they are counted selfish because the ideal they served was a mystic racial 'self', of perhaps more likely, the word 'selfish' was used in this context as a mere swearword. I do not advocate selfishness in either of these senses.

Nor do I advocate selfishness in the sense of having no consideration for others. I have no ethical grounds for condemning lack of consideration, but that is altogether different from advocating it as a principle.

I advocate selfishness in the sense of seeking only to satisfy one's individual desires.

Let me clarify the distinction between these last two meanings. If 'selfish' means 'without consideration for others', then a person who scoffs the lot when others are hungry is selfish, a person who goes without so others may eat is unselfish, and a person who eats when food is plentiful is neither selfish nor unselfish. If 'selfish' means 'seeking only to satisfy one's individual desires', then a person who scoffs the lot when others are hungry is selfish (satisfying greed), a person who goes without so others may eat is selfish (satisfying a benevolent impulse), and a person who eats when food is plentiful is selfish (satisfying normal hunger).

In the sense of selfishness which I advocate, almost anything anyone does is selfish. But not quite everything, and the exceptions are important. It is never selfish to feel guilty because one has failed to abide by a fixed rule or live up to an ideal.

The decision to take selfishness as your ethical code is not a meaningless or trivial decision, since it requires the rejection of regulatory and idealistic ethics.

Selfishness after death

All right, so the hereafter has nothing to do with anarchism. Indulge me, or skip to the next section.

Belief in personal survival after death takes various forms. Some believe that a person is not a body, but an immortal soul or spirit or ghost infesting a body. When somebody dies, the soul and the body part, and the soul stays about the vicinity, or moves to another body, or goes to a gathering-place of souls. Others believe that, when a person dies, there simultaneously comes into being, in another part of the universe, a person whose memory is continuous with that of the dead person.

It is not for an ethical essay to discuss whether these propositions are true, or why anyone believes them. The ethical question is,

We may deduce what people prefer to do by observing what they choose to do. So-called self-sacrifice occurs when preferences are not what we expect. The archetype of self-sacrifice is said by some to be the man who lays down his life for his friends, but the very fact that he chooses to do so shows that he prefers his friends to his life. This is evidence of great love for his friends, but it is not self-sacrifice.

The Remembrance Sunday presenter, when he said 'the sacrifice is worthwhile even when it achieves little or nothing', was talking in fact about one of those appalling incidents in the First World War, when a crowd of young men set out to massacre another crowd of young men, and unintentionally got massacred themselves. This is not self-sacrifice, nor is it evidence of great love. It is evidence of either murderous patriotism, or a fear of disobeying orders which exceed the fear of death.

This is what makes the notion of self-sacrifice pernicious. Dying for love of one's friends is called self-sacrifice, dying in the attempt to kill someone is called self-sacrifice, and, using the kind of fallacious reasoning which is used in Remembrance Sunday broadcasts, war is identified as an act of love. The Remembrance Sunday broadcast of 1986 was illustrated with snatches of film, alternately showing benevolent acts like caring for the sick and warlike acts like recapturing the Falklands, all of which were described as self-sacrifice. Love and war were quite deliberately confused.

Viking captains would visit the mothers of those killed in battle, and comfort them by saying their sons had died enjoying themselves, and gone to Valhalla where dead heroes joyfully kill each other every day, and wake up next morning to kill each other again. Modern British mothers are comforted by the thought that their sons who died in battle were doing something benevolent. There is nothing wrong with using nonsense to comfort the bereaved, but self-sacrifice is a nasty nonsense.

reading from a prompt board. He had already read the words at least once, during the run-through, and before that they had been carefully considered by at least two people, the script-writer and the producer. It is not unfair to criticise the sentence as a piece of literature.

We see immediately that it embodies a formal logical fallacy. The statement that everything involving self-sacrifice is worthwhile, because everything worthwhile involves self-sacrifice, is an instance of 'A contains B therefore B contains A'. One might argue with equal validity that everything with legs is a peacock, because all peacocks have legs. Irrationality is common in talk of self-sacrifice; inevitably, because it is an irrational notion.

Life is full of choices. We continually want to have our cake and eat it, stay in bed and get up, or, in general, do two things which exclude each other. Mostly we choose the alternative we like best. Self-sacrifice is said to occur in some instances where someone chooses the alternative they like least. I say 'said to occur' because I do not think it ever really occurs that anyone chooses against their preference. I think it is logically impossible.

If you are asked whether you want tea or coffee, and answer, 'I prefer coffee but I will choose tea', your answer calls for an explanation: '... because coffee keeps me awake', '... because the coffee they serve here is terrible', '... because there is only enough coffee for one, and I want you to have it'.

All the explanations I can think of describe circumstances which change the balance of preference in the particular instance, that is to say they make a distinction between habitual preference and preference on this occasion. 'I prefer coffee but I will choose tea' means the same as either: 'usually I prefer coffee but in these special circumstances I prefer tea'; or, 'usually I choose coffee but in these special circumstances I choose tea'. To say, 'taking all present circumstances into account I prefer coffee, but taking all present circumstances into account I choose tea', is to contradict oneself.

how does belief or disbelief in 'personal survival affect one's ethical attitude?

Believers in personal survival are usually opposed to selfishness and will tell you there is a connection between their anti-selfishness and their belief. Whatever the nature of this connection, however, it is evidently not a necessary connection. For there are a few believers who are unashamedly selfish, and many people opposed to selfishness who are unbelievers.

If you believe that all fungi are poisonous, or that the kitchen is on fire, or that Proxima Centauri is four light-years distant, then your factual belief, true or mistaken, may affect your behaviour in practical ways, but will have no effect on the ethical doctrine which guides your behaviour. This is true of all factual beliefs, including factual beliefs about the hereafter.

A nasty belief about personal survival is that one may be tortured, not to death but for ever, in retaliation for behaviour on earth which was not to the taste of the Boss of the Universe. If the punishable offences are overt acts, such as genocide or using scissors on a Sunday, they may be avoided. But if selfishness is an unpardonable offence, a selfish person has no escape. One cannot stop being selfish in order to avoid the punishment, for that would be giving up selfishness for a selfish reason, which is a contradiction.

If personal survival after death is a fiction, no one will ever find out. If it is a fact, unbelievers will discover their error, but that in itself will be no reason to change their ethics. A selfish person is a selfish person, alive or dead.

Benevolence

As I use the word here, 'benevolence' includes love of one's nearest and dearest, and also includes kind acts and intentions towards victims of distant famines, unlovely people like homicidal rapists in prison, and beetles stranded on their backs.

There is a verbal trick, apparently proving that benevolence does not occur. *'Why are you giving a fiver to Oxfam?' 'I think it might relieve someone's distress?' 'Do you like the thought of relieving someone's distress?' 'Yes.' 'Then you are not doing it to relieve someone's distress, but for your own pleasure in relieving someone's distress.'*

The trick is exposed if we apply the same procedure to an act which is not benevolent. *'Why are you singing in the bath?' 'The reverberations make my voice sound great.' 'Do you like your voice to sound great?' 'Yes.' 'Then you are not doing it to make your voice sound great, but for your own pleasure in making your voice sound great.'*

Obviously there is no distinction between wanting one's voice to sound great and wanting the pleasure of one's voice sounding great. Nor is there any distinction between wanting to relieve someone's distress and wanting the pleasure of relieving someone's distress. The trick depends on the false assumption that benevolence and selfish pleasure are incompatible.

Awareness of someone else's emotions causes us to experience a semblance of the same emotions ourselves. This phenomenon is called 'empathy'. When the other person's emotion is painful it is called 'primary distress', and the response it produces is called 'empathic distress'.

Empathic distress may be relieved by becoming less aware of the primary distress, for instance by running away or hiding one's eyes. Or it may be relieved by relieving the primary distress, which is a benevolent act.

To obtain maximum benevolence from others, maximise their awareness of your distress. The Ethiopian famine of 1984 was a usual type of famine, which at first provoked only a usual type of caring response. Then the first carers managed to get pictures of the suffering on television, and a massive, popular relief effort started. People were more moved to empathic distress by the sight than they had been by the news.

Empathy is not the only motive for benevolence. Species in which the invariable response to empathic distress is to run may care for their mates and young from entirely different urges. In humans, there is also the pride of perceiving oneself to be benevolent. These are all selfish motives, and all produce real benevolence.

The capacity for empathy varies from individual to individual, between the morbid extremes of those who feel so much for others they are unable to cope with life, and those who feel so little they are a social menace. The capacities for parental love and pride in oneself vary just as widely. But no one is ever benevolent except for selfish reasons.

Self-sacrifice

Self-sacrifice means choosing to act against one's personal preference from some noble motive. A donation from a poor person to a worthy cause is counted as self-sacrifice, because it is presumed that the poor person would prefer to spend the money on comfort. Dying for an ideal counts as self-sacrifice because it is presumed that the idealist would prefer to live. Suicide is not self-sacrifice, because it is presumed that the suicide prefers to die.

As I shall show, the notion of self-sacrifice is illogical and pernicious.

In 1986 I watched the Remembrance Sunday broadcast (Remembrance Sunday, as British readers will know, is a day of official mourning for those killed in battle). One broadcast sentence so startled me that I wrote it down: 'The sacrifice is worthwhile even when it achieves little or nothing, because everything that is of value depends on self-sacrifice.' The presenter used the tone and expression of someone comforting the bereaved. If his words were spontaneous it would be unfair to analyse them, because we comfort people mostly with tone and gesture, not paying much attention to the words. But he was not speaking spontaneously. He was