

THE ALTRUISTIC QUESTION AND ALFRED SCHULTZ'S DEFINITION OF HUMAN ACTION

Peter Iorhom Akunoko PhD

Department of Philosophy,
Benue State University,
Makurdi.
pakunoko@bsum.edu.ng

Abstract

The altruistic debate was initiated by Auguste Comte and was defined as “living for others”. Here, morally right actions are those that the consequences are more favourable than unfavourable to everyone except the actor. Actions are considered altruistic when they are motivated by the desire to benefit others other than oneself for that person's sake. Comte's altruism is what one might call absolute altruism which is completely against individual personality, self-worth and self-esteem. Though there are moderate arguments for altruism which can be called degenerate forms of altruism which permit certain altruistic actions to be motivated by self-interest, this paper argued using Alfred Schutz's definition of human action as motivated behaviour to show the impossibility of altruism as envisaged by Auguste Comte. The researcher proposed a redefinition of human values as reasoned behaviour if one is to accept absolute altruism of Comte. The paper concluded that human actions may be altruistic but motivated by egoistic concerns.

Keywords: Altruism, Egoism, Action, Collectivism, Objectivism.

Introduction

Self love and preservation characterized human attitude towards life. Daily human actions affirm this assertion as true enjoying a strong support from ethical egoists. This ethical egoism which some philosophers call objectivism considers man as an end in himself and not as a means to the ends of others. Within the frame of this line of thought, the human person lives for his/her own sake and does not make it a duty to sacrifice himself for others and in the similar vein could not consider it an obligation for others to sacrifice themselves for him. He works for his rational self-interest targeting the achievement of self-realization and personal happiness as the highest good. This questions the possibility of altruism. Suhaib (2019) holds that “altruism was a coinage from Auguste Comte, and he summarized it as “living for others”. More generally, ethical altruism entails selfless concern for the welfare of others. The way the term is commonly used does not imply living for others, rather helping others in the pursuit of their ends” (p. 3). It then means that what accounts for the altruist is the innate motivation to promote the welfare of others.

The motivation that underlies altruistic action seems to be at variance with Alfred Schutz's understanding of human action. Of course, Schutz's actions are also characterized by motives that seem contra-altruistic. Actions in Schutz's are determined by project which precedes the action in time. The project constitutes the primary and fundamental meaning of the action. These actions are conceived in a completed mode as

if they are over and done with. They are conceived in the future perfect tense. The meaning of action can only be made evident when the motive is uncovered. The role of motives in the determination of the meaning of action was made clear by Schutz (1962) when he defined actions as “motivated behaviour”. (p.69)

The question that arises from his conception of action is whether there are purely altruistic motives, judging from the fact that self-love and self-actualization are intrinsic to man and primordial to human existence. One can then ask whether Schutz's definition of human actions as motivated behaviour is not a condition of altruistic impossibility. It is the task of this paper to ascertain whether pure altruistic actions exist or whether ethical egoism underlies every human action.

Ethical Altruism

Altruism simply means the placing of others above self, and also of their interests above personal interest. The term altruism was coined by Auguste Comte and summarized as “living for others” (Suhair, 2019: p.3). In line with this, Campbell (2006) maintained that it is Rand's view that “altruism means placing what is good for others above what is good for oneself”. (p.1) This paints an altruist as one who regards the good of others as essentially not hindered by concerns for the rights or dignity of individuals, who have as their major moral obligation to submerge themselves within the group or collective and abandon themselves for the collective interest.

Campbell (2006) noted that Comte, who sought to establish a new religion of “the Great Being, Humanity,” defined altruism as “living for others” (p.3). In living for others an individual must subordinate himself to the alter ego as the source of his stability. This condition is only realizable due to the impulse of propensities prompting man to live for others. When man fails in living for things outside him and lives only for himself alone, he is prone to be controlled by excitement. It follows that, happiness and worth, as well in individuals as in societies, depend on adequate ascendancy of the sympathetic instincts. Thus the expression, live for others, is the simplest summary of the whole moral code of positivism. (Comte 1973a, 565-566). The claim of altruism as a moral theory is that the moral obligation of man is to help others not minding whether it is at the expense of self-interest. Moral altruism considers actions as morally right when the act favours the other even if to the disadvantage of the self. Such actions may be favourable to everyone except the actor or agent. Altruism is seen as the most potent way of expressing personality as it emphasizes sympathy which regulates individual existence as an intersubjective being. Comte (1973b) corroborates this with the view that “the ultimate systematization of human life must consist above all in the development of altruism (p.253).

Comte seems to have over emphasized altruism over personality and individual good, and could not realize that there cannot be any collectivism (which he favours) without individual personalities. His arguments point to the fact that self-regard or positive self-evaluation must be deemphasized and feelings for others promoted. Comte rejected any claim of individual rights which is at variance to social duties and detested any kind of liberalism which for him is a kind of modern anarchy. His vision was for a Religion of Humanity which will be established by the state with the function of training every citizen in altruism and discourage outbreaks of personality. (Campbell 2006: p.4).

The objectivist Rand was one of the greatest critics of Comte's brand of altruism. In his book *Virtue and Selfishness* (1984: ch1) Rand expounds on his three cardinal values of her ethical system, namely "Reason, Purpose and Self-Esteem, with the corresponding virtues of Rationality, productiveness, pride". It is important to note that for Rand, production is the central purpose of one's life, reason its source and pride the reward. These three values with corresponding virtues when applied make man an objectivist with self-interest as his ultimate goal of life. It was even difficult for Rand to accept the use of the term altruism as used by Comte. She labeled it variously as selflessness or collectivism. For Rand what it means to live for others is simply a form of "ethical collectivism or the old Christian-communist denial of self". (Rand 1997; 85)

Rand equated altruism with living a second hand life and considers altruism to be an absolute evil (Rand, 1997, 244). Unfortunately, Rand later agreed with the Comtean definition of altruism which is a doctrine which holds that man must live for others and place others above self. From Rand the Comtean idea of altruism began to degenerate to take moderate forms. The degeneration of altruistic morality to a more liberal understanding became possible. According to Bass (2006)

Altruism is the view that the interest of others matters in their own right, apart from the way they might impact upon one's own interests, and therefore that in varying degrees, it could be appropriate, desirable or morally required, on some occasions to act on behalf of others, even at some cost to one's interests (331).

This is a moderate way of defining altruistic morality. It is not completely anti personality and self-worth or esteem but promotes the good in helping others as a moral duty.

Ethical Egoism

Though the goal of my paper is to discuss altruism and establish its impossibility using Alfred Schutz's definition of action, it is important to look briefly on egoism. Ethical egoism has ontological foundations. Ayn Rand popularized the idea of ethical egoism or objectivism. Suhaib (2019) summarized Rand's understanding of egoism thus, "Man—every man—is an end in himself, not a means to the ends of others; he must live for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself; he must work for his rational self-interest, with the achievement of his own happiness as the highest moral purpose of his life." (p.2). Egoism is motivated by human personality and crave for self-actualization. Omelchuk (2013) notes that "self-actualization means absolutely different types of activity, which, however, are all directed by the belief in Being. It means that taking one's self as a body or mind at specific stages of personality formation, always enables one to go to some new levels of self-identification through self-transcendence. Self-transcendence in our opinion should be understood not as "going out of one's limits" but as going out of the limits of those who have lost their existential value of self-realization and self-identification". (p.119) It is good note that man is in his essence a being that is in a continuous movement oriented towards the whole of reality around him but when this constant yearning for auto-transcendence halts it is probably a sign of full self- realization.

It is then intrinsic to the nature of man to always value his own happiness as the only foremost moral purpose of his life and to consider self-achievement-oriented endeavours noble and consider objective reality and his reason as the only absolute parameters in his life. This means that it is through reason that we can understand reality and this reason also provides a guide to human action. This reason grants man the status of an end in himself and not just a means for the ends of others. His rational self-interest and personal happiness underlie his actions including the seeming altruistic ones. This is not a complete denial of the existence of certain altruistic actions. It is rather an affirmation of the fact that moderate forms of altruism are possible but only within the realm of reason without denying personality, self-worth, self-esteem and self-realization. This moderate understanding of altruistic action can be accommodated in Alfred Schutz's definition of human action.

Alfred Schutz's Understanding of Human Action

Human actions are determined by a preconceived motive I Schutz. It is the ongoing process of a human conduct or behaviour which the actor devised targeted at a projected end or goal. An act is a completed process of action, that is, the result or outcome. Schutz made a distinction between overt and covert action. Covert action may be projected but not purposive. On the other hand, an overt action is geared towards the outer world and changes it. So, overt action is both projected and purposive (Schutz, 1962: p.67). Altruistic action is a form of an overt action in that it is both projected and purposive with the motive to serving the interest of others even when the action does not favour the actor. Actions are therefore, projected within the framework of time. It then means that ontology of time is the fundament of any action at all.

According to Schutz (1962) all projecting consists in an anticipation of future conduct by way of phantasy. We have only to find out whether it is the future ongoing process of the action as it rolls on phase by phase or the outcome of this future action, the act imagined as having been accomplished, which is anticipated in the phantasying of projecting (p.68). For Schutz it is the completed action (act) which is the starting point of all our projecting. One has to visualize the state of affairs or outcome of one's future action before the action proper. What is anticipated here is not the future action but the future act. According to Schutz (1962) this act is anticipated in the future perfect tense, *modo futuri exati* (p.69). The time perspective that characterizes the project explains the relationship between the project and the different kinds of motives that necessitate actions.

Schutz (1962) defines actions as motivated behaviour (p.69). What actually differentiates action from mere behaviour is the project that characterized action. This project is anticipated in the future perfect tense, that is, as accomplished. Every action necessarily involves the anticipation of the future in the sense that it is future directed. Schutz (1976) notes that "the distinguishing characteristic of action is precisely that it is determined by a project which precedes it in time. Action then is behaviour in accordance with a plan of projected behaviour; and the project is neither more nor less than the action itself conceived and decided upon in future perfect tense" (p.11). Actions are different from mere behaviour in that, actions are conscious while behaviour is unconscious. Actions take place through the process of retention and reproduction. In line with this Schutz

(1967) notes that “an action is conscious in the sense that before we carry it out, we have a picture in our mind of what we are going to do. This is the “projected act”. Then as we do proceed to action, we are either consciously holding the picture before our inner eye (retention), or we are from time to time recalling it to mind (reproduction) (p.63). The process of action involves retention of the projected act and also a reproduction of the projected act to keep track of the course of action.

Actions are grouped according to two kinds of motives. Schutz (1976) identified these motives as: in-order-to motive and the because motive”. (p.11). These motives underlie any kind of action and constitute the reason for the action. Schutz (1976) further notes that “the in-order-to motive refers to the future and is identical with the object or purpose for the realization of which the action itself is a means; it is “*terminus ad quem*.” The because motive refers to the past and may be called its reason or cause; it is a “*terminus a quo*” (p.11). Motives may have both a subjective and an objective meaning. The subjective meaning refers to the experience of the actor who lives in his ongoing process of activity. This is what the actor actually has in view as bestowing meaning upon his ongoing action. This according to Schutz (1952) is always the in-order-to motive, the intention of bringing about a projected state of affairs, of attaining a preconceived goal. (p.71) All actions including seeming altruistic ones have in-order-to motives which propel the actor to undertake the action. These motives are subjective and constitute the meaning for such actions. The subjective nature of in-order-to motive casts doubt on the possibility of genuinely altruistic acts. The genuine because motive is an objective category that is only accessible to the observer who has to reconstruct from the accomplished act that is, the outcome of the actor's action, including the attitude of the actor to his action. The actor himself can become an observer when he turns back and looks at his past and the state of affairs brought about by his actions. Only by this that he can succeed in grasping his genuine because motives of his own acts.

It is important to note the impossibility of understanding the other people's acts without first of all understanding the in-order-to motive and the because motive of such acts. Again, let us note that there are manifold degrees of understanding. These degrees of understanding limit my scope such that I cannot grasp the full ramifications of other people's motives. Schutz (1976) notes that “I cannot grasp the full ramifications of other people's motives, with their horizons of individual life plans, their background of individual experiences, their references to the unique situation by which they are determined. (p.12). Schutz (1976) further notes that “such an ideal understanding would presuppose the full identity of my stream of thought with that of the alter ego, and that would mean an identity of both ourselves (p.12). The problem of other minds is such that, for one to understand the exact content of the other's consciousness, one must become the other in all ramifications and such merger of consciousness is not possible. It then means that the in-order-to motives of the actor cannot be vividly grasped by the observer. As elusive as these motives may be to the external observer, they characterized all kinds of real human actions. It then means that altruistic acts are motivated. This casts doubt on the possibility of purely altruistic motives as conceived by Comte.

Conclusion

The question that comes to my mind as I begin to write this conclusion is that, is ethical altruism possible? If yes, what kind and degree of altruism is realistic. Comte had initiated the altruistic debate and provided the foundation for other understandings of the concept of altruism. He construed altruism as living for others. We have stated earlier that Comte is the founder of positivism and championed a rational, scientific and social system that favours a total subjugation of the individual to the collective. His altruism was that which subjugates the self placing others above self and other's interest above one's own. His altruism comes against self-worth, self-esteem and personality in general. Campbell (2006) criticizes Comte on his over exaggeration of altruism and held that 'in pressing for altruism Comte exalted the emotions over the intellect (p.4). Suhaib (2019) argued against Comte that "altruism does not have to involve loss for the individual self" (p.3). Suhaib proposes a categorization of altruism into strong altruism and weak altruism. Strong altruism encompasses acts that are undertaken despite them causing loss of the individual self's well-being. Weak altruism encompasses acts whose underlying motives (at least partly) involve benefiting others or preventing harm to them. (p.3)

Mercy (2019) in arguing against Comtean kind of altruism noted that "psychological altruism holds that humans have feelings of altruism in them. The psychological egoist would believe that those feelings spring forth from feelings of egoism" (p.173). It then means that the seeming altruistic acts are prompted by selfish motives. Mill (1865) criticizes Comte's extreme altruism. He notes

because the good of the human race is the ultimate standard of right and wrong, and because moral discipline consists in cultivating the utmost possible repugnance to all conduct injurious to the general good, Comte infers that the good of others is the only inducement on which we should allow ourselves to act, and that we should endeavour to starve the whole of the desires which point to our personal satisfaction, by denying them all gratification not strictly required by physical necessities. The golden rule of morality in Comte's religion, is to live for others. To do as we would be done by, and to love our neighbour as ourselves, are not sufficient for him; they partake, he thinks, of the nature of personal calculations. We should endeavour not to love ourselves at all... All education and all moral discipline should have but one object, to make altruism predominate over egoism (p.138-139).

This does not mean that Mill rejected altruism outrightly. However, altruism conflicted with Mill's utilitarianism.

Talcott Parsons' idea of human action contrasts completely with Comte's absolute altruism. Parsons (1991) argues that action does not consist only of ad hoc "responses" to particular situational "stimuli" but that the actor develops a system of "expectations" relative to his own need-dispositions and the probabilities of gratification or deprivation contingent on the various alternatives of action which he may undertake. (p.2). He notes that the acting ego expects a reaction of the alter ego. This reaction is anticipated in advance and it affects the choices of the actor. This is clearly in contrast to Comtean altruism but may not negate completely other degenerate forms of altruism.

Alfred Schutz's definition of human action as motivated behaviour presents a situation that argues for altruistic impossibility. Though Schutz's goal was not to argue against the Comtean type of altruism, his definition of human action became a potent weapon against extreme altruism. However, there are moderate arguments for altruism which target the benefit of others without compromising completely the interest of the actor. This kind of altruism fits perfectly into Schutz's classification of motives. For altruism as expressed by Comte to have any chance at all, Schutz's understanding of human action needs to be redefined. In line with this, I defined human action as reasoned behaviour. This means that human action is a product of deliberation and choice. Since man is a rational animal his actions are not devoid of reasons. In line with this, FitzPatrick (2017) argues “you might explain your altruistic act toward a stranger in dire need by citing considerations you judge to be good reasons for so acting, i.e. considerations you take to show that so acting is in fact practically justified or good to do. You might similarly offer reasons for your feeling angry over someone else's action that, let us suppose, caused this person to be in such need in the first place. Such cases involve explaining ourselves by offering purportedly *justifying reasons*—considerations we took to justify our belief, action or feeling—within a space of reasoned discourse that invites demands for such justifying reasons and allows for critical challenges to those that are offered (i.e. asking whether the reasons offered *are really good reasons* for so believing, acting or feeling)” (p.3). All reasoned actions are motivated by certain reasons and may be motivated by feeling happiness when we see others happy or a reaction against the action or inaction of others that put people in certain dehumanizing conditions. These reasons could either be that of sympathy or empathy. This action when targeted at benefiting the other without necessarily compromising or neglecting the good of the actor are said to be altruistic. The underlining reasons for action may both be altruistic and egoistic in character and the state of affairs that the action may bring about (act).

References

- Bass Robert. 2006. Egoism versus rights. *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 7, no.2.
- Comte Auguste. 1973. *System of Positive Polity*, vol.1: Containing the general view of positivism; Introductory Principles. Translated by John Henry Bridges. New York: Burt Franklin.
- . 1973b. *System of Positive Polity*, vol.4: Containing the Theory of the future of man. Translated by Richard Congreve and Henry Dix Hulton. New York: Burt Franklin.
- FitzPatrick WJ. 2017 Human altruism, evolution and moral philosophy. *R. Soc. open sci.* 4: 170441. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rsos.170441> (p.3)
- Mercy B. Josephine, 2019. The Egoism-Altruism Debate: A Study with Reference to Ayn Rand's Philosophical Ideology. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)*. A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal Impact Factor 6,8992 (ICI) <http://www.rjelal.com>. Vol.7. Issue 1. Jan-Mar 2019.
- Mill John Stuart. 1865. *Auguste Comte and Positivism*. London: N. Trubner & Co.
- Omelchuk K. Roman. Egoism and Ontological Approach to belief. *Journal of Siberian Federal University; Humanities & Social Science*, 2013, 6.

- Parsons Talcott. 1991. *The Social System*. Bryan S. Turner (ed). Routledge Ltd.
- Rand Ayn. 1964. *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism*. New York: New American Library.
- Rand Ayn. 1997. *Journals of Ayn Rand*. Edited by David Harriman. New York: Dutton.
- Robert L. Campbell. 2006. Altruism in Auguste Comte and Ayn Rand. A Dialogue on Ayn Rand's Ethics; Reply to Robert H. Bass. *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 7, no.2; 357-360.
- Schutz Alfred. 1967. *The Phenomenology of the Social World* Translated with introduction by George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert. New York; North-western University Press.
- . 1962. *Collected Papers 1: The Problem of Social Reality* Edited by Maurice Natanson. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- . 1976. *Collected Papers 11: Studies in Social Theory* Edited by Arvin Broderon. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Suhaib Aslam. 2019. Ethical Egoism vs. Ethical Altruism – Position Paper
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335173230>.