

Presidential Address 1999 Dallas, Texas

Altruism¹

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We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking.²

But I felt: you are an *I*,
you are an *Elizabeth*,
you are one of *them*.³

Were the ancient Greeks and Romans altruistic? Is anyone? Common sense suggests that people care about others just as they do about themselves; the problem is, it also suggests the reverse. As Elliot Sober and David Sloan Wilson put it in their recent book, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (1998: 287), if common sense is what people commonly believe, then it would seem that “egoism has made large inroads” into it, and “is now a worldview endorsed by large numbers of people.”⁴ The atomized condition of modern life may in part explain this development, but responsibility must lie as well with the many authorities in philosophy, psychology, biology, and economics who hold as a matter of principle that all motives are selfish. Most of the relevant arguments are rehearsed or at least adverted to by Sober and

¹I have edited the original address slightly to eliminate purely oral features, and have appended some footnotes; I have not, however, altered the substance of the talk or sought to provide exhaustive documentation and bibliography. I wish to thank Fernando Broncano and Phillip Mitsis for their detailed and extremely helpful comments on an earlier draft.

²Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Stephen Fender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 5.

³Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems 1927–1979* (New York: Farrar-Straus-Giroux, 1979) 160, from the poem “In the Waiting Room.”

⁴Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

Wilson, who seek to resolve the issue in favor of altruism by invoking considerations relating to evolution and natural selection. Their effort is not altogether successful, in my view; nor is it entirely necessary. But neither, as we shall see, is it wholly without precedent in classical antiquity.

It is important to recognize that altruism is not, in the first instance, a question about behavior but rather about the interpretation of behavior. The disagreement between those who insist that all actions are motivated by egoism and those who affirm that at least some actions are inspired by regard for others does not reduce to a quarrel over what people do, but why they do it. Nor can one decide the issue simply by asking people to state their reasons, for what they say is likely to reflect what they believe about motivation, and this, as we have suggested, is likely to be a product of theory, however derivative or informal, as much as of observation or introspection. Anyone who defends egoism knows that people may say they have acted unselfishly, or for another's benefit alone. But was this their real or, more strictly, their ultimate motive? Those who deny the possibility of altruism maintain that, however generously we may seem to behave, we always have an ulterior purpose, which is precisely to advance our own pleasure, welfare, or interest. Altruism allows that one may act, and act often, on selfish or hedonistic impulses; it merely claims that sometimes, at least, we do so strictly for the sake of others. Egoism is thus the more rigorous of the two doctrines, altruism the more pluralistic in its account of motives.⁵

It is perfectly possible, of course, to inquire into how Greeks and Romans actually behaved. There are cultures in which generosity and sympathy are less prized or more, and comparative data on treatment of prisoners of war or the aged, for example, may reveal significant differences between one group and another. Although Greek and Roman violence toward enemies could extend as far as the extermination or enslavement of entire populations, Livy tells us that it was a point of pride with the Romans that they were particularly given to sentiments of pity toward the conquered. Hendrik Bolkestein devoted a large volume to investigating the ideal of charity among the ancient Egyptians, Hebrews, Greeks and Romans, and concluded that the democratic ethos of the

⁵Barbara Gold remarks (personal communication): "I think that there is probably no such thing as pure altruism that does not have an impact on or give benefit to the giver." I am inclined to agree. My interest in this paper is in the intellectual and cultural conditions—specifically in classical antiquity—under which the question of altruism vs. egoism first presents itself as a problem.

classical city-state militated against concern for the poor as such.⁶ To address the question of altruism, however, we must direct our attention to how the Greeks and Romans described their motives and those of others, whether systematically, like the philosophers, or in the chance fashion of historians, orators, and poets. And what people believe is not without effect on how they act. Political parties in the United States today, for example, are engaged in a debate over the nature of “compassion,” and the stand one takes on this question may influence how one behaves or votes in regard to social welfare. A cartoon in a recent issue of the *New Yorker* magazine shows two lions lounging in the veldt; one says to the other, according to the caption: “I like it: compassionate predators”⁷—not an altogether inaccurate characterization of the ancient Romans, come to think of it. In any case, we stand to gain some insight into Greek and Roman behavior from their assumptions about human motives, as well as from their recorded practices.

If we take Aristotle as our guide, and he is always a good point of departure when it comes to understanding what the Greeks thought, the question of whether the Greeks themselves believed in the possibility of altruism would appear to be open and shut. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, Aristotle writes: “They say that one must wish good things for a friend for his sake [*ekeinou heneka*]” (*EN* 8.2.1155b31), and this last proviso is a leitmotif in his analysis. In the second book of the *Rhetoric*, where he discusses various emotions, Aristotle says that loving (*to philein*) someone entails wishing good things (or what that one believes to be good things) for that person’s sake and his only—not one’s own, Aristotle insists parenthetically—and acting, to the best of one’s ability, to secure those things for him (2.4.1380b35–1381a1). A friend (*philos*), Aristotle continues, is one who both loves and is loved in return,⁸ and those who regard themselves as mutually so disposed consider themselves to be friends (2.4.1381a1–3).⁹ Aristotle draws from his definitions the conclusion that a friend shares the other’s pleasure or pain “for no other reason than the other’s sake” (2.4.1381a5–6). So too, Aristotle defines *kharis*, that is, benevolence or a favor, as “a service to one in need, not in return for something nor so that the one

⁶Hendrik Bolkestein, *Wohltätigkeit und Armenpflege im vorchristlichen Altertum: Ein Beitrag zum Problem “Moral und Gesellschaft”* (Utrecht: A. Oosthoek Verlag, 1939); Bolkestein speaks, in the language of his time, of the west as opposed to the east.

⁷*The New Yorker* (1 November 1999) 99; cartoon by J. B. Handelsman.

⁸Kassell marks this sentence as a later addition to the text by Aristotle himself, on no sufficient grounds, in my opinion.

⁹Note that, according to Aristotle, *philia* or love may of course be unrequited; he stipulates only that the *philia* that obtains between *philoï* must be reciprocal.

who does the service may get something, but rather so that the other may” (2.7.1385a17–19), a description that should give pause to those who interpret *kharis* and indeed *philia* itself as based exclusively on reciprocity and obligation. Love, kindness, and, we may add, good will or *eunoia* are all explicitly designated as altruistic sentiments, that is, sentiments that “have the welfare of others as ends in themselves,” according to the definition offered by Sober and Wilson (228). Pity may be another such motive. Aristotle defines pity as “a kind of pain in the case of a perceived fatal or painful harm of one not deserving to encounter it, which one might expect oneself, or one of one’s own, to suffer, and this when it seems near” (2.8.1385b13–16). Although the penultimate clause stipulates that the pitier must believe that he or she is vulnerable to a comparable harm, the response to another’s suffering or misfortune, along with any accompanying desire to remedy it, is not, on this description, mediated by reference to one’s own interest.

In identifying a set of altruistic emotions, Aristotle is concerned at least in part to distinguish them from passions that are in fact self-interested, which for Aristotle is not necessarily a negative qualification. Thus, Aristotle defines competitive emulation (*zêlos*) as “a kind of pain at the perceived presence of good and honorable things that are possible to acquire for oneself and belong to those who are similar in nature [to ourselves], not because the other has them but because oneself does not” (8.11.1388a30–33). The last clause differentiates emulation or rivalry from envy, for example, the object of which is not to have something oneself, but simply that the other not have it (2.10.1387b23–24), or from spite or malice (*epêreasmós*), which Aristotle defines as “blocking the wishes [*boulêseis*] of another not in order to have something for oneself but rather so that the other not have it” (2.2.1378b18–19). These kinds of gratuitously hostile impulses (whether insults, as in the case of spite, or injuries, such as envy prompts) are, for Aristotle, signs of the worst kind of character, just because they do not involve self-interest or gain.

Aristotle’s view of the altruistic sentiments runs counter, as I have suggested, to a tendency today to interpret Greek ethical ideas in terms of reciprocity and exchange. I do not mean that reciprocity and altruism are necessarily mutually exclusive. Consider the definition offered in the introduction to a recent book on reciprocity in ancient Greece: “Reciprocity is the principle and practice of voluntary requital, of benefit for benefit (positive

reciprocity) or harm for harm (negative reciprocity)."¹⁰ In a subtle chapter on altruism in this same volume, Christopher Gill seeks to subsume what he calls "other-benefiting motivation" (307) under the larger category of solidarity and reciprocity; as he puts it, "commitment to the norm of the mutually-benefiting relationship motivates actions in which one partner acts in a way that is disadvantageous to himself but beneficial to the other partner" (314). But I think that Gill errs when he denies to Aristotle a full-fledged concept of altruism, comparable to the modern ideal. Gill offers three conditions for altruism in the modern sense: "wanting to benefit any other [and not just some others], removing any reference to self-interest, [and] respecting difference of viewpoint [as to what constitutes the good]" (320). Aristotle certainly meets the second and third of these requirements: in the *Rhetoric*, as we have seen, he explicitly excludes a friend's acting in his own behalf as opposed to the other's, and he also indicates that a friend may desire and promote for the other what the other thinks is good (*ha oietai agatha*, 2.4.1380b36). As for the first point, universal charity is a very strong condition: it is enough for altruism that we behave unselfishly in regard to some people. Even here, however, Aristotle acknowledges that there is a certain affection or *philia* that obtains among all human beings, simply by virtue of their belonging to the same species (*NE* 8.1.1155a19–22); and where there is love (in this case, *philanthrôpia*), there is, according to Aristotle, a disinterested regard for the well-being of the other. Aristotle recognizes, of course, that friends derive mutual benefit from their relationship (he defines friendship, after all, as bilateral love), but he plainly distinguishes between such an incidental advantage and the other-regarding nature of love as such, whether it is mutual, as between friends, or one-way, like a mother's love for her baby. For Aristotle, altruism is both well-defined and possible.

When I was studying friendship in the classical world, I concluded that Aristotle's altruistic conception of *philia* represented more or less accurately the prevailing attitude in his time. I still believe that to be true. Nevertheless, in his insistence that friends must wish good things for their friends' own sake and not their own, Aristotle may seem to be protesting, if not too much, then at least a little. One reason may be internal to Aristotle's own analysis. For Aristotle affirms that friends share each others' joys and pains (the terms he employs are *sunalgein*, *sunêdesthai*, and related compounds beginning with the prefix *sun-*). But if this is so, then in desiring the good for our friend we are automatically wishing it for ourselves. If love is reducible to identification or empathy with

¹⁰Richard Seaford, "Introduction," in Christopher Gill, Norman Postlethwaite and Richard Seaford, ed., *Reciprocity in Ancient Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 1.

another, then “the question remains,” as Sober and Wilson observe, “of whether the resulting desire to help is ultimate or instrumental” (232). Thus Sober and Wilson conclude: “Empathy and sympathy do not automatically entail the existence of altruistic desires” (236). The problem takes a particularly salient form in Aristotle because of his description of a friend as another self. We shall return to this question of identification with the other. For now, let me suggest that, in adding the provision “for no other reason than the other’s sake” (*Rhet.* 2.4.1381a5–6) to his definition of *philia*, Aristotle was deliberately emphasizing the other-regarding character of the love between friends, irrespective of any benefits that might redound to oneself. He did not, in other words, derive altruism from empathy, nor is there any suggestion of such a line of reasoning. We may note, moreover, that the reflexive character of empathy does not affect the case of altruistic *kharis* or generosity.

A second reason why Aristotle stressed the role of altruism in friendship and benevolence may be, however, that it was not in fact a universally shared assumption. If so, who or what was his target? Who were the thinkers prior to or contemporary with Aristotle who maintained that love and kindness were invariably motivated by concern for oneself rather than for another? Several candidates come to mind: Democritus and materialism generally; the sophists, with their emphasis on nature and the right of the stronger as opposed to customary morality; the individualism associated with the cynics; Cyrenaic hedonism.

It may be doubted that Aristotle was taking aim at Democritean doctrine when he insisted on the altruistic nature of affection, at least if we take as genuinely Democritean the *sententiae* attributed to Democritus and Democrates by John Stobaeus. The aphorism that runs, “The generous person [*kharistikos*] is not he who looks to a return, but rather he who treats another well by choice [*proêirêmenos*]” (D-K fr. 68B 96 [Democrates]), appears clearly to distinguish between doing something for personal advantage and doing it for the sake of another (cf. also fr. 229). The sophists may seem a likelier prospect, in particular those like Thrasy Machus, Antiphon, and Critias, who are associated, rightly or wrongly, with the doctrine that might makes right and the primacy of self-interest. Apart from the difficulty in ascertaining what doctrines these individuals might actually have advanced, however, we must be alert to the difference between self-interest and egoism. Egoism presupposes, according to the definition offered by Sober and Wilson, that “all ultimate desires are self-directed; when people care about the situations of others, they do so for purely instrumental reasons” (296). The operative word here is “all”: a true egoist recognizes no exceptions, not for friends, not for loved ones. An egoist never does anything for someone else for his or her sake, as an end in itself. Can we affirm that even the most radical of the sophists held such a position?

Antiphon the Sophist, in a fragment preserved by Stobaeus (=D-K fr. 87B 49), warns that marriage and children bring as much anxiety as they do pleasure. The sentiment is familiar from other literature, and is a topos of bachelors in New Comedy, but Antiphon gives the argument a special twist: “If I had another body [*sóma*],” he says, “that mattered to me as I do to myself, I could not live,” since he gives himself, he says, more than enough trouble in connection with his own health, daily provisions and reputation; “what then,” he asks rhetorically, “if I had another body, which mattered equally to me? Is it not obvious that a wife, if she is to her husband’s liking [*katathumia*], causes him no less fondness and pain than he does to himself,” so that he will now be concerned for the health, wealth, and reputation of both their bodies? And it is still worse when one has children. Antiphon thus advises us to avoid those conditions, in particular marriage and parenthood, that promote identification with another person. This is indeed a selfish view, but not one that denies the possibility of caring for another as much as one does for oneself. On the contrary, the argument is predicated on precisely that capacity.¹¹ Even Callicles, a character probably invented by Plato just in order to defend unabashedly a will to power without regard for conventional norms of justice, admits to a concern for others; for he rejects Socrates’ view that doing what is just is preferable to one’s own advantage on the grounds that a person who follows Socrates’ advice will be unable to protect from danger “either himself or anyone else” (*Gorgias* 486b6–7), or “to grant more to his friends than to his enemies” (*Gorgias* 492c2; cf. 508c4–7). It is simply assumed that a man, however selfish, will wish to aid his friends, not merely in order to secure himself against danger but because helping friends (and harming enemies) is what a person is naturally disposed to do.

Perhaps the most chilling expression of the prerogatives of power in ancient literature is to be found in Thucydides’ Melian dialogue, which seems to carry to its logical extreme the sophistic critique of conventional ethics. The Athenians set the conditions of the debate as follows (5.89):

For ourselves, we shall not trouble you with specious pretences—
either of how we have a right to our empire because we overthrew the

¹¹It may not be wholly fanciful to compare with Antiphon’s discussion Saint Paul’s *Letter to the Ephesians* 5:28, “husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies.” Perhaps one may interpret in a similar fashion the view of Aristippus, the founder of the Cyrenaic school, that “a friend is for the sake of usefulness, for a part of one’s body is also cherished, as long as it is there” (cit. Diogenes Laertius 2.91 = fr. IV A 91 Giannantoni; tr. Annas [below, n. 21] 231). Annas takes it to indicate that concern for others had no “intrinsic value” for Aristippus. The explicitly egoistic view of Hegesias (D.L. 2.95 = fr. IV F 1; cf. Annas p. 233) is post-Aristotelian.

Mede, or are now attacking you because of a wrong that you have done us—and make a long speech which would not be believed; and in return we hope that you, instead of thinking to influence us by saying that you did not join the Spartans, although their colonists, or that you have done us no wrong, will aim at what is feasible, holding in view the real sentiments of us both; since you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.¹²

Like Callicles, the Athenians frankly avow motives that, on their view, everyone shares, although people hesitate to state them openly. In his book *Athenian Democracy*, A. H. M. Jones observed: “If these speeches are intended to reproduce the actual tenor of Athenian public utterances, it must be admitted that the Athenians of the fifth century were...a very remarkable, if not unique, people in admitting openly that their policy was guided purely by selfish considerations and that they had no regard for political morality.” Jones preferred to suppose that the speeches were invented by Thucydides to “point his moral.” The philosopher Jon Elster concurs. Although, as he explains in his recent book entitled *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions*, he regards the ancient Greeks as having been uniquely forthright as a people and virtually immune to hypocrisy (75), Elster is confident that even they “would not be that frank.”¹³

Can we conclude from this passage that the Athenian representatives do not admit the possibility of altruistic behavior? Let us take a closer look. Translated literally, the Athenians advise the Melians to “accomplish what is possible [*ta dunata*] on the basis of what both parties truly think,” since what is just (*dikaia*) is determined by equal force (*anankē*), “but those who exceed [*proekhō*] do what is possible and the weaker yield [*xunkhōreō*].”¹⁴ States, then, are like physical pressures: when neither is more powerful, they are in equilibrium; when a stronger meets a weaker, however, it advances as the other cedes ground. The point is not, I think, that states appeal to justice when they are equal in power, but rather that justice is nothing more than the moment of balance between two

¹²Cited according to the translation in Elster 1999: 332–33.

¹³Jon Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 333; citation from A. H. M. Jones, *Athenian Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957) 66, 67.

¹⁴τὰ δυνατὰ δ' ἐξ ὧν ἑκάτεροι ἀληθῶς φρονοῦμεν διαπράσσεσθαι, ἐπισταμένους πρὸς εἰδότας ὅτι δίκαια μὲν ἐν τῷ ἀνθρωπείῳ λόγῳ ἀπὸ τῆς ἴσης ἀνάγκης κρίνεται, δυνατὰ δὲ οἱ προύχοντες πράσσουσι καὶ οἱ ἀσθενεῖς συγχωροῦσιν.

equal forces. The Athenians are arguing that states, in their interactions with one another, are impersonal agencies: their movement is explained by causes, not by reasons or motives. This, they say, is what they really think. But is that true? Are they, as Jones puts it, simply “admitting openly” to a selfish policy? Given the brilliant rhetoric with which they make their case, one ought at least to inquire why they have chosen to present it in this fashion.

We may doubt that Thucydides means us to believe that the Athenians discussed the policy concerning Melos among themselves in this manner. Presumably, the debate in the Assembly, if one took place, raised questions of right and wrong, and even of mercy. In the Mytilenean debate, which is the closest parallel to such a case in Thucydides, Cleon had warned: “I, for my part, both earlier and again now oppose altering your decision and erring in the three ways most ruinous to empire: pity [*oiktos*], delight in speeches, and being nice [*epieikeia*].” Even Cleon, however, limits the harshness of this view: “For it is right,” he adds, “to render pity [*eleos*] to those who are similar, but not toward those who will not feel pity in return [*antoiktiountes*] but are forever and necessarily our determined enemies” (3.40.2–3). At Melos, indeed, the Athenian representatives hint broadly that, had they been permitted by the Melian leaders to address the general public, they would have employed different arguments, of the kind the leaders evidently regarded as seductive and deceptive (5.85).

If the Athenian representatives, arguing *in camera*, cast their policy in the objective language of forces and equilibria, it may be because they believed that this was the best way to persuade the Melian leaders to surrender rather than attempt a suicidal defense. People tend to assume that those who profess motives of self-interest are being honest. This may not always be a valid inference. As Jon Elster remarks: “Some people have and value an image of themselves as aggressively motivated by interest and ambition. They would be embarrassed to think of themselves as do-gooders or as concerned with anyone’s welfare but their own. At the same time, they may have a tendency...to promote the good of others” (358–59). Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, had commented a century and a half earlier on the Americans’ affectation of tough-guy realism, although they are in fact, he said, a generous people.¹⁵ But a person may also deliberately disguise benevolence for practical reasons: “A person,” Elster writes, “who is genuinely motivated by impartial concerns may find it expedient to argue in terms of self-interest,” just because “a man who professes impartial motives will not be trusted” (399). The Athenian envoys were communicating to

¹⁵A. de Toqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969) 526; cit. Elster, p. 359.

the Melians a decision that had presumably been made in Athens; we may suppose that they were not at liberty to negotiate it. Their object was to convince the Melians to submit to Athens at the least cost to Athens and themselves; that is the sole reason for a dialogue at all. Since the alternative was the destruction of the Melians, simple humanity required them to seek the most effective form of persuasion possible. A posture of mechanical intransigence was just the ticket.¹⁶

My defense of the Athenians' motives in the Melian dialogue may strike some readers as perverse. Be that as it may, I do not believe that the cruel exigencies of war were uppermost in Aristotle's mind when he insisted that friendship and benevolence have as their object the good of another, and not one's own. Thucydides was not denying the possibility of altruism among friends, after all; he was rather illustrating how the claims of the stronger might override appeals to justice. To affirm, as Aristotle does, that a disinterested regard for another is essential to love, friendship, or good will is no answer to such a view. What one wants instead is an argument for being just even when one is in a position to inflict material harm on another. The philosopher who rose to this challenge was, of course, Plato. The irony is that, in arguing for the priority of virtue, Plato opened himself to the very charge of egoism. For if the sole reason for just or virtuous behavior is that the self is better off for it, then the motive for aiding others is ultimately one's own advantage. And this species of selfishness is far more rigorous, if more subtle, than a defense of aggression in the service of empire. For when egoism is tied to an ideal of goodness, it becomes a universal imperative.¹⁷

¹⁶Peter R. Pouncey takes a similar view in his review of Gregory Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity: The Limits of Political Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), in *BMCR* 99.9.5 (5 Aug. 1999); see also James V. Morrison, "Historical Lessons in the Melian Episode," this volume, n. 4, for bibliography of defenses of Athenian humanitarianism in the Melian episode. Cf. Henry David Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government" (later entitled "Civil Disobedience"), in Nancy L. Rosenblum, ed., *Thoreau: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 17: "I sometimes say to myself, When many millions of men, without heat, without ill-will, without personal feeling of any kind, demand of you a few shillings only, without the possibility, on your side, of appeal to any other millions, why expose yourself to this overwhelming brute force? You do not resist cold and hunger, the winds and the waves, this obstinately; you quietly submit to a thousand similar necessities." The Athenians' rhetorical strategy consists, at least in part, in obliterating the difference between the brute force of human beings and that of natural necessities.

¹⁷Cf. Nicholas Rescher, *Unselfishness: The Role of the Vicarious Affects in Moral Philosophy and Social Theory* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975) 99: "Since the dawn of philosophical ethics in antiquity, some philosophers (at the early

Plato's argument that the good is the unique and ultimate motive for any action, which he developed at least in part in order to counter the sophists' critique of popular ethics, was, I believe, Aristotle's implicit target when he insisted on the possibility and necessity of altruism. It has been suggested that Aristotle's treatment of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is a point-for-point response to Plato's discussion of *philia* and *to philon* in the *Lysis*. Whether or not this thesis is true in detail, surely the formulas that Aristotle employs for the causes and motives of friendship recall Plato's.¹⁸ In the *Lysis*, Plato distinguished between the reason why (*dia ti*) and that for the sake of which (*heneka tou*) desire exists. Plato was concerned to discover the primary or final beloved—the *prōton philon*—for the sake of which we love anyone or anything. Since the *Lysis* ends in *aporia*, we cannot specify just what that ultimate ground for desire was to be, but the preceding arguments suggest the possibility that it will prove to be in some sense something that is ours or native to us (*oikeion*). But whatever the thing is for the sake of which we love someone, according to Plato, it is not the beloved individual as such.

Now, Aristotle located the *dia ti* or cause of love in utility, pleasure, or, in the best kind of friendship, in the character of the beloved person. As for the *heneka tou*, the sake or motive of our desire, Aristotle made that the good of the other, or what seems to him to be his good, rather than one's own. Aristotle's doctrine of altruism appears to have been a direct reply to Plato's metaphysics of desire.¹⁹

stage preeminently the Platonic Socrates and the Stoics) have sought the justification of morality in terms of personal advantage." I may note here a distinction that some philosophers have drawn between psychological egoism, which holds that people just do act selfishly, and ethical egoism, which holds that they ought to do so. The latter has the appearance of being inconsistent, since, by defending it as a principle, I implicitly encourage others to act in a way that may not be to my own benefit. Because Plato maintains that what is best for a person is virtue, the two positions merge in his case.

¹⁸See, for example, David K. Glidden, "The *Lysis* on Loving One's Own," *CQ* 31 (1981) 39–59; A. W. Price, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

¹⁹A well-known problem in Plato's *Republic* or *On Justice* betrays how an exclusive preoccupation with the good turns out to be self-regarding, even though it mandates the sacrifice of one's material goods in the interest of others. In the allegory of the cave, Socrates finds himself hard-pressed to explain why philosophers, once they have escaped from the cave and gazed upon the light of the sun, should descend again and help their fellow men, especially since they are certain to provoke their ire. "Do you suppose our pupils will disobey us when they hear this," Socrates asks, "and will not wish to share the toils of the city, each in turn, but to spend most of their time living in purity with one

I have been seeking to determine how the opposition between altruism and egoism emerged as a problem in Greek ethical theory, and have identified as the immediate impetus the Platonic account of virtue as a transcendental aspiration of the self (mediated, in the middle dialogues, by *erôs*), independent of a personal interest in others. There is a curious analogy to this movement in the more recent history of philosophy, which is enlightening for both the similarities and the differences it bears toward the evolution of Aristotle's view. In his essay *On the Basis of Morality*, which was, as the title page informs us, *not* awarded the prize by the Royal Danish Society of Scientific Studies in 1840, Arthur Schopenhauer criticizes Kant's notion of absolute obligation or duty as contradictory; for the notion of "ought" inevitably implies reward and punishment, whether in this world or the next. A recompense, Schopenhauer says, is implicitly "postulated for virtue, which thus only seemed to work for nothing, and appears decently veiled under the name of the highest good, which is the union of virtue and supreme happiness. Basically, however, this is nothing but a morality aiming at happiness and therefore resting on selfishness" (56).²⁰ Besides being egoistic, the motive of duty, according to Schopenhauer, is in fact the very opposite of what we should understand by morality. For Kant, Schopenhauer asserts, virtue begins "only when a man who has no sympathy in his heart and is cold and indifferent to the sufferings of others, and not really born to be a philanthropist, nevertheless carries out good deeds merely for the sake of pitiful, miserable duty" (65–66). From Kant's principle, moreover, that our own unwillingness to help others entitles others to refuse help to us (*Metaphysical Principles of the Doctrine of Virtue*, 30), Schopenhauer concludes that, for Kant, "obligation rests absolutely and entirely on assumed reciprocity. Consequently, it is utterly egoistic and obtains its interpretation from egoism" (91).

For Schopenhauer, egoism is both the natural condition of humanity and the very antithesis of morality. "By its nature, egoism is boundless.... Egoism is colossal; it towers above the world; for if every individual were given the choice between his own destruction and that of the rest of the world, I need not say how

another?" "Impossible," Glaucon replies, "since we are enjoining what is just to the just, but each of them will undertake to rule under extreme compulsion [*pantos mên mallon hōs ep' anankaion*]*—the opposite of those who now rule in the several cities*" (*R.* 520d6–e3). The philosophers appear to act out of obligation rather than benevolence. Christopher Gill, in calling attention to this "ethical crux," affirms that it is unhelpful to treat "the philosophers' reluctance to re-enter the cave as selfish, or, at least, as showing a deficiency in altruism" (315).

²⁰Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, tr. E. F. J. Payne (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995).

the decision would go in the vast majority of cases" (131–32). The reason why this is so, Schopenhauer explains, "is due ultimately to the fact that everyone is given to himself directly, but the rest are given to him only indirectly through their representation in his head. Thus in consequence of the subjectivity essential to every consciousness, everyone is himself the whole world, for everything objective exists only indirectly" (132). How, then, is it possible to be other than selfish? The only case, Schopenhauer asserts, in which an act is other than egoistic is "when the ultimate motive for doing or omitting to do a thing is precisely and exclusively centered in the weal and woe of someone else" (143). Very well; but how do I become conscious of another person's weal and woe as anything other than a representation in my head? Such an altruistic motive "necessarily presupposes," according to Schopenhauer, "that, in the case of his woe as such, I suffer directly with him, I feel his woe just as I ordinarily feel only my own.... But this requires that I am in some way identified with him, in other words, that this entire difference between me and everyone else, which is the very basis of my egoism, is eliminated, to a certain extent at least" (143–44). Compassion, then, in the literal sense of the term, constitutes "the primary ethical phenomenon" (148) and is the basis of morality.

I have dwelled on Schopenhauer's essay not because I am convinced that his attack on Kant is justified, but rather because, as a response to Kant's ethical imperative, it bears, as I have suggested, a certain analogy to Aristotle's critique of Plato's *prôton philon*. Schopenhauer exhibits clearly how virtue and well-being may be construed as egoistic motives, and insists in turn that the only truly unselfish act is that which is done ultimately and exclusively for the sake of another. So too, Aristotle amends Plato's notion of the ultimate ground—the *heneka tou*—of desire as the good in itself, appropriating the same expression to refer to wishing the good of another for his sake and his alone.

This said, however, we must note the vast differences between Schopenhauer's theory and that of Aristotle. Desiring the good of the other is, for Aristotle, essential to love and benevolence—not to virtue as such, which is firmly grounded in a conception of the good. Aristotle is not telling us what we ought to do; he is describing the nature of a certain affect. In insisting on the altruistic character of *philia* and *kharis*, Aristotle is making a contribution not to ethics but to an analysis of the emotions.²¹ Those who love just do desire the well-being of the beloved.

²¹ Julia Annas' translation of *philia* as "commitment" obscures the emotional quality of the term; "commitment" does better as an equivalent for *prohairesis*. See Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 223.

Moreover, although Aristotle describes a friend as another self, and speaks of participation in the pleasure and pain of a friend—his terms are, as I have indicated, *sunêdesthai*, *sunkhairein*, *sullupeisthai*, *sunalgein*, and the like—he is not seeking to explain by this how one knows directly, rather than as a mere representation in one's head, what another person is feeling. Unlike Schopenhauer, Aristotle does not regard human beings as egoistic by virtue of the nature of consciousness as such; Greek philosophy in general exhibits little interest in the so-called problem of other minds. Sympathy, accordingly, has no epistemological function in Aristotle's theory. Its role is specific to the emotion of love. Thus, in the case of pity, we are aware of the suffering of another but do not, according to Aristotle, participate in his or her suffering (no *sun-* words here); rather, we observe it from a distance. Correspondingly, nowhere in his treatment of *philia* does Aristotle ever discuss pity. Between pity and the participation in the feelings of a beloved there is, for Aristotle, a profound gulf that is obscured by Schopenhauer's term *Mitleid*.²²

Just because we know what others are experiencing does not mean that we automatically wish them well. Altruism toward those we like or care about is not a basis for universal charity. We are equally capable of wishing that our enemies suffer, or of being indifferent to their condition. Although it is perhaps hard to give sense to the idea of wishing someone harm for his own sake, Aristotle's notion of spite or malice comes close.²³ The context in which Aristotle raises the issue of altruism is, as we have seen, not morality but love and good will. The capacity for such love is a fundamental element in human society, although Aristotle did not feel the need, as Sober and Wilson do, to guarantee the possibility of altruism by showing how it could be favored by evolution and natural selection. Another Greek thinker did, however, and I shall conclude this

²²When Aristotle comes to discuss the nature of self-love, he explains it, interestingly enough, on the analogy with love for others, rather than the reverse: since we rejoice and condole with ourselves, just as we do with friends, it follows that we are, in some sense, friends to ourselves as well (*NE* 9.4.1166a7–8, 27–29). So I have argued, at least, in *Friendship in the Classical World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 77–78 (but contrast Annas [above, n. 21] 254 [*ad NE* 9.4]: “Friendship is thus explained as the extension to others of a relationship that one has to oneself”; Annas' view is shared by most scholars). So too, we wish what is good for ourselves, just as we do on behalf of those we love. The argument takes our capacity to feel with those we love as the point of departure. It is not a way of resolving the epistemological solipsism that was a central dilemma for Cartesian and sensationalist philosophy.

²³So too, Schopenhauer takes malice as a fundamental trait of human psychology.

paper with a brief look at one of the more puzzling affirmations of other-regarding behavior in the classical philosophical tradition.

Epicurus asserted that the wise man will undergo “the greatest pains on behalf of his friends,” and that he will even, “on occasion, die for a friend.”²⁴ How could a doctrine that defined the goal of life as pleasure possibly justify the sacrifice of life itself in behalf of another person? We can, of course, appeal to the universal solvent of all claims for altruism. Thus, Sober and Wilson write (286): “Consider a soldier in a foxhole who throws himself on a live grenade to save the lives of his comrades. How can hedonism explain this act of suicidal self-sacrifice, if the soldier believes that he will not experience anything after he dies? The hedonist suggests that a self-directed benefit accrues before the act of self-sacrifice is performed. It is no violation of hedonism to maintain that the soldier decides to sacrifice his life because that decision is less painful than the decision to let his friends die.”²⁵

Christopher Gill resolves the paradox of Epicurean altruism in a more subtle way, by invoking the idea of generalized reciprocity, which, as he describes it, “accepts localized episodes of pain and distress on behalf of the friend, and does not look for utility or pleasure on a piecemeal, contractual basis” (324). In Cicero’s *De finibus* (1.67), the Epicurean Torquatus asserts that “we rejoice in our friends’ joy as much as in our own and are equally pained by their distress” (tr. Long and Sedley, 132). But Gill denies that even this implies an altruism that is “wholly disinterested” (325). Now, the language that Torquatus employs is remarkably similar to Aristotle’s. In itself, this is no reason for surprise or suspicion: I expect that Epicurus was indebted to Aristotle here, as he was for certain other aspects of his ethical and physical theories, although Aristotle indicates that even in his time the idea was a commonplace. Like Aristotle,

²⁴The first of these is reported by Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 1111B = fr. 546 Usener; the second is recorded by Diogenes Laertius 10.120; translations by A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 127, 133.

²⁵Cf. Robert H. Frank, *Passions within Reason: The Strategic Role of the Emotions* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1988) 3: “Behavior of this sort [i.e., altruistic behavior] poses a fundamental challenge to those who believe that people generally pursue self-interest.... Biologists, for example, tell us that someone may give up her life to save several of her immediate relatives, thereby increasing the survival rate of genes like the ones she carries.” The criteria that must be met for someone to be honored by the Carnegie Medal for heroism include the provision that “the actor must not be directly related to the victim” (Frank 212), indicating that too close a bond puts in question whether an act of self-sacrifice may count as wholly selfless.

Epicurus assumes that we can know what others are feeling, and that, in the case of friends or loved ones, we respond to their joy or grief as we do to our own. As we have seen, however, such empathy does not necessarily imply that we wish a friend well for his or her sake rather than our own, since the two desires mutually entail each other. In asserting that one may even sacrifice one's life in a friend's behalf, Epicurus may, like Aristotle, have intended precisely to separate out the disinterested quality of love, which participation in another's joy and suffering threatened to obscure.

But if Epicurus believed that we share in the joy and pain of loved ones, and also wish them good things for their sakes rather than our own, he was further obliged, as Aristotle was not, to confront the question of how such a sentiment developed in human beings. For, unlike Aristotle, Epicurus did not assume that people had always been by nature social animals. In the beginning, according to Lucretius' summary of Epicurean anthropology in the fifth book of *De rerum natura*, humans lived in isolation from one another. Subsequently, however, the human race

began to soften. For fire saw to it that their chilly bodies could not now bear cold so well under the covering of the sky; sex sapped their strength, and children by their charm easily broke their parents' stern demeanour. Then too neighbours began to form friendships, eager not to harm one another and not to be harmed; and they gained protection for children and for the female sex, when with babyish noises and gestures they indicated that it is right for everyone to pity the weak (5.1014–23, tr. Long and Sedley, 127).

Friendship (*amicities*) and pity emerged at the same time as they became necessary for survival: when people ceased to be individually self-sufficient. Now, the mechanism of natural selection is not wholly foreign to classical thought; Lucretius, for example, tells us that the earth, early in its history, cast up various kinds of creatures that were unfit to survive or reproduce. I think of the foundation myth of Thebes as a parable of the natural selection of cooperative behavior: there would have been no Theban race had all of the original Sown Men fought to the death; the five who lived carried the other-regarding traits that were required for the survival of the group. So too in Epicureanism the capacity for friendship and, along with this, I suggest, a disinterested desire for the good of the other, are part of our biological inheritance: we are as eager, in Lucretius'

formulation, not to harm others as we are to go unharmed.²⁶ An Epicurean, to be sure, will desire pleasure for a friend, whereas Aristotle would have desired his happiness, or whatever the friend believed to be good. For both, however, the desire is altruistic, not as a matter of belief or obligation, but because a disinterested concern for the other pertains to the nature of affection. In itself, the altruistic nature of love is not a reliable basis for ethics; but it may explain why an Epicurean could sacrifice his life to save a friend's.

²⁶It is possible that Epicurus (or Lucretius) believed that friendship and pity emerged as consequences of social life, that is, by acculturation, once humans began to dwell in groups, rather than as biologically selected traits.