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Altruism - natural predisposition, virtue,
institution

Příspěvek byl přednesen v květnu 2008 na konferenci Individual and Collective Mécénat and the Culture of Public Donation in Central Europe, 19th - 20th Century. V plném znění vychází knižně v: HLAVAČKA, Milan, POKORNÁ, Magdaléna, PAVLÍČEK, Tomáš (ed.) *Collective and individual mécénat and culture of public donation*. Historický ústav AV Praha 2010.

When one says a Benefactor

Every one of us has an idea as to what it means. Words such as a "benefactor", "benefaction", "altruism", "philanthropy" or "charity" are often used indiscriminately. And yet, the very existence of all these terms suggests that they each have their own meaning. Undoubtedly, it was the need to label something new that gave rise to them. They all address a man's place in society, his ability to empathise and to sympathise, his capacity for benevolence, social care and solidarity. There is a thin line between philanthropy, benefaction, charity and alms and it might be determined by the degree of institutionalisation and by the manner of organisation.

While the word "benefactor" is synonymous with a "sponsor", "alms" and "charity", it has almost disappeared from the Czech vocabulary and some even regard it as an archaic term. "Sponsoring" has, in the meantime, gained a somewhat derogatory taint. On the other hand, "philanthropy" is the most commonly used term in the context of mutual help and solidarity. It often encompasses corporate philanthropy, thanks to which we are experiencing a golden age of philanthropy. Rich entrepreneurs use their wealth for purely personal reasons, assert their own values and their own

interests. They wish to help a cause they believe is worthy. When the word "philanthropy" first appeared in the Czech dictionary at the end of the 19th century, it conveyed enthusiasm and zest for changing other people's life to one's liking, which included the philanthropist's ideas of what good is.

"Philanthropy" comes from Greek, is derived from "philein" (to love) and "antropos" (human being). It, therefore, means love to mankind but is also translated as "humanitarianism", "benevolence" or "help to the socially disadvantaged". The meaning no longer entails love to a fellow being or a need for mutual help. What is left is the need to resolve problems resulting from inequality within the society. Organised philanthropy aims to rectify inequalities and thus refine the society. The concept of philanthropy works with the notion of good, the presumption being that good deeds are done by those who like people. However, the judgement "this is good" is passed by the benefactors, not the beneficiaries.

What are the values behind a benefactor's notion of good? What is the moral base and dimension of philanthropy? And do philanthropic pursuits have anything in common with altruism? Who gives, why and where do they take from? It is because of these persistent questions that I wish to address "altruism" in my paper. It is a term which is rarely mentioned in connection with philanthropy these days. Somewhere at the beginning of times and of our individual lives, altruism was in our nature. Aristotle saw altruism as a virtue since a confident, wise citizen polis acts consciously, not on impulse. Aristotle's virtues still work with the strategy of natural predisposition. It was only in the Middle Ages when Christianity began to push for the institutionalisation of this natural predisposition and virtue and concepts such as alms, charity and philanthropy started to develop - both in their individual and collective forms. In the course of the

19th century, the state took over this strategy and gradually forced out individual responsibility, without offering an effective and efficient system of collective responsibility.

I shall attempt to cast light on altruism as a natural predisposition and as a virtue and I will try to show how problematic its institutionalisation can be. My contemplations draw on the notion of economics as a science of choice and decision-making, within which Mises' rule applies: every man acts in such a way that will improve his current standing. Altruism, a voluntary human behaviour, also aims to better one's existing position and this person is no different from any other participant in the marketplace, except for the fact that the gains from his (economic) pursuits are not expressed in money. His benefits should, however, follow Ricardo's law of comparative advantage.

The French sociologist Auguste Comte introduced altruism as an ethical and philosophical term at the end of the 19th century. He used it to label behaviour, feelings and thinking, whose objective is the welfare of another individual than the actor himself. More often than not, altruism is defined as a moral principle, which, in contrast to egotism, has the capacity to selflessly sacrifice one's interest for the sake of another person. Altruism is seldom translated into Czech satisfactorily, although "lidumilnost" as in "love for a fellow being" might be good enough. More commonly, however, we hear the term selflessness, whereby "selfless" is usually seen as pertaining to conscious behaviour which harms the actor, or is to his detriment in the name of someone else's gain.

When attempting to shed light on the nature and value of altruism, we inevitably touch upon the field of moral philosophy and, sooner or later, start walking the line between egotism and altruism - between asserting one's interests and serving others. We are confronted by examples of

relationships between altruism and rationality and we need to consider cases when fulfilling the needs of others legitimises one's own needs.

This paper can give little room to our inherent need for definition, qualification and limitation. The categories of individual and collective benefaction are phenomena which are too broad to be reduced to one definition. One definition simply cannot encompass answers to such complex social questions, such as Why do people opt to give up a part of their independence for the benefit of the society? Why do they forego a part of their wealth for the benefit of the socially excluded ones? and What conditions have to be fulfilled in order for people to act altruistically?

My further questions are: Are we selfish, are we good, or are we good because we are selfish? Is there a possibility that natural selection (the motor of evolution and its dynamics) takes place at a group as well as an individual level? Although we do not understand it yet, we need discover the evolutionary mechanism that allowed altruistic predispositions to become established. Last but not least, are we altruistically inclined and what exactly does it mean?

Parable of the Good Samaritan

The parable of the Good Samaritan asks the very questions above. It forces us to question why some people are willing to sacrifice their time for others and why they are willing to bear other costs.

30. A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers; they stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away leaving him half dead.

31. A priest happened to be going down the same road and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.

32. So too a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

33. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was, and when he saw him, he took pity on him.

34. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him.

35. The next day he took out two silver coins, gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."

36. Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?

37. The expert in the law replied: "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him: "Go and do likewise."

The story is about a person who is helping another. This help entails certain costs and whether the person is rich or not is irrelevant. He understands that money is needed but he also gives his time, foregoes his comfort when he walks for a part of the way so that the injured man can be taken by the donkey. The others went past the injured man, uninterested. Who behaved rationally, who selfishly and who altruistically? There is a whole range of empirical evidence that when an individual acts in a rational manner, it brings a change for the worse to the society as a whole. This gives rise to social traps, or social dilemmas, the theory of which presumes that everyone looks after their own interest only. However, experience says that some are also interested in how others are doing. Altruism is one of the most efficient ways to resolve such social traps.

Social dilemmas

A social trap comes into being when an individual's rational behaviour results in a turn for the worse for the society as a whole. The social dilemma theory shows that the cost incurred by helping others is not the main determinant of people's readiness to do so. What is much more important is whether other members of the group are helping too. Motivation is the key to the resolution of social dilemmas and points to altruism as an effective and viable strategy of social behaviour. It is a mechanism capable of forcing people, by peaceful means, to collaborate. It gives impression that an individual's activities have an influence on the work of the group and it creates a sense of group identity. This in turn gives rise to reciprocity, where individual members of the group expect the same helpful acts from the others. The extent of collaboration within the group continues to grow even when the individual finds out that his cooperation leads to increased gains by the others. Social dilemmas can interfere with this reciprocal cooperation and there are three types:

- 1) the prisoner's dilemma
- 2) the free rider dilemma
- 3) the tragedy of the common

The first social dilemma, the prisoner's dilemma, describes a situation of two prisoners who can influence the extent of their punishment by choosing whether they will testify against each other. If both remain silent, the police will sentence them for a minor charge and their punishment will be less severe. If one testifies, he will walk free. Clearly, it would be better for both to remain silent and receive a minor charge. For each of them separately, however, it would pay to testify against the other. And they will do it.

The heroine of Puccini's opera Tosca has an awful dilemma. The chief of police Scarpia sentences her lover to death but

offers her a deal - if she gives herself to him, he will not kill her lover - blank cartridges will be used. Tosca decides to deceive Scarpia - she yields to his request but stabs him just as he order the apparently mock execution. She does not know Scarpia lied to her, the cartridges are live, her lover dies. Tosca kills herself.

Without realising it, Tosca and Scarpia played a game with each other - in game theory described as the prisoner's dilemma - which comes into play whenever an individual's interests are in conflict with those of the whole. If they had kept their sides of the deal, they would both have gained - Scarpia would have got Tosca and Tosca would have got her lover. It is a game which only has one round. But if the game is repeated, when more than one round is played, it shows that selfishness is hardly a rational approach.

A whole range of games is played and computer situations modelled according to this scheme, the hawk-dove game being the most famous one. Computers have revealed that the Tit-for-tat strategy is the most effective - the dove has admittedly never broken the bank but with time it managed to beat the hawks. When it was time to try and beat tit-for-tat, it was Tit-for-two-tats that won! It was then immediately beaten by the primitive "cooperate at all times" strategy, but this was often beaten by the "cheat at all times" game, which in turn stood little chance among the tit-for-two-tats players

What does experience with all this experimenting with the theory prove? What do social dilemmas show?

Among other things, social dilemmas tell us that **people are willing to cooperate when they are sure that the others will do the same**. If the individuals who are about to enter mutual interaction do not know each other's identity, if they do not know each other's behaviour from previous interactions, if there is any chance that they will never interact again, the

interaction is threatened with failure, ie with a social trap. A rational decision of an individual will lead to social irrationality. Conversely, if the individuals see themselves as belonging to the group and if they acknowledge the existence of certain mutual bonds, then they also expect reciprocity from the other members. Communication within the group enables one to find out who wants what and, long term, to observe the behaviour of the others. Communication can also produce moral pressure and strengthen collective identity. In trying to resolve social dilemmas the members consider the group before themselves, competition shifts away from the individual level to the group level and altruism within the group becomes greater.

Altruism - a natural predisposition

We are now entering the field of socio-biology, according to which nature ensured we can benefit from our lives as social beings. When two players meet and like each other, they can play indefinitely. If one deceives the other, be it through misunderstanding, it can result in a string of mutual retaliations, which will not bring any use to anyone and sadness to all. Reciprocity is instinctive, taught by life in society, not at school, and upbringing can only strengthen it. Society does not work because we created it but because it is a product of our biological instincts. Its existence stems from our natural predispositions, it expresses our natural needs, just as art or institutions do.

Biological altruism is defined as behaviour of an individual which benefits others while he bears the costs which his behaviour entails. Costs and benefits are measured as reproductive ability, ie the number of expected offspring. It is not based on a conscious decision to help. Typically, it

takes two forms, which explain the evolution theory of kin selection (the theory of inclusive fitness) and the theory of reciprocal altruism. These two theories have weakened the validity of the group selection theory, whose main problem has been the insolvability of further social traps, above all the free rider dilemma. Free riders take advantage of the altruistic behaviour of the other members of the group, without contributing anything. Their numbers within any given group can grow so fast that they destroy it. The theory of kin selection is based on the idea that there is a gene which forces its carrier to act towards other carriers of this gene altruistically. It does not rule out that some types of behaviour may be passed on in a non-genetic way, eg through imitation or social learning. The theory of reciprocal altruism explains that altruistic behaviour towards non-kin can be beneficial as well as effective as long as we can expect some sort of repayment from the others, a tit-for-tat. The cost of such behaviour corresponds to the likelihood of this "investment" being returned. Part of this is the ability to recognise those who have received our altruistic care and to spot the free riders..

Socio-biology says that man is a social primate, living at a high level of collaboration among genetically unrelated individuals. If his behaviour is to be labelled as altruistic, he needs to bear the costs of it while someone else benefits. It must be free of motives, free of both personal and/or psychological gain. It follows on from here that altruism and its reciprocity is precisely what motivates man to cooperate, despite the fact that it has no influence on increasing his reputation (subjective psychological gain). Human altruism seems to be based on a high level of reciprocity and an individual must be prepared to bear the costs of both altruistic reward and punishment, regardless of his own

interests. Cooperation is facilitated by reputation since if individuals know about each other or are able to find out at no extra cost that others collaborate, these others have a good reputation, are worthy of altruistic treatment and are respected members of the society. In other words, those who cooperate must be rewarded and the deceitful ones who do not act reciprocally need to be sidelined.

Reputation is what helps ostracise uncooperative individuals and brings us onto the topic of a social dilemma called "tragedy of the commons". It is a situation when individual rationality leads to social irrationality, when one's acting in a sly manner results in everyone's loss.

According to an important representative of socio-biology, Richard Dawkins, genes may be responsible for some aspects of our behaviour. He came up with the selfish gene theory, based on the notion that whatever it is that individuals do is not done in the interest of their group, their families, or themselves. Each individual strives to act in such a way that benefits his own genes. Inevitably, he is a descendant of individuals that strove for the same. (None of our ascendants lived in celibacy). A bee or an ant are just as desperate and helpless as a finger that has been chopped off. Yet, the moment they are a part of a colony, the moment the finger is attached to the hand, they are able to achieve so much! Serve the interest of all.

The first preliminary conclusion might be: Our altruism is made possible by our selfish genes and/or selfishness. All altruism is selfish.

Altruismus as a virtue

Let us come back to good-doing and to the roots of the value system of benefaction. The Greek philosopher Aristotle said

that good can only be received from the good! In relation to good, he explains that the highest good is bliss, the highest of all the good deeds. Aristotle was the first and the last author who sought answers to what bliss and good are, instead of what is it to be good and to be blissful. His answer was that we want bliss for the sake of itself, never for any other reason and whatever else we strive for is so as to be blissful. He left behind the nontrivial message: Perfect good suffices on its own.

Aristotle's key question is whether bliss can be learnt or got accustomed to, whether it is a matter of chance or whether it is god-given. He claimed that, unlike intellectual virtue, moral virtue is the result of correct behaviour repeated regularly. A blissful man is one who is active in perfect virtue and adequately furnished with material goods. He lives well and acts well. Human virtue is not physical; it is mental fitness, *arête*, and is divided into moral and intellectual. While intellectual virtue is acquired and developed through learning and therefore needs time and experience, moral virtue (*ethike*) is acquired by habit (*ethos*). No moral virtue is innate since nothing that is innate can be changed through habit. We have a natural capacity to acquire virtues and then perfect them through habit.

Perfect friendship can only exist among good people, who similar in their virtues. Only such people are equal. They desire good because they themselves are good and they wish good onto others for the others' sake, for their own good. The practical Aristotle noticed that benefactors love their beneficiaries more than the other way round. A beneficiary resembles a debtor, a benefactor is analogous to a creditor - when it comes to loans, debtors may even wish their creditors were dead, whereas creditors will see to it that their debtors stay alive. And while benefactors expect gratitude, beneficiaries may not be overly concerned about returning the

favour. People prefer to be on the receiving end of good deeds and have a bad memory in this context. Donors love their donees like an artist loves his piece of art - and the donee loves his donor in the same way that a piece of art would love its artist if it came to life. The giver gives because it makes him feel good, because he knows that it is good, that it is a virtue, and because through virtue he will reach bliss. He also knows how hard it was to earn the money he then gave away. The taker, on the other hand, is like a heritor - it cost him nothing. Surprisingly perhaps, all this is, according to Aristotle, most relevant to each of us alone - one needs to be one's best friend, to love one oneself most. There is nothing bad about self-love. Aristotle's conclusion is that a truly selfish person is one who claims the greatest good and thus selfishness is not bad. Selfishness has been given its pejorative taint by those for whom only material things are good.

The second preliminary conclusion may sound very similar to the first: **"only" self interest lies behind all our good deeds.** Aristotle, in fact, posed the question whether the terms altruism and selfishness have to be reconciled. More importantly, though, he questioned: How did we become fitted with them? What is it that altruism initiates, what interest can it help sustain?

Altruism as an institution

Alms represent the beginnings of the institutionalisation of altruism and the establishment of certain rules of good-doing, mutual solidarity and assistance. In the 4th century the Christians were given three ways to fulfil their fasting duties and prepare themselves spiritually for the biggest holiday of the year, Easter: fast, prayer or alms. Alms are

characterised as assistance to those who are worse-off than the given person. It is a practical expression of love towards a fellow being and thus towards God. Later on, as charity evolved, it had to do with the social sentiment among people of the Middle Ages, more commonly the city dwellers than countrymen, determined by their every-day struggle to save their soul. In practice this meant that old people without income, belongings or relatives could not die in the street. We will not find a will in which the dying person had not included the poor. By the end of the Middle Ages, perhaps in relation to the Black Death epidemic of 1347-51, organised care for the elderly, beggars, the disabled and orphans had begun to come into existence. Monastery hospitals, nunneries and municipal hospitals, founded and financed by city councils and devout individuals, were the institutions of such care. Of course this social network was very thin - most of the needed were still depended on the institution of alms at the church or at a several occasions throughout the year, such as Easter. Christianity has a strong social dimension. Christian philanthropy can briefly be expressed as follows: God loves me infinitely, thus I can and should some others regardless of any other criteria and in doing so emulate God (be his hands, legs and heart on Earth). Christianity, however, was far from being the first intellectual or spiritual system addressing the issue of helping others. It can be found in many much older cultures, in all pre-Christian religions, in the institution of a gift.

According to the Durkheim school of sociology, the morality of a gift founded the oldest economic system of total commitments between clans, barter in fact. In his essay on *The Gift*, M. Mauss defined a gift as a reciprocal relationship and an expression of contacts between people and as a basic economic strategy. A gift is an example of what a social fact in its

totality is: a gift is not only what it appears to be, it is an economic phenomenon and at the same time an expression of a complex value system. Mauss regarded a gift as a representation of processes, which take place in a society. The act of giving in turn affects the nature of individual social systems. A gift is part of the legal, economical, religious as well as the general ethical system. What is reflected in the act of giving is the society's value system, it shows who is who, how binding certain types of behaviour in a given culture are, what the society's relationship to property and wealth is. At the same time a gift always has a limiting function, it is a means to social pressure.

The total social fact of the gift demonstrates concisely how our morals are a mixture of voluntariness and commitment. It shows that apart from their purchase price things also have an emotional value. An unreturned gift puts its recipient in an inferior position, especially if he accepted it without even considering a gift in return. In an economic system based on the institution of a gift, an invitation, like courtesy, must be returned. The round keeps getting more expensive. We have to give back before we accept. A Maori saying goes: "Give as much as you take and all will be alright."

As altruism continued to be institutionalised, with the state beginning to take over a part of the tasks of mutual help and solidarity, benefactors undoubtedly started to question the secondary financial costs of philanthropy - the cost of giving. We are talking about taxation and the legislative changes to philanthropic activities. As state offices flourished, individual solidarity may have paradoxically declined. This gives rise to heretic questions: Is the loss of solidarity not too high a price to pay for modernisation and economic development? How much room for philanthropy do individual members of society have and what are their

motivations? What is the impact of the crowding-out effects between the state and citizen involvement (both individual and collective) - are finite financial resources divided? Private philanthropic activities become complementary to the state activities.

And yet it is obvious that institutions of altruism have more in common with the institution of the market than that of the state. Market institutions use profit as the main indicator of their efficiency. They obtain vital signals for their work both in advance as well as ex post facto - from their customers, by searching for areas of unmet demand, by looking at their profits, the changes in the value of their shares. In the same way as institutions of altruism, they are based on voluntariness and competition. The state is fundamentally involuntary, it has a power monopoly over a given territory and is the only body, capable of forcing others to (not) act in a certain way. Like the state, the institutions of altruism are driven by other than profit motives. Every philanthropic activity, however, is tit-for-tat - be it that the "tat" is a good feeling. Thus, no act of philanthropy and benefaction is a market institution as such; the price is not a deciding criterion for effective allocation of resources. In no way is it an institution of the state sector, though. And here we are faced with a problem since some organisations of these traits can be labelled as beneficial, while others may be of the opposite quality. Therefore, the value of other people's lives and freedom has to be acknowledged as an inherent attribute of the human being and included among the main characteristics of institutions of altruism. What is meant by freedom is not that "my freedom ends where others' begins" but freedom in a sense of respecting the fact that one is alive not thanks to themselves but to living in a society. With these characteristics institutions of altruism become

sovereign categories of civil society and as such have more in common with market organisations than with the state.

If we can characterise philanthropic activities as voluntary, competitive, free of being motivated by profit in a financial sense and respectful of the freedom of others, then pure human compassion with the suffering of others can be identified as the moral base of these activities. In their base we can then look for altruism as a yes to life within a society. And this could be our third possible preliminary conclusion. Therefore, if the above characteristics are missing, most money gifts from the rich towards good causes are no more than an appeasement of one's own conscience through redemption or a political bribe, not dissimilar to a pardon of the Middle Ages. By signing a cheque such benefactor may buy himself social reputation but he does not become a bearer of moral values.

Conclusions:

The puzzle why people are willing to give up a part of their independence for the benefit of the society has one solution - it is more beneficial. Our preliminary conclusions were firstly that selfishness is what makes our altruism possible, secondly that there is self-interest of some kind behind all our good deeds, and lastly that using certain parameters acts of benefaction and philanthropy which stem from altruism can be differentiated from calculatingly utilitarian behaviour.

The character of the good Samaritan comes back - his help to the assaulted and injured man, the first aid he provided, taking the man on his donkey to the nearest place where he will be well looked after. He did not forget to give money to the man's future carers and should it not turn out to be enough for the numerous wounds, he will give them more. The

fact that we have no idea how rich or what religion he was is unimportant. The Samaritan understood from Jesus' stories that money is needed in order to make such mercy happen. The parable of the Good Samaritan shows that expenses are a necessary part of altruism. It can also help us explain the relationship between altruism and egotism and/or understand the very meaning of egotism. We do not know the inner motives of those who do good, or think they do so. The psychology of the giver always remains hidden. The Samaritan can thus be an example of someone who knows that every good deed will eventually be returned - within the system of total commitments. We never know when we might need help from the others. A good deed which incurs nonreturnable costs can therefore be a very selfish act. The more we can empathise with the suffering of others, the more selfishly we behave when we attempt to ease their suffering. In other words, only those who do good from a cold conviction, without any emotions, are the real altruists. From a researcher's point of view, the motivations behind philanthropy carried out by atheists may seem to be much more colourful than that by believers in God.