YISHUN JUNIOR COLLEGE
JC2 PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION 2016

H1 GENERAL PAPER **8807/02**

PAPER 2 **15 AUGUST 2016**

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1 hour 30 minutes

READ THE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This Insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

ALTRUISM

Judith Lichtenberg discusses the issues surrounding pure altruism[1].

1 Who could doubt the existence of altruism? True, news stories of malice and greed abound, but all around us we see evidence of human beings sacrificing themselves and doing good for others. Still, doubting altruism is easy, even when it seems at first glance to be apparent. It is undeniable that people sometimes act in a way that benefits others, but it may seem that they always get something in return — at the very least, the satisfaction of having their desire to help fulfilled. Students in introductory philosophy courses torture their professors with this reasoning, and its logic can seem inexorable.

2 Contemporary discussions of altruism quickly turn to evolutionary explanations. Reciprocal altruism and kin selection are the two main theories. According to reciprocal altruism, evolution favours organisms that sacrifice their good for others in order to gain a favour in return. Kin selection — the famous "selfish gene" theory popularised by Richard Dawkins — says that individuals behaving altruistically towards others who share their genes, will tend to reproduce those genes. Organisms may be altruistic; genes are selfish. The feeling that loving your children more than yourself is hard-wired lends plausibility to the theory of kin selection. These evolutionary theories explain a puzzle: how organisms that sacrifice their own "reproductive fitness" — their ability to survive and reproduce — could possibly have evolved. However, neither theory fully accounts for our ordinary understanding of altruism.

3 The defect of reciprocal altruism is clear. If a person acts to benefit another in the expectation that the favour will be returned, the natural response is, "That's not altruism!". Pure altruism, we think, requires a person to sacrifice for another without consideration of personal gain. Doing good for another person because something is in it for the doer is the very opposite of what we have in mind. Kin selection does better by allowing that organisms may genuinely sacrifice their interests for another, but it fails to explain why they sometimes do so for those with whom they share no genes.

4 When we ask whether human beings are altruistic, we want to know about their motives or intentions. Biological altruism explains how unselfish behaviour might have evolved but it implies nothing about the motives or intentions of the agent: after all, birds, bats and bees can act altruistically. This fact helps to explain why despite these evolutionary theories, the view that people never intentionally act to benefit others except to obtain some good for themselves, still possesses a powerful lure over our thinking.

5 The lure of this view — egoism — has two sources: one psychological, the other logical. Consider the psychological. One reason people deny that altruism exists is that, looking inward, they doubt the purity of their own motives. We know that even when we appear to act unselfishly, other reasons for our behaviour often rear their heads: the prospect of a future favour, the boost to reputation, or simply the good feeling that comes from appearing to act unselfishly. People's true motives may be hidden, even (or perhaps especially) from themselves. Even if we think we are acting solely to further another person's good, that might not be the real reason. (There might not be a single "real reason" — actions can have multiple motives.)

[1]Altruism refers to the fact of caring about the needs of other people more than your own.

6 So the psychological lure of egoism as a theory of human action is partly explained by a certain humility or scepticism people have about their own or others' motives. There is also a less flattering reason: denying the possibility of pure altruism provides a convenient excuse for selfish behaviour. If "everybody is like that" — if everybody must be like that — we need not feel guilty about our own self-interested behaviour or try to change it.

7 The logical lure of egoism is different: the view seems impossible to disprove. No matter how altruistic people appear to be, it is possible to conceive of their motives in egoistic terms. Doctors who give up a comfortable life to care for AIDS patients in a remote place do what they want to do, and therefore get satisfaction from what only appears to be self-sacrifice. So, it seems, altruism is simply self-interest of a subtle kind.

8 The impossibility of disproving egoism may sound like a virtue of the theory, but, as philosophers of science know, it is really a fatal drawback. A theory that purports to tell us something about the world, as egoism does, should be falsifiable. Not false, of course, but capable of being tested and thus proved false. If every state of affairs is compatible with egoism, then egoism does not tell us anything distinctive about how things are.

9 A related reason for the lure of egoism concerns ambiguity in the concepts of desire and the satisfaction of desire. If people possess altruistic motives, then they sometimes act to benefit others without the prospect of gain to themselves. In other words, they desire the good of others for its own sake, not merely as a means to their own satisfaction. From the fact that a person's desire is satisfied, we cannot draw conclusions about effects on the individual's mental state or well-being.

10 Still, when our desires are satisfied, we normally experience satisfaction: we feel good when we do good. Yet that does not mean we do good only in order to get that "warm glow" — that our true incentives are self-interested (as economists tend to claim). Indeed, as primatologist Frans de Waal argues, if we did not desire the good of others for its own sake, then attaining it would not produce the warm glow.

11 Common sense tells us that some people are more altruistic than others. Egoism's claim that these differences are illusory — that deep down, people act only to further their own interests — contradicts our observations and deep-seated human practices of moral evaluation. At the same time, we may notice that generous people do not necessarily suffer more or flourish less than those who are more self-interested. Altruists may be more content or fulfilled than selfish people. Nice guys do not always finish last, but nor do they always finish first.

12 The point is rather that the kind of altruism we ought to encourage (and probably the only kind with staying power) is satisfying to those who practise it. Studies of rescuers show that they do not believe their behaviour is extraordinary: they feel they must do what they do, because it is just part of who they are. The same holds for more common, less newsworthy acts — working in soup kitchens, taking pets to people in nursing homes, helping strangers find their way, being neighbourly.

13 People who act in these ways believe that they ought to help others, but they also want to help, because doing so affirms who they are and want to be and the kind of world they want to exist - their identity is tied up with their values, thus tying self-interest and

altruism together. The correlation between doing good and feeling good is not inevitable — inevitability lands us again with that empty, unfalsifiable egoism — but it is more than incidental. Altruism is possible and altruism is real, although in most people, it intertwines subtly with the well-being of the agent who does good, and this is crucial for seeing how to increase the amount of altruism in the world.