On the Dilemma of Morality: Self-interest and Altruism*

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Abstract

The dilemma of morality as depicted in controversy on self-interest and altruism, (or selfishness and unselfishness) has been in existence a long time. [1] Though it did not merely originate with them, this dilemma reached its fruition and received classic expression in eighteenth-century moral philosophers. In spite of immense solutions, the core question of the dilemma still remained open. The overall aim of this paper is to suggest that the concepts of self-interest and altruism are liable to be a source of confusion in our moral thinking, and to take some steps towards dispelling this confusion. While it is not aspiring to discuss the dilemma so as to conclude any discussion, in its turn, it tries to modeling a moderate solution for the dilemma.

I. Hypothesis

Is human action always grounded in selfishness and motivated by self-interest? Is it possible for men to act selflessly and altruistically? Consider the following argument: 'It is better to be unselfish than to be selfish. The most unselfish person is the one who takes no thought for himself at all. Therefore, I ought to aim at becoming that sort of person'. I think that many people must at some time in their lives have been placed in a dilemma by some such reasoning as this. The dilemma I have in mind consists in a strong inclination to accept both the premises and the argument, combined with an equally strong reluctance to seriously accept the conclusion. I want to suggest that the concepts of selfishness and unselfishness are liable to be a source of confusion in our moral thinking, and to take some steps towards dispelling this confusion.

Now if I find myself in the above position, three explanations are possible. One is that my seriously held moral beliefs really do

commit me to accepting both the premises and the argument, and hence to accepting the conclusion, but for some reason I have failed to recognise this as a consequence of my beliefs. The second possible explanation is that my moral beliefs do not really commit me to anything of the kind, but I feel that they do because of some unnoticed confusion in my thinking, presumably a confusion connected with the concept of unselfishness. The third is that I am in a state of genuine moral uncertainty as between a moral view which does commit me to accepting both the premises and the argument, and hence the conclusion, and one which does not. [2]

I have described a certain dilemma and suggested three possible reasons why a person might find himself in this dilemma. The hypothesis I want to put forward in connection with this dilemma is the following. There are certain types of moral view which do commit the person who holds them to a belief in an ideal which might be described as 'taking no thought for oneself'. There are certain other types of moral view which do not commit the person who holds them to a belief in this ideal. But because of some confusion connected with the concept of unselfishness, a person whose views are of the second type may mistakenly feel that he too ought in consistency to accept the ideal.

If this hypothesis is correct, it is relevant not only to the problem of someone who finds himself in the dilemma I have described purely by reason of conceptual confusion, but also to the problem of someone who finds himself in it by reason of moral uncertainty. For if I am in a state of moral uncertainty, I am not well placed to resolve this uncertainty until the two views between which I am wavering are clearly distinguished in my mind.

II. The Model

Let us start by giving more substance to the hypothesis. As a preliminary, I want to distinguish between three kinds of action. I shall call an action self regarding, if its motive is to promote the agent's own happiness, considered as an end in itself. I shall call an

action other regarding, if its motive is to promote someone else's happiness, considered as an end in itself. And I shall call an action value regarding, if its motive is to promote the realisation of some moral or non moral value, again considered as an end in itself. The meaning of the phrase 'considered as an end in itself' is admittedly unclear. What I specifically mean to rule out by using this phrase is the possibility of the thing in question being regarded merely as a means to something else. For instance, if I seek to promote another person's happiness not because I care about his happiness as such, but because I believe that if he were happier I would find him easier to live with, this would not count as an other regarding action. I do not mean the three terms to be exclusive. An action may fall under any two of the three descriptions, or under all three.

I suggest above that certain types of moral view commit the person who holds them to belief in an ideal which might be described as 'taking no thought for oneself'. I shall from now on refer to the ideal I have in mind here as the ideal of selflessness.

According to this ideal, the best life is one which contains no self regarding actions at all, but only other regarding or value regarding actions. Ideally, a man ought to renounce all concern with his own happiness and let his life be governed only by his values and the interests of others. He may perform actions which are in fact conducive to his own happiness; but he should not perform any action because it is conducive to his own happiness.

The belief in such an ideal of selflessness is of course an extreme view; it rules out any number of actions which are usually thought unobjectionable or even commendable. But even in this rather crude formulation it is, I think, recognizably identifiable with views which have seriously been held.

However, an important qualification needs to be made, precisely because of its extreme character, the ideal of selflessness is one which hardly anyone would expect all human beings to live up to or even to aim at. A person who believes in this ideal is therefore liable to hold that although this ideal is the true morality (or rather

an aspect of the true morality), there is also a need for a less demanding morality for the general run of people to follow. He may, therefore, maintain that a man's moral duty requires only that he should conform to this less demanding morality.

Living up to the ideal of selflessness, or even trying to live up to it, is not a duty, but an act of virtue beyond the call of duty. This in a sense disposes of the argument from which this discussion started. For if even the person who believes in the ideal of selflessness is not committed to accepting the conclusion of that argument, namely, that he personally ought to aim at achieving the ideal of selflessness, then certainly nobody else is. But we are still left with the following modified version of the argument on our hands: 'It is better to be unselfish than to be selfish. The most unselfish person is the one who takes no thought for himself at all. Therefore this is the best kind of person to be'. And this modified version of the argument is still capable of giving rise to the same type of dilemma as the original one.

However, it may be asked what a belief in the ideal of selflessness really amounts to, if a person may consistently believe in this ideal without regarding it as his duty to live up to it. The answer to this question depends on whether the person in question does in fact make it his aim to live up to the ideal. If he does, and he makes serious efforts to achieve this aim, then obviously there is much more to his belief than a merely verbal profession of belief. But what are we to say about a person who does not make it his aim to actually live up to the ideal, but nevertheless professes to believe in it? Is such a person simply a hypocrite? I think he need not be, for the following reason. One characteristic function of ideals of this type is to stimulate people into doing more than their duty. [3] A person may, therefore, be influenced in his conduct by such an ideal even though he does not aim at actually living up to it. And perhaps we may allow for an even weaker form of adherence to an ideal. I may believe in an idea, in the sense that if I ever wished to do more than my duty, I would look to that ideal for guidance. I never do in fact have such a wish. Such a belief may not amount to much, but

it is still distinguishable from no belief at all. If I ever did form the wish to do more than my duty, I would behave differently from a person who did not share my belief. I have said that some people hold moral views which do commit them to a belief in the ideal of selflessness. I have also said that some other people hold different moral views which do not commit them to a belief in this ideal, but which may on occasion seem to. Now there is a type of moral view which on the face of it seems to be radically different from the ideal of selflessness. I mean the type of view which regards happiness as the most important good, and one to which all human beings have an equal right. The ideal situation for such a view is one in which every human being is as happy as he is capable of being. But if this situation is unattainable, as is often assumed, the aim of morality will be that of setting up a code of conduct which will tend to promote the least objectionable approximation to the ideal situation an approximation sometimes referred to as 'the general happiness'.

Philosophers have sometimes held views of this type in conjunction with a doctrine of psychological hedonism, i.e. a doctrine that all actions are necessarily self regarding. Such a philosopher will have to reject the ideal of selflessness not on moral grounds, but on the ground that what it requires is logically absurd. It is also possible to hold a view of this type without any psychological hedonism, and for such a view, the pursuit of happiness and the renunciation of its pursuit recommended by the ideal of selfishness, may be genuine alternatives.

A thorough consideration of the topic would of course require one to show in detail that the concepts of happiness and of a self regarding action really can be construed in such a way as to allow for the occurrence of both self regarding actions. Such a task is beyond the scope of this paper, but it seems not too unreasonable to assume that it could be satisfactorily carried out, especially since the requirement is not to show that the concepts of happiness and of a self regarding action have to be construed in this sort of way, but only to show that they can be.

I said that on the face of it the type of view we are now considering, which I shall call for reference universalised hedonism, is radically different from the ideal of selflessness. According to the ideal of selflessness, my own happiness is a matter which ideally I ought not to be concerned with at all. Universalized hedonism, on the contrary, regards it as normal and proper that I should desire and seek my own happiness. Moral limitations need to be imposed on the way in which I do this only because my interests may come into conflict with the interests of other people who, according to this view, have as good a claim to happiness as I have. If morality sometimes requires me to act contrary to the interests of my own happiness, this is so not because my own happiness is something which ought not to matter to me, but because other people's happiness ought to matter too. Thus universalized hedonism aims at enabling everyone to pursue happiness in a harmonious manner; the ideal of selflessness aims at turning them away from the pursuit of happiness altogether.

We, therefore, have here two very different types of moral view. However, the two are not actually incompatible. It might for instance be held that the happiest life is, as a matter of fact, the kind of life recommended by the ideal of selflessness. A person who held this belief, and who also held some form of universalised hedonism, might therefore genuinely committed by his views to a belief in the ideal of selflessness. There are certain logical difficulties in a position of this kind, but I shall not go into these, because the possibility of a person's holding such a position is not the one I wish to discuss here. It is clear that a person may hold some form of universalized hedonism without believing the happiest life to be that recommended by the ideal of selflessness. Now at first sight it seems highly unlikely that such a person's views should, on examination, turn out to entail a belief in the ideal of selflessness. What I want to suggest is that there are in fact forms of universalized hedonism which do not entail a belief in this ideal, but may nevertheless easily be thought to entail such a belief. This is possible, I want to argue, because most forms of universalized hedonism lead to an emphasis on the value of unselfishness, and this in turn may be thought to

lead to an exaltation of the completely selfless life as an ideal.

I say that most forms of universalised hedonism lead to an emphasis on unselfishness, because there is one obvious exception. It has sometimes been held that the greatest general good results from everyone pursuing his own interests as hard as he can without any regard to anyone else's. Clearly such a view leaves room for unselfishness only in a very paradoxical sense. The only way in which I can display unselfishness, in the sense of a proper recognition of other people's interests, is by behaving in the sort of way normally regarded as thoroughly selfish. Unselfishness in the ordinary sense is for such a view as this not a virtue but a vice.

However, with this one exception, universalised hedonism does normally give rise to a morality which sometimes requires me to act in the interests of other people either independently of my own interests, or actually contrary to them. In other words, I am sometimes required to perform actions which may do nothing to promote my own happiness, and may even detract from it, but which serve to promote the happiness of the people. It is this which leads to the emphasis on unselfishness. Very roughly, unselfishness consists in a willingness to perform actions of this kind, and selfishness in a reluctance to perform them.

Now a belief in the value of unselfishness in this sense does look as if it might lead to a belief in the ideal of selflessness. For surely the person who displays the greatest willingness to perform purely other regarding actions is the one who spends his whole life doing nothing but this in terms of the argument from which this discussion started, 'The most unselfish person is the one who takes no thought for himself at all'. [4]

There does then seem to be a prima facie case for saying that a person who believes in the value of unselfishness is at any rate committed to accepting the premises of our argument, namely, that it is better to be unselfish than to be selfish, and that the most unselfish person will be one who lives up to the ideal of selflessness. But this, if correct, would still leave it an open question whether a

person who believes in the value of unselfishness is committed to accepting the inference from these premises to an acceptance of the ideal of selflessness.

The answer to this question seems to turn on the following point. It might be the case that the logic of 'selfish' and 'unselfish' resembles that of such terms as 'small' and 'large'. In other words, there might be a scale of selfishness unselfishness, such that if one person A occupies a higher position on the scale than another person B, A is said to be more unselfish than B, and B is said to be more selfish than A. And it might be held that, other things being equal, a person who occupies a higher position on the scale is morally better than one who occupies a lower position. Actions or courses of action might also be graded as selfish or unselfish in the same general way.

Now it might also be the case that if I do not live up to the ideal of selflessness, and necessarily occupying a lower position on the selfishness-unselfishness scale than one I could have occupied if I had lived up to that ideal. Then I could, other things being equal, become a morally better person than I am by living up to the ideal.

This does not as it stands entail a belief in complete unselfishness as a moral ideal, because of the clause 'other things being equal'. For it might be that the greatest possible degree of unselfishness is incompatible with other moral virtues which are more important. However, unless we are able to demonstrate that this is in fact the case, the belief in unselfishness construed on this particular model does seem to lead to a belief in the ideal of selflessness.

III. Evaluating the Model

But is the model a correct one? As a means to answering this question, have a closer look at the concepts of selfishness and unselfishness. The terms 'selfish' and 'unselfish' are most frequently used in discussions relating to one or other of the following two questions: (I) What should I do when my interests conflict with someone else's? (II) How far should I make it my business to

actively promote the interests of other people?

I shall, therefore, consider the usage of 'selfish' and 'unselfish' first in connection with the first question, and then in connection with the second. According to most commonly held moral viewpoints, there is no one general answer to the question 'What should I do when my interests conflict with someone else's?' unless this answer is simply 'It depends on the circumstances'. A person might hold that when my interests conflict with someone else's I ought always to let the other person's interests prevail; or ought always to try to reach a compromise; or ought always to try to get my own way by every means at my disposal. But most people in fact think that different courses of action are appropriate on different occasions. And the way in which a person will apply the terms 'selfish' and 'unselfish' in a situation of this kind is closely connected with his opinions as to what is the most appropriate course of action in that particular situation. This in turn is bound up with his opinion as to what would be the fairest way of resolving the conflict.

Let us first consider the case where it is held that compromise is the fairest solution to a conflict. I am not thinking of the sort of case where compromise is advocated purely on grounds of feasibility.

One might think that in a conflict between A and B, A is wholly in the right and wholly in the wrong, and that the fairest solution would therefore be for to give way to A. But it might be clear that B would never agree to this, and so compromise might be advocated as a second best solution. In other cases, however, it might be held that compromise is from all points of view the best solution, and this is the sort of case I want to consider.

A compromise solution involves each of the parties to the conflict making a partial sacrifice of his interests, in order to make it possible for the desires of each of them to be partially satisfied.

Now suppose there is a conflict of interests between A and B, and I consider that a compromise would be the fairest solution. If one of the two parties refuses to compromise and insists on having it all his own way, I may criticise this behaviour as selfish. If, on the

other hand, he shows himself willing to reach a compromise, I may commend his behaviour as unselfish.

Thus, if I regard compromise as the fairest solution to a conflict between two people, I shall regard a person who is willing to compromise as more unselfish than one who wants it all his own way, and I shall correspondingly regard the latter person as more selfish. But what am I to say if, in a situation where I regard compromise as the fairest solution, one of the parties prefers to sacrifice his own interests completely? Am I to say that he is even more unselfish than the one who is willing to compromise?

There is a certain naturalness in saying this, and I think quite a lot of people would say it. But if the model I put forward of a scale of selfishness -unselfishness is correct, it has a consequence which is less easy to accept. If the person who prefers to sacrifice his own interests completely is more unselfish than the person who is willing to compromise, then the latter person is more selfish than the former, which implies that he is displaying at least some degree of unselfishness. And it seems odd to say at the same time that compromise is the fairest solution, and that a person who is to compromise but not to sacrifice his own interests completely is thereby displaying any selfishness at all. However, this might be said, and it might in particular be said by an adherent of the ideal of selflessness. For him, perhaps, a man is guilty of selfishness as long as he gives his own interests any weight at all. This is of course a possible way of using the term 'selfish', but it is not the usual one, though perhaps it has enough in common with the usual one to be capable of being used to persuade people that since they disapprove of the kind of behaviour usually called selfish, they ought also to disapprove of the kind of behaviour which the adherent of the ideal of selflessness calls selfish.

The alternative is to agree that the man who is willing to compromise is not in any degree selfish, and this I think is more in accordance with ordinary usage. But if we follow this alternative, we must adapt the original model of the selfishness unselfishness scale to fit. And we can at the same time give more content to the model. It

now seems that there is a point on the scale above which the term 'selfish' does not apply at all. This point appears to be the one I occupy when I behave in the way required for a fair solution of the conflict. If I deviate from a fair solution in a sense favourable to myself, I will occupy a lower point in the scale and will be guilty of selfishness. If I deviate from a fair solution in a sense favourable to the other person, I will occupy a higher position in the scale and will be displaying unselfishness if I am actually at the fair solution point.

IV. Moral Judgements, Motivations and Benevolence

Now we must turn towards some basic notions in moral philosophy to see how they must be considered in connection with this modified version of the selfishness unselfishness scale. Let us first observe what moral judgements can be made in this connection. The adherent of the ideal of selflessness is still able to say that the higher the position one occupies in the scale the better. In fact, the new version of the scale enables us to give a clearer statement of his views. He may hold that strict duty requires only that I should not fall below the fair solution point. But if I want to do more than my duty, I must rise above this point. The adherent of universalised hedonism will agree that I ought not to fall below the fair solution point. Is he also committed to holding that it is commendable for me to rise above it, and that the further above it I rise the better? There seems to be no reason why he should be. Indeed, the emphasis which his view lays on the idea that one person's happiness is as important as another's tends to suggest that for him the fair solution point is the ideal one for me to occupy. There is an oddity in saying 'Your happiness and the other person's matter equally, but it is better for you to act as though his mattered more'.

Nevertheless, even people who hold this type of view do not generally regard a deviation from fairness in favour of oneself. To give due consideration to other people's interests is regarded as a moral duty; to give due consideration to one's own is not, though it may be thought legitimate and desirable. Thus whatever else

may be said about a deviation from fairness in the other person's favour, it is not usually regarded as in itself morally wrong. It might, however, be held that deviation from fairness in the other person's favour is, if not morally wrong, at any rate undesirable. Or it might instead be held to be a matter of individual preference; if I choose to behave in this way, there is no objection to my doing so. But there is no particular moral virtue in it either. From the fair solution point upwards, all degrees of unselfishness are morally equivalent. Or, finally, it might be held that it depends on the circumstances: some deviations in the other person's favour are undesirable, some neutral, and some commendable. Any one of these positions will provide the adherent of universalized hedonism with an alternative to holding that a higher position on the selfishness unselfishness scale is always preferable to a lower one.

There is an important notion which I would now discuss here. This is the notion of motivation. I have tacitly proceeded on the assumption that deviations from a fair solution in one's own favour are motivated by self interest, and deviations in the other person's favourably genuine concern for the other person. This is of course not always true, and what I have said should be taken to apply only to situations where this condition is in fact satisfied.

If a person deviates in his own favour from what I consider to be the fair solution and does this not from self interest but because he believes it to be his duty, or because he believes it to be the best thing for the other person, I shall not criticise him for being selfish, though I may consider him misguided. Again, if he deviates in the other person's favour not out of concern for the other person, but because he is afraid to stand up for himself, neither the adherent of the ideal of selflessness nor the adherent of universalized hedonism is committed to approving his action or even to terming it unselfish. However, for the sake of simplicity I shall continue to concentrate on the cases where such complications of motivation are not present.

I have so far considered only one type of 'fair solution', namely

compromise. But this is of course not the only type. It may also be held in certain situations that the fair solution consists in one of the parties giving way to the other. Let us suppose, therefore, that in a given situation I think that the fair solution would be for A to give way to B. If we look at the matter from the point of view of A's actions, the same kind of judgement regarding selfishness and unselfishness can be made as before. Namely, if A acts in the way I believe to be necessary for a fair solution, namely by giving way to B. I shall call his action unselfish, and if he fails to do this I shall call it selfish.

But if we look at the matter from the point of view of B's actions, the position turns out to be rather different. For if the fair solution is that A should give way to B, B acts in accordance with the requirements of this solution if he simply insists on having his own way. And this is surely not the sort of behaviour we would think of calling unselfish--though I do not think we would normally call it selfish either.

We must, therefore, make a further modification in what we have said about selfishness and unselfishness. It now appears that a person cannot always be described as unselfish because he acts in the way required for a fair solution. The term 'unselfish' is applied only if his acting in the way required by a fair solution involves at least a sacrifice of his own interests.

Thus there is an important connection between the concepts of unselfishness and self sacrifice. But the connection implied here is not of a kind which would lead from a belief in the value of unselfishness to a belief in the ideal of selflessness. For the self sacrifice in question here is not that which consists in deviating from a fair solution in favour of the other person, but that which consists in making a partial or complete sacrifice of one's own interests in order to reach a fair solution.

Unselfishness could therefore be regarded as a subsidiary virtue to fairness. What primarily matters is that in situations of conflict I should be willing to seek a fair solution. In practice, it will very

often be the case that in order to reach a fair solution I must make some kind of sacrifice. Unselfishness, in the sense of a willingness to do this, is therefore a necessary condition of fairness. If I never act unselfishly, I shall almost certainly some times act unfairly. And a belief in the value of unselfishness on this sort of ground clearly does not commit one to a belief in the even greater virtue of deviating from fairness in favour of the other person. There are of course yet other types of 'fair solution' than the two I have considered here, for example various types of more or less regulated competition. These solutions too may involve an element of self sacrifice, in the sense that I might have done better for myself if I had not agreed to abide by the rules of the competition. So a willingness to reach a fair solution may count as unselfish even where the solution is a competitive one.

Before we leave the topic of conflict I would like to make one last point. There is a type of minor self sacrificing action which one would expect any reasonably unselfish person to quite often perform, and which cannot at first sight be justified in terms of fairness. I am thinking of such actions as, for example, agreeing to see the film one's friend would prefer to see rather than the film one would have preferred to see oneself. Unless there are special circumstances, this seems to have nothing to do with fairness; why should my friend's taste in films count for more than mine?

But this comment misses an important point. Actions of this kind are frequently performed as part of the informal and extended type of compromise known as 'give and take'; a perhaps very loose and informal agreement between two people that they will each make their fair share of concessions. Thus the action which taken in isolation seems to be an example of self sacrifice unmotivated by considerations of fairness, may turn out taken in its context to be more accurately described as an example of the spirit of compromise.

I want finally to consider the concepts of selfishness and unselfishness in relation to the second of the two questions

I mentioned, namely 'How far should I make it my business to actively promote the interests of other people?'

We have so far considered selfishness and unselfishness in relation to situations of conflict. But a person's behaviour in such situations is not the only factor relevant to our calling him a selfish or unselfish person. A person might always behave with perfect fairness in such situations, and to this extent be describable as an unselfish person. But at the same time he might never go out of his way to do anything for anyone. In other words, he might make a policy of never unfairly sacrificing other people's interests to his own, but never do anything to promote their interests beyond what such a policy required. And in comparison to a person who often did show an active concern with other people's interests, he could certainly be described as selfish.

Furthermore, there are certain types of action which are commonly spoken of as unselfish, but which do not fall under the general description of unselfishness which was given above. I mean actions which are undertaken in the interests of another person, but which do not involve any sacrifice of the agent's own interests. And one can imagine a person who frequently performed actions of this kind, but who also habitually behaved selfishly in situations of conflict. Such a person might be willing and even eager to promote other people's interests where they did not conflict with his own, but at the same time reluctant to make any kind of sacrifice when a conflict did arise.

There seem, therefore, to be two distinct criteria by which one might assess a person's unselfishness; his behaviour in situations of conflict, and the degree of active benevolence he displayed. A person might rate very high on one of these criteria, but very low on the other. Whether we should speak here of two different senses of 'unselfish' or merely of two different aspects of unselfishness I am not sure. At any rate, the criterion of active benevolence suggests the possibility of a selfishness unselfishness scale different from that we considered before; one according to which the most unselfish person is the one who displays the most active benevolence, and

the most selfish person the one who displays the least active benevolence. And this scale seems to lend itself to a much more plausible argument for the proposition that a belief in the value of unselfishness entails a belief in the ideal of selflessness.

For the person who has renounced all interests of his own does seem to be better placed than anyone else to display the highest possible degree of active benevolence. And on this scale there is no obvious equivalent of the fair solution point, no point of which one could say 'Above this point, more unselfishness is not better than less'. It seems far more natural to say that a greater degree of active benevolence is always morally better than a lesser degree. Perhaps it could be argued that there is a point beyond which greater degrees of benevolence do not correspond to greater degrees of moral worth, but it is not easy to think of plausible grounds for such a view.

Nor does there seem to be much future in the argument that the highest degrees of benevolence are incompatible with the practice of other more important moral virtues; what could these virtues be? So is it after all the case that an adherent of universalised hedonism, assuming that his views do commit him to a belief in the value of benevolence, is committed to accepting the ideal of selflessness?

I think this conclusion can be resisted, but on rather different grounds from those put forward in connection with problems of conflict. The adherent of universalized hedonism may agree that a higher degree of benevolence is always morally more praiseworthy than a lower degree, and also agree that the person who lives up to the ideal of selflessness is able to attain degrees of benevolence which are inaccessible to anyone else. And yet, I think, he does not have to draw the conclusion that ideally everyone ought to lead a life of complete selflessness. He may admit that such a way of life will typically be richer in morally praiseworthy actions than any other way of life, but at the same time argue that, even from a moral point of view, the most important criterion for judging a way of life is not the number of morally praiseworthy actions it contains.

There are two disputable rivals for the criterion mentioned above.

One obvious rival criterion is the criterion of usefulness. It is by no means evident that the most benevolent life is necessarily also the most useful; and it is possible to hold on moral grounds that it is more important that a man's life should be useful than that it should be rich in morally praiseworthy actions. There need not be any inconsistency in this; one may very well regard a man's actions as highly useful without considering that he displays any particular moral virtue in performing them.

Another rival criterion is that which may be roughly described as the criterion of suitability to the individual. Provided that the life which suits a man best is not positively immoral, it may be held, it is more important that his way of life should be the one which suits him than that it should be morally praiseworthy. And this too can consistently be held on moral grounds.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is possible to hold that although moral virtue is important, the most important end of life is not that of displaying as much moral virtue as possible. This of course implies that the term 'moral virtue' is here being used in a rather narrow sense, and it may be asked whether it would not be more appropriate for a person who holds this type of view to use it in a wider sense. But this is a question I shall not try to answer here.

Endnotes:

* This paper first delivered in Centre for Ethics, Newcastle, May 1994.

1. For a concise but fascinating discussion of aspects of this dilemma in eighteenth-century moral philosophy see: Roberts T.A., *The Concept of Benevolence*, Macmillan: London 1973; also see Sen A.K. and Williams B.A.O.(eds), *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, CUP: Cambridge 1982.

2. It may be asked at this point what my moral beliefs have to do with my accepting an argument. The answer is that the argument in question is an enthymeme, it requires extra premises to make it logically valid, and it seems clear that some at least of these extra premises would have to be moral judgements. My feeling that the argument is valid amounts to a feeling that I could make it logically valid by adding extra premises

acceptable to myself.

3. "Duty" here being understood to mean the least one can morally get away with.

4. I am simplifying the issue slightly here; in fact, the ideal of selflessness does not require that all a man's actions should be other regarding, for he may also perform value regarding actions which have no effect on anyone's happiness. But the kind of life recommended by the ideal of selflessness may at any rate be compatible with the performance of a greater number of purely other regarding actions than anyone who did not live up to the ideal would have time for.