Philosophy 306

Reciprocity, Cooperation, Trust, and Altruism (esp. related to Held)

5 different kinds of interaction between persons (ranging from the most egoistic to the most self-sacrificial):

1. (Reciprocal) egoism: Each individual agrees to work with the other solely for the purpose of benefiting him/herself. Every action within the interaction is motivated purely by self-interest. In order for all parties to benefit, it is not necessary for any of them to trust each other. There is no "freeloader" (or "free rider") problem. The situation itself ensures that the self-benefiting of one will help the other. (Example: Hume's boat, from Held, p. 66.)

2. Trusting cooperation: The parties engage in the activity solely for self benefit, but that benefit can happen only if the parties trust each other to some extent. Each individual could benefit *more* by making the agreement to participate, and perhaps pretending to do so for some period, but then breaking or violating the agreement. However, if every party looked at it and acted in this way, no one would enter the activity in the first place, and all would be worse off than if they had all cooperated. So some degree of trust is necessary for the mutually beneficial cooperation. (Example: Held's example of two people needing a truck, pp. 67-68.) (One famous version of this type of situation is called the "prisoner's dilemma." But in prisoners dilemmas, the agents have to act without knowing anything about the other person, rather than having a sense, through some sort of contact with the other, of whether the other is worthy of trust.)

To summarize, imagine three situations:
A: All parties engage in trusting cooperation.
B: No one engages in trusting cooperation.
C: One person pretends to cooperate but actually exploits others' cooperation for his own benefit.
The one person in C does better than he does in A. Everyone in A does better than everyone does in B. However, if other people initially in A follow the exploiter's behavior, as in C, then everyone ends up in B, thus worse off than if all had cooperated.

Note that while cooperation requires trust, it does not require actually caring about the well-being of the other participants; that is, it does not require altruism in Blum's sense. (However, it *does* require altruism in *Kitcher's* sense of that word, which involves a more minimal definition in which one merely revises one's intentions in response to a perception of the needs of others but does not require actually caring about the other for her own sake.)
[In ordinary language, the word "cooperation" can be applied to both 1, reciprocal egoism, and 2, trusting cooperation; but I prefer to confine it to 2, to distinguish cooperation more clearly from down-the-line egoism.]

3. Reciprocal altruism: A relationship or activity in which each individual is motivated by a concern for the welfare of the other(s), but, in addition, each individual is aware that if she were in need, the kind of benefit which she is making available to others would be given to her also. (example: Kropotkin's mutual aid within bounded groups.)

Another way to say this is that in reciprocal altruism, the *overall relationship* is of benefit to the agent, but each *specific act* is not. In addition, the acts are not motivated by egoism but by altruism, although the agent is aware of the overall beneficialness of the arrangement. (Example: friendship (as in Blum ["Friendship as a Moral Phenomenon"].) What is the difference between 2 and 3?

4. Altruism [from handout "Egoism and Altruism"]: concern for the well-being of others, or particular others, for their own sake. The giver may or may not benefit in the future from having engaged in the act of altruism; so, unlike 3, there is no consciousness of a reciprocity that will benefit oneself.

5. Self-sacrificial altruism: Act of altruism in which the agent sacrifices his own well-being for the sake of the others. This is what Held calls "altruism," but I don't like her definition, because not all actions out of concern for others involve self-sacrifice, even if the agent is not concerned about her own well-being in the moment. Self-sacrificial altruism is only a subset of the more general category of altruism, in my definition. (But this is basically a semantic rather than a substantive issue.)