

Projection, Identification, and Altruism (in relation to Anna Freud, "A Form of Altruism")

In A. Freud, "**projection**" seems to have the following characteristics: (a) The subject possesses desires and feelings that she can not acknowledge having. (b) She makes herself believe that someone other than herself has these desires or feelings. [Freud portrays this as a kind of throwing these desires onto the other person, sort of.] What Freud calls "**altruistic surrender**" adds to these a 3rd characteristic: (c) the subject helps the someone else to satisfy those desires.¹

Freud implies that, in some way that is not easy to state, the subject's helping the other person gratify his² desires also in some way gratifies the subject's *own* unacknowledged desires. However, whatever kind of gratification this is, it is different in character from either the "greatest want" or the "feel good" arguments [see handout on "Some Basic Definitions About Motivation and Egoism"]. What is the difference? Is it that she is not getting gratification from simply any choice she makes, but only for very specific desires that she has (although she cannot acknowledge them, even to herself)?

I think Freud includes two morally and psychically distinct phenomena that meet these 3 criteria for projection and altruistic surrender:

- (1) The someone else *actually possesses* the desires that the subject cannot acknowledge having herself, and that is why that particular person is "selected" for altruistic surrender.
- (2) The someone else does *not* possess those desires, but the subject comes to believe, or makes herself believe, that he does.

These two are distinct because in case (1) when the subject helps the other to satisfy what she takes to be his desires, she is actually helping the other person by helping him satisfy his *actual* desires. But in case (2), she is pushing the other to satisfy desires that he does not actually have, and so this is not actually helping him. Freud describes the governess and some of her other examples in *both* of these ways. She does not clearly distinguish them.

Both (1) and (2) do involve what we have up to now defined as "altruism" since the subject is supporting desires that she *believes* the other person to have. Does she also satisfy the criterion of altruism that she helps the other *for his own sake*?

In Freud's examples, the subject seems to get genuine enjoyment *for the other* at the other's satisfying his desire, at least at a conscious level. If we distinguish between an altruistic action and an altruistic person, can we say that these are altruistic actions?

Identification

Freud's idea of altruistic surrender involves something beyond the 3 criteria mentioned above. It involves the "identification" of the subject with the other. It is this identification that allows the unconscious satisfaction of the agent's unacknowledged desires through helping the other. If she just helped the other person without identifying with him, she would not get the egoistic gratification that Freud says she gets. But I think her idea of identification is not entirely consistent. There are (at least) 2 possibilities of what she could mean.

- (1) The subject (temporarily) believes she actually is the other person. (example of governess as a child re her older sister's date seems to fit this description [126-7]).
- (2) The subject is perfectly aware that the other person is a different person than herself, with a different subjectivity, but she believes her own situation is exactly the same as the other person's. (Spelman's discussion of white suffragists might be like this?)

¹ Other forms of projection involve projecting negative emotions on to the other, such as jealousy or anger, emotions it would not be appropriate to help the person to gratify.

² For ease of reference I am going to refer to the subject as "she" and the projected-upon person as "he."