

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

Different kinds of interaction between persons along an egoistic/altruistic axis

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, where one person benefits from the effort of others without doing her own part. The situation itself ensures that the self-benefiting of one will help the other. (Example: Hume's boat, from Held, p. 66f. She also calls it "coinciding self-interest.")

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 acted in this way, no one would enter the activity in the first place, or it would break down almost immediately, 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. See Held 69ff, although she doesn't actually explain what prisoner's dilemmas are.)

Altruism: beneficence engaged in out of concern for the well-being of others, or particular others, for their own sake. The giver/subject may or may not benefit in the future from having engaged in the act of altruism. The giver/subject may or may not be sacrificing her own benefit by engaging in this act.

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. Held regards this fact as an advantage of cooperation (69).

[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, e.g., poor neighborhoods.)

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. Each act is motivated by altruism rather than egoism, although the agent is aware of the overall beneficialness of the arrangement.

4. Self-sacrificial altruism: Act of altruism in which the agent sacrifices her own well-being for the sake of the others. This is what Held calls "altruism," and it is a somewhat less extreme version of what Rand means by "altruism." I disagree with this 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.)