

On the Duty of Altruism

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Steven Cahn asks whether morality requires you to sacrifice your life, when it is the only way of stopping a bomb from destroying an entire city. I shall assume that the bomb will kill a large number of inhabitants. So, Cahn is asking whether morality requires you to sacrifice your life when it is the only way of saving a large number of other lives. It's worth keeping in mind that sacrificing your life is not the greatest sacrifice that you could make. Surrendering to many years of horrendous torture would be a much greater sacrifice. Still, we can focus on loss of life here.

There can, of course, be special duties to make such sacrifices (e.g., based on promises, contracts, or required rectification for past wrongs). Our question is whether there is a *general duty*, applicable to all, to make such sacrifices. I shall suggest that there are many cases in which morality does *not* require such a sacrifice. I shall not provide extensive argument. My goal is to flag some key issues rather than to resolve them conclusively.

Suppose that each of the inhabitants is evil and *will torture* large numbers of innocent people and that the only way of preventing this torture is to allow the bomb to go off. In this case, you have no obligation to sacrifice your life, or anything at all, to save their lives.

Alternatively, suppose that the inhabitants will not harm others in the future, but each has a future that is only slightly worth living and the total value of their futures is *less* than your future. Again, you have no duty to sacrifice your life. (Throughout I assume that the value of a life, and costs and benefits, are in terms of wellbeing broadly understood.) Even utilitarianism agrees with the above two assessments.

Suppose then that the future lives of the inhabitants have a total value that is *slightly greater* than the value of your future, which is positive. Utilitarianism, of course, would claim that you have a duty to sacrifice your life, but this seems implausible. If you have a duty to sacrifice your life, it only applies when the total benefit you provide to others is *significantly greater* than the cost to you. Utilitarianism is, I claim, too demanding.¹

Suppose then that the future lives of the inhabitants have a total value that is *significantly greater* than the value of your future, which is positive. Even here, I deny that you always have an obligation to sacrifice your life. Suppose that each inhabitant has a future only slightly worth living, say 1 unit of wellbeing, whereas you have a normally valuable future, worth say 1000 units. If there are 100,000 inhabitants, their total gain is 100,000, which is much greater than your loss. I claim that you have no general duty to sacrifice your life when your loss is *greater* than the gain to any of the *individual* beneficiaries. Indeed, I would argue that you have no duty to sacrifice when there are not *a significant number* of beneficiaries each of whom gains at least as much as you lose.²

Above, for simplicity, I assumed that there were no relevant *fair-share claims* at issue. These are claims that individuals have to receive a fair share of resources (e.g., having their basic needs met, having equal opportunity for wellbeing, or getting what they deserve). (I assume that fair shares are not merely based on who would get the greatest benefit, or related views.) I believe that each of us has some kind of duty to provide others with their fair shares when, and only when, we have more than our fair share. Consider the case where sacrificing your life will leave you with less than your lifetime (expected) fair share and that those you save already have received more than their lifetime fair shares. In that case, you have no duty, I claim, to sacrifice your life, even if there are a significant number of them and each obtains a benefit no less than

the loss you suffer. The unfairly disadvantaged do not have a duty to make sacrifices for the unfairly advantaged.

In sum, there is, I claim, no unqualified general duty to sacrifice one's life to save the lives of others. One does, however, have the duty to sacrifice one's life in the special case where it is the *only way* of discharging one's duty to provide fair shares to others. This, I suspect, will be rare, since typically there are many ways of discharging the fair share duty. Sacrificing one's life to save one group, for example, will rarely be required, since typically one could discharge the duty by helping others. I am inclined to think that duty to sacrifice one's life for others is limited to the case where this is the only way of discharging one's duty to provide fair shares to others and to cases of special duties from past actions (e.g., promises, or wrongdoing). In particular, individuals *who do not yet have their fair shares* do not have a duty to make even small sacrifices for large gains for large numbers of innocent others, even if these others do not yet have their fair shares.

There are, however, two extreme kinds of cases where I am tempted to endorse a duty to sacrifice one's life for others. One is where *the agent already has her lifetime fair share* and a significant number of people each obtains a benefit no less than the loss she incurs (even if each already has his lifetime fair share). The other is where the agent has *a future not worth living*. After all, in such cases, it costs her nothing (and arguably provides her a benefit) to benefit others. Because the duties in these two cases are in tension with the more general view articulated above, I take no official stance here.³

¹ See, for example, Peter Vallentyne, "Against Maximizing Act Consequentialism", in *Moral Theories*, edited by Jamie Dreier (*Contemporary Debate Series*, Blackwell Publishers, 2006), pp.

21-37.

² See, for example, Marc Fleurbaey, Bertil Tungodden, and Peter Vallentyne, “On the Possibility of Non-Aggregative Priority for the Worst Off”, *Social Philosophy and Policy* 26 (2009): 258-285. See also T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), ch. 5.

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