

“Generous to a Fault”

MORAL GOODNESS AND PSYCHIC HEALTH

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Is altruism good? In thinking about goodness we are so accustomed to equate it with altruism that the very question sounds odd. So much of our conversation about morality revolves around the twin concepts of egoism and altruism. To act egoistically, to benefit oneself, comes naturally, requires no particular education, and deserves no special praise. But seeking to benefit others seems to be the very essence of goodness, and those who sacrifice their own well-being or take personal risks for others are particularly honored for it. Indeed, the personal cost of an action is often taken to be sufficient testimony to its goodness.

Nevertheless, it is not difficult to argue that altruism is not always good. There are many examples of people who work tirelessly for the happiness of others but are unable to acknowledge and pursue their own wish for happiness. Cyrano de Bergerac's self-sacrifice is tragic, for example.¹ Some people devote themselves to the care of others to the point of ruining their own health. The attempt to be as morally good as it is possible to be can lead to a life that is out of balance, with no attention to other kinds of goods such as the development of one's own talents. Moreover, altruistic actions sometimes harm those they are intended to benefit. Once one begins to question the idea that altruism is goodness, other questions arise: What is the standard of goodness guiding the judgment that certain forms of altruism are *not* good? What is the idea of goodness that might lead one to conclude that it is not always good to be “good” (altruistic)?

Let me illustrate the problem through what appears to be a simple children's story, *The Giving Tree*.² In this story a tree loves a little boy. Every day when he is young, the boy climbs the tree, eats her apples, rests in her shade; and the boy loves the tree. As he grows older, he leaves the tree alone and comes back only when he wants something—apples to get money, branches to build a house, and finally the trunk itself to build a boat and sail far away. The tree is sad when the boy is away and happy each time she can give something of herself that will make him happy, though we are told that

she is “not really” happy when he takes her trunk. Finally the boy comes back as an old man and needs only a place to rest, so the tree invites him to sit on her stump, and she is happy once again.

About a dozen people, primarily professors of religion and ethics, recorded their thoughts on this story in a published symposium.³ The striking thing is that the story provoked reactions that were extremely strong and diametrically opposed. Some saw the tree as masochistic, the boy as narcissistic, and the story itself as “wicked,” “vicious,” or “evil.” Others viewed the tree as the ideal of goodness and her relationship with the boy as the model of love, referring to the tree as an ideal mother or as the image of Christ. In their view it is precisely the tree's willingness to sacrifice her very substance, her trunk, that demonstrates the quality of her love and the depth of her goodness. In contrast, those in the first camp view this gift particularly as proof that the relationship is self-destructive and depleting for the tree. Moreover, the relationship is without any redeeming benefit to the boy's moral growth. He never learns gratitude, reciprocity, or self-sufficiency. One of the commentators put the question squarely, asking “whether we can commend in our everyday lives a love that seems so thoroughly to diminish the self, or that can reduce our prospects for flourishing as the creatures we were apparently meant or expected to be.”⁴

Here is the answer to our question: psychic health or flourishing is the standpoint from which certain forms of altruism can be criticized. In thinking about altruism, we have uncovered an important and divisive conflict between two conceptions of goodness. Let me call the first the “ethic of altruism.” According to this view, goodness is primarily a matter of concern for the well-being of others, which includes willingness to sacrifice out of love or out of duty. In its religious form, the concern for others is not primary but follows from love of or duty to God. The alternative view I will call the “ethic of psychic health.” Here goodness is primarily a matter of care for the state of one's soul in light of what it means to thrive as a human being.

At first glance these alternatives appear to merely restate a familiar opposition between Greek and Christian approaches to ethics, and there is something to this. Consider, for example, Aristotle's view of generosity. For Aristotle, generosity is a mean between extravagance and stinginess, and the man who gives too much is criticized for neglecting himself.⁵ An Aristotelian “giving tree” would give from leaves and branches but would never sacrifice her trunk. Contrast this with the following comment: “*The Giving Tree* presents an alternative ideal. It is that what appears to be self-loss may

be in reality our deepest fulfillment, since service, not detachment, makes us into creatures with whom our fellows may in some way abide. . . . According to the Christian Gospel, this 'ideal' is set before us as a task to which we are called by the grace of God in Jesus Christ."⁶

According to this view, one cannot give too much. But for a number of reasons it would be a mistake to accept a simple identification of the "ethic of altruism" with Christianity and the "ethic of psychic health" with the Greek tradition.⁷ First, a tension between these two ethical conceptions exists *within* Christianity. Christianity calls on believers to renounce the goal of flourishing in their own case in order to serve God. Yet, at the same time, God wills human flourishing. A scene in the film *Chariots of Fire* illustrates this tension nicely. A devout Scottish Presbyterian runner is challenged by his sister, who worries that his competitive racing is impious and distracts him from his missionary work. He replies, "God made me for a purpose, for China, but He also made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure. To give it up would be to hold him in contempt. To win is to honor Him."⁸ Second, what I am calling the "ethic of psychic health," far from belonging exclusively to the ancient world, has been said to characterize modern secular humanism: a society in which there are no goals or allegiances beyond human flourishing.⁹ While this perspective may have begun with the Greeks, it has found its way into the modern world.

So we cannot avoid confronting the tension between these two rival ethics. The competition between them permeates our moral discourse. The polarization evident in the symposium discussed above is one indication of how far our moral reactions and commitments are informed by one or the other of these views. How can we come to terms with the competing claims of these two primary goods, altruism and psychic health? There are four distinct possibilities, the first two within the "ethic of altruism" and the second two within the "ethic of psychic health." First, we can recognize that there is a real and irreconcilable conflict between these two goods and put altruism first. We would admire the tree even though her altruism depletes her. Second, we could deny that there is a conflict: to be altruistic *is* truly to flourish. After all, the tree is happy. Many recent studies are motivated by a commitment to this point of view, trying to show that people who serve others are happier and even physically healthier and longer-lived than people who live more selfish lives.¹⁰ Third, we can recognize that there is a real and irreconcilable conflict between these two goods and put psychic health and flourishing first. This is the point of view informing the judgment that it is possible to be too good. Susan Wolf makes this case by arguing that moral goods must be balanced with nonmoral human goods.¹¹ Sigmund Freud can

be placed in this camp as well. He would want to know whether the tree's generosity to the boy comes at an excessive psychic cost. Last, one might argue that there is no real conflict because nothing can truly be morally good if it compromises psychic health and flourishing. In other words, the tree's generosity cannot be admired as good precisely because it compromises her psychic growth. She cannot relinquish the fantasy that the boy might remain a child forever; each time he returns she asks him to climb and play again, and she calls him "Boy" even when he is an old man. Jean Hampton develops this position, in explicit disagreement with Wolf, by arguing that "any 'altruistic' behavior is morally wrong when it prevents one from paying moral respect to oneself." Moral respect for oneself is then explained in terms of what is required for one to flourish and a recognition of one's value as a human being.¹²

I will devote the rest of this essay to exploring the third and fourth possibilities, those that accept psychic health as the primary standard. We are so accustomed to assuming the identity of goodness and altruism that I want to recover the perspective from which that position looks questionable. To do this I will look briefly at Plato and Freud. Freud, as I have already noted, represents the third alternative: that moral goodness can be costly in terms of psychic health. Plato denies the conflict and identifies true goodness with a truly healthy soul, my fourth alternative. Our question, then, is, What is the relation between goodness and the health of the soul?

Even a cursory consideration reveals the complexity of the problem. On one hand, certain psychic capacities that are components of a mature and healthy personality seem to be necessary conditions for goodness. Impulse control, empathy, and self-awareness are obvious candidates. For example, to function in a way that is beneficial to her child, a mother must be able to regulate her own feelings of anger, shame, or competitive envy. A father who is not aware of his own excessive need for love and approval from his child may be unable to say no when that is what his child needs to hear. As people develop into healthy, mature adults, they develop capacities essential for moral behavior. To the extent that their development is incomplete or damaged, they will have difficulty being good.

On the other hand, it is equally obvious that psychic health is not necessary for many kinds of goodness. On the contrary, much good behavior (like all behavior) is fueled by neurosis and psychic conflict. The expression "liberal guilt" carries this implication. Among other examples, Robert Coles describes vividly the complex psychological conflicts behind the generosity and self-sacrifice of a privileged white northerner who becomes an organizer in a small African American community in the South, and also of

a Brazilian hairdresser and prostitute who regularly gives her earnings to destitute children.¹³ Kierkegaard describes female nature as “devoted and selfless. In her self-abandonment she has lost herself, and is only happy when having done so, this being the only way she can be herself. A woman who is happy without self-abandonment, that is, without giving all of herself, no matter what she gives it to, is altogether unfeminine.”¹⁴

Contra Kierkegaard, I would argue that the psychic costs of trying to live up to such an ideal are very great; yet, at the same time, women who try to do so might very well genuinely benefit others through their self-sacrifice. And if these examples show that unhealthy psychic states can be the motivators for good behavior, we might also consider the corollary: that increased psychic health might lead to decreased goodness. This is the charge sometimes leveled against Freud: that the search for honest, often painfully honest, self-awareness is ultimately nihilistic. “One need not be self-deceived in order to act maliciously. . . . Lucidity may render us exquisitely articulate and unapologetic about our aggressions.”¹⁵ So, I ask again, What is the relation between goodness and the health of the soul?

It seems that psychic health both is and is not a necessary condition for goodness. This paradox may be partially resolved by recognizing that it all depends on what counts as goodness and what counts as psychic health. For example, a person who overcomes her neurosis and gains new psychic freedom may become less dutiful than before but also may be more able to recognize and respond to the needs of others—less good in one respect, better in another. To explore these issues, I turn first to Plato and then to Freud. Each takes an extreme position on this question. For Plato, there can be no conflict between goodness and psychic health because the two are one and the same. For Freud, the demands of morality are the source of painful psychic conflicts.

PLATO

What does it mean to say that goodness *is* the health of the soul? Is the idea of psychic “health” anything more than an analogy? Socrates often uses it this way, claiming that medicine is to the body as justice is to the soul; that he is like a doctor administering painful but beneficial remedies through argument; that the health of the body is like lawfulness (justice and moderation) in the soul (*Gorgias* 464b, 475d, 504b–d). But he also speaks directly of a healthy condition of the soul (e.g., *Gorgias*, 526d). The soul has certain natural functions—living, “managing, ruling, deliberating, and all such

things” (*Republic*, 353d–e)—and a healthy soul is one with the capacity to perform these functions well. It is through this conception of psychic health that Socrates explains to Glaucon what human goodness (virtue) really is.

“To produce health is to establish the parts of the body in relation of mastering, and being mastered by, one another that is according to nature, while to produce sickness is to establish a relation of ruling and being ruled by, one another that is contrary to nature.”

“It is.”

“Then, in its turn,” I said, “isn’t to produce justice to establish the parts of the soul in a relation of mastering, and being mastered by, one another that is according to nature, while to produce injustice is to establish a relation of ruling, and being ruled by, one another that is contrary to nature?”

“Entirely so,” he said.

“Virtue, then, as it seems would be a certain health, beauty and good condition of a soul, and vice a sickness, ugliness and weakness.” (*Republic*, 444d)

A healthy thing is one so ordered as to perform its natural functions well. The virtues of a thing are those qualities that allow it to perform its natural functions well: for example, speed and stamina in a racehorse, justice in a human being. Hence, for human beings, virtue and psychic health are one and the same.

This is hardly satisfying. It seems to be true by definition, in an abstract sense. What does it mean to identify the right ordering of the soul with goodness or virtue more concretely? Socrates’ argument in *The Republic* is that the familiar virtues—wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice—are all accomplished through the right ordering of the soul. A soul is well ordered when reason rules, enlisting the energy of the spirited part of the soul as an ally in governing the desires. A person with such a soul clearly would be moderate. Spiritedness directed by reason would yield courage rather than recklessness. To the extent that the rational faculties were well developed, this person would be wise. With envy, anger, ambition, greed, and lust under control, this person would be unlikely to commit injustices. But what about justice? Socrates identifies it with the right ordering of the soul itself, and it becomes difficult to distinguish it from moderation. He might have defined it as something like obedience to reason, but justice is defined as “minding one’s own business and not being a busybody” (*me polupragmonein*, *Republic*, 433a). The discussion of the virtues yields

a strikingly self-regarding, inward-looking conception of what it is to be a good human being. The crucial thing is to care for the health of your own soul.

It is precisely because the identification of goodness and psychic health makes goodness self-regarding that Socrates is able to meet the challenge posed by Glaucon and Adeimantus.¹⁶ They had challenged Socrates to show that justice, like physical health, is the sort of thing that is good for itself as well as for its consequences (*Republic*, 367d). Throughout book 1 of *The Republic*, as various definitions of justice are being examined, Socrates never challenges the unstated premise of the conversation that whatever justice is, it must be good for the just man. And if justice is health of the soul, then justice is indeed good for the just man. Justice is not a matter of sacrificing your own benefit for the good of others; justice is good *for you*. Immediately after the long passage quoted above, Glaucon declares that he is convinced: "If life doesn't seem livable with the body's nature corrupted, not even with every sort of food and drink and every sort of wealth and every sort of rule, will it then be livable when the nature of that very thing by which we live is confused and corrupted, even if a man does whatever else he might want except that which will rid him of vice and injustice and will enable him to acquire justice and virtue?" (*Republic*, 445b). If virtue is health and vice is sickness, who would choose vice?

It seems that a vision of goodness as psychic health provides good grounds for avoiding injustice. It might even provide grounds for pursuing justice in the form of meeting one's legal obligations. Socrates, in the *Apology*, indicates that he has behaved in exactly this way. But is there a role here for justice in a more positive sense—for seeking to right wrongs or to benefit others? Is there room for altruism and sacrifice if justice is "minding one's own business"?

In the *Apology*, Socrates raises and answers the question of just what his business is (20c–23b). It is his "service to the god," which requires him to question his fellow Athenians as to the extent of their wisdom. He pays no attention to his private affairs or to the public business but instead functions as a "gadfly" (30e) and (take note) a "busybody" (*polupragmon*, 31c). He has become poor in this service; a "poor benefactor" and a "gift of the god to the city" (31b, 36d). His benevolence consists in persuading others to care for the right things: not wealth or power but virtue, truth, and the state of their souls (29e, 30a, 31b–c). Lest we dismiss this Socratic altruism as a singular phenomenon emanating from Socrates' special status as a philosopher or his special relationship with the Delphic oracle, we should note that he exhorts his supporters to treat his sons as he has treated them. They should

see to it that his sons care for the right things (41e). Moreover, in the *Gorgias*, Socrates asserts that the best politics redirects the city's appetites and makes the citizens better: "That alone is the task of a good citizen" (517c). Socratic altruism benefits others through a particular kind of moral education, one that changes people's values so they come to a new understanding of what it means to benefit themselves.

If we were to approach Plato's works with the idea that egoism and altruism are mutually exclusive opposites and that altruism is goodness, we would find them simply baffling. Socrates' activities to benefit the city are perfectly consistent with his own benefit, as he repeatedly asserts (35d, 36c, 37d). To be sure, Socrates is a poor man, and he loses his life unjustly on account of his service to the god. But he makes it clear that poverty and death cannot harm him.¹⁷ There is altruism here, but there is no self-sacrifice, no self-abnegation, no abandonment of his commitments, no loss of well-being. Critio pleads with Socrates to consider the effects of his death on his friends and family, and one might argue that responding to *those* pleas, putting friends and family first, would have been self-sacrificing. But Socrates does not make that sacrifice; he puts his own integrity first. He is concerned to keep his soul free of any unjust act (44c, 45d, 48d).

To the question I raised at the beginning of this essay, whether we can commend in our everyday lives a love that seems so thoroughly to diminish the self or that can reduce our prospects for flourishing as the creatures we were apparently meant or expected to be, Socrates would surely answer no. If Socrates were the model for the giving tree, we might imagine this: when the boy came to pick some apples, the tree would engage him in a long conversation; the apples would be forgotten; the boy would walk away a better human being; the tree would continue to thrive; and both would be happy.

FREUD

Plato's position lets us eat our cake and have it too. An egoistic concern for psychic health does not compromise goodness at all: quite the contrary. These two goods are entirely in harmony with one another, and goodness contributes to happiness.¹⁸ Freud paints a darker picture. In his view, moral goodness is a source of suffering and a threat to happiness. This is because he understands moral goodness as obedience to those authoritative requirements and prohibitions that every society imposes on its members to ensure cooperation rather than conflict. And at the same time, he understands each individual as naturally driven by both erotic and aggres-

sive impulses that cannot be satisfied directly without threatening social order. Those impulses in each of us must be either repressed or sublimated, or both, and that is a painful process. There is no way around this conflict between society's demands and the individual's wishes; it is at the heart of both individual personality development and the development of civilizations.

How does a person acquire the capacity to be moral, that is, to master his instinctual impulses? Freud describes the process whereby the soul of the child is modified to develop a conscience, or what he calls a "superego."¹⁹ The child, utterly dependent and fearful of losing his parents' love, needs to master his oedipal impulses. He accomplishes this by identifying with his parents, internalizing their authoritative values as his own "ego ideal." He experiences the tension between this ideal and the actual performance of the ego as a sense of guilt.²⁰ The intensity of the self-incrimination he feels comes from his own aggression, and this is the surprising and important point. The natural aggressiveness that we must suppress cannot simply disappear. Inhibiting its external expression means turning it inward.

From the point of view of instinctual control, of morality, it may be said of the id that it is totally non-moral, of the ego that it strives to be moral, and of the super-ego that it can be super-moral and then become as cruel as only the id can be. It is remarkable that the more a man checks his aggressiveness towards the exterior the more severe—that is aggressive—he becomes in his ego ideal. The ordinary view sees the situation the other way around: the standard set up by the ego ideal seems to be the motive for the suppression of aggressiveness. The fact remains, however, as we have stated it: the more a man controls his aggressiveness, the more intense becomes his ideal's inclination to aggressiveness against his ego. . . . But even ordinary normal morality has a harshly restraining, cruelly prohibiting quality.²¹

[The super-ego] in the form of "conscience," is ready to put into action against the ego the same harsh aggressiveness that the ego would have liked to satisfy upon other, extraneous individuals. The tension between the harsh super-ego and the ego that is subjected to it, is called by us the sense of guilt; it expresses itself as a need for punishment. Civilization, therefore, obtains mastery over the individual's dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city.²²

The capacity for moral goodness in the form of the development of the superego is, at the same time, a source of painful psychic conflict. More-

over, an excessively harsh superego can also be the source of neurotic disorders—melancholia and obsessional neurosis in particular.²³ An excessive sense of guilt can lead people to do irrational things, sometimes even to commit crimes, in order to bring on the punishment that can relieve the pain of their guilt feelings.²⁴ As important as it is, conscience is nonetheless a decidedly mixed blessing.

Not surprisingly, Freud takes the position that people can be "too good" for their own good. He sharply criticizes moral ideals that he sees as unrealistically demanding, particularly Christian ideals such as "love thy neighbor as thyself," which he sees as tantamount to "love thine enemies." Universal love is an unreasonable demand: not everyone is equally deserving of love, and most important, universal love is impossible. Human aggressiveness is natural. The demand for universal love requires excessive repression and is still bound to fail. A community founded on universal love will not overcome its aggression altogether; it will express that aggression toward outsiders. The very fact that moral ideals are believed to be divine commands only makes matters worse, if your primary concern is to lessen the punitive requirements of the superego.

It would be an undoubted advantage if we were to leave God out of it altogether and honestly admit the purely human origin of all the regulations and precepts of civilization. Along with their pretended sanctity, these commandments and laws would lose their rigidity and unchangeableness as well. People could understand that they are made, not so much to rule them as to serve their interests; and they would adopt a more friendly attitude to them, and instead of aiming at their abolition, would aim only at their improvement. This would be an important advance along the road which leads to becoming *reconciled to the burden of civilization*.²⁵

People would do well to learn to be kinder to themselves when it comes to expectations for moral behavior.

The passage just cited makes Freud's aims clear, I think. He does not seek to increase man's compliance with moral precepts. Neither does he seek to release men from the pain of moral demands by encouraging libertinism. We are necessarily burdened with the moral demands of civilization; they serve our interests. Freud seeks only to reconcile us to our fate and to ease the burden by decreasing the psychic suffering it causes and by increasing psychic health. Psychic health is a person's ability to master his impulses and adjust to the reality of his situation. This is the task of the ego, which Freud compares to a rider on a horse (the id), attempting to control

its direction.²⁶ To the extent that the rider, and not the horse, is in control, the person is free to direct his own life. The ego is able to gain greater control the better it recognizes the reality of its situation. An honest confrontation with the truth about oneself is an important part of this process. Self-knowledge, self-command, and psychic freedom are essential components of psychic health. And psychic health implies the ability to manage the inevitable conflicts between the ego and the ego-ideal enforced by the superego. Freud aims to reduce the suffering that arises from the demands of morality. This may not seem like an exalted goal (to patients skeptical of the benefits of analysis, Freud replied that they might gain much by transforming their "hysterical misery" into "common unhappiness"),²⁷ but it is a humane and even altruistic one.

Like Plato, Freud understands psychic health to be self-mastery in accordance with the truth about human nature. But it should be clear by now that, unlike Plato, Freud does not believe there is any reason to expect that improvements in psychic health will necessarily bring improvements in morality as well, particularly if morality means willingness to comply with the demands of social authority. Moreover, moral ideals that are out of reach, enforced with too much exactitude, or both, can take a severe toll in diminished psychic health and happiness. There is a paradox to morality. Moral rules develop to make it possible for human beings to reap the benefits of social life, particularly cooperative labor and love. In that sense they contribute to human happiness. Yet at the same time, each individual pays a price in happiness for the sake of morality. To the extent that there is a tension between morality and happiness, morality seems to have the upper hand in Freud's account. It has the superego and the sense of guilt as allies and hardly needs additional support. Happiness, on the other hand, could use the support that Freud offers from his version of what I have called an "ethic of psychic health." Nonetheless, Freud's children's stories rarely have entirely happy endings.

IMPLICATIONS

Does this brief discussion of the thought of Plato and Freud help us understand the relation between goodness and the health of the soul? From a Platonic point of view, a healthy soul seems to be both a necessary and a sufficient condition for goodness. Psychic health and virtue, maturity and morality, are one and the same. Many people today take a similar position, believing that increases in healthy self-esteem, for example, will lead to good behavior.²⁸ And there is some plausibility to this. Psychic capacities

like self-command, impulse control, reality testing, confidence, trust, and many others are requisites of moral behavior. But Plato is not entirely successful in defending the identification of psychic health and goodness.

A more nuanced reading of Plato's *Republic* would reveal some of the complications of his position. The very first time Socrates makes an analogy between an individual and a city, the analogy that governs the argument of *The Republic*, he famously makes the case that a gang of robbers must be just among themselves in order to function. By analogy, he concludes that an individual could not be effectively and single-mindedly evil (*Republic*, 351c-352a). But the case is much less convincing for an individual than for a group. One can imagine, for example, a successful Mafia don who is confident, in command of himself, and fully mature in many respects. Such a person might well be described as healthy but evil. The example indicates that, at the very least, in addition to psychic health, sound moral judgment and the desire to be good are also required for morality.

Plato, of course, would not accept the example: no evil person could have a healthy soul. This is because Plato's conception of psychic health is a soul ruled by its rational part in accordance with nature. For Plato there is a truth about nature and about man's place in it that determines what human goodness is. To be ruled by the rational part of the soul is to be directed toward truth and goodness. For the philosopher, driven as he is by an erotic longing for the truth, sound moral judgment and the desire to be good can be safely assumed. Psychic health includes them. Throughout *The Republic*, Plato's identification of the health of the soul with virtue is far more convincing for the philosopher than it might be for ordinary folk. For them, the case that virtue is its own reward and that a well-ordered soul is a sufficient condition for goodness is less convincing. Ademantus is right to ask whether the guardians in the ideal city of *The Republic* will be happy (*Republic*, 419a), and Freud would have asked the same question.

Freud maintains that psychic health and goodness conflict, and there is some plausibility to this as well. We have all experienced painful and compelling feelings of guilt and anxiety that can lead us to act against either our wishes or our better judgment in complying with social norms. Perhaps Freud emphasizes these kinds of conflicts because he was responding to a historical moment when the moral demands of the culture were particularly severe and their negative psychological consequences particularly obvious. Nonetheless, he is able to sustain his view of the conflict between psychic health and goodness only by construing goodness in a rather limited manner. Freud speaks of morals as the social imperatives meant to control our behavior. Goodness, then, is a matter of obedience, duty, compli-

ance, and self-regulation. But what if we consider a more expansive notion of goodness—one that includes, for example, the capacity to forge loving relationships of various kinds that enrich the lives of all parties?²⁹ Certainly Freud recognizes the ways psychic health enables healthy relationships and is tied to the capacity for love. If this form of social bond and cooperation is included in the conception of goodness, alongside compliance with social norms, even Freud would have to admit that there is a positive relation between psychic health and goodness as well as a conflictual one.

There is no simple or categorical answer to the question of the relation between goodness and psychic health. We have already seen that psychic health is necessary for certain kinds of goodness. But it is not a sufficient condition: psychic health is also compatible with badness (the Mafia don again). Similarly, certain kinds of psychic unhealth can motivate good behavior, for example, through excessive guilt or a neurotically anxious desire to please. But at the same time, an unhealthy psyche can be the source of considerable evil: consider a person whose experience as an abuse victim leaves him unable to control his rage. Freud, who views healthy and unhealthy states of the soul on a kind of continuum, might argue that not only are each of these human types possible, but each of us individually in different ways at different times experiences each of the four possible combinations of goodness/badness and health/unhealth. An appreciation of this complexity emerges from a consideration of ethics of psychic health. It should lead to skepticism toward both sides of a contemporary argument over the relation of goodness and the health of the soul. Some claim that doing good will improve health, happiness, and flourishing. Others claim that improved happiness, health, and flourishing will produce goodness.³⁰ The realities are simply more complicated than either position allows.

What other implications does an “ethic of psychic health” have for how goodness is understood? Remember that I have identified as ethics of psychic health those approaches that either give precedence to psychic health where it is in conflict with goodness or adopt psychic health as the standard for recognizing what goodness truly is. Clearly there are a wide variety of positions that belong in this category, and I deliberately chose Freud and Plato to illustrate that divergence. I might have discussed Rousseau, who is similar to Plato in identifying psychic health as the standard for goodness but is unlike Plato in many other respects. Rousseau’s ideal is one of integrity or psychic wholeness that is inseparable from goodness. What all types of good men and women share is integrity.³¹ For Rousseau, evil emerges in the world as the result of a process of corruption that divides people

against themselves. Similarly, I might have discussed Nietzsche, who, like Freud, views morality as a threat to psychic health but differs from Freud in rejecting any form of moral goodness that impedes strength, vitality, or greatness. But despite the variety and complexity of alternative “ethics of psychic health,” they share some common elements and some common implications.

The first major implication of an ethic of psychic health concerns how moral development and moral education are understood. If goodness is a matter of the right ordering of the soul, as Plato would have it, it seems that moral development and personality development become one and the same. Goodness is fundamentally about who you are. Similarly, if goodness is about the development of the conscience and its relation to the other parts of the soul, as Freud describes it, moral development might best be conceived as a subset of personality development. Again, goodness has everything to do with who you are in a fundamental sense.

This is probably not a very controversial claim, but it does not seem to be the claim that informs most contemporary approaches to moral development and education. These tend to treat moral education as if it resembled other forms of education or training. Note that these approaches would be compatible with an ethic of altruism, where the underlying assumption is that children can be taught to share, to be concerned for the welfare of others, and so forth. Book titles like *How to Teach Values to Your Children* imply that values education is like learning math: a form of knowledge the child acquires as an addition to what he or she already is. Many character education programs have a similar appeal, though here it is habits, rather than knowledge, that are acquired through training. Any child can develop behaviors that are tolerant, respectful, responsible, or altruistic in an environment that habitually requires them. Last, there are programs that attempt to help children learn to make good choices, treating morality as a matter of acquiring decision-making skills.

Whatever the benefits of these approaches, they share a common defect. They treat moral development and education as if it takes place at a distance through something that adults do *for* children, or do *to* children, or *give* to children, but not as something that adults do *with* children. In contrast, consider Freud’s discussion of the creation of an ego-ideal and its enforcement by the superego. The content of the ego-ideal will include social norms and rules, but it will be decisively shaped by who each particular child’s parents are, who the child is, and the relationship between them. The child acquires a conscience through a process that takes place within a relationship with particular adults, occurring in every interaction between

them. This means that moral education or development is not something that can be segregated or compartmentalized; it is not something acquired superficially; it is something that is going on continuously in the child's life in relation to others and at the level of his or her very being. And, importantly, this means that children's moral development cannot be separated from the moral maturity of the significant adults in their lives. Helping adults to continue to progress morally, to gain self-awareness or to overcome their own particular obstacles to empathy and so forth, might be the best thing we could do for children's moral development.³²

The second major implication of ethics of psychic health is that they provide a standpoint from which to challenge common conceptions of goodness that draw on the dichotomy between egoism and altruism.³³ Egoism and altruism are often conceived as a continuum, with egoism at one pole and altruism at the other, so that the more one seeks to benefit oneself, the less one benefits others and vice versa. The model of giving that best captures this conception is philanthropy. One imagines a finite resource such that the giver's share is depleted by however much is given to another.³⁴ But there are many other ways of conceptualizing giving that do not pit the needs of the self and the needs of others against one another in a zero-sum game. Parental love is the most obvious example of a form of giving that can be fulfilling for the giver rather than depleting. Consider also expressing appreciation for gifts received; this too is a gift.³⁵ There is often reciprocity involved in giving that goes unrecognized in discussions of "altruism."

Moreover, egoism and altruism are not always mutually exclusive but are often conjoined in a variety of ways. Anna Freud characterized adolescents as "excessively egoistic, regarding themselves as the center of the universe and the sole object of interest, and yet at no time in later life are they capable of so much self-sacrifice and devotion." She observed that many very giving people come to identify themselves with those they help and thus give to others and to themselves simultaneously.³⁶ Drawing on studies of gentiles who rescued Jews from the Nazis, Neera Kapur Badhwar also challenges the usual dualism of egoism and altruism. "[The rescuers'] unambiguous sense of themselves as part of a common humanity gave them *both* an altruistic desire for affirming others *and* a self-interested desire for being true to this sense of themselves."³⁷ It was precisely the combination of egoism and altruism that allowed them to be wholeheartedly altruistic. Rousseau describes how children first come to care for others in response to those who care for them. His account of generosity and compassion explains both as extensions or developments of the basic sentiment of self-love.³⁸ Self-love is the foundation of goodness, not its enemy.

Instead of simply seeking to constrain egoism and encourage altruism, then, we ought to be trying to encourage healthy forms and discourage unhealthy forms of both. That, of course, requires the ability to distinguish between them. Does it matter whether altruism is accompanied by righteousness and bitterness or humility and contentment? Can we tell the difference between altruism and masochism, or a healthy ego and a narcissistic one? From the point of view of the "ethics of psychic health," the Giving Tree is the epitome of masochistic giving that only encourages the boy's narcissism. Might Socrates' altruism and apparent self-sacrifice serve as an alternative model? Consider that Socrates gives the Athenians something they need rather than everything they ask for. And his giving in no way diminishes him. It follows from his devotion to a certain way of life.

I began by asking, Is altruism good? And my answer is, Not always. Altruism is most likely to be excessive and unhealthy precisely when, thinking within the logic of the egoism/altruism dichotomy, its goodness is measured by the degree of self-sacrifice it demands. Kinds of self-sacrifice are not all alike. There is such a thing as "abject self-sacrifice":

A person who leads such a self-sacrificial life has abdicated or never developed her own independent judgment and ends. If others did not wish to use her for their own ends, she would have nothing to live for. *Others* she sees as ends in themselves; herself, as only a means to their ends. Lacking a sense of self-worth, she has discounted the importance of her own interests. . . . It is this radical failure of interest in herself for her own sake—this radical lack of *self*—that explains why, in her, even altruism fails to be a virtue.³⁹

Goodness requires recognizing the moral claims of the self as well as the moral claims of others.

A healthy altruism, by contrast, gives the self its due. Consider the biblical commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." The Reverend Joseph Butler, in 1729, commenting on this text in his sermons, argued not only that egoism and altruism are intertwined, but that appropriate self-love is also a moral demand.⁴⁰ In Kantian terms, to exempt oneself from the moral law is unjust. The point here is that this is true whether that exemption advantages or *disadvantages* oneself. Rousseau praises the Calvinist ministers of Geneva for their severity toward themselves and their gentleness toward others. But why are they not also deserving of gentleness?⁴¹ He invokes an ideal of a person who is outraged at injustice toward others but indifferent when he himself is its victim. Why?⁴² "To treat all people equally does not mean giving everyone but oneself equal concern."⁴³

"Ethics of altruism" too often fail to recognize the claims of the self, and as a result they make the mistake of measuring goodness by the self-sacrifice it requires. So often, well-meaning people who are doing a great deal of good in the world torment themselves with doubt about the purity of their motives. If they find that serving others is relatively easy or even enjoyable, they wonder whether their giving "counts" as good. They wonder, "Isn't this just my way of being selfish?" Maybe it is; but why condemn this sort of selfishness?⁴⁴ Goodness should be measured not by the sacrifice required but by its contribution to human flourishing, one's own *and* others'. Imagine a physician who has been in private practice for thirty years and decides to work for Doctors Without Borders. She is assigned to Cambodia, where living conditions are difficult, but she finds the experience exciting and fulfilling — so much so that on her return she signs up for another assignment. Does her evident pleasure in this new role compromise the moral quality of her action? Would we prefer someone who did this sort of work out of a grudging sense of duty? Shouldn't we be aiming for precisely the sort of people who can find genuine satisfaction in helping others?

I hope it is clear that, by emphasizing the claims of the self, I am not encouraging selfishness and discouraging altruism. It would be perverse indeed to argue that what the world needs is more self-concern. In the Jewish tradition, there is no special merit in suffering as a result of giving and no need to impoverish oneself through charitable giving. But Maimonides warns that in the real world this is not the real problem, and one must not use this as an excuse for stinginess.⁴⁵ Similarly, I would not want to see the argument I am making used as an excuse for egoism. I have tried to show that the choice between egoism and altruism is a false one. An ethic of psychic health allows plenty of room for altruism and has the additional advantage of allowing us to distinguish between its truly beneficial forms and its harmful ones. Moreover, in emphasizing the claims of the self, I am not denying that responsibilities to others sometimes require real sacrifices. Everyone faces situations where primary obligations to others require us to forgo opportunities, desires, and needs of our own. But here it is important to recur to the difference between suffering and harm.⁴⁶ There is suffering that is not necessarily harmful, and there is sacrifice that falls short of "abject self-sacrifice." I argue not that there are no painful choices to be made, but only that we ought not to "commend in our everyday lives a love that seems so thoroughly to diminish the self."

Let me add one final reason that it is a mistake to view egoism and altruism as necessarily contending forces, with altruism identified with goodness and egoism considered as either immoral or amoral selfishness.

It leads us to neglect, misunderstand, and consequently underestimate cruelty. While it is true that seeking to benefit others (altruism) is opposed in some sense to seeking to benefit oneself (egoism), it is surely also opposed to seeking to harm others or taking pleasure in their pain (cruelty). But the altruism/egoism dichotomy blinds us to this second possibility. Here is what Hobbes had to say about cruelty: "*Cruelty, Contempt, or little sense of the calamity of others, is that which men call CRUELTY; proceeding from security of their own fortune. For, that any man should take pleasure in other men's great harms, without other end of his own, I do not conceive it possible.*"⁴⁷

Because Hobbes assumes that people act egoistically, to advantage themselves, he mistakenly identifies indifference with cruelty. Indifference is a particular form of selfishness, so it accords with Hobbes's assumption. But he cannot understand that people might "take pleasure in other men's great harms." Unlike Hobbes, I believe reality confirms that possibility far too often. Selfishness, after all, is not the worst of human evils. Moreover, we have seen that egoism and altruism are not simple opposites: benefiting others and benefiting oneself are often simultaneous. With this understanding in mind, rather than discouraging egoism and encouraging altruism, we might seek instead to combine their forces and enlist them in the battle against cruelty.

These are just some of the various reasons to expand our thinking beyond the dichotomy of altruism and egoism. We could be thinking differently about moral education, about what selfishness really is and is not, and about the many ways of giving to others. I have tried to show how an "ethic of psychic health" can open up these questions. At the same time, there is more than one "ethic of psychic health," and the relation between goodness and the health of the soul remains exceedingly complex. But *that* is the relation that must be understood if we ever want to fully understand the relation between one's own good and the good of others.

NOTES

1. Anna Freud calls this phenomenon "altruistic surrender." *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, rev. ed. (New York: International Universities Press, 1973), 132.
2. Shel Silverstein, *The Giving Tree* (New York: Harper Collins, 1964).
3. "The Giving Tree: A Symposium," *First Things*, January 1995, 22–45.
4. William Werpehowski, "Symposium," 41.
5. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 4.1119b.25–1122a.15, trans. Martin Ostwald (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1999).
6. Werpehowski, "Symposium," 41.

7. See below at note 45 for a comment on how giving is viewed in Judaism. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck argue that altruism is a modern concept that would have made no sense within the framework of classical Judaism. See "Altruism in Classical Judaism," in *Altruism in World Religions*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005).
8. "Babette's Feast" is another story that explores this tension, in Isak Dinesen, "Babette's Feast" and *Other Anecdotes of Destiny* (New York: Vintage, 1988).
9. For both points, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 16–20.
10. For example, see Stephen Pot, Jill Neimark, and Otis Moss Jr., *Why Good Things Happen to Good People: How to Live a Longer, Healthier, Happier Life by the Simple Act of Giving* (New York: Broadway, 2008).
11. Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 8 (August 1982): 419–39.
12. Jean Hampton, "Selflessness and the Loss of Self," in *Altruism*, ed. Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller Jr., and Jeffrey Paul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 146.
13. Robert Coles, *The Moral Life of Children* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), 157–200.
14. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hanay (London: Penguin, 1989), 80–81n. Here is an example of what I've called the second alternative discussed above.
15. Philip Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 353.
16. Laurence Cooper, in his comments on this paper at our conference, criticized how much my account of Plato's position makes the identity of goodness and psychic health seem automatic, rather than an achievement. He sees that identity as resulting from the education of the desire to be noble, a desire that Glaucon and Adeimantus both possess. That desire, which is rooted in natural passion, can explain how regard for oneself can lead one to care for others. Noble action is both self-regarding and self-forgetting.
17. See Stanley Hauerwas's chapter in this volume, where he paraphrases Raimond Gaiter's argument that "Socrates meant not that a person who lives virtuously could not suffer, but that, even in their suffering people who see their life in the light of a certain kind of love, a love of philosophy, could not be harmed" (94).
18. At least for the philosopher, who turns out to be the just man. Whether Socrates' argument holds for the rest of us is not at all clear. See 34 below.
19. Bruno Bettelheim points out that Freud used the German word for "soul," but his English translator avoided the term, generally substituting "mind." Bettelheim, *Freud and Man's Soul* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 4: 12–13, 70–78.
20. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. Joan Riviere, ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960), 26–27.
21. Freud, *Ego and the Id*, 44. Friedrich Nietzsche also sees the connection between cruelty toward the self and altruism: "Only the bad conscience, only the will to self-maturation provided the conditions for the value of the unegoistic." Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), second essay, sec. 18, 88.
22. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 70–71.
23. Freud, *Ego and the Id*, 44–45.
24. Philip Rieff, ed., *Character and Culture* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 179–81.
25. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 41; my emphasis.
26. Freud, *Ego and the Id*, 15.
27. Rieff, *Mind of the Moralizer*, 358.
28. For critiques of this view, which also document its prevalence, see Roy Baumeister, Laura Smart, and Joseph M. Borden, "Relation of Threatened Egoism to Violence and Aggression: The Dark Side of High Self-Esteem," *Psychological Review* 103, no. 1 (January 1996): 5–33, and William Damon, *Greater Expectations: Overcoming the Culture of Indulgence in Our Homes and Schools* (New York: Free Press, 1996).
29. Self psychology, a post-Freudian development in psychoanalytic thinking associated with the work of Heinz Kohut, focuses on the formation of the self through relationships with others rather than on the management of instinctual drives.
30. See notes 10 and 28 above.
31. Ruth W. Grant, *Hypocrisy and Integrity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 75–88.
32. Richard Weisbourd, *The Parents We Mean to Be: How Well-Intentioned Parents Undermine Children's Moral and Emotional Development* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2009), chap. 5.
33. The term altruism was invented by Auguste Comte. The pair egoism/altruism has come to replace self-interest/benevolence, which was common in the eighteenth century. Thomas Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: British Academy, 2008), recounts how the new term reshaped moral understandings in Victorian Britain.
34. Experimental studies of altruism invariably use this model. Typical examples are studies of "the ultimatum game" and "the dictator game," where altruism is measured by the amount of money subjects are willing to give to other subjects under various conditions.
35. See Dinesen, "Babette's Feast."
36. Such identifications are sometimes healthy and sometimes not. Coles, *Moral Life of Children*, 164–69.
37. Neera Kapur Badhwar, "Altruism versus Self-Interest: Sometimes a False Dichotomy," in *Altruism*, ed. Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller Jr., and Jeffrey Paul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 114.
38. "But when the strength of an expansive soul makes me identify myself with my fellow, and I feel that I am, so to speak, in him, it is in order not to suffer that I do not want him to suffer. . . . Love of men derived from love of self is the principle of human justice." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 235n. See also 212–13, 220ff., and 291, where Rousseau speaks of "the temptation of doing good." For a contemporary discussion of why we so often fail to recognize the pleasures of kindness, see Adam Phillips and Barbara Taylor, *On Kindness* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009).
39. Badhwar, "Altruism versus Self-Interest," 117.

40. Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (Cambridge: Hilliard and Brown, 1827; reproduced, Virginia Theological Seminary, 2005), sermons 11 and 12.
41. "Letter to the Republic of Geneva," in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Basic Political Writings* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 31.
42. Grant, *Hypocrisy and Integrity*, 173.
43. Hampton, "Selflessness and the Loss of Self," 164.
44. As Laurence Cooper remarked in his conference comments, "The value of a self-interested action depends upon the value of the self."
45. My thanks to Rabbi John Friedman for this reference. Maimonides, *Mishnah Torah*, book 7, "Seeds," chap. 10.
46. See note 17 above.
47. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 53.

[THREE] Are Moral Conversions Possible?

David B. Wong

The hopeful among us would like to believe in the possibility of moral conversion.¹ Here I discuss what warrant there is for hope. By "moral conversion," I mean a significant change for the better in an adult's moral commitments and actions, most typically a change from an unremarkable or poor moral record to an admirable one. Such conversions are often construed as triggered by an experience or a series of experiences that reveals to the agent something he had not seen or felt before. I use the term "conversion" with full awareness that to some it might suggest a religious conversion. I accept a parallel insofar as a moral conversion brings about a dramatic transformation in the way the agent construes the meaning of his life. I do not mean to suggest other parallels that might be drawn, based on the experience of some during religious conversion that they are taken, without any intention on their part, by something much greater than themselves, in a way that defies explanation by psychology or other human sciences. My approach is to ask whether moral conversions, as I have defined them, really happen, and how they happen if they do. These two questions are tied together. Whether we think such conversions happen depends on whether we think we have a plausible conception of how they happen. Moral conversions cannot be recorded as matters of objective observation, independent of what we think the agent's motivations were and how they changed. And most cases of apparent or possible conversion are subject to multiple interpretations of the agent's motivations and of what, if any, change occurred.

I will examine three cases of apparent moral conversion, try to interpret the agents' motives, and draw some speculative conclusions about moral conversion. The first case is from a film about a fictional drab functionary of the East German regime who ends up trying to save the people he is assigned to spy on. The film expresses our very human hopes for the possibility of conversion, but I shall discuss questions that critics have raised about its plausibility. My discussion will lead to the second case, the real-life story of Oskar Schindler, who is credited with saving the lives of over a thousand Jews during the Nazi occupation of Poland. Schindler's