

SCHLICK, ALTRUISM AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HEDONISM

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Moritz Schlick, in his *Problems of Ethics*,¹ claims that the altruistic life is the life which is filled with the most pleasure, *and* that this fact is shown by experience. Not only does this statement seem counter-intuitive, it also seems to contradict what Schlick himself says elsewhere in his *Problems* concerning the basis for human motivation. In this paper, I will first give a brief summary of the arguments offered by Schlick to support his account of social ethics. Specifically, I will concentrate on what he believes the true task of ethics to be, viz., to construct a decision theory, and that, he claims, is the motivation of our daily decision-making processes. The second part will be a critical examination of some of the theoretical questions which arise from his theory (as opposed to charging that his claims do not appear to be borne out by empirical verification). As a response to these questions, I will suggest a sympathetic projection theory at work in his social psychology.

I

According to Schlick, ethics is "a system of knowledge, and nothing else; its only goal is the truth." (1) In other words, the study of ethics is properly a branch of science, and as such, consists of a set of propositions, each of which is verifiable. The task of the moral philosopher is to determine which are the true propositions which make up the science of ethics. It is necessary, then, to formulate the propositions of ethics in a meaningful way, that is, to determine under what circumstances the propositions can be verified. And as with any science, the first task is to investigate the object of the science. Just as optics investigates light, ethics, says Schlick, seeks the meaning of 'the good.' (1)

But Schlick certainly does not want to make ethics merely a matter of linguistic analysis. Ethics, he says, attempts to explain human decisions, specifically those decisions we call 'ethical decisions.' Instead of grounding his theory in a notion of duty, Schlick instead sees the basis of ethics lying in

psychology and sociology. Ethics should deal with the causes and motives of our ethical actions; it is a matter of *why* we act in ethical ways, of *why* we choose the decisions that we make.

In looking for an answer to the question of why we act ethically, Schlick begins by investigating the motives underlying all human conduct. According to Schlick, the fundamental motivation behind our actions is the quest for pleasure and/or the avoidance of pain. He writes that "at least in general, in a conflict of several ends-in-view, a man will act in the direction of the most pleasant." (37) More specifically, it is the *expectation* of pleasant results, that is, the *idea* of pleasant outcome.. which motivates our choices. It is, for Schlick, a universal law that we choose the alternative which we believe will bring us the most pleasure.²

What does it mean, then, when we say that a person is behaving ethically? Schlick does not follow the route that Stevenson and the emotivists took; to say 'x is good' does not express my approval of x. It is rather, according to Schlick, to say that *society* approves of x. As he says, in ethics "we want only a simple determination of what, in human society, is held to be good." (89) For an individual to behave morally, then, is for that person to behave in the way that a particular society wishes him or her to behave. The answer to the question of the meaning of 'the good' is now answered : it is what the society believes to be good, that of which society approves. And what is it of which society approves? Schlick writes :

In order to explain the words 'approve' and 'society' we add that when we say : the decision of an individual is 'approved by society', this means : is *desired* by a large majority of those persons with whom the individual comes into contact through word or deed. (83)

What is 'morally good' is thus for Schlick precisely the set of actions which are, in the opinion of most of the members of that particular society, considered to be pleasurable and/or valuable for that society.

We are now brought to the question of what it is that the majority of members of society find pleasurable. The law of motivation tells us that individuals act so as to attain those things which they believe will bring them pleasure. In a like manner, Schlick says, society will seek to encourage those acts which will benefit it, i.e., acts which increase the pleasure of the other members of society. Put another way, it will encourage altruistic actions :

According to our conception, the moral demands or duties go back in the last analysis to the feelings of pleasure and pain of individuals, since they are nothing but the average, prevailing desires of society. (84)

I take Schlick to be saying that others will promote action by an individual which brings them (the others) pleasure—they will promote altruistic behavior in and encourage altruistic behavior from an individual, since it is what they believe will bring *them* pleasure. The way to promote this is to reward those who act in such a way - the individual will behave altruistically because society will reward him with pleasure for doing so.³ In other words, it *does* pay to be altruistic, in that it increases the pleasure received by the altruist.⁴

Schlick, it should also be noted, is at pains to distinguish his theory from utilitarianism. The difference, he says, rests on the fact that utilitarians say that "the good is what *brings* the greatest possible happiness." We express it more carefully: 'In human society, that is *called* good which is *believed* to bring the greatest happiness.' (87) In other words, Schlick's is not a normative theory about what we should do (*viz.*, act so as to bring about the greatest happiness), but an observed empirical claim of sociology about what humans in fact call good.⁵

II

There are, I believe, many questions which can be raised about Schlick's ethical theory, for example, one may ask whether an altruistic act done for the agent's own good is really an altruistic act.⁶ There are also the apparently dubious claims (which empirical tests could quite possibly show not to be the case) that pleasure is the sole motivation behind all our actions⁷, and that altruistic acts are generally rewarded with pleasure. It is this last question on which I wish to concentrate for the remainder of this article. But I am not concerned with trying to *empirically* determine whether Schlick's claim in fact holds (though this is indeed an important step in a critical assessment of his position). Rather, I want to investigate how Schlick can psychologically and sociologically explain, in a theoretical way, why an agent would choose altruistic actions, given Schlick's own law of motivation.

As noted above, Schlick claims that just as the motivation for an individual to make a given choice among a set of possible alternatives is the expectation of pleasure, so too society desires (calls "good") those actions which

it believes will bring *it* pleasure.⁸ But how do an individual's desires become joined with others' in a way that it can be meaningful to say that society wills that such and such a result come about? As ethics for Schlick is primarily a study of our decision-making processes, it is a matter of the mechanics of conflict resolution, of choosing between available alternatives. This, he says repeatedly, can only take place in the mind of an individual.⁹ It has also been noted that it is the individual's expected pleasure from making a given choice is the sole motivation for choosing it over other alternatives. We are left with the motivational question, then, of why the individual believes that he or she will attain the maximum pleasure from performing acts which are other directed. Schlick realizes that this is the important point which remains to be addressed, writing that "the main problem, 'Why do men act morally?' will be solved as soon as we can show how the idea of the things which appear useful to society can also be pleasurable for the individual agent himself." (160)

Schlick's problem, restated, is that there is an apparent clash in his theory between his universal law of motivation and the altruistic drive (which, like the law of motivation, is also offered as empirically valid) which he claims is present in all humans. How can we at once be motivated in our decision-making by our beliefs as to what will bring us pleasure, and at the same time be other-directed? The way out demands that Schlick demonstrate that altruism does in fact increase the pleasure of the altruist.¹⁰ He needs to show that it is because we are both driven in our decision-making to attain those ends which we believe will bring us pleasure *and* we are social beings who attain our greatest pleasure by willing acts which benefit others.

What first needs to be investigated, then, is the role that our social nature plays in our decision-making. It is of course not difficult to see why other would want us to behave altruistically -- it would bring them pleasure -- but the question is why should *we* want to act altruistically. Schlick writes :

Of course my moral behavior would bring joy to *others* (the society which commands is always composed of other. I cannot count myself of their number), but for me my behavior would have only an apparent value which the others were clever enough to suggest to me. (172)

Schlick denies that we behave morally either because we have been duped into believing that it is what we should do, or because of a fear of punishment by the law. He states that :

Suggestion and reference to social sanctions are of course only the most primitive means of the production of motive feelings; the *subtle* influences which most interest the philosopher are not to be attained by their help. We already know that the social impulses themselves contribute stronger and more pleasure motives. (173)

Schlick sees the answer to the question of how the idea of the things which appear useful to society can also be pleasurable for the individual agent as lying in a melding of expected result (what he calls 'motive feelings') and actual result ('realization feelings'). There is no doubt that quite often in life the results actually achieved by the performance of a given action will be very different from the expected results : we expect an action to bring us pleasure and it instead causes us pain, or vice versa. By a process of reinforcement, we will desist from performing actions which, though initially believed to be means to pleasure, repeatedly do not satisfy this expectation, If moral acts do in fact bring pleasure (regardless of whether we expect them to or not), we will, over time, learn that they bring pleasure, and these actions will "have the tendency to become paramount impulses." (181) So there are two questions before us : (1) what actions lead to pleasure, and (2) do these actions constitute the moral life, i.e., what society calls the good life.

In effect, Schlick is asking the age-old question of whether the virtuous life, in itself, is the happiest life. It is his conclusion that it is;¹¹ he writes : "I have no doubt that experience indicates very clearly that the *social* impulses are those which best assure their bearers of a joyful life." (186) Schlick goes on to dismiss on empirical grounds the pessimistic objection that the altruist, rather than being rewarded with pleasure for his or her altruism, "reaps ingratitude and envy, or is ridiculed and abused." (189) He says that

Experience on the average (there is in these matters only average experience) does not confirm pessimism. For this reason at the very beginning of this discussion I advisedly pointed to *experience* as furnishing proof that the social impulses increase the capacity for happiness; and this makes the deductive derivation unnecessary. (190) It seems clear, then, that Schlick believes experiential evidence will confirm his claim that altruistic actions do indeed serve as the best means to pleasure.

But there still remains the important question of how this happens.

Certainly there are instances where the performance of altruistic acts brings rewards to the person who performs them -- e.g., the man who risks his life to rescue children trapped in a burning house is rewarded with praise from his community; the woman who devotes her life to helping the poor is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, etc. -- but on the whole, it seems that many, if not most altruistic actions do not elicit rewards from society for the agent, but rather go unnoticed and unappreciated. If we are talking about rewards such as money or power (and the pleasure they can bring), it certainly seems that it is the person who acts ruthlessly and without regard for others' concerns, not the altruist, who acquires the most for himself or herself. So who is it, we may ask, that Schlick can claim experience to show that altruistic acts are the best means to pleasure? What needs explanation is the psychological process whereby we are able to go from a drive for our own pleasure (psychological hedonism) to a belief that we will gain this pleasure by benefiting others (altruism).

An answer to this problem is not offered explicitly by Schlick, but I believe the seeds for a response lie in the remarks quoted above. Like some of the British moral philosophers of the 18th century (e.g., David Hume and Adam Smith), Schlick adopts a theory of sympathetic projection, whereby we imagine ourselves in the place of others, feeling (and desiring to feel) what they themselves do.¹² Adam Smith, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, described the process in this way :

By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them.¹³

He goes on to say that the "compassion of the spectator must arise altogether from the consideration of what he himself would feel if he were reduced to the same unhappy situation."¹⁴ And just as we are able to feel the pain of the one for whom we feel compassion, so too are we able to feel his pleasure :

How amiable does he appear to be, whose sympathetic heart seems to echo all the sentiments of those with whom he converses, who grieves for their calamities, who resents their injuries, and who rejoices at their good fortune! When we bring home to ourselves the situation of his companions, we enter into their gratitude, and feel what consolation they must derive from the tender sympathy of so affectionate a friend.¹⁵

It is my claim that Schlick too believes that by imagining herself or himself in the place of other, the altruist participates in (and compounds for herself or himself) the pleasure of those with whom she or he identifies. The following passage lends support to this interpretation :

The social impulses constitute a truly ingenious means of multiplying the feelings of pleasure; for the man who feels the pleasures of his fellow men to be a source of his own pleasure thereby increases his joys with the increase in theirs. *he shares their happiness.* (189, my emphasis)

By projecting the desires of others as our own, we are able to see the anticipated pleasure of the other as what will bring us pleasure, and we will therefore will, so far as it is possible, that those alternatives are actualized.

This interpretation of Schlick requires further explanation of two points. First, there is the matter of *what* is projected : does the sympathetic person feel the feeling that the other is experiencing, or does he feel what *he* would feel were he in the other's place (which might be different from what the other person is feeling)? Given what Schlick says about each consciousness being "enclosed within itself" (see note 9 above), it must be that an individual can only feel the latter, that is, he can imagine what he would feel were he in the same circumstances as the one with whom he is sympathizing. This does create a problem for Schlick, for there may be some circumstances in which another is in a state of pleasure/pain, yet were I in his situation, I would not feel any pleasure/pain (or at least not to the same degree), and thus I would not be able to sympathize with him.

Second, what does it mean to 'share in another's pleasure'? If we view pleasure as a mental state, that to share pleasure would be to share a mental state, and this is not possible. Of course, one mind can at different times experience many different mental states, but the exact same mental state cannot be simultaneously shared by more than one mind. However, if we understand finding a certain thing pleasurable in terms of having a preference for that thing, sharing pleasure would mean sharing preferences, and this view of pleasure seems to allow for Schlick's idea of an imagined identification. Specifically, Schlick would say that we have a preference for sharing in others' preferences. In other words, I gain pleasure from altruistic actions because I have a preference for seeing those things for which others have a preference attained by them,

and I have this preference because the idea of the desire being realized brings me more pleasure than any other alternative open to me.

It is, then, because I put myself in the other's shoes, so to speak, and feel compassion for her,¹⁶ imagining her pains and joys to be my own, that I desire to increase her pleasure and reduce her pain. This interpretation is in keeping with Schlick's law of motivation, for again, I imagine myself as being in the place of the other, so my concern for him is concern for myself. Indeed, it is this aspect of human nature which allows for the movement from psychological hedonism to altruism which we sought to explain. We are now provided with answers to the two questions raised above : (1) it is *altruistic actions* which are the best means to pleasure, and (2) these acts to indeed constitute the moral life, for as indicated, they are the actions of which society approves, because they are the actions which will bring it pleasure.

Again, my claim is that there is a kind of sympathetic projection theory which lies at the base of Schlick's social ethics. This interpretation provides Schlick with a response to an objection which must be met, for it offers a psychological explanation of how it is possible that, given his claim that we will those actions which we believe will bring us pleasure, we are most likely to achieve this pleasure by living a life which is other- directed. As I argued above, Schlick is giving us a hypothetical imperative : if we want pleasure, we should be altruistic, since by being the cause of joy for others, we, as experience bears out, are able to increase, to a greater extent than any other means will allow, our own pleasure.¹⁷

NOTES

1. All references to this work will be to : Moritz Schlick, *Problems of Ethics*, trans. David Ryan (New York : Prentice Hall, 1939).
2. The reader may ask at this point whether the law of motivation is tautologous. Indeed, Schlick is aware of the objection when he warns that "we even find (the law) considered almost self-evident. But we must again be careful not to consider it too self- evident."(51) Schlick argues that the law is not a tautologous claim,

and does so by noting the distinction between desiring and willing. To say that we desire what we find pleasant is indeed a tautology; but volition is tied to action, and it need not be the case (logically) that we will perform actions which we consider to bring us the most pleasure. He writes :

That something imagined with the maximum amount of pleasure is actually willed, that is, leads to innervation, is anything but self-evident; it is simply a fact of experience. We are so accustomed to this fact that we are inclined to believe it is part of the very concept of the willed that it also be something desired. However, we see that here we are concerned with an empirical fact, with a law established by experience; because we can very well imagine a different state of affairs. The child with the piece of cake could, for example, very well observe a large piece with much greater pleasure and still make the discovery that whenever a smaller or less tasty piece was offered its hand always reached for the latter. And it could be so universally : Whenever several ends-in-view of different pleasure values compete with one another the reaction might unhesitatingly proceed in the direction of the least pleasurable. This is quite *conceivable*. (52)

3. Schlick takes care to point out that this is not a result of rational insight. He writes that "the processes whereby the general welfare becomes a pleasant goal are complicated...[and] take place chiefly in the absence of thinking." (98)
Werner Leinfellner makes the interesting point that it would have been consistent with Schlick's theory for him to replace "his psycho-sociological anchoring of ethical decisions by a genetically rooted explanation, for instance, which [sic] genes 'impose' pleasant feelings, pleasures (*Lust*) on certain acts." He notes, however, that at the time Schlick was writing, "It was certainly too early for such a biological, genetic foundation." ("A Reconstruction of Schlick's Psycho-Sociological Ethics," *Synthese* 64 (1985) : 320)
4. It may seem that Schlick, in saying that altruism is a fundamental part of human nature, comes close to affirming an essence of humanity of a human nature which is known *a priori*. Suzanne Stern-Gillet raises this concern and notes, correctly I believe, that "Since he devotes much energy to show that the law of motivation is empirically valid, ... Schlick's assertoric imperative is grounded *a posteriori*" ("*Schlick's 'Factual Ethics'*," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 37 (1983):160).
5. J. J. C. Smart ("An Outline of a System of Utilitarian Ethics," in J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism for and Against* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1973) has distinguished the underlying sentiment of utilitarianism, benevolence, from altruism :

The utilitarian's ultimate moral principle, let it be remembered, expresses the sentiment not of altruism but of benevolence, the agent counting himself neither more nor less than any other person. Pure altruism cannot be made the basis of a universal moral discussion because it might lead different people to different and perhaps incompatible courses of action, even though the circumstances were identical. When two men each try to let the other through a door first a deadlock results. (32)

The altruist, then, is not necessarily concerned with the general welfare, but only in promoting the interests of the other individuals with whom she comes in contact (which could, in some instances, decrease the general welfare).

6. Stern-Gillet raises this question, concluding that in this point "lies the weakness of Schlick's conception of altruism." (*op. cit.* 156).
7. To mention just one counter-argument to this claim, Herbert Fingrette (*Self-Deception*, London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969) has argued that one of the causes of self-deception is a desire to avoid ideas which might threaten our self-identity, and this he says, cannot be reduced to a simple avoidance of painful feelings.
8. It might be asked whether in talking about 'society willing' or 'society desiring', Schlick is guilty of anthropomorphizing society. It must be remembered that ethics for Schlick is a branch of psychology, specifically in that it is concerned with the decision-making processes which occur in humans. When Schlick refers to society as wishing something, for example, he means that individuals are acting in such and such a way; there is no 'collective psyche', only individual decisions, motivated by anticipated pleasure. Schlick thus appears to agree with Carnap's claim that cultural objects ('society') are reducible to heteropsychological ones ('individuals')
9. Schlick emphasizes this extremely solitary aspect of human existence when he writes : "[T]here is no bridge from man to man which does not first lead over individual feelings. Here lies the source of the final, awful loneliness of man, from which there is no escape, because each individual, each consciousness is enclosed within itself". (175)
10. As Schlick's is a theory of motivation emphasizing *anticipated* outcomes rather than a normative theory evaluating acts based on actual outcomes, it would seem Schlick only need demonstrate that people *believe* altruistic acts will bring them happiness, whether they do or not. Yet it would seem odd for someone to expect to receive pleasure from altruistic acts if, after repeated experiences, this proved never, or even rarely, to be the case. Thus I think we are justified in asking this empirical question concerning actual outcomes.

11. Schlick does note that this may at first sight seem improbable to some :

The reason that the happiness value of social inclinations seem *a priori* incredible to many philosophers lies clearly in the fact that these impulses are directed toward another's welfare: and must not the impulses which bring happiness to their bearer be directed, rather, toward his own welfare? (186)

12. Werner Leinfellner (*op. cit.*, 331) refers to this as 'ethical identity phase' of Schlick's ethics.

13. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macphie (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1976) : 9.

14. *Ibid.*, 12.

15. *Ibid.*, 24.

16. Nancy E. Snow ("Compassion" *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 3 (July 1991) : 195-205) distinguishes between compassion and sympathy. Using the terms C-feelers and C-objects for compassion feelers and compassion objects respectively, she defines compassion in the following way :

It is a relatively intense emotional response to the serious misfortune of another. This response is a 'suffering with' the other and includes concern for other's good. This altruistic concern is frequently expressed in benevolent other-regarding thoughts, desires and actions. *Compassion is made possible by the C-feelers ability to identify with the C-object's plight.* Central to the C-feeler's compassion is his or her belief, 'that could be me,' which facilitates identification between C-feeler and C-object. (197, my emphasis.)

Sympathy, she says, "differs...by being an appropriate response to a wider range of misfortunes, including those less serious." (*ibid*) The difference, then, is in the intensity of the two emotions, and not (though she does not say so explicitly) in the process of identification which (I want to hold) is involved in each.

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