

# **THE DUTY OF ALTRUISM**

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The duty of altruism by Ray Madding McConnell

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**RAY MADDING MCCONNELL**

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# THE DUTY OF ALTRUISM

## CHAPTER I

### THE PROBLEM

THERE is no more perplexing problem before the philosophy of conduct than the search for a sufficient ground of the obligation to be altruistic. That humanity acknowledges the existence of this obligation is plainly shown by a psychological analysis and historical survey of the phenomena of moral consciousness. This investigation undertakes a study of the attempted solutions of the problem.

The most common way of trying to solve the problem is altogether unsatisfactory. It shows, first, that the man who "fulfills his duties to himself" by taking good care of himself is also "fulfilling his duties to others" in becoming capable of rendering greater service to them, that is, in becoming a better providing father and husband and a more intelligent and useful citizen; and secondly, that the man who "fulfills his duties to others" by serving them, being a good husband, father, and citizen, is at the same time "fulfilling his duties to himself" in enlarging his life. Such a procedure as this merely evades the problem. Of course there are innumerable instances where the interests of self and the interests of others are perfectly compatible, so interlaced as to be



inseparable. But the question is, Are there not cases where the interests of self are antagonistic to the interests of others; and if so, what is to be done? Paulsen's argument<sup>1</sup> that the effects of an action supposed to concern only the agent always really extend to others, and that the effects of an action supposed to concern only others always really include the agent also, has absolutely no bearing upon the settlement of the question as to whose interest should be dominant in the agent's intention, and why; nor of the question whether there may not be cases where the interests are opposed, and the *effects* of the action are good for the agent but bad for others. Paulsen does not prove a universal identity of interests by citing a few cases where the interests are identical. Is it always true that "one's industry affects beneficially all others, while one's laziness injures others"? Does the "servant of the state," to cite one of Paulsen's examples, in supplanting another in office, do the one supplanted a good? And when he places his son ahead of the son of another father, does he serve this other father and son? No such procedure as Paulsen's can be adequate proof that the interests of one individual are never antagonistic to the interests of another individual or even of most other individuals. No such procedure can prove the impossibility of conflict between egoism and altruism, or afford any assistance towards finding a rational ground for preferring altruism to egoism.<sup>2</sup> Paulsen's

<sup>1</sup> Paulsen, "System der Ethik," Bd. I, S. 377 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Precisely the same criticism may be passed on Spencer's two chapters, "Egoism versus Altruism," and "Altruism versus

whole case is made out in showing (1) that usually individual virtues affect also other persons beneficially, and social virtues affect also the individual beneficially, and (2) that usually no separation is made in the motives of actions between the interests of self and the interests of others. "The farmer who ploughs his field could not understand the question as to whose interest he had in view; the artist, the scholar, and the statesman would not say that they worked exclusively either for themselves or for others." Now neither of these facts is an argument that there can never be any conflict between the interests of self and the interests of others. In fact, Paulsen's discussion finally weakens down into the statement, "What the foregoing was intended to show is only this: that contradiction between one's own welfare and others' welfare, and between selfish and altruistic motives, forms not the rule, but the exception. The rule is agreement in effects as well as in motives."<sup>1</sup> But the real problem is in these exceptional cases. The great question is this: Can we prove to a man in these exceptional times that he *ought* to prefer the interests of others to his own, that he *ought* to seek the good of others at the cost of his own?

The conflict between egoism and altruism is very frequently smoothed over by obscuring the ques-

Egoism," in his "Data of Ethics," pp. 187-218. The only concern is to try to show that the interests of self are best conserved by a proper regard for the interests of others, and that the interests of others are best conserved by a proper regard for the interests of self. There is no real weighing of egoism and altruism in the scales of moral worth.

<sup>1</sup> Paulsen, *op. cit.*, Bd. I, S. 384.

tion at issue. Each side devotes attention to showing how the position of its opponent may be resolved into its own, and there is no conflict. For instance, when the altruist says that the mother is not moved to the nursing and care of her infant through any calculation of her own pleasure and profit, the egoist replies that the sympathetic feeling on the part of the mother is her own feeling, and that she is moved by this feeling and consequently by a self-regarding motive. And when Max Stirner, the arch-egoist, says, "She can will only her own volitions, think only her own thoughts, feel only her own feelings; and only her own thoughts and feelings can be the motives of her will," it is replied from the other side, "Of course she alone can be the *subject* of her thought, feeling, and will; but it is an altogether different question as to whether she alone can be the *object* of her thought, feeling, and will." In such cases, however, where the interests of self and the interests of others are so nearly identical that it is impossible to separate them or to say which predominates, the question is not easily studied. When these two groups of interests coincide, the ethical problem becomes obscured. The problem is seen at its best in those "exceptions," when the two groups are in vital conflict. Then, on which side lies the right? *Ought* I to seek the interests of self or the interests of others? And what is the ground of the obligation?

Society has often been compared to a living organism. It is said that society is a unitary being, the members of which are related just as the members of the human body are related.