ALTRUISM, INGROUPS, AND FAIRNESS: COMMENTS ON DAVID MESSICK'S "SOCIAL CATEGORIES AND BUSINESS ETHICS"

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The Scope of Altruism

In attacking utilitarianism Bernard Williams[1] likes to consider the case of the man who has a choice of saving his wife or a stranger from drowning. Williams takes it as clear, and a problem for consequentialism, that the man has a moral obligation to save his wife. The relationship is a good thing without reference to consequences that one might suppose it requires if it is to be valuable.

David Messick suggests a consequentialist view of certain relationships—for example, those that create a limited altruism—that have survival value. Some kin relationships are like that; and insofar as they are, there is something to be said for them from a utilitarian point of view. Messick does not rest there, as his primary concern is fairness, but he does seem to hold that there is a utilitarian basis for valuing families and family ties. One need not be a sociobiologist to learn something about practical morality from the facts Messick adduces.

Amartya K. Sen,[2] Williams's co-conspirator against utilitarianism, raises a doubt about consequentialism when he identifies two assumptions that are distinct and questionable: first, that people always act according to what they take to be their own best interests; second, that people are narrowly selfish in the sense that their own best interests do not embrace the well-being of other people. Sen claims that the second assumption is false, that one's own best interests may indeed embrace the well-being of others, no doubt especially one's kin. It would follow that, again, ties of family and friendship need no further justification, utilitarian or otherwise.

If that is so, then performing a good deed for a family member or a member of some ingroup that is important to one is not altruistic if, as Messick claims, altruism is a matter of choosing to provide a benefit to another at a cost to one's self. We need not construe the notion of self-interest so narrowly as to assume that love, filial piety, and so on are merely causes of the greatest goods in life; they are rather goods in themselves.

One of Robert C. Solomon's[3] objections to using game theory in business ethics is that it normally makes just the questionable assumption that Sen identifies: it takes the players to be self-interested in a narrow way, so that (for example) one prisoner has no interest in what happens to the other prisoner. Clearly that is not always so: if you, my good friend, are arrested along with me, then I may care so deeply about your welfare as to undertake a strategy designed to minimize our combined jail

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sentences. A friendly act like this is at least in part strategic rather than merely saintly, for it is based on a conception of interests that encompasses the welfare of a member of one's ingroup. We might say a friend is a sort of Aristotelian saint, for whom happiness is the welfare of certain others as well as oneself. But a friendly act is not pragmatic in the sense of having been done in hope of reciprocity.

A friend will do better than a rogue in all or near all populations for the same reason Messick says a pragmatist will, since the friend may profit twice, so to speak, from every successful transaction. But a friend must not be a sucker: indeed, we interpret our friends' actions generously and cut them great slack, but we do not stay friends with those who just keep betraying us.[4] After a few bad experiences we bail out not only because the other does not reciprocate but also because we stop extending our interests to encompass the other's welfare. (The case of actual love is different, however, as Shakespeare claims in Sonnet 116: "Love is not love Which alters when it alteration finds Or bends with the remover to remove.")

Arbitrary Ingroups

This analysis does not undermine Messick's claim that in some cases "the perception of common category members is sufficient to induce helping behavior" (p. 6). On the other hand, the kind of situation I am describing would occur where "the cues signaling group membership... [are] quite shallow" (p. 7). To take Messick's example, I am more likely to recognize a dot-nosed person as a fellow pragmatist than as a friend.

It is extraordinary that the distinction between ingroup and outgroup can be trivial in itself. Why should I trust a dot-nose just because I'm a dot-nose too? Why should I assume I can deal straight with this person by virtue of this accidental feature? It appears that relationships of this sort are built on self-fulfilling expectations. There is no way for me to know for sure that if I behave as a pragmatist you will reciprocate, no way for me to predict your action on the basis of knowing your values and knowing that you are rational. Deciding to treat another as a member of some ingroup, hence as a fellow-pragmatist, requires a possibly self-fulfilling leap of faith. If that is so, there need not be any wholly rational way to decide where to draw the line between ingroup and outgroup. Yet dividing people into ingroups even on a somewhat arbitrary basis can achieve efficiencies by preserving the commons in various localities.[5] Once matters are arranged and expectations created, it is rational to treat people in your group differently even if there is no intrinsic difference between them and members of the outgroup, because you have reason to think they are going to treat you differently because they have reason to think you are going to treat them differently because ... etc. There is, in other words, sometimes reason to be prejudiced against (or rather, not be prejudiced in favor of) people who individually and in the aggregate are as worthy as are we—that is, we the members of this ingroup. Of course there is not always very good reason; and one of the first casualties of prejudice is one's ability reasonably to assess whether others are as worthy as we.

Why can't there be just one big ingroup? Beyond the evolutionary reason Messick gives (on pp. 2f.) there is a further consideration: it simply is not feasible to create the universal expectation that just anyone you meet, including those you do not know and will never see again, will enter into a pragmatic deal with you. Trivers, whom Messick cites on p. 4, would presumably agree. But if some now inconceivable technologies were to make it possible to communicate far more readily with everyone, perhaps there could be a single ingroup. Technology does sometimes alter our moral obligations.[6]

Sports fans know about arbitrary ingroups. Why do I care whether the baseball players who wear uniforms trimmed with black and orange win? I don't know those people. Why do I buy drinks for strangers who wear the familiar black cap with the orange S and F?[7] Without attachments of this sort, professional sports would be pointless. Since we do tend to colonize in this way, it is a good thing that we have games rather than wars.

Attachments of this sort may help unite an organization, and in many respects that is a good thing: loyalty helps preserve the commons. Organizations that have none of this team spirit will be less effective than otherwise, though it can be grossly overdone.

Ingroups and Unfairness

Messick shows how this sort of pragmatism within one's ingroup leads to unfairness. We would nearly all want to say that one ought to rescue one's spouse in preference to some other equally worthy drowner. We would not want to say that one ought to bend over backwards to approve a loan for a member of one's ethnic group in preference to an equally creditworthy applicant—or, for that matter, for one's spouse. Why not? Because it isn't fair, we might say, even if no creditworthy person of some other ethnic group is harmed. The primary distinction between the cases is that kinship ties are important on broadly utilitarian grounds beyond whatever intrinsic importance they may have in part as a result of our expectations. In all circumstances we can readily imagine, a good society is one in which family ties are important. The same is not true of ethnic ties, though we can imagine communities —there may be some within our own society—in which certain ethnics may suffer greatly unless they regularly grant one another special favors. But even if family ties are intrinsically important to us, so that we can enjoy them for themselves, it is possible that in some societies they are not intrinsically important, and that in some other societies ethnic ties are intrinsically important.

In any case, bending over backwards for marginal white applicants but not marginal black ones seems racist even though it is motivated by no hostility to the latter. We are normally supposed to discriminate according to ability —for example, to do a job or repay a loan. Why? Largely because making a practice of doing so usually has good consequences. At this point in our history we discriminate affirmatively on the basis of race and gender, for the same reason. Is either kind of discrimination fair? It is not immediately clear how we can show it is fair or unfair other than on grounds that include utilitarian considerations. Surely, too, what is reasonable as a basis for discrimination will differ depending on organizational, sociological, and historic considerations that will change over time.

This is no part of an argument that justice is reducible to utilitarianism; my view is that neither is by itself the sure foundation of morality, and that follows from my skepticism about foundationalism altogether. But that is an argument for another day.[8]

Messick combines two forms of discrimination and gets something that seems less unfair than either: black loan officers who do some bending over backwards of their own. This is a bit like the primary argument for legalizing drugs: we can reduce the problem if we stop trying to eliminate the human frailty at its core and aim instead to control the damage this frailty does under current circumstances. It is clear that any morally responsible approach to this sort of issue must be attentive to the findings of social psychology, but this one raises questions.

Messick's device would appear to have the result that fewer white applicants would get the extra consideration they need to qualify, while more minority applicants would get this boost. If we do not assign all and only white people to white loan officers—a system Messick does not suggest, no doubt for good reason—then the unfairness will at least be randomly distributed. This is better in the sense that it would contribute less to further fraying of race relations. Is it fairer?

Where goods cannot be distributed equally or according to desert—an issue that itself raises some important issues that lie beyond our scope—randomness may be no more than the closest we can get to fairness. Rawls's account of justice[9] is perhaps not so different: what is fair is what disinterested parties (or interested parties working under appropriate rules) would negotiate. So we might try to imagine what rules the founders of an organization would agree to if they were in the Rawlsian Original Position, and leave it at that. The people in the Original Position must also be allowed to consider organizational culture and its possible impact on people's inclinations, including what people might take their interests to encompass. What is required in such an organization is not only rules but moral education, including the cultivation of certain virtues.

Assessing Performance

There is much to be said for getting as clear as possible about precisely what counts as good performance, for, as Messick suggests, ambiguity and vagueness invite stereotyping. Poorly defined terms like "interpersonal skills" have been used to bludgeon Ann Hopkins of Price Waterhouse[10] and no doubt many others, including a disproportionate number of women. I have less hope than Messick does, however, of finding standards and rules "that can be used more or less mechanically" (p. 28). Logic forces me to accept his claim that promotion and hiring criteria "can be made as objective and quantitative as possible" (p. 29), but we create problems by trying too hard to do that. One recalls the punch line of the joke about the person looking for the contact lens under the lamppost instead of near where it fell out: "But the light's better over here!"

I see more promise in Messick's suggestion that we get people "to be cautious in making such judgments" (p. 29). One way to do this is to ensure that people are aware of what they have been doing and saying; and if he is right in suggesting that the ingroup often does not intend to discriminate negatively and that we are often unconscious of our motivation to discriminate, that will be a significant step. People need to notice that they call a man angry and a woman hysterical, a man firm and a woman irrational, a man tough and a woman bitchy. But managing the corporate culture involves not only vocabulary but also the self-fulfilling expectations that correspond to people's views of who is in their ingroup and what is in their interests. This requires patient and skilled management. As I noted before, it cannot be done on a wholly rational basis; but rational support is not the only kind of support a corporate culture needs. To move people in an organization away from taking refuge in inappropriate ingroups entails not only getting people to stop discriminating against (say) women but also getting them not to value being the sort of person who is invidiously discriminatory against any fellow employee.

In advocating performance standards Messick resembles the partisans of principle-based ethics. In attending to corporate culture and its constituent dispositions I sound like a virtue ethicist.[11] We are both advocating views that are very much worth advocating. It is often claimed that different ethical styles are applicable to different situations. I would go further, and argue that there are some problems that benefit from more than one style and that the assessment of performance is one of them. In either case, organizations create enough kinds of problem to keep both Kantians and Aristotelians busy.

Endnotes:

[1] See for example his *Moral Luck* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 16-18.

[2] Amartya K. Sen, *On Ethics and Economics* (New York: Basil Blackwell), pp. 79f.

[3] Robert C. Solomon, *Ethics and Excellence: Cooperation and Integrity in Business* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 54, p. 61.

[4] There is good reason for a player whose faith in another has been disappointed by the latter's exploitative behavior to cut the offender some slack rather than exact immediate revenge and possibly set off a vendetta. Presumably this gives one an opportunity to distinguish between an enemy and a slightly hasty friend. See Avinash Dixit and Barry Nalebuff, *Thinking Strategically: The Competitive Edge in Business, Politics, and Everyday Life* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1991), pp. 106-115.

[5] On the organization as a commons see Edwin M. Hartman, "The Commons and the Moral Organization," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 4 (1994), esp. pp. 253f.

[6] This is not to say that it can alter our moral principles. That claim would require more argument than this essay can accommodate.

[7] Note, Sen might say to me, how happy you are when the Giants win, though their winning has no obvious good consequences for you. If Sen is right, their winning is in my interests. But it would be odd to say that I decided to form an attachment to the Giants so as to serve my best interests.

[8] See further Edwin M. Hartman, *Organizational Ethics and the Good Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) esp. Chapters 2 and 5.

[9] See especially John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971) and John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

[10] See Ilyse Barkan and Joseph L. Badaracco, Jr., "Ann Hopkins (A)," Case 9-391-155 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School, 1991).

[11] Julian E. Brown, an executive in a Chicago bank, tells me that one of the ways in which loan officers help people of marginal qualifications get loans is to interpret applicable regulations and definitions in a benign way and to counsel applicants on how to package the information they submit. This is a point in favor of virtue ethics: there is nearly always room for interpretation in the application of any principle and the presentation of any information; and as Wittgensteinians have argued by invoking an infinite regress of rules for the application of rules, no situation can be entirely circumscribed by rules. As a practical matter, we can infer that loan officers and performance evaluators will nearly always have room to maneuver in marginal cases.

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