

Philippe Kourilsky

Altruity: Key to the Fight Against Poverty

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D- Altruity: Key to the Fight Against Poverty

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Abstract. This paper presents the concept of *altruity* and illustrates its philosophical and practical importance in the fight against poverty. Altruity—a highly specific form of rational altruism—is the duty that comes with freedom. The individual duty of altruity is the necessary counterpart of the right to individual freedoms. It is, by its very nature, distinct from (though complementary to) generosity, and devoid of any expectation of reciprocity (while not excluding it). The idea of altruity is the cornerstone of a theory of individual responsibility, and of a theory of justice, which provide a conceptual framework for the struggle against poverty. And because it is only meaningful if implemented with a pre-defined method, it also provides a framework for action, as the FACTS Initiative has shown. Altruity thus emerges as one of the keys to the fight against poverty.

Keywords. Field action, altruity, social justice, liberalism, freedom, poverty.

1 Introduction

Poverty is one of the greatest problems of our time. Almost one billion men, women and children are seriously afflicted by hunger. Almost two billion live in conditions of precarious hygiene, with a shortage of drinking water, sanitation, electricity and other essential goods. Over the next 40 years, this planet is expected to accommodate a further 2.5 to 3 billion inhabitants on top of the 7 billion it currently holds. Must I continue to recite this litany of all too familiar figures, all too often ignored, neglected or forgotten? Poverty ravages the poorest countries on earth, and remains a scourge even in the richest nations. It raises problems of every kind: philosophical and moral, political and economic. The fight against poverty, meanwhile, is faced with very specific, practical obstacles, whether financial or operational.

In two recent books (Kourilsky, 2008; Kourilsky, 2010)—which I shall refer to as TA (for *Le Temps de l'Altruisme*) and MA (for *Le Manifeste de l'Altruisme*)—I analyzed the notion of altruism from a new angle. I extracted what I saw as its principal component, to which I gave the name “altruity”. Although this research was inspired by the issue of poverty, the link between altruity and poverty was not examined in detail in these works. The aim of this paper is to show that altruity provides a dual key—philosophical and practical—for those who would fight poverty. But first, a point of method: in what follows, I will shuttle back and forth between two points of view that pertain to the same concept: a general viewpoint, which often corresponds to a somewhat idealist approach, and a contextual viewpoint, more typical of a pragmatic approach. This way of thinking is common in the analysis of complex systems; they have to be studied at different levels of complexity, which are subsequently correlated and reconciled, rather than placed in opposition (TA, ch.3; MA, ch.5).

2 Altruity: a philosophical approach to the fight against poverty

2.1 Poverty and freedom

Why help the poor? Out of a sense of duty? From religious conviction? For the sake of kindness, empathy, generosity? There are numerous motivations. There also numerous counter-motivations: they are called selfishness, individualism, negligence, or the shirking of duty. There are those who feel that the poor are alien to them, and that they have no responsibility towards them. The poor, it is said, are entirely responsible for their own poverty. Up to them to get out of poverty, if that's what they want. The poor are free to stay poor or not, just as the non-poor are free to help them, or not. This viewpoint, fortunately, is not shared by everyone, but it can only be refuted by examining the notions of freedom and responsibility.

What do we mean by “poor”? Many economists rely on quantified definitions. In developing countries, the poor are those who live below a threshold set, by the United Nations in 2008, at 1.25 dollars per person per day. For rich countries, we use thresholds or percentages: in France, the poor are those whose incomes are 50%—or in the case of extreme poverty, 60%—below the national median income. Taking a quite different perspective, one can, with Georges Simmel, say that the poor are those who are in need of assistance (Simmel, 1908). Poverty then becomes a function of the relationship that is established between the poor person and myself. As I have argued elsewhere (TA, chh.6 & 8), these definitions reflect distinct points of view. Distinct, but not mutually exclusive—they can be complementary. The decision to prioritize one or the other is not without consequence. If the poor are those who earn less than \$1.25 a day, I can claim to have no obligation towards them, and can even hold them responsible

for their condition. If the poor are defined by their need for assistance, the question of the link between them and me is posed from the outset, and with it, that of the freedom of both parties, poor and non-poor.

An essential contribution made by Amartya Sen was to demonstrate that poverty constitutes a loss of freedom(s). Amartya Sen defines individual freedoms (or capabilities) as the freedoms that people enjoy to lead the kind of life they value (Sen, 2000). What does it mean to be free in principle if you are dying of hunger for lack of resources? Freedom is, of course, a universal principle to which we all subscribe. But we should also seek to understand how it is expressed in a given context. As I have pointed out elsewhere (MA, ch.5), the notion of “individual freedom” is the contextual corollary of the universal idea of “freedom”. And again, it makes no sense to place them in opposition. Far from being mutually exclusive, the two ideas are destined to be complementary, to coexist, to both be part of the bigger picture.

2.2 Altruity, or the duty that comes with freedom

It is widely accepted that one person’s freedom ends where another’s begins, and that freedom therefore must have limits in any society. But when one looks at the question from the angle of individual freedoms, it becomes clear that one person’s freedom is also constructed by that of other people. If I am too poor to buy bread, I suffer from a deficit of individual freedoms. But if I do have the means to buy bread, I still need a baker to make it and sell it. In the contextual, pragmatic approach to individual freedoms, the idea of freedom must also be based on the necessary interdependence between people, which, as it happens, is increasingly evident in a globalised world. **Each person’s freedom is both constructed and limited by that of other people.**

The postulate that underpins the rest of my approach is that there are no rights without associated duties. And yet there is one right that is universally recognized as fundamental: the right to freedom. What, then, is the corresponding duty? Seen at the contextual level, that of individual freedoms, the answer becomes clear. It is the duty to contribute to the construction of other people’s individual freedoms. This is what I call **the individual duty of altruity** (MA, ch.1). And at the level of the universal idea of freedom, we arrive at the following statement: **the right to freedom corresponds to a duty of altruity**, altruity being defined as a “**purposeful commitment to act for the freedom of others**”.

In this definition, the commitment to act for the freedom of others stems corresponds to a form of altruism (TA, ch.7). As for the adjective “purposeful”, it implies something that has been thought through. The purposeful commitment to act for the freedom of others is therefore a highly specific variant of rational altruism. After the publication of my two books on this question, I observed from day-to-day usage that the many meanings conveyed by the word “altruism” interfered with the very specific meaning that I wanted to give it. To avoid confusion, I coined the term “altruity”, which I now use.

This intellectual shuttling between “individual freedoms” and “freedom” is echoed by a similar back-and-forth movement between “individual duty of altruity and “duty of

altruity”. It is at the contextual level that the crucial idea of **proportionality** between individual freedoms and the individual’s duty of altruity comes into play. This makes sense at the moral level as well as the practical level: the greater my individual freedoms, the greater also is my capacity to act, and with it, my duty of altruity. Here, then, are the foundations of a **theory of individual responsibility** (TA, ch.7). It can only be implemented if individuals themselves evaluate their own freedoms and their duty of altruity (MA, ch.6). I will return to this central point in the second part of this paper.

This conception of individual responsibility has numerous implications. In particular, it can be scaled up to apply to a social group of any size, so long as that group claims to value freedom, because that claim entails a duty of altruity (MA, ch.9). At the national scale, for example, one can conceive of a duty of national altruity, directed at the most deprived, both inside and outside the country. The beneficiaries would be other, poorer, nations, as well as the poor that live in the country concerned.

2.3 Altruity, generosity and reciprocal giving

At the scale of the individual, the introduction of the idea of altruity helps to clarify two important points. Firstly, altruity is radically different from generosity. Generosity appeals to the heart as much as the head, whereas altruity strives to be exclusively rational. Moreover, generosity belongs to the domain of the freedoms: I am perfectly free to be generous or not, and I can even decide how my gift is allocated, by choosing, for example, to support the arts rather than help the poor. Altruity, on the other hand, is a duty that is incumbent upon me on rational grounds and within a set moral framework. This moral framework is secular in so far as it does not invoke any transcendental power, but it is compatible with most religious codes of ethics. Altruity and generosity therefore belong to separate categories. That doesn’t stop them being complementary; indeed, when it comes to dealing with poverty, they make a good match. Nonetheless, the distinction between the two leads us to ask the following question: Is generosity sufficient to solve the problem of poverty? The whole of historical experience provides a clear, simple answer: no.

Altruity is also distinct from the idea that gained currency following the anthropological works of Marcel Mauss (1925), according to which all gifts are made with the expectation of a counter-gift. Altruity is radically asymmetrical. The duty of altruity is in no way reliant on expectations of reciprocity. Which is not to say that reciprocity is not a motivation for certain human actions; simply that it is not the sole motivation. Alongside reciprocal giving, there is room for rational behaviours guided by the idea of altruity. This is an important distinction, because it is this theory of reciprocal gift-exchange, often combined with game theory, that underpins much of the experimental psychology research—and most of the economic theory—on altruism (Kolm, 2006).

2.4 The question of social justice

Altruity also provides the basis for a **theory of justice**, which encompasses social justice (MA, ch.10). Individuals who

practice altruity are, on the whole, likely to formulate more equitable judgments, and over time—providing the democratic mechanisms function correctly—this will inevitably produce more social justice. Following the line recommended by Amartya Sen (Sen, 2010), and contrary to that traced out by John Rawls (Rawls, 1971), this theory does not seek to shed light on the nature of perfect justice, nor to define perfect institutions that could deliver such a thing. The theory of justice derived from altruity leaves open the question of the ends, and of the practical means for attaining them. Consequently, it can adapt to several types of political system, so long as they allow individual viewpoints to be expressed, reported and integrated. These indeterminations, and the “statistical” nature of the process of integrating different viewpoints, merely reflect the freedom of each individual and the responsibility that goes with it. In this context, the social contract will still apply, but between individuals who have first evaluated their own duty of altruity. The notion of contract here needs to be seen dynamically: it is not fixed within a pre-existing framework. This makes it more realistic, as the stakeholders have taken stock of their obligations and their capacity for action (TA, ch.10).

This conception of justice is, therefore, method-based.

It has no normative content. It does not prescribe ideal institutions. It does not promote perfect equality between men. Instead, it proposes a probabilistic system for reducing injustice and inequality, in a pragmatic mode, based on analyzing the facts on the ground. Far from implying the abandonment of universal ideals, it provides a way of moving towards them (MA, ch.9).

Thus, through altruity, a logical link is established between the idea of freedom and that of social justice: the right to freedom implies a duty of altruity, and the performance of that duty contributes to the furtherance of social justice. This schema is of critical importance, because it leads us to question liberal political philosophies.

2.5 Questioning liberalism

Do the political philosophies that come under the banner of liberalism respect this link between freedom and social justice? All of them uphold the idea of liberty. Yet the generic term “liberalism” covers quite distinct theories with very different social and economic consequences, as was clearly brought to light by the financial crisis of 2007-2008 (Stiglitz, 2010; Supiot, 2010). Put simply, at one extreme, we have ultra-liberalism: the least possible government and the fewest possible taxes, both being seen as encroachments on the freedom of citizens. The corollary to that is limited public social assistance, which may be supplemented by individual generosity. At the other extreme is the welfare state, with highly developed social services, funded, as they must be, by high taxes (Rosanvallon, 1995). Experience suggests that the problems of poverty are less acute in the latter case than in the former—judging by the notable differences observed between the United States (with a liberal formula being pulled towards ultra-liberalism by a fringe of the Republican party) and France (with a welfare state being pulled towards greater state intervention by part of the left). In general, the

ultra-liberals promise stronger economic growth, and claim that the increase in national wealth will eventually trickle down to the poorest—a claim which is not always borne out. Welfare states are more concerned with social protection and the regulated redistribution of wealth, but the mechanisms involved are accused of weighing down the economy and hampering growth—which is indeed sometimes the case. That being said, there are still considerable problems of social justice in most of the developed countries within the fold of liberalism. Moreover, to date, the rich countries have not managed—or perhaps wanted—to resolve the problem of poverty outside their borders. Far from it. And as stated above, a free nation has a duty of altruity not only towards its own citizens, but also towards other nations. From this viewpoint, my assessment is that it is almost impossible to reduce injustice at the global scale under the liberal system as it currently stands.

Since its very origins, liberalism has, I feel, suffered from a deep-seated flaw, which is now being exposed and exacerbated by particular historical and demographic circumstances (MA, chh.2 & 3). My contention is that this flaw, of a moral nature, stems from the very idea of freedom, when understood as a basic right without being clearly tied to an individual duty. In the welfare state system, many duties relating to social justice are in fact identified, but they are transferred to the collectivity without sufficient involvement of individuals. In an ultra-liberal system, such transfers to the collectivity are avoided, even resisted, and matters of social justice are left to the discretionary generosity of individuals, which, as we saw, is distinct from altruity. It is, therefore, the absence of the concept of altruity that, in every case, undermines liberal moral and political philosophies. Unless due consideration is given to altruity, and unless the moral flaw of liberalism is seen for what it is, and counteracted, then the issue of poverty, at the national as well as the global scale, will not be adequately addressed. Hence the idea of an “altruistic liberalism” which I have advocated elsewhere (TA, ch.12, MA, ch.11), and which could come into being in a “post-liberal” era, if one wants to use that term to emphasize the need for a break with the current period. As regards France, so proud of the principles that stem from the Revolution, I think the word “altruity” should be included in the motto of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” which is the badge of the Republic. The trilogy “Liberty, Equality, Altruity” sounds about right. If we want to keep the idea of fraternity, we could settle for the tetralogy: “Liberty, Equality, Altruity, Fraternity” (MA ch.8), even if it is somewhat less easy on the ear.

3 Altruity: a practical approach to fighting poverty

3.1 Altruity and the development of the individual viewpoint

Another major characteristic of altruity is that its implementation calls for a specific approach. The concept is meaningless unless combined with a method: the idea of altruity is unusable unless it comes with a set of instructions. The

reason for this is simple. In its very principle, whatever the intended action (the fight against poverty, policy decisions, etc.) its implementation requires that every individual be fully aware of his or her individual freedoms and of the corresponding duty of altruity. Moreover, putting plans into practice in a selected field calls for active and rational reflection, and this requires that the individual has relevant **information and knowledge**, and takes them into account. This obligation applies to anyone who claims any kind of objectivity. People have a duty to inform themselves, and this corresponds, as we shall see, to a right to information.

Keeping informed is essential for anyone who intends to examine an issue in depth. If I keep informed, it is to build and supplement my knowledge so that I gain a better understanding of a dual reality: that of my place in the world (from which I derive the awareness of my individual freedoms and my duty of altruity) and that of the problem I seek to attack. In a rational approach, which is partly based on introspection (since I have put myself in the position of analyzing my own situation), and partly on observation (since I am preparing to address a specific issue, namely that of poverty), it is my task to formulate well-constructed viewpoints, which, if they are to be robust, must be not only well-informed, but also, as we shall see below, validated.

The method of thought that enables one to make progress towards these objectives is, as I have argued elsewhere (TA, chh.1, 2, 3), close to the scientific method. I maintain that there is no fundamental difference between the objects of science and the “ordinary” objects that make up our environment. The difference lies, rather, in the attention they receive. The very notion of reality is obviously a topic of discussion, but there can be no doubt that science discovers elements of reality, some of which elude, or even contradict, our intuition. A method of thought of the same order as the scientific method, and applied to “ordinary” objects, can therefore do the same. Thus, simply expanding the scope of my thinking about such ordinary objects as a table or a loaf of bread is liable to change their reality-content. In particular, because this expansion involves taking into consideration other objects that interact with the first object, there is every chance I will bring in the human factor, in the form, here, of the carpenter and the baker, in addition to the table and the loaf of bread. In other words, a method of thought that seeks to rationally explore fields of reality is likely to favour the discovery of the Other, and to surface a number of previously unnoticed social aspects (TA, ch.3).

Now we come to the **validation** stage. If my viewpoint is to be robust, it needs to have been subjected, as far as possible, to reality-testing, and also to criticism from others. Once again, scientific practice is instructive. It shows us the importance of debate and the constructive confrontation of views. There is not a single scientific finding—even in mathematics—that is not subject to peer-review. In the “exact” sciences, more than in the human sciences, the process often culminates in a (near) consensus. For this reason, science currently represents the finest form of the democracy of knowledge. Similarly, my viewpoint on anything, including the assessment of my duty of altruity, cannot be considered to be robust unless I have submitted it to others for criticism and

discussion (MA, Ch.6). The final choice, however, is mine, and my freedom will be respected.

That being said, my choice will often not be solely rational. I will probably bring some of my own history into the mix, some of my own hopes and aspirations. My final stance will not necessarily conform to what my duty of altruity—or the elements of validation received from other people—would dictate. This is why the introduction of altruity into human behaviours has what I describe as a “probabilistic” dimension. As I suggested earlier, it involves a **wager**. There is a good probability that altruity will improve my sense of responsibility, and, through the aggregation of individual behaviours, improve social justice. But it is only a probability: the influence of my impulses, interests and passions is not eliminated by altruity, it is only balanced by it. Which is why **education** is of such importance—including education in altruity—due to its capacity to promote rational and reasonable attitudes, and to contain impulses and passions.

3.2 Putting knowledge at the service of the fight against poverty

The rational process required for the implementation of altruity depends, then, on an active search for information, which must culminate in a better understanding—and a well-grounded judgment—of the situation. This statement of principle, which applies to any individual, leads to a more general question: do we, overall, have enough knowledge at our disposal in the fight against poverty? The answer is negative. There are serious deficits of knowledge, evident in research, in education, and more widely in the way knowledge is produced. Research, for example, on the social and solidarity-based economy, and on the economics of philanthropy, is still thin on the ground (Kolm *et al.*, 2006). The methodical comparative evaluation of field actions has opened up a new, but still largely unexplored, area (Duflo, 2010). In the educational domain, the creation of professorial chairs and specialist courses on the fight against poverty is still a very recent phenomenon, although many leading universities and institutions, in France and abroad, now have them¹.

It is in the production and dissemination of knowledge that we find the worst shortcomings. We have done far from enough to capitalize on knowledge and know-how about field actions. We replicate our failures, but not our successes. Generally speaking, fieldwork is not sufficiently grounded in established facts. As a result, a considerable share of the effort and resources invested in the fight against poverty is dissipated in ineffective actions. It was to help redress this deplorable state of affairs that the FACTS (Field ACTION Science) initiative was set up. Its goal is to improve the situation of the poor and deprived through better use and more efficient dissemination of knowledge and know-how (Kourilsky *et al.*, 2009). More specifically, it starts out from the observation that the results of field experiments—especially those with innovative

¹ As illustrated by the creation in 2007 of the professorial chair on «Knowledge against Poverty» at the College de France (<http://www.college-de-france.fr/>)

findings—are all too rarely written up, evaluated, published and circulated. This is due to the fact that it is neither a rule nor common practice among fieldworkers to publish their results and submit them to peer review. In this respect, their communities are very different from scientific communities, for whom it is a central obligation. The creation of an international journal—FACTS Reports—aims to help remedy this situation.²

It is useful at this point to specify the link between the idea of altruity and the fight against poverty **on the ground**. The fight is conducted in an environment strongly permeated by generosity. As altruity presupposes a rational and methodical approach, at every level of reflection and action, it obliges the field actors who practice it to become informed, to inform others, and to open themselves up to constructive criticism in order to obtain validation. These are the very principles that presided the creation of FACTS Reports, where the results are published after peer review. As noted earlier, if altruity implies a duty to inform oneself, there must also be a corresponding right: the right to information (MA, ch.8). This is not just a theoretical freedom, or an absence of censorship. It requires that information be available and accessible in practice. In this respect, the creation of FACTS Reports is also a step in the direction of the right to information which field actors are supposed to enjoy.

4 Conclusion

The concept of altruity structures the debate in two ways. At the philosophical level, it provides the framework for an argument that underpins a theory of individual responsibility as well as a theory of justice. At the practical level, it implies the implementation of a method in which rationality, knowledge and debate are the foundations of reflection and action. The concept of altruity is crucial in many different fields. In political philosophy, it leads to the idea of rebuilding liberalism as “altruistic liberalism” (MA, ch.11). In economics, it is becoming essential to integrate it into whole segments of economic theory (MA, ch.7), as H. Defalvard (2011a & b) has sought to do. It leads, notably, to the ethical evaluation of the externalities associated with economic decisions and phenomena (MA ch.7).

With specific reference to the fight against poverty, the concept of altruity provides a moral framework that justifies, supports and extends the fight, as a key question of social justice at the local, national and international scale. It also provides a practical method for approaching the problems of poverty, which usefully stresses rationality, knowledge and validation through discussion. Herein lies one of the original features of the aforementioned FACTS Initiative, whose link to science

(embodied in the acronym FACTS = Field ACTION Science) comes as no surprise, because the methodology it proposes for field action is analogous to the scientific method.

Donations, markets and regulations are three pillars of the fight against poverty. Altruity plays a role in all three. It clarifies the question of gift-giving relative to the exercise of generosity or the expectation of a counter-gift. And although this point has not been covered, altruity is clearly involved in the design and adoption of regulations. It questions the economic workings of markets, and can help in formalizing and promoting the social and solidarity-based economy. Finally, it contains a fourth dimension. In its implementation, it constitutes a method that promotes knowledge-based action validated by peer review. For all of these reasons, the concept of altruity emerges clearly as one of the keys to the fight against poverty.

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²FACTS Reports is a free, open-access, electronic platform, for publishing innovative results obtained from fieldwork, in a replicable form, and after peer review by other field actors. This is only the first stage, albeit a significant one, in the FACTS Initiative which seeks, more generally, to facilitate communication between field actors, to help them structure their communities, and to develop a culture of evidence-based action. A welcome side effect is that it affords the actors in question a degree of well-deserved recognition, which has often been singularly lacking (cf. Kourilsky et al., 2009, founding text of the FACTS Initiative).