

# PHILOSOPHER'S COLUMN

## Humanism and Caring for Others

There is a strain of contemporary humanism that morally strangles itself by worshipping the virtues of intelligence. It tells us that only intelligence really counts and that, when we lack sufficient and reliable evidence, we ought to suspend belief. Failing to distinguish between believing and knowing, between the need for epistemological integrity and the need to live well, these humanists typically promote a revolving moral pluralism that is balefully vague. It's one thing to reject any permanently fixed moral or political values. It's another to refuse to decide what core characteristics are wanted in both the human center and the institutional boundary and, thereby, refuse to make any durable commitment to caring for others. The fierce combination of both is corrosive and often leads to what may be called *moral chameleonism*.

These considerations appear to dispose of the difficulties mentioned. Yet, I do not wish to contribute to the kind of intellectual-bashing that threatens to return us to the Dark Ages. Intelligence is more than a good; it is a primary good. Intelligence—especially when understood as the combination of knowledge, receptivity to knowledge, and capacity for problem-solving—is worthy of our admiration, if not our love. But intelligence is not enough.

Humanism must also care about caring for people. And I don't mean "care about" in the wishy-washy sense of merely having inert concern about the welfare of other human beings. Admittedly, being inertly concerned is better than being indifferent or cruel. But what really counts is whether there is active concern, whether this feeling is transmuted into the gold metal of helping those in actual need. For the heart of caring lies not merely in feeling disposed to act but in the way we actually connect this feeling with other lives and act

beneficently.

The importance of intelligence and caring is stressed because the evidence indicates that these core characteristics are necessary to produce and maintain a society in which people attain the most. That is to say, intelligence and caring are primary goods because, when properly nurtured, they allow for the fullest development of all important potentials of all of society's citizens.

Some humanists may object and say that this doctrine is self-refuting and lapses into an impossible altruism. These charges are mistaken. First, there is a difference between humanism and altruistic humanism. Humanism is the system of thought and action that makes the welfare of humanity the measure and end of all moral and political endeavors. As such it is, almost by definition, committed to caring in some real sense for the welfare of the whole community. Altruistic humanism differs in that it adds a *prima facie* obligation to act kindly, an obligation which becomes more stringent when others are faced with deadly peril but which is not limited to such dire need of help.

Second, because we as humanists respect and wish to preserve the autonomy and self-esteem of other human beings, and because indiscriminating beneficence may humiliate or encourage them to be less self-helpful than they would otherwise be, we do not legislate that humans must *always* be helpful to other humans.

Third, caring for others is not self-refuting in the way extreme altruism is. In other words, caring for others is rational because we are required neither to sacrifice to the point of death (or even close to it) nor to enrich our fellow humans. We are only required to maintain life, to live more simply in order that others may live and have equal opportunity to prosper.

Fourth, humanism is not the same as impoverished Aristotelian individualism. We do not maintain that caring for the unworthy is evil. Nor do we blindly insist that only individuals can have obligations. Among other things, this means that we, in good sense, can discuss our society's obligation to protect human beings against the basic vicissitudes of life as well as its obligation to be actively concerned about protecting and enhancing the welfare of its citizens on levels higher than that of subsistence and protection against unjust assault. Not only can these things be rationally discussed but, when we enter the political arena, there is a method of providing social coherence and mediating social disagreements. An enlightened humanism thus recognizes that, although it is time-consuming and untidy, caring for others and promoting a high degree of social participation in decision-making and matters of public welfare go hand-in-hand.

Finally, caring for others is not tantamount to loving each and every human being. Humanism inexorably requires not universal love but that our interests shall not be limited to our kin or immediate community. Our interests, our range of caring, must embrace the whole community of beings with whom we can come into immediate or mediate sentient relation. It must reach, however vaguely, beyond the present epoch and consider future generations. And even if we decide not to assign all sentient beings or future generations equal moral standing, at least we have included them in the scope of our compassion. [M]

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