

ON LEAVING SPACE FOR ALTRUISM

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It is sometimes argued that certain policies, institutions or social structures ('practices' from here on out) fail to *leave space for altruism*, and that this renders them sufficiently morally objectionable to provide a presumptive case for political intervention—e.g., for making such practices illegal. Such space for altruism (SFA) arguments are offered from a surprising variety of political stances. For example, some towards the right argue against the welfare state on grounds that requiring citizens to give to the poor (via taxation) removes opportunities to act altruistically or charitably.² Others, typically from the left, argue against offering financial incentives in exchange for blood, blood plasma, kidneys or bone marrow on the grounds that the offer of compensation can crowd out altruistic donation and so *de facto* removes, or at least disincentivizes, a space for altruism.³

Unfortunately, we have found no clear account of the value of spaces for altruism in the literature. The reason, it seems, is that while SFA arguments employ rhetoric suggesting that they are meant to function independently, they typically appear in conjunction with assumptions suggesting that promoting altruism goes hand-in-hand with promoting other values. For example, John Keown argues against paid plasma donation on the grounds that unpaid donation “promotes altruism and social solidarity.”⁴ It is not hard to see why Keown wouldn't bother explaining why this is a good thing, given that he took it not to be in competition with anything else of value: he is explicit that he believes demand would be relatively easy to meet in a purely unpaid system, and even raises concerns that paid plasma would crowd out unpaid plasma, appealing to Titmuss' arguments in *The Gift Relationship* and

¹ Authors listed alphabetically; authorship shared equally.

² See, e.g., Beito, *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State*.

³ See, e.g., Titmuss, *The Gift Relationship*. During the debate in Canada over a Senate Bill to ban commercial paid plasma operations, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union issued a press release to this effect as well. Warren “Smokey” Thomas, president of the union, was quoted worrying about “the societal aspects of blood-for-money”: “Donating blood is one of the most common forms of pure altruism. We give our blood to save the health or life of someone who, most often, is a total stranger. When blood donation is seen as a matter of dollars and cents, instead of a free gift of life, yet another societal good is sacrificed to the god of profit.” Press release, “OPSEU endorses Wallin bill to end blood-for-pay,” OPSEU Blood Services and Diagnostics, June 1, 2018, available at <https://opseu.org/news/opseu-endorses-wallin-bill-to-end-blood-for-pay/17568/>, accessed Feb. 2, 2021.

⁴ Keown, “The Gift of Blood in Europe,” p. 96.

supporting arguments from Peter Singer.⁵ (Note that, given his utilitarianism, Singer would presumably not accept any SFA—or other—argument against a welfare-promoting practice.) Unfortunately, it has become increasingly clear that these assumptions are unfounded: no country in the world meets the demand for plasma-based products without paying for plasma (directly or indirectly).⁶ (And, we add needlessly, no country in the world successfully supports its poor through charity alone.) Accordingly, our goal is to consider whether SFA arguments have any legs once thoroughly divorced from the attractive, but ultimately unfounded, idea that introducing non-altruistic incentives is typically unnecessary or even counterproductive. Our conclusion is that SFA arguments against welfare-promoting practices fail, or at least face serious objections.

1. SFA Arguments

We understand ‘space for altruism’ as roughly synonymous with ‘opportunity for action motivated by exclusively other-regarding considerations’. SFA arguments concern the potential impact of certain practices on such opportunities. Consider:

Patricia is living on a fairly tight budget but has always made room in that budget for charitable giving. At the moment, she can afford to give 5% of her pre-tax income to the poor. Patricia’s state, however, is considering a welfare program that would raise Patricia’s tax rate by 5%.

If the welfare program is instituted, then Patricia will still be able to benefit the poor through her mandatory contributions to the state welfare program, but she will have lost the opportunity to do so of her own volition, and thus at least arguably to do so motivated by exclusively other-regarding considerations.⁷

Cases like Patricia’s give our opponents the strongest case, since a space for altruism has arguably been eliminated. But it is worth noting that actual SFA

⁵ Singer, “Altruism and Commerce.”

⁶ Canadian Blood Services, for example, puts this bluntly: “As self-sufficiency is not operationally or economically feasible in a volunteer, non-remunerated model, Canadian Blood Services strives to maintain a sufficiency of 30% for [immune globulin].” For the rest, Canada depends on imports of immune globulin made with paid plasma. See Canadian Blood Services, “Management Analysis,” at p. 43.

⁷ Perhaps it is psychologically possible for Patricia to be not at all worried about being audited and pay her taxes entirely out of an other-regarding sense of civic duty. In that case, one might argue that by instituting the tax we have simply replaced one space for altruism with another. It should be obvious, however, that those who raise such concerns SFA arguments against such taxation schemes are not at all likely to be moved by this suggestion.

arguments are frequently much less clear cut. Consider, for example, the argument against compensated plasma. No one has proposed that paid plasma collections *replace* unpaid plasma collections. If you want to give plasma purely for other-regarding reasons, you can simply donate rather than sell. Any objection here must therefore be not to the elimination of opportunities to act altruistically, but rather to the introduction of other motivations that might “crowd out” altruistic ones.

Both economists and psychologists have significant literatures on this kind of crowding. For psychologists, the crowding phenomenon is sometimes understood through the mechanism of the “overjustification effect.” This concerns cases where an offer meant to incentivize action decreases intrinsic motivation. Some take this as a symptom of our prizing autonomous decision-making, leading us to respond negatively to threats and at least some offers.

Alternative proposed mechanisms for crowding include framing and signaling. Framing suggests that the problem is a result of how we come to reason about a situation as a consequence of its being “framed” in a particular way. An offer of money functions as a frame that may result in our reasoning in accordance with cost-benefit analysis—rather than in terms of what we owe, what our duties and obligations are, and so on—and so may make us more likely to sell our plasma than to donate it.

The signaling version suggests that the problem is a conflict between the public meaning and our private understanding of our actions. We mean to do—and to signal—something altruistic, but the availability of compensation undercuts (or “muddies”) that signal, even if we ourselves are not eligible for compensation; the mere fact that others are being compensated for the same actions may be enough to undermine the relevant communicative function.⁸

Here, the worry isn’t that compensated plasma will literally prevent us from giving out of the goodness of our hearts, but that it will make us less likely to donate, alter our motives for doing so or make those motives more difficult to communicate. It should be clear that any such concerns would apply at least as well to cases like Patricia’s where the space for altruism is actually eliminated.

II. Problems with SFA Arguments

Problems of Weight

What, if anything, undergirds the value of spaces for altruism? Whether the value in question is intrinsic or extrinsic, our first concern is the same: it seems unlikely that the relevant value would be *weighty* enough to create even a presumptive case for

⁸ For a recent overview of these mechanisms, see Gold, “The Limits of Commodification Arguments.” See also Chapter 12 of Brennan and Jaworski, *Markets without Limits*.

prohibition or elimination of the practices in question. Recall that we are addressing arguments against practices that are acknowledged to increase net welfare. Yet welfare is widely regarded as one, if not the most, important value in determining public policy (except, perhaps, for liberty or autonomy, which we take not to be plausible grounds for the value of altruism⁹).

In the specific cases we've mentioned, welfare programs and blood plasma, this concern is arguably bolstered by the fact that the welfare at stake is both significant and redounds to the worst off. Welfare programs are meant to bring the poorest members of society up (or at least closer) to some reasonable standard of living, one often significantly above their current circumstances. And while even the otherwise advantaged may receive blood plasma, the fact that they often need it to save their lives means that the potential welfare gain is, again, significant. Surely the dying count amongst the worst off.

Of course, welfare may sometimes lose out to other values, so this is not a blanket objection to SFA arguments. But it also does not seem to be a coincidence that the two cases we've mentioned have the weight of welfare strongly on their side. Spaces for altruism exist where there are opportunities to act for other-regarding considerations. Most—some might say all—other-regarding considerations concern others' welfare. And especially when it comes to public policy, we can expect people to focus on protecting spaces for altruism that are *significant*. Together, these points suggest that most SFA arguments will seek to protect opportunities to have an impact on others' welfare that are significant—either in the sense that the impact is large, or that it applies where there is most need. If a welfare-promoting practice impacts such opportunities, the presumptive explanation is that the practice is having precisely the significant impact its opponents wish to reserve for altruistic action.

Problems of Scope

Let us suppose that whatever grounds the value of spaces for altruism sometimes outweighs the value of welfare. Even so, it does not follow that any SFA argument is successful. To see why, it will be useful to distinguish different senses in which one might take spaces for altruism to be valuable. Obviously there are many; for the sake of simplicity we focus on three, mapping roughly onto the common triad of virtue theoretic, deontological and consequentialist frameworks in normative ethics. First, one might understand the claim that spaces for altruism are valuable as the claim that

⁹ One might take the position, say, that certain spaces for altruism are important because altruistic giving is more free than giving as part of a taxation scheme. But it should be clear that here, the altruism isn't really doing any work; the claim is surely just that doing *anything* is more free when it is not part of a taxation scheme.

such spaces allow for the development or exercise of some important virtue.¹⁰ Second, one might understand it as the claim that such spaces are important for the fulfillment of some moral duty. Third, one might understand it as the claim that the existence of spaces for altruism always or generally has good consequences.

Begin with the virtue theoretic reading. First, suppose SFA arguments rely on the importance of a general virtue of *being altruistic*. It seems doubtful on this view that the importance of any particular space for altruism would be significant, even if possessing this virtue requires performing altruistic actions. We have many opportunities to act altruistically, and such opportunities appear to be fungible. Indeed, even Patricia, who loses all ability to give away resources, surely has opportunities to perform altruistic actions. This is for the simple reason that not all altruism requires resource transfer. Perhaps Patricia can volunteer at a soup kitchen in her spare time. Perhaps she can be kind to a neighbor. Perhaps she can give someone a hug. And, of course, if it is possible to possess the relevant virtue without taking altruistic action, there may be even more relevant opportunities.

The champion of some particular SFA argument might deny the fungibility of these opportunities and instead maintain that some particular space for altruism is necessary for the possession of some more particular virtue. But it is hard to imagine what virtue this would be in the cases under consideration—what virtue can be developed or exercised only through the free donation of plasma or the charitable giving *of resources in particular*.

Similar points apply to the deontological reading. Surely any duty to act altruistically would be an imperfect one; morality does not require us to be altruistic in all ways at all times, not even with respect to (say) charitable giving or plasma donation. If the relevant duty is to act altruistically in *some* way, then again, so long as there are other opportunities for altruism, eliminating any particular space for altruism—especially for a good cause—would not be wrongful.¹¹

Suppose, though, that we accept the already implausibly strong view that there is a duty to maximize one's altruistic behavior. Even at this extreme, SFA arguments are vulnerable. For eliminating some specific space for altruism would not be wrongful if it introduced a new space for altruism or the eliminated space were

¹⁰ In the literature on the problem of evil, for example, some suggest that opportunities for altruism or beneficence contribute to “soul-making,” or the cultivation and expression of good character. See, e.g., Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*.

¹¹ David Boonin points out that this might justify a sort of “Lockean proviso”: in eliminating any given space for altruism, we must ensure that we leave enough and as good opportunities for other-regarding action. We are happy to accept this possibility; our position is that no actual SFA arguments show this proviso to be violated, and that there are good reasons to believe none will, given that opportunities for altruism are varied and numerous (unlike, say, fertile land).

replaced by others that would not otherwise be available. For example, payment for plasma may remove one specific opportunity for altruism—plasma donation—it simultaneously creates a new opportunity for altruism by giving the seller money which could be spent on charitable giving.

Again as in the virtue theoretical case, the champion of some particular SFA argument might claim that there is a particular imperfect duty—say, to give money to charity or to donate plasma—that explains the value of spaces for altruism. But the idea that there is a duty to donate *resources* is as implausible as the idea that there is some virtue that can only be developed or exercised through such action.

An obvious additional worry is that if there is such a duty, then the poor consistently fail in their duties. One might reply that the duty is to give *surplus* resources to charity. But if this is the case, Patricia no longer fails in her duty; once the tax is implemented, she *has* no surplus resources to give. One might try to get around this by arguing that there is a duty to ensure that Patricia has surplus resources to give. But we can see no plausible motivation for such a claim.

An imperfect duty to donate plasma is more plausible. But here we find a new problem, one that applies to the duty of monetary charity as well: it is not obvious what the implications are for the existence of a plasma market. Assume there is a duty to donate plasma. And even assume, in our opponents' favor, that it is wrong to demand to be compensated for acting in accordance with one's duty.¹² Even given all this, it is not obvious what we should do given that many people in fact do not donate plasma, and that we have good reason to believe we would have insufficient plasma to meet the needs of patients without at least some countries' permitting payment. On the one hand, if we permit plasma markets, we expect to increase welfare (through increased plasma supply) but we potentially incentivize wrongdoing.¹³ It seems to us quite plausible that considerations of welfare win out here. Suppose, by analogy, that there is a duty to care for the elderly without compensation. If not enough people fulfill this duty of care, surely it is better to offer incentives. Suppose there is a duty to care for the sick without compensation. Again, if not enough people meet this duty, it seems right to provide a salary to nurses and doctors.

Finally, there is the consequentialist reading, on which spaces for altruism are valuable because they produce good consequences. Here, we acknowledge that if appropriately weighty non-welfare considerations can be identified, SFA arguments

¹² For relevant discussion see Wells, "Markets with Some Limits."

¹³ How much wrongdoing we incentivize depends on whether it is worse to fail to donate plasma or to do so but demand compensation. If the former is worse, then we only incentivize the wrongdoing of those who would have done it for free but for the opportunity to be paid. If the latter is worse, then we incentivize the wrongdoing of everyone who pays for plasma. We find the latter hard to believe, but will say no more against it here.

might be successful. But we remain dubious about this possibility, and through the remainder of this section we hope to instill or reinforce similar doubts in our reader.

More Problems of Weight

The claim under scrutiny is that there is some valuable feature of states of affairs that is at least typically promoted by altruistic actions of a particular kind, and which is weightier than relevant considerations of welfare. Here we offer a kind of “reversal test”¹⁴: given classical consequentialism, it would seem to follow that, if it were an option, we should harm some people in order to provide others with opportunities for acting altruistically. We doubt anyone would seriously suggest that we do this.

Non-(classical-)consequentialists might object that the independent wrongness of harm acts as a thumb on the scales. But we can get the same result without an agent. Suppose, for instance, that a small asteroid is headed towards Earth. The asteroid is covered in an amazing substance that functions as a substitute for blood plasma for transfusions as well as for the manufacture of plasma protein products, and that reproduces at a sufficient rate to meet all foreseeable needs. We are deeply suspicious of the idea that we have *any* reason to divert this asteroid.¹⁵ But surely, even if such a reason exists, it is far too weak to outweigh the considerations that favor allowing the asteroid to land. Or, consider the perhaps even more absurd implication that if I can benefit someone I care deeply about, I have a reason to make sure someone less invested in their welfare benefits them instead, since that person would be acting altruistically while I might be acting at least partly from selfish motives. (One could respond that the value is the same so long as there is *some* altruistic motive, but this would strengthen the point that market transactions, like selling plasma, can be altruistic.)

At this point, one might object as follows: True, there would be no weighty reason to move away from a world of very high welfare. And true, there would be no weighty reason not to move *to* a world of very high welfare. But it doesn’t follow that there is no weighty reason not to move *towards* such a world, given that we won’t get there. The idea here is that given the need for altruism in *this* world, it is more important that we retain or provide spaces for it than it would be if we were at or close to maximum welfare. The trouble is that this seems to return to the idea that

¹⁴ For the reversal test see, e.g., Bostrom and Ord, “The Reversal Test: Eliminating Status Quo Bias in Applied Ethics.”

¹⁵ Another impressive feature of this asteroid is that it is coming in for a smooth landing in an empty field, so there are no other concerns, such as about collateral damage, that might speak in favor of diverting it.

altruism is instrumentally valuable, a position subject to all the same concerns about weight already raised.

Given the above arguments, we conclude that SFA arguments against welfare-promoting practices fail, or at least face serious objections. Spaces for altruism are arguably valuable insofar as they promote welfare. But any further value is at least typically outweighed by the welfare benefits such practices are expected to create. This is especially so given that the spaces for altruism the relevant practices eliminate still leave—or even create—many other spaces for altruism, both resource-focused (in the actual world) and non-resource-focused (in both the actual and arguably even ideal worlds).

III. Concluding Remarks: Debunking Explanations

Before concluding, we want to offer two, related, partial debunking explanations for the appeal of SFA arguments beyond the one alluded to in the introduction: the assumption that spaces for altruism and other values go hand-in-hand.

Repugnant Markets

We first want to consider why SFA arguments are popular in the context of certain markets. Our view is that such arguments are ultimately motivated by independent concerns about markets in the particular goods in question. Consider, for example, objections to a market in blood plasma. It is notable that SFA arguments only seem to be raised with respect to markets in goods, like this, where people have independent concerns about the good's being marketed. By contrast, no one has ever argued that markets in, say, *food* are objectionable because they fail to leave space for altruism. Yet, clearly, if there were no market in food, far more opportunities for altruism would be available! Or, if that is too radical, consider the market in apples. One way to create a space for altruism is to prohibit the selling of apples. If we did that, the only way you could bake an apple pie would be to grow your own apples or rely on the kindness of those with apples to give you some. We suspect no one thinks that this is a good idea.

One might vindicate this asymmetry by identifying some relationship between the value of the resources in question, such as blood plasma, and the value of spaces for altruism. But as already discussed, even if there is some connection—e.g., via an imperfect duty to donate plasma—the SFA arguments are weak.

One might instead argue that the asymmetry has to do with the distinction between protecting and creating spaces for altruism. We already have a market in food, after all. But this has little probative force. First, people use SFA arguments to defend *new* laws banning compensation in jurisdictions where that practice is currently legal. Second, we can easily imagine development of novel nutritional

substances for which there is as yet no market. We doubt that anyone would object to their being marketed on grounds that this would remove a space for altruism.

Finally, one might object that the explanation for the absence of such arguments about food markets stems from the fact that, unlike in the case of plasma, there would not be enough food to go around without market inducements to produce more. It costs money to produce food; it costs nothing (above maintenance of one's life, which one is presumably already willing to pay) to produce plasma.

The first problem with this line of thought is that it is not clear that there is any principled distinction between being paid to produce something and being paid to transfer it to others. All this seems to suggest is that the altruism required to replace the food market is *greater* than that required to replace the blood plasma market, because people have to be altruistic in their production as well as their transfer of the good. This matters practically, of course, in terms of whether we can *expect* to get as much from altruism as we would from the market. But since we are already accepting that we don't get enough from altruism in the plasma case, it is hard to see why this would make a principled difference.

Second, this argument rests on an illicit assumption that our only options are failing to protect spaces for altruism by allowing markets or protecting spaces for altruism by disallowing markets. But this is not the case. For example, in the case of food, we could protect spaces for altruism by requiring producers to sell food *at cost*. This would leave essentially the same space for altruism as exists for blood plasma—altruism would be needed for transfer but not for production. Yet no one has ever made such an argument. Nor, we feel confident, would they, even with respect to novel nutritional substances for which there is as yet no market. Again, we take this as evidence that space for altruism objections are not purely motivated by concerns for the value of altruism, but rather are motivated or at least exacerbated by objections to markets in particular goods.

Altruism Amongst the Angels

Finally, consider a potential objection to the claim that altruistic action is intrinsically valuable. It is implausible, the objection goes, that there is *ipso facto* something bad about a world in which everyone is as well off as they can be. Certainly, one might think that something other than welfare matters, and thus that even in a world where everyone is as well off as they can be, other things can be bad. But the claim here is much stronger; it is that a world in which everyone is as well off as they possibly can be is *therefore* bad because there are no opportunities for beneficence. If Quincy is as well off as he can be, Patricia can't improve Quincy's well-being through altruistic action, and there is something bad about this.

This may make us feel torn. On the one hand, a world without altruism seems sad. On the other hand, it is hard to believe there is anything bad *per se* about a world where everyone is as well off as possible. Thankfully, we believe there is a way to have our intuitive cake and eat it, too. To do so, we need only remind ourselves that not all welfare boosts come from the acquisition of resources. Indeed, perhaps one source of welfare is *being the recipient of altruism*.¹⁶ If that's the case, then far from entailing the absence of altruism, it may be that imagining a world of maximum welfare *requires* imagining a world with *lots* of altruism. It just may be that that's not a world where the altruism comes in the form of resources, because everyone already has enough of those. Maybe there are just a lot of hugs.

We suspect that this idea that altruism is *part* of a world of maximum welfare may play a role in motivating SFA arguments. But note that, as just discussed, it also seems to rely explicitly on the idea that there will always be resource-independent spaces for altruism. For surely a world in which everyone has as much "stuff" as they need is not a world that is *ipso facto* bad in some way. Yet if such resource-independent spaces for altruism exist, this only serves to bolster our point that the spaces protected by prohibitions on blood plasma markets (etc.) are redundant.

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¹⁶ Of course, being altruistic might also contribute to the agent's well-being, though we set this aside here to avoid any complications concerning this point's impact on the idea of altruism's involving purely other-regarding considerations.

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