

Charity and Altruism: Rational Requirements for Action

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Abstract

This paper discusses the possibility of altruism based on the linguistic, and then practical notion of charity, to distinguish it from psychological and ethical selfishness. My starting hypothesis is, as Thomas Nagel argued, that altruism could be interpreted as a rational requirement for action. This hypothesis arises from a specific approach in analytical philosophy to the problem of explaining action, which combines the concepts of charity and altruism in a single interpretative framework about others. My aim is to present a common thread linking the thought of Willard Van Orman Quine, Donald Davidson and Thomas Nagel, thus contributing to a possible new interpretation of altruism as something that is distinct from ethical and psychological egoism, and which may be useful for experimental psychology. To achieve my objective, I will develop the analysis of the two concepts mentioned above.

Keywords: Altruism, Charity principle, Intention, Practical reasoning.

1. Introduction

In the last few years, there has been a growing philosophical interest in the problem of altruism and its definition (see Stich and Walmsley 2020, and Batson 2011). Recently, most of the research in this field has been devoted to giving a definition that would respect the norms of economic rationality and the traditional tendency towards expected utility by interpreting altruism as psychological and ethical selfishness. Accordingly, on the one hand the discussion has been brought into the moral, and practical realms, and, on the other, an analysis of the concept has been made in terms of empathy and recent neuroscientific research (see Batson 2012, 2015, and Schramme 2017).

However, in my opinion these two approaches seem to have limitations: the first stance does not allow for a real distinction between selfishness and altruism, thus implying the impossibility of the latter's autonomous existence; while the other leaves out the motivating aspects of the concept, putting it in second place to empathy and recent neuroscientific research.

The question is therefore: is there a third way? My hypothesis is affirmative and concerns Thomas Nagel's conception of altruism as a rational requirement. This hypothesis is based on a specific problematic in the philosophy of action and philosophy of language, developed first by Willard Van Orman Quine and later by Donald Davidson: namely, the interpretative charity principle. The possibility of combining charity and altruism in a single interpretative conceptual scheme concerning the other will allow me to distinguish altruism from psychological and ethical egoism and thus give it an autonomous possibility of existence based on the agent's rationality on the one hand and his motivational choices on the other.

Before getting started, however, it is important to stress that our primary concern here is altruism in the Senecan sense (see Seneca 1994). Altruism is defined here as one's disposition towards caring about other people without receiving benefits in exchange. Such a disposition is difficult to define and investigating it leads to epistemic difficulties because it goes against the fundamental norms of economic rationality and the tendency towards expected utility mentioned above (Boca and Scaffidi Abbate 2016). To remedy this problem, many in the traditions of moral philosophy and socio-biology have interpreted altruistic behavior as the result of man's selfish desire to pursue his own personal interests in terms of im-material benefits, for instance self-realization and gratification. In this sense, altruistic behavior seems to be a sort of psychological and ethical selfishness (Feinberg 1978). This form of selfishness can be expressed in the thesis that all human action is motivated by self-interest. In brief, in helping others we do something useful as a means to our own benefit. This means that we do not really care about others; in other words that altruism does not exist. The normative counterpart of psychological selfishness is called ethical selfishness (McConnell 1978), which holds that one ought to have no direct concern with the good of others.

I believe that we can criticize the interpretation of altruism in terms of psychological and ethical selfishness, firstly because it reduces altruism to a kind of egoism, and secondly because it does not take into consideration the distinctions between self-regulated behavior, goal-oriented behavior, and selfishness within a rational deliberative process, like a desire belief model (Davidson 1963) or a belief desire intention model (Bratman 1987; Bratman 1990).

Here I would like to focus briefly on what altruism is in order to understand why it is important in the field of action theory and in the interpretation of others. Altruism is behavior motivated by a desire to benefit people other than oneself, setting the good of others as the goal of our own actions (see Badhwar 1993). This definition seems to take into account the typical strategy of instrumental rationality and awareness of the existence of the other and his mental processes in the coordination and planning of our actions. In the first part of this paper I articulate the charity principle in light of instrumental rationality in order to show that this concept is involved in Nagel's theory of altruism. In the second part of the paper I draw up a hypothesis about the process of understanding and explaining an altruistic action by reinterpreting the concept within a rationalist model. I propose to differentiate the roles played by intentions during practical reasoning, so as to be able to identify the condition that defines when an individual is capable of altruistic reasoning.

Indeed, it seems necessary to distinguish between egoistic and self-regulated reasoning, as the latter is oriented towards one's goals. It also seems necessary to take into consideration which plans in reasoning lead to an action, in order to distinguish between the final goal and the functional elements leading to it.

In conclusion, the connection between the charity principle and the possibility of altruism will underline the importance of organizing a model to explain and understand action based on the coordination of the functions of its elements.

2. From Linguistic Interpretation to Behavioral Understanding

To understand how the principle of charity is implicated in Thomas Nagel's analysis of the possibility of altruism, it is necessary to identify the development that this principle has had in fulfilling the role of a methodological constraint with regard to both linguistic interpretation and the understanding of human behavior.

It is Quine who, in his theory of translation, outlines the principle of charity as a useful methodological criterion. According to this criterion, before beginning a translation process, it should be considered that the subject to be interpreted possesses a set of propositional attitudes that are no different from those possessed by the interpreter. In *Word and Object* Quine clearly expresses that in the process of translating logical connectives it is necessary to call into question the principle of charity in order to avoid incurring translation that would impute a form of illogicality to the native, such as 'p and non-p'. Such translations would in fact make the native's own understanding difficult, as it encounters a structurally unintelligible language. Quine writes:

To take the extreme case, let us suppose that certain natives are said to accept as true certain sentences translatable in the form 'p and not p'. Now this claim is absurd under our semantic criteria. And, not to be dogmatic about them, what criteria might one prefer? Wanton translation can make natives sound as queer as one pleases. Better translation imposes our logic upon them, and would beg the question of prelogicality if there were a question to beg (Quine 1960: 53).

This imposition of our logic on the native is nothing more than the assumption of the principle of charity, whereby the probability of a mistranslation by the interpreter is greater than the attribution of contradictory beliefs to the interpreted. Attributing false beliefs to the native would thus appear to be nothing more than a blatant mistranslation or an obvious disagreement between interpreter and native about the meaning and usage of certain expressions. In short, "one's interlocutor's silliness, beyond a certain point, is less likely than bad translation—or, in the domestic case, linguistic divergence" (Quine 1960: 54). Interpretive charity therefore consists, according to Quine, in the assumption of skepticism with respect to translations that attribute absurd beliefs to the native (Quine 1960: 63).

What can be deduced from the Quinean thesis is that the interpretation of others—of their language—in the specific case of an indigenous population) is guided by a methodological criterion that is, so to speak, a presupposition of interpretive rationality, which assumes a similarity between us and the other regarding his propositional attitudes. In practice, we attempt to reinterpret beliefs and dispositions that are extremely different from our own on the basis of an agreement of logical similarity.

The Quinean thesis has had a significant influence on the thought of Donald Davidson,¹ who has provided a strong interpretation of the principle of charity by

¹ The Principle of Charity has been strongly criticized because of the notion of similarity among human beings it presupposes, i.e. from the interpreter's point of view (Ross, 1985:

applying it to cases of explication and understanding of both verbal utterances and, more importantly, behavior. The point on which Davidson primarily focuses is the revelation of a set of coherent and true beliefs in the behavior—but also in the linguistic utterances—of an individual. If the interpreter fails to detect such coherence, then there is no possibility of defining that individual as rational, so he probably does not believe or state anything (Davidson 1973:137). This means that in order to understand others, we must consider them as rational—“correct”, in Davidson’s terminology—thereby imposing the principle of charity (Davidson 1974a: 197). Although in Davidson the principle of charity continues to reflect the methodological constraint whereby interpretation is based on an assumption of similarity between interpreter and interpreted founded on the implicit and intersubjective consistency of the belief structure, there is a new and fundamental point on which he insists: an agreement about the rationality of beliefs.

In this way, Davidson makes the principle of charity coincide with the presupposition that interpreter and interpreted share a vast number of beliefs—and propositional attitudes—that allow for a form of agreement—with useful relevant variations—even about the truth judgment.

What Davidson emphasizes, and what seems useful for the purposes of this article, is that a constraint such as charity does indeed impose logical consistency as a requirement of rationality, according to which the interpreted must be held to be logically consistent, but above all that the beliefs attributed to him fulfill the requirement of rationality of beliefs.

Rationality thus becomes as much a normative as a descriptive principle, implicit already in the agentic condition, where being rational means having consistent attitudes in terms of basic principles, such as logical inference and continence, shared by anyone who possesses propositional attitudes or acts intentionally (Davidson 1985).

Only through the sharing of these principles is it possible to understand, interpret and explain behavior. Charity, which involves this sharing, necessarily implies rationality.

500 and Hacking, 1986: 149). In responding to this objection, I think we have to take into consideration Robert Nozick account. Antonio Rainone writes in his book *La riscoperta dell'empatia* (Rainone 2005) that this normative methodological principle is in part similar to *Einfühlung*, as Robert Nozick had argued in *Philosophical Explanations*, where, in reference to Quine’s radical translation and the meaning theory of Davidson, he noted that “recently, theories of translating the utterance of others, of ascribing beliefs and propositional attitudes to them, have held that some “principle of charity” should be satisfied—the beliefs and utterances are interpreted so as to be rational. [...]. These theories utilize the analogy of the other to you—he is rational also, as you are—yet they do not leave a large place for understanding via imaginative projection, substituting instead elaborate theoretical constraints on hypotheses” (Nozick 1981: 750).

As Rainone writes, we can agree or disagree with Nozick, according to whom the application of charity does not involve a form of imaginative projection onto the other, by leading the interpretation back to a type of explanation by analogy, thus “normalizing” the empathic procedure (Rainone 2023: 11). The close connection of the principle of charity with interpretation by analogy as well as with rationality does not seem to preclude the possibility that it constitutes a more up-to-date formulation of the epistemic theory of *Einfühlung*. Therefore, only after a step of recognition of the other might it be possible to veer toward what we might call an empathic approach that complements the interpretive methodology.

The close link between rationality, charity, interpretation and agentivity is precisely what I intend to highlight in the Davidsonian analysis, because in my opinion it is possible to detect some similarity in Nagel's arguments. Rationality is thus implicit in the assumption of similarity. This relationship is made explicit in a passage in *Psychology as Philosophy*, where Davidson states that: "The constitutive force in the realm of behaviour derives from the need to view others, nearly enough, as like ourselves. As long as it is behaviour and not something else we want to explain and describe, we must warp the evidence to fit this frame" (Davidson 1974b: 196).

The similarity aspect is highlighted to an even greater extent by Davidson in relation to the explanation of action, in a passage in *Problems in the Explanation of Action* from 1987:

The point to emphasize is not that we as explainers and observers employ our norms in understanding the actions of others; in some sense we employ our norms whatever we study. The point is rather that in explaining action we are identifying the phenomena to be explained, and the phenomena that do the explaining, as directly answering to our own norms; reason-explanations make others intelligible to us only to the extent that we can recognize something like our own reasoning powers at work. It would be a mistake to suppose that this is merely a sign of lack of imagination, or perhaps of soft-heartedness. It is a central, and irreplaceable, feature of the intentional (Davidson 1987: 114-15; my italics).

What The italics seem to be missing in the two preceding quotations is, in my view, on the one hand the expression of the relation of implication between rationality and similarity and, on the other, the point of conjunction between the Davidsonian and Nagelian arguments. Before analyzing Nagel's thesis regarding the possibility of altruism, it is necessary to specify what Davidson expresses through this reformulation of the principle of charity and how the identification of similarity is situated in a rationalist analysis of the explanation of intentional action. In order to understand and explain the actions of others, it is necessary to rely on an assumption of similarity between agent and interpreter; a similarity that is based on an agreement of the internal coherence of the intentional structure of both and the mode of reasoning. Understanding and explaining the actions of others means identifying their appropriateness and coherence with respect to desires and beliefs, regardless of—and thus not limited to—the socio-cultural context in which the other finds himself or herself, or the motivational internalism connected to it.

An important aspect that follows from this argument is that, precisely on the basis of the assumption of similarity between interpreter and agent interpreted, when explaining an action, it can be expected that there will be no major divergences from the point of view of the behavioral pattern, i.e., how interpreter and interpreted would behave. It follows that if the behavior is nothing more than what is intended to be understood and explained, then, even more so, its description must be traced back to shared systems of beliefs and desires and reasoning on the basis of a criterion of reasonableness that attributes a certain plausibility to apparently bizarre actions, bending the evidence to the criteria of a model of instrumental rationality and thus emphasizing through rationalizations the coherence and appropriateness of the action: in a certain sense, the interpreter expects that action. In short, interpretation through rationales makes it possible, by fitting

into a causal model such as the desire-belief model, to show the reasonableness of the behavior to be explained.

If the condition for being an agent is rationality and if a shared system of propositional attitudes is required, then the recognition of the other and his mental states is a direct implication of the rationality requirement.

3. Charity as a Prerequisite for Altruism

Davidson's considerations² about the recognition of the other allow us to advance a parallel with Thomas Nagel's analysis of the possibility of altruism and the appeal to rational constraint that the same philosopher profiles in terms of an explanation of—in this case altruistic—intentional behavior.

In my view, charity finds its counterpart in Nagel's arguments aimed at refuting both psychological and ethical egoism. Indeed, in 1970 Nagel published a book titled *The Possibility of Altruism* in which he rejected both the strong form of psychological egoism, the conception whereby human beings are always motivated by their own legitimate interests, i.e., convenience, even in actions that seem to be as acts of altruism, and its normative counterpart—ethical egoism—which consists in the dictum that one should not have a direct interest in the good of others. Indirect concern, as well as selfish ethical aids, may be justified: the good of others may be instrumental to one's own good, or one may happen to

² Someone may argue that Davidson had partially reoriented his theory of interpretation toward an externalist perspective. Maybe so, but only for the theory of meaning. I think could be interesting to investigate the relationship between the internalism of Davidson's account of action theory and the internalism of meaning theory, but here I would like to focus attention on the specific perspective that Davidson offered regarding practical rationality. Already in *How is Weakness of Will Possible?*, he expressed a particular form of internalism (Davidson 1969: 26). This is evident when one compares it to Bernard Williams' perspective (Williams 1979). Davidson's internalism thesis looks at external reasons—i.e., duties, obligations, moral principles and institutional norms—which cannot lead to action unless they are psychologically internalized; a reason can lead to action only if it becomes part of the conative and deliberative system based on agent practical reasoning. Something similar—as John Searle has noted (Searle 2001)—is implicit in the Davidsonian conception of action and the pro-attitudes from which action apparently originates.

Another aspect—and one that is perhaps more interesting—is the similarity between Davidson's account of action explanation and Williams' account of Methodological Individualism. In defining formal individualism Williams underlined its fundamental principles: consciousness and deliberation. This means that the consciousness of an agent carrying out an intentional action is intimately connected to a previous deliberation. Williams wrote: “[...] deliberative or practical questions are radically first-personal, where that means that they are individually first-personal. That is one of two truths that together constitute the position I shall call ‘formal individualism’. The other is to the effect that what an individual does is often explained by the individual's deliberation, and, to the extent that his or her action is intentional, it can be explained in terms of a deliberation that the individual could have conducted. It follows from the two claims together that intentional action can always be explained by reference to a consciousness which the agent at least could have had and in many cases did have, and which refers to the agent” (Williams 1985: 122). Williams' principles were also endorsed by Davidson. They refer to our idea of human beings as rational individuals who pursue their own ends and are aware of what they are doing and the way to achieve those ends. Like Davidson's account of action explanation, formal individualism does not try to eliminate any reference to social norms and institutions from the explanations of individual behavior.

have a sentimental attachment to others. But in the absence of these contingent relationships with others, there is no reason, according to the ethical egoist, to be concerned about their welfare.

Nagel thus begins his essay by questioning whether someone is actually self-ish—psychologically and ethically—in order to show that altruism is a rational requirement of action. In his thesis he takes a strong position by arguing that in certain circumstances we should help others for their sake, but—and more importantly—that we act irrationally if we do not do. This is evident in the Nagelian analysis through the introduction of a specific rational constraint that is nothing more than “the impersonal point of view”; in short, as rational beings, we are required to look at ourselves and others from this perspective. Nagel writes: “to recognize others fully as persons requires a conception of oneself as identical with a particular, impersonally specifiable inhabitant of the world, among others of a similar nature” (Nagel 1970: 100).

Nagel’s words seem in a sense to have something in common with the idea of similarity set forth first by Quine and then by Davidson: to understand and interpret others’ behavior as altruistic requires a similarity agreement between interpreter and interpreted, where anything that one agent can predicate about himself can similarly be attributed to the other:

So any type of thing which one can significantly assert of oneself—what one is thinking, feeling, or doing—must be significantly ascribable in the same sense to others, whether by themselves in the first person or by a person other than themselves, in the second or third person. If I say of another individual that he is amused, there must be something in what I am saying about him that is identical with what I say on myself in saying ‘I am amused’ (Nagel 1970: 101).

The impersonal point of view seems in a sense to be a methodological presupposition that implies that concept of charity through which I recognize the other as being similar to me and therefore as being no more and no less rational than I am. Also interesting is surely the intersubjective perspective explicated by Nagelian recognition, namely, that similarity is expressed by placing the first person as one in otherness. This implies that the relationship between interpreter and interpreted is a relationship between equals, regardless of who takes the charitable attitude. Even more, it is important to point out that Nagel, by analyzing the impersonal point of view, provides the reasons underlying an altruistic choice that are adequate and consistent with respect to behavior, and does so by inserting precisely that shared rational requirement which is the recognition of the other grounded in the determination of means and ends as fundamental elements of practical reasoning. It follows that altruism is a rational requirement: this means that to the extent that we are rational—recognizing the other as similar to me—we must act altruistically. There are objective reasons for acting altruistically, and as rational beings capable of recognizing others as being similar in degree of rationality to us, we should accord ourselves and others the ability to follow these reasons. Recognizing the reality of other people and the ability to see oneself merely as an individual among others is what makes altruism possible; and it makes it possible by implying a principle of rationality. It should be remembered that Nagel’s rationalist position fits into the debate on motivation: principles of rationality play a primary role in determining our ends and motivation to act; in his thesis he assumes that a form of objectivity must be given through which the

basic principles of a practical rationality can be defined. Rationality relating to altruistic behavior would be guaranteed by the fact that practical reason implies the adoption of an impersonal and therefore neutral point of view. A rational agent must look at all his reasons as if they were timeless and from an impersonal perspective, and these would obligate him, since he is a rational agent. In summary, Nagel defends the idea that a certain class of motives, such as altruistic motives, are based not on desires but on rational considerations. There are two distinct classes of desires: those that are motivated and those that are unmotivated. Motivated desires are those that the agent has through the recognition that there is a reason for pursuing the object of his desire. These include desires that are arrived at, for example, by decision after deliberation; desires for which we can give a rational explanation, which therefore provide us with reasons for acting. And this is where the assumption of Davidsonian-like rationality and agreement is situated: motivating reasons are those considered in Donald Davidson's 1978 theory of intention in light of deliberative critical reasoning that leads to the formulation of an all-out judgment and enshrines an agreement of consistency between reasons for action and behavior (Davidson 1978).

Moreover, it should be emphasized that in this regard Nagel denies that all motivation is basically grounded in desires and seeks to show that there are types of motivation that can be better understood if we think of them as having—additional—rational considerations as their source. With this goal in mind, he offers a theory of prudential motivation as a model through which altruistic motivation can be understood and which provides for the existence of planning, almost as if opening the door to the model of Michael Bratman's Planning Theory.³ In Nagel's theory, reason is the source of motivation, except in the case of unmotivated desires. Someone's judgment that he has a reason to promote his own future well-being commits him, beyond any unmotivated desires he has in the present, to the judgment that he now has a reason to promote this state of affairs. Acceptance of the latter judgment means that an individual is motivated to promote this state of affairs. And when motivation arises in this way, the attribution of a desire to the agent is a consequence of the rational considerations that are motivating it. In light of these considerations, we can specify a little better Nagel's position on the relationship between the impersonal point of view, rationality and altruism: in my opinion he argues that a rational agent must consider practical situations from a perspective that can make abstractions with respect to the position he himself has in that situation; a rational person considers himself as one person among others who are as real as he himself is, and altruism would thus be based on his ability to see himself in impersonal terms; the rational requirement of motivational content would thus involve the consideration that anyone can have reasons for promoting his or her own interest, precisely in the terms of this shared realism. Such a judgment commits an agent, whatever unmotivated desire he or she may have in the present, to making the judgment that he or she must promote other people's interests. Acceptance of the latter judgment means that a person is motivated to promote the interests of other people who are equal—similar—to him or her. This is the desire motivated by our "charitable" recognition of the reality of others and the ability to see oneself as an individual among

³ Bratman elaborates a theory treating intentions as elements of partial plans of action which play important roles in forming practical reasoning, in so far as they coordinate and organize our activities over time. See Bratman 1987.

others—with the same rational structure. Just as there are requirements of rationality about thought, altruism and prudence must also be included among the requirements of rationality in regard to desire and action. Since concern for my own future and for others stems from the very structure of reason, not caring for my future or for others in whose position I might find myself would be seen as something irrational.⁴

4. Charity, Similarity and Intention: A New Possibility for Explaining an Altruistic Action

Nagel's thesis, considered in terms of the principle of charity, allows us to formulate in the latter part of this article a hypothesis that starts from a model of rational explanation of action about understanding and explaining altruistic action. This model clarifies an important feature of human practical reasoning: planning. Planning and its hierarchical structure highlight the difference between what motivates an agent to perform (or choose) an action, altruistic behavior, and the consequences of the action in terms of gratification and expected behavior. I believe that if we look at human rationalization in terms of expected utility this does not necessarily allow us to define an individual as altruistic or selfish, but only informs us that an agent self-regulates his choices and behavior based on his goals, beliefs, desires, and favorable attitudes; in this perspective an agent creates a hierarchy of intentions directed toward the ultimate goal. The rational being does not inform us about the content of his choices and actions, but simply shows us that the agent is structured in this way to pursue goals and carry out behavior. However, in order to connote an action and choice as altruistic, the agent must, following both Nagel and Davidson, previously consider the existence of others, their intentional states and self-regulated goals, in order to make them his own purpose and reveal the content of his choice. In short, he must be able to conceive of the other as charitably as his good.

We can therefore stress Nagel's thesis and argue that in order to interpret the practical reasoning of an agent who intends to perform an altruistic action, it is necessary for him, in a sense, to adopt the other's goal as a rational prerequisite for his action. Reinterpreting the principle of charity and adoption from the impersonal point of view, we could say that in cases of interpretation and explanation of an action it is necessary to attribute to the agent as much rationality and similarity as possible in order to understand his behavior. This attribution is nothing more than the identification of the rational requirements and plans that lead one to support that particular behavior (or choose that particular action). The attribution of rationality would allow the identification of the reasons that lead the agent to a particular action and not vice versa.

⁴ See Nagel 1986. Nagel likens the impersonal point of view to the prudential policy of regarding all moments of one's life as being equal in importance. One has reason not to be indifferent to one's future because the present moment is no longer motivating merely because it is present. Similarly, he argues that one has reason not to be indifferent to other people because the fact that an individual is me is no longer motivating just because he is me. Terms such as "now" and "later", "me" and "not me" do not indicate any difference that makes a rational difference. A time that is later than the end becomes a time that is now; therefore, it is arbitrary and irrational to discard the future just because it is the future. Giving more weight to someone's good because that person is me is no less irrational.

This allows motives to be ascribed into a regulated structure through which behavior is defined and modulated, regardless of its connotation. In turn, rational requirements are useful to the deliberative process and its planning structure, made up of revisions and modifications, in view of an ultimate goal. Only the agent's explication of these requirements can lead to the connotation of behavior as altruistic or selfish. It seems, then, that the mechanisms activated by practical reasoning for the planning to achieve equity are implied by a prior attribution of rationality that predisposes the individual to the recognition of otherness and social interaction. Having identified rationality as a normative principle within which to interpret the requirements of an action, we need to clarify how I assume these requirements shape behavior. This is the context for my hypothesis, whereby I propose to differentiate the roles played by intentions during practical reasoning, so as to be able to identify the condition that defines when an individual is capable of altruistic reasoning. The planning structure of the deliberative process reveals the agent's reliance on a hierarchical form of adopted intentions and purposes which, in addition to not all having the same motivational force, cannot be considered as conclusive, or, as Davidson puts it, "all-out". In fact, to define an action as altruistic, the agent's ultimate purpose must be altruistic, regardless of the connotation of the intentions that are functional to the ultimate purpose. In this sense, the tendency toward expected utility, which at the outset we considered to be in conflict with altruistic behavior, will consist in the identification and consideration of the altruistically motivated ultimate purpose rather than in calculations of the benefits gained from reciprocating. This is different from the case where the intention to act altruistically results in a functional motivation for the ultimate intention of receiving an internally calculated reward, such as receiving gratitude. To be altruistic, the act must have an intention that is functional to an ultimate altruistic purpose, not vice versa. If, on the other hand, the intention is connoted as altruistic but functional to a non-altruistic (and not necessarily negative) purpose, then the action will not be altruistic.

The distinction between the functions of intention that I propose is based on the hierarchical and planning structure of the belief-desire intention model theorized by Bratman (Bratman 1987). By attributing a functional role to intentions, I aim to emphasize the importance of the different roles and the content they express. In fact, the entire decision-making process depends on the content of the ultimate motivating intention to achieve its ultimate goal.

Having dealt with ethical egoism and laid the groundwork for deconstruction by recourse to a different normative constraint, rationality, I intend to turn my attention again to what we have called psychological egoism. The strong thesis of this type of egoism, namely, that human beings are always driven by their own interests, is, in my view, refuted by the introduction of the aforementioned concepts of functional intention and ultimate purpose. Indeed, by means of these two rational requirements we observe that altruism as we have defined it, i.e., a disposition to the care of others without deriving any benefit from it, is possible and pursuable, as long as the agent's intentions play an auxiliary role, and are precisely functional to the ultimate purpose, which in itself turns out to be the benefit of others. However, this thesis pertains to the generality of internal and external rewards that an agent may believe he must obtain and which he erects as an ultimate goal, aiming towards self-gratification. It is difficult to refute the cases in which external conditioning intervenes for example, because of biases that we might generously call agglomeration; that is, unconsciously allowing the agent to

relate a deliberative process back to one that has previously been carried out and acted upon and that has had certain consequences in terms of gratification. Such a learning process causes the agent to agglomerate the present deliberative situation to one that has already been experienced and to act similarly altruistically based on this reinforcement. Can this particular type of action be defined as altruistic? If we would like to stay within the framework of the rational models of action explanation outlined so far, then the answer is probably yes, because the ultimate goal possesses the “rewarding” characteristic only conditionally. The conditional attribute represents a desirability feature of the ultimate goal, but not necessarily the feature that moves the agent to act, and this precisely on the basis of the agent’s unawareness of the effects of his learning and the impossibility of defining that learning as necessary and sufficient in a deliberative process in favor of a particular action. The resulting reward would therefore be neither expected nor intended.

It could be objected that self-gratification in agglomeration cases could be reduced to the problem of the description of the intentional action. If this objection were true, it would be even simpler to ascribe the reward to an extensional description of the performed action in terms of its effects; however, this description does not correspond to the agent’s rationalization, namely the authentic explanation of the performed action.

The conditional hypothesis described above should be confirmed through corroboration of neuroscientific study parameters that map the brain areas associated with the reward system. Nonetheless, at present we may say that although unconscious learning leads to an agglomeration principle that seems to cause action, rationally it cannot be affirmed because such reinforcement, when considered in isolation within a deliberative process, does not seem sufficient to cause a specific altruistic action.

5. Conclusion

We usually think that altruism is a type of behavior that must be explained in terms of its counterpart, egoism, and that rationality has a relationship with it only in terms of expected utility. In this paper I have focused on altruism within a rational model of action explanation, considering the concept in light of charity, or, more specifically, in light of a rational methodological constraint, which implies the recognition of others and their psychological states as being functional to the understanding and explanation of a type of behavior. The use of the principle of charity and the impersonal point of view has allowed me to provide a conceptual autonomy to altruism, which would make its possibility real without necessarily placing it in the shadow of selfishness. In brief, I first introduced a normative principle of rationality and developed a planning theory based on the distinction between functional intentions and ultimate goals to refute ethical egoism. The hierarchical structure of intentions was useful for me to distinguish psychological egoism from altruism. Finally, I hypothesized that the conditional characteristics of the consequences of an action are not necessarily helpful in defining the act as selfish. I wanted to provide an integrated approach to show that the existence of altruism is possible and that it is readily classifiable as a rational requirement for action: primarily as a principle of recognition of otherness, but also as the ultimate goal provided by an intention. In the latter case the

identification of the agent's motivation could provide us with the connotation of the action.

In conclusion, the connection between the charity principle and the possibility of altruism will underline the importance of organizing a model to explain and understand action based on the coordination of the functions of its elements.

However, the question remains open and further work must be done to refine the definition of altruism, particularly the development of further relevant experimental paradigms⁵ that would promote greater accuracy in the identification of altruism or its refutation through integrated, interdisciplinary investigation.

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⁵ It may be interesting to investigate the topic from a neuroscientific point of view. Possible research could aim to: a) define the basis for impersonal altruism in a socio-cultural context, with reference to the role played by the DLPFC (Dorsolateral Prefrontal Cortex) through functional magnetic resonance (fMRI); b) define the cerebral basis of altruism in an interpersonal game, with reference to the causal role played by the DLPFC through functional magnetic resonance; c) investigate the role of the DLPFC in altruistic decision-making processes and in evaluations of altruistic decisions through transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS) and d) use the results of our study to explain the different notions of altruism and create a mental architecture of the concept, in order to strengthen and corroborate the Nagelian hypothesis both philosophically and neuro-scientifically.

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