Debate

The unpaid donation of blood and altruism: a comment on Keown

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Abstract
In line with article 3.4 of EC directive 89/381, Keown has presented an ethical case in support of the policy of voluntary, unpaid donation of blood. Although no doubt is cast on the desirability of the policy, that part of Keown's argument which pertains to the suggested laudability of altruism and of its encouragement by social policy is examined and shown to be dubious. (Journal of Medical Ethics 1998;24:252-254)

Keywords: Altruism; blood; donation; paid/unpaid; European Community directive 98/381

Introduction
Keown presents "an ethical case in favour of voluntary, unpaid donation [of blood and plasma]. It comprises five arguments". I shall discuss and strongly disagree with one of these arguments, the one about "altruism and social solidarity". Keown's claim that: "There would appear to be at least five sound reasons for discouraging, as a matter of social policy, paid donation of blood and plasma" is, I shall suggest, a dubious one.

That there is a sound non-ethical case for favouring this system of blood and plasma collection - it is, for instance, cheaper for the taxpayer and likely to be safer than alternative systems - and that this case suffices to establish a preference for it I do not doubt.

Keown on altruism and blood donation
Keown writes:

"A major argument for exclusive reliance on unpaid donation is that, unlike paid donation, it promotes altruism and social solidarity. Titmuss, in his landmark study of blood donation and social policy, wrote that his study was essentially about 'the role of altruism in modern society'".

Keown agrees with Singer's view "... that altruism is a virtue which increases the more it is practised" and says that: "The old maxim that an act tends to become a habit and a habit tends to form a character seems apt."

The following quotation from Murray is presented with approval by Keown:

"'Gifts to strangers affirm the solidarity of the community over and above the depersonalizing, alienating forces of mass society and market relations. They signal that self-interest is not the only significant human motivation. And they express the moral belief that it is good to minister to fundamental human needs, needs for food, health care and shelter... These universal needs irrevocably tie us together in a community of needs, with a shared desire to satisfy them, and see them satisfied in others'."

According to Keown:

"An individual who acts altruistically tends thereby to develop an altruistic character and becomes more rather than less disposed to act altruistically. It is obvious too that the same holds in relation to the person who performs selfish acts: the person who (say) steals other people's property tends thereby to develop a rapacious character... In short, acts of altruism promote further acts of altruism in that they tend to reinforce altruistic dispositions."

Against altruism or, at least, the encouragement of it
Keown states or seems to imply something like the following propositions:

(i) Non-paid voluntary blood donation is, because it is voluntary and unpaid, altruistic;
(ii) Altruism in general is a particularly good thing; and
(iii) Social policy should be formulated to encourage altruism because altruism is a particularly good thing.

Each of the claims is contentious.

Consider, first of all, (i). When people submit contributions to, say, the Journal of Medical Ethics, their actions are voluntary and unpaid: does it follow from this that they are altruistic? I do not see
that it does. The writing and offering for consideration for publication of such papers might be but need not be altruistic.

Not all actions are either done for the sake of money or are altruistic. Some are both. Some are neither. Those which are altruistic are not always morally more laudable than the rest. Even when actions are morally laudable, it is not always appropriate that, through the formulation of social policy, they and/or the motivation which provoked them be given encouragement by the state.

In relation to (ii) and (iii), consider the following passage.

"The child sat by and watched its progress with a troubled mind. Regardless of the run of luck, and mindful only of the desperate passion which had its hold upon her grandfather, losses and gains were to her alike. Exulting in some brief triumph, or cast down by a defeat, there he sat so wild and restless, so feverishly and intensely anxious, so terribly eager, so ravenous for the paltry stakes, that she could have almost borne bettering her mind. Exulting so, her mind was all for money or are more laudable or are less. They can be, I think, be even worse than marrying someone purely for financial gain.

**Conclusion**

I do not know whether altruism in the abstract and in general can be nurtured - perhaps this is a psychological rather than a philosophical issue - but, if it can be, I see - as a philosophico-ethical
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matter - no reason why such altruism rather than, say, the pursuit of self-interested monetary gain should be encouraged by the state nor by any other agency nor person.

If the altruistic donation of blood is such an unreservedly good thing, then why stop at the donation of a pint? Why not give two pints, or three, or ...? Why not, in an act of altruistic suicide, donate the whole lot? The answer, of course, is that altruism untempered is not a good thing. Altruism is a good thing only in the context of, amongst other things, the pursuit of self-interest and the acquisition of money.

Vitamin C can be good for us. I do not think that it necessarily follows from that that politicians and/or “social-policy makers” should encourage us to consume vitamin C. Manifestly, it does not follow that they should encourage us not to eat food which does not contain vitamin C. They should not encourage us to eat only vitamin C.

Analogously, to lead a good life, in all senses of “goodness”, we need a healthy, balanced diet of motives and actions, which includes altruistic and non-altruistic actions, self-interested and non-self-interested actions, actions performed for money and actions which are not performed for money and ones which are a combination of two or more of these sorts. The idea that “social policy” should be formulated in order to encourage one rather than another of these types of motives and actions is misguided. It seems to me to be misplaced sentimentality, masquerading as moral sensitivity.

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References
1 Keown J. The gift of blood in Europe: an ethical defence of EC directive 89/381. Journal of Medical Ethics 1997;23: 96-100.
2 See reference 1: 96.
3 See reference 1: 96.
4 See reference 1: 97-98.
5 See reference 1: 97.
6 See reference 1: 98.

News and notes

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Also, for information, contact: Professor Hyakudai Sakamoto, President, The East Asian Association for Bioethics, c/o University Research Center, Nihon University, 4-8-24 Kudan-Minami, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 102, Japan. Fax: int + 81 35 27 58 326; e-mail: sakamoto@chs.nihon-u.ac.jp
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