Debate

A reply to McLachlan

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Abstract

In an earlier article in this journal, I advanced five ethical arguments in favour of a voluntary, unpaid system of blood donation.¹ In his reply to my article, Hugh McLachlan criticised one of those arguments, namely, the argument that an unpaid system promotes altruism and social solidarity. In this reply to Dr McLachlan, I maintain that his criticism is misguided, and that he appears unclear not only about my own argument, but also about his own. (Journal of Medical Ethics 1998;24:255–256)

Keywords: Altruism; blood; donation; paid/unpaid

In his comment on my paper,² Hugh McLachlan “strongly disagrees” with one of my five arguments in favour of a system of voluntary, unpaid blood donation – the argument from altruism and social solidarity.

Dr McLachlan’s criticisms of my argument are misdirected, largely because he appears to have misunderstood it. Much of his comment consists of the unsubstantiated attribution to me, directly or indirectly, of propositions which I nowhere advance, and which I do not advance because I do not hold. Moreover, it remains unclear precisely *why* he “strongly disagrees” with the argument that the promotion of altruism and social solidarity amounts to a good reason for preferring an un-paid to a paid system of blood donation.

In the interests of brevity, I shall confine my reply to exposing, first, some of his mistaken attributions and, secondly, the unclear basis of his disagreement with my position.

Unsubstantiated attributions

Dr McLachlan claims that I state, or seem to imply, that “non-paid voluntary blood donation is, because it is voluntary and un-paid, altruistic”. I neither state, nor imply, any such thing. It is surely obvious that many immoral acts, such as rape, are un-paid and voluntary but that they are hardly altruistic. It is, moreover, clear from the survey of unpaid donors’ motives which is cited in my paper that not all unpaid donors are motivated by altruism.

Dr McLachlan proceeds to state that not all altruistically motivated acts are morally superior to non altruistically motivated acts and that it is not always appropriate for the state to encourage altruism. Again, I nowhere suggest the contrary. It is, again, one would have thought, obvious that an altruistic motive is no guarantor of ethical conduct. Even if inspired by altruism, an agent may act immorally by choosing an immoral end or by choosing an immoral means to a moral end. For example, dentists who forcibly drill and fill patients’ teeth against their wishes surely act unethically, however altruistic their motives for so doing. Nor is it always appropriate, as a matter of social policy, to promote altruism over non-altruistic conduct. There are, for example, situations in which the altruistic amateur can do more harm than good and the job should be left to the paid professional.

Further, any suggestion that I hold that because an act is paid it is therefore wrong; or that the pursuit of money is always selfish; or that people should have no regard for their self-interest, is quite without foundation. As is any suggestion that I would deny that good outcomes can result from the self-interested pursuit of money; or that altruism can sometimes produce havoc or result in immoral acts.

In the light of the above, to be accused by Dr McLachlan of “making and suggesting false dichotomies” is remarkable.

Unclear basis for disagreement

It is evident from the propositions which Dr McLachlan mistakenly appears to attribute to me that he is unclear about my argument. But he also seems unclear about his own. It is nowhere apparent precisely *why* he “strongly disagrees” with my argument that the promotion of altruism and social solidarity in our system of voluntary blood donation is a good reason for resisting a move to paid donation. It is quite unclear how any of the points he makes above, such as the point that altruistically motivated acts can nevertheless be immoral, has any application to the conduct at issue: blood donation. Had he devoted more space

to developing his own argument, instead of setting up and knocking down a series of “straw men”, his argument might have been less opaque.

He concludes that it is “misguided” for social policy to encourage altruism. *Why* it is “misguided” remains unclear. Surely unselfishness is something that a community should (or at the very least may) encourage among its members, both in the interests of its individual members and the community as a whole? Surely any community, whether a family, college, or state, is enriched by the altruism of its members, by their willingness to have regard to the interests of others and to act unselfishly?³ And for a state to promote such altruism and provide means for its expression, whether by encouraging, through its system of taxation, donations of money to charitable causes, or through its health system, donations of blood to others in need, is not only defensible but commendable. Was President John F Kennedy wrong when he said that we should ask not what our country can do for us, but what we can do for our country? Yet Dr McLachlan states that he sees no reason why the state should encourage altruism over the “self-interested” pursuit of money. Whether this is because he thinks that altruism is no better than self-interest, or because it is not the role of the state to encourage it, or not at least in respect of blood donation, remains a mystery.

Is Dr McLachlan suggesting that donors, even if paid, could nevertheless be acting out of “self-interested” but not “selfish” motives? But there are plenty of opportunities for people to act in a self-interested manner, and relatively little encouragement is required to get them to do so. Further, if paid donation were introduced, why would this not encourage many to donate out of purely selfish motives, radically transforming the entire culture of the blood donation system in the process?

Dr McLachlan’s argument, whatever it is, does not, with respect, even begin to get on its feet, particularly when deprived of its little army of straw men. He seems unclear not only about my argument, but also about his own.

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References

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- 2 McLachlan HV. Debate: The unpaid donation of blood and altruism: a comment on Keown. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 1998;24:252–4.
- 3 “Altruism”. *The new shorter Oxford English dictionary* [1993]. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993: 61.