

Altruism, blood donation and public policy: a reply to Keown

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Abstract

This is a continuation of and a development of a debate between John Keown and me. The issue discussed is whether, in Britain, an unpaid system of blood donation promotes and is justified by its promotion of altruism. Doubt is cast on the notions that public policies can, and, if they can, that they should, be aimed at the promotion and expression of altruism rather than of self-interest, especially that of a mercenary sort. Reflections upon President Kennedy's proposition, introduced into the debate by Keown, that we should ask not what our country can do for us but what we can do for our country is pivotal to this casting of doubt. A case is made for suggesting that advocacy along the lines which Keown presents of an exclusive reliance on a voluntary, unpaid system of blood donation encourages inappropriate attitudes towards the provision of health care. Perhaps, it is suggested, and the suggestion represents, on my part, a change of mind as a consequence of the debate, a dual system of blood provision might be preferable.

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Introduction

According to Keown, I have misinterpreted his views on altruism and blood donation and have presented my own case unclearly.¹⁻³ I will deal with both of these objections of Keown's, question his account of the relationship between particular public policies and the promotion of altruism, and then indicate how reflection on his thoughts is leading me to change my mind, not about the nature of altruism and public policy, but about the desirability of an exclusive reliance upon a system of voluntary, unpaid blood donation.

The interpretation of what Keown wrote

Keown writes: "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."⁴

In his original article, he says the following, which did and still does suggest to me the contrary: "A major argument for exclusive reliance on unpaid donation is that, unlike paid donation, it promotes altruism and social solidarity."⁵

In his reply, he says things which suggest to me the contrary, such as the following: "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 act unselfishly? And for the state to promote such altruism and provide means for its expression, whether by encouraging, through a 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."⁴

Whether or not Keown here means to state that altruism should, in the abstract, be encouraged by the state, it seems to me that what he says invites or at least suggest that interpretation. His quotations, with obvious approval, from the work of Titmuss, who, in relation to social policy, is the champion of altruism, also suggest that this interpretation is a fair one.

Keown gives no textual support for his attack on my interpretation of what he wrote (as opposed, say, to what he believes or to what he meant to say). His attack on me and defence of himself amounts to the argument that I attributed to him a position which could not consistently or rationally be held. The argument, although true when thus phrased, is not much of an attack on me nor of a defence of himself. I did and do claim that such a position is suggested by what he wrote.

Hence, I am not at all impressed when Keown says: "... to be accused by Dr McLachlan of making and suggesting false dichotomies is remarkable".⁶ It is not remarkable at all.

Note that in his reply to my comment upon him, Keown persists in making and suggesting false dichotomies, as in the two following

sentences: "Was President Kennedy wrong when he said that we should not ask 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."⁴

I can see no reason "why the state should encourage altruism over the 'self-interested' pursuit of money" because Keown, despite his intention and claims, has provided none. Keown has provided none because, I suspect, there are none. Again, he gives the appearance of presenting as a dichotomy altruism, as if it were on the one hand, and the accepting of money, as if it were on the other. Why does Keown put "self-interested" in quotation marks? Are they meant to be scare quotations marks?

This leads to the matter of my views on blood donation and altruism as expressed in my comment.

Blood donation, altruism and public policy

I wrote that I was in favour of the present system of unpaid blood donation. There are good reasons for that system but the promotion of altruism, in the abstract - whether or not it can be so promoted - is not, in my view, one of them.

Actions can be self-interested and, even, involve the acquisition of money and also be altruistic. It is misleading to suggest a dichotomy of altruism and self-interest.

Neither altruism nor self-interest in the abstract should be - if they can be - fostered by the state. Altruism in the abstract is no better or worse than self-interest in the abstract. Both are required for a balanced individual and a healthy society and state. Both can lead to good consequences in some circumstances and bad ones in others. Both can be, in some circumstances good motives for actions and in some circumstances bad motives. I am not sure that the encouragement of any sort of attitudes rather than the encouragement of particular sorts of actions and behaviour is the proper business of the state. Some particular manifestations of self-interest, including that directed towards the acquisition of money, should be encouraged by the state, some should be allowed by the state and some should be prohibited by the state. The same can be said of manifestations of altruism.

The idea is misguided, in my view, that it is desirable for social policy to be geared towards, in the abstract and in general, the promotion of altruism. The idea is mistaken too that, were there to be a makeable choice, social policies should be

preferred which provoke and/or are provoked by altruism rather than those which provoke and/or are provoked by self-interest.

My views on altruism might be clarified, if clarification is required, and developed, possibly, by my responding to Keown's jibe about Kennedy.

Altruism, self-interest and President Kennedy

Was Kennedy wrong when he said what Keown said he said? Yes he was, or would have been were he to have been speaking, when he did, as a philosopher rather than as a politician. We should not ask what we can do for our country rather than what our country can do for us. We should ask both these (and other related) questions but neither question carries moral priority over the other.

If membership of a particular country involved nothing but self-sacrifice from its members then it would not be much of a country and its members should think about altering or abandoning it. Indeed, were not Kennedy's British ancestors very keen to ask what precisely their country did for them? To say, for instance, "No taxation without representation" is to be - and rightly to be - very conscious of the question: "What does my country do for me?". If President Kennedy had been around as a politician at the time of the Boston Tea Party, would he have said to his fellow British-Americans: "Ask not what Britain can do for you but, rather, what you can do for Britain?" I doubt it.

Notice that Kennedy does not say that we should ask what we can do for our country rather than what we can and should do for ourselves. Kennedy does not say that we should be wary about the acquisition of money. If Kennedy is implying a dichotomy, then, despite what Keown might think or lead the reader to think, it is a different dichotomy from the one which Keown presents. Kennedy is not saying here - did he say it any where else? - that the state, if faced with the choice, should encourage altruism over the self-interested pursuit of money. (Is Keown trying to suggest that Kennedy was, despite all appearances, some sort of a socialist?) In any case, it is one thing for citizens to ask what they can and should do for their country, it is another thing for the state to have social policies about it.

Kennedy does not say that one should ask what one should do for one's country rather than earn money for one's self. What, in any case, should one do for one's country? I would say, and I imagine that President Kennedy would have agreed, that what we can and should do for our country is

to earn enough money to meet the needs of our selves and our families so that we are able, when it is required to do so, to act altruistically towards others and so that we are not an avoidable drain on the altruism and benevolence of others. The altruism of other people is not like a muscle which they have and of which the exercise should be encouraged in order to make it more powerful. It is a scarce resource which should be tapped, if at all, gingerly.

Due regard to our own interests and, even, to our own wallets is a proper and sometimes an obligatory manifestation of our altruism. What, perhaps, we should do for our country, for our families and ourselves is get a paying job. If we cannot get a paying job then, perhaps, in some circumstances, we should, if we can, sell our blood or other renewable bodily parts and services.

Public policy and the promotion of altruism

That public policies in general can, and that the particular policies of voluntary, unpaid blood donation and of tax relief on donations to charity actually do, foster altruism in general is claimed but not proved by Keown. The claims, which I take to be psychological and, possibly, sociological rather than philosophical ones might well be true but they are not obviously true.

When, say, the state gives tax relief for donations to charity, I am not sure whether this is a wise policy. If it is justifiable, then it is justifiable - not as the promotion of altruism in general and as such but - as the encouragement of donations to charity, whatever might be the motivation of the donors.

Incidentally, I know of no British social policy, although there might be plenty, which was justified by the politicians who promoted it on, or largely on, the grounds that it promoted, in the abstract, altruism. Is there any?

Keown's views on the encouragement of the existence and expression of altruism by way of public policies are interesting but contentious. They provoke in me this reflection: the more the state makes it attractive or not unattractive to give to charities through, say, tax incentives, the more it encourages the giving to charities but the less, one might say, it gives scope for the altruism involved of the givers. If, say, those who gave to charities were, by order of the government, to be severely flogged, then less would be given to charities but that which was given - at least by non-masochists - might be more altruistically provided.

Such public policies as Keown mentions need not make people any more or less selfish although

they might render more or less selfish the performance of particular actions. Tax relief on donations to charities increases donations to charities when it does, not by encouraging or providing a means of expression of altruism (of which there is not a shortage), but by reducing the motivational force of self-regard which, in this particular instance, pulls in the other direction from altruism. Given a particular blend and strengths of self-regarding, altruistic and other motives - which blend and strengths remain unaffected by the policy measure - what tax relief on donations to charity does, as a policy of severely flogging givers to charity would do, is to alter the attractiveness to the potential givers of giving to charity. Thus, a policy which increased donations to charity would be a quite different sort from one - whatever that might be - which would increase altruism.

Similarly, a policy which encouraged voluntary, unpaid blood donation might or might not encourage and promote altruism.

A system of compulsory, unpaid blood donation or voluntary, paid blood donation might, without resulting in a reduction of altruism, produce more blood. If those who are now prepared to donate blood when there is no payment involved become unwilling to do so when money changed hands, then, despite what Keown suggests, one might think that such people were motivated to donate blood by vainglory rather than by altruism.

It is possible that through the unpaid donating of their blood, people thereby strengthen their tastes for other altruistic and charitable actions. On the other hand, it is possible that they do not. It is possible too that the time and effort involved in the donation of blood might be better spent in some other altruistic and charitable pursuits at the expense of which - in the sense of the opportunity cost - the blood is donated.

It is not clear how public policies would promote or do the opposite to altruism and it is far from obvious that such policies should be directed towards the promotion of altruism. Not only can one envisage societies and economies which persist on the basis of self-interest with altruism being required to plug the gaps, as it were, history provides numerous examples of them. Societies and economies which persist on the basis of altruism with self-interest plugging the gaps are not only, at least for non-Marxists, difficult to envisage but also, history provides no examples of industrialised ones. Perhaps in this sense self-interest is more important than altruism, at least with regard to public and social policies and for impersonal rather than intimate, face-to-face relationships. Altruism, despite what Keown seems to me to

suggest, is not something which should be maximised; and, furthermore, the mix of altruism and self-interest which is optimal for, say, to use his examples, a family or a college, need not be optimal for a community nor for a society nor for a state.

Conclusion

I was in favour of a system of voluntary, unpaid blood donation on the grounds that there are good (non-ethical) reasons for the adoption of such a system in, say, contemporary Britain although not necessarily in all other places: it provides good blood and blood that is cheap to the tax-payer. However, my views in this matter are, I think, in a state of flux. I feel myself being attracted to the view that there should be, in Britain, a dual system of blood donation or, at least, that there should be no state discouragement of the emergence and operation of one.

If people want to give their blood for no payment and agents and agencies of the National Health Service and other lawful people and bodies want to take it from them that is fine. Fine too, I think, it would be if people wanted to sell their blood and other lawful people and bodies wanted to buy it from them.

I suspect that it might be preferable for the state to allow the existence of both systems of blood acquisition. It might be preferable for the following reasons. It is one thing to support an exclusively voluntary and unpaid system of blood donation for non-ethical reasons. It might be another to support it, as Keown does, on ethical grounds, as part of the advocacy of altruism. The latter approach - as Keown's reply and the re-reading of his original article leads me to suspect - can have the unfortunate consequence of encouraging two inappropriate attitudes towards the provision of health care and related services.

How such services should be provided and distributed in contemporary Britain is - like the matter of how other crucially important things like food and books should be provided and distributed - fundamentally an economic issue, which can have ethical implications. It is this and is better thought of as this, than as being fundamentally an ethical issue, which might have economic implications. Advocacy of unpaid blood donation on ethical grounds might encourage the latter inappropriate view of the matter.

Similarly, the view might be encouraged that it is better freely to give and receive rather than to buy and sell and that it is wrong to buy and sell body parts and bodily services or, at least, that it is morally preferable to donate them freely. Such a view is, I think, not only false but it can have, when

acted upon, bad consequences. An instance of this is the allowing, in Britain, of surrogate motherhood where there is no payment made by the commissioning couple to the surrogate mother but the disallowing of commercial surrogate motherhood.

There are advantages and disadvantages of getting, say, a fitted kitchen provided for you by enthusiastic, kind-hearted friends. There are advantages and disadvantages of paying a professional kitchen-fitter to fit your kitchen: it is more expensive but with commercial kitchen-fitting, once the job is done you can quietly and effectively sever all ties with the kitchen-fitter if you are happy with the service you have received, and live the rest of your life without his/her intrusive presence; if you are not happy then you have the possibility of legal redress.

So too with surrogate motherhood. There are advantages and disadvantages of an unpaid system and advantages and disadvantages of a commercial system. Let both systems exist, as with the fitting of kitchens - and let the potential users decide which system they prefer to use. So too, I suspect, it should be with blood.

Keown writes in his reply to me: "... 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?"⁴

Notice that in my comment, I did not advocate payment for blood donation: I was not even thinking about doing so when I wrote it. After further reflection on Keown's views, I think I might do so now.

Some people fit kitchens out of purely selfish motives or, at least they might do so without my being led to conclude that the commercial fitting of kitchens should be discouraged or disallowed. People might write, publish or sell books out of purely selfish motives but that is not much of a reason for disfavouring the availability of commercially produced and supplied books. If some people were to sell their blood purely for selfish motives, so what? For the reasons stated concerning the two inappropriate attitudes towards health care provision, I would not be unhappy to see the entire culture of the blood transfusion system - indeed the entire, peculiarly British way of thinking about the provision and distribution of health care services - transformed.

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