Self-Actualization and Self-Interest

Frederick Ellrod

Recent theories in "humanistic psychology," such as those of Abraham Maslow and Carl R. Rogers, have reintroduced the notion of "self-actualization" into their model of the human person.[1] This move is largely a healthy one, offsetting, for instance, excessive concentration on the adaptation of the individual to society. But it also gives rise to the question of whether emphasis on *self*-actualization tends to produce an overly individualistic view, and perhaps even an egoistic ethos, one in which motivation and morality are reduced to each individual's efforts to promote that individual's own good. Maslow's 1964 article "The Superior Person," for example, by extending the approach of humanistic psychology to the economic and political realms, suggests that an ideal organizational arrangement consists in "a situation so arranged that each person involved, by pursuing his own selfish aims, aids the other people involved and the institution itself."[2] While he does not state that a person must pursue *only* selfish ends, the formulation used makes it more important to determine what relation self-actualization bears to selfishness or self-interest. Must the self-actualizing person be a person primarily intent on maximizing personal actualization?

I propose to argue that this need not be so. A theory of self-actualization is open to the possibility of an altruistic ethic. In making this argument I shall take as a point of reference the views of Aristotle, perhaps the first self-actualization theorist. Certain developments of a theory of self-actualization found in Aristotle can help clarify in what respects a self-actualizing person is, and is not, self-interested.

I.

Since much of the problem lies in the ambiguity of such phrases as "self-interest," it will be necessary first to define these terms as I will use them. "Selfishness" suggests morally objectionable self-seeking; "self-interest" is less pejorative and thus more general. We may say that a self-interested act is one performed in order to achieve some good for oneself. If someone *always* acts for such reasons, we call that person selfish or self-centered, an egoist.

It is often argued that *in fact* everyone always acts for one's own good. We may call such a theory "psychological egoism." This view

will not be addressed here. Instead, we will consider a related theory which may be referred to as "ethical egoism." This states that whether or not all actions are selfish, they *ought* to be; that is, that the only rational justification for an agent's action is some reference to the agent's own good. Ethical egoism is seldom advocated explicitly but it is often assumed in political or economic discussions. The purpose here is to ask whether it *must* be advocated by someone who holds a self-actualization theory of the person, such as Maslow.

What exactly is meant by "self-actualization"? The term suggests the realization of hidden talents or traits, the development or unfolding of the self. It thus considers the person to have both actuality and potentiality, as Aristotle would put it: while I *actually* have certain traits or qualities (for example, brown hair or the ability to speak English), there are others which I have only potentially (for example, gray hair or the ability to speak Chinese). A theory of self-actualization has something to do with the development of the self in new ways, gaining new qualities that are only possibilities at the moment.

Yet there is more to it than this. After all, a person is potentially many things: older, wiser, more expert, more forgetful, a hero, a criminal, a corpse. All of these are potentialities. But most theories of self-actualization are not content merely to describe the various possible transformations of a human person. Rather, some of them are emphasized as *natural* to the self, as the *proper* way to develop. We feel that a small child should become more willing to listen to others' viewpoints, not less; that a miser should change in the direction of generosity, not still more intense avarice. To regress or become worse seems not an *actualization* of the self (though it obviously fulfills a possibility in some sense), but a degeneration, a failure to become actual in the normal or the best way for a human being. Thus a psychologist may speak of therapy as removing repressions, for instance, in order to allow the patient's *true* or *real* self to emerge. Obviously, the blocked, frustrated patient prior to therapy was "real" in a sense, eating, sleeping, talking, registering on electroencephalograms; the claim must be that this actualization of the person is somehow *less* real, less "true" to the "deeper" or "inner" self, than another, toward which the therapist helps the person advance. Some actualizations of the person are seen as preferable; there is a built-in direction in the person which defines some ways of developing as better than others, as "natural" to the individual.

This is clearly an evaluative claim. The "true self" is the "healthy self" (a self which needs no substantial help or redirection); which is in effect the "*good* self," the self which is as it should be. A theory of self-actualization, then, defines certain ways of living or character traits as good and healthy, as "actualizations" of the self, in contrast to others which are seen as unfortunate, as debilitating, distorted, or problematic. A theory of self-actualization, as proposed by Maslow, Rogers, or Aristotle, includes some delineation of the *ideal* person. It is this ideal which serves as the psychologist's goal in therapy, or as a model of virtue for the ethicist.[3]

Without some such personality ideal, there would be little distinctiveness in a self-actualization theory; only the statement that people change in different ways, which is trivial. A psychology of self-actualization is thus linked closely to an ethics. A *good person* (in some sense) is definable as one who is actualized in the proper way, whose self has developed along the lines which are inherently best for it. And once we have some description - which need not be detailed or precise - of the ideal personality, this can serve as a standard for moral judgments about persons and their actions. The typical (but not necessarily the only possible) ethic of such a view holds that those *actions* are good which flow from or lead to the proper actualization of the self. It seems plausible that what helps the person become self-actualized is good or worthwhile; what hinders self-actualization is bad. And it seems plausible, too, that self-actualized people will themselves act well.

Having thus characterized self-actualization, we can now restate our original question. Must a self-actualization theory lead to ethical egoism? If a psychological view stresses the development of the person, does it therefore imply that actions are to be justified for an agent *solely* in terms of what contributes to the agent's own good? This is the question we may now examine directly.

II.

The answer depends on the content of the theory, the specific ideal set forth: *in what* does self-actualization consist? What qualities exemplify the ideal human being? I wish now to argue that if certain qualities are taken to be part of this ideal, then self-actualization is consistent with altruism, or concern for the good of others.

Here the approach of Aristotle is illuminating. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle states the goal of human life as an "activity of the soul" or of the person (to which he gives the name "happiness," though this does not match the usual English usage of that word).[4] He makes the point we have discussed above, that some actualizations or activities are preferable to others. To these he gives the name of *virtues*. Here the term means *any* excellence or good quality in the self, any desirable actualization, not merely those qualities (mostly other-directed) which are now commonly called virtues. Thus the virtuous person, for Aristotle, is the well-developed or well-actualized person, the fully healthy personality.[5] Since "virtuous" (or "good") is a more manageable term than "self-actualizing," we may perhaps follow Aristotle in this usage. It may be noted that Aristotle would thus agree with Maslow's intimation in "The Superior Person" that the good manager and the morally virtuous individual are not wholly separate. Organizing ability, enterprise, and tact may be among the attributes of the good person, as well as more traditional virtues such as courage and moderation.

But the word "virtue" does remind us that such abilities are not the only ones considered essential for the well-developed person. Aristotle does indeed include, in his survey of virtues in the *Ethics*, basically self-directed traits such as proper pride, ambition, and moderation in one's appetites.[6] To this extent the good person might be said to be self-interested. But he also includes neutral qualities such as courage, truthfulness, and wit. At times acting in accord with these traits may advance the self-interest of the agent; even a selfish person must at times exercise courage to achieve that person's own ends. But at other times these qualities will clearly impel the good person to actions which may be against that person's own immediate, or even long-range good, as in a soldier dying on the battlefield.[7] Further, the catalogue of virtues or excellences extends also to some which are explicitly other-regarding: generosity and magnanimity with respect to money, friendliness in social intercourse. The qualities which Aristotle finds natural in the well-formed or properly actualized individual seem to embrace both self-interested and non-self-interested traits. Aristotle, then, seems to hold a self-actualization theory which is not egoistic.

How is this possible? Since the virtues specify what it is for a person to be self-actualized, and since self-actualization constitutes the ideal for the agent, the virtues *define* the *true* good of the person in a way independent of what we normally consider one's "good" or

"interest." To have enough to eat is obviously in my interest. But it can be argued that to become self-actualized is even more a thing for which I should strive and which I should wish to achieve. If generosity is a worthy trait for a human being to have, then I have a reason for acquiring it, whether or not its *results* add to my own prosperity in other respects. Virtue is by definition, in such a view, its own reward. And thus I might prefer to take a courageous stand for a cause, or give my life generously for another, even if this results in the loss to me of all worldly gain. If it is in my own interest to become virtuous, then it may well be (to press the paradox) in my own interest to seek the interest of another. A theory in which self-actualization provides the standard for my action, therefore, need not be one in which I need only seek my own satisfaction.

III.

The above argument suggests that *actualizing oneself* need not be equivalent to *acting in one's own interest* as we normally understand it. To realize one's potential in the *best* way may include, and might even require, action which does not contribute to the agent's own good, in the usual sense.

But this position leaves open the possibility of an objection, one commonly used in a sophisticated development of ethical egoism. Presumably, self-actualization itself is a good thing for the one actualized. Whatever types of action are considered "virtuous," if they contribute to the realization of the agent's "true self," they are therefore to one's own benefit, whatever their ostensible other-directedness. If someone, for example, gives a large sum of money to charity without receiving any tangible return, we normally consider this an altruistic or non-self-interested deed. But in the Aristotelian account of virtue just given, there *is* some return for the agent involved: the self-realization implicit in the generous act of giving. To exactly the extent that the agent's self-actualization is considered a personal good, the agent's supposedly unselfish but virtuous actions will be a personal good. It is thus possible still to claim that whatever an agent does is *really* done for personal benefit (at least for the intangible benefit of self-actualization), and thus self-interested.

This objection carries considerable weight, particularly since the classical tradition on which we are drawing indeed emphasizes that the agent's true interest is in being virtuous, not in accumulating

wealth or power.[8] It seems a salutary move to be able to claim that acting rightly is really in one's own interest; but here that argument has been turned back on us by the ethical egoist. Does this prevent us from holding that self-interest should not determine all our actions?

Given the notion of virtuous acts as self-actualizing, and of self-actualization as a good for the person, it does become true that a virtuous action will be to the agent's benefit. Yet it does not cease to benefit the object of the action (which may be another) as well. If *both* the agent and the other receive some good from an act, shall we say that it is self-interested or altruistic?

Normally we make such a distinction on the basis of the *motivation* of the deed. If I do something which is good both for me and for another, that may be either self-interested or other-interested, depending on *why* I did it. If my intention was to promote my own good and the other's good came along as only a side-effect, then the deed was a selfish one, even though someone else gained from it; while if my sole interest was to help the other person, it may be an altruistic or generous thing for me to do, even though I also profited in some way from it. Mixed cases, of course, are more common. Ordinarily we assign credit for altruism insofar as the act is not helpful to oneself, in view of the common tendency to seek one's own good first. But it is *possible* (although we may be skeptical in a given case) for someone's intention to be focused on another even when one's own good is also being achieved.

In the view developed above, however, *all* good actions involve good for the agent, namely, self-actualization. Thus we cannot distinguish cases where the agent is acting altruistically by a total lack of benefit to self, for one might be intending another's good even while achieving one's own. Let us say, then, that a self-interested act is one which is *directed to* or *motivated by* one's own good. An altruistic or other-interested deed is one directed to someone else's good. Does a theory of self-actualization, if combined with a theory of virtue as discussed above, commit us to the view that there are no altruistic acts?

Clearly, it does not. For I may perform self-actualizing acts without *intending* my own actualization. Even if virtue or good moral character is defined in such a way that every other-benefiting act will also contribute to my own perfection, I may carry out such acts without a thought for my own perfection, but with the intention of helping another. The point is brought out in Aristotle's consideration of friend-

ship, for he considers that this "is a virtue or implies virtue."[9] It is the good or virtuous person who is best suited for friendship properly so called.[10] Yet this best type of friendship is characterized by a concern for the friend for the friend's *own* sake, not for the sake of any pleasure or benefit to the agent.[11] It is the other's good that is primarily intended. And the essence of friendship lies not in having the other think of me, but in my own care for the other: in loving, rather than in being loved.[12] Thus friendship seems a case *par excellence* wherein one acts, not for one's own good, but for someone else's; and this in spite of the fact that presumably the friendship is also self-actualizing for the agent. In fact, Aristotle's comment suggests that the friendship would degenerate to one of pleasure or use if the agent's own enjoyment or benefit *were* uppermost in mind.

Thus even though the action of a good person inevitably serves personal good, if it be virtuous action, there are cases in which it is not only possible but necessary that the agent be intending not that agent's *own* good, but the good of another. The result is a paradox of sorts: if friendship (and the same may apply to other sorts of action) is a perfection or actualization of the self, it is one that can only be attained by *not attending* to self-actualization; somewhat as pleasure, to be attained, must not be sought, but must come as an epiphenomenon of some other activity.[13]

IV.

Self-actualization, therefore, does not require that the self-actualizing person seek personal good exclusively. Nonetheless, it is true that some of Maslow's remarks, for instance, suggest one does; the self-actualizing executive "needs to have his own way," independent of whether this is good for the organization, and a proper structure seems to assume that everyone will act in his own interest.[14] Rogers speaks, similarly, of the healthy personality's resistance to acting to fulfill others' expectations or needs.[15] Whence comes this tendency to regard self-actualization as self-centered?

Two brief suggestions may be made here. The first is that an emphasis on autonomy of *judgment* may be meant, rather than an entire autonomy of *interest*: the mature or virtuous person acts for what *that person* thinks is good, but this may still be the good of another.[16] The second point, pertaining specifically to Maslow, is that

the problem may be a tendency still to assimilate self-actualizing action to the more traditional psychologist's model of need-fulfilling action. Maslow wishes to distinguish actualizing behavior from behavior aimed simply at satisfying the agent's own basic needs.[17] But the difference between the two types of action may not be merely that of two levels of needs, basic biological drives and more intangible interpersonal desires. It might be that self-actualization is different from need-fulfillment also in that the former does not have to be directed to one's own good at all, but may also aim at the good of another. Self-fulfillment should not be assimilated to need-fulfillment. There is nothing to prevent us from holding that some sorts of behavior have the function of keeping the person alive and well, while others are simply self-actualizing, and may be to the good of the agent, someone else, or both.

V.

A theory of self-actualization, then, need not be one of ethical egoism. A brief remark may be added on possible implications of this conclusion for political theory.

In "The Superior Person" Maslow argues that a well-ordered political system will possess the property of *synergy*: it is arranged so that by pursuing personal good a person necessarily also contributes to the good of the whole.[18] Since people often do seek their own good much of the time, this sort of arrangement is certainly of value (defenders of the "free market system," for instance, usually consider it to be of this type). Problems, of course, arise when it becomes difficult to produce an effective synergy, or when this imperative conflicts with others, such as maximization of overall good.

But if the account above is correct, there is another factor involved. If we assume that the excellence of self-actualization includes, as Aristotle thought, certain inherently other-regarding virtues, then the nature of self-actualization has already ensured that to some extent self- and other-interest will coincide. Altruistic action will, in fact, be to the agent's own good as well. The difficulty, of course, comes in causing the agent to realize this, to acknowledge that it is worthwhile to perform generous or compassionate actions as well as to service the agent's basic needs and desires. In other words, synergy may be encouraged, not only by arranging the organization cleverly so as to yoke various people's goods together, but also by making

people virtuous, helping them become better (more self-actualized) persons. Moral improvement of individuals may be as effective a means of producing mutually beneficial relations in society as are structural improvements; in fact, it may even be impossible for one to succeed without the other. A good and well-functioning state may require, to some extent at least, good and morally mature citizens.

Aristotle may again be a useful reminder here. He observes that a type of friendship (which, as we have seen, involves in its best form mutual regard and other-interest) is needed by the state itself. Further, he notes that the highest type of friendship is only possible among good persons.[19] A healthy political environment, we may then argue, must include some "leavening" of virtuous people, among whom civic friendship may flourish. For such people will recognize that they possess a common good, not only by the structure of their organization, but also by the fact that the interest of one is the actualization of another.

Self-actualization is thus not linked by necessity to exclusive egoism in ethics or in politics. Rather, it may point the way to a political theory in which generosity and friendliness play a part along with justice and self-interest.[20]

Notes

1. A.H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), esp. ch. 12-13. For Maslow's definition of the term, see pp. 91-92. Rogers does not use the terminology of self-actualization, but his theory is congruent with it. See Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, Sentry Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), esp. ch. 2, 8, 9; Carl R. Rogers and Barry Stevens, *Person to Person* (New York: Pocket Books, 1971), pp. 4-21.

2. Abraham H. Maslow, "The Superior Person", in Warren G. Bennis, ed. *American Bureaucracy*, Trans-action Books No. 14 (n.p.: Aldine Publishing Co., 1970), p. 33.

3. See Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, esp. pp. 200-201, for a characterization of the self-actualizing person. Rogers gives similar criteria for the health and proper development of the person. See Maslow, *On Becoming a Person*, pp. 35, 38, 167-76, 191-92; *Person to Person*, pp. 17-19. It should be noted that this text does not attempt to address the question of whether such an ideal can be a foundation for ethics.

4. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans, W.D. Ross, in Richard McKeon, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), I, 7, 1098 a 3-7. Further references to this work will cite it as "NE," followed by book number, chapter number, and page number according to the standard pagination.

5. *Ibid.*, NE, I, 7, 1097 b 23 - 1098 a 18. Aristotle actually restricts this description to excellences of the "rational principle", but this need not concern us here.

6. *Ibid.*, NE, II, 7, for Aristotle's brief listing of morally virtuous qualities. Even these self-directed qualities are not necessarily valued because they serve the *agent's own* interests, if they are also respected in others.

7. *Ibid.*, NE, III, 6, 1115 a 24-35.

8. For instance, Plato's *Republic*, in Books II-X, can be seen as an extended argument that the just or virtuous person is really better off than the unjust or vicious, simply in being just. Aristotle makes a similar point; NE, *op. cit.*, I, 8, esp. 1099 a 7-30.

9. *Op. cit.*, NE, VIII, 1, 1155 a 4.

10. *Ibid.*, NE, VIII, 3, 1156 b 6-7; 4, 1157 a 18-19.

11. *Ibid.*, NE, VIII, 2, 1155 b 31-32; 3, 1157 a 18. *Cf.* IX, 1, 1164 a 10-12.

12. *Ibid.*, NE, VIII, 8, 1159 a 26.

13. *Ibid.*, NE, X, 5. It may be noted that Aristotle suggests that a good person loves *himself* best (IX, 8). But this is not essential to a self-actualization theory of virtue, and, even if it were, would not imply that he could not also love others for their own sake, less intensely, but without self-interest.

14. Maslow, "Superior Person", *op. cit.*, pp. 33, 31.

15. Maslow, *Person to Person, op. cit.*, pp. 18, 15. It is noted, as we have here, that "deep and helpful relationships with others are experienced as actualizing," and agrees that such a view need not be selfish.

16. This seems to underlie Rogers' statements.

17. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality, op. cit.*, pp. 91-92, and ch. 7, 8. He continues, however, to call self-actualization a "higher *need*."

18. Maslow, "Superior Person", *op. cit.*, pp. 33, 31.

19. *Op. cit.*, NE, VIII, 1, 1155 a 23-28, and ch. 9-11; 4, 1157 a 18.

20. A shorter version of this text was presented at the February 1981 meeting of the National Capital Area Political Science Association, and an abstract printed in the 1981 edition of *Short Essays in Political Science from the 1981 Spring Conference of the National Capital Area Political Science Association*.

PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHOLOGY, SPIRITUALITY

"Only in reaching out for the other in a way that desires the good of the other *in one's difference* can I possibly extend beyond what I already am."

Thomas Langan

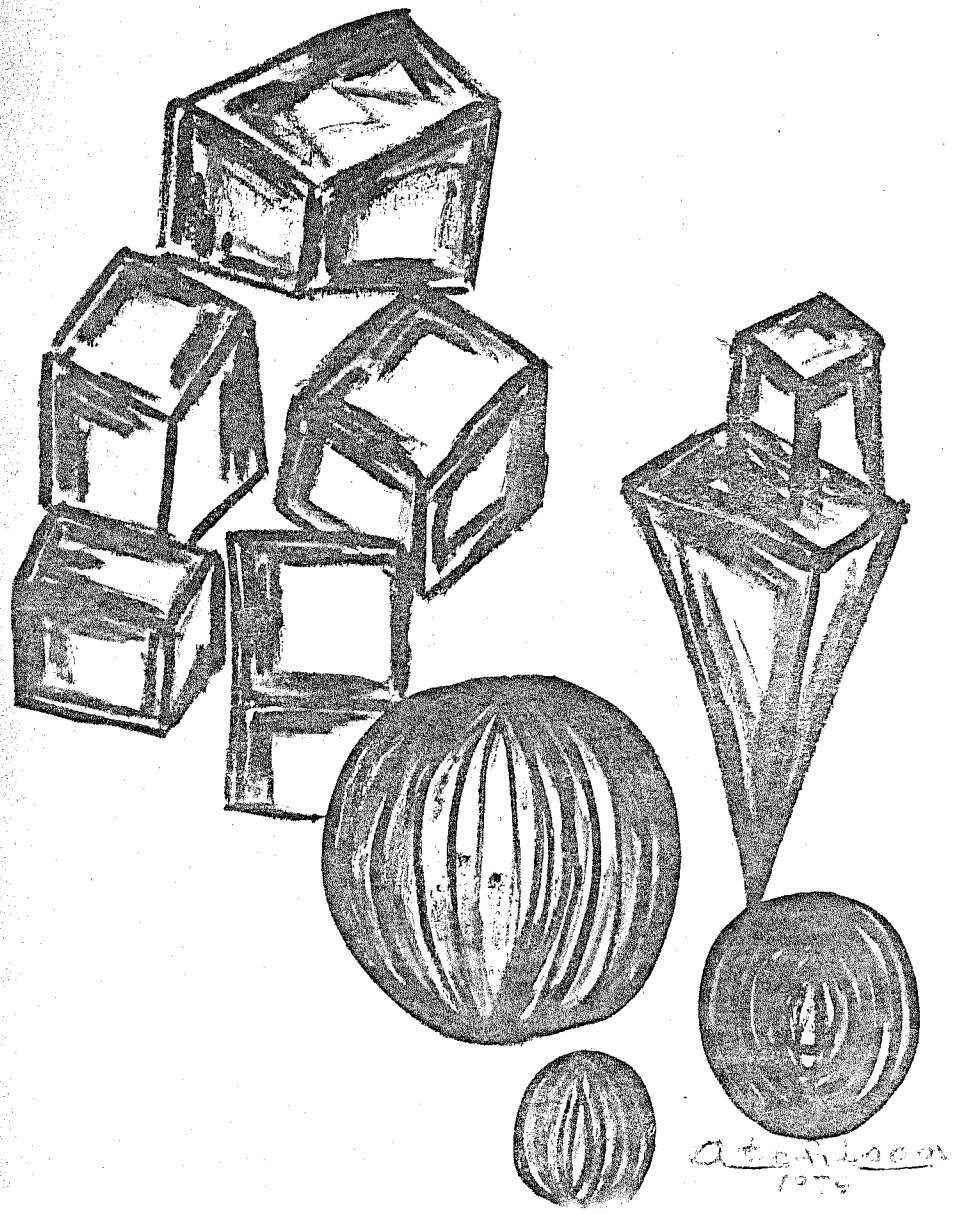
"The levels of body, emotion, intellect, and 'spirit' are taken not as discrete entities, but rather as points along a continuum, each of which shades imperceptibly into the next (as the colors in a rainbow)."

Sandra Wawrytko

ISBN 0-910727-05-8

PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY

James W. Kidd, Ph.D., Editor



PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY

Editor
James W. Kidd, Ph.D.

San Francisco

Golden Phoenix Press

1984

83 Library of Congress Number 80836

ISBN 0-910727-05-8

Phototypography: Morgan

Printed by: The James H. Barry Co.
San Francisco

Plate on front cover: "Being There"

James Atchison was born in Oakland and has lived and worked in the Bay Area most of his life. He is a professor of psychology as well as a practicing psychologist. He studied art with Henry Schafer-Simmern at Berkeley. Professor Atchison began showing his art in 1954. His latest presentations were at: University of New Mexico, Gallery I Old Mill Palo Alto, California and Western Psychological Association, San Francisco, California.

Copyright 1984
Golden Phoenix Press
1300 La Playa #1
San Francisco
California
94122