4 'Am I bothered?' Everyday morality and moral concerns and their implications for charitable giving and the Big Society

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Mapping the different moral topographies of individuals

This chapter offers an account of how charitable giving matters to individuals, suggesting that charities are embedded in their lives with different degrees of meaning and importance. Individuals are reflexive beings, who interpret the social world in relation to things that matter to them, deliberating and prioritizing a multiplicity of moral concerns and commitments, such as the family, career, political and social causes and religion (Archer, 2007; Sayer, 2011; Taylor, 1989). The first part of this paper draws upon Archer's (2003; 2007) study on internal conversations and moral concerns to suggest that individuals have different dominant moral concerns that affect how they deliberate and commit themselves to charities. It offers a framework for understanding charitable giving based upon moral concerns, commitments and sentiments, suggesting three modes of personal and moral evaluation that help individuals navigate their way through the world in relation to things that matter to them. For some, charitable causes are essential to their way of life, whereas for others charitable acts are an incidental and marginal activity. Consequently, the Big Society agenda can excite and motivate individuals in different ways, depending upon their dominant concern. It is a mistake to suggest that individuals will respond to the Big Society opportunities in a similar way, with shared meanings, motivations and morals. While some individuals may volunteer as a way of socializing, bonding and belonging to the local community, a few may see the Big Society as a chance to demonstrate their practical skills and competence by undertaking demanding and challenging volunteering activities. Others may find some vindication in the

Big Society programme to foster civic virtues and active citizenship that brings about social change and justice.

The second part of the paper suggests how different life experiences, resources and dominant moral concerns can give rise to different judgements of compassion, responsibility and charitable acts (Sayer, 2005, 2011), so that individuals' sense of responsibility to others can be distorted by social class, parochialism and other forms of discrimination (Smith, 1976; Lamont, 1992, 2000). It suggests how social structures can distort moral judgements and how dominant moral concerns can produce self-deceptive and biased giving and non-giving.

Moral concerns and the voluntary sector

Morality is integral to everyday life, and moral sentiments, responsibilities and judgements partly constitute lived experience and everyday morality (Taylor, 1989; Benhabib, 1992; Sayer, 2005; Nussbaum, 2000). Everyday morality describes how ordinary individuals, who are emotionally entangled in social relationships, have to prioritize and dovetail incommensurable moral concerns into a moral orientation that allows them to deliberate on what is the right thing to do. Moral sentiments relate to things that we have reason to value, moving us into action. Moral responsibilities are unavoidable: as vulnerable, needy and interdependent human beings, we have to care for, and be cared for by, others. Moral judgements are equally pervasive, in that we are always embedded in a web of human relationships that shape, and are shaped by, moral obligations, expectations, rights and norms, requiring us to evaluate moral claims.

We are inescapably evaluative beings, 'existing in a moral space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary' (Taylor, 1989: 28). Our identity involves strong evaluations, allowing us to define what is important to us and what is not, and affirming moral concerns and deep commitments. We assess what social factors constrain and enable our life projects in a world not of our own making, how much endurance is needed to stay the course, and we decide what to do next (Archer, 2000). Moral reflexivity constitutes an individual's orientation towards society. Moral concerns, practices and situations are always understood through the way in which we describe them, in the process often misinterpreting them. Self-deception, rationalization of wrongs, self-denial, feeling exempt from the rule, miscalculations and excessive emotions trip us as we strive towards our goal.

Archer (2007) argues that over the course of their lives individuals establish a dominant mode of personal orientation towards society that shapes how they understand and evaluate social and ethical action, and that this has significant implications for charities, volunteering, civil society and the Big Society. Archer (2003, 2007) argues that there are three dominant modes of reflexivity and concern.[1] The first mode is illustrated by individuals whose primary concern is familial and collegial solidarity, and who subordinate other concerns, such as studies, work and faith. Such individuals have intense and dense inter-personal relationships, and are characterized by normative conventionality, meaning that moral principles and standards connect them to family and friends, and social networks censure their moral behaviour. They are moral conventionalists, who regard charity events as an opportunity to socialize and to have fun with family members, friends, work colleagues, neighbours and people in the community: for instance, a person may volunteer with her friends to run in a charity marathon. Such individuals' sympathy and compassion beyond their micro-worlds are restricted to familiar groups in the local community. Although their charitable acts exhibit a degree of sympathy, compassion and beneficence towards vulnerable and suffering groups, their giving tends to be short-lived and spatially restricted. Consequently, giving is weakly embedded into their lives. They are mobilized to donate by popular media appeals, conveniently placed collection boxes, local fetes and national disasters. While giving is sincere, it is not deep or resilient. Moral conventionalists are not likely to initiate any Big Society projects, but will participate in volunteering that family members, friends and neighbours have developed. Their participation in civil society will be limited spatially and socially, connected to people, surroundings and causes they know (Archer, 2007). Furthermore, volunteering for the community will be short-lived or restricted to a few hours a week, as their time is taken up by familial and social commitments.

The second mode is characterized by individuals whose dominant concern is work and who often undertake studies and training, and obtain satisfaction from getting their practical skills, competence and social performances right. Self-discipline, self-responsibility and self-improvement are part of their identity. They accommodate family and friends, but demand autonomy and privacy. Given their preoccupation with work and career, they minimize their contact with social collectives and associations. They are moral individualists, who pursue integrity, recognition and satisfaction in their performative practices, and take pride in their work. Their dedication to work

[1] Archer (2003, 2007) identifies four modes of reflexivity; I have chosen not to discuss the fourth mode, which is called 'fractured', partly because I did not encounter many fractured reflexives in my study.

and performance means that moral deliberations on giving do not absorb them, and are incidental and marginal to their everyday practices. Moral individualists regard charitable practices as an opportunity to demonstrate their competence, skills and knowledge. Charitable acts have an instrumental and strategic value, such as securing future employment, and are characterized by self-interest and reciprocity. Moral individualists are largely ambivalent about charities; they may give, but do not commit themselves. They are likely to use the Big Society opportunities to demonstrate their practical knowledge in managing challenging projects and to achieve social recognition in performing demanding work well. They may see themselves as productive workers, rather than as good citizens (Archer, 2007). The nature of their engagement with the voluntary sector will be limited by their desire to develop and exercise practical skills.

The third mode involves individuals whose dominant concern is values and who are sensitive to issues of injustice, suffering and oppression. They possess a sense of calling, and their attempt at holistic integration of concerns produces an eventful personal story. They are moral critics of society, who intensely scrutinize thought and action, take initiatives to promote their beliefs and values, and actively participate in civil society. Charitable causes are strongly embedded in their lives, and are seen as an opportunity to express their sympathy, compassion and justice for distant and unknown others. Their values and faith, which are an amalgam of cultural and political beliefs and ideas derived from different moral traditions, motivate their acts. Giving is thoughtful and purposeful: for instance, a person may scrutinize cancer research charities for animal testing before giving. Charitable acts, such as tithes, are seen as a matter of moral obligation towards vulnerable groups and minority causes, despite being costly to low-income donors. Moral sentiments of compassion, fairness and integrity trump class sentiments of superiority, disgust, embarrassment and guilt. Moral critics give themselves to their causes, but sometimes become dissatisfied as charities fail to meet their ethical ideals. The Big Society agenda is likely to vindicate moral critics as active citizens, who participate in civil society to pursue social change. The voluntary sector draws upon their commitment, labour, values and dynamism to achieve social justice and fairness. But they often become disillusioned by philanthropic ideals and practices, and as a result change charities at regular intervals. They are also most likely to criticize the ideals and objectives of the Big Society, finding its agenda incoherent and unsatisfying.

Biased giving and non-giving

This section focuses on how social structures and cultural ideologies can produce partial and distorted judgements (Rorty, 1998; Smith, 1976; Sayer, 2005), and how dominant moral concerns can result in biased giving, as concerns for career, family and community trump humanitarianism and social justice.

Individuals are embedded in social structures and ideologies that constitute their social position, shaping their relative capabilities and resources in society (Archer, 2000). Some groups, such as white middle-class men, have better access to opportunities than black working-class women in trying to become, say, a doctor, an artist or a social activist. It is not surprising that opportunities afforded by the Big Society will favour middle-class rather than working-class individuals. But the former will not automatically seize those opportunities, because personal reflexivity is necessary to interpret which moral concerns and commitments are important, and much endurance is needed to stay the course (Archer, 2003, 2007). Structures and ideologies are only opportunities or constraints in relation to people's goals and life projects, as discussed in the previous section.

There are two significant ways in which social structures and ideologies can produce distorted judgements on charities. First, self-deception refers to individuals who believe what they want to believe, regardless of reliable evidence that they are mistaken in their interpretations of society (Mele, 2001). Social structures and vested interests can distort perceptions and values, making it difficult for an individual to form disinterested judgements (Smith, 1976; Sayer, 2005). Self-deception is an inevitable part of our daily practices and relationships, but it can be dangerous if it develops into a damaging worldview (Rorty, 1998). For example, a wealthy accountant who sends her children to an elite private school may donate money to the private school, believing that the school will assist talented, working-class pupils to achieve academically and to facilitate greater social mobility in society.[2] But such action reveals the condescending class sentiments that cloud her understanding of the unjust nature of the UK schooling system. She may want to believe that she is helping talented working-class pupils, but in fact she is legitimizing her own class privileges and perpetuating class inequality. She is aware of arguments that private schools can contribute towards social inequalities, but she puts her children's interests ahead of social justice, vindicating her decision by selecting and processing information that highlights the benefits of private education. Not

[2] In October 2011, private and independent schools won a legal battle against the Independent Charity Commission to maintain their charity status.

unlike some progressive and affluent middle-class families, she is unwilling to sacrifice her children's future and class position for greater social equality.

Consider another example of self-deception that produces biased giving: a white British self-employed businessman may refuse to donate money to disaster relief charities overseas, adopting a policy of 'charity begins at home'. He volunteers at a local neighbourhood scheme to safeguard his community from petty crime, street violence and vandalism. He cites recent newspaper reports that highlight how governments in developing countries are corrupt and charities have huge administrative costs. He is aware of media stories of poverty, malnutrition and disease in Africa, but he brackets them to focus on how humanitarian and development aid results in corruption and waste. Although he is right to raise questions on the harm that may be caused by international charities and non-governmental organizations in developing countries (Illingworth *et al*, 2011), he is quite selective in processing information about the efficacy of international relief work. Fundamentally, he cares more for his own family and community than for distant and needy others.

The second way in which distorted judgements are produced is through moral weakness, doing the 'wrong' thing against one's better judgement (the Greek term for which is *akrasia*).[3] Individuals may *prima facie* act badly, but actually act coherently in relation to a web of unarticulated beliefs, values and dispositions (Rorty, 1997; Arpaly, 2003). For example, a middle-class university lecturer may believe that giving more of her wealth away is the right thing to do, but will typically donate only a small fraction of her income. She may express *akratic* regret at her inability to act in accordance with her beliefs, and may offer an excuse for her behaviour, saying that she is no worse than the average person (Cohen, 2000). Middle-class individuals, who have become accustomed to their comfortable lifestyle and privileges, find the prospect of losing power and status too painful. Only if they are deeply committed to social justice (rather than to their career or family) will they donate a larger percentage of their wealth, willingly forsaking the benefits of a higher purchasing power. Some university lecturers, such as Toby Ord, an Oxford don, are so strongly committed to international aid that they will donate as much as 10 per cent of their income for the rest of their working life. There are also some businesspeople, such as Zell Kravinsky, who are so dedicated to social wellbeing that they have donated almost all of their wealth to charities.

[3] Using judgemental terms – such as 'wrong', 'the right thing to do', 'immoral', 'bad' and 'praiseworthy' – may be regarded as out of place in a social science text, but we draw upon 'thick' ethical concepts (such as 'suffering', 'poverty' and 'harm') to describe and evaluate social practices and relationships (Taylor, 1989; Sayer, 2011). In discerning whether actions are moral or immoral, we have to contextualize people's behaviour, rather than apply abstract ethical standards.

Consider another example of moral weakness that produces non-giving: a working-class bank clerk on his way to work often passes by a homeless person begging for money. He believes that he ought to give some money, reasoning that the homeless person is a victim of a disruptive or abusive family upbringing. Despite this, he does not stop to give. He has regrets as he walks by, reprimanding himself for his stinginess. His reluctance to give can be partly explained by his frugal working-class upbringing, from which he has learned to spend and give carefully. But the truth is that he does not care enough for the homeless person to stop to give. He is more focused on getting to work on time and getting a promotion, than on correcting social injustices.

Conclusion

Everyday morality and dominant moral concerns shape charitable giving in two ways. First, we are reflexive and evaluative beings, who deliberate upon moral concerns and commitments, navigating our way through the world, distinguishing right from wrong and just from unjust. Such evaluations involve thick ethical descriptions, grounded in concrete and everyday experiences, enmeshed in a web of social relationships and entangled in a world of multiple concerns, commitments and attachments. Judgements and sentiments also relate to our human nature as vulnerable, needy and dependent beings, requiring a range of goods to achieve well-being. We have real or imagined conversations about how to pursue our moral concerns and how we ought to live. This paper has suggested three modes of moral reflexivity on charitable giving, based upon the dominant moral concerns and commitments of individuals: first, moral conventionalists, who value family and friends, focus on charity events as an opportunity to socialize and to have fun with others; second, moral individualists, who value work and career, emphasize charitable practices as performative acts that demonstrate their practical knowledge, competence and skills; third, moral critics are deeply committed to values and faith, reflected in their pursuit of moral ideals in charitable causes.

The other way in which charitable giving is shaped by these dominant moral concerns is that they can distort ethical evaluations, resulting in class and distant 'othering' and a neglect of care responsibilities. Class and parochial judgements can skew charitable giving, trumping sympathy and impartiality with their interests, causing individuals to misjudge charity receipts and organizations (self-deceptive actions) and to lack the moral will to give to good causes (*akratic* behaviour). In addition, social structures and cultural ideologies can nurture

and distort moral sentiments, judgements and responsibilities, enabling and inhibiting charitable giving.

One implication to be drawn from this for the Big Society project is that it cannot be assumed that individuals who participate in the Big Society initiatives will necessarily have similar concerns and commitments – rather, their participation will depend on their dominant moral concerns. For moral conventionalists, who are passive citizens, participation will be spatially and socially limited to local and family issues, such as school fetes, children's clubs and neighbourhood schemes. Moral individualists' engagement with the voluntary sector will be minimal: they will aim to use charities for instrumental reasons, such as career development and social recognition. And moral critics, who are deeply committed to social change and justice, will bring ideals, energy and dynamism to civil society, but they will also become disappointed with how charitable organizations operate.

Another implication is that the Big Society's vision of the good life is couched in ideas of social entrepreneurship, mutual reciprocity, community participation and localism that appeal to moral individualists and conventionalists, who ironically have the least to contribute to civil society. Those individuals, such as moral critics, who actively participate in creating a good society, usually have a richer ethical conception of human wellbeing that informs and motivates their evaluations and practices.