

Lecture Notes—Jean Hampton on altruism and self-sacrifice. Dick Arneson

Hampton aims to convince us that morality rightly understood requires self-respect and therefore self-concern. Sacrificing oneself to benefit others, far from being the acme of morally good conduct, may not be morally admirable and may be morally impermissible.

She uses the example of her friend Terry, described as a wife and mother who sacrifices her own needs and desires for the sake of her children and husband. So intent is Terry on serving others that she fails to develop a clear conception of her own needs and desires for herself—what she wants for her own sake as opposed to what she wants as part of the project of serving others. Pregnant, she works to serve the needs of her two young children and husband, to the point that her health collapses and she suffers a miscarriage. Hampton takes Terry's conduct to be morally deficient and tries to develop an account of duties to oneself and duties to others that adequately explains this response to the Terry example. In the background of this project lies Hampton's suspicion that going conceptions of morality overvalue altruism and dispositions to self-sacrifice.

Hampton makes use of some material in interviews with children conducted by Carol Gilligan with a view to uncovering the children's views about morality. Hampton thinks the interviews reveal assumptions about morality that are held not just by this or that child but more broadly and that find their way into moral theorists' writings on the nature of morality as well. The problematic assumption that is revealed is that morality consists of duties toward others and at most allows (but does not require) any concern for self. On this assumption the most that could be said by way of criticism of Terry is that by trying to do too much she fails adequately to fulfill her duty to serve the needs of others. Hampton focuses on two children interviewed by Gilligan, Jake and Amy. Jake (says Hampton) sees morality as constituted by duties of noninterference summed up in the slogan "Don't harm others (in certain ways)!". Morality requires that one respect other people's rights not to be treated in certain ways that would wrongfully harm them.

Amy agrees with Jake that morality is "other-regarding" but holds that besides negative duties not to harm we also have positive duties to help others. The duty to show care and concern for the people one encounters is potentially limitless. When other people's interests come into conflict, one must not accept helping some at the cost of harming others but should seek to develop creative compromises that cater to everyone's interests in ways all can accept. Amy according to Hampton holds that "a perfectly moral person is one who actively seeks out ways of benefiting others and offers her services and/or her resources in order to meet others' needs" (p. 140). She further holds that "any act that could benefit others is a prima facie obligation" (though maybe not an all things considered obligation).

It is noteworthy that both the Jake-like conception of morality and the Amy-like conception permit extreme self-sacrifice. Hence neither the Jake-like conception nor the Amy-like conception nor theoretical elaborations of these basic ideas provide any ground for criticizing Terry as being excessively self-sacrificing. So some different as yet unstated moral conception must be articulated to explain how Terry's conduct counts as wrong if indeed it does. A further point is that Hampton thinks Jake and people who think along the same line as Jake go wrong in supposing that morality consists only in negative duties not to harm others in certain specified ways.

At this point Hampton describes an essay "Moral Saints" by Susan Wolf that in effect says, if the various conceptions of morality on offer all uphold sacrificing one's own interests and constraining one's own interests for the sake of others, perhaps the moral standpoint is a limited standpoint that should not be deemed supreme in guiding us as to what all things considered it is most reasonable to do and how it is most reasonable to conduct ourselves throughout our lives. On all going conceptions of morality, says Wolf, the morally perfect person or moral saint would be exclusively concerned to do good for others and would have no time left to develop herself in ways that would make her into "an interesting and well-rounded person." So a rational person should not strive to be morally perfect, a moral saint, but should rather than doing always what is

best from the moral standpoint, instead sometimes choose what is good or best from the standpoint of furthering her own individual perfection. This would involve choosing to develop one's talents in any of many possible ways. Hampton's response: Wolf's criticism of the moral standpoint and its claims to supreme authority over our conduct apply not really to all moral views but only to the Amy-like ones. Jake-like conceptions are untouched by her critique, but such views are anyway unsatisfactory because "to think of morality along Jake-like lines gives us *too much* room for self-development" (p. 145). Morality does require us to do good for others and attend to the needs of others to some extent and in some ways. What that extent and those ways are remains to be seen.

HAMPTON'S VIEW

I won't here try to summarize fully Hampton's complicated sketch of what morality would have to look like in order adequately to balance legitimate self-concern and legitimate concern for others.

She acknowledges the account is sketchy and tentative, so the question is, what are the most plausible and promising ways to interpret and develop what she says.

Morality, says Hampton, requires that each person should respect herself or himself. Doing this require respecting all persons including oneself as having "intrinsic and equal value" (p. 146). It also requires developing a generic account of what any human being needs in order to flourish and providing for one's generic needs. It also requires developing a particular account of what one needs, insofar as one is "a *particular person*, to flourish as that particular person" (p. 146) and providing for one's particular needs. This in turn requires ensuring "that we have the time, the resources, and the capacity to develop the characteristics, skills, plans, and projects that make us unique individual selves" (p. 149). Some of one's individual distinctness comes from one's genetic inheritance and one's environment. But some is "self-authored." Each person chooses who she will be, by making certain kinds of choices over time that shape her own preferences and values and aims. Doing this and doing it well are important for that very person's flourishing. There are, moreover, objective conditions that must be met, if one is to count as self-defining rather than self-denying. We need (and presently lack) an account of when a person is in the right state (conscious, not being drunk or in a similar impaired condition, not in the grip of an emotion that takes over one's control and executive functions, and so on), such that what one comes to prefer and affirm in that state counts as authentically self-defining. But there are also, says Hampton, objective conditions on what can be the "content of an authentic self-authored preference." One such condition is that the content of a self-authoring preference "cannot conflict with what is required to meet that person's objective needs as a human being." So self-destructive and self-harming preferences are ruled out. Hampton adds that one's preferences that just reflect what one believes is socially expected or what one believes is required to fill an assigned social role one passively accepts are ruled out as not authentic, not a part of the genuine self-authorship project. One may fail to develop authentic preferences in these ways whether or not one should be blamed for the failure.

The next step is that Hampton holds further that "service to others is only morally acceptable when it arises from an authentically defined preference, interest, or project undertaken by one who pursues her legitimate needs as a human being, and who accepts a Kantian conception of human value" (which says all human persons are equal in fundamental worth) (p. 156). So is Hampton then ruling out all self-sacrifice as wrong? Is she saying one is only permitted to serve others or act to benefit others when one's acts simultaneously benefit oneself and are aimed at benefit to self? No, says Hampton. Moreover, genuine self-sacrifice can be morally acceptable when "that sacrifice is authentic and done out of love." The love in question unites the interests of the lover and the beloved, so if I love my friend, then benefits to my friend also register to some degree as benefits to me, and if I love my children, benefits to my children automatically count, to some degree as benefits to me. The interests of the lover and the beloved are fused, to a degree, in the preferences of the lover.

Morality may require that each person brings it about that she loves some other persons at least to some degree. So some self-sacrifice may be morally acceptable for any morally good person. But people may become self-authored and develop authentic preferences that are not ones that generate self-sacrifice and this may be just as commendable as developing preferences that can lead to self-sacrifice. Shouldn't we nonetheless greatly admire people who live their lives in ways that are enormously self-sacrificing? Hampton says No. This is not even permissible unless the sacrifice proceeds from authentic preference and is done from love for those one serves. Anyway even permissible altruism is just one possible commendable choice among many commendable nonaltruistic modes of life.

It may seem that Hampton has ruled out the possibility that any real as opposed to apparent self-sacrifice could qualify as morally permissible. If I sacrifice for my Mom from an authentic preference to serve her and the service is done from love that unites her interests and my own, then aren't I benefiting myself automatically when I cater to interests of my Mom, given the fusion of interests love is said to involve? My understanding is that Hampton does allow the possibility of genuine self-sacrifice. The fusion of interests that love brings about is not total. So if my brother is an alcoholic and I devote myself to spending all my time caring for him for ten years, helping him automatically benefits me some, given I love him, but it is still possible that overall I would have been far better off not devoting myself to caring for my brother for all those years but instead devoting myself to any of many other possible projects, eg moving to California, becoming a great surfer, and becoming the spouse of Angelina Jolie or Brad Pitt or both.

But Hampton's conditions for permissible self-sacrifice are complex and demanding, and Terry arguably fails to fulfill many of them, so she fails to show proper respect for herself in the example and indulges in morally wrong altruistic acts.

A criticism of Hampton.

The utilitarian will agree with Hampton that if someone sacrifices himself in ways that reduce total utility, as Terry does, that is morally wrong. Terry is prone to sacrificing her own big important needs in order to achieve tiny benefits for her husband and children. Each person should respect herself by counting her own interests as no less valuable as the comparable interests of others in determining what should be done. But once the calculations are made by equal counting, why is it wrong, rather than admirable, to sacrifice one's own good, even a lot of it, to gain a bigger more than offsetting gain that accrues to others? Why is it wrong rather than heroic to sacrifice oneself for others when that boosts aggregate good, especially by a huge amount (as when the Little Dutch Boy of legend sticks his finger in the dike, freezing himself but saving the entire city)? Even if we disagree with utilitarianism and regard it as morally permissible not to make big sacrifices of one's good for others, why not regard it as admirable? Hampton's conditions rule out too much, this criticism alleges.

It would be worth considering why Hampton's conditions on acceptable self-sacrifice include the condition that the sacrifice be done from love. She seems to be worried about cases in which sacrifices made not from love turn out to be annoyingly self-righteous and act as a wet blanket that reduces human good and human solidarity and good feeling. But not all sacrifice done from a sense of duty or some other nonlove motive will be counterproductive in this way.

Developing a robust healthy sense of one's individuality and a strong set of self-interested aims is good. That by itself is compatible with denying that sacrificing one's own development of a strong healthy self is never morally permissible or admirable or even morally required.