

A reflection on the reflective ethics of charity

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This article is a reflection on the NSU Winter Symposium of March 2020, entitled 'Feminism and Hospitality: Religious and Critical Perspectives in dialogue with a Secular Age'.¹ It contends with moral judgments which regard charity as an act of alienation from the other and as a reiteration of hierarchies of power. Instead of this conceptualisation, I propose an ethics of charity in terms of an ethics of the reflective agency of otherness. This ethics of charity entails acts of aid for an other which stem from the recognition of the agency pertaining to both parties. It will be shown how this recognition of agency, and the reciprocity it entails, is critical for the success of the charitable endeavour in two ways: first, for the manifestation of the act itself of aiding and providing for another; second, for the assertion of the other's own agency through the reciprocal act of charity.

1 I am thankful to the coordinators of the symposium, Laura Hellsten and Nicole des Bouvrie, in collaboration with Åbo Akademi University, the Donner Institute for Research in Religion and Cultural History, and the Inez and Julius Polin Institute for Theological Research, for creating the framework in which such reflections can sprout and grow. To my friends and colleagues, old and new participants of the NSU 'Feminist Philosophy' symposium, I express gratitude for continuously intriguing and challenging me. Specifically, for the vivacious discursive adventure together that brought this article into being.

THE ROOM FILLS with lively conversation as people enter. The low hum is accentuated by staccatos of voices in edifying discussion, the excited hand-waving of reunions between friends and colleagues, the kindly curious salutations between those newly acquainted. Time is in motion – the lecturers rise and teach and pass to and from the front of the room. Presentations and workshops weave into hours of learning, mutual study, and exploration. Empirical findings are imparted, theses offered, and contemplations shared. These formulate into conceptualisations of hospitality and otherness, refugees and volunteers, biblical texts and church asylum, ethics and praxis, solidarity and charity. Charity. As an antonym of solidarity. The act of giving provisions to a person in need is conceptualised as an act stemming from and reiterating alienation from the other, a stance reifying an inequality of power and resources that does not recognise the human in those on the receiving end. Solidarity, on the other hand, as a reciprocity; as an act of morality not for the good of the other but for the good in itself. Solidarity as the experience of receiving hospitality from those to whom one gives aid, not an experience of offering hospitality oneself. Solidarity as not receiving thanks.

My brows furrow. What are these moral judgments I am hearing, that ‘charity is bad’? That charity is an act which perpetuates privilege rather than remedies inequalities? That reciprocity requires not receiving thanks? That recognising the other entails rebuffing the recognition of oneself and the aid and hospitality one offers the other? How is it that in this symposium of feminist philosophers, theologians, lawyers, and social scientists, a symposium originating from and occurring in the welfare states of the Nordic region – that here the recurring ethical sentiment is that ‘charity is bad’?

Perplexed by this moral judgment, I delve into days of dialogue with myself and with my colleagues about these notions of charity versus solidarity, about the ethics of hospitality, gratitude, and recognition. The notion raised by my friends is that charity is an act of giving aid to a person in need enabled by one’s position of privilege in the hierarchy of economic and social situations. They postulate that such an act is antithetical to solidarity. The privilege entailed in the deed renders it inhospitable towards the person receiving the charity, thus deepening the chasms of alienation and inequality between the sides instead of alleviating them. Charity fails to see the other, to recognise their agency and sympathise with their situation. Rather, it is a one-sided movement of the transfer of goods initially acquired due to society’s unjust distribution. The receiver, the other, is thus rendered devoid of action, their full humanity unrecognised. Subsequently, the hierarchy is maintained. Even the offering of gratitude by the receiver of the charity, my colleagues posit, is not a reciprocity of agency. On the contrary, such thanks would further entrench the receiver in their disadvantage and otherness in relation to the giver of the charity. For, they explain, it would be an act

of submission, of maintaining the hierarchical order which alienates this receiving other, denying them their human agency. This denial relates to the perception of the other’s agency in the eyes of the giver, in the eyes of the other themselves, and in society’s categorial view of ‘givers’ and ‘receivers’ of charity.

Inversely, my colleagues define solidarity as the act of seeing and recognising the other as agentic and in possession of capacities. To give aid to an other in solidarity, one must dispense with the situational awareness which deems one to be acting in a positive fashion. One must not consider the discrepancy in commodities between the two sides which elicits the need of the other and the capacity to give of the giver. Solidarity, my friends define, is a deed done for an other, but which rather entails receiving from the other more than having given. The other is not the receiving party but rather the benefactor to whom the aid-giver is in debt. This depiction is one of being able to help others only by negating the help one has given. One must not rejoice in this act of kindness, nor in the positive outcome it brings to the other. For, then it will have been done for personal emotional gain, obscuring the recognition of the other, the affinity with them, and the morality of the act. My colleagues are unwilling to name the act as providing aid for someone in need, or to receive thanks for it. According to their approach, receiving thanks is to regard oneself as superior and thus to be inhospitable to the other and degrade them.

An ethical creed is discussed: the obligation to do good because it is the good in itself rather than for the pleasure, welfare, or will of either side of the engagement. This Kantian-style creed² causes

2 See generally Kant’s theory of the ‘good in

me to ponder its denial of the value of the experiences that charity arouses for both giver and receiver, as though such recognition would mar the act's morality. Indeed, I too am ethically ambivalent regarding acts of charity stemming from the giver's pleasure in the act or its outcomes. In such a case, is one truly fulfilling a moral obligation, or serving one's self-appreciation? Yet, I cannot accede to an ethics which refutes the agency of both parties of the charitable act – agencies which enable the charity and which are cultivated by it. Therefore, I make a request to rescue charity – the act of providing aid for an other with means one is privileged to possess – from the bad faith into which it has fallen. To reclaim the ethics of charity as an ethics of the reflective agency of otherness.

I postulate an ethics of charity, as acts of aid for an other, which stems from the recognition of the agency pertaining to both parties, by each of them, by their surrounding social context, and by the conceptual scheme of what charity is. This recognition of agency is critical for the success of the charitable endeavour in two ways. Most importantly, one must recognise one's contribution and ability to provide for others in order to more fully harness one's capabilities, in actions and in resources, for the aid of others. For example, if one blinds oneself to the economic resources in one's possession, whether they have been acquired through personal effort or by virtue of social situation, the money will be rendered conceptually less accessible even for the betterment of others. For, abashment concerning the possession of such wealth will

itself' in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, originally published in German in 1785 and available in English in Mary J. Gregor and Jens Timmermann's edition of 1998.

inhibit its use as a consequence of a reluctance to draw the attention of others and of oneself to its existence. If a person humbly hides the talents they have – such as carpentry or musical artistry – they will not be sought after when an other is in need of those talents – to fix a broken cupboard, or to comfort people in their sorrow.

A lack of recognition of one's own capabilities, specifically in relation to the person in need, can furthermore lead to a self-silencing, thwarting one's potential offer of aid. This can arise in such a situation where a person lacking parental duties enters the house of a friend who is a parent to a young child, to find the kitchen in disarray and the sink full of unwashed dishes. If the non-parent hinders themselves from acknowledging their privileged position in the specific sense of having energies and time in relation to the parent, if they do not wish to shame the parent by relating straightforwardly to the untended kitchen and to the disparity between their positions, the non-parent may impede themselves from entering the kitchen and washing the dishes.³ Thus, this refusal to recognise one's own repository of resources – whether monetary, in talent, or in capacities – inhibits the realisation of one's agency to help or provide for an other. It entails a restriction on oneself, on one's actions, and on one's resources, hampering their manifestation and use in the fullest extent possible. This obstruction of one's own agency directly diminishes the acts of charity that are possible for one to perform for others.

3 I thank my friend-who-is-a-parent for providing me with this opportunity to act in charity and to experience its reflective agency of otherness, consequently contributing to the conceptualisation of this 'reflective ethics of charity'.

The second manner in which recognition of agency is critical for the success of the charitable endeavour involves the reflectiveness of agency constituted in the act of charity. In a similar vein as Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948),⁴ the agencies – and the subjective freedoms – of both sides of the charitable act are innately linked. This is 'the bond of each [hu]man with all others ... [for] every [hu]man needs the freedom of other[s]' (1948: 30, my un-masculinisation). In the charitable endeavour, when a person recognises that they provide for an other, that recognition of one's agency entails a recognition of the agency inherent in the receiver. By naming the act of charity, acknowledging its enactment, its facilitators, and its results, the giver of the charity enables the receiver to realise their own agency by engaging in reciprocity. Once the aid is named and acknowledged by the giver, it is possible for the receiver to acknowledge the reception and thus offer gratitude – the lack of which would deprive them of their being active and resourceful agents. Preventing their ability to thank and partake as reciprocal partners in the act of charity, diminishes the other to an object of reception rather than a subject with the capacities to contribute to others. This severing of the reciprocity integral to the act of charity comprises the severing of the reflective trait of agencies. As Beauvoir writes, '[d]ishonestly ignoring the subjectivity of [one's own] choice... [one] ignores the value of the subjectivity and the freedom of others' (*ibid.* p. 20).

Moreover, this restraint of the other's very agency upholds the hierarchies between the two parties as sole-giver and sole-receiver. The inequality in resources

that one attempts to blind oneself to and dissociate from are precisely what facilitates the ability to aid others in need. Even in a utopian world where all resources would be perpetually allocated equally and equitably, discrepancies between people would not cease to exist. They may take the form of varying talents, differing familial situations, or loss of resources due to natural disasters. This may offer an 'optimistic' interpretation of the biblical claim in Deuteronomy 15:11: 'For there will never cease to be poor in the land; therefore I am commanding you saying: Open your hand generously to your brother, to your indigent, and to your destitute in your land.'⁵ There will always be an other in need for whom one's tangible and intangible resources may – and must – provide aid.

The lack of recognition of one's capacity to help others does not repeal existent inequalities but rather maintains them. To disassociate oneself from the charity one has provided is a stance of privilege. It is the person situated at the higher ends of the social hierarchy who can afford to blind themselves to the disparity of privileges between them and others, even while they themselves enact that difference by giving aid to someone in need. By repudiating the recognition of one's own act of charity and the reciprocity of the other, a person shrouds themselves in an illusion that they are not more privileged than others. Thus, they fail to recognise the less privileged positions of the other and obstruct the latter's ability to reciprocate and re-establish their own agency. The self-deprecation of preventing the acknowledgement and gratitude for charitable acts prevents the receiver from realising their own agency in their regained self-sufficiency and ability to reciprocate

4 See also Beauvoir's *Pyrrhus and Cineas* originally published in French in 1944.

5 English translation from Sefaria 2020.

the act of giving. In such a manner, one precisely fortifies and reproduces the inequalities of society rather than diminishing them, as could be done by fortifying the agency of the other in the reflective ethics of charity.

The reflectiveness of agency entailed in the reflective ethics of charity brings me back to the ambivalence regarding acts of charity stemming from the giver's pleasure in the act or its outcomes. This 'moral anxiety' (Beauvoir 1948: 31) brings into question the character of such acts of charity if a consideration of the experiences and wills of those involved deems the act to be egoistical and perhaps entirely unethical. Beauvoir's answer manifests the reflective ethics of charity, explaining that 'there is no ethics against which this charge, which immediately destroys itself, cannot be leveled; for how can I worry about what does not concern me? I concern others and they concern me. There we have an irreducible truth. The me-others relationship is as indissoluble as the subject-object relationship' (*ibid.* p. 31).

As experiencing beings who are linked to each other in existence, freedom, and subjectivity, it is thus inherently the case that ethically we are linked as well. Our acts of charity connect us to each other and to the bond of agency which connects us through the mutual reflection of our otherness. Solidarity and charity are not contesting forms of action. Charity does not negate the ability to be hospitable towards an other and to be in solidarity with them. Rather, charity in its fullest application enables a deeper sense of recognition of the other. It is true that acts of charity, as I have portrayed them, can bring with them ethical ambivalence regarding the giver's wants and pleasure in the act or its outcomes. My creed of charity can furthermore touch upon a discomfort felt by many, my colleagues

and myself included, about a blatant recognition of one's own privilege. But, it is the honest acknowledgment of one's tangible and intangible resources that renders its use for others possible. Admission – and appreciation – of what one possesses, renders it accessible to be used for the good and need of others.

So too does the reluctance to accept gratitude from the receiving other impinge on the very hospitality it is attempting to achieve. For, to prevent the receiver of aid from expressing thanks does not accelerate this other's agency, nor does it diminish the unequal distribution of goods that may have caused the latter's need in the first place. Quite the contrary. To prevent thanks silences the receiver's ability to speak their experience. It arrests this person's drive to action – an action that would have placed them on reciprocal ground of agency and a capacity to give with the provider of the charity. The intuition of unease that my colleagues convey in our discussions is understandable, common, and stems from a moral and caring stance. However, it is the flip side of the ethical ambiguity concerning aiding an other for one's own pleasure. Catering to one's own unease at being recognised as privileged reinstates the very hierarchies inherent in placing the self-interests of the privileged over the fundamental recognition of the other. Though well meant, it is an inhospitable act of denial of agency; the very result my friends seek to avoid.

To be hospitable is to engage eye to eye with the other, to recognise the eminence in the other's face (Lévinas 1969: 262, 293). This is a two-directional motion. By looking into the other's eyes, one not only sees the vitally human in the other; one manifests it. For, to look someone in the eye is to open one's own eyes for the other to actively look into. It is an agentic action towards

the other which inherently instigates the agency of the other towards oneself. As a human of action, one looks into the other's eyes and sees there the human of action agentically looking back. Only by allowing the other to recognise oneself, can one recognise the other in their full immensity and competence. If one is to avert one's eyes in discomfort, what is being denied is not the auditory articulations of gratitude, but the very agency of the other. This mutual recognition is imperative for ascertaining solidarity and is ingrained in the reflective ethics of charity. It is this reflectiveness of agency, of morality, and of the profound recognition between the giver of goods and the giver of gratitude, by which acts of charity embrace the mutual experience of being in solidarity. ■

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