The Other, Altruism and Empathy. Variety of Prosocial Behavior

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Abstract

Sociology is par excellence the science of the other since relationality is the object of its approach. It is precisely from the relationship that is established with the other that various dynamics develop, which can be pro-social or counter-social, generating forms of altruism and selfishness, generosity and appropriation, acceptance and rejection, collaboration and competition. Altruism, in particular, has been the object of attention by Comte and Spencer in a universalistic perspective very different from the contemporary forms assumed by the phenomenon of globalization. Perhaps, it is only through the analysis of the modalities of altruism that we can understand well enough the reasons that produce attitudes and behaviours that are more or less favourable towards others. If we then combine altruism with the peculiar processes of the exercise of empathy, the sociological problem in its complexity becomes even more intriguing. It is not by chance that Daniel Batson has started a rather articulate discussion that tends to show how altruism is motivated by empathy.

Keywords Altruism · Empathy · Generosity · Otherness · Prosocial behavior · Relationality

Introduction

In Emiliana Mangone's study (2020) on altruism, the part to be considered most significant is in chapter 4, entitled "Beyond the Dichotomy between Altruism and Egoism", because it is precisely on pages 147 to 173 that the central question of the difference between altruism and egoism and the consequences that derive from it on the behavioral level is addressed, and therefore sociologically more relevant. The lesson of the classics, from Comte to Durkheim, from Mauss to Sorokin and Moscovici, is still valid to a large extent, but science is always in progress and cannot stop, as if to imply that a degree of satisfaction has been reached with the results obtained

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that there is no longer any need for further contributions. In this, Mangone's essay offers new glimpses, different perspectives and almost risks, so to speak, to be seminal as are other contributions such as those of Batson (1991, 2011, 2019) above all and then Gouldner (1960), but also Penner et al. (2005).

The theme of altruism, indeed, has not found adequate interest on the part of sociologists (Wuthnow, 1993), despite the obvious connections with concepts such as solidarity, inequalities, social classes, values, poverty, interpersonal relations, cooperation, volunteerism, assistance, social promotion. Perhaps a certain suspicion of moralism, religionism, goodness, imaginable as inherent in orientations inclined to philanthropy, prodigality, munificence, charity, self-sacrifice, oblateness, has been detrimental to the practicability of the argument. In short, the criterion of scientific neutrality would not have favored the legitimation, with its attention, of choices of field linked to ethical principles, ideological options, confessional affiliations. Perhaps this explains a certain ostracism towards an author such as Pitirim Sorokin (1950), who called himself (like the American historian Henry Adams) "Conservative Christian Anarchist", a supporter of ethics of love and founder of a university center for altruism (The Harvard Research Center in Creative Altruism) and therefore considered a strong conservative, as an advocate of rural culture and the traditional family.

Individual and society

Emiliana Mangone does well to criticize the Durkheimian perspective of the relationship between society and cultural objects such as altruism and egoism: "the 'creators' of altruism and egoism can be both individual and collective subjects. We disagree with Durkheim's idea that culture, and therefore cultural objects, are a product only and exclusively of the collective; individuals, as part of it, are continuously involved in socialization and integration processes, both of which are related to the construction of meaning" (Mangone, 2020, pp. 151–152).

The elaboration of cultural objects is the result of complex procedures that have to do with the role of the social actor, with his world of life (*Lebenswelt*, according to the connotation first of Simmel, then of Husserl and Schutz) (Husserl, 1999; Schütz, 1967; Simmel, 1912), with the socialization received, with daily life, with the values transmitted and introjected, in short, with the social construction of reality, as imagined by Berger and Luckmann (1966). It is difficult to think that this perspective of sociological analysis can be compatible with the hypothesis advanced by the "rational choice theory" (Coleman, 1990; Coleman & Fararo, 1992), according to which every individual option would be driven by the criterion of convenience, of one's advantage, of return in terms of profit and/or image.

The world of life is closely connected to the theme of altruism and religion in particular, as pointed out by the already mentioned Simmel, who in his famous essay on religion explicitly mentions the *Lebenswelt*: "Hier liegen die allgemeinen, kaum vermeidlichen Schwierigkeiten der Religion: dass sie aus Ansprüchen und Antrieben der Seele hervorgeht, die mit den 'Sachen' der Empirie und mit verstandesmäßigen Kriterien nicht das geringste zu tun haben, aber nun, statt

eine autonome Lebenswelt aufzubauen, sich in Behauptungen gewohnten realistischen, wie selbstverständlich sich aufdrängenden Gefüges umsetzen; unvermeidlich geraten solche Behauptungen über die diesseitige und jenseitige Welt in Widersprüche mit den intellektuellen Massstäben, die von ganz andersartigen Ursprüngen herkommen” (Simmel, 1912, p. 13); (Here we see the most universal, almost inevitable difficulties associated with religion: it derives from needs and impulses of the soul that do not have the least to do with the ‘things’ of the empirical world and with rational. Instead of constructing their own autonomous life world, these impulses become realized in a seemingly self-evident context that imposes itself unquestioningly. It is inevitable that such claims concerning the world and the hereafter come into conflict with the intellectual standards that have an entirely different origin) (Simmel, 1997, p. 142).

Therefore, it should be recognized to Simmel to have first used the concept of the world of life (*Lebenswelt*) to express sociologically the lived world or the world of lived experience and to have pointed out the implications that exist with the religious perspective, with needs and impulses that extend to include issues concerning the earthly reality and the transcendent. Given these premises, the relationship between the individual and society is essentially expressed in relationality and therefore in attitudes and behaviors that involve the other and others. The twofold possibility of collaboration or indifference then arises. If the former prevails, value orientations linked to generosity, availability, and, in practice, generalized attention to peers, companions, and friends are manifested. A further step is given by an openness to the wider society and to taking on the needs of others. In short, a typical phenomenology of altruistic tendency emerges.

The world of life in its German formulation of *Lebenswelt* reappears explicitly with Husserl’s approach (1973, p. 49, 1986). His conception of the alter ego underlies the essential relation to the other, Hegelian-inspired (Hegel, 2018), i.e. coming from the idea that self-consciousness arises only in the light of and through the mediation of another self-consciousness. Hence comes the fact that man is essentially intersubjectivity. In more current terms, we could say with Donati (2010) that the subject is mainly relation.

The epigone of the long flowchart that starts from the philosophy of ancient Greece, in particular from the dialectics of Plato’s dialogues to reach the Hegelian reinterpretation of reality, is probably Alfred Schütz (1972, 1982), Husserl’s pupil and, in turn, master of Berger and Luckmann. Together with the latter, it is not by chance that Schütz himself is the author of a publication that deals, once again, with *Lebenswelt* (Schütz & Luckmann, 1973).

Then there is the de facto transition from the world of life to the world of daily life to be taken into account, since in fact “‘world of daily life’ shall mean the intersubjective world which existed long before our birth, experienced and interpreted by Others, our predecessors, as an organized world. Now it is given to our experience and interpretation. All interpretation of this world is based upon a stock of previous experiences of it, our own experiences and those handed down to us by our parents and teachers, which in form of ‘knowledge at hand’ function as a scheme of reference” (Schütz, 1972, p. 208).

From the Griswold diamond to the Mangone diamond

Griswold's (1994) cultural diamond has been widely successful in being used on many occasions and for many purposes and scientific disciplines. The re-proposal made by Mangone (2020, pp. 150–158) helps a lot to understand the dense network of relationships that are established in the opposition between altruism and egoism, leveraging the strategic concept of *Lebenswelt*. However, in Griswold, the succession of elements appears indistinct, does not seem to follow a precise order and undergoes nominalistic variations over time and of the various publications: at first (Griswold, 1986) it seems to start clockwise from the subject, to head towards the social world, passing through the audience and reaching the cultural object; later (Fig. 1), again in clockwise succession, it moves from the producers to go towards the social world and then to the receivers and finally to the cultural object. Starting from Griswold's cultural diamond, numerous and very different graphic and nominalistic solutions have been proposed by more than a dozen authors.

In Mangone (2020, p. 150), on the other hand, the same diamond (Fig. 2) is articulated from the subject understood as a creator to the *Lebenswelt* and from this to the subject seen as a receiver, to finally arrive at altruism and egoism as cultural objects. Above all, Mangone's re-proposal is appreciable because it attempts, and succeeds, in clarifying a labyrinth of possible applicative branches that risk creating

Fig. 1 Griswold's cultural diamond (Griswold, 1994, p. 16)

Fig. 2 Elements, connections, and relationships involved in the construction of altruism/egoism as a cultural object (Mangone, 2020, p. 150)

confusion, especially if not applied to specific cases and precise themes. In fact, in setting as an analytical-interpretative objective the problem of the relationship between altruism and egoism, it is well understood that the latter are both cultural products, certainly not innate and not passed down through DNA. This is why the delicate question of the origin of these terminal precipitates, which play such a large part in the history of human society, must be addressed. They are the result of social construction of reality or representations and interpretations that derive from attributions of meaning.

But, sense can be understood both as meaning and as direction. Certainly, the first aspect is present in the cultural process that favors the spread of altruism as well as egoism, but the idea of a direction, of a part towards which one goes or from which one comes, also has its weight. Mangone (2020, p. 150) first of all points to the initial relationship that can be traced in the back and forth between a subject (creator) and the world of life expressly indicated as *Lebenswelt*. This takes place in a two-way, reciprocal manner, from one to the other and vice versa. This occurs only in this case in such terms and with such procedures, while the relations between a subject (receiver) and *Lebenswelt* are seen by Mangone in an exclusively unidirectional way: from the first to the second and not vice versa. The same can be said for the proceeding between a subject (receiver) and altruism/egoism (cultural objects), as well as between subject (creator) and altruism/egoism (cultural objects). Instead, bidirectionality reappears in the case of transversal connections between a subject (creator) and subject (receiver) as well as between *Lebenswelt* and altruism/egoism (cultural objects):

Appropriately, Mangone (2020, p. 151) points out that “the *Lebenswelt* is, therefore, the element from which meanings and representations spring, and from which all other connections start”, and that “between lifeworld and subjects, understood as creators, there is a reciprocal connection that allows for the other to be recognized. This reciprocity becomes paramount for everything related to altruism and egoism”.

Empathy and Altruism

Charles Daniel Batson has devoted his life as a scholar to answer a fundamental question: why are humans inclined toward altruism? What is it that moves them? What reasons underlie their choice to devote themselves to others or dedicate something of their own to others? A key answer came from linking the feeling of empathy to that of love, generosity, philanthropy and prodigality towards others.

There are three models of Batson (1991) that see empathy as the motivation that drives altruism. In the first two models, the objectives pursued differ, although starting from the same empathic orientation: in the first model, one aspires to a social or personal reward, while in the second model one tries to avoid punishment. Finally, in the third model, in which the reason is given by the desire to reduce the impact of adversity, altruism is aimed at alleviating the anguish due to empathy.

But the most consistent landing place of the Batsonian studies is available in a later publication (Batson, 2011) that highlights the hyper complexity (Table 1) not only of motivations but also and above all of the objectives and, even more so, of the emotional experiences that are felt in the different ways of relating to others, in key, respectively, of egoism (thinking about oneself) and altruism (thinking about others), of collectivism (thinking about one's own set of belonging) and of principlism (thinking about principles, values, as a basis of reference) (Batson, 2011, pp. 207–224).

The scheme that Batson deduces from his research is very instructive and certainly represents an important contribution to the study of both altruistic and egoistic phenomenology, as it highlights the constant objective of the well-being of others, accompanied, if anything, by universal values (justice, common good). He then lists the emotional springs that push towards certain orientations: pain and fear but also pleasure and pride, sympathy and irritation, loyalty and sense of belonging, disgust and indignation. Finally, he outlines the most significant aspects as well as the most problematic ones: on the one hand, pleasure-pain dynamics, empathic concern, collective pride and universal good; on the other hand, instrumental or unconscious egoism, targeted empathic attention, functional collectivism, that is, utilitarianism and ethical sensitivity that is more imposed than desired. In such an articulated picture, it is easy to understand that the guidelines that move social individuals are multiple and not always well defined so that a great deal of heuristic attention is needed in searching for reasons and explanations. However, we have a theoretical-conceptual framework (based on the hypothesis of empathy-induced altruism) that can support the researcher.

The continuous attempts made by Batson to establish the arguments that produce attitudes and behaviors of altruistic and/or egoistic type, even though they are useful to deepen the knowledge of the starting motivations that lead to a certain way of thinking and acting, however, penalize the real weight of the experience of individual and social agents. In other words, behavior as such is subordinate to the care with which the origins of the phenomena examined are studied.

As Mangone (2020, p. 195) rightly notes, “the study of the different forms of altruistic relationships (altruism, solidarity, cooperation, gratitude, etc.) and the

Table 1 Goals, emotions, strengths and weaknesses of the four motives for benefiting other individuals and society at large (Batson, 2011, p. 214)

Motive	Ultimate goal/ valued state	Need-state emotions	Strengths	Weaknesses
Egoism	Increase one's own welfare	Many, including pain, distress, discomfort, fear, anxiety, shame, guilt, pleasure, praise, pride, etc	Many forms; powerful; easily aroused; strong emotional base in pleasure-pain	Benefiting others, whether individuals or society at large, relates to egoistic motivation only as an instrumental means or an unintended consequence
Altruism	Increase the welfare of one or more other individuals	Empathic concern, including sympathy, compassion, tenderness, empathic distress, empathic anger, etc	Powerful; focused on other's welfare as ultimate goal; may generalize to group of which other is a member; strong emotional base in empathic concern	Empathy-induced altruism is limited to individuals for whom empathy is felt; welfare of society at large relates to altruistic motivation only as an instrumental means or an unintended consequence
Collectivism	Increase the welfare of a group or collective	Group pride, esprit, loyalty, patriotism, collective shame, collective guilt, etc	Powerful; focused on welfare of the group as ultimate goal; strong emotional base in group pride, loyalty, patriotism, etc	Limited to group; welfare of individuals in need relates to collectivist motivation only as an instrumental means or an unintended consequence
Principlism	Uphold some moral principle (e.g., fairness, justice, greatest good, do no harm)	Disgust, anger at violation of propriety principles; possibly moral outrage at violation of conflict principles	Directed toward universal and impartial good	Moral principles are abstract and varied; conflict moral motivation is easily corrupted; it is vulnerable to oversight, rationalization, and self-deception; lacks a strong emotional base; is experienced as a motivational "ought" not "want"

relative methodologies adopted must be oriented towards the integration of the subjective and objective dimension. The element that holds everything together is the interpretation and construction of reality through the relationships between individuals, and between individuals, society, and culture. Since individuals are agents of interaction (in their daily life and in institutions), all these aspects should be seen as a correlation of interpretations and not only as the response to a triggering cause”.

Undoubtedly, it is well-founded to argue that a good theory is the best guarantee for empirical research, but it is also necessary to do everything possible to ensure that the theory is built starting from the data that are as complete as possible or at least tend to be complete. In short, one cannot exhaust the approach by considering the source alone without also addressing the actual outcomes. From motivation to action, many other variables escape those who analyze only the characteristics of the source. The fact is that during the process, other decisive factors intervene that give rise to the ultimate decision traceable in daily behavior, in acquired habits, in Bourdieu's *habitus* (“a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class”) (1977, p. 86) and in the “habits of the heart” of Bellah and his collaborators, who deal precisely with the relationship between individualism and commitment (Bellah et al., 1985), distinguishing between an expressive individualism (which is manifested “through intuitive feeling to ‘merge’ with other persons, with nature, or with the cosmos as a whole”) (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 334) and a utilitarian individualism—“that takes as given certain basic human appetites and fears – for Hobbes, the desire for power over others and the fear of sudden violent death at the hands of another – and sees human life as an effort by individuals to maximize their self-interest relative to these given ends” (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 336).

Conclusion

The overcoming of the dichotomy between altruism and egoism, of which Mangone (2020, p. 197) speaks extensively – concluding that “the search for the reason of phenomena must no longer refer to a *cause*, but to a *meaning*, which can represent the most effective key for analyzing and developing the interaction between individuals” – depends largely on how the relationship with the other is set up. On this topic, sociological literature offers many possibilities of theoretical and empirical investigation, but above all, the fundamental contribution of two great authors such as Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) and Kurt Wolff (1912–2003), almost the same age, with different cultural and methodological backgrounds, yet converging in their final results.

Of the former, we should remember his trilogy on time and narration (Ricoeur, 1984–1985–1988) and, above all, his text on the other (Ricoeur, 1992), but also the reading that Andrzej Wierciński (2003) provides on the difficult balance between suspicion and sympathy, or rather between denial and acceptance of the other.

Ricoeur is a scholar who has set the stage for the development of schools around him, not only because he has taught in several countries: groups of his disciples have formed in France, Italy and elsewhere. His name can be found in *The New*

Encyclopædia Britannica. Micropædia (vol. VIII: 576) but, strangely enough, is missing from the *Encyclopedia Americana*, even though he taught in the United States at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago for fifteen years (1970–1985). Strongly influenced by Husserl's thought (1973, 1986, 1999) and marked by his experience as a prisoner of war for five years (from 1940 onwards) in the Nazi camps, Ricoeur interpreted as search for meaning his preferred approach, which led him to take into the utmost consideration the subject and the other. His mental and ideological readiness was such that before him “all books are simultaneously open” (Ricoeur, 2000, p. III).

The thesis argued by the French scholar is the following: “*Oneself as Another* suggests from the outset that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other, as we might say in Hegelian terms” (Ricoeur, 1992: 3). Therefore it is necessary to “acquire simultaneously the idea of reflexivity and the idea of otherness, in order to pass from a weak correlation between someone and anyone else,... to a strong correlation between belonging to the self, in the sense of mine, and belonging to another, in the sense of yours” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 39).

The whole thing then resolves itself into an ethical issue whereby “the self, stripped bare... should make it clear to us that the issue here is the ethical primacy of the other than the self over the self” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 168). The desired goal is “*to live well with and for others in just institutions and to esteem oneself as the bearer of this wish*” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 354). Therefore, not serving oneself but having a relationship with others is what gives meaning to life. In short, ethics is “the aim of an accomplished life” while morality is “the articulation of this aim in norms characterized at once by the claim to universality and by an effect of constraint” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 170). You can thus obtain that “self-respect, which on the moral plane answers to self-esteem on the ethical plane, will reach its full meaning... when the respect for the norm will have blossomed into respect for others and for ‘oneself as another’” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 203).

Ricoeur also refers to the “golden rule” traceable in so much sociological literature, especially in the United States (Ammerman, 2013): “treat others as you would like them to treat you” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 219). Meanwhile, however “the tragedy of *Antigone* touches what... we can call the agonistic ground of human experience, where we witness the interminable confrontation of man and woman, old age and youth, society and individual, the living and the dead, humans and gods. Self-recognition is at the price of a difficult apprenticeship acquired over the course of a long voyage through these persistent conflicts, whose universality is inseparable from their particular localization, which is, in every instance, unsurpassable” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 243).

For this reason, Ricoeur pauses to talk about responsibility, which is also emphasized by Mangone (2020) in the subtitle of her book and reiterated several times, arguing that “the ethics of responsibility is far removed from both hyper-subjectivism and objectivism. It seeks intersubjective and intercultural values that help the dialogue between the different positions aimed at the collective good” (Mangone, 2020, p. 183). Being responsible is also the object of much attention on the part of Ricoeur himself, who defines it concerning both the future and the past, writing that “these two acceptations of responsibility, prospective and retrospective, join together

and overlap in responsibility in the *present*. But this present is not the instant as a break, the point-instant of chronological time. It has the thickness that the dialectic of selfhood and sameness gives it, in connection with permanence in time. Holding oneself responsible is, in a manner that remains to be specified, accepting to be held to be the same today as the one acted yesterday and who will act tomorrow” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 295). It is no coincidence that “most... sufferings are inflicted on humans by humans. The result is that most of the evil in the world comes from violence among human beings” (Ricoeur, 1992: 320). Therefore “in order to be the ‘friend of oneself’ – in accordance with Aristotelian *philautia* – one must already have entered into a relation of friendship with others” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 330).

Together with Ricoeur, the other author that can corroborate even more the thesis supported by Mangone (2020) is Kurt Wolff, a German-American sociologist and theorist of otherness (Cipriani, 2017). Wolff’s book on “surrender and catch” (Wolff, 1978) is connected to phenomenology, that “asks us not to take our received ideas for granted but to call them into question – to call into question our whole culture, our manner of seeing the world and being in the world in the way we have learned it growing up” (Wolff, 1984, p. 192). “Surrender and Catch” idea is also useful because “surrender” can be declined as love or “cognitive love” or “total involvement” or “faith” (Arlene Goldbard: arlenegoldbard.com/2008/12/13/surrender-and-catch/), thus as another form of overcoming the dichotomy between altruism and egoism.

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