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Altruism. Lights, camera, action!

ABSTRACT

*The libertine character Douglas Reynholm in the UK television show the IT Crowd truthfully remarks, 'I am sad to say that the only secure route to a Knighthood, in this sorry age, is via charity work' (The IT Crowd, 'Calendar Geeks' Episode 6, Series 3). If self-interest is the motive to become involved in charity work, does that make Douglas Reynholm and other people like him, good or bad? Intuitively the answer to this question is in the negative. However, under the ethical egoism theory a positive answer is justifiable. The starting point of this paper is to first define ethical egoism theory. From here this article will connect this moral theory to Jane Bussmann's book entitled *The Worst Date Ever*. Although Jane's motive and involvement with the humanitarian issue of child soldiers was borne out of self-interest (that was to date and hopefully one day marry and live happily ever after with John Prendergast, the spunk of *Peace and International Conflict*) this paper maps her experiences in Uganda against this moral theory, as well as utilitarianism.*

KEYWORDS

NGO,
altruism
child soldiers
ethical ego theory,
utilitarianism

INTRODUCTION

There is a perception today that any act of altruism or an act of social responsibility creates a trajectory for a Knighthood, or other state awards or honours, and fame. Possessing a conviction to contribute towards a better society is not in *malum in se*, but when does an individual's moral reason to advance a social cause and themselves at the same time become questionable? This article will briefly explore why some people help others to benefit their own self-interest and how not-for-profit organisations are used as a means to maximise self-interest and self-welfare. This exploration is seen through the lens of ethical ego theory.

Ethical ego theory is employed in this paper to understand why an individual is likely to contribute to the betterment of society by rationally pursuing their own interests. This paper will first explain the major concepts of ethical ego theory. This explanation sets the foundations in attempting to explain why Jane Bussmann in her hilarious auto-biography entitled *The Worst Date Ever* (2009), goes to Uganda to avail herself with international humanitarian issues and to serve her self-interest by securing a date (and perhaps marriage) with a particularly good-looking man.

ETHICAL EGO THEORY

At some point in our lives it is inevitable that we will have some level of contact with one or more not-for-profit organisations. Whether you are approached in the street for a direct donation or you volunteer your time to help out your child's school. Whatever your efforts are, people will often help others when called upon. One way to understand why some people help out others is through ethical egoism in the above mentioned, and other, circumstances.

Ethical egoism states that an individual's morality is based on the pursuit of advancing his or her own self-interest and/or welfare (Geirsson and Holmgren 2000: 58). This theory is both normative and descriptive. Descriptive egoism according to Geirsson and Holmgren accepts that an individual may act altruistically and, also, be motivated to help others, but this theory maintains that these actions and motives are hidden behind self-interest (2000: 59). Whereas, under a normative view altruism is secondary and, moreover, an individual's actions and motives are always justifiable, - when it is in their own and best interests to behave a certain way regardless of the impact upon others (Rachels 2000: 71). However, defining all actions and motivations by self-interest over moral sentiments is theoretically simple.

Criticisms of ethical ego theory are supported by examples where individuals may appear to act unselfishly, but their actions are in accordance with, or compatible with their self-interests (Vaughn 2013: 66-67). Rachels rebuts these arguments by claiming that individuals will do what they most want to do and there is a difference between selfishness and self-interest (2000: 74). Accordingly, selfish behaviour ignores the interest of others in circumstances where they ought not to be ignored - although these genuine egoists are rare, the ethical egoist remains open to following common-sense morality. Following common-sense morality such as, not killing innocent people or stealing, an individual will follow these rules *only* to avoid a

personal disaster (Timmons 2013: 189-199). To avoid such a personal disaster an individual will internalise the ability to accept utility, which is not counterintuitive and, moreover increases and maximises an individual's welfare (Timmons 2013: 197, 199). Should the principles of moral theory be what guides an individual's behaviour then ethical ego theory might go some way to explain why a Hollywood celebrity journalist took herself into some of Africa's war ravaged countries.

THE FUTURE MRS JANE BUSSMANN-PRENDERGAST

The horrible reality of being a free-lance celebrity journalist in Los Angeles was being realised by Jane. Coupled with feeling disenfranchised with almost everything that she first found endearing about Los Angeles Jane's only hope for a fulfilling life was for 'a former underwear model might like her' (Bussmann 2009: 6). Lonely and without any sign of an underwear model on her horizon Jane goes on surviving day-to-day in 'the Golden age of stupid' (2009: 7).

Trapped in 'the Golden age of stupid' Jane's street-smart intuition was telling her that she was 'cruising for a bruising' and this 'bruising' came by way of Ashton Kutcher's lawyer (2009: 58). Kutcher had complained about Jane's article in the London *Evening Star* and he subsequently engaged Hollywood's biggest litigator, Marty Singer of Lavelly & Singer (2009: 63-64). Jane's attempted to resolve the matter by emailing Singer to explain that a rogue editor must have re-written her article and that she 'has never had an editor behave like this' (2009: 65) which turns out to be a useless strategy. Singer being an astute Hollywood lawyer finally landed Jane with the knockout punch by publicly releasing her email (2009: 65). Nobody wants to be on the public record insulting his or her employer and now Jane found it to be a matter of emergency to look for a new career and to run away from Hollywood (2009: 66-67).

BECOMING USEFUL

In searching for a new career Jane had divided people into two groups, being: (1) Useful People; and (2) Useless People. Being exposed to too many Useless People in Hollywood Jane desperately now wanted to join the corps of the Useful People (2009: 69). In Jane's quest to become a Useful Person, it was felt that a not-for-profit organisation would give her the necessary leverage to achieve greater wellbeing and happiness, and, it would provide her with the means to escape Hollywood. Jane's

search to find a new interest, which would turn her into a Useful Person, was more difficult than anticipated. Jane observed that the ‘world of selflessness was highly competitive’ (2009: 70) and the notion of having to be utterly selfless did not have any motivating effect on Jane. With her application to Save the Children rejected (2009: 70-71) she felt like one of the Useless People. Feeling down Jane remained determined to join the Useful People when she found a *Vanity Fair* article about John Prendergast.

Jane instantly fell in love with John Prendergast and everything crystallised for her. John Prendergast was a former White House Director of Africa Affairs under the Clinton Administration and now a human rights activist for Africa (2009: 72). Being instantly captured by John’s intellectual charisma to solve the insolvable problems of Africa, Jane decided that she must interview John. This decision was motivated by the prospect that this interview would make Jane one of the Useful People, but she was even happier with the thought that her interview would inevitably secure her a ‘date’ with John. Jane orchestrated this interview by agreeing to write an article for the *Independent* about dating out of her league (2009: 71-75). The connection between human rights abuses in Africa and the theme of the *Independent*’s article is unclear, but Jane felt that her decision to go to Washington DC to get an interview/‘date’ with John was the right one.

Hearing the discourse about war crimes and serious human rights violations occurring in Uganda did not initially capture’s Jane’s attention, as her attention was predominately on her lip-pluming gel and whether she had achieved the fashionable, natural look for John (2009: 77). When John took his chair Jane became interested in the issues of Uganda and she started fantasising about ‘spending the rest of her life with him – 50 years of war crime, political discourse and filth’ (2009: 80). During the interview Jane learnt only two things. First, John did not have a wife and, secondly, something about ‘a renegade madman called Joseph Kony’ (2009: 84). Clearly trying to impress and knowing very little about Uganda’s humanitarian crisis Jane asked, ‘ever thought of being in a documentary?’ (2009: 86) and at this juncture Jane declared herself to be a documentary maker (2009: 91).

JANE THE DOCUMENTARY MAKER

Jane thought ‘how hard could it be to shoot a searing, multi-award winning factual feature?’ (2009: 87) This new career as a documentary maker provided her with an

excellent opportunity to be closer to John, which will secure her 'date' and thus facilitate her marriage to him. Jane was capable of justifying and rationalising her excellent idea to take on the copious task of making a documentary. Jane's rationalising of this decision is evidenced the spending of £10,000 of her own money to buy equipment and hire a crew. This, despite the sensible advice from BBC and Channel 4 not to do so (2009: 87). Unsurprisingly the documentary project failed. Regardless that this project's failure was foreseeable Jane is merely doing what she wants to do and her actions are justifiable on the basis that it would achieve and maximise her self-welfare. Throughout this documentary project Jane starts to capture John's character. Here John shows that he is an imperative by stating that he works about twenty hours a day and when asked by Jane to describe the worst atrocities he has seen his emotional answer is that, 'it is best I don't have memories, I prefer to channel them efforts [sic] into policy advice... trying change things'(2009: 86).

Irrespective of the different intrinsic values, morals and motives between John and Jane, John asked Jane to Uganda. Similar to their initial meeting Jane orchestrates her newspaper contacts to fund her trip to Uganda, which will make Jane a Useful Person and maximise her happiness and welfare. Jane convinced an editor of a newspaper that she could be a travel writer as Jane believed that she was perfect for the job 'as she had a DKNY safari dress and she would [sic] be having sexy, dangerous drinks in exotic hotels with a sexy dangerous man' (2009: 104). Although, John had travelled to Uganda with the actor, Don Cheadle, to make a documentary about Ugandan children (bypassing Jane's project entirely), this did not challenge Jane's determination to secure her date with John, despite calling him a 'wanker'- and still being stuck in Hollywood (2009: 113).

Jane's life was going nowhere quickly. A stark reminder that to be happy she had to run away to be with John (2009: 113). With a stroke of luck *The Mail on Sunday* funded Jane to write a travel piece about volunteering as a teacher in a Ugandan school (2009: 114). The editor strongly encouraged Jane to 'go for it. Altruism is in' (2009: 114). Jane announced to her sister her travel plans and her sister retorted by saying 'John isn't going to marry you!' (2009: 117) Again justifying her situation to her sister Jane made out that her trip was about the 20,000 kidnapped children while packing her high heels (2009: 117). Despite Jane's best efforts to convince her sister Jane's focus truthfully was on herself to maximise her welfare by becoming Mrs John Prendergast. The strategy to achieve great happiness

was put in place and, additionally, a Non-Governmental Organisation ('NGO') easily facilitated Jane's strategy by offering a platform for an egoist to redescribe their motives to give them an altruistic spin. This altruistic spin by Jane comes across as ingenious, but for an ethical egoist Jane is thinking of her own interests and she behaves in an altruistic manner that is motivated by the final payoff of securing her own happiness (Geirsson and Holmgren 2000: 59).

JANE IN AFRICA

Upon Jane's arrival in Africa she instantly felt Useful (2009: 126) and she envisaged that she would be meeting John very soon for cocktails (2009: 133). However, shortly after Jane's arrival there was a message from John that he went back to Washington DC and then Jane started to realise that she had been in a 'fantastic imaginary relationship' (2009: 136-137). Even though Jane's relationship with John may never eventuate she could rationalise her presence in Africa by being 'Useful' with her skill sets as a foreign correspondent; - although Jane did not hold the credentials as a foreign correspondent this was a minor technicality. There was also the mere fact that Jane had organised with a local NGO to teach children for the summer which was not her priority at the time of her arrival and, as such, Jane would not return any of the NGO's numerous phone messages. Jane again demonstrates that altruism is secondary and she appears to be selfless as she knows that she would not obtain any happiness or benefit from working for the NGO.

Over time, Jane discovered the harsh realities of life in Uganda, elections (she declared were a joke) and she spoke directly with survivors of the civil war, former child soldiers and their families. Eventually Jane took up the volunteer teaching job with the NGO, but only for a month (2009: 154). Needless to say the volunteering did not go well and Jane had another justifiable reason to leave her teaching post as John was now coming back into town. This news prompted Jane not to think beyond their silver wedding anniversary in a safari lodge at sunset (2009: 117).

Jane rushed back to Gulu only to find that John was not coming. John suggested to Jane that she meet with Betty Bigombe. Betty (similar to John) is a strict imperatist. Betty was part of the Ugandan peace process (2009: 187) and all of Betty's efforts were independent and done all on her own (2009: 178). For all of Betty's efforts this consequently meant that some of her children could not go to school as she had spent all her monies on satellite phone bills in communicating with the rebels

(2009: 189). Encouraged by Betty, Jane was to meet with various religious leaders who were helping former child soldiers, but this idea was opposed by Jane. Jane did not like priests (2009: 183) and in order to avoid her intrinsic displeasure she resisted. Despite her protests Jane meet with some of Betty's contacts and she soon discovered that she liked Father Carlos. Jane writes about Father Carlos with fondness by praising his works with former child soldiers (2009: 183-185). Father Carlos provided Jane with the valuable understanding of post-conflict struggles such as, curfews, still needing UNICEF escorts into certain areas of Uganda and the ongoing efforts to reintegrate former child soldiers into the community. With each new experience Jane shifts away from her main priority of wanting be Mrs John Prendergast and she starts to comprehend the real humanitarian issues, -which exceeded her concerns about lip-pumping gloss. However, this shift is abruptly interrupted when John calls to ask Jane to Kanpala. Once again Jane accepts the invitation, and Jane's concern is now about how she is going to locate some lip-plumping gloss (2009: 292).

Frocked up and ready for her 'date' with John at the Sheraton. Jane promised herself to stay focused on the humanitarian issues and she was certain that she did not fancy him anymore (2009: 299). Then Jane sees John and 'the room fell away' (2009: 300). Listening to John talk of 'complex political theories' Jane's mind drifted into a daydream, and now this conversation was happening on a veranda of a safari lodge (2009: 301). Towards the early part of the 'date' Jane sensed that John was not his normal self and she too starts to feel differently towards him. John admits that he is burning out and he needs two week off, - which is not surprising for a strict imperativist. Jane then has a profound realisation that it was John and not her and she was not his 'date' (2009: 302-303).

JANE OUT OF AFRICA

Following the failed 'date' Jane promised to help the Ugandan children affected by the Civil War by getting the story out (2009: 347). Highly frustrated by the lack of support and understanding of Uganda's humanitarian crisis back in Hollywood Jane approached the situation on a utility basis by employing all her capability to get this story out by telling of her experiences. Here Jane's shift is away from maximising her self-welfare and her actions are directed to produce a benefit for all concerned by telling the story of the children of Uganda. Jane demonstrated this act of utilitarianism and shows her sense of her moralistic duty to highlight these grave humanitarian

issues by writing *The Worst Date Ever* and performing her one-woman comedy show off Broadway about her time in Uganda and being inspired by ‘the world’s coolest peacemaker’ (2009: 349). By getting the story out Jane also wins a few awards along the way and sees her self-interest and her duty to help others remain intact.

CONCLUSION

Securing her own happiness became a duty for Jane. The precept of happiness leads Jane to adapting her suitability to the purposes of life, which consequently had Jane making some bad decisions in order to attain and maximise her own welfare. This at times comes across as selfish and her actions disingenuous. However, after a series of disappointments Jane enumerates an additional duty by slowly moving away from her principle duty of self-happiness and away from her a vain delusion towards using her talent to help the children of a post-civil war Uganda. This without doubt does make Jane one of those Useful People.

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