

HOLMES ROLSTON III, TEMPLETON PRIZE WINNER,
ADVISOR TO THE JOHN TEMPLETON FOUNDATION

Unlimited Love and its Limits

Agape love is central to Christian conviction, embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the iconic virtue in I Corinthians 13. Sir John Templeton, perhaps the most visible wealthy Christian philanthropist in his lifetime, sought to realize such agape. For that he is justly to be praised, a role model for us all.

So one hesitates even to ask if there are limits to unlimited love. Still, we do need to think about the logic of love, both generally and in the wisdom of John Templeton. Love is the cardinal virtue, but love is not the only virtue, or duty. Neither in deontological ethics nor in utilitarianism, the two main Western traditions, is altruism the pivotal principle. The moral agent does what is just, giving to each his or her due, and whether this due is to self or other is secondary. The question of fairness (justice) is not so much one of preferring self over other (I win; you lose), or other over self (you win; I lose), but of distributing benefits and losses equitably (summing wins and losses, we each get what we deserve). The agent does the greatest good for the greatest number, which might mean benefits to self and/or to other, depending upon options available.

The Golden Rule urges one to love neighbor as one does oneself, but this is not other love instead of self-love. "Do to others as you would have them do to you" seeks parallels in the self doing for others with others doing for the self, suggesting reciprocity as much as antithesis between self and other. The first and most widespread Hindu and Buddhist commandment is noninjury, *ahimsa*, whether the injury is to others or to self. The commandment enjoins self-defense as well as defense of others threatened with injury. Aristotle recommended the golden mean, also a balancing of values. Doing the right, the good, is a matter of optimizing values, which often indeed means sharing them, but this is never simply a question of always benefitting others instead

of oneself. Socrates's concern is amply for the self doing well as the self does well by others. There is no egoism-altruism dichotomy pivotal to his ethics.

In John Templeton's writings, he admires wisdom of diverse kinds from multiple religious (and secular) sources, particularly those that support his humility approach to life. He loves aphorisms that support his laws of life. We hardly know more than an ant crawling along a shelf in the Library of Congress, he once said. So he devoted his wealth to enlarging human knowledge.

The Templeton Foundation has supported many initiatives with beneficial effect: the science/religion dialogue, meaning in evolutionary natural history, the evolution of ethics, the anthropic principle in cosmology, character formation, studies in the laws of life. One concern has been whether charity undermines the capacity of the beneficiaries for self-support—and here Templeton argues that free enterprise should be promoted in developing nations. All of this is commendable philanthropy, but it would be a stretch to think of most of this as agape, or unlimited love. Rather, Templeton invests in research, scholarship, and education important to its agenda.

The Hebrews claimed that the righteous person is "like a tree, planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season," by which the sages, prophets, and rabbis meant both good deeds and a prosperous family. Such a person is, in their idiom, "blessed" (benefitted), and by contrast sinners "perish" (Psalm 1). The Hindus and Buddhists interpreted the value of virtue in terms of good karma, deeds that benefit others and self at once. Calculating whether the self wins or loses in a direct tradeoff with whether others gain or lose can hardly be said to be the principal axis of analysis of any ethical system in the classical past or contemporary present. The questions are more those of justice and love, or integrity and virtue, or honor, or of optimal quality of life—that is, of good and evil, right and wrong.

Many dimensions of morality do not directly focus on altruism: questions of the rights of the minority, of capital punishment, the extent of free speech versus pornography, preferential hiring, abortion, euthana-

sia, fair wages, and so on. Ethics is about optimizing and distributing moral and other values, about what sorts of values count morally, and what the moral agent ought to do to promote these values. This is a more comprehensive question than whether the self is preferred over others or vice versa.

Well, Christians may reply, just this shows the deepening of Christian conviction: agape, over *philia*, over *eros*. Jesus embodies suffering, sacrificial love, which is a level of concern unreached by Socrates or Plato, or the utilitarians, or advocates of human rights. Here the good is less than the best. God is love. God saves by grace alone, through faith. The issue is not merit, rights, justice, fairness. The thrust is forgiving love. Redemptive love in Christian discipleship exceeds more calculating loves; agape is unlimited love. This is the ultimate role model. Didn't Augustine say, "Love, and do what you will"?

Classical ethics, perhaps strengthened by classical Christianity, invites altruism and constrains egoism. Altruism in the ethical sense applies where a moral agent consciously and optionally benefits a morally considerable other, without necessary reciprocation, motivated by a sense of love, justice, or other appropriate respect of value. But in turn that requires that religion be concerned with more than altruism. Religions also are concerned with justice, fairness, equitable sharing of resources, prudent care of oneself, a right relationship to God, reaching nirvana or union with Brahman, and so on. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the goal of forgiving grace is often said to be a state of righteousness. Altruism needs complementing with justice.

At this point, an inclusive, comprehensive ethics may choose to argue that what the impoverished, the poor, the downtrodden are entitled to is not so much charity as recognition of their human rights. They do not so much wish to be the ongoing beneficiaries of super-altruism as to receive fair treatment from those who have exploited them and who have perhaps become wealthy as a result of their exploitation. Doing the right is a matter of recognizing entitlement as much as giving gifts. Charity is voluntary, but such entitlements can and ought to be enforced in the courts, written into legislation, regulated, policed. Waiting for the

philanthropic wealthy to fix the ever-increasing inequities between the rich and the poor looks in the wrong direction for a solution to the most pressing moral issue on the world agenda.

John Templeton delighted in being a contrarian. That was a role he recommended. But when I tried that within the Templeton environment, I found that John Templeton and his associates, while they seemed to listen, never took my concerns with ongoing seriousness. Of course, Templeton and those who worked with him to distribute his money wisely were deeply concerned that such philanthropy be effective, that it raise the standards of living of the beneficiaries, that they become more virtuous, fair, thrifty, self-sufficient. Amen, again.

But the Templeton agenda could never seem to register the need for structural reforms to the inequities of global capitalism. That will have to be addressed by other ethicists who face these problems and, also in love, confront global free enterprise with limits. Meanwhile, John Templeton exemplified unlimited love, superbly.

My impressions are based on a half dozen encounters with John Templeton, first at a conference on Empathy, Altruism, and Agape, at the conclusion of which he sought advice from the Templeton Foundation International Advisory Board, October 1999 in Boston; equally on discussions at that board's annual meetings in Nassau, from 2006 onward. He has, of course, written frequently on these issues. He heard me lecture on altruism once, in Philadelphia, April 1999, with some conversation afterward. Also, he spoke at the press conference in New York, 2003, when my winning the Templeton Prize was announced.

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