

Egoism, Altruism and Self-Harm

0. Prelude

I had not met the topic of self-harm in philosophy prior to this conference, and I had initial doubts about it. However, it now strikes me a good test case in three areas of philosophy. The first is trying to define self-harm, since the nature of harm and of its victims is central to moral thinking. The second is its place in modern action theory, which usually focuses on the intentions and motives of actions focused outside the self. The third is the place of self-interest in any moral theory that focuses on social behaviour, or altruism, or the achievement of happiness. If nothing else, self-harm makes a nice change from the Trolley Problem (of deciding which casualties are preferable if you have control of a runaway train).

1. Questions

Philosophers usually place a topic like self-harm under the heading of Applied Ethics. This distinguishes it from Metaethics, which concerns the sources and authority of any thought about morality and values, and Normative Ethics, which tries to identify the best general principles (or 'norms') for guiding moral action. Applied Ethics focuses on the issues raised by specific moral problems, often those concerning life or death dilemmas. At the level of metaethics there are major controversies, rooted in theories about reality, persons and truth. At the level of normative ethics there are roughly four main theories, each with its champions, and each theory containing at least some wise guidance about how we should behave. Hence when addressing an issue in applied ethics, such as self-harm, it cannot be a simple matter of implementing agreed principles, and tidying up a few practical details. Our practical dilemmas are part of our theoretical dilemmas, and theory may need to be adjusted when it comes up against practice.

The first step is to decide what the question is. Bad questions lead either to no answers or to boring answers. Good questions bear some sort of fruit, which is at least interesting and illuminating, even if it is not conclusive. The two questions which I have selected are 1) what sort of behaviour can be reasonably described as 'self-harm?', and 2) if something counts as self-harm, what is the sensible moral response to it?

Looking for a response which is 'sensible' may sound a bit woolly here, but it is a word I am fond of in moral thinking. Its ancestor is Aristotle's word *phronesis*, which used to be translated as 'prudence', and is nowadays translated as 'practical reason'. Personally I think Aristotle meant that the best solutions are those which we all recognise as sensible. He named it as the most important virtue (because the others are impossible if you don't have common sense), and he was clear that to be sensible did not require a huge intellect, or great theoretical knowledge. We can all distinguish the sensible people in a group, and I think our ultimate aim is to identify the sensible attitude to self-harm. In particular, it is typical of sensible people in moral discussions (at least in a liberal society) that they tend to be easy-going and tolerant, but when a certain point is reached they dig their heels in, because they spot that something important is at stake. So our ideal, in discussing the morality of self-harm, is to find those sticking points, and identify which aspects of the problem should really matter to us.

2. The Self

Before the morality, though, the first question is to figure out what counts as self-harm. In typical philosophical fashion, I will start with 'self' and then move on to 'harm'. Firstly, what sorts of harm can be described as 'self-harm', and secondly what sorts of things done to oneself qualify as 'harm'? So what makes a harm into a self-harm, and where are the borderline cases? There are no simple answers here. Clearly the self-harming person must not only receive some harm, but must also initiate it. But there are stronger and weaker ways of initiating an action. What if I make an unwise investment? Then I have initiated and caused my own harm, so I have harmed myself, but we wouldn't describe it as self-harm, because my own harm was not the target. If I stub my toe while sleep-walking, I am clearly the source of my own harm, but I didn't even intend the action which produced the harm. Hence for self-harm we need the sort of initiation required in law for the commission of a crime (known as *mens rea*), which is to knowingly and deliberately intend roughly the harmful outcome that occurred.

Given that the person must appropriately initiate their own harm, how do we specify the victim? Harming my own body seems clear enough, and so does inflicting on myself a miserable state of mind. However we can't say that harm to myself only occurs if the harm is to my body or to my state

of mind, because there are situations where I am harmed without being aware of it. A child is harmed if someone steals from them a legacy they never knew they had. If I perversely deprive myself of promising opportunities, perhaps of marriage or education or entertainment, I can never really know what harm is done to myself by missing those things, and if I perversely decide to become thoroughly anti-social then I may never even think about what sorts of benefit I am missing. We must say, speaking broadly, that self-harm must be deliberately and knowingly inflicted on either my body, or my state of mind, or my situation. To summarise the 'self' aspect of the problem: I do harm to myself when I deliberately damage my body, or make myself miserable, or spoil my own opportunities in life.

3. Harm

That will do for the self, but what counts as 'harm'? An obvious case would be if I gratuitously cut off one of my own fingers, but why does that qualify as harm? Is it because it hurts, or because it diminishes my natural physique, or because it deprives me of an ability? Not everything that hurts is a harm, because valuable medical treatment can hurt, and if I painfully pinch myself but do no damage then we don't usually describe that as 'harm'. So mere pain doesn't seem to be a key factor. Not everything that diminishes my physique is a harm, because then we would have to disapprove of haircuts, nail trimming and diets. We want to hang on to the important parts of our physique, but that implies importance for what we are able to do.

Physical self-harm seems to mainly concern damaging our ability to perform actions, rather than the experience of pain or making physical changes. However, if I pinch myself so severely that it draws blood, I seem to have moved from a weird experiment with pain to actual self-harm, but a small cut in the skin is unlikely to impede my ability to do anything, so why is that self-harm? Having an intact skin is important for health, and a cut can lead to infection, so a pinch that draws blood carries dangers which are missing from a harmless pinch. More extreme types of self-harm not only damage our abilities, but increase the likelihood of dying. So when we said that the harm diminishes our ability to perform action, we must not only refer to the performance of conscious actions (in the case of the severed finger), but also include non-conscious functions, such as the workings of my immune system. It seems best to say that physical self-harm is a curtailment of my bodily functions.

If we focus on the harm of a cut, we may define the harm in terms of the increased likelihood of death, but if we try to make the undesirability of self-harm dependent on the self-evident undesirability of death, that raises fresh problems. Utilitarianism is the doctrine that morality consists of maximising either pleasure or benefit, and minimising their opposites. Death is a well known problem for this theory. To illustrate with an example, if I identify a person who is both miserable and unloved, and sneak up and painlessly kill them, and then secretly dispose of the body and say the person has moved away, utilitarians struggle to explain why that was wicked. I seem to qualify as a particularly good utilitarian, since my murder has obviously enhanced happiness in that locality.

The only remedy is to include in the calculation the victim's strong desire to remain alive, but that is a major change in the theory, to what is called Preference Utilitarianism. In that version of the theory murder returns to being an obviously heinous crime, because people are particularly keen not to be murdered. But if the infliction of death is a harm because the person doesn't want to die, it seems contradictory to use the risk of my undesired death to explain the harm caused by a cut which I *did* desire. We can, if we wish, attribute a Freudian non-conscious death-wish to a person who self-harms, but since a self-harmer is not committing suicide, that doesn't seem to have much basis. The issue of self-harm can drift quickly into the issue of suicide, but it may be better to keep the two separate. Many objections to suicide can be offered, but a strict application of the word 'harm' doesn't seem right, simply because it is unclear what harm is done to a person who dies.

So rather than define the harm to myself in terms of its mortal dangers, or in terms of its pain, it seems best to define it as undermining my healthy functioning. That fits physical harm nicely, but should we also consider mental harm and situational harm? The pain of the pinch is an unpleasant self-infliction on the mind, but its brevity and transience seem to rule it out as a case of harm. It is hard to find examples of self-inflicted mental harm, because people watch horror films and deliberately pursue frightening activities like facing fast bowling. People behave in ways which we describe as 'perverse', such as provoking arguments which drive away a person they love, but that usually seems inexplicable, rather than a conscious attempt at self-harm. Drink and drugs may be examples, but that usually looks like harm by neglect, done in favour of short-term pleasure, rather than an active quest for mental harm. No one drinks to achieve a hangover, and it is hard to imagine someone trying to diminish their own intelligence, or self-induce clinical depression.

It is similarly difficult to find examples of people deliberately damaging their own current or future situation in life, with self-harm as the motive. People may give up wealth or family for religious reasons, or to escape some greater misery, or out of concern for other people, but not with the sole aim of harming their own situation in life. So people with experience in this field may tell me I wrong, but I conclude that nearly everything we count as self-harm is physical in character, and consists of some sort of damage to actual or potential health, or to successful physical functioning.

4. *Akrasia*

The ancestor of our attempts to understand self-harm is one of the oldest questions in philosophy, asked by Socrates. Why, he wondered, do people often perform actions which they know are not in their best interests? Modern examples are smoking cigarettes, or eating large cakes when on a diet. Socrates launched the debate with a surprising answer – that this puzzling phenomenon never occurs. His view (now known as ‘intellectualism’) was that people *always* act in what they judge to be their best interests, because that is how actions come about. The only explanation of modern smoking, he would say, is that smokers either do not believe the general health warning, or they do not think the warning applies to them, or they think destruction of their health is in their best interests. If Socrates is right, then I would guess that most smokers are in the middle category, and think they are probably exempt from the general danger.

For the Greeks this was the problem of *akrasia*, meaning ‘lack of control’. In modern discussions it is often referred to as ‘weakness of will’. Why is the world full of people who know what they should do, and then they don’t do it? The main alternative to the intellectualist explanation of Socrates was the more common sense view of Aristotle, that people judge one way but are then lured by tempting desires to act differently. That is, Aristotle thinks *akrasia* results from inner conflict, but Socrates thinks it results from stupidity. The Stoics sided with Socrates, and rejected the Aristotle view by saying that not only are beliefs intellectual, but desires are too. Yearning for cake just is a judgement that cake would be a good idea. Modern theories of *akrasia* tend to include sub-conscious mental life, which may include judgements we are unaware of, or desires we are unaware of.

If we apply this episode in ancient philosophy to the problem of self-harm, we could conclude that a self-harmer has made a clear judgement that damaging their own body is the right thing to do, presumably as a response to an unusual situation. Or we might say that it is obvious to the self-harmer that the damaging acts should be avoided, but some emotions drives them to it anyway. Or we might say (in the modern way) that the self-harm results from inner forces which are inexplicable both to the agent and to even an expert observer. The inner source of self-harm is thus either an opinion, or an emotion, or an enigma.

Speculation about the source of self-harm would not be complete without including an important modern perspective, which we might call Hegelian or Marxist – meaning that the causes of self-harm are in a society rather than in an individual. Which theories we evoke of politics, or economics, or sociology, or of group psychology would take us too far afield.

5. Egoism

With some thoughts now in place about the agent and the victim of self-harm, the nature of the harm involved, and possible motivations for self-harm, I will now move on to the moral issues. I always find myself approaching problems in philosophy by first identifying the extreme views, and then considering the options that lie between them. One extreme is fairly clear, which is a total condemnation of any act which fits my account of self-harm. It might seem that the other extreme is total tolerance of such acts, but a more extreme view is the judgement that self-harm is a good, and we should all be encouraged to indulge in it. You might say that such an attitude is unthinkable, but that is what makes it interesting. Imagine anyone saying ‘I hope that one day I will become a self-harmer’, or a therapists saying that a dose of self-harm might help. Self-harm is so intrinsically undesirable that it is hard to imagine even a self-harmer approving of it.

Clearly we can tolerate self-harm, even if we agree that it is not a good thing. Indeed, tolerance of things which we consider bad is almost the hallmark of a liberal society, which usually abides by John Stuart Mill’s slogan that “the individual is not accountable to society for his actions, in so far as these concern the interests of no person but himself”. This implies that we might settle the matter by agreeing on that liberal slogan, then investigating to see whether self-harm damages the interests of any other persons, and tolerating it without comment if it doesn’t. However, I think the moral question of liberalism concerns not whether we are liberal in this way, but whether we *ought* to be.

To judge an action it is normal to identify the motive, but I don't know why people harm themselves, and I am not willing to speculate. People who self-harm are normally presented as young adults who have in some way been traumatised, but each person is different. Let us assume that the explicit reasons anyone might give for their self-harm range from the implausibly trivial to the irresistibly powerful. If those are the sole reasons (which they probably are not, given our acceptance of strong non-conscious causes for such behaviour), then we could assume that the trivial grounds do not justify self-harm, but the powerful ones do (perhaps expressed as 'if any of us had such strong reasons, then we would all have resorted to self-harm').

That may be moving too fast, however. The first question to ask is not 'do self-harmers have an adequate justification for what they do?', but rather 'are self-harmers required to give any justification for their actions?'. To test that one, the best case to consider is someone who indulges in self-harm for no reason at all, other than a passing whim (perhaps inspired by the title of a conference at their local community centre). We might approve (or at least not condemn) someone doing that on liberal grounds – that it is fine because we can't think of an objection to it. If we need, however, to justify this liberal attitude, then a key issue is the place of egoism in our normative moral theory. That is, where do our guiding principles of morality place us between the extremes of altruism (concern for other people) and egoism (concern for ourselves)?

I referred near the beginning to four main normative moral theories, which I take to be virtue theory, utilitarianism, deontology, and contractarianism. For the present discussion I will reduce each of these to a simple slogan:

- be a good citizen (virtue theory)
- maximise good consequences (utilitarianism)
- obey what universal duty requires (deontology)
- pursue mutual self-help (contractarianism)

Of these theories the fourth one, contractarianism (associated with Thomas Hobbes) is clearly egoistic, because the only aim of kindness to others is to receive kindness in return. Modern versions of it are supported by winning strategies in game theory. Contractarians don't see our whimsical self-harmer as behaving either morally or immorally, because they are not interacting with other people, so there is no contractual behaviour which would need a moral justification.

The second theory, utilitarianism (associated with Bentham and Mill), is highly altruistic, because (in Bentham's words) "everybody counts for one, and nobody as more than one". Hence each individual must be hugely concerned with the happiness of other people, and very little with their own. Our whimsical self-harmer will therefore be criticised by utilitarians, on the grounds that, even if their self-harm is private, they are adding to the unhappiness in the world by harming themselves.

Deontology, in the manner of Immanuel Kant, is also altruistic, because it requires people to submit themselves to the best universal principle, rather than what would suit them. The popular slogan here is 'what if everybody did that?' Hence my indulgence in self-harm (if I thought it my duty) would implicitly endorse the rule that everybody should harm themselves, but it seems obvious that self-harm is never intrinsically admirable (even to the self-harmer), so deontological ethics sees self-harm as a major wrong.

I think the most interesting of the four theories for the case of self-harm is virtue theory, which is particularly associated with Aristotle. Aristotle starts from the natural functions of a human being, which are primarily to be rational and to be social, and sees the aim of morality as the achievement of excellence in those functions. Social excellence requires the collection of virtues we associate with someone who is an all-round good citizen. From that you might conclude that the theory is an altruistic one, requiring self-sacrifice in the interests of society, but that is not Aristotle's view. He sees that it is not a matter of choosing either egoism or altruism, because the two are interconnected. The question to ask is, what individual qualities does a citizen need in order to fulfil their social role? For example, in the modern world we want citizens to be fit and educated, so they should focus on themselves to achieve that. The egoistic vice we disapprove of, says Aristotle, is not self-love, but excessive self-love, or loving the wrong aspects, such as one's own pleasure-seeking.

From Aristotle's perspective I think the appropriate response to self-harm would be disapproval. Mild self-harm, perhaps as a one-off act of curiosity, is unimportant, as long as it does not interfere with the constructive development of one's skills and character. Serious and sustained self-harm is entirely wrong, because it disrupts a person's constructive self-development, both as an individual and as a

citizen. If, as was suggested earlier, the best way to define harm is to see it as undermining successful physical functioning, then according to Aristotle this is the exact opposite of virtue, which has excellent functioning as its aim.

To conclude by addressing the title of this conference, it seems very hard to ever justify self-harm, because it is contrary to every self-evidently desirable aim of human life. It is always possible to justify activities such as self-harm in rare situations, such as avoiding conscription into an evil army, but in normal circumstances it is not justified. Needless to say, people who are drawn to self-harm should be tolerated and helped, but anything beyond that is a distortion of healthy values.

This fairly conservative conclusion strikes me as right, because our culture attaches a degree of glamour to self-harm. Great artists who are drug addicts or alcoholics, whether they die young or become rugged survivors, are impressive to the young because they have taken a bold existential step, and explored modes of living that are avoided by more timid souls. The talent somehow justifies the self-harm, and it can even be seen as a requirement for creative work. There is virtually no support for such a view in the history of the arts. If behaviour fits my account of self-harm, then it may be tolerated, but it is hard to say anything in its favour.

Reading

Aristotle *Ethics* 1166a–1169a (on egoism); 1109b30–1113a14 (on uncontrolled action)

Diogenes Laertius *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* Ch.7 §111 (trans. Pamela Mensch)

Gibson, Peter *A Degree in a Book: Philosophy*. Chs. 10-11, on ethics

Mill, John Stuart *On Liberty, and Utilitarianism*

Plato *Protagoras*