More good letters--

This is in response to Roger Kimball’s disquisition on selfishness and altruism.

It seems entirely right to me neither to deny selfishness its place in human nature nor to exaggerate it (and likewise for altruism). But the core of your argument has a puzzling ambiguity. You write:

"One proposition is that we cannot knowingly act except
from a desire or interest which is our own. Not only is this true: it is what philosophers call a necessary truth—it could not be otherwise.

The other proposition is that all of our actions are self-interested. But this proposition, far from being self-
Can "desire" and "interest" be conflated like that? Do you mean to make use of these as separate categories of reasons for acting? If so, then does it make sense to compare that proposition to the second? Indeed, it seems to me that what’s doing the work in making the first proposition defensible and the second indefensible is precisely the term "desire." You might say that we are altruistic (to the degree that we are) because we have desires that motivate us in that fashion, a love for things outside of ourselves: God, spouse, child, nation, and so on. But that’s entirely disconnected from interest.

Many thanks (and thanks for a great weblog).

Bryan McGraw

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Dear Sirs:

Roger Kimball’s recent posting on utilitarianism brings up a point that was addressed in a literary satire in the 1950s. Shirley Jackson wrote a frightening short story called "The Lottery." In a small, traditional New England town, there is an annual festival in which the climax
is a lottery: a town resident is picked randomly and put to a sacrificial death by stoning. This tradition is continued because it is for the common good.

Perhaps the story was an implicit critique of utilitarianism. Jackson’s sympathies did not seem to be with the townspeople.

Brian Horrigan

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Granted in my example from history, the number of sacrifices was greater than one per year, but the goal was, no doubt, to benefit the many. And while granting the Aztec view of "benefit" probably differed from that of Bentham and perhaps even Singer, but still, isn’t the principle the same?

Ronald Gans
NYC
From the Reading Room: Going out for air...

With heavy heart, I show you this...

http://dc.indymedia.org/media/all/display/17011/index.php?limit_start=24

"THE AMERICAN MYRMIDON
awarded for pillage & killing, a
vicarious agent for a criminal regime

unvarnished, honest, in truth,
murderous psychopaths in pure culture

Wehret den Anfängen!"

Poor taste? Ignorance? Stupidity?
All of the above? It would be better if things like this could remain unread, unseen and under the rock where these people obviously live.

Enoch Soames