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## Heroism, Meaning, and Organ Donation: A Reply to Fruh

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Kyle Fruh presents us with a perplexing difficulty: If many living organ donors describe their experience as deeply rewarding—and so as advancing their own welfare—how can it simultaneously be the case that their actions are accurately described as “morally heroic”? More specifically, if donors benefit substantially from the act of donating, then isn’t the element of significant sacrifice, traditionally required for this kind of special moral achievement, thereby eliminated? Aren’t we left with a situation in which donating an organ advances the interests of the *donor* in such a way, and to such an extent, that it no longer appears to be a sacrifice? I agree with Fruh that there is something extremely counterintuitive about this way of talking about organ donors, and so an alternative account of this phenomenon is certainly needed.

Fruh attempts to resolve this difficulty by suggesting “that it is not incompatible with . . . moral heroism that the hero should benefit from the heroic act under certain conditions” (p. 23). On his view, a moral hero ought to be distinguished from both a “personal hero” and an “ordinary altruist.” Personal heroes are those people who someone admires for her “outstanding competence” in a particular domain, such as sports or music or parenthood (p. 23). A moral hero does not need to be someone’s hero in this way

for her to be properly characterized as “heroic.” Indeed, Fruh astutely observes that someone can perform a morally heroic act in isolation.

By contrast, ordinary altruists seem to have something in common with moral heroes, namely, that they perform acts of a sort that count as specifically *moral* achievements. Fruh describes ordinary altruists as “helpful, generous people performing quotidian acts of good will” (p. 23). Like moral heroes, ordinary altruists (1) are not saints (in that they may have committed immoral acts in the past), and (2) perform other-interested acts. However, the acts of ordinary altruists don’t place particularly onerous burdens on them, whereas moral heroes make quite serious sacrifices. Moral heroes undertake actions in which they forfeit some significant good for themselves (comfort, safety, time, wellness) in order that someone else may be made better off. Further, the sacrifices made by moral heroes entail “objective hardship[s] that [are] also experienced as such” (p. 24). This means that for an act to be an act of moral heroism, the person performing it must *feel* that she is enduring a hardship. Losses or forfeitures of one kind or another that the agent does not experience as bad for her therefore don’t count as sacrifices on this view.

Having provided us with this background, Fruh proceeds to explain just how it is that an organ donor can be understood as both morally heroic (as having made a serious sacrifice constituted by the experience of hardship) and as having had a rewarding donation experience. He does this by making three main claims. First, he notes that “if the winning and losing take place in quite distinct dimensions of well-being, then you could lose even while you also win” (p. 24). Secondly, he argues that at least in some cases, gains in one dimension of well-being do not compensate for losses in another dimension. Finally, he claims that organ donors forfeit a measure of well-being by undergoing hardships such as the pain, discomfort, fear, and recovery time that organ donation requires. This forfeiture constitutes the sacrifice that makes their acts morally heroic, but the act of donating *also* provides them with a boost in the separate dimension of well-being associated with meaningfulness. This resolves the apparent difficulty with characterizing organ donors as moral heroes when they claim to have benefited from the experience of donating their organ. The gains they received are not able to make up for the sacrifices they made, even though both the gains and losses are equally real, and tied to the same act. Fruh explains that “to *vindicate* hardship through producing meaning, we might say, is to transform it—but not to erase it” (my italics, p. 25).

I have two main worries about this account. My first worry is connected to a very different view of what it means to be an organ donor as it is characterized in the literature on effective altruism. My second worry concerns the account of well-being that grounds Fruh’s view.

In *The Most Good You Can Do*, Peter Singer describes two people who opted to become anonymous kidney donors. Their donations were non-directed, so they had no idea who would benefit from their kidneys. One of the donors, Zell Kravinsky, comments that “the reason many people didn’t

understand his desire to donate a kidney is that 'they don't understand math'."<sup>1</sup> Singer explains that what Kravinsky meant "is that they did not understand that, because the risk of dying as a result of donating a kidney is only one in four thousand, not to donate a kidney to someone in need is to value one's own life at four thousand times that of a stranger."<sup>2</sup> Since most people don't think their lives are four thousand times more valuable than anyone else's, it is simply logical to become a donor.

The other donor, Chris Croy, asserts that

I don't think what I did was all that good. . . . GiveWell.org (a non-profit that advises philanthropists on how to most effectively allocate their money) says it costs about \$2,500 to save a human life, so as far as I am concerned giving \$5,000 to anti-malaria efforts is a greater deed [than donating a single kidney].<sup>3</sup>

Neither of these donors seems to regard what he did as heroic. On the contrary, they seem to suggest that the risks and inconveniences they undertook were quite insignificant relative to the benefits that would accrue to someone else. Granted, the risks and hardships were no doubt more extensive than most people are willing to undergo for a stranger, but perhaps the point here is that what matters is the *relationship* between the sacrifice and the payoff, rather than simply the size of the sacrifice. This conflicts with Fruh's claim that "it seems the distinction between (mere) altruists and moral heroes might be captured largely in terms of the value of what's given up in sacrificing, with heroic sacrifice being across some threshold of seriousness from the lesser sacrifices of altruists who give their time, money, labor, etc." (p. 24). By contrast, the donors Singer discusses seem to imply that what is required by moral duty—as opposed to what is heroic or supererogatory—depends on the size of the costs to the donor in relation to the size of the payoff to the recipient. Indeed, if we understand what it means for an act to be "vindicated" in terms of whether or not it is "justified" or "warranted," then we can claim that their donations were vindicated because taking in the interests of all affected, their acts were utility maximizing.

This way of looking at organ donation need not explain such acts in terms of meaningfulness gains at all. Instead we might think that when organ donors describe their experience as having been enriching or rewarding, what they mean is just that they are satisfied with having done their moral duty. On this type of view, such satisfaction is hardly surprising since most of us don't perform our moral duties on a very regular basis. Further, on this account organ donors aren't moral heroes at all. They are merely doing what is required of them while the rest of us are not. Finally, with a utilitarian framework in the background, there is not even any real puzzle to be solved here, since it is perfectly normal for the morally correct act to have both costs and benefits for the agent while also having benefits for others such that overall the act ends up maximizing utility. This also makes sense of the notion that the hardships donors endured were "not in vain" (p. 25).

This brings me to my other worry. I am not altogether persuaded that meaningfulness is a dimension of well-being that is distinct from other dimensions in the way suggested by Fruh's account. His view, as I understand it, relies on the idea that meaningfulness is a source of benefits or a dimension of well-being sufficiently distinct from other dimensions of well-being, such as freedom from physical pain, that there can be discrete, non-compensating simultaneous gains in the former and losses in the latter. This picture suggests to me that meaningfulness is something that can be somehow detached from other elements of well-being. For instance, on this model it seems like someone could have a very good—but meaningless—life, if all other dimensions of well-being were present at a very high level. Or someone could be undergoing unbearable torture but refuse to betray her country, and so she could have a high level of well-being *qua* meaningfulness but in all other respects be in a completely miserable state. I think it is counterintuitive to say in the first case that the person has a genuinely good life. It also seems wrong to describe the second case as one in which some element of her *well-being* has been preserved, regardless of what other admirable characteristics she may be demonstrating.

These examples suggest to me that meaningfulness is not the kind of thing that should be understood as a dimension of well-being, or source of "benefits" or "gains" at all. Rather, meaningfulness should be understood as a feature of other acts or behaviors or relationships, which themselves may either detract from, or increase, my over all well-being. Take Susan Wolf's example of the parent who "doesn't care" whether she is or isn't better off—all things considered—from having adopted a child. Fruh explains this by saying that "the fact she finds being a parent to this child meaningful is an independent source of reasons to endorse the choice" and so the hardships involved in it are transformed "by recruiting [them] to a meaningful enterprise" (p. 25). But I don't think the hardships are transformed at all. It is just as possible that the hardships detract from her overall well-being. The meaningfulness of being a parent is not a gain she makes in well-being at all, but just an aspect of an enterprise that is worthwhile for reasons entirely independent of her own well-being. These could be reasons of principle, for instance, or else reasons grounded in the well-being of others. All that is needed here is a conception in which there are multiple sources of value—with well-being as only one of them. These other sources could give me (sometimes decisive) reasons to do things that are unrelated to, or that considerably detract from, my own well-being. This suggests that when organ donors describe themselves as having been enriched by the act of donating, their acts are best understood not as characterized by losses in one dimension of well-being and gains in another, but rather as acts that were worth doing but that nevertheless made them worse off.

#### NOTES

1. Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 87.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 70.

**REFERENCES**

Fruh, Kyle. "Moral Heroism, Living Organ Donation, and the Problem of Winning by Donating." *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and Medicine* 15, no. 2 (2016): 22-26, in this volume.

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