

About Altruism

Judith Lichtenberg

There are two main things we want to know about altruistic behavior. First, does it exist? Second, if so, how can we produce more of it?

The second question is practical. Although altruism does not guarantee desirable results—suicide bombers may be as selfless as anyone you can find—what we might call constructive altruism could alleviate a lot of suffering. If we knew how to get people to care less about Number One and more about others, the world might become a less nasty place.

The first question, by contrast, is abstract and theoretical. It usually gets asked by philosophers, scientists, undergraduates, and others pondering the essential nature of human action. They want to know whether people *ever* act in a way that is genuinely selfless, or whether instead human motives are always egoistic—aimed at the agent's own good. This is the question on which I shall focus in this essay, since unless we can answer it, we never get to the second question.

Who would doubt the existence of altruism? Two recent news stories seem to prove it. Just after the new year, Wesley Autrey, a man standing with his two young daughters on a New York City subway platform, jumped down onto the tracks as a train was

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approaching to save another man who had suffered a seizure and fallen. (Autrey succeeded, and neither man was hurt.) In April, an engineering professor, Liviu Librescu, blocked the door to his classroom so his students could escape the bullets of Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech student who killed thirty-two of his classmates. The students were able to jump to safety

from the classroom window. Professor Librescu was less fortunate, and died from Cho's gunshots.

If these acts aren't altruistic, you may say, then what in the world could altruism be? What could people possibly mean when they doubt that altruism exists?

Anyone who has considered these questions knows that doubting altruism is easy. Yes, it's undeniable that people sometimes act in a way that benefits others, and that they may do so at what appears to be significant cost to themselves. Yet it may seem that when people act to aid others they get something in return—at the very least, the satisfaction of having their desire to help fulfilled. From there some conclude that achieving their own satisfaction is always people's dominant motive. Genuine altruism, it seems to follow, is an illusion. To those caught in its web the logic of these steps may seem inexorable.

Biological Altruism

Philosophers and undergraduates are not the only ones to ask how altruism is possible. Evolutionary theory also makes the question compelling. At first glance it appears that evolution has no place for altruism, since organisms who put others' interests above their own would not survive to reproduce their kind. This is the crude but popular picture of evolution as "survival of the fittest." Yet we seem to observe examples of altruism in nature, and evolutionary theory must explain how they are possible.

Three accounts of altruism have been proposed. One is *reciprocal altruism*, first described by William Trivers in 1971. Reciprocal altruism elevates "I scratch your back, you scratch mine" to a theory. Organisms sometimes sacrifice their good to the good of others, but they do so, according to this view, in the expectation that the favor will be returned. Reciprocal altruism requires that organisms interact more than once and that they are capable of recognizing each other, otherwise returning the favor would be impossible. Examples of reciprocal altruism include vampire bats who donate blood, by regurgitation, to others of their group who fail to feed on a given night (since vampire

bats die if they go without food for more than a few days).

A second theory of biological altruism is *kin selection*, also known as inclusive fitness. Where reciprocal altruism focuses on the individual organism as the unit of selection, kin selection centers on the gene. This is the famous “selfish gene” theory made popular by Richard Dawkins, although the idea was developed originally by William Hamilton in 1964. On this view, an individual who behaves altruistically to others sharing its genes will tend to reproduce those genes; the likelihood that the genes will be passed on depends on how closely related the individuals are. Parents share half their genes with offspring; likewise among siblings; first cousins share an eighth. The theory is supported by the observation that individuals tend to behave altruistically toward close kin.

The third evolutionary approach departs both from reciprocal altruism’s focus on the individual organism and kin selection’s focus on the gene. *Group selection* takes groups of organisms as the evolutionary unit. The idea is that groups containing altruists possess survival advantages against groups that do not. A clan in which members work for the good of all rather than their individual good will prosper against enemies. The weakness in this view is that groups of altruists seem to be subject to “subversion from within,” as Dawkins calls it. “Free riders” who behave selfishly will possess advantages within the group, and altruists, it appears, will eventually die out. Although Darwin himself first proposed group selection, it eventually fell out of favor among evolutionary theorists. Elliot Sober and David Sloan Wilson have recently revived it, but it remains controversial.

What Does Biological Altruism Have to Do with Altruism?

Although contemporary discussions of altruism quickly turn to evolutionary explanations, the connection between the latter and the commonsense meaning of altruism as we apply it to humans is questionable. A look at reciprocal altruism reveals one reason why. If a person acts to benefit another in the expectation that the favor will be returned, the natural response is: “That’s not altruism!” Genuine altruism, we think, requires a person to sacrifice her own interests for another without consideration of personal gain. Calculating what’s in it for me is the very opposite of what we have in mind. Reciprocal altruism seems at best to amount to enlightened self-interest.

But there is a further reason why evolutionary altruism does not amount to altruism in the ordinary meaning of the term. When we ask whether people have acted altruistically, we are interested in their *motives* or *intentions*: we want to know whether they intended to

benefit another person (recognizing the cost to themselves) or whether their motive was to benefit another (without regard to gain for themselves). Whether people act altruistically, then, depends on their psychological state, on what is going on or not going on in their mind when they act.

Biological altruism, on the other hand, is defined in terms of “reproductive fitness”: an organism behaves altruistically when it tends to increase another organism’s ability to survive and reproduce while decreasing its own. Biological altruism implies nothing about mental states; birds and bats and even bees are capable of it. As Sober and Wilson put it, “An organism need not have a mind for it to be an evolutionary altruist.”

So in a certain sense evolutionary and psychological altruism have nothing to do with each other, since the everyday, psychological variety has everything to do with motives and the evolutionary variety has nothing to do with them. Indeed, as Samir Okasha notes, thinking of most biological organisms as selfish is just as wrong-headed as thinking of them as altruistic: selfishness, like altruism, is about motives and intentions.

Of course, biological and psychological altruism can go together: a person who intentionally sacrifices her interests for another will, other things being equal,

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decrease her reproductive fitness. If she sacrifices her life, her genes will not be carried on (unless she sacrifices her life for a close relative, as kin selection observes). Still, the existence of evolutionary altruism is not *sufficient* for psychological altruism, our commonsense understanding of the concept, which has to do with motives and intentions. Nor is evolutionary altruism *necessary* for psychological altruism. Behavior is not determined solely by genes and evolution; environment, culture, and choice also play a role. Even if we found no examples of evolutionary altruism, psychological altruism would still be possible.

It’s worth noting an ironic twist in the relationship between biological and psychological altruism. Kin selection and group selection, two of the evolutionary accounts of biological altruism, have a dark side in terms of our usual understanding of unselfish behavior. Individuals who favor their genetic relatives, members of their own group, or others similar to them lack these inclinations toward those who are not so connected. Altruism, from this point of view, is relative, and correlates with the division between in-groups

and out-groups. If our hope is that altruism can enlarge empathy for other human beings and lessen hostility or indifference, the biological account may be disappointing, because it implies an “us” and a “them.” Still, biology is only part of the story.

Understanding Psychological Altruism

Our question is whether people ever act altruistically, in the ordinary, psychological sense of that term. According to egoism, people never intentionally act to benefit others except to obtain some good for themselves. Altruism is the denial of egoism, so if ever in the history of the world one person acted intentionally to benefit another, but not as a means to his own well-being, egoism would be refuted. In this sense altruism is a very weak doctrine: by itself it says nothing about the *extent* of selfless behavior; it asserts only that there is at least a little bit of it in the world.

Egoism possesses a powerful lure over our thinking, which has, I believe, two sources. One is logical: it derives from philosophical puzzles and difficulties encountered in thinking about these questions. The other is psychological: it rests on thinking about our own motives and intentions.

Consider first the psychological. One reason people feel pushed to deny that altruism exists is that, looking inward, they doubt the purity of their own motives. We know that even when we appear to act altruisti-

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cally, other reasons for our behavior can sometimes be unearthed: the prospect of a future favor, the boost to our reputation, or simply the good feeling that comes from appearing to act unselfishly. As Kant and Freud observed, people’s true motives may be hidden, even (or perhaps especially) from themselves: even if we think we are acting solely to further another person’s good, that might not be the real reason. Perhaps there is no single “real reason”—actions can have multiple motives. To decide whether an altruistic motive is dominant or decisive requires a counterfactual test: would you still have performed the action had you not benefited in some way? But even if the question is theoretically answerable, we are rarely if ever in a position to answer it.

So the lure of egoism as a theory of human action is partly explained, I believe, by a certain wisdom, humility, or skepticism people have about their own or others’ motives. We know that we are not as selfless as

we would like to be or even as we might appear. But there is also a less flattering reason for our attraction to egoism: it provides a convenient excuse for selfish behavior. If “everybody is like that”—if everybody *must* be like that—we need not feel guilty about our own self-interested behavior or try to change it.

But although these observations give us reason to be cautious in attributing altruistic motives to ourselves or others, they do not license the conclusion that no one ever acts altruistically. Generally that inference is aided and abetted by consideration of some logical puzzles surrounding altruism and egoism.

A central enticement of egoism is that it seems impossible to disprove. No matter how altruistic a person appears to be—take Mr. Autrey or Professor Librescu or your favorite do-gooder as an example—it is possible to conceive of their motive in egoistic terms. If Mr. Autrey had ignored the man on the tracks, he would have suffered such guilt or remorse that risking his life was worth avoiding that pain. The person who

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gives up a comfortable life to care for AIDS patients in a remote and hard place does what she wants to do, and therefore gets satisfaction from what appears to be self-sacrifice. So, it appears, altruism is simply self-interest of a subtle kind.

The impossibility of disproving egoism may sound like a virtue, but, as students of the philosophy of science know, it’s really a fatal drawback. An empirical theory that purports to tell us something about the world—such as egoism, which claims to describe the nature of human motivation—should be falsifiable. Not false, of course, but capable of being tested and thus proved false. If no state of affairs is incompatible with egoism, then it does not really tell us anything distinctive about how things are.

Is egoism unfalsifiable? It’s not clear. Daniel Batson and his colleagues attempted to test egoism through a number of complex experiments. One experiment considered a common version of egoism, what Batson calls the “aversive-arousal reduction hypothesis.” This is the idea that observing someone in need of help is unpleasant and causes people to attempt to reduce the unpleasantness, for example by helping. The alternative explanation Batson calls the “empathy-altruism hypothesis,” which says that a person’s motive in helping is ultimately to relieve the *other’s* distress, not one’s own. In the experiment, subjects viewed a video-

tape of a woman (“Elaine”) who they believed was receiving painful electric shocks. After witnessing two shocks, the subjects were told they could substitute for Elaine—receiving the shocks themselves. Subjects in the “easy-escape” treatment had been told at the outset that they could quit the experiment after witnessing two shocks; those in the “difficult-escape” treatment were told they would have to watch Elaine endure ten shocks. Subjects also varied in how much empathy they felt for Elaine; on the assumption that empathy increases when we identify with another person, the experimenters manipulated the amount of empathy by leading subjects to believe they had a lot, or not very much, in common with her.

The altruistic hypothesis predicts that high-empathy subjects—the people who at least *appear* to be altruistic—will be more likely to agree to take the shocks for Elaine than low-empathy subjects when escape is easy; egoism predicts that when escape is easy even high-empathy subjects will choose to exit, thereby avoiding the aversive feelings produced by seeing Elaine receive shocks. The results of the experiment confirmed the altruistic hypothesis, but they do not disprove egoism. Perhaps high-empathy subjects realized they would experience guilt or unpleasant memories of the shock victim afterwards and chose not to escape for that reason. Batson and his colleagues devised an experiment to test *this* version of egoism as well. Its results also disconfirmed egoism, but again further egoistic accounts can be given to explain the results. Batson and his colleagues tested several versions and all were found wanting.

As Sober and Wilson note, this does not prove that other versions of egoism will also fail. Because sophisticated forms of egoism appeal to the internal rewards of helping others—rather than simply money, say—it’s always possible that a more subtle psychological reward lurks that the experiments have not detected. This possibility will strike many as far-fetched and confirm suspicions that egoism is unfalsifiable; nevertheless it permits those attracted to egoism to hang on to their convictions.

The Objects of Our Desires

Another reason the debate between altruism and egoism is hard to resolve has to do with ambiguity in the concepts of desire and the satisfaction of desire. If people possess altruistic motives, then they sometimes act to benefit others without the prospect of benefit to themselves. Another way to put the point is that they desire the good of others ultimately or intrinsically or for its own sake—not simply as a means to their own satisfaction. Suppose I desire that another person in danger not die, and act accordingly to save his life. If my action is successful, my desire will be satisfied. It

does not follow, however, that *I* will be satisfied—since my desire would be satisfied even if I myself died in the attempt to save the other person’s life. As Sober and Wilson argue, the fact that a person’s desire is satisfied tells us nothing about any effect on her mental state or personal well-being.

On the other hand, when one of my desires is satisfied I normally experience a certain degree of satisfaction. (Not always: a person may be perverse in the sense that the satisfaction of a desire brings no satisfaction to him.) In that case, the satisfaction of even an apparently altruistic desire will bring the agent some sense of well-being. We normally feel good when we do good. But it does not follow that we do good *only in order* to feel good. Indeed, it seems plausible that if we did not desire the good of others for its own sake then attaining it would not in fact make us feel good.

Interestingly, Sober and Wilson argue that having altruistic desires or motives could in fact be advantageous from an evolutionary perspective. (Charles Darwin himself suggested such a view in *The Descent of Man*.) Evolutionary theory would predict that people have desires and motives that enhance their reproductive fitness. The desire to take care of one’s children

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fits this description. If human beings are egoists, then they are wired to feel good when they take care of their children, and ultimately that’s why they do it. If, on the other hand, parents have altruistic desires for their children’s welfare, then when they see that their children need help they will be directly motivated to act, without consideration of their own well-being. Altruism is a more reliable and efficient mechanism for getting parents to take care of their children, because egoism requires a further step: the belief that helping one’s children will produce pleasure or avoid pain for oneself.

If humans possessed both altruistic and egoistic motives to help their children, that would further increase their reproductive fitness. We shall see that the idea that altruistic and self-interested motives might coexist—so tightly as to be difficult to pry apart—is plausible for other reasons as well.

Altruism and Self-interest Intertwined

Common sense tells us that some people are more altruistic than others. The point is not limited to the

realm of saints and heroes. In everyday life people vary in their propensities to benefit others; we judge them accordingly. Egoism's claim that these differences are illusory—that deep down, everybody acts only to further their own interests—contradicts our observations and deep-seated human practices of moral evaluation.

At the same time, we may notice that many people whose habits lie at the more altruistic end of the spectrum seem not to suffer more or flourish less than those who are more self-interested. Often they may be more content or fulfilled. Some will find this judgment surprising. Don't nice guys finish last? Don't we all know people who routinely sacrifice their own interests to others—typically a significant other or perhaps a workplace superior—and suffer for their self-effacement? The experiences of such people seem to refute the view that altruists get satisfaction from choosing to do good.

But this objection confuses two different kinds of people. We admire Wesley Autrey and Liviu Librescu; Paul Rusesabagina, the hotel manager who saved over 1,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus during the 1994 Rwandan genocide; the (much-studied) rescuers of Jews from the Nazis; health workers who give up comfortable lives to treat sick people in poor countries. But we don't admire "doormats"; we feel sorry for them. As Jean Hampton argues, their "selflessness" amounts to a lack of self-respect. By contrast, admirable altruists are fully self-respecting. Unlike the behavior of the suspiciously selfless, their actions do not depend on believing that other people's interests always trump their own.

We should not go to the other, naively rosy extreme and conclude that it always pays to be good. Nice guys don't always finish first. The point is rather that the kind of altruism we ought to encourage, and probably the only kind with staying power, tends to be satisfying to those who practice it. Studies of rescuers show that they tend not to believe their behavior is extraordinary; they feel that they have to do what they do, because it's just part of who they are. Neera Badhwar argues convincingly that such people would suffer had they not performed these heroic acts; they would feel they were betraying their moral selves. In carrying out their actions, "they actualized their values, the values they endorsed and with which they were most deeply identified. ...They satisfied a fundamental human interest, the interest in shaping the world in light of one's values and affirming one's identity." The same holds, I believe, for more common, less newsworthy acts—working in soup kitchens, taking pets to people in nursing homes, helping strangers find their way, being neighborly. People who do such things believe that they ought to, but they also want to do them, because these acts affirm the kind of people they are

and want to be and the kind of world they want to exist. This idea accords with the view discussed earlier: people typically get satisfaction from doing what they desire, and this is quite independent of the content of those desires—specifically, whether they are oriented toward self or others.

So the answer to the first question posed at the beginning of this essay is that there is some altruism in the world, although in healthy people it intertwines subtly with the well-being of the agent who does good. And this is crucial for answering the second, practical question: how to increase the sum of altruism. Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (II.3) had it right: we have to raise people from their "very youth" and educate them "so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought." Excellent advice, although putting it into practice is easier said than done. Still, once we recognize that the pursuit of self-interest is not our inevitable fate, we can get to work on figuring out how to wean people from what is nonetheless the path of least resistance.

Judith Lichtenberg
 Professor
 Department of Philosophy
 Georgetown University
 jl537@georgetown.edu

Sources: Elliot Sober and David Sloan Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1998); Samir Okasha, "Biological Altruism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2005 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed., <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2005/entries/altruism-biological/>; W.D. Hamilton, 1964, "The Genetical Evolution of Social Behaviour I and II," *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 7 (1964); R.L. Trivers, "The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism," *Quarterly Review of Biology* 46 (1971); Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford, 1976); Daniel Batson, *The Altruism Question: Toward a Social-Psychological Answer* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991); Jean Hampton, "Selflessness and the Loss of Self," in *Altruism*, ed. by E.F. Paul, F.D. Miller, Jr., and J. Paul (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1993); Neera Kapur Badhwar, "Altruism Versus Self-Interest: Sometimes a False Dichotomy," in Paul et al., *Altruism*.

