

Pure Altruism

Egoic Altruism

Why Do Human Beings Do Good Things? The Puzzle of Altruism: Altruism isn't always just disguised self-interest. 'Pure' altruism does exist.

Altruism and Connectedness

By Steve Taylor

In other words, there is no need to make excuses for altruism. Instead, we should celebrate it as a transcendence of seeming separateness. Rather than being unnatural, altruism is an expression of our most fundamental nature — that of connectedness.

In 2007, a construction worker named Wesley Autrey was standing on a subway platform in New York, when a young man nearby had an epileptic seizure and rolled on to the track. Hearing the approach of a train, Wesley Autrey impulsively jumped down to try to save the young man, only to realise that the train was approaching too fast. Instead, he jumped on top of the young man's body and pushed him down into a drainage ditch between the tracks. The train operator saw them, but it was too late to stop: five cars of the train passed over their bodies. Miraculously, both of them were uninjured. Asked later by The New York Times why he had done it, Autrey said: 'I just saw someone who needed help. I did what I felt was right.'

According to some psychologists, there is no such thing as 'pure' altruism. When we help strangers (or animals), there must always be some benefit to us, even if we're not aware of it. Altruism makes us feel good about ourselves, it makes other people respect us more, or it might (so far as we believe) increase our chances of getting into heaven. Or perhaps altruism is an investment strategy — we do good deeds to others in the hope that they will return the favor someday, when we are in need. (This is known as reciprocal altruism.) According to evolutionary psychologists, it could even be a way of demonstrating our resources, showing how wealthy or able we are, so that we become more attractive to the opposite sex, and have enhanced reproductive possibilities.

Finally, evolutionary psychologists have also suggested that altruism towards strangers may be a kind of mistake, a 'leftover' trait from when human beings lived in small groups with people we were genetically closely related to. Of course, we felt an instinct to help other members of our group, because our own survival depended on the safety of the group as a whole, and because, more indirectly, this would support the survival of our genes. We don't live in small tribes of extended family anymore, but we habitually behave as if we are, helping the people around us as if we are related to them.

What all these explanations have in common is that they are really attempts to explain away altruism. They remind me of my attempts to excuse my indolence when my wife comes home and finds that I haven't done the DIY jobs I promised to. They're attempts to make excuses for altruism: 'Please excuse my kindness, but I was really just trying to look good in the eyes of other people.' 'Sorry for helping you, but it's a trait I picked up from my ancestors thousands of years ago, and I just can't seem to get rid of it.'

Altruism is the belief or practice of unselfish concern for someone else's well-being. In this text, the author explores the various reasons for humans to act altruistically and whether or not humans can show true selflessness towards others. As you read, take notes on what drives humans to behave altruistically.

The question of why human beings are sometimes prepared to risk their own lives to save others has puzzled philosophers and scientists for centuries. From an evolutionary point of view, altruism doesn't seem to make any sense. According to the modern Neo-Darwinian view, human beings are basically selfish. After all, we are only really 'carriers' of thousands of genes, whose only aim is to survive and replicate themselves. We shouldn't be interested in sacrificing ourselves for others, or even in helping others. It's true that, in genetic terms, it's not necessarily self-defeating for us to help people close to us, our relatives or distant cousins — they carry many of the same genes as us, and so helping them may help our genes to survive. But what about when we help people who have no relation to us, or even animals?

Yesterday, I was about to have a shower, and saw a spider near the plug hole of our bath. I got out of the shower, found a piece of paper, gently encouraged the spider on to it, and scooped it out of danger. Why did I do this? Perhaps in the hope that a spider would do the same for me in the future? Or that the spider would tell his friends what a great person I am? Or, more seriously, perhaps it was the result of moral conditioning, a respect for living things and an impulse to 'do good' which was ingrained in me by my parents? (Although come to think of it, my parents didn't teach me those things...)

Now, I don't doubt that these reasons apply sometimes. Many acts of kindness may be primarily — or just partly — motivated by self-interest. But is it naive to suggest that 'pure' altruism can exist as well? An act of 'pure' altruism such as Wesley Autrey's may make you feel better about yourself afterwards, and it may increase other people's respect for you, or increase your chances of being helped in return at a later point. But it's possible that, at the very moment when the act takes place, your only motivation is an impulsive unselfish desire to alleviate suffering.

It's this fundamental oneness which makes it possible for us to identify with other people, to sense their suffering and respond to it with altruistic acts. We can sense their suffering because, in a sense, we are them. And because of this common identity, we feel the urge to alleviate other people's suffering — and to protect and promote their well-being — just as we would our own. In the words of the 19th century German philosopher Schopenhauer, 'My own true inner being actually exists in every living creature, as truly and immediately known as my own consciousness in myself... This is the ground of compassion upon which all true, that is to say unselfish, virtue rests, and whose expression is in every good deed.'

No, I think this simple act was motivated by empathy. I empathized with the spider as another living being, who was entitled to stay alive just as I was. And I believe that empathy is the root of all pure altruism. Sometimes empathy is described as a cognitive ability to see the world through another person's eyes, but I think it's actually much more than that. In my view, the capacity for empathy shows that, in essence, all human beings — and in fact all living beings—are interconnected. At some deep level, we are expressions of the same consciousness. (As several philosophers of consciousness — such as David Chalmers — have suggested, it may be that rather than producing consciousness, the function of the brain may be to 'receive' or 'channel' a consciousness which exists outside the brain, and which in fact permeates the whole universe. Consciousness may be a fundamental force of the universe, like gravity.)

The prior selection has been mixed up so that many paragraphs, subheadings, and even the title are out of their proper order. Working with a partner, cut out all of the various pieces and put them in the correct order. You are attempting to decipher how the author originally wrote the piece to determine order of ideas presented and text structure. Once you are done, glue them into your notebook on 78-79 in your notebook.