

False Pretexts of Altruism and the Truth About Cooperation

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Without deeper analysis, altruism seems to be alive and present in our world today. However, most of what is called altruism is really mere cooperation. True altruism cannot be achieved unless you directly give up your life without receiving any benefit. Only by analyzing such acts and exploring the true motives of these acts, can we see that 1) biological influences (such as genetic relatedness) and 2) social components stemming from reciprocity are what determine these cooperative actions. We cooperate together for greater overall fitness of society. Through cooperation we can have a striving community that can grow together. Ultimately, even cooperative actions are selfish. True altruism is rare and reserved only for saints and saviors.

It has been said that random acts of kindness are what makes the world a better place. However, while this may be true, we must look at why these acts are completed to fully examine if these are truly altruistic acts or if they have an ulterior motive. To be considered an altruistic act, an individual must be willing to sacrifice his or her reproductive fitness for the benefit of the recipient of the act without receiving anything in return; essentially the person must be willing to give up his or her own life. A classic example of an ‘altruistic act’ is the story of Wesley Autrey. Wesley was standing on a subway platform in New York when a young man nearby had an epileptic seizure and rolled onto the track. Autrey, hearing the roar of the train coming, jumped on top of the man and pushed him down into the drainage ditch between the tracks. All five cars of the train passed over both of the bodies and, miraculously, both men were unharmed. When asked by the *New York Times* why he did it, he responded, “I just saw someone who needed help. I did what I felt was right.”¹ At face value this seems like nothing more than an altruistic act, a

human sacrificing his life for another human. However, biological instincts such as reproductive fitness or genetic relatedness stemming from inclusive fitness could be responsible for the action. Others may state that, subconsciously, Wesley could have been thinking ahead to the rewards he would get for such an act.

A term that I believe fits better for these kinds of ‘altruistic’ acts is cooperativity. Humans cooperate together for the greater fitness of the group or society; they do not just sacrifice their lives for others for no apparent reason. I will analyze aspects of cooperation that make up this evolutionary idea and how it disproves the use of the term altruism. I will also address the theological, ethical, and sociological implications that accompany these acts of kindness.

Biological Component

First, let us analyze cooperation from a biological standpoint. As Steve Taylor, a professor at Leeds Beckett University states, “From an evolutionary point of view, altruism doesn’t seem to make any sense.

¹ Buckley, 2007, p. 1

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.”² As explained by Taylor, our main evolutionary goal is to pass on adaptable genes to our offspring to ensure the continuity of our species. By involving ourselves in these self-sacrificial acts for the benefit of another random being would be a violation of our one ‘purpose’ in life, evolutionarily speaking. What is interesting is that some species of animals exhibit these ‘altruistic’ qualities and actually survive while implementing them. For example, social animals like bees and ants work for the community and provide for the queen due to a haploid-diploid system of genetic relatedness. Therefore, biologically speaking, the self-sacrificing act could only be justified if we sacrificed for another individual who is related to us by carrying similar genes as ours and who has greater reproductive fitness than us. The idea, kin selection, was proposed by Maynor Smith and was even coined the ‘selfish gene theory’ by Richard Dawkins.

This theory is formulated on the basis of natural selection and Hamilton’s rule of relatedness. As explained by Kevin Foster “Hamilton’s rule predicts that altruistic action will be favored when $RB > C$, where C and B are the cost and benefit to actor and recipient, respectively, and R is their relatedness.”³ Therefore, in order for the act to be biologically justified, the left side of the equation must be greater than the right side of the equation, which can be heavily influenced by the coefficient of relatedness. In conjunction, Sarah Coakley presents a similar situation “Suppose a

particular gene induces altruistic behavior towards other individuals. The donor of the altruistic act pays a cost, c, while the recipient obtains a benefit, b. The currency of this interaction is fitness (reproductive success). Such a gene is favored by natural selection if the cost to benefit ratio, c/b, is less than the coefficient of relatedness, r, among individuals.”⁴ Therefore, we are more willing to sacrifice for individuals who are genetically related than for complete strangers. This idea of kin selection could be the idea that coincides the most with how social animals construct their lifestyle. They are willing to risk their lives for the reproductive fitness of the group and the success of their relatives. Thus, these animals act in a cooperative fashion; they don’t give up their lives for zero benefit; in other words, they do not act altruistically. As mentioned before, there are two ways to truly justify self-sacrificing acts and those are through relatedness and reciprocity. Reciprocity has more to do with ethical and sociological influences.

Sociological Reciprocity

Reciprocity is simply defined as sacrificing for another being in order to receive future gain. Sarah Coakley goes further and explains “Reciprocity can lead to cooperation among unrelated individuals in the absence of group selection.”⁵ Consequently, because Wesley Autrey was not related to the man who fell onto the tracks, the only other biological or sociological explanation for acting the way he did, barring theological influences or true altruism, was him thinking of the reward he would gain from this act. The reciprocation for an act could be a multitude of things from monetary rewards, to social recognition to sexual repayment. The magnitude of reciprocation is determined by

² Taylor, 2013, p. 1

³ Foster, 2005, p. 1

⁴ Coakley, 2013, p. 3

⁵ Ibid.

what society and context the good deed was done in. There are three types of reciprocity when dealing with cooperation: indirect, direct, and spatial.

The first idea we will address is indirect reciprocity. As Brent Simpson and Rob Willer concluded “Recent theoretical models and empirical studies of indirect reciprocity show that actors behave pro-socially in order to develop an altruistic reputation and receive future benefits from third parties.”⁶ Coakley also corroborates with this in saying “Indirect reciprocity is the idea that altruistic acts are not returned by the recipient but by some other individual from the population.”⁷ Therefore, in Wesley Autrey’s case, he wasn’t going to receive anything in particular from the man he saved, but he was going to receive social recognition from the city of New York, which could lead to many other benefits. For this reciprocity to mean something, we have to live in a society that respects and desires reputation. By gaining this reputation, it provides a means for upward movement in society. It can be concluded that beings in need of this reputation would be willing to give up their reproductive fitness in order to gain in social capital. Thus indirect reciprocity would be a way to disqualify a so-called ‘altruistic act.’

Direct reciprocity is based along the same ideas, but says that the reciprocity comes directly from the recipient of the act. Professor Sarah Coakley puts direct reciprocity under trial, using the Prisoner Dilemma (PD) game theory. In order to analyze whether humans are hard-wired to complete altruistic acts, she created a scenario where two prisoners were in a game in which their success depended on how well they cooperated. The major conclusion she came to was that the biggest influence on how a player acted was how his

opponent did. In a situation where an opponent caused harm, the corresponding player acted in the same way. When the opponent acted in a way that benefited his counterpart, the favor was returned. There were very few instances where one player returned a positive benefit after being harmed by the opponent. Therefore, the PD proves that we are not altruistic beings and, at best, we cooperate based on how our counterparts and society react to our actions.

The last of the reciprocity ideas is spatial reciprocity. Marie Barnett gives a good definition of spatial reciprocity. She states, “Spatial reciprocity occurs in spatially structured games when the strategies of successful players are copied by their neighbors; this reduces the effectiveness of defection, since a highly successful defector will soon find itself surrounded by copycat defectors whom it cannot exploit.”⁸ Again this reciprocity is analyzed through the actions in game theory. In spatial reciprocity, neighbors only act by copying their counterparts. Therefore, a society that is full of defectors—players who will only cause harm—will tend to fail because of the lack of cooperation. In those scenarios, altruistic acts are almost impossible to identify.

Theological Influence

In many societies now and in the past, theology has had a major impact on how we live in community. One of the major pillars of religion is building community with each other, which cannot be completed without acts of selflessness. The greatest example we have been given of acting and living selflessly is the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. The perfect example is the story of the Good Samaritan. In Luke 10:25-37 the Parable unfolds, beginning by a man asking Jesus how to

⁶ Simpson, Willer, 2008, p. 37

⁷ Op. cit. ref. 4

⁸ Barnett, 2013, p. 1

receive eternal life. Jesus explains that by loving God and loving your neighbors you will be exalted into heaven. Jesus then sets out the parable: a man is beaten on the street and many pass by him, even so called religious people. Then a Samaritan comes by, goes to the victim, bandages him, brings him to an inn to recover, and pays for the innkeeper to help him heal. In the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, George Morelli addresses the parable and connects it to the idea of altruism. He states, “The Good Samaritan shows us the spiritual way of ‘Divine Altruism.’ Altruism can only be ‘Divine’ if it ‘fulfills the law of Christ,’ enlivened by Divine Love of God and neighbor, with nothing expected in return.”⁹ In conjunction, there are scriptures that also coincide with divine altruism. For example, Luke 6:35 states “But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back.” So the Bible sets us up to love our neighbors, to cooperate with them. But is it calling us to give up our lives?

If we truly claim to be followers of Christ and claim that we want to live our lives like Him then we must be willing to give our lives for our neighbors like Christ did. Then that raises a question into the motives of this sacrificing act. In Jesus’ case, He did it to give us life, to allow us to live in this world, and to escape the wrath of God. He gained absolutely no reward from his sacrifice. In our cases, as followers of Christ, can we truly be altruistic? I believe the answer is no, because we have heaven to look forward to. We know that when we die, if we have died for our neighbors and we have loved God, then the promise of heaven and its treasures is given to us. However, fortunately for followers of Christ, that is where God’s grace comes in and saves us. Most of us are not willing to fully give our

lives up and follow through with what Jesus’ life sets us up to do, but we try to live up as close as possible to those expectations. Very few have truly achieved true altruism. As mentioned before, Jesus is one of those beings, and another well-known person who accomplished altruism was George Price.

True Altruist

George Price, a population geneticist and physical chemist, surprisingly fits the bill of an altruist. The book *The Price of Altruism* by Oren Harman is a biography on the life of George Price. Price, initially an atheist, began to toil with the ideas of altruism and was said to have a religious experience that caused his conversion to Christianity. Through his conversion to Christianity, he tried to prove all of his colleagues wrong in proving that altruism was achievable the way Jesus lived his life.¹⁰ In a synopsis of Price’s Research, Maria Popova states:

“In his quest to understand altruism, Price inevitably dissected such complex and timeless concepts as self-sacrifice and kindness, and eventually became so vexed by the selfish reasoning for kindness embedded in his own mathematical theory of altruism that he set out to prove the theory wrong by committing a seemingly endless number of random acts of kindness to complete strangers. He spent the latter part of his life helping alcoholics and the homeless, often inviting them to live in his home and, though he had most of his belongings stolen, he went undeterred until he was forced to move out of his house due to a construction issue. Unable to help the homeless any longer, he went into a deep depression. On January 6, 1975, Price committed suicide using a pair of nail scissors to cut his own carotid artery.”¹¹

⁹ Morelli

¹⁰ Harman, 2011.

¹¹ Popova, 2011, p.1

Conclusion

The life of George Price and his dedication to proving altruism lead to his death. He gave all he had, and he completely devoted his life to help others in need. However, even his life can be questioned as to if he actually acted altruistically. We do not know what his mental status was as he was giving away all his possessions. We cannot truly know if his motivation was to act selflessly to help others or if his mindset all along was to prove his colleagues wrong. However, Price's life does prove one thing for us, and that is that we cannot live as an altruistic society. If we did all live this lifestyle we would eventually cease to exist because we will have all died for our neighbor until there was no one left. Thus,

as a society we must try to live cooperatively. Cooperativity can be encouraged through reciprocal rewards for selfless acts. It can also be influenced by a factor of love and compassion for those related to us, but it is not and will never be a lifestyle that is self-sacrificing for no benefit. We must actively persuade that cooperativity, not altruism, is the key for self-sacrificial acts of social animals and of humans like Wesley Autrey. Many of the acts our society claims as altruistic on the surface level, actually fail to reach the criteria of altruism set out by people like Price. However, this doesn't mean that we live in a selfish society. This cooperative society doesn't take away from the acts of kindness that make this world a better place.

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