

The Problem of Altruism

A perennial question that appears to throw up a roadblock to the possibility of ethics is a view we call psychological egoism, that is, the claim that all human actions are motivated solely from self-interest. The idea is that we can only act in such a way as to satisfy our own desires and so morality is therefore impossible.

The standard move is to point to one person doing one nice thing for someone else, say, helping the old lady across the street with her groceries, and say, “see, people are capable of acting from a rational motive other than self interest, so ethical questions are meaningful.” The psychological egoist will make the first standard move and respond that this supposedly nice act – and indeed, all supposedly nice acts – are actually self-interested in the end. They will posit something like “It makes you feel good to help someone.” Or “you were hoping she would give you some money for helping.” Or “you just wants to create a world where it is more likely that when you get old someone will help you.” By showing that any act that is supposedly done to help another also has some actual or possible benefit for the agent, the claim is that the act could not have been altruistic and so was actually motivated by self-interest.

The usual reply to this first standard move is to come up with some situation, actual or hypothetical, in which the agent truly loathes the action and/or suffers greatly as a result of it, but undertakes it out of a sense of duty. Now the old lady is known to be an aging Nazi sympathizer who spits at you the whole way across the street and accuses you of squishing her tomatoes and demands you reimburse her for them. When you refuse, because you didn’t squish her tomatoes, it only reinforces her idea that Jews are incapable, dishonorable, and cheap. Not only that, but by helping her, you missed your bus and now will be late for dinner...no fruit cup for you buddy. You knew it was the right thing to do, but it doesn’t mean you aren’t pissed about it. There was absolutely no self-interest here. You don’t feel good about having done it. You knew you were going to get nothing but grief for it and that any lasting effects would be negative reinforcement of false stereotypes.

Here we get the standard second move of the psychological egoist. “You may not think you, get a sense of satisfaction from doing the right thing, but deep down, subconsciously, you really do.” By making this clever move to the subconscious, the egoist has cut you off at the pass. You can’t wiggle out. So, is ethics dead?

Of course not. Both of the standard moves are deeply flawed. Let’s take them in the opposite order. The second move suffers from the classic problem that afflicts many universal claims about human motivation, it is unfalsifiable. For a claim about the way the world works to be meaningful, it must be possible for it to be false.

Why? Suppose you turn on your tv to catch the weather and there is staff meteorologist Steve Gimbel who claims that his forecasts are always 100% accurate. “Tomorrow,” he says, “it will rain or it won’t. Back to you Bob.” Is this report 100% accurate? Well,...yeah. It is true that it will either rain or it won’t. One of the two has to be true. But does this actually tell you anything about the weather? Do you now have any reason to believe anything about whether to bring your umbrella? No. The forecast seemed to be about the weather because it used weather words, but because it is true no matter what, it actually says nothing about the world. To make a meaningful scientific claim is to possibly be wrong.

But the second standard move makes sure that nothing you say would make the claim about acting from self-interest false. It is tucked away safe and sound where actual facts about the world can’t touch it. The contents of your supposed subconscious are constructed by the egoist in such a way that he has to be

right, no matter how the world is...but that just means he isn't really describing the world.

There is also a problem with the first standard move. The idea is to create a false dichotomy between acts that are completely self-interested and those that are completely altruistic. For virtually any nice thing you may do, it is fairly easy to construct some small advantage conveyed to the agent. Does this mean people don't act from pure motives sometimes?

Of course, not. Just because there is some fringe benefit from an action does not mean that the acquiring of that benefit is the actual motivation for the act. This is the same move that is made in bad evolutionary arguments. Just because some feature of an organism conveys a certain advantage, either in terms of survival or attracting a mate, does not mean that the mentioned advantage is the reason it was evolutionarily selected for. Traits are often the results of complex genetic interaction and any given trait may have been the accidental result of two or more other traits that were the ones actually selected for. Just because there is an advantage you can point to, doesn't mean that I must be the cause.

People do sometimes do the right thing for the wrong reason and it may be impossible in any given case to know exactly why someone did the right thing, but this does not in any way mean that there aren't some cases where we do the right thing for the right reason. You may be aware of the reward for doing the right thing, but would have done anyway. You may be very glad to have the tax write-off, but the real reason you donated to that charity is that you authentically wanted to help.

Are there any purely altruistic actions, actions with absolutely no benefits to the agent? Dunno, and to be honest, don't really care because philosophically the answer to that question is not important. It does not hold the possibility of ethics hostage in the way the psychological egoist thinks.

<http://philosophersplayground.blogspot.com/2007/02/problem-of-altruism.html>

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On a flight I took the other day, I watched the stewardess give the usual five minute safety presentation, and for the first time stopped to think about the implications of some of her words, which I had heard hundreds of times before without noticing them.

In the event the cabin depressurizes, oxygen masks will automatically drop from the ceiling. The stewardess warned us to make sure we put our own masks on before attempting to help our seatmates with theirs. This is part of an FAA-approved script, from which they never depart in making these presentations.

I imagine that this warning is aimed at the following scenario. The cabin depressurizes and anyone without a mask will become unconscious in moments. Your seatmates are children or otherwise helpless. If you attempt to help them without securing your own mask first, you will pass out without succeeding and everyone will die or become incapacitated. If you put your own mask on, your seatmates may pass out but will revive as soon as you have placed their masks on their faces. Thus, your attempt to help them will only succeed if you help yourself first.

It is marvellous to think that the danger of a human being assisting another before herself is so great that the FAA felt the need to warn against it on every airplane flight. The implication is that if the oxygen masks drop from the ceiling, it is *human nature*--immediate, instinctive behavior-- to assist your

companions with their masks before you don yours. Such altruism in the face of danger reveals great compassion, for it is performed in a moment of terrible risk, at great potential cost to oneself, when no one knows what the future holds.

Altruism and compassion are not synonyms. Compassion is an emotion, sharing the suffering of another. Altruism involves acting to help another. Not all compassion leads to altruism, and not all altruistic acts are performed because of compassion.

Altruism and compassion are linked to one another. A supposedly "compassionate" person who never performed a single altruistic act would lead us to doubt the person's professions of sympathy. At the other end of the spectrum, an individual whose obsessive and continuous acts of altruism were performed in the absence of any compassionate feelings--perhaps motivated instead by a powerful sense of duty--would be an interesting moral study. One could argue, with Kant, that this last individual would be the most moral of beings, feeling no immediate pleasure from her acts.

Acts of altruism are easier to study than feelings of compassion. To know what anyone is feeling, we must usually rely on what we are told, while acts take place in the empirical world. Motivations may be ambiguous, but by studying the degree of cost and risk associated with the act, we may be able to detect the degree to which these acts are honestly motivated by compassion.

In [Is Compassion Tragic?](#) I discuss the *means-ends blur* in our discourse about compassion. While few feel comfortable attacking compassion (just as equality, a related concept is off-limits), those who have no compassionate feelings of their own express themselves by attacking compassionate acts as misguided (just as those who oppose equality do so by arguing that particular programs, such as affirmative action, are wrong-headed.) If the question on the table is whether altruism is correct behavior, we can best answer by looking for the roots of altruism. If it is deeply implicated in our human natures, what gave rise to it and in our present complex circumstances, does it promote or interfere with human survival?

In his **Evolution and Ethics**, published in 1894, T.H. Huxley noted that every major human religion and most philosophies have independently arrived at the same conclusion: that the best way to conduct oneself is to do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

In the Christian tradition, it is first mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy...

[R]esist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.

And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also.

And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.

Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.

If one accepts this as the word of God, as a rule graven in the stone of the universe, then the inquiry as to the source of altruism need go no further. Elsewhere, I have written that [God is a stopsign](#), a verbal placemaker that means, "Stop asking questions here." For example, if a child asks why an acquaintance has been killed in a car accident, or moved away, and in my answer I reference God, I have communicated no more information to the child than if I referenced Og or Dog. (Q: What does a dyslexic

agnostic insomniac do all night? A: Lies awake, wondering if there is a dog.) Instead, I have provided a stopsign or doorstop, conveniently blocking further inquiry.

In the absence of God, the existence of altruism becomes a central problem of philosophy and later, of sociobiology. It becomes impossible to derive ethics from the empirical world; as Hume noted, you cannot derive an "ought" from an "is":

In every system of morality which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a god, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprised to find that instead of the usual copulation of propositions *is* and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought* or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible, but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought* or *ought not* expresses some new relation or affirmation, it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason ought to be given for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others which are entirely different from it.

It is possible that most of us share the panic of my correspondent who noted that, in the absence of God, the strongest statement you can make is "I like morality", which is essentially the same sort of statement as "I like ice cream". Certainly, sociobiologists such as Richard Dawkins and Edward O. Wilson who embark on long genetic explanations for altruism may be unconsciously motivated to find an empirical basis for it. I have gone into their theories in detail in [Morality Without God](#). Suffice it to say that altruism is presented as an Evolutionarily Stable Strategy (ESS) because reciprocal; if I rescue others related to me, the genes we hold in common are more likely to propagate through the population; I am also more likely to be rescued myself if I am ever in trouble, so I will have a chance of having a greater number of offspring than a more selfish person. Of course, sociobiology supports a sort of Manichean world-view, as it envisions selfish strategies that work as well as altruistic ones. For example, some men maximize their chances of distributing their genes by investing a lot of time and energy in a few children they have in a faithful monogamous relationship, while others pursue an equally successful strategy of having more numerous offspring with multiple partners and investing nothing in any of them.

Sooner or later, most discussions of biological and social origins of morality get around to [The Prisoner's Dilemma](#), a game theory parable which appears to demonstrate conclusively that we all benefit more over time from reciprocal altruism than we would from selfishness. This is intuitively true and explains a good deal about the way we live; though living in groups is not the only ESS (many animals lead very solitary lives except during mating season), it is the one the human race has chosen, and reciprocal altruism must certainly be the primary factor. Philosopher Peter Singer, in **The Expanding Circle**, gives a nice example of prehistoric man discovering that two hunters can best bring down a sabretooth tiger without injury if they help each other. Safety in numbers is in fact mutual assistance.

Following this path, one can place human behavior in three buckets:

- I regard you as a means to an end--my own survival and satisfaction. I will exploit you in any way that suits me, including killing and eating you if I am starving. I will never help you because there is no benefit in it for me.
- I regard you as a means to an end, but in a more enlightened, forward-looking way. Foregoing immediate payoffs, I now understand that in a series of interactions over time, we can both become richer, safer and happier if we help one another.
- I regard you as an end in yourself. I will help you in ways that are of no conceivable benefit to me and which even put me at risk.

The Prisoner's Dilemma involves a binary switch--betrayal or cooperation--which results in the first two states described above. In the P.D., utter selfishness is "betrayal", and enlightened selfishness is "cooperation". The PD fails to explain self-sacrifice, describing it merely as the act of a "sucker" (the game's worst result, when one player cooperates while the other betrays him, is called "the sucker's payoff").

While sociobiology, evolution and game theory all provide some interesting insight into altruism, no such approach can lead to a "final theory". Despite the volumes that have been written since trying to root morality in science, Huxley was right when he wrote in 1894 that

it is none the less true that, since law and morals are restraints upon the struggle for existence between men in society, the ethical process is in opposition to the principle of the cosmic process, and tends to the suppression of the qualities best fitted for success in that struggle.

In other words, the type of altruism that represents the real conundrum of philosophy and science--the disinterested altruism that regards other people as ends in themselves--can never be fully clarified by any biological explanation, since it so clearly opposes all biological and natural processes. Disinterested altruism, like certain other human activities, flies in the face of evolutionary theory and the [Second Law of Thermodynamics](#).

Philosophers, scientists and the religious all share a desire for certainty; the first two find it in detailed explanations, while the religious take comfort in their stopsign. However, if you accept the premise that morality is a type of [fuzzy thinking](#) and that this is natural and desirable, a good deal of the intellectual tumult goes away.

In part, the question of the origin of altruism may simply be the wrong question. Science is often irresponsibly reductive of its subjects of study; anyone who loves to watch birds today is shocked to learn that the proper exercise of nineteenth century ornithology almost always consisted of shooting the subject. Dissecting the brain can only give us very limited information about the soul, and biological or social explanations of love, courtship or marriage fail to capture the full human impact of the phenomena. All these centuries after Hume, we are still looking to give the "ought" a firmer underpinning. Even if morality is completely normative, and not the least bit empirical, there is still a completely valid line of inquiry: How "ought" we to live? There is no shame in the fact that the answer is a fuzzy one.

Here is one last salute to the scientists: altruism is a behavior that originated in the things which you study, but which got free of them and of you. This is the ultimate beauty of being human, that we break bounds. The three bulleted items I set forth above--selfishness, enlightened selfishness, and selflessness--are a progression. Singer says:

Beginning to reason is like stepping onto an escalator that leads upward and out of sight. Once we take the first step, the distance to be travelled is independent of our will and we cannot know in advance where we shall end.

As the title of his book, **The Expanding Circle**, implies, Singer traces a progression from love of our spouse and offspring, to concern for our neighbors, all members of our [nation](#), of our race, of humanity, and finally, all living things:

Ethical reasoning, once begun, pushes against our initially limited ethical horizons, leading us always toward a more universal point of view.

Similarly, selfless altruism is simply enlightened selfishness further up the escalator, just as enlightened selfishness itself is selfishness further up the escalator. There is a fuzzy progression where behavior, which originally developed with one end in mind, comes to share new motivations, and sometimes loses its original motivation entirely. For example, pleasurable sex certainly originated because creatures that enjoyed copulation had more offspring. Human sex today serves many other ends completely unrelated to childbearing, including sharing of intimacy, expression of love, mutual reassurance, antidote against loneliness and the like. Altruism is also likely to be a rewarding behavior almost completely unhooked from its original biological motivation. If we felt good saving our own child, why should we not feel good saving someone else's?

Behaviors that enhance our likelihood of distributing our genes are more likely to occur if they also make us feel good--so individuals who feel good about such actions will have more offspring. Helping people feels good, feels *right*, irrespective of any cost-benefit analysis. Industrial accidents in which ten or fifteen workers are overcome trying to rescue the initial victim from the fumes, or fires in which several firefighters are hurt trying to rescue a child, cannot be justified by any cost-benefit analysis known to us.

This is where the sociobiologists stumble into complete absurdity. Richard Dawkins, in **The Selfish Gene**, wrestles amusingly with the problem of "suicidal altruism," in which an individual dies rescuing another. After calculating the degrees of kinship and the circumstances under which saving another will pass on at least as many of your genes as you could have passed on yourself, he concludes:

A gene for suicidally saving five cousins would not become more numerous in the population, but a gene for saving five brothers or ten first cousins would. The minimum requirement for a suicidal altruistic gene to be successful is that it should save more than two siblings (or children or parents), or more than four half-siblings (or uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, grandparents, grandchildren) or more than eight first cousins, etc.

But naturally when a child is drowning and we jump in to save it, it is not the result of a calculation of its degree of consanguinity. We do it because something emotional in ourselves, something admirable and which precedes reason, immediately, and without any calculation of which we are aware, concludes it is the right thing to do. It feels good. It is what we would want someone else to do for us.

It is this instinct that we refer to when we talk about a "moral compass" which some people have and others lack. The person who does not stop to think, who rushes to rescue, is the person most of us would like to be. We honor such behavior even when we cannot explain it, even when we are unable to emulate it ourselves. The man who jumps off a bridge to rescue a woman struggling in the freezing water below is a hero, not a fool, and the extreme risk to his own life, incurred for a stranger, is completely admirable. We mutely sense that if we could all live like this, the world would be better.

No theory of optics, of seeing, of the brain can explain the concept of beauty. There is nothing empirical about beauty, yet we have wide ranging agreement that certain things are beautiful. Altruism is beautiful. It is a beautiful idea, that inspires us when other people act on it and makes us feel very good about ourselves when we act upon it. That's all we need to know.

<http://www.spectacle.org/297/alt.html>