

4-1-2013

How Can We Explain Altruism?

Teresa LeVasseur
Providence College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/science_religion_2013



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

LeVasseur, Teresa, "How Can We Explain Altruism?" (2013). *Spring 2013, Science and Religion*. Paper 1.
http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/science_religion_2013/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberal Arts Honors Program at DigitalCommons@Providence. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spring 2013, Science and Religion by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Providence. For more information, please contact mcaprio1@providence.edu.

Teresa LeVasseur
Science and Religion (HON 480)
Fr. Nicanor Pier Giorgio Austriaco

How Can We Explain Altruism?

Not many would question the thick moral fiber of a firefighter or a nurse, or even a social worker who all dedicate so much of their time and energy to the care and safety of others.

However, there is something we must distinguish. Such people are indeed doing a great service to humankind, but they are getting paid to do so. This is not to diminish the gratitude one should feel towards a nurse or doctor, but to examine human kindness beyond reward. A certified nurse assistant does not gain any extra monetary bonus for sitting with an elderly gentleman in a nursing home and helping him write a letter to his child. Most people who donate blood do not do it for the sticker and free cookies. Why would a 20-year-old man jump off a bridge on a windy day into icy waters to rescue the dog of an older woman he had never met (Caride)? What about the biblical example of the Good Samaritan who took care of the battered man on a road (Hunt 21)? The motivation behind these actions is essential in determining if the actions fit into the category of altruistic behaviors. Altruism refers to acts performed for the benefit of another without any expectation of a reward (Hunt 11). These acts must be selfless, untainted by desires for such things as political gain, being owed a favor later, or a bettered reputation. From the secular perspective, biologists have proposed evolutionary mechanisms as a means to explain altruistic behaviors. Theologians instead examine the relationship between God and humankind to explain how altruistic behaviors are possible.

Some examples have been found in animal behavior that suggest a possibility for a biological basis in altruism. Carolyn Zahn-Waxler observed, in a study of how children reacted to family members' emotional displays of sobbing or wailing, that many family pets displayed as

much concern as the children. Pets paid special attention to the family members acting distressed by staying close and nuzzling with them (Keltner 18). Studies with rhesus monkeys led by Jules Masserman in 1964 offer more compelling evidence. Rhesus monkeys in these studies refused to pull on a chain that would give them food at the expense of a shock to another monkey (Keltner 18).

These findings can be contrasted with human obedience studies conducted by Stanley Milgram in 1963. In Milgram's studies, participants were placed in a "teacher" position and told to administer a shock to a "learner" (a confederate) at increasing voltage as the learner responded to questions incorrectly. An overwhelming number of participants went up to administering the highest shock level, even after hearing the "learner" cry out and stop responding. The participants would have been compensated even if they had chosen to stop, so why didn't they? The desire to be obedient and the power of an authority figure should not be underestimated, but what does this say of human nature? Similarly unpleasant results were found in a simulated prison study by Craig, Banks, and Zimbardo in 1973. Potential participants were initially screened using personality inventories so that the final group of subjects would be a rather homogenous mix of people with "average" temperament. Participants were randomly assigned to act as a prisoner or a prison guard in a simulated prison. The resulting abuse by most of the guards to the prisoners, such as insulting language, cruel punishment, humiliation, and even an instance of physical attack, resulted in the study being terminated before completion. In this simulation the guards were never told to treat prisoners so disrespectfully. The guards were merely placed in a position of power and that power seemed to lead to escalating levels of cruelty each day. The prison study provides only a small example of the monstrous acts human beings are capable of.

When attention turns to explaining altruistic acts, biologists and psychologists sometimes apply a definition of altruism that refers to prosocial, helpful, behaviors without including the strict rule that such behaviors should not be done for a reward. A reason for expanding the definition to include behaviors that are less selfless may be due to a darker understanding of human nature. One cannot offer an explanation for why humans behave altruistically if humans are not capable of such actions by nature. An understanding of altruistic behavior requires an account of human nature that can explain evidence of both benevolent and malevolent human behavior.

Selfish human behaviors can easily fit into Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection. Natural selection describes the process of an organism developing and maintaining certain traits or characteristics based on how they help that organism survive and reproduce (Dugatkin 2). Organisms with traits that are more beneficial pass the genes carrying these traits on to their offspring. Organisms with less beneficial traits are less able to pass on their genes, so the traits are weeded out with the following generations. Genes apply not only to physical attributes, but also behavioral traits (Dugatkin 3). Even the necessary power of obedience, demonstrated in the Milgram study, is beneficial in an evolutionary sense especially for children. "Such trusting obedience is valuable for survival: the analogue of steering by the moon for a moth... Child brains need to trust parents, and elders whom parents tell them to trust," (Dawkins 176). Natural selection would explain the power of obedience by saying that people who were more predisposed to be obedient were more likely to survive and carry on their genes for obedience.

Biologists have attempted to adapt the existence of altruistic behavior in humans (and other organisms) to fit the model of natural selection. The natural drive to preserve one's genetic material leads into the theory of kin selection. The idea of kin selection is meant to provide an

explanation for seemingly altruistic behaviors among relatives. The obvious example of kin selection at work is that most human parents would sacrifice their lives for their children. Kin selection is "something that occurs between relatives and that comes about because help given to relatives rebounds on the helper because relatives share the same genes: when a relative reproduces, one is, as it were, reproducing oneself by proxy" (Ruse 59). Kin selection suggests that blood relation is a factor in how easily someone engages in altruistic behavior. In a scenario where a person must choose to save his or her brother or his or her cousin, kin selection would predict that said person would save the brother (Nowak 97). A popular example of kin selection is in the self-sacrificing behavior of sterile honey bees for their hives, "natural selection could favor the evolution of sterile castes if individuals in such castes helped their blood kin...because doing so would help ensure the survival of those individuals that could reproduce" (Dugatkin 7).

Group selection expands the mechanism of kin selection to entire groups of a species. In humans, this likely began with tribes. A tribe that works well together and whose members make individual sacrifices for the greater good of the group survives better than a tribe where there is individual greed and an every-man-for-himself attitude (Nowak 84). The concept of group selection is meant to explain the seemingly instinctual response that most humans feel when seeing another human in distress. "This instinct can be so strong that a person will sacrifice his own life to save his comrades. We all have this instinct, even if we don't all act on it" (Nowak 82). Whether group selection is just kin selection in disguise has been raised as an issue, as tribe members in general are more closely related with each other than non-tribe-members. Supporters of group selection, such as Warder Clyde Allee, have responded that "Even when families played a role in the evolution of cooperation, it was subordinate to the general forces that work on all groups, not just families alone" (Dugatkin 54).

Reciprocal altruism is another mechanism to explain cooperative rather than competitive behaviors between organisms. Symbiotic relationships, such as human beings and the bacteria in their intestines, are mutually beneficial to both parties (at least most of the time). Reciprocal altruism does not require the two parties to be so tightly linked as in a symbiotic relation. Direct reciprocity is like the alchemic principle of equivalent exchange, where in order for something to be gained something must be given. Vampire bats demonstrate direct reciprocity well (Dawkins 217). When one vampire bat does not find enough blood to eat, another bat may regurgitate some of the blood it found for the first bat. The bat who received the food is expected to pay back the favor some day. The bats develop reputations based on whether or not they donate blood to other bats after they have been donated blood themselves. A bat who develops a reputation as a "cheat" is less likely to be helped by other bats when it does not find enough blood on its own (Nowak 22). Indirect reciprocity refers to the power of reputation. Here is an example: if Julia has heard from Sam that Arthur is a "cheat" who doesn't repay favors, Julia's decision not to help Arthur can be made without Julia having to have been directly swindled by Arthur. Indirect reciprocity can be applied to explain many philanthropic behaviors or charity work, especially those of politicians who must strive to maintain good reputations (Nowak 53).

"Reciprocal altruism has nothing to do with kindness, unselfishness, and self sacrifice. It doesn't explain what motivates all those who comfort, help, or rescue others with no thought of reward" (Hunt 58). A study was conducted where one group of participants was given a reward for performing a task (such as a five-minute interview) and another group was not rewarded. The results of the study demonstrated that when approached a second time, the group that did not receive a reward was more likely to perform the behavior a second time. These findings are opposite to the findings that reciprocal altruism would predict (Hunt 59). Thomas Nagel also

opposes the evolutionary explanations for moral behavior, "Evolutionary naturalism provides an account of our capacities that undermines their reliability and in doing so undermines itself" (27). None of the above theories proposed by biologists adequately address the original, pure sense of altruism. Reciprocity describes potentially altruistic acts as being ultimately motivated by the anticipation of repayment. In the case of kin selection, people are motivated to seemingly selfless acts for the selfish benefit of preserving their own genes. Group selection is a similar motivational mechanism to kin selection where altruistic behaviors are driven by a desire to preserve a group beyond blood relatives. Purely altruistic acts should have no other reward in mind than the benefit of the life being aided. A better path to understanding altruism begins, then, with a view that life is inherently supremely valuable.

"[W]henever we base ethics on physics, we extinguish what is particularly human and we no longer liberate the human being but crush him or her. We must ourselves recognize what Kant recognized and knew perfectly well..." (Ratzinger 46). What Kant recognized was that physical sciences are not enough to understand human behavior. Rational sciences are required as well. Immanuel Kant's work on ethics is a step in the direction of recognizing that unless a life is inherently valuable, genuine altruism is very difficult to explain. Kant's categorical imperative is comprised of three main formulations. The first is that an action done for the sake of duty has moral value. The second is that for an action to be morally correct, it would be a plausible and desirable universal law. These two formulations move human beings beyond acting only for things that they want towards being able to act against their desires for the sake of something greater. For Kant, that greater imperative is a sense of duty. "It is not enough that an act conform to duty; it must also be done for the sake of duty. It must be done out of a concern for what is morally right, not out of some self-serving motive" (Hinman 211). Kant's description of a moral

act is close to the description of an altruistic act, which is also done without a self-serving motive. Kant even argues that people who are naturally kinder and gain pleasure in helping others are less morally righteous than those who struggle and do the right thing (Hinman 214). This strong proposal illustrates how Kant values reason as the true guide to moral behavior, rather than emotions, which he considers to be less reliable. The final formulation adds another important concept, "We should always treat humanity, whether in ourselves or other people, as an end in itself and never merely as a means to an end" (Hinman 210). This final formulation presents a moral foundation for treating people with respect.

For Kant, respect refers to never encroaching on a human's free agency and autonomy. Another aspect of respect includes recognizing the priceless value of a human being. "If it has a price, it can be replaced by something else of equivalent value. If it has an absolute value, it has dignity and is not for sale" (Hinman 232). What makes human beings priceless? Kant attributes the value of people to their ability to rationalize, to use reason and will. However, the concept laid out by Kant has some limitations. The formulation refers only to how people are meant to treat each other; it only addresses external representations (acts) of respect for human life and ignores internal aspects (thoughts and feelings). "Although we respect reason and will in human beings, we apparently have no direct duty to respect their feelings" (Hinman 233). The use of the term "merely" suggests that humanity can be used to a degree, although not to the degree where they are exclusively being used and not respected (Hinman 210).

Although Kant's theory is a movement towards showing the altruistic capabilities of human beings, it is not enough to entirely explain altruistic behavior. Is duty really enough to explain all selfless behaviors? Why are reason and will so valuable? Kant's work on ethics holds human reason as the best guide towards moral behavior, but "a human being is much more

certain about what he hears from God, who cannot be deceived, than about what he sees by his own reason, because his reason can be deceived" (Wawrykow 12). The Catholic perspective offers an explanation that can attribute inherent value to human life as well as to describe how human beings are able to overcome biological impulses in favor of a desire for something much more satisfying, God.

The anchor for proper understanding of the Catholic tradition is to know what and how God is. This foundation for Catholic understanding has been laid out and explored by Thomas Aquinas. To better understand what Aquinas reveals, it is helpful to begin by stating what God is not. God is not just an existing supernatural entity who created the earth; God is existence itself. "The distinction between God and creatures...lies in all creatures being such that their existence and essence (or nature) differ while such is not the case with God" (Davies 42). Existence in its purity is goodness itself, meaning that God is goodness (Davies 45). God completely transcends the material world and is not part of time or space (Davies 41). God is also the creator of all things, continuously. Everything that exists is existing because God is thinking of it; God's thoughts and love are creative forces (Wawrykow 101). When creatures are understood as being the product of God's love and inherently good, it follows easily that life is inherently valuable. When life is inherently valuable, it makes sense for altruistic acts to occur because another life is something worth sacrificing for. "Human beings are not a mistake but something willed; they are the fruit of love" (Ratzinger 57).

Every creature is compelled to seek its particular good, or proper end (Pope 55). In a very simple example, a seed has the proper end of becoming a full grown plant and so what is good for the seed is what brings it closer to that. For example, water and nourishment help the seed grow. Human beings are unique creatures in that they have a physical body and an immaterial

soul. The immaterial soul is the seat of human intellect and will, meaning that the intellect and will are not limited to physics or laws of physical science. The soul and body are inextricably linked together to form one person. Only in death does the soul separate from a person, but in this state the "person" is incomplete (Davies 22). Human beings have typical bodily drives for food, physical safety, and reproduction but also have a higher inclination. Humans, with their immaterial soul, are ordered to the ultimate end that is the Beatific Vision, being with God in heaven (Wawrykow 102). Unfortunately, Human beings are not able to achieve this goal alone.

God only creates things that are good, because goodness is existing, so evil is the absence of existence (Davies 34). Evil is not a thing or a creation; evil is when a creation is not completely existing (Davies 35). The same applies for evil acts, they are not evil themselves but are lacking in goodness. Human acts of evil are possible because humans are fallen. The fall, or the origin of Original sin, began with human pride. Human beings deny their status as creatures and want to be gods themselves, "they consider their dependence on God's creative love to be an imposition from without," and reject the truth (Ratzinger 70). Although human will (part of the immaterial soul) is designed in such a way that it always desires what it will achieve an end it perceives to be good, sometimes what it perceives to be good is actually harmful. If a human being does not strive towards the ultimate end of being with God or does not believe that is their proper end, the person may choose "goods" that are harmful rather than helpful. An example of a harmful "good" humans choose is drinking alcohol. People perceive the benefits of social lubrication and the chemical effects of alcohol to be a better good than abstaining from it. A stronger example of how badly this can go wrong is the commentary of Rudolf Höss who felt that the Auschwitz concentration camp was "a remarkable technical achievement," (Ratzinger 69).

Although humanity is sinful and flawed, with the help of God humans are capable of overcoming their natural inclinations. "To render possible acting on the supernatural level, God provides humans with a grace that enhances the person's capacity, granting the wherewithal for supernatural acting," (Wawrykow 194). These supernatural acts include acts of pure altruism. Although human beings are unworthy of God's love and unable to earn grace, God gives it as a gift. Grace does not erase the pre-existing nature, but perfects it (Pope 58). This grace (more specifically known as *habitual grace*) takes root in the human soul, and from it flow the virtues of faith, hope, and charity. With these virtues the person is able to know and love God on a deeper level and is put in the path toward the final end of being with God (Wawrykow 134, 169). The virtue of charity is also referred to simply as "love." Charity loves God above all, but also is a love of all people, which sees them as sharing in "eternal fellowship with God" (Pope 59). It is also important to understand that although grace is a gift from God, this does not mean that the acts of humans with this gift are not their own. Although it is only through God that humans and their choices exist, God has designed humans with the free will to make their own choices. It is God's will that human beings have free will. "God can move the will so that it moves itself" (Wawrykow 203). This clarification is important because it means that human beings are not merely God's puppets and freely choose to perform acts of altruism.

Biology alone can explain some aspects of human behavior, but not true altruism. The actions of human intellect and will are beyond scientific comprehension, although the physical body through which the intellect and will act can be described with physical science. The Catholic view of human nature, free will, and altruism is compatible with the theory of natural selection supported by scientists. The Catholic view also offers an explanation for human acts of cruelty that are empty of goodness. It is perfectly plausible that God has created the world

through natural selection which develops instincts and predispositions for kin selection and reciprocity that can be observed even in creatures that do not have an immaterial soul. It is the immaterial soul and its link with the divine that allows a rich explanation for how human beings are capable of totally selfless acts motivated by the virtue of charity and love. The biological perspectives can fit neatly into the theological perspective, but secular theorists are not so willing to embrace theological propositions. Hence the theological view is better able to explain all aspects of human nature, including wonderful acts of altruism, without rejecting any of the scientific, practical principles that are accepted as true.

Works Cited

- Caride, Daniela. "Man Saves Dog from Drowning." Web log post. *Taildom*. The Daily Tail, Inc, 10 Nov. 2009. Web. 02 May 2013.
- Davies, Brian. *Thomas Aquinas on God and Evil*. Oxford [England: Oxford UP, 2011. Print.
- Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Print.
- Dugatkin, Lee Alan. *The Altruism Equation: Seven Scientists Search for the Origins of Goodness*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006. Print.
- Haney, Craig, Curtis Banks, and Phillip Zimbardo. "Interpersonal Dynamics in a Simulated Prison." *International Journal of Criminology and Penology* (1973): 69-97. Web.
- Hinman, Lawrence M. *Ethics: A Pluralistic Approach to Moral Theory*. 2nd ed. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College, 1998. Print.
- Hunt, Morton M. *The Compassionate Beast: What Science Is Discovering about the Humane Side of Humankind*. New York: Morrow, 1990. Print.
- Keltner, Dacher, Jason Marsh, and Jeremy Adam Smith. *The Compassionate Instinct: The Science of Human Goodness*. New York: W.W. Norton &, 2010. Print.
- Milgram, Stanley. "Behavioral Study of Obedience." *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67.4 (1963): 371-78. Web.
- Nagel, Thomas. *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*. New York: Oxford UP, 2012. Print.
- Nowak, M. A., and Roger Highfield. *SuperCooperators: Altruism, Evolution, and Why We Need Each Other to Succeed*. New York: Free, 2011. Print.
- Pope, Stephen J. *The Evolution of Altruism and the Ordering of Love*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown UP, 1994. Print.

Ratzinger, Joseph. *In the Beginning--: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1995. Print.

Ruse, Michael. "Naturalist Moral Nonrealism." *God & Morality: Four Views*. Ed. R. Keith Loftin. Downers Grove, Ill.,: IVP Academic, 2012. 54-74. Print.

Wawrykow, Joseph Peter, "Grace" *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*. ed. Van, Nieuwenhove Rik, and Joseph Peter. Wawrykow. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2005. 192-221. Print.