



Does challenging superstition or faith protect people?  
 Is it mistaken to support organised religion in membership or donations?

If people do good because they are human, not because God prompts them,  
 is it right to risk giving God any credit when they alone own their good?



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## ALTRUISM THE POWER OF COMPASSION - BOOK REVIEW

Altruism: The Power of Compassion to Change Yourself and the World by Matthieu Ricard is a hugely popular and esteemed read.

What does he mean by altruism? Here is the answer he accepts:

For the altruist, the only thing that matters is the goal for the other person. It is not about you or how you feel or what you desire. Kristen Monroe (University of Irvine, California) spoke of how we must mean one thing only by the altruism word - doing things to help others and expecting or looking for nothing back and taking a risk of loss for ourselves to help that person. Good intentions are not enough - the goal of how you are supposed to help must be very clear and the clearer the better.

This is actually commanding you to do good and not just to do it but to do it and make the choice to keep any benefit to yourself out of your mind. It does not say why it is wrong to help x so you can feel you are a hero. We are never told the why. Altruism becomes a matter of being commanded by some authority - typically a human one which is why it backfires so much! Divine authority is no help. There are those who say they have the authority to speak for God. Its back to human authority again. This is nothing more than roundabout dependence on human authority.

To help the goal of the other may help the other but it is still about helping the goal. The goal is not the person. Its not very personal or human. And why their goal and not yours? Goal is goal. If altruism is about the other person this is not altruism.

Pity can pose very well as altruism. But it usually is just a feeling and no action to help is taken. It is a game to look caring. Pity is hypocrisy for if John was suffering we would not take the suffering if we could instead of John on the basis that somebody has to take it. We would not say, "Better for me to take the suffering for John if I can for he does not want it and at least unlike him I can consent to it. Better to suffer out of choice than not to."

The book argues that the suggestion that human nature is just selfish protects itself from evidence that it might be wrong by explaining away altruistic actions. For example, the soldier may die for his comrades for he wants to be thought of as a hero. [If an atheist soldier did this, maybe he feels there is a life after death or a God. I said feels not believe. Even his thinking God would approve of him would mean he was seeking the reward of being considered great. You cannot really show if any hero really was as sacrificing as it seems]. The view that human nature is mainly selfish though not entirely cannot be refuted by any example of altruism for mainly does not mean always. It may be the truth is pretty close to always. Thus there is no valid evidence or rational difficulty with deciding that human nature is more or less about what it can get for itself.

If somebody has a theory or doctrine, in this case about if humans are naturally self-centred, selfish or sacrificing, and there is no way to show it is false or unlikely then it is clearly not just unscientific but anti-scientific. It is an ideology. It is about serving the idea not the truth. Observation shows that human nature clearly does selfish things, particularly it will not speak out very well against the harm done to the innocent, and it does this most of the time. The good deeds often hide far from noble instincts. You will never see the real motives except occasionally. If you were just assuming that human nature is mainly unselfish even if it may be a very confused way of going about being unselfish and protecting that from evidence that would be ideology too. The same can be said if you assume that human nature is mainly spiritual or about a desire for God even if it is not conscious or detected.

Clearly ideology is bad, that is certain. It is self absorbed in a bad way.

If we need ideology to decide if human nature is mainly selfish or non-selfish that is actually proof that we should assume the former! To use a bad thing to show people are caring and genuine is proof that they cannot really be regardless of how

they act.

He asks an important core question: Are we selfish because we respond to our own desire to help others? Are we selfish then?

If you say yes he says you are being ridiculous for it amounts to saying that if you don't want to help and the more you don't want to do it then that is all the better if you assist them. Is that really ridiculous? What are you if you have the desire but act not because of it? You are taking care to avoid being deceived that it is more about you than you seem to experience.

Do we not admire the oppressor who suddenly forces himself or herself to change just for a minute to help us? You have wants and needs that are hard to shift and are just there. Overcoming them even if just for a second to help others makes you a hero as much as you would be if you had to break out of a burning house with a child. It may be your fault the straitjacket of self-interested emotion is there but its not your fault that you cannot get rid of it instantly. You can't just make the past vanish in an instant.

Acting but not out of a desire to help that is there or acting in spite of an urge that makes it all about you are both altruism. The latter is the strongest most determined and most heroic form. He wants you to answer no to his question and thus shows he is not really a promoter of altruism.

We see now how judgemental his understanding of "altruism" actually is. It is not the loving thing it pretends to be. It is not altruistic towards the person who fights themselves to help and who may use a superhuman effort. It denigrates that person and by extension the people they help.

The reason the feeling you want to help is encouraged is that everybody knows there will be few good works if any done without it. That shows the manipulative side of the altruism preachers. The other reason is that you can feel you did not act on a feeling to help and be wrong. We suspect that we all in fact act on some feeling. We want to get some bit of self-fulfillment from acting.

Suppose you will not help unless you feel like it. Many see us as self-centred rather than selfish there. They say self-centred is you making it about you but selfish is what you would be if you were helping them in a way that makes you see them as inferior or beneath you. So self-centred is close to selfish and selfish is just approaching others in a way that has no true respect for them. The problem with self-centred is that though it allows for respect for others that respect is diminished. If you and the other are equally valuable then you have lost sight of that and see your own value only.

It is argued that helping because you feel like it and want the pleasure and discipline of doing so means you have to listen to what the desire is saying and act without acting for the desire. But then you act for another desire, the desire of self-mastery. Self-mastery may not look like a reward but it is for who wants to be controlled by passions bigger than themselves?

In other words you do want to help for your emotional buzz but you bypass that temptation and help for the person. That takes huge self discipline. It is about trying to make it about the other person not what you desire or feel. In this you end up doing it for your sense of self-control so you end up doing it for a DIFFERENT DESIRE OR FEELING! You cannot win.

**Our author says, "I am altruistic for I must help the other without wanting to", is nonsense and stupid. He says its stupidity is an argument against, "If I wanted to help and fulfil my want by helping then I was not altruistic. I got a reward." It is in fact not an argument against it at all. It is the only candidate for an counter-argument and it is wrong. Helping others then without desiring to is true altruism. Most altruists are in fact phonies. Bring in God into it and being altruistic towards him and you add to the problem.**

Other critics say you can only be motivated by your own desire to help and not by the other person's desire to be helped. This seems to define motivation as desire but its not the same thing. You can be motivated to do something that is necessary but which you absolutely hate doing.

If I am motivated to help x for myself or desire to help x for myself in both cases there is self-interest. One is about my motivation. The other is about my desire. X is an instrument. Motivation self-interest and desire self-interest are self-interest.

A tendency to act and a desire to do it are not the same thing. A motivation is a reason for acting and is more about seeing what needs to be done not about how you feel about it.

Joseph Butler said that human nature cannot be pure selfish for whether you wish good for others or bad in both cases you are still interested in others and what is going to happen to them. So even the vindictive person is thinking of others - just not in the right or best way.

But since when is me thinking about my fat bank account showing I am not selfishly hoarding up money? The way I think is what makes me selfish!

If there is no good then nobody can do it to me. The good I want cannot exist unless I and the rest of humanity let it or make it. So if I do good to others is that because I want to make good and further it? Is my motive that I am doing it for me by doing it for another? A selfish person may give John medicine so that the medicine can be medicine for if there is no medicine or it does not work the person will not have it available for herself or himself. Good in a sense does good for us. Is that what it is all about? Yes. We all know that. So no matter how unselfish you are, you are trying to make and channel good. ME ME ME is there underneath it all.

For violence to be waged, it is believed that people must become more selfish/self-centred and less altruistic. And also, the person has to be reduced in value in your mind enough so that you can proceed to deliberately do harm. So violence is linked in this book to a lack of altruism or to people not being altruistic enough.

A society that condemns violence is still to blame for it if it is too much of a selfish society. If you are selfish then what the violent narcissist does has something to do with you. There is something there even if there is not much. You are part of the boiling mixture that produces people like that.

The book says that hatred is characterised by seeing only faults and bad motives in the other. Soon the flaws get exaggerated and exalted to an importance they do not have or deserve. And the good side is explained away as a scheme or ignored. Hatred consists of a desire to hurt another person and also to convince yourself and everybody else that the person is just bad and needs destroying in one form or another. Demonising the other person is what hate is largely about. It is also how it operates.

Yet we all know people who hate who know very little about the target of the hate. They don't know enough about them to twist the things they do into something bad looking. People have hated others for being good. The book's analysis applies for some not all.

Hate is simply wanting to hurt another and seeing them as needing some kind of destroying, It may or may not use demonisation.

There is no mention of how even if we don't dedicate ourselves to suspecting the motives of others the fact is we never really know what they are. That may not erupt in violence but can be a slow cooker for toxicity.

The book says selfishness is what happens when you have an amplified and unrealistic idea of how great you are. You have to be real for your own safety, physical, mental, moral and emotional. For example, imagine the agony if you think you can easily get a PhD and are proven wrong! It is hard torturous work keeping up the illusion. If you want to love yourself then being selfish won't work for your only reward for your effort will be frustration and fear and they feed on themselves. Break the cycle or it will get worse! If we are naturally selfish then it is important not to let it go too far.

Today's crazy world thinks self-esteem, liking yourself, is what makes everything fall into place in the person and the wider society. The author says that bad self-esteem is not what is driving evil tyrants. Stalin, Hitler and Saddam Hussein, according to people who knew them well, said that if these men were anything they were totally carried away by how great and wonderful they were. They were their own Gods. Strangely another monstrosity with a superiority complex, Jean-Jacques Rousseau stated things like, "I know and I feel that doing good is the truest happiness that the human heart can taste." The dictators in their speeches said equally heart-warming things. They knew that human nature thinks in terms of, "I will be tolerant for they are not all bad." That kind of thinking is the reason a religion can murder left right and centre and still end up cherished like today's Catholic Church.

Is it true as the book says that altruism and compassion, though they allow judging when appropriate, are not based on any form of judgementalism?

They are about wanting people to have benefits even if they don't deserve them so it involves judging. You have to judge what you think they deserve and don't deserve. To want them to have benefits because they don't deserve them is not altruism or compassion for it is rewarding their bad side.

Buddhism argues that people who do harm and are selfish need light for their problem is ignorance. The ignorance and lack of knowledge and unwisdom are doing the evil not them. Buddhism argues that to be altruistic you must bring them light and thus react in a nonjudgmental practical way. Keep the thought of sin or immorality out of it.

This is why as regards a God of justice and fair play, Buddhism is definitely atheistic and should indeed be anti-God.

Religion defines altruism as an unconditional love for God and argue that selfless love for others is a gift from him and you cannot have or understand altruism without a firm faith. It is interesting that altruistic discussion is markedly secular. The

religious view is hardly mentioned.

Christianity sees prayer as representing altruism and being its best manifestation for unless God is asked to give you a spirit of sacrifice and altruism it will not happen. If prayer does not work then this tells you will be left selfish. Or if your prayer is for some reason not pleasing to God then you will still be left selfish. Maybe the prayer is not real for real prayer seeks an unselfish relationship with God. We ask now in that case if the selfishness punishment? It may be that prayer does not work for there is no one to hear it and even if there were it would not be acceptable. So you are judged as unworthy as a person and as a person of prayer. Prayer then involves self-righteousness. Prayer is smug so we need to see it for what it is.

That aside, even if prayer were truly good no real altruist holds prayer in such esteem. She or he sees the person who jumps into the water to save a drowning child and thus risking serious danger as doing something that is better than all the prayers that were ever said.

Our writer talks about Ayn Rand, the apostle of rational self-interest.

Rand thinks that because humankind at the core wants to be alive and to be happy that this is proof that humankind is selfish.

Two arguments are poised now against that.

Firstly at most it would make people self-centred but that is not the same thing as selfish.

And secondly that trying to be happy can backfire and lead to misery. You are better off being kind to others and not thinking about your happiness for you cannot be a slave to a desire. That will only ruin you. Reality is not about you or about keeping you safe and happy which is the prime reason selfishness will backfire and not deliver on its promise of happiness.

But to that you can say that the issue is the KIND of selfishness not selfishness as such. If I am forced by reality and my realism to feed my dog the best of food that does not mean I am unselfish. It means I am just selfish in a way that lines up to reality and keeps on the right side of it.

The argument that we are not selfish for selfish is too destructive makes no sense. It is like saying nobody is really an alcoholic for everybody knows how destructive too much alcohol is.

There is no real argument against Rand's philosophy. There is something wrong with altruism if all you can do is lie to try and keep people in thrall to it.

The book makes a determined case for altruism but the lack of any real convincing evidence, and a problematic definition of it, shows that there is something wrong with the philosophy of altruism. It is not a philosophy so much as a scheme filled with gaps and assumptions and holes. The only alternative is to say that altruists are in denial about how self-centred they are. Like our tyrants, they have huge self-esteem their own way. They esteem themselves for being the impossible - the altruist!

The failure of a book that puts together all the know arguments for the goodness and validity and practical value of altruism and falls short says it all.