

Part III

ALTRUISM: EVOLUTIONARY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL

I wish to describe a program of research aimed at testing the evolutionary and psychological theories for an account of the evolution of altruism in mammals and man. (Randy Lee, 1987) Whether such an enterprise is at all reasonable—based on well-established research on altruism, on what one knows of altruism

I have wanted with the following in Part III. It has been done in effect to address the alternative goal of increasing another's welfare, a goal understood as being largely, but not defined as a goal, without any further, ulterior, goal of one's own. I have written: "Altruism and egoism, then defined, may itself be egoistic." I have also, given detailed motivation, made it clear that a researcher who sets out to investigate and for which the ultimate goal is to increase awareness of such "egoistic" goals, does have the potential for investigating the crucial difference between what is the ultimate goal—another person's or world's good. This is not, however, a well-known or at the expense of altruism culture in Western moral philosophy.

1. High Implications of These Definitions

The proposed definitions of altruism and egoism, respectively, are such that they are in agreement at first glance. Let us examine why.

1. The definitions focus on motivation, not on consequences. Thus, this focus, sociobiological and evolutionary, is consistent with the view that is claimed with the recent work of which I am a part, with the authors for writing (e.g., Dawkins 1976, Wilson 1975) view of animal and human behavior. The definition of altruism excludes both: (1) the idea that one acts only to increase one's own and any goal, as might a lion or eagle, and (2) the idea that one acts only to increase or to do the best way to. It is neither about the consequences, but about the motivation. And, it is not a force. Whether that force leads to a force or to a force, as the behavioral options available at the time, as well as the other, as well as the other, as well as the other.

2. Altruism and egoism, respectively, are not "egoistic" motivations. A person may have a goal of creating the good of another, or of being, but not of being selfish.

Experimental Tests for the Existence of Altruism¹

C. Daniel Batson

University of Kansas

I wish to describe a program of research designed to provide experimental evidence for or against the existence of altruism in humans (also see, Batson 1991). Whether such an enterprise is at all newsworthy—or at all worth doing—depends, of course, on what one means by altruism.

I have worked with the following definition: *Altruism is a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare.* I have juxtaposed altruism to *egoism*, defined as *a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing one's own welfare.* Altruism and egoism, thus defined, have much in common. Each refers to goal-directed motivation; each is concerned with the ultimate goal of this motivation; and for each, the ultimate goal is to increase someone's welfare. These common features provide the context for highlighting the crucial difference: Whose welfare is the ultimate goal—another person's or one's own? These definitions are, I believe, true to the egoism-altruism debate in Western moral philosophy.

1. Eight Implications of These Definitions

The proposed definitions of altruism and egoism have some implications that may not be apparent at first glance. Let me mention eight:

1. The definitions focus on motivation, not on behavior or consequences. Given this focus, sociobiological and evolutionary discussions of altruism that deal exclusively with the consequences of a helping act rather than the motives for acting (e.g., Dawkins 1976; Wilson 1975) are of no real use in determining the existence of altruism as defined here. If an individual acts reflexively or automatically without any goal, as might a bee or wasp, then no matter how beneficial to another or to the self the act may be, it is neither altruistic nor egoistic. Both altruistic and egoistic motives may evoke a variety of behaviors or no behavior at all. A motive is a force. Whether this force leads to action will depend on the behavioral options available at the time, as well as on other motivational forces present.

2. Altruism and egoism, as defined, require a self-other distinction. A person may have a goal of meeting the needs of a collective or group that includes both self

and others. Such a goal may be operating when one acts “for the sake of the marriage,” trying to keep it alive independent of what is best for oneself or one’s spouse. Such a goal may also be operating when one contributes to public TV for the good of the community or enlists in the army to serve one’s country. Pursuit of such goals is neither egoistic nor altruistic as defined here because the target of benefit is not self or other; the target is a larger social unit.

3. *A single motive cannot be both altruistic and egoistic.* This is because to seek to benefit both self and other implies two ultimate goals (as long as self and other are perceived to be distinct), and each new ultimate goal defines a new motive.

4. *Both altruistic and egoistic motives can exist simultaneously within an individual.* An individual may have more than one ultimate goal at a time, and so more than one motive. If altruistic and egoistic goals are of roughly equal attractiveness and lie in different directions, so that behaviors leading toward one lead away from the other, then the individual will experience motivational conflict.

5. *An individual may be altruistically motivated and not know it, may be egoistically motivated and not know it, may believe his or her motivation is altruistic when it is actually egoistic, and vice versa.* We do not always know—or report—our true motives. As a result, I do not believe that we can rely on self-reports or introspection to answer the question of the existence of altruism.

6. *As defined here, altruistic motivation need not involve self-sacrifice.* Pursuing the ultimate goal of increasing another’s welfare may involve cost to the self, but it also may not. Indeed, it may even involve self-benefit and the motivation still be altruistic, as long as obtaining this self-benefit is an unintended consequence of benefiting the other, and not the ultimate goal.

Some scholars assume that altruism requires self-sacrifice and cite as examples of altruism cases in which the absolute cost of helping is very high, involving risk or even loss of life. Their logic seems to be that in such cases the costs of helping must outweigh the rewards, so the helper’s goal could not be self-benefit.

There are at least two problems with this logic. First, it shifts the focus of attention from the crucial question of motivation to a focus on consequences. What if the helper had no intention of risking death, but things got out of hand? Is the motivation altruistic? Or what about a cost-free comforting hug for a friend? It may involve no self-sacrifice, but the ultimate goal may still have been to increase the friend’s welfare. Second, using self-sacrifice as a criterion for altruism tends to overlook the possibility that some self-benefits for helping increase as the costs increase. The costs of being a hero or martyr may be very great, but so may the rewards. To avoid these two problems, I think it best to define altruism in terms of benefit to other, not cost to self.

7. *As defined here, altruism is not the same as goodness or morality.* It is possible (although certainly not necessary) to assert that altruistic motivation, if it exists, is good. Yet moral goodness need not be altruistic. Feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, rescuing a drowning person, comforting the sick, all are likely to be seen as morally good regardless of the underlying motive. Such goodness may well raise the question of the existence of altruism, but it does not provide an answer. To keep motivational concepts distinct from moral concepts, I think it wise to avoid using the moral terms *unselfish* and *selfish* as synonyms for *altruism* and *egoism*.

8. *Logically at least, there may be motives for benefiting others that are neither altruistic nor egoistic.* For example, a person might have an ultimate goal of upholding a principle of the greatest good for the greatest number or of justice. The motive to uphold such a principle may lead the person to help at least some others in need. This help might, in turn, benefit both the needy individual and the self. Yet these benefits would be instrumental to upholding the principle rather than themselves being the ultimate goal, and if the ultimate goal is neither benefit to another nor benefit to self, the motive is neither altruistic nor egoistic as defined here.

2. Inferring a Person's Ultimate Goal

Given these definitions, helping another person may be altruistically motivated, egoistically motivated, both, or neither. To ascertain that some act was beneficial to another and was intended (i.e., was helpful) does not in itself say anything about the nature of the underlying motivation. In order to know whether a given motive for helping is altruistic or egoistic, we must determine whether benefit to the other is (a) an ultimate goal and any self-benefits are unintended consequences (altruism) or (b) an instrumental means to reach the ultimate goal of benefiting oneself (egoism).

If helping benefits both the person in need and the helper, as it often does, how are we to know which is the ultimate goal? More generally, if multiple goals are reached by the same behavior, how are we ever to know which goal or goals are ultimate? This problem has led many scientists to give up on the altruism question, concluding that it cannot be answered empirically. I think this surrender is premature. I think we can empirically ascertain people's ultimate goals; indeed, I think we do it all the time. Consider an example that has nothing to do with altruism.

Susie and Frank work together. One Monday morning, music-loving Susie is unusually attentive to homely but well-heeled Frank. Frank wonders, "Has Susie finally discovered my charms, or is she broke and wanting me to take her to the concert this weekend?" Frank is questioning Susie's motivation, wondering about her ultimate goal. As matters stand, he lacks the information to make a clear inference—although wishful thinking may produce one. But now imagine that Susie, returning from lunch, finds in her mail two concert tickets sent by her father. If she coolly passes Frank on her way to invite John, then Frank can infer with considerable confidence—and chagrin—the ultimate goal of her earlier attentions.

This simple example highlights three principles that are important when drawing inferences about a person's ultimate goal: First and most obviously, we do not observe another person's goals or intentions directly; we infer them from the person's behavior. Second, if we observe only a single behavior that has two potential ultimate goals, the true ultimate goal cannot be discerned. It is like having one equation with two unknowns; a clear answer is impossible. Third, we can begin to draw reasonable inferences about the ultimate goal if we can observe this person's behavior in different situations that involve a change in the relationship between the two potential ultimate goals. The behavior should always be directed toward the true ultimate goal.

Everyday uses of this logic abound. We use it to infer when a student is really interested or only seeking a better grade (What happens to the student's interest after the grades are turned in?), why a friend chose one job over another, and whether politicians mean what they say or are only after votes.

The Susie-and-Frank example suggests that two steps are necessary to infer the nature of a person's motivation from his or her behavior. First, we must conduct a con-

ceptual analysis of the various potential alternative goals for the person's action. Unless we have some idea that a given goal might have been the person's aim, there is little likelihood of concluding that it was. Frank realized that Susie might be after the concert rather than after him. Second, we need to observe the person's behavior in systematically varying circumstances. Specifically, the circumstances need to vary in a way that disentangles the relationship between potential ultimate goals, making it possible for the person to obtain one goal without obtaining the other—just as after lunch Susie could get to the concert without Frank. The person's behavioral choices in these situations should prove diagnostic, telling us which of the goals is ultimate, because the behavior should always be directed toward the ultimate goal. These two steps provide, I believe, an empirical basis for inferring the nature of a person's motivation.

Over the past 10-15 years, other social psychologists and I have used this two-step logic to try to answer the question of the existence of altruism. First, we have developed a conceptual analysis that identifies (a) three general classes of egoistic motives for helping and (b) one likely source of altruistic motivation. Second, we have conducted laboratory experiments in which individuals are given an unexpected chance to help a person in need. In these experiments we have systematically varied circumstances in an attempt to disentangle the altruistic ultimate goal (benefiting the other) from one or more possible egoistic ultimate goals (benefiting the self).

3. The Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis

The three general classes of egoistic motives for helping that we have considered are: (a) reward seeking—including material, social, and self-rewards; (b) punishment avoiding—including material, social, and self-punishments; and (c) aversive-arousal reduction—reducing the arousal produced by witnessing another in need. The possible source of altruistic motivation that we have considered is *empathic emotion*. By empathic emotion I mean other-oriented feelings congruent with the perceived welfare of another. If the other is perceived to be in need, then empathic emotions include feelings of sympathy, compassion, tenderness, and the like. This emotional reaction has been named as a source—if not *the* source—of altruism by Thomas Aquinas, David Hume, Adam Smith, Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, William McDougall, and several contemporary psychologists. I shall call the proposal that empathic feelings for a person in need evoke altruistic motivation to relieve that need the *empathy-altruism hypothesis*. This hypothesis claims that empathy evokes motivation directed toward the ultimate goal of reducing the needy person's suffering; the more empathy felt for a person in need, the more altruistic motivation to have that need reduced. It is this hypothesis that I have sought to test experimentally. The empathy-altruism hypothesis does not deny that reaching the hypothesized altruistic goal is likely to enable the helper to gain rewards, avoid punishments, and reduce aversive arousal. It claims that these benefits to self are not the ultimate goal of empathy-induced helping; they are unintended consequences.

4. Egoistic Alternatives to the Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis

Of course, the empathy-altruism hypothesis may be wrong. There is clear empirical evidence that empathic feelings lead to increased helping (see Batson 1991, for a review), but the motivation for this helping may be egoistic rather than altruistic. Is benefiting the other the ultimate goal, with subsequent benefits to self unintended consequences (altruism), or is benefiting the other an instrumental goal on the way to the ultimate goal of obtaining one or more self-benefits (egoism)? Following the logic of the Susie-and-Frank example, to answer this question about the nature of the underlying motivation we need (1) a conceptual analysis of likely egoistic alternative goals and (2)

observation of the pattern of behavior across situations that systematically vary the relationship between one or more of these possible egoistic goals and the altruistic goal. The best way to do this is, I believe, to conduct experiments in which we manipulate relevant situational conditions. Let me illustrate how we have tried to do this.

The most frequently proposed egoistic explanation of the empathy-helping relationship is *aversive-arousal reduction*. According to this explanation, empathically aroused individuals help in order to benefit themselves by reducing their empathic arousal; benefiting the victim is simply a means to this self-serving end. Psychologist Martin Hoffman (1981) put it in a nutshell: "Empathic distress is unpleasant and helping the victim is usually the best way to get rid of the source" (p. 52).

What experimental manipulation might allow us to tease apart this egoistic alternative and the empathy-altruism hypothesis? Because empathic arousal is a result of witnessing the victim's suffering, either terminating this suffering by helping or terminating exposure to it by escaping should enable one to reach the egoistic goal of reducing the arousal. Escape is not, however, a viable means of reaching the altruistic goal of relieving the victim's distress; it does nothing to promote that end.

The difference in viability of escape as a means to these two goals produces competing predictions in an Escape (easy vs. difficult) x Empathy (low vs. high) experimental design. These competing predictions are presented in Table 1. Among individuals experiencing low empathy for the person in need, both the aversive-arousal-reduction explanation and the empathy-altruism hypothesis predict more helping when escape is difficult than when it is easy. This is because both assume that the motivation of individuals feeling low empathy will be egoistic. Among individuals feeling high empathy, the aversive-arousal-reduction explanation predicts a similar (perhaps even greater) difference; it assumes that empathically induced motivation is also egoistic. Among individuals feeling high empathy, the empathy-altruism hypothesis predicts high helping even when escape is easy.

Table 1

Predictions from Aversive-Arousal-Reduction Explanation and Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis for Rate of Helping in Escape x Empathy Design

<i>Aversive-Arousal-Reduction Explanation</i>		
Escape	Empathy	
	Low	High
Easy	Low	Low
Difficult	High	High/Very High

<i>Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis</i>		
Escape	Empathy	
	Low	High
Easy	Low	High
Difficult	High	High

Over half a dozen experiments have now been run using this Escape x Empathy design. In a typical procedure, participants observe a “worker” whom they believe is reacting badly to a series of uncomfortable electric shocks; they are then given an unexpected chance to help the worker by taking the shocks themselves. To manipulate ease of escape, some participants are informed that if they do not help, they will continue observing the worker take the shocks (difficult escape); others are informed that they will observe no more (easy escape). Empathy has been both manipulated and measured. (I should point out that this procedure—and the others I shall describe—involves deception. The worker does not actually receive shocks, nor do participants ever receive shocks. Once the experiment is over, we carefully explain the deceptive aspects and true purpose of the experiment to participants.)

Results of these experiments have consistently conformed to the pattern in the bottom half of Table 1 predicted by the empathy-altruism hypothesis, not to the pattern in the top half predicted by the aversive-arousal-reduction explanation. In spite of the popularity of the aversive-arousal-reduction explanation of the empathy-helping relationship, then, this explanation appears to be wrong.

A second egoistic explanation of the empathy-helping relationship is *empathy-specific punishment*. This explanation claims that we have learned through socialization that an additional obligation to help, and so additional shame and guilt for failure to help, are attendant on feeling empathy for someone in need. As a result, when we feel empathy, we are faced with impending social or self-censure above and beyond any general punishment associated with not helping. We say to ourselves, “What will others think—or what will I think of myself—if I don’t help when I feel like this?,” and we help out of an egoistic desire to avoid these punishments.

Several different techniques have been used to test this empathy-specific-punishment explanation against the empathy-altruism hypothesis. Let me mention just one: providing justification for not helping. If a person is helping in order to avoid shame and guilt, then receiving information that increases his or her perceived justification for not helping should lower the rate of helping. But if a person is helping out of an altruistic desire to reduce the other’s suffering, then even with increased justification, the rate of helping should remain high. Therefore, the empathy-specific-punishment explanation and the empathy-altruism hypothesis predict a different pattern of helping across the four cells of a Justification for Not Helping (low vs. high) x Empathy (low vs. high) design. These different predictions are presented in Table 2.

Colleagues and I have conducted three experiments employing different versions of this Justification x Empathy design (Batson et al. 1988, Studies 2-4). In one, for example, justification was provided by *information about the inaction of other potential helpers*. We reasoned that if most people asked have said no to a request for help, then one should feel more justified in saying no as well. Individuals experimentally induced to feel either low or high empathy for a young woman in need were given an opportunity to pledge time to help her. Information on the pledge form about the responses of previously asked peers indicated that either 5 of 7 had pledged (low justification for not helping) or 2 of 7 had pledged (high justification). The young woman’s plight was such that others’ responses did not affect her need for help. As depicted in Table 2, the empathy-specific-punishment explanation predicted more helping in the low-justification condition than in the high by individuals feeling high empathy. In contrast, the empathy-altruism hypothesis predicted high helping by these individuals in both justification conditions. The latter pattern was found. Only among individuals feeling low empathy were those in the high-justification condition less likely to help than those in the low-justification condition. This difference in the low-empathy

condition indicated that our justification manipulation did indeed change participants' perceptions of the legitimacy of not helping.

Table 2

Predictions from Empathy-Specific-Punishment Explanation and Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis for Rate of Helping in Justification x Empathy Design

Empathy-Specific-Punishment Explanation

Justification for not helping	Empathy	
	Low	High
Low	Moderate	High
High	Low	Low

Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis

Justification for not helping	Empathy	
	Low	High
Low	Moderate	High
High	Low	High

The other two experiments used different need situations and techniques for providing justification for not helping. In both of these experiments too, results conformed to the pattern predicted by the empathy-altruism hypothesis, not to the pattern predicted by the empathy-specific-punishment explanation. Results of these three experiments, as well as highly-consistent results from other studies using different techniques to test the empathy-specific-punishment explanation, converge to suggest that this second egoistic explanation of the empathy-helping relationship is also wrong.

The last major egoistic explanation of the empathy-helping relationship is *empathy-specific rewards*. The general idea is that we have learned helping is especially rewarding when we feel empathy. Actually, there are several different versions of this explanation. I shall consider only the one that has received the most attention to date, the negative-state-relief version proposed by Cialdini, Schaller, Houlihan, Arps, Fultz, and Beaman (1987). Cialdini and his colleagues have argued that it is the need for the rewards of helping, not the rewards themselves, that is empathy-specific: Feeling empathy for a person who is suffering involves a state of temporary sadness, and the empathically aroused individual is motivated to relieve this negative affective state. Relief can be had through any mood-enhancing experience, including but not limited to the social and self-rewards that accompany helping.

The technique that seems best suited to testing the negative-state-relief explanation is to confront individuals with a somewhat costly opportunity to help and lead some to believe that even if they do not help, they can anticipate a cost-free mood-enhancing experience. As seen in Table 3, the negative-state-relief explanation predicts that anticipating such an experience will eliminate the empathy-helping relationship; the empathy-altruism hypothesis predicts that it will not.

Table 3

Predictions from Negative-State-Relief Version of Empathy-Specific-Reward Explanation and Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis in Anticipated Mood Enhancement x Empathy Design

<i>Negative-State-Relief Explanation</i>		
Anticipated mood enhancement	Empathy	
	Low	High
No	Low	High
Yes	Low	Low

<i>Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis</i>		
Anticipated mood enhancement	Empathy	
	Low	High
No	Low	High
Yes	Low	High

Schaller and Cialdini (1988) conducted an experiment using this design and claimed support for the negative-state-relief explanation. They admitted, however, that the evidence was weak; their results were not statistically reliable except on a questionable post hoc analysis.

In an independent effort to assess the relative merits of the negative-state-relief explanation and the empathy-altruism hypothesis, Batson et al. (1989) conducted two experiments using an Anticipated-Mood-Enhancement x Empathy design much like the one used by Schaller and Cialdini (1988). Results of these two experiments both conformed to the pattern in the bottom half of Table 3 predicted by the empathy-altruism hypothesis rather than to the pattern predicted by the negative-state-relief explanation. Results of experiments designed to test other versions of the empathy-specific-reward explanation have also supported the empathy-altruism hypothesis (Batson, et al. 1988; Batson et al. 1991; Smith, Keating, & Stotland 1989).

Considering the evidence to date as a whole, then, it does not appear that any of the current versions of the empathy-specific-reward explanation can account for the empathy-helping relationship. This third major egoistic alternative to the empathy-altruism hypothesis also seems to be wrong.

5. A Tentative Conclusion and Suggestion

In sum, results of more than 25 experiments conducted over the past 10-15 years in a number of laboratories have presented a remarkably consistent pattern. The results have failed to conform to the predictions of any of the three major egoistic explanations. Instead, with remarkable consistency, the results conform to the predictions of the empathy-altruism hypothesis. At present, I know of no plausible egoistic explanation for these results. They have led me, tentatively, to accept the empathy-altruism hypothesis as true.

The two-step process based on the Susie-and-Frank example—conceptual analysis followed by systematic experimentation—appears to have born fruit. It has, I believe, provided an empirical answer to the classic philosophical question of the existence of altruism. And it has done so without changing the question, which all too often occurs when science seeks to contribute to philosophical debates.

More generally, is it too bold to suggest that this two-step process might be a model for addressing other questions that have been raised by moral philosophers? It certainly seems a more useful strategy than the “cautious observation of human life” to which David Hume appealed in the last lines of the Introduction of his *Treatise*. Hume rejected more direct experimentation, arguing:

Moral philosophy has, indeed, this peculiar disadvantage, which is not found in natural, that in collecting its experiments, it cannot make them purposely, with premeditation, and after such a manner as to satisfy itself concerning every particular difficulty which may arise. When I am at a loss to know the effects of one body upon another in any situation, I need only put them in that situation, and observe what results from it. But should I endeavour to clear up after the same manner any doubt in moral philosophy, by placing myself in the same case with that which I consider, 'tis evident this reflection and premeditation would so disturb the operation of my natural principles, as must render it impossible to form any just conclusion from the phenomenon. (1739-1740/1978, p. xix)

Experiments like the ones I have described, which build on a research tradition that has developed in social psychology over the past 50 years, are specifically designed to overcome “this peculiar disadvantage” that obscures the truth. Ironically, they overcome it by deceiving participants about the true purpose of the experiment, so that reflection and premeditation do not disturb the operation of the natural principles. Can it be that deceit is the way to truth concerning the value-laden questions about human nature raised by moral philosophers?

Notes

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