

## **Genuine Love Is More Than an Altruist's Daydream**

The Institute for Research on Unlimited Love is a nonprofit organization at the School of Medicine, Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. The Institute for Research on Unlimited Love has a regular column in Research News.

By Stephen G. Post

A number of readers have e-mailed me saying that human nature is so incurably egoistic that genuine love is impossible. I wish to put this unscientific argument to rest using the social science perspective of altruism.

“Altruism” is an inclusive concept that refers to other-regarding motivation or action. An altruist need not manifest love—an altruist may be helpful or heroic from a rational sense of duty alone (the heroic fireman or soldier). The mechanical and impersonal altruist need have no glimmer of affective affirmation and kindness in facial expression or tone of voice. Such helpers are appreciated, but they lack the attractive quality of love and seldom make good long-term mentors. Love always attracts, altruism need not. Thus, unlimited love, as love for all persons without exception, is the highest manifestation of altruism and is often associated with God (See *Altruism and Altruistic Love: Science, Philosophy and Religion in Dialogue*, Oxford University Press, 2002).

The term “altruism” means literally, “other-ism.” It was created by the French sociologist and positivist Auguste Comte (1798–1857) to displace terms burdened by theological history or metaphysical underpinnings. He was indebted to the French legal expression, *le bien d'autrui* (the good of others). Neither a psychological nor an ethical egoist, Comte envisioned a world that would replace all religious love with secular altruism. For this reason, religious thinkers have steered clear of the science of altruism that he spawned.

This intellectual divide is regrettable, because theologians need the science of altruism to answer a key question: how recalcitrant is human nature to unlimited love?

The claim of a hard-wired psychological egoism in human beings has recently been discredited by the social sciences. Scientific analysis indicates a direct link between compassion and helping behavior—i.e., a link that skips the egoistic step of the agent asking, “What if that were me suffering?” and precedes any sense of psychological well-being that such behavior might provide. Instead, compassionate love responds directly to the experience of the other as other. C. Daniel Batson, the premier contemporary social scientist concerned with altruism, uses the following definition: “Altruism is a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another’s welfare.” Batson defines an essential question regarding altruism: “We want to know if our helping is always and exclusively motivated by the prospect of some benefit for ourselves, however subtle.” He refers to egoistically controlled altruistic conduct as “pseudo-altruism.” According to Batson, altruistic motivation must involve the empathy-altruism axis, in which the agent feels the needs of the other on an emotional level and engages in helping behavior. As he frames the discussions, there are two egoistic accounts of why we engage in helping behavior. One path “is based on social learning and reinforcement; the other path is based on arousal reduction.”

Path 1, social learning and reinforcement, is divided into reward-seeking (being paid, gaining social approval, receiving reciprocated help) and punishment-avoiding motives (avoiding censure, avoiding guilt). Path 2 is independent of anticipated rewards and punishments. Seeing the other in distress may cause the agent to feel disturbed, anxious and upset, to the extent that helping behavior follows as a matter of self-interested relief.

Batson argues that Paths 1 and 2 are not mutually exclusive. Both involve a “hedonic calculus,” even if this must be rapid in some circumstances, and both are forms of pseudo-altruism. Path 3, then, the empathic pathway, requires the agent to adopt the perspective of the other, imagining how the other is being affected.

The Greek *empathia*, “feeling into,” refers to the capacity to feel the subjective experience of the other. The agent does not ask what he or she would experience under these circumstances, but what the other is experiencing. In essence, empathy requires an intuiting of what the other is experiencing, which requires both a cognitive dimension and as an other-oriented emotion that is termed “compassion.”

Batson claims that the prototype for the attachment that underlies empathy is “the parent’s attachment to the child.” But such attachments encompass other family relationships and friendships. Batson uses the term “attachment” in a way that is equivalent to “love.” The strength of the attachment, coupled with the magnitude of the perceived need, determines the strength of the empathic emotion.

Batson states, “In study after study, with no clear exceptions, we find results conforming to the pattern predicted by the empathy-altruism hypothesis, the hypothesis that empathic emotion evokes altruistic motivation. At present, there is no plausible egoistic explanation for the results of these studies.” He therefore urges that the empathy-altruism hypothesis be tentatively accepted as an answer to the altruism question, “Contrary to the beliefs of Hobbes, La Rochefoucauld, Mandeville and virtually all psychologists, altruistic concern for the welfare of others is within the human repertoire,” he says.

While I find Batson’s decades of empirical work persuasive, I offer some criticism. The empathy-altruism axis needs the enhancing and stabilizing power of reason and the spiritual perspective of a common humanity if human altruism is to extend beyond the narrow domain of the near and dear into the domain of all humanity. As Kristen Renwick Monroe points out, “Counter arguments suggest that the perspective-taking aspect of empathy in itself is not sufficient to cause altruism, since this increased understanding need not necessarily be utilized for the other person’s welfare.” Monroe recognizes the established importance of empathy but couples it with the altruist’s perception of a shared humanity.

The philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum wishes that Batson had used the word “compassion” rather than “empathy.” Empathy, she says, is the “imaginative reconstruction of another person’s experience, without any particular evaluation of that experience.” Thus, “a malevolent person who imagines the situation of another and takes pleasure in her distress may be empathetic, but will surely not be judged sympathetic.” Sympathy, like compassion, includes a judgment that the other person’s distress is bad.

Batson could also do more with the role of religion in encouraging altruistic behavior. In an early study, Nelson and Dynes explored the impact of religious devotion and attendance at religious services on a variety of helping behaviors. The researchers mailed a questionnaire to a sample of adult male residents in a city that had recently been struck by a tornado.

The subjects were asked three questions to determine their level of devotion: How often are table prayers said at mealtimes in your home? How often do you pray privately or only with your wife (excluding mealtimes)? How important is prayer in your life?

Respondents were also asked how frequently they attended church and to rate their level of religious commitment. The subjects' responses to these questions were then compared with their involvement in both "ordinary" helping behaviors (helping motorists with car trouble, etc.) and emergency helping behaviors (providing relief goods for tornado victims and performing disaster relief services unrelated to regular employment). The researchers found that devotionism, church attendance and level of religious commitment were positively correlated with levels of helping behavior, both in routine and emergency situations.

Setting these concerns aside, Batson has served humanity well by pointing out that there is such a thing as a genuinely other-regarding emotional-psychological motivational state that leads to helping behaviors. In a time of hatred and massive world conflict — sometimes agitated by religious fanaticism — it is good to be reassured by a man who has devoted his professional love to establishing this single scientific truth about human nature.

*Stephen G. Post invites readers to submit their own stories of "Unlimited Love." Please e-mail him at [sgp2@po.cwru.edu](mailto:sgp2@po.cwru.edu), with permission to post the story on the Unlimited Love website. Your help will be appreciated and will be an inspiration to many.*

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