

SYNOPSIS

Natural Ethics - a Confrontation with Altruism

by Jan and Birgitta Tullberg

Natural Ethics challenges the prevailing moral philosophy from a sociobiological perspective. It is not a philosophical book that takes pride in voicing that the more you know, the more you realize that there is no answer. On the contrary we think we have a qualified and controversial answer to the conventional judgment that altruism is a virtue.

Main content

This book penetrates the central question of moral philosophy - "what is good for man?". This question that Aristotle raised a long time ago is just as important to the intellectual layman as to the philosopher. The conventional way of treating this problem is to pit egoism against altruism. It is assumed almost by definition that altruism is beneficial and the discourse concentrates on the following two questions: "Which among the altruistic ideals should be chosen?" and "How can we make people more energetic in pursuing an altruistic ideal?" We think there are convincing arguments for the fundamental assumption being a fatal error.

The categories egoism and altruism are loaded with normative message, but low on functional substance. We introduce the findings of neodarwinism which bring in new categories that give a better understanding of social behaviour, including that of humans. Our species share not only a physical, but also a behavioural heritage with other animals.

In addition to egoism and altruism our analysis has three other categories. One of them is kin selection; the mechanism that explains why it may be rational for an individual to make personal sacrifices for genetically related individuals. The rationale that drives this process is not egoistic, but neither altruistic. The behaviour is in line with the genetic selfinterest; it mirrors the fact that our genes are represented in others to a degree relative to kinship. Another category is egoism in group. Aggregations like a herd of zebras or a trade union are based on the benefit of combining forces. The individual is not sacrificing himself for others, but gaining strength and protection for himself by joining others. A third category is reciprocity. One individual helps another, and later the help is

returned. Both individuals are gaining, since the favour received is of higher value than the one given. This at first sounds impossible, but can often be realized and is a precondition for reciprocity to evolve. For example the successful bat gives food to another at a low cost since she had plenty herself. If food is given back at a time when she has an empty stomach it is certainly worth more.

With these three categories added to the two standard, we get a better foundation for an analysis. A theoretical conclusion from the principles of natural selection is that altruism is unstable. It can only exist temporarily, as a modification of unconditional reciprocity that collapses into egoism. An important observation that is of no surprise is that altruism is nonexistent in nature. Observations of altruism have been announced many times, but they have later been shown to belong to other categories, usually kin selection.

In human societies, however, altruism does occur. These actions are such that they are not egoistic, not beneficial for relatives, not egoism in group, and not cooperation for mutual benefit. They have some costs for the individual, but no sufficient corresponding advantages. This functional view does not follow the conventional pattern of considering altruistic deeds you sympathise with, being real altruism - and deeds you do not sympathise with for being fake altruism - in essence just plain egoism. We do not think there is any functional difference between a martyr for a good cause and a martyr for an evil cause.

Evidently, evil often results despite the intention of creating good. If the precondition is met that human society is a possibility without altruistic actions there are good reasons to make a radical evaluation - Is the net effect of altruistic behaviour in human cultures good or bad? We think we make a good case proving that altruism is not a necessary component and that there are good reasons for not considering the effects of altruism desirable.

When looking into rules, ethics, and social customs there are evidently different value systems within and among cultures. One way of structuring norms is to split them into the following three spheres. First, the integrity sphere highlights the rights of individuals, from human rights and freedom of speech to teenage independence. The second sphere is the reciprocal. Here we have the laws of commerce and all social conventions dealing with how to respond in social interaction. The third sphere - the altruistic, urges people to do self-sacrificing deeds for others

and for different ideals, and claims such deeds are a duty. This sphere is considered, if not the most important, at least the one of the highest value.

Our conclusion is that integrity and reciprocal morality together give a good and sufficient guidance for human actions. The central virtue of reciprocity is to respond to good deeds with good deeds, and to retaliate against egoists that try to be free riders and use others as means. By defending the gift with no strings attached, proponents of altruism indirectly also promote the receiving with no strings. This moral fits the non-reciprocal egoist fine and he does not fail to notice that altruism is a good disguise for parasitic behaviour; to teach others to give and make sure to receive more than you give. The attacks on reciprocal morality most often come from altruism.

We argue that, contrary to general belief, altruistic morality is not a glue that is a prerequisite for society, but an undermining force for reciprocal morality which is the central sphere in human societies. Without an altruistic morality, we would probably have few altruistic deeds. This gives rise to a significant strategic question: Should we discard altruistic morals?

To answer that question we analyse the effects of altruistic actions in human societies. It is surprising how little there is. If the reader asks himself what kind of unselfish deeds he has been doing, the answer will probably turn out like "I do a lot for my family, last weekend I helped a friend to move, and last Christmas I gave \$10 to the Red Cross. Only the last example qualifies as altruism. The other four categories, that together can be branded as the broad selfinterest, cover most human behaviour.

There are some altruistic behaviour that can be considered good, for example blood donations. They benefit the receivers/taxpayers and psychological tests show that the donators feel very satisfied with their deeds. Most altruistic deeds, however, are of marginal importance and of a value that can be disputed. On the other hand there is one kind of action that is of central importance - when an altruistic ideal can make individuals risk their life in a war. In the dawn of culture war was motivated by kin selection and group egoism, and many wars still are to a certain degree. In most modern wars however, the rationale for the soldier is weak; the existence of his family is not at stake and the prospect of looting is limited. The risk of being killed is substantial. An altruistic ideal can compensate this deficit of rationale and make the soldier marching. Many soldiers are recruited by force and few armies strictly rely on volunteers, but the stick or the carrot are not mutually exclusive

alternatives. In order to make people risk their lives both tools are needed; an army with a charismatic prophet has the advantage.

If you make a financial investment it is better to first make the strategic decision whether you will go for high profits/high risks or low risks/low profits. Often you have to make such a strategic decision that includes both good and bad components. For instance, a concept like freedom of speech has a number of specific negative side-effects, but most of us make the evaluation that the concept as such is good, and we accept these side-effects. We do not try to mould it to perfection, because we know there is a great risk of damaging something vital when trying to fix a detail. In the same way, we hold that altruism to a large extent is a system where good is integrated with bad and that it can, yes, should be evaluated as an entity. Do the good effects of blooddonations outweigh the negative "blooddonations" that swamp the battlefields? - Our opinion is negative.

The success of two new systems gives strong support to our Darwinian view that selfinterest is fundamental. That capitalism is founded on selfinterest is not disputed, but often criticized. The other successful system is democracy, but some people will dispute a strong linkage to selfinterest. The political debate can sometimes sound like a competition in charity; who should we help the most. This is mainly a question of etiquette. Politicians do not say: "If you give me your vote I get you a higher pension". Still no voter miss the receiving part of a proposed programme and the design of the message is more slick.

We think that the virtue of democracy lies in the power of individual selfinterest. In knowing their own selfinterest the voters are the real experts. Some psychologists and philosophers might claim they know better, but the expert will be strongly influenced by a special selfinterest - his own. The pragmatic politician as well as the idealistic prophet are also primarily moved by the same force, but the crucial difference is that the democratic politician has to adjust his ideals, dreams and visions to ideas that the voter can see as compatible with his own selfinterest. The ruler without democratic reins is more free to follow his own mind. An excess of castles and mistresses is not the main danger. The really painful result comes when he tries to materialize a historic mission - the egocentric great deed for future recognition. The less selfinterest and the more of altruism, the harder it is for the ordinary citizen to restrict the leadership. Our conclusion is that the voters' selfinterest is not a drawback of democracy, but a fundamental virtue.

Taken together, Darwinism, capitalism and democracy is such a superior force - both intellectually and practically - so it seems like the encounter with altruism is no contest. But altruism is still on its feet. Many economists stress the importance of what we call integrity morals, but most also see an important status for altruism. Also neodarwinists like Richard Dawkins and George C Williams give it a place of honour. The overwhelming majority from the social sciences also lend their support. One reason altruism exists is that its intellectually weak structure is not criticized and attacked, but looked upon with benevolence.

What altruism lacks intellectually, it compensates through psychological attractiveness. It is an excellent manipulative tool. How should a leader obtain public support for something that has low rewards and high costs, like pyramids or imperialistic expansion? It has to be marketed as a duty to the Gods, history etc. Not only leaders, but other groups join to promote altruistic ideals - ideals that happen to be in line with the group interests. For ordinary citizens the case is less clear. To present yourself as a reciprocal individual seeking other reciprocal individuals seems like a good alternative. But by pretending an altruistic inclination you are even more attractive to people who want to make a favourable trade, and most of us do. The drawback is when altruism sounds like a set up. Hardcore altruism is unattractive also as an image, and any person claiming that he just lives to serve others will often be taken for a dangerous lunatic or a shameless liar. By pretending to be more normal, but having an altruistic inclination, we appeal to others' interest of getting a free, or at least subsidized ride.

The psychological attraction of altruism is easily felt, and the negative reaction comes not until altruism is exaggerated. By opposing "exaggerations" many people think they have made a balanced judgment that protects against the negative sides of altruism. The result is declarations of adherence to high ideals - combined with modest acknowledgements of not following them to the extent the person would like to do.

This kind of games people play may be considered rather harmless, but we do not think so. It generates a lot of smoke that disturbs a serious discussion of real advantages and disadvantages with a shadow play of intentions and pretensions. In reality nobody speaks for the working class, God, or the future - we primarily just speak from the point of the individual *Homo sapiens* we are. All other perspectives are just thought experiments. In reality there are just different people trying to persuade others with intellectual and emotional reasons to get in line with what

they perceive as their wide selfinterest and some egodominated visions. The argumentation is strengthened when this prescription is in line with the other persons wide selfinterest. All totalitarian ideas have a common ground in their dislike for this selfinterest. They all share the opinion that there are other values to which the individuals should subordinate their interests. When nurturing the altruistic morality, the supporters of altruism are promoting the foundation of past and future totalitarian movements. They are under mining a morality which is in line with and would support the scientific, the economic, and political systems of the modern democracies.

Leviathan, the ruthless ruler, has the shape of a crocodile in the Book of Jobs; Hobbes envisioned his body as composed of worshipping citizens. Rousseau thought he could behead the ruler, but his ideas turned out to give strong support to the Leviathan spirit. We think we have seen the dark power that bend people into submission; it is altruism.

The intrusion of Darwinism into the fields of sociology and philosophy is not unexpected. What is surprising is that the influence from Darwinism over the culture gap has been so slow. We are convinced that these issues will produce a lot of discussion, and that the central question, the confrontation with altruism, will be controversial for a long time. The altruistic belief system is well entrenched and will not give up easily. But neither will the conclusions from Darwinism disappear into thin air.

Our ambition is to stimulate a reevaluation- a reevaluation that will be very hard for most people to embrace, because it opposes the central assumption of conventional ethics.