

Rushton, J. P. (1985). Altruism. In A. Kuper & J. Kuper (Eds.). The social science encyclopedia (pp. 22-24). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. [Reprinted in softcover, 1990].

Altruism

For thousands of years philosophers have been intrigued by the problem of altruism, whether considering its status as a virtue, or debating its part in human nature. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British philosophers in particular, including Bentham, Hobbes, Locke, Mill, Sidgwick and Smith, argued at length about the psychological genuineness of human benevolence. It was the French philosopher, Auguste Comte, however, who originated the term, placing it in opposition to egoism. He believed the purpose of an advanced society was to foster the love of humanity, and that positivistic science, especially the discipline of sociology (a term he also coined), would produce this new set of values. More recently, behavioural scientists from several disciplines have examined the concept of altruism more objectively (Rushton and Sorrentino, 1981).

The definition of altruism is a matter of controversy. Some define it in terms of underlying motivations such as empathy or intention, while others prefer definitions in terms of behavioural effects such as 'that which benefits others'. One advantage of the behavioural definition is that it finesses the endless and fruitless debate as to whether such a thing as 'true' altruism exists. Defining altruism behaviourally does not, of course, preclude looking for the underlying motivation. It also allows the concept to be applied to animals.

In regard to motives, a number of internal mediators have been suggested. Among these are role-taking ability, empathic emotion, guilt, ideas of justice, personal values and social norms. There has been much research and model building on these hypothesized processes (Rushton and Sorrentino, 1981). Many of these models suggest that there are genuinely altruistic motivations, at the very least in the sense that internal standards prevail over immediate egoism.

Where does altruism originate? Three major developmental theories are (1) sociobiology, (2) cognitive development, and (3) social learning.

(1) Sociobiologists suggest that altruism is part of the inherited nature of human beings, arising from evolutionary history. Evidence for this view comes from studies of (a) animals, and (b) behaviour genetics. In regard to (a), altruism has been found in other species that, like our own, live in social groups. Social insects such as ants, bees and wasps, through to birds, dogs, porpoises and chimpanzees, all demonstrate altruism – in parental care, mutual defence, rescue behaviour, co-operative hunting and food sharing (Wilson, 1975). Sociobiologists view altruism as having evolved to help propagate genes. The altruist is helpful to kin, who share genes and thereby increase the number of reproductively successful offspring they raise. In so doing he helps to propagate his own genes. In this view altruism serves the 'selfish' biological purpose of propagating DNA, and is expected to follow lines of genetic similarity. In regard to (b), twin studies have found that individual differences in altruism, empathy, kindness and nurturance, as measured by paper-and-pencil questionnaires, have a substantial genetic component (Rushton, 1984).

(2) Researchers following in the cognitive developmental tradition of Piaget (1932) have documented the increments with age in children's capacity to (a) role-take the needs and perspectives of others, and (b) make moral judgements concerned with increasing ethical altruism. Both of these are seen as developing in a series of stages over the life span, invariant in sequence, hierarchical in nature, and universal across cultures. Many individuals, however, are said never to reach the higher levels of role-taking or moral reasoning due to 'developmental arrest'. This theory, therefore, essentially sees altruistic behaviour as based on maturationally unfolding cognitive development. In its support are the findings that individual differences in both role-taking ability and level of moral reasoning are predictive of altruistic behaviour, and that all three increase with age.

(3) The social learning theory approach, as its name suggests, stresses the importance of social conditioning in the development of altruism. Four processes in particular have been well researched: (a) classical conditioning; (b) response-contingent reinforcement and punishment; (c) observation of others; and (d) verbal socialization, including attributional labelling. Learning theorists have applied these procedures to understand the way in which socialization occurs through the educational system, the family, the peer group, and the mass media (Rushton, 1980). For example, if one of the main ways in which people learn is by observing others, then it follows that people should learn a great deal from viewing others on television. It is now fairly well documented that television has the power to alter the norms of appropriate behaviour.

A different orientation to altruism has come from

personality theorists who have investigated whether there is a 'trait' of altruism, that is, whether some people are consistently more altruistic than others. The answer appears to be 'yes'. Evidence suggests that the likelihood of people being altruistic can be predicted from the manner in which they endorse or respond to items on paper-and-pencil measures of empathy, moral judgement, social responsibility, and moral knowledge. Altruists also appear to be consistently more honest, persistent, and self-controlled than non-altruists, and are likely to have strong feelings of personal efficacy. As already mentioned, some of this individual difference variance is inherited.

The effects on altruism of many social variables have been examined (Rushton and Sorrentino, 1981). One that has been much researched is the size of a group helping in an emergency. It is found that bystanders are more likely to offer help in an emergency if they are alone than if they are with others; the presence of others reduces helping, possibly through diffusing people's sense of responsibility. Another variable related to altruism is mood: good moods increase altruism whereas bad moods decrease it. Perhaps connected both with group size and mood is the apparent negative relation between altruism and population density: altruism is more frequent in small towns than in suburbs and more in the suburbs than in big cities. Finally, altruism has been related to friendship and similarity. In children, altruism and friendship sociograms overlap, and studies of adults have shown that they are more likely to help members of their own race or country than members of other races or foreigners. People also feel more empathic with, and help, those they perceive as similar to themselves.

Altruism has usually been viewed as an unqualified virtue. However, research is beginning to show that this is not always the case. Kindness can have unintended negative consequences. In some circumstances it can lead to a lowered self-concept, a feeling of helplessness and resentment in the recipient. Some have also argued that institutionalized altruism, such as occurs in the social welfare system, robs the individual of feelings of initiative or responsibility.

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- See also: *empathy and sympathy; social learning theory; sociobiology.*