Is Pure Altruism Possible?

—Judith Lichtenberg

Who could doubt the existence of altruism?

True, news stories of malice and greed abound. But all around us we see evidence of human beings sacrificing themselves and doing good for others. Remember Wesley Autrey? On January 2, 2007, Mr. Autrey jumped down onto the tracks of a New York City subway platform as a train was approaching to save a man who had suffered a seizure and fallen. A few months later the Virginia Tech professor Liviu Librescu blocked the door to his classroom so his students could escape the bullets of Seung-Hui Cho, who was on a rampage that would leave thirty-two students and faculty members dead. In so doing, Mr. Librescu gave his life.

Still, doubting altruism is easy, even when it seems at first glance to be apparent. It’s undeniable that people sometimes act in a way that benefits others, but it may seem that they always get something in return—at the very least, the satisfaction of having their desire to help fulfilled. Students in introductory philosophy courses torture their professors with this reasoning. And its logic can seem inexorable.

Contemporary discussions of altruism quickly turn to evolutionary explanations. Reciprocal altruism and kin selection are the two main theories. According to reciprocal altruism, evolution favors organisms that sacrifice their good for others in order to gain a favor in return. Kin selection—the famous “selfish gene” theory popularized by Richard Dawkins—says that an individual who behaves altruistically toward others who share its genes will tend to reproduce those genes. Organisms may be altruistic; genes are selfish. The feeling that loving your children more than yourself is hard-wired lends plausibility to the theory of kin selection.

These evolutionary theories explain a puzzle: how organisms that sacrifice their own “reproductive fitness”—their ability to survive and reproduce—could possibly have evolved. But neither theory fully accounts for our ordinary understanding of altruism.

The defect of reciprocal altruism is clear. If a person acts to benefit another in the expectation that the favor will be returned, the natural response is, “That’s not altruism!” Pure altruism, we think, requires a person to sacrifice for another without consideration of personal gain. Doing good for another person because something’s in it for the doer is the very opposite of what we have in mind. Kin selection does better by allowing that organisms may genuinely sacrifice their interests for another, but it fails to explain why they sometimes do so for those with whom they share no genes, as Professor Librescu and Mr. Autrey did.

When we ask whether human beings are altruistic, we want to know about their motives or intentions. Biological altruism explains how unselfish behavior might have evolved, but as Frans de Waal suggested in his column in The Stone on Sunday, it implies nothing about the motives or intentions of the agent: after all, birds and bats and bees can act altruistically. This fact helps to explain why, despite these evolutionary theories, the view that people never intentionally act to benefit others except to obtain some good for themselves still possesses a powerful lure over our thinking.

The lure of this view—egoism—has two sources, one psychological, the other logical. Consider first the psychological. One reason people deny that altruism exists is that, looking inward, they doubt the purity of their own motives. We know that even when we appear to act unselfishly, other reasons for our behavior often rear their heads: the prospect of a future favor, the boost to reputation, or simply the good feeling that comes from appearing to act unselfishly. As
Kant and Freud observed, people’s true motives may be hidden, even (or perhaps especially) from themselves. Even if we think we’re acting solely to further another person’s good, that might not be the real reason. (There might be no single “real reason”—actions can have multiple motives.)

So the psychological lure of egoism as a theory of human action is partly explained by a certain humility or skepticism people have about their own or others’ motives. There’s also a less flattering reason: denying the possibility of pure altruism provides a convenient excuse for selfish behavior. If “everybody is like that”—if everybody must be like that—we need not feel guilty about our own self-interested behavior or try to change it.

The logical lure of egoism is different: the view seems impossible to disprove. No matter how altruistic a person appears to be, it’s possible to conceive of her motive in egoistic terms. On this way of looking at it, the guilt Mr. Autrey would have suffered had he ignored the man on the tracks made risking his life worth the gamble. The doctor who gives up a comfortable life to care for AIDS patients in a remote place does what she wants to do and therefore gets satisfaction from what only appears to be self-sacrifice. So, it seems, altruism is simply self-interest of a subtle kind.

The impossibility of disproving egoism may sound like a virtue of the theory, but, as philosophers of science know, it’s really a fatal drawback. A theory that purports to tell us something about the world, as egoism does, should be falsifiable. Not false, of course, but capable of being tested and thus proved false. If every state of affairs is compatible with egoism, then egoism doesn’t tell us anything distinctive about how things are.

A related reason for the lure of egoism, noted by Bishop Joseph Butler in the eighteenth century, concerns ambiguity in the concepts of desire and the satisfaction of desire. If people possess altruistic motives, then they sometimes act to benefit others without the prospect of gain to themselves. In other words, they desire the good of others for its own sake, not simply as a means to their own satisfaction. It’s obvious that Professor Librescu desired that his students not die and acted accordingly to save their lives. He succeeded, so his desire was satisfied. But he was not satisfied—since he died in the attempt to save the students. From the fact that a person’s desire is satisfied we can draw no conclusions about effects on his mental state or well-being.

Still, when our desires are satisfied, we normally experience satisfaction; we feel good when we do good. But that doesn’t mean we do good only in order to get that “warm glow”—that our true incentives are self-interested (as economists tend to claim). Indeed, as de Waal argues, if we didn’t desire the good of others for its own sake, then attaining it wouldn’t produce the warm glow.

Common sense tells us that some people are more altruistic than others. Egoism’s claim that these differences are illusory—that deep down, everybody acts only to further their own interests—contradicts our observations and deep-seated human practices of moral evaluation.

At the same time, we may notice that generous people don’t necessarily suffer more or flourish less than those who are more self-interested. Altruists may be more content or fulfilled than selfish people. Nice guys don’t always finish last.

But nor do they always finish first. The point is rather that the kind of altruism we ought to encourage, and probably the only kind with staying power, is satisfying to those who practice it. Studies of rescuers show that they don’t believe their behavior is extraordinary; they feel they must do what they do, because it’s just part of who they are. The same holds for more common, less newsworthy acts—working in soup kitchens, taking pets to people in nursing homes, helping strangers find their way, being neighborly. People who act in these ways believe that they ought to help others, but they also want to help because doing so affirms who they are and want to be and the kind of world they want to exist. As Professor Neera Badhwar has argued, their identity is tied up with their values, thus tying self-interest and altruism together. The correlation between doing good and feeling good is not inevitable—inevitability lands us again with that empty, unfalsifiable egoism—but it is more than incidental.
Altruists should not be confused with people who automatically sacrifice their own interests for others. We admire Paul Rusesabagina, the hotel manager who saved over one thousand Tutsis and Hutus during the 1994 Rwandan genocide; we admire health workers who give up comfortable lives to treat sick people in hard places. But we don’t admire people who let others walk all over them; that amounts to lack of self-respect, not altruism.

Altruism is possible and altruism is real, although in healthy people it intertwines subtly with the well-being of the agent who does good. And this is crucial for seeing how to increase the amount of altruism in the world. Aristotle had it right in his *Nicomachean Ethics*: we have to raise people from their “very youth” and educate them “so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought.”

OCTOBER 19, 2010

The Living Death of Solitary Confinement

—Lisa Guenther

There are many ways to destroy a person, but the simplest and most devastating might be solitary confinement. Deprived of meaningful human contact, otherwise healthy prisoners often come unhinged. They experience intense anxiety, paranoia, depression, memory loss, hallucinations, and other perceptual distortions. Psychiatrists call this cluster of symptoms SHU syndrome, named after the security housing units of many supermax prisons. Prisoners have more direct ways of naming their experience. They call it “living death,” the “gray box,” or “living in a black hole.”

In June the Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights, headed by Senator Richard J. Durbin, Democrat, of Illinois, held the first Congressional hearing on solitary confinement. Advocates and experts in the field were invited to submit testimony on the psychological, ethical, social and economic issues raised by punitive isolation. Among the many contributors was Anthony Graves, who spent over eighteen years on death row in Texas, most of them in solitary confinement, for a crime he did not commit. Graves describes his isolation as a form of “emotional torture.” Two years after his exoneration and release, he still feels trapped in isolation: “I am living amongst millions of people in the world today, but most of the time I feel alone. I cry at night because of this feeling. I just want to stop feeling this way, but I haven’t been able to.”
that might compel them to do so. The law does not stop people from falling into poverty traps of borrowing and debt, from being exploited by debt settlement companies promising to help them escape those traps, or losing their homes after buying mortgages they can’t afford to pay back. And there is certainly no prohibition against the mind-numbing and often humiliating menial work that poor people do in exchange for paltry wages from hugely rich companies. A swiftly eroding welfare state might offer the thinnest of safety nets to those who fall on hard times, but it does nothing to address the lack of social mobility caused by the dramatic rise in inequality. And while it might be thought poor form to walk by a drowning man, letting children go hungry is considered not only permissible, but as Senator Sessions said, “a moral issue.” These facts might be not quite as ethically outraging as walking past a drowning man, but they, too, grate against our commonsense notions of fairness.

Rejecting the Nozickian worldview requires us to reflect on what justice really demands, rather than accepting the conventional wisdom that the market can take care of morality for us. If you remain a steadfast Nozickian, you have the option of biting the bullet (as philosophers like to say) and embracing the countereuitive implications of your view. This would be at least more consistent than what we have today: an ideology that parades as moral common sense.

OCTOBER 20, 2013

The Myth of Universal Love

—Stephen T. Asma

Now that the year-end holidays have passed, so have the barrage of entreaties to nurture a sense of “good will to all mankind,” to extend our love and care to others beyond our usual circle of friends and family. Certainly, this is a message we are meant to take to heart not just in December but all year long. It is a central ideal of several religious and ethical systems.

In the light of the new year, it’s worth considering how far we actually can, or should, extend this good will.

To some, the answer might seem obvious. One of the more deeply ingrained assumptions of Western liberalism is that we humans can indefinitely increase our capacity to care for others, that we can, with the right effort and dedication, extend our care to wider and wider circles until we envelop the whole species within our ethical regard. It is an inspiring thought. But I’m rather doubtful. My incredulity, though, is not because people are hypocritical about their ideals or because they succumb to selfishness. The problem lies, instead, in a radical misunderstanding about the true wellsprings of ethical care—namely, the emotions.

Two of the leading liberal social theorists, Jeremy Rifkin and Peter Singer, think we can overcome factional bias and eventually become one giant tribe. They have different prescriptions for arriving at ethical utopia.

Singer, who is perhaps the world’s best known utilitarian philos-
opher, argues in his book *The Expanding Circle* that the relative neocortical sophistication of humans allows us to rationally broaden our ethical duty beyond the “tribe”—to an equal and impartial concern for all human beings. “If I have seen,” Singer writes, “that from an ethical point of view I am just one person among the many in my society, and my interests are no more important, from the point of view of the whole, than the similar interests of others within my society, I am ready to see that, from a still larger point of view, my society is just one among other societies, and the interests of members of my society are no more important, from that larger perspective, than the similar interests of members of other societies.”

Like mathematics, which can continue its recursive operations infinitely upward, ethical reasoning can spiral out (should spiral out, according to Singer) to larger and larger sets of equal moral subjects. “Taking the impartial element in ethical reasoning to its logical conclusion means, first, accepting that we ought to have equal concern for all human beings.”

All this sounds nice at first—indeed, I would like it to be true—but let me throw a little cold water on the idea. Singer seems to be suggesting that I arrive at perfect egalitarian ethics by first accepting perfect egalitarian metaphysics. But I, for one, do not accept it. Nor, I venture to guess, do many others. All people are not equally entitled to my time, affection, resources or moral duties—and only conjectural assumption can make them appear so. (For many of us, family members are more entitled than friends, and friends more entitled than acquaintances, and acquaintances more than strangers, and so on.) It seems dubious to say that we should transcend tribe and be utilitarian because all people are equal, when the equal status of strangers and kin is an unproven and counterintuitive assumption.

Singer’s abstract “ethical point of view” is not wrong so much as irrelevant. Our actual lives are punctuated by moral gravity, which makes some people (kith and kin) much more central and forceful in our daily orbit of values. (Gravity is actually an apt metaphor. Some people in our lives take on great “affection mass” and bend our continuum of values into a solar system of biases. Family members usually have more moral gravity—what Robert Nozick calls “ethical pull.”)

One of the architects of utilitarian ethics, and a forerunner of Singer’s logic, was William Godwin (1756–1836), who formulated a famous thought experiment. He asked us to imagine if you could save only one person from a burning building. One of those persons is Archbishop Fénélon and the other is a common chambermaid. Furthermore, the archbishop is just about to compose his famous work *The Adventures of Telemachus* (an influential defense of human rights). Now here’s the rub. The chambermaid is your mother.

Godwin argues that the utilitarian principle (the greatest good for the greatest number) requires you to save the archbishop rather than your mother. He asks, “What magic is there in the pronoun ‘my’ that should justify us in overturning the decisions of impartial truth?”

Singer has famously pushed the logic further, arguing that we should do everything within our power to help strangers meet their basic needs, even if it severely compromises our kin’s happiness. In the utilitarian calculus, needs always trump enjoyments. If I am to be utterly impartial to all human beings, then I should reduce my own family’s life to a subsistence level, just above the poverty line, and distribute the surplus wealth to needy strangers.

Besides the impracticalities of such redistribution, the problems here are also conceptual. Say I bought a fancy pair of shoes for my son. In light of the one-tribe calculus of interests, I should probably give these shoes to someone who doesn’t have any. I do research and find a child in a poor part of Chicago who needs shoes to walk to school every day. So, I take them off my son (replacing them with Walmart tennis shoes) and head off to the impoverished West Side. On the way, I see a newspaper story about five children who are malnourished in Cambodia. Now I can’t give the shoeless Chicago child the shoes, because I should sell the shoes for money and use the money to get food for the five malnourished kids. On my way to sell the shoes, I remember that my son has an important job interview for a clean-water nonprofit organization and if he gets the job, he’ll be able to help save whole villages from contaminated water. But he
won't get the job if he shows up in Walmart tennis shoes. As I head back home, it dawns on me that for many people in the developing world, Walmart tennis shoes are truly luxurious when compared with burlap-sack shoes, and since needs always trump luxuries I'll need to sell the tennis shoes, too, and on, and on, and on.

This brings us to the other recent argument for transcending tribe, and it's the idea that we can infinitely stretch our domain of care. Jeremy Rifkin voices a popular view in his recent book *The Empathic Civilization* that we can feel care and empathy for the whole human species if we just try hard enough. This view has the advantage over Singer's metric view, in that it locates moral conviction in the heart rather than the rational head. But it fails for another reason.

I submit that care or empathy is a very limited resource. But it is Rifkin's quixotic view that empathy is an almost limitless reserve. He sketches a progressive, ever-widening evolution of empathy. First, we had blood-based tribalism (in what Rifkin calls the time of "forager/hunter societies"), then religion-based tribalism (after the invention of agriculture and writing), then nation-state tribalism (circa the nineteenth century), but now we are poised for an empathic embrace of all humanity—and even beyond species-centric bias to Buddha-like compassion for all creatures. He argues that empathy is the real "invisible hand" that will guide us out of our local and global crises.

Using a secular version of Gandhi's nonattachment mixed with some old-fashioned apocalyptic fearmongering, Rifkin warns us that we must reach "biosphere consciousness and global empathy in time to avert planetary collapse." The way to do this, he argues, is to start feeling as if the entire human race is our extended family.

I have to concede that I want cosmic love to work. I want Rifkin to be right. And in some abstract sense, I agree with the idea of an evolutionary shared descent that makes us all "family." But feelings of care and empathy are very different from evolutionary taxonomy. Empathy is actually a biological emotion (centered in the limbic brain) that comes in degrees, because it has a specific physiological chemical progression. Empathy is not a concept, but a natural biological event—an activity, a process. (Affective neuroscience, including research by Jaak Panksepp, Richard Davidson, and others, has converged on the idea that care is actually a mammal emotion, part chemical, part psychological.)

The feeling of care is triggered by a perception or internal awareness and soon swells, flooding the brain and body with subjective feelings and behaviors (and oxytocin and opioids). Care is like sprint racing. It takes time—duration, energy, systemic warm-up and cooldown, practice and a strange mixture of pleasure and pain (attraction and repulsion). Like sprinting, it's not the kind of thing you can do all the time. You will literally break the system in short order if you ramp up the care system every time you see someone in need. The nightly news would render you literally exhausted. The limbic system can't handle the kind of constant stimulation that Rifkin and the cosmic love proponents expect of it. And that's because they don't take into account the biology of empathy, and imagine instead that care is more like a thought.

If care is indeed a limited resource, then it cannot stretch indefinitely to cover the massive domain of strangers and nonhuman animals. Of course, when we see the suffering of strangers in the street or on television, our heartstrings vibrate naturally. We can have contagion-like feelings of sympathy when we see other beings suffering, and that's a good thing—but that is a long way from the kinds of active preferential devotions that we marshal for members of our respective tribes. Real tribe members donate organs to you, bring soup when you're sick, watch your kids in an emergency, open professional doors for you, rearrange their schedules and lives for you, protect you, and fight for you—and you return all this hard work. Our tribes of kith and kin are "affective communities," and this unique emotional connection with our favorites entails great generosity and selfless loyalty. There's an upper limit to our tribal emotional expansion, and that limit is a good deal lower than the "biosphere."

For my purposes, I'll stick with Cicero, who said, "Society and
human fellowship will be best served if we confer the most kindness on those with whom we are most closely associated.”

**Why should our care be concentrated in small circles of kith and kin?** I’ve tried to suggest that it can’t be otherwise, given the bio-emotional origin of care, but more needs to be said if I’m making a normative claim.

If we embraced our filial biases, we could better exercise some disappearing virtues, like loyalty, generosity and gratitude.

Cultivating loyalty is no small thing. George Orwell, for example, considered preferential loyalty to be the “essence of being human.” Critiquing Gandhi’s recommendation—that we must have no close friendships or exclusive loves because these will introduce loyalty and favoritism, preventing us from loving everyone equally—Orwell retorted that “the essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection, that one is sometimes willing to commit sins for the sake of loyalty and that one is prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one’s love upon other human individuals.”

In general we have circles of favorites (family, friends, allies) and we mutually protect one another, even when such devotion disadvantages us personally. But the interesting thing about loyalty is that it ignores both merit-based fairness and equality-based fairness. It’s not premised on *optimal* conditions. You need to have my back, even when I’m sometimes wrong. You need to have my back, even when I sometimes screw up the job. And I have to extend the same loyalty to you. That kind of pro-social risky virtue happens more among favorites.

I also think generosity can better flourish under the umbrella of favoritism. Generosity is a virtue that characterizes the kind of affection-based giving that we see in positive nepotism. So often, nepotism is confused with corruption, when it really just means family preference. And favoritists (if I can invent a word here) are very good at selflessly giving to members of their inner circle.

Gratitude is another virtue that thrives more in a favoritism context. The world of Singer’s utilitarianism and Rifkin’s one-tribism is a world of bare minimums, with care spread thinly to cover per capita needs. But in favoritism (like a love relation) people can get way more than they deserve. It’s an abundance of affection and benefits. In a real circle of favorites, one needs to accept help gracefully. We must accept, without cynicism, the fact that some of our family and friends give to us *for our own sake* (our own flourishing) and not for their eventual selfish gain. However animalistic were the evolutionary origins of giving (and however vigorous the furtive selfish genes), the human heart, neocortex and culture have all united to eventually create true altruism. Gratitude is a necessary response in a sincere circle of favorites.

Finally, my case for small-circle care dovetails nicely with the commonly agreed upon crucial ingredient in human happiness—namely, strong social bonds. A recent Niagara of longitudinal happiness studies all confirm that the most important element in a good life (eudaimonia) is close family and friendship ties—ties that bind. These are not digital Facebook friends nor are they needy faraway strangers, but robust proximate relationships that you can count on one or two hands—and these bonds are created and sustained by the very finite resource of emotional care that I’ve outlined. As Graham Greene reminds us, “One can’t love humanity, one can only love people.”

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