

# The egoism versus altruism philosophy essay



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One of the most common human traits is egoism. Egoism is called the action of individuals for their own good. In other words, individuals act for their self-interest. Selfishness is an interesting phenomenon. Although people perceive it as a bad human trait, they forget to look at it as a tool for survival. Without selfishness we might not exist as a species. Evolutionary theories about that are growing and gaining momentum. However, there is also another side to that coin. As everything in life to keep the balance another trait is exhibited. It is called altruism. Altruism is the complete opposite of egoism. Altruism is defined as a concern for the welfare of others and is considered as a virtue in many cultures, and as such is encouraged. Charities, donations, voluntary work or other similar acts or organization that deal with them are considered selfless. People sacrifice some part of themselves, be it money or time, to help others in need. Everyone has read or heard stories about selfless heroes risking their welfare for the sake of others. This kind of behavior is encouraged from an early age. However, after taking another look, something else is noticed. Every time a selfless act is committed, there is some kind of reward, usually just a gratitude. This leads to questions such as does true altruism exist or people act selflessly just to feel better themselves after receiving the gratitude of others.

As mentioned above egoism and altruism are acts. For an individual to commit those acts this individual must first survive and live (Spencer, 1879). Spencer (1897) argues that in nature egoism should and does take place before altruism. He strongly agrees with the theory of evolution, saying that in order to survive an individual must be selfish. He reasons the egoistic motives are more important for the survival of species. If an individual takes care firstly of,

him/her/itself and do not rely on anyone else there would be more chance of the species to continue its existence. He adds that if individuals cared for others more than they cared for themselves this would eventually mean death for the individual, thus limiting the care given to others and slowly leading to extinction of species. In addition he says that human beings are not as different from other beings as we may think. He gives happiness as an example. Mentioning two persons one happy, that makes everyone happy easily because of his joyous mood and one who does something that makes him miserable in order to please others. He says that the first kind is more important as the energy the happy person has is far greater than the energy of the miserable one and thus by taking care of his own happiness he is more capable of doing his work better. Common knowledge is that only the fittest genes survive. However there is a phenomenon that M. Brewer and L. Caporael (1990) discuss. That topic is rape. Stripped of its anti-social status, they look at rape as a reproductive strategy of the weaker and less fit individuals. Rape is not a phenomenon only within human society but it is exhibited among animals as well. This increases the chances of reproduction.

During conceiving billions of sperm cells are released but only the fittest one can fertilize the egg cell in the female. As George Williams suggests our genes are selfish in order to survive. They get passed on from generations to generations, because they are the fittest, and the most suitable for survival. Individuals are supposed to be selfish in order to take what they need to prosper. Competition for food or other types of resources is usually severe and if the individual is not strong enough and not selfish the outcome will be a loss in the race for survival which will inevitably lead to death. However,

Williams also argues that selfishness in order to survive does not prevent an individual from caring for others. The genes urge the parents to take care of their children in order to secure a successful gene survival. Birds feed their offspring, mammals nurse their children, plants ensure that sufficient amount of nutrients is available for each of its seeds. And this is all for the survival of the family, of the species, not only the individual. Satoshi Hirata states that to better understand human mind from evolutionary perspective people should look into the habits and way of life of the closest living relative- the chimpanzee. He reviews relatively recent studies of different aspects of monkey social intelligence such as deception, understanding of perception and intention, social learning, trading, cooperation, and care for others. He explains that chimpanzees are capable of using their social intelligence for selfish motives. However, he also believes that chimpanzees are also capable of prosocial acts. He draws this conclusion from observing the mother-infant bond and also adds that namely this bond brings chimpanzees so near to humans and that this bond is the key for understanding the manifestation of social intelligence from evolutionary perspective.

The last paragraph leads to the question are people evolutionary predisposed to egoism or rather to altruism. To help with the answering of that question Bergstrom(2006) conducted a research to examine the interactions between individuals within a group. The paper shows that if the group is formed randomly, with no connection between the groupmates then selfish behavior is more likely to prevail over maximizing group payoffs. However even when selfish behavior is exhibited interesting models can be

found for which “ group selection” sustains cooperative behavior. It explains that there are forces that support cooperative behavior such as assortative matching in groups, group longevity, and punishment-based group norms.

In everyday life people often meet other people, and may even strike a conversation with them. The opposing side is usually kind or polite enough to answer. Everyone has been in a situation where they had to ask for the time or ask for some help with groceries, and usually some people are ready to help. Meara Habashi (2007) looks into this behavior. She conducts a research examining agreeableness and altruistic and egoistic motives for helping. According to the study people usually are rewarded one way or another for the help and thus this makes the act non-altruistic. However, later on the paper uses the theory of Batson that helping and benefiting from it does not necessarily mean that the act is not altruistic. According to him if the ultimate goal of the act is to increase the welfare of another individual the act is considered altruistic. Thus, according to Batson altruistic action can co-exist with egoistic one. In her study Meara Habashi mentions Batson claiming that there are major differences in altruistic and egoistic motives for helping. The first leads to helping across variety of situations, relieving another’s distress without concerning one’s own wellbeing. Helping out of egoistic motives, however, means that one helps “ only when there are when there are no other alternatives to relieving one’s own distress.”

Inspired by Batson and his theories were also Mark Sibicki and Linda Matthews. They conduct an experiment to further analyze if the empathic concern produces an egoistic motivation to reduce one’s own stress or an altruistic one to reduce another person’s distress. The experiment is based <https://assignbuster.com/the-egoism-versus-altruism-philosophy-essay/>

on the work and methodology of Toi and Batson, which supported the empathy-altruism model, in combination with the mood-fixing manipulation used in the research of Maucia et al., which agreed with the egoistic-instrumental model of helping. During the research subjects were assigned to whether directly observe or just imagine a set in which someone needs help. Also some of the participants were given a placebo that supposedly will 'freeze' the mood they are in. In Mark Sibicki's experiment, there are three key tests of the egoistic versus altruistic perspective. One of them includes a two-way interaction between observational set and mood lability. In other word if the motivation to help is egoistic, subjects would help when they understand that helping will relieve their own negative state, but not when they know their state is unmanageable. However, knowing that altruistic model defines as primary concern for other person's welfare, the empathy-altruistic model suggest that the results in the observational state manipulation would be the same in both labile-mood and fixed mood conditions. The second test concerned the two-way interaction between predominance of empathic concern or personal distress and mood lability. A third tes of the egoistic versus altruistic perspective focuses on correlation between empathic concern and helping within the fixed-mood and labile-mood conditions when escape is easy. From the study it became evident that the rate of helping is higher in the easy to escape condition when there are altruistic motivations. The study also shows that the emotion state changed greatly when subjects were instructed to imagine the situation rather than observe it. Consistent with the intent of the mood-fixing manipulation subjects who were under the placebo effect experienced much less sadness and personal distress in the three conditions. Although the research is

thorough it does not actually provide an answer to whether help is truly altruistic, but it rather suggest that egoistic or altruistic motives for helping greatly depend on mood, emotion, and other environmental facts.

By the previous paragraph is evident that both altruistic and egoistic motives are involved when someone helps another person. After this to mind comes another question. Can be those altruistic/egoistic motives be combined when help is needed for example when making donation advertisements?

Apparently they can, but Daniel Feiler and colleagues (2012) suggest not to if one wants to succeed. Their study tries to answer the question if emphasizing the benefits for both the helper and the ' helpee' will improve or worsen one's willingness to give money. To answer that question they conducted a research involving three experiments. In the first one university students were asked to make a donation to their university. There were, however two conditions . In one of the conditions it was emphasized on one of the motives for donation-either egoistic or altruistic. In the other condition were emphasized both motives. The results of the experiments show that emphasis on single motives improved the likelihood of donation and emphasis on both decreased it. The second experiment is similar to the first and bears the same results. The third one is a bit different. It aims to answer the question why emphasizing both motives decreases the likelihood of donation. As it turns out using both motives increases the awareness of persuasion intent making people think twice before they commit.

Evidently every person attaches different weight to the welfare of others. To help measure that a social value orientation is introduced. It is defined as the person's preference to how to distribute his/her resources between the self

and another person. J. de Groot and L. Steg state that these social value orientations have hardly any empirical ways to measure. They review three studies that are aimed to examine an egoistic, altruistic, and biospheric value orientation can be distinguished empirically by using an adapted value instrument. The results from the experiments support the thesis that they can indeed be accurately measured using the adapted value instrument. This provides great help in further studying egoism and altruism as more accurate data can be acquired.

In conclusion selfishness and altruism are constant part of nature. They have to exist in order for species to exist. However, one cannot exist without the other. Much is argued about the problem of whether altruism is part of selfishness or is a separate trait, but everyone agrees that they both exist and is needed in order for species to survive.

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