

True altruism does  
not exist



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

**Discuss in relation to theory and research on pro-social behaviour.****Introduction**

Helping behaviour has been a focus of social psychological research since the 1950's (Hogg and Vaughan, 2008) and within this literature; there exists an abundance of studies concerned with the concept of altruism. The main aim of this essay is to consider the assertion that every action is a selfish one and thus true altruism does not exist. In order to do this, relevant theory and research on pro-social behaviour will be explored.

Broadly speaking, pro-social behaviour involves carrying out an act that benefits another (Hogg and Vaughan, 2008) and the interest in this topic since the 1950's, from a research point of view, has impressive longevity. Altruism, as a concept, has attracted much debate and is a type of helping behavior, essentially involving helping another without any expectation of personal gain (Batson and Coke, 1981; Macaulay and Berkowitz, 1970). Perhaps it is rather difficult to realistically suggest that an act could ever be categorised as truly altruistic or indeed if it is not, then it must be selfish. This essay will help to support the view that altruism exists to some extent but often there can be benefits for the individual in demonstrating this behaviour. Research has unfortunately at times aimed to minimise the assertion that a motive to help others without personal benefit can exist (Krueger, 2012).

**Theory and Research**

Wilson (2015, p. 5) very recently documented that “ the question of how altruism evolves is such a controversy that is just entering its resolution phase.” Altruism is a fairly complicated concept to explore and some of

Wilson's (2015) writings reflect this. For instance, Wilson (2015) alludes to the idea that it can be challenging to truly understand an individual's intention when helping another in that it may be to feel better, win favour with God or ensure the other person is in debt to you. The question therefore might be along the lines of what constitutes truly altruistic behaviour and when does it become selfish.

Wilson (2015) also helpfully simplifies how one might view altruism by focusing, temporarily, only on the behaviour. An example is illustrated by Wilson (2015) whereby if one individual helps another at a cost to themselves then that demonstrates altruism regardless of what they thought or felt about the situation.

Pro-social behaviour theory provides mixed support for the idea of true altruism. For instance, altruism does not particularly receive support from the well-known bystander-calculus model (Piliavin, Dovidio, Gaertner and Clark, 1981), if one is to accept it. This model would assert that individuals would take action in an emergency essentially to reduce their own unpleasant arousal (Batson and Oleson, 1991). This theory clearly makes reference to the significance of the thoughts and feelings of the individual. It may suggest that in part, the helper is to a degree being selfish, but at the same time, is actually carrying out an act that helps another. From this point of view, altruism is perhaps not the correct term since the individual is driven to act, to an extent, to serve his or her own interest.

Egoism and altruism have historically been framed as a “versus relationship” with Hogg and Vaughan (2004) summarising that a significant

number of psychologists side with the theory supporting the egoism argument whereby behaviour is driven by personal gain. The work around egoism tends to feel like the darker side of pro-social behaviour theory and research.

Some of the evidence showing apparent support for this theory is rather questionable. For instance, Manucia, Baumann, and Cialdini (1984) conducted an experiment whereby certain participants were given a placebo pill but told that by taking it, their current mood would "freeze." This led to people under this condition apparently being not as likely to help an individual in need since it would not improve their mood. Brown and Maner (2012) praised the intelligence of this study although it does have an artificial feel about it and one could question how much it might reflect a real-life scenario. It cannot necessarily be used as evidence that altruism does not exist since for some people, the motivation in the first instance might be to actually help the other person (Brown and Maner, 2012).

The above mentioned study is somewhat at odds with a review of theory and research regarding altruism at that time (Piliavin and Charng, 1990). One conclusion by these authors was that evidence from a number of fields such as sociology and social psychology among others suggest that altruism is indeed a feature of human nature (Piliavin and Charng, 1990). Bierhoff (2002) builds on this and suggests that altruism exists and reported that it is arguably perfectly captured in the parable of the Good Samaritan whereby having empathy for the victim led to the unselfish act of helping the victim to safety, even at personal cost. This parable is still taught in the modern day and apparent acts of altruism remain a feature of everyday society. This is <https://assignbuster.com/true-altruism-does-not-exist/>

not to discount the assumption that there could be side effects whereby the individual may experience private rewards for acts of altruism.

It is now necessary to consider relevant research studies in more detail in order to further explore the rather controversial central claim that every action is a selfish one and true altruism does not exist. It has been unfortunate in a way that researchers have, more often than not, chosen to focus on “ anti-social” rather than pro-social behaviour. This perhaps reflects a tendency to be more interested in the worst in people. This also leads to the idea that people may be more likely to dismiss altruism and consider other explanations for this type of helping or selfless behaviour.

May (2011, p. 25) implies that caution should be taken when interpreting altruism-based research in stating that “ the consensus among psychologists (and common sense) is that a great number of our mental states, even our motives, are not accessible to consciousness.” As mentioned above, Wilson’s (2015) more recent writings seem to have certain parallels with this and it may be that one has to accept that knowing the individuals intent to help may not be possible. This could cast doubt on the reliability of much of the experimental work in the field of altruism, particularly when self-reporting measures are so commonly used.

Cialdini and colleagues certainly invested much effort in demonstrating that true altruism does not exist. In a related piece of research, Maner, Luce, Neuberg, Cialdini, Brown and Sagarin (2002) explored the effect of manipulated perspective taking with a focus on the empathy-helping relationship, which they suggested underpins altruism. Interestingly, the

study featured 169 university students who had an incentive to participate in the study in order to help fulfill their academic requirements. There is a certain irony about this in that it does not reflect altruism towards the researchers. Following observing the views of participants who had listened to a particular interview, Maner et al. (2002) suggested that negative emotional states like sadness are more likely to lead to helping others rather than genuine altruism.

While it is difficult to prove that true altruism does exist, Batson and colleagues adopted a very different angle with regards to this concept. For instance, in a similar but earlier study, Batson, Sager, Garst, Kang, Rubchinsky and Dawson (1997) again used only university students to assess empathy and helping behaviour towards a young woman in need. In certain conditions, this woman was depicted as being from a rival university yet the students displayed empathy and a willingness to help. As with much of Batson's research, this paper argued that empathy for others brings about natural altruism in people. These above examples highlight the entirely different ways in which altruism can be framed.

Krueger (2012) alludes to the idea that the search for true altruism is one that cannot realistically bring success. Research has unfortunately historically been rather black and white in its mission to explain altruism. It has almost featured a rivalry between benefitting the self against motives to benefit others. Krueger (2012, p. 397) argues that it is "more important to protect the motive to benefit others from being discounted" while essentially avoiding branding people as selfish.

It is perhaps possible to learn something valuable about the nature of altruism from a piece of research regarding “giving blood” (Evans and Ferguson, 2013). It is difficult to generalise findings to the wider population given that it involved only university students. However, this particular paper examined, via surveying an impressive 414 responders, the motivating factors underpinning white blood donation. Evans and Ferguson (2013) reported that giving blood does not appear to be an act that reflects the actual definition of pure altruism. Instead, a blend of factors such as a sense of contributing to society, a feeling of being able to benefit others and personal satisfaction might explain blood donation. There are apparent benefits to the individual giving blood in the experience of positive emotions, described as “warm glow” by Evans and Ferguson (2013). This may not reflect true altruism. It would however seem unfair to suggest that the generally accepted altruistic act of giving blood is selfish.

If one continues to accept the view earlier put forward by May (2012), it would help to have some acceptance that it may not be possible to really know if true altruism exists. In a cross-cultural qualitative paper, Soosai-Nathan, Negri and Delle-Fave (2013) documented evidence from Indian and Italian cultures that illustrated that altruism can be more than a pro-social behaviour. Soosai-Nathan et al. (2013) suggest that altruism can help to improve relationships and boosts happiness and wellbeing. It would also be useful to view this in a positive light if possible while clearly, these types of “personal” rewards may well reinforce the altruistic behavior. It is fundamentally a good human quality though. This may be a more useful area

for further research – to improve wellbeing – rather than aiming to disprove altruism, which has quite a dehumanising feel to it.

It would however be ignorant to bypass the idea that altruism is influenced by a number of factors. It would be overly simplistic to accept that it is just a natural trait of individuals.

The area of giving money to fundraisers adds interesting insights to the understanding of altruism. Andreoni, Rao, and Trachtman (2011) conducted a natural field experiment involving monitoring the giving of money to fundraisers in a particular area of Boston, USA, and noted that a high volume of people avoided, via a number of means, the fundraisers who were standing at exits of a shopping centre. Robson (2002) warns of the dangers of these types of studies, e. g. loss of ability to control variables and loss of validity. Nonetheless, Andreoni et al. (2011) suggest that people may avoid eye contact with a fundraiser as empathy may be triggered otherwise, leading to the giving of money. On the other hand, people may give as they would like to be seen as being altruistic. There may also be a compromise between giving money to charity and balancing personal finances. Andreoni et al. (2011) conclude that altruism in people is influenced significantly by a combination of social cues and psychological mechanisms. This is perhaps unsurprising but helps to illustrate the complexity of human altruism.

## **Conclusions**

Firstly, it would seem incorrect to necessarily reject findings from pro or indeed anti altruism research. May (2012) summed things up nicely, reminding that so often, people's true intentions and thoughts about a



situation are not visible even to themselves. If one accepts this then there might not be great confidence in suggesting either that altruism definitely exists or that all acts are selfish.

Altruism can certainly be viewed as a fairly controversial concept and one that has featured in social psychology theory and research for some years. It would appear that it is extremely difficult to be involved in a truly altruistic act and Staub (1974) much earlier alluded to this as generally when one acts in a pro-social way, inwardly, it can be rewarding, bringing about positive feelings.

When considering all of the available evidence, perhaps it can be concluded that altruism in its truest sense, as its very definition states, does not exist. However, there is likely to be an altruism continuum upon where most people in society would sit, rather than acts necessarily being classed in a fairly black and white fashion as altruistic or selfish. Krueger (2012) adopts a common sense stance on altruism and is suggestive that it exists and people do engage in acts designed to benefit others, without intended personal gain.

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