‘I’m glad to help you’:

Emotional Influences over Altruistic Behaviours

Module: Patterns of Action Dissertation

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I. Introduction

There is a general disposition in the society to see altruism as a valuable part of human nature. Its importance in the main world religions, public policies (Siminoff, 1995; Lacetera and Macis, 2008) and the media (Ross, 2002; Wilson, 2008) reflects the tendency to appreciate and promote altruistic behaviours.

In spite of the favourable light in which altruism tends to be depicted in lay public, the value of altruism has rarely been regarded self-evident in philosophy and science. On the contrary, explanations for altruistic actions have historically been sought by thinkers like Woff, Kant, Hume, Smith, Comte, Nietzsche, and many more. The traditional line is clear: within the philosophical and scientific community, altruism has been seen as atypical and explanation-requiring behaviour. This perspective reached its peak with the rise of the influential Darwin’s theory of evolution and natural selection, which sees humans, as well as other animals, as constant competitors for resources. The first part of this essay will consist of a review of the attempts to integrate the phenomenon of altruism into the theory of evolution, giving examples of the instances when these theories fail to explain why altruistic behaviours arise.

The second part of this essay will introduce the theories concerning emotional influences on altruistic behaviour. Although emotions have long been regarded disruptive to moral judgment and action, during the last two decades a number of theories have argued otherwise, including but not limited to Clarke's (1993) micro-affect theory, Damasio’s (1994) somatic marker hypothesis, LeDoux’s (1998) theory of emotions, and Loewenstein’s et al. (2001) risk as feelings hypothesis. Widely regarded as examples of the morality in the humankind, altruistic actions therefore call to be examined through the lens of emotions. In this essay, evolutionary importance of emotions in relation with altruistic behaviour will be discussed, as well as two theories of emotional influences in altruism: altruism for gaining pleasure and altruism for reducing displeasure.

It will be considered whether such emotional influences threaten the concept of altruism, and if the selfish and selfless emotional motives can be differentiated. To illustrate the difficulties which may arise when attempting to do so, an example of experimental work (Batson, 1981) will be discussed, followed by a brief discussion of future directions.

E.g.: encouraging blood and organ donations
2. What is altruism?

Originally the term ‘altruism’ was introduced to refer to behaviours promoting interests of others rather than oneself in a broad sense. Delivered from the Italian ‘altrui’ (literally ‘to others’), this term (‘altruisme’) was coined by a French philosopher and sociologist Auguste Comte (1798–1857), and introduced into Britain (‘altruism’) by George H. Lewes (1817–1878). Over time, however, the precise meaning of the term ‘altruism’, as we shall see later, has become a subject of discussions.

In the literature the term ‘altruism’ is frequently used interchangeably with terms ‘prosocial behaviour’ and ‘helping’. Distinctions between the three are subtle, and are best understood as a hierarchy, helping being the broadest category which includes all forms of social support, prosocial behaviour being a subcategory of helping restricted to actions which are consciously intended to improve the situation of the help recipient, and altruism referring to a subcategory of prosocial behaviour in which the helpful actions are done without obligations (e.g., professional) or expectation of rewards (see Figure 1).²

![Figure 1. The hierarchy of helping behaviour, prosocial behaviour and altruism](image)

² NB: since altruism necessarily is helping (but not vice versa), the reader should be aware that the term ‘help’ will occasionally be used thorough the text to refer to altruistic actions.
3. Why help? Altruism within the theory of evolution

“We are all here on earth to help others. What I can’t figure out is what the others are here for”

W. H. Auden

Investigations of the nature and purpose of altruism are largely inspired by the notion that its existence poses one of the main challenges to the theory of evolution (ToE). ToE argues that species change their characteristics between generations in order to better adapt to the environment. Drawing on the seeming paradox that the sizes of different populations tend to remain stable over time in spite of increasing numbers of offspring, Darwinian theory argues that due to limited vital resources (such as land and food) to support the growing populations, organisms are in constant struggle for the survival. Presumably, only the fittest and best-adapted individuals survive till maturation and reproduce, passing their adaptive characteristics to the future generations (nowadays it is known that this information is transmitted via genes).

This theory has provided a very influential account of the behaviour of humans and non-human animals, explaining various phenomena such as intergroup aggression, wars and carnivorousity. However, stressing the intra- and inter-species competition for resources, the evolutionary theory makes altruistic behaviour appear unnatural. Why would one person help another if they are in a competition for survival and reproduction?

Aiming to give answer to this question, several sophisticated theories, the most well-known being the theories of group selection, kin selection and reciprocal altruism, have been proposed to incorporate altruistic behaviour into the framework of ToE.

a. Group- and kin-level selection

Strongly advocated by numerous influential theorists (Haldane, 1932; Wynn-Edwards, 1962, 1986; Thompson, 2000), the hypothesis of group-level selection proposes that organisms behave in the interest of the flock’s/tribe’s/species’ survival. Consequently, this hypothesis argues that altruistic behaviours, whilst being of no advantage (or even of disadvantage) for the altruist personally, nevertheless benefit the group to which the helper belongs, making that group more likely to survive and prosper in comparison with groups where no altruistic acts take place. However, it has been demonstrated mathematically that purely selfish behaviour is more likely to bring evolutionary success than group-level altruism due to particularly slow rate of the latter which can only be overcome in highly artificial conditions (see Ridley and Dawkins, 1981).

Kin-level selection refers to a specific case of group selection concerning in particular those individuals that share the most genetic material with the altruist, i.e. relatives/the kin. From the genetics-orientated evolutionary point of view, the main purpose of an organism is to pass its genes to the next generation. Reproduction leads an organism to create either genetically-identical or very similar copy of itself (asexual reproduction) or offspring that have a combination of genetic information from two members of the species (sexual reproduction), and therefore is a direct means to pass one’s genes. Since the kin share a considerable amount of genetic information, assisting kin
survival can be seen as an alternative way to promote one’s genetic material. From this perspective, behaving in an altruistic manner towards one’s relatives is evolutionary adaptive.

Although still popular in the scientific community (Foster, 2006; Hepper, 2008; van Veenen; 2009), group- and kin-level selection theories fail to explain why individuals might behave in an altruistic manner towards those who are not members of the same group and with whom they have little genetic material in common. Even if the theory is interpreted as broadly as treating human species as a group or kin, it nevertheless fails to explain some of the examples of altruism, specifically altruistic actions directed towards non-human animals, such as rescuing a dog from the fire or volunteering for a society saving lives of rare whales.

### b. Reciprocal altruism

Reciprocal altruism theory claims that both genetically unrelated and related organisms which engage in mutual help are personally more likely to survive than those that do not, especially if there are numerous opportunities to help, frequent contact within relatively small groups, and a balanced pattern of giving and receiving (Trivers, 1971). For example, mutual grooming among mammals ensures the removal of parasites and subsequently enhancing survival prospects of each mammal (Dawkins, 1989).

The key strength of this theory is that it has stood for experimental investigations. Initially used as a means to model and predict economical behaviour, a branch of applied mathematics known as a game theory has been successfully applied to modelling evolutionary behaviour. Such modelling allows predicting how likely specific traits are to persist in a given population.

A game named prisoner's dilemma has been applied to examine the success of cooperation and non-cooperation. In this game, if two parties cooperate they both gain, and if both fail to cooperate then both lose. If one party cooperates when the other does not, the former loses even more than if both defect, and the latter wins even more than if both cooperate. Because neither of the parties is aware of the opponent’s strategy before it is adopted, both have a strong incentive not to cooperate since cooperation pays off if and only if the other party cooperates too. However, a widely-reported finding is that if the game is played a number of times (iterated prisoner’s dilemma), a strategy named tit-for-tat emerges: the players tend to cooperate in the first move and afterwards adopt the opponent’s strategy (e.g., Axelrod, 1984). Interestingly, helping turns out to be the most successful strategy too: those who do to reciprocate others’ favours are not helped in following games (a ‘punishment’ for non-cooperativeness) leaving those who continue cooperating more successful.

Reciprocal altruism, however, fails to explain relatively rare but nevertheless occasionally occurring situations where individuals help with no prospects or expectations of future reciprocity, such as blood or organ donation to people they will never meet.

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3 Originally by Smith (e.g., 1982)
4. Altruism and emotions

Having discussed the evolutionary account of altruism we can see that, although a large proportion of altruistic behaviour can be explained by one or another version of the theory, people sometimes engage in altruistic acts where neither group/kin level selection nor reciprocity seems to be sufficient an explanation.

Is there any way to explain these actions? An appealing, although speculative, account has been proposed by Campbell (1998). Although her theory was originally formulated with regard to reciprocal rather than non-reciprocal altruism, the rationale she employs is also applicable to explain the latter. Drawing on the research concerning the prevalence of tit-for-tat strategy discussed above, in particular the finding that people tend to cooperate until facing a reason to do the reverse, Campbell has argued that a general predisposition to aid another person exists in the nature. By itself this suggestion is not innovative and can be seen as a mere reflection of her belief in the very existence of altruism. However, this author has made a further step suggesting a mechanism by which such predisposition is able to persist in humans even if their nature is to evolutionary ‘serve’ themselves. Specifically, she has argued that such predisposition to aid is maintained via association of help with positive emotions.

Contemporary proponents of evolutionary theory commonly hold the position that emotions act as guides towards evolutionarily adaptive behaviours. The rationale behind this hypothesis is that what brings us happiness tends to be associated with survival and reproductive success in some way, and what bring us sadness tends to signal danger to survival and successful reproduction. Numerous examples compatible with this theory have been proposed, for instance that happiness is experienced in relation to good food, friends, sex, public recognition, gaining property, or a child’s success, and that sadness occurs in face of death of a child, loss of a mate, threats to resources, or rejection by peers (see Plutchik, 2003). It cannot be ignored, however, that if the theory is accepted at this rather radical level, an obvious simplification of human behaviour, and even resemblance to hedonism, arises. Nevertheless, the hypothesis that at least some of the adaptive actions might have been ‘marked’ by natural selection with pleasant emotions offers an appealing explanation of various human behaviours, and possibly altruism too.

Let us now discuss how specifically emotions might encourage altruism. Broadly speaking, there are two general ways to make a person feel better: to induce a positive emotional state, or to remove a negative emotional state (similarly to how positive and negative reinforcement operates). Emotions have been argued to influence altruistic actions in both of these ways, which will now be discussed in turn.

a. Pleasantness of helping

“Feel good about yourself – give blood!” – advertisement (Red Cross)

Campbell (1998) assumed that helping others is inseparable from positive emotions. Indeed, pleasant feelings often accompany altruistic behaviours (Eisenberg, 1986). We are likely to feel good
about ourselves after giving money to charity, donating blood, or taking care of an injured animal. The nature and purpose of such emotions is of high theoretical interest, as is their compatibility with the concept of altruism. Take a moment to compare the following quotations:

- “The person who engages in (altruistic behaviour) anticipates no other satisfaction or gain than the pleasure of contributing to the welfare of others” – R. Cohen (1972, p. 41)

- “Remote poverty offers much besides – a refreshed sense of your own blessing (...) Perhaps we should hope that the objects of our charity never catch on to just how good a deal is – otherwise they might put the price up” – T. Sutcliffe (‘The Independent’, Mach 13, 1997)

These examples illustrate that co-occurrence of pleasant emotions and altruism can be interpreted very differently depending on the writer’s point of view. Whilst it can be argued, as Mr. Sutcliffe does, that the obtained pleasure devalues altruism, an alternative position, like Cohen’s, is to view pleasant feelings as natural (and hardly evitable) positive companions of helping behaviours which do not make such behaviours any less altruistic.

At this point the question whether or not behaviour is altruistic if it is accompanied by pleasant feelings becomes largely philosophical. Can we ‘blame’ people for feeling good when doing something good? Experience of emotions is universal among humankind, and emotions accompany the majority of human decisions and actions, even if below the level of consciousness (Damasio, 1995). Therefore a requirement not to feel positive emotions to be considered as an altruist seems illogical; similar altruism-advocating arguments have been made by Leeds (1963) and Macaulay and Berkowitz (1970).

On the other hand, anticipating emotional rewards and acting on basis of such anticipation can indeed be incompatible with the concept of selfless altruism. Page (1996) gives a hypothetical example of a person who receives considerable personal satisfaction from helping others, and, with aim to pursue this emotional reward, chooses to help one needy person but not another after estimating the amount of emotional satisfaction which would be gained in both cases. Although this is rather extreme a scenario, similar situations can be seen in real life too. For instance, people who decide to help charities, naturally, are unable to donate to all of them. Their choice, among other factors has been shown to be influenced by how the giver is expected to feel with regard to the donation (Piliavin et al., 1982).

b. Unpleasantness of not helping

As discussed above, Campbell assumes that helping is necessarily pleasant. A subtly different view of emotional influences on altruism is to see helping as a means to get rid of displeasure rather than to obtain pleasure.

A famous bystander-calculus model (Piliavin et al., 1981) focuses on the processes through which people arrive to a decision to behave in an altruistic manner and suggests that individuals engage in ‘expected utility’ calculations (costs and benefits of helping versus costs and benefits of not helping) when facing a dilemma whether or not to help. Importantly, the model draws heavily on a famous socio-psychological finding that a person experiencing arousal can interpret it in a variety of ways
(Dutton and Aron, 1974) and postulates that before the evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages, emotional processes are of crucial importance\(^4\).

The model assumes that at first the person gets aroused by other’s distress she is seeing, and afterwards the arousal is interpreted as one of the two emotions: personal distress or empathetic concern. Whichever of the two emotions is perceived, the arousal is essentially unpleasant and is consequently eliminated via helping the person in need, unless the advantages of not helping and disadvantages of helping are high enough to override the urge to get rid of the unpleasant state.

Regarding this dual interpretation of aversive arousal, the question about the selflessness in altruism arises again. Even though, as discussed above, the co-occurrence of pleasant emotions and altruistic behaviours is probably not sufficient for judging such actions as selfish, the possibility that feelings leading us to helping are self-concerning rather than other-concerning are of higher peril to the unselfishness of altruism. It is therefore of high interest to differentiate which emotion people are perceiving when they are feeling the unpleasant arousal: personal distress or empathetic concern.

**Introspection problem**

The crucial problem related for differentiating between these two emotions (and, in turn, for understanding the role of self-concerning emotions in altruistic behaviours) is the difficulty to assess the motives behind individual cases of altruism (why the specific person behaved altruistically in a given situation), since the behavioural outcome of the actions motivated by self-concerning and other-concerning emotions is essentially the same – helping.

How can we assess why the person behaved altruistically? Intuitively appealing is the position that altruists themselves should know the motives of their actions best. However, there are reasons to argue that introspection might not be appropriate when assessing altruism-related motives. A speculative but nevertheless very interesting account on this issue has been suggested by Sober and Wilson (2002). These authors argue for a distinction between ultimate and instrumental goals with regard to altruism, the former being the final goal an individual strives to achieve and the latter reflecting the sub-goals helping to fulfil the final desire. Crucially, Sober and Wilson propose that final desires might operate at unconscious level. In addition, they link this theory to the concepts of altruism and evolution by suggesting that one of the ultimate goals people have is the evolutionary strive to seek welfare for oneself. This does not, however, preclude the individual from having altruistic instrumental desires, accompanied by an honest belief that her desires to help others occur for their own sake rather than being a part of a larger self-serving mechanism, making them likely to report other-concerning motives with regard of helping whether or not this the real cause. Even if we judge Sober and Wilson’s theory as being too vague, there is a general tendency for people to present themselves in a positive light when answering questions about oneself (evaluation bias). Given the positive light in which altruism is seen in lay public, it is likely that individuals will, consciously or unconsciously, present their motives being more altruistic than they actually are.

**Experimental testing**

The problems of unawareness of a) whether the arousal people experience when they are about to help another person is self- or other-directed and b) how (in)accurate they are when assessing their

\(^4\) This assumption is in line with contemporary models with emotional influences on decision-making, such as the somatic marker hypothesis (Damasio, 1995)
motives of helping seem to form a closed circle leaving us with no tools to evaluate the variable of interest using introspection. Consequently, some research groups have demonstrated great efforts to experimentally test whether it is self-serving or other-regarding emotions which stimulate altruism. However, experimental investigations appear to be suitable for differentiating the two hypotheses only if one employs a monistic ‘either/or’ approach towards the motivation of altruism. To make this point more clear, let us take a look at the experiment of Batson et al. (1981) which is chosen due to its impact on subsequent research on altruism.

The study of Batson and colleagues

In Batson et al.’s study, the attempts to differentiate emotional motives — personal distress (PD) and empathetic concern (EC) — were based on an assumption that if people are helping in order to reduce their own distress they would avoid helping if there was a simpler means to escape the unpleasant situation. In this experiment, participants were instructed to watch another participant (‘Elaine’) receiving electric shocks over a closed-circuit television set. In fact, they were presented with a pre-made videotape depicting a confederate being administered with two shocks and ostensibly finding them distressing due to unpleasant childhood experiences with electricity, followed by experimenter’s comment to Elaine that she would not have to continue if another participant agreed to substitute. Straight after that, the same experimenter entered the room and asked whether the participant would agree to take the shocks instead of Elaine.

Participants were allocated to one of the two conditions: some were able to leave the unpleasant situation easily since they were required to watch two shocks only, whilst others were not able to leave the scene as they had agreed to watch 10 shocks being administered. Batson and colleagues also attempted to manipulate the level of empathy the participants would feel for the subjects: perceived similarity of Elaine and the participant was manipulated - those in high-empathy (HE) condition were given a description of Elaine closely matching their self-description, and those in the low-empathy condition received a description failing to match their own description of themselves (see Krebs, 1975).

Does such experimental design allow a comparison of EC and PD hypotheses?

The answer to the question above directly depends on whether one employs a monistic (people always help due to empathetic concern) or pluralistic (people sometimes help due to empathetic concern) theory of altruism, and a monistic (people always help due to personal distress) or pluralistic (people sometimes help due to personal distress) theory of egoism.

If one employs the pluralistic view and only expects people to sometimes aid others due to empathetic concern rather than self-serving, such an experiment does not allow testing the two hypotheses against each other. Specifically, the EC hypothesis’ predictions that helping in HE subjects will exceed helping in LE subjects in either or both of the experimental conditions does not intersect the predictions of believers in ‘self-serving’ that when it is difficult to escape the unpleasant situation LE, HE or both LE and HE participants will help more.

A different picture of predictions arises if we adopt the more stringent versions of the hypotheses, expecting either HE to rule out the effect of the ‘easy escape’ condition, or the ‘easy escape’ to rule out the effect of HE. Having obtained results that HE participants were more likely than LE participants to help in the ‘easy escape’ condition, Batson and colleagues judged the EA hypothesis as superior to the PD hypothesis. However, the study received criticism for the ‘out of sight – out of
mind’ assumption (but see Batson, 1991). However, as discussed above, had they adopted pluralistic account of altruism, the same conclusion would not have been reached.

4. Summary and future directions

This essay discussed altruistic behaviour within the framework of the theory of evolution, as well as the influence of emotional rewards on altruistic actions.

In conclusion, although traditional evolutionary accounts of altruistic actions can explain many instances of helping, some altruistic behaviours, such as voluntary donations to unknown people or helping non-human animals, remain enigmatic from the evolutionary theorists’ perspective. Moreover, it appears that there might be a link between the theory of evolution, altruism, and emotions: the apparent predisposition to help others might have arisen via the association between altruism and pleasant emotions. Investigating the precise altruism-related emotional mechanisms, however, appears to be difficult due to definitional and methodological issues.

This essay highlights two crucial matters for the future theories and research concerning the phenomenon of altruism. First, it is of key importance for writers to state as clearly as possible the way in which they define altruism. The simple hierarchical structure of ‘helping behaviour - prosocial behaviour - altruism’ seems to be insufficient to define altruism when more subtle emotional rewards are concerned, and consequently it would be of benefit for the field and for the commentators/future discussions if the theorists could present the precise definition of altruism they are employing.

With regard to experimental work concerning emotions and altruism, additional advice for the researchers is to clearly state whether their expectations of the experimental outcomes are in line with the monistic or pluralistic theory of altruism/egoism, since, as seen in the discussed example (Batson’s experiment), they do not necessarily lead to equivalent predictions. Without such ‘a-priori’ distinctions, alternative interpretations of data may arise after the study is carried out, different results being judged as supportive/unsupportive for the same hypothesis after the data is collected. Only taken such care can the investigations of emotional motives in altruism be clear and fruitful.
References


