The Nature of Altruism

It was the first day of school. In his seventh grade Social Studies class, Trevor listens intently to his teacher’s question, “What does the world mean to you?” A silence falls over the class. The teacher starts to explain that even at 11years-old it is possible for each of them to bring change to the world.

Trevor focuses his eyes on the chalkboard looking at the words that explain the assignment. With a slight tilt of his head he ponders the requirements of the project. He needed a way to bring change in the world. With sincere encouragement, the teacher confronts the students’ uncertainty as he says in a solemn tone, “The realm of possibility exists where? In each of you.”

The premise of Trevor’s plan is to help three people and those three will each help three more. This was the theme of the 2000 hit movie, “Pay it forward.” The movie, based on a book by Catherine Ryan Hyde, eventually turned into a real life practice of displaying acts of kindness to those around you. This concept is still promoted in schools and organizations by such action groups as the Pay It Forward Foundation. Practices such as offering acts of kindness and being generous to others “just because” describes the basis of altruism.

Being altruistic is to intentionally act in a way to relieve suffering or provide a benefit to another person without needing an external reward. An altruistic person will react to a situation without concern for personal harm. Does it take a plan like Trevor’s in order for people to show compassion or generosity to each other? Do responders of hurricanes, tsunamis or earthquakes have an ulterior motive in coming to assistance? Does the person return a wallet out of consideration for the person who lost it?

Perhaps the teacher in the movie is right when he said; the possibility is in each of us. This challenge is what researchers, in their studies, seek to prove. More is becoming known and confirmed about altruism today. Taking from the Bible and Confucianism, current social neuroscience research is identifying brain chemicals and genes as the link to understanding this remarkable phenomenon.

## Christian and Confucian Altruism

The concept of altruism is traced back in time with the foundation of Christian tradition and in the philosophy behind Confucianism. For Christians, Jesus Christ taught about love on a universal level. “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31 NAB). This verse, acknowledged as the golden rule, has been passed through the generations and is known to be the cornerstone of Christian love. This and other bible verses proclaim how the followers of Jesus are to love one another and offer great works towards friends and enemies alike.

A parable told by Jesus in the gospels of the Bible illustrates the generosity all Christians are called to reveal to one another. The Good Samaritan parable tells the story of a Jewish man robbed, beaten and left for dead as he traveled down from Jerusalem to Jericho. “But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight” (Luke 10:33 NAB). In the story, the Samaritan tended to the man’s needs, took him to an inn and paid for his stay. In those times the Jews and Samaritans did not take favor with one another. It was very unusual for a Samaritan to even consider assisting a Jewish person as recorded in this passage. Jesus then instructed his followers to “…Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37 NAB). In the Christian practice altruism is the principle behind following the way of Jesus Christ.

Andrew Ma in his article written for Leadership Advance Online; discusses the Confucius philosophy as a benevolent love. This viewpoint describes the love for one another based on a hierarchy. Within this structure, only superiors can reveal a benevolent kindness towards inferiors; whereas inferiors must only show loyalty and obedience to superiors (Ma, Comparison to the origins).

Andrew Ma further explains the Confucius philosophy saying the practice is to show more love to family than to strangers. It is only within the family that this love is given. This concept of love to kin differs from the Christian belief of showing unlimited compassion towards all persons.

## Innate Altruism

Reported in Science Daily, researchers from Michigan State University used digital evolution to show a possible evolutionary reason for altruism. The report explained that genetics may be the rationale scientists have been looking for. What was found through this experiment was that genes of organisms may be more similar to genes of a complete stranger than those of a relative (Science Daily, Research sheds light).

This explanation shows how organisms are drawn to others with physically similar genetics. If this prediction is accurate, the researchers expect genes prone to help kin will possibly, through evolution, only help organisms with physical similarities.

Other scientists have identified the hormone oxytocin to be an emotional enhancer that elicits generosity and compassion found in altruistic people. Some scientists believe that the same hormone essential for uterine contractions in child birth is responsible for increasing compassion. Released by the pituitary gland in the hypothalamus of the brain, the hormone is secreted either into the blood stream, the spine or into other parts of the brain (Online Medicine Tips).

The presence of oxytocin in the body has been found to strengthen the maternal instincts leading to an intense loving bond between mother and child. The theory of the affects of oxytocin also enhances the belief of early attachment needs in children from birth through early childhood.

Men are also capable of producing oxytocin in response to a passionate experience as well as the feelings elicited in fatherhood. Oxytocin is known to be secreted during skin to skin contact. This idea leads into the work of Dr. Dacher Keltner, Psychology Professor at UC Berkeley, on human touch, oxytocin and altruism.

Dr. Keltner conducted a study to identify the affects of oxytocin on a person’s rate of generosity. Typically two out of ten people will show generosity by giving money away. When oxytocin was injected into the subject’s bloodstream 50% of the subjects were more generous with their money (Keltner, *Born to be good*). This finding helps to illustrate effects of the hormone oxytocin as related to a person’s level of compassion towards another.

Looking at how our bodies can produce the effect of oxytocin release, Keltner has conducted studies using human touch. Dr. Keltner found human touch to be one of the most sophisticated languages and key to the secretion of oxytocin through the body. He has found that touch is a strong social connector, it activates award, reinforces reciprocity, signals safety and is used to soothe. Generosity, caretaking and compassion increases through the simple action of gentle touch (Keltner, *Born to be good*).

Contrary to some scientists regarding the origin of oxytocin, Dr. Keltner refers to the vagus nerve as the branch to the nervous system responsible for releasing the hormone. He proposes that it is this part of the nervous system that produces altruism. In his research he showed how gentle touch can elicit changes in a person’s vagul responses associated with more compassion. It is this area which also produces more trust within a person. Keltner’s finding identified the need for stimulation of the vagus nerve, to produce oxytocin, which calms the individual’s fight or flight response (Keltner, *Born to be good*).

Keltner also speaks of the work of Charles Darwin who was inspired by a personal experience when witnessing the suffering of his daughter. From this, Darwin developed two hypotheses: sympathy is wired in the brain and sympathy is contagious through the action of touch (Keltner, Darwin’s touch). Keltner surmises that Darwin’s work proved society is more based on the “survival of kindness” rather than “survival of the fittest”. This premise shows society is more likely to flourish when there is a high level of sympathy among people and continues to spread through its offspring.

## Altruism vs. Egotism

The research offers a good argument for the biological and neurological roots of altruistic people. The outward appearance shows an altruistic person participating in a true selfless act. Social research shows from the outside looking in, one will see what appears to be altruistic behavior however; the underlying motive may not be a true selfless act.

A study published in 2008 in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, set out to prove if people were egoists, someone who does good expecting an award and only if the giving won’t hurt the giver. During the study, the subjects were asked questions by the researchers to distinguish between the altruistic and the egoists. They were then given money and told they could keep the money or give it away. This would occur in private with no one knowing if money was given or not.

During the second round of the study, the individuals were given money, told they could keep it or give it away except now someone would be watching and would see their giving. In this phase of the study, the findings indicated that the egoists gave away 46% of their money after knowing that someone else was watching them, compared to only giving 22% of their money away in private. The altruistic subjects gave away 51% of the money in public compared to 40% while in the private situation (Dixon, Altruistic advantage).

Overall, this study identifies that egoists tend to be generous only because of self-interest and the expectation of a reciprocal award. These researchers began to question if altruistic people whose internal instinct is to be generous, may have a disadvantage in the world because their kindness is truly external. This may leave altruistic persons vulnerable in a competitive situation while an egoist will use the situation for a pure selfish motive.

## The Health and Happiness Factors

## Studies conducted on the effects of helping others show a connection between helping and better health. At Harvard, a group of students looked at pictures of Mother Teresa caring for children; swabs of saliva were taken before and after viewing the pictures. After witnessing the altruistic behavior of Mother Teresa, the finding showed an increase in antibodies in the saliva of the students after seeing the photos (Post and Neimark, 6 ways giving). This helped to prove that being a bystander to a compassionate event can boost a person’s immunity.

People who suffer with chronic pain who provide support to others in the same condition, report less intense pain in their own body. In addition, a study conducted at Carnegie Mellon University, shows people with more social connections are less prone to catching colds and becoming sick than people less socially connected.

Stephen Post wrote a report highlighting a study conducted through the Do Good Live Well Organization, which surveyed over 4,500 people about their volunteer service to others. Ninety-six percent of those surveyed reported that volunteering makes people happier.

The idea behind Alcoholics Anonymous, the self-help group, is to involve members in helping one another through the recovery process. Maria I. Pagano looked at the helping behaviors of alcoholics (Post, Health, Happiness). The findings showed 40% of the members, who commit to helping others in the Alcoholics Anonymous groups, remained sober the year after rehabilitation.

In his book, *It’s Good to Be Good* Stephen Post wrote, “Helping should be for the other, and benefits to the helper are a side-effect… of sincere giving….” This thought brings forth such questions as, does being kind bring happiness to the helper or does the positive mood of the helper create the generosity? To answer, Post referred to studies from 1972 which defined this paradigm as a reciprocal feedback loop (Post, Altruism, happiness).

Post also discusses the concept of becoming burned out or overwhelmed with caretaking responsibilities, such as caring for the sick and those in helping professions. Post identifies how it only takes a few hours a week of volunteering to produce the positive effects of altruism. As a volunteer increases the amount of time in caretaking activities, it is easy to fall into an emotional overload causing stress and depression in the helper (Post, Altruism, happiness). It is important for helpers to be able to identify the point of overextending and take precautions to maintain their own wellbeing.

## Altruism today

The media, through the constant broadcasting of the world news, portrays the negative events happening in society. First hand exposure to violence, crime and human suffering is all over the news coverage. With the overwhelming negative media there often are stories of those people who rise to the surface to attend to the suffering and those in need.

In the midst of the New York City terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, the residents of Gander Newfoundland in Canada opened their city, homes and arms to 7,000 stranded strangers. Tom Brokaw reported this story from Gander where all flights were diverted out of the United States during the no-fly-zone. Out of pure kindness and generosity, the residents of Gander took care of all 7000 passengers for four days. One woman said she put herself in the shoes of those passengers and knew what she had to do (MSNBC, 2010)

Human suffering, pain and struggle are shown on TV screens. Reports of devastation and destruction are found in the newspapers. Hope is challenged when negative seems to overshadow the positive. Then a city reaches out to strangers and outsiders provide for victims. Hope returns through generosity, kindness and altruism of others. Trevor made a statement with his experiment in the movie “Paying It Forward”. He touched three, three touched nine. The realm of possibility is within each of us; it is our choice to pass it on.

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