

The super-altruists

Tom Farsides considers whether anyone can claim to be a super-altruist, and whether this comes at a cost

There are many ways of being exceptionally altruistic, each of which may be considered a form of 'super-altruism'. Appreciating the characteristics of each form of super-altruism can illuminate the nature of altruism more generally.

Men have died for lesser things
Vengeance, Country, God and King
Someday I'll swing from the gallows
pole
A final dance for my Molly-O
Steve Earle, 'Molly-O'

While still alive, Paul Vandenbosch donated one of his kidneys to a stranger (Laurance, 2009). The small but growing number of people who do this are sometimes called 'altruistic donors'. Their altruism is exceptional in many ways. Sometimes in direct opposition to the expressed wishes of their friends and family, these donors voluntarily incur considerable personal costs to bring benefits to people totally unknown to them, anticipating that they will receive no substantial rewards in return (Challenor, 2012). Given these facts, it is unsurprising that healthcare professionals closely scrutinise prospective donors' motives, occasionally with considerable suspicion (Dixon & Abbey, 2005). Reflecting this, the title of one study asked 'The living anonymous kidney donor: Lunatic or saint?' (Henderson et al., 2003).

Given these options, the answer has to be saint. People who want to become altruistic donors are assessed to make sure that they are psychologically well-adjusted and are motivated by some combination of altruistic, moral, and integrity concerns. These judgements are not wholly independent. Clinicians consider anonymous living donation compatible with mental health when – and only when – such behaviour seems consistent with and motivated by volunteers' socio-

moral identities. People who downplay or fail to understand the personal costs of donation do not qualify to become altruistic donors. People who are accepted as donors are persuasive in insisting that their donations will involve *acceptable* personal costs given their coherent and enduring altruistic commitment and the hoped-for benefits to others' welfare (Henderson et al., 2003). People who want things are often willing to incur costs to get them. Living organ donors are exceptionally altruistic; they have an intense desire to improve someone else's welfare (Massey et al., 2010). They are therefore willing, where necessary, to incur exceptional costs in pursuit of this goal.

People are especially willing to pay a price for things they desire when they can comfortably afford to do so. Between them, Warren Buffet and Bill and Melinda Gates have given billions of dollars to philanthropic causes. They have also invested considerable amounts of their time, energy and reputation trying to make sure that others substantially benefit from their donations (tinyurl.com/o9a8msb). Yet super-philanthropy is not the exclusive domain of the super-rich. Wealth is a relative asset, and nearly everyone reading this is likely to be much richer than the vast majority of people alive today. Recognising this, Toby Ord has donated tens of thousands of pounds of his academic salary to charity. He has also set up a campaign to encourage others to charitably donate at least 10 per cent of their own earnings. So far, well over \$100 million has been pledged (www.givingwhatwecan.org). Although not giving as much in absolute terms as super-rich donors, and therefore perhaps not having quite the same scale of direct positive impact on others' welfare, Toby Ord and those like him are unquestionably exceptionally altruistic by most standards.

The people mentioned above and others like them tend to explain their exceptionally altruistic actions as resulting in part from broadly utilitarian moral judgements: any relative costs to them of donating are heavily outweighed by the

questions

What precisely is altruistic about preventing someone from committing suicide?

'I love you.' Appreciation, altruism, or both?

resources

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benefits they hope to bring to others. They have more than enough resources (time, money, body parts, etc.) to meet their personal needs and they choose to use a proportion of the excess to try to benefit others to a much greater extent than it costs them. Crucially, they expect that trying to help others or succeeding in doing so will be *personally* satisfying. This means that many of the costs they incur are not sacrifices. Rather, they are prices they are willing to pay. Because they wish to help others, they enjoy using their resources this way: it brings them personal satisfaction (Dunn et al., 2008; Gneezy et al., 2012).

Whereas many people and theories consider concern for the self and concern for others as antagonistic, those committed to altruism incorporate concerns for others' welfare *among* their personal concerns. Frimer et al. (2011) compared

the concerns of 25 winners of awards for extraordinary volunteerism ('moral exemplars') with those of 25 demographically matched comparison participants. The moral exemplars on average scored higher in both communion (love, dialogue, caring, unity, etc.) and agency (self-mastery, status, achievement, empowerment, etc.) than did the comparison participants. The moral exemplars managed this in part by integrating these themes 'within their personality' to a greater extent than did the comparison individuals, such that they adopted other-concerns as enduring personal concerns (see also Aquino et al., 2009; Colby & Damon, 1992; Lee et al., 2005; McAdams et al., 1997).

Some adopt others' interests to such an extent that on occasion they come close to losing much of their distinct individual identity. People with such 'fused' identities

seem to have an increased willingness to serve in exceptional ways. Swann et al. (2009) found that making ingroup identities or personal identities salient for people with fused identities increased their self-reported willingness to fight or die on behalf of their ingroup. Swann et al. (2010) found that compared with people without fused identities, people whose identities were fused with their nation showed elevated willingness to serve that nation, both by helping ingroup members and by showing relative approval of extreme acts of violence done on behalf of their nation. Physically arousing participants by having them exercise, which was thought to increase their sense of personal agency, exacerbated these differences. These findings suggest that participants with fused identities had adopted national concerns as self-defining personal priorities.

Nationalism, patriotism and other forms of deep loyalty have led countless millions to lay down their lives in service of others. This is because altruism towards some is very often accompanied by antipathy towards others (Blogowska & Saroglou, 2011). Altruism being parochial does not prevent it being extreme. Extreme dedication to a cause can foster extreme violence towards others perceived to have interests in conflict with that cause. Ingroup heroes are often outgroup villains. Extreme parochial altruists are willing to lay down others' lives as well as their own in pursuit of welfare for those they care most about. Altruism – albeit highly selective altruism – is a characteristic common among suicide terrorists (Tobena, 2012). Such altruism is clearly extreme, both in its intensity and in its specificity. People manifesting this form of altruism seek to benefit very particular others and sometimes do so in ways that harm both themselves and third parties (Ginges et al., 2011).

Parochialism is a matter of degree, and altruism can be extremely extensive. McFarland et al. (2012) developed a measure of identification with all humanity (IWAH). Identifying with all humanity



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increases the likelihood of being altruistic towards any subset of humanity. Everyone becomes relatively psychologically close to the self and there are no outgroups that might otherwise be thought to have interests antagonistic to parochial ingroups. Accordingly, McFarland et al. found that IWAH scores were associated with several measures of positive other-concern, even when co-predicting with related measures, such as commitment to universal values. In one study, for example, McFarland's participants were given an opportunity to win prize money and were asked how much of it they would donate to charity if they won. IWAH scores correlated with the size of their pledges.

Altruism can be relatively broad without necessarily encompassing all humanity. Einolf (2010) analysed two waves of a national survey of middle-aged Americans and found that the broader and more inclusive the perceived moral obligations of participants, the more they engaged in volunteer work and charitable giving. At extremes of both altruistic reach and altruistic intensity, Gentiles who rescued Jews from Nazi persecution explained that their strong sense of common humanity made any potential intergroup differences unrecognisable, trivial or even illegitimate (Monroe, 2010). These rescuers exposed themselves and others to enormous risks not because of parochial altruism towards Jews but because of concern for any human in extreme need.

Altruism can also extend beyond humanity. Bastian et al. (2012), for example, found that participants who consciously compared animals to humans extended their circle of moral concern and reduced their ingroup preference in favour of humans. Extremely elevated concern for animals can lead to super-altruism towards them – often with attendant costs for the altruists, those close to them, and those perceived to be behaving in ways harmful to animal welfare (Herzog, 2010).

It was noted above that altruists are willing to incur costs to promote others' welfare and do not necessarily think of

such costs as sacrifices. Nevertheless, the stronger a person's altruism, the greater their willingness to make sacrifices when doing so seems necessary to serve the perceived welfare of whomever or whatever they are altruistic towards (e.g. Sque et al., 2006). This does not mean that sacrifice is required for extreme altruism or that sacrifice is an unfailingly reliable marker of such altruism. Altruists have a goal to promote others' welfare; not to personally suffer.

Some people *do* derive perverse satisfaction from their own suffering, especially when they can falsely claim that they are suffering in order that others might benefit. Oakley et al. (2012) suggest that such people are 'pathological altruists', but in using this term they fail to do justice to the requirement that altruists are committed to the positive welfare of others. As noted in Oakley et al., rather than genuinely trying to help others, the people they describe are seeking to experience pain and suffering while only pretending to be trying to help others. This may well be pathological, but it is not altruism. Having an exclusive self-focus and a lack of concern for the impact of one's behaviour on others precludes rather than exemplifies any genuine form of altruism.

Oakley and her colleagues document another form of alleged 'pathological altruism'. This is where a person sincerely tries to help another but ends up harming someone in the process, be it themselves, the person they were trying to help, or some third party. The key phrase here is that a person 'sincerely tries to help another'. Calling failed attempts to help others pathological makes as much and as little sense as calling failed attempts to achieve any personal goal pathological. People are not deemed pathological when they fail to pass a driving test, get an article published, or complete a marathon, even if they do so multiple times. As with any other goal, even very ambitious and



John Rabe took personal risks to help save the lives of many thousands of Chinese civilians during the siege of Nanking, 'but' he was also a Nazi

extreme ones, attempts to help others are pathological only when they are pursued in ways that most competent people would deem manifestly dysfunctional (Gruber & Keltner, 2012).

Judgements of functionality depend heavily on who is doing the judging, at what time, and with what facts at their disposal (Franco et al., 2011). Actions that seem super-altruistic from one perspective may be judged very differently from another. As already noted, extreme altruists can knowingly sacrifice aspects of others' welfare as well as their own in service of some subjectively perceived greater good. Social campaigners can neglect their families; heroes can risk leaving their children orphaned to save strangers' lives; champions of freedom and justice can be willing to kill for their cause. The more extreme the altruism, the more likely it is that extreme risks and costs will be accepted in pursuit of the welfare of those

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who altruists care most about. People with different priorities will often take a very different view. Many people think of rescuers of Jews from Nazi persecution as exemplars of super-altruism. One mother of a rescuer disagreed, thinking her daughter selfish and irresponsible. 'I don't think you have the right to do this,' she said. 'Your responsibility is for the safety of your own children' (Oliner & Oliner, 1998, p.217).

Altruists sometimes deliberately hurt those they seek to serve; to try to secure bigger benefits for them overall or in the long run (Jonas, 2010). 'It's for your own good' is a common claim made by loving parents while disciplining their children. This too can be taken to extremes. Many people who engage in assisted-suicide or even homicide-suicide appear to be motivated by sincere beliefs that dying is in the best interests of those they kill. Most people consider the latter behaviour deluded and an example of genuinely pathological altruism (Yip et al., 2009), but a reluctance to automatically call the former pathological may be growing (Williams et al., 2007).

It is understandable if people want to challenge claims of super-altruism that involve serious harm, especially if done intentionally. Even when done to bring about the best-possible objective outcomes, people may have intuitions that someone who deliberately harms others cannot be called altruistic, let alone a super-altruist (Haidt, 2001; Tetlock et al., 2000). The basis for such intuitions seems to be a belief that people can only be genuine altruists if they help others in ways that are not harmful to anyone (Uhlmann et al., 2013). In turn, this may be part of a package of beliefs that people can only be super-altruistic if they try to maximally help everyone (except themselves) all of the time (Post, 2003). This seems a literally impossible requirement.

So we have seen that altruism can be super-intense, super-inclusive, super-costly, super-frequent, super-enduring, super-effective, etc. (Sorokin, 1954/2002). This

means that no one can realistically aspire to be super-altruistic in every way possible, which in turn opens the door for people who wish to challenge any claim of super-altruism. Even the most heroic of mega-super-altruists will be bound to fail on at least one possible criterion of altruism. Yes, John Rabe took personal risks to help save the lives of many thousands of Chinese civilians, 'but' he was also a Nazi (Chang, 2012). Yes, people perform heroic rescues during genocides 'but' those same people are also at other times bystanders or even killers (Campbell, 2010). If we refuse to acknowledge super-altruists of any type because no one is super-altruistic in every way possible, we are depriving ourselves of an important source of information about the best we can become. There are multiple ways to be super-altruistic and there is much to be gained by understanding as much as possible about all of them (Walker et al., 2010).

Humans are a super-altruistic species. No other animal has the capacity for altruism that people do. Human toddlers routinely and spontaneously help others in ways that adult members of most other species simply cannot (Warneken & Tomasello, 2009). Human adults regularly perform intentional acts on behalf of others that are unimaginable anywhere else within the animal kingdom. The brief review above makes it clear that this is not always an unambiguously and universally good thing. Fostering altruism of certain types towards some can simultaneously encourage indifference, bias and even animosity towards others.

A large part of socialisation involves teaching people what they should strive for and suggesting acceptable methods of pursuing those goals (Lois, 1999; Marder et al., 2010). Teach people that they should care only about maximising their personal wealth by any means necessary and they will tend towards becoming narcissistic, psychopathic, Machiavellian, materialistic super-egoists (Kasser et al., 2007). Teach people that they should care only about maximally serving the welfare of a specific 'other' by any means necessary

and similarly extreme consequences will ensue. If people come to care intensely and exclusively about their country, their God, their family's honour, etc., it should not be surprising that they care relatively little about anything else, including themselves. Everything and everyone not included within their circle of concern will be ignored, exploited or abused. If we do not wish super-altruism towards some to be accompanied by super-apathy or super-antagonism towards others, any teaching of directed concern needs to be accompanied by encouragement of at least minimal responsibility towards all (Tarrant et al., 2009), including the self (Neff, 2011).

Because being super-altruistic can be super-challenging and sometimes super-costly, more than just altruism needs to be nurtured among individuals who go on to become super-altruists. Associated virtues necessary to sustain altruism in various challenging circumstances also need to be nurtured; for example, commitment, bravery, resilience, self-efficacy, wisdom.

Finally, it should be noted that what is required to be *super*-altruistic depends heavily on particular contexts. If altruism is routinely rewarded within a particular setting, even fairly intense and inclusive forms of altruism will be relatively unexceptional. If, however, altruism is routinely punished, or if the only behaviours routinely rewarded are ones incompatible with altruism, even relatively small acts of altruism will be rare, and substantial acts of altruism will be the exclusive domain of only truly heroic super-altruists (e.g. Hammond & Bousfield, 2011). Encouraging super-altruism and encouraging routine altruism are related but distinct projects.



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