

Is Altruism Possible?

Drawing on Parry's (1986) interpretation of Mauss (1990), this essay traces the way that Western concepts of altruism have developed. It argues that while, as Parry notes, the ideal of disinterested giving emerged in contrast to a sphere of market relations, nevertheless many social analysts insist on imagining altruism in terms that are reminiscent of commodity relationships. In an attempt to broaden the ways we imagine altruism, the essay proposes a distinction between "commodity altruism" and "gift altruism". Applying ideas from the philosopher Martin Buber (1937) to an ethnography of hospice care-givers by Russ (2005), it concludes that altruism may reside not just in self-sacrifice, but also in the attitude with which a gift is given.

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Defined as the pursuit of another's utility at the expense of one's own, altruism makes no sense in an economic model that is predicated on self-interest. According to the model of *homo economicus*, apparently altruistic acts must be explained by indirect or delayed benefit to oneself or, in more sophisticated models, to one's kin. Commonly, people are said to act "selflessly" in order to experience the pleasure of being (seen to be) selfless. But this explanation, I suggest, is problematic. Rational actors must experience some kind of loss in order to believe in their own selflessness, and this loss must, in their eyes, outweigh the pleasure they experience in being (seen to be) altruistic. If this were not the case, they could not believe in their own selflessness, or derive any pleasure from it. Confronted with apparently altruistic acts, the self-interest model can refute altruism only by asserting that the actors lack rationality or self-awareness.

Anthropologists have advanced more sophisticated accounts of what might at first seem to be "altruistic" behaviour. Perhaps partly influenced by the model of *homo economicus*, they have argued that much gift-giving is not disinterested but strategic. Following Mauss (1990) and Malinowski (1922), many have suggested that the purpose of gift-giving is to contest hierarchy or to establish reciprocal social bonds.

For Bourdieu (1977:1-15), the giving of gifts is a strategy in contests of honour, where social capital accrues to those able to return a counter-gift that is more valuable than the original gift. Appadurai (1986:12) has a similar notion. More recently, in an analysis of charity during a Moroccan pilgrimage, Kosansky (2002) suggests that giving reproduces status hierarchies between donors and recipients, and at the same time serves to justify these hierarchies by connecting them to a sacred order. In other contexts, the focus of gift-giving is not establishing or contesting hierarchy, but maintaining relationships that structure everyday life and that might prove useful in future (Smart 1993, Erwin 2006).

Anthropologists have also noted that altruism is not always a benign ideal. Rather, it is often embedded in relations of power that it helps to maintain. In an analysis of gender relations in Palestinian families, Sa'ar (2001) argues that power structures determine whether actions are construed as "generous" or "altruistic". Because men may later come to lead the kin group, any personal concessions they make for the sake of the group are seen as generous and taken as a sign of potential strength. By contrast, a Palestinian woman cannot hold positions of equivalent power in the group, and in times of crisis must rely on her father's kin rather than her husband's. Any concessions that she makes for her husband's group are therefore construed as purely self-giving and altruistic. Altruism becomes a feminine ideal that helps to perpetuate an unequal power relationship. Stivens (2005) makes a similar point.

Far from being a universal concept, moral ideals such as altruism are embedded in other aspects of social life: they depend on economic, cultural and ontological notions that vary from place to place. Witherspoon (1973), for example, reported that the Navajo do not have a concept of altruism as opposed to egoism. Navajo shepherders voluntarily pasture their own sheep in a collective herd from which everyone shares the proceeds. Because the Navajo have an economic "theory" that assumes plenty instead of scarcity, their neighbours' sheep prosper not at the expense of their own, but rather to their benefit. This example demonstrates how moral ideals can arise out of economic theory: the moral ideal of altruism, as opposed to egoism, depends on the assumption of economic scarcity. More fundamentally, moral ideals may depend on ontological notions of the self. Altruism, understood as the sacrifice of an individual's own interests for the sake of another, makes little sense in Melanesia where, as

Strathern (1988) notes, people do not exist as separate selves. Where people exist as nodes of society rather than units who have potential interests against the group, there would seem to be little room for an altruism that privileges society above the self.

These examples indicate that the modern Western concept of altruism is an idea with a specific history, born and sustained within a particular worldview. Parry (1986) and others (Russ 2005) have argued that the ideal of disinterested giving emerged as a counterpart to the ideology of the market. According to Parry's reading of Mauss, the gift in archaic societies was a combination of interest and disinterest; it was only in the modern period, when the market emerged as the domain of self-interest, that the notions of self-interest and disinterest were separated and opposed. Lock (2002:318), too, claims that Comte "invented" the concept of altruism towards the end of the nineteenth century as a counterbalance to the egoism of modern society. But notions of modern altruism also draw on traditions of religious asceticism. Parry (1986:468) suggests that Christianity, in asserting that self-denial was the route to other-worldly salvation, prepared the ground for the modern opposition between utility and altruism.

The history of our concepts of utility and altruism seems to bear out Derrida's (1978) suggestion that much Western thought is structured by dichotomies. Wilk (1996) notes that the discipline of economics traces its roots to philosophers of the Enlightenment who asked whether humans were naturally self-interested (Hobbes 1991) or altruistic (Rousseau 1936). Adam Smith (1937), whose writings laid the foundation for much subsequent economic theory, followed Hobbes in asserting that people were by nature selfish, co-operating only because of enlightened self-interest. Others such as Durkheim and Comte followed Rousseau in asserting that humans were naturally social, more inclined to follow group norms than calculate and pursue their own individual utility. The division between the academic disciplines of economics and sociology/anthropology, we might suggest, reflects a fundamental opposition in Enlightenment thinking between self and other, mundane and sacred, individual and society. Certainly, anthropologists have often found themselves opposed to the perspectives of economists (Wilk 1996:33). This position has extended in some cases to taking professional political stances against capitalist economic policies, and remains reflected in the personal attitudes of anthropologists (Hart 2005).

These polarisms of self/other, individual/group and mundane/sacred have structured much important theorising about human behaviour. Durkheim (1963) distinguished between egoistic suicide, where the individual is excessively isolated from the group, and altruistic suicide, where the actor is overly influenced by collective ideals such as national or group honour. Even those economists who have argued that altruism is a genuine and irreducible fact have done so by asserting that humans have two opposing motivations which reflect these polarisms. Margolis (1982) held that human behaviour was produced by a fundamental tension between self-interest and group-interest. As Wilk (1996) notes, Etzioni (1988) argued along similar lines, suggesting that people were motivated by both “material interest” and “moral interest”.

Anthropologists reproduced and extended this set of oppositions in their distinction between the commodity and the gift. Mauss (1990) elaborated a notion of the gift which in subsequent theorising came to be opposed to the “commodity”. Whereas gifts were inalienable from the person who produced them and thus helped to maintain social bonds, commodities were wholly alienable. Commodity relations were conceived of as impersonal and transient, with the transactors free to enter into them or not; gift relations were seen as personal and enduring, where once the first gift had been given, subsequent transactions were obligatory (Gregory 1982, Carrier 1995). Strathern (1988), Weiner (1992) and Levi-Strauss (1993) have all in different ways asserted a structural divide between gifts and commodities.

The notion that commodities and gifts are always in strict opposition has inevitably been criticised. Many have argued that the opposition between the two is not a natural fact but rather a function of the West’s ideology of the “pure gift” (Appadurai 1986, Carrier 1995, Parry 1986, Parry & Bloch 1989). Smart (1993) has shown that in China, gift and market exchange work together not in opposition. Parry (1986) has suggested that gifts can be alienable, adducing the example of sacrificial gifts in India that are given to transfer sins irrevocably away from the donor. Herrmann (1997) observes that garage sales in the United States combine characteristics of commodity and gift exchange: objects are seen as inalienable and are almost “given away”, yet the transactors are often unknown to each other and in terms of form the sale remains a sale. Conversely, alienable commodities may be transferred between interdependent

persons (Parry & Bloch 1989). This literature demonstrates that a rigid opposition between gifts and commodities is not appropriate to all contexts. But it also shows that the terms are embedded enough in our worldview to survive critique and dominate debate over a century after they were first proposed.

But what does the putative opposition between gifts and commodities mean for the concept of altruism? According to the ideology of the free gift, altruism lies on the side of gift side of the commodity-gift spectrum, opposed to egoism which lies on the commodity side. At the same time, the ideology has constructed altruism as disinterest: the ideally altruistic act is often seen to be one where the altruist and their beneficiary are unknown to each other. Common “textbook” examples of altruism are the rescuing of a drowning stranger (Bell 1995:827), or the donation of blood (Healy 2000, 2004). Admittedly, the proposition that blood donation is altruistic has been questioned. Erwin (2006) notes that while blood donors often claim altruistic motivations, levels of donation are increased by small compensation such as T-Shirts or time off work. She also suggests that donors may enjoy intangible benefits such as social recognition and feelings of increased self-worth. Healy (2004), similarly, notes that levels of donation depend on an institutional framework of opportunities and incentives. Stark (1992) observes the fragility of altruistic tendencies: people tend to stop giving blood when they see that others are being paid for doing so.

These observations, however, only reinforce the idea that altruism is commonly understood as a lack of any desire for a return on one’s beneficence. The archetypal act of altruism is impersonal, anonymised and transient. Titmuss (1971) argued that since blood donation is voluntary and anonymous, it is the ideal example of altruism. Healy (2000) writes that anonymity increases the altruistic significance of an act because it prevents the actor receiving thanks or recognition from the recipient. Lock (2002) argues that altruism, in contrast to gift-giving, benefits society rather than personal individuals: “unknown individuals benefit”. Erwin (2006:148) glosses altruism as actions “taken for the general benefit of society” or those that benefit “anonymous others”. She seems to share the notion of altruism as an impersonal enterprise, arguing that altruism exists in China on the grounds that “heroic citizens work tirelessly for the social good”, and because charitable institutions have been set up (2006:149).

The modern practice of charitable donation reinforces this characterisation of altruism as impersonal, anonymous and transient. Donations are made to “causes” or institutions, not to people. Each one is an anonymous part of a larger whole, indistinguishable from the many other donations alongside which it is made, and is often mediated by relatively anonymising technologies such as internet-banking and direct-debit transactions. Even the usual substance of donations – money – reflects the way that the recipients of donations are conceptualised as fungible, interchangeable objects.

The observation I want to draw from this is that while the ideology of the gift identified by Parry and others opposes altruism to egoism as gift to commodity, many people including social analysts have privileged a notion of altruism that has more in common with the commodity relationship than with the gift relationship. Altruism supposedly occupies a domain that is separate from and opposed to the market, yet it shows features characteristic of commodity-relationships: altruistic acts are ideally anonymous, impersonal, transient, and free. We might suggest that the modern Western concept of altruism has shown a “boomerang” trajectory: emerging in opposition to the domain of the market and its sphere of self-interest, it was drawn back to the magnetic ideology of economism that it originally tried to escape. The result is a paradox: if altruism – the principle of the anti-market – exists, it should do so within the confines of a commodity relationship.

This common notion of altruism depends on the dichotomous framework outlined above, which has defined altruism against egoism as disutility against utility, other against self, and loss against profit. In an attempt to draw attention to a broader spectrum of acts that might be considered altruistic, this essay proposes a distinction between “gift altruism” and “commodity altruism”. It suggests conceiving of altruistic acts as having two primary components: an orientation towards a personal other; and a quality of self-sacrifice. Where the former is privileged in the understanding of the actor, the act falls into the realm of “gift altruism”; where the latter is privileged, the act can be understood as “commodity altruism”.

Furthermore, the essay suggests that this distinction can be understood in terms proposed by Buber (1937), who identified two fundamental sets of relationships that structure the way an individual approaches the world. The first type of relationship – “I-Thou” – is what Buber calls true relation, as it “engages the whole being”. It is characterised by the direct encounter with another: “no aim, no lust, no anticipation intervene between I and Thou” (1937:11). By contrast, the “I-It” relationship is characterised by separation and objectification. It engages only part of one’s being, and is limited to the world of function and perception. In gift altruism, as with the “I-thou” relationship, the altruist and beneficiary are mutually constituted by the direct relationship between them. The parties do not exist as separate and independent entities; in a sense, what exists is not the parties to the relationship, but the relationship itself. By contrast, in commodity altruism, the “I-It” relationship prevails. The altruist and beneficiary are separated from (and perhaps even unknown to) each other. Each is constituted not by the direct relationship or by the encounter, but by their separate statuses and activities: on the one hand, by the activity of giving, the status of being a giver, and the awareness of being altruistic; on the other hand, by the activity of receiving, the status of being a beneficiary, and the awareness of being “helped”.

To summarise the proposed distinction: in commodity altruism, the “other” is an impersonal counterpart against whom the parties define and defend themselves. What is important is an economy of profit and loss: the commodity-altruist must, by definition, lose something in the transaction. In gift altruism, on the other hand, what is important is the relationship itself and the direct encounter. The possibility that the “benefactor” might gain something in the process does not detract from the altruistic nature of the gift relationship. Indeed, the dynamics of the relationship might allow both parties to be altruistic.

This notion of gift altruism can perhaps best be illustrated by turning from a philosophical source to an ethnographic one. Russ (2005) describes the giving of care by nurses to the dying in a San Francisco hospice. We can note at least five ways in which this type of giving differs from commodity altruism as typified by the ideal of anonymous blood donation. First, there is a sense in which it is not voluntary. Having received the gift of care – the capacity to be with the dying – carers have no choice

but to pass the gift on. “I felt this strong need to give” said one care-giver. Another explained that “it’s almost like a calling – I couldn’t not do it” (2005:133). They also often described themselves as having been chosen, rather than choosing themselves: “somehow I just have a feeling for it” (2005:132). Similarly, the patients have no choice but to accept their approaching death.

Second, the giving of care is not an impersonal or a wholly alienable transaction. Not only does a personal relationship exist between care-givers and patients, but the former have themselves often needed care in the past, having suffered serious illness or the death of someone close to them. Their capacity to care has been painfully and personally earned. Third, there is an element of a personal encounter that renders gift altruism similar to Buber’s “I-Thou” relationship. Russ notes (2005:143-144) that care-givers were often drawn to the work by the possibility of “intimacy and communication...there is a desire for direct experience in caring”. Carers were instructed to “bridge the distance” between themselves and the patients other, to “meet the patient where he’s at” (2005:141).

Fourth, the care-giving described by Russ is not involved in a straightforward material economy of profit and loss. The work of a hospice is not to restore patients to health so that they can resume roles as economically valuable contributors. It is rather to prepare patients to accept death: the practitioners talk of “giving the gift of death” to the patients. Indeed, dealing with the experience of death leads many hospice nurses to question whether the material world is in fact more real than the “spiritual” or “emotional” world (2005:143). Similarly, the currency of gift altruism is not economically measurable. What circulates in the economy of the hospice are intangible things such as “care”, “forgiveness”, “grief”, “pain” and “presence”.

Fifth, the care-giving in the hospice is reciprocal. One care-giver describes the pleasure he drew from an encounter with a patient: “his breathing was shallow, and his eyes were rolled back, and I could see the light of his eyes, and it just came over me, this light...I remember that feeling of him being a warmth coming over me”. Another explains that “I miss that contact ...something with a little intimacy and sex behind it...I’d have to say I get that through caregiving” (2005:140-41). Others describe the death of the patient as a gift given to them: “I was privileged to be there

that moment with him”, and they admit “they gained far more than they gave” (2005:144).

This reciprocal nature of the transactions described by Russ raises an important question: if care-givers are fulfilling their own needs, what makes their work altruistic? Put more broadly: given the reciprocal and obligatory nature of gift-giving, is the notion of gift altruism a contradiction in terms? In its defence, we can suggest that gift altruism should be defined not by a tally of profit and loss, but by the nature of the giving and of the relationship between the parties. In Buber’s terms, it is an “I-Thou” relationship: what is important is a way of being, not considerations of strategy or instrumentality. Russ (2005:133) describes the exercise of the gift of caring as “an attitude, a mode of attention, a quietness and a stillness with which the care is performed”. Gift altruism resides then not in what is given (the sacrifice, the effort) or why or even what is held back (Weiner 1992), but rather in the way in which it is given. The currency of gift altruism is not so much the care as the way of caring.

Previous perspectives on giving have tended to privilege questions of strategy (Bourdieu 1977), reciprocity (Mauss 1990) and purity of intention (Erwin 2006). The possibility of altruism is delimited by these criteria: if an act is unintentional, or reciprocated, or conducive to personal gain, it cannot be altruistic. The concept of gift altruism privileges a different question: what is the attitude of mind of the giver? This is a perspective that tolerates a broader definition of altruism. Lock (2002:329) notes that in Buddhism, giving should be enjoyable. This implies a kind of spiritual economy that is not based on a theory of the scarcity of pleasure or goodness. An act may be reciprocated, and beneficial to the actor, and even in some sense obligatory or automatic, and retain its altruistic quality. In the spiritual perspective of the gift-altruist, the pleasure of giving affirms the authenticity of the act; it does not undermine it, as it threatens to do in economists’ theories of the self-interested “altruist”.

We could suggest then that gift altruism is not self-*less* so much as self-*present*. Only when the self is present can the other be properly attended to, rather than an object that is simply given to. Unfortunately, in the case described by Russ (2005:139), this kind of encounter is unrecognised and unrewarded by the medical companies for

whom value is constituted by more tangible outcomes. Whereas commodity altruism is typified by an ideally self-less transaction, gift altruism is typified by a self-present encounter. Gift altruism implies obligation and positive freedom: the freedom to be what one is. Carers give to fulfil their own nature: they have a gift and must pass it on. Commodity altruism, by contrast, implies choice and negative freedom: the freedom from the obligation to one's own self-interest. Commodity altruists give to deny and to be free of their own nature.

It is tempting at this point to return to the question posed at the start of the essay: is altruism possible? To assert a distinction between "commodity altruism" and "gift altruism" is to suggest that some behaviours cannot be reduced to the pursuit of self-interest. It is to argue that the obligation and reciprocity of the gift do not always detract from its altruistic, other-oriented nature. Feelings of fulfilment might accompany the efforts of the carers described by Russ, but this does not mean that these feelings are the main dynamics of the relationships she describes. To deny that self-fulfilment is the main dynamic at work in the hospice is, admittedly, to assert faith in something intangible. Buber adopted this position when he wrote about love that "feelings are a mere accompaniment to the metaphysical and metapsychical fact of the relation" (1937:81).

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In conclusion, this essay has argued that altruism is not automatically vulnerable to the economists' model of self-interested behaviour. It noted that anthropologists have shown that altruism is not a universal ideal, nor always a benign one. Rather it is often embedded in power relationships and is the product of a specific history and worldview. Western concepts of altruism have been constructed in opposition to the individual (Durkheim 1963), to the market (Parry 1986), to modern economics (Malinowski 1922), to the self (Margolis 1982), and to the material (Etzioni 1988). However, while the ideology of disinterested giving emerged in contrast to the domain of the market, the essay noted that altruism has paradoxically often been imagined as a type of "commodity relationship": impersonal, transient and free. The

essay attempted to broaden the concept of altruism beyond this impersonal ideal, proposing a distinction between “gift altruism” and “commodity altruism”. The proposed concept of gift altruism privileges not the extent of the altruist’s self-sacrifice, but rather the way in which the gift is given, and the nature of the relationship within which the giving occurs.

As a final thought, we might note that anthropologists appear to be well-placed to study examples of “gift altruism”. Whereas the methods and aims of economists depend on objectifying what is studied, anthropologists may be in a better position to encounter, however momentarily, the reality that they later seek to represent. Indeed, by describing the suffering of their subjects (Das 1995:23), they may sometimes play a similar role to the care-givers described by Russ (2005:145) who give the “gift of voice and witness”.

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