



### Is Altruism Simply a Matter of Programming?

By Joel Axenroth

Webster's defines altruism as: "1: unselfish regard for or devotion to the welfare of others. 2: behavior by an animal that is not beneficial to or may be harmful to itself but that benefits others of its species."

It is the second definition that I want to focus on here. As for the first definition, unselfish regard for the welfare of others, this is subject to much interpretation. What defines unselfish regard and differentiates it from selfish regard? If I act in an altruistic manner for the pleasure that such actions bring me, or for the regard and acclaim that society and my peers provide to me for such actions, am I truly acting from unselfish motives? Isn't the pursuit of my own pleasure, regardless of what form that pleasure takes, a strictly selfish act? If caring for others brings me pleasure and some measure of fulfillment and provides me an increase in my own self worth, am I not undertaking altruistic actions for selfish reasons? And if I commit to such actions in an open manner for all to view and acclaim, am I also not seeking such acclaim for selfish reasons, which includes the benefits and regards that society affords me?

So, for us to be truly altruistic, must our actions therefore bring us no pleasure or acclaim? If we accept the defini-

continued on page 4



Welcome to the Spring Issue of the Deist Alliance Quarterly Newsletter. This quarter's theme is Altruism.

What is the Deist perspective on altruism?

- 1) "Is Altruism Simply a Matter of Programming?"  
by Joel Axenroth
- 2) "Deist Altruism: Sensible Selflessness"  
by Dave Gaddis.
- 6) "Our Choice: Selfishness or Altruism"  
by Brandon Norgaard
- 8) "Altruistically Yours"  
by Chuck Clendenen



## Deist Altruism: Sensible Selflessness

By Dave Gaddis

Pure altruism requires human beings, as a matter of moral duty, to subjugate their own interests to those of others regardless of the personal costs. Ayn Rand argued passionately against altruism, going so far as to call it evil and self-destructive.

*“If any civilization is to survive, it is the morality of altruism that men have to reject.” – Ayn Rand*

On the other hand we prophets and spiritual leaders extolling the virtues of altruism. Consider Jesus’ teachings during the Sermon on the Mount, for example. As a Baptist preacher, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a great human being by any measure, was profoundly influenced by Jesus’ teachings.

*“Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness.” - Martin Luther King, Jr.*

Can altruism be **both** evil and virtuous? Absolutely. As with anything that lacks moderation and rationality, suffering is increased by the extremes of altruism. Even with good intentions, should parents give their child’s college fund to a poor family – “nobly” putting the interests of another, more needy family ahead of their own? Be honest. On the other hand, should we follow Ms. Rand’s selfishness model? Do we really have **no** obligation to our fellow human beings? In Unified Deism, we “encourage all to advance the human condition within their personal capacity to do so.” This position recognizes the responsibility we have to one another while stopping well short of making it a moral imperative. Deist altruism is based on a more sensible selflessness with three guiding essentials: balance, focus, and personal responsibility.



One should primarily take care of their family's wellbeing. Failure to do so risks putting yourself or your loved ones on the receiving end of someone else's sense of altruism, which may fall well short of your needs. Instead, find **balance**. You do more for humanity by raising and being a family that contributes to society. Once you have provided for your family's present and future, then you should feel compelled to help others. It does not have to be focused on money either. Donating your time, essentially sacrificing part of your precious life energy, to others is even nobler from this writer's perspective.

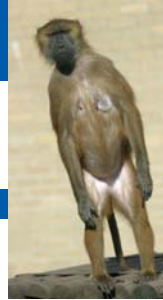
**Focused** altruism calls us to do acts that provide long term resolution before we choose short term ones. For example, a day of volunteering at Habitat for Humanity is more focused than one serving the poor at a food kitchen. Both are noble, but the former will provide years of shelter for a family instead of a single meal. When feasible, the Deist should consider focusing his or her time on efforts that provide lasting change.

*“What we have done for ourselves alone dies with us; what we have done for others and the world remains and is immortal.” – Albert Pike*

Finally, **personal responsibility** is a mainstay of Deist philosophy and it extends to the object of our altruism. It is neither practical nor wise to expend resources on those unwilling to help themselves. This is not pointed at the mentally or physically challenged but squarely at those who have the capacity to lift themselves up but choose not to try. It is pointed at those who do not take advantage of free alcohol or drug rehab programs, training programs, counseling services, or other social services. Be patient, but demand personal responsibility from those who elect to take your time or the fruits of your labor and selfishly squander them.

Deist altruism recognizes the innate value of human beings and calls the Deist to action. However, this action should be tempered by balance, focus, and personal responsibility. Once you have provided for yourself and your family, focus your altruistic efforts on helping those willing to help themselves. Keep an eye toward long term solutions vice immediate relief when possible. Employ sensible selflessness instead of the self-destructive, idealized altruism of the revealed religions.

*“What we do in life echoes in eternity.” – Maximus*



continued from page 1

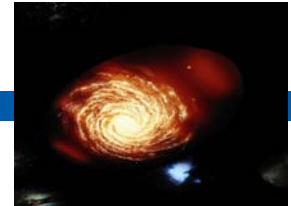
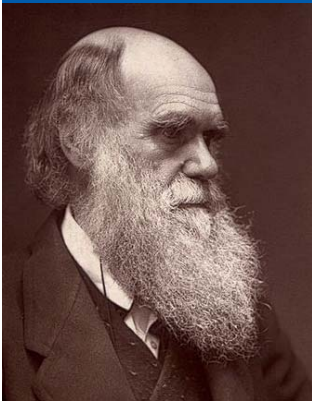
## "Altruism"

Behavior by an animal that is not beneficial to itself but benefits others of its species.

tion that unselfish regard is a requirement of altruism, then is acting in a manner that results in a benefit to us, perhaps not materially but in the form of increased self-regard, pleasurable feelings, or public acclaim, inconsistent with the definition of altruism?

If such is the case, then why would men (or women) act in such a manner, to the detriment of their own interest and to the benefit of another's? Why would we undertake an action that brings us no pleasure, no acclaim, and no reward? Isn't such an action contrary to our very nature - to act in a manner that brings us no corresponding gain of any kind?

Let us examine closely Webster's second definition. Behavior by an animal (and isn't man just a slightly more complex animal?) that is not beneficial to itself but benefits others of its species. The key phrase here is "benefits others of its species". For the theory of evolution, that brutally direct element of survival of the fittest, proclaims that it is not only the fittest member of the species that survives but the fittest species as a whole that survives. Evolution, and survival of the fittest, is not an individual attribute but a species-wide design that encompasses all aspects of species survival. That some members, or a subset of members, must sacrifice themselves so that others can survive is not only accounted for in the evolutionary



model, but also gives that species an edge in species survival over less altruistic species.

We see this simple evolutionary programming for altruism at work in the human animal in instances where members will give some of their own material comforts, sustenance, and even their lives if need be to protect and succor other members of their species in need. This instinctive altruistic behavior is something that we are now programmed to exhibit as part of our evolutionary model. It has become an instinctive part of our central design. We celebrate it when we see it displayed in others, and we take joy in it when we display it ourselves.

Yet as much as we like to think that it is our brain, our intellect, and our superior morality derived from years of thought and study that have created our altruism, this is not the case. Like rudimentary morality and many of the advanced aspects of our better natures, our altruism derives not so much from our own design but from our designer and from the evolutionary model that was created for us in which we evolve. Our survival and development as a species required the evolution of these basic moral actions to which our intellect now spends so much time giving meaning.

Our altruism derives not so much from our own design but from our designer and from the evolutionary model that was created for us in which we evolve.



## Our Choice: Selfishness or Altruism

By Brandon Norgaard

One of the great questions of life is whether we truly have free will, at least some of the time, or whether our actions are completely determined by a complex clockwork in our brains, built on genetics, our environment, and the laws of physics. After deliberating over this question for some time, I concluded that most of our actions must be determined by physical events in most cases, but I still do believe that we have free will to make moral choices.

What this means is that most simple choices we make every day, such as what to eat for lunch and what movie to watch, are likely determined by brain functions of which we are not fully aware. But in situations where we need to make important moral decisions, such as whether to always help ourselves or to sometimes help others as well, we are able to make changes that are not predetermined by the forces of nature. Indeed, in such situations, our own consciousness is a force of nature alongside of gravity and electromagnetism.

We have the ability to conceptualize reality, to deliberate possible future actions and to choose which actions we will do. We also have the ability to understand ourselves and our natural preference for achieving sustained life, liberty, and happiness. Empathy allows us to understand and relate to the experiences of other people. Reason helps us understand the effects our possible actions will likely have on them.

What this means is that our moral choices consist of

figuring out who will likely benefit from any action we will make and who will likely be worse off. If we have more resources than we need to stay alive and be free and happy, then we have the choice to give some of those extra resources to those in need and thus to be *altruistic*, or instead to keep everything for one's own self, and thus to be *selfish*.

Altruism, though, is not always easy, nor is it always a good idea. Altruistic acts are by definition those that benefit others at one's own expense. This might to some people sound almost masochistic, but it need not be. One does not need to die for others or to live in poverty for the benefit of others. This kind of self-denying altruism seems quite irrational. On the other hand, if someone has more resources than they need, be it money, time, or something else, and opts to share some of this while keeping enough for one's own well being, then this is the best kind of altruism. It helps others and nobody is acting masochistically. It is a win-win situation.

In our lives, we often struggle to provide for ourselves and for our family. Life is not easy and many are left with fewer opportu-



nities to be successful than others. Now, for those of us who have become successful in life and are able to provide for our families with more than enough resources for sustained life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, a certain degree of altruism would probably be the better moral choice.

All of us should accept that our fortune is not entirely our own making. This means that every fortunate soul among us owes a debt of gratitude to others who helped make our good fortune possible. Each of us has, in varying degrees, benefited from the altruism of others at times in our lives. With this in mind, it makes sense to return the favor by helping others in need if one has the capacity to do so.

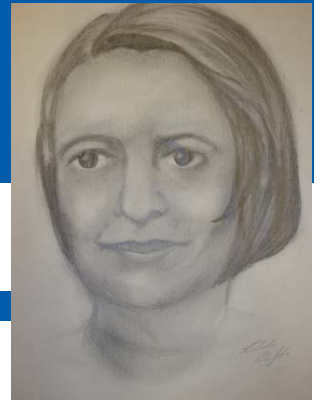
Another thing to keep in mind is that simply providing material resources to people in need does not necessarily help them. I believe that we should help the poor and hungry of the world if we have resources to spare, but only with the goal of helping these people become self-sufficient eventually. If a family is hungry and homeless, then the best thing for them would be for the parents to get a job through which they could earn enough money to provide

food and shelter for themselves and their children. In order for this to be possible, they probably need food, shelter, health care, and education to be given to them in the short term. If they are given these resources in their time of need, then before too long they should have the opportunity to provide for themselves.

The best altruistic acts are those that are meant primarily to help others to provide for themselves for the long term. This does often involve giving resources that others vitally need in the short term. If these resources are maintained indefinitely then this would not be beneficial to anyone because the recipient would not be encouraged to take any initiative for their own well being and would instead end up being rewarded for laziness.

There are situations where we find ourselves with more resources than we need. We have a free choice of what to do with this extra money, time, and property we have. We can acquire bigger houses, bigger cars, shiny jewelry, luxurious vacations, and make our lives as comfortable as possible with things far beyond what we need or even really want. Or we can use some of the extra resources we have to help people who are in need so that they will have more opportunities to provide for themselves and for their children. And we can do this all while avoiding anything close to masochism. Generous people often find that a simpler life is a happier life.

continued on page 10



## Altruistically Yours

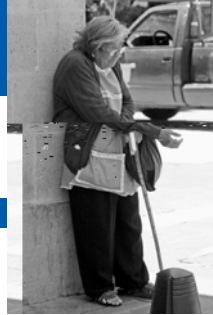
By Chuck Clendenen

I have always been interested in Ayn Rand's philosophy. I support much of what she promoted, including her pro-capitalism stance, but I believe that there was something that Ayn Rand defined incorrectly. One of the key things that Any Rand mischaracterized was altruism. She felt that there were two great evils that have been promoted as alternatives to selfishness: one, that man should sacrifice himself to the supernatural, and the other, that man should sacrifice himself for the sake of other men. The latter evil is known as altruism, which Ayn Rand rejected as being neither kind nor generous. According to Rand, altruism is not an act of good will. On this point I disagree completely with Ayn Rand.

Some people are defined by what they discover and learn early in life. Others are defined by the ideas they reject and the concepts they rebuild to replace them. Rand escaped repressive regime and fought against concepts that socialism promotes. If we look at how Rand defines altruism we see that she condemns the notion that we should place the needs of others above our own. Altruism as obligation, especially government altruism, is unnatural and counter to reason. If government is to decide what sacrifices we shall make to act generously towards persons of the government's choosing, then I too must reject such "altruism" as evil. If someone else decides for me, I am not altruistic. I am merely a source of revenue.

But involuntary "altruism", which Rand condemns, is false altruism. Love for one's fellow man is the foundation of true altruism. I use Robert Heinlein's definition of "love". Love is that condition when someone else's happiness is essential to our own. If we love our fellow humans, we will feel compelled to do something to reduce their suffering and increase their happiness, thus increasing our own happiness in the bargain. Is this selfish? No more than any other form of love is selfish. This is reasoned altruism, which comes from the head and not just the heart, and it can only be genuine if it is





Reason would dictate that we should strive towards the long-term best outcome for those whom we help, and there will be times that tough love is needed.

voluntary. Authentic altruism cannot be compelled, either by force or persuasion. But when we see suffering, we *must* act. People will risk their lives to save total strangers who are in mortal danger. We are hard-wired to be concerned about our fellow humans. Lack of compassion is a character defect. Not giving people everything they want is not lack of compassion. We instead should give people what they need, and sometimes what they need is to learn to take responsibility for their own actions.

We must choose carefully where to expend our energy and other resources, because the total burden of human need is more than we can bear, collectively or individually. We must study carefully before we choose whom to help with our limited resources. This is a difficult thing to do. If we try to do too much, we run the risk of diluting our efforts and rendering them ineffective. We should make sure that true love is at our center of gravity. Reason would dictate that we should strive towards the long-term best outcome for those whom we help, and there will be times that tough love is needed. Throwing money at a problem is usually not the best way to solve a problem. Teach a man to fish.

If you can make a living doing what you love, you will never work a day in your life. If your love for your fellow humans leads you to activities that end up helping other people lead better lives, you will never have to be concerned whether your efforts are called altruism or compassion or something else. You will simply be fulfilled, and your own small corner of the world will become a better place.



We are looking for great ideas. We are looking for YOU!

continued from page 7

We have this choice of whether to help others some of the time or to always help ourselves. It seems that too often, people make choices that tend more toward selfishness rather than smart and effective altruistic choices.

**Illustrations in the public domain:** p. 2 - Rev MLK tombstone (morgueFile photo). RdJaniero (morgueFile photo). Belisaire demandant l'aumone (Jacques-Louis Wikimedia Commons). p. 3 - Reid Family, Queensland (Wikimedia Commons). Volunteers of America Soup Kitchen (Wikimedia Commons). p. 4 - Cheetah family (morgueFile photo). Baboon (morgueFile photo). Sacrifice (morgueFile photo). p. 5 - Darwin (Wikimedia Commons). Baby grasping finger (morgueFile photo). Galaxy (morgueFile photo). p. 6 - Clockwork (morgueFile photo). Selfishness (morgueFile photo). Justice (morgueFile photo). p. 7 - Freedom (morgueFile photo). Money (morgueFile photo). Jewelry (morgueFile photo). p. 8 - Awe (morgueFile photo). OKC memorial (morgueFile photo). Ayn Rand drawing (Wikimedia Commons). p. 9 - Baby with parents (morgueFile photo). Hope (morgueFile photo). Hands (morgueFile photo). p. 10 - pointing finger (morgueFile photo).

**Copyrighted illustrations:** p. 3 - Ayn Rand (Wikipedia. Copyright Phyllis Cerf, photographer. Fair use for educational purposes. Both

<http://deistalliance.org/>

**The views expressed by the authors of the articles in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect the views of all Deists or of all the members of the Deist Alliance.**

**Credit for authorship is given for each article. Except as noted, all images are in the public domain or released under the Gnu Free Documentation license, most often from Wikimedia Commons or by the editor.**

