

# Altruism

## I. Definition and Key Ideas

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The word *altruism* literally means “other-ism”; and it is the philosophy of doing things purely for the benefit of others, without expecting to get anything out of it yourself.

### **Example**

Donating your money or time to a charity or to help someone, without trying to get recognition for it.

Philosophers and psychologist debate whether true altruism exists, and how it could be possible to observe or detect it—because the crux of the arguments is whether a person’s *motivations* are truly altruistic or not. After all, people who help others often report that the experience is fulfilling and helps them feel good about their lives and themselves; therefore, they get some benefit out of it. Does that still count as altruism? We’ll explore this problem throughout the article.

## II. Altruism vs. Compassion

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Altruism and compassion are related concepts. Compassion is the ability to feel the pain and happiness of others, and truly to care about the well-being of others. When we see someone devastated by loss or sadness, we feel some of that pain ourselves; and when that person gets help and starts to smile again, we have an urge to smile ourselves; that’s part of compassion—empathy—feeling other’s feelings. But compassion also includes feeling motivated to help others, just because you want them to feel good. It’s one of the most basic concepts in every world religions and widely considered to be a key element in living a meaningful, fulfilling life.

### **Compassion is not the same as altruism**

Compassion is the feeling that motivates altruism. With altruism, you act generously and helpfully to others without expecting any benefit for yourself. This may seem difficult if you don’t have great compassion; not difficult to help people, but difficult—some say impossible—not to want to get something for yourself.

Many philosophers argue that altruism is not a helpful concept. It doesn't matter, they argue, if you *also* gain some benefit or happiness from helping others; in fact, that's even better! And altruism is defined in terms of the motivation; even an action that benefits you can be considered altruistic as long as you didn't do it expecting to benefit. So, since selflessness isn't necessary in order to do good for others, some philosophers argue that altruism is an unrealistic standard and compassion is better, because it definitely motivates you to help people.

### III. Altruism vs. Enlightened Self-Interest

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Aside from altruism and compassion, another way to help others acting out of “enlightened self-interest.” This idea starts from the principle that helping others always ultimately benefits you in all sorts of ways; you feel better about your own life, you make friends, and in time some of those people may come to your aid when you need it. If you live your life only for narrow personal gain, you won't get any of these benefits. Therefore, the [argument](#) goes, it's better to be kind and help others for your own ultimate benefit.

This argument is persuasive to many people, but it also has many critics. Its critics focus on two questions:

1. **Is it true?** Enlightened self-interest depends on a very specific calculation: that the benefits of helping others outweigh the risks. Let's say you have \$50 to spare at the end of the month. Enlightened self-interest says you should give it to charity or in some way use it to benefit others because this will bring you fulfillment, increased social ties, and possible support in the future. But do these benefits truly outweigh the benefit you could gain by simply spending that money on yourself? It's a leap of faith that supporters of this idea have to make, and some people say it's too much.
2. **Is it moral?** Enlightened self-interest is a moral system based on selfishness (though admittedly it's a complex, generous form of selfishness). Because of this, some critics argue that it isn't truly moral at all – that in the end morality must be based on something beyond self-interest.

### III. Famous Quotations About Altruism

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#### *Quote 1*

“I slept and I dreamed that life is all joy. I woke and I saw that life is all service. I served and I saw that service is joy.” (Khalil Gibran)

Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet* uses metaphors and poetry to describe a spiritual journey towards wisdom and a moral life. In this short line, Gibran describes the process of learning to be more compassionate through altruism. Initially, when he wakes up, Gibran is not sure *why* he must serve; he just knows that it's his duty. But once he begins to serve—to live altruistically, it becomes the greatest source of happiness for him. So, his altruism turns into a kind of enlightened self-interest, but Gibran arrives there only because actually *practiced* altruism: it isn't something that he can learn from a book or through rational calculations. He has to transform himself through service before he can live by enlightened self-interest.

### **Quote 2**

“There are evidently some principles in [human] nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it.” (Adam Smith)

Adam Smith, often cited as the founder of modern capitalism, is misunderstood by almost everyone in the media these days. Lots of people on TV seem to think that Adam Smith argued for a system of self-interested competition, in which every individual and every company would strive to make as much money as possible and stay ahead of their competition, without regard for the effects on others. And that by maximizing their profits, these capitalists will, supposedly, benefit everyone. But Smith's argument was the opposite – that capitalism only works because of human generosity and our natural desire to see others happy. If human beings behave completely selfishly, Smith argued, capitalist systems will eventually fail.

## **IV. The History and Importance of Altruism**

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The Western idea of altruism can be traced back to the early Christians, who viewed Christ's self-sacrifice as a model for all humanity to follow. Just as Christ suffered for humanity's sins, so we should accept suffering for the benefit of others if we want to be like Jesus. Christian philosophers made various arguments for this principle, mostly based on God's commandments rather than the ideas of compassion and enlightened self-interest.

During the Enlightenment, philosophers throughout Europe criticized traditional religious views and sacred institutions, but they continued to defend many aspects of Christian morality, particularly the importance of self-sacrificing altruism. Philosophers like David Hume,

Immanuel Kant, and Thomas Jefferson made arguments for an altruistic moral system not based on the traditional concept of God.

This tradition of altruistic ethics took a hit in the late 1800s following the monumental impact of Charles Darwin's discoveries. Darwin showed that all natural life changes over time due to a process of natural selection. In this view, all living organisms, including humans, are naturally in competition to survive and reproduce, and so it seems like it should probably be natural to be very selfish, and un-natural to be altruistic. Unless enlightened self-interest is really true.

Darwin believed that human beings can still be capable of altruism for much the same reason that we're capable of art and scientific invention – because consciousness gives us abilities that other animals don't possess. The Dalai Lama has also said that compassion and altruism are learned potentials of the human mind.

Biologists have developed various theories that account for altruism within the Darwinian perspective, and collectively, these ideas have come to be known as “biological altruism,” a relatively new and controversial idea that may allow us to reconcile traditional altruistic morality with the revelations of modern biology (see section 7).

## **V. Altruism in Popular Culture**

### ***Example 1***

[SPOILER!] In Disney's *Frozen*, Anna makes the ultimate sacrifice to save her sister, Elsa. Elsa is about to be murdered by Hans, but Anna allows herself to die instead, thus trading her life for Elsa's. This is the ultimate form of altruism, since Anna is motivated only by a desire to save her sister. However, she does get the benefits of enlightened self-interest, even though they weren't part of her motivation – and according to the prophesy, “an act of true love can melt a frozen heart,” this ultimately saves Anna.

### ***Example 2***

Another example of sibling-based altruism comes at the beginning of *The Hunger Games* (this is a popular trope in Hollywood!) When Prim Everdeen is selected to represent her district at the deadly Games, and her sister Katniss steps in to take her place. Again, Katniss is not motivated by self-interest, but only by a desire to help her sister.

## VII. Controversies

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### *Biological Altruism*

As we saw in section 5, Darwinism once seemed like a harsh blow against traditional altruism, in spite of Darwin's own efforts to make them compatible. Modern-day biologists and moral philosophers have continued his work by trying to understand how altruism can exist even if human beings, like all creatures, are products of evolution, which seems like it should promote only self-interest and caring for one's children and mate.

Some of the most fascinating work in this area is being done by biologists studying moral behavior in apes and monkeys. They behave sometimes with seemingly altruistic fairness, compassion, caring, and generosity. Several experiments have revealed this sort of behavior both among wild primates and in the lab, suggesting that there may be a biological basis to human altruism.

### **But how?**

Shouldn't evolution result in genes that should program us to seek our own survival over everything else? As it turns out, no – and there are several reasons why. Richard Dawkins argues in *The Selfish Gene* that even if our *genes* are selfish self-replicators, *we* are not. Using the science of modern genetics, he shows several reasons that genes might be protected and passed down due to altruistic behavior. For example, if you live in a small group, as we all did throughout human evolution, then benefitting the people around you is obviously going to promote your own survival and reproduction! Basically, it's a biological argument for enlightened self-interest.

Another approach, suggested by Dawkins and others in the 70s, is to note that human beings aren't just genetic creatures – we're also *cultural* creatures. And cultures, like genes, need to be passed down from generation to generation in order to survive. The culture that survives is the one that successfully reproduces itself—and cultures reproduce by colonizing new minds. Therefore if altruism promotes the spread of one's culture, that would promote the spread of altruism. This does seem to happen; many people have converted to religions because representatives of that religion bring them education, health-care, or defense. Many religions and cultures have spread this way, so that seems to show at least one way that altruism can spread naturally regardless of our biological programming.