

Altruism, Virtue, and the Nature of Humanity
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-**Altruism is “an interest in other people *for their own sake.*”** – Antony Flew, *Dictionary of Philosophy*. 1979.

-**“[T]he good person must be a self-lover...”** – Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1168a28-29).

In 2002 I spent the end of the year volunteering my time to the Salvation Army. I stood outside the exits of stores like Safeway and Food-4-Less and rang a bell. I wished people “Happy Holidays,” “Merry Christmas,” “Happy Hanukah,” and any other variations I could come up with for “Seasons Greetings!” It could be monotonous work now and then, but it gave me a lot of time to observe people and to think about what I saw. My observations ultimately led to a serious analysis of the nature of altruism, and of motivated behavior in general.

I had quite a fun time observing people’s reactions to seeing me. My nights working for the Salvation Army were especially interesting because I was specifically not asking for donations. I was merely wishing people pleasant yuletide greetings and ringing a bell. I was also wearing a Santa hat and had battery-operated Christmas lights entwined around my arm and head. I was shocked that some people I encountered reacted to my, “Happy Holidays!” with a series of defensive justifications. They reacted as if I had said, “Give me money for a good cause!” rather than something festive, and furthermore they were unable to *just* refuse to donate, they had to make excuses as well! I could tell it was psychologically painful for them to not donate. Sometimes they would spend a full minute explaining to me how they had already donated to some charity, and so it was okay that they weren’t donating anything now. Still other people responded by completely ignoring me.

I encountered three common ways of responding to a Salvation Army bell-ringer such as myself, and examine them in my paper “Conditioned Responses to the Ringing of a Bell.” One of the most common ways

was to ignore the bell-ringer with such completeness, i.e. avoiding looking in even their general direction, setting a fixed, mask-like expression on their face,

giving wide-berth to the bell-ringer, etc., that it could only have been through conscious effort. (Houchin 1)

Another common way was to respond positively and donate money. A third common response was to respond positively and then not donate money, but rather make excuses. These experiences, as outlined in my aforementioned paper,

...lead me to wonder why so many would fanatically ignore me. Could it be because they too felt guilty about not giving, and wanted to avoid facing the source of their disease? It is interesting to note that if it is normal for a person to feel guilt if they do not donate money, then those who do donate money may be simply performing operant avoidance. Operant avoidance occurs when an organism chooses to act on its environment in order to avoid a punishment or negative feeling (Skinner). Thus, those who give money do not do so in order to help others, but in order to avoid a painful sense of guilt. Their primary desire is to maintain their happiness, not to increase another's happiness. "Of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some good to himself" (Hobbes 105).

This is where my considerations of altruism really began, and I found Hobbes said what I was thinking. I asked myself why people do things for others. I wanted to understand the basic motivation for altruistic behavior. After much thought, I drew a couple of conclusions that Hobbes draws in the Leviathan: that people only engage in altruistic acts in order to avoid negative psychological consequences. They help because if they did not help, they would feel bad. In addition to that, I concluded no one ever does something they do not wish to do. When any action is taken, it is done because the person wants to do it, and this makes every action ultimately reducible to a selfish motivation.

Later I heard about the “What Motivates Altruism” class here at CSU, Chico and determined to take it in order to broaden my understanding of the subject. I was interested to see what would become of the beliefs I found myself holding in December of 2002.

The opinion of altruism I had settled upon is a form of psychological egoism as described by Hobbes. This is a somewhat depressing worldview as it doesn't account for much nobility in human expression towards others. Distasteful as the conclusion is, at the time I couldn't see any counterargument to the assertion that all human action is done to satisfy the agent. However, I have since encountered compelling arguments against psychological egoism and alternatives to it. As such, my old view has changed and broadened during this past semester, due in no small part to my shadowing of a local altruist.

That altruist is Kirk Monfort, a local community member designated exceptional by Professors Flescher and Worthen. By today's standards, Kirk is a very quirky individual, and indeed exceptional in many regards. He drives a car only twice a year, and that's to ferry a bunch of college freshman to San Francisco and back on an annual field trip for the GST program he manages at the college. He is both a professor at CSU, Chico and the vice-chair on the Chico Planning Commission. The Planning Commission reviews, modifies, and decides whether or not to approve many of the development projects in the city. From my time spent with him, I found that he believes that everyone owes something to their community and ought to serve it in some way. He also believes strongly in positive rights as opposed to negative rights.

The differences between the two forms of rights are striking when considered practically. The United States system of law and legislated morality is one of negative rights. All one has to do, legally, is not violate another person's rights. There is no obligation to assist anyone. The

moral consequences of this are shown by the rape and murder case involving Jeremy Strohmeyer and David Cash. While at a casino, and both drunk and high, Strohmeyer lured a 7-year old girl into a women's bathroom, where they were alone. Cash saw this taking place and simply left. When he returned, Strohmeyer had raped and killed the girl. Cash did not report the crime, even after the body was found, or after Strohmeyer confessed to him. Strohmeyer received life sentences, but Cash was not charged with any crime, for he did not break any law (Feldman).

Under a system that leans into the negative-rights end of the spectrum, Cash is not condemnable because he did not actually violate any of that 7-year old girl's rights. Under a system that leans into the positive-rights end of the spectrum, Cash would be condemnable and accountable for not taking action to protect the 7-year old girl's rights. This case illustrates to me the need for our legal system to lean more towards the positive rights end of the spectrum. There should be some basic level of respect and responsibility our law-system demands of us as a people.

Kirk appears to exercise a personal system of positive rights in his work on the campus and in the city. He frequently goes out of his way to help the community, something I've had the opportunity to see firsthand this semester. Kirk's life appears to have a coherent shape and form to it, ultimately leading to his current positions here in Chico and at the university. He told me that he moved around a lot when he was a kid, but basically grew up in a classic Levittown that popped up after World War II ended. Kirk described it as a "soulless piece of shit." When he attended college he saw what a real community looked like and decided that he wanted to live in a college town. That's when he first started thinking about becoming a professor. He said that Chico is a special place and, through his work on the Planning Commission, he wants to keep

Chico looking and feeling like a nice, positive community and not evolving into a “soulless piece of shit.”

Early on in Kirk’s life he was aware of his surroundings and the effects they had on his own psychological well-being. He was able to determine what he wanted and where he wanted to live, and as we will see he believed in his own efficacy enough that he was able to accomplish his goals. All of this is illustrated in a story he told me in response to my asking him why he had become interested in the City Planning Commission. He said, “Selfish reasons, selfish reasons,” and then proceeded to tell me about how when he was quite young he had lived in a part of Chico that got abused by developers. He said he had felt offended and dismayed by the way his neighborhood was transformed into something in which he did not want to live.

Naturally, Kirk was not satisfied with feeling offended and powerless. Because of his robust sense of efficacy, he felt he could actually change the city and his environment. He got involved with local politics, eventually working his way up to the City Planning Commission, where he now strives to keep Chico friendly and pleasing to live in while still allowing for realistic growth. Kirk likes Chico. He enjoys living here, and believes it is a special place. He doesn’t want to see the entire city get abused the way his aforementioned neighborhood was. Clearly, his inclination to live in a well-developed city is a motivating factor for his actions on the Planning Commission.

When asked what he thought of being picked as an altruist to be shadowed for this class, he quipped, “We’re hard up, aren’t we?” Kirk believes our society has perverted the natural, community-oriented nature of human beings so that now, when somebody (like him) does what anybody ought to do in a *normal* society, they’re treated as a rarity. Another motivation that is working on Kirk’s actions is his belief in what virtue is, how to be a “good person,” and his

sense of community. He told me that he believes everyone *ought* to give something back to the community. He said, "I've often thought on the perversity of thinking individualistically," and that, "Without a large sense of community our species wouldn't have made it." But just how large a sense of community does Kirk have?

To get an idea of that, we can look at his position on the city Planning Commission. He seems to involve himself equally in whatever comes before the commission, wherever in Chico it may be and whatever it may be about. He spends half a dozen hours or more every two weeks preparing for the meetings. He reads through a binder several inches thick, written almost entirely in legalese, and he travels to the sites under question and examines them thoroughly. He told me he does that so he can be familiar with the area so that when people declare, "You can't build there! There's a tree at the spot!" he can reply, "I've seen that tree! It's a twig!"

Kirk tries to mediate between citizens and developers during the Planning Commission meetings. He explained to me, "I try to tell people when they're getting a good deal, but they don't listen." I saw a classic example of this at a meeting on October 22. Kirk's efforts at this meeting can be seen as quite altruistic, using either one of these definitions of altruism:

- As helping another at a cost to oneself, or
- As "an interest in other people *for their own sake.*" (Flew)

A developer wanted to put in 6 two-story houses. All the neighbors opposed this because they all have one-story houses. They felt that the two-story houses would violate their privacy rights by allowing the new residents to look into their backyards.

Now, the developer was willing to have the land zoned as low-density residential, because that is what the rest of the neighborhood is zoned as, but he wanted to develop it using the City's small-lot subdivision standards which would allow higher density. Under normal

residential standards he could build on only five lots. Using the small-lot standards he could build on six. But six small, one-story houses aren't as profitable as five big houses. So, in order to make this profitable, he wanted to build two-story houses. He was willing to put the houses back 25 feet from any other property line, and make the second-story windows high, horizontal-slits; bathroom windows out of which one could not look. He was also more than willing to jump through a few other (expensive) hoops involving sewer lines and streets. In essence, the developer was willing to cooperate with the citizens in a prisoner's dilemma game, because the developer understood that he was playing an iterated game with the citizens.

The Prisoner's Dilemma is an old logic problem that is covered in extensive detail in Robert Axelrod's The Evolution of Cooperation. The Prisoner's Dilemma is complex, and Axelrod's ability to explain it succinctly and effectively far exceeds mine, so I shall quote him extensively on the subject. Axelrod describes the Prisoner's Dilemma game as one where,

There are two players. Each has two choices. Namely cooperate or defect. Each must make the choice without knowing what the other will do. No matter what the other does, defection yields a higher payoff than cooperation. The dilemma is that if both defect, both do worse than if both had cooperated. (7-8)

Axelrod says this is,

simply an abstract formulation of some very common and interesting situations in which what is best for each person individually leads to mutual defection, whereas everyone would have been better off with mutual cooperation. (9)

He goes on to walk the reader through the infallible logic supporting the conclusion that defection is always the best strategy, with "best" being defined as getting the highest payoff.

This is true *only if* you are playing the game only once with your opponent, or you know when

the last turn will be. The reason for this is that if you are only playing once, you will never have to deal with your opponent again, so you have nothing to gain by bending over backwards for him and risking getting taken advantage of by a defection, for they will never be around to reciprocate your kindness. The same is true of the last move for a game of a known finite number of turns, because there will be “no future to influence” (10) beyond that move. Axelrod, takes this to its logical conclusion,

On the next-to-last move neither player will have an incentive to cooperate since they can both anticipate a defection by the other player on the very last move. Such a line of reasoning implies that the game will unravel all the way back to mutual defection on the first move of any sequence of plays that is of known finite length (Luce and Raiffa 1957, pp. 94-102) (10).

Axelrod immediately follows this up with the observation that it does not hold true for players who “will interact an indefinite number of times” (10). The reason for this is that a player will be able to cooperate in the hopes of influencing their opponent to cooperate as well, leading to a greater payoff for each individual player than mutual defection. And as stated, this can only occur if the last turn is not known to the players, and if the players know they will probably have to deal with each other in the future. This is known as an iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma.

Getting back to the Planning Commission meeting, the developer understood that he was playing an iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma with the citizens. He would have to deal with them for an indeterminate period far into the future. For this reason, he was willing to cooperate with them and make numerous concessions in the hopes that they would likewise cooperate and not object to his construction of 6 two-story houses with teensy windows. Tragically, the

citizens did not understand the Prisoner's Dilemma and defected. They believed they were playing a one-shot game, and that after they defected and reaped their payoff, the developer would go away. Kirk tried to explain to them that this was not the case and they really should accept the developer's offer.

You see, legally, the developer only had to build 10 feet away from the property lines, and could put gigantic bay windows on all his second-story floors. There was (not really) anything the city could do to prevent him from doing just that. But still, the citizens refused the developer's generous offers, insulted him, and generally defected.

And so the citizens won that round of the game. The Planning Commission ended up making it so that the developer could only build 6 one-story houses, because the low-density residential zone allows the commission that prerogative. Kirk tried to salvage the situation by getting the commission to allow ONE house to be two-story.

As Kirk later explained to me, following the small-lot development standards for his project had been the developer's idea, and if he didn't want to do that he didn't have to. He could just follow the normal development standards (allowing him only 5 houses, but fewer restrictions), and there was nothing the city could do about it. Kirk told me that, after the meeting, the developer would just crunch the numbers and see if building 5 one-story + 1 two-story houses was more profitable than following normal development standards and building 5 two-story houses. If it ends up being more profitable to build the 5 two-story houses, he probably won't feel like sacrificing a lot of potential profit by putting in tiny windows and setting the houses way back. In other words, when the next turn of the game comes up, the developer won't have any reason to cooperate and will most likely defect.

I found this to be an amusing example of the Prisoner's Dilemma in action, and it provides a good example of how Kirk goes to great lengths to help other people, even when it gains him nothing. Specifically, Kirk had to spend hours in fruitless debate after he had already spent a good deal of time acquainting himself with the legal documents and the laws and rules germane to the debate.

On the surface, this appears to be altruistic. Kirk volunteers a great deal of time, effort, and thought to an activity for which he is not directly compensated, and which benefits a great deal of people. However, I am not sure I can see it as a wholly altruistic act. It seems to me as if Kirk has engaged in an epic overgeneralization, and then coupled that with an unusual sense of power and efficacy. When it comes to having an agreeable living area, most people are content with decorating their house nicely. Not Kirk. No, Kirk has to go and have a direct hand in shaping the entire city of 70,000 in which he lives. He views the entire city of Chico as his living area. So in helping those citizens, and in helping the Planning Commission develop all parts of Chico efficiently and pleasantly, he is helping himself live in a good area.

But it must be recognized that if there weren't people like Kirk, who care about keeping the city attractive, then the city would quickly become San Jose. And so Kirk's selfish actions (i.e., making his own living area as pleasing as it can be) extends out to directly benefit the countless individuals who happen to live in the same city as him. This gives his actions an altruistic appearance, merely because they are so far above what most people are willing to do. Many people won't even stop to pick up a piece of garbage in front of their house, but Kirk is cleaning up development projects all over the entire city.

Likewise, his apparently altruistic actions in the community and towards individuals can be similarly explained. His actions appear altruistic because they come at some cost to him, and

he does not seem to be directly rewarded for them. It seems he does them for the other's sake alone. However, I think he probably has engaged in another kind of overgeneralization. It is normal for people to make sacrifices for their close friends and family. It is normal for people to be altruistic towards those particularly close to them. Indeed, each of those forms of altruism have been shown to be behaviors that are evolutionarily prosperous.

In Richard Dawkin's The Selfish Gene, he talks about kin-selection and reciprocity, which are simply terms for the two altruistic behavior types I described above, and which I have suggested Kirk has overgeneralized. The theory of kin-selection suggests that creatures who act to save closely related relatives, even at mortal cost to themselves, will succeed in increasing the propagation of the gene that induces kin-selection. This is because the same gene that "causes" the self-sacrificial act has a significant statistical chance of being present in the creature's close-relatives.

Reciprocity means that creatures who correctly recognize iterated Prisoner's Dilemmas will increase the propagation of the gene that induce that form of altruism. The reason for this is that creatures who both have that gene end up working together, thereby increasing the survival chance of both creatures.

As an illustration of reciprocity altruism, Dawkins uses a hypothetical example of birds who are "parasitized by a particularly nasty kind of tick which carries a dangerous disease. It is very important that these ticks should be removed as soon as possible." Normally, an individual bird can keep itself clean of ticks, but there is a spot on top of its head that it cannot reach.

Dawkins says "the solution to the problem quickly occurs to any human. An individual may not be able to reach his own head, but nothing is easier than for a friend to do it for him. Later, when

the friend is parasitized himself, the good deed can be paid back.” Dawkins goes on to note that, in fact, “mutual grooming is ... very common in both birds and mammals” (183).

It is clear to me that human beings are genetically predisposed towards kin-selection and reciprocity. We love our children and our siblings and our parents to a significantly greater degree than an *unrelated* stranger. Even if a person had never met their brother before (perhaps the brother had been separated at birth), if they were suddenly reunited, they would be willing to make great sacrifices for each other even though they were complete strangers. Likewise, we are friends with people who are nice to us, and we are willing to make altruistic sacrifices for our friends, but we are much less inclined to make those kinds of sacrifices for people who have taken advantage of us.

Kirk engages in those same kinds of altruism, but he does so for a much broader group of people than his kin and friends. He has re-defined the circle that is closest to him to include a much larger community. This broader circle of inclusion is unusual in our society, perhaps because it would have difficulty successfully being selected by evolution. By this I mean if one sacrifices for too many genetically dissimilar people, one will simply die without actually increasing the chances for the propagation of the gene that predisposes one towards sacrificing for too many people.

Because this sort of overgeneralization is rare, Kirk gets labeled an “altruist,” and one who must be studied. In this analysis, Kirk’s remark that “we’re hard-up aren’t we?” is accurate, from a certain point of view. Kirk only appears exceptional and altruistic because so many around him have much more restricted views of their home and community. Relative to the rest of us, he is altruistic. Relative to himself, he doesn’t appear to be so. He is merely looking out for his own environment and his own community. He just sees those two things as larger than

most. This relative way of defining praiseworthy individuals and actions lead me to some interesting conclusions concerning altruism and virtue, but I'll cover that later.

For now, we need to continue examining Kirk Monfort. His overgeneralized sense of community and home isn't the only unusual thing about him. He also has a dry sense of humor and an interesting worldview. When I met him for our first weekly lunch at the Bell Memorial Union, he told the cashier that he was paying for my slice of pizza as well as his. This was a very nice gesture and one I hadn't been expecting. I thanked Kirk for the pizza, and he said, "It won't happen again." I thought this priceless response was quite hilarious, and think it does a good job of displaying Kirk's character. He's nice and generous, and but with a crusty and somewhat cynical way of looking at and interpreting the world.

After learning about psychological egoism in the "What Motivates Altruism" class, I talked about it with Kirk later that week during lunch. I found what he said to be very persuasive and it effectively changed my psychological egoist stance as outlined at the beginning of this paper. Kirk pointed out that there is a distinction between selfish behavior and self-interested behavior. He said that the way we use the word selfish is meant to set the behavior of some people off from others, not just to describe people who perform voluntary actions. He made an argument that he said Bishop Butler gives:

If I'm setting you up on a blind date and we get past the initial question of whether she's good looking, you might ask me what kind of person she is. And if I say to that, "well, she's selfish," you aren't going to take the date.

If you grant that all voluntary actions are selfish in that they are self-interested, because no one would voluntarily do something that would ultimately result in a net-negative gain for

them, then everyone and every action is selfish. This is the conclusion psychological egoism draws, and it is the conclusion I had drawn after my time observing people donate to the Salvation Army. However, when Kirk describes the girl as “selfish,” that does not confer the idea that she engages in voluntary actions. It describes the girl in a positively unflattering light.

In short, Kirk makes a distinction between a “selfish” action (to which a strong negative connotation is attached) and a “self-interested” action (to which a dry and scientific meaning is attached). Kirk concluded that he can accept the theory that altruism is ultimately “self-interested” as described above, but that it doesn’t make unselfish actions impossible. I myself believe that every voluntary action is “self-interested,” but I suggested to Kirk that that observation is an uninteresting one, because it doesn’t actually say anything meaningful about altruism, or actions in general, only that they are all voluntary. That is when my preliminary definition of altruism started to shift from psychological egoism’s dismissal of it, to something else.

Shortly after this conversation, I read some of James Rachels’ Elements of Moral Philosophy, specifically the fifth chapter in which he rebuts psychological egoism. He does so by attacking it on the same grounds that Kirk had, but Rachels draws a conclusion that goes a little bit farther than mine. Rachels imagines a person named Jones who “gives his money for the cause of famine relief rather than spending it on the movies” (66). Viewed through the lens of psychological egoism, this would not be an altruistic act, for Jones is “only doing what *he* most wants to do” (Rachels 66). However, Rachels argues that even if every action is motivated by personal desire, it can still be genuinely altruistic. He asks us to

concede, for the sake of argument, that all voluntary action is motivated by desire
... Even if this were granted, it would not follow that Jones is acting selfishly or

from self-interest. For if Jones wants to do something to help starving people, even when it means forgoing his own enjoyments, that is precisely what makes him *un*-selfish. What else could unselfishness be, if not wanting to help others, even at some sacrifice to oneself? (67)

Here we are beginning to look more closely at the voluntary actions that make up “altruism.” As I said, I agree with psychological egoism’s claim that voluntary actions are necessarily motivated by desire, but as Rachels points out there is a deeper level present:

Another way to put the point is to say that it is the *object* of a want that determines whether it is selfish or not. The mere fact that I am acting on *my* wants does not mean that I am acting selfishly; it depends on *what it is* that I want. If I want only my own good and care nothing for others, then I am selfish; but if I also want other people to be happy and I act on *that* desire, then my action is not selfish. (67)

I find Rachels’ contention that it is the *object* of desire, not the *origin* of the desire, that determines an action’s moral worth very attractive. This concept is carried even further by Neera Kapur Badhwar in her article, “Altruism versus Self-Interest: Sometimes a False Dichotomy.” Like Rachels’ arguments above, I find Badhwar’s to be very persuasive.

Badhwar examines altruism and self-interest through the lens of rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust. Rescuers are frequently held up as ideal examples of altruists. There are a number of reasons for this, which Badhwar gives in her article. The number one reason she gives is:

Rescuer’s individual decisions to rescue Jews were *not* the result of a conscious calculation of costs and benefits – rescuers made their decisions spontaneously,

in full awareness of the personal risk, and without expectation of reward, either material or social. (95)

Badhwar addresses psychological egoism, which would say the rescuers still *wanted* to risk incredible dangers to save Jews, so they were still selfish, by arguing that “their [rescuers’] unambiguous sense of themselves as part of a common humanity gave them *both* an altruistic desire for affirming others *and* a self-interested desire for being true to this sense of themselves (114).

Badhwar contends that an altruistic action is more morally worthy if it is done in order to affirm the altruist’s sense of self as well. The following passage does a good job at showing what it is I take from Badhwar’s article:

Altruistic motivations alone would have been sufficient to make their acts fully altruistic, but the self-interested desire to affirm their altruistic identity was necessary to make their act wholeheartedly altruistic. And it is only because their altruism *was* thus wholehearted that it can be truly said of them that they loved their neighbor as themselves and not just as an other. (115)

If someone helps another because they like helping people, then I think that is better than someone helping another randomly, accidentally, or without any idea that they were doing something good. It comes down to whether you would find it more morally praiseworthy if someone helped because they liked helping, or if they helped only because they had been forced to, or without any conscious idea that they ought to be helping; completely divorced from any internal self-reward or affirmation for the act.

It seems to me that Kirk has reached a point in his life where he couldn’t not do what he does in the community. He would have to radically alter his very self, his identity, in order to

cease donating so much of his time and energy and thought to the people and places around him. I think he is nicely described by the description of a person who not only does things for others for their sakes, but does things for others in order to affirm his own self as well.

Looking at altruism through the lens of Kirk Monfort's actions in the community, and the texts required for the "What Motivates Altruism" class, has allowed me to drastically broaden, sharpen, and improve my own views of altruism. In many of the texts I read and conversations I had concerning altruism, the topic of virtue was also raised. Because of that, I have also had my notion of virtue enhanced and more precisely defined as a result of my studies of altruism. It seems to me that altruism is a subset of virtue, not virtue itself. This is an arguable claim, and many of the texts I read this semester would disagree with that idea and profess that altruism is virtue, and virtue altruism. It is here that I can begin to assemble my own, more robust views on altruism and virtue.

I spent a lot of time talking with Kirk about these issues, and his actions and words can be useful for examining virtue as well as altruism. Kirk behaves the way he does in part because he has developed the *habit* of helping, which came about first from selfish-motivations, but now operates automatically and without any such motivations. It's this habitual helping that makes Kirk appear to be an altruist. As I read Badhwar, she says an action cannot be wholeheartedly altruistic until the altruist is habitually altruistic; that is to say until the altruistic act is necessary for the altruist's self-definition. In my view, this state is "merely" altruistic, but not particularly virtuous. The altruist, even if habitually altruistic, may not be particularly morally exemplary.

I can demonstrate this using Kirk once again. He has emphasized the point that virtue is by definition a habit. You aren't a good person unless you are habitually a good person. I agree

with this view. It is a hopeful and realistic view, because habits are easily taught and formed, and once they are established they tend to carry on automatically. All you have to do is start doing good things regularly, and before long you'll do them without thinking. I think that is clearly what has happened with Kirk, as his initially selfishly-motivated actions, e.g. saving his neighborhood and improving the quality of his home, have become so habitual that they no longer need a selfish motivation. They just continue on, by habit, and not only that, they inevitably lead to greater and more selfless actions. This effect occurs because he has developed a habit of helping, which has built into it an inclination to not-refuse-to-help, and so he does other thing such as going out of his way to help his students get good jobs on and around campus.

This makes Kirk a good person, but it does not necessarily make him a virtuous person. Virtue is not just helping. It also involves making yourself better than what you are. This is an Aristotelian view, and Aristotle himself says, "[T]he good person must be a self-lover..." (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1168a28-29). I find this idea of self-love, self-realization, and self-focused development and betterment to be core to my definition of virtue. If one is just helping constantly and never doing something for themselves then they seem hollow and pathetic. It would take a combination of altruistic acts and self-love in order to make someone a virtuous individual.

Part of what this means is that I believe a person needs to be engaged in a pursuit that will bring them happiness *for the sake of their own happiness*. I always try to find a selfish-motivation in everything anyone does, because it would either be inhuman for someone to engage in an activity in which they have no personal interest, or it would indicate that the person

is acting randomly and unpredictably, and does not actually care about what they are doing. For that reason, I get extremely suspicious when someone gives me something or does me a favor at no possible benefit to themselves. This kind of internalized analytical worldview has led me to seek explanations for all of my behavior on the same terms.

I see the same kind of thought process going on with Kirk when I ask him why he does what he does. He always has an answer ready that goes back to some desire of his that will make him happier. For example, when I asked him why he started working on the Planning Commission and he replied, "Selfish reasons, selfish reasons," and then told the story of how he wanted to take action against the poorly handled development of his neighborhood.

Kirk, I believe, would agree with me that the goal or point of life is to make yourself happy. There are moral theories that go against this way of thinking. Wyschogrod's "ethics of excess" is one such theory. Her theory is so-called because it is genuinely excessive. In it, Wyschogrod states that the only way one can be truly human is to be an alterity-altruist. One must always help the needy other with no qualifications and for no self-originating reason or motive. It is the needy other's presence, or gaze, that must generate the motive and the reason for the altruistic act. She would wholeheartedly disagree with my assertion that a person ought to do something that will bring them happiness *for its own sake*.

Additionally, Wyschogrod says that if you engage in any thinking at all before helping someone, you have already failed to be moral, to be altruistic, or to be human. She is strictly opposed to empathy, because it places the agent into the other's shoes. This would, according to her, make altruism impossible. By replacing the other with yourself, any actions you then take will be directed not at the other, but at yourself. Likewise if you help someone because you needed to affirm yourself, or you wanted to help, then you have missed the point of altruism.

Wyschogrod's theories boil down to helping the anonymous other without any thought whatsoever. Blind acts of aid. Random, unfocused, unqualified altruism. Which, as I said above, seems inhuman or reckless.

When I presented this theory of alterity-altruism to Kirk, he balked at it. If everyone lived that way, he said, we would be in a world where everyone holds the door open for someone else, and no one goes through the door. It would not be a good world if everyone was completely selfless towards each other. Wyschogrod rebuts this criticism of her theory by pointing out that the criticism is an impossible hypothetical. The nature of reality is that there will always be selfish people who are not perfect altruists, so there will always be someone to walk through that door.

Even so, Wyschogrod's ethics of excess demand the abnegation of self. It requires you to not even think about or consider or be motivated in your helping tasks. Kirk described this kind of theory as being "an impoverished worldview." It says that human beings ought to be moral robots, always doing the one right thing in all situations.

Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative is similarly impoverished for this reason. It commands that we always do that which can be willed as universal law. It is a formula that, if we *always* followed (as we ought to if we want to be moral, according to Kant) then we would become moral robots; automatons bound to morality. Utilitarianism is another such impoverished view of altruism, and for the same reasons. This theory simply dictates that we always do whatever will achieve the greatest good for the greatest number.

All of these moral theories are distasteful to me because they claim that in order to be moral, you must *always* follow some moral formula, and if you ever deviate from it, then by definition you have done the morally wrong thing and are therefore condemnable. These

theories require one to believe that it is everyone's duty to be moral in this sense. This eliminates the possibility of supererogation, or going above and beyond the call of duty. In these views, there are no moral options. If something is morally good, then it is morally required. And if it is morally required, then you are immoral if you do not do it. Therefore there is no moral act you could do which would be more than your duty.

J.O. Urmson addresses this issue of supererogation in his article "Saints and Heroes." In it, he argues that moral options must be accounted for, and that they do exist. He says,

every case of "going the second mile" is a case in point, for it cannot be one's duty to go the second mile in the same basic sense as it is to go the first — otherwise it could be argued first that it is one's duty to go two miles and therefore that the spirit of the rule of the second mile requires that one go altogether four miles, and by repetition one could establish the need to go every time on an infinite journey. (205)

Indeed, each of these theories ends up requiring just that of a moral individual. If you wish to be moral, you must go on an infinite journey of always serving others. In order to eliminate this impoverishing "infinite journey," one has to allow for supererogation. There must be a point at which to go farther would be remarkable. This point, for Urmson, is a basic level of moral duty common to all people.

In theories that do not have this point, this "infinite journey" is required. The effect of that is a disallowing of self-centered actions or a pursuit of *personal* happiness for its *own sake*, and that pursuit I believe is essential for a well-lived life. But within these theories there is no room for any non-moral interests and skills. Susan Wolf talks about this in her article "Moral Saints," where she says that time spent "reading Victorian novels, playing the Oboe, or

improving [one's] backhand" (139) is time *not* spent helping others. These moral theories command that, in order to *be* moral, one must by definition never engage in non-moral activities. However, it is a person's foibles and eccentricities that make them interesting and easy to relate to. It is their hobbies and individual pursuits that make them human. The fact that on occasion they pursue their own happiness for their own sakes gives their lives meaning. When a moral theory denies this self-centeredness, it becomes the case

that, for a moral saint, the existence of these interests and skills can be given at best the status of happy accidents—they cannot be encouraged for their own sakes as distinct, independent aspects of the realization of human good. (Wolf 142)

I find this to be dreadful. These non-moral interests and skills *must* be developed for their own sakes in order for a person to achieve any sort of virtue.

I want to return to the utilitarian theory for a moment. From the utilitarian perspective, you are constantly on the hook to be using your resources to the greatest good for the greatest number. What does this mean? This means you can't go to the movies; that money would be better spent on famine relief. You can't spend a few hours working on your model railroad; that time would be better spent volunteering at the soup kitchen. Kantianism and Wyschogrod's "ethics of excess," as well as many other moral theories, end up drawing the same conclusion. If you spend any time not being a moral robot, you are by definition immoral.

Moral views that place altruism as the ultimate and only goal of humanity make little sense to me. They do not allow for what I take to be essential, noble qualities of humanity. Humans need to develop *themselves* for their *own sakes*. And we achieve this development by engaging in non-moral things such as hobbies, or reading novels, or playing musical instruments,

or cooking fancy dinners. I agree with Susan Wolf when she says, “a life in which *none* of these possible aspects of character are developed may seem a life strangely barren” (139). That is why I do not believe altruism is a sufficient quality for making someone a virtuous human being.

I discussed a paper I wrote analyzing Albert Camus’ The Plague with Kirk at some length. Briefly, I argued (and still do!) that Rambert is a morally superior individual relative to Rieux because Rambert is conflicted; he grows as a human being. He becomes more than what he was. Rieux, on the other hand, performs all of his altruistic acts without any feeling of conflict. He doesn’t believe he could do anything else. He is almost Wyschogrodian in that he doesn’t have to engage in any kind of thought or internal debate about whether or not he should do what he does. He just does it, because that is the thing to do, and there aren’t any other options.

Kirk took issue with this judgment of mine by asking what more Rieux could have done. He asked me, if once you get to the top of the altruistic totem pole (in a Wyschogrodian sense of perfect alterity-altruism), do you automatically become morally inferior to people who have selfish desires? I concede that Rieux’s actions had a greater positive effect on people than Rambert’s, because Rieux was always doing his altruistic acts, whereas Rambert delayed and only eventually began doing exactly what Rieux did. Rambert is not even altruistic in the way altruism has been defined by all of the moral theories in this paper, for he isn’t helping others for their own sakes. He cannot escape from the city, and he comes to feel ashamed that he is not helping. That is why he starts to help. For him, it is not important that the people get helped, it is important that *he* be the one helping. Rambert struggles with his own inclinations in an effort to make himself a better person, whereas Rieux simply is who he is.

If we look at this as a “who helped the most contest,” or a “who was the best altruist contest,” Rieux would clearly win. But my contention is that, morally and virtuously speaking, the quantity of people you help doesn’t matter, and that if you reach the top of the altruistic totem pole in a Wyschogrodian sense, then you have in fact fallen to the bottom of my totem pole of virtue. I would say the same for any of the impoverished moral theories. Realization of them means utterly failing at virtue. And for me, virtue is a necessary part of morality.

Rieux could have done better morally if he had had an actual conflict and had grown as a human being. Accepting yourself and failing to strive to become better than what you are is a moral failure. It is also a very subjective thing, for only an individual can know what it takes for himself or herself to improve as a person, or to go above and beyond the call of duty.

While I like that Urmson allows for supererogation, I do not like that he sets the basic level of duty for everyone at the same level. For Urmson, Rieux would be morally praiseworthy, because his actions exceed the basic level of duty that binds us all. I don’t agree with that, because the basic level of duty for Rambert and Rieux really are different. Rieux’s basic level is set higher than Rambert’s. For Rieux, helping people as he did is just what he does, it is neither special, nor going above and beyond his duty, it simply *is* his duty. It is because Rieux did not try to do more than his baseline, no matter how high it may have been, that he is less morally commendable than Rambert. Even though Rambert’s baseline is set below Rieux’s, the fact that he tries to raise himself higher makes him more morally commendable than Rieux. Each individual has set the bar for what separates “duty” from “supererogatory” themselves. It is only by going above that bar that they can be at their moral best.

There are problems with saying the basic level of duty for each person is subjective, but I feel its extreme applications are defensible. For example, if we look at Rieux as doing the best

thing humanly possible for the greatest number of people, and that he literally could not be any more helpful to anyone anywhere, *and* he has maximized and perfectly balanced the amount of time he needs to spend on himself and on developing his own happiness, then how could I ask him to become even better? If he is already doing the best possible, then how can he do more? How can he grow as a human being, and become better than the perfect-self he already is? My answer to that is that there will never be a person who is in that situation. There will always be something more you can do, even if you have already done a great deal. The criticism is a nice hypothetical, but utterly unrealistic. My defense here is similar to Wyschogrod's defense of her ethics of excess.

The other end of the spectrum is to look at someone like Jeffrey Dahmer and ask if he is a morally virtuous individual. Maybe he had *wanted* to do much more horrible things to those children, and he had to struggle with himself to *only* do what he did. By restraining himself to some degree he arguably made himself better than what he had been.

Here I would have to clarify that although it is a necessary condition for moral value that one make oneself better than oneself, it is not a sufficient condition. It is *also* necessary that the person do something of altruistic value—something that genuinely helps an other. In the case of Rambert and Rieux, they both satisfy the second condition—that of helping an other. Rieux helps others a bit more than Rambert, because he starts earlier, but it's my belief that the first condition, that of improving the self, is also necessary and so Rambert ends up morally superior. Jeffrey Dahmer, though he may have made himself a better person, most certainly did not genuinely help an other, and so remains morally condemnable.

Outlined below is my view on what makes someone truly morally praiseworthy.

To Be Morally Good

- Be altruistic! (Necessary and sufficient condition. Following the impoverished moral views would result in a morally good person. Rieux and Rambert are both Morally Good.)

To Be Morally Praiseworthy/Commendable/Virtuous/A Fully Realized Human Being

- Be altruistic! (Necessary condition.)
- Strive to make yourself better than what you are! (Necessary condition. Rieux accepts who he is and experiences no struggle to become better. Only Rambert meets this condition.)
- Neither of the two above conditions are sufficient on their own; you need both!

This view I have developed interacts with the view that virtue is by definition habitual. Using Rambert as an example, when he starts out, he is Morally Good and Morally Praiseworthy because he is helping other people, and striving to improve himself as a human being.

However, if I follow the logic of “helping people regularly leads to habitually helping people,” then, if Rambert continues doing the same thing, he will eventually be Morally Good but not Morally Praiseworthy, because he would then just be doing habitual things; no conflict. If Rambert wants to continue being Morally Praiseworthy, or at the top of the moral totem pole, he will need to find another way to be better than what he is, whatever that may mean at the time.

Thus, I would say that at the point where the actions become habitual, and you are affirming your personal beliefs about helping others without thinking about it, you are Morally

Good. It is when you *first start* doing something more, before it is a habitual thing, that you are Morally Praiseworthy. It is when you *create a new personal belief* and you strive to affirm *that*, rather than your old, habitual belief (however Morally Good that habitual belief may have been), then that is when you are at your moral best. This comes from a view I currently hold that one of the key aspects of humanity is that of continually improving the self and never accepting what “is.” Humans are unique in their capacity to strive for more than what is.

I have now outlined and criticized several theories of altruism, analyzed Kirk Monfort’s community actions through various lenses, and discussed the idea of virtue and being morally good versus being morally praiseworthy. I have also outlined my own requirements for virtue, and moral goodness and praiseworthiness. I’ve required that altruism be necessary for both moral states. This is all well and good, but my outline above begs the question of what I consider to be altruistic.

Within this paper, there are no theories of what altruism is that I can wholeheartedly accept because all of the theories focus on motivation over consequences. That is to say, it does not matter if an action actually hurts the individual, as long as it was done for their sake and not for any sake of your own, then it was altruistic and therefore morally good. I don’t accept that.

I believe that if someone does something good specifically to help other people, but primarily for their own interests, then it is still an altruistic and morally good act. Rambert can function as an example of this. He helped people not for their own sakes, but for *his* own sake. He wanted to make himself a better person, and in order to do that he had to struggle internally and bring himself to help others. His own moral development required that he help, and just

because he was not helping primarily for the *other's* sake, does not mean his actions were not altruistic.

A more extreme example of this would be someone who wanted to be hailed as a hero and a saint, and wanted to be loved by an entire people. Such an individual might understand that true love and respect will only come from genuinely selfless acts. Such an individual might go to great lengths to genuinely aid and help other people. And yet, this individual will only be engaging in these selfless acts in order to win praise and adulation. If he could have secured that praise and adulation in some other way, he would have.

None of the theories of altruism I discussed in this paper would give this individual the title of altruist or call him morally praiseworthy. I, however, would consider this person to be engaging in altruistic acts. The consequences of an act matter more to me than the motivations. It would be different if someone was *using* other people by engaging in apparently altruistic acts. If an individual wanted to gain someone's trust so they could steal from them or otherwise abuse them, then the actions they engaged in in order to help their victim would not be altruistic, because those actions would only be being done to allow later abuse of the individual.

In addition to my objection of motivation being placed higher than consequence, I've also pointed out that I don't like moral theories that dictate that one ought to always be doing the most morally right thing. I believe that supererogation must be accounted for. Some actions may be morally good, such as donating all of your leisure time and money to famine relief, but not be morally required. I wouldn't hold anyone condemnable for going to see a movie when they could have donated that money to some worthy cause.

In my view, what counts as supererogatory must be subjectively defined. This places all the responsibility on the individual. Only they can ever know if they are merely doing their duty, or truly going above and beyond what and who they are.

So my view of altruism is that it is possible for people to do genuinely selfless acts. It's morally good for someone to be altruistic, but it is pathetic if all they are is altruistic. Some variety, inconsistency, and self-centeredness are necessary for them to be good, virtuous human beings. Supererogation is also a reality, and what is "above-and-beyond" changes from person to person. And finally, consequences matter in determining whether an act is morally good, and actions ultimately motivated by overt selfishness are not necessarily immoral or non-altruistic. None of the theories I have come across in my time studying altruism adequately satisfy the above conditions, but I am satisfied with my own new and improved, better developed theory of what altruism and virtue are.

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