Altruism: A Natural Thought History of an Idea

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Altruism: A Natural Thought History of an Idea

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Writing this thesis has been an incredibly long and illuminating journey. I have learned so much and had the wonderful opportunity to really delve into and analyze different theories of altruism, enhancing my sociological background, and performing close textual analysis, an exercise that I thoroughly enjoy.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction—The Origins of Altruism 4
Chapter 2: Comte’s Conception 8
Chapter 3: Mill’s and Spencer’s Interpretations 21
Chapter 4: Durkheim’s Altruistic Suicide & Kropotkin’s Mutual Aid 30
Chapter 5: Foray into Contemporary Theory 41
Chapter 6: Diverging Disciplines 46
Chapter 7: Conclusion—Altruism at Work 63

References 68
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION—THE ORIGINS OF ALTRUISM

What is altruism? It is a term most people have heard of, achieving the rare feat of academic jargon converted to popular vocabulary. But even so, there are a myriad of different interpretations of the word. It seems that most everyone has a sense of what it means, rather than a distinct, unifying definition. So how do we understand a word fully, a word that has come to mean so much for so many different disciplines? The answer, I believe, is to start at its original conception. By attempting to locate the origin of the word altruism (not the notion(s) itself, for that has existed far longer) we can begin to track its movement through history, through intellectual texts and ideas, along the diverging fault lines of different disciplines, up until the present, where it has come to represent so many different things. How has altruism come to be, as we see and understand it now? The purpose of this thesis study is to find out.

The subsequent chapters are organized according to a historical account of the usage and understanding of altruism, beginning within the sociological canon but later expanding to include divergence into other disciplines and modern public usage. Tracking altruism throughout history felt like planting a tree, beginning with its conception at the roots, moving upwards in a linear timeline of theory, and expanding at the branches to include a wider variety of practices. By analyzing major theories of
altruism together, we can form a comprehensive natural thought history of this word, this idea, and thus more clearly understand its evolution into the word we know today.

Chapter one begins with a brief history of the conception of the term, and Comte’s original interpretation. Auguste Comte, who took an arguably much more scientific (though controversial) stance than later classical theorists, defined altruism as the complete submission of the self, and felt it was necessary to the benefit and progress of society. He considered altruism the most highly ranked of impulses, which he located in his phrenological model of the brain. His collectivist stance was quite severe, in that even the slightest form of self-regard was discouraged.

Naturally, Comte’s rather harsh views were later challenged by several other theorists. John Stuart Mill agreed with Comte’s belief that altruism was a positive behavior, but felt that Comte’s complete disregard for the individual was unrealistic, and therefore ultimately unproductive for society. He proposed a sort of compromise, a combining collective individualism, that considered individualism as a source of relatability that actually aided, not hindered, altruism. However, others were not so diplomatic in their interpretations. Herbert Spencer, who was largely responsible for popularizing the term in the English language, had a much more negative view of altruism. An avid follower of Darwinian theory, Spencer felt that altruistic behavior
was ultimately detrimental to society’s growth and progress, because it inhibited the
evolution of dominant members of society.

Yet others felt more strongly that altruism, though at times individually
debilitating, was ultimately necessary for the cohesion of societal structure. Emile
Durkheim’s interpretation of altruism was more in line with that of Comte, in that he
advocated for a strong moral collective, though, unlike Comte, he did not consider it
undesirable if the individual should by some manner residually benefit. Durkheim
viewed society as an organism of sorts, and recognized that in order for it to thrive, the
various parts must work in conjunction with one another. Peter Kropotkin argued that
society prospered when individuals engaged in the behavior of mutual aid, drawing
upon observations from his numerous explorative journeys.

Moving out of the classical and into the contemporary sociological era, the
study of altruism received somewhat less attention than it had in previous generations
(perhaps due to its increasing prevalence in other disciplines) but there are several
contemporary theorists who meditated on the idea. Pitrim Sorokin, who established his
own research center devoted to altruism, considered altruistic behavior to be an
expression of love in action. Like Comte and Durkheim before him, he felt that positive
social action was a method of resolving societies’ moral crises. His colleague, Talcott
Parsons largely agreed, but felt that altruistic behavior was expressed as a result of our
value systems, and not necessarily indicative of the individual’s level of integration in society.

Subsequent chapters broaden this study to include biological, psychological, and economic interpretations of altruism, and their relationship to sociological theory. An exploration of evolutionary biology reveals that there is just as much variation in competing scientific definitions of altruism as there is among sociological theories, and that certain of each seem to align. Meanwhile, much of the psychological research on altruism has found evidence of positive relationships between altruism and altruistic behavior in the form of volunteerism, and individual happiness and well being.

The chapter on diverging disciplines concludes with an analysis of the vocabulary of altruism in the discipline of economics. Much of economic theory considers altruism a hedonistic, or normative behavior, that plays an important role in the regulation and/or function of society. Economists like Serge-Christophe Kolm argue that the existence of social freedom, or the lack of constant fear of rights and property infringement is integral to most societies, and altruism can serve as a mitigating factor to maintain that order, a feat that self-defense, or state enforcement could not accomplish alone. This thesis concludes with an examination of the modern non-profit sector, and how the theoretical framework of altruism can be applied in a way that continues to be relevant and useful to social theory.
CHAPTER 2: COMTE’S CONCEPTION

The history of altruism is inextricably tied to that of sociology, in that the creation of both is generally ascribed to Auguste Comte (1798-1857). Comte, the father of sociology, significantly contributed to the establishment of Positivism as well. He was a champion of science, who advocated for a rational and scientific social system rooted in the total subjugation of the individual to the collective. His *Religion of Humanity*, developed later in his life, substituted society for the god(s) who govern the subservient peoples. Comte is also widely considered the coiner of the term “altruism.” He determined altruism to be the placing of others above the self, of their interests above one’s own. Comte’s personal definition regarded altruism as “living for others” (vivre pour autrui).

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, Comte and his followers are said to have begun using the term altruism starting in 1830. Comte, considered by most to be the father of sociology (having also coined that name) is accredited with the invention of the French version of the word: altruisme. The beginning of the word comes from the French *autrui*, meaning someone else/others, with the “isme” suffix taken from the ending of *égoïsme*, which had already been in existence since the early 1700s, deriving from the Latin *egoismus*. It is fascinating that Comte created this word, not only with the other in mind, but taking directly from its construction. It is
clear from altruism’s very conception that it is closely related to egoism, and that when studying one, one must consider the other. In fact, when conceiving of his *Religion of Humanity*, he went so far as to suggest the fluidity of the two, and their transformative properties (Pickering 1993).

Of course, there have been some who question as to whether Comte actually did coin the term. There exists suggestion that it could have been borrowed from his professor, François Andrieux, at the École Polytechnique (Pickering 1993: 445). However, there is evidence in publications that the French version of the word altruism (altruisme) first made its printed appearance in Comte’s *Système* (1851) and later *Catéchisme* (1852).

Although Comte introduced the concept of altruism in these earlier works, it is largely associated today with his *Religion of Humanity*. This new, secular religion was meant to provide the sort of cohesive function of traditional religion and worship, replacing God as the object of reverence with other people. In his master work, *Le Cours de Philosophie*, Positive Comte identified his law of three stages, listing the different mentally conceived stages he believed society experiences as it grows and evolves. These were the Theological stage, largely dependent on a deity(s) for explanation, the Metaphysical stage, an abstraction of the god(s) previously personified, and finally the Positive stage, the most scientifically driven. Absolving the need for a supernatural presence, this stage relies entirely upon observation, experiment
and comparison, by way of the scientific method. It is a thoroughly intellectual approach to society, and though Comte idealized this state, he eventually came to feel that some component might be missing.

In a society driven entirely by scientific curiosity and intellect, what would serve to unite people, ensuring that the pursuit of scientific knowledge would remain righteous and moral? Where would people place their faith? Comte’s answer was the *Religion of Humanity*, which he believed would exist on the basis of morality alone, preached and venerated in traditional religion, but independent of supernatural force. It would thrive on the inherent morality Comte believed to be present in all of humanity, manifesting itself in people’s relation to others. The religion was founded on the three pillars of altruism, order, and progress.

As aforementioned, “vivre pour autrui” is a phrase Comte used in describing the *Religion of Humanity*, a derivative of altruism meaning “live for others.” He thought of altruism as being fundamentally related to sociability, in fact, he often used the terms interchangeably in contrast to egoism, which revolved around individualism and the personal. Comte believed that these two divergent impulses resided in the affective regions of the brain. This initial reasoning is perhaps why altruism has found intersectionality across so many different disciplines today, notably biological and evolutionary science. Comte was very much aware of the resemblance between
humanity and animals, and sought biological evidence to back up many of his claims. In this way, he suggested a phrenological approach to examining the brain.

Phrenology is considered a pseudoscience, one that is principally concerned with measuring the dimensions of the human skull. It is founded on the belief that the brain is an organ of the mind, and so in turn, certain areas of the brain were believed to contain “localized, specific functions or modules” (Fodor 1983: 47). We can trace phrenology’s first emergence to the period of the Essenes\(^1\), when it was practiced in primitive form by certain mystical groups (Furst 1968). It was later developed and methodized to resemble more of what we might consider a “science” in 1796, by the German physician Franz Joseph Gall, and subsequently became a popular discipline throughout the nineteenth century (Graham 2001). Gall’s supposition that thoughts, emotion, personality are situated in various localized sections of the brain has been lauded as a significant historical advance toward neuropsychology (Fodor 1983). The Edinburgh Phrenological Society was later established in 1820, as the primary British center for phrenology. Yet despite its popularity at the time, and major influence on nineteenth-century fields of psychiatry and neuroscience (and of course, Comte’s later theorizing), phrenology is now largely considered a completely archaic combination of primitive neuroanatomy and moral philosophy.

\(^1\) A sect of the second temple of Judaism, that was active from second century BCE to the first century CE.
Comte created a unique cerebral theory to try and explain the different phenomena of impulse and emotion. He rejected much of contemporary psychology, including the famous French philosopher Victor Cousin’s (1792-1867) “Moi”. Cousin conducted psychological observation, in which he determined that one’s will alone is conducive to the person or “Me” (Moi). The “me” then therefore constitutes the center of the intellectual sphere, without which consciousness would be impossible. Comte was highly critical of this theory, believing it to be little above “murky spiritualism” (Pickering 1993: 501) and criticizing his idea that people could observe their own intellectual operations. While he felt sure that one could study the mechanisms of the mind, he believed biology, aided by sociology, was the greatest approach to doing so, and favored a more phrenological approach similar to that of the aforementioned Gall (Pickering 1993). Comte believed that physiology, a sub-discipline of biology, not psychology, was capable of discerning the operations of the mind, for he felt that thought was biological in nature. Like Gall, he was critical of psychologists’ refusal to study the multiple organs of the brain, and he recognized the natural prevalence of the affections.

However, there were some aspects to Gall’s approach that Comte viewed as unsatisfactory. He created his own “phrenological chart” to replace Gall’s schema of the mind, for he felt that its unscientific and shortsighted nature had failed to put a definitive stop to disputes (Comte 1854). Although Comte believed that Gall was
correct in placing all of the superior functions—those relating to the affections (including morality) and intelligence—in the singular location of the brain, instead of yielding to the conventional scientific notion that some might be located in the heart or intestines, he ultimately felt that Gall did not adequately examine their interrelationships. Moreover, he determined Gall’s localizations to be flawed, in that he overstated the number of cerebral organs, as well as failed to illustrate the specific connections between the brain and the rest of the body (Comte 1852). Gall’s representation of the brain was too fixed, and it did not account for the impact of the development of the species on the mind.

Instead, Comte recommended an intuitive approach to the brain: the study of individuals’ intellectual and moral actions in society, in order to determine the number of cerebral organs and their various positions. His approach was to determine the laws of the mind indirectly by studying what humans produced, rather than the traditional method of direct introspection. He identified what he believed to be the three main features of human existence: loving, thinking, and acting, and thus developed an initial hypothesis that there existed eighteen cerebral organs related to them. These organs, he supposed, made up the central nervous system. Comte’s map of the brain was divided as follows: it depicted ten affective organs (those that were attributed to the phenomena

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2 Comte did, however, praise Gall for at least illustrating the existence of unity between cerebral and corporal existence.
3 Comte considered the sciences and their history to be the main products of the human.
of loving—including altruism), five intellectual organs, and three practical organs. Comte reasoned that, in line with Gall’s prediction, the intellectual and emotional organs were adjacent to one another in the brain, and their functions were therefore thoroughly connected. For Comte, this type of spatial proximity was the biological proof that affirmed that emotions directed the mind and activity (Comte 1854). The system worked together as follows: the heart, which was connected to loving, drove individuals; the mind, which was associated with thinking, informed it; while the character, tied to acting/performing, ultimately executed the actions.

Affective organs, which were purely internal, with no immediate connection to the external world, were located at the rear of the brain, and because Comte considered them to be the most significant set, they were also the largest and most abundant. These affections received influential impressions from the outside world through the organs associated with intelligence and activity, which were located toward the front of the brain. These in turn nourished and stimulated the interior. However, the affections were also able to communicate their own desires to the exterior world through these same organs. Therefore, the affective organs were responsible for inner harmony, which directed the intellectual and active practical organs (Comte 1854, 1852).

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4 Comte declared that these ten affective motors could be viewed as desires in the active state and sentiments in the passive state. In a physical model, they resided between the intellectual and the active motors in the brain.
According to this logic, intellectual and moral actions by people could be used to determine the quantity and positioning of different sub-organs within the brain. These affective organs were categorized and ordered by Comte (another scientific provision of his ideal society) into personal and social spheres. They were ordered based on their decreasing energy yet increasing dignity, in other words, their facility for generating altruism. The ones furthest back in the brain were considered the lowest organs because they were nearer to the rest of the body, and consequently were able to receive impulses from it, causing them to be the most energetic. As a result, Comte determined these organs to be the most concerned with individual self-interest. They constituted various tenets of egoism, like impulses of pride and vanity. Comte classified them in order of lowest to highest dignity: the nutritional instinct, the sexual instinct, the maternal instinct, the military (or destructive) instinct, and the industrial (or constructive) instinct (Comte 1852). Figure 1 represents a type of phrenological model that Comte describes.

5 Comte believed them to be located in the lower back of this cerebral region, closest to the motor apparatus. The nutritional instinct was related to the universal need for the preservation of the individual; the sexual and maternal with preservation of the species. The military instinct was an instinct of improvement by means of destruction, whereas the industrial instinct was an instinct of improvement by means of construction.
Comte explained instinct to be any spontaneous inner impulse that moved an individual in a singular direction (Comte 1865). Following these primal instincts were two intermediary ones, associated with personal ambition, the previously mentioned pride and vanity. Pride referred to the need for domination in the temporal sphere, whereas vanity was concerned the need for approval in the spiritual sphere (Comte 1854). In total, Comte characterized these seven personal affective motors as essentially comprising egoism.

The higher up social organs, with their relation to intellect, were considered to constitute altruism. These included attachment, veneration, and goodness. These

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6 Comte felt that both of these instincts could be satisfied only by social means. For example, pride used force and sought to command. Comte observed that this was quite was common among the aristocracy. Vanity meanwhile relied on opinion and aimed to persuade or convince. Comte found it to be especially present among women and scholars. He felt that the difference between pride and vanity could be described as the first natural source of the division of the temporal and spiritual powers. While temporal leaders possessed a personal instinct of pride, spiritual leaders were filled with the more social instinct of vanity.
“social motors” as he called them were likewise organized in a hierarchy. Attachment, the lowest of the three, normally occurred between two individuals, with a basis in equality. The personal nature of this motor made it the most closely related to egoism, in that it involved an emphasis on the individual. Veneration could involve multiple people, with a certain superior (in that it involved altruistic behavior) clause that allowed for submission. Finally there was goodness, the highest of the three, which above all, could be associated with the concept of humanity, a motor composed of impulses of universal love, sympathy\(^7\), and charity. This particular motor was directed towards what Comte considered to be a sacred collectivity (Comte 1854).

Comte viewed humanity as weak, because of the fact that the organs with the worthier, less egoistic goals also had less energy due to their greater distance from the body (Comte 1854).\(^8\) However, he located these three social or sympathetic organs in the higher front and middle of the affective region of his phrenological model of the brain, close to the intellectual organs. This meant that these intellectual organs were directly affected by the organs related to altruism, more so than by those associated with egoism. Furthermore, he conceded that organs related to altruism grew more powerful when stimulated by life in society, because of their closeness to the mental

\(^7\) It is important to note the distinction between empathy and sympathy used in this context. Empathy refers to personally identifying with others, feeling for them because of resonation with the self. Whereas in sympathy, one feels for others, separating the individual self from “altruistic” selfless impulse.

\(^8\) Comte referred to Dante’s celebration of the sympathetic affections in the “three best cantos” of the Divine Comedy.
organs. This is significant because it suggests the possibility of the transformation of egoism into altruism, if its forces were driven toward the social, therefore strengthening those social instincts (Kremer-Marietti 2002).

These biological structures and considerations allowed for Comte to devise a series of theories regarding an ideal expression of altruistic behavior. According to Comte:

“The individual must subordinate himself to an existence outside himself in order to find in it the source of his stability. And this condition cannot be effectively realized except under the impulse of propensities prompting him to live for others. The being, whether man or animal, who loves nothing outside himself, and really lives for himself alone, is by that very fact condemned to spend his life in a miserable alternation of ignoble torpor and uncontrolled excitement. Evidently the principal feature of progress in all living things is that the general consensus which we have seen to be the essential attribute of vitality should become more perfect. It follows that happiness and worth, as well in individuals as in societies, depend on adequate ascendancy of the sympathetic instincts. Thus the expression, ‘live for others,’ is the simplest summary of the whole moral code of Positivism” (Comte 1973a: 556-65).

For Comte, the idea of personality, or really any form of individuality, was invariably a negative thing. According to his doctrine, it is not enough for a society to simply promote feelings for others—it must discourage any form of self-regard or positive self-evaluation. Comte’s politics consisted largely of his uncompromising belief in collectivism. He thoroughly rejected any notion of individual rights as opposed to social duties, and therefore dismissed any form of liberalism as a sort of modern anarchy. In terms of moral education, Comte envisioned a state enforced
Religion of Humanity that would serve to instruct citizens in the ways of altruism as well as discourage undesirable “outbreaks” of personality. In a translation of volume four of Comte’s Système, Comte declares:

“Over and above the several means of repressing personality, the essential condition of purification is the exertion of sympathy, which regulates individual existence by the family relations, and these again by the civic. It follows that, from every point of view, the ultimate systematization of human life must consist above all in the development of altruism.” (Comte 1973b: 253).

It is worth noting as well, that in advocating for altruism, Comte favored emotions over intellect. Perhaps this is an early clue of why altruism has found a home in popular language, breaking out of the world of academic jargon, unlike so many other terms.

Comte may have been the first to define altruism, but he was certainly not the last. His particular formulation was crisp and uncompromising. However, he did acknowledge that this kind of scenario was a utopian kind of view, and that in reality it would be unrealistic to expect altruism to completely triumph over egoism. Yet he also maintained that a society’s progressiveness could be measured depending on its level of display of altruism. So how did altruism come to be understood in the multifaceted and rather vague manner we anoint it now? The short answer, which I will attempt to satisfy throughout this thesis, is that the notion of altruism was thoroughly diluted within a generation. Comte’s suggestion of altruism as an involuntary impulse, an instinct (albeit one that is subject to growth and development though its existence is
taken for granted) was rather revolutionary at the time, and remains so today. However not everyone was as convinced as Comte was that altruism was dependent on the complete abandonment of self-interest. Alternative definitions of the word began to spring up almost immediately after its conception. The word was first introduced into English by the author George Henry Lewes, in an 1852 article for the *Westminster Review*. It was later popularized in the sociological canon by English theorist Herbert Spencer, who admitted to borrowing the term from Comte. Throughout its adaptations by authors, theorists, and other commentators, the concept of altruism has continued to grow, subtly shifting at times, into the more generalized, open-to-interpretation manner with which we view it today.

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9 See Oxford English Dictionary, entry on altruism.
CHAPTER 3: MILL’S AND SPENCER’S INTERPRETATIONS

3.1 John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), a contemporary and acquaintance of Comte, was captivated by Comte’s idea of altruism, but fundamentally disagreed with his interpretation of how and why it operates. Mill remained unconvinced that society could enduringly act solely in the interest of universal welfare. Mill proposed a different explanation of altruism, one that he viewed as more realistic and viable. Individualism, seen so negatively in Comte’s interpretation of egoism, should instead be perceived as a necessary component of relatability in the social realm. Mill understood Comte’s version of altruism to be submission of the self to society, which he viewed as developmentally counterproductive. In one of the first divergent versions of altruism, Mill suggested that altruism pertains to the paradox of collective individualism.

Mill’s contributions to ethics are well presented in his book *Utilitarianism*, published in 1863. He was a close associate and the apparent heir of many of Bentham’s theories, continuing the use of the word “utilitarianism.” Yet unlike Bentham, Mill did not ascribe to the basic principles of hedonism that constituted the foundation of Bentham’s theory. Mill refused to believe that human nature is exclusively egoistic. On the contrary, he felt that human beings are almost equally
altruistic, particularly in moral consideration, and believed that altruism is the meaningful basis for the moral command and responsibility (Mill 1906). Moreover, unlike his predecessor, Mill acknowledges that there are some obvious qualitative differences among pleasures. Mill abandons Bentham’s idea that only quantitative, not qualitative differences exist, and he could therefore no longer defend Bentham’s “hedonistic calculus” as the means for determining whether or not a certain action should to be carried out. Instead, he argues for an altruistic hedonism.

Mill wrote that within utilitarianism, altruism is the choice to act in a manner that benefits not only one’s own good, but also the good of the tribe, or further yet, all people. He describes utilitarian morality as recognizing the power of sacrificing one’s own “greatest good” for the good of others as present in human beings (Mill 1906). Yet the only thing he refuses to admit is that that sacrifice is in itself a good. Furthermore, he felt that the promotion of altruism (both individual and collective), and its superiority over egoism should be one of the principal goals of education.

Yet one of the standard objections to utilitarian thought is that it demands an unrealistic degree of altruism. Mill was aware of this problem, and as aforementioned, took issue with the Comteian perception of altruism. Mill worried that utilitarianism excessively demanded the individual’s willingness to sacrifice his or her own happiness for the benefit of society. Mill envisioned a different sort of altruism, one that was of a more limited nature. He felt that in normal social circumstances (that being the micro
interactions of everyday life) a moral individual should only be required to attend to the happiness of those close to him or her. Mill believed that public utility should only be taken under consideration by individuals whose decisions have a great impact on society at large (e.g. government officials, religious leaders).

The notion of a more limited form of altruism is quite common in philosophical literature. It is generally understood that under normal circumstances, people should help others on the basis of morality. Most moral philosophers also argue that altruism is a necessary component of a “good life”; and they, like Mill, usually refer to this more limited vision of altruism, meaning an altruism that extends to those to whom we feel close (e.g. children, parents, friends, colleagues and neighbors) (Mackie 1977: 167).

3.2 Herbert Spencer

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), whose work came slightly after Mill’s, was influenced by Mill’s criticism of Comte’s conception of altruism, mainly that it should take precedence over egoistic claims. Like Mill, Spencer was skeptical of the idea of the total acquiescence of individual needs and desires to those of others. In his *Principles of Ethics*, Spencer ventures further than Mill, conveying that egoism in fact precedes altruism in order of imperativeness. Unlike Mill, who instead merged some of Comte’s ideas about egoism to fit within his ideal notion of what altruism should be,
Spencer places an emphasis on the separation of the two, but in a contrasting fashion to Comte’s original views.

Spencer’s theories of altruism were largely influenced by the work of Charles Darwin. Darwin’s *On The Origin of Species*, which details his theory of natural selection, is largely associated with survival of the fittest, a term actually coined by Spencer in his reactionary work *Principles of Biology*. However, Spencer’s theories regarding altruism are perhaps best articulated in his 1879 work *The Data of Ethics*, in which he explores individualist moral philosophy by examining the nature of human conduct, and the different ways in which that conduct might be judged. He also discusses the conflict between altruism and egoism, and what he refers to as “absolute ethics.” Spencer best defines altruism as being all action that, in the normal course of things, benefits others instead of benefiting the self. He concludes that therefore, “from the dawn of life, altruism has been no less essential than egoism” (Spencer 1879: 201). Though it is primarily dependent on egoism, egoism is secondarily dependent on it.

He writes that the study of ethics must recognize the truth (which is recognized in unethical thought) that egoism precedes altruism. He reasons that the acts that are required for sustained self-preservation, including the enjoyment of benefits achieved by such acts, are the fundamentals of universal welfare. Spencer believed that unless individuals suitably care for themselves, any acts they commit for the benefit of others result in death, and logically, if everyone dies there remains no “other” to be cared for.
Spencer argues that the enduring supremacy of egoism over altruism can be rendered obvious by simply contemplating existing life, but that it is made even further visible through the contemplation of life in the course of evolution (much of which he borrowed from Darwinian theory).

According to Spencer, earlier ideas pertaining to the comparison of egoism and altruism are weakened by the exclusion of the all-important factor of heredity. In line with his coining of the term, “survival of the fittest” he wrote

“If health, strength and capacity are usually transmitted, and if disease, feebleness, stupidity, generally reappear in descendants, then a rational altruism requires insistence that egoism which is shown by receipt of the satisfactions accompanying preservation of body and mind in the best state” (Spencer 1879: 192).

Spencer continues by stating that when egoism is unfairly subordinated there is a direct result of a decrease in general happiness. He reasons that individuals who bear enough self-regard to keep themselves in good health and high spirits subsequently become an immediate source of happiness to those around them, as well as preserve their ability to increase their happiness through altruistic behavior. But Spencer warns that those whose “bodily vigor” and mental health are compromised by excessive self-sacrifice become a cause of depression to others around them, and therefore, render themselves incapable (or less capable at least) of actively maintaining their own welfare.
Furthermore, as indicated above, apart from this primary series of effects produced on others there exists a secondary series of effects. Spencer argues that an adequately egoistic individual is able to retain certain powers that make altruistic activities possible at all, while an individual who is inadequately egoistic, more or less loses his or her capacity to be altruistic. Spencer maintained that the truth of the one proposition is self-evident while the truth of the other is forced on us daily by examples. One example that Spencer offers is that of a mother who, raised in what he refers to as the “insane” fashion customary among cultured peoples, possesses a body too weak for suckling her infant. Yet she is cognizant of the fact that her natural nourishment is best for her child, and as she is concerned for its welfare, continues to provide milk for longer than her body can endure. The result, Spencer demonstrates, is that exhaustion gives way to sickness caused by depletion, which occasionally ends in death, and often entails chronic weakness. Spencer elaborates:

“She becomes, perhaps for a time, perhaps permanently, incapable of carrying on household affairs, and thus her other children suffer from the loss of maternal attention” (Spencer 1879: 194-195).

In addition, where the income is small, payments for nurses and/or doctors negatively affect the whole family. This demonstrates once again how the undue subordination of egoism to altruism can be described as injurious. Examined both directly and indirectly, excessive unselfishness can be argued to generate selfishness.
Continuing this logic, Spencer asserts that when egoistic claims are so overly subordinated by their altruistic counterparts what he refers to as “physical mischief” (what can be inferred as bodily harm) is produced, there is a tendency towards a relative decrease in the appearance of altruism in individuals, and therefore an increased preponderance of egoism. Spencer notes that pushed to extremes, like those that Comte envisioned:

“…Sacrifice of self for the benefit of others leads occasionally to death before the ordinary period of marriage, leads sometimes to abstention from marriage, as in sisters of charity, leads sometimes to an ill-health or a loss of attractiveness which prevents marriage, leads sometimes to non-acquirement of the pecuniary means needed for marriage, and in all these cases, therefore, the unusually altruistic leave no descendants” (Spencer 1879: 197).

Thus, a society favoring altruism over egoism is inherently doomed in its development. Spencer further prophesized that in those cases where the priority of the welfare of others over personal welfare has not been so extreme as to prevent marriage, physical degradation resulting from years of self-neglect often results in infertility, so that once again, the most altruistically inclined individuals leave no like-natured offspring. This eventual extinction of the especially un-egoistic inevitably then in turn prevents any desirable lessening of egoism in human nature that would have else occurred. Spencer concludes that such a disregard for the self, in that it actually lowers
“bodily vigor” below the normal level, eventually produces a counterbalancing excess of regard for self in the society.

This again, Spencer states, clearly shows that egoism precedes altruism in order of imperativeness. Though flourishingly worded, his main argument is simple enough: those acts that enable the continuation of life, must, on average, be considered more absolute than all other acts that life itself enables, including the altruistic acts that benefit others. Spencer urges us to move from a view of life as existing to one of life as evolving, in order to better observe this. Since sentient beings have progressed from low to high types, Darwinian logic dictates that the superior shall profit and the inferior shall suffer. Spencer declares that adherence to this principle has been, and still is necessary, not simply for the continuation of life but for the increase of happiness. Since those who are superior possess faculties that are better adjusted to these requirements, they experience greater pleasure and less pain. Spencer concludes that lastly, excessive altruism actually increases egoism: both directly in the contemporary life of the actor and indirectly in the future.

Although Spencer’s singular definition of altruism was closer to Comte’s, in that it includes all action which, in the normal scheme of things, benefits others rather than the self, he believed that egoistic acts, benefitting the self, are what made the continuation of life possible, and that all other acts that life in turn makes possible,
including those benefitting others, are subsequently important. According to Spencer’s theory, sentient beings have progressed from low to high types, under Darwinian law that states the superior shall profit and the inferior suffer. Darwin’s theory of societal success therefore lends itself logically to Spencer’s less than favorable views of the feasibility of altruism as the dominant impulse in society. However, he did acknowledge the two as dependent on one another in different fashions.
CHAPTER 4: DURKHEIM'S ALTRUISTIC SUICIDE & KROPOTKIN'S MUTUAL AID

4.1 Emile Durkheim

Spencer’s skepticism of altruism was not necessarily digested by all of his subsequent colleagues in the sociological canon, as evidenced by French sociologist Emile Durkheim’s (1858-1915) condemnation of the term. Durkheim described altruism as nothing less than “the violent and voluntary act of self destruction for no personal benefit,” (Durkheim 1995: 29) in contrast to the idea of rational self-interest. Yet Durkheim is largely considered one of the greatest supporters of the principles of moral collectivism and altruism. His paradigm of social realism compared society to an organism, one that was a moral reality onto itself and at the same time the sole determinant of moral phenomena.

Durkheim recognized the existence of functional egoism, stating that both altruism and egoism have been present from the beginning in every human consciousness. Yet unlike Spencer, who found altruism to be rather ornamental, with sentiments of egoism being the driving force of societal growth, Durkheim argued that altruism formed the fundamental basis of social life. He felt that the increased state of altruism arising through self-service simultaneously benefitted the common consciousness. Durkheim also suggests that the collective voice has a resonance that a
single voice cannot have. Again, this is a decisive departure from Spencer and traditional utilitarian viewpoints. Where Spencer would fight for moral individualism, Durkheim again asserts the moral priority of the collective.

Many of today’s definitions likening altruism with simply goodness or kindness do not hold to the intensity with which Durkheim equated it with self-sacrifice and morality in essence. He maintained that what people viewed as good or desirable might vary in different societies, but altruism would remain a universal idea. Durkheim based his version of altruism on the idea of duty and perceived desirability of obedience to moral authority. He, unlike Comte, felt that if the individual happened to benefit, it was acceptable but not necessary. This line of thinking is directly in contrast with that of Spencer, who believed that egoism was the driving force, and altruism a supplementary side effect. Yet throughout his work Durkheim presents sometimes seemingly inconsistent views of society, though his relentless case for moral collectivism and altruism never wavered.

Durkheim’s *Study of Suicide* outlines four main types of suicide: Anomic Suicide, Fatalistic Suicide, Egoistic Suicide and Altruistic Suicide. Durkheim concluded that anomic suicide occurs when the decaying forces in a society cause individuals to feel lost or alone (Durkheim 1897). A commonly cited example of this is teenage suicide, as well as suicide committed by individuals who have been sexually abused as children or whose parents are battling addiction.
Fatalistic suicide can be considered an opposite of sorts to anomic suicide, much as egoistic is to altruistic. It occurs when a person is excessively regulated, when his or her future is blocked, or passions are choked by oppressive discipline. Durkheim wrote that fatalistic suicide occurs in overly oppressive societies, which cause people to express a preference for death than to continue living within that society. Of the four categories, Durkheim believes this to be the most rare reason for people to take their own lives, however instances do occur (Durkheim 1897). For example, in prison environments some people might prefer to die than live in a setting in which constant abuse and excessive regulation prohibits them from pursuing their desires.

Egoistic suicide occurs when people feel completely removed from society. Durkheim discusses how typically, people are integrated into society through labor roles, family/community ties, and other social bonds. However, when these social bonds are weakened by retirement and/or loss of family/friends, the likelihood of egoistic suicide increases. Durkheim notes that elderly people who lose these ties are the most susceptible to this type of egoistic suicide (Durkheim 1897).

And finally, there is altruistic suicide, in which individuals are excessively regulated by social forces. An example of altruistic suicide is someone who takes his or her life for the sake of a religious or political cause, such as the “suicide bombers” or the hijackers of the airplanes that crashed into the World Trade Center on September eleventh. Durkheim muses that individuals who commit altruistic suicide tend to
subordinate themselves to collective expectations, even when the result is death (Durkheim 1897). This type of suicide is committed for the benefit of others, but as illustrated by the above examples, can be dangerous. Durkheim notes that certain groups, such as tribal peoples, sometimes view committing suicide as a sort of duty, such as when out of respect or loyalty, a wife kills herself after her husband dies, or a man takes his own life in old age. These can be seen as cases of insufficient individuation. Sacrifices of this nature, Durkheim stated, are imposed by society for social purposes. In order for the individual’s corresponding suicide to be categorized as obligatory and altruistic, the individual personality must be seen as possessing little value (Durkheim 1897).

In each of these four categories the individual takes his or her life because they are unhappy, but it is important to note that for the altruist, this unhappiness is unique in both its causes and effects. The egoist is sad because nothing is “real” to them in the world besides the individual, while the altruist is unhappy because the individual seems too “unreal” to them. While the egoist cannot visualize a goal to which he or she might commit themselves, (and thus feels useless/without purpose), the altruist commits his or herself to a goal of beyond this world, and hereafter this world becomes an obstacle and burden to them. The result is a difference in the expression of melancholy between the two. The egoist may experience a melancholy suffocated by fatigue and despair,
which manifests in the total lapse in activity, but the altruist’s unhappiness derives from feeling of hope or faith, and therefore manifests itself in acts of tremendous energy (Durkheim 1897).

We can discern that altruistic suicide aligns with a rather coarse structure of morality in that it is completely indifferent to the individual, while egoistic suicide can be said to raise the individual beyond collective constraints. If we continue along this path of logic, we can observe that conditions of altruism and egoism actually respectively relate to those categories of primitive and advanced societies. However, Durkheim was cognizant of the fact that altruistic suicide does continue to appear among more “civilized peoples” (e.g. it was quite prevalent among early Christian martyrs and French revolutionaries). Durkheim even claimed that a “special environment” existed in contemporary French society one in which there is an enduring air of altruistic suicide and behavior. He is referring to the military and the ways in which its tenets of self-sacrifice characterize what Spencer would refer to as the “evolutionary survival” of the morality of more primitive peoples. He wrote,

“The soldier kills himself at the least disappointment, for the most futile reasons, for a refusal of leave, a reprimand an unjust punishment, a delay in promotion, a question of honor, a flush of momentary jealousy, or even simply because other suicides have occurred before his eyes or to his knowledge” (Durkheim 1897: 238-239).

So, we have established that in most cases of altruistic suicide, society is guilty of repressing the individual in a manner a more moderate thinker like Mill might deem
too strict. Durkheim further specifies this condition, calling it “obligatory altruistic suicide” (Durkheim 1897: 222) because it is customarily executed as a duty to a group. However this certainly does not imply that all altruistic suicides can be called obligatory. Other forms include optional altruistic suicide and acute altruistic suicide (the latter can be likened to a more mystical suicide from religious fervor). Durkheim does however contend that there are certain similarities between altruistic and egoistic suicide. He acknowledges that numerous individuals equate altruistic suicide with some sense of morality, but questions whether the concept of individual autonomy present among many egoistic suicides is not also moral in a way. Furthermore, when an individual commits altruistic suicide, they still value the individual personality, even in others. Thus, every type of suicide can be understood to be in some way the “exaggeration of deflected form of a virtue” (Durkheim 1897: 252).

This analysis of altruistic suicide reflects one of Durkheim’s most characteristic arguments throughout *Suicide*—that the word suicide cannot be defined on the basis of purely subjective mental states (e.g. personal motive or reason). His characteristically sociological theory suggests that suicides tend to mirror the moral sentiments of the societies they occur in; they are rather exaggerated articulations of altruistic behavior which, in a more modest form, might be branded “virtuous” (Jones 1986: 81-114). Consequently, altruistic suicides illustrate a rather bold indifference to one’s own death
(as well as to the deaths of others), while egoistic suicide conveys a certain respect and/or sympathy for others (as well as a desire to minimize one’s own suffering).

Another fascinating component of Durkheim’s ideas about altruism is their connection to the field of individualism. Durkheim’s theory demonstrates that both excessive and insufficient individualism can lead to suicide (altruism referring to the latter). His penchant towards altruistic behavior is evidenced as a major theme that permeates his work, as he frequently prioritized the social over the individual. In his work on *The Division of Labor*, Durkheim discusses the ways in which modern society is maintained by a division of labor, one that causes individuals to be dependent upon each other by virtue of the fact that they specialize in different types of work (Durkheim 1997). In this way, it seems that altruism reaches an almost Mill-like interpretation, that it exists as a sort of collective individualism phenomena. It is not enough to assume total submission of the self to others; instead, it is more logical to view altruism as part of a web of interpersonal and dependent relationships.

In his research, Durkheim dedicated much of his attention to the social realm, and he did not dismiss the idea of individualism for this very reason. Durkheim recognized that the individual has become sacred in modern society, as evidenced by various trends in modernity, and so he referred to the modern form of collective conscience as the “cult of the individual” (Durkheim 1953: 29). Durkheim theorizes that humans beings are composed of two selves: the first pertaining to the isolated
individuality of the corporal body, the second referring to the social. These two selves exist in a constant state of tension; they are united in that individuality and society develop in tandem. This premise is evidenced by a simple examination of one of the many paradoxes of modernity: it is only in modern society, which is characterized by the division of labor, that humans begin to recognize themselves as distinct individuals. Unlike Comte, Durkheim felt that individuality may result in both negative and positive outcomes. Interestingly enough, egoism, which he defined as the selfish pursuit of individual interests, is inconsistent with the concept of moral individualism, and is actually more closely related to his theory of altruism, the ability to sacrifice self-interest for the good of others.

Durkheim argues that all societies are, in essence, moral societies, for humans cannot live together in harmony without some basic level of agreement and cooperation. This suggests that even societies characterized by organic solidarity and the division of labor are moral, because cooperation, and compromise, boast a fundamental level of altruistic morality. In an interesting departure from Comte, with whom Durkheim shared much of his sentiments regarding altruism, Durkheim concluded that this sort of morality increases with the growth of the individual personality (in contrast to mechanical solidarity in which morality is dependent on popular opinion). It can therefore be inferred that the presence of altruism is not only
present in Durkheim’s idea of a moral society—it is critical to the functionality of the society as a whole.

4.2 Peter Kropotkin

It seems imprudent not to include a brief section on Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921), an accomplished theoretist in multiple disciplines, including social science. Although Kropotkin did not employ the term altruism as often as some of the other theorists referred to in this study, his seminal work, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* is highly relevant to this discussion. Kropotkin can aptly be described as an adventurer, and frequently traveled to far and remote regions for exploration and study. While still a young man, Kropotkin traveled to Eastern Siberia and Northern Manchuria, seeking to explore Darwinian theory about evolution and animal behavior (Kropotkin 1910). He expected to experience Darwin’s assumption of brutal, competitive environments where animals struggled to survive. Instead, he was faced with overwhelming evidence of the opposite.

Kropotkin describes the extreme conditions that he faced while abroad: cold weather and rugged terrain, that seemed to him to indicate in favor of Darwin’s theory of the struggle to survive. Yet Kropotkin found that in areas with an abundance of life, despite the scarcity of the surroundings, animals instead exhibited behavior of mutual aid (Kropotkin 1910). Animals would use each other’s bodies for warmth, share food,
and protect their kinship groups. Kropotkin did not confine his observation to only animals either. He visited rural peasant villages, and witnessed similar activity of mutual aid and cooperation among humans.

So how does this relate to our discussion of altruism? As a result of his observations, Kropotkin rejected Darwin’s theory, and concluded that mutual aid, or the presence of a kind of altruistic behavior was crucial to the maintenance of life, the preservation of species, and their continued evolution. His understanding of altruism is rather similar to that of Mill and Durkheim, because “mutual aid” in its very name suggests a balance between altruistic and egoistic behaviors.

Yet it is for this reason precisely that we cannot use the two terms, altruism and mutual aid, entirely interchangeably. In the strictest sense, Mutual aid cannot be considered purely altruistic, because individuals do receive something in return for their efforts. Though they might not always immediately profit from engaging in altruistic behavior, Kropotkin concluded that the self does eventually benefit, because of the assumption that others will respond similarly in the individual’s time of need. In this way, Kropotkin avoids the pitfall of unevenly distributed altruism, in which some individuals practice greater self-sacrifice than others, and are then, as Spencer states, inherently disadvantaged. His argument for mutual aid exemplifies the ways in which altruism alone has the potential to lessen collective orientations to problem solving.
Kropotkin’s account of true sociability circumvents the alienating features of altruism, instead focusing on community and group action.
CHAPTER 5: FORAY INTO CONTEMPORARY THEORY

The study of altruism in classical sociological theory appeared to begin to wane after the 1960s, until a recent resurgence, due in large part to the exploration of the term in other disciplines. There is however, evidence that tracing the concept through the work of more recent social theorists suggests (at least on the surface) that altruism is a core concept that sociology has considered fundamental to any understanding of human behavior. One example is the work by the Russian sociologist Pitirim Sorokin (1889-1968), who paid the most explicit attention to it. Establishing his Research Center for Creative Altruism at Harvard University in 1949, Sorokin spent almost twenty years studying human conflict, and the means to reduce it, specifically integralism and altruism.

Sorokin believed that by gaining an understanding of the past and present human condition, we could begin to comprehend how to prevent social violence. His approach to understanding altruism was rather broad in that he wanted to include all fields of knowledge to locate the ultimate answer. He believed that science alone could not provide an answer; we must incorporate knowledge founded in “empirical, rational, and supersensory input” (Sorokin 1954: 92). He believed that truth is multidimensional, in that it is composed of spiritual, sensory, and mental parts. In the Preface of his book *Forms and Techniques of Altruistic and Spiritual Growth*, Sorokin
declared that altruism is “conduct as close as possible to the Sermon on the Mount\textsuperscript{10} or similar norms” (Sorokin 1954: vii). The book marked a striking departure from conventional vocabulary in Western sociology, by employing terms such as “God,” “spirit,” “the soul” and “grace,” (Sorokin 1954). It also covered a much vaster terrain than the typical concerns of American sociologists, by analyzing Buddhist Hindu, and Muslim practices around the world.

For Sorokin, altruistic behavior could be conceptualized as “love in action,” as an integrating force that had the power to unify individual personalities, groups, and societies into a whole. As previously indicated, he was inspired by similar teachings of the great mystics in Indian and Buddhist ethical and religious traditions, as well as some Western thinkers, including Plato and Kant, and Solovyev (Bierwiler 1978). He believed that altruistic conduct contained elements of love and generosity, and because it was uncontrolled by external compulsion, it was performed for its own purpose. Sorokin viewed altruistic behavior as the source of positive social activism, and therefore as a means of resolving the various crises societies faced. Like Comte and Durkheim before him, Sorokin felt that these were crises of values, of a moral nature. He therefore selected the genres of cultural meanings and values as his major elements of analysis.

\textsuperscript{10} A collection of sayings and teachings of Jesus.
Within his studies of altruism, Sorokin presents a theory of personality structure that features what he called a “supraconscious element”\(^{11}\) to balance, or even replace Freudian and other theories of personality, that emphasized primarily unconscious and/or instinctual elements (Bierwiler 1978). He was also disturbed by the high level of violence in the “sensate”\(^{12}\) culture of the twentieth century Western world. Like Comte and Durkheim before him, he genuinely believed in the positive outcomes of altruistic behavior, and he therefore proposed that changes in value orientation, towards the direction of love and altruism, would produce successful and enduring alleviation of this violence.

By merging Eastern and Western philosophical traditions, Sorokin challenged the traditional, empirical notion of the scientific method, resulting in some criticism from the scholarly community. However, it is important to note that, like much of his other work, his study of altruism has received relatively little continuing attention, because it has been interpreted as deriving more from his philosophical and religious convictions than from a more systematic sociological inquiry.

His colleague, Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), can be considered an equally prominent contributor, not simply as a follower of Durkheim (particularly in regards to Durkheim’s writings on integration and regulation) and Weber, but for his efforts to

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\(^{11}\) Supraconscious here refers to existing or functioning above the level of the conscious, rational, or logical.

\(^{12}\) Relating to things that can be experienced through the senses; a sense modality.
provide a detailed conceptual basis for the study of human interaction in social systems (Parsons 1951). As earlier discussed, Durkheim refers to the state of low integration egoism and high integration altruism. Parsons however argues that integration refers to the value placed on the individual and his interests, as opposed to that placed on the group and its interests. Parsons does agree with Durkheim that in altruism the individual is subordinate to the group, yet unlike Durkheim, Parsons holds that this is not a question of the strength of integration but rather of values. This goes against Durkheim’s views that in order for the individual to occupy a minimum space in collective life he or she must be nearly entirely immersed in the group, and the group itself must be highly integrated (Parsons 1992). Additionally, in his work, Parsons relied heavily on the terminology of classical Greek philosophy, including the fundamental distinction between ego and alter, which in Parsons’ schema became the basis for much wider considerations of self, and other orientations.

It seems remarkable that, given the seriousness with which many of sociology’s founding theorists regarded the concept, recent theoretical and empirical sociological work (recent referring to the period since the 1960s) has displayed a certain reluctance to employ the idea of altruism with the same gravity. This is not to say that related issues are being ignored. On the contrary, a great deal of attention has been devoted to topics such as helping behavior, volunteer work, generosity, tolerance, and participation in social reform movements. Each of these related topics could have been
considered a gateway to further inquiry about the nature of altruism. However, with a few exceptions, the term altruism itself has been largely ignored. It seems that only in recent years has there been a revival of interest in altruism, but interestingly, it has been largely generated by developments outside the discipline of sociology, particularly within biology, psychology, and rational-choice economics (Piliavin and Charng 1990), which the next chapter in this thesis will explore.
CHAPTER 6: DIVERGING DISCIPLINES

6.1 Biological Sciences—Evolutionary Biology

Competing concepts

Interestingly, within recent years, the study of altruism has probably received the most attention from the natural scientific community. Within the fields of the natural sciences, the term altruism is generally understood to refer to certain behaviors that benefit others, but in turn result in a personal cost to the behaving individual. Yet some variation does exist. In the field of evolutionary biology, for example, several scientists have developed competing concepts of altruism, resulting in contrasting predictions regarding the evolution of altruistic behavior (Kerr, Godfrey-Smith and Feldman 2004). In general, like many of the early sociological theorists, their interpretations differ on account of who actually benefits from altruistic behavior, as well as how to assess the cost of altruism.

In the case of scientific terms, one might argue that the pervasiveness of their use may give way to the rather treacherous belief that their meaning is indisputable. However, irony exists in the fact that such pervasiveness can actually lead to increased ambiguity, particularly when the term in question derives from common jargon and lacks the “precision, uniformity, or neutrality” that scientific terms tend to have.
(Wilson and Dugatkin 1992: 29-33). Although the word altruism did not originate as part of a vocabulary that can be categorized as jargon, its definitive power has certainly diluted since the days of Comte and Spencer. Confusion tends to surface when the subtle differences in the meanings of key terms like this are disregarded. And within evolutionary biology, the term altruism is certainly an example of this ambiguity. As aforementioned, a unifying definition does exist to some degree; altruism is behavior that simultaneously entails what scientists call “fitness costs”\textsuperscript{13} to the behaving individual and “fitness benefits” to the receivers (Bourke and Franks 1995).

According to Kerr et al. in their 2004 article “What Is Altruism,” we can attempt to group scientific understanding of altruism into three main groups: The “focal-complement” interpretation of altruism, the “multilevel” interpretation of altruism, and the “individual-centered” interpretation of altruism (Kerr, Godfrey-Smith and Feldman 2004). The first theory, popularized by biologists Matessi and Karlin, operates only within the assumption that altruism is costly to self, but beneficial to others. Under these conditions, the cost of altruism is illustrated solely in terms of changes in fitness, or physical well being for the altruistic, or “focal” individual. Therefore, the benefit of altruism to the other, or “complement” of the focal individual, is also conveyed solely in terms of the changes in fitness. In this way, a fitness structure

\begin{itemize}
  \item[13] Costs to the overall condition or physical well being of the behaving individual.
\end{itemize}
fulfilling these conditions can be described a “focal-complement altruism” case (Kerr, Godfrey-Smith and Feldman 2004).

For the “multilevel” interpretation of altruism Matessi, this time working with associate Jayakar, determined that the cost of altruism can be derived from the condition that, within any mixed group (of altruists and non-altruists), the altruist continuously maintains a lower fitness than that of the non-altruist. In determining that the benefit of altruism is given by group productivity, the number of altruists in the group should increase. For example, we can assume that the fitness of an individual lies in its expected number of offspring. If this is the case, the number of offspring for a group should thus increase as the proportion of altruists within the group increases (Kerr, Godfrey-Smith and Feldman 2004).

This second interpretation of altruism relies on fitness comparisons both within and between groups; this is why it is referred to as “multilevel.” Kerr et al. note that multilevel altruism is quite close to how earlier scientist J. S. Haldane conceived it in the early 1900s (Haldane 1932). There are several other noted scientists that use this interpretation today. E. O. Wilson has described altruism as “behavior that decreases relative fitness within groups, but increases the fitness of groups” (Sober and Wilson 1998: 60). Additionally, in a discussion of group selection, population geneticist George R. Price discussed behaviors that are “group-benefiting” but not “individual-benefiting” within the context of this sort of covariance framework (Price 1972).
It is important to note that multilevel altruism theory does require that the altruism of a “converted” altruistic actor result in an increase in fitness for the entire group, including the converted individual. Thus, while focal-complement altruists that help others do so at a personal cost, multilevel altruists are able to simultaneously help themselves and their group. This further indicates that in the focal-complement model the benefit of altruistic behavior is shared with its complement, while the benefits of multilevel altruism can be shared in a much wider capacity with the entire group, including the focal altruist.

In their article, “Theories of Kin and Group Selection,” Uyenoyama and Feldman describe an “individual-centered” interpretation of altruism, in which they define altruism by the following condition: that the cost of altruism results in a lower fitness of the individual altruist within the group (same as multilevel altruists). However in this interpretation, the benefit of altruism is measured by the increased fitness of every individual, by adding more altruists to the group. The focus therefore lies on individuals in their relation to the rest of the group, and not on the group (or society) as a whole. (Uyenoyama and Feldman 1980).

There are however, some fundamental differences between these three models. If the conditions of one of these presented definitions of altruism amply satisfied all of the conditions of another definition of altruism, then by default, the latter definition would include the former. Yet this is not the case. In fact, none of these three groups
include, or are included by one another. As stated, their differences lie within the way in which cost and benefit are evaluated. True, each interpretation measures benefit of altruism through a comparison of fitness (in which the number of altruists in the group varies). Nevertheless, the benefiting party could be “the individual (individual-centered altruism), the group complement of the altruist (focal-complement altruism), or the whole group (multilevel altruism)” (Kerr, Godfrey-Smith and Feldman 2004). Though the cost of altruism involves a comparison of individual fitness across groups in the focal-complement model, both multilevel and individual-centered altruism involve a comparison of individual fitness within groups.

To some extent, these differing scientific definitions of altruism correspond to the different ways our earlier theorists thought about altruism. We can see evidence of this especially when thinking about the “benefit” part of the definitions. The multilevel model that assumes whole groups function as evolutionary units (to which benefits may be assigned) seems more in line with the Comteian, or Durkheimian vision. However the focal-complement assertion, where individual receivers are the only beneficiaries seems more in line with Spencer’s skeptical views. These definitions also differ in their theories of what type of evolutionary process is necessary for the evolution of altruism. Focal-complement altruism is perhaps the most demanding; it cannot survive with random group formation (Kerr, Godfrey-Smith and Feldman 2004). Individual-centered and multilevel conjectures of altruism can also sometimes cause the evolution of
altruism to look rather unlikely. However these two latter models do include instances where by “converting” to altruism, and individual is able to increase its own fitness. These examples demonstrate just how important the exact definition of altruism is to determining the plausibility of evolutionary hypotheses of altruism. Although these particular comparisons in definition relate to the specific field of evolutionary biology, later in this chapter will see similar issues arise in other disciplines including psychology and economics.

*Notable contributors*

Darwin’s theory of natural selection described a rather harsh environment in which individuals competed for dominance in order to survive. E. O. Wilson, a biologist at Harvard, published his work *Sociobiology* in 1975, which served as both an expansion and a refinement of Darwin’s *On The Origin of Species*, the latter of which so influenced earlier social theorists like Spencer. In it, Wilson shared a new perspective, the idea that social behaviors are not purely social, but rather they were often genetically programmed into certain species to aid in their survival (Wilson 1975). This occurred in the form of altruism, which he characterized as self-destructive behavior performed for the benefit of others, being “bred into species’ bones.” The concept of the inheritance of behavior surfaced from earlier scientist J. B. S. Haldane’s belief that altruistic behavior could be passed down the generations (Haldane 1932).
However it was *Sociobiology* that was responsible for initiating and subsequently popularizing the effort to find an explanation for the evolutionary mechanics that dictate social behaviors (such as altruism and aggression) (Wilson 1975).

Within Darwin’s original theory of natural selection, such selflessness does not appear at all advantageous. If an individual were to sacrifice his or her life for someone else and thereby lose any chance of passing on his or her genes, the “engine of evolution” would appear to simply pass them by. However, Wilson resolved this paradox by highlighting the related theory of kin selection. Consistent with the laws of kin selection, altruistic individuals would be able to achieve success because even though they might not get to pass down their own altruistic genes directly to offspring; they would invariably be passed on by kin who shared the same traits. Because the entire group of kin is incorporated in the genetic triumph of a few, this phenomenon is referred to as “inclusive fitness” (see above for further distinctions of these varying fitnesses) (Wilson 1975). By the 1990s, this phenomenon had become a core concept in both biology and psychology.

However, Wilson recently had a change of heart. In 2010, he renounced much of the very theory that he had helped to produce. Along with several of his Harvard colleagues, Martin Nowak and Corina Tarnita, Wilson concluded that the mathematical construct that served as the foundation for his theory of inclusive fitness actually collapses under closer inspection. His new research indicates that self-sacrifice to
protect a relation’s genes does not necessarily drive evolution at all. For humans, Wilson discovered that familial ties are not actually that important. He rather found that altruistic behavior is apparent in social groups regardless of whether or not they are family. Wilson acknowledges that individuals are behaving selfishly when they compete against one another, but notes that altruistic attributes of human society are activated when group selection becomes important. Wilson also notes that though we are most likely the only species capable of navigating between individual and group level selection, a great level of discord still exists. These intrinsic tensions between the different levels is often what leads to what he refers to as “the great dramas of our species: the alliances, the love affairs, and the wars” (Weintraub 2011: 1).

However, not everyone is in agreement with Wilson’s new admission. His contemporary and fellow evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins, maintains the belief that altruism does in fact play a major role in evolution. In his book *The Selfish Gene* Dawkins states his belief that our genes are inherently selfish in nature (Dawkins 2006). This, he assures, is not to profess the rather absurd notion that genes are affected by motive or will, but rather that we may think of the results they bear as being metaphorically and/or pedagogically as such. The debate lies in the fact that the evolutionary consequences of the genes in question (the ones that inevitably get passed on) only cater to the interests of those genes (to continue being replicated), and not necessarily the interests of the entire organism. By decreasing the level of evolutionary
dynamics to the microscopic scale of a single or several complementary genes,

Dawkins firmly discards any notion that argues that evolution functions on a macro group level. His micro-genetic vision accounts for the existence of altruism on an individual level, particularly in kinship relationships, for when an individual sacrifices his or her life for the sake of the kin, they are intrinsically behaving in an egoistic, or selfish manner, in that they are ensuring the passing down of their own genes (Dawkins 2006).

6.2 Psychology

As with biology, there has been much discussion within the field of psychology over whether humans are indeed able to express pure, altruistic behavior. (Batson 2011). We have already discussed the ways in which definitions of altruism vary, from the traditional Comteian notion of self-sacrifice/lack of individual benefits to more Mill-like arguments that in many cases, altruism ultimately benefits the self in certain ways. The latter view calls into question the actual selflessness of altruistic behavior. Indeed, the social exchange theory in psychology proposes that altruism exists only when the benefits are greater than the costs (Maner, Neuberg, Cialdini, and Sagarin 2002). Yet not everyone agrees. Psychologist Daniel Batson argues against the social exchange theory, identifying four major motives for altruism. Like Mill, he recognized the importance of the individual in the equation, and therefore professed that altruism
ultimately benefits the self. This is the type of inherent relation to egoism previously discussed. Batson goes on to include the ultimate benefit to the other individual, as well as to a group. Once again, these sorts of categorizations mirror the kinds of biological groupings previously discussed. Finally, he recognizes altruistic behavior to be motivated by the desire to uphold a moral principle.

We can think of these four motivators more generally in terms of egoism, altruism, collectivism, and principlism (Batson 2011). Batson eventually concluded that altruism alone ultimately serves selfish gains, and so he fashioned a separate, but related entity of “selfless altruism.” However, he did resolve that empathy-induced altruism can be genuinely selfless (Batson 2011). Empathy-altruism refers to the hypothesis that psychological altruism is present in individuals, and is evoked by the empathic desire to help those who suffer. It is important to distinguish feelings of empathy with those of personal distress, in which individuals are compelled to relieve their own disagreeable sentiments. Psychologists have observed this kind of altruistic, or “helping behavior” in humans starting at around two years old, when toddlers become capable of beginning to understand subtle emotional cues (Svetlova, Nichols and Brownwell 2010).

Much of psychological research, often more so than its sociological counterpart, relies on experiments and observational studies. Altruism has been studied through the
lens of certain “pro-social behaviors including helping, comforting, sharing, cooperation, philanthropy, and community service” (Batson 2012: 243). Research has demonstrated that individuals are much more likely to actively engage in these altruistic behaviors if they recognize the other in need and feel a personal responsibility towards reducing their distress. This actually relates to sociologists Berger and Luckmann’s notion of the “zone of lucidity,” which proposes a positive relationship between our spacial distance from others and our level of concern (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Some research also suggests that the number of people witnessing suffering affects the likelihood of helping, what sociologists call the bystander effect. Studies have shown that increased numbers of bystanders actually result in a decrease in individual feelings of responsibility (Hudson and Bruckham 2004). However, exceptions do occur.

Hudson notes that if a witness possesses a high level of altruism or “empathic concern” they are likely to assume personal responsibility regardless (Darity 2008: 87-88).

Additionally, the existence of altruism, of some moral feeling of personal responsibility, has been linked with other “pro-social” activities, including charitable giving (Van der Linden 2011).

Many threads of psychology will often link volunteerism as a form of altruism to sufficient levels of happiness and health in individuals (Musick and Wilson 2003). In one study of older adults, researchers found that those who volunteered expressed significantly higher levels of “life satisfaction and the will to live,” while indicating
significantly lower levels of “depression, anxiety, and agitation” (Hunter 1980: 205-213). Once again, we see evidence in multiple disciplines to further the opinion that altruism and egoism are inherently (and perhaps effectively so) connected. In fact, studies have shown that volunteerism and “helping behavior” have positive effects on both mental and physical health (Post 2005). For example, one study compared the physical health of mothers who consistently volunteered to those who did not, and found that over a period of thirty years, fifty-two percent of the latter experienced a major illness while only thirty-six percent of the former experienced one (Moen, Dempster-McClain and Williams 1992). Additionally, a four year study on adults ages fifty-five and over found that individuals who volunteered for two or more organizations had a sixty-three percent lower likelihood of dying. After integrating the control of prior health status, the study determined that volunteerism accounted for a forty-four percent reduction in mortality (Oman, Thoresen, and McMahon 1999).

Certain psychological findings have even gone so far to assert that the mere awareness of kindness, or altruistic impulse in oneself and others can be associated with increased well being. Mill’s suggestion of a form of collective individualism, an interpretation of altruism that allowed for individual benefit and relatability, seems more relevant here than ever. However, it is important to recognize that, while much of psychological research enforces the idea that altruistic behavior results in individual happiness, the inverse relationship has also been observed, that happier people also
tend to be kinder. This bidirectional relationship between altruism and personal happiness strengthen other arguments of mutual, or group benefits of altruism. (Underwood, Fromming, and Moore 1977). However, studies have also identified that a certain balance is required for this type of positive feedback. If we all lived in the Comteian positivist society of complete submission of self, feelings of over-taxation by the needs of others would confirm Spencer’s suspicion that altruism can have negative effects on individuals’ health, happiness, and by extension progress. This kind of result is evident in a study by Schwartz et al. that discovered that feelings of being overwhelmed by others result in greater assaults on mental health than any positive results that might be brought about by helping (Schwartz, Meisenhelder, Ma, and Reed, 2003).

6.3 Economics

Apart from the scientific realm, another field that has widely studied and interpreted altruism is that of economics. In fact, much of the usage of the vocabulary of altruism relates to the field of normative economics and the idea of social choice. After all, it is logical to reason that concern for the quality or justice in society suggests altruistic tendencies towards other individuals. Considerable research has demonstrated that certain economic frameworks and methodology can be extremely useful in
analyzing altruism, as well as related topics of giving and reciprocity, ensuring ample consideration of pertinent motives, sentiments, and relationship types (Kolm 1984).

However, as we have seen in each of the other disciplines, within the field of economics, altruism and giving can be separated into different categories or types. French economist Serge-Christophe Kolm, a leader in economic theory of altruism, confirms that most economic studies operate with the assumption that altruism is hedonistic, or as economic theory would label it, normative. This can refer to a variety of norms, including seemingly innate moral values/norms, non-moral social values/norms, as well as rational moral principles (e.g., impartiality and justice, universalization, or alleged reciprocity). The hedonistic or natural assumption of altruism can therefore encompass several sub-classifications. These include expressions of affective altruism (visible affection, sympathy)—see chapter on Comte for similar categorization—pure, Bentham-like hedonistic altruism (this refers to the stronger sentiments like that of empathy), and what we call moral hedonistic altruism, (feelings of compassion, pity etc.) (Kolm 1984).

It can therefore be reasoned that all sentiments of altruism have the ability to inspire the acts of giving and helping. However, we must not discount the fact that giving and helping can derive from other motives as well, like the desire to conform to basic norms or to encourage different social effects. Or, they may be quite simply self-interested. According to Kolm, these “social effects” of giving may fall into the
category of judgment/sentiment (e.g. praise, esteem, gratitude, and affection), social relations (peace, agreement, friendship), or social situations (in that giving has the potential to generate both higher or lower statuses). Giving may additionally favor the self-interest of the giver through various effects such as return-gifts, rewards for service, or it may affect the altruistic giver through more indirect means such as markets or other social processes.

Kolm reasons that in economic theory, the most integral consequence of altruism is the respect garnered from other individuals, which in turn contributes to the protection of individual rights and properties. In a modern society, without a basic system of trust and altruistic encouragement in place, individuals would most likely be unable to adequately protect certain rights and properties through the police or other enforcement agencies alone. The existence of altruism therefore allows for peace and social freedom, which is the basic social ethic (and general facility) of society (Kolm 1984). Furthermore, the social norms of altruistic reciprocity allow for the constant and spur-of-the-moment improvement of assorted market failures, as well as possible organizational deficits. However, it is important to note that these types of collusion or reciprocative norms may also have the potential to contribute to market failures, because of their invariably competitive nature. Once again, in discipline after discipline, we see evidence for the argument for the careful balance between altruistic
and egoistic tendencies. However, perhaps one universally positively perceived effect of the altruistic impulse to alleviate suffering is that it habitually results in increased charity, which is widely considered an important fixture in many societies. (Kolm 1970).

Continuing with this theme, it can be imagined that the chief importance of altruism, and its behavioral manifestations of giving and reciprocity, is that they represent essential facts in societies, what sociologists might refer to as social facts. These essential facts are invariably what keep society together. Altruism is present everywhere in the social and economic world, in the general respect to individuals and their rights and property, in the family unit, in different groups and communities, most certainly in charitable efforts, and even in the spheres of politics and public policy. Methods of giving in particular are often improved by their economic analysis, which can inform individuals about maximizing impact and efficiency in their altruistic pursuits. It is clear that altruism, giving, and reciprocity are crucial to the function and performance of the economic system. The societal tenets are unique in that they allow for exchanges, but are also valuable in fixing inevitable failures that occur. Even by examining the most superficial feature of altruistic economic impact, that of numbers, we are privy to just how engrained altruism is in our economy. Data indicates that private charities are accountable for some five percent of transfers in GNP (Gross National Product) in the United States (Kotlikoff and Summers 1981). Additionally
monetary gifts made to children through education account for approximately eighty percent of savings in the United States, which translates to “investment, capital accumulation, technical progress, and growth” (Gale and Scholtz 1994: 145-160). Altruistic efforts, particularly the joint giving to those in need can even be considered a public good, in fact, the principles of efficiency, morality, and consistency, require that it be viewed as such and so realized by public transfers. It is clearly integral to our society; most current tensions exist over the debate as to whether altruism should be further institutionalized in our government economy, through increased taxes for welfare and other public service programs.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION – ALTRUISM AT WORK

This final chapter can almost be considered a continuation of the previous, in that much of altruism that is present in the modern workforce, particularly with regards to non-profit organizations, is covered in economic theory. I will therefore draw upon several of the ideas previously discussed, to formulate my own theory about the ways in which altruism has been institutionalized in modernity.

The past century has seen an incredible number of changes in western societal structures, for example, the advancement of technology and increased globalization. Perhaps one of the most interesting changes to behold is a transformation within the workforce. The growth of the non-profit sector from a sphere primarily connected with “non-economic” institutions like churches, clubs, political parties, and charities to a predominant feature of the workforce, one that supports millions of people’s livelihoods, occurred incredibly rapidly, and is continuing to expand every day. More and more people, particularly younger individuals, are entering and staying within the non-profit arena, despite the serious lack of competitive wages with other for-profit businesses and organizations.

So what is the appeal of this type of work that is causing such a rapid expansion? And how does it relate to this study of altruism? At first glance, the answer may appear to be an obvious one. Altruistic behavior undoubtedly drives much of the
growth in popularity of this line of work. We have not quite arrived at Comte’s grand vision of a government enforced altruistic societal code, (particularly because the majority of these organizations are non governmental). Yet we are moving closer towards it—towards a society where the individual becomes subordinate to society’s needs, but of their own consent.

Yet the issue is not completely black and white. Although altruism seems to be implied in their very name, many non-profit organizations collect significant resources from public sources, and still others engage in profit-making activities (Rose-Ackerman 1996). At the same time, many for-profit companies are engaged in philanthropy and making charitable contributions. Interestingly, altruism does not necessitate the creation of a non-profit organization, and conversely, many non-profit organizations receive minimal private donations of time and money. Likewise, ideological assurance is not firmly related to nonprofit establishment. For example, some individuals forgo the creation of a non-profit organization, in favor of pursuing politics, and many for-profit entrepreneurs are highly devoted to the goods and services they generate. Additionally, some nonprofits are funded on profit maximizing principles (Rose-Ackerman 1996).

Because of these discrepancies, it is difficult and problematic to link the non-profit sector as a whole to a singular view of altruism. That is why it can be useful to use the different frameworks for thinking about altruism that we have explored in
earlier chapters, in order to think about the ways in which non-profit organizations employ both altruistic and egoistic tactics, and the various benefits or pitfalls of doing so. A more liberal Comteian type view might suggest that non-profit organizations, in their current state, still need to be working towards an idealized, purely altruistic state. However, we do not live in a Marxist, communist society, and at least in the United States, people need to make a certain amount to support themselves and maintain a certain standard of living. It is worth noting that the majority of non-profit organizations in the U.S. are located within cities, where the cost of living tends to be higher.

A more practical view would be perhaps to take a mild Spencerian stance, in which we accept the so-called “egoistic” activity of the non-profit sector as necessary to its existence at all. For example, many non-profit organizations are criticized for spending too much on fundraising, or other overhead costs. There are certain expectations that comes with the label “not-for-profit” that sometimes generates anger or suspicion when donors feel that their money, their altruistic behavior, is being misused or exploited. Yet the reality is, many of these organizations would not be able to survive without employing these “egoistic” methods. Fundraising in particular is vital to the success of organizations that often operate fiscal-year-to-fiscal-year.
Another debate is over the question of incentive. You could make the argument that in order to attract the best possible and most experienced candidates, non-profit organizations need to increase salaries in order to attract the same level of talent that for-profit organizations are offering large paychecks to. One could argue that indulging egoistic self-interest could ultimately benefit the overall success of the organization and by default the amount of good they are able to do. In that case, it seems that, as Mill predicted, altruism and egoism are inherently entwined, and may interact in a certain way that benefits both parties: the self (the organization) and the other (employees).

Equally prevalent in modernity is the growth of philanthropy, both in the numbers of organizations dedicated to carrying it out and in the number of individuals participating. Modernity poses a unique quandary—this study has indicated that we are moving towards a society largely grounded in individualism and egoism, yet we also experience an incredible output of altruism, in that larger percentages than ever before of philanthropic and civic engagement. Once again this brings us back to the Millian presumption that elements of egoism, or as Durkheim would phrase it, individualism, should not only be considered inevitable and thus acceptable elements in society; they are actually necessary, in some cases, for the maximum output or utility of altruistic behavior in society.

These kinds of discussions are evidence enough that altruism is still very much a useful and relevant concept for studying contemporary behavior, both on a micro
individual level and on a macro organizational, or even societal scale. Though it may appear fundamental in nature because of the extremity in which it was conceived, the truth is that the dilution of altruism over the centuries, the multiplicity of the definitions and ideas surrounding it, has fashioned it into a comprehensive sociological theoretical framework that can be used to think about many aspects of the modern world. Its expansion into the realm of other disciplines only adds to its multifaceted visage, and the number of ways it can be deemed relevant in modernity. These are the reasons altruism has been able to escape the confines of academic jargon and retain a place in our general vocabulary—its expansion into so many different subjects coupled with an implied pre-social nature makes it virtually universally applicable. Yet despite its far-reaching branches, the ideas surrounding altruism remain grounded in social theory, and thus it continues to increase the relevance of sociology across disciplines in the canon of what we call knowledge.
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