Chapter 13
Afterword

Stephen G. Post and Matthew T. Lee

In the most general and accepted terms, *altruism* is any behavior or attitude that can be contrasted with *egoism*. For the altruist, others are "ends-in-themselves" rather than mere means to the fulfillment of the interests of the self, which is what defines the egoist. *Altruism* means, literally, "other-regarding." As such, it would seem to be a plausibly universal attitude and behavior, at least with respect to the nearest and dearest, such as family members and friends. The extension of altruism to wider circles is commonplace within the narrow context of the agent's communities; extension to a shared humanity may sometimes be limited by intense group loyalties but is also clearly achievable through helping activities that transcend ethnic, cultural, religious, racial, class, and species barriers. At least in principle, the universality of altruism is best demonstrated by the universality of the Golden Rule in its form of "doing unto others," which appears widely across cultures and times, and is thus an aspect of what Aldous Huxley termed *the perennial philosophy.* In broad terms, other-regarding behaviors are without exception endorsed in all major world religions and in the world cultures that have grown up around them.

Does altruism require self-sacrifice? Not in any essential way. Often the altruist identifies with the needs of the other, and therefore, the sense of cost more or less vanishes, unless the activities are unduly strenuous and exhausting. The altruist may engage in face-to-face helping, contributing, and serving others in areas of legitimate need without experiencing this in any psychological sense as a burden or as costly to self. This is the case even when an outside observer might be able identify significant costs, such as when a medical volunteer contracts a debilitating disease while meeting the health needs of others and shrugs it off as an expected

S.G. Post (✉)
Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care, and Bioethics,
Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY, USA
e-mail: stephen.post@stonybrook.edu

M.T. Lee
Department of Sociology, University of Akron, Akron, OH, USA
e-mail: mlee2@uakron.edu

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occupational hazard. Such altruists have redefined costs and benefits in ways that may puzzle an observer. Indeed, in many instances, such behavior allows the agent to feel deeper purpose, gratification, and happiness. Altruism therefore does not include self-sacrifice in its core definition, unless one defines such self-sacrifice in terms of any activity that is not directly focused on the narrow interests of the self. But this makes no sense given the essentially social and communal way in which humans flourish. In general, the interests of the self and the interests of others whose security matters to the agent are coincident or coextensive, although this sense of commonality may dissipate under conditions of resource stress.

There are times, then, when caring for the other really does cut into the well-being of the agent, and in the absence of community support or respite, this can take a toll emotionally and physically. For many people, there are spiritual sources of empowerment and meaning that can mitigate the mental and physical costs, on balance. But it is certainly possible, although not required, that a sense of disadvantageous self-sacrifice can be associated with altruism, in which case altruistic duties may become more central to moral consciousness than do altruistic dispositions. Comte, the sociologist who coined the term *altruism*, understood loss to the agent as a possibility, but not a necessity for behavior to be deemed altruistic. It is only in modern biological circles that loss to self has been deemed an essential aspect of altruistic action. Their paradigm is the animal that makes a warning cry to protect others from an attacker. But nonhuman animals do a great deal of helping behavior that is routine and unassociated with risk. As with humans, risk only sometimes comes with the territory of altruism. One wonders why those who study animal behavior focus on warning practices, rather than on more general altruistic behaviors.

It is essential that altruism, to be such, must be separated motivationally from the interest in reciprocal gains. These gains may come, and hopefully will, but they are a secondary motivation rather than a primary one. Reciprocal altruism is less altruism than contract. We do believe that altruism, to be genuine, must primarily involve the motivation to help others, not self, although internal benefits to self may and usually occur regardless. If reciprocal gains follow, they are welcome, but not sought as a goal. But once again the spiritual dimension complicates the picture somewhat: altruists may be motivated to follow a divine calling, which often includes helping others. The primary motivation here may be to serve God and do God's will, with secondary consideration given to benefits that may accrue to self or others. Habits of helping can become internalized and almost a matter of reflex, so that the "motivation" may involve the inclination to know God's love. Expressing this love to others has been experienced in some cases as basically a conditioned response.

In this collection, certain chapters do a splendid job of contextualizing altruism within major world traditions, and they seem to agree that altruism, volunteering, service, and helping others are evident in these various traditions. These chapters add specificity to the religious cultures of altruism. For example, Joan D. Koss-Chioino finds that altruism is integral to both spiritual transformation and healing practices among Spiritists in Puerto Rico and the United States. Contrary to the egocentric understandings of self that are prevalent in modernist societies, premodern groups

are portrayed as advancing "sociocentric" worldviews that foster deeper levels of empathy. Spiritists, for example, practice a "radical" empathy that extends not only to the individual who has sought their assistance with healing but also to all others who may need healing. This deep and extensive empathy may cause the healer to suffer greatly. But to further complicate matters, according to their belief system, the ongoing health and well-being of the Spiritist healers themselves depends on their willingness to engage in precisely this kind of other-directed helping behavior. Suffering for the other is required to heal both self and other. This is why Koss-Chioino concludes that "ritual healers feel they have no choice but to carry out the healing work."

Yueh-Ting Lee and colleagues from the University of Toledo, in "Daoism and Altruism: A China-USA Perspective," write about a very different religious and cultural context in their exploration of the relationship between altruism and ancient Chinese Daoism (or Taoism). It is fascinating to learn about "wateristic" personally attributes. Altruists should be like water, "modest and humble," always going to "the lowest place," and "helpful and beneficial to all things." Water is "flexible" and "transparent" and exhibits "gentleness with perseverance." Lee and colleagues tell us that water is altruistic because everything depends on it, but it seeks nothing in return. It goes to the lowest level, like a humble person who does not wish to be aggressive or competitive. Water is soft and gentle, but over time in persistence, it will cut through the hardest rock. The Daoist goal is to cultivate a water-like personality. There is a most interesting cross-cultural affinity between this Daoist ideal and some of the Christians engaged in benevolent service that we report in our coauthored book with Margaret Poloma, *The Heart of Religion*. Like the Daoists, some Christians argue that the true apostle of God is the one who "goes to the lowest place" to serve and empower others in need. The servant of God does not seek self-aggrandizement by keeping the helped in a permanent state of dependence, forever subordinate to and reliant on the helper. Instead, the goal is to lift up the needy so that they are not only able to meet their own needs but become benevolent leaders who in turn help others in need along this path. And like Koss-Chioino's Spiritists, some of these Christian altruists also feel that they have no choice but to practice radical and extensive empathy. There do seem to be important commonalities across cultures in this regard, despite the coexistence of differences.

Other chapters engage with this important point in nuanced ways. For example, Abhik Gupta, in "Altruism in Indian Religions: Embracing the Biosphere," identifies a number of commonalities across diverse Indian religious traditions. The ideal of universal "non-harm" and "biosphere altruism" is facilitated by diverse cultural forces ranging from tribal creation myths involving a "primordial altruism" to the centrality in Buddhism of *Metta* ("loving kindness") meditations. Alexandra Arkhipova and Artem Kozmin note, in their chapter on cross-cultural altruism in folktales, that in Germanic and Baltic cultures, there is often an emphasis on saving the self by one's own efforts. However, this does not diminish the theme of helping others, and most of us can recount numerous fairy tales in which beneficence wins the day. Such themes seem more prominent in Eastern European folktale traditions. Bruno Bettelheim, for example, in his classic *The Uses of Enchantment*, shows how

often fairy tales establish the values of kindness and helping in the minds of children. In her chapter "Cultural Values and Volunteering: A Cross-Cultural Perspective," Henrietta Grönlund indicates that volunteerism is essentially universal, but shaped by cultural factors. She also points out that cross-cultural variations in volunteerism are still in their infancy.

The question of extending altruism to a shared or a common humanity is really the key interface, for at the intersection of groups of various kinds, we sometimes get the impression that altruism is anything but universal and is easily overwhelmed by harmful tendencies and behaviors. Altruism can be extended to a shared humanity by appreciative understanding of the traditions of the other, by a moral principle of equal regard, by an abiding compassion regardless of differences, by role training or positional expectation as with helping occupations, and by spiritual experiences of an underlying reality of love in the universe. Actually, when we see acts of violence and hatred, we are usually witnessing either narrowly focused altruism and love that has assumed a defensive morality vis-à-vis outsiders or destructive emotional states overwhelming altruism for various reasons. But the altruism is there, even if difficult to discern.

Spiritual and historical cultures are vital to the extension of altruism to a universal concern. In medicine, as an example, ethics rightly begin with the writings of Hippocrates (400–300 BCE). Yet one finds in the ancient Greeks and Romans no passionate or compassionate concern for the patient. Unlike the Good Samaritan, the Hippocratic physician does not go out of his way in response to patient needs. In fact, barbarians, slaves, poor people, the contagious, and dying patients were to be ignored and certainly were not part of the physician's domain of duty. While the great Hippocratic tradition has great strengths, it has these deep limitations as well. It is only the Hippocratic Oath as it later absorbed the light of universal and unconditional love of the patient in the great period of the Judeo, Christian, and Islamic growth that we hold dearest. Here the physician is no longer casual but rather called by God to heal the sick regardless of their circumstances, degree of illness, or ability to pay. The Islamic Code of Medical Ethics as it is articulated today reflects this depth of calling to serve the needy. The physician swears to Allah to protect human life in all stages and in any situation, doing his or her "utmost to rescue it from death, malady, pain and anxiety." The physician protects dignity and is "an instrument of God's mercy, extending my medical care to near and far, virtuous and sinner, and friend and enemy." One finds a similar depth of commitment in Moses Maimonides, whose famous prayer hangs on the wall of countless Jewish clinicians. It reads, "The eternal providence has appointed me to watch over the life and health of Thy creatures." Furthermore, "May the love for my art actuate me at all times; may neither avarice nor miserliness, nor thirst for glory of for a great reputation engage my mind; for the enemies of truth and philanthropy could easily deceive me and make me forgetful of my lofty aim of doing good to Thy children." These lines are entirely different in tone and passion for the needy patient than anything that could possibly have been produced by the Hippocratic Oath. The oath makes reference to the Greek gods and goddesses, but it has no such depth. From the Prayer of Maimonides to the Christian founding of the first hospitals, from the advances made

by Muslim physicians to the establishment of great medical schools in Europe and the Middle East, from Florence Nightingale's founding of modern nursing to Dame Cicely Saunders' establishment of the Hospice movement, and from Albert Schweitzer's "reverence of life" to Paul Farmer's "theology of liberation," good medical practice owes so much to a sometimes forgotten God of love. Those who have no interest in God can still appreciate your being committed to walking with them through their experiences, on their terms, and this is more than sufficient testimony to the power of love in all of our lives.

Is altruism a universal value? It would seem so. Helping others is a necessity in any community. As Darwin pointed out in *The Descent of Man*, much of human evolution occurs between communities such that those communities with the highest degrees of helping, serving, caring, and altruism are likely to survive and prosper. However, achieving loyalty to the universal community remains the challenge of our times. Most people of good will believe that we will get to such universality because the survival of the human species depends on it. It is possible that an unlimited, altruistic love may be moving toward the status of master imperative in a number of cultural traditions. Such love would serve as a lens through which the religious texts of these cultures are read and reinterpreted. In this sense, religion could increasingly serve as an additional facilitator of the universality that evolution has helped to instill in all of us, regardless of cultural background. It goes without saying that both evolution and religion have also fostered insularity and intergroup conflict. The chapters in this book leave us cautiously optimistic that even more common ground across cultures can be identified with regard to altruism.

This volume is an initial exploration of a theme that requires more work. It is clear that the "love of neighbor as self" is virtually a universally stated precept, and we await the time when its implementation will be equally universal.