
The Paradox of Selflessness: Can True Altruism Exist?

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Ever mused about whether it's possible for humans to perform a completely selfless act, without gaining absolutely nothing in return?

This question has enthralled psychologists, philosophers and the general public for years now.

In order to explore this deeply, let's dive into an alluring story and examine the underlying psychology of selflessness.

Wesley Autrey: A Modern-Day Hero

In 2007, Wesley Autrey, a construction worker in New York City, was waiting for a train with his two daughters, when he noticed a man named Cameron Hollopeter, a film student, having a seizure.

Autrey borrowed a pen and used it to keep Hollopeter's jaw open. Following the seizure, Hollopeter tripped from the platform, falling onto the tracks.

As Hollopeter lay on the tracks, Autrey saw a train approaching and tried to take Hollopeter off the tracks, but realized there wasn't enough time. So he threw himself over Hollopeter's body, and pressed him in a drainage trench between the tracks, where he held him down. The train passed over them, and surprisingly, they were left unharmed.

Autrey became a national hero and received widespread recognition for his selfless act. He received numerous awards for his bravery as well.

However, this act raises a vital question:

Was his heroism truly selfless, or did he gain something intangible from his actions?

* The Psychological take:

Psychologists argue that even the most seemingly selfless act provide at least some sort of reward, be it tangible or intangible. Like a boost in confidence and self esteem , or social recognition.

For example: Suppose one helps a friend get out of a pickle. This might seem like a selfless act as what is the person expecting to get in return? Nothing, right? But in reality, they do receive something in return: a feeling of joy and the potential to strengthen their friendship. While there may not be tangible or material rewards involved, there is still the satisfaction of knowing that one has made a positive impact.

In Autrey's case, although he risked his life to save a civilian, he might have experienced a deep sense of personal fulfilment.

* Evolutionary Psychology :

Evolutionary psychology suggests that altruism has evolved in a way that when one helps others, they are more likely to help in return, thus creating a supportive environment.

So, when we help someone, there's often a hidden benefit involved, which can foster good relationships and trust. The potential for a future benefit, like getting help in return, in no way diminishes the goodness of your actions. It shows that kindness and helpfulness can be meaningful ways to live.

* The Debate on True Altruism:

Philosophers for centuries have grappled with the concept of altruism. Renowned Philosopher Immanuel Kant posited that moral acts should be done out of duty without any hint of self interest, to be truly laudable .

So basically, according to this standard, a truly selfless act would need to be completely motivated by the desire to help others, expecting no rewards in return. But is that truly ever the case?

Consider everyday acts of generosity: donating to a charity, volunteering, or even helping a friend.

Each of these actions provides intangible rewards. Like a sense of joy, pride, purpose, or community connection. These actions in no way abates the goodness of the acts, but they sure do complicate the idea of pure selflessness.

* Personal Experiment:

Let's say you go shopping and notice a person struggling to pay for their groceries, so you, discreetly cover for them at the checkout before they even realise it. You're aware of the fact that they are never going to know who helped them, but knowing that you lightened their burden, gives you a sense o...