
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Altruism

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

Last Week's Letter: [Confession](#)

[Back to All Letters](#)

Next Week's Letter: [Evil](#)

Dear Anna,

Yes, I do believe in self-less behavior.

Auguste Comte coined the term altruism in 1848. He argued that science knew everything there was to know, and could be used to establish a new humanistic social order, relying on the “inherent tendency to universal love” to replace belief in God.

Comte’s confidence in science became known as positivism. Although the concept of altruism survived, his confidence in the power of “benevolent emotions” did not. It gave way to a belief that self-interest is the only motivation for our behavior.

The inheritors of positivism claim that everything we do is a function of the survival benefit that it confers on us – or our genes. We are simply deluding ourselves—or being deluded by parasitic memes—if we believe that we are acting for any other reason.

Yet, altruism survives. We continue to be moved by our encounter with others, by our ability to imagine ourselves in their shoes, and by a desire to relieve their suffering.

In his autobiography, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, the Israeli novelist, Amos Oz, tells a story about his father. A gifted scholar, his father poured all of his intellectual energies, and most of his nights and weekends, into writing a book about Hebrew literature. He was elated when it was published, but profoundly disheartened when it didn’t sell.

One night, Oz’s father came home smiling. The local bookstore had sold out of his books, and ordered more. He took Oz’s mother out to celebrate, leaving Oz with a neighbor.

In the neighbor’s apartment, Oz noticed four copies of his father’s book. He knew that one was a gift, and then remembered that the bookstore has sold three earlier that day. “I felt a rush of gratitude inside of me that almost brought tears to my eyes,” Oz says. The neighbor “shot me a side-long glance through half-closed eyes, as though he were silently accepting me into his band of conspirators, and without saying a word he leant over, picked up three of the four copies on the coffee table, and secreted them in a drawer of his desk. I too held my peace, and said nothing either to him or to my parents.”

Times were hard, Oz notes, and buying the books required real sacrifice. Yet, the neighbor does not appear to have received any payoff beyond the pleasure of knowing that he has done what he could do to promote the life of another.

Evolutionary psychology may not be able to account for altruism, except as a delusion. But, if buying those books is motivated by a delusion, then it's the delusion that makes life worth living.

We still call it love.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*