

# African Research Review

AN INTERNATIONAL MULTI-DISCIPLINARY JOURNAL,  
ETHIOPIA

AFRREV VOL. 11 (2), SERIAL NO. 46, APRIL, 2017: 99-107

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

DOI : <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrrrev.v11i2.8>

---

## **Altruism, Its Relevance for the Individual in the Contemporary Society: A Philosophical Perspective**

**Alawa, Peter Z.**

Department of Philosophy

University of Port Harcourt

E-mail: [peteralawa@yahoo.com](mailto:peteralawa@yahoo.com)

Phone: +2347066784981

---

### **Abstract**

In our contemporary society, people no longer care for others, not because of the recession but because they are egotistic. The individuals are only after what they can gain or collect from other people without rendering any service and this is problematic. In this work, we are to reject and correct this bad behaviour in our society and introduce “altruism” which means selfless-concern for others. This is because life is not only about duration but is all about donation. Our method is textual analysis. It is a critical look at what is written on altruism, egoism, universalistic life in order to know what Altruism really is and how it can influence the individual in the society so that the world can be a better place.

**Key words:** Altruism, Egoism, Universalistic and society

### **Introduction**

Generally, people are not interested in others; they feel they do not exist, not to talk of caring for them. For instance, a rich man in my community who was blinded by his wealth would not for any reason queue up to wait for his turn for public services in the banks, hospital and petrol stations. No, he feels so filled up to the neck in his

possessions that relationship with other people is merely an exercise of fun without concern for others. For some people money is synonymous with life, the absence of money is equal to the absence of life and they think money is everything.

Some people in authority who want their position to be felt by all and has no need to take advice or suggestions from others. It is possible to think of all these sets of people in their various ways of possessing the capacities to live alone. We ask ourselves these questions, whether these people are really human beings? In this work, we are reflecting on altruism is? What is egoistic and universalistic ways of life? What is the relevance of Altruism to the individual in the contemporary society? These will be followed by an evaluation and conclusion. Let us now discuss Altruism.

### **What is Altruism?**

The term “altruism” is derived from the Latin word “Alter” which means “other”. It means living for others. Altruism is an ethical doctrine that holds that the individual has a moral obligation to help, serve others; if necessary at the sacrifice of self-interest. Altruism is the disinterested and selfless concern for the well-being of others. It is an act to promote someone else’s welfare, even at a risk or cost to oneself. It also means living for others; a practice of concern for others. It is a beautiful traditional virtue in many culture Mautner (1993) remarked: “Altruism is the benevolent concern for the interests and welfare of the other persons. The word was created by August Comte to distinguish between egoism which means selfishness” (p. 16). According to Mautner, altruism is the sincere acts of giving to people without gain or interest which is the opposite of egoism. In continuation, Erich Fromm (1956) commenting on altruism says: “Giving is more joyous than receiving, not because it is a deprivation, but because in the act of giving lies in the expression of my aliveness” (p. 133). For Fromm, to give does not mean that one has too much but it means no one is too poor to give, but giving the secret of wealth.

Altruism is often seen as a form of consequentialism as it indicates that an action is ethnically right if it brings good consequences for everyone except the actor. Fredrich Nietzsche held the idea that it is virtuous to treat others as more important than oneself; it is degrading and demeaning to the self, and hinders the individuals’ pursuit of self-development, excellence and creativity. He maintained that it was an ideology fabricated by the weak for the weak, and master’s self- poisoning resentment about individual and collective weakness.

In another perspective, Emile Durkheim sees altruism as one of suicidal missions - such as egoism suicide, Onomic suicide, for instance, altruism is that one dying for his country without gain. It is suicidal. Following Durkheim, Rand said that most problems in the world are caused by the doctrine of altruism. He argued that there is no rational ground for asserting that sacrificing yourself in order to serve others is morally superior

to pursuing your own self-interest in order to serve others. Others have argued that actions formerly seen as altruistic are in reality just for an enlightenment self-interest.

Altruism is derived from moral theory that we are morally obliged to seek the good of the same thing as egoism from which is an antithesis. Neither is it similar to universalistic way of life which differs in its emphasis on the “otherness” of the individuals whose good is to be sought. Despite our earlier assertion that it belongs to our human nature to think of the altruistic life as the most noble one. We discovered that in practice, only very few people live in conformity with this common sense intuition of ours. Thus, we have discovered the root of the problems of our contemporary society - that of not being able to reconcile our practical life with the fact of our societies.

In all honesty, to resolve this problem of people not caring for others in the society, every one of us has to live a life of altruism, obeying the voice of one’s conscience. Serve others unreservedly rather than do so for the self-sake, seeking the good of others rather than their own. Spencer wrote:

In practice, complete altruism, just like complete egoism will lessen the general good. If anyone of us completely neglects his own health in his eagerness to serve others, or if he objects to acquiring the skill in some art with which to serve others, then he would soon find himself unable to do the things for the other people which his altruism impetus him to do (Spencer, 1991, p. 3).

According to Spencer and other moralists, one agrees that there must be a compromise between the ideals of altruism and those of egoism in practice. But the extent which we allow for such a compromise is given by our redefinition of altruism as, our, moral obligation for the good of others with no conscious regard of oneself. In this way, we admit of the fact that even in extreme cases of self- sacrifice, there is some self-realization, however, little agent might desire it. The emphasis here is that the individual should not be primarily motivated by self- realization to act. Let us now reflect on forms of altruism.

### **Forms of Altruism**

If we allow for generosity in our society, then the well- to-do members, as well as the privileged few, will re-channel the outflow of their possession to others who are less fortunate, dispensing of them freely and with a noble mind. They will recognize and endeavour to satisfy the claim our society makes on them by virtue of their right to hold these possessions by using their wealth, their learning and knowledge, good physique for the common good. They will cooperate in their various ways as the different organs of the body in the society, in order to make for its well-being.

In the same way, if sympathetic behaviours are allowed to reign and become generally enlarged in our society then it would make for a conformity of our practical life with the natural fact of our societies. This is because each and every of us will be able to perceive another's distress and with a noble mind make move to comfort him/her or remove the cause Inah (1980) remarked: "This will be possible such behaviours as "get out of my office" from a boss to an applicant or an employee; such behaviours as Armed Robbery, Malevolent practice, and other social ills (p. 44).

According to Inah, if the people in the society care for others and have listening ears to their problems, there will be understanding between the employee and the employer, and also the boss and the applicant. The question of being angry that the boss manifests by telling the applicant to get out of the office will not be there. Also the bad behaviour in the society such as armed robbery and malevolence which are the major ills in the society will disappear.

If the individual practices self-sacrifice in our society, then remunerations for services rendered will count less, and this in turn will give room for the poor and less privileged of the society to enjoy the services of others. It will make for a true communal spirit and interdependency of one on another. Here, we would like to clarify that, the self-sacrifice demanded from each and everyone one of us by morality, is not self-sacrifice in every direction. We also agree with some critics of altruism that self-sacrifice is not the only course of action that is morally filling. There are other intuitions of what is right provided by the conscience. What we are asserting of altruism is that it holds the view that there is something intrinsically good in self-sacrifice. It needs not deny other things which are also intrinsically good.

We also acknowledge cases of real conflict between the demands of self-sacrifice and other principles such as duty to one's parents or care for one's health. This recommends exercise of virtue of prudence in deciding what course of action to follow. We understand these cases as exceptions rather than the rule. Generally, all things being equal we ought to want sacrifice ourselves for others. Let us now discuss what is egoistic life?

### **Egoistic Way of Life**

Egoistic life is a way of life which derives from the moral theory that it is the moral obligation of each and every one of us to seek his own good. It is a way of life a good many of us commonly follow consciously or unconsciously. It is a kind of life that places the individual first before any other person or thing. Egoism in its strict form recommends that we seek our own good with no regards whatsoever for the good of others, except where the good of others is a means to our own. Egoistic life, because it is common among us, leads us to conclude that we are naturally selfish. Plato observed:

If Thrasymachus' account of human nature was correct, men would find no point in limiting themselves to what justice prescribes, provided that they could be unjust successfully. Thrasymachus' account of human nature is certainly egoistic (Plato)

For Plato one believes that Thrasymachus' position that "might" is right is selfish in nature but for Plato himself in human nature the pursuit of good as such and pursuit of my good necessarily coincide. Indeed, egoistic life is a contradiction to the life of society.

Thomas Hobbes was the first major philosopher, apart from Machiavelli, to present a completely individualistic picture of human nature. There are at least three sources of Hobbes' individualism. First, there is his reading of political experience and his contact with the civil war, with the struggle of one private interest against another. Secondly, Hobbes believes that the individual must not compromise social life and be governed only by their pre-social drives. Thirdly, there is the detail of Hobbian psychology, which insists that such drives must be competitive and aggressive because of the will to power over other men which ceaselessly and restlessly drives men forward. Paul Edwards, commenting on Hobbes, says:

From all three sources arises a picture of human nature as essentially individual, non-social, competitive and aggressive. From this view it follows that the apparent altruism which is benevolence of men in many situations needs to be explained, the Hobbesian explanation is simply that what appears to be altruism is always in fact, in one way or another, disguised self-seeking (Edwards, 1967, p. 463).

For Hobbes, human nature only seeks to satisfy one's own desire and not others. Hobbes confirmed it when he says: "In the state of nature life is "nasty" brutish and short". One must agree with Thomas Hobbes that life of anyone of us, in the community where each person sought his own good in utter disregard of the interests of others, life would be very difficult in that situation.

In another perspective, Herbert Spencer rightly points out that, egoism is injurious to our self-interests. The man who shows no consideration for others need expect no consideration from others because every man needs the help of others to attain his own good. Let us now discuss universalistic life.

### **What Is Universalistic Life?**

The universalistic life derives from the moral theory that we have the moral obligation primarily to seek the good of our community as a whole. Many people are also attracted to this way of life, mainly because they believe and think that by living in this way they are taking their society very seriously, and are actually and most effectively exercising their sociality. According to Inah (1980)

Universalism characterizes and directs the life of both socialist and communist states supporters of this way of life argue that the moral principle which underlies it is capable of an almost indefinite expansion as moral insights deepen, because, we can seek the good of the community but under it is our own personal interests (Inah, 1980, p. 44).

Inah is saying that universalistic life is like egoistic way of life and it must be rejected because those living universalistic way of life are interested in the good of the community, town, villages but underlying intention is all about their own personal gains. In the first place, the concept of “community” is an abstract one. “community as such “does not exist; it is you and I and others that comprise the community. Hence, the “good of the community” as such refers to an abstract good rather than to your own concrete good. It became doubtful to even suppose the attainment of the maximum good of each one of us. It is doubtful to believe that working twenty-four hours each day as a doctor for my community’s hospital implies a balance of good health for every member of my community.

It is true that the higher spiritual goods such as education are shareable; there are other basic lower goods such as food, clothing etc. which doubtfully are supposed would be produced in sufficient quantify for the man who sells the greatest common good.

Universalism makes self-sacrifice an illusion because when we say that we have sacrificed ourselves for the common good and we have a share in this common good, then our sacrifice is meaningless. Self-sacrifice means we partake in no way in the benefits of services we have provided. Therefore, on the basis of these practical problems which universalism presents, we are not adopting it as a way of life in our society whose progress and concrete feelings we so much desire. Let us discuss Altruism: its relevance for the individual in the contemporary society

### **Altruism: Its Relevance for the Individual in the Contemporary Society**

In altruistic life, we perfectly confirm to the natural fact of our society, of our been made to live in and for society. We give and receive by an altruistic life. St. Vincent de Paul writes: “it is only in giving” (St. Vincent de Paul, 1997, p. 2). The great religions of the world urge that a disinterested concern for the welfare of others is one of the highest ideals that man pursue. And such unselfishness, of course does not go unrewarded.

We see societies bestow their recognition and approval upon those who serve them well; and religion promise such benefits as peace of mind of a clear conscience in this world, and of rich rewards in the next. St Augustine of Hipo writes:

All powers and authority belong to God, no one questions him. God does whatever he wills. He created things visible and invisible. And

that man being a created creature in the image of God, needs authority to harness and make heaven in the society (Augustine, 1958, p. 500).

For Augustine, the effectiveness of this depends more on the attachment of man to his Creator - God. In continuation, Augustine says: Our hearts are restless until they rest in the Lord" (Augustine, 1975, p. iv).

Each and every one of us must therefore, engage in our various ways in a line of selfless service to others. Christ notes the honour service for others entails, and also the right way to seek such honour or greatness in Mark 9:35: that whosoever wants to be first must place himself last of all and shall be servant of all.

The life of the ruler or the governor is an altruistic one. True and dedicated service wears the crown. The family head, the clan head, the governor and the president are all first and foremost servants. It is only proper that prominence and primacy be given to the aspect of leadership and every other thing made its subordinate.

What naturally should obtain is that we work our way to honour and first positions through service for others. But in our society common experience tells the reverse. A public servant wants first and foremost to be known and addressed as one even before he fulfils the obligation the status entails.

Let us go the natural way and work our ways to greatness through genuine and disinterested service given to others. It is my humble opinion that if everybody leads an altruistic life our society will be very improved.

### **Evaluation**

Generally, it is said that altruists' ways of life that can change the society can be seen as suicide by Emile Durkhan. For him, one dying for his country or for others or the benefits of other humans is suicided because one has no benefit from such an action. Indeed, some people believe in egoistic way of life which means they want to collect from others without contributing to the life of others This exemplifies our present day society, a society where nobody cares about others People only go about their own businesses do that which benefits them alone. This egoistic way of life has made the society to be precarious instead of a good society that values relationships with one another.

On the other hand, universalistic way of life seeks the interest of the community, but underlying it, one has his/her own personal interest. This kind of life must be rejected by the society. Nevertheless, today many people at the helm of affairs pursue the common good but at the back of their minds, they are after what they can gain from the common goods. This can be seen in Nigeria's federal, state and local government systems. Ekwowusi (2003) remarked:

The concept practices of our leaders from top to bottom who are only pursue the common good of their people but behind they are after their own gains. And now they are insensitive to the problems of the people who voted them into power (p.16).

According to Ekwowusi, many of our traditional rulers, politicians pretend that they will provide good governance to their subjects but they are there only for their own selfish interests. They only seek what they can get from the people by representing them. It means that people elected into public offices engage in all sorts of corruption; betray the mandate given to them by their citizens. Therefore, the citizens withdraw their consent because sometimes, our traditional rulers, government functionaries do not have conscience. And this begins with civil disobedience, which makes the people in power loose it. This kind of protest that starts as a non- violent gets out of hand and like snow balls into a violent one. The people living universalistic way of life should have the courage to blame themselves and the revolutionaries.

In spite of the criticisms against altruism in the society by the followers of Emile Durhken, that altruism is one of the suicides in the society, its numberless positive effects cannot be overemphasized. It follows that altruism is a moral theory that is always at the service of human beings and their freedom without gain of the person practicing it. The position element of altruism is the task of helping and organizing the society to be better. Egotistic life should be rejected in the society because they gain from the society and they never contribute or give to others. Also, universalistic way of life is not good for our society because they pretend that they are working for all of us but they are not with us. They are after what they can gain from the common good.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, altruism is very good for our society because it makes people to be ready for duty and service for others without looking for reward at the end of the day. A better understanding of altruism today is that people who are living this kind of life never lack, it is in giving that we receive and this is the secret of genuine wealth. The altruistic way of life will develop the society and not egoistic way of life and universalistic way of life. Therefore, in so far there is society there must be altruism.



### References

- Augustine, (1958). *City of God*. New York: Image Books.
- Augustine, (1975). *The confession*. New York: Image Books.
- Edwards, P. (1967). *The encyclopedia of philosophy*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Ewowusi, S. (2003). Crisis of political morality. In *This Day* Vol. 9 No. 9 No. 3020 30th July.
- Fram, E. (1956). *Art of loving*. New York: Harper & Brothey Publishers.
- Inah, O. J. (1980). Altruism. In *The foundation magazine*. Ikot Ekpene: Students of Bigard Memorial Seminary.
- Maunter, T. (1993). *Dictionary of philosophy* New York: Penguin.
- Plato (1999). *Republic*. New York Penguin Books.
- Spencer, H. (1991). *Good works*. New York: Image Books.
- St. Vincent de Paul (1997). *Autobiography*. New York: Penguin Books.