

Every Action is Self-Interested



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“One Voluntarist’s Perspective” is an original column appearing most Mondays at Everything-Voluntary.com, by the founder and editor Skyler J. Collins. Archived columns can be found here. OVP-only RSS feed available here.

Altruism is the “the belief in or practice of disinterested and selfless concern for the well-being of others.” This seems impossible, especially when we consider what motivates human action. Let me explain using a logical proof.

Human Action

1. Humans act.
2. Action is the purposeful utilization of means over a period of time in order to achieve a desired end.
3. While some ends are themselves means, action is aimed ultimately at alleviating the actor’s feeling of uneasiness.
4. A person feels uneasy about some state of affairs in the world around him, and desires to change it.
5. By definition, feeling uneasy is always undesirable.
6. Alleviating one’s felt uneasiness satisfies one’s desires.
7. The primary intent of action is to satisfy the actor’s own desires.
8. All other intentions of action are secondary to the actor’s primary intent of acting.
9. Every action is self-interested, therefore no action is disinterested or selfless.

Altruism

There you have it. Feel free to challenge any part of this logical proof concluding that every action is self-interested and therefore no action is disinterested or selfless. I don’t believe it can be done, but I remain open-minded. As it stands, this proves altruism to be incompatible with human nature, specifically human action. Even beliefs are actions, and of course practice is action, too.

The Takeaway

Besides understanding the impossibility of altruism, what's the takeaway? Because some of us feel uneasy about the suffering experienced by others, we desire to remove this feeling by offering aid. This is noble, but we're confronted with the reality that our own aid is insufficient. So we desire that others contribute along with us. We feel uneasy about suffering, and so we expect others to also, and to the same degree as ourselves, motivating them to offer aid. But they don't. Why not?

One thing we didn't need to cover above is value. People value things differently, and so they feel different degrees of uneasiness toward the various states of affairs in the world around them. They feel more uneasy about not having that new car than they do about some foreign stranger's suffering. This is the problem that must be overcome by anyone who wants help to put an end to suffering. So rather than preaching altruism and shaming people for their unavoidable self-interest, why not make an appeal in-line with the fact that all action is self-interested?

For example, find ways of connecting your cause to your target's values. Or, find ways of increasing your target's feeling of uneasiness toward the suffering of others. Share the facts surrounding the suffering. Strategies like these seem more effective and have the added benefit of being rational.

Final Thoughts

Helping others is a good and virtuous practice, but it's irrational to say that our actions can ever be disinterested or selfless. All action is motivated by the actor's desire to alleviate his own felt uneasiness. This is a logical truth. Some action is also motivated by the actor's desire to alleviate another's felt uneasiness, and other action is also motivated by the actor's desire to increase another's felt uneasiness, I suppose because the other's lack of felt uneasiness makes the actor feel uneasy. In any event, I hope altruists learn something valuable from the above analysis.

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