

Tone: Instructive, Confident, Calm, Logical

Questions for Discussion

1. Kennedy cites the Commission on National and Community Service's imperative to "renew the American ethic of service and civic responsibility." How would you describe the "American ethic of service"? Do you think the experience described by Kennedy supports the commission's goal?
2. In what ways did Kennedy's students, such as Junior, help her to learn about teaching? About difference? About values?
3. Do you think Kennedy's experience is typical of many participants in the Summer of Service? If so, in what ways? If not, how might it differ?
4. Kennedy's essay integrates both outside sources and her own observation and experience. Do you find both types of evidence equally convincing and compelling? Discuss.
5. The selection process for the Summer of Service gave preference to students who had prior service experience. Do you think organizers should favor those who have a history of service, or should they try to get students who have never before done community or public service to participate? Discuss the pros and cons of each approach.

Ideas for Writing:

1. Bess Kennedy cites Clinton's campaigning and the Commission on National and Public Service; others may cite the Points of Light Foundation, associated more with the Bush administration. Some critics charge that community service, particularly on college campuses and in the college curriculum, promotes a liberal political agenda. Do you feel that community service has become the political "property" of one political party or the other? If so, how does it reflect a particular party's platform? If not, how can people from opposing sides of the political spectrum find common ground in community involvement and service? Discuss.
2. The Summer of Service comes some thirty years after John F. Kennedy's "Inaugural Address." In what ways do you think the project or its founding commission fulfill some of the goals articulated in John Kennedy's speech?
3. Would you be interested in spending a summer participating in community-oriented projects? Write an essay that outlines the reasons for your interest and the goals you would hope to pursue. You may be able to submit the essay as a personal statement should you decide to apply.

□ P1: The author will define altruistic behavior.

□ P2: The author will discuss primary motivations of humans.

Altruistic Behavior

Desmond Morris

Desmond Morris (b. 1928) was born in Wiltshire, England, and took a B.Sc. degree at the University of Birmingham and a D. Phil. at Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1954. He worked as a researcher in animal behavior at Oxford and held positions in Granada TV and Film Unit (England) and the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. He is a scientific fellow of the Zoological Society of London and

Focus: animal behavior, Zoology

Audience: Adults

2 properties: 1. benefit others 2. cost to self

ev. theory = humans must be selfish

writer

served as curator of mammals. A full-time writer since 1968, Morris's numerous works include both scientific publications and books for mainstream adult audiences and children. Probably his work most well known to the general public though at times criticized by anthropologists, is *The Naked Ape* (1967), which presents the study of humans as one variation within the ape family. In the selection below, Morris argues that behavior that might seem selfless is often in fact self-serving in fostering the survival of one's own community or tribe.

Journal Thesis: selfless behavior not actually so

Write about a time when you helped someone else, perhaps a stranger, a child, a fellow student whom you did not know. What do you think motivated you? Alternatively, if you avoided responding actively in a situation where a person needed help, why do you think you did so?

Altruism is the performance of an unselfish act. As a pattern of behavior this act must have two properties: it must benefit someone else, and it must do so to the disadvantage of the benefactor. It is not merely a matter of being helpful, it is helpfulness at a cost to yourself.

This simple definition conceals a difficult biological problem. If I harm myself to help you, then I am increasing your chances of success relative to mine. In broad evolutionary terms, if I do this, your offspring (or potential offspring) will have better prospects than mine. Because I have been altruistic, your genetic line will stand a better chance of survival than mine. Over a period of time, my unselfish line will die out and your selfish line will survive. So altruism will not be a viable proposition in evolutionary terms.

Since human beings are animals whose ancestors have won the long struggle for survival during their evolutionary history, they cannot be genetically programmed to display true altruism. Evolution theory suggests that they must, like all other animals, be entirely selfish in their actions, even when they appear to be at their most self-sacrificing and philanthropic.

This is the biological, evolutionary argument and it is completely convincing as far as it goes; but it does not seem to explain many of mankind's "finer moments." If a man sees a burning house and inside it his small daughter, an old friend, a complete stranger, or even a screaming kitten, he may, without pausing to think, rush headlong into the building and be badly burned in a desperate attempt to save a life. How can actions of this sort be described as selfish? The fact is that they can, but it requires a special definition of the term "self."

When you think of your "self," you probably think of your living body, complete, as it is at this moment. But biologically it is more correct to think of yourself as merely a temporary housing, a disposable container, for your genes. Your genes—the genetic material that you inherited from your parents and which you will pass on to your children—are in a sense immortal. Our bodies are merely the carriers which they use to transport themselves from one generation to the next. It is they, not we, who are the basic units of evolution.

New def. of self: "self" none for genes

down look in evolution key is selfish acts? humans



The big idea is... evolution doesn't support altruism.

We are only their guardians, protecting them from destruction as best we can, for the brief span of our lives.

Religion pictures man as having an immortal soul which leaves his body at death and floats off to heaven (or hell, as the case may be), but the more useful image is to visualize a man's immortal soul as sperm-shaped and a woman's as egg-shaped, and to think of them as leaving the body during the breeding process rather than at death. Following this line of thought through, there is, of course, an afterlife, but it is not in some mysterious "other world"; it is right here in the heaven (or hell) of the nursery and the playground, where our genes continue their immortal journey down the tunnel of time, re-housed now in the brand-new flesh-containers we call children.

So, genetically speaking, our children are us—or, rather, half of us, since our mate has a half share of the genes of each child. This makes our devoted and apparently selfless parental care nothing more than *genetic self-care*. The man who risks death to save his small daughter from a fire is in reality saving his own genes in their new body-package. And in saving his genes, his act becomes biologically selfish, rather than altruistic.

But supposing the man leaping into the fire is trying to save, not his daughter, but an old friend? How can this be selfish? The answer here lies in the ancient history of mankind. For more than a million years, man was a simple tribal being, living in small groups where everyone knew everyone else and everyone was closely genetically related to everyone else. Despite a certain amount of out-breeding, the chances were that every member of your own tribe was a relative of some kind, even if a rather remote one. A certain degree of altruism was therefore appropriate where all the other members of your tribe were concerned. You would be helping copies of your own genes, and although you might not respond so intensely to their calls for help as you would do with your own children, you would nevertheless give them a degree of help, again on a basis of genetic selfishness.

This is not, of course, a calculated process. It operates unconsciously and is based on an emotion we call "love." Our love for our children is what we say we are obeying when we act "selflessly" for them, and our love of our fellow-men is what we feel when we come to the aid of our friends. These are inborn tendencies and when we are faced with calls for help we feel ourselves obeying these deep-seated urges unquestioningly and unanalytically. It is only because we see ourselves as "persons" rather than as "gene machines" that we think of these acts of love as unselfish rather than selfish.

So far, so good, but what about the man who rushes headlong into the fire to save a complete stranger? The stranger is probably *not* genetically related to the man who helps him, so this act must surely be truly unselfish and altruistic? The answer is Yes, but only by accident. The accident is caused by the rapid growth of human populations in the last few thousand years. Previously, for millions of years, man was tribal and any inborn urge to help his fellow-men would have meant automatically that he was helping gene-sharing relatives, even if only remote ones. There was no need for this urge to be selective, because there were no strangers around to create problems. But with the urban explosion, man rapidly found himself in huge communities, surrounded

Humans must be selfish. To understand, redefine self as 'housing of genes.'

by strangers, and with no time for his genetic constitution to alter to fit the startlingly new circumstances. So his altruism inevitably spread to include all his new fellow-citizens, even though many of them may have been genetically quite unrelated to him.

Politicians, exploiting this ancient urge were easily able to spread the ad-system even further, to a national level called patriotism, so that men would go and die for their country as if it were their ancient tribe or their family.

The man who leaps into the fire to save a small kitten is a special case. To many people, animals are child-substitutes and receive the same care and love as real children. The kitten-saver is explicable as a man who is going to the aid of his symbolic child. This process of symbolizing, of seeing one thing as a metaphorical equivalent of another, is a powerful tendency of the human animal and it accounts for a great deal of the spread of helpfulness across the human environment.

In particular it explains the phenomenon of dying for a cause. This always gives the appearance of the ultimate in altruistic behavior, but a careful examination of the nature of each cause reveals that there is some basic symbolism at work. A nun who gives her life for Christ is already technically a "bride" of Christ and looks upon all people as the "children" of God. Her symbolism has brought the whole of humanity into her "family circle" and her altruism is for her symbolic family, which to her can become as real as other people's natural families.

In this manner it is possible to explain the biological bases for man's seemingly altruistic behavior. This is in no way intended to belittle such activities, but merely to point out that the more usual, alternative explanations are not necessary. For example, it is often stated that man is fundamentally wicked and that his kind acts are largely the result of the teachings of moralists, philosophers and priests; that if he is left to his own devices he will become increasingly savage, violent and cruel. The confidence trick involved here is that if we accept this viewpoint we will attribute all society's good qualities to the brilliant work of these great teachers. The biological truth appears to be rather different. Since selfishness is genetic rather than personal, we will have a natural tendency to help our blood-relatives and hence our whole tribe. Since our tribes have swollen into nations, our helpfulness becomes stretched further and further, aided and abetted by our tendency toward accepting symbolic substitutes for the real thing. Altogether this means that we are now, by nature, a remarkably helpful species. If there are break-downs in this helpfulness, they are probably due, not to our "savage nature" reasserting itself, but to the unbearable tensions under which people so often find themselves in the strained and over-crowded world of today.

It would be a mistake, nevertheless, to overstate man's angelic helpfulness. He is also intensely competitive. But under normal circumstances these rival tendencies balance each other out, and this balance accounts for a great deal of human intercourse, in the form of *transactional behavior*. This is behavior of the "I'll-scratch-your-back-if-you'll-scratch-mine" type. We do deals with one another. My actions help you, but they are not altruistic because they also help me at the same time. This co-operative behavior is perhaps the dominant fea-

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ture of day-to-day social interaction. It is the basis of trade and commerce and it explains why such activities do not become more ruthless. If the competitive element were not tempered by the basic urge to help one another, business practices would rapidly become much more savage and brutal than they are, even today.

16 An important extension of this two-way cooperative behavior is embodied in the phrase: "one good turn now deserves another later." This is delayed, or nonspecific cooperation. I give help to you now, even though you cannot help me in return. I do this daily to many people I meet. One day I will need help and then, as part of a "long-term deal," they will return my help. I do not keep a check on what I am owed or by whom. Indeed, the person who finally helps me may not be one of the ones I have helped. But a whole network of social debts will have built up in a community and, as there is a great division of labor and skills in our species today, such a system will be beneficial to all the members of the society. This has been called "reciprocal altruism." But once again it is not true altruism because sooner or later, one way or another, I will be rewarded for my acts of helpfulness.

17 Anticipation of a delayed reward of this kind is often the hidden motive for a great deal of what is claimed to be purely altruistic behavior. Many countries hand out official awards to their citizens for "service to the community," but frequently these services have been deliberately undertaken in the anticipation that they are award-worthy. Comparatively few public honors ever come as a surprise. And many other "good works" are undertaken with later social (or heavenly) rewards in mind. This does not necessarily make the "works" any less good, of course; it merely explains the motives involved.

18 The following table sums up the relationship between competitiveness and helpfulness, and their intermediates:

1. Self-assertive behavior	Helps me	Harms you	Mild competitiveness to full criminality
2. Self-indulgent behavior	Helps me	No effect on you	The private, non-social pleasure
3. Co-operative behavior	Helps me	Helps you	Transaction, trade, barter and negotiation
4. Courteous behavior	No effect on me	Helps you	Kindness and generosity
5. "Altruistic" behavior	Harms me	Helps you	Loving devotion, philanthropy, self-sacrifice and patriotism

Questions for Discussion

1. State Morris's definition of altruism in your own words. Do you agree with his definition? How do you define altruism?
2. What is Morris's biological definition of the self? Is his definition persuasive? Do you accept the notion that selfless parental care is merely "gene self-care"?

3. Individually or in small groups, construct your own definition of the terms "altruism" and "self." Compare and contrast your definitions with Morris's.
4. According to Morris, what is the connection between "transactional behavior" and altruistic behavior? How does transactional behavior support day-to-day living? Do you find evidence of transactional behavior in academic communities such as your college? Discuss.
5. Identify several examples that Morris uses to develop his points. Do you find them convincing? Can you think of other kinds of support he could have used? Do you find his chart helpful? Is it appropriate for the selection?

Ideas for Writing

1. Review your journal entry for this selection. Write an essay analyzing the incident in view of Morris's argument. Does your example support or refute Morris's claims about altruistic behavior?
2. Discuss the ways in which altruistic behavior serves one's tribe or community. Consider, for example, what role love plays in altruism. How does altruistic behavior relate to patriotism? How does Morris's theory help to explain why people participate in community service and philanthropy?
3. Write a letter of response to Morris, or write a dialogue between Morris and Alexander or between Morris and one of the other authors whose work is included in this chapter or in Chapter 1.

*What kind?*  
*Key Concept: motives behind actions*  
*folks anticipate recognition*