

The Banality of Altruism

Refuting the denials of altruism by Hobbes, Santayana and Freud, the Oliners have documented authentic altruistic behavior.

BY AMITAI ETZIONI

You are working in your garden in a country occupied by Nazis, during World War II. A young man who looks very Jewish sneaks over. He needs a place to hide. You know the danger involved: death or worse for you, your spouse, and children. You have never met the young man before, nor are you a "Jew-lover," a particular admirer of the group. Would you risk all to help him? If so, why? What is your motivation? And can it be instilled in others?

Samuel and Pearl Oliner set out to study this seemingly rare form of behavior. They are more than qualified. He is a well-established sociologist and his wife is a professor of education at Humboldt University. Samuel has experienced firsthand what he studies. At age twelve he survived the extermination of the Jews in a Polish ghetto and he survived the war, hidden by a Polish peasant. My niece, as a small child, was saved by Catholic nuns in Holland, my aunt and uncle by Dutch farmers. I myself was taken out of Germany in 1936 by a non-Jewish relative.

Amitai Etzioni is a visiting professor at the Harvard Business School and author of The Moral Dimension: Towards a New Economics (forthcoming).

A sample of rescuers

The Oliners (and a small band of others studying those who saved lives under Nazi occupation) use strict criteria for selecting whom to study. It is not enough for someone to come forward and state they took the risk, or even for one who was saved to attest to another's heroism. The rescuers are carefully screened and their pasts authenticated. Survivors can nominate a person to be considered a rescuer; the rescuer is then listed with the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem. However, before they are declared bona fide rescuers, their deeds must be substantiated by documents and/or by several witnesses. Moreover, the Oliners chose to study only those who helped exclusively out of humanitarian motives, without any kind of material rewards. And they studied only those who helped a "marginal," "outside" group—in particular, the Jews. They excluded, for the purpose of their study, those who helped their own kind.

If one turns to this volume, seeking insight into a unique form of super-heroism—into sainthood—one is likely to be somewhat disappointed. The sociological methodology used by the Oliners is poorly suited to delve deeply into the human soul, to capture



ILLUSTRATION BY MARK ERICKSON WILLIAMS/THE WORLD & I

essences. Instead, they carefully drew up samples, interviewed rescuers, compared them statistically with people with similar "attributes" (age, sex, class, etc.) who did not help Jews, and drew conclusions from percentage differences, often small percentage differences. For example, the report notes that 70 percent of rescuers and 56 percent of nonrescuers emphasized learning

ethical values at home, as if the 14 percentage points difference explains anything. After all, in either group many more took the same position than the few who differed. Similarly, the finding that only 1 percent of the rescuers' families stressed obedience compared with 9 percent of nonrescuers disregards the fact that for 91 percent there was no difference on this score.

Next, the Oliners brought to bear the often useful but sometimes cumbersome tools of psychological theory in their attempts to "conceptualize" altruistic behavior, to interpret it as a Freud, as a Piaget, and as certain other psychologists would. Wisely, they often quote extensively from interviews with the rescuers, and the most telling parts of their volume are those in which heroes' voices are heard unaltered. However, to weave these accounts together—to capture the essence of the altruistic hero, the combination of the terror of discovery and the grandeur of self-sacrifice—might well require the capability of an exceptional novelist or poet.

The frequency of altruism

The Oliners' strength lies elsewhere. First, they demonstrate convincingly (although they never stress or even focus on this point) that altruism, even of the highest order, is not rare behavior. The common impression is that at most a handful of individuals—a German baron, a few Polish priests, and a few select others—rose to this heroic stature. Yet, Yad Vashem has an authenticated list of about 6,000. And if one relaxes the criteria, the Oliners estimate that between 50,000 and 500,000 non-Jews risked their lives and the lives of their families to save Jews. Obviously, if one includes those who risked their lives to save persons of any faith or background, the number would be much greater. Note also that for every rescuer there were an estimated ten more individuals who helped and risked indirectly: by donating food, providing information, transmitting messages, and so on. In short, a high degree of altruism was quite common.

Indeed, to establish the relevance of the Oliners' work for those who care little about bygone days and heroes, or extreme forms of behavior, one must remove only one condition. The Oliners restricted their sample to those whose *exclusive* motivation was altruism, for reasons I shall explain shortly. However, most acts have multiple and mixed motives. You need not be pure to be

an altruist. One may save a life because one feels one ought to or has a moral obligation, and because one covets the publicity, tries to impress one's friend or parent, or hopes for an award. Such an act still has an altruistic element, both in motive and in consequence. Those who are only interested in publicity, girls, boys, or awards, do not risk their lives. There are easier—and above all, safer—ways to glory, social standing, or affluence. It follows that people who engage in giving, caring behavior have a sense of inner affirmation, of value. Moreover, while motivation does matter, motivations are difficult to judge and are often murky, especially if studied forty years later through retrospective interviews. Deeds speak more clearly.

While I would have been satisfied with a study of those who extended themselves to help others, with no questions asked about deep or hidden reasons, the Oliners had a good reason to explore motivation. The reasons are briefly discussed both in a foreword to their book by Harold M. Schulweis, the head of the Foundation to Sustain Righteous Christians and in the book itself by the authors. The book, in effect, serves as a timely rebuttal to the denial of altruism.

The irreducibility of altruism

Cynics and skeptics, at least since the ancient Greeks, have sought to deny the existence of altruistic acts and motives. They have argued that altruistic behavior forms "amiable interludes like tearful sentiments in a ruffian, or they are pleasant self-deceptive hypocrisies acted out. . . . However, dig a little beneath the surface, and you find a ferocious, persistent, profoundly selfish man" (according to philosopher George Santayana). Thomas Hobbes was so adamant on this point that when he was teased about giving alms to a beggar, he explained that he was doing so for *his* benefit, because it hurt him to see a man hungry. (A common rebuttal: Why not walk away if you really don't care?) Anna Freud likewise challenged the possibility of au-

thentic altruism on the ground that the person *enjoys* the act of self-sacrifice. Others explained altruism as a form of social conformism or as trivial in scope, like refusing to eat South African avocados.

Over the generations the denial of altruism has survived much documentation of godly behavior by numerous mortals. Indeed, in recent decades the thesis has been raised to the level of a cardinal tenet of one kind of conservatism—secular laissez-faire conservatism—and of the social sciences. Economists build their theories on the assumption that everyone is out to profit all they can, motivated by nothing but self-interest. Recently this idea has been extended to other social sciences. James Buchanan, a Nobel Prize winner, argues that the behavior of our elected officials is driven by nothing but the desire to be reelected, and that voters are motivated by one consideration, their pocketbooks. Psychologists talk about “balance-sheet suicide”: People commit suicide not out of desperation and impulse, temporarily overcome by emotions, but because their calculations inform them that their misery exceeds their joys. Even religious life is explained by these laissez-faire social scientists as an effort to maximize an “after-life utility.”

Slowly, a groundswell of a “pro-social” response is building up. A considerable body of experimental data affirms the existence of widely practiced altruistic behavior. Several experiments show that many people mail back “lost” wallets to strangers, cash intact. In another study, 64 percent of the subjects who had an opportunity to return a lost contribution to an “Institute for Research in Medicine” did so. The costs are forgoing the found cash, as well as paying for postage, and going to the trouble of mailing the contribution. The rewards? Chiefly the inner sense of having done something right.

In some situations, many individuals who see others in distress rush to help them without calculating the consequences for themselves when they feel responsible, as parents do for their children when their

houses are on fire. In a set of experiments designed to study “costly self-sacrificing” behavior, people were asked whether they would contribute bone marrow for strangers. Of those asked, 59 percent said they would donate; an additional 24 percent indicated at least a 50/50 chance that they would if called upon; 12 percent indicated a less than even chance that they would make such a contribution; only 5 percent said they would refuse outright.

Neoclassical social scientists argue that studies of attitudes of the kind where people are asked if they would make a contribution do not provide firm predictions of behavior. This is generally a valid criticism. However, studies of actual altruistic behavior reach a

The Oliners' work is a study of qualities we all have potentially, the conditions under which we and our children may become more caring and giving.

consistent conclusion. Latane and Darley sent researchers requesting help into, of all places, the streets of New York City. A high proportion of people who were approached for aid did assist individuals whom they thought were in distress in a variety of situations. For example, an investigator who repeatedly fell down as drunk elicited help from passersby in 70 percent of the episodes. In many situations, gifts are not given to elicit reciprocal gifts nor adjusted “in terms of marginal utilities to the recipients,” but to express a family commitment or bond. Although cash is the most efficient gift, it is often tabooed. When cash is given (rather than an object), it is because this is defined as proper by the values of the group(s). People do things for the sake of

others that they do not do for themselves. An older woman, for example, refused surgery to save her vision until reminded of the effect her blindness would have on her children. And as I argue in *The Moral Dimension* (forthcoming), people are often affected both by rational consideration of interest and by moral and social values, by a keen commitment to reaffirm their values.

Education for altruism

The Oliners' study explores the factors that form and sustain the altruistic personality. Their argument is complex and cannot, nor need it be, reproduced here. They pay some attention to those who believe that there is a gene that makes people altruistic, and they touch on Freudian notions. But above all, they seem to draw on those social psychologists who see altruism as a learned form of behavior; and the Oliners are keen to lay out the ways altruism is taught, so it can be practiced more widely.

They found that rescuers were not saints; like nonrescuers, they attended to their own and were concerned with achievement and self-interest. Nor were they oblivious to approval by others. But rescuers showed more of a capacity for *attachment* to others, and for attachment to persons outside their family circle, friends, and even nation. It might be said of them that they loved *both* human beings and humankind.

Providing help to Jews did not reflect a sense that Jews were particularly worthy but was a reflection of the rescuers' moral obligation. (This helps explain how they occasionally put up with individuals for years who were quite troublesome or otherwise obnoxious; for example, some who considered working in their rescuers' kitchens demeaning.)

Rescuers had strong, close families; discipline was light and, above all, reasoned; and parents tended to explain their controls, such as they were. Also, parents put high demands on their children to care for others without concern for reciprocity. And the parents themselves exemplified this conduct

in their relations with family members and others. When the children occasionally did not live up to the parents' expectations, these incidents were treated as educational opportunities rather than as character flaws.

In contrast, the authors report that nonrescuers (those who were in similar circumstances but did not extend help) had limited family attachments, had disciplinarian parents, and were subject to corporal punishment. Finally their parents only infrequently provided reasons for their standards and expectations.

The reader may readily agree that the Oliners clarify what provides for a good family background and a successful child-rearing approach. However, there is rather little here to explain why some individuals become altruistic heroes while others become only decent, caring human beings, extending a helping hand to the poor, volunteering to work at a hospital, or reading to the blind. Possibly the factors that turn "routine" altruistic individuals into heroic ones are not so much a matter of character but of occasion. After all, even the most altruistic of us have few opportunities to risk our lives and those of our families to help a refugee fleeing a totalitarian power. And as the study shows, much of the rescue work was "routine" or undramatic. For instance, one farmer did not dare hide two Jews he helped in his own house; they lived in a nearby forest, and he brought them occasional clothing and told them about places it was safe to steal food; in the winter, he dug a ditch for them to sleep in at the end of his lot.

More profoundly, the authors who, in effect set out to study heroic altruism—the exceptional deeds of very special individuals under extremely trying circumstances—ended up studying the human, social, and educational conditions of caring and giving. As a result, their study is not primarily about rare acts forty years ago in Nazi Germany, but a study of qualities we all have potentially, the conditions under which we and our children may become more caring and giving. ■