



Spring 2009

# Apparent Altruism on Penn's Campus and It's Larger Implications

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## Recommended Citation

Meznaric, Christopher M., "Apparent Altruism on Penn's Campus and It's Larger Implications" (2009). *Anthropology Senior Theses*. Paper 101.

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# Apparent Altruism on Penn's Campus and It's Larger Implications

**Disciplines**  
Anthropology

APPARENT ALTRUISM ON PENN'S CAMPUS AND ITS LARGER IMPLICATIONS

By

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In

Anthropology

Submitted to the  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Pennsylvania

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2009

Penn's campus is crowded with people trying to do good volunteer work for one cause or another. But why are they really doing this? Do they have some ulterior motive or is what they do true altruism? The paper uses personal interviews with volunteers from different organizations on campus to attempt to find the real motives. Following a discussion of the literature surrounding the concept of the gift and altruism we present the results of the interview. The paper concludes that true biological altruism does not and cannot exist, but that the cultural evolution of apparent altruism is extremely important and may have larger implications for who we are as humans.

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## **Introduction**

The famous Locust walk, a small, unimposing brick pathway, quietly traces a path through the beautiful Ivy League campus of the University of Pennsylvania. It is brightened by elegant lamps, shadowed by tall trees, and surrounded by world famous buildings and libraries, engraved with the names of experts and thinkers. It is a beautiful path to walk down both because of its history, and because of its present day.

However, the daily appearance of Locust walk is anything but tame and proper. On any given weekday, either side of the path is lined with various groups of people, who have reserved their own piece of the walk in hopes of handing you a flyer or otherwise promoting something that they are personally invested in or feel you should somehow be a part of. Depending on your mood, or perhaps the weather, one may be more or less likely to listen to these peddlers. As of late, I have taken a serious interest in listening to exactly what these on-campus groups, dedicated to helping others, are truly saying. I am not interested in the specific cause for which they may currently be rallying; rather I am concerned with the general understanding of altruistic motives that these groups seem to perpetuate. What truly is their gift? Is what they do altruistic? I hypothesize that their gift is in some capacity calculated, and that altruism is not present on this campus. I hope to examine how this proposed lack of altruism affects the outcomes of the volunteer work these individuals do and what it may mean for the much larger picture of altruism.

Perhaps if this problem were only confined to Penn students, it would not be as alarming. However it is a trend that is mirrored throughout society and it is one that only continues if those outside of the university setting encourage it to continue. Perhaps the concerns I will be raising

are ones that have unintentionally been continued, perhaps intentionally, but after a reading of this paper they will hopefully be understood in a new light. There is a great problem with rewarding people undeserved; there is also a great power in analogy, as with most things, do not only take this argument at face value.

### **Background to Research**

I have already mentioned two terms which may seem clearly defined: the gift and altruism. Each field of study and researcher may and has approached these differently, so the inclusion of an outline of what they can represent will be important. Additionally, a thorough description of this paper's utilization of these terms will follow.

### **The Gift**

Marcel Mauss' *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* is one of the most referenced texts on this topic and has inspired a number of works. It is thus fitting to begin with his understanding and description of the gift.

Mauss' work focuses on the idea of giving and returning and what that does and does not mean for social relationships. The essay begins with a detailed account of the exchange of gifts in Polynesian society; it outlines the idea of contractual gifts following marriage, "the birth of a child, circumcision, sickness, a daughter's arrival at puberty, funeral rites, [and] trade" (Mauss 1950:8). It continues with the specific Samoan names that accompany feelings of exchange. To begin, let us look at one of Mauss' specific discussions, that of the *tonga*. There are a number of translations and understandings that have been implied for this term, however, "if we extend the field of our observation, the notion of *tonga* immediately takes on another dimension (Mauss 1950:10)." This *tonga* refers to "everything that may properly be termed possessions, everything

that makes one rich, powerful, and influential, and everything that can be exchanged, and used as an object for compensating others;" In this society, "the *toanga* [sic] are strongly linked to the person (Mauss 1950:10)."

A description of the *hau* is given within the essay in the form of a transcript of an interview with Maori informant, Tamati Ranaipiri. He describes the idea of the *hau*. The story begins with one person giving another person "a certain article," *taonga*, without price or bargain, and then that person passing that same *taonga* onto a third person. After a period of time, that third person can decide to give another *taonga* back in exchange for the original *taonga* that was given; this is called *utu*. This new *taonga* now "is the spirit (*hau*) of the *taonga*" which the first person had given to the second and which was subsequently given to the third. This must now be returned to the original giver because it would not be fair for the second person to keep the new *taonga* because it is a *hau*, or spirit. Tanaipiri notes that if he were to keep this, "serious harm might befall [him], even death" (Mauss 1950:11).

As I have described, the book is intriguing not simply because of its engaging description and discussion of the gift and reciprocation within "archaic societies," but rather, because its concepts are adaptable to so many situations, times, and places and they beg for further research and discovery. This study, Mauss notes, "is not sufficiently complete and the analysis might be pushed still farther" (Mauss 1950: 78). What makes his work truly adaptable and inspiring is this call; this paper will build on his description of the gift applying it to college campuses and, further, to a macro view of what these findings can mean to society. After all, "the facts that [Mauss has] studied are all... *total* social facts... they involve the totality of society and its



institutions... and a morality that is organized and diffused throughout society” (Mauss 1950:78-79).

On its own, this is an interesting study; however, I describe it here to illustrate the conception of the gift as it was explained then, and how it relates to today's understanding. We can see a number of parallels between the workings of this “archaic society” and those of our own American culture. If we simply understand the *toanga* as a gift one would give to someone else, it becomes easier to see the link. Let us take an example: if my good friend knows that I have always wanted a new Gibson guitar and he buys me one, I would be very grateful. Ideally, however, it would not be left at that. I would feel as though I owed him something in return and “to avoid feeling inferior and to safeguard reputation, the recipient must reciprocate” (Sherry 1983:4). We might call this feeling or spirit of the gift the *hau*. Perhaps, a new easel for my generous art-loving friend would be in order.

The gift has been described in many contexts and in a number of different forms, however, it is this idea of reciprocation which is of most interest to me because this topic becomes muddled when we begin to deal with the conception of altruism. How can altruism exist in a society as it is described by Mauss? Reciprocation is key and within the campus we will see that what we call altruism may only be apparent and based on Mauss's model in a silent way. This model of the gift and reciprocation will thus be used throughout this paper.

### **Volunteering: The Abstract Gift**

We must note one further difference between this paper's take on the gift and that of Mauss' and other theorists'; we will be dealing with what I will be calling “The Abstract Gift.” So far the gifts I have been describing have been physical gifts, however we will not be dealing with

this here. “Volunteering is any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or cause;” this will be our “gift” of focus (Wilson 2000:215). Many theorists have debated this topic and “the present question involves to a substantial extent matters of definition” (Smith 1982:1). As Peter Lynn and Justin Davis Smith note, “some scholars believe that work is not truly volunteered if it is remunerated” (Wilson 2000:216). Though volunteering and altruism are often times closely related and sometimes used interchangeably, they are separate ideas that don’t necessarily need each other. Volunteering is the process by which you give help or aid to another person or group, while altruism is an abstract idea that may or may not be occurring during somebody’s volunteer work. It will be important to keep the abstract concept of altruism separate from the “abstract gift” as we try to understand how these two truly interact.

### **Altruism**

Does altruism exist? This topic is fiercely debated throughout disciplines ranging from sociology and psychology to evolutionary biology and anthropology. The following will be a brief discussion of the work that has been done relating to the existence of altruism through a number of different lenses and from conflicting points of view, the purpose being to familiarize the reader with the current debate on this topic. This paper is dealing with a very small scope: altruism on college campuses, and discussing whether it exists there or not. Though the answer to this question has many implications, finding that altruism is not present here will not prove that altruism does not exist in any capacity, however, showing that it does exist here could lend credit to arguments in its favor. It is for this reason that we should be familiar with the literature on altruism.

## **The Evolution of Altruism**

Evolution is one of the main areas that theorists have attempted to use in proving and disproving the existence of altruism. It seems natural that this field of study would be interested in this question because to some the evolution of altruism is a contradiction while others see the process of evolution as a birthing place for this concept.

The current theory of biological evolution is called the *Synthetic Theory* or *Modern Synthesis*; it is the combination of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection with the knowledge of genetics that Darwin did not have at the time. As Darwin questioned in his famous book *The Origin of Species*, "can we doubt (remembering that many more individuals are born than can possibly survive) that individuals having any advantage, however slight, over others, would have the best chance of surviving and of procreating their kind?" He adds that "we may feel sure that any variation in the least degree injurious would be rigidly destroyed" (Darwin 1909:94). Theodosius Dobzhansky's 1937 book *Genetics and the Origin of Species* is one of the first publications to combine this idea with the knowledge of genetics (Ayala 1982:275).

It has been argued that through this theory it would be impossible for something as "injurious" as altruism to have evolved. A common example used throughout the literature is the warning call used by certain animals. Take for example Alan Carter's example of the prairie dog. When one of these animals spots a predator it calls out so that its neighbors are warned of the danger. Because of this, the neighbors' survival chances are raised, allowing them to survive to maturity, have offspring, pass on their genes, and through the lens of the modern synthesis theory, raise their evolutionary fitness. However, in doing this, the prairie dog that had originally raised the call has attracted the predator's attention to itself and has lowered its own chances of

survival. If instead that same prairie dog had simply hid from the predator without signaling it would have raised its own fitness. Since it is widely held that alleles determine certain behaviors, it would seem that those animals who are genetically predisposed to hiding because of selfishness would have a greater chance of surviving and thus of passing on their selfish genes. The argument, then, is that evolution would tend to favor the selfish, and altruism could not possibly evolve (Carter 2005:213).

Richard Dawkins talks at length on this and other topics in his work, *The Selfish Gene*. In it, he interestingly describes humans and all other species as only “machines created by our genes” (Dawkins 2006:2). Much like Carter, Dawkins opens by stating that humans and all other creatures have evolved by natural selection and that selfishness is inherent in this process. He expects that “when we go and look at the behaviour of baboons, humans, and all other living creatures, we shall find it to be selfish;” finding true altruism would be “something puzzling.” He notes that in “special circumstances,” “limited altruism” may be possible; genes are selfishly and ultimately, looking for the best end goal for themselves by employing an altruism that only appears genuine. Though it has been largely argued, Dawkins does not see the welfare of species as a population fitting into the processes of evolution as we currently understand them (Dawkins 2006:2). Dawkins defines altruism through an evolutionary lens: for true altruism to exist one must lower their “welfare” in favor of raising another's. Selfishness, he says, has the opposite effect. He goes on to explain that “welfare' is defined as 'chances of survival', even if the effect on actual life and death prospects is so small as to *seem* negligible” (Dawkins 2006:4).

In summary, evolutionary biology, here, sees true altruism as lowering your own welfare, while raising another's, and selfishness as raising your own, while lowering another's. Dawkins

concludes that though we are indeed machines for our genes, we are conscious enough as beings to rebel against them. In a well placed analogy, he argues that our genes strongly influence our sexual desire but that we can, for the most part, stop these impulses when it is not socially acceptable. In the same way, he argues, we can curb our impulses for selfishness (Dawkins 2006: 332).

These two arguments take the stance that it is impossible, or at least highly improbable, that altruism could have appeared through natural selection. However, it is important to understand the counter arguments as well. In *Sex and Death*, Kim Sterelny and Paul E. Griffiths (1999) provide us, as the subtitle promises, with an introduction to the Philosophy of Biology. After providing essentially the same example as Carter's prairie dog population and stating that it would seem obvious that altruism should be rooted out, they provide us with three specific points to deal with altruism's apparent existence.

Firstly, it could be an error. One of the main pillars of the theory of evolution is that it acts on random genetic mutations or mistakes that naturally occur. They argue, why not here? Robin's will often times feed cuckoo chicks in place of their own young simply because they do not possess the capacity to differentiate the two. Lionesses may feed non-related cubs only because they do not want the side effect of not feeding her own young because she was shielding herself from others. "Some propensity for error is inevitable" and "apparent altruism flows from imperfect design." This "error" hypothesis cannot, however, explain all of the known instances that we might call altruism, so they propose a second idea (Sterelny 1999:153).

Altruism may simply be an "Illusion." That is to say that what we may perceive as a purely altruistic act may in reality only be a misunderstanding when we look at the real "costs

and benefits involved.” As Heinrich explains within *Sex and Death*, ravens that call other members of their group to feed on a carcass may appear to be motivated by altruistic motives, when in reality the raven – without territory of its own – attempts to keep away other species whose territory it may actually be. In so doing, it benefits the other members of the species; however, the motive was selfish. One additional note within this topic is the idea of punishment avoidance. This raises new questions about the punisher and who will act as such, however, that is a complex topic that we will not get into at length. An animal may act in a way that appears to be altruistic only so as to not be punished; this still turns out to be the best move “*for him*” (Sterelny 1999:154). This idea leads to reciprocal altruism which is a concept in which two or more animals can only succeed at a task or secure a resource together; this idea of cooperation should not necessarily be seen as altruism. The topics presented in this second argument will form a strong analogy to the interactions on campus that will be discussed later.

A third and final point that they raise is one that is greatly debated within evolutionary theory today. They argue that perhaps altruistic behavior can be explained as leading selection on a collective, group level; this stands in contrast to what Dawkins proposed in *The Selfish Gene*. They do however address the challenges to this idea, building on Dawkins' ideas. Perhaps a warning call is in actuality a signal to the predator, alerting it that the potential prey is aware of its intentions and should not bother in any attempt to attack. Additionally, they argue that perhaps animals that defend territory together, and breed communally, have in fact evolved in a group where “tolerance” is selected for because “there is no obvious individual gain in 'defecting' to intolerance.” This works under the assumption that tolerant creatures are usually surrounded by other tolerant creatures (Sterelny 1999:156). As you can see there are a number of views that can

be taken and it is difficult to distinguish which is correct, however, this awareness of alternate views may prove to be an important lesson.

### **Further Views on Altruism**

Jane Allyn Piliavin and Hong-Wen Charng attempt to make the case that since the 1980s within the fields of social psychology, sociology, economics, political behavior, and sociobiology there has been a “paradigm shift” to a belief that true altruism can and does exist (Piliavin 1990:27). The authors note the debate of altruism's definition early on. In summing up a number of quotes from various sociobiologists, they find that the similarity among all of them is that there is “an emphasis on the costs to the altruists,” and more interestingly, that “they do not mention motives.” However, psychological definitions of altruism seem to focus on intentions and the benefit or cost to the actor. They make mention of five points which are necessary if we are to agree that motivation is a central point in how altruism is defined. They note that “altruistic behavior (*a*) must benefit another person, (*b*) must be performed voluntarily (*c*) must be performed intentionally, (*d*) the benefit must be the goal by itself, and (*e*) must be performed without expecting any external reward” (Piliavin 1990:29-30).

Elliot Sober continues this idea by insisting that there exists, what he calls, a “vernacular altruism.” The difference between it and evolutionary conceptions of altruism is that “you have to have a mind” because it deals largely with the question of motives. Motives will be large part of the discussion dealing with volunteer work on campus and so will be an important point to keep in mind as we reach the discussion section. Another feature of this understanding is the fact that vernacular altruism does not have to deal necessarily with reproductive benefits, it can deal

simply with giving a gift out of the goodness of someone's heart (if this is possible). Finally, he makes it clear that vernacular altruism cannot be a comparative idea, it must be absolute. That is not to say that we do not compare *how* altruistic people are, but rather that we are “making a comment on their motives, not comparing their motives with those of others.” He feels that altruism is an intrinsic property and likens it to being a millionaire, rather than being rich (Sober 1988:76-77).

There have been attempts at trying to find a personality which seems to yield altruism, but until this point, results have been scattered and inconsistent. However, experimental research has found that a couple regularities do occur. “People high in self-esteem, high in competence, high in internal locus of control, low in need for approval, and high in moral development” seem to be points that characterize people that display “prosocial behavior” (Piliavin 1990:31). Further social psychological research continues to discuss the “altruism-egoism controversy;” Cialdini feels that everything that appears altruistic hides selfish motives, even if the only benefit to the apparent altruist is happiness. Simmons recounts that her own data has shown that in “real world” research, as opposed to laboratory research, it is much more difficult to parse altruistic and egoistic motives (Simmons 1991:5). My analysis of interviews of campus volunteers will show that this is true. It becomes very difficult at times to accurately differentiate certain responses and motives, to the point where you can only rely on your strongest inclination of the truth and provide both views of the matter.

### **Motives to Volunteer**

Another topic that appears in the literature is an idea of sympathizing with those who you are helping. In their book, *The Altruistic Personality*, Oliner and Oliner describe the difference



between “rescuers” and “nonrescuers” during the time of the Nazis and World War II. Rescuers were those people who would hide or assist Jewish people. It is a description of a time in the past, however the analogy and main point can transfer to an understanding today. They note that both rescuers and those rescued used a “language of care” when describing the motivations for help. “*Pity, compassion, concern, affection* made up the vocabulary 76 percent of rescuers and 67 percent of rescued survivors used at least once to express their reasons (Oliner 1993:168).

As another example, Alexander M. Thompson and Barbara A. Bono provide a “theoretical and empirical exploration into what motivates volunteer (*i.e.*, unpaid) firefighters to devote considerable time, effort and skill to their communities' welfare, often at significant personal risk” (Thompson 1993: 323). They describe their understanding of “volunteer motivation” by beginning with a short summary of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*; Through Marx, Thompson and Bono argue that one of the main reasons behind specifically becoming a volunteer firefighter is a “purposive effort to struggle against the alienation which pervades contemporary capitalist society” (Thompson 1993:326). Marx's original argument was on a more general level, he saw socialism as an “emancipation from alienation, the return of man to himself, his self-realization” (Marx et. al 2004:37). Quoting Marx in *Wage Labor and Capital* (1933,19), Thompson and Bono cite that man “does not count the labor itself as a part of his life; it is rather a sacrifice of his life.” They use this to then restate their point: that volunteer firefighters do that work so that they may “[participate] in relatively self-actualizing, non-alienating labor to a degree not generally possible within the institutional framework of capitalist labor markets” (Thompson 1993:327). The argument continues by listing a variety of motivating factors that these firefighters have ranked from least to most important. They find that 67 percent of their interviewees listed helping one's community as most important,

while 49 percent listed job opportunities as least important. Interestingly, however, Terkel quotes this firefighter's interview: "But the fireman, you actually see them produce. You see them put out a fire. You see them come out with babies in their hands. You see them give mouth-to-mouth when a guy's dying. You can't get around that. That's real. To me, that's what I want to be" (Thompson 1993:328). It is interesting that this direct quote expresses wanting to feel as though you are this character. It may be difficult to understand the motivation behind "that's what I want to be;" is it because this image of the firefighter is a powerful community activist or is because he is a romanticized character we all want to be for ulterior reasons? It is difficult to draw this conclusion, even more so when it is simply black and white. One of the reasons that interviewing individuals was chosen rather than conducting a large survey was simply to put a face and emotion behind the response, but this will be discussed further in the methodology section. Again, we must look at this as more than simply the example of the firefighter. I am not suggesting that this example and its results will prove to hold in all instances of volunteerism, simply that we must begin to use this sort of questioning process when we attempt to understand it and its motives as a whole.

Another interpretation attempts to place a strictly empirical spin on understanding the truth behind volunteering, Kathleen M. Day and Rose Anne Devlin attempt to verify "the hypothesis that volunteer work increases one's earnings" (Day 1998:1179). They state that "everyone seems to 'know' that volunteer experience enhances one's resume and leads to improved labour market opportunities. They conclude empirically that it is true that volunteer work does increase monetary earnings, finding that volunteers typically earn 7 percent higher incomes than non-volunteers (Day 1998:1190). As with the arguments on the evolution of altruism, we can see that there are ways both empirical and not which argue different motives

behind volunteer work. Day and Devlin state that it is apparently a “well-known fact” that volunteering leads to labour market rewards (Day 1998:1180). But how does that affect the work being done? Should we let people see themselves as altruists if in reality they are not? What are the consequences, if any? Let us explore this question here on Penn's campus.

### **Methodology**

The study was done by conducting a small number of one-on-one interviews in place of a larger sample; this was chosen as the best course of action given the options. To get a larger sample would have required that a survey be handed out, filled out at the subject's leisure and returned with no worthwhile personal interaction. Though it may appear on the surface that less hard data was collected and thus the results are weaker, this is simply not the case. As I mentioned above, it is extremely difficult to draw conclusions based solely on a lifeless and stagnant paper survey when attempting to figure out what one's motives truly are. The robustness and value of the information is markedly increased when an anthropologist is able to witness the subject as he or she responds. The pessimism or optimism, the embarrassment, the body language, the change in tone of voice; they can offer much more than even the most well thought out paper survey response. Additionally, the questions that were used as a guideline are simple starting points. Taking care not to lead an interviewee, it is of great use to ask for elaboration or to expand upon unclear topics. This also encourages full and genuine responses because less effort is placed on crafting the statement while more is placed on expressing oneself.

It proved exceptionally difficult to find candidates that would sit down for an interview; however, those that were willing were very gracious and represented a fairly diverse cross section of the volunteering community on campus. A large sample was not required because we

are not looking for a necessarily empirical response, only ideas to work from. In the end, six volunteers were interviewed. Three of the interviews came from Habitat for Humanity members, all of which had different positions, one from a sorority sister in Alpha Phi, one from the former volunteer program coordinator of Phi Kappa Psi, and one from a member of Onyx senior society. Note that the volunteers will simply be referred to as Volunteers 1 through 6 because subjects were generally more comfortable giving real, unaltered answers when they knew that they would not be attached to their name. Each of these groups will be discussed in further detail within the individual interview analysis sections.

Habitat for Humanity was selected because it is one of the most well know organizations on campus; volunteer 2 expressed that she felt as though almost everyone raises their hand when asked if they have volunteered in the past and that they name Habitat for Humanity as the organization they have worked with. Additionally, this organization is a fairly straightforward and classic volunteering organization. Interviews were conducted with sorority and fraternity members because many organizations do some form of volunteering, however, volunteering is generally not perceived as the main function of these groups. The rationale, then, was to see if volunteering functioned differently when it is perceived as somewhat of a side note.

The interviews were generally between twenty and thirty minutes each and began by telling each volunteer that the study was interested in finding out about volunteerism on campus and the sincerity behind that volunteerism. Each interview began with the question, “why did you join this group?” As can be expected the way the questions were interpreted and answered varied by the type of organization that the volunteer was a part.

## **Results**

The following section will look closely at the outcomes of the interviews, We will attempt to understand the true motives behind volunteering on Penn's campus and how they have come to be perceived. A discussion of what these findings mean for the lives of these volunteers and for those to whom they are giving this gift will also be included.

### **Habitat for Humanity**

Habitat for Humanity is a “nonprofit, ecumenical Christian ministry founded on the conviction that every man, woman and child should have a decent, safe and affordable place to live (Habitat for Humanity). Volunteer 3 pointed out that there are three main parts to the group's work; they include building, fundraising, and education. Builds are described as day long events spanning from about 7:45-8am until 3-3:30pm on weekends in which members assist a family in building their future home. Volunteer 1 noted that fundraising has included coffee shops and other events in the past to try and fund the work that they do, while education was described as getting the word out on campus about the causes and work the organization does. It was expressed that the education aspect of Habitat was somewhat neglected on campus.

The three members of Habitat for Humanity will first be analyzed because the juxtaposition of their individual responses is quite interesting. Volunteer 1 was kind enough to sit down to an interview at a coffee shop. She noted that her high school had a chapter of habitat for humanity and that she had been a member then, so after arriving at Penn she thought that she would like to continue. Her dedication served her well because at the time of the interview she was an elected co-president of the Penn chapter of Habitat.

After allowing the volunteers to explain why they had joined the organization, follow up questions were asked in hopes of gaining a more complete picture of the decision. When asked if the end goals that she had in mind were in line with those of the organization she answered that her initial concern was less about poverty and more about having a hands on way of helping. Further questions attempted to probe the reality of her "altruism." When asked if she talked to her friends about the work she does, she answered that outside of her mother she told people on campus for the purpose of educating and raising awareness. She admitted with a smile, however, that she had only once bragged: when handing over a check for \$10,000 that had been raised by their chapter. She did say that she had listed her role in the organizations on resumes but pointed out that a large motivator behind that fact was that she wanted to become a part of a local government and maybe do community service work with them. She also expressed hopes of eventually becoming a city planner. When asked about the effect on the outcome of the effectiveness of the help given based on motives she said that she felt that on a day to day basis she did not think that the true motives affected the function of the organization. However, when you are "trying to make big decisions" things can become complicated and the mission can be lost. In describing the mood during periods of volunteering, she expressed that fundraising can become very frustrating but that builds have a very light and fun atmosphere. All of the Habitat volunteers expressed a similar sentiment: Volunteer 3 said that he likes to "keep it light and fun" during builds and that there is no reason to "ride your ass," it "should be fun." Volunteer 2 noted that music is always playing and that there is generally not a sense of "oh my god, these people don't have houses."

When asked about other members in the group, Volunteer 1 said that it is hard to say whether half of the people are actually there for the "right reasons." She expressed that one

specific board member “comes off as not caring” outside of habitat. She claimed that “he’s there for the position,” after pointing out his status as a Wharton business school student. She also complained about those people that say they care yet only go to the builds – the “fun” part – without helping with the fundraising. “It’s hard but you have to do it.”

Volunteer 1 defined altruism as the following: “when a person does something for someone else, or a group of people, or something, without thinking about what they’ll get back.” It is interesting that she says “thinking about what they’ll get back.” Notice that it does not say that they will not get anything back, only that they are not actively thinking about it. She felt that the outcome of the group may or may not be affected by people that are not “altruistic” but that anything negative that would come of that is “counter balanced” by the more altruistic people. The word “more” indicates that there is a range associated with altruism in this volunteer’s perception, by a strict definition there would not be a range, only if we are talking about apparent altruism. In a follow up question, she was asked if she thought that a smaller group composed entirely of altruists would work more efficiently than a mix with more people. “Maybe, maybe not,” the “altruists” have to motivate the non-altruists. An answer to this question could speak volumes about altruism and volunteering and will be revisited in the discussion section.

Volunteer 2 had a somewhat less mixed outlook about the groups work, and it was interesting to hear her understanding of Habitat. One of her friends in high school had been an active Habitat volunteer when he tragically passed away. There was a memorial created for him in the Habitat chapter of which he had been a member. She noted that she never was a part of that organization, but that her friend and the work he did was always in the back of her mind so upon arriving at Penn she decided to become a member. She was asked if outside of her

emotional connection to the group, were there any other reasons such as a desire to meet people or have fun that inspired her to join. "I wanted to build relationships with motivated people," she answered, adding that she was interested in the prospect of learning something about herself. As a senior at Penn at the time of the interview, she was a volunteer member but had held the position of co-president for two years in the past. She wanted more than to just help on builds, she wanted to see more. Her goal, she said, was pretty much aligned with that of the organization's: helping to provide affordable housing. However, her previous responses about building social networks and forwarding herself should also be listed as goals. Note that many times the subject is not aware of inconsistencies such as this one.

She said that she did talk a lot about her work with the organization, and much like Volunteer 1, she did it in hopes of spreading the word and fostering the success of events. She also noted one instance of pride and a feeling of real accomplishment on the day she turned over the check for house sponsorship. "It was the best day ever;" she was happy that they had secured a future home for the family but she was also happy for herself; pointing out that she had "never swung a hammer before freshman year." She went on to say that the personal statement for at least one of her medical school applications was entirely based on her work and experience with Habitat. She pointed out that this was more concerned with the fact that it was a leadership position and not as much with the volunteer aspect. She raises an important point and the discussion section will touch on it.

She did notice that volunteers are generally seen differently. Initially people think "oh, you must be a really nice person," but afterwards they may think, are they doing it because "they really want this on their resume?" She expressed that she is from Philadelphia and so the people



she is working with her are the same as her. This is the second instance of personal, emotional investment in the cause - her high school friend being the first. Wherever she ends up going, she says that she would like to continue being part of Habitat and if there is not a chapter where she is, she would go as far as setting one up.

Volunteer 2 defines altruism as “doing something you know will make a positive difference without benefit to you.” But she goes on to say that it is impossible to talk about volunteer work if you cannot see something in it for you, it is pointless otherwise. You are going to want to do it again if it touches you. She admitted that she thought what she does is altruistic, but after catching herself she said that you do get some benefit of happiness, but you are not necessarily looking for it. This response contradicts her previous statements in which she said that one should really feel as though one will take something from it. Regardless, she says that she “honestly think[s]” that people are not doing it to pad their resumes and that they are there to make a difference; “maybe I’m naïve.” When asked if she felt that the true motives affect the final “gift” she said “ya, especially with Habitat.” “Chances are you’re not going to want to talk to a single mother for eight hours” if you are not invested in it. This is interesting because it raises the question, how do you define the gift that is being affected? Is the gift the physical home being built, or is it also the interaction? In certain volunteering situations, such as working with the elderly that may not have any family, the entire gift is based on interaction. So why can we exclude one gift because a larger one is present, it seems that stated motives might be important. I would argue that both the final product, the physical home, and the interaction that happens to go along with it are equally important. It all depends on definition.

Volunteer 2 seemed very confident that what she was experiencing was for the most part, altruistic enough, even if her definitions somewhat contradicted this. Volunteer 3, however, had little reservation about telling me his true, perhaps cynical, perspective. He stated that he heard about Habitat and that it “seemed fun.” He wanted to get outside of the city for the activity and to feel involved, also noting that everyone was friendly. At the time of the interview, volunteer 3 was the build coordinator, which is an executive position into which you are voted. When asked, he said that he did feel like he had less time because preparation and the actual build took away weekend time, adding, however, that he felt better off socially. In discussing the group's goal as it related to his own, he did not hesitate to say that they were different. He “didn't join the organization because of the mission,” he himself said it was mainly “selfish” motives. He does say that the “mission is great” but that he mainly is interested in getting out of the city. Though he doesn't see himself as an altruist, he feels that he sometimes is seen as one.

His feeling is that sometimes it may be a positive thing to have true believers involved because there is a lot of passion in what they do, but he makes sure not to discount those that may not be “true believers” arguing that “once you're in it you're gonna wanna do a good job.” In his eyes, whatever motivates you, no matter what it may be, makes the organization better. When asked about his post-college volunteering plans, he said that he would like to continue volunteering but probably not with Habitat because of the large fees that non students are required to pay.

When asked for his personal definition of altruism he said “doing something for the benefit of others with no direct benefit to you.” He slowed down towards the end of his response adding “direct” before benefit. He noted that it should be altruistic on the surface, but that there

may always be some underlying benefit, such as happiness. I asked him his thoughts on the worth of raising awareness, if he thought that it may perhaps be an empty gift. He did not think so, saying that issues are easy to talk about and that it can really get things going by pushing issues into a number of new arenas.

We can see that within an organization with such a large presence on campus, we run into a number of competing views. Is any one of them really right? Can one belief truly be said as being closer to the truth than others? We will address these issues and the ones previously raised in the discussion section.

### **Fraternity Volunteering**

Volunteer 4 is a brother of Phi Kappa Psi. It was of special interest that I was able to interview him specifically because one year prior he had been appointed as the head of the volunteering program at his fraternity. He stated that he originally had no desire to join any fraternity until he realized that there was a “huge Greek presence.” When asked to describe the kind of volunteer work that his fraternity does he explained that there were two components: small, weekly events such as hour-long soup kitchens that would promote brothers' involvement, and one large event for each semester. He specifically named a “Toys for Tots kind of thing” in which they mostly contributed by raising money on locust walk. He had a bit of a hard time finding the words, but eventually described the volunteering program's ultimate goal as “just trying to get people involved.” Because he was appointed as head of the volunteering program he said that he wanted to preserve the fraternity's maxim, “the great joy of serving others,” while increasing awareness. He added that he is a volunteer firefighter at home where he really enjoys

the work he does, so he wanted to do it on campus. His sentiment was that it is “the right thing to do.”

When discussing his use of volunteering in forwarding himself, he stated that he felt as though interviews are “organized bragging about yourself,” so he will mention it, but otherwise he will only talk about it if prompted. Much like volunteer 2 discussed, he stated that he only places it on his resume or discusses in any way with potential employers because it is a leadership role that proves responsibility. He thinks that it “stands out more if you can claim responsibility and put a quantitative spin on it.” People are missing out on a rewarding thing, he explained, adding that he thinks volunteers are mostly seen as just doing something good. He does not get the sense that people perceive volunteers as motivated by selfish reasons, rather it is more of a feeling of “good for him.” In discussing his post-college volunteering, he says that he thinks he would like to continue some form of volunteer work because he “likes to keep busy.” Notice that most of the responses he has presented deal primarily with feeling good about one’s self or acting towards your own benefit, even if subtle.

“Acting in an unselfish manner for the betterment of somebody else” is the way he described his understanding of altruism. He was not sure if what he was doing was altruistic, but said that he did come to enjoy it, adding that “setting altruism as the bar is a flawed thing.” “You can enjoy what you're doing and benefit other people.” By saying this he is essentially admitting that perhaps what is occurring is not altruism but is worthwhile anyway. He also mentioned a mix of willingness to volunteer among the brothers in his fraternity; some really do want to do the work while you need to “push [others] to do it.” Additionally, he adds that the outcome may

be affected by the motives of those people doing the work but “as long as you have good leadership,” somebody there for the right reasons, “as a whole you should be OK.”

Some of the ideas he raises beg a number of questions. What really does being OK as a whole mean? What are the right reasons to volunteer? Once again, these questions and others will be addressed in the following sections.

### **Sorority Volunteering**

The interview with volunteer 5, a sister in her senior year at the Alpha Phi sorority, is a good addition because we are able to hear about volunteering from a non-leadership perspective in Penn's Greek life. She had originally joined her sorority because she wanted to branch out and meet a new group of girls, but started doing the philanthropic events because they are “kick ass.” Before that, however, she notes that during freshman year's Greek week they were “strongly encouraged” to do volunteer work. In reminiscing about it, she concludes that she probably would have done the events anyway because she wanted to “bond with [her] sisters and meet boys from fraternities.” She explained that the volunteer work that they do is mostly planning of large events to raise money for the Alpha Phi Foundation. The money raised goes to support women's cardiac care.

One event she was very eager to discuss was Karaoke Phi-ver. This is an event coordinated by the Alpha Phi sisters in which fraternity brothers perform choreographed karaoke songs to a paying audience. It is a very popular event that is almost always a great success. She was asked if attendance was a requirement or if she would be socially reprimanded by her sorority sisters. Her very adamant response was, “why wouldn't you want to go, it was awesome,” plus, she adds, it is for a good cause. Notice that the actual fundraising and

volunteering side is secondary to the enjoyment of the event. Later, she mentioned smaller projects such as decorating stuffed bears for patients in the cardiac wing of Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and planting trees. Interestingly, she smirked at how forgettable events such as that seemed to be. She says that “we have fun” and help other people, “this way we can do two things at once.”

“It sounds so corny,” but she feels good when she does it. She compares herself to people tutoring children in west Philadelphia and says that she is not nearly as gracious as they are, but that she feels like she is giving something back. She has the impression that you are special if you volunteer on a regular basis, those that volunteer only less regularly are not. This is an interesting perception; consistency seems to imply authenticity to these onlookers. She says that volunteering is enjoyable enough to do in some capacity after graduation but only if she is not alone or if she felt very strongly about the specific cause.

She defined altruism as “helping someone, or being good to someone without getting anything back in return.” To elaborate, she felt that what she was doing was altruistic because she did not get anything “physical” in return. Only accepting physical things poses a problem to altruism, anything else received – including those things raised by other volunteers – allows for, in her opinion, altruism. She returns to her previous example when explaining that motives do not affect the outcome in her volunteer work: if someone were tutoring children, we might see a negative effect if they did not honestly want to be there, but as far as planting trees or raising money is concerned, there is no change.

### **Onyx Senior Society**

The final volunteer, number 6, is a member of the black senior society, Onyx. This organization recognizes and inducts “black students for academic achievement and leadership.” Volunteer 6 was asked to join this group because they felt that he fulfilled the tenants of what the organization stood for: heritage, humanity, and humility. He states his goal in accepting the offer included social networking and an opportunity to work on service projects to which he otherwise would not have been exposed. It is primarily student driven, so it calls on the members to take on the responsibility of volunteering. He feels that only some of the members may have volunteered if it were not for the group but personally, he says, he would have.

He stated that the groups end goal is to make community service a constant part of being a leader, and that his goal is similar. He is very interested in making a difference and influencing the lives of children. He expresses concern that he only really talks about the organization with other members and that maybe he should be getting the word out. He personally does not feel pride, but he is proud of what Onyx does. He describes that one added bonus is that the organization is composed entirely of African American students because he feels as though there is a climate of underachievement in this community. He is glad that they are able to forward a model of success.

He lists his involvement in a section called awards and honors because he doesn't want to downplay his achievements, nor the organization. However, he does not feel as though he is viewed in a better light because of it and that volunteer work “is almost expected” if you are lucky enough to receive a Penn education. He adds that this need to give has become internalized, “as you gain, you should also help.” Further, he feels as though perhaps “subtly, or

slightly, [people] praise those that volunteer, but don't punish those that do not." People respond with excitement when they hear of volunteer work, when, he feels, it should be commonplace. It is clear to see why he says he will continue this type of work after college. The venues may change, but the volunteering will not. He hopes to align his career with volunteering in some way.

Volunteer 6 defines altruism as "recognition of the need for community, and the need to help those around you," "other problems reach beyond your own, and solutions will be beyond the individual, there is a need to collaborate and think beyond yourself." Coming from a strong Nigerian heritage, he stresses the strength of community, neighbors are like brothers. "Be a member of the community not just a part of it." In response to the question of whether he finds himself altruistic he says that he might not be in the way that it is defined officially, nor does he think that he has reached it yet in the way that he defines it, but that he is moving towards it. He no longer views volunteering as an inconvenience, once he began viewing it as necessity it became only about time management.

He thinks that perhaps people volunteer for the same reasons as him, but that "some of it may be inertia." They are doing it because they are obligated to, yet he doesn't think that those that do not volunteer should be punished because he feels as though it should be an internal choice. In one of the most interesting responses to the question of whether motive affects the outcome of the volunteering, he answers "it doesn't affect the people being helped; it does affect who will help after them." If they are seeing selfish motivations, it may discourage others from volunteer work. He argues that purely selfish reasons may be detrimental.



## Discussion

Many points have been raised in the background to the research as well as within the compiled interview information. The interview responses are riddled with contradictions, both between volunteers and within each of their own discussions. What is that allows for this? We could say that it is simply due to short sighted responses lacking depth of thought, and we might be partially correct, however, it must go deeper than this.

Let us first address some of the specific questions that have been raised within the responses. Recall that volunteer 1 was asked if she felt that a smaller group composed entirely of altruists would function more efficiently than a larger group with a mix of motives. She did not have a definite response, only stating that true altruists would need to lead the others. Let us consider the backing to the notion that everyone 'knows' that volunteering leads to benefits for the volunteer, as Day and Devlin state, and that this proves that altruism does not exist. Our extensive discussion of altruism paired with subjects' own responses – volunteer 3 saying himself that he is motivated by selfishness – and evidence of ulterior motives by onlookers support the no altruism idea.

However, let us for a moment assume that altruists do exist. They would be a subset – and by definition a smaller group – of all of those who volunteer. This would mean that if we were to allow only true altruists to pass without judgment of ulterior motives, we would see a decrease in the real number of volunteers. With a decrease, the benefit to those on the receiving end would fall as a consequence. This is of course not taking into account a higher efficiency for those who are truly dedicated to the cause, but let us ignore that for a moment. The answer to the question could only be that the larger groups composed of both true altruists and non-altruists

(with proper leadership) would succeed in creating a larger output of benefit. The logical response would be that we would want more help, and by alienating people as non-altruists we would lose it.

We can then complicate the matter by reapplying relative efficiency into the mix. It would seem that perhaps what the interviewed volunteers explained might have some validity. They expressed in several instances that depending on the nature of the volunteer work, motive may be more or less detrimental to the final product. Borrowing volunteer 5's example in which she compares planting trees to tutoring children there may be a real discrepancy. Regardless of my motives, if the task is to plant a tree, it will get done, that is assuming that volunteer 3 was correct in saying that if you become a part of something you are going to complete it. However, if my motives are less pure, then it will show in my attitude towards the tutoring and in turn the children, and perhaps volunteer 6's (member of the Onyx senior society) hope of sending a sign of motivation will be lost for the children.

It is difficult to apply one single argument to each of these concepts because there is so much variation. But that is the foundation of life as we know it and it really is what makes anthropology, evolutionary biology, and other related disciplines interesting. I will state here that I agree with Richard Dawkins that a gene based biological evolution of altruism is probably not what is occurring before our eyes. Instead, we are looking at apparent altruism. There very well could have been some instance of cultural evolution that took place in our past that made us prone to apparent altruism. Perhaps Sterelny and Griffiths suggestion of the "illusion" of altruism was the culprit. An accidental beneficiary of an apparent altruistic act may have decided to pay the apparent altruist back; this would fit loosely within the model of cooperation which is a

stable idea within evolutionary biology. So if this phenomena is only based on culture, does that make it any less real? No, it is only called non-altruistic so often because we are incorrectly assuming that if this cultural occurrence does not have a biological backing it does not really exist.

This idea puts apparent altruism on a real spectrum. If we think of it on a range we can understand what is happening. We see levels of how much people volunteer or care for others in the real world. Perhaps our belief that what we are looking at and doing is real altruism is an analogy to the mistake that was made by that first accidental beneficiary. Our culture has evolved to a point where this has been and continues to be perpetuated in such a way.

If we try to deconstruct it, and understand what is really happening, we may begin to consider ourselves fools. No smarter than our flea ridden ancestors; considering our neighbor's outcry as a gesture of goodwill when in reality it is only a warning to its potential predator that it is aware of it. And perhaps all of this volunteering would fade away. Would that be so bad?

To someone that exists without culture, no. But we do exist with culture. To me and to the reader it would be a terribly difficult change, because cultural programming is real. If we consider our cultural feelings as trivial, then we should have no problem returning to a state of complete selfishness, since altruism is not "technically" real. But it is. And for us to survive as we understand the world today, we need these people who believe that they are altruistic to continue.

Now, if I understand that these people are doing something that has no backing, I will begin to look down upon them, I will not volunteer, and I will socially ostracize them as fakes. And so be it, I then fall to the low end of the spectrum of apparent altruism. In the same way that

no one has been able to define “man” because of the possibility of so much variation, biological, cultural, or otherwise, altruism cannot be pinpointed. So many factors, social, psychological, or otherwise can go into the way an individual will mature to understand altruism and those things are all real to that person. If I insist that you must be able to walk upright to be considered “man,” what can be said for a paraplegic? His life experience was altered for one reason or another and he must now live in a wheelchair. In the same way, someone who “knows” that it is innate in them to help others because his life experience was altered in some way, must now help.

This illusion that we are experiencing may then have then been folded into the functioning of cooperation, and so over time we came to enjoy the benefit we receive from helping, whether it be happiness or some other payment, and those receiving the benefit in turn believe that true altruism must exist. Why else would they help? The circle is then perpetuated to a point where giving and volunteering becomes a good thing. So if one day we happened to stop believing altruism then there might be a change away from helping others. But in any measurable way it would not be better or worse, it would only be different. The only yardstick we could use is our current feeling on the subject. Imagine this tangential example. If in the future we have dropped nuclear bombs all over the world, destroying all cities, if we created an atmosphere unsuitable for living because of our global warming, have we destroyed the planet? No, we have changed it. We may have destroyed it for us, but that is simply perception, the world may now be a much better place for someone or something else. Now I am not arguing that we should not be self involved, that is the foundation of our evolution, but in thinking about these things we have to understand that all any of us can have is our own perception. There is no real judge that can

say that it is right or that it is wrong. I realize the ethical and moral implications of that statement, but as far as altruism and volunteering are concerned, it is true.

### **Conclusions**

These closing arguments may seem slightly removed from the generally pessimistic tone throughout this paper, but that is partially the point. I have used it deliberately. For good science, the scientist must remove himself from his work; he must have no investment in the outcome. I am now, and perhaps will be forever, bothered by what I see as faking of altruism. So, in this way, I have become my own subject. And that is OK; that is what has created the world around us, ranges of self awareness, and being our own subjects. But during this research I made sure that I stayed only aware enough to see the world as it just simply is.

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