

Understanding Altruism

Student's Name

Institution



### Understanding Altruism

A concept coined in Catéchisme Positiviste by Auguste Comte, altruism is to be focused on in this essay, where the primary aim is to derive an understanding of the term, in relation to philosophy. The term has been used over the years to describe a certain manner of living and thus will be explored based on its meaning over the years, where the writer seeks to illustrate its stagnation with regard to meaning. In this manner, altruism has been approached as a form of philosophy, adopted by a faction of human beings to elicit a type of human behaviour, as in the case of Utilitarianism, and thus poses an interesting subject to be approached, as showcased, due to its immense applications in normal day life.

Altruism, as defined by Auguste Comte, refers to the trait exhibited by others, where one does not focus on their individual needs, but rather puts those of others above self-interest (Comte & Dupin, 2009). Thus, as an ethical doctrine, altruism dictates that an action can be deemed moral if its sole intention is to posit a positive impact on the lives of other people, regardless of the impact that such an action poses to the conductor of the activity. In this sense, Comte claims that an individual who lives through the altruism doctrine, determines their life to be forfeit in the face of other people's lives, that is, they live for the sake of other individuals. A different, yet similar construct of the altruistic theory is James Fieser's, where the philosopher states that an act, conducted with the interest of others put foremost, and which has repercussions that are favourable to everyone else save for the actor, is morally sound (Fieser, 2000).

Kant's Golden Rule is a principle that determines the manner in which individuals should treat each other and also claims how an individual wishes to be treated by others. The Golden Rule, while advanced by Kant, has existed in various cultures and religions for a long time, where it is deemed a reciprocity law by some, while others view it differently. As such, this rule can be viewed either in a positive light or negative, depending on the cultural or religious beliefs held by individuals affected by its inculcation (Gensler, 2013).

Firstly, a variation of the Golden Rule dictates that a person should treat other people as they would wish to be treated (Gensler, 2013). This variation is positive as individuals are prone to self-preservation, and thus an application of the rule in this manner would mean that a person would not subject others to treatment that would otherwise inflict harm on another. Moreover, once self-preservation has been alleviated, it is prudent to assume that people seek

gratification, and thus, an activity that would lead to the fulfilment of another's needs, could be viewed as positive and thus posits an application of the Golden Rule.

Secondly, a prohibitive variation of the Rule can be stated as one's inhibition towards actions that they would not wish to be conducted on themselves. Such an approach dictates that some activities should not be conducted as they would seemingly harm other individuals. This variation is tied to the empathetic view that dictates that what an individual wishes upon others, they wish it upon themselves (Gensler, 2013).

The aforementioned theories surrounding altruism vary in a significant manner. Fieser's depiction of altruism involves an aspect of martyrdom, where one would be willing to die for others if the situation posited required their sacrifice in order to save others. However, the Golden Rule indicates that an individual can only take care of others as they wish to be taken care of. While some would argue that a person would wish for others to be ready to die for them, an argument can be posited as in the case of a mother and child. In a typical relationship between the aforementioned individuals, a mother would not wish their child to suffer on their behalf as in the case where they are likely to sacrifice physical comfort for their child to enjoy such comfort.

Therefore, it would be prudent to develop an understanding of altruism from various angles to determine its true meaning. Whether it involves the sacrifice of oneself for the benefit of others, and to what extent this sacrifice can be made. The variations illustrated for the Golden Rule apply to altruism to a large extent. Nonetheless, as indicated in the mother and child scenario, some aspects of the Rule cannot be inculcated in altruism without eliciting some questions that tear at the underlying nature of the philosophical stance. Nevertheless, a commonly adopted understanding of altruism dictates that one's actions should be focused on the benefit of others, rather than oneself, for them to be considered morally correct. As a tree bears fruits not for itself, or the sun shining, not for itself but for others, so too should human beings behave, for the benefit of all mankind, and thus, altruistically.

## References

- Comte, A., & Dupin, F. (2009). *Catéchisme positiviste: (1852)*. Paris: Sandre.
- Fieser, J. (2000). *Metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics: Historical and contemporary readings*. Australia: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Gensler, H. J. (2013). *Ethics and the golden rule*. New York: Routledge.

