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Why It's Good to be Good: The Power of Altruism

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This article is about altruism. It is about the behavioural science behind why altruism is hard to come by, but also why we should try to include it in our daily lives.

Isn't December wonderful? For many people, the month marks the start of the holiday season, a time that often comes with gifts, celebration, and valuable family time. The advent of Christmas, in particular, links back to the emotions of kindness and acts of giving. It is no wonder, then, that this is when **most charities experience a steep increase in donations**. In a time

when many people feel inspired by the “spirit of Christmas”, charitable actions become more common.

Have you ever wondered why that is the case? It is funny to think altruism is seasonal. Normatively, selflessness should be something we practice regularly, regardless of the time of the year. However, here is where we must realise that **altruism is hard to exert**. Actually, there are several reasons why we cannot easily give resources away to others. There are also reasons why we should try to do it every once in a while (**see here and here**).

In the spirit of Christmas, I shall explain the behavioural science behind why altruism is hard to come by and why we should strive for it, framed by the Dickens’ popular story “A Christmas Carol”.

A Behavioural Science Story About Altruism

Ebenezer Scrooge is a stingy, miserly accountant in 19th-century London. After leading a life of bitterness and selfish actions, Scrooge receives the visits of three ghosts who show him the different ramifications of his selfish behaviour, ending in death and loneliness. Scrooge, realising how miserable his selfish life was, has a change of heart and becomes kind, generous, and familiar.

Scrooge’s character arc is a symbol of the contrast between being selfish and altruistic. Before his redemption, Scrooge’s approach to the needy was colder. He contributed to charity and social causes just enough to comply with the law and social expectations. Furthermore, he considered the poor

and needy to be lazy and responsible for their own disadvantages. In this way, he is subjected to the **thick skin bias**.

What is this “thick skin bias”, you may ask? It is the belief that **poor people are responsible for their own poverty**. People who entertain this bias believe that individuals fall into poverty by being inept or lazy (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Furthermore, they believe people in need are more resilient to hardships because they have experienced them before. In reality, however, **poor people are more vulnerable to physical and mental illness and pain** because they are subjected to tough experiences more frequently ([here](#) and [here](#)).

This mindset that hardships bring about toughness of character is popular in Western culture. Scrooge's attitude, in turn, is the one of a stereotypical bitter man who is both biased and believes in this “**hardship breeds toughness**” heuristic (see [here](#)).



Altruism vs. Loss

If the main reason why people don't act selflessly is because of a bias, shouldn't we simply educate them? In principle, pointing out that poverty is not a consequence of individuals' faults could help. However, the full picture is a bit trickier.

Let's consider the following scenario (inspired from **Singer, 2009**).

You are on your way to work. It's getting late and you have an important meeting, which may determine whether you get a promotion or not. You are walking through a park close to your office when you hear a splash. In a nearby pond, a child has fallen and is currently drowning. There is no one else in sight and the kid is splashing in desperation, trying to stay afloat. Would you, in this situation, help the child out of the water and look for help or ignore them and rush off to work?

The decision, as presented here, sounds really simple. Why would we care about something trivial like a promotion when a human life is in danger? Realistically, however, **we would prefer to save our own resources** (i.e., time, money, energy). That's because investing them on someone else seldom generates benefits for us. Sure, there's the feeling of satisfaction for having helped someone else, but is it really worth it?

Every time we encounter a dilemma like this, our mind runs a **cost-benefit analysis**. Basically, our brains weigh everything we're investing and/or sacrificing against the outcomes of our behaviour. And, sometimes, we have a hard time comparing abstract resources, like time, with abstract gains, like morality (**look here**). As a result, we think twice when our instincts scream to help the drowning child. Does that mean we're bad people? **No, we're simply loss-averse** and losses outweigh relative to gains.

Be Kind, Live Longer

Now, if we're talking about the cost of altruism, we should discuss its benefits, too. Being altruistic means to put other people's needs and wants before ours, which is key to understanding actions like donations,

volunteering and pro-sociality ([see here](#)). Economic research has shown that givers give to experience **warm-glow**, that is, selfish emotional gratification derived from doing selfless acts ([see here](#)). Psychologists call this a **“helper’s high”**.



And, while it seems that altruism has selfish gratification, the truth is **it that it also makes us happier and healthier ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#))**. In fact, people who behave selflessly tend to have a better mental health than their more egocentric peers ([here](#)). Even at a neurological level, there is evidence that **altruistic actions trigger the dopamine pathways of the brain ([see here](#))**. Those pathways are the ones responsible for making us feel satisfied and happy ([look here](#)).

The benefits of altruism are not only mental—they’re also physical. **People who help others regularly get to live longer, on average ([see here](#))**. It is no coincidence that Scrooge sees his own grave in the story; Dickens literally showed us that selfishness would be the death of his character. Even in the

mind of the 19th-century author, altruism was already a positive force associated with well-being and life.

The Bottom Line

“A Christmas Carol” is not just a story about a bitter old man who suffers from major haunting problems; it is about kindness. It is about the very human struggle between our biases and our prosocial instincts. Like Scrooge, many people believe that poverty makes individuals less worthy of aid and more resilient to tough conditions. In reality, poverty causes people to be more vulnerable and in need of help. However, this isn't enough to engage in altruistic behaviour. We often have to battle our own consciousness that prevents us from spending resources on others.

If we overcome all these barriers, we may enjoy the benefits of being good. We will most likely live happier, longer, and better than those who close themselves to others. In a very scientific way, welcoming the Christmas spirit to act kindly can also prove to be beneficial for the giver.

In conclusion, remember that even a greedy and miserly man like Ebenezer Scrooge is capable of embracing altruism. Even if it's difficult or inconvenient to do so, helping others will help you and those around you have a better time.

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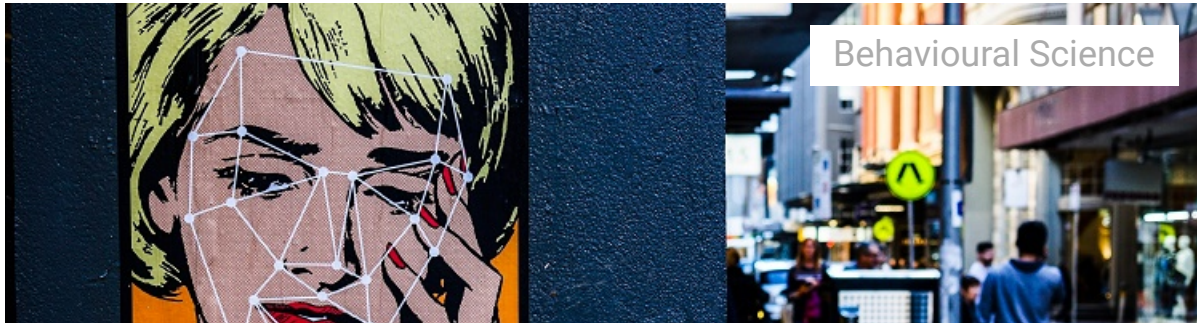
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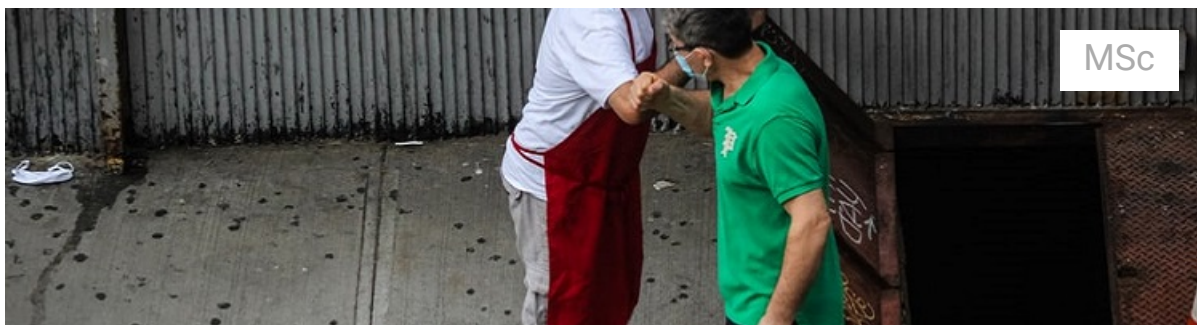
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