

Advocacy for Altruism by Huff Post

ALTRUISM - Forget everything you have been taught, because Matthieu Ricard is here to teach you a new way of interpreting the human being. A French Buddhist monk and a disciple of Dalai Lama, Matthieu Ricard is the author of *Plaidoyer pour l'altruisme* (Advocacy For Altruism), in bookstores since September 19. It is a non-religious book similar to an encyclopedia, and its content is very relevant for these times of economic crisis.

There is evidence that we aren't selfish human beings driven only by our own interests. Moreover, today's society is not more violent than it was in the past. Yes, we can change the way we are and, therefore, cooperate more, not only on an individual level, but on a community level, too.

Whether it is related to economy, environment, our well-being, or our relationships with others, we will all benefit from accepting and developing altruism.

This idea is not supported only by the monk, but also by science. Evolutionism, neurology, psychology, as well as case studies on conflicts, all show that altruism is not only a behavior inborn in people, but it can also be developed. To become a better person is really something possible, as long as we accept some obvious facts that we have forgotten.

HuffPost: Science proves that altruism is an inborn behavior both in children and in animals...Then, why did you decide to write this book?

MR: Because not everybody thinks like that. People often tend to think that they are selfish. When I started working on this book, I thought there was no need to prove that altruism existed. I believed in this idea. But I didn't expect to discover such great thinkers like the 17-century philosopher Hobbes, psychologists from the first half of the 20th century, and the neoclassical economists for whom altruism was an unknown concept. They just didn't believe in it. Basically, they used to say that behind all altruistic gestures, there is a selfish motive. In other words, a clever and acute mind will always find a selfish motive behind a good deed.

And you disagree with that...

This universal theory on selfishness is a preconceived idea. There is no scientific study to support it. But since this idea has existed forever, scientists decided to prove through experiments that altruism existed. Daniel Batson, a great American psychologist, studied this for 25 years, together with his team of scientists. He developed about thirty

stratagems to distinguish the selfish behavior from the other ones, but mostly from the empathy shown towards people in distress, which was explained by the urge to help people in distress because we cannot stand seeing them suffer. Finally, they realized that some people are capable of genuine altruism, no matter the circumstances. Anyway, there was no evidence to support the idea of people being selfish. This was an open-door for my theory, and this time it was science that backed me up.

What prevents us from being altruistic?

There are several things. First of all, the misconception that we are all selfish and, therefore, that trying to be different is a waste of time. But, if you analyzed people's everyday gestures, you would realize that 70% of them could be considered as gestures of goodwill: small gestures like holding the door for someone. The simple good deeds are more present in our day-to-day reality than we would have thought, and this is an encouraging idea. Second of all, we all know that learning how to read, write, or play chess requires a minimum of effort, so how could other aspects of our existence, such as attention or altruism, require no effort and be developed from the beginning? It's absurd. All our abilities are developed until they reach a certain level. Therefore, to develop our capacity of altruism requires a constant exposure to a certain way of thinking that can change our brain.

And you also mentioned that there is a technique that helps people to develop their altruism: it's through meditation...

The term meditation is mystical, exotic, but its meaning is to educate oneself, to become familiar with a new way of thinking and acting while developing one's qualities. Let's consider the altruistic behavior. It's obvious that throughout our life we feel unconditional love for our children, for someone else, or even for an animal, and that feeling doesn't require any effort in showing altruism: wishing they were healthy and happy in their lives. The problem is that this feeling doesn't last. To develop altruism means spending more time, let's say ten minutes every day, on filling our mental space with altruistic love, and if we get distracted, to concentrate on it again, or if it disappears, to bring it to life once again. This is meditation.

How can meditation change us?

Experiments show some changes on a personal level. It's been proved scientifically and validated by neuroplasticity. The brain undergoes some changes when subjected to any kind of training, whether it is juggling or meditating. It is the case for people who meditated about 50 000 hours in all, but also for people who meditated about 20 minutes every day for a month. After four weeks of everyday meditation, there were noticed functional modifications in the human brain, behavioral changes - cooperation, pro-social behavior, mutual aid -, as well as structural changes. For instance, it was noticed that the parts of the human brain responsible for empathy, maternal love, and positive emotions gained volume, which showed that meditation worked.

Does this mean that meditation should be taught in schools, colleges, or universities?

Meditation should be taught ever since kindergarten, but under a different name and totally voided of any religious meaning, without bearing the Buddhist label. Meditation is a technique. For 30 years, Doctor John Kabat Zinn has taught how to reduce stress through mindfulness meditation in 300 hospitals throughout the US. Inspired by the Buddhist religion, it has become a non-religious concept. Another example is Richard Davidson's

program at the Wisconsin University that promotes the idea of training 4 or 5-year old children for compassion and pro-social behaviors. After ten weeks of three 30-minute meditation sessions per week, researchers succeeded to stimulate pro-social and altruistic behaviors in children. The results were incredible.

In fact, your studies also proved that even animals can be altruistic.

The behavior of the young chimpanzees that helped their old mother to drink water because she was unable to move proves that animals can be altruistic, doesn't it? If bonobos are capable of such behavior, why shouldn't we be? There are hundreds of examples of altruistic gestures in animals living in the wild as well as in labs. Darwin also made reference to the evolution of emotions and he attested that animals were also capable of such feelings.

Reconsidering our relation with animals could be an open-door to altruism...

Humans suffer from some sort of schizophrenia: we are capable of empathy and altruism towards our children, close friends and family, or other human beings through our humanitarian actions. Nevertheless, when it comes to animals, human beings are reluctant to think of them as being sensitive creatures. Certainly, they won't manifest against their exploitation; animals are deprived of our capacity of making a political commitment... But it would be absurd to believe that emotions, altruism, or empathy were God's creations specifically for human beings, and not consider the millions of years of evolution. There is no cut-off point between the different stages of evolution.

What should we do, then?

We should reexamine ourselves. Today, we keep the abattoirs out of our sight: out of sight, out of mind. In reality, we don't want to acknowledge that a billion and a half of terrestrial animals are killed each year for our eating needs. Or, these animals aren't robots. It's completely ridiculous to treat them as objects. Gandhi said that the degree of civilization is measured by how people treat animals. Obviously, they don't have long-term projects, but our lack of empathy towards them puts humankind in danger of suffering from mass psychopathy. Kafka said that "war is a monstrous failure of imagination." He eventually became a vegetarian and one day, while watching a fish tank, he said, "now, I can look at you in peace; I don't eat you anymore." (laughing)

But how could becoming a vegetarian have an altruistic impact beyond our personal eating needs?

I am a vegetarian by choice because it is better for the animals and for our environment. Developing countries grow 775 billion tons of corn and soya to feed the animals in the industrial farms in the highly developed countries. The return is zero! It requires 10 kilos of vegetal proteins to produce 1 kilo of animal proteins. The world is upside down...

Then, there is the human cost because poor people are deprived of these vegetables. There is also an environmental cost because of the methane gas from livestock and their manure, which is one of the main causes of the climate changes.

To conclude, there is an ethics code related to animals, human health, poverty, and environment. According to the United Nations, eating less meat could be one of the best ways to reduce inequality and solve the environmental problems... It doesn't imply becoming a fanatical vegan, but to balance things so that animal massacres end

permanently.

What about the profit-oriented economy? How could altruism be compatible with such a concept?

The theory of homo economicus is based on the idea that human beings are reasonable and that they try to maximize their interests. It's a reductionist model of the human being. Most of the economists know that human beings cannot be reduced to such an image; nevertheless, this image served as a source for many economic models. However, many economists, such as Amartya Sen, Joseph Stiglitz or Dennis Snower, have emphasized the problem of the common assets: air quality, fresh water reserves, democracy - these are everybody's concern.

Indeed, if you consider only your personal interest, you have nothing to care about. So, besides reason, the only one economists considered in their calculations, you need to care, a term even better than altruism or compassion because, if people say "I don't care," then it means it doesn't affect them. Care implies concern for others. Economists have begun to accept this idea and to imagine a system based on more than just selfish interests. Society would function much better and this new system would match the reality better because not all people are selfish maniacs!

Do you see altruism as the guiding thought of the 21st century?

Absolutely! It's Arianna's thread that could link the economy in the short term, life satisfaction in the mid-term, and environment in the long term. Without altruism, no intellectual system could reconcile the three different types of preoccupations. The tough economist seizes the moment without thinking of the future. But if he cared about others, he would do something to improve their quality of life. If he cared even more about others, destroying the planet would be out of question.

But there are still conflicts, violence...

Violence has its causes. It's the dehumanization of the other. People see people as vermin, pests, rats; they treat one another as animals. We should understand the causes to better fight this problem. There are also other influences that create a false image of the reality. It's enough to watch the news. There is violence everywhere - Syria, Sudan, and Kalashnikovs in Marseilles... And this isn't true.

History shows that violence has continuously diminished. In England, during the 14th century, there were 100 homicides for 100 000 inhabitants each year; nowadays, the number of homicides was reduced to 0.7. In Europe, the rate dropped by 100 to 50 times compared to 3 centuries ago. In 1950, the average number of victims of conflicts throughout the globe was of 30 000. Now, it's 900. Child and women abuse has diminished. A lot still needs to be done, but a lot has been done already.

We can encourage the decrease of violence...

We all know the factors related to the decrease of violence and we could encourage this idea: women social status, democracy... Let's take Europe for example. In the 14th century, there were 5000 political entities in Europe; under Napoleon, there were 250, and, nowadays, there are about fifty, which are all democratic and make business together... The risk that Belgium starts a war against Italy is zero. Countries in conflict with other countries have a dysfunctional democracy. Undoubtedly, humankind has

evolved and we have to admit it because it is encouraging.

What do you find to be the most encouraging signs in today's society?

What keeps my hope high is to realize that humankind has evolved. Kindness is more often present in our lives than we could imagine. We can educate ourselves in this respect on an individual level, as well as on a community level... Victor Hugo said that "nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come." Therefore, I think that the time of altruism has come.