



# Altruism: New perspectives of research on a classical theme in sociology of morality

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**Abstract**

Since coined by Comte, altruism has become one of the most controversial concepts in social and behavioral sciences, although altruistic behavior and related topics have been successfully studied within a number of fields. Oddly, while the theme of altruism was of primary significance in classical sociology of morality, modern sociology seems to have relatively little interest in studying altruism and altruistic behavior (although there are some exceptions) and the field is largely dominated by other social and behavioral sciences. The article aims at reconsidering altruism as a concept and as an area of research in sociology of morality by reviewing the major concepts of altruism in classical sociology and modern behavioral sciences. The article argues that, although for the 'new' sociology of morality it is necessary to take into account behavioral and psychological perspectives, a promising sociological approach to the study of altruism in different social contexts can be based on renewing the classical focus on the normative components of moral behavior.

**Keywords**

Altruism, altruistic behavior, morality, moral norms, social norms, sociology of morality

Altruism is one of the most problematic and at the same time crucial concepts in social sciences. It is difficult, if even at all possible, to give a universal definition of altruism: while scholars commonly understand it as an action benefiting others to the cost for the actor, there is little agreement about the essence of the costs and benefits in question, as well as about how to determine them. Therefore, it could be sometimes difficult to

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classify certain actions as altruistic, egoistic or even aggressive (for example, to share a cigarette with somebody). Moreover, the main debate (which probably goes back to the dawn of philosophy) concerns the problem of whether a genuine altruism does exist – or whether people are fundamentally self-interested, and any act of helping others has a utilitarian explanation (Krebs, 1991).

The aim of this article is by no means to resolve this controversy. Rather, it is to try to briefly trace the history of the concept in classical sociology and other social and behavioral sciences and to demonstrate how altruism gets its explanation in different fields, conceptions and approaches. It is necessary to note that the concept of altruism is related to a number of similar concepts in social science, such as solidarity, prosocial behavior, helping behavior, etc. – while these relationships are important, I do not propose to examine them here in detail. However, one more objective of the article is to show how sociology, which now arguably does not play a key role in the studies of altruism, can contribute to this interdisciplinary field by drawing attention to the classical sociological conceptions of altruism, for which it was of primary significance. I argue that altruism is a crucial classical sociological concept which, like anomie or alienation (Kalekin-Fishman and Langman, 2015), still has a considerable potential for both theoretical and empirical application.

In what follows, I first consider key ideas concerning altruism in some classical sociological theories – namely, those of Comte, Spencer and Durkheim – and discuss the possible reasons for the general decline of interest in the study of altruism among modern sociologists. Then I review the main models of explanation of altruism in behavioral sciences, based on theories of kin and group selection, as well as on the mechanism of reciprocity. I also consider the idea of altruistic motivation in the context of psychological approaches to the subject. Finally, I discuss the possible directions for sociological research on altruism by reconsidering the normative components of moral behavior.

## Altruism in classical sociology

Although the term ‘altruism’ is now commonly used not only within social scientific discourse but also in everyday language, it was coined just a little more than 150 years ago by the French philosopher Auguste Comte. The long search for virtues in the history of philosophy, of course, included those (like benevolence or goodwill) that now can be gathered under this term, but Comte’s invention turned out to be very important for the subsequent development of social and behavioral sciences. For Comte, the founding father of positive philosophy, altruism was a counter-concept to egoism: the dichotomy reflected his view of social progress, with altruism describing the desirable future state of humanity. In his *System of Positive Polity*, Comte (1875) tries to classify different affects according to their proximity to the extremes of the egoism–altruism continuum. For him, both types of behavior (or affective orientation) are evident in both animals and humans, but only the latter can reach the highest point of altruism as it provides a powerful impulse for intellectual and moral development (Comte, 1875: 502, 560). ‘Live for others’ was a famous motto of Comte’s late positivist project – for the philosopher, altruism was a synonym for collective life as such.

Altruism, then, was not just a descriptive term meaning actions that benefit others at the cost of the actor – on the contrary, it was initially normatively loaded. At the same

time, Comte's dramatic influence on the next generation of sociologists resulted in the growing popularity of the concept, since it turned out to be useful for emphasizing prosocial aspects of behavior, which was of vital importance to sociology that was trying to establish itself as a new scientific discipline. Herbert Spencer was one of the subsequent sociologists who actively used the term; at the same time, he was trying to advocate the utilitarian viewpoint, according to which morality (including altruism) is fundamentally based on utility and self-interest. While Comte was stressing the fundamental relation of altruism to collectivism, Spencer tried to demonstrate that altruistic behavior can be analyzed from an individualistic position. What is notable in light of the modern debate on the problem is that neither Comte nor Spencer saw altruism as something distinctively human or something that requires a conscious decision: for both altruism is displayed in animals (in this latter case Spencer would call it 'unconscious' or 'automatic'). Spencer's definition of altruism was especially wide and naturalistic:

Whatever action, unconscious or conscious, involves expenditure of individual life to the end of increasing life in other individuals, is unquestionably altruistic in a sense, if not in the usual sense; and it is here needful to understand it in this sense that we may see how conscious altruism grows out of unconscious altruism. (Spencer, 1896: 201)

For Spencer, altruism, thus understood, needed evolutionary explanation as it appeared to contradict the logic of, to use his famous expression, 'survival of the fittest'. His argument was based on the principle that, if something as odd as altruism exists, it can do so only if it ultimately results in the increased well-being of the altruist. This individualistic principle means that altruism is 'subordinate to egoism', which was Spencer's central point: otherwise, unbounded altruism would finally lead to the altruist self-abandonment which simply would not allow him or her to continue this benevolent practice<sup>1</sup> and eventually would result in the altruist's decreased chances for successful reproduction (Spencer, 1896: 197). The fact that altruism exists, for Spencer, means that the benefits of this practice for those who live in mutually altruistic groups are higher than the costs, in terms of each individual, not the group as a whole (Spencer, 1896: 206). To justify this primary egoism of human nature, Spencer also applies utilitarian logic when he claims that the pleasure of committing an altruistic act has its proper place in the sum of pleasures one can get from life, and in this sense it is necessarily egoistic (Spencer, 1896: 214). However, following Comte, Spencer saw the egoism–altruism dichotomy as one of the key methodological principles of social science, as he believed that the relative degree of altruism in a society is a measure of social progress, although he insisted that 'pure altruism' is logically and practically impossible (Spencer, 1873).

Durkheim was arguably the most eminent opponent of Spencer's individualistic position (Turner, 2005), and the concept of altruism in Durkheim's theory is fundamentally related to a number of other key concepts, such as society and solidarity (Gofman, 2014). As the most famous advocate of the newborn science of sociology, he used this concept to stress his central idea of society as a reality *sui generis*. For Durkheim, altruism was not an action with the aim of another individual's welfare, but that of a social group as a coherent whole. Spencer's individualism, Durkheim argues, is wrong when it speaks of individuality in primitive societies or the primary egoism of human nature because, 'Spencer, and

other sociologists with him, seem to have interpreted these facts of the remote past by means of very modern ideas' (Durkheim, 1984: 142). Modern individualism is not universal and in those primitive societies with 'mechanic solidarity', i.e. societies that had no idea of personality, altruism as a group-beneficial activity was a common practice – sometimes it even took extreme forms, resulting in what Durkheim famously called 'altruistic suicide' (Durkheim, 2002). Durkheim's definition of altruism expresses the idea of society as the transcendent aim of a moral action, although it is rather metaphorical:

Having giving the name of egoism to the state of the ego living its own life and obeying itself alone, that of altruism adequately expresses the opposite state, where the ego is not its own property, where it is blended with something not itself, where the goal of conduct is exterior to itself, that is, in one of the groups in which it participates. (Durkheim, 2002: 179–180)

Morality, for Durkheim, starts with disinterestedness, and, in fact, it is opposed to egoism. The idea of altruism in his conception is almost indistinguishable from the idea of social solidarity as he emphasizes the formula: 'Everywhere that societies exist there is altruism, because there is solidarity' (Durkheim, 1984: 145). Altruism for Durkheim, who embraces Comte's idea, is a manifestation of collectivity, which starts within the family, the 'school of altruism and abnegation' (Durkheim, 1984: xliv). Unlike Spencer, however, Durkheim does not consider consanguinity as the sole basis of 'family altruism'. For him, family is first of all a social group characterized by solidarity, while consanguinity just fosters this social unity (Durkheim, 1984: xliv). The primacy of the social over the biological was one of Durkheim's central ideas, so that altruism, even in its family form, for him is rather a product of social than biological organization.

Although the idea of society *sui generis* is known to be central for Durkheim's sociology, he also speaks of individuals, as he believes it is impossible to study the whole without studying its parts. In a series of lectures published in English under the title *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*, Durkheim (2003) speaks of moral 'rules of conduct'. Morality, from his point of view, can be both universalistic and particularistic: in the former case, it regulates people's relationships to each other as human beings (which for Durkheim, is the highest form of ethics); this Kantian position assumes following all the principles concerning respect for human dignity. However, in the latter case, moral rules refer to specific human groups in which an individual is a member. This kind of morality assumes its social variation and means that at least a part of moral rules are relativistic. Altruism, from this perspective, can be seen both as a universal and particularistic moral norm, and the very existence of 'moral particularism' (Durkheim, 2003: 5) proves the importance of sociology as a science of societies which focuses on their historical and structural differences.

Spencer and Durkheim, of course, were not the only early sociological theorists who took the term altruism seriously. Simmel, for example, used the altruism–egoism dichotomy to characterize the permanent conflict between the individual and society. For Simmel, altruism is nothing but egoism of the group trying to make individuals put all their efforts into playing their social roles, as opposed to the 'striving for wholeness' or self-development on the part of individuals (Simmel, 1950: 59). Although this conception is rather metaphysical, it demonstrates the fact that altruism became a commonly used sociological concept and had promising future within the field.

The turning point for the concept of altruism in sociology arguably was the creation of system theory by Parsons. Hitlin and Vaisey (2013) see Parsons' conception as one of the key reasons for the decline of sociologists' interest in morality-related topics in general, and the same can be said concerning altruism in particular, which is quite astonishing given Parsons' central idea to bring normativity to the core of the theory of social action (Parsons, 1966, 1991). However, it is true that Parsons' concept of normative pattern variables of action, which of course could be used for describing a variety of altruistic actions, largely replaced the term 'altruism' (which he rarely used) and his complex system of concepts substituted the problem of explaining altruism as such with the problem of describing different normatively oriented actions using a special theoretical language. The subsequent crisis in system theory, especially due to widespread criticism of its overestimation of internalized moral norms (Wuthnow, 1993), led to a situation when the core sociological problem of morality and altruism became almost marginal in sociological theory and research.

Although in the second half of the 20th century major sociologists did not pay much attention to the problem of altruism and rarely used the concept, there was at least one notable exception. Among the distinguished sociological theorists of the time, Pitirim Sorokin (1967) is known for both extensively using the term and for doing it in the context of his normative ideas of how, as Johnston (1996) puts it, 'to create better people'. Sorokin's focus on a largely normative and prescriptive theory of 'creative altruism' (or 'love', which, for him, is literally a synonym) is commonly attributed to his Russian cultural background (e.g. Ponomareva, 2011), i.e. the impact of Orthodox Christianity and Russian classical literature with its emphasis on unconditional love as a moral ideal (Tolstoy, Dostoevsky), though it is also possible to draw a parallel between this conception and Comte's original positivist project. Although Sorokin's early work (Sorokin, 1914) was done in a quite positivist (or even behaviorist) manner, his key distinction between 'theoretical' and 'practical' science remained salient in his work and in the second half of his career he definitely inclined to the latter. Coser's famous note on Sorokin's studies of altruism as having zero value for sociological theory (Coser, 1977) illustrates the common reaction to his 'unscientific' work within the sociological community. While there is some recent revival of interest in Sorokin's studies of altruism (Krotov, 2012), his largely prescriptive theory to date had little, if any, impact on scientific studies of altruism (see discussion of the prescriptive sociological approach to altruism below).

This brief section shows that the concept of altruism has its origins in sociology, and it was one of the basic concepts of this then newborn social science. In classical sociological conceptions one can find both individualistic (Spencer) and collectivistic (Durkheim) explanations of altruism. What is more important, altruism, for Durkheim and others, was not just a behavior or a motivation, but a social (moral) norm: while certain classical sociological conceptions of altruism can be called naturalistic, others emphasized the normative expectations of unselfish behavior as a crucial characteristic of human sociality. The latter tradition, however, became much less popular since the time of Durkheim and Parsons, while the main focus in scientific studies of altruism moved from sociology to the field of evolutionary biology and related disciplines.

## **Evolutionary theory: Altruism as a behavior**

The existence of altruism among different animals was once considered a key evolutionary 'mystery', especially from the perspective of some simplistic interpretations of natural selection as 'survival of the fittest'. Parental care is an obvious case and never needed a specific theory; however, the manifestation of altruistic behavior towards non direct descendants lacked rigorous explanation. Although there were a number of major scholars after Darwin who contributed to a biological understanding of altruism (see Dugatkin, 2006), solving the 'puzzle of altruism' (at least in application to a number of important cases) is mostly associated with WD Hamilton and his theory of kin selection (Hamilton, 1963, 1964). The principle of kin selection states that the more genes two individuals share, the more probable altruism between them is; it also connects altruistic behavior with the donor cost and the recipient benefit. 'Hamilton's rule' sees altruism as a universal biological phenomenon which can be explained by the increased chances for survival of the shared genes, and this rule is equally applicable to social insects and humans. Although to explain altruism by the percentage of the shared genes may sound reductionist (especially to a social scientist), a number of studies demonstrate a consistent effect of biological relatedness on retrospective and prospective altruistic behaviors (Burnstein et al., 1994; Curry et al., 2013; Stewart-Williams, 2007).

While kin selection theory provides a fundamental scientific explanation of altruistic behavior, it by no means covers every kind of altruism, especially between individuals who are not closely related. The concept of reciprocal altruism introduced by evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers (1971) reflects the idea that altruistic behavior can be mutually beneficial when two genetically unrelated individuals exchange altruistic acts over time. This conception assumes that altruism is fundamentally based on self-interest and can be explained by the increase in genetic fitness of both parties of reciprocal relationships. The importance of reciprocity as a basic and universal principle of cooperation is also demonstrated by computer simulations of behavioral games (Axelrod, 1984). For evolutionary biologists, the existence of cooperation in the form of reciprocal altruism, as well as kin altruism, does not require conscious decision-making and, in this sense, the concept of reciprocal altruism is also applicable to animals (Alexander, 1985). However, the idea of reciprocal altruism is also popular in social sciences, first of all, economics (Kolm, 2006), anthropology (Mauß, 2002), and some sociological conceptions (Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958), which emphasize the importance of exchange – including that of goods and services – in social cooperation.

Although the concept of reciprocal altruism extends our ability to understand such a paradoxical (at least to some economists) behavior, there are two major difficulties with explaining altruism by the donor's external benefits received later in return from the recipient. The first one is related to 'genuine' altruistic acts towards strangers, which cannot be explained by direct reciprocity. Anthropological and sociological theory of exchange uses the concept of generalized reciprocity to stress the idea that certain forms of altruism can be explained by the mechanism of reciprocity even when there seems to be no direct interchange of altruistic acts (Sahlins, 1972; Takahashi, 2000; Yamagishi and Cook, 1993). Theoretically, a disposition to altruistic acts, fatal in a community of egoists, can be beneficial to the altruist if such a disposition is shared by a sufficient

number of individuals: in experimental settings, there is certain evidence that generalized exchange is associated with a higher sense of solidarity and more extensive prosocial emotions compared to direct exchange, which is a plausible mechanism of reinforcing altruistic behavior in large groups (Molm et al., 2007). This conception supports Spencer's initial explanation of altruism as ultimately based on individual benefits of those who are prone to altruistic behavior – whether these benefits are external or internal (or, which is most likely, both).

The second serious problem with using reciprocity in explaining altruistic behavior is the existence of extreme forms of altruism, such as sacrificing one's life for others who are not genetically related. 'Economic' models of altruism, which see it as a behavior performed for one or another 'selfish' reason, are hardly applicable in such cases: however, some scholars propose explanations according to which these rare cases are still based on self-interest, such as the desire for glory or a belief in reward in the afterlife (Wilson, 1988). The immediate reason for the act of sacrifice is usually associated with specific affect – for example, Durkheim considered 'altruistic suicides', an individual's sacrifice for the group, as primarily driven by the strong emotions one experiences before committing such an extreme act (Durkheim, 2002). This powerful affective impulse can be also explained by evolutionary psychology as a rudimentary by-product of kin selection: sacrifice for unrelated others could be an evolutionary 'mistake' based on psychological mechanisms evolved during the time when the individual's immediate social environment consisted mostly of close relatives, so these mechanisms could be beneficial for the altruist's genes for the most of history, although they might be evolutionary reasonable in complex modern societies (Wilson, 1988: 153).

One more possible explanation of extreme altruism comes from kin selection's rival theory – that of group selection (Maynard Smith, 1964). Although kin selection is still part of evolutionary theory's mainstream and has comprehensive empirical support, group selection theory, advocated by some evolutionary biologists and psychologists, has its origin in Darwin's initial works (Darwin, 1981). Overall, group selection theorists consider social groups as fundamental units of selection – as opposed to individuals or genes; from this perspective, a group benefits from the altruism of its members if this altruism helps it to win the competition with groups consisting of relatively more selfish individuals (Wilson, 2007). For instance, sacrifice for one's ethnic or national group (Stern, 1995) can be explained by group competition – the same is true, as Collins shows, at the micro-level, especially when there is a high degree of ritualized solidarity between group members, for which platoons of soldiers on the battlefield is a good example (Collins, 2004: 169). Although there is no place here for a more detailed discussion, the idea of altruism based on group selection, apparently, corresponds to the Durkheimian holistic tradition in sociology: for both theories, group benefits are crucial for explaining altruistic acts. Sacrifice or 'altruistic' suicides are seen as genuinely unselfish for individuals, and this, however, sends us back to Simmel's idea of 'selfish groups'.

This section reviews some major models of explanation of altruism in behavioral sciences as a form of living organisms' behavior. The concepts of kin and reciprocal altruism belong to the core of the evolutionary theory of cooperation, as they propose a universal explanation of altruistic behavior based on individual (or genes) self-interest; in addition, group selection theory, although controversial, provides an explanation of

altruism as a group-beneficial adaptation. However, these approaches are unable to consider altruism in a normative and motivational sense as a conscious decision to increase the well-being of others and a representation of such behavior as a moral ideal, which is a remarkable difference between the societies of humans and social insects. The opposite side of the egoism–altruism debate claims that genuine, unselfish altruism is a natural human disposition, and the answer to the altruism question lies within the psychology of motivation.

## **Psychology: Altruism as a motivation**

The idea of altruism as a specific kind of motivation has been known at least since the time of Aristotle, who considered unconditional interest in the well-being of another person as an essential characteristic of what he called genuine friendship – as opposed to friendship based on pleasure or utility (Aristotle, 2004; Kahn, 1981). In contrast to the ‘economic’ models of altruism in behavioral sciences discussed so far, some modern psychologists continue this tradition of studying ‘genuine’ altruistic motivation to help other people without anticipating personal benefits (Monroe, 1994; Piliavin and Charng, 1990). Such an understanding of altruism lead to terminological difficulties with the concept, because, from this perspective, kin and/or reciprocal altruism can look not ‘really’ altruistic if they are not based on a corresponding unselfish motivation.

Piliavin (2009) draws a distinction between ‘prosocial behavior’, ‘helping behavior’, ‘cooperation’ and ‘altruism’, stressing that the last concept can be used both in a general descriptive sense, meaning a helping action without anticipating external reward, and in a motivational sense, meaning an intentional action to help others based on what Batson (2011) calls ‘altruistic concerns’ or a feeling of empathy (De Waal, 2008; Einolf, 2008). The studies of motivation to help (or – as in the most famous research by Darley and colleagues – not to help [Darley and Batson, 1973; Darley and Latane, 1968]) are one of the major topics in social psychology, and this tradition also takes into account both situational and personal factors of altruistic behavior. However, as Piliavin notes, the very existence of genuine altruistic motivation is doubtful to many people (Piliavin, 2009: 211) – both lay people and social scientists – and the problem is fundamentally related to the old question of external vs. internal rewards for altruistic acts. For instance, the ‘warm glow’ theory (which can be traced back at least to Adam Smith [2002]) claims that while an act might be altruistic in the sense of benefiting the others and getting nothing material in return, the (necessarily selfish) feeling of doing good could be a sufficient motivation for such an act (Tonin and Vlassopoulos, 2014).

While scholars like Batson (2011) argue that altruism as a genuine interest in the well-being of another person does exist, others believe that the idea of a genuine altruistic motivation is problematic both theoretically and empirically. Theoretically (as has been noted by many, including Spencer), it is very difficult, if at all possible, to ‘purify’ one’s motivation as to exclude all the potentially utilitarian or ‘selfish’ components – from the warm glow to the very basic feeling of satisfaction from accomplishing a goal, even if the goal is to help others or to get relief from negative feelings. This means that any altruistic act can in principle be explained using one or another kind of ‘selfish’ concern and the very idea of genuine altruistic motivation could seem rather fruitless for social



sciences. Elster, however, is one of those modern social theorists who take the problem of distinguishing altruistic behavior and altruistic motivation seriously. For him, an act is altruistic when it could at least possibly result from a genuinely altruistic motivation, even if in fact this is not so; at the same time, other (self-regarding) motivations can, in Elster's terms, mimic altruistic motivation, so the problem of detecting a genuinely altruistic act remains unresolvable (Elster, 2006). From this perspective, genuinely altruistic motivation is just an analytical abstraction – while it can be more or less useful in theory, it is very difficult to prove its existence in any particular case. The empirical difficulties with detecting a genuinely altruistic act are also best illustrated by Elster, who uses the example of a person donating to charity in an empty church:

What might his motivation be? One possibility is that he is trying to buy salvation. Various theologians tell us this aim is unattainable since salvation is essentially a byproduct of actions undertaken for other reasons. Yet many believers tried to attain it, some by donating money and others by choosing martyrdom. Another possibility is that he is trying to gratify the inner audience, not only by his donation but by the apparently virtuous choice of a place for giving where he cannot be observed. A third possibility is that he wants to help others in need, that the collection box was simply a convenient vehicle for the donation, and that he would have chosen it even had others been present to observe him. Until the day scientists can conduct brain scans at a distance, we shall not know. (Elster, 2006: 204–205)

Understanding altruism as a genuine motivation to help others is one of the most controversial ideas in the field; however, this conception provides an alternative to traditional explanations of altruism as grounded in 'selfish' reasons. Whether a purely altruistic motivation exists or not (or whether we have any scientific means to prove its existence), people undoubtedly demonstrate altruism every day, sometimes – consciously or not – driven by selfish considerations and sometimes by a strong desire to help others. It is important that the motivation for altruistic acts can have a variety of different sources (although for some naturalistic models of explanation of altruistic behavior motivation has little, if any, interest), but that does not disregard altruism as a useful concept in social theory. Although psychological motivation as such could be a significant component of an altruistic act, the sociological tradition sees altruism as norm-oriented behavior, while the importance of social norms is often ignored in behavioral sciences. In what follows, I show how classical sociological conceptions of altruism can contribute to the modern interdisciplinary field of studies of altruistic behavior. But first I discuss the recent movement for reviving the prescriptive sociological approach to altruism.

## **Altruism in prescriptive sociological perspective**

The domination of biology, psychology and other disciplines in the field of studying altruism (and other morality-related phenomena) begs the question of whether sociology can offer a specific focus to scientific studies of human altruism. Modern sociology of morality is arguably far from flourishing and this situation, as Hitlin and Vaisey note (2010: 3), would seem quite puzzling for the classics of sociology; the same can be said concerning sociological studies of altruism, as we can suppose that, for example, Durkheim would be quite depressed if he saw a book published in 2014 with the title

*Altruism, Morality and Social Solidarity: Formulating a Field of Study* (Jeffries, 2014a). Unfortunately for Durkheim, who believed these three concepts to be crucial for the whole discipline, the authors of this book are not far from the truth: the studies of altruism have become so invisible in 'mainstream' sociology that a special effort is needed to 'revive' the field and bring altruism back to the sociological agenda. The recent movement aimed at reconsidering altruism as an area of sociological practice is largely associated with the American Sociological Association's section on Altruism, Morality and Social Solidarity founded by Jeffries and his colleagues.

This project, however, was initially inspired by the moral realist position and seeing sociology as a value-based prescriptive discipline aiming at promoting the good (Jeffries, 2014b). As was shown above, the origin of the concept of altruism in sociology was almost inseparably connected with certain normative ideas of creating a better (or more progressive) society, so this perspective can be seen as an attempt to revitalize this tradition. Unlike the descriptive and explanatory approaches in social and behavioral sciences discussed so far, this project is based on reconsidering the works of notable scholars with normative reasoning, such as Sorokin (Krotov, 2012) and Addams (Lengermann and Niebrugge, 2014), and linking altruism with ideas of love and benevolence expressed in different ethical and religious conceptions (Nichols, 2014). The project's contributors strive to synthesize the concept of altruism with those of morality and solidarity, as well as theorize on empirical research, such as Lee's studies of subjective experience of religious altruism (Lee, 2014).

This project's merit can be seen in drawing attention to the studies of altruism and other prescriptive aspects of morality (i.e. what is considered good and desirable), which is important, since, for example, modern moral psychology seems to be biased towards the studies of moral transgressions. However, far from disregarding the significance and potential of such a perspective (especially for those interested in 'practical science', to use Sorokin's expression), I argue that this explicitly prescriptive approach to altruism is not fully adequate for sociology of morality due to two main reasons (not to mention apparent difficulties with the idea of moral realism and the old and hardly resolvable question of whether social science should be value-based or prescriptive at all). The first is related to a considerable risk that focusing on promoting the good (instead of descriptive studies of morality) would lead to oversimplification of human psychology and impose an erroneous feeling of moral consensus. The attempts to create a synthetic project integrating scientific theory, normative ethics and altruistic practice in one 'amalgamated' approach result in considerable vagueness. Durkheim (and others with him, including 'young' Sorokin) famously argued that before making any recommendations in the sphere of morals, sociology should obtain a full and validated knowledge of the 'laws of moral reality' (Durkheim, 1979). And there might be reasonable doubt that sociological knowledge of the social practices of moral action to date is that comprehensive and acknowledged.

The other problem with normative sociology of morality is a risk of conceptual and methodological 'closure' and isolation from the current research in other social, behavioral and cognitive sciences. Concentrating on ethical considerations about promoting universal love, while excluding biological or reciprocal factors from the definition and explanations of altruism (Jeffries, 2014b: 13), would not allow sociology to incorporate

a number of widely recognized theories of human behavior. An alternative approach to sociological research on altruism would rather pay close attention to conceptions from other fields – this does not imply renouncing sociological research on morality and altruism, but broadening it and showing how this knowledge could be used in our discipline (see also Turner, 2010). However, such an approach would also seek to offer a new sociological focus to the interdisciplinary science of morality. I argue that it can be based on reconsidering and reinterpreting the classical sociological conceptions of social norms.

### **New sociology of morality: Altruism as a social norm**

It is true that studies of altruism were never totally abandoned within sociology – Healy's (2004) research on the role of organizations in blood and organ donation in the US can be mentioned among the most notable examples. Yet, especially compared with other behavioral sciences, sociology still lacks an elaborated research program for studying moral phenomena. The project of the 'new' sociology of morality by Hitlin and Vaisey is the most recent attempt to bring studies of morality back to the core of sociology; they suggest that while such studies are often disparate and not explicit (and the field is generally dominated by behavioral sciences), they have a promising future (Hitlin and Vaisey, 2013). 'New' sociology of morality is seen as an integrative perspective which takes useful ideas from both behavioral sciences and other fields of sociology. However, another source of inspiration may be found through reinterpretation of the classical sociological conceptions of morality in the context of present knowledge and research.

The problem of social and moral norms was constitutive to sociology, and the sociological tradition largely saw altruism and morality as one of the major problematic fields (Levine, 1995). For Comte, Durkheim, Spencer and Parsons, the idea of altruism reflected a universal normative expectation for suppressing selfishness which makes social cooperation possible. Altruism was a part of the fundamental 'moral order' in society, and the very existence of the shared norms regulating people helping each other, even at considerable cost, was a paradigmatic sociological fact. Parsons illustrated this idea of altruism as a social norm with the example of 'altruistic' professional ethical codes (e.g. physician or scientist), which require a certain disinterestedness on the part of the professional (with the threat of sanctions) (Parsons, 1991: 317). Although Parsons did not state that following altruistic normative expectations could not be explained by utilitarian motivation, his conception of an actor was widely thought to be 'oversocialized' (Garfinkel, 1967) and the sociology of morality and altruism gradually lost its status as the field's crucial sub-discipline (Hitlin and Vaisey, 2013).

While the idea of moral norms and normative order was central in the late 19th and first half of the 20th century sociology, this explicit theoretical interest has subsequently declined and, as Simpson and Willer put it in their recent review, 'the field has maintained a discontented relationship with the concept of norms for decades' (Simpson and Willer, 2015: 45). A vast number of experimental studies in sociology and social and cognitive psychology concentrated on the processes of emergence and maintenance of cooperative social norms (often under the name of rules), reviewed by Simpson and Willer, indicate the growing importance of this once almost neglected topic. Moreover, addressing the problem of social and moral norms is becoming an interdisciplinary issue

– for example, some evolutionary anthropologists recognize the insufficiency of the mechanism of kin and reciprocal altruism in explaining cooperation in complex societies (Henrich and Henrich, 2006). Empirical studies of cultural diversity in proneness to altruism in different societies also demonstrate the necessity of employing the idea of social norms in explaining moral behavior (Henrich et al., 2005). At the same time, mainstream sociological theory keeps neglecting this perspective and, as a result, there is a lack of theoretical elaboration of the concept of moral norms in modern sociology.

Moral norms, of course, can be conceptualized in different ways, but the general idea of altruism as a moral norm implies certain social expectations of helping others in different social contexts. As for altruistic behavior, these expectations can be both conditional and unconditional and support the mechanisms of kin and reciprocal altruism (e.g. ‘always help your relatives’ or ‘always help those who helped you in the past’), as well as some form of ‘genuine’ altruism (e.g. ‘help everyone in need’), and the level of normative pressure may vary depending on many factors. These expectations also can be seen as related to the more or less explicit ‘prescriptive theories’ people construct about the proper behavior in a given situation, as suggested by Boudon (2010). From a sociological perspective it is important that normative expectations concerning altruism can also vary across different social groups and strata – this factor could explain the difference in behavioral manifestations of altruism between, for example, rich and poor people (Piff et al., 2010). The normative standards of altruism or ‘disinterestedness’ in professional groups, a classical matter of interest in sociology, still need further investigation since this sphere is not accounted for in the prevailing behavioral theories of altruism. Overall, cultural and social perspectives of altruism are a promising direction for future research, by which sociology can enlarge understanding of moral behavior as based not only on evolutionary or utilitarian principles but on normative expectations.

The normative dimension of altruism also should not be ignored in the studies of motivation of helping behavior because, as Simmons (1991) noted in relation to her famous studies of organ donation, following a normative expectation can often constitute a substantial part of an altruist’s motivation to help others (and, to use Hitlin’s metaphor, serve as ‘Bright Lights’ towards which people orient their moral behavior [Hitlin, 2008]). This does not mean, of course, that the relationships between moral norms and moral behavior are straightforward because people do not always act in accordance with what they (or others) think is right, but many of the everyday altruistic acts between strangers (and even more outstanding manifestations of altruism) are not explainable without involving the idea of a complex of shared normative expectations (for which Parsons was once so much criticized). Overall, this normative perspective can enrich both naturalistic conceptions of altruism which see it as a product of objective or ‘external’ mechanisms and those psychological approaches which concentrate on the subjective or ‘internal’ motivation of altruistic acts – and this perspective is essentially sociological. As Hitlin and Vaisey (2013) point out, morality is practiced not in experimental settings but in the real world of social relations, where social factors arguably play no less a significant role than biological and psychological ones.

Reconsidering altruism as a concept and as a field of studies means reconsidering the classics of sociology. For instance, Spencer’s evolutionary idea about the universal character of altruistic behavior among living organisms and his principle of utility fit modern naturalistic theories of altruism, and sociologists by no means should ignore this

perspective in an attempt to avoid ‘reductionism’. Theories of kin and reciprocal altruism have wide interdisciplinary recognition, so that a sociology of morality needs to incorporate these ideas. However, the fact that in human societies altruism is supported by a set of corresponding normative expectations in the form of beliefs about proper behavior requires a more Durkheimian line of thinking. The ‘new old’ sociological approach to altruism, thus, assumes a deep and comprehensive analysis of relations between altruistic behavior, altruistic motivation and the moral norms which serve as guidelines both for one’s own behavior and for judging the actions of others. Being a good person means being altruistic – at least to a certain degree – and sociologists know perhaps better than anyone else that even personal moral ideals are very often socially constructed.

## Conclusion

The concept of altruism has a weird history in social sciences. It has its origin in sociology where it was widely used to stress the essentially social character of human beings and therefore was directly related to the very idea of the discipline. Oddly enough, starting from the middle of the 20th century, sociologists almost abandoned the studies of human altruism, leaving room for biologists and psychologists who now largely form the research agenda in the field. Is there a chance for sociology to re-establish itself as a discipline for which altruism is a primary field of interest and to make an important contribution to the interdisciplinary science of morality?

This article’s message is that sociology does have such a chance. Altruism is often considered a paradoxical behavior, and the reasons why people help each other are sometimes not clear to either lay people or scientists, at least to economically-minded ones. While there might be other valuable approaches, I believe what sociology can add to the existing explanations of altruistic behavior is a reconsideration of the classical conceptions of moral norms and normative actions which, integrated with approaches of modern behavioral sciences, would provide a necessary new focus to the studies of moral behavior. Whether utilitarian explanations can cover all the possible forms of altruism or not, normative orientation, as the undeservedly forgotten Parsons always stressed, is an essential part of human actions, and this means sociology should make its move.

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## Note

1. Adam Smith famously argued against such unbounded benevolence to all those who suffer in the world because it would lead to nothing except permanent anxiety and depression.

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## Résumé

Depuis son invention par A. Comte, l'altruisme est devenu l'un des concepts les plus controversés des sciences sociales et comportementales bien que les comportements altruistes et les thèmes associés soient des sujets étudiés par plusieurs disciplines. Curieusement, alors que le thème de l'altruisme occupait une place de premier plan dans la sociologie de la morale, la sociologie moderne montre peu d'empressement à étudier l'altruisme et les comportements altruistes (à part quelques exceptions) et ce champ d'études est encore largement dominé par d'autres sciences sociales ou comportementales. Cette contribution vise à réexaminer l'altruisme comme concept et domaine de recherche de la sociologie de la morale en examinant les principales notions associées à l'altruisme dans la sociologie classique et les sciences comportementales. Même s'il convient de prendre en compte les perspectives comportementales et psychologiques de la « nouvelle » sociologie de la morale, cet article suggère qu'il est possible d'adopter une approche sociologique plus prometteuse pour étudier l'altruisme dans différents contextes sociaux en privilégiant une analyse classique des composants normatifs du comportement moral.

## Mots-clés

Altruisme, comportement altruiste, moralité, sociologie de la morale, normes morales, normes sociales

## Resumen

Desde que fue acuñado por A. Comte, el altruismo se ha convertido en uno de los conceptos más controvertidos en las ciencias sociales y del comportamiento, mientras que el comportamiento altruista y temas relacionados han sido estudiados con éxito dentro de una serie de campos. Curiosamente, mientras que el tema del altruismo era de importancia primaria en la sociología clásica de la moral, la sociología moderna parece tener poco interés en estudiar el altruismo y el comportamiento altruista (aunque hay algunas excepciones) y el campo está dominado en gran medida por otras ciencias sociales y del comportamiento. Este artículo se propone reconsiderar el altruismo como concepto y como un área de investigación en la sociología de la moral mediante la revisión de los principales conceptos de altruismo en la sociología clásica y ciencias de la conducta modernas. El artículo sostiene que, a pesar de la "nueva" sociología de la moral, es necesario tomar en cuenta las perspectivas psicológicas y de comportamiento, un enfoque sociológico prometedor para el estudio del altruismo en diferentes contextos sociales puede basarse en renovar el enfoque clásico en la normativa componentes de la conducta moral.

## Palabras clave

Altruismo, comportamiento altruista, moral, sociología de la moral, normas morales, normas sociales