

# On Unenlightened Altruism

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## Abstract

Altruism is generally accepted to be the practice of unselfish concern for the well-being of others coupled with an associated measure of personal cost. Altruism as an actionable treatise for living aims to benefit society. While altruistic acts have traditionally been viewed as virtuous, in some cases, positive outcomes might not be forthcoming if the actor is not enlightened about the consequences of specific courses of action. While this precept has been argued extensively in historical commentary, no formal definition exists for it. This article terms this concept as 'unenlightened altruism'. The article reviews the scant extant discourse on 'unenlightened altruism' in scholarly literature, provides a formal definition for the ideology, opines consequentialist implications and correlates it to related ethical constructs. From the consequentialist standpoint, it is argued that it might be more ethical not to act than to act out of unenlightened altruism.

## Keywords

Unenlightened altruism, enlightened altruism, unenlightened self-interest, enlightened self-interest, humane paradox, consequentialism

## Introduction

The ethic of altruism is multidisciplinary, sparking debate for natural and social scientists alike. Altruism has been studied by anthropologists, evolutionary biologists, neurologists, psychologists, sociologists, ethologists, theologians and philosophers alike. Many distinct ideologies have emerged anent altruism namely pure and impure altruism (Andreoni, 1990), reciprocal altruism (Trivers, 1971), competitive altruism (Roberts, 1998), psychological altruism (Wilson, 1992), ethical egoism (Medlin, 1957), psychological egoism (Feinberg & Shafer-Landau, 2008), moral obligation (Wolfe, 1991), ethical altruism (Caplan, 1978), rational egoism (Mueller, 1986), enlightened self-interest (Keim, 1978), deferred gratification (Schneider & Lysgaard, 1953), unenlightened self-interest (Smith, 2010), effective altruism (Singer, 2010), utilitarianism (Mill, 2007) and consequentialism (Scheffler & Scheffler, 1994).

Altruism is widely considered a virtuous action aimed at benefitting society. The consequences of unenlightened altruism might not be altruistic when seen in an enlightened, broader sense, since the actor is often acting out of ignorance, subjectivity and myopia, though his/her intent is altruistic. In this

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context, altruism has the power to have a negative impact on society if the consequences of the altruistic act are not well understood. Scholars have written extensively about the negative consequences of unenlightened altruism, but no formal discourse or definition exists for this ideology. Scholarly references (Jayatilleke, 1972; Kelly, 1901; Urban 1930), mention unenlightened altruism, though these texts use the designation in singular instances as allusions to specific pieces of their main precepts and do not formally acknowledge or define the term. This article formally defines the term 'unenlightened altruism', argues that from the consequentialist standpoint it could be unethical to act out of unenlightened altruism, and correlates unenlightened altruism to related ethical ideologies.

## Defining Unenlightened Altruism

In order to define unenlightened altruism, it is important to first discern the historical and contextual meaning of both altruism and enlightenment. Coined by the French philosopher Auguste Comte, the founder of positivism, altruism was part of an ethical commentary on morality and man's fundamental obligations, rights and duties to humanity (Budd, 1956). Modern contextual use of altruism has expanded this strictly moralistic genesis to codify a practice, a habit and an ethical doctrine. Altruism as an actionable treatise for living finds credence, validation and approbation from leaders in disparate areas including local and world government, religion and human rights. The well-intentioned altruist inherently aims to benefit society through action.

Altruism sparks dialectic debate even when considering seemingly beneficent acts of charity. Motivation, intent, self-interest and personal validation as consequence of completing altruistic acts, have all been part of the philosophical commentary. While these altruism discourses all seem to include a component of 'putting what is good for others above what is good for oneself', ideologies are split as to the sources of innate motivation that drives some to strive for altruism, how to assess costs associated with altruism, how to access personal gain from the act of giving, the degree of intrinsic self-interest built into thoughtful action, and what constitutes a true altruistic act. Nevertheless, contemporary definitions of altruism unequivocally hold that altruism is the concern for the welfare of others at some cost to one's self (Kerr, Godfrey-Smith & Feldman, 2004).

Enlightenment is a philosophical commonplace in both spiritual and secular contexts. Immanuel Kant, in his 'Treatise on Enlightenment' (Kant, 1784), calls for the individual to have the courage to take up the 'vocation of free thought', move beyond traditional civic ken, and make use of his own mind without guidance or direction from another. His motto of enlightenment was '*Sapere Aude!*' or 'Dare to know!' He claims that the courage to use your own reasoning becomes not only enlightened freedom for a few but also the impetus for the possibility of enlightenment for mankind. For Kant the process was linear, a freethinking minority gradually work on the character of the people, who become capable of managing freedom and affecting the principles of their government. Therefore, the courageous independent thinking of a few men leads to the possibility of the enlightenment of government and society at large.

Modern secular definitions for enlightenment imply a more pedestrian and moral characterization than pure courageous free thought, often viewed in the context of action and planning in acts of charity, humanitarianism, philanthropy or public works. An enlightened person would have a clear understanding of a situation garnered through maturity, wisdom, knowledge and experience that includes the interests of a global community. An enlightened altruist would then take appropriate action.

Spiritual enlightenment is an integral part of the historical tradition of Eastern philosophy and religion. In the spiritual context, enlightenment refers to a state of evolving consciousness characterized by perspicacity and global sentience. A spiritually enlightened individual overcomes the pull of worldly desires, feels one with the universe, uses technique of self-realization, meditation and wisdom to understand situations and the consequences of actions, and considers compassionate approaches to problems at hand (Combs, 1996). Concatenation of thought becomes the path to move beyond the egocentric conventional objective reality, become present in the 'now' and merge with the infinite consciousness of universal humanity. In the Buddhist tradition, there is no 'self', no independent existence. Enlightenment becomes one of the ultimate goals of spiritual transformation and the quest for enlightenment is evolution of consciousness to what is called a 'fully awakened state'. An enlightened spiritualist looks towards universality and an evolving consciousness. Combs also discounts Freud's characterization of the unconscious mind by likening consciousness to an event, a verb; not a thing or a noun. According to Combs, there is no higher goal than spiritual enlightenment; there is no secondary application to a state of action. As you increase capacity for knowing, it becomes immoral and pragmatically unwise not to take action. Altruism, universal concern, global sentience and spiritual legitimacy exist within the nexus of enlightened men in the spiritual context. Enlightenment embodies altruism inherently, as shown by the words of the Dalai Lama XIV when he entreats each individual to 'use all my energies to develop myself, to expand my heart out to others; to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all beings' (Hancox, 2011).

Philosophers perceive commonalities of concept in both the secular and spiritual context of enlightenment. The courage and freedom to create a broader understanding of global sentience creates a framework for erudite commentary and interaction with both individuals and society as a whole. Wisdom, experience and knowledge work together to illuminate universal precepts and open the mind to sapient appraisals of surroundings and consequences.

Despite the comparative silence in finding a proper scholarly analysis of the concept of unenlightened altruism, the underlying premise is tacitly allusive. Enlightened acts embody high objectivity or detachment in a spiritual sense, involvement of the global community instead of a narrow focus on either an individual or a small group, and the wisdom to strive for knowledge outlining the inevitable consequences of an act. Unenlightened altruism can be aphoristically defined as the precept of subjectively acting in the best interest of others without consideration for the global community or having a clear and complete understanding of the situation at hand. While high objectivity attests to a degree of spiritual enlightenment, requirements for knowledge of sociology and world affairs and an interest in affecting the global community are secular in nature.

## Consequentialism and Unenlightened Altruism

According to the ethical theory of consequentialism, the righteousness of an action depends on the outcome or consequence of the action rather than simply the rationale, intent or action itself (Scheffler & Scheffler, 1994). The use of the term unenlightened altruism in scholarly references (Jayatilleke, 1972; Kelly, 1901; Urban, 1930), have negative connotations from the consequentialist standpoint. This is because the tenet of unenlightened altruism essentially proffers a dichotomy of acting within an intellectual vacuum. On one hand, you have a seemingly positive ethos with followers answering the

moral call of a society that implores us to look to the good of others and act on behalf of the welfare of others even with associated personal costs. However, proceeding with a disregard, misunderstanding or without a full comprehension of the situation and the consequences of any possible actions can have unintended, pernicious consequences.

In his 1901 treatise on Government and Justice, Edmund Kelly implies that unenlightened altruism is the moral force working in a quest for justice that encourages taking up the 'cry for reform' with an inherent misinterpretation, misunderstanding or disregard for the real elements in the problems at hand. Kelly (1901) states, 'We have therefore to be as much on our guard against unenlightened altruism as against private greed; the sentiment of justice created by the one may be as little conformable to wisdom as that created by the other.' In his 1930 treatise on moral philosophy, Urban states, 'It is not difficult to show rationally that unenlightened altruism is likely to be self-defeating.' Jayatilleke, writing in 1972 on Ethics in the Buddhist perspective, champions ethical universalism and entreats us to consider not only motive, but to also consider other factors including the inherent nature of an act, the manner in which it was carried out, and the people affected by it. Jayatilleke states, 'Such unenlightened altruism would be illustrated in the activity of a foolish person with good intentions, who wishes to help his friend without being able to do anything of value.' In addition to these negative contextual connotations, unenlightened altruism risks likelihood of some measure of counter productivity. Unintended consequences could prove antithetical to the actor's original altruistic intent.

Even if the call to action comes from disparate intrinsic and extrinsic sources, altruism implies the actor is operating from good intent. However, the consequences of unenlightened altruism might not be altruistic when seen in an enlightened, broader sense, since the actor is often acting out of ignorance, subjectivity and myopia, though intent is well placed. This concept has been elucidated by the Dalai Lama XIV (Lama, 1991) as follows,

It is important to join the practice of love and compassion with the practice of insight. Even if you seek to help someone out of concern, without insight you cannot be very clear about what benefit will come of your efforts. A combination is needed: a good human heart as well as a good human brain. With these working together, we can achieve a lot.

Are the people involved in a pattern of altruism, humanitarianism and philanthropy spending time understanding how their actions make a difference in the big issues of the day? Have they thought more than shallowly about the effect of aid on the problems at hand? What is the value of the bleeding heart that values intent but devalues efficacy? How do we move beyond the trend of western paternalistic altruism? How do we move beyond the traditional role of the altruist as a player somewhere in the equation, feeling good and advertising his role, to more grass-roots focused strategies that empower local people? From the consequentialist standpoint, it might be more ethical not to act than act out of a well-intentioned but ill-conceived unenlightened altruism.

One simple example showcasing the consequences of unenlightened altruism is the act of an inexperienced swimmer impetuously jumping into a river in an attempt to save the life of a drowning man. The altruist has every intention of saving the man from drowning, but his ineffective swimming skills are a considerable liability. The impulsive, however beneficent, action of the altruist puts the safety of both parties in jeopardy, engendering subsequent events with high probability of unintended deleterious outcomes. If the altruist was more enlightened about the consequences of his hasty ill-conceived response, he could have considered courses of action with inherently better probability of survival for

both parties. Finding assistance from other individuals or using a rope to pull the drowning man to safety might have been choices begetting increased probability of a desirable outcome. This illustrates that the probability of a positive outcome, however well-intentioned the action, is commensurate to the knowledge of the consequences.

The tenets of patriotism and national foreign policy are common examples showcasing myopia and subjectivity in unenlightened altruism. Policies made by one government are by design often focused on the concerns of the citizens of a nation. Externalities are often not considered when formulating policies. In a world with limited physical, economic and natural resources, taking such a myopic view of advancement for a select number of citizens may come at a cost for others. An action benefiting the citizens of one nation might prove detrimental to agents outside that nation. Unenlightened altruism is often evident in everyday life with unenlightened agents claiming to be doing 'good' for their society without understanding the true impact these acts has on the global community. Enlightened altruism holds that the thought behind any action must inherently aim to consider the global community, not simply aim to better the prospects of one group without understanding how the agents outside the group are affected.

Religious leaders, societal norms and government agencies implore the citizenry to participate in altruistic acts on moral grounds. Societal norms outline traditional and acceptable methods of action. Well-meaning citizens participate in charitable acts, perpetuating patterns of acceptability and conformity in action for both individual and organizational acts of charity. Western tradition has kept a paternalistic attitude towards charitable giving. Western altruists take an active role in determining who get what aid, what is offered, how it is distributed and what goals it was designed to attain. In the traditional Western philanthropic view, the rich have a moral obligation to help the poor whether the poor want that particular form of help or not. This attitude was typified in 'White Man's Burden' (Easterly, W. & Easterly, W.R., 2006), which proffered an emblematic view for that the justification of expansionist policy and the role of the benevolent imperialist.

Another example of unenlightened altruism is the act of giving money to a charitable organization running programmes designed to reduce poverty or death rates due to untreated disease and unattended starvation. A humanitarian might support a cause or organization that purports to alleviate key world issues and has monetary resources and cultural acceptance, but does not have a historical track record for efficacious success. This is problematic at all levels of aid. In this vein, the American economist William Easterly has written extensively on the topics of sustainable economic growth and foreign aid. Analyzing historical trends in the implementation of foreign aid, Easterly chides the humanitarian to scrutinize traditional remedies and build new processes (Easterly, 2006). To Easterly, the seminal problem is the failure to apply economic principles to practical policy work.

Many people are worried about starving children in Africa and donate money to charitable organizations running programmes designed to reduce poverty or death rates due to untreated disease and unattended starvation. At first, this seems as a commendable altruistic act but today, two of the greatest risks from a global perspective are overpopulation and ecological unsustainability (Howell, 2013). If the real problems are overpopulation, global sustainability and local independence, then change will only occur if we address the underlying issues and rethinking how we deal with population issues and local empowerment and creating self-sustaining societies. When seen in a broader sense, food and medical care alone do not solve the 'Humane Paradox' addressing underlying global risks like overpopulation and unsustainability. This does not imply that attempts to save lives are unnecessary and unethical. However, when seen in a broader, enlightened sense, they may be of lesser consequential value than efforts to

attack overpopulation and sustainability issues. Simply enabling survival and increasing deficient pleasure does not automatically lead to a eudemonic flourishing society. For humans to flourish self-actualization must be a possibility (Maslow, 1970). Creating an effective society enabling eudemonia might be of more ethical value than simply enabling survival. It might be more ethical, from the consequentialist standpoint, to allow short term suffering if resources allocated elsewhere enable global long-term eudemonia.

Joan Holmes, the founding president of 'The Hunger Project', has tried to create an organization that takes a different approach to how the developed world traditionally approaches poverty issues in the less developed world. In many situations, aid was not only misdirected, but actually turned into part of the problem. Many aid agencies never bothered to distinguish between famine, which contributes 10 per cent to the starvation issues at hand and chronic persistent hunger, which contributes 90 per cent to the starvation issues at hand, translating into aid programmes that provided relief instead of building long-term solutions empowering agents of aid to become authors of their own future. The project is dedicated to empowering women and men to end their own hunger (Salwen & Salwen, 2010).

Philanthropy and humanitarianism are rife with examples of unenlightened altruism. Well-intentioned individuals frequently donate their money or time unaware or unconcerned with truly understanding critical components of the resulting possible outcomes. For example, a philanthropist might donate money to a cancer research organization without scrutinizing past history and statistics on the actual distribution of prior funds. The original intent was for the entire donation to be applied directly to cancer research. In reality, only a small percentage of the donation may end up directed towards actual research, with the rest directed to organizational overhead. Western tradition and societal norms petition the citizenry to engage in patterns of charity on moral grounds. The enlightened philanthropist knows that right intent is a necessary but not sufficient condition for lasting, substantive change.

One classic example of unenlightened altruism is the rational self-interested belief by both individuals and organizations justifying the accumulation of excess wealth and power as an avenue to help society in the long run. Wealthy individuals and well-funded organizations do allocate an inordinate amount of time and resources to 'do well'. However, they neglect to look at the detrimental effects done to the global society during the accumulation of excess wealth and power. Once reaching positions of wealth and power, they might act altruistically. Nevertheless, this often comes at a huge overall cost to others and the environment. Measuring the overall cost versus the benefit to society, the secondary acts might not hold significant value. Self-interest beyond basic survival and comfort could be unethical and defeat any future altruistic act. History has shown us that no relationship exists between excess wealth and power and the capacity to act altruistically. In this sense, not taking or consuming in excess is actually giving to society.

Consequences of right intent put into action are situational. Altruism debates centre in part on the how, why, where and when action happens. When an altruistic act is implemented or applied on a larger scale, the extent of the consequences increase proportionally and actions affect more agents. For example, if the mayor of a city creates a programme to feed the homeless, the extent of the consequences and number of variables of this example are high. Some of the variables include corruption, budgetary imbalances, programme implementation methodology, activities of personnel involved and quality of food provided. This implies that while performing an altruistic act that affects multiple agents and/or entities the actor must be highly enlightened if the desired altruistic outcome must be met. In their commentary on the evolution of their families journey from altruistic un-enlightenment to enlightened giving, Kevin and Hannah Salwen (Salwen & Salwen, 2010), look at how his own family moved beyond the traditional

construct of altruistic acts to learn the importance of local empowerment as a vehicle for efficacy to creatively address injustice in aid work. They encourage those wanting to give voice to marginalized communities, to make sure it is their voice, not your own personal vision of their voice. They encourage philanthropists to act like smart venture capitalists: 'research where to invest, provide the cash and then let the experienced management team run the show'. To the Salvens, the critical lesson became the background work. They state, 'We need to pick our aims and methods carefully or else it was easy to go totally off course and accomplish almost nothing.'

Organizational dynamics often mirror unenlightened altruism. In the quintessential managerial role, leaders and executives directly impact not only the organization, but employees and stockholders. This may not be a traditional area to consider decisions made to advance the general welfare. Unenlightened decisions made on behalf of the stakeholders and corporation can have unintended or deleterious effects. For example, corporate mergers, product decisions, campaigns, internal policies, hiring practices, expansion policies and competitive tactics, entering new markets all have the potential to affect many stakeholders and consumers. When performing an altruistic act affecting multiple agents, an actor must map right intent with for a well-formalized realization of good outcome for the global community.

Unenlightened altruism could have a deleterious effect on constituents in the political arena. Policy makers often propose incongruous policies that by design affect inordinate number of agent. Acting without a clear understanding of the effects of implementation, may prove to be counter-productive. Government leaders then must make the effort to distinguish efficacious acts of altruism from our sentiment of it and place a premium on consonant action. The question of addressing problems and moving away from patterns of unenlightened altruism is a common theme in political discourse. This is the archetypical illustration of the proverb: 'Look before you Leap'.

An enlightened altruist must be objective, and have a well-formed and complete understanding of the state of both the global human condition and ecological sustainability. Performing an altruistic act without having a good understanding of the global situation will eventually lead to more harm than good from the consequentialist standpoint. An enlightened altruist would attack the root causes of suffering rather than simply alleviate the suffering of the victims.

## Unenlightened Altruism and Other Ethical Constructs

Effective altruism and unenlightened altruism have a negative correlation. Effective altruism aims at applying evidence and reason to act in ways that will have maximum social good. An unenlightened altruist will typically not use much reason and evidence before performing an altruistic act. However, it must be noted that an effective altruist might be subject to ignorance. While effective altruists focus on principles such as cost effectiveness, cause selection, impartiality and counterfactual reasoning, they might not be enlightened in a global sense before acting. This could lead to unenlightened altruism.

Enlightened self-interest might prove to be more ethical and utilitarian than unenlightened altruism. In the case of enlightened self-interest, even though self-interest is the ultimate goal, knowledge, the interests of others and the consequences, are given high consideration. On the other hand, unenlightened altruism could have more detrimental effects because though the intent is good, the act is unenlightened. Unenlightened self-interest tends to be more unethical than unenlightened altruism since the former is purely selfish with absolutely no regard for the interests of others or the environment. The ideal way to act for maximizing social good would be enlightened altruism.

Unenlightened altruism and hypocrisy are disparate concepts. Unenlightened altruism proffers an actor with requisite concern for welfare of others but lacking perceptive action. In action, good intentions are not enough to guarantee realization of a good end. On the other hand, a hypocrite's actions are implicitly impure even if the consequences are efficacious. For example, a mayor of a city could instigate what he knows is a poorly designed programme to feed the homeless as part of an overall campaign to gain personal popularity, garner favour with constituents or get re-elected. In this case, the mayor is not acting under the principle of unenlightened altruism, but under the principles of unenlightened self-interest, enlightened impure altruism and hypocrisy.

Pure altruism and unenlightened altruism have no direct correlation. Pure or impure altruism appertain to the intent and motivation of the actor. Enlightenment relates to situational knowledge, objectivity and inclusion of global agency. An altruistic act can be selfless or pure in motive and yet unenlightened in implementation. Moreover, altruistic acts can be impure in motive and enlightened in implementation. In this case, the right action of the enlightened but impurely altruistic act could beget more overall good than an unenlightened but purely altruistic act. It is clear in these situations, good intentions are not enough.

## Conclusion

The term 'unenlightened altruism' has been used in only a few cases in historical, scholarly literature and has never had an erudite discourse or unambiguous definition. This article analyzed the context of these past references, established a clear definition, and discussed implications and correlations to other philosophical and political constructs. This article argues that while altruistic acts are traditionally considered virtuous and ethical action towards creating a eudemonic society with the implied undercurrent of ecological sustainability, harmony, prosperity, progress and advancement, unenlightened altruism has the power to do just the opposite.

Efficacy requires a sapient analysis of the problems, resources and solutions at hand. When well-meaning intent begets response, unenlightened altruism becomes an actionable reform occurring with an inherent misinterpretation, misunderstanding or disregard for the problems or consequences at hand, with the potential for deleterious effects on the global community and economic sustainability. An unenlightened altruist does not scrutinize traditional remedies, build new processes or apply economic principles to practical policy work.

Moving beyond the traditional construct of altruism engenders a vehicle for efficacy in action. A truly enlightened altruist would act with objectivity, with knowledge of the inevitable consequences of any response after carefully considering the problems at hand and after deliberating on a global scale. When intent brings about action on the world stage, meaningful positive sustainable change requires enlightened action. Tools are readily available in our information age that enables objectivity and the pursuit of informed thought in the context of an expanded worldview. Motivation for informed action and interest in the global community create an atmosphere ripe for the rise of the enlightened altruist. Efficacy in action requires an ethical construct that petitions actors to examine objectivity, the global community and wisdom even within the context of altruism. From the consequentialist standpoint, if these three tenets are not intentionally considered, it might be more ethical not to act than to blindly act as an unenlightened altruist.

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