

2-1-2008

Do people really want to help others? A look at the human nature of service

Emily Tran
Roger Williams University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/rr>

Recommended Citation

Tran, Emily (2007) "Do people really want to help others? A look at the human nature of service," *Reason and Respect*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 7.
Available at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/rr/vol3/iss1/7>

Copyright ©2-1-2008 by the authors
Reason and Respect is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
For more information, please contact mwu@rwu.edu.



Do People Really Want to Help Others? A Look at the Human Nature of Service

Emily Tran, Environmental Science '10

When children are first being taught right from wrong, their parents usually mention something along the lines of “treat others as you would have others treat you.” As those children grow up, they are punished for not abiding by that general law and rewarded for performing kind acts towards others. From this, children learn that one should help others because it is the right thing to do. But would people still act in a kind manner if there were no reward? Take, for example, *Avenue Q*, the risqué Broadway comedy that makes fun of human nature using puppets, which cheerfully sing “when you’re helping others, you’re really helping yourself” (Lopez and Marx). If this is really the case, then how is one supposed to instill a value of helping others in children?

Often, service is forced upon children, such as in high school where students must do a certain amount of community service to graduate. Forcing students to do community service will not necessarily instill the value of service. If this were so, more students in college would volunteer than currently do. In 2005, only 30.5% of college students volunteered in some way. Though the percent of college students who volunteer seems to be growing, this increase seems heavily attributed to the September 11th attacks that occurred during most college students’ high school careers (“College Students”). How does forcing students to perform service benefit them? So long as the community is helped and problems are solved, why should people try to get students to want to do service of their own accord? After all, most people in our society do not naturally act in a manner that serves the community simply for the sake of doing the right thing and helping others. If Darwin’s survival of the fittest theory holds true, then one of our natural instincts is to do what is best for oneself. Dogs have evolved instincts to defend their property and territory even if it is not threatened because that is how they protect their young and successfully raise new generations. Similarly, we have evolved instincts to take care of all our own needs by making sure that we provide ourselves and our children with the best possible food, clothes, and shelter that we can. By striving to make one’s own and one’s children’s lives as comfortable as possible, parents maximize the possibility that their own genes will be perpetuated through more generations. Obviously, people generally do not spend their lives contemplating how best they can perpetuate their own genes, but a large portion of our motivation comes from the will to be happy and ensure happiness for future generations.

Understandably, people do not work simply in accordance with an evolution theory. People are more intelligent than mice or rabbits that base most of their lives off instincts and reproduction, and obviously there are exceptions. Gandhi did not starve himself for the sake of perpetuating his genes for future generations, and Mother Theresa did not perform endless acts of love and kindness in order to ensure that she herself was comfortable. However, when they were born, they probably did not have any thoughts for others but themselves, as that is how babies think. By default, humans do what is best for themselves, because that is what our instincts tell us to do. The beauty of human intelligence is that we are capable of overcoming our instincts, and just as some dogs learn new tricks that go against their instincts better than other dogs, some people are more capable of training themselves to have more concern for others. Bob Geldof admitted this fact. Until he saw a news report on the starving people in Africa, he had more concern for his financial situation and his own child’s education than for people in a far-off place that he had never met. Many others probably saw that same news report and felt very sorry for those starving people, but eventually stopped thinking about them and went on with their daily lives. Admittedly, many people do think more for others than for themselves, but most people in our society convince themselves in some way or another that they are more important than those around them, and consequentially they do not perform significant amounts of community service. Society also plays a role in the general population’s dearth of true compassion for those around them. Parents drill their children on doing well in school, getting a good college education, and getting a good job so they have a decent salary and can live comfortably. Seldom does one hear people explaining how their parents

grounded them for refusing to help at the local food pantry or not asking their elderly neighbor if she needs help with the yard work. My parents made it a house rule that all the family members should get a certain amount of exercise per week and took us on family vacations that involved hiking, biking, and skiing every year. As a result, our family is generally more physically fit than the average American family, and I have taken on the value of physical fitness by joining organized sports and often spending free time outside. The same would likely happen if it were a house rule that everybody should somehow contribute to the community regularly. If it were made a rule in a family that every member needs to perform a certain amount of community service per month, the children in that family would likely carry on that value and do more voluntary service after they are no longer bound by house rules.

Every authority figure in a child's life contributes to that child's set of values. Parents, teachers, coaches, and even older siblings all influence what a person decides to do throughout a lifetime, but if those authority figures hold individualistic views, the value of service will not be instilled in the child. Bentley College English professor Bruce Herzberg, one of the most prominent advocates for service-learning courses, taught a class in which students tutored homeless people. He realized that it was difficult for his students to "transcend their own deeply ingrained belief in individualism and meritocracy in their analysis of the reasons for the illiteracy they see" (312). Even the homeless people whom the students tutored, he noted, "have imbibed the lessons about individualism and equal opportunity" (312). Because this value of individualism is so deeply instilled in our society, people do not tend to question selfish actions. If a person works very hard and earns lots of money as a result, the majority of people in our society will not question the fact that he bought a large house and an expensive car rather than giving more money to charity. The general consensus is that he earned it and can therefore do whatever he wants to with it, thus demonstrating the individualistic views of our society.

Humans probably are not inclined to serve others unless it benefits them. We are a product of evolution and a part of the animal kingdom, and thus we live by the unbreakable laws of nature. Consequently, there is an even deeper philosophical question at stake: Does it even matter if we perform service? Do people really need to help others? Of course, the immediate response of any reader will be a resounding "yes," but this is not an argument about service, simply a passing question about the nature of our lives. As with any philosophical question, it possesses no real answer and leads to a long line of questions that follow, each causing an equal lack of understanding. At any rate, we can only keep asking ourselves these questions while we continue to learn, evolve, and sometimes even help others, whatever the reason may be.

Works Cited

- "College Students Helping America." *Corporation for National and Community Service*. 2006. 12 December 2006. <http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/06_1016_RPD_college_exec.pdf>.
- Geldof, Bob. Guest Lecture. Civil Discourse Lecture Series. Campus Recreation Center, Roger Williams University, Bristol, RI. 24 October 2006.
- Herzberg, Bruce. "Community Service and Critical Teaching." *College Composition and Communication* 45 (Oct. 1994): 309-319.
- Lopez, Robert and Jeff Marx. *Avenue Q*. Perf. Jennifer Barnhart, Evan Harrington, Robert McClure, Ann Sanders, Howie Michael Smith, and Haneefa Wood. RCA Victor Records, 2003.