EMPATHY AND PROTEST: TWO ROOTS OF HEROIC ALTRUISM

Krzysztof Konarzewski

As the world moves away from the impersonal ideologies inherited from the nineteenth century, altruism becomes one of the least questioned educational goals and one of the most popular objects of psychological inquiry. About altruism almost everything seems to be known, and if we do not experience it in our everyday life, this is attributed only to the insufficient effort we put into preaching and striving for it. What contribution could then be made by a new book about altruism by Samuel and Pearl Oliner (1988) to the theory of character education? The answer looks straightforward. It is the authors' attempt at discovering the psychological roots of true altruism that makes the book important for educational studies, and educators. The remainder of this paper is an elaboration of that answer.

EMPATHY AND PROTEST: CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS

From the Oliners' interpretations two hypotheses may, I believe, be extracted. The first explains altruism by empathy, the second, by protest. Conceptually they are quite distinct from one another: the first considers altruism as an act on behalf of somebody, while the second as an act against somebody or something.

The hypothesis of empathy says that an individual shows an inclination to help another person if that person has been “incorporated into himself” in the sense that the fear and pain of another becomes his own fear and pain. He rescues others as he would
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rescue himself if he were in a similar situation. The other becomes
the vicarious self. Rescuing of the other is rescuing the self-in-the-
other.

The hypothesis of protest says that the tendency to help another
person stems from disagreement with the existing state of affairs
or the social order. An individual may disagree either with the
world itself or his position in it. The world in which lawlessness
is rampant, brute force is the last resort, and innocent people are
condemned to torture and death—that world may elicit the protest
in various forms, among them, altruistic protest. An individual
may endeavor to sabotage the regime by means of helping people
whom the regime considers enemies and persecutes the most. The
protest may also stem from the recognition of one’s own position
as unjustly disadvantageous relative to others. By helping the opp-
pressed an individual may try to undermine the social order that
put him on such unequal terms with them. Leo Montada (in this
volume) has aptly called these two forms of protest “moral out-
rage” and “existential guilt.”

At the core of altruistic motivation, according to the first hy-
pothesis, lies the unfortunate other who may have to be physically
or symbolically present. According to the second, this position is
occupied by the world that has been pulled out of its proper form
by the hostile forces. Hence the altruistic acts may not be depen-
dent on the presence of the persecuted other. In fact, such persons
may be actively sought. There is another, equally obvious differ-
ence between the two hypotheses. While the first requires the vic-
tim to be personally attractive to the potential rescuer, and
considers love as the surest way to altruism, the second makes no
claim of that sort. One may come to the victim’s aid even if he
personally dislikes him and would have quit the relationship had
the victim been in a more favorable situation.

PSYCHOLOGICAL PREREQUISITES: INCLUSIVENESS
OR INDEPENDENCE

The two hypotheses assume different psychological prerequisites
of altruistic behavior. According to the first, it is inclusiveness—
that is, perceiving of other people as essentially similar to the self,
regardless of the ways they are socially categorized. As the Oliners
(1988) put it, we would expect a person involved in the act of
altruism to be one whose “ego boundaries were sufficiently broad-
ened so that other people were experienced as part of the self" (183). The main obstacle to altruism is everything that splits people into separate categories, makes them different from others—in short, blocks the process of the "stimulus generalization."

The second hypothesis assumes independence as the basic prerequisite of altruism. It is independence of a special kind, however: independence from the "factual" on behalf of the "actual." By the latter I mean not the habitual forms of community life but rather their axiological foundation. The opposition of the independence, and hence the main enemy of altruism, is conformity to current leaders and movements. Dependent people easily admit all elements forced out by the present to be relics of the past, and eagerly accept the changes as historical necessity, an outcrop of collective justice, and so on. Many mental adaptations of this kind have in fact an opportunistic basis. That can be seen from the fact that people are usually more ready to accept some new order if it is introduced by the powerful, prestigious, or conquering agents that could hardly be resisted.

Since the condition just described has two sides—independence from the new changes and loyalty to the old foundation—it may be called conservatism as well. But this is not ordinary, inert conservatism that pushes an individual aside from the social life. It is rather an active rejection of the new order if it does not keep within the bounds of decency.

EDUCATION FOR INCLUSIVENESS AND INDEPENDENCE

The two psychological prerequisites of altruism are acquired in different educational settings. Inclusiveness requires an education that creates the climate of universal solidarity of men on the, so to speak, biological basis. It can be achieved by the rejection of all social categories in introducing people to the child. Such an education consists of making the child interact with others—regardless of their gender, ethnicity, social class, religious affiliation, and the like—by means of setting tasks, modeling, suasion, etc.

It is obvious that education of that kind is almost impossible. Social differentiation of people reflects the social structure. To introduce the child into that structure is an important task of any socialization, which by definition aims at the reproduction of some social order. An education aiming at the formless community of the whole mankind would have to take place, as in the pedagogy
of J. J. Rousseau, outside the society and against it. There is, however, some way to soften this limitation. I would say that what is conducive to inclusiveness is to instruct a child about a social category after, and not before his experience with concrete representatives of the category. The information “This is a Jew” in relation to somebody whom I know very well contributes little to my representation of that person. If I, however, do not know any Jews personally, this word labels all my uncertainty relating to the whole group of people. “Jew” as an attribute of otherwise known persons makes me intensify my interaction with them in order to explore this new difference. “Jew” as an attribute of strangers prevents me from getting in touch with them while it opens my ears to everything “people say about” them.

We could then set two educational strategies against each other. In the first, differences between people are discovered, while in the second they are assumed at the point of departure. From that point of view it is very interesting that in the Oliners’ sample only 4 percent of rescuers, in contrast to 13 percent of nonrescuers, reported that they hadn’t known if there were any Jews in their vicinity before the war (114). I suspect that among that 13 percent of the respondents’ confessions of the sort “I hate the word Jew, it sounds so rotten” could be easily found. As the assumed difference seemingly fills informational gaps, it reduces the need for unbiased inquiry, and strengthens the primitive impulse of in-group solidarity (Tajfel et al. 1971). The discovered difference, by contrast, motivates the processes of both cognitive repeal of the strangeness it implies, and preservation of its descriptive sense. That is my interpretation of the slightly ambiguous passage from the Oliners’ book that says that rescuers “feel more comfortable dealing with people different from themselves and are readier to emphasize the likeness that binds them to others than the distinctions that separate them” (250).

What can be said about independence? It grows, I believe, in educational contexts that require the child to reflect on the validity of various claims set up for him by other people, and teach him to resist the claims regarded as unjustifiable. Basic means of such education are examples of moral examination of the mutual claims in the family and the practice of appropriate reasoning in the course of everyday life. At the opposite pole is an education that puts the main emphasis on obedience.

Two kinds of obedience may be distinguished: “positional” and
mercenary. The first implies uncritical acceptance of claims advanced by persons of higher social rank. In families that B. Bernstein (1971) has called positional, questioning of the validity of claims is seen as unnecessary or is even prohibited. It is known in advance that the father, as head of the family, is always right, that the mother is right unless the father opposes her, and so on. The world of the child splits into two circles: one contains all the persons whom he has to obey, another those whom he does not. It has been keenly observed the satisfaction with which the obedient child ignores the claims of adults belonging to the latter group. Mercenary obedience also makes the control of the validity of claims unnecessary, since it is based on profit and loss accounting. Many parents introduce their offspring into dull pragmatism by explicating moral duties in terms of profitability, and by disdaining reasons that may bring, if observed, unpleasant consequences.

Many a fact from the vast pool of facts collected by the Oliners confirms this description. It should be noted that members of the middle and upper-middle classes—where, according to Bernstein (1971), positional families are rare—were clearly overrepresented in the sample of rescuers. That can mean that many rescuers had the opportunity in their childhood to learn to examine the validity of claims or at least had avoided severe obedience training. Indeed, the rescuers reported more often than nonrescuers that their parents rejected both blind obedience and pragmatic attitudes toward conflict situations. Even more interesting are the differences in disciplinary measures used by the parents. Both rescuers and nonrescuers reported that their parents used punishment of various sorts, but the former more often mentioned that the parental disapproval was accompanied by the verbal explication of their reasons. The authors interpret that effect in a rather complex way as a modeling of the correct relation of the strong to the weak: when parents—the stronger part in the interaction—explain why they are dissatisfied with the child instead of just scolding or spanking him, they demonstrate to him how to resign the domination over the weaker part. I think it can be seen in a simpler way. Giving the reasons for parental disapproval instructs the child to take a reflective, critical attitude toward every claim before he accepts it. Unwarranted disapproval, on the other hand, shifts his attention from the claim itself to the position of its source. Little wonder that many nonrescuers perceived punishments inflicted upon them
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as a mere unloading of parents' emotions rather than a deliberate response to the intrinsic evil of their deeds (183).

Special attention should be paid in this context to the role of religion. Despite the saliency of religious motives of the rescuers in the eyes of the Jews themselves, the rescuers did not differ from the nonrescuers in religiousness just before the war. It appeared, however, that the rescuers were significantly more religious in childhood and had more religious fathers (156). A possible interpretation of this result assumes that early religious experience weakens in the child the feeling of dependence on others. I have found some support for this in my research on the attributions of school successes and failure made by adolescents. Boys and girls who attributed their successes and failures to God clearly rejected the idea that the help of their classmates and the moods of their teachers may have been responsible for the respective outcomes. It looks as if the feeling of dependence on the supernatural helps the young person to deny his or her dependence on mundane powers.

HEROIC ALTRUISM AS EMPATHY AND PROTEST

The Oliners insist that any single hypothesis fails to explain the altruistic acts, and I shall agree with them. The hypothesis of protest, if taken alone, seems to them particularly inadequate. Protest is a response that is primarily destructive: it aims at eliminating the malefactor, not saving his victims. Indeed, only 17 percent of rescuers mentioned their hatred of the invaders as a motive for their activity, in contrast to 37 percent of the members of the underground. Patriotism and hatred facilitate armed resistance rather than the acts of altruism, as table 6.2 from The Altruistic Personality clearly shows. These facts stimulate the authors to question the relationship between independence and moral courage. They even suggest that great ideas or abstract principles may harden people to the sufferings of real individuals.

That criticism should not, however, imply the acceptance of the hypothesis of empathy. Compassion fails to explain those acts of help that put the rescuer himself in the situation to be pitied. Incorporation of the other into the self makes understandable that the person, in order to ease the other's distress, makes attempts similar to those he would make, should he suffer himself. But there
is a limit to those attempts: the sufferings he exposes himself to. If someone denied it, he would have to admit that the cues of others' distress could screen out the cues of one's own distress. However, it is inconceivable on the grounds that empathic altruism is in fact rescuing oneself—in-the-other. Perhaps one should be reminded here that when the Bible lays down the empathy-based law for interpersonal relations, it commands the believer to love his neighbor as he loves himself—but no more.

We should conclude that altruism studied by the Oliners must be determined by both empathy and protest. Both roots of heroic altruism are indispensable as they limit and complement each other. The readiness to the empathic response focuses the protest on the victims and prevents entering into the vicious circle of violence. The ability to protest gives the readiness to help a quality of heroic self-sacrifice.

Without taking into account these two abilities, true altruism is deeply mysterious. But with them it becomes by no means clear. The point is that between the two abilities there is some incompatibility, both psychological and educational.

Psychologically, empathy implies some dependence on others. In my research (Konarzewski and Zychlinska 1978) on prosocial behavior I have found that female university students who worked hard on behalf of an anonymous partner perceived the partner as more similar to them, and—what is of prime interest here—were more field dependent than students who worked poorly. According to Witkin et al. (1962), who introduced the notion of field dependency to personality theory, people high on that measure experience themselves in a way influenced by others, while people low on that measure (i.e., field independent) can better realize their needs, feelings, and traits as well as perceive them as distinct from those of other persons. Hence if a person is able to respond empathically to another's needs, he or she is likely also to be socially dependent, which may prevent the acts of protest.

Educationally, the projects that promote interpersonal contacts in the climate of universal tolerance seem to distract students' attention from the axiological basis of the social order. The students' interpretations of social phenomena take on a psychological color as they rely on the notion of social competencies of interacting individuals. Hence, possible collective constraints of their behavior may escape notice.

The combination of the training of empathy with the training
of protest, while not logically impossible, is by no means easy to achieve. That may explain why the acts of heroic altruism only rarely brightened up the darkness of the Holocaust.

REFERENCES


