

A Dialogue on Ayn Rand's Ethics

Reply to Robert H. Bass, "Egoism versus Rights" (Spring 2006)

Altruism in Auguste Comte and Ayn Rand

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Robert H. Bass (2006) emphatically rejects Ayn Rand's well-known argument that altruism in morality is inconsistent with respect for individual rights in politics. His article raises a multitude of issues. As much needs to be said about its treatment of egoism as its treatment of altruism. A good deal could be said, as well, about Bass's insensitivity to the ancient ethical tradition to which Rand's moral theory largely belongs. But here I will target a single point of controversy: Rand's interpretation of altruism, which Bass declares is such a gross distortion as to invalidate her entire critique of it.

Did Rand Misunderstand Altruism?

As Bass correctly summarizes, Rand ([1943] 1968; 1957; 1961; 1964) maintained that altruism means placing what is good for others above what is good for oneself. According to Rand, the altruist regards achieving the good of others as essentially unconstrained by any concern for the rights or dignity of mere individuals, whose prime moral obligation is to submerge themselves within the collective and sacrifice themselves for it.

This, however, should be no comfort to any Objectivist seriously concerned to address positions that real people hold. For Rand's conception of altruism was entirely fantastic. It is a doctrine that has never been held by any important moral thinker and, in particular, not by *any* of the

thinkers she castigated as espousers of altruism—not, e.g., by Kant or Marx, Mill or Spencer, Dewey or Rawls. [My emphasis. Here Bass is footnoting pages 32–37 of *For the New Intellectual*.] Not one of them has maintained that the interests of the individual are of *no* importance, that service to others is the only justification for her existence, or that anything goes, so long as there is some beneficiary other than herself.

It is difficult not to suspect a bait-and-switch at work here. The thinkers she criticizes are indeed exponents of altruism in the ordinary sense of the word—that is, they believed that the interests of others matter in their own right, apart from the way they might impact upon one's own interests, and therefore that, in varying degrees (depending upon the thinker and his other commitments), it could be appropriate, desirable or morally required, on some occasions to act on behalf of others, even at some cost to one's own interests. Then, having identified these thinkers as altruists, in the ordinary or garden-variety sense, she charges them with being altruists in her entirely different sense. (Bass 2006, 331)

There is a good deal more to be said about Kant and Marx and Dewey and Rawls than I can get to in this brief response. Here one point will have to suffice. Bass's criticism would carry a good deal more weight had he deemed it worthwhile to mention Rand's response to a real person named Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Comte might be thought to merit a little attention in this regard, since he actually invented the word *altruism* (1973a). Here is what Rand (1961, 36) had to say about him:

Auguste Comte, the founder of Positivism, the champion of science, advocated a “rational,” “scientific” social system based on the total subjugation of the individual to the collective, including a “Religion of Humanity” which substituted Society for the Gods or gods who collect the blood of

sacrificial victims. It is not astonishing that Comte was the coiner of the term *Altruism*, which means: the placing of others above self, of their interests above one's own.

What Did Comte Think?

It has been pointed out, on more than one occasion, that Rand's one or two paragraph treatments of Western philosophers in *For the New Intellectual* are less than charitable, and in some cases substantially distorted. I've complained myself about the way she ran Herbert Spencer over (Campbell 1996). So our first order of business is to assess whether she got Comte right or not.

She did, as an examination of Comte's later writings will confirm. Comte was so devout a collectivist that he denied there could be a science of psychology—on moral grounds, for it would be too individualistic! And although Comte (1966; 1973a) was squeamish about the death penalty, and reluctant to discuss the use of force, the exquisitely planned and directed social order that he pined for had no chance of coming into being without massive compulsion. By addressing his personal appeals to the Tsar of Russia rather than, say, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Comte (1966) implicitly conceded this point.

A long way from indulging in fantasy, Rand was merely taking Comte's conception of altruism seriously.¹ Comte, who sought to establish a new religion of “the Great Being, Humanity,” defined altruism as “living for others” (*vivre pour autrui*):

The individual must subordinate himself to an Existence outside himself in order to find in it the source of his stability. And this condition cannot be effectually realized except under the impulse of propensities prompting him to live for others. The being, whether man or animal, who loves nothing outside himself, and really lives for himself alone, is by that very fact condemned to spend his life in a miserable alternation of ignoble torpor and uncontrolled excitement. Evidently the principal feature of Progress in all

living things is that the general consensus which we have seen to be the essential attribute of vitality should become more perfect. It follows that happiness and worth, as well in individuals as in societies, depend on adequate ascendancy of the sympathetic instincts. Thus the expression, *Live for Others*, is the simplest summary of the whole moral code of Positivism. (Comte 1973a, 565–56)

Of moral education, Comte declared:

[O]ver and above the several means of repressing personality, the essential condition of purification is the exertion of sympathy, which regulates individual existence by the family relations, and these again by the civic.

It follows that, from every point of view, the ultimate systematisation of human life must consist above all in the development of altruism. (1973b, 253)

For Comte, as the above passage suggests, “personality” was invariably a bad thing. Not only must feelings for others be promoted, any form of self-regard or positive self-evaluation must be discouraged.

As for Comte’s politics, his uncompromising collectivism comes through clearly in the passages already quoted. The four hefty volumes of the *System of Positive Polity* embroider on the regimentation that Comte sought to impose, in detail that readers not committed to his scheme for remaking society will find mind-numbing. Of particular interest: Comte thoroughly rejected any notion of individual rights as opposed to social duties, detested any form of liberalism as “modern anarchy,” and envisioned a Religion of Humanity, established by the State, whose function would be to train every citizen in altruism and discourage outbreaks of “personality.” It’s worth noting, too, that in pressing for altruism, Comte exalted the emotions over the intellect. Rand (1957) also maintained that altruism depends on putting feelings before facts, though Bass does not mention this.

Rand's Choice of Terms

What's more, there is reason to think that hard-core, Comtean altruism was of particular importance to Rand. An examination of her earlier writings, as well as the published portions of her journals, shows that it took some years for her to settle on "altruism" as her label for the moral tendencies that she most deeply opposed. In her earliest published journals, she referred to the viewpoint that she opposed in varying terms: collectivism, Christian morality, the morality of selflessness, and so on.

Greater clarity began to emerge with her notes for *Second Hand Lives*, eventually published as *The Fountainhead*. In one of the first that has survived, she asks "What it means to live for others"; the adversary is identified, not as altruism, but as "ethical collectivism" or the "old Christian-Communist denial of 'self'" (1997, 85; 22 December 1935). Her first actual reference to altruism is in a character sketch of Peter Keating (1997, 99; 12 February 1936); Keating's altruism is described as phony, functioning primarily to feed his vanity.

Rand's second reference to altruism in her journals is a quick note from 1942, as she was rushing to complete work on the novel. Now altruism is seen as fundamental: "We must be *ashamed* to admit second-hander's motives—acts of altruism" (1997, 220). Three other such notes follow from the same year (221). Each equates altruism with living a second-hand life; one seems to indicate that "egotism" and "altruism" are words better not used in Howard Roark's court-room speech. But toward the end of 1942, she changed her mind; the morality of altruism is a secondary theme in that speech, but a prominent one.

"Altruism," Roark tells the court, "is the doctrine which demands that man live for others and place others above self" ([1943] 1968, 712). Altruism was fully cemented in Rand's standard terminology in 1943, as she began sketching an intended treatise on the morality of individualism. As per the initial outline, human beings ought to be "Traders, not servants. . . . Altruism is an absolute evil" (1997, 244; 18 August 1943). An early synopsis barely paraphrases Roark's

speech: “Altruism is the doctrine which holds that man must live for others and place others above self” (249; 4 September 1943). This does not merely echo Rand’s note from 1935—it is a perfectly Comtean definition.

Did Rand *know* then that “living for others” was Comte’s definition? We cannot be entirely sure, because Rand does not mention him in her journals. We do know that during this period Rand was in close contact with Isabel Paterson, who was definitely aware of the outlines of Comte’s system. In a newspaper column, Paterson had made fun of several prominent social theorists, including Jean Bodin, Giambattista Vico, Auguste Comte, and Herbert Spencer, quoting passages on each from *The Story of Social Philosophy*, by Charles A. Ellwood (supposedly, as read out loud to her by humor columnist Will Cuppy). “There was just one thing none of them knew—the appropriate phrase to inscribe on the final page of their immortal works. . . . No dice. . . .” (Paterson 1938, 12).

So Rand’s characterization of altruism was impeccably Comtean. What’s more, her selection of altruism as the primary label for the tendencies that she opposed was plausibly occasioned by an encounter with Comte’s ideas. Rand could actually claim greater authenticity than a good many others who have held forth on the subject.

Watering Altruism Down

Since Comte was there first, and his formulation was crisp and uncompromising, how did altruism come to be understood as Bass insists we understand it? When and how did altruism devolve to the wide and smeary range of views that “the interests of others matter in their own right, apart from the way they might impact upon one’s own interests, and therefore that, in varying degrees (depending upon the thinker and his other commitments), it could be appropriate, desirable or morally required, on some occasions to act on behalf of others, even at some cost to one’s own interests” (Bass 2006, 331)?

The answer is that the notion of altruism (the word entered the English language through commentaries on Comte and translations of him) was thoroughly watered down within a generation.

Comte's altruism was evidently disturbing to many of his readers. But there was great reluctance to pronounce altruism a misguided ideal in general. John Stuart Mill, who had been a financial supporter of Comte's efforts, found the *System of Positive Polity* reactionary and grossly illiberal, when not obsessively bizarre, and, some years after Comte's death, voiced his criticisms openly.

Because the good of the human race is the ultimate standard of right and wrong, and because moral discipline consists in cultivating the utmost possible repugnance to all conduct injurious to the general good, M. Comte infers that the good of others is the only inducement on which we should allow ourselves to act; and that we should endeavour to starve the whole of the desires which point to our personal satisfaction, by denying them all gratification not strictly required by physical necessities. The golden rule of morality, in M. Comte's religion, is to live for others, "vivre pour autrui." To do as we would be done by, and to love our neighbour as ourselves, are not sufficient for him: they partake, he thinks, of the nature of personal calculations. We should endeavour not to love ourselves at all. . . . All education and all moral discipline should have but one object, to make altruism (a word of his own coining) predominate over egoism. (Mill 1865, 138–39)

Mill had a major opening. The notion of altruism was new, the word not widely used yet, and Comte's moral orientation was at odds with both the utilitarianism of Mill's upbringing and the individualist tendencies of Mill's maturity. But Mill would not reject altruism outright, in favor of a different moral standard. Instead, as he immediately continued:

If by this were only meant that egoism is bound, and should be taught, always to give way to the well-understood interests of enlarged altruism, no one who acknowledges any morality at all would object to the proposition. But M. Comte . . .

thinks it the grand duty of life not only to strengthen the social affections by constant habit and by referring all our actions to them, but, as far as possible, to deaden the personal passions and propensities by desuetude. Even the exercise of the intellect is required to obey as an authoritative rule the dominion of the social feelings over the intelligence (*du cœur sur l'esprit*). The physical and other personal instincts are to be mortified far beyond the demands of bodily health, which indeed the morality of the future is not to insist much upon, for fear of encouraging "les calculs personnels." (139)

In other words, Mill felt obliged to concede that altruism must be a good thing, not to be questioned by any moral person. So if Comte's definition was unsatisfactory, better that the notion be given a different one—or left undefined entirely.

Indeed, within a few more years, altruism had acquired a spectrum of weaker meanings. Meanwhile, Comte's original radical conception of it was being shunned as scarcely worthy of mention in discussions among moral philosophers.

For Leslie Stephen, whose views show both Kantian and utilitarian influences, altruism (a word Stephen just assumes his readers know) is a matter of sympathetically feeling pain when another person feels pain, and consequently acting to relieve the other's pain.

[A]ltruism, whatever its meaning or analysis, begins at the point where I am capable of benevolent intentions; or, in other words, where conferring pleasure upon others becomes a possible motive. (Stephen 1882, 224)

Examples of altruistic behavior, Stephen thinks, are readily provided by common sense:

A man is altruistic who loves his neighbour as himself; who gives money to the poor that he might have spent in luxury; who leaves house and home to convert savages; who sacri-

fices health to comfort prisoners or sufferers in a plague-stricken city. (220)

Leaving aside disagreements over the value of missionary work, there are obvious problems with these examples. On the one hand, many acts of benevolence are far less costly to the benefactor than those that Stephen has chosen. On the other hand, as Mill had accurately noted just a few years before, loving your neighbor as yourself would not have satisfied Comte. Comtean altruism entails loving your neighbor and doing your utmost *not* to love yourself.

Still, according to Stephen, the “moral law” of any society requires altruistic behavior, which in some cases will entail self-sacrifice, even to the point of martyrdom. That seems rather more Comtean—but Comte is never cited in any of these discussions.

One of Stephen’s goals was to situate his system of morality in an evolutionary context, a project in which he drew considerable inspiration from his contemporary Herbert Spencer. But he did not go nearly so far as Spencer in the direction of trivializing altruism.

A significantly deeper thinker than Stephen, Spencer (1978) sought to resolve the tension between egoism and altruism through an intricate dialectical argument. Some portions of that argument should have met with Rand’s entire approval. Notably, Spencer rejected “pure” or “perfect” altruism as perverse, even “suicidal” (259). In arguing against it, he cites Comte’s definition, though without ever mentioning the man who formulated it:

In yet one more way may be shown the inconsistency of this transfigured utilitarianism which regards its doctrine as embodying the Christian maxim “Love your neighbor as yourself,” and of that altruism which, going still further, enunciates the maxim “Live for others.”

. . . Mark the consequences if all are purely altruistic.

First, an impossible combination of moral attributes is implied. Each is supposed by the hypothesis to regard self so

little and others so much, that he willingly sacrifices his own pleasures to give pleasures to them. But if this is a universal trait, and action is universally congruous with it, we have to conceive each as being not only a sacrificer but also one who accepts sacrifices. While he is so unselfish as to yield up the benefit for which he has labored, he is so selfish as willingly to let others yield up to him the benefits they have labored for. To make pure altruism possible for all, each must be at once extremely unegoistic and extremely egoistic. As a giver, he must have no thought for self; as a receiver, no thought for others. (262)

But the overall strategy of his argument required Spencer to find *some* form of egoism and *some* form of altruism up and down the process of biological evolution, at the cost of trivializing both. It required him to say that when an “infusorium or other protozoon” (232) reproduces by dividing, it is practicing “physical altruism of the lowest kind.” Somehow there can be egoism or altruism without any valuing of self or other.

Among human beings, Spencer posits not just “family altruism” and “social altruism” (234–35); he insists that merely refraining from aggression against others constitutes “negative altruism” (235).

So despite his cogent argument against Comtean altruism, Spencer’s own formulation ends up even broader and smugger than Bass’s. Those who wonder how genes could ever be “selfish” or how the simplest exchanges of benefits could have ended up being labeled “reciprocal altruism”—usages that are current in sociobiology and evolutionary psychology—can find the origins of these confusions in Spencer’s writings.

Who’s Been Baiting and Switching?

Even after due allowance is made for the way that altruism was watered down within three decades after Comte’s original presentation, Bass’s complaint about baiting and switching might still be justified. But only if the advocates of weaker forms of altruism held

consistently to them, never sliding into the promotion of generalized living for others, or of submerging the individual in the collective mass. In examining the views of moral development researchers, John Christopher and I (1996a; 1996b) found that some of them do indeed slide around, from describing low-cost forms of generosity as altruistic to treating altruistic acts as frankly self-sacrificial; for instance, Eisenberg's (1986) book on the subject fails to maintain a consistent standard of altruistic motivation or behavior from one chapter to the next. If advocates of weaker forms of altruism allow Comtean implications to slip in, and do nothing to repudiate them, they and not Rand are the ones who might be fairly reproached for baiting and switching.

By 1935, Ayn Rand was defining her moral views in contrast with a purported ideal of living for others. This was, in fact, altruism as understood by Auguste Comte, the man who introduced the word, although Rand made little use of it herself for several more years. Rand's Comtean understanding of altruism had fully crystallized by the end of 1942, when she wrote Howard Roark's courtroom speech, and it informs all of her later writings.

Perhaps, then, it is the champions of weaker or more wavering conceptions of altruism that Bass should be complaining about, instead of a critic of altruism like Rand, who was being true to the intentions of the founder. At the very least, any moral theorist who appeals to "common sense" or "garden-variety" understandings of altruism² owes the reader an account of his or her decision to keep using a word that Comte brought into the language and that is still quite capable of bearing a Comtean meaning.

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Notes

1. Some may excuse passing Comte over because his writings are not treated as canonical in contemporary Anglo-American academic moral philosophy. But

what is the warrant for excluding him? His later writings were fairly influential in their day: the Brazilian flag still carries the Comtean slogan “Order and Progress,” and Comteanism contributed to the Progressive movement in the United States via such figures as Utopian writer Edward Bellamy, sociologist Lester Ward, and public intellectual Herbert Croly (Harp 1995). The young Jean Piaget (1918), one of the founders of moral development research, also acknowledged Comte as an inspiration (Campbell 1999). One suspects that Comte’s mania for systematizing lost its political appeal to the Left long ago because he believed in an overt social hierarchy with a semi-hereditary “patriciate” as well as a State religion with a priesthood; his outlook on the social and political status of women was hyper-Victorian; and he favored *veuvage perpetuel*, in which widows and widowers would never remarry so they could devote the remainder of their lives to venerating the memory of the deceased.

2. It is doubtful that appeals to common sense are worth a whole lot when egoism and altruism are being discussed. Is there common sense agreement on what is good for me, and on what is good for others? Or about the extent of harmony or conflict between what is good for me and what is good for everyone else? Aren’t these precisely the kinds of matters that badly need clarifying?

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