

Selflessness and Self Preservation

Pacing Ourselves May Be The Toughest Part of The Giving Equation

I recently read a review in *The Economist* (May 22, 2010) of a new book written by Oren Harman titled "*The Price of Altruism: George Price and the Search for the Origins of Kindness*" in which the scientific explanation for altruism is discussed. Why should people be kind to strangers? It seems that George Price, an American economist, studied the question and developed a mathematical formula (now known as the "Price Equation") describing how characteristics of altruism can prove disadvantageous to the individual but also improve the state of the average group member. He noted that such characteristics are found in nature in bee and ant colonies wherein the sterile workers protect the queen and the colony at the expense of their individual survival. Another interesting example of altruism can be found in cellular slime moulds. This collection of cells live as individual amoebae until starved, at which point they aggregate and form a multi-cellular reproducing body in which some cells sacrifice themselves to promote the survival of other cells in the body.

Price was able to mathematically describe populations in which kindness was widespread and all members benefited from altruism. He calculated that this spirit of generosity could even be passed down through generations to the ultimate benefit of every member across time. Price compared his findings with similar but dying populations where charity was essentially nonexistent or abused.

At the time, researchers of altruistic behaviors among animals were ideologically opposed to the Darwinist concept of "survival of the fittest" and coined a new term known as "survival of the nicest". This new theory explaining altruistic behavior was needed to produce a conceptual framework compatible with theories of evolutionary origin. The Price Equation of Altruism is known today as a mathematically provable theorem which explains a motivation to help others without regard to reward or the benefits of recognition. In other words, "selflessness".

In the end, Price was so consumed by what he saw as the essential nature of altruism to society that he sought out and helped needy strangers at considerable personal sacrifice. In his later days, he had several homeless men staying in his apartment in London while he slept in his office. Price redoubled his efforts to help the poor as he observed the affects of cold weather on people without shelter. For all intents, he became a vagabond like those whom he sought to observe and describe. Eventually, despondent over his limited ability to help the homeless, Price committed suicide in the winter of 1975 by slashing his throat with a pair of nail scissors. His funeral was attended by five homeless men and a couple of his fellow scientists who recalled his days as a brilliant trained chemist. His legacy is the "Price Equation".

The Price Equation clearly helps us understand the positive and perhaps even essential nature of philanthropy to society and helps explain our impulse to give to others in light of what might otherwise be our Darwinian nature. George Price's life is also instructive on the depths of our capacity for empathy. To me, however, the life of Dr. Price also underscores the old maxim taught on every commercial airliner before flying: in the event of a loss of power, "secure the oxygen mask for yourself before you can be of value to others".

"The Price of Altruism: George Price and the Search for the Origins of Kindness", by Oren Harman, WWNorton, 464 pages, Bodley Head.