

Selfishness versus Unhappiness

W. S. Bell

1890

While it is true that we are always intent upon our own happiness, it is equally true that we are forced to devote much of our time and energy toward reducing our unhappiness. In our efforts to lessen our pains it seems sometimes as if our motives were altruistic. As for instance where one rushes into danger to save another from injury or death at the peril of his own life. But to be more specific, let us suppose a case: We shall imagine for instance a father and little daughter standing on the deck of a ship as it plows the ocean. By some accident the child loses its balance and falls overboard. The cry of the child pierces the father's heart and instantly renders him frantic, and he jumps overboard to save his precious child. But before the great ship can be stopped and boats lowered the father and child have been lost to the sight of the passengers. They have sunk beneath the waves, yet the boat's crew row back heroically to the place where they were supposed to be. But the search is in vain.

The act of the father in this case might be called unselfish or altruistic. Let us see. When his child fell into the ocean the father's heart was instantly filled with agony. His suffering was unendurable. He *must* do something. He is no longer self-possessed. He is driven by the storm of emotion to act, and the only thing to be done seems to him, is to plunge into the water after his child. His judgment and reason did not weigh and balance motives and the probabilities of success. It was uncontrollable feeling that moved him to act. He knew well enough that he could not swim a single stroke. One moment's thought would have told him that he was plunging into the jaws of death, as there was no prospect of his saving the child.

"Did he not love his child?" Yes. "Was it not because of his love of her that he sprang into the ocean after her?" No. The love of his child was the *occasion*, but not the *cause*. His unbounded affection produced agony and despair, and he could not control them; they controlled him. He could not live in such torture, and insane as was his act, it was the only one that promised *relief*. The imperative demand for less agony was the *cause* of his act. The love of his child was the cause of his agony, and the agony was the cause of his jumping into the water after her. The love of the child then was only an *indirect* cause, the *direct* cause was his *own* suffering. His action was obviously egoistic, and not altruistic. He could not endure the pain. He must have less pain, and in his momentary insanity no other thing seemed possible for him to do.

Now let us suppose another case. The father is an expert swimmer, and his child falls from a ship, the land is not far away, the water is smooth, and it is probable that the father may reach his child before it drowns and bear it safely to the shore. But in this case there is no more evidence

of Altruism than there was in the other. It is not probable that a father takes into deliberate consideration his swimming abilities. In both cases the fathers acted from impulse. The love of the child caused the impulse in each case, but the direct demands of the Ego to lessen its pain were the direct cause. We love others, but, never can love them better than we do ourselves.

We may die for a friend, but when we come to the last analysis we find Ego in front of *alter*. We shall find that the man who gives his life for a principle or a cause, as the martyrs are supposed to give theirs, generally gives it for himself. He gives it on his own account. He does not die for others, but dies for himself. He is built that way. And in most cases he would have but little hesitancy in making martyrs of others if he had his way. Those who have died as martyrs had the stuff in them for making others enjoy the same great blessing. Bruno did not die for others. He died because it was a fuller satisfaction to his nature to die than to live by denying the truth, by denying his manhood. He died in the enjoyment of a self-satisfaction which he could not have if he lived.

Living for others, and dying for others are fictions. Man lives chiefly for himself, and he tests all things by the amount and quality of happiness or unhappiness that he thinks they may bring to him. That he is benevolent, charitable, etc. at times there is no question, but these expressions of his good will are but safety-valves through which he puts himself on good terms with himself. He does the good things because it is a pleasure for him to do so, or because he thinks he will in some way derive pleasure in consequence of his act.

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