



The Concept of Altruism: An Islamic and Psychological Perspective

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Abstract

Altruism refers to taking a personal interest in the well-being of others. It can be understood by studying both religious and psychological perspectives. Sacrificing for the well-being of others is one of the most significant values in Islam and is mentioned in the teachings of the Quran and Hadith. Islam explains spiritually helping behavior. On the other hand, Psychology provides an empirical and scientific explanation of the motivation behind altruistic behaviors. Psychological theories highlight the motivations and mechanisms for altruistic behavior with a scientific explanation. These theories often place altruism in the domain of self-interests, reciprocity, and biological imperatives, but raise questions about pure selflessness. Whereas, Islamic teachings elevate altruism to a divine imperative. Quranic principles and Prophetic hadiths signify selflessness, claiming it as an act of worship, spiritual accountability, and the way to pursue Allah's pleasure. By bridging psychological and Islamic perspectives, the article highlights the intrinsic motivation and spiritual beliefs in shaping altruistic behavior. The analysis of overlapping and distinction of both psychological and Islamic domains about altruism has great importance to show how the understanding of both perspectives makes true sense of altruism.

Keywords: *Altruism, Islam, Psychology, Selflessness, Motivation, Qur'an and Hadith*

1. Introduction

The American Psychological Association defines altruism as an act of self-sacrifice that is cooperative for others (American Psychological Association). It is a personal value that stems from genuine concern for the well-being of others. There can be multiple ways to sacrifice, from everyday acts like giving up your space for others to life-changing acts of kindness like donating a kidney. No matter how big or small the effort.¹ Distinguished experts claim that there are multiple factors to promote prosocial behaviors, as one's personal egoism, pure empathy, or sometimes an individual provides benefit to others to gain personal benefit²

¹ Dr. Burhan Rashid, The Concept of Īthār (Altruism) in Islam: An Exposition in the Light of the Qur'an and Hadith, Insight Islamicus p.1, vol. 22, 2022; <https://islamicstudies.uok.edu.in/Files/36892408-1fed-4431-9848-0761b9e02587/Journal/32f9e55e-f053-40de-b934-5b1ee03966a2.pdf>



1.1 Theories of Altruism:

Altruism has been studied through different lenses, which have led them to explain altruism in different theories, such as evolutionary theory, social exchange theory, and empathy altruism analysis:

1.1.1 Social Exchange Theory

The origin of social exchange theory can be traced back to 1958, when American Sociologist George C. Homans published a paper titled “Social Behavior as Exchange”, a framework based on the combination of behavior and task simplicity. Over the next few years, other studies expanded the boundaries of Homan’s fundamental concept.³

The theory is defined as social behaviors that consist of an exchange relationship in which people are motivated to help others when they find a benefit for themselves. It is based on cost-benefit analysis.⁴

1.1.2 Evolutionary Perspective of Altruism:

The evolutionary perspective gives another explanation for helping behavior. The theory was proposed by Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace, which states that organisms produce more offspring to make them survive in their environments⁵

According to a Psychologist, Donald Campbell, the idea of genes influencing our behavior reflects a kind of “original sin”. It indicates that individuals have a natural tendency to prioritize them in the first place.⁶

However, there are two situations in which individuals have self-sacrificial behavior:

Kinship Selection: Kinship selection is defined as evolution selected for altruism towards close kin to improve the survival of shared genes.⁷ According to psychologist David Barash (1979), “Genes help themselves by being nice to themselves, even if they are enclosed in different bodies.”⁸

Reciprocity: According to Trivers (1971), Reciprocal altruism refers to altruism that occurs between people whose behavior might help them in the future. Hamilton used the word reciprocity instead of altruism.⁹

To promote group survival as well as a network of trust, it is emphasized in the Holy Quran to help various members of society, as relatives, neighbors, orphans, or travelers. It creates strong support and a network that helps in maintaining social cohesion and survival as well.

Demonstrating altruistic behavior towards others can enhance collective well-being, which reflects kin selection and reciprocal altruism.

Because Allah Almighty orders in the Holy Quran:

“Worship Allah and associate nothing with Him, and to parents do good, and to relatives, orphans, the needy, the near neighbor, the neighbor farther away, the companion at your side, the traveler, and those whom your right hands possess. Indeed, Allah does not like those who are self-deluding and boastful.”¹⁰

It is also found from the sayings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) that one should be tied with kin relations, as it has reciprocal benefits for individuals.

“Whoever would like his provision to be increased and his life to be extended,



*let him uphold the ties of kinship."*¹¹ (Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 78, Hadith 206)

It is evident from the sayings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) that one should take the initiative to help others from close relatives, as it is said:

*"Start with those for whom you are responsible: your mother, your father, your sister, your brother, then your nearest and dearest."*¹²

1.1.3 Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis

The Empathy-Altruism hypothesis proposes that individuals who have feelings of sympathy and compassion for others are more likely to help others. It also challenges the egotism concerns behind altruistic actions.¹³

1.1.4 Egotism Motive to Altruism:

Egotism is a driving force in which an individual behaves in a way that reflects concerns about the benefits of oneself. It is considered pivotal in all human driving forces.¹⁴ Egotism motive to altruism was also dominant at the Renaissance, according to which people used to assist others as they had some personal desires. According to Wallach & Wallach (1983), altruism could be best explained through the egoistic motive.¹⁵

1.2 Concept of Altruism in Islam:

While doing something good for others, one should not expect goodness in return. As an Arab proverb claims, "Do good and then throw it into the sea". Zokaei and Philips claim that an individual's perception of the collective ummah has provided a base for universalistic altruism.¹⁶ Islam has a deep lens on altruism. It encourages its followers to practice kindness, goodness, and charity. Islamic teaching defines altruism as a moral and spiritual obligation. The Quran and Hadith teach to practice the acts of altruism for the sake of Allah. Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H) exemplified selflessness in every aspect of life. The concept of Altruism, according to Islam, can be understood by studying multiple topics, as

1.2.1 Ithaar:

Dr. Burhan Rashid says in his article about an Islamic concept of Altruism that

*"Islam enjoins its followers to be generous and ready to spend for the welfare of others."*¹⁷

Al-Ithar is an Arabic term that means sacrifice and preferring others over oneself, or acting selflessly for the benefit of others without considering one's own interests. The Islamic concept of Al-Ithar (الإيثار) (Altruism) means to self-sacrifice. According to Almaany dictionary,

إيثار: تفضيل الغير على النفس¹⁸

Altruism is preferring others over oneself, which means unselfishness, the quality of unselfish concern for the welfare of others. Self-sacrifice is the most important thing to control human beings' negative power and purify their hearts.

1.2.2 Notable Examples of Altruism in the Prophetic ﷺ Era

The great example of altruism found in Islamic history is the fraternity between Insar and Muhajareen implemented by the Prophet (P.B.U.H) at Madina. Muhammad Sohail Bukhari stated in his book that,



*The principle of Islamic brotherhood was implemented in letter and spirit. Every refuge was publicly declared brother to one of the original citizens of Madina, the latter sharing each and every responsibility of the former. This new relationship solved the problem of rehabilitation.*¹⁹

Brotherhood is a great example of Islamic history. Even Shah Moeen un-Din Ahmad Nadvi and Alama Shibli Numani give the title “Sacrifice of Ansar” (انصار کا ایثار) in their books for the incident of brotherhood in the Prophetic era. Allama Shibli Numani asserted the uniqueness of the brotherhood of Madina in his book.

*The hospitality and kindness shown by the Ansar e Madina to the refugees is unexampled and unique in world history.*²⁰

Shah Moin ud-Din Ahmad Nadvi also pointed out similar words about the altruism of Ansar in the following words,

*History cannot proffer an instance of the altruism, generosity, and hospitality shown by the Ansar on this occasion.*²¹

Allah Subhana wa Tala stated in the Quran about the great example of this sacrifice demonstrated by Ansar.

وَيُؤْتِرُونَ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ وَلَوْ كَانَ بِهِمْ خَصَاصَةٌ ۚ وَمَن يُوقِ شُحَّ نَفْسِهِ ۖ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

*They give ‘the emigrants’ preference over themselves even though they may be in need. And whoever is saved from the selfishness of their own souls, it is they who are ‘truly’ successful.*²²

The above-mentioned verse explains very beautifully the idea of altruism in very clear words and in its complete sense. Sacrificing is basically the concept of how a person ignores their needs and desires for others' comfort or happiness. The verse also shows the beauty of the Ansar's hearts, how they care about their brothers' needs over their own needs. Especially, the verse was revealed after a special occasion. According to a hadith, once a hungry man came to the Prophet P.B.U.H.

Narrated Abu Huraira: A man came to the Prophet. The Prophet sent a messenger to his wives (to bring something for that man to eat) but they said that they had nothing except water. Then Allah's Apostle said, "Who will take this (person) or entertain him as a guest?" An Ansar man said, "I." So, he took him to his wife and said to her, "Entertain generously the guest of Allah's Apostle " She said, "We have got nothing except the meals of my children." He said, "Prepare your meal, light your lamp and let your children sleep if they ask for supper." So, she prepared her meal, lighted her lamp and made her children sleep, and then stood up pretending to mend her lamp, but she put it off. Then both of them pretended to be eating, but they really went to bed hungry. In the morning the Ansari went to Allah's Apostle, who said, "Tonight Allah laughed or wondered at your action." Then Allah revealed²³ (above mentioned verse Al-Hashr: 9)

One more wonderful example of Ansar's sacrifice is;

Narrated Sa'd's father: When the emigrants reached Medina. Allah's Apostle



established the bond of fraternity between 'Abdur-Rahman and Sad bin Ar-Rabi. Sad said to 'Abdur-Rahman, "I am the richest of all the Ansar, so I want to divide my property (between us), and I have two wives, so see which of the two you like and tell me, so that I may divorce her, and when she finishes her prescribed period (i.e. 'Idda) of divorce, then marry her." Abdur-Rahman said, "May Allah bless your family and property for you; where is your market?" So, they showed him the Qainuqa' market. (He went there and) returned with a profit in the form of dried yogurt and butter. He continued going (to the market) till one day he came, bearing the traces of yellow scent. The Prophet asked, "What is this (scent)?" He replied, "I got married." The Prophet asked, "How much Mahr did you give her?" He replied, "I gave her a datestone of gold or a gold piece equal to the weight of a date-stone." (The narrator, Ibrahim, is in doubt as to which is correct.²⁴

There are many precedents of Hazrat Muhammad (P.B.U.H) practicing Zuhd' (asceticism) that define the true meaning of Altruism in Islam. Because Prophet (P.B.U.H) guided us to strengthen our connection with Allah, the main purpose of human existence according to Islam.

Because of this, the Prophet (P.B.U.H) always liked to live a simple life to maintain a strong relationship with Allah. For instance, he ate little and preferred never to fill his stomach. He used to bind stones on his belly to allay his hunger. Even though he had nothing to eat for several days, he considered milk to be sufficient.

Anas bin Malik narrated from Abu Talhah, who said:

"We complained to the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w) of hunger and we raised (our garments) from our stomachs (exposing) a stone (on each of us). So, the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w) raised (his garment exposing) two stones." ²⁵

There is another hadith that shows the altruistic behaviors of the Prophet (P.B.U.H)

Abu Maisarah narrated from 'Aishah that they had slaughtered a sheep, so the Prophet (s.a.w) said: "What remains of it?" She said: "Nothing remains of it except its shoulder." He said: "All of it remains except its shoulder." ²⁶

1.2.3 Examples of the Altruism of Allah's Beloved Ones

The big example in Islamic history is the incident of Karbala. How the grandson of Hazrat Muhammad (P.B.U.H), Hazrat Imam Hussain (A.S), sacrificed his family for the eternity of Islam. Islamic history set the amazing concept of altruism through the remarkable examples of scarification. The companions of the Last Prophet (P.B.U.H) set the monumental examples of altruism. For instance, an example of Hazrat Abu Bakr (R.A) is as follows;

I heard 'Umar bin Al-Khattab saying: 'We were ordered by the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) to give in charity, and that coincided with a time in which I had some wealth, so I said, "Today I will beat Abu Bakr, if ever I beat him." So I came with half of my wealth, and the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said: "What did you



leave for your family?" I said: "The like of it." And Abu Bakr came with everything he had, so he said: "O Abu Bakr! What did you leave for your family?" He said: "I left Allah and His Messenger for them." I said: "[By Allah] I will never be able to beat him to something."²⁷

Similarly, Sufi saints follow the concept of altruism because they want to practice Islam firmly, not just to appear but also implement it into their souls, and want to refine purely, spiritually, for the sake of Allah's love. They love His creatures because of Allah and hate because of Allah. That's why they adopted some practices to control their inner. Because according to them, prophets were also sacrificing their desires for their lord, and when they sacrifice their selves, then they sacrifice for His creatures just because of Him (Allah).

For instance, in the Quran, Hazrat Suleman (A.S) killed his horses because they delayed his prayer. He loved his horses, but he made a sacrifice that came to hurdles between him and his Ibadat(worship). Some say this tradition is not authentic, which is not acceptable.

فَقَالَ إِنِّي أَحْبَبْتُ حُبَّ الْخَيْرِ عَن ذِكْرِ رَبِّي حَتَّى تَوَارَتْ بِالْحِجَابِ²⁸

And he said: "Alas! I did love the good (these horses) instead of remembering my Lord (in my 'Asr prayer)" till the time was over, and (the sun) had hidden in the veil (of night)."²⁹

But Abul Aala Maududi translated the verse differently,

he said: "Lo! I have come to love this wealth on account of the remembrance of my Lord." And when the horses disappeared."³⁰

Imam Fakhruddin Razi doesn't accept the interpretations and commentaries of Surah Saad, verse 32, which cite the tradition of Hazrat Sleiman, mentioning that he killed his horses in a fit of rage because they became the reason for delaying his Asr prayer. While Ibn e Kathir cited this tradition in his commentary "Tafseer ibn e Kathir", he demonstrated that Hazrat Suleiman sacrificed his horses for Allah's love. Whether one chooses any of the above-mentioned contradictory translations and interpretations, it declares the sam point: Hazrat Suleman did not love wealth and worldly affairs. He loved horses and wealth because of Allah. If things detached him from Allah, he walked away beautifully. However, the question is not whether he killed his horses or not, or delayed the prayer or not. According to Molana Modudi, Pir Muhammad Karam Shah Alazhari, and similar other translators interpreted it simply that he loved wealth(horses) because of Allah's pleasure for Jihad fi sabillilah. Otherwise, he has no interest in them.

As Abu Umamah reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said,

"Whoever loves for the sake of Allah, hates for the sake of Allah, gives for the sake of Allah, and withholds for the sake of Allah has perfected the faith."³¹

Hazrat Ali proved these words by his action in the Battle of Ditch when his enemy spat at his face, but he forgave him; however, he was going to kill for the sake of Allah, but now walked away and set him free. Rival was surprised by his action, then he replied.

If I had killed you then, this act of mine would have been out of anger of my Nafs and not out of sincerity to Allah Ta'ala. Allah Ta'ala does not accept any deed that is not done out of



sincerity. Killing you at that time would have been against sincerity. Hence, I refrained from myself." ³²

Bilqies Shahida stated in her article about Sufism that;

Sufism stands for detachment from worldly pleasures. A Sufi must minimize his worldly needs and thus become harmless to other creatures. Next, he should try to free the soul from attachment to sensible objects. A Sufi values this life as a source of training himself for a true life. ³³

Ali Reza Nurbakhsh stated about the example of the Sufi's sacrifice in his article,

The altruism practiced by the early Khorasanian Sufis went beyond the practice of altruism as I have described here. In fact, it was defined in terms of caring for the welfare of others and before one's own welfare and comfort, without any expectation of reward. ^{34s}

Attar, one of the greatest Sufi poets (d. 1221), relates the following story about Ibrahim Adham. One day, three people were performing their devotional practices in a ruined mosque. After they went to sleep, Ibrahim stayed standing near the door of the mosque throughout the night. When he was asked later to explain his action, he replied that the weather was freezing and a cold wind was blowing. Since there was no door to the mosque, he stood in the entrance of the mosque, like a door, to make it possible and safe for the people inside to sleep. ³⁵

The Quran and hadith have a greater emphasis on the practice of *ithar*. In the holy Quran, Almighty Allah has described the qualities of those people who give benefit to others for the sake of Allah Almighty, in these words:

"And they give food despite love for it to the needy, the orphan, and the captive, [saying], 'We feed you only for the countenance of Allah. We wish not from you reward or gratitude.'" ³⁶

The Quran also emphasizes helping others with empathy without having any self-concern for altruistic behavior: In the Quran, it is said:

"Righteousness is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west, but [true] righteousness is in one who believes in Allah... and gives wealth, despite love for it, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the traveler, those who ask [for help], and for freeing slaves." ³⁷

Eid al-Adha is one of those occasions that are examples of altruism. Muslim Umma who can afford to sacrifice animals in the remembrance of Prophet Ibrahim's sacrifice for Allah's will, they donate meat to the needy and please their God, and ultimately, they get spiritual happiness³⁸

Allah (SWT) said in the Quran:

"The animal offerings are among the rites decreed by GOD for your own good. You shall mention God's name on them while they are standing in line. Once they are offered for sacrifice, you shall eat therefrom and feed the poor and the needy. This is why we subdued them for you, that you may show your appreciation." ³⁹



The verse indicates that those who sacrifice an animal should also distribute among the needy without expectation of returning by the poor. They should have a pure urge to gain Allah's happiness. Consequently, Allah appreciates them. Allah Almighty has no concern with the cost of an animal, but people's pity is prioritized.

As it is mentioned in the Quran:

"It is not their meat nor their blood that reaches Allah: it is your piety that reaches Him" ⁴⁰

1.4.1 Charity

Charitable acts can induce emotional support, one can find satisfaction by helping others, and improve one's community. In the Quran, Allah Almighty claims that He multiplies rewards in the form of spiritual as well as personal growth for one who dares to give charity in the way of Allah:

As it is mentioned in Surah Al Baqara:

"The example of those who spend their wealth in the way of Allah is like a seed [of grain] which grows seven spikes; in each spike is a hundred grains. And Allah multiplies [His reward] for whom He wills." ⁴¹

Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H) also emphasized the importance of charity one gives to others, as it gives one inner and spiritual protection. If an individual gives charity to those who are in need, this act can make an individual wealthy. On the other hand, if one thinks that one would get poor by giving others from one's money. This act can lead to difficulty.

It is narrated by Abu Huraira:

"A man came to the Prophet and asked, "O Allah's Apostle! Which charity is the most superior in reward?" He replied, "The charity which you practice while you are healthy, niggardly and afraid of poverty, and wish to become wealthy. Do not delay it until the time of approaching death and then say, 'Give so much to such and such, and so much to such and such.' And it has already belonged to such and such (as it is too late)." ⁴²

Conclusion:

The article has focused on altruism, its causes, and benefits according to the lenses of psychology and Islam. Psychological theories have been reviewed from a psychological perspective. To explain the Islamic perspective, Islamic teachings, verses from the Holy Quran, and Hadith have been quoted. The psychological perspective views altruism as personal benefits or evolutionary advantages. On the other hand, Islam promotes altruism as a selfless act to gain Allah's will. By bridging both perspectives, one comes to acknowledge a holistic understanding of altruism. In short, altruism is not just about helping others to gain benefit but also enriching the soul, connecting with the divine, and trying to create a more empathetic world.





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