

The Altruism Reader

The Altruism Reader

SELECTIONS FROM
WRITINGS ON
LOVE, RELIGION, AND SCIENCE



Compiled and Edited by
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Contents

Preface	vii
PART I: DEFINING LOVE	
1. The Core Meaning of “Love” <i>Stephen G. Post</i>	3
2. The Love Racket: Defining Love and Agape for the Love-and-Science Research Program <i>Thomas Jay Oord</i>	10
PART II: ANCIENT RELIGIOUS WRITINGS ON LOVE	
3. The Hebrew Scriptures: Psalms 100, 107	31
4. The Dhammapada: Joy	34
5. The Bhagavadgita: The Religion of Faith	36
6. The New Testament: Luke 10:25–37, 1 Corinthians 13, 1 John 4:7–21	39
7. The Qur’an: The Cow	42
8. Teaching Christianity: On Christian Doctrine <i>Augustine of Hippo</i>	44
9. Summa Theologica: The Treatise on Charity <i>Thomas Aquinas</i>	55
10. Agape and Eros: Excerpts <i>Anders Nygren</i>	60
11. Love in Any Language <i>Thomas Jay Oord</i>	86
PART III: CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS WRITINGS ON LOVE	
12. Loyalty: The Calling of the People of God <i>Katharine Doob Sakenfeld</i>	95
13. Understanding Our Fundamental Nature <i>His Holiness the Dalai Lama</i>	117
14. Ahimsa: The Path of Harmlessness <i>Thich Nhat Hanh</i>	129
15. The Incarnation <i>Daniel Day Williams</i>	133

16. Agapeistic Ethics	<i>Gene Outka</i>	148
17. Philia	<i>Edward Collins Vacek</i>	156
18. Kenotic Creation and Divine Action	<i>John Polkinghorne</i>	177
19. Kenosis: Gender Connotations	<i>Sarah Coakley</i>	183
20. Love in Islam	<i>Amira Shamma Abdin</i>	188
PART IV: THE PHYSICS OF ALTRUISM		
21. Ethics, Cosmology, and Theories of God	<i>Nancey Murphy and George Ellis</i>	201
PART V: THE BIOLOGY OF ALTRUISM		
22. Evolutionary Ethics	<i>Robert Wright</i>	213
23. The Selfish Gene: Excerpts	<i>Richard Dawkins</i>	226
24. The Robustness of Reciprocity	<i>Robert Axelrod</i>	237
25. Getting Along	<i>Frans de Waal</i>	242
26. Bentham's Corpse	<i>Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson</i>	263
27. The Four Paths to Cooperation	<i>Lee Alan Dugatkin</i>	274
PART VI: ALTRUISM IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES		
28. Affect and Prosocial Responding	<i>Nancy Eisenberg, Sandra Losoya, and Tracy Spinrad</i>	285
29. Aversive-Arousal Reduction	<i>Daniel C. Batson</i>	313
30. Triangulating Love	<i>Robert J. Sternberg</i>	331
31. Saving Others: Was It Opportunity or Character?	<i>Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner</i>	348
32. Progress through Love	<i>Stephen G. Post</i>	369

Preface

THE WORD “LOVE” may be the most important and yet most ambiguous word in the English language. We speak about loving food, falling in love, loving God, feeling loved, and loving a type of music. We say love hurts, love stinks, love means never having to say we’re sorry, love waits, love is the answer, and God is love.

The ambiguity of love meanings prompted psychologist Sigmund Freud to note that “‘love’ is employed in language” in an “undifferentiated way.” Theologian Mildred Bangs Wynkoop calls love a “weasel-word” because of its diverse meanings and ambiguity.² Comedian George Carlin put it this way: “Griddle cakes, pancakes, hotcakes, flapjacks: why are there four names for grilled batter and only one word for love?”³

This ambiguity encourages us to search for other words to clarify what we mean by “love.” The word “*altruism*” is one such substitute, and it occupies a prominent place in the sciences. The word literally refers to “the other.” Many people refer to actions aimed at the best interest of others as “other-regard.” Such actions are altruistic.

Scientists, theologians, and philosophers employ still other words to refer to love and altruism. Some prefer words like “*compassion*,” “*agape*,” “*prosocial behavior*,” “*care*,” “*positive regard*,” and “*benevolence*.” These words carry connotations with particular importance for those who use them, and complex debates can emerge about which words best describe the phenomenon in question.

Off and on over the centuries, scholars have pondered the questions of altruism and love. Sometimes this research takes the form of answering the big question: How do we best understand love? This question is basically one of theory, but it typically leans heavily upon experience—both observed in others and felt personally. The theoretical question generates considerable and sustained reflection.

Scholars of religion have often assumed that promoting loving behavior is finally more important than a theoretical description of what love is. They have focused more upon promoting loving behaviors and delineating what it takes to form loving people. But this emphasis upon promoting love inevitably leads to discerning which acts or feelings are loving and which are not. And such discerning relies at least somewhat on theory and definition.

The sciences have typically spent more energy asking for evidence of love. This effort tends to focus upon studying consequences and motives. Discerning motives is difficult, but some researchers devise methods to overcome this difficulty. More often, scientists measure the consequences of actions. From these

quantifiable consequences, they propose possible scientific explanations. Still other scientists—typically those in the social sciences—identify different kinds of love, or they distinguish between love and other actions and emotions. All of these typically scientific endeavors, however, possess important points of contact with religious concerns about love.

Research on love has become more common in recent decades. This shift is due in part to developments in the sciences. Scientific positivists in the early twentieth century dismissed value-laded claims about existence because it is difficult to verify such claims with our five senses. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, however, scientists have become aware that questions of value are not only important as research programs but even reside at the core of science itself.

Although scientific research on altruism and love is enjoying a surge in recent days, it has actually been around in some form for millennia. Early in human evolutionary history, humans wanted evidence to establish the claim that one person loves another in the sense of acting for another's best interest. In this sense, contemporary scientific research continues the age-old quest to understand better what most humans consider an extremely—if not the most—important aspect of life.

Research on love in religious studies is also becoming more prevalent in recent years. This interest is fueled in part by the attempt to overcome interreligious conflict. Some see religious research on love as a means to find commonalities among the world's great religions. Still others wonder if theologies of love are more intellectually and existentially viable than theologies oriented around other ultimate concerns.

Religions that consider love as a key if not the primary divine attribute are especially interested in love studies. Often, theologies of love emerge as theologians work with revelation, traditions, reason, and personal experience to formulate an intellectually and existentially viable understanding of God. This endeavor seems especially important to those theological traditions that contend that humans were made in the image of God and are called to imitate God in at least some ways.

As the title suggests, this book offers various essays on love and altruism. The first half provides material from religious traditions, important theologians, and moral philosophers. Included are primary texts from sacred books and classic sources. Much of the first section also includes contemporary reflections on love and altruism. This material derives from some of the leading love scholars of our time. Of course, this selection is just the tip of the iceberg; many more essays on love and altruism worthy of inclusion in this anthology are not present because of space constraints.

The second half of the book includes material describing scientific research on love. Most of this research has been in the social and biological sciences. Research summaries and theories in psychology, sociology, anthropology, neurology, socio-biology, and nonhuman primate studies are included. In these contexts, love is often identified with altruism. Here, too, these essays represent a small portion of the large body of scientific research related to love and altruism.

The essays in this collection are reprinted as they were first published. However, because some are excerpts from longer chapters or were originally chapters in a

full-length work, minor discrepancies will appear, such as references to previous pages or statements in the original work. A reference for the original publication is provided for each essay, so that the reader may go to the original, if necessary.

The primary purpose of this anthology of readings on love and altruism is that it be used as a text in college, university, and seminary courses. The idea for this project emerged from a discussion involving professors who had won awards for their courses on altruism and love. Stephen G. Post, director of the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love, and Thomas Jay Oord, an institute theologian, brought together these professors at the Claremont School of Theology in the spring of 2004. Participants included Wolfgang Aichtner, Craig A. Boyd, Patricia Bruininks, Andrew M. Flescher, Elisabeth Grab-Schmidt, Nancy Howell, Shelley Dean Kilpatrick, Jay McDaniel, Thomas E. Phillips, Stephen J. Pope, Kevin Reimer, F. LeRon Shults, James K. A. Smith, and Daniel L. Worthen. The material in this anthology should be particularly helpful for teaching students cutting-edge research related to love.

A word about terminology is in order here at the outset. The reader will find the words “*altruism*” and “*love*” used often in this book, but other similar words are also present. Some authors distinguish between altruism and love, while others use the two interchangeably. In general, however, essayists writing on religion prefer the word “*love*.”⁴ Essayists writing on science generally prefer the word “*altruism*.”

The perceptive reader will notice that a few more essays on altruism and love are written from a Christian perspective than from other religious perspectives. There are two major reasons for this disparity. First, it is simply the case that Christians have produced more essays in English about these themes than have adherents of other faith traditions. Second, it is likely that more readers will identify with or understand Christian themes. Instructors using the anthology as a text, however, are encouraged to require additional readings from religious perspectives not well represented here. This book is not in any way meant to be exhaustive!

I must express gratitude to many who have helped in this process. I thank the many publishing houses and presses for granting permission to reprint material. I thank especially Laura Barrett and the staff at John Templeton Foundation Press for their efforts to see the project to completion. I also thank my assistants who helped with the project: Leah Hagemeyer, Bethanie Edwards, Tiana Cutright, and Jill Jones. My gratitude also extends to my good friend, Stephen Post, for supporting the project in so many ways.

Finally, I thank family members who have taught me love and altruism over the years: Gene, Louise, John, Carol, Sydnee, Lexi, and Andee Oord, as well as John and Ruth DeBoer. I especially thank my soul-mate, Cheryl Oord.

My hope is that these readings will help us all understand love and altruism better and express them more consistently. I believe that we all ought to go after a life of love as if our lives depended on it. Because our lives do.⁵

Thomas Jay Oord

NOTES

1. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Random House, 1994), 49.
2. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1972), 9.
3. I express appreciation to my colleague Jay Akkerman, who is a committed Carlin fan, for bringing this delightful quote to my attention.
4. For an argument for why this is so, see Jacob Neusner and Bruce D. Chilton, eds., *Altruism in World Religions* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005).
5. I am grateful to Eugene Peterson for this phrase, although it is not exactly the way he would have formulated it. A similar version occurs in his translation of 1 Corinthians 14:1 in *The Message Bible* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPublishing Group, 2007).

PART I

Defining Love

1

The Core Meaning of “Love”

STEPHEN G. POST

*Defining love is difficult. Stephen G. Post rises to the challenge in this essay from his book *Unlimited Love: Altruism, Compassion, and Service*. Part of the difficulty of defining love is deciding how we ought to think about acting for our own good in relation to the good of others. After addressing this difficulty and the various facets of love, Post explores positive self-regard in relation to positive other-regard. This material is ideal as the first reading in an anthology of readings on love and altruism from religious and scientific perspectives, because Post closes the essay by briefly addressing the importance of studying and practicing love.*

“[L]OVE” IS A word with many meanings. In this consideration of unlimited love, our interest is in love for neighbor as a pervasive affirmation of the very being of all others, including self. This affirmation includes as background a thankfulness for the gift of life, a humility in the context of a fundamental human equality, and a deep acceptance and patient tolerance of others that is not thwarted by the inevitable imperfections, both internal and external, in which we all share. It is an affirmation that leads us to take interest in others, to be attentively present to them in a manner that is undistracted and respectful, to be actively concerned with their well-being, to listen to them with care, to be loyal to them in life’s journey, to act on their behalf with courage and fortitude, to delight in their successes, and to require nothing in return. Depending on states of need, love is appropriately manifest in compassion, forgiveness, service, companionship, and a sage response to behavior that is destructive of life and its potentialities.

All true virtue and meaningful spirituality is shaped by love, and any spiritual transformation that is not a migration toward love is suspect. We are busy being reborn into lives of love, or else we are busy losing ground. Many perceive that growth in love is a universal law of life without which no meaning or lasting purpose is possible. It is also widely perceived that the journey of love is pulled along by the alluring nature of God, who assists us along the way.

A useful example of transformation in love emerges from the Russian tradition of the *ars moriendi* (“art of dying”) literature, as represented for modern readers by Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. Ivan is a remarkably unloving individual,