

# Harnessing human nature for charity and volunteering: Some ideas from evolutionary psychology

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To promote charity and volunteering, we need to work with human nature as it is.

The good news is that our prehistoric ancestors evolved diverse and sophisticated ways of being kind to each other. We've spent 35 million years as social group-living apes, and over a million years as hyper-social hominids using language, sharing cooked food, and trading favors. From that deeply social past, we have inherited moral adaptations for promoting the welfare of our mates, children, relatives, friends, allies, and groups. These moral adaptations include the capacities for empathy, sympathy, and fairness, and the emotions of nurturance, protectiveness, pride, gratitude, shame, guilt, embarrassment, remorse, outrage, disgust and punitiveness. These empathic capacities and moral emotions are the foundations of modern charity and volunteering.

The bad news is that human altruism is rather selective and status-conscious. The selectivity arose because altruism can evolve only when it yields some fitness benefit, direct or indirect, to the altruist's genes, body, family, or group. These fitness benefits could include more thriving offspring or relatives, increased mating opportunities, higher social status to control more resources, or stronger clans that can defend against rival groups. Altruism had to pay somehow, or evolution would have eliminated it. The status-consciousness arose because altruism can be a powerful signal of the altruist's material resources and moral virtues. Giving away resources through conspicuous charity, or time through conspicuous volunteering, is a costly, hard-to-fake signal that one has abundant resources, time, and empathy. Thus, charity and volunteering increase the giver's social status, moral prestige, family honor, and group reputation – which in turn brought survival or reproductive benefits to the giver.

In the last couple of decades my field of evolutionary psychology has traced the origins, functions, and details of these adaptations for selective, status-conscious altruism. We've drawn heavily from evolutionary biology, game theory, behavioral economics, primatology, anthropology, and moral philosophy. Researchers have found, for example, that the mutual kindness of couples in love can be understood as a system of 'courtship gifts' in which each individual strives unconsciously to display his/her wealth, taste, attentiveness, warmth, and conscientiousness to the other. The mutual kindness of married couples reflects the gains from trade arising from an efficient sexual division of labor (men hunted and fished larger animals; women gathered plant and small-animal foods, and cooked foods on fire), plus the huge gains in offspring survivorship from having two protective, high-investing parents. Love for kin declines as genetic relatedness drops off from self to siblings to cousins. Successful male big-game hunters share meat with favored fertile young women to increase their sexual prospects. Wealthy individuals host costly feasts to further increase their status. Formidable individuals gain status by punishing or exiling local cheats, slackers, and psychopaths. In each case, we can trace the likely prehistoric fitness benefit of acting in these altruistic ways.

Crucially, the fact that a moral adaptation evolved to promote survival and/or reproduction in certain ways does not undermine its moral legitimacy. There's a key distinction here between an instinct's adaptive function (which may be genetically self-promoting) and an instinct's subjective motivation (which may be genuinely altruistic, empathic, and sympathetic). Although each altruistic instinct evolved because it brought some indirect benefit to the altruist, that adaptive function does not make the instinct itself fake, false, superficial, unreliable, exploitative, or illegitimate, nor does it imply a secret hidden motive that is selfish. Priests and philosophers might lament the selectivity and status-consciousness of human altruism, and how far short it falls of some utopian ideal. But in the real world of animal brains that evolved through genetic self-interest, we should feel fortunate to have such a cornucopia of genuinely empathic moral instincts that can be harnessed in policy.

Better policies, grounded in evolutionary moral psychology, could dramatically increase the effectiveness of British magnanimity, including charity and volunteering, in at least three ways.

First, policy needs to acknowledge that in an efficient market economy, most of the power that individuals have to 'do good' depends on them acting morally as workers, consumers, and investors – not on the more conspicuous virtue-displays of charity and volunteering. As Matt Ridley argued in *The Rational Optimist*, for over a hundred thousand years, economic growth from trade, divisions of labor, and new technology have done vastly more good for humankind than any amount of charity ever could. Many social and environmental problems that charities try to resolve were exacerbated by government over-regulation, subsidies, quotas, tariffs, monopolies, or failures to enforce property rights.

Yet within the market economy, there is plenty of scope for moral virtues to improve human welfare ever further. Any workers doing their job with more skill, attentiveness, and integrity than strictly required by their employment contract are already ‘volunteering’ that extra labor for the common good – and these are pro-social work values worth celebrating. Also, anybody working in a lower-paid, more socially beneficial job than they could otherwise do given their talents (including many nurses, teachers, soldiers, and even MPs) might be foregoing tens of thousands of pounds per year – an important but under-acknowledged form of charitable giving. Social entrepreneurs, devoting their money and time to efficient for-profit solutions to social and environmental problems, are no less virtuous than individuals who donate money and time to non-profits of often questionable efficiency. People can also do powerful good through their consumer choices and ethical investment decisions, which allocate vastly larger sums of money than charitable donations could ever match. Policies can promote the common good most effectively by increasing citizens’ abilities to express their moral preferences in how they work, what they buy, and how their pensions are invested. We need to challenge the artificial distinction between magnanimity and the market. For example, as economist Robert Frank has argued, switching from an income tax to a consumption tax would increase citizens’ abilities to invest ethically and to give charitably.

Second, a major challenge is that most charity and volunteering is very inefficient at delivering benefits to the intended recipients. Good intentions aren’t enough. Charity-evaluation websites such as Givewell.org find that most charities offer no evidence of their effectiveness or cost-efficiency, no transparency, and no outcome monitoring and evaluation. Although British charities must be non-profit, and sometimes pride themselves on having modest administrative and marketing overheads, they need not meet any effectiveness criteria. As a result, much of charity and volunteering consists of well-meaning people throwing money and time at problems that sound emotionally upsetting, without having any idea whether their largesse does any good. Such magnanimity, even when motivated by genuine empathy, seems better designed to raise the donor’s status than the recipient’s well-being. For example, charities devote much time and money to holding banquets, parties, and ceremonies in which the donors are feted and acknowledged by their peer groups. To an evolutionary psychologist, this is entirely unsurprising, and even laudable – better to gain status from magnanimity than from warfare. However, this status-through-magnanimity system has the unfortunate side-effect that the donors may not know or care whether their charitable gifts are really doing any one any good at all. In response, we need more evidence-based charity. Just as NHS-approved medicines must show efficacy in treating disease, perhaps legal charities should be required to report certain information on outcomes, effectiveness, and cost-efficiency. Then donors could make informed choices about maximizing benefits per pound donated.

Finally, government should be clear about its goals in promoting charity and volunteering – is it to bring real benefits to the needy, to help donors feel happier or more prestigious, or to promote general neighborliness, social capital, and public trust? All are legitimate aims, but they pull in different policy directions. To maximize real benefits to the needy, policy needs first to reduce the market distortions that harm the needy, second to promote market virtues (such as pro-social work values and careers, pro-social consumer choices, social entrepreneurship, and ethical investment) that help the needy, and third, to promote evidence-based charity by requiring registered charities to measure their effectiveness in achieving their stated aims. To help donors feel happier or more prestigious, policy can draw upon the happiness research showing that charity and volunteering increase the donor’s physical health, mental health, well-being, self-esteem, and sense of social connectedness. Any policies that promote the public recognition of magnanimity – that make conspicuous charity even more conspicuous – are likely to increase donor happiness and prestige. The third goal – promoting social capital – is perhaps closest to the vision of a Big Society. Psychology and economics show that when people see others behaving altruistically, this creates social norms that foster general altruism, trust, and cooperativeness. What matters here is the public salience of other people’s charity and volunteering, not whether their altruism does any real good or brings them any individual benefits. Britain’s sense of itself as a kind and decent society could be promoted by focusing on conspicuous charity and volunteering narrowly construed. But it could also be promoted by celebrating the moral virtues in people’s ordinary behavior as workers, consumers, investors, spouses, parents, relatives, neighbors, and citizens. All of our distinctive human virtues, both conspicuous and inconspicuous, are worth acknowledging, studying, and leveraging in social policy.