

# Rational Altruism and Global Citizenship Education

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## Abstract

*Today there is a growing sense in diverse countries that education should prepare young people to react to effects of globalization, good and bad. In relation, there have been calls for moral philosophers and philosophers of education to focus on concepts underpinning education for “critical democracy” and “compassionate citizenship,” amidst a sense of hopelessness in global anarchy, and against a simplistic globalization-as-free-trade model. In this essay, I examine rational altruism as a virtue underpinning global citizenship and social responsibility. First, I consider the views of altruism offered by Thomas Nagel, Lawrence Blum, and Eamonn Callan, in relation to a Buddhist view of altruism as elaborated by Joel Kupperman. I defend a dispassionate view of altruism, and briefly discuss its implications for education for global citizenship.*

**Keywords:** altruism, global citizenship, compassion, rationalism, moral philosophy

Today there is a growing sense in diverse countries that education should prepare young people to react to effects of globalization, good and bad. In Hong Kong, globalization is a major facet of the curriculum, and textbooks focus on critical perspectives toward cultural, economic, and political globalization. The Australian curriculum similarly focuses on “global conflicts” and developing students’ skills “to participate in contemporary debates” (ACARA, 2013). Kathy Hytten (2009) argues relatedly that philosophers of education should focus on concepts underpinning education for “critical democracy” and “compassionate citizenship,” amidst a sense of hopelessness in global anarchy, and against a simplistic globalization-as-free-trade model. She likens compassion to “caring about others,” and argues for a conception of critical, “justice-oriented” citizens, who focus on root causes of structural injustice and not merely their colorful symptoms.

Compassion and caring are worth scrutinizing in relation to education, however. Though developing appropriate emotional expressions within a cultural context may be within the domain of schooling, people within a community still experience and show emotions in individual ways. It would thus be challenging to systematically teach or assess emotional responses in formal education. Multicultural educators find that attempts to foster feelings, attitudes, and dispositions via schooling can often backfire (Applebaum, 2009; McCarthy, 2003). Students may disengage from or resist education which is seen to have an affective component, which asks them to feel particular ways about others in society. In relation, moral education can generally be challenging. As Martin Buber has noted, teacher instruction about morality can seem like a joke to students, who may not see educators as moral authorities (1955). Though Eamonn Callan views moral education more optimistically, he also acknowledges that teaching from the right sense of moral conviction can be difficult, as issues of morality are often those about which people cannot easily agree to disagree (1997).

Additionally, whether compassion and caring should be promoted and emphasized in education is worth asking. From a liberal view, personal autonomy and reason may be sacrificed when one is swayed by emotion. Immanuel Kant has also written that, “It is not possible that our heart should swell from fondness for every man’s interest and should swim in sadness at every stranger’s need; else the virtuous man...with all this goodheartedness would become nothing but a tenderhearted idler” (1965, p. 58-59). Hytten’s call for compassionate citizenship could develop cynicism or a new kind of hopelessness in youth, when things do not go as planned upon organizing a food drive (as she suggests), or when engaging in similar development projects (Jackson, 2013). Actions arising out of care for others are also scrutinized by egoists, as disingenuous or

otherwise ineffective, as we know our personal interests better than those of others, and may risk seeing people as extensions of ourselves rather than as autonomous individuals, if we try to act for the interest of others rather than for our own good.

Altruism seems a more likely candidate than compassion or caring, as a civic value and moral virtue worth developing through education. In this essay, I examine altruism as a concept underpinning the global citizenship ideal of social responsibility. I consider the notions of altruism which emerge in the views of Thomas Nagel, Lawrence Blum, Callan, and Joel Kupperman. I defend a dispassionate view of altruism, and relate it to global citizenship education.

### **Defining Altruism**

Altruism has been examined more in economics, evolutionary biology, and social psychology than in Western philosophy. Perhaps one reason for this is its connection to emotional states, which many ethicists aim to remove from consideration in questions of fairness and justice. Western thinkers often see emotions as uncontrollable in contrast with rational action, and thus work to filter out affect in moral reasoning. Nagel thus (1970) “pure rational altruism” as lacking in any emotional content: a rational duty of benevolence based in an objective, impartial understanding of common humanity. He argues that although pure altruism “may never occur in isolation from other motives,” such as “sympathy, benevolence, and love,” it is nonetheless the rational understanding of the like interest of another that gives the reason to act (1970, p. 79-80). Against this backdrop, Blum criticizes Kantianism (which he understands as related to, but not exclusively defined by, Kant’s own moral views) as a focus on rational duty which seems to wrongly ignore the moral value of altruism as an emotional disposition.

In his defense of rational altruism, Nagel distinguishes rational ethical altruism from a feeling or “generalized affection for the human race” (1970, p. 3). His rational altruism is undergirded by the ability, or *possibility*, to be objective: to “view ourselves from both the personal and impersonal standpoints” (1970, p. 144). From this possibility he describes both *prudence*, a timeless orientation toward one’s own good, and *altruism*, an interest in objective rather than subjective human good, as secondary “rational requirements on action” (1970, p. 87). Commitment to objective good motivates action that benefits others (and oneself in the future, in the case of prudence), and can theoretically exist without any particular feelings.

Both the possibility and value of dispassionate recognition and action on behalf of the objective good is questioned by Blum (as well as Martha Nussbaum), however. Blum argues that there is a qualitative distinction between acting out of sense of duty and acting due to altruistic emotion in real life, and that the latter should be held as superior to the former, in terms of human relationships and in developing any sense of altruistic duty. He argues first that “a sympathetic, compassionate person is more likely to act to foster the good of others. This is part of what it means to be sympathetic and compassionate, insofar as these involve dispositions to have certain emotions, and these emotions involve a disposition to act for the sake of the other’s good” (1980, p. 132-133). As altruistic feelings are seen to lead to altruistic action, the feelings are fundamental to the altruistic actions, rather than unnecessary or conceptually separate. Nussbaum similarly defends compassion as an emotion motivating altruistic action, defining compassion as the belief that one suffers through no fault of their own and is “an end whose good is to be promoted” (2001, p. 321).

Additionally Blum argues that rational duty without emotionality is not ideal or sufficient in real-life scenarios involving altruistic action. He gives a few examples to consider. The first is a husband’s act of visiting his dying wife in the hospital. Blum contends that it makes a difference to the wife’s appreciation of the act if she were to discover that he did not visit out of a sense of concern and love for her, but out of a sense of objective duty. Additionally, he asks readers to consider that he (Blum) has a flat tire and a man, Manero, pulls over to help him out. Blum argues that if he discovers that Manero has an auto repair shop and will stop in such situations out of a personal business interest rather than out of concern for Blum, this changes the way he feels about the goodness of his (Manero’s) act.

Blum thus argues that the act in the interest of the other with the emotional orientation of concern for the other “constitutes a kind of totality which is the bearer of the good to the recipient” (1980, p. 146). The good is different depending on the emotions which accompany the action, according to Blum. Blum calls this the *intrinsic value* of altruism, which is an emotional concern people can feel and appreciate, whether or not someone can obviously assist them in a hard situation. (Relatedly, Blum criticizes Kantians for giving up prematurely on altruistic emotion, in the case that concern can lead to action, even if the possibility of benevolent action is not clear at the first glance.) Nel Noddings similarly argues that the value of care lies in the appreciation of the one “cared-for,” favorably distinguishing a sense of relational care from more objective views (Noddings, 1999).

Blum’s arguments here are not entirely convincing, however. It is true that in some cases, I would rather someone assist me out of a feeling of concern rather than out of mere duty. Yet this does not mean the emotional concern always makes the action better. As a woman, I would delight in discovering Manero was helping me with my tire out of a sense of cold, rational duty; his genuine empathy could make me uncomfortable. Whether I care why my husband visits me on my death bed depends on many different factors; it is hardly the case that the emotionally-motivated visit will always be received with more appreciation than a more dutiful practice. I do not require affection as often as I wish for a more basic interest in my good, from others.

Furthermore, I do not feel that my own acts of altruism rely on my emotional state, or a related kind of expectation of appreciation from those “cared-for.” When I open a door for a slow-moving or heavy-laden person, or pick up something that he or she dropped on the ground, I do these things out of a sense of duty; there is no need to feel some sort of more passionate or empathetic feeling in order to act toward another person’s good. In the case of rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe, it was discovered that many were equally or more strongly motivated by a desire to protest evil than by empathy (Konarzewski, 1992, p. 27). Empathy or compassionate altruistic emotion may play a role in promoting others’ good; however, too much moral distress and compassion can also be debilitating, as Blum (1980) also notes in conceding that there are appropriate and inappropriate kinds of emotional, altruistic feeling.

Against a view that promotes caring feeling over rational duty, as an intrinsic good or as an appropriate motivator of altruistic action, Callan argues that duty must precede feelings of care when one acts justly. He also gives two examples (1997). First he considers the case of an illiterate husband and wife. The wife wants to learn to read, but the husband forbids her. Finally he consents, perhaps due to a sense of caring attachment for his wife. However, to act altruistically and see her as an end in herself requires more than this: a recognition of her right to pursue her good. The point is made more clearly in a second example, where husband and wife are exchanged for slaveholder and slave. Surely, one should free a slave not out of a sense of affection, which is partial and may not hold across a number of cases, and which can be fleeting and influenced by irrelevant factors. One should act in this case instead out of a sense of moral obligation, even if (or while) the slaveholder may also be emotionally attached to a slave. Through these examples Callan demonstrates that care for others is not mandatory in the same way that rational duty is (though they may be different kinds of goods). Though Blum, Nussbaum, and Noddings (2002) would argue on the contrary, that care, compassion, or sympathy is a kind of good and therefore a disposition we should increase in society apart from that of objective, rational duty, Callan cautions that such feelings of positive connection to others must not replace or come before rational duty, to support others’ good and prevent harm.

The educational implications of Blum’s view of altruistic emotion are also less than straightforward. He discusses two possible approaches to developing altruistic emotion. The first follows Kant in *The Doctrine of Virtue* (1964). It is to habitually seek out situations which expand altruistic emotion, namely those which provide opportunities to better understand the states of disadvantaged people. As Blum notes, this view suggests that we interact with and direct our emotions, rather than being passive with regard to them. Many educators also argue that literature or service which exposes students to others’ lives can change students’ orientations toward others in a positive way (Nussbaum, 2001; Boler, 1999; Noddings, 2003; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). Yet Blum concedes this does not always lead to the desired affect. Empirical evidence shows that one can reinforce their stereotypes or simply feel a selfish kind of dismay upon exposure to the sad plight of others

(Applebaum, 2009; McCarthy, 2003). Additionally, Blum notes that even if altruism is thus developed, the feeling can be fleeting, leaving a person as their experience or exposure ends.

Alternatively, Blum proposes one develop altruistic emotion by reflective cognitive practice, seeing appropriate altruism as interrelated to knowing about others' situations: At first you feel sorry that a friend has been laid off from his job; yet your sorrow and concern decrease upon discovering further that he was planning to quit the job before he was laid off, and has another job lined up (1980, p. 202). In this case, your feelings and openness to acting in the interest of your friend likely change as you gain the further information. Yet Blum admits here that we often have emotions even when we know they are not quite appropriate; we may feel too concerned, or not concerned enough, with another person's welfare (see also Nussbaum, 2001). This does not negate the insight that our emotions are related to our cognitive processes. However, that we have such imperfect abilities of self-assessment and rational revision of feelings challenges educators who would prioritize cultivating cognitively-framed emotional altruism over other goals. Indeed, teachers are not necessarily emotional experts, themselves, but may struggle to feel and express appropriate moral distress in the classroom (Callan, 1997; Jackson, 2009).

A more rational than emotional sense of altruism as defended by Nagel and Callan is also promoted in Buddhism. Kupperman (1995) acknowledges that a kind of universal altruistic emotion which is divided equally among all people worldwide (as is advocated in Buddhism) seems to amount to a lack of affection for anyone. However, he argues that such an outlook implies not cold-heartedness to all of humanity, but rather an acceptance of (inevitable) suffering, which is "guarded and limited in intensity" (1995, p. 125). In relation, he interprets Stoic philosophy not as against emotionality altogether, but instead as encouraging a sort of dispassionate impartiality in the face of emotional attachments, as in the statements, "If's it all the same to you, I think I'd rather have X than Y," or, "I have no feelings in the matter" (1995, p. 127). Kupperman notes that such impartiality, of being "at peace," or tranquil rather than apathetic, is demanded in liberal Western societies in the public sphere, though it may not be emphasized over care in relation to friends and family. Though Nussbaum challenges the dispassionate stances of the Stoics and Buddhism in her defense of compassion, she also indicates that compassion should not operate without many rational requirements on understanding (2001). A more dispassionate than emotional altruism is helpful as we consider what care and compassion imply in the global domain.

### **Altruism and Global Citizenship**

Discourses of global citizenship consider that one has choices to make when they act, not merely to aid or not aid another, but to aid different others, with different relationships to oneself. From a view of society as a social contract, it would appear that one has different, if not greater duties to others within their own society than outside of it (Goodin, 2002). Impartial altruism, as opposed to an altruism based in emotional care, would not make such distinctions (although theories of altruism concede the place of special duties and care toward friends and family). Some remain critical of notions of global citizenship given challenges to acting justly and impartially toward others even within their own society. Callan (1997) suggests one should cultivate their sense of reasonable moral distress about others in their own society, before developing more expansive views.

Yet as Amartya Sen argues, "primary allegiance does not eliminate the possibility of other allegiances" (2002, p. 115). If we view the nation-state not as a social contract of individuals, but as having assigned responsibility for people regardless of their value to the collectivity (Goodin, 2002), we may conceive of global altruism arising out of rational recognition of likeness not just to those with whom we share borders, but to all people worldwide. As nation-states are imagined communities (Anderson, 2002), surely our sense of objective duty to compatriots can be applied outside national borders today. Caring more emotionally or compassionately for, or "loving" our neighbors and fellows around the world may also be worthwhile; yet rational altruism is more essential to developing a sense of global social responsibility motivating just action, rather than action inspired by affect, which can be fleeting and difficult to appropriately develop.

Indeed, such a view of rational altruism extending around the globe gives little justification for education to enhance emotions of caring and compassion. While these latter, possibly beneficial dispositions may be seen in some instances to be in short supply, and to be potential motivators of altruistic behavior, they can also be seen to enable rash action or undue sentimentality. In cases of international development work and other projects where people aim to help others across social boundaries, people's care and empathy (among other feelings, like guilt) can preclude their understanding issues and possibilities critically (Jackson, 2013; Jackson, 2008); it can thus preclude effective altruistic action based in a sense of social injustice and breed cynicism. Furthermore, expressions of care are not universally the same, even if care is valued in family relationships around the world (Noddings, 1999). Thus, one should stop short of wondering, "what would make them *feel* good" emotionally, when considering the implications of global citizenship for relating to others, as there is no objective *intrinsic* caring good at hand. One should focus instead on the more objective question of, "what would ensure their *autonomy*," freedom, independence, equal ability, and so on (Engster, 2004).

How to enhance rational altruism is another matter. To learn that one could, without personal fault, be in need of others' help requires firstly information about how poverty and other disadvantages impact people's lives (Nussbaum, 2001). To see that one could be in another person's shoes, as in Nagel's objective view, requires comparison of conditions and experiences. Recognizing that no individual is "self-made" in society is a related disposition whose rational justifications students should be exposed to, given contradictory messages of egoism and neoconservatism powerful in many societies and worldwide today. Moral distress in students is a potential outcome of learning about other people's lives around the world (Callan, 1997). However, while some argue that students should explore their feelings as they engage in such learning (Nussbaum, 2001; Boler, 1999), the prioritization of altruism as a sense of rational duty to others instead implies that teachers should aim to frame moral distress as rational rather than emotional, as possible (Callan, 1997).

Developing in students a rational sense of moral distress rather than altruistic emotion about the lives of poor people in other countries can enhance students' abilities to critically consider systemic causes of inequality and injustice, as Hytten argues, and not just become sad, alienated, cynical, or hopeless, which are all too likely of outcomes when teachers instruct from a sense of emotional indignation (Jackson, 2009), or with the aim of inducing sympathetic feelings in students about others' lives. It is hardly acting in disadvantaged global others' interest to focus on developing students' feelings toward them (Jackson, 2013; Spelman & Lugones, 1983); virtues connected to respect for humanity should be prioritized above affect in such situations. Empathy may be involved, as one considers what it would be like to be in another's shoes. However, it is not productive to dwell on feelings over action if the target is global citizenship as behavior and not just a superficial global-minded sensibility.

In summary, although Nussbaum, Hytten, and others call for a compassionate, caring global citizenship which develops student empathy for others, the value of loving everyone on the planet is questionable; the feeling may be impossible, outside of a Buddhist orientation, echoed in the defense of rational altruism, of duty to others as like oneself, without undue emotional attachment. That rational altruism is a virtue apart from and before emotional altruism suggests we should focus less on building student compassion and caring in global citizenship education, and more on impartial understanding that people need help due to no personal lacking or fault. There is no need for such altruism to be bound by nationality, for one's compatriots are not necessarily any more like oneself than are others outside their nation-state. Altruism as a moral duty to help people to increase objective good can undergird global citizenship, and requires no effort to develop troublesome, tenuous affect.

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