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Website: <https://jppssuniuyo.com/jpci> Email: [jppssuniuyo@gmail.com](mailto:jppssuniuyo@gmail.com)

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Article

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### POVERTY AS A CHALLENGE TO ALTRUISM

**Emmanuel Adetokunbo Ogundele**

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies,  
Augustine University, Ilara-Epe, Lagos State, Nigeria

Email: [emmanuel.ogundele@augustineuniversity.edu.ng](mailto:emmanuel.ogundele@augustineuniversity.edu.ng)

#### Abstract

This paper explores the complex relationship between poverty and altruistic behaviour, examining how economic deprivation poses a significant challenge to the practice and effectiveness of altruism. Altruism is defined as selfless acts that prioritize others' interests without expectation of reciprocation. It encompasses both psychological altruism (motivated by desire to benefit others) and biological altruism (acts that enhance recipients' fitness while reducing the actor's importance). The study investigates altruism from social, philosophical, and religious perspectives, revealing its multifaceted nature and underlying the theoretical foundations including egoistic, egocentric, and alter-centric motivations. The research identifies key challenges faced by altruists in impoverished contexts, including resource constraints that limit potential donors and increased demand from growing numbers of individuals in need. These factors can lead to inequitable distribution of resources, compassion fatigue, and burn-out among altruists. The paper proposes strategic solutions including community-based initiatives that target collective rather than individual needs, institutional support through government policies and programs, and empowerment strategies focused on capacity-building and skills development. The findings demonstrate that while poverty constrains altruistic behaviour, targeted interventions can help overcome these barriers and promote effective altruistic practices in impoverished environments. Hence, the paper tends to add another dimension to the wealth of publications on altruism by examining poverty as one of the possible challenges inhibiting or limiting the performance of altruistic acts. It will also propose possible strategies to help curb the problem faced by altruists while looking at impoverished contexts.

**Keywords:** Altruism, Poverty, Pro-social Behaviour, Social Stratification, Development.

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## **Introduction**

Humanity is structured in a manner that seems imbalanced in that while some humans can be considered as haves, some others can be considered as have-nots. Going forward, there are those who have and give to others out of their abundance while there are those who do not have, but still sacrificially and genuinely give to others. In any case, the act of sacrificial giving can be perceived as altruism. In essence, the word altruism implies “for the other” as derived from its Latin origin.<sup>1</sup> Broadly speaking therefore, altruism means a promotion of the interest(s) of the other. In this sense, Snyder and Dwyer argue that altruism in the behavioral sense is that which “occurs when one acts in a manner that benefits another person or a group of people.”<sup>2</sup> Having established an understanding of the concept of altruism, it is imperative to explicate the concept of poverty with the aim of giving a profound ground for the drive of this paper. However, it is necessary to note that there are various differing opinions on the notion of poverty. Nonetheless, that of the European Commission as quoted by Nyasulu Gerald appears to be widely acceptable. In the view of the European Commission, poverty has to do with “persons, families, and groups of persons whose resources (material, cultural, and social) are so limited as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life in the member state to which they belong.”<sup>3</sup> The presentation of poverty in the foregoing implies that when reference is made to poverty, it is the inability to afford the basic human needs of an individual. Having formed an understanding of the two basic pillars of the discourse, one may question the relationship between poverty and altruism and how poverty is a challenge to altruism. Attempting to respond to the foregoing and other related questions, this paper gears towards an exploration of the challenges poverty poses to altruism and an examination of the complexities of promoting altruistic behavior in impoverished contexts.

## **Understanding Altruism**

Humans have had cause to act altruistically towards others especially strangers with no idea of reciprocation in mind. Some even have had to get themselves involved in the act of blood donation anonymously with no aim of getting anything in return. This act in its true sense can be seen as altruism. The term “altruism” simply put, implies prioritizing another person instead of the self. In other words, it has to do with putting the interest of the other person before that of the self. In this sense, an action is said to be altruistic especially if it has no discernible ulterior motive. Thus, altruism according to Michael Vlerick refers to other-regarding and selfless acts and disposition.<sup>4</sup> Altruists in other words, engage in selfless acts towards others with no expectation of returns for personal benefits. That is to say, those who genuinely engage in altruistic acts, do so sacrificially. This understanding does not negate the fact that there are some individuals who engage in altruistic acts with the aim of personal gains or for public recognition. This notion therefore opens the way to discussing the various and major forms of altruism which does not scientifically have similarity with the

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<sup>1</sup> Radovanovic, B. 2018. Altruism in Behavioral, Motivational and Evolutionary Sense. *Philosophy and Society*, 30(1). pp. 122-134. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.2298/FID1901122R>

<sup>2</sup> Snyder, M. and Dwyer, P.C. 2013. Altruism and Prosocial Behavior. Millon, T., Lerner, M., and Meiner, I. (eds). *Handbook of Psychology*, Vol. 5: Personality and Social Psychology. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. pp. 467-485.

<sup>3</sup> Nyasulu, G. 2010. Revisiting the Definitions of Poverty. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, 12(7). pp. 147-158.

<sup>4</sup> Vlerick, M. 2020. Explaining Human Altruism. *Synthese*, 199(7339). pp. 1-19. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-020-02890-y>

vernacular sense in which we earlier used the concept. On the one hand, actions can be termed psychologically or behaviorally altruistic while some others can be seen as evolutionally or biologically altruistic. Psychologically or behaviorally, altruism is largely concerned with motives. In other words, psychological altruism refers to the desire to benefit the other.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, biological altruism concerns itself with acts. That is to say, biological altruism refers to the acts that increase the fitness of the receiver and decrease the fitness of the actor/giver so as to increase the survival and reproductive chances of the recipient.<sup>6</sup> To instantiate this view, the act of giving food to the hungry can be termed biological altruism while the desire to share food with the hungry qualifies as psychological altruism. The key concepts to look out for in the foregoing instances are giving and desire. The biological form of altruism is said to be a common occurrence in the natural world of existence wherein individuals perform altruistic acts for the increase, fitness and reproduction of their offspring without concerns about themselves. The aim of biological altruism is the evolutionary success of the recipient which is either the offspring or genetically related organisms.

The discourse on altruism revolves around various theories which include. egocentric theory propounded by Becker, the egoistic theory propounded by Axelrod and the altercentric theory by Mead/Frank.<sup>7</sup> The foregoing implies that human altruistic actions are derived from three theories which inform the motives for altruistic acts. These theories include egoistic which implies that human altruistic acts are egoistically driven meaning that they are performed in order to achieve a personal goal perhaps to inflate the ego of the performer. Furthermore, another theory that backs up altruism is the egocentric theory which is focused on the individual benefit from altruistic actions. Following this theory is the alter-centric theory which bases its argument on the feelings of the other person. In other words, altruists do what they do because of the feelings of the other person. For instance, if an altruist sees an individual who is perhaps hungry; an altruist feels the pain of such a person and decides to feed him/her not minding the effect it may have on him/her. In other words, there is a movement from deep empathy to action. In essence, an altruist who falls under the theory of alter-centrism can be classified as empathetic. Therefore, it is evident from the theoretical presentations that altruistic actions are either motivated by empathy, reciprocity or moral obligation. Thinking about altruism, one cannot but express that it is a good practice as altruists help others, cooperate with others and support the common good.<sup>8</sup> While that thinking of altruism is good, some scholars have had to argue that there are some limitations of altruism as well as its negative impact on the potentials of the individual and communities which has often not been given a good consideration among scholars. Among the plethora of arguments presented by scholars against altruism is that consistency in the practice of altruism may inhibit self-improvement and demonstration of initiative among recipients of altruistic acts.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Vlerick, M. 2020. Explaining Human Altruism. *Synthese*, 199 (7339). pp. 1-19. Doi:

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-020-02890-y>

<sup>6</sup> Vlerick, M. Explaining Human Altruism. pp. 1-19.

<sup>7</sup> Khalil, E.L. 2001. Adam Smith and Three Theories of Altruism. *Recherches Economiques de Louvain*, 67(4). pp. 421-435. Doi: 10.3917/rel.674.0421

<sup>8</sup> Ben-Ner, A. and Hu, F. 2017. *The Bright and Dark Sides of Altruism*. Doi:

<https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11694.003.0004> Available at:

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326478743\\_The\\_Bright\\_and\\_Dark\\_Side\\_of\\_Altruism](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326478743_The_Bright_and_Dark_Side_of_Altruism) (Accessed 1 July 2025).

<sup>9</sup> Ben-Ner, and Hu, F. *The Bright and Dark Sides of Altruism*.

In-line with the above, Coates is of the view that altruistic acts may result to the recipient doing away with incentives to work, investment in their own human capital and self insurance.<sup>10</sup> What this implies is that there is the presence of risk by those who are recipients of such altruistic and charitable acts if it is persistent in the long run as they will develop undesirable attitudes and habits towards the individuals who possess them and also to the larger society. If this view is to be considered to its logical conclusion, it is evident that true altruism has its dark side. This is because it gives the mindset of dependence to the recipient with no sense of working to actualize his/her own goals and aspirations. Inasmuch as the above is an expression of the negative side of altruism, some other scholars have had to also argue for the positive side of altruism. In this manner, Post holds that altruistic emotions as well as behaviors have positive associations with the well-being, longevity and the health of the performer as long as they are not overwhelmed by the help they render.<sup>11</sup> This means that altruistic actions are beneficial to the performer so long as they do not feel heavy with the actions they perform.

### **Poverty and its Impact on Altruism**

The multifaceted nature of the concept of poverty has resulted in the inability to pinpoint or ascribe a meaning to the concept especially with the numerous scholarly representations of the concept. However, some opinions on the notion of poverty will be considered as they relate to our bone of contention. Overtime, the idea of poverty has been largely considered and seemingly limited to individual income.<sup>12</sup> Subsequently, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of poverty had a shift from individual income to subsistence needs that is what an individual needs to survive. In the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept was later used in reference to lacking basic needs which further results to an extension of the lack of subsistent needs to the absence of basic individual needs such as healthcare, sanitation and education, and then in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept was used in relation to relative deprivation not excluding individual income as well as other resources and social conditions.<sup>13</sup> It is necessary to note, all the presentations of the notion of poverty as seen, cover the various forms of poverty from its economic, social and political standpoint. Judging from the foregoing representations of the idea of poverty, one can present poverty as the absence of the basic needs for an individual's sustainability. Put differently, individuals, group and families can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to live adequately, take proper diet, and participate in societal activities which are considered customary or that are widely encouraged and societal approved. Given the fact that virtually everyone has the ability to provide at least one of the basic human necessities for survival, it can be argued that just like beauty, poverty is in the eyes of the beholder. It is only a matter of perception. Put differently, one can be termed poor only by the one who experiences and sees it.

An examination of human society will reveal what seems to be partially stratified given that individuals live in their different grades both economically, socially *et cetera*. Hence, there are subtle differences in the gradation of the styles of living among individuals

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<sup>10</sup> Coates, S. 1995. Altruism, the Samaritan's Dilemma, and Government transfer Policy. *The American Economic Review*. pp. 46-57.

<sup>11</sup> Post, S.G. 2005. Altruism, Happiness, and Health: It's Good to be Good. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 12(2). pp. 66-77.

<sup>12</sup> Ludi, E. and Bird, K. 2007. *Understanding Poverty*. Available at: <https://media.odi.org/documents/5678.pdf> (Accessed 1 July 2025).

<sup>13</sup> Ludi, E. and Bird, K. 2007. *Understanding Poverty*. Available at: <https://media.odi.org/documents/5678.pdf> (Accessed 1 July 2025).

as well as the differences that are made obvious economically, socially and otherwise. In this way, while some persons have the means to go on vacation, organize birthday parties for their children, others may desire these things but do not have the means to carry them out in spite of their interest. The foregoing represents a style of living and the different levels of persons in a given social sphere. If this established case is accepted, then it follows that some persons are at an advantageous position to perform altruistic acts while others are not and at the same time others are at the receiver's end of altruistic acts. Clearly then many people desire to perform altruistic actions but are limited by resources. In this sense, poverty becomes an evident restraint to the performance of altruism. In another consideration, another obvious challenge faced by altruists is that of increased need. In this sense, an altruist may be faced with the challenge of many people he/she may want to be generous with available resources. Consequently, a rise in the number of people in need can be seen as one of the major challenges faced by altruists. In its social context, the concept of altruism implies giving and exhibiting selflessness at a group level thus implying altruism in its social context as not considering the self first while in a social body.<sup>14</sup> What this view implies is that among many people in a group, whether or not they are related by blood, one can perform altruistic acts so as to help in the alleviation of their struggles. In other words, those who involve themselves in the performance of altruistic acts and those who are on the receiving side of altruistic acts need not be tied as in the case of family.

In the philosophical context, the concept of altruism plays out in the discourse on ethics as it is represented by philosophers as the study of the rightness and wrongness of human action(s). In this presentation one can see human action as right or wrong when considered in relation with how they are carried out towards the other person. In this sense, altruistic acts can be ethically plausible given that they are beneficial to the recipient of such action(s). From a religious perspective, altruism can be traced to the core pillars of the three largely recognized religions namely, Islam, Judaism and Christianity which according to Naqvi are built on four complementary and inseparable elements viz; unity, equilibrium, free will and responsibility.<sup>15</sup> The religious view as seen is understood as a fundamental reason for the performance of altruistic actions especially to religious adherence. From the foregoing understanding, the sense of unity, responsibility, free will and equality builds in the altruist the sense that all humans are equal and are to be treated as such. In this sense, those who are considered less can be selflessly assisted and supported. The view of Yuniawan and colleagues further emphasizes the established notion as they posit that the interpretation of altruism as the norm of unselfishness is the willingness of the individual to act in a sacrificing manner for the sake of the other person's happiness and can be considered a standard moral life that can preserve biological systems that are able to stand the test of time.<sup>16</sup>

### **Challenges to Altruism in Impoverished Contexts**

Demonstrating altruism comes with some challenges that appear to constraint the performer of altruistic acts. Some of these challenges are viewed from two perspectives. According to Deb Angarika and Major-Smith Daniel, the two forms of challenges faced by altruists are the classic problem of altruism and the other is referred to as the second-order

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<sup>14</sup> Yuniawan, A., et al., 2018. A Systematic Literature Review of Altruism: Challenges, Outcomes and Future Research Directions. *European Research Study Journal*, XXI (4). pp. 493-501. Doi: 10.35808/ersj/1137

<sup>15</sup> Naqvi, S.N.H. 2016. *Perspectives on Morality and Human Well-Being: a Contribution to Islamic Economics*. Kube Publishing Ltd.

<sup>16</sup> Yuniawan, A., et al., 2018. A Systematic Literature Review of Altruism: Challenges, Outcomes and Future Research Directions. *European Research Study Journal*, XXI (4). pp. 493-501. Doi: 10.35808/ersj/1137

problem of altruism.<sup>17</sup> On the classic problem of altruism, it focuses on how an attitude that decreases an individual's productivity can evolve. Put differently, the classic problem of altruism examines how an individual can be sacrificial for the benefit of the other to their own detriment. At a close examination of this classical altruistic problem, one discovers a limitation and a promotion of the self more than the other. This view in itself is not faulty but may not be plausible as it is a representation of egoism rather than alter-centricism.

The second fundamental problem of altruism according to Deb and Major-Smith is the second-order problem that entails the inability of various scholars and authors to reach an established ground on what is and what is not altruism.<sup>18</sup> The second-order problem of altruism seems to be a problem that lingers based on the ground that there will constantly be scholars who have various and differing views on the discourse on altruism. So long as this is the case, the second-order problem of altruism is likely not to be resolved. A problem that is faced by the practice of altruism is resource constraints. In this way, the altruist is willing to perform, but is retrained by lack of resources. Increase in the number of those in need in impoverished contexts can also be challenging to altruistic behavior as this may result to potential burnout and compassion fatigue. In essence, though the altruist may have the resources to act altruistically he may be dazed with the challenge of the multiplicity of the number of those in need that he is likely to assist. In this case, performing altruistic actions in impoverished contexts is heavily challenging on the altruist as it probably will lead to inequitable distribution of available resources thus leading to overpowering of the altruist. Accordingly, impoverished contexts serve as inhibition to altruistic behaviors especially due to lack of resources that perhaps leads to inequitable distribution.

### **Strategies for Promoting Altruism in Impoverished Contexts**

Altruistic behaviors meet with various challenges as presented in the above. However, these challenges can be handled properly when the right approach is employed. Among the strategies on dealing with the problem of altruism include community-based initiatives. In this sense, to bring about successful altruistic behavior, the community of the recipients of such acts is to be put into consideration by targeting the need of each community rather than basing it all on individual needs. Another possible strategy to help curb the problem of altruism is institutional support. Here, institutions including government policies and programs help to promote altruistic behaviors in impoverished contexts as the involvement of these institutions will help to boost the altruists with resources to help them meet their target. Also, governmental policies may help in the provision of those in need in specific communities. Empowerment and capacity building are also possible strategies to help come out of the challenges posed by altruistic behaviors in impoverished contexts. This suggests that individuals with the ability to learn skills are to be taught and those with skills are to be empowered. In this way, there will be a great reduction in the number of needy individuals especially in impoverished settings. This is the typical approach of teaching people how to fish instead of giving them fish. The possibility of creating an ever-dependent population of

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<sup>17</sup> Deb, A. and Major-Smith, D. 2019. The Problem of Altruism. Shackelford, T.K., Weekes-Shackelford, V.A. (eds). *Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science*. Cham: Springer. pp. 1-11. Doi: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-16999-6\\_1199-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-16999-6_1199-1)

<sup>18</sup> Deb, A. and Major-Smith, D. 2019. The Problem of Altruism. Shackelford, T.K., Weekes-Shackelford, V.A. (eds). *Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science*. Cham: Springer. pp. 1-11. Doi: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-16999-6\\_1199-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-16999-6_1199-1)

people can be encouraged by some approach to altruism. This is quite discouraged here if the means for capacity development and empowerment are there.

### Conclusion

Altruism is a selfless attitude displayed towards another person with no attachment of ulterior motive. The paper has been able to establish to a large extent the concept of altruism, its possible challenges as well as the possible way out of the problems that may be faced by altruists especially when practiced within impoverished contexts. Following from the discussions, it is worthy to note that poverty is a challenge to altruistic behaviors in that it limits an individual who is interested in performing altruistic acts. Poverty is therefore restrictive in the practice of altruism in spite of the best of intentions. The real point that is being made here, people must do as much good as possible within the capacity and ability of the doer. Doing good without expecting reciprocity is a worthy human attitude which should be upheld as such and encouraged in spite of any challenging contexts.

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