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Article

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AN EXAMINATION OF POVERTY AND THE CHALLENGE OF ETHICAL ALTRUISM IN NIGERIA

Elijah Okon John ¹ & Edidiong Francis Itokem ²

Department of Philosophy, University of Uyo, Nigeria ^{1 & 2}

Corresponding Email: osomeblessing@gmail.com ²

Abstract

Poverty remains one of the most persistent global ethical challenges despite unprecedented economic growth and technological advancement. While economic and political analyses dominate discussions of poverty, the moral obligations individual and societies owe to the poor remain contested. This study examine the concept of poverty and the challenge of Ethical Altruism in Nigeria. Ethical altruism-the moral commitment to act for the benefit of others, even at personal cost, provides an important philosophical framework for addressing this problem. The paper relies on a critical analysis to examine poverty through the lens of ethical altruism drawing from John Rawls's theory of justice, and other moral philosophers, including political theory. It evaluated a holistic conception of poverty, classical and contemporary altruistic frameworks including utilitarianism and virtue ethics, as well as the practical challenges of altruistic action. By analyzing poverty as both a structural injustice and a moral call to responsibility, the paper argued that ethical altruism must be reinterpreted within a framework that balances individual moral duty with institutional reform. The paper, therefore concluded that while altruistic action alone cannot eradicate poverty, it remains a vital ethical force for motivating social transformation and moral accountability in a deeply unequal world.

Keywords: Ethical Altruism, Human Autonomy, Moral obligation, Poverty.

Introduction

Poverty continues to affect billions of people worldwide and remains one of the most pressing moral and social issues of the twenty-first century. According to global development studies, poverty involves not merely a lack of income but also a deprivation of

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capabilities, opportunities, and human dignity (Sen, 87). The persistence of extreme poverty raises profound ethical questions: what obligations do individuals and societies have towards those living in poverty? Is helping the poor merely charitable, or is it a moral duty? Ethical altruism offers one philosophical framework for addressing these questions. Altruism broadly refers to the moral principle of acting for the welfare of others without expecting personal benefit. Within philosophical ethics, altruism challenges the dominance of self-interest and emphasizes the moral significance of compassion, responsibility, and solidarity. Philosophers have long debated whether humans possess genuine altruistic motivations or whether call actions ultimately stem from self-interest (Batson, 23). In contemporary debates, ethical altruism has gained renewed relevance through discussions surrounding global inequality, humanitarian intervention, and effective philanthropy. Scholars such as Peter Singer (2011) argued that individuals living in affluent societies have a strong moral obligation to assist those suffering from extreme poverty.

Singer's famous analogy comparing helping the poor to rescuing a drowning child, illustrates the ethical urgency of global poverty. However, critics argue that purely altruistic approaches may oversimplify the structural causes of poverty, such as colonial legacies, political corruption, economic inequality, and institutional failure. Consequently, the challenge of ethical altruism lies not only in motivating individuals to act but also in addressing the broader social systems that perpetuate poverty. This paper thus, examines the relationship between poverty and ethical altruism from a philosophical and ethical perspective. It explores the theoretical foundations of altruism, analyses core concepts, as well as competing ethical frameworks, and evaluates the practical limitations of altruistic responses to poverty.

What is Poverty?

The word "poverty" is derived from the Latin word "pauper" which means poor. It has series of meanings, linked through a series of resemblances, as it can be viewed from multidimensional elements like region, era, geographical condition, circumstances and many more. However, different notions of poverty has been analysed such that circumstances which applies in one sense do not necessarily apply in others. Poverty is multidimensional and this paper includes the examination of relevant ones. From an ethical standpoint, these definitions highlights that poverty is not merely an economic problem but also a moral issue involving justice, dignity, and human rights.

Poverty as a Material Concept

The first group of definitions concern poverty as a material concept. People are poor because they do not have something they need, or because they lack the resources to get the things they need. Here, poverty is a state or condition in which a person or community lacks the financial resources and essentials for a minimum standard of living. Poverty-stricken people and families might go without proper housing, clean water, healthy food, and medical attention. It is the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions. Contemporary observation reveals that poverty entails more than the lack of income and productive resources to ensure sustainable livelihood. According to the World Development Report (WDR, 2022), "poverty's manifestations include hunger and malnutrition, limited access to education and other basic services, social discrimination and exclusion, as well as the lack of participation in decision-making".

A Pattern of Deprivation

Not every lack or a need can be said to be equivalent to poverty, and there are several interpretations of what makes up poverty; Some interpretations emphasize certain kinds of need, like hunger and homelessness, as particularly important. Some emphasize the seriousness of the deprivations that are experienced: food and shelter are often seen as more important than entertainments and transport (though there may still be grounds to consider people who are deprived of entertainments and transport as 'poor'). According to Spicker (48), "the duration of circumstances is potentially important: a person can be homeless because of a natural disaster, but still be able to command sufficient resources to ensure that needs are met, and met rapidly." Poverty generally refers not just to deprivation, but to deprivation experienced over a period of time (Spicker, 46). Duration is therefore important, because temporary deprivations (like those experienced by the victims of catastrophes) are not enough to constitute 'poverty'. Poverty is defined, then, on the existence of a pattern of deprivation, rather than by the deprivation itself.

Limited Resources

Needs are closely linked to resources; every need is a need for something. Poverty can be taken to refer to circumstances in which people lack income, wealth or resources to acquire or consume the things which they need. Booth (35) observed that "The 'poor' are those whose means may be sufficient, but are barely sufficient, for decent independent life; the 'very poor', those whose means are insufficient according to the usual standard of life in this country". If poverty is defined primarily in terms of need, a need which was not caused by limited resources would be sufficient to make someone poor; if poverty is only a result of limited resources, it would not.

Mental Poverty

This is simply a state of possessing an impoverished mindset, a condition in which one is unable to think his way through self-actualization because he feels trapped, helpless, and uninspired. It goes on to be a system of poor thinking where one may have everything they need to lead a comfortable wonderful life, but they nonetheless focus on the negative. It includes a refusal to change, to try and learn new and better ways of not only thinking but also putting thoughts into action. The idea of poverty as a mental state does not fit in with the materialistic concepts of poverty, however, this notion argues that if poverty were understood differently, it would not only focus on the struggle against material poverty but strive for a mental examination and reformation. Therefore, this definition amounts to expounding that one should rather pursue 'moral-dignity', rather than a continuous aim for materialistic struggle. In a nutshell, poverty refers to a condition that causes its victims through lack of economic resources to live a life in which they cannot fully participate in a range of activities expressive of their nature as human beings. But the crucial point to note is that whether poverty is viewed as a material concept, as patterns of deprivation or mental, the cumulative impact in decision making cannot be overemphasized.

What is Altruism?

Altruism refers to the selfless concern for the well-being of others, often expressed through actions that benefit another person without expectation of personal reward. According to John (110,111), altruism is the pursuit of the goal of life that is motivated by people-oriented interest and directed towards the goal of all. In this way, man's action are geared towards the enhancement of the good of persons other than oneself. A holistic understanding of altruism therefore requires integrating diverse viewpoints to appreciate its moral,

psychological, and social dimensions. Historically, the term “altruism” was introduced by the French philosopher and sociologist Auguste Comte (312), who used it to describe a moral obligation to live for the sake of others rather than oneself. In Comte’s view, altruism functioned as a foundational principle for social harmony, emphasizing that individuals should subordinate personal interests to collective well-being. Utilitarian ethics, associated with Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, emphasizes maximizing overall happiness. Within this framework, altruistic actions are morally justified when they produce the greatest good for the greatest number (Mill, 14). Contemporary utilitarians have argued that individuals in wealthy societies should donate significant portions of their income to alleviate global poverty. Singer’s (231) argument suggests that failing to help the poor when one can do so at minimal cost constitutes a moral failure.

In contrast, virtue ethics – originating with Aristotle – focuses on moral character rather than rules or consequences. From this perspective, altruism becomes a virtue expressed through compassion, generosity and solidarity. Virtue ethics emphasizes moral development and the cultivation of habits that promote concern for others. Helping the poor becomes part of a morally flourishing life rather than a purely calculative obligation. Another influential perspective comes from Immanuel Kant (Kantian ethics) that stresses the intrinsic dignity of every person and the moral duty to treat others as ends rather than means (Kant, 36). Although Kant does not explicitly endorse altruism as self-sacrifice, his principle of respect for persons implies obligations to assist those in need when possible. These views of altruism therefore recognize it as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by ethical ideals, emotional motivation and social norms. Understanding altruism through this distinctive views helps clarify why humans consistently demonstrate concern for others and why such behaviour remains fundamental to the functioning of societies.

Poverty and its Ethical Challenge

The persistence of poverty raises fundamental questions about global justice and moral responsibility. Some philosophers have argued that poverty represents a moral failure of global institutions. For example, Thomas Pogge argued that wealthy societies contribute to global poverty through unfair economic structures, trade policies, and political influence (Pogge, 13). According to Pogge, the moral problem of poverty is not merely about failing to help but about actively participating in systems that harm the poor. This argument shifts the focus from charitable altruism to structural justice. If poverty results from unjust global systems, then addressing it requires institutional reforms rather than solely individual generosity. Development scholars further argue that addressing poverty requires system change involving governments, international institutions, and social movements (Sachs, 65). Therefore, altruistic actions, while valuable, cannot substitute for comprehensive policy reforms and structural transformation. Hence, a more balanced ethical framework combines altruistic compassion with structural justice. Such an approach recognizes that individuals have moral responsibilities to assist the poor while also advocating systemic reforms. Ethical altruism should therefore function not merely as charity but as a catalyst for broader social transformation.

Moral Obligations of Individuals

From an ethical standpoint, individuals possess direct moral responsibilities to assist those experiencing poverty. One influential argument comes from utilitarian philosopher, Peter Singer (231), who contend that if individuals can prevent suffering without sacrificing something of comparable moral importance, they are morally obligated to do so. In his

seminal article "*Famine, Affluence, and Morality*," Singer argues that geographical distance or the presence of other potential helpers does not diminish moral responsibility. According to Singer, failing to aid those in extreme poverty when one has the capacity to do so is morally equivalent to allowing preventable suffering to continue. Singer's argument challenges conventional distinctions between charity and obligation. Rather than viewing assistance to the as an act of generosity, he reframes it as a duty grounded in moral consistency. If individuals accept the moral principle that suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad, then they must also accept the obligation to prevent such suffering when possible (Singer, 232). However, critics like John Kekes in "On the Supposed Obligation to Relieve Poverty" (507), argued that Singer's standard may be excessively demanding. Philosophers such as Thomas Nagel maintain that moral obligations must be balanced with individual's rights to pursue personal projects and maintain reasonable standards of living. Nonetheless, even moderate ethical positions generally affirm that individuals have at least some duty to contribute to poverty alleviation through charitable giving, volunteerism, and responsible consumption.

While utilitarian arguments emphasize preventing suffering, other philosophical ideas frame obligations toward the poor as matters of justice rather than benevolence. John Rawls in his *Theory of Justice* argued that social institutions must be arranged so that inequalities benefit the least advantaged members of the society. Rawls' "difference Principle" holds that economic inequalities are morally permissible only if they improve the situation of those who are worst off (Rawls, 266). From a Rawlsian perspective, poverty is not merely a personal misfortune but often a consequence of unjust social arrangements. Therefore, societies have a responsibility to design institutions – such as fair taxation systems and healthcare affordability, social safety nets, employment opportunities on a fairness policies, and equal educational opportunities – that ensure basic fairness. Individual obligations arise indirectly through participation in, and support for these just institutions. Similarly, Thomas Pogge argued that citizens of affluent societies bear responsibility for global poverty because international economic structures often perpetuate inequality. Pogge contend that people in wealthy countries contribute, even if indirectly, to global systems that disadvantage poorer populations, thereby creating obligations to reform these structures and compensate those harmed by them (Pogge, 15). While individual actions are important, structural solutions are necessary to address poverty effectively. Economic systems, political institutions, and social policies play crucial roles in shaping opportunities and access to resources. In an increasingly interconnected world, obligations toward the poor extend beyond national boundaries. Globalization has intensified economic interdependence, making it difficult to treat poverty as solely a domestic issue. All human beings possess equal moral worth regardless of nationality. From this perspective, individuals and societies in wealthier countries have responsibilities to support global poverty reduction through foreign aid, fair trade practices, international cooperation, as well as individual welfarism.

Beyond moral philosophy, religious traditions also articulate strong obligations toward the poor. In many religious ethical systems, caring for the poor is considered a moral imperative grounded in compassion, justice, and the recognition of human dignity. For example, Christian ethics emphasizes charity and social justice, with biblical teachings urging believers to care for "the least among them". Similarly, Islamic teachings mandate charitable giving through practices such as zakat, which requires Muslims to donate a portion of their wealth to those in need. These traditions reinforce the idea that wealth carriers social

responsibilities and that poverty alleviation is a collective moral duty. Religious frameworks often combine individual charity with broader social obligations, encouraging both personal generosity and instructional efforts to address system poverty.

Understanding obligations towards the poor has significant implications for public policy and individual behaviour. At the societal level, governments may implement policies such as progressive taxation, workable healthcare, social welfare programmes, economic investment, educational reforms and infrastructure. These measures aim to address structural causes of poverty and promote equal opportunities. At the individual level, obligations may manifest through charitable giving, ethical consumption, political engagement, and advocacy for policies that support poverty reduction. While individuals alone cannot solve system poverty, their actions contribute to a broader social change. And so the question of what obligations individuals and societies have towards those living in poverty lies at the intersection of ethics, political philosophy, and social policy. Utilitarian thinkers such as Henry Sidgwick in "The Methods of Ethics" (382), emphasize the moral duty to prevent suffering, while theories of justice highlight the responsibility to design fair social institutions. Religious traditions more so reinforce the moral imperative to care for the poor. Despite differences in theoretical approaches, a broad consensus emerges: both individuals and societies bear significant responsibilities towards those living in poverty, ultimately, fulfilling these obligations is not only a matter of compassion but also a fundamental requirement of a just and humane society.

Is Ethical Altruism Possible at all?

Ethical altruism, is the moral doctrine that individuals ought to act for the benefit of others, sometimes even at a cost to themselves. It is distinct from psychological altruism, which asserts that humans do act selflessly, and from egoism, which claims that all actions are ultimately self-interested. Ethical altruism is therefore normative, it prescribes what we ought do, not merely what we do. A central difficulty in evaluating ethical altruism lies in disentangling motivations from outcomes. This is where John (111) referred to altruism as fundamentally the true basis of morality. An act may produce benefits for others while being motivated by self-interest (e.g., reputational gain or egoism), or it may be motivated by genuine concern yet fail to produce beneficial outcomes. This distinction complicates any claim about the possibility of ethical altruism, as the concept itself straddles intention, action, and consequence. Philosophers such as Auguste Comte, who coined the term "altruism," conceived it as a moral ideal grounded in living for others. However, critics have long argued that such a standard is either psychologically unrealistic or normatively excessive. Thus, the question is not merely whether altruistic acts occur, but whether purely ethical altruism action motivated solely by concern for others, without self-interest is coherent and achievable.

One of the most significant challenges to ethical altruism is the doctrine of psychological egoism. This view asserts that all human actions are ultimately motivated by self-interest, even when they appear altruistic. For instance, helping others may produce internal satisfaction, reduce guilt, or enhance social standing, thereby rendering the act self-serving. Thomas Hobbes famously argue that even seemingly generous acts are motivated by personal gain, such as the desire for recognition or avoidance of discomfort (Hobbes, 129). Contemporary defenders of psychological egoism often point to evolutionary explanations, suggesting that prosocial behaviour evolved because it indirectly benefits the individual or their genetic lineage. However, psychological egoism faces serious objections. First, it is often criticized as unfalsifiable: any action can be reinterpreted as self-interested by

appealing to hidden motives. Second, empirical research in psychology suggests that humans are capable of empathy-driven behaviour that is not reducible to self-interest. Studies on empathic concern indicate that individuals sometimes help others even when no reward or recognition is possible. Thus, while psychological egoism raises important doubts, it does not definitively rule out the possibility of ethical altruism. Instead, it highlights the difficulty of proving the purity of altruistic motives.

From an evolutionary perspective, altruism appears paradoxical: why would organisms engage in behavior that reduces their own fitness while benefiting others? Several theories attempt to resolve this tension. Kin selection theory, advanced by W.D. Hamilton, explains altruism as behaviour that benefits genetically related individuals, thereby promoting the survival of shared genes (Hamilton 16). Similarly, reciprocal altruism, as proposed by Robert Trivers suggests that individuals help others with the expectation of future reciprocation (23). While these frameworks explain how altruistic behaviour can evolve, they do not necessarily undermine ethical altruism. Evolutionary explanations address the origins of behaviour, not its moral status. A behavior can have evolutionary roots and still be morally praiseworthy. Moreover, humans possess cognitive capacities that allow them to transcend purely biological imperatives. Cultural norms, moral reasoning, and reflective self-awareness enable individuals to act in ways that are not strictly dictated by evolutionary advantage. Thus, while biology may predispose us toward certain forms of altruism, it does not conclusively determine the limits of ethical altruism.

Again, Immanuel Kant offers a framework in which ethical altruism is not only possible but morally required. According to him, actions have moral worth only when they are performed out of duty, in accordance with the moral law, rather than from inclination or self-interest (Kant 4:397). Kant's categorical imperative requires that we treat others as ends in themselves, not merely as means. This principle entails a form of altruism: we must consider the interests and dignity of others in our actions. Importantly, Kant distinguishes between actions that merely conform to duty and those performed from duty. Only the latter possess genuine moral worth. However, Kantian altruism is not entirely selfless in the sense of excluding all personal considerations. Acting from duty involves rational recognition of moral law, which is part of one's own rational nature. Critics like G.W.F Hegel (135), and Bernard Williams (182), argue that this introduces a subtle form of self-reference, though not necessarily egoism. Kant's framework demonstrates that ethical altruism is conceptually coherent within a deontological system. It does not depend on empirical claims about human motivation but on rational principles that guide moral action.

Utilitarianism, particularly in the works of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, provides another strong foundation for ethical altruism. The principle of utility requires that we act to maximize overall happiness or well-being, regardless of personal cost. This framework embodies a radical form of impartiality: each person's happiness counts equally. In this sense, utilitarianism demands that individuals often prioritize the well-being of others over their own, especially when the benefits to others outweigh the personal sacrifice. Peter Singer's contemporary formulation of utilitarian ethics pushes this idea further, arguing that individuals in affluent societies have a moral obligation to alleviate global suffering, even at significant personal expense (Singer 231). Singer's argument suggests that ethical altruism is not only possible but morally obligatory. However, critics contend that utilitarianism imposes excessively demanding standards. If one is always required to maximize overall good, personal projects and relationships may be undermined. This raises the question of whether such a demanding form of altruism is psychologically sustainable.

More so, Virtue ethics, rooted in Aristotelian philosophy, approaches altruism from the perspective of character rather than rules or consequences. In this framework, altruism is understood as a virtue, a stable disposition to act for the good of others. Aristotle emphasized the importance of *philia* (friendship) and the role of community in ethical life. While he acknowledges that individuals naturally care for themselves, he also argued that virtuous individuals take pleasure in benefiting others (Aristotle 1169a). This suggests that altruism and self-interest need not be mutually exclusive. From a virtue ethics perspective, ethical altruism is possible insofar as individuals can cultivate dispositions that align their well-being with the well-being of others. Rather than requiring the elimination of self-interest, virtue ethics integrates it into a broader conception of human flourishing. This approach avoids the stark dichotomy between egoism and altruism, suggesting that ethical life involves a harmonious balance between concern for oneself and concern for others.

However, the central issue in evaluating ethical altruism is the nature of moral motivation. Even if altruistic action is possible, can it be sustained without some form of self-interest? Philosophers such as David Hume (85) argued that moral action is grounded in sentiment, particularly sympathy. On this view, individuals are naturally disposed to care about others, and this emotional capacity provides the basis for altruistic behaviour. In reacting to this view, Thomas Nagel in his work *The Possibility of Altruism*, argues that altruism is not just a "feeling" we happen to have, but a logical necessity. Nagel challenged the egoist by using the concept of the objective self. If I am in pain and believe that others have a reason to help me, I am making a claim that my pain is "objectively bad." If I believe my pain is objectively bad, then I must admit that anyone's pain is objectively bad. To deny this would be a failure of logic (Nagel 82). Nagel, thus, suggests that altruism is a "formal requirement on action" We act altruistically because we recognize ourselves as merely one person among many. By shifting our perspective from the "subjective" (I want this) to the "objective" (This is good for a human being), we make altruism a reality of the rational mind. However, the presence of empathic satisfaction complicates the notion of pure altruism. If helping others produces a "warm glow," does this undermine the altruistic nature of the act? Some argue that it does not, as the pleasure is a byproduct rather than the primary motivation. Thus, the problem of moral motivation does not negate ethical altruism but underscores its complexity. Altruistic action may involve a mixture of motives, without being reducible to self-interest.

Cases of extreme altruism such as risking one's life to save others provide compelling evidence for the possibility of ethical altruism. Examples include individuals who rescue strangers from danger or donate organs to unknown recipients. Economist James Andreoni coined the term "Warm Glow Giving" to describe the phenomenon where individuals donate to charity not because they care about the cause, but because they enjoy the neurochemical reward of being a "giver" (Andreoni 464). These actions often occur spontaneously, without time for calculation or consideration of personal gain. They suggest that humans are capable of prioritizing others' well-being in profound ways.

Is Altruism Possible? The Nigerian Experience

In some parts of Nigeria especially the Northern communities, altruism is often viewed through the lens of individual volunteerism. However, ethical altruism is frequently embedded in the concept of "Extended Family Systems" and "Community Cohesion," where the "Self" is fundamentally tied to the "Other." The 2014 Ebola Outbreak is perhaps the most potent modern example of "Extreme Altruism" in Nigeria. When Patrick Sawyer, the first Ebola patient in Nigeria, attempted to leave the hospital in Lagos, Dr. Adadevoh physically

intervened. Despite intense diplomatic and social pressure, she refused to release him, knowing full well the lethality of the virus. Adadevoh had no "selfish" reason to stay; she could have delegated the task or succumbed to the pressure of Sawyer's associates. Instead, she stayed to treat him and coordinate the quarantine. Adadevoh and several of her colleagues contracted Ebola and died. Her actions are credited with preventing a nationwide catastrophe in a city of over 20 million people. This aligns with the Kantian "Duty" model. Adadevoh's commitment to her Hippocratic Oath overrode her survival instinct. As noted by health analysts, "Adadevoh's intervention was the single most important factor in stopping the spread of Ebola in West Africa's most populous nation" (Adebayo 112).

Another significant case study is the 'naira-donation' in the absence of a robust state-sponsored welfare system, Nigerians have developed a culture of "Informal Altruism." This is seen in the practice of "Ajo" (rotating credit unions) and the spontaneous crowdfunding of medical bills for strangers on social media. During the 2020 'EndSARS' protests, a decentralized altruistic network emerged. Young Nigerians provided free legal aid, medical supplies, and food to protesters they had never met. This was a "porous moral circle" in action, where the shared identity of "citizen" superseded ethnic or religious divisions (Udugba 45). In Northern Nigeria, the practice of *Zakat* (obligatory almsgiving) is a pillar of faith. While a Psychological Egoist might argue this is done to avoid "divine punishment" or gain "heavenly reward," the socio-economic reality is that it redistributes wealth to the *Asnaf* (the needy) regardless of personal relationship. Large-scale charity by Nigerian churches often fills the gaps left by the government, funding schools and hospitals. However, critics like Soyinka have pointed out that when charity is used to "buy" influence, its altruistic status becomes "impure" (Soyinka 89). Hence, in the African worldview, the "Self" does not exist in isolation. Therefore, the distinction between "My Benefit" and "Your Benefit" is a false dichotomy. If the community thrives, I thrive. This Holistic Altruism suggests that the "Self" and "Other" are a single ethical unit. Therefore the reality of genuine altruism remain not only true but highly significant.

The Challenge of Ethical Altruism

Ethical altruism is grounded in the idea that moral agents should prioritize the welfare of others when making ethical decisions. Modern philosophical discussions of altruism are heavily influenced by utilitarianism and ethical theory that holds that actions should be judged according to their consequences, specifically their capacity to maximize suffering. Altruism here becomes a rational moral principle because helping others increases overall well-being. Peter Singer has provided one of the most influential modern defenses of altruistic ethics. In his *Famine, Affluence, and morality*, Singer argued that individuals in affluent societies have a moral obligation to help those suffering from extreme poverty if they can do so without sacrificing something of comparable moral significance (Singer, 231). His argument radically expands the scope of moral responsibility by suggesting that geographical distance or the presence of other potential helpers does not diminish moral duty. His position has significantly influenced movements such as effective altruism, which advocates using evidence and reason to maximize the positive impact of charitable actions. However, this perspective also raises serious questions about how much individuals are morally required to sacrifice for others.

One of the most prominent critiques of ethical altruism concerns this issue of moral demandingness. Critics like John Arthur (163), argued that strong altruistic principles require individuals to give up too much of their own well-being for the sake of others. In line with this view, Samuel Sheffler has argued that moral theories must allow room for personal

projects, commitments, and relationships. For Sheffler, individuals are permitted to give special weight to their own interests and those of people close to them (14). If moral theories like utilitarianism require individuals to sacrifice nearly all personal resources to benefit the public or total stranger, they risk becoming psychologically unrealistic and morally oppressive. Similarly, Thomas Nagel suggest that ethical systems must balance impartial moral concerns with the legitimate standpoint of the individual agent (Nagel, 168). From this perspective, while helping others is morally admirable, individuals cannot be expected to treat their own interests as morally significant. The demandingness objection therefore challenges the practicality of strict altruistic ethics. If moral obligations become too burdensome, they may discourage rather than encourage moral action.

Another challenge concerns the relationship between altruism and personal autonomy. Ethical theories that prioritize the welfare of others may risk undervaluing the autonomy and rights of individual rights. The moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant offers an alternative framework that emphasize respect for persons as autonomous rational agents. For Kant, moral duty arise from rational principles rather than purely from consequences (37). While Kant recognize duties of beneficence, he did not require individuals to sacrifice their entire well-being for the sake of others. Kantian ethics therefore places units on altruistic obligations by emphasizing the intrinsic dignity and autonomy of individuals. Moral agents must treat both themselves and others as end in themselves rather than merely as instruments for maximizing overall welfare. Kant's perspective highlights an important tension within ethical altruism: how to promote the well-being of others without undermining the moral agency and legitimate interests of the individual.

A further challenge is when altruism is viewed as a substitute for systemic social reform, because, focusing solely on individual acts of charity may obscure the structural causes of poverty and inequality. It is on this note that Pogge argue that global poverty is not merely the result of unfortunate circumstances but is often produced and maintained by unjust global institutions (Pogge, 15). Here, individuals in wealthy societies have obligations not only to provide charitable assistance but also to reform the economic and political systems that perpetuate inequality. Sen also emphasized that poverty should be understood as a deprivation of capabilities rather than simply a lack of income (87). Relatively, Esikot and Edidiong further emphasized on the danger of poverty as an unresolved existence of a pattern of deprivation, rather than the deprivation itself (294). Addressing poverty therefore requires institutional changes that expand access to education, healthcare, and political participation. These perspectives suggest that ethical altruism must be complemented by broader social and political reforms. Without addressing structural injustice, altruistic actions alone may only provide temporary relief rather than lasting solutions.

Furthermore, ethical altruism also faces challenges from psychology and evolutionary theory, as humans are naturally inclined toward partiality and self-interest rather than universal altruism. Evolutionary theories suggest that altruistic behaviour evolved primarily within kinship groups and cooperative communities. As such, individuals may find it psychologically difficult to extend equal concern to distant strangers. This tension between moral ideals and psychological realities complicates attempts to implement demanding altruistic norms. Nevertheless, moral education, cultural norms, and social institutions can expand the scope of moral concern beyond immediate social groups. Ethical frameworks that encourage empathy, global awareness, and cooperative behaviour may help overcome these psychological limitations. Given these challenges, many philosophers like Liam Murphy (64) and Thomas Negel (164), argued for a balanced approach to altruism. Rather than

demanding extreme self-sacrifice, ethical frameworks can encourage reasonable contributions to the well-being of others while respecting individual autonomy and social justice. A balanced approach seeks to;

- i. Moderate altruistic obligations – this encourages helping others without requiring excessive sacrifice;
- ii. Institutional reforms – this requires a strategic address of structural causes of poverty and inequality;
- iii. Moral education and cultural change – this approach should aim at promoting social empathy and global responsibility. By integrating these elements, ethical altruism can remain a powerful ideal while avoiding the pitfalls of unrealistic moral expectations.

Conclusion

Ethical altruism represents one of the most compelling moral ideals in philosophical thought. Ethical altruism is possible, but it is rare. It requires a deliberate, rational override of our biological "hard-wiring." While most of our "kind" acts are indeed coloured by "Warm Glow" or social expectations, the existence of the "Extreme Altruist" and the "Moral Hero" (like Dr. Adadevoh) proves that the human spirit can achieve a state of Objective Concern. By emphasizing concern for the welfare of others, it challenges individuals and societies to confront issues such as poverty, inequality, and global injustice. However, ethical altruism also raises significant philosophical challenges, including questions about moral demandingness, individual autonomy, structural responsibility, and psychological feasibility. Hence, this study reveals that while strict forms of altruism may impose excessive burdens on individuals the core ethical insight of altruism remains deeply valuable. Moral agents have legitimate responsibilities to assist others and promote human well-being, particularly in a world/society where more than fifty percent of its citizens grapple with intense poverty and vast inequalities. The task for individuals therefore, is not to abandon altruism but to refine it. By balancing altruistic concern with principles of justice, autonomy, and institutional reforms, philosophers and policy makers can develop a more realistic and effective approaches to moral responsibility in the modern society.

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