

BOOK REVIEW:

Do Unto Others:
Extraordinary Acts of Ordinary People

[Samuel P. Oliner, Boulder, CO: Westview Press. 288 pp.]

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Martin Buber observes in *Between Man and Man* that if we consider the individual alone, then we see that individual as we see the moon, only as an object in isolation. If we consider only the aggregate, then we see individuals as we see stars in the Milky Way, as a large vague cloud (Buber, 1965). Only by studying individuals with other individuals can we understand both the personal stories and the general themes. *Do Unto Others: Extraordinary Acts of Ordinary People*, Samuel Oliner's well-researched and readable analysis of altruism, presents just such an expository collage of narratives and themes. Oliner profiles individual acts of altruism and places these profiles in the context of others, with repeated particulars conveying the resonant patterns of altruistic behavior. Through its firm embrace of complexity, its adherence to balance, and its commitment to clear, direct explication, *Do Unto Others* makes a distinctive contribution to our understanding of altruism.

As a social scientist, Oliner is comfortable with multiple ways of knowing. At its best, *Do Unto Others* effectively integrates personal narratives, empirical analysis, and theory with prose that is straightforward and free of jargon, allowing the reader to move deftly through profound subject matter. The three stated purposes of the book are to discuss heroism in different contexts, to find commonalities across different settings, and to consider the implications for moral education. In this regard, the book recalls and complements the remarkable work *Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust* (Block & Drucker, 1992). Whereas *Rescuers* depicts a series of detailed, individual portraits, *Do Unto Others* interweaves many different cases in order to identify common patterns, moving gracefully between the nomothetic and the idiographic, providing typologies of altruistic and heroic acts and the shared traits of people who perform these acts.

In short, altruistic behavior is voluntary, unrewarded helping of another, with *heroic* altruism including a high degree of risk or self-sacrifice. *Do Unto Others* tells us that altruism begins in infancy as an innate

predisposition and is nurtured in a healthy relationship with one's parents. The concentric influences of peers, school, community, and society reinforce and expand the young person's altruistic qualities, which can then become internalized "normocentric" values. To realize the force of these normocentric values, consider the reaction of two communities to the treatment of Ryan White, the courageous teenager who contracted AIDS from a transfusion of blood in the mid-1980s. When his disease became known, Ryan's home town of Kokomo, Indiana ostracized him. Students harassed him in the hallways and on the sidewalks, parents withdrew their children from school, and school officials barred him from attending classes. Ultimately, Ryan left Kokomo and moved to Cicero, Indiana, where the townspeople and the students and teachers in his high school welcomed him and his family warmly. Kokomo and Cicero, two Midwestern towns in the same state undergoing the same struggle with AIDS, nurtured two different sets of normocentric values—and correspondingly different displays of altruistic behavior among their citizens.

Central to the development of moral individuals, according to Oliner, are empathy and a willingness to act—or efficacy. Such individuals learn optimism, certainty, moral autonomy, concern for others, and respect for time-honored moral principles, most notably the Golden Rule. Significantly, the title of the book refers to the Golden Rule in the *positive* form, which has multiple sources, including Leviticus 19:18 ("Love your neighbor as yourself") and Matthew 7:12 ("Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them"). In contrast, Rabbi Hillel offered the negative form: "What is hateful to you do not do to your fellow." In normal times, the negative form provides more freedom—by instructing people to avoid immoral acts and allowing them to choose any behaviors that are not hateful. Though more constraining than the negative, the positive form is more *proactive*, telling what altruistic acts *should* be performed. Moreover, in times of crisis, simply not hurting people is morally insufficient, and in fact defines the role of the bystander. In malevolent societies, to "*do* unto others . . ." is to be a rescuer.

The book opens with a compelling account of the Polish rescuer, Balwina Piecuch, who hid the young Samuel Oliner from the Nazis and saved his life. It then explores heroic and conventional altruism, dividing altruistic people into eight types, with each chapter devoted to one type. A brief concluding chapter identifies general lessons.

Oliner begins his discussion of the eight types of altruistic behavior by focusing on the heroic deeds during the attack on the World Trade Center. I was briefly put off by the jingoistic title, "Let's Roll," which for me connoted an unfortunate bumper-sticker simplicity that was uncharacteristic of this thoughtful chapter. The following chapter skillfully depicts non-Jewish

heroic altruists who saved Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. Underlying their heroic altruism are ethical beliefs about justice and fairness and an active response to persecution. When asked why he rescued Jews, the courageous Giorgio Perlasca provided a response that is typical of these rescuers: There was no other choice. Among those profiled are the so-called “Japanese Schindler,” Sempo Sugihara, who saved thousands of Polish Jews by writing transit visas, Carl Lutz, who attempted to save more than 100,000 Jews, and Georg Duckewitz, who contributed to the saving of 7,200 Jewish lives in Denmark. With the emphasis on action, Oliner says that success came about from the “daily practice” (pp. 61) of saving Jews. In that regard, I wished for more information about the extraordinary efforts of Bulgaria to save Jewish people.

Chapter 4 presents a representative set of brief biographies of Jewish rescuers in Nazi-occupied Europe, profiling equal numbers of men and women and building a strong case for the prevalence of Jewish resistance. Oliner is adept at drawing on statistics to sharpen a point or underscore a theme extracted from analysis of the narratives, concluding, “The myth of Jewish passivity does not bear out because there was a disproportionate number of Jewish resisters against the Nazi oppressors in all of Nazi-occupied Europe” (p. 89). In fact, much of the early Holocaust research understated the extent of Jewish resistance, which could take a variety of forms, great and small, and in many instances can be found only in survivor testimony.

The well-researched chapter 5, based in part on 214 interviews of Carnegie heroes, further explores the distinctive traits of heroic altruists: normocentrism, social responsibility, empathy, strong spiritual beliefs, a belief in reciprocity, well-defined moral principles, efficacy, and sometimes blunt impulsiveness. The following chapter on military heroes directly confronts the conflict between the moral principle of not killing and the practical necessity of killing during times of war. Fierce devotion to one’s group, so antithetical to *rescuing the other*, is a necessary component of heroism under fire.

The moral leaders of chapter 7 are a diverse group—beginning with Dr. Wendy Ring, a general practitioner who established a mobile clinic in Humboldt County, California to provide medical care to the homeless and the poor. Ring displays the qualities of all those in this category: empathy, humility, the ability to carry out her goals, sustained commitment, a willingness to set aside self-interest, and idealism tempered with a sense of realism. The moral leaders who follow include Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Elie Wiesel, Mother Teresa, Jonas Salk and Albert Sabin, Rachel Carson, Chico Mendes, and Julia “Butterfly” Hill, a young woman who saved an ancient redwood tree

by living in it for two years. Even with the legendary moral leaders of our time, Oliner does not deify. He recognizes these women and men as flawed and striving human beings, not demigods. In fact, one of the overarching themes of the book is the *interdependence* of altruistic exemplars. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, looked to Gandhi as a role model for moral action, with help from Bayard Rustin. While in prison, Nelson Mandela developed a sustaining relationship with his warden, James Gregory, who guarded him from 1966 until his release 24 years later.

The chapter on philanthropy offers several overlapping typologies, which begin to stack up: Maimonides's eight levels of giving are followed by seven types of philanthropists, four levels of philanthropy, two factors influencing people to give away money, and seven levels of corporate giving. The chapter is difficult to diagram, but useful for pointing readers to recent, primary sources on philanthropy. Drawing on different religious traditions, Oliner concludes with clear requirements of philanthropy, emphasizing "the results of giving to alleviate suffering" (p. 193). In his study of volunteers, Oliner focuses on the hospice movement, categorizing the various reasons for volunteering (and not volunteering). Cogent reporting of his survey results highlights this brief chapter, though it could be strengthened with the inclusion of at least a few profiles of moral exemplars; Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter come to mind as potential candidates. The brief concluding chapter lists the "common components" of heroic and altruistic behavior, with a view toward prescription, how to foster goodness and facilitate moral action.

As a social scientist, I am tempted to use Ockham's razor to reduce Oliner's eight types of altruistic and heroic acts to four: 1) heroic responses in crisis (heroes in the World Trade Center attack and Carnegie heroes), 2) courageous resistance against tyranny (non-Jewish rescuers in Nazi-occupied Europe and moral leaders), 3) fierce devotion to one's group in the face of death—a devotion that can involve the killing of others (Jewish rescuers in Nazi-occupied Europe and military heroes), and 4) sustained, unselfish giving for the good of others (philanthropists and volunteers).

Considering the rarity of fully developed altruism, is Oliner's book Panglossian? After all, "tiny" is too large a word to characterize the proportion of people who helped Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. Indeed, the author may occasionally err in the service of optimism. For example, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was not established "to forgive" (p. 154), as Oliner says, but to promote full disclosure of the crimes of apartheid and to begin the process of *reconciling* the perpetrators and the victimized. Forgiveness was left to the families and was explicitly not mandated by the TRC. In general, however, Oliner answers questions of sanguinity with *balance*—by presenting goodness against a backdrop of

inhumanity. In the first chapter, for example, we learn about Oliner's rescue from the Nazis, but we also hear about the murder of his family and about a cruel and opportunistic Polish man named Krupa, who crippled the Jews he captured "just for fun" before delivering them to the Gestapo (12). Similarly, the chapter on Carnegie heroes begins with the case of a "bad Samaritan," David Cash, who walked away and did nothing while his friend Jeremy Strohmeyer sexually assaulted and murdered a seven-year-old girl.

Nevertheless, readers may still wonder about the abundance of cowardice and indifference and the dearth of moral leadership and heroic altruism. In part, Oliner's disciplined hopefulness deflects this concern. There is more altruism than most people are aware of, and how much of it one finds depends on where one looks. Oliner's final self-reflection explains his perspective: "Perhaps my own personal losses have turned me in the direction of studying the nature of goodness, for the dark beginning made me yearn for light" (p. 211).

Susan Sontag describes compassion as "an unstable emotion" that must be "translated into action" to survive (Sontag, 2003, p. 101). Significantly, Oliner's book begins with the word "Do" – and continues by documenting the value of translating compassion and empathy into action. Ultimately, reading about these extraordinary acts of altruism creates an ebullient sobriety, a strong and careful desire to educate others and to apply Oliner's findings to existing problems in the world. We know what needs to be done, we know it's possible, but we also know the difficulties that lie ahead. Oliner bestows this responsibility by refuting the need for superhumanness and reiterating the theme of possibility. "Goodness, like evil," he says, "is teachable, and the results of such teaching are measurable" (p. 211). By the end, the book has accomplished the main goal of a moral exemplar: offering inspiration through example.

REFERENCES

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