



THE MEME OF ALTRUISM AND DEGREES OF PERSONHOOD

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Ms. Stoel addresses the principles of acting for the sake of others and how those actions apply not only to humans, but all sentient beings from the insect and animal kingdoms to artificial intelligence.

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The struggle for civil rights has been one of constant movement through the centuries and it is by no means finished. From a king having only rights, then onto the noble men, to all white men who owned land, to all white men, to men of color, to womyn¹. Despite ongoing struggles, there is a clear trend visible that shows a general increase in acknowledgment of rights (non-citizens, non-human animals, children, people with disabilities, womyn and minorities).

¹ Womyn's rights: "[O]ne of a number of alternative spellings of the word "women" used by some feminist writers." Retrieved from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Womyn>

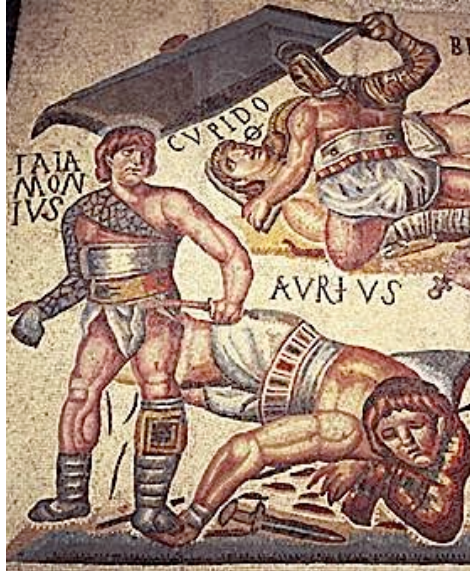
The fall of the Roman Empire



Ancient Library of Alexandria
Credit: <http://mediterraneancultures.wikispaces.com/08-EGYPT>

When thinking of Rome, the beautiful architecture, the sophistication of the empire's literary (The Great Library of Alexandria) and political culture come to mind. Unfortunately these cultural glories were limited to a tiny privileged elite - those who owned enough land to count as gentry landowners. They represented maybe three percent of the whole population. Its structures were probably horrible reminders of inequality to pretty much everyone else.

The Romans had an economy based on slave labor. Cheap slave labor resulted in the unemployment of the people of Rome who became dependent on handouts from the state. At some point the ratio of slaves vs. non-slaves was five to three. The Romans attempted a policy of unrestricted free trade but this led to working class Romans being unable to compete with foreign trade. The government was forced to subsidize the working class Romans to make up the differences in prices. This resulted in thousands of Romans choosing just to live on the subsidies sacrificing their standard of living with an idle life of ease. The massive divide between the rich and the poor increased further still. The Romans' dependency on slave labor led not only to a decline in employment, morals, values and ethics, but also to the stagnation of material innovation, whether through entrepreneurial or technological advancement. The terrible treatment of slaves led to rebellion and several Servile Wars, the most famous being the revolt led by Spartacus.



Depiction of Revolt of Spartacus
Credit: <http://www.vhinkle.com/rome/spartacus.html>

Captive barbarians were being fed to wild animals in the Coliseum, and its criminal law dealt ruthlessly with anyone seeking to remedy the highly unequal distribution of property.

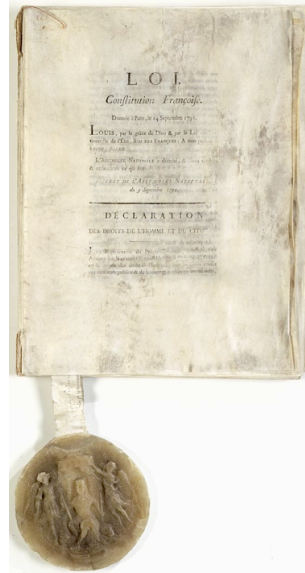
In 650 AD, as in 350 AD, peasants were still laboring away in much the same way to feed themselves and to produce the surplus that funded everything else; for example, the full cost of the military via incredibly high taxes from which the elite was exempt. However, as the Empire grew, the cost of maintaining it and its armies, which the emperor's powers depended on, grew with it. This cost eventually grew so great that any new challenges such as invasions and crop failures could not be solved by the acquisition of more territory. Intense, authoritarian efforts to maintain social cohesion by Domitian [the Roman Emperor from 81 to 96 AD] and Constantine the Great [the Roman Emperor from 306 to 337 AD] led only to an ever greater strain on the population which led small farmers to destitution or into dependency upon a landed elite. The barbarians invaded and marked the beginning of the fall of the Roman Empire. As the west fell, the east muddled through a while longer because it was a bit richer, but slowly, piece-by-piece, it too succumbed and gave way to feudalism.

The peasant revolt of 1381

Since the 14th Century, the word *peasant* has had a negative connotation and is not a neutral term. It was not always that way; peasants were once viewed as pious [Living next to God] and seen with respect and pride. Life was hard for peasants; life was hard for everyone. As nobles increasingly lived better quality lives, there arose a new consciousness of those on top and those on bottom, and being a peasant was not a position of equality. King Richard II tried a heavy-handed enforcement 'the third poll tax', the third in a line of poll tax experiments that became increasingly unpopular. The third poll tax was neither levied at a flat rate nor according to schedule; instead, it allowed some of the poor to pay a reduced rate, while others who were equally poor had to pay the full tax, prompting cries of injustice.

There had been many revolts already, but the peasant revolt of 1381 was the one that came to be seen as a mark of the beginning of the end of serfdom in medieval England. Although the revolt itself was a failure, it increased awareness in the upper classes of the need for the reform of feudalism in England and the appalling misery felt by the lower classes as a result of their enforced near-slavery.

The French Revolution 1789–1799 *Liberté, Egalité, and Fraternité*



Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, signed by Louis XVI, sealed with the seal of the king.
Credit: <http://a-l-ancien-regime.tumblr.com/post/16258316197/constitution-of-1791-decree-of-the-national>

If the guillotine is the most memorable negative image of the French Revolution, then the most positive is surely the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*², one of the founding documents in the human rights tradition. Prior to the revolution many things were askew, the country was nearing bankruptcy and outlays outpaced income. This was because of France's financial obligations stemming from involvement in the Seven Years War³ and its participation in the American Revolutionary War⁴. The country's extremely regressive tax system subjected the lower classes to a heavy burden, while numerous exemptions existed for the nobility and clergy.

The Revolution itself is regarded by some historians as one of the most important events in human history. In fact, the Revolution is often seen as marking the "dawn of the

² Frank Maloy Anderson, ed., "The Constitutions and Other Select Documents Illustrative of the History of France 1789-1901" [Minneapolis: H. W. Wilson, 1904], 170-74. Retrieved June 28, 2012
<http://www.columbia.edu/~iw6/docs/dec1793.html>

³ Robson, Eric. [1996]. *The New Cambridge Modern History, Vol. 7: The Old Regime 1713-63*. Retrieved June 28, 2012

http://histories.cambridge.org/extract?id=chol9780521045452_CHOL9780521045452A022&cited_by=1

⁴ Membridge [n.d.] *American Revolutionary War*. Retrieved June 29, 2012
<http://www.americanrevolutionarywar.net/>

modern era". Within France itself, the Revolution permanently crippled the power of the aristocracy and drained the wealth of the Church, although the two institutions survived despite the damage they sustained.

The American Civil War

Before the American Civil War slavery separated the North and the South. The slavery issue addressed not only the well-being of the slaves (although abolitionists raised the issue), but also the question of whether slavery was an anachronistic evil that was incompatible with American values or a profitable economic system protected by the Constitution. All sides agreed slavery exhausted the land and that they had to find new lands to survive. The south feared living together with free blacks would cause sin and destruction; Northerners came to view slavery as the very antithesis of the good society, as well as a threat to their own fundamental values and interests [Foner, 1970].

Ending slavery became the only goal. War and slavery for the Confederacy's 3.5 million blacks effectively ended when Union armies arrived; they were nearly all freed by the Emancipation Proclamation [Lincoln, 1863].

What we can observe here is a repetitive cycle through the ages, equality/abundance/progress vs. inequality/scarcity/transformation or collapse of a civilization. I contend this is due to the altruism meme; history constantly shows that it is in both human/non-human and economic interest to be altruistic, the more equality the more progress (in all its forms) we can see.

"When you call yourself an Indian or a Muslim or a Christian or a European, or anything else, you are being violent. Do you see why it is violent? Because you are separating yourself from the rest of mankind. When you separate yourself by belief, by nationality, by tradition, it breeds violence. So a man who is seeking to understand violence does not belong to any country, to any religion, to any political party or partial system; he is concerned with the total understanding of mankind."

— J. Krishnamurti, *"Freedom from the Known"*

Genetic and memetic altruism

Human culture and organization are the creations of an animal; a large brained and evolved hominid. Social patterns came into existence because of drives, motivations, instincts and needs. Genes and memes drive human evolution. Where genes use us as battlebots in which competing genes slug it out (as in "survival of the fittest"/"natural selection"), memes are the driving force behind social evolution.

"Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation." [Dawkins, 1976]

Language, a very successful meme learned through imitation/knowledge sharing, evolved by individuals interacting with each other more and more frequently. Groups

formed and humans became more altruistic hence, co-operative groups were more productive and sustained healthier, stronger, and more numerous members and made more effective use of information. Through the development of communities and social relationships we have become more 'domesticated' and subsequently, less aggressive.

Altruism is not only a superior moral faculty that suppresses basic selfish urges, but is rather basic to the brain, hard-wired and pleasurable [Moll, et al 2006]. Both memetically and genetically we appear to be predisposed for altruism (well, most of us anyway).

Others do it too

Altruistic behavior is seen amongst many different animal species, from apes to cellular slime moulds. Altruistic behavior is even seen in tiny little robots [Waibel, Floreano, & Keller, 2011].



Meerkat
Credit: Free MS Office Clipart

A great example of a non-human, animal altruistic society is that of meerkats. Meerkats have sentries where each has watch duty for about an hour and alert the rest of the group when a predator is nearby, thereby endangering him or herself as they also bring the predator's attention to themselves. By doing so it ensures the higher probability of its group members' survival and secures gene survival even though it may not be through offspring of its own. Young female meerkats take care of the young, even to the extent that when an enemy approaches they will collect the young meerkats and lay over them to protect them with their own bodies. A selfish meerkat in this group would have a higher probability of survival than the altruistic meerkat for certain, but imagine if the social arrangements were different? What if all the meerkats were selfish; no sharing of food and no raising the young meerkats together? Instead of sentries, the meerkats would

have to spend most of their time looking out for predators while trying to hoard food to secure and protect resources while looking out for their own young. That is, if you live long enough to have young. *Meerkats would not be able to have sustainable communities if it wasn't for altruism.*

Are selfish communities sustainable?

Selfishness has purpose when an entity is a lone wolf, but not when it is part of a social community. In a society selfishness leads to inequity. For both social and economic purposes, it makes a lot of sense to be altruistic in a community.

Research clearly indicates that the countries that fare poorly (measured by social gradients like crime, dropping out of school, mental illnesses etc.), whatever the outcome, seem to be the more unequal ones. There is a direct link from general social dysfunction to inequality [Wilkinson, 2011].

It's not just that one or two things go wrong; it's most things. Think of the expense, the human cost of that. Inequality is one of the major oppressors hindering a global change of mentality from scarcity to abundance.

I contend that a society based on selfish behavior is not sustainable. With that kind of social arrangement we lose social cohesion and oppressive conditions for both humans and other entities are created. Entire civilizations fall when selfishness reigns. Regardless of my personal feelings on whether or not altruism is innate, we need to progress to ensure continuation of the species.

The Technological Singularity and the Altruistic Singularity

The hard work of millions of scientists has turned countless science fictions into science facts. We now have technologies science fiction writers only fantasized about. Kurzweil argues, that whenever a technology approaches some kind of a barrier, a new technology will be invented allowing us to cross that barrier. He cites numerous past examples of this to substantiate his assertions. He predicts that such paradigm shifts have and will continue to become increasingly common and will lead to a "technological change so rapid and profound it represents a rupture in the fabric of human history" [Kurzweil, 2001]. We must ask ourselves the question: Is there an evolutionary pressure that weeds out zero sum predatory behavior and rewards crowd sourced/synergistic behavior? Not that selfishness in itself is always bad, for example: Linux was begun in stark competition with other large operating systems. Throughout history we can clearly see there is an increase in synergy/technology/science/cooperation, which for the sake of brevity and clarity, we can call an altruistic trend. We have increasingly more 'faith' in our fellow humans because we simply stand to lose if we don't. When we start losing faith our society will collapse.

For better or worse, we have become dependent on the societies we live in and in order to progress, in abundance and safety, we must endeavor to become more 'altruistic'; we must engineer the 'altruistic' singularity.

Degrees of personhood

With the development of autonomic computing, ambient intelligence and our increased understanding of the animal world, our philosophical conceptions of human self-constitution and agency are being challenged more than ever before. We have come to a point where we have enough reason to reassess and emancipate the most basic concepts of law to extend the circle beyond humans and include such non-human entities as animals, artificial intelligence, or extraterrestrial life.

I argue that if we do not, we may be sowing the seeds of our own self-destruction. While we enslave other entities but refuse to take responsibility for them, we are creating ‘oppressive/predatory’ environments that will force these non-person entities to develop defense mechanisms; for example, the ‘self aware AI’ risks debate.



AI Vitruvian Man

Much has been speculated about the development of AI's and what they could be like. We could end up fighting for the same resources once computer intelligence develops self-awareness. AI could lay in waiting, biding its time until it is strong enough to show it's 'true colors'. Then there is the possibility of a 'friendly AI', but this requires we instill it with an altruistic nature. Of course, a good way to do this apart from proper programming is by example. What better way to 'ensure' a friendly AI then by treating it as an equal, giving it civil rights?

“Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is to be a slave.”

– Roy Batty *Bladerunner*

Humans including non-humans as persons may be a tough pill to swallow. Rather than trying to change the laws to include other species, I suggest we reject speciesism but do not try to say that all should be treated equal, that all lives have equal worth, or that all interests of humans and non-humans must be given equal weight. Instead, we make the more limited and defensible claim that where non-humans and humans have similar interests, we must not disregard or discount the interests of another being just because that being is not human.

I suggest we create a ‘scale’ to measure the degrees of personhood. All capacities and attributes that an entity possesses (collectively constituting personhood), for example: agency, intentionality, self-determination, etc., will place this entity into a certain category. Rights would then be extended to ‘the degree that the entity is a person’; great apes get many similar rights, insects get much fewer rights etc. For example, an entity that can display behavior of avoidance of physical pain (volition, intention) should be given the right not to receive pain from actions by humans.

From here to there

Broad acceptance of such a concept would be in the interest of many existing human and animal rights organizations, which with implementation of this scale will have a more solid legal standing. Not only for the civil rights of humans and non-humans today, but also for the humans and non-humans of the future.

We are standing at a crossroad, one road leads to a possible dead end for humans (and whatever potential we may have had), and the other road to a future free of suffering, filled with potential.

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