

## Posted to the Gilder forum - November 7, 1999

### Altruism

Altruism is giving without expectation of returns, ever, of any kind.

I have just posted a reply to Toni Mack that includes some new thoughts regarding altruism. I suddenly realized that personal altruism as defined above is probably OK. But often in giving we can do more harm than good so we should be very careful of what and when we give. We have to think past the act itself and look for the repercussions. Not an easy task, specially with loved ones and cripples and other helpless people. That is where the idea of not giving fish to the poor but teaching them to fish comes from.

Many of you are familiar with Pavlov's salivation experiments with dogs—conditioning. People are conditioned just as easily as dogs. Most rich and outstanding people come from poor backgrounds. Take Andrew Carnegie he became one of the richest men on earth and he certainly was not born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Take Jesus, born in a barn, he became one of the most influential people ever. The Chinese have a saying: "No fortune lasts three generations." What do they mean? The first generation is poor and will work hard to make ends meet but in the process they just might make a fortune. The second generation gets an education and just might enlarge the fortune. The third generation, born with a silver spoon in its mouth (or a silver foot as they said of George Bush) is sure to lose it. They say that necessity is the mother of invention. It is also the mother of great fortunes.

In our altruistic drive we must make sure we don't condition our recipients to become beggars. Giving to and helping flood victims is good with no possible harmful consequences. The victims are not going to be conditioned by this one time help. On the other hand, give food to the hobos that reaches your door and you are conditioning them to remain beggars for the rest of their lives.

And this bring us to the "ethical" aspect of altruism.

Both capitalism (democracy) and communism believe in equality. In capitalism we talk about the equality of opportunity while in communism we talk about the equality of outcome. Both sound good to a tender heart but in practice they are total opposites. Capitalism tries to pull every one up to the top while communism pushes everyone down to the lowest common denominator.

Altruism cannot have both outcomes. It goes against reason that the same action can have two different and opposite results. Imagine what would happen to physics if this were possible, we would not be living in an orderly world or even in a chaotic one. We would be living in a madhouse.

So we have to take sides in our definition of the word altruism in its ethical sense. It is either

applicable to communism or it is applicable to capitalism but never to both.

My choice is:

Communism is altruism at work.

Capitalism is fair trade, value for value, at work.

Denny