

ARE OUR ACTS OF KINDNESS AS STRAIGHTFORWARD AS THEY SEEM?

It's a bitterly cold morning as you set off to meet your friend, and the coins in your pocket are sufficient for a hot chocolate. As you turn the corner with the café in sight, you spot a very thin young boy, shivering in a torn and dirty T-shirt. Would you avert your eyes and rush past? Or might you act in a more altruistic way, despite the fact that this child is unknown to you, and buy the hot drink for him instead?

1

In his defence, the other person said he was stressed out and was dealing with personal issues, but my friend knew their tutor had warned him not to let personal problems impede his academic goals. Eventually her altruistic traits won through and she told him he could take the credit as well as her, but that he would have to hurry up and sort his life out. Although similar dilemmas have existed since time immemorial, the term 'altruism' was coined by Auguste Comte, the French philosopher and father of sociology, in 1851. He defined it as 'intentional action, ultimately for the welfare of others that entails at least the possibility of either no benefit or a loss to the actor'.

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Displays of 'niceness' have an underlying selfish motive, according to this school of thought. For example, in the second scenario above, it may be a case of 'You scratch my back, then I scratch yours'. And by donating a drink to the child, are you just stroking your own ego? While these arguments are nothing new, with the dawn of the digital age, the controversy has grown. But let's start with a belief that is rarely contested. Many people claim that modern technology has made the world a smaller place, and has eliminated international borders.

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Although some will respond to these in weary resignation, others, refusing to feel powerless, will want to take action. But which action? I was recently introduced to a man who had once jumped on a plane to help out in a region severely affected by flooding. We'll call him 'John'. He said he had been deeply moved by the people's plight and had wanted to do something 'proactive'.

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However, he was soon brought down to earth, realising that in a disaster zone, he was a useless bystander. As we talked, he confessed that he lacked any specialist training or skills, but this had only occurred to him in hindsight. His heart had been in the right place, but he had ended up eating food that could have been handed out to local people, and requiring medical attention from doctors that were already overwhelmed.

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Online campaigning appears to offer an alternative approach. It's easy to believe you can be a catalyst for change without looking up from your laptop. In the digital age, we can watch videos of our favourite celebrities protesting against injustice, click on 'like' to endorse a worthy cause, tweet 140 characters about a humanitarian crisis, and generate viral slogans from hashtags. But what does this accomplish?

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According to relief agencies, there is plenty of goodwill, but a dearth of donations – possibly a result of 'charity fatigue'. Indeed, it was estimated that donations fell by 20% last year. Then the concern that your money won't end up 'in the right place' is also a deterrent. Just as the motives for altruism can sometimes be questionable, you can also be rendered powerless by questions about how best to show it.



Disaster Relief

Students sorting clothes for a disaster relief effort

- A** It is true that real-time updates and live feeds allow you to view people's tragic situations in far-flung countries as never before. And the images, taken not just by photo journalists but by anyone with a recording device, have become far more intimate.
- B** The situation turns out not to be as straightforward as it seems. In order to do so, your own needs must come second to the needs of others. According to psychologists, this is easier said than done.
- C** Certainly it can help people to feel part of a global caring community. However, this is illusory in terms of creating impactful change, and it may also lead them to overlook the most practical thing in a critical situation.
- D** Scientists and psychologists have been debating the nature and evolutionary origins of altruistic behaviour ever since. It has also been suggested that altruism doesn't really exist.
- E** Then consider a slightly different situation in which the potential recipient of your goodwill is more familiar to you. This happened to a friend only recently: her contribution to a collaborative project was far more significant in terms of time, effort and ideas than her classmate's.
- F** Vague notions of tending to the sick, or helping to rebuild the infrastructure had begun to form. As with many other willing volunteers, the relinquishing of home comforts for a few months seemed to him a small sacrifice to make.
- G** This, according to relief agencies, is not a unique case. In the haste to assist the needy, many would-be volunteers rush in without weighing up what they can realistically contribute against how much they might actually hinder relief efforts.

Reading

- 1 You are going to read a magazine article. Six paragraphs have been removed from the article. Choose from the paragraphs (A–G) the one which fits each gap (1–6). There is one extra paragraph that you do not need to use.

In gapped-text activities, study the wording immediately before each gap. This will tell you the sort of information you are looking for. Remember to also look at the wording after a gap – this may be what you need to confirm the answer.

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Are sports stars born or made?

What separates a competent player in a school or local team, from a gold-medal winning star? At what stage is it possible to identify potential new stars – in childhood, the teenage years or not until adulthood? Is that potential determined by their genes or their environment? Certainly, there is plenty of superficial evidence for the importance of genes.

① ☐ Well, the short answer is, maybe. That's because, when we dig deeper into the influence of genes, we find that this is a highly complex area of science. Let's take something as straightforward as height. It's reasonable to assume that someone's height is going to have a major impact on how far they can progress in certain sports like basketball or high jump. And research has also established that it's a highly heritable characteristic – 80% being down to genes and 20% environment and diet.

② ☐ None of this is to say that genes aren't important. It's just that there are other aspects of sports performance that are going to be easier to identify and manipulate. For

starters, few young athletes would be able to get involved with sports at all without help from their parents, who provide valuable resources including transportation, finance and emotional support. Then it's also widely recognised that coaches contribute to an athlete's development in numerous ways.

③ ☐ Indeed, Sir Clive Woodward, formerly the England rugby coach, believes that there are very few things that cannot be coached. However, most coaches would also recognise that there are certain influences that they do not control and one of the most crucial of these is the wider culture. Why do so many good ice hockey players come from Canada? Footballers from Brazil? Rugby players from New Zealand?

④ ☐ Admittedly, there's little that most sportspeople can do to influence this. But what is relatively easy to change is where a young athlete grows up. Evidence suggests that this should be neither too small nor too big: minor towns lack the necessary facilities and in larger centres the facilities become overloaded. There's also the debate about age. Is it better to allow children to play a broad spectrum of sports before choosing a specialisation, or to specialise young?

⑤ ☐ Given this, specialising too young could be a mistake. But whichever route an athlete takes, this has nothing to do with genetics and everything to do with environment. So is there any role at all for genetics in determining top athletes? The answer seems to be a qualified 'yes'. That's because knowing more about our genetic make-up can provide information of great value to athletes.

⑥ ☐ The truth, then, is that top athletes need both nature and nurture. Few, if any, are going to make it to the very top on raw talent alone; it will take years of dedicated training and coaching as well. But certain inherent physical abilities may predispose an individual to reach the highest ranks of a particular sport.

A The most obvious is to optimise the athlete's training and so enable them to advance to higher levels of attainment. But their role is wider than is generally understood and may include everything from nutrition to psychology.

B The choice may vary depending on the individual. Remember, however, that many sports complement each other, lending skills that can transfer to another discipline and enhance a youthful athlete's abilities.

C However, that's where the simplicity ends. Scientists have – so far – identified hundreds of thousands of different variations in DNA that can account for how tall someone is.

D How else can we explain why some athletes become world class within 12 months of taking up a sport, while others train for years and are never more than mediocre? Is there any other explanation for why certain countries like Jamaica seem to dominate sprint races while East African athletes often dominate distance running events?

E It may be the sort of foods or training programmes that are most beneficial for their body type, or learning more about their susceptibility to certain injuries. And it might provide insights into which sport they're most likely to excel at.

F That's because athletes have so far shown very little enthusiasm for this sort of experimentation. Instead, they have preferred to rely on established techniques.

G This is one aspect of elite sporting success that's difficult to pin down, but, say the experts, hard to overstate. The fact remains that certain national identities seem to have so much invested in one particular sport that it makes further success in that sport inevitable.

