

The Invention of Altruism. Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain

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Author:

Thomas Dixon

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Stuart Jones

Beatrice Webb wrote in her first volume of autobiography, *My Apprenticeship*, that the age in which she grew up was dominated by two 'idols of the mind', namely a belief in scientific method and 'the consciousness of a new motive; the transference of the emotion of self-sacrificing service from God to man' (quoted p. 249). Auguste Comte was the prophet of both of these idols. On the one hand positivism stood for the ascendancy of scientific or positive explanations of the world, in place of theological and metaphysical explanations. On the other hand, while it renounced theology, positivism proclaimed itself to be a deeply religious creed: there could be no social order without religion, but if a theological view of the world were no longer intellectually credible, the object of worship must be transferred from something 'out there' to something 'down here': from God to man, as Webb put it, or to Humanity collectively. The Comtist 'Religion of Humanity' – the original source of the adjective 'humanitarian' – was a major influence on the flight from self to selflessness in late 19th-century moral thought. The neologism that captured this new ethical mood was 'altruism', a term which Comte effectively coined, and which, like other Comtean neologisms, such as 'sociology', has been assimilated into the mainstream vocabulary of all western languages. The process by which 'altruism' was assimilated into the English moral lexicon is the focus of Thomas Dixon's outstanding new book, which has been expensively produced by OUP for the British Academy's Postdoctoral Monographs series.

'Altruism' had, and has, several analytically distinct meanings. It could refer to selfless motivations: 'psychological altruism', as Dixon calls it. It could refer, alternatively, to actions which, irrespective of the intention, benefit other people rather than the agent: 'behavioural altruism'. Or it could refer to an ethical

doctrine which identifies the morally good with the good of others: 'ethical altruism' (pp. 4-5). The three senses were intertwined in late Victorian usage, and it is one of the strengths of Dixon's approach that his focus on the word 'altruism' allows him to capture its conceptual ambiguities. But the third sense was the one which was most characteristic of the period, as Comtists and others stressed the importance of instilling psychological altruism by means of education or religion so as to realise the aspirations of ethical altruism.

This is a fundamental dimension of the intellectual history of the later Victorian period. Stefan Collini first drew historians' attention to it in a brilliant essay on 'the culture of altruism', published in 1991, but Dixon's comprehensive study is to be welcomed as a major contribution to our understanding of the subject. It is not a straightforward matter to write the history of moral sentiments, although if we think of recent histories of 'humanity', and 'fear', it is perhaps a more fashionable pursuit today than it has been at any time since the days of Lecky's *History of European Morals*. Dixon's approach is to frame his study as an exercise in what he calls 'word history', or 'historical semantics': it is the dissemination and gradual acceptance of the Comtean neologism that forms the core of his subject.

'Word history' is not a new pursuit: one thinks, for instance, of Koebner's and Schmidt's classic study of the term 'imperialism', published nearly half a century ago. But it is worth considering the value of this technique, if only because it is potentially one of the greatest beneficiaries of digitization: it is now possible, thanks to resources such as EEBO, ECCO and the Nineteenth-Century Pamphlets project to undertake in a matter of hours or days investigations which might formerly have consumed many months. It seems likely, therefore, that the coming years will see further work of this kind. Does it enable us to answer the big questions? Does word history really matter, or is it a lazy way of pursuing conceptual and indeed intellectual history?

Dixon makes a cogent and convincing case for his approach. First, he contests the view, propounded most famously by Quentin Skinner, that one can possess a concept - Skinner uses the example of 'originality' in Milton - without knowing the meaning of a corresponding word. If Skinner is wrong on this, and Dixon right, then 'conceptual history' - the project pioneered by Reinhard Koselleck in Germany and propounded to English-speaking scholars by Melvin Richter - cannot do without word history. They are not quite identical pursuits, since a word may correspond (as 'altruism' did) to several distinct concepts; but conceptual history must start with lexical history. Moreover, Dixon demonstrates that words (and not simply the concepts to which they correspond) do matter. In the case of altruism, the concepts it articulated might have been expressed in an older language of 'charity' or 'benevolence', or alternatively in the language of utilitarianism or of co-operation. But if they had been so expressed, their resonance would have been very different. It mattered that it was Comte's neologism that triumphed: the word 'altruism' was explicitly anti-Christian in its origins, and aroused resistance on that account, as well as simply because it was a neologism; and it blurred the distinction between the three main concepts to which it could refer.

Whatever the general case for word history, the semantic approach makes good sense here. On the one hand the 'culture of altruism', as Collini calls it, was everywhere in the late Victorian period. On the other hand, the word 'altruism' was a new coinage, and it had a difficult time gaining acceptance. The term 'altruism' was first used in English in 1852, by G. H. Lewes, in a discussion of Comte's work in the *Westminster Review*. For the next few decades it was commonly used in inverted commas, to indicate a neologism and a barbarous one to boot: like 'sociology', it combined Latin and Greek elements in a way that offended against Victorian good taste. But Gladstone was using it in his reading notes in the 1870s, as the newly digitized catalogue of his library allows us to establish, and by the 1890s the term was being widely used. In 1894 an obituary in *The Times* could commend the work of the Revd George W. Herbert, of St Peter's, Vauxhall, in the following words: 'The spirit of altruism had rarely a more striking exemplification of its working than in the career of this meek and self-denying vicar of a South London parish.'⁽¹⁾ The last complaint Dixon has traced about this lexical import comes from a clergyman in a Gissing novel published in 1901.

The structure of the book is elegantly simple, and makes what might have been an intricate work highly readable and surprisingly easily navigable. Each chapter has a protagonist: not necessarily a proponent of the term, but in each case someone who took a clear stance in relation to it. We start in James Murray's

scriptorium, with the collation of early uses of the term. It is an appropriate starting-point for a work of lexical history, and it supplies Dixon with his sub-heading: in an important sense, the Oxford English Dictionary was where ‘moral meanings’ were made, as Murray’s dictionary both charted changing usage and conferred legitimacy on neologisms. From there, in chapter two, we move across the Channel, to Comte’s apartment in the Rue Monsieur-le-Prince, just across the road from the Place de la Sorbonne, where a bust still commemorates the inventor of altruism. Still in the same chapter, we return to Britain to explore a range of ‘encounters with positivism’: Comte’s translators and interpreters, such as Lewes and Martineau; the positivists themselves, such as Richard Congreve and J. H. Bridges; but also a range of others, such as Henry Sidgwick, who engaged critically with Comte’s work. Newton Hall, the positivists’ meeting hall in central London, is the setting for chapter three, on ‘Death and Immortality’: it was there, on the last day of 1883, that George Eliot’s poem, ‘O may I join the choir invisible’, was performed as a cantata at the ‘Festival of all the Dead’. In chapter four we move to the Grosvenor Hotel, where that intriguing group of mid-Victorian intellectuals, the Metaphysical Society, puzzled over the implications of modern science for faith and morals: Darwin, though not himself a member of the Metaphysical Society, is the key figure here, along with such leading lights of the society as R. H. Hutton, the critic, who engaged with Darwin’s legacy. Here Dixon indulges himself just a little (and understandably), and shows that Darwin’s self-appointed spokesmen today misconstrue what Darwin himself wanted to say. It was at the heart of his project to demonstrate the evolutionary uses of selfless behaviour, and he certainly did not suppose that the theory of natural selection posited egoism as man’s innate characteristic; although it should be said that many of Darwin’s contemporaries, as well as ours, mistook his purpose in this respect. From Darwin we move to ‘Herbert Spencer, the Radical’. Spencer was, *inter alia*, a prophet of the shift from ‘militancy’ to ‘industrialism’: modern society was characterized by differentiated heterogeneity and by voluntary co-operation, and Spencer, though revolted by the collectivist turn of liberalism under Gladstone’s Second Government, shared with many radicals a much greater revulsion against Disraelian imperialism, which they saw as a throwback to the age of militancy, and this is the chapter in which we get the fullest account of the use of the idea of altruism in the foreign policy debates of the time. Next we turn to the East End of London, and the fictional settlement house established by Mrs Humphry Ward’s hero, Robert Elsmere, who was, as Dixon puts it, ‘one of the most famous “altruists” of the century’: an enthusiast for humanity, whose enthusiasm is brought into relief by being juxtaposed with the scepticism of the learned squire, Roger Wendover, whom Ward based on her first Oxford patron, Mark Pattison. Chapter seven then examines the eugenics movement, and the Victorian cult of motherhood; while the final chapter constitutes an epilogue, tracing the Edwardian reaction against altruism led, in particular, by the disciples of G. E. Moore.

This is an impressive cast. Dixon’s book is not simply a study of great thinkers. Some of the most interesting sections of the book are the discussions of second- or third-order thinkers. They include James Hinton, the ear surgeon and early member of the Metaphysical Society, who was one of the keenest proponents of altruism, in which he saw a ‘moral unity, “myself in and for others”’. Arabella Buckley, erstwhile secretary to Sir Charles Lyell, made herself one of the foremost popularizers of the moral implications of Darwinian ideas. In striking contrast to Darwin’s French translator, Clémence Royer, for whom Darwinism demonstrated that competition governed the world, Buckley (like Darwin himself) found that ‘one of the laws of life which is as strong, if not stronger, than the law of force and selfishness, is *that of mutual help and dependence*’. William Roberts, later known as Ernest Newman, was a young Liverpool secularist of the 1890s, a critic of Benjamin Kidd, and subsequently the leading British authority on Wagner. He defended Oscar Wilde’s somewhat Nietzschean teaching that imaginative hedonism was a superior ethical stance to philistine self-sacrifice.

The lexical approach is (in this case) a tremendously fruitful way of trying to capture an ethical shift which is often remarked upon but difficult to chart. But how full an account of the intellectual history of altruism do we get from Dixon’s lexical history?

I found myself wondering whether the lexical approach does not have the effect of exaggerating the secularist filiations of altruism. Dixon’s protagonists – Comte, George Eliot, Darwin, Spencer, the fictional Robert Elsmere and his creator, Mrs Humphry Ward - all belong to the worlds of secularism or religious

scepticism. That may well be an accurate appraisal of the connotations of the word altruism – its adoption within the world of religious orthodoxy was slow, because it was coined by Comte and integrally connected with his religion of humanity, whose injunction, ‘Live for Others’, stood in implicit or sometimes explicit antithesis to the injunction to ‘Live for God’. But an intellectual or moral history of altruism – that is to say, a history less concerned with the word itself, and more with a cluster of values, embracing notions of *service* and philanthropy and humanitarian duty, would surely embrace shifts within Christian theology. A central theme in what Boyd Hilton has characterized as the emergence of an incarnational theology was that service to God is best performed through service to man. F. D. Maurice, who is, curiously enough, barely mentioned in Dixon’s book, would rightly claim a central place in such an intellectual history; and in reading this book I wondered whether a parallel history might be written of the idea of ‘co-operation’, with Maurice playing a leading role, though he did not coin the term. Among European ‘secular’ thinkers, Mazzini was a major influence: not mentioned in this book, and perhaps rightly, but a crucial figure in the shift to a cult of ‘service’ (duty not rights; and duty to humanity). What Maurice, Mazzini and their followers highlighted was the role played by service to the ‘little platoon’ in cultivating the larger service of humanity: ‘patriotism’, in particular, did not stand in opposition to the universal love of humanity, but served as a school of altruism.

Dixon is far too subtle a scholar to have any truck with this kind of reductionism, but those who still construe late Victorian intellectual debates in terms of a conflict between science and religion overlook the remarkable degree of overlap between Christian theologians and secularist moralists. Nietzsche wrote that this was because ‘bluestockings’ such as George Eliot lacked his courage to confront the implications of their rejection of the Christian faith: if the doctrine is wrong, so are the moral teachings. But was he right? The positivists and their sympathizers – Eliot and J. S. Mill as well as the hard-line doctrinaires – rejected Christianity on ethical as well as scientific grounds: altruism was not Christianity without the theology, but an altogether higher moral system, though one that certainly drew on Christian insights. Conversely, theology moved in a direction that shadowed this humanitarian turn.

Dixon is in general good in giving due attention to those who voiced scepticism about the neologism, but there are some surprising omissions among the critics of altruism. The most striking, to my mind, is the jurist and polemicist James Fitzjames Stephen, who was surely one of the most important critics of his contemporaries’ weakness for the vogue for ‘humanitarianism’ and ‘altruism’. For Stephen, ‘altruism’ could only mean acting from someone else’s motives, and was therefore an absurdity; just as ‘selfishness’ – acting from one’s own motives – was redundant. ‘Self is each man’s centre, from which he can no more displace himself than he can leap off his own shadow’.[\(2\)](#)

One problem with ‘word history’ is that the process by which a word becomes assimilated is not likely to correspond very precisely with the history of the currents of thought with which it is associated. In the case of altruism, the point at which the word became fully domesticated coincided – half a century after its introduction – with the questioning of the vogue for altruism in advanced intellectual circles. For though Dixon tells us (p. 9) that in the last two decades of the 19th century altruism was ‘the fashionable watchword of the day, on the lips of many a campaigner and social reformer’, the online Hansard reveals only two usages in the 19th century, both from 1895, and by, as it happens, two notable figures: Timothy Healy, later the first Governor-General of the Irish Free State, and Sir Charles Dilke. It was only in the first decade of the 20th century that the term started to be at all common in parliamentary debates. Yet this was the decade when the ethical doctrine of altruism was starting to wilt under the assault of Moore and his Cambridge allies. Dixon is aware of this paradoxical aspect of his subject: on the one hand, it is the story of the slow assimilation of a neologism that now forms part of our everyday moral lexicon; on the other hand, his book reconstructs a late Victorian obsession that now seems very remote indeed. Much the same might be said of Comte: in his encyclopaedic ambitions and grandiose construction of a secular religion, he is a quintessentially 19th-century figure whose works are unread today; yet in a curious way he can also be read as the prophet of our age.

Notes

1. *The Times*, 21 November 1894. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Leslie Stephen, *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1895), p. 334. [Back to \(2\)](#)

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