

# Am I My Brother's Keeper? If So, When, and To What Extent?

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*Altruism* means feeling an unselfish concern for the well-being of others, and then regularly and spontaneously acting on that feeling — for instance, more than at just holiday times, or when specifically requested to get up and go help

somebody. The urge to make life easier for persons outside oneself is a powerful motivating agent in some people, while in others it seems almost entirely lacking. So science wonders why. Articles in “The New York Times Magazine” and elsewhere lately have reported studies on whether the impulse toward altruism is “hard-wired” into human brains or is the result of sympathetic moral instruction, or some combination of both. The research is indicating that our normal, healthy tendency is to care for each other, although this tendency may be artificially, culturally subdued or even stamped out in some of us. This is instead of our interior default value being just to fend for ourselves, out of which we may be successfully coached by some positive influence.

It appears we are here, by nature, to help.

To early Christian writers the highest form of love was called by the Greek word *agape* (αγάπη), and meant God’s love for his church, that manifested itself in human relationships whenever a person forgave and directed disarming love toward an oppressor. In modern metaphysical circles, the term has now been broadened to mean God’s love that is purely unconditional, though well before Christianity, to Plato, it had its conditional shades too, such as love of family (because they are family), and of enjoyable pursuits (because they are enjoyable). As for *agape*, one could say that God’s unconditional love for creation, as great as that sounds, isn’t even purely unconditional, because if that creation were not God’s, God would not therefore love it, or love it as much, anyway. Therefore the connection between God and God’s creation is the condition on which the love is premised — no connection, no condition. But *in the moment* does unconditional love outweigh conditional? Pure altruism may theoretically be as

unselfish as *agape* is unconditional, but won’t less pure forms frankly do as much good in their everyday application? Consider: if you are starving and I give you food, does my reason for doing so matter to you? Should it matter to you, to the extent that you would even refuse the food if my motive smelled bad? Or is the only salient point that the goods get delivered? Around us now, there is much interest in intention in relation to action. But listen closely and it sounds like the latest installment in the 500-year back-and-forth of faith versus works.

The first instance in Western sacred writings that the problem of the responsibility of caring for others arises, is in the book of Genesis, chapter 4. Here Cain, the first-born of Adam and Eve, is asked where is his brother Abel, and he replies with the first human lie (“I don’t know”) followed by the first sarcasm (“Am I my brother’s keeper?”). Cain has not only not “kept” his brother, but has in fact just murdered him, as Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, knows full well, but poetically observes that Abel’s “blood is crying out from the ground.” Yahweh then curses Cain to endless wandering, placing a

mark on his forehead which is to protect him from harm as he forlornly travels the world. This is odd

**“By the very laws of his nature man is, so to speak, forced into social relationships and peace with other men, so far as possible.”**

— AUGUSTINE, *De Civitate Dei*

because, so far in the story, no other people have been created besides Adam, Eve and their two sons, one of whom is already dead. So from whom would be Cain be kept safe? Cain then moves to the east of Eden to the land of Nod (which means “wandering,” not “sleep”), marries someone he find there, and with this woman has a son called Enoch. Back home, his father Adam lives to be 930. Taken literally, it’s all a mystery.

Now, the reason Cain kills Abel given to us is that Cain is a tiller of the land while Abel raises sheep, and when each present their offerings to Yahweh, Yahweh is pleased with Abel’s but not with Cain’s. Some scholars offer that this is describing not just sibling rivalry run amok but an age-old competition between settled agrarians and nomadic herders for resources and the power to shape society’s future, in which the settlers and their settlements “won,” resulting in civilization as we now have it. What kind of world would it be if the brothers had gotten along?

Cain and Abel were allegorical figures, Cain’s son Enoch is said to be a “solar myth,” and that brother we wonder about keeping is metaphorical too. Jim Holt writes in a Times piece about “plausible Darwinian reasons” for altruism: “First, there is ‘kinship selection,’ which is supposed to lurk behind the sacrifices you make for your biological family...second, there is recip-

rocal altruism. Here the basic idea is: You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours... Neither, however, would appear to be of much use in explaining philanthropy." For that, he cites a university study where a "warm neural glow" was precipitated by selfless, generous acts. There was no *reason* why giving should have felt good, it just did; the brains of the givers were bathed in healthful opiate-like endorphins. We are our metaphorical brothers' and sisters' keepers because it feels good to be such, which may or may not have anything to do with the fact that we are all somehow related since we have all been conceived and born of the same localized species. Cain went over the hill and met some other people. Unless we introduce the possibility of extraterrestrial intermarriage into the conversation — and let's not — we haven't yet discovered that hill to go over, so we are all literally "akin". Kindness and goodness emanating from this position of planetary kinship is well-documented, as when children of various cultures come together to laugh and play because they have not yet been taught to notice their differences and fear them, by those who believe that surface differences are real and are to be feared. Lamentable things can occur that pit against each other, moving us to the Cain-like personal violence or the collective inhumanity of war,

**What matters more than kindness? The desire to rejoice in each other's prosperity and exchange solace in adversity is the sweetest facet of the human condition.**

Assuming then that we are our global siblings' keeper both metaphorically and actually, how exactly are we to keep them? Using the illustration of Maimonides, if we teach them to fish, they can eat for a lifetime, but they may forget that we were the one who taught them and give credit somewhere else, may fish differently than we instructed, and may even catch more fish than we ever did. If we don't teach them to fish, but just give them a fish to tide them over, then if the relationship is to continue on the same footing we have to keep coming up with extra fish, and we have fostered dependency, but there is certain payoff in that we control the relationship. Doling out good, we can become the source for others, not merely one of a number of resources. This doesn't sound like a good plan to anybody, but in human relationships it's wise to step back and notice the flow of control, and whether we are really accepting of others claiming their personal power, even if it means we are not as badly needed. Are we willing to allow others to excel, if their excelling surpasses ours?

but these are exceptions to the rule. Toward one another we are innately compassionate (that is, *feeling with*) though we may learn to be otherwise.

It's neither an affront against God nor a defect of character to want to be needed. Unhealthiness only creeps in when we don't own up to wanting to be needed, and frame it as a request. As a matter of fact, framing every complaint we have as a *request* is a powerful tool for self-growth as well as effective group activity. Whether we want to feel needed, loved, important, integral or useful, we can pipe up and say so, in so many words, to the appropriate parties, and if those parties are kindly disposed toward us, they will acknowledge how feel and meet us at least halfway in providing what we ask. And if they are not kindly disposed toward us, it's good we should know that, before going any further with them. When we ask for love, we don't have to waste our time trying to finesse love out of a situation, creating elaborate strategies for getting what we need without identifying to anyone else what that is. But it takes courage to ask for love from another human, or group of them, because once the request is made, there it is, undeniably expressed, and subject to an answer that, whatever it is, will change everything about the future.

Notice how, when the discussion

starts out about how best to help others, it ultimately circles back to the self and its ways. This is unforced. The self is all that changes. We might as well say, "There is One Self, and that Self is God." Others are who others, but I am beholding them through the consciousness that I have cultivated, therefore my experience of them is as much or more about me than it is about them. Of course, the same is true of them, beholding me. We can and do pretend that there are solid, objective realities outside of the self and its consciousness. Then we can and do forget that we are pretending, and tumble into the illusion of our pretense itself being objectively real. We can do all this and nothing substantially changes; there is just a postponement of self-awareness, that picks back up when we again assume responsibility for the perceptive filter through which we view others and the amorphous thing we call our world. We did not personally invent that filter, but we did fill it with all the information it contains, and there is a constant transference of data within it each second we are alive.

The details of keeping our brothers and sisters most effectively will work themselves out as we go along, as we always have. The wonder of the spiritual dimension of our lives is that there is a Power that contains all potential as well as all form. From this limitless potential is springing now as ideas whatever any of us

**"One man likes to push a plough,  
The other likes to chase a cow  
But that's no reason why  
they can't be friends."**

— lyric from *Oklahoma!*,  
RODGERS & HAMMERSTEIN

needs in order to have a full and rich life. I may not and you may not be able to predict what this will be. We almost certainly won't be able to think it up, since our thoughts are based at least loosely on prior information and experience, and what we need is likely outside that box. But as I am fond of quoting, whenever Ernest Holmes had a person ask him what he thought they should do about some situation, he would respond, "I don't know, but there is Something that does know. Let us listen to It." Then he would engage in affirmative prayer, that pictured a desired end result, and left the means to that end to the Infinite Mind from which all means derive.

Our job is twofold: to trust that there is a way for the desired good to come about, and to imagine a positive result at the level of feeling. If there were enough for everyone, and everyone knew it, and lived it, how would that feel? If the "farmer" and the "cowman" were fast friends, and either put their differences aside or delighted in their diversity of experience, how would that feel? If there were nothing to fix, or bewail, or condemn, how would *that* feel? Can we bring ourselves to feel those ways now? We use our imaginative faculty to call up the feeling. Then we bask in it and allow forms to congeal around it, and our perceptive filters to accommodate themselves to this new way of seeing and being. This is the metaphysics of it. Physically, meanwhile, we support this unfolding progress by directly stating our needs and wants, rendering ourselves both guileless and harmless, clearing the decks of fear-based motives and control-based attachments.

The Cain of legend asks, "Am I my brother's keeper?" With a fresh understanding that the self and what it perceives are virtually indistinguishable, that what is known at one point within a complete and infinite universe must be present at every point, and that by our very nature we are drawn to feel the joys and sorrows of each other, we may today be able to answer, no, more than that — I am my brother.



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