

SUMMARY

IN DEFENSE

OF SELFISHNESS

PETER SCHWARTZ



Summary of “In Defense of Selfishness” by Peter Schwartz

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Why being selfish sometimes can be healthy.

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Introduction

On the surface, selflessness kind of sounds like a weird concept. In fact, its very name sounds weird: self-less, or being **without yourself**. After all, if you're never thinking of yourself, then how do you ever get to do anything you want to do? How do you ever get anything nice for yourself? And when you think about it from that perspective, you might find yourself wondering why anybody would ever go along with a system like that. Why would you choose an actively selfless life? Of course, in reality, this system is intended to work if everybody goes along with it. You do what's best for someone else who in turn does what's best for you and on it goes in an endless circle of reciprocal kindness. And that sounds like a pretty great system for life!

But of course, as you've probably noticed, it doesn't always work that way. Instead, many people only look out for themselves. They take advantage of others and look for ways to ensure that they always get the upper hand. This, of course, is a prime example of selfishness and this is not the type of selfishness that the author advocates in this book! Instead, Peter Schwartz is thinking about the healthy kind of selfishness. And over the course of this summary, we'll explore what healthy selfishness is and what it looks like in practical application.



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What is Altruism?

Altruism is a word we often hear in connection with selflessness and kindness. And, as a result, we assume that altruism is always a good thing. In fact, the popular connotations of this word might lead us to define altruism as “doing something kind for someone else out of the goodness of your own.” In practice, you might think of altruism as something like giving your sister the last chicken leg when you really want it for yourself. You might associate altruism with donating money to a charity at Christmas or giving up your seat on the train to someone who needs it more than you do. And all of these are certainly kind things to do! So, is it possible that altruism can ever be problematic?

The author affirms that it actually is! That’s because altruism has the capacity to distort our worldview and cause us to make decisions that truly are not in our best interest or that of others. To understand how that can be possible, let’s take a look at the definition of altruism. The University of Berkeley conducted a study on kindness and morality and in the course of this study, the researchers defined altruism as “our motivations or state of mind when we act to promote someone else’s welfare, even at a risk or cost to ourselves.” So, how can that be a problem? Well, as Berkeley’s definition suggests, altruism can be problematic because it invites us to take on unnecessary risks by promoting the health and welfare of others. This occurs because, in order for us to behave altruistically, we must first alter our perspective.

For example, think about one of the hypothetical scenarios we mentioned earlier in this chapter: giving money to a charity at Christmas. Donating to a charity is awesome because it’s predicated on the belief that there are other people less fortunate than yourself who could benefit from your donation. But it’s one thing to acknowledge that other people need help. It’s another thing altogether to decide that you personally have a burden to help them. But when you break down that concept, altruism still doesn’t sound like a bad idea. After all, why shouldn’t you help other people? Pretty much everyone has been taught that putting others’ needs above your own is the

“right thing to do.” That’s why we believe that people who are selfless are morally good people. But the author argues that it can be problematic to assume that you owe a moral debt to everyone else in the world. Because if you believe that you are ethically bound to sacrifice yourself for the good of someone else, after a point, you no longer own the right to exist as an individual.

In fact, if you want to put this concept into a context that typically freaks people out, just think about it in terms of communism. In a communist society, the system prioritizes the good of the people over that of the individual. For example, your wealth, your possessions, and your labor all serve the interests of the people. Extreme altruism operates on basically the same principle. Just as communism forces you to relinquish the results of your labor for the common good, altruism requires you to sacrifice your selfhood and your individuality in favor of serving others. Put simply, a purely altruistic worldview causes you to reconfigure your worldview so that your only purpose is meeting the needs of others. So, when you consider altruism through this lens, it’s easy to see how extreme altruism can be both problematic and unhealthy on a personal level! But when we apply extreme altruism en masse, it can create even more detrimental mistakes.

To prove this point, the author provides a uniquely disturbing example: how including people with disabilities can be problematic. Now, if ever there was a controversial statement, that has to be it! Why on earth could anyone feel justified in deliberately excluding people with disabilities? How could you ever claim that that’s the right thing to do? If anything, people with disabilities deserve more inclusion and more accessibility! But are there ever moments when that might not be the case? The author argues that there is indeed one scenario where accommodating people with disabilities is both unwise and unsafe. And that scenario involves the emergency exit seats on airplanes.

Should blind people be allowed to sit in the emergency exit seats on airplanes? Chances are, you’ve never even thought about that question before. But let’s consider the responsibilities of people who sit in those

emergency exit seats. Obviously, we all hope that there will never be an emergency during the course of our flight. But if a catastrophe did occur, the person who sits in the emergency exit seat would be responsible for opening the heavy exit door and helping their fellow passengers to safety through that exit. Is a blind person really the best fit for that job? If you think about it in the coldest, most practical sense, the answer is clearly no. And that's why most American airlines had a policy which dictated that blind passengers cannot sit in the emergency exit seats.

Unfortunately, however, the National Federation of the Blind saw that policy as discriminatory and unnecessarily prohibitive. So, they petitioned for the policy to be removed so that blind people could sit in any seat on any airplane-- including the emergency exit seats. Many people heard that proposal and jumped on board with their petition, arguing that including people with disabilities is always the right thing to do. This, of course, stems from the altruistic belief that you should look out for other people and do the right thing. But as you can see from this example, sometimes the altruistic thing to do is also an idiotic thing to do. And following a blindly altruistic worldview can sometimes lead otherwise rational people to make foolish decisions.



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Nice Doesn't Always Equal Right

Have you ever done something because it's the "nice" thing to do, even if it made you uncomfortable? For example, maybe a friend says something that's objectively offensive. You want to call them out but it doesn't seem like the nice thing to do and your friend probably wouldn't like it. So, you stay quiet or go along with them because you want to be a nice person who is kind to others. And there's nothing wrong with being a nice person! But unfortunately, "nice" doesn't always equal "right." That's because being nice often means going along to get along. Put simply, prioritizing other people's feelings above all else often requires you to sacrifice your morality and your individuality.

Now, that's not to say that you should always do whatever you want with no regard for other people's feelings. Of course not! And that doesn't mean that you should call out every little thing that bothers you. For example, there is a world of difference between making a scene because someone cut in line in front of you and calling your friend out because he made a joke about raping a woman. Some cutting in line is annoying and rude, but it's probably not worth starting a fight about it. In the latter example, however, it's okay to send the clear message that you disapprove of sexual violence and misogyny. In the latter example, you shouldn't feel pressured to "be nice" and stay quiet about things that are objectively disturbing.

But if your worldview is dominated by extreme altruism, you would absolutely feel the need to stay quiet! That's because, as mentioned in the previous chapter, extreme altruism prioritizes other people's feelings above all else. So, because your friend might be offended if you said, "It's not okay to joke about rape," you should go along with it. The author uses this example to illustrate the point that altruism often requires you to relinquish your individuality and personal morality. And that's why he argues that selfishness can be good sometimes! In this example, it might be considered selfish to stand up to your friend because you would be prioritizing your values over his feelings. But sometimes that's okay! It's also okay for you to

relinquish your own personal opinions-- no matter what altruistic ideology purports.

To put this example into practical application, let's consider the fact that altruism encourages you to believe whatever information is fed to you. This practice is perpetuated under the lie of everything being "for the common good." So, if everything is viewed through the lens of being "for the common good," then you might be told that it's in everyone's best interest to believe that everybody is good at everything. (To make this example a little more relatable to your daily life, just think about participation trophies). Participation trophies are awarded on the principle that everybody should be encouraged for simply showing up. Under this model, you shouldn't think about things in terms of "winners" or "losers"-- even if you're playing a school football game! According to this mentality, everyone is a winner just because they tried. And while people certainly should be encouraged to show up and give something their best shot, that doesn't mean that you should eliminate the concept of winners and losers. But altruism would argue that if everyone can't win, no one can win.

Most people wouldn't want to live in a world like that. And that's why it's important for you to retain your individuality and your right to your own opinion! For example, maybe you tried out for chorus in high-school but you didn't get picked because you can't sing. You tried, you gave it your best effort, but you can't carry a tune in a suitcase. So, if you know you can't sing, would you want to spend your life that your voice sounds just as good as Adele's? Most people would find that patronizing and insulting-- both to themselves and to Adele! It's easier and more honest to accept that some people can sing and some people can't, even if that means having to count yourself among the losers.

And that's exactly why it's important to retain your individuality. Our society doesn't have to be perfect, but it should be objective and realistic. Some things should remain true, no matter what; reality should not be distorted at the whim of any given person. So, embrace a healthy degree of selfishness! Embrace the ability to retain critical thought and the ability to hold your own

opinions. Embrace your right to set personal boundaries even when it isn't "nice." Because without selfishness, you lose the right to say, "I refuse to be emotionally abused or taken advantage of." Without selfishness, you lose the freedom to walk away from toxic situations. Without selfishness, you lose the gift of honesty, both for yourself and for others. That's why being selfish is not just healthy-- sometimes it's absolutely healthy. And that's why we don't want a world that runs solely on altruistic ideology.



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Final Summary

Altruism sounds nice because we think it's all about helping other people. But unfortunately, we've forgotten that it's often about helping other people **at all costs**. And when you prioritize everyone over yourself, even at the risk of great personal harm, you are embracing unhealthy and dishonest choices. As a result, this means that altruism isn't always as helpful as it sounds! It's always good to be kind to other people and to look out for your fellow man; in fact, everyone should do so as often as they reasonably can.

But the key word there is "reasonably"-- and that means that you don't have to sacrifice yourself for other people all the time. You don't have to believe everything people tell you and you don't have to go along with the masses just because that's what everyone thinks you're supposed to do. Healthy selfishness is all about setting personal boundaries and embracing critical thought so you can make good, rational decisions. So, in that case, it's absolutely okay to be selfish!



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