

Review: *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain*

by Thomas Dixon

Mark Blacklock

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An account of the entry of ‘altruism’ into the first fascicle of the Oxford English Dictionary in 1884 opens the first chapter of *The Invention of Altruism*. This semantic investigation is a highly promising and intriguing route into the subject, and illustrative of the most successful aspects of this study: not only does it provide a brief historical sketch of the processes by which definitions and sources were collected through a network of correspondents for the first OED, illuminating the ambiguities still surrounding the terminology of ‘altruism’ some thirty years after it was first introduced into the English language by G. H. Lewes in 1853, it also generates a discussion of theoretical questions over the shifting meanings of words and their use as ‘mirrors’ or ‘witnesses’ to history, allowing Dixon to outline his methodology.

Post-structuralist critiques of attempts to reconstruct the thought processes of historical actors are but briefly noted, and the author argues that the ‘impossibility of certainty or infallibility need not deter us from the attempt’.¹ Instead, he stresses Raymond Williams’s influential study of ‘key words’ and cites Quentin Skinner, arguing that by tracing the genealogy of words, we ‘find ourselves looking not merely at the reflections but at one of the engines of social change.’²

Skinner is a theoretical touchstone, as is the German discipline of *Begriffsgeschichte*, or conceptual history. Identifying his own methodology as a form of ‘historical semantics’, Dixon outlines his hopes for his inter-disciplinary approach:

Tracing the uses of a single word or family of words allows an account to emerge which encompasses material from several different genres, theories and disciplines without losing overall coherence, and thus hopefully, broadening the canon and the contexts of intellectual history (38).

As such, *The Invention of Altruism* sits on a shelf alongside other recent studies of key words, including ‘enthusiasm’, ‘democracy’ and ‘curiosity’. The scope is broad, the ambition impressive, the title slightly misleading, because as the author notes in his introduction, this is not really a study of the invention of altruism at all, but rather a study that

explains how and why the language of altruism was imported, adopted, resisted, and finally accepted between its first introduction as a strange and unwelcome neologism and its successful naturalization as a ‘traditional term’ in ethical discourse around the turn of the twentieth century (2).

The word itself was, after all, invented in France, either by Auguste Comte or his teacher François Andrieux, a hybrid formed from the Latin stem *altrui*, meaning for or to another, and the Greek suffix *-ism*.

The establishment of Comtean positivism in England is skilfully sketched. In this narrative, a ‘Comtist coterie of writers’ was centred on John Chapman, editor of the *Westminster Review*, around the middle of the century. Harriet and James Martineau, G. H. Lewes and George Eliot began to spread the gospel of a religion of humanity, establishing the context for the broadcast of the word ‘altruism’ and the social principle of living for others, innate to humanity, according to Comte. Their ‘first emissary to the North’, John Henry Bridges, lectured in Bradford. John Stewart Mill wrote articles on Comtean thought, while Henry Sidgwick grappled with his writing shortly after leaving Cambridge.

It is in the context of research on Sidgwick that a recurrent difficulty with the stated ‘historical semantics’ is first encountered. Sidgwick, we are informed, ‘only occasionally used the terms “altruism” or “altruistic” and then normally within quotation marks and as non-technical terms’ (76). George Eliot, whose relationship with positivism is the concern of the first half of chapter three, ‘used the term “altruism” only twice in her own writings’ (108). Work on Eliot and Sidgwick therefore deals with the proliferation of concepts that are understood by altruism, rather than the word itself: tension between tracing word and concept threatens to overwhelm the professed methodology. In the fourth chapter on ‘The Darwinian Conscience’ Dixon concedes:

Although the language of altruism always remained foreign to Darwin himself, reviewers, critics, popularizers, and interpreters of his works

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were soon making connections, positive and negative, between Darwinism and ‘altruism’ (137).

Patience with the stated approach is required, then, as context is established to enable further tracking of the word itself: the canonical thinkers of the second half of the nineteenth century may not have employed the terminology directly, but are nevertheless interpreted in light of it. Such patience is richly rewarded, particularly in detailed and exhaustive research into outbursts of altruistic discourse away from the more frequently researched loci of Victorian intellectual life: in chapter six, Dixon traces the identity of the pseudonymous ‘Altruism’, author of a *Gas Consumer’s Manual* written in Manchester in 1882.

A short section on the intriguing James Hinton, member of the Metaphysical Society alongside Sidgwick and a marginalised but significant proponent of the terminology of altruism, emphasises the ambiguous potential of this moral terminology at an early stage, particularly in relation to Hinton’s erotically loaded notions of ‘sacrifice’ and ‘service’. The opposition of orthodox Christian sermonisers to the terminology of this new ‘religion’ is also compellingly argued: ‘Whether in lectures, sermons, treatises, or novels, it was Christian opponents of “altruism” as much as anyone who made sure that the term reached the largest possible audience from the 1870s onwards.’ (121)

The terminology returns fully to the foreground with the examination of the central role of Herbert Spencer and his *Data of Ethics* (1879) in popularising an altruistic terminology informed by Darwin’s work, and in introducing the philosophy of altruism into British foreign policy through the Anti-Aggression League. Altruism became a pre-cursor to pacifism before that word existed. Dixon writes:

An American lecturer even claimed that it was Herbert Spencer who had invented ‘the word “altruism” to take the place of love because the old word (sweet word!) was so quivering with life as to be unfit for the dissecting operations of science’ (192).

The shifts in meaning of the terminology become even more apparent in the last two decades of the century as altruism became commonly aligned with socialism, and defined in opposition to emerging notions of egoism and individualism as the *fin de siècle* approached. Dixon’s history follows recent accounts of the *fin de siècle* in stressing degeneration. So too is this an exclusively nineteenth-century narrative,

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with the language of altruism seen as outmoded by the time the final version of G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* was published in 1903: 'But "altruism" and "egoism"? Those were the key words of an earlier generation.' (356)

Referencing is concise and accurate, although initial referencing to name changes would have provided useful clarification, particularly in such an expansive study: while Marian Evans becoming George Eliot is not so difficult to follow, Beatrice Potter's post-nuptial transformation to Beatrice Webb, noted in the body of the text, is not consistently maintained. 'Idealism', a terminology at least as contested as 'altruism' in the same period, would have benefited from some brief clarification; the name of the philosopher T. H. Green rarely appears without the prefix 'idealist', but a reader without a specific knowledge of British idealism may struggle to discern Green's position.

As a generalist history and an addition to the expanding library of 'key word' studies, *The Invention of Altruism* is extremely useful, illuminating not just the spread of the terminology of altruism, its paradoxes and ambiguities and the several concepts understood by different groups to be contained within it, but also the broader intellectual contexts of the late-nineteenth century. A text that deals with Mill, Eliot, Darwin, Spencer, Wilde and Nietzsche, while finding space too for esoteric figures like James Hinton and small publications such as *The Eagle and the Serpent* is clearly covering a great deal of ground. Indeed, it is difficult to see how any of these could have been omitted in doing justice to the topic. The significantly less obscure ODNB is cited with almost indecent frequency.

A minor gripe, only noted because this is such an expansive work: while discussion of neo-Darwinian misreadings and contemporary meanings of the terminology of altruism are seductive, they are perhaps more properly the concerns of an entirely different text, particularly as the development of the terminology of altruism throughout the twentieth century is not considered here. A curious incidence of anachronistic reference is perhaps a symptom of this inconsistent impulse to connect with contemporary meanings: in a discussion of insect ethics, a 1992 novella by A.S. Byatt is cited as if it were a nineteenth-century source. Such a colourful reference jars dramatically, not least because it is the only example of such referencing in the entire text.

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If the over-stressing of contemporary relevance and one wayward reference are the most serious flaws in an exhaustive history such as this, then they should surely be excused. In his conclusion Dixon writes: ‘Instead of arguing that the Victorians were either particularly selfish or especially altruistic we should recognise instead that it is to them we owe our modern habit of making moral judgements in the rhetorically loaded language of selfishness and altruism.’ (365) *The Invention of Altruism* encourages and enables its readers to do just that and the ambition of its scope does indeed broaden the canon of intellectual history.

¹ Thomas Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 29. All further references to this book are given in parentheses in the body of the text.

² Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics, I. Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 178.