

**Matthieu Ricard**

**Altruism and Happiness: Towards a Sustainable Harmony**

*Every person I have known who has been truly happy, has learned how to serve others.*  
—Albert Schweitzer

Modern life confronts us with a number of unique challenges, each with its own temporality and priority. We can view them as three different categories based on preoccupations and time scales: the economy in the short-term, life satisfaction in the mid-term, and the environment in the long-term.

Altruism is the vital thread that can link harmoniously these three time scales. If we were more altruistic, if we were more considerate of others, we would not indulge in wild speculations with the savings of investors who placed their trust in us.

If we were more considerate of the quality of life of those around us, we would make sure that working conditions, family life, and many other aspects of society were improved.

Finally, if we were more considerate of future generations, we would not blindly sacrifice the environment they are inheriting from us in favor of our short-lived wants and needs.

The evolutionist Martin Nowak, among others, reminds us that “Cooperation is the architect of creativity throughout evolution, from cells to multicellular creatures to anthills to villages to cities. Without cooperation there can be neither construction nor complexity in evolution. Cooperation—not competition—underpins innovation.” (Nowak and Highfield, 2011)

We now need to move to the next level of cooperation and, in the economic field, to add the “voice of care” to the “voice of reason”. Altruism is no more a luxury, but a necessity. We must have the insight to recognize its potential and have the audacity to say so.

***A sustainable harmony***

Since economic growth, even the so-called “sustainable growth”, cannot go on forever—at the current rate, we would need three planets to meet humanity’s needs in natural resources by 2050—and that a negative growth would harm the poorest, we need to aim at a qualitative rather than a quantitative growth. We can however achieve a “sustainable harmony” that will require taking another 1.4 billion people out of poverty on the one hand, while decreasing the unsustainable level of consumption of the affluent nations on the other hand (Kasser, 2003). This can only be achieved through enhancing care and solidarity both at individual and at societal levels.

Kasser, T. 2003. *The high price of materialism*. The MIT Press.

Nowak, M. and Highfield, R. 2011. *SuperCooperators* (Reprint.). Free Press.