

The Covid-19 Pandemic in the Lens of Comtean Altruism

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Abstract

Altruism for August Comte is a belief of disinterestedness and an unselfish concern for other people. It is a theory that postulates the generous side of a person in times of difficulty and even death. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought substantial damage to different spheres of human life. Despair and unwillingness to live were evident. However, despite severe damage to both body and spirit to almost everyone, the human person stirred the ability to survive, assist and share with others even the little that they have. This is notwithstanding that there are those who take advantage of the situation. This study collected narrative experiences and involvements in the midst of Covid-19, coupled with the utilization of a philosophical and critical social type of qualitative research. It aims to provide knowledge involving the existing social structure by describing, evaluating and interpreting different personal experiences of Covid-19, and anchoring them on the philosophy of altruism according to Comte.

Keywords: Auguste Comte, Altruism, Social Sympathy, Covid-19 Pandemic, Bayanihan

Introduction

Natural calamities, pandemics and diseases are not new to Filipinos. Every now and then, Filipinos experience different catastrophes like typhoons, volcanic eruption, and diseases; and at this moment, the Covid-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, most of these diseases were not endemic to the Philippines but were rather introduced as a consequence of various factors. These factors range from economic, political, social and cultural.¹ The major reason for example as to why Filipinos become susceptible to these diseases is poverty. Poverty causes malnutrition, which is also caused by factors such as the economy, demography, and political transformation. In the late 1800's, for example, when the Filipinos were fighting for independence, the Spanish and American authorities applied various ways to contain the rebellion. They control the flow of food supply to the areas infested by insurgents, burn fields and destroyed storehouses. Filipinos were forced to subsist on food lacking with vitamins which consequently made them susceptible to disease.² History tells us that many patriots were forced to give up the fight, because of a lack of food and supplies. But the desire for freedom and independence was burning deep inside. Then the cholera outbreak occurred that caused the death of thousand Filipinos across the country.

Another global public health crisis happened in 1918 which according to stories it is known as the "Panahon han Peste" (Time of Pestilence) or the Spanish flu outbreak. Based on the account of the current Parish Priest of Palo, Leyte, Rev. Fr. Gilbert Urbina, in the Libros de Entierros (Register of Burials) of the church of Palo, an unusual increase of burials was noticed from the later part of 1918 until the early part of 1919. An average of 15 burials a day were recorded in the Parish of Palo alone. The pandemic may have manifested its presence in Palo in the latter part of October. "The height of its onslaught was

¹ Ken de Bevoise, *Agents of Apocalypse: Epidemic Diseases in the Colonial Philippines*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 285

² *Ibid.*

November 1918 during which an average of fifteen people died per day. Gradually the effects tapered down by March 1919".³Today, people across the country experienced home quarantine fearing that they'd be infected with the disease and eventually die. They have to stay indoors with windows and doors shut. Those unfortunate individuals who died, were buried hurriedly by family members without the traditional "lamay" (wake). This was done in order to avoid further contamination and infection of the virus. People were aware that if they stay outside their homes, the possibility of infection is very high. They stay inside their homes and make good of what is available in their backyard gardens, poultry and support from relatives and neighbors to keep their bodies healthy.⁴

Helping someone in a certain situation is not always automatic in a person. There are those who elect to help, while there are those who choose to ignore. There are reasons whether valid or invalid that an individual has, and such reasons are at his disposal. The act of rendering support to another creates an admirable atmosphere between two or more parties. When a community is hit by a calamity and everyone dwelling in it is a victim causing shortage of food, no electricity, wanting of security, and many other inequities, the same survivors experience a feeling of helplessness and despair. There were times when victims themselves opt to take advantage of the scenario, while there were those who wanted to help and even gave it an extra mile.

When Covid-19 hit the Philippines, many citizens were scared of the virus that some tried to mock the government for not shutting down the country immediately. Others hoarded food and other supplies in the event that total lockdown of establishments might happen. While some acted indifferently, others acted in a manner that is benevolent to other people's concerns. Medical practitioners, law enforcers, and barangay officials were at the forefront of the drive against the deadly

³ Gilbert Urbina, Interviewed by Dennis M. Bautista, Palo, Leyte, April 4, 2020.

⁴ Ibid.

virus despite the imminent to their lives. In fact, at the outset of the outbreak here in the Philippines, a number of doctors and medical professionals succumbed to the deadly virus. They could have opted to resign from their jobs. They could have availed early retirement or simply could have passed on the duty to other colleagues. Instead, they faced the virus head on despite the fear of possibly losing their lives in the process, and some indeed died. Even ordinary citizens helped each other whether family members, relatives, neighbors or friends in the hope of surviving the threat. There were mixed reactions from all walks of life. Some went to social media to show their positive and negative perceptions of the situation, while some just kept silent about it and lived on. I was skeptical of the reactions of the Filipinos that I was made to remember of the Comtean Altruism.

Comtean Altruism

Auguste Comte was a French philosopher responsible for the development of positive philosophy. The idea of his philosophy was to cure the sickness the French society was experiencing during its revolution. Further, Comte introduced the word altruisme in 1851, and years later it was entered into the English language as altruism.⁵ Altruism or Ethical Altruism is an ethical doctrine that assumes that individuals have a moral obligation to help, serve or benefit others, if necessary at the sacrifice of self-interest.⁶ Comte further wrote that altruism “gives a direct sanction exclusively to our instincts of benevolence,” and therefore “cannot tolerate the notion of rights, for such a notion rests on individualism.”⁷ Comte reasoned that an action is morally right if the outcome of such action is favorable than unfavorable to other individuals except to the agent. The core of this teaching was a human person

⁵ Introduction to Ethics, *Lumen Learning, Chapter 5 Ethical Theories*. Retrieve from <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/atd-epcc-introethics-1/chapter/altruism/>

⁶ Comte, August. *Catéchisme positiviste (1852) or Catechism of Positivism*, trans. R. Congreve, (London: Kegan Paul, 1891)

⁷ *Ibid.*

“living for others” (vivre pour autrui).⁸ A person works and lives for the benefit of other people.⁹ He firmly believed that a human person has to place others above the self, their interest above one’s own. To fulfill this responsibility would mean the total development of a person as a truly human person.

Altruists prefer to experience his success with other people to fulfill the same status. In other words, he feels happy when other people are happy and sad when they are sad. The ethical philosophy of altruism is an important tool in securing better relationships among men in all societies. For instance, a family needs to practice this philosophy in order to enhance and solidify the strong bond between husband and wife, among children and the family as a whole. It is given for a parent to teach within the family goodwill towards brothers and sisters and help each other solve problems and similar situations for each member to achieve and contented life. From a larger scale, by encouraging cooperation rather than contention, it advances congruity within communities of any size. Obviously, harmony inside communities does not really proclaim harmony among communities, and the two may even be contrarily related - for instance, the manner by which social struggle will in general abatement within countries at war. The notion of altruism is applicable not to every morally motivated treatment of others, but more narrowly to what is done out of a concern for the good of others—in other words, for their well-being¹⁰

Altruism is often seen as a form of consequentialism because an action is determined to be ethically right by the value of its outcome.¹¹ It is also considered as similar to utilitarianism, however an essential difference is that the latter prescribes acts that maximize good consequences for all of society, while

⁸ Golub, Caroline. 2014. "Altruism: A Natural Thought History of an Idea." Honors Thesis Collection. [http:// repository.wellesley.edu/thesiscollection/190](http://repository.wellesley.edu/thesiscollection/190).

⁹ Altruism, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, August 25, 2016. plato.stanford.edu

¹⁰ Kraut, Richard, "Altruism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/altruism/>>

¹¹ Ibid.

altruism prescribes maximizing good consequences for everyone except the agent. John Stuart Mill felt obliged to concede that altruism must be a good thing, not to be questioned by any moral person.¹² Herbert Spencer on the other hand argued that since the rest of society will almost always outnumber the utilitarian, a genuine utilitarian will inevitably end up practicing altruism or a form of altruism. Effective altruism is a philosophy and social movement that maintains that the consequences of our actions - for ourselves and others - are important, and seeks to maximize the overall quality of these consequences.¹³ Spenser wrote

First, an impossible combination of moral attributes is implied. Each is supposed by the hypothesis to regard self so little and others so much, that he willingly sacrifices his own pleasures to give pleasures to them. But if this is a universal trait, and action is universally congruous with it, we have to conceive each as being not only a sacrificer but also one who accepts sacrifices. While he is so unselfish as to yield up the benefit for which he has labored, he is so selfish as willingly to let others yield up to him the benefits they have labored for. To make pure altruism possible for all, each must be at once extremely unegoistic and extremely egoistic. As a giver, he must have no thought for self; as a receiver, no thought for others.¹⁴

Comte's altruism urges man to prioritize the social perspective over personal that is, man should live for others. This belief has permeated modern philosophical thinking on morality. W.G. Maclagan considers altruism "a duty to relieve

¹² Campbell, Robert, 2006, Altruism in Auguste Comte and Ayn Rand reply to Robert H. Bass, "Egoism versus Rights" *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 7, no, pp 357-69.

¹³ Introduction to Ethics, Lumen Learning, Chapter 5 Ethical Theories. Retrieve from <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/atd-epcc-introethics-1/chapter/altruism/>

¹⁴ Spencer, Herbert. 1978. *The Principles of Ethics, Volume 1*. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics.pp. 231-248 (Original works published 1879 and 1892).

the distress and promote the happiness of our fellows...Altruism is to...maintain quite simply that a man may and should discount altogether his own pleasure or happiness as such when he is deciding what course of action to pursue".¹⁵ James Fieser states the altruist dictum as "action is morally right if the consequences of that action are more favorable than unfavorable to everyone except the agent."¹⁶ B.A.O. Williams is a little bit more inclusive, defining altruism as referring "to a general disposition to regard the interests of others, merely as such, as making some claim on one, and, in particular, as implying the possibility of limiting one's own projects."¹⁷

To illustrate, an act of saving a drowning person is an example of altruistic tendency. Saving a drowning person is a serious matter for it may cause the loss of life of both the savior and the victim. When a person disregards danger to his life just to save another is a selfless and heroic act. This commendable act values the life of another person at the same time endangering the giver's own life. Helping a neighbor who is in great need, whether financially or morally, without expecting something in return is another examples of an altruistic approach. Just imagine how grateful can that neighbor be when an unexpected genuine assistance is given to him.

Comtean Altruism and the Coronavirus Pandemic

The most vulnerable sector in the society when tragic events like natural calamities or pandemics occur is the poor. It is not surprising why the Philippine government catered the social Amelioration Program because the poor families cannot live to fight another day sans job or other forms of livelihood. This is a form of social sympathy of the government towards this

¹⁵ W. G. MacLagan, *Self and Others: A Defense of Altruism* (The Philosophical Quarterly, IV(15, 1954), pp. 109-127.

¹⁶ James Fieser, *Great Issues in Philosophy*, 2009. Retrieved from <https://www.utm.edu/staff/jfieser/class/120/7-ethics>.

¹⁷ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, (London: Routledge, 2006.), p. 93.

sector. However, this program encountered problems in the process, creating outbursts of anger from some beneficiaries because of slow distribution of the grant. Some beneficiaries may have been left out, but they struggled and fought their way to survival through their efforts and the help of other people. Resiliency is the ability to be strong in the midst of adversity. Defined in the general sense as “efforts to restore or maintain internal or external equilibrium under significant threat by means of human activities including thought and action.”¹⁸ Consistent with this view, resiliency is the capability to organize and make use of all available resources not only to help oneself, family and community. It is also an attitude to help everyone out of the devastating impact of the traumatic experience brought by Covid-19.

People panicked. They do not know what to do. The government responded by putting almost everything on hold. They set checkpoints and quarantined people to avoid contamination and the spread of the virus. Life became different from what people were used to. They were confined in their houses, communities and the activities outside the homes were limited. Those who were tasked to man the checkpoints like the local officials, police, soldiers have no other choice but to face the possibility of having the virus. Doctors, nurses and other health workers and hospital staff have to stay in their hospitals to cater the needs of those affected by the virus. They were the frontline workers in the fight against the spread of the virus. They risked their lives to save the rest. One doctor said that “we have no choice but to do what we were tasked to do, that is to help those who need medical help. Despite of the fact that the virus might affect us also, we have to attend to the need of our patients.”¹⁹ Another said that “We are doing this to save the rest.”²⁰ Unfortunately, some of these so-called frontliners paid the ultimate sacrifice. We have seen on videos of unfortunate

¹⁸ Carolyn Smith and Bonnie Carlson, *Stress, Coping and Resilience (Social Service Review, 1997)*. (71), 231-257.

¹⁹ Deo Obero, Interview by Dennis M. Bautista, Tacloban City, March 30, 2020.

²⁰ Marion Acuin, Interview by Dennis M. Bautista, Tacloban City, April 3, 2020.

events like the case of a police officer. He has been on the street manning the checkpoint and he cannot go near their loved ones. He said that "I have to bear this loneliness of having my love ones away from me, be contented with video call and text to avoid passing the virus if I already have it to them."²¹

Seeing all these heartbreaking situations, many Filipinos come out of their way to ease the burden they experienced. This disease affected everyone in the society. It was not discriminatory only towards the poor who are obviously the more vulnerable compared to the rich, but also the frontliners and even repatriated overseas Filipino workers. The rich have the capacity to store a gargantuan amount of supplies to last for weeks and even months compared to the poor who has a meager chance of storing up substantial supply to suffice for him and his family. Besides, the poor were the primary recipients of the Social Amelioration Program of the government. Food is an essential part of human survival. Humans eat. The denial of this basic element could lead him to commit felonious acts which could proximately result to the deprivation of his liberty and even death, and remotely towards the survival of his family or dependents.

In the midst of this unfortunate happening, it is obvious in the media that those who are well-off in life have extended a helping hand in order to assist those in dire need. Some people have willingly shared their wealth for the benefit of other people in the society. For instance, San Miguel Corporation through its chief executive officer Ramon Ang has donated more than a billion pesos for the benefit of everyone. Soldiers, police officers, teachers, farmers and ordinary citizen donated their salaries for the same cause. Others have initiated fund-raising programs for the same reason. Sharing and caring have been the consistent battle cry of the human spirit in order to beat the social and mental ill-effects of the dreaded disease.

²¹ Oscar Labrador, Jr. Interview by Dennis M. Bautista, Tacloban City, April 5, 2020.

The spirit of *pakikipagkapwa* (being one with the other) *pakikisama* (being along with) and *bayanihan* (Community spirit) binds them together to rise again. Pakikipagkapwa, pakikisama and bayanihan are sacred values that also define who the Filipinos are. Pakikipagkapwa is treating another person as a fellow human being. Pakikisama according to Fr. Frank Lynch, is a camaraderie that makes the Filipinos flexible and easy to be with. Bayanihan is also a form of camaraderie among the people in the community that connotes helping one another in times of need.²²

Help came from many sectors. Government, religious organizations, companies, and private individuals all over the country began to extend their hand by providing food, protective suits, face masks and face shields to protect the frontliners from the virus. Even ordinary individuals extended help even in the simplest possible way. For them, this fight involves everyone, not just the government and medical professionals. The government provided food and other necessary help to those in need. It likewise asked everyone to do their part. Common people like the farmers from Benguet, the salad bowl of the Philippines where fresh highland vegetables originate, and small farmers from all over the country donated their harvest to those who need food²³. Doing small things like staying at home, praying and offering anything to others are ways done by Filipinos to help fight the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the lens of August Comte, this is what altruism is, to be a person for others. Every individual has a moral obligation to serve, help, or benefit others. If necessary, one has to sacrifice his own self-interest for others. One author posits that Comte's system is viewed as both ethical and religious. Happiness is not only found in living for others as the supreme end of an act, but regulative supremacy of social sympathy over the self-regarding

²² Felipe Landa Jocano, *Working with Filipinos - A Cross-Cultural Encounter*. (Quezon City: Punlad Research House, 1999). p. 43.

²³ Cordillera Autonomous Region". It's More Fun in the Philippines. Archived from the original on 9 May 2013. Retrieved 10 June 2020.

instincts.²⁴ Besides, man's love towards a supreme being can only be concretized through his love for his neighbour.²⁵ His ethical theory may be summarized in this proposition. The dominion of feeling over thought is the normative principle of human conduct, for it is the affective impulses that govern the individual and the race. While it is true that man is under the influence of two affective impulses, which are the egoistic or personal, and the altruistic or social impulses, the egoistic impulse of man refers to an action "which makes any good of the ego the end and motive of action."²⁶ The altruistic or social impulse, on the other hand, refers to the willingness of man to do things for others. However, a just balance is impossible between these two existing impulses, one or other must preponderate.

This disease may disable the human person from physically helping another, but it does not paralyze him from helping in another way. This particular act of helping, clearly manifest the two affective impulses mentioned by August Comte. The kind of impulse effected by the agent doing the act depends on the one acting. But if the social or altruistic impulse preponderates, is what Comte believe to be morally right because the consequence of that action was more favorable than unfavorable to others except the agent. This the first principle of morality according to Comte, the regulative supremacy of social sympathy over self-regarding instinct or the subordination of self-love to the benevolent impulses.²⁷

In contrast, even without this Comtean doctrine, Filipinos by nature are resilient. They are happy and fun-loving people.

²⁴ Gabriel Moran, *Understanding Religion and Being Religious*. (PACE, 1991). 249-252.

²⁵ Sheldon Ives G. Agaton, *Morality and Religiosity: A Filipino Experience*. (Recoletos Multidisciplinary Research Journal, III 2, 2015), 83-95. Retrieved from <https://rmrj.usjr.edu.ph/index.php/RMRJ/article/view/113>

²⁶ Jay Fox, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1909. Retrieved May 9, 2019, from [www.newadvent.org: http:// www.newadvent.org/cathen/05328a.html](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05328a.html)

²⁷ Auguste Comte, *System of Positive Polity or Treatise on Sociology*. (Translated by John Henry Bridges. Vol. I. Paris: L. Mathias, Carilian-Goeury and Vor Dalmont, 1851). p. 12.

Best of all, Filipinos here and abroad are known to be hospitable and helpful. They have a strong impulse to help especially to one who needs it most. The moral obligation dictates him not to turn a blind eye because it is the benevolent thing to do.

The overriding concept in this endeavour is to relate the Comtean Altruism with the perspective of Filipino concept of helping, *pakikisama*, or *Bayanihan* for that matter in challenging situations like the Covid-19 health crisis. Obviously, the two are apart from each as the former is a philosophical mindset of French origin while the latter are traits of Filipino derivation. However, these two can be interrelated since both are tackling the same object that is the human being himself. When Comte talks of social sympathy coupled with benevolent impulse, he must be referring to the behaviour of man in dealing with another person who desires assistance. The tendency to serve another who needs help from the Comtean perspective is the same perspective when a Filipino elects to lend a helping hand to a person who needs help. This is the core reason why Comte's philosophy of altruism was used as a foundation of this paper.

Comtean altruism paired with *Bayanihan* will be a crucial yet important ingredient in the survival against the scare of the Covid-19. The Philippine government, no matter how hard it works, without the social sympathy, unity and cooperation of the people will struggle to solve the crisis. In other words, Comtean altruism coupled with *Bayanihan* among Filipinos can beat the scare and life-threatening reality of the Covid-19. The *Bayanihan to Heal as One Act* was basically enacted to address various important socio-economic concerns of the country and its people. For instance, the Social Amelioration Program was meant to help the financial concerns of the poor and the displaced workers. Despite incapacity to work and look for a living, this financial aid from the government somehow supported them in their daily expenses in order to survive. This Act basically uses such term to connote unity and cooperation among the populace in the country. Without the cooperation of the entire citizenry, the objective of defeating the spread of the virus will be a long shot. Seeing the positive outcome of this law,

lawmakers proposed pending bills before the Congress to further address the ill-effects of this virus, and these bills are stimulus packages meant to address the needs of the country and the people.

Even the local government units adhere to this strategy of social sympathy and *bayanihan*. For instance, with the influx of returning residents to their respective provinces, there are isolated cases when they would not register with their respective municipalities. Again, this is dangerous to his family and to the community. He could be a carrier of the disease and eluding quarantine protocol could be devastating. Local government units sought the help of the community to report undocumented residents to ensure they undergo proper protocol. This method or policy can save lives and can save the community.

However, this Comtean Altruism and the Filipino traits recently mentioned are not absolute and all-encompassing. Meaning not all Filipinos are resilient, hospitable, happy, fun-loving and helpful. There will always be exemptions, otherwise it will be a logical fallacy on *assumptio non probata*. There were violators right after the super typhoon Yolanda struck the country. In the same manner, there are people who continually violate the provisions of the Bayanihan to Heal as One Law. Some people try to evade checkpoints and quarantine protocols. The simple rules of wearing face masks and maintaining physical distancing are constantly violated. These are isolated cases illustrating that despite serious threat of the virus, some individuals continue to disregard protocols. But generally, Filipinos are on a positive note. When challenging situations arise, Filipinos generally lend a hand to those in need.

Every human person is distinct from each other. This is called individual differences. Every person acts differently given a certain situation. The catastrophic occurrences of Yolanda and Covid-19 gathered different reactions from people. Some acted sympathetic towards another while others remained indifferent and even deviant. But generally, people acted in a manner congruent with the dictates of the government as well as his

moral dictation. This is how altruism becomes manifest in every individual especially in times of difficulty. The higher impulses within us are brought under the influence of a powerful stimulus from without. By its means, they are enabled to control our discordant impulses, and to maintain a state of harmony towards which they have always tended, but which, without such aid could never be realized.²⁸ Problematic situations appear every now and then in societies. Lives become stressful as a result, nevertheless, the altruistic part in a person would oftentimes come out to pacify the difficulty and eventually help ease the burden that humans experience resulting from a bad phenomenon. Comtean Altruism and *Bayanihan* are important components in the containment and eradication of a challenging and even life-threatening occurrences like Yolanda, Covid-19 and other similar phenomena.

Conclusion

Covid-19 is tragic, but the citizens are slowly overcoming the adversities and painful effects of it. It gravely affected not just the Philippine economy but the global economic structure. Just recently, Japan reported that it is experiencing a mild recession, and the pandemic is yet far from culmination. A number of government projects were withdrawn in order to fund the Bayanihan Act. The collection of taxes slowed down which is detrimental to the economy again as taxes are the lifeblood of a nation. The government cannot solve this situation alone. It needs the cooperation or the Bayanihan spirit of the people. It may be far from over, but it appears that the nation is winning this battle. The social sympathy may not be absolute as dissent and constant criticizing will always be displayed. Nevertheless, the Bayanihan Act paired with social sympathy and helpfulness from the people show a positive outcome. This virus can only be definitely solved when a vaccine becomes available. In the meantime that the vaccine is still on trial stage,

²⁸ Ibid. pp. 18-19.

mitigating the spread of Covid-19 is possible through the government's undying effort and the social concern and benevolence of the people.

There are valuable lessons that people can get out of certain tragic episodes in life. The intensity may vary from one experience to another. Every human person will have to experience sad moments in life. Nobody is spared from such unwanted chapters, nevertheless, he should overcome it and the ability to heal the hurt should be utilized. Comte's altruism is a benevolent doctrine. More so, it is a gem in times of adversities. Helping a person is excellent, but helping another in times of great difficulty is exceptional.

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