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Terrorism and Heroism

Steve Taylor Ph.D

On May 22nd 2017, my home city of Manchester, UK. suffered a terrorist attack. Waiting in the foyer at the end of a concert by Ariana Grande, a 22-year-old man detonated a bomb strapped to his chest, killing twenty-two people (including himself) and injuring over 500. Most of the victims were teenagers, children or parents waiting to collect their children. However, amid the senseless savagery of the attack, there were numerous stories of heroism and selflessness.

A report into the emergency response to the attack, commissioned by the Mayor of Manchester noted “hundreds if not thousands of acts of individual bravery and selflessness.”¹ More specifically, the report described “the heroic actions of some members of the public involved in the widespread provision of first aid and reassurance to the casualties as well as assisting in the portage of those casualties...multiple examples of individual acts of kindness and heroism from people doing their job and from members of the public demonstrating great public spiritedness.”²

Members of the public worked with police officers to carry out injured people on metal railings. Stewards formed a human wall to stop people going towards the smoke. A woman who saw crowds of confused and frightened teenagers running out of the venue guided around fifty to the safety of a nearby hotel. There she shared her phone number on social media so that parents could come and pick their children up. Taxi drivers across the city switched off their meters and took concertgoers and other members of the public home.

In a more specific example, a homeless man named Stephen Jones was sleeping rough near the venue and rushed in to help. He found many children covered with blood, screaming and crying. He and a friend pulled nails out of the children’s arms—and in one case, out of a child’s face—and helped a woman who was bleeding severely by holding her legs in the air. Jones described how “It was just my instinct to go and help people out.”³

As a paramedic named Dan Smith who was at the scene commented, “There was an unbelievable amount of people doing what they could to help...I saw people putting together in a way I have never seen before...The thing I will remember more than any other is the humanity that was on display. People were catching each other’s eye, asking if they were okay, touching shoulders, looking out for one another, saying thank you.”⁴

Danger of Death

Acts of heroic altruism are a common feature of crises and emergency situations. When a person's life is endangered, it is common for witnesses or bystanders to act impulsively to try to save them, even if this involves risk to their own lives. This applies to small-scale individual incidents - such as attempting to save someone from drowning or jumping down from a train platform to save someone who has fallen down on to the track - and also to major disasters such as earthquakes or airplane accidents.⁵

One might expect such acts of heroic altruism to become less frequent as personal risk increases, but this does not appear to be the case. In terrorist attacks, there are almost always reports of heroic altruism, despite acute life-threatening danger. For example, in another UK incident in 2019, a purportedly "reformed" terrorist was attending an offender rehabilitation conference in London, when he ran amok with two knives, immediately killing two other conference participants. The terrorist ran outside, intending to kill others. However, members of the public quickly surrounded him, wielding improvised weapons such as a fire extinguisher and a long narwhal tusk (taken from the wall of the conference hall). The group wrestled the terrorist to the ground, and held him down until police officers arrived. This was despite the fact that he was apparently wearing a suicide vest (which was later found to be fake). One witness described how a pedestrian "ran through traffic and jumped the central partition to confront the attacker with several others...Amazing bravery."⁶

In another example, in November 2015, Paris suffered a series of near-simultaneous terrorist attacks. The most serious was at the Bataclan Concert Hall, where terrorists shot indiscriminately at the crowd, killing 89 people. A security guard named Didi was standing at one of entrances to the hall. When he saw the gunmen, "I told myself, I've got to quickly get as many people out of there as possible because these terrorists have come to kill as many people as they can."⁷ Following the gunmen inside, he began to open doors, to allow people to escape. When he saw crowds struggling to push through, he realized he needed to open more doors, so went into the main hall, where the gunmen were firing. He lay down on the floor with other concertgoers until the gunmen stopped to reload, when he jumped up and yelled for people to follow him. He led them to the exits, then to the safety of a nearby students' hall of residence. Didi continued to go back and forth, guiding groups of people from the hall and the hall of residence, saving an estimated 400-500 people. A pregnant woman whom he guided to safety said, "My life will never be long enough to thank him for

what he did. And thanks to him, my baby has a mother. We saw the worst things that night, the worst human beings ever. And then we saw the best thing.’⁸

Unfortunately, there are many cases of heroic individuals dying during terrorist attacks. Also during the Paris attacks, a man named Ludovico Boubas was eating with friends at a bar when terrorists began shooting at the terrace. Rather than diving for cover, when he saw a gunman taking aim at a woman nearby, he impulsively dived in front of her, losing his own life while saving hers. The previous day, 2000 miles away in Beirut, a man named Adel Termos acted with similar selfless bravery when he saw a man approach a crowd wearing a suicide vest. He accosted the terrorist, wrestling him to the ground. In the process, the bomb was detonated, killing him but undoubtedly saving many others.

Explaining Extreme Altruism

Adherents to Neo-Darwinism and evolutionary psychology often portray human beings as ruthless genetic machines, only concerned with survival and reproduction.⁹ From such a perspective, altruism is problematic, especially at the extreme level described above. If human behaviour is motivated by selfishness, why would we be willing to impulsively endanger our own lives for the sake of strangers? Theories such as kin selection, reciprocal altruism, or egoic altruism struggle to account for such selfless and heroic behavior.¹⁰

It is significant that “emergency altruism” - as it might be called - is usually enacted spontaneously, without conscious deliberation. In a series of studies led by the psychologist David Rand, a strong correlation has been established between impulsivity and altruism. The less time individuals have to deliberate, the more likely they are to be altruistic.¹¹ In a study of 51 examples of extreme altruism by recipients of Carnegie Hero Medals, Rand & Epstein found that around 90% of the acts were purely impulsive, with participants making comments such as “‘I’m thankful I was able to act and not think about it.” “I just did what I felt like I needed to do’ and “I think it was just instinct.”¹²

In my view, this suggests the contrary to Neo-Darwinism: that altruism is innate to human beings. As the “altruism-empathy” hypothesis developed by Daniel Batson suggests, altruism may sometimes have selfish motives, or bring some beneficial after-effects, but there is also a “pure” altruism which arises from the human capacity for empathy.¹³ Our capacity to sense the suffering of others give rise to an impulse to alleviate that suffering.

Terrorist attacks illustrate two extremes of human nature: acute brutality and extreme altruism; the indiscriminate slaughter of innocent human beings, and the willingness to

sacrifice one's own life for the wellbeing of others. The brutality of terrorism arises from disconnection - from ideological abstraction that divorces adherents to the reality and value of other human beings. In contrast, heroic altruism arises from a fundamental connection between human beings, which enables empathy, and triggers an impulse to save the lives of others.

Notes

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4. Wilkinson, Damon. "The NHS Heroes Who Came to Manchester's Aid in the City's Darkest Hour."
5. Wang et al., 2019; Taylor, 2023.
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