

# THE ART ALTRUISM PROJECT

## 2026 ESSAY AND PLAN



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# 1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

## 1.1 The intellectual framework for the Art Altruism project.

The Art Altruism Project is one of my recent irrational ventures. It is an ongoing small scale multi-year artistic and social experimental project, managed from my art studio in Bluffy, France.

Its goal in summary is the promotion of altruistic and collectivistic behaviour in the French Alpine region. It will try to achieve this through a combination of a) practical demonstration (the gifting of artwork by myself and other artists) and b) linked communications.

The project is small but not completely trivial: its implementation will require a significant investment of my time over several years, and several thousand euros in material and workshop costs. Altruism and collectivism are both complex topics, of which I have only a shallow knowledge. I undertook some informal charitable artistic work over the period 2021 – 2024. This provided inspiration and general encouragement, but no clear single best pathway.

In this context, the project therefore warranted some preliminary investment in its outline design, feasibility assessment and further development. Hence, over the period 2024-2026, I have researched, read, reflected, discussed and planned. In 2026 I implemented a pilot phase: (donating 16 decorated benches to multiple communes).

This essay is part of the project development process. It summarises the intellectual framework, rationale and outline implementation plan for the project. Writing it has helped me identify project opportunities and risks, gaps and weak spots. As the project progresses, it also may help others understand what on earth I am doing with this project, and why.

In order to successfully promote altruism and collectivism, I felt I first needed to gain at least a moderate understanding of the two topics. So, I read up on psychology and sociology. I present here only a small fraction of the reviewed material, condensed into a layperson's summary. The real knowledge can be found in the references.

AI was not used at any stage of the research, writing and editing process – I like to use my own brain and forge my own path. So, apologies in advance for the rough edges.

## 1.2 The spectrum of prosocial and anti-social motivation and behaviour.

Altruism is part of a larger family of prosocial and anti-social motivations, which are summarised here.

**Egoism** – Motivation focused on increasing on one's own welfare, irrespective of/ potentially counter to the welfare of others.

**Altruism** – Motivation focused on increasing the welfare of another individual.

**Collectivism** – Motivation focused on increasing the welfare of a group or collective (of which the individual may or may not be a member).

**Principlism** – Motivation with the ultimate goal of upholding/supporting some moral principle – for example fairness or justice or environmental sustainability.

All of these motivations have theoretical promise and problems, and in real life are rarely exhibited in true isolation. The more common situation is a plurality of motivations and a resultant blend of behaviours.

Academic debate continues on the existence of all of the states, except egoism, for which the evidence is sadly abundant and clear.

### 1.3 What is altruism?

Altruism, it seems, is a term and positive character trait that most people can broadly describe and agree on at the high level. However, at the detailed and academic level, definitions and even the existence of true altruism in humans remain under debate.

For better or worse, I am following the definitions and logic of one of the leading thinkers and publishers in the field of studying altruism, Daniel Batson, an American social psychologist<sup>i</sup>. For those who wish to explore this topic in more depth I can recommend his comprehensive book “Altruism in Humans”. Batson C.D, Oxford University Press, 2011 <sup>ii</sup>.

First, some dictionary definitions of altruism:

Larousse Dictionary : Disposition de caractère qui pousse à s'intéresser aux autres, à se montrer désintéressé (par opposition à égoïsme)<sup>iii</sup>

Oxford Dictionary, via Google: Selfless concern for the well-being of others, without care for one's own interests; unselfishness.

Cambridge Dictionary: Willingness to do things that bring advantages to others, even if it results in disadvantage for yourself.<sup>iv</sup>

Merriam Webster Dictionary: Unselfish regard for or devotion to the welfare of others.<sup>v</sup>

Wikipedia: Concern for the well-being, the life, of others, independently of personal benefit or reciprocity.<sup>vi</sup>

The Batson definition is tighter, and drier: ***A motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare.***

For non-academics, an imperfect but potentially more practical approach is focused on behaviour rather than motivation. **Altruistic behaviour is acting in a way that benefits another, rather than (only) the acting individual.**

### 1.4 What is collectivism?

Collectivism has political, social, philosophical and psychological definitions. I focus here on the psychological and sociological aspects and provide a few example definitions;

Batson: A motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing the welfare of a group or collective.

Nickerson<sup>vii</sup>: Collectivism is the tendency to view oneself as interdependent and a member of a group rather than as an independent being.

Kemmelmeier 2002<sup>viii</sup>: The core of collectivism is the idea that groups bind together and mutually obligate individuals.

Triandis<sup>ix</sup>: Collectivists value security, good social relationships, harmony within ingroups, and personalized relationships.

Schwartz 1994<sup>x</sup>: Collectivistic societies rely on mutual obligations based on status. The personal is merely a component of the social, and as such, ingroups, rather than individuals, are considered to be the basic unit of a collectivist society.

Collectivism is a sociological/whole of society phenomenon, and hence intrinsically complex.

Scholars have developed a classification system for societies that places fully individualistic and fully collectivistic societies at opposite ends of the spectrum. Western and/or wealthy nations such as the USA and Australia are strongly individualistic<sup>xi</sup>, whilst Eastern and/or poorer societies, such as India, China and Turkey are strongly collectivistic.

## 1.5 The collectives of interest – French communes and villages

The collectives of interest in my project are very specific: Communes, villages and hamlets in the French Alps. For clarity, Communes are the local components of the government of France, mandated to provide services and organisational control over specific, relatively small areas. Villages and hamlets are small clusters of residences and urban development. A single Commune may contain one or more villages and many hamlets.

I live in the Commune of Bluffy, which we commonly refer to as a village, but in reality is one very small village centre and 3 dispersed hamlets.

My motivation for this focus is linked to my experience in Bluffy. For 24 years I have seen firsthand the benefits, potential and difficulties of Commune-focused collectivism. The Communes in France render great benefits to their residents and visitors. They achieve this in the face of chronically limited resources and continual difficulties, with the support of a veritable army of volunteers.

In Bluffy I contribute to this effort in a small way, via volunteering and gifting. I support our local association by allocating my time for basic building construction, repairs and maintenance and fruit production. This will continue. I now wish to use my more specialised artistic skills and professional experience in an attempt to generate a wider and lasting impact.

## 1.6 The benefits of altruism

The benefits of altruism are multi-fold and well proven. The most obvious benefits are accrued by the individual recipients of altruistic attention – they receive direct support. Research suggests that altruism centred actions can also benefit groups in need and the person undertaking the actions. It is these broader and more subtle positive impacts that are of particular interest for me.

Bates discusses the key role of empathy in altruistic motivation and its practical impacts. In summary, empathy catalyses both more help in general, and better targeted and more sensitive help. Empathy also plays a key role in the durability and reliability of help – once emotional connections are forged, individuals are more likely to continue helping in future. Research also suggests links between empathy, altruism and the inhibition of aggression, derogation and victim blaming.

Altruistic motivation can also generate positive impacts in seemingly unfavourable and unlikely situations. Contrary to the egoistic and aggressive/competitive “winner takes all” negotiation culture, introducing elements of empathy and altruism in negotiations and conflict situations encourages mutual benefit (win-win) outcomes and a reduction in intergroup and intragroup conflict.

One very interesting and well researched phenomena are the psychological and health benefits accrued by the altruistic actors – **to give and to help is proven to be good for you**. As an example, one in-depth study<sup>xii</sup> found a positive correlation between volunteering and reported self-esteem, life-satisfaction and physical health – and a negative correlation with depression. Personally, I can endorse this finding, as I find volunteering for our village a consistently positive experience in many ways.

Batson presents a long list of potential benefits and critically examines the evidence to support or weaken the claimed impacts. With these caveats, here is the full list of studied benefits:

- More help and more sensitive and reliable help for individuals in need.
- Less aggression.
- Less child abuse and neglect.
- Reduced sexual assault.
- More forgiveness,
- Less derogation and blaming victims of injustice.
- Increased cooperation in conflict situations.
- More positive attitudes towards stigmatized groups and increased willingness to help those groups.
- Increased concern for endangered species/environments.
- More sensitive and responsive care in friendships, romantic relationships and marriages.
- More happiness and increased self-esteem.
- A sense of fulfilment and meaning in life.
- Less stress. Increased longevity.

Batson also researched the negative aspects of altruism. The most interesting point raised was that altruism is not always accompanied by wisdom. Bad results from good intentions are a common occurrence. Critics of international aid and charity in general cite innumerable examples of negative outcomes, irrespective of the altruistic or other motivations of the donors or aid practitioners.

From all of this, I conclude the following:

- Altruism has multiple clear and proven benefits.
- Benefits flow directly to the recipient, but also the giver and broader society.
- To avoid the most important potential negative aspect of altruistic acts, the emotional driver needs to be coupled with an intellectual investment, in problem analysis, logic, planning etc...

## 1.7 The benefits of collectivism

Collectivism is a complex sociological model that has multiple definitions and significant positive and negative aspects. It was difficult to condense what I found into a succinct package, so instead I will directly quote an extract from the corporate training website MasterClass<sup>xiii</sup>.

*Collectivism has several advantages, including:*

- **Higher unity and harmony:** *Since those in collectivist societies value the group dynamic, there is a much higher sense of togetherness and community.*
- **Increased feeling of support:** *Those in collectivist societies tend to feel as if they have a stronger network of friends, close family members, and extended family who will support them during times of difficulty.*
- **Stronger sense of empathy:** *Members in collectivist societies tend to spend more of their time and energy thinking about others rather than themselves, resulting in a culture with a much stronger sense of empathy and consideration for others.*

I feel and experience all of these benefits, to some degree, living in Bluffy. It is far from perfect, but it is definitely positive.

## 1.8 The Effective Altruism and Longtermism movements

There are two social movements related to altruism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that I have drawn ideas from and hence warrant a mention. Both movements have their pros and cons – particularly Effective Altruism, which many (including myself) consider to be a combination of interesting concepts, good intentions and problematic implementation and conduct.

As quoted in the EA website<sup>xiv</sup>, Effective Altruism is both a) a philosophy that uses reason and logic to find the most effective ways to help others and b) a global organization of people and organizations. One of its defining features is an emphasis on researching precisely where and how limited resources can be best allocated to deliver impact. Another feature is the focus on very specific and numerically significant targets which may be neglected by more conventional charitable systems.

From EA I have taken the concept of careful targeting, experimentation and tailoring my efforts to fit my specific added value – art and design capabilities.

Longtermism<sup>xv</sup> is a relatively radical philosophy, with multiple outlandish and morally dubious ideas regarding the relative/mathematical value of current lives versus potential future lives<sup>xvi</sup>. What is interesting to me is its logically driven conclusion that reducing existential risks to global civilization and the human species is a high priority – and one that is currently greatly underrated.

I agree with this conclusion, and so am planning to invest significant personal resources on this topic (existential risk) over the next decade. I believe that integrating a humble and altruistic mindset/framework from the first will help counter the Longtermist ethical gaps and issues.

## 2 ART, ALTRUISM AND COLLECTIVISM

### 2.1 The latent potential for art and artists to promote altruism and collectivism

My broad research indicated the potential for an interesting and positive activity or project linked to these two topics. The next step was design – determining what to do. Over time I developed four questions to help direct my enquiries on this very specific topic.

- How in general can/does artwork promote altruism?
- How in general can/do artists best promote altruism?
- What will be the most suitable approach for myself?
- How can I test my ideas on a small scale before investing further?

### 2.2 The artwork

There is very substantial evidence of art being used, for millennia, to promote specific social messages and values, such as religious morality. So art is commonly used in Principlism. I found however only limited evidence online of art specifically designed to illustrate or promote altruism. Indirectly, the most common connections appear to be a) religious martyrdom – self-sacrifice for a specific belief or faith and b) heroic acts in conflict settings. These have limited relevance I feel to modern artistic life.

I have viewed online many artistic works that aim or claim to connect to altruism, via the title or subject matter. Apologies to the artists, but personally, I am not convinced that the direct or blatant visual connection works very well. Altruism is a complex psychological and sociological phenomenon. In practice it is more of a process than an instantaneous emotion or act. This is not simple to illustrate via a single image online.

My online research unearthed another line of enquiry linked to art and the Effective Altruism movement. This essay , by Rhys Southan, discussed the value of creating art versus dedicating equivalent resources to altruistic acts <sup>xvii</sup> . The topic has been further examined in the generic and AI assisted writing forum PapersOwl <sup>xviii</sup> . Unsurprisingly, art came off second-best, and I agree with the conclusion – most art, of all types, is not inherently altruistic or beneficial.]

## 2.3 The artists

From personal experience and discussions, I note that most artists have some altruistic tendencies and are locally engaged. However I also noted that most have not attempted or succeeded to integrate altruism into their artistic ventures. The potential is there, but the results are lacking. This observation motivated me to search for a solution to this problem. I am also an artist, so the hope is that I will be able to at least understand the issue fractionally better than most researchers.

To start, in general, creating art is not a lucrative profession. Most artists cannot make a decent living selling their artwork. So the potential for most artists to simply donate funds generated by artwork sales is overall somewhat limited. Limiting participation to only the limited number of rich artists is considered neither useful or viable.

What most artists can and often would like to do instead, is to contribute their time and artistic talent.

At first glance, this is a simple and very positive idea. However, looking into the detail, the donating of either artistic time or artwork is fraught with issues:

- The potential recipients of altruism typically do not need artworks – they need more basic support and goods and services.
- There is the perception that art given away is not of value, and that this gifting may devalue the other works that the artist is trying to sell.
- Artworks are not divisible and so not easily shareable.
- A lot of art is fragile or not designed for the outdoors – it requires care from the new owners.
- Personal taste is important. Buyers self-select art that they like, but this may not be the case for an artist donating to a specific individual.
- Frames for paintings and prints can be expensive and the material costs for sculptures can be significant.
- Taxation and certification issues can be complex or problematic, particularly in France.

So it is difficult, but it is certainly not impossible.

I feel the missing link appears to be a viable mechanism and/or framework to enable artists to cost-effectively create and donate artworks that are design from the outset to be suitable for donation – avoiding the pitfalls and maximizing the unique added value that artists have to offer. The Arte Altruisme Project is in part designed to provide a testing ground for such mechanisms.

## 2.4 My early experiments : 2021 – 2024

All of this analysis and reflection on altruism and collectivism was triggered in part by some completely informal and unplanned charitable activities I undertook in our Bluffy village from 2021 – 2024. In 2021 I created an enamel, wood and copper sculpture of a rooster and informally donated it to the commune. It still sits in the main square of Bluffy and is (according to the Maire and others) a source of communal pride.



From 2022 to 2024 I constructed and donated several decorated outdoor benches to the commune. They are still installed throughout the village and used by both residents and visitors.



Over the years I have received substantial thanks and intermittent positive feedback regarding these donations. The feedback is both written and oral and generally relates to how viewing or using the works made the individuals feel. The rooster donation was written up in the regional newspaper. So, I have encouraging anecdotal results from this early work, and some indications of how local level art-centred altruism does and could work.

### 3 THE PROJECT

#### 3.1 The 2026 pilot phase

In 2026, I implemented a semi-formal pilot phase of the Arte Altruism project. I created and donated 16 artistic outdoor benches for the communes of Bluffy and the surrounding area. The artistic outputs are simple and practical – the benches are individually crafted and decorated and installed on paths and in public spaces. I

used only solid wood, either recycled or sourced from trees locally cut for other reasons. The benches have a design life of 10-20 years.



The communication approach linked to the donated public works is low-profile and incremental. A stainless steel plaque with a QR code for the Scenario2100 website is attached to each bench. In theory, this will guide visitors to the online discussion material for the next 10-20 years – a trickle feed of thousands of viewers. In addition, the recipient communes are highly active communicators, with well-established networks and communication channels.

As of July 2026, 6 benches have been installed in Bluffy and I am in the process of allocating, donating and installing the 10 remaining benches. I am monitoring the website for traffic, which will be in part generated by the QR codes.

### 3.2 My proposed approach

The general positive verdict on both altruism and collectivism appears relatively clear. The early informal and pilot phase activities also appear to have generated positive results. It is also clear that an ongoing experimental attitude will be needed, as it will not be possible to confidently predict the precise outcome of my future ventures in this topic.

So, this is my proposed approach:

- I will aim to undertake more practical altruistic and collective generic acts, via a regular stream of small scale activities.
- I will not attempt to integrate explicit expressions/indicators of altruism and collectivism into the physical appearance of the artworks that I produce. My works are overall just not suitable for this and I have doubts on the general efficacy of visually messaging such a complex topic.

- I will experiment in turn with several delivery and outreach methods, centred on art and designed to cost-effectively promote altruism and collectivism in a variety of ways.
- After a period of solo testing, I will ask other artists to participate in this experimental process. The focus for other artists will be donation of time via artistic creation.
- I will communicate the findings (whether positive or negative) to the broader artistic and local community.

### 3.3 The project theory, workplan and financing 2027+

#### Theory

I consider the current version of the Arte Altruisme Project as a small scale experiment.

The experimental goal is the promotion of altruistic and collectivistic behaviour in the French Alpine region.

The stepwise experimental theory of the project is as follows:

- A. Multiple small and practical demonstrations of altruism and collectivism will generate immediate benefits for the recipients, participants and observers.
- B. This may trigger further reflection and discussion of the topics.
- C. This in turn may catalyse both longer changes in mindsets and further practical positive acts – generating a positive circle of change.

I aim to implement this project for several years and informally monitor the outcomes. I forecast achieving at least these 3 objectives:

1. As an absolute minimum, it will be beneficial for myself - the project is enjoyable and satisfying to implement. Keeping my expectations modest and having some fun are important in this regard.
2. It will probably also benefit, in a similar manner, any other artists who choose to participate in the experiment.
3. It will generate some small scale practical and local benefits and goodwill for the Aravis-Annecy regions of the French Alps.

I consider the project worth doing just for these 3 objectives. The project may also succeed in its more ambitious and catalytic objective:

4. Generating broader and longer term discussions and changes linked to altruism and collectivism.

This fourth objective is simultaneously ambitious, diffuse and largely un-measurable. I am Ok with that, as not everything worthwhile or of value can be measured.

#### Workplan

The 2027-2030 workplan is under development. There are two options that I wish to test:

- A. **Promoting volunteering.** Promoting volunteering at the communal level, via recognition and rewarding specific volunteers. I am considering creating some form of ongoing artistic prize system for volunteers. Artists would create the physical award artwork and the Communes (Maires and Conseils) would select and award worthy individuals within their communes. I would start with my own artwork for the first year and then attempt to recruit other artists into the project.
- B. **Iconic outdoor sculptures.** Outdoor sculptures that are large, beautiful and high visibility have the potential to attract large numbers of visitors/viewers. This is particularly the case for touristic regions. Visitors now share their experiences profusely via social media. So, if I can succeed in creating and installing something exceptional, it may upscale the communication elements of the project and start to progress the fourth goal.

## Financing

I propose to self-finance the project for now. I forecast costs in the order of Euro 2000-5000 over 5 years. I am not selling anything specifically within this project, so revenue will be zero.

I will submit applications to the state for household tax relief for the donations, to partially cover the costs of production (raw materials, tools, energy, enamel workshop rental, etc.). I will ask other artists and local residents to volunteer time and potentially some materials.

## 3.4 Closing remarks

Enough of analysis, planning and talking – time to just get on with it. Let us see what happens!

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