

The altruism of Dona Benigna in Benito Perez Galdós's *Misericordia* Religious Morality, Cultural Predisposition or Genetic Inheritance

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Abstract

In the novel Misericordia (2004) by Benito Perez Galdós there is a character, Doña Benigna, who has developed an altruistic behavior in favor of other characters. What is certain is that the origin of this cooperative behavior is unclear. We would think that it emanates either from an acquired moral religious education, or from a cultural predisposition or a genetic inheritance. The moral development of the individual is one of the foundations for the birth of man as free individual during this period of Spanish history. Benito Perez Galdós's narrative raises a debate about the issue of morality as solidarity action in this critical period of Spain's evolution.

Keywords: *Altruism, religious moral learned, cultural predisposition, genetic inheritance, conception of the individual.*

In the novel *Misericordia* by Benito Perez Galdoós, *there* is a character, Doña Benigna, who represents an altruistic behavior in favor of other characters: Doña Paca and her family, the poor who live in slums and a blind, one of her misfortunate companions. Throughout the story, Doña Benigna has sacrificed the family's scarce material goods and has turned into the provider of daily food to the Doña Paca family, in addition to solidarity actions with the rest of the characters previously appointed. This character takes a moral responsibility through altruism in her behavior as she expects nothing in return for the sacrifices and work done to maintain the economic and moral conditions of the Doña Paca family and the other characters that she helps. This work aims to look into the solidarity behaviour where the protagonist is engaged towards a group of people who is not by any means related to her by blood. The origin of this cooperative behaviour seems

unclear. We would think that it comes from moral commitment acquired from religious education, or from a cultural predisposition or even from a genetic inheritance. We consider the origin of altruism in Benign's case as a discussion forum according Jo Labanyi who presented it as an element of the realistic novel: "The realistic novel is not crudely prescriptive, but neither is it descriptive. Rather than copying reality, it functions as a forum for critical debate, giving rise to issues of contemporary concern."¹ Doña Benigna's behaviour is the trigger that generates that discussion in which we seek the origin of this character's altruism and make the reader think about its origin, its positive and negative consequences. Morality is a crucial element in the formation of the subject. The nineteenth century produced social changes and democratization of society that are still prevailing today. After the old regime - *Antiguo Regimen* - a change is made in the conception of the individual. The values that bonded people together started to disappear giving way to a free and independent man with ideas about the notion of being and self-formation.

Within this framework of individual formation, moral identity is a crucial part in the formation of subjects, as suggested by Luciano García in the introduction to *Misericordia* "Society in the novel is in decline and people have lost their social privileges. The protagonists struggle to survive and maintain the same social and economic status. The Spanish society is transforming the old regime and has evolved into the creation of «Spanish man», as free individual."²

Galdós proposes altruistic and selfish behaviors as a topic of debate in the construction of the subject. Benigna's behaviour is integral (altruist). Doña Paca takes advantage of Doña Benigna solidarity. The origin of altruism (Benigna's solidarity) is difficult to determine given the multiplicity of its possible origins. There are few references in the novel that tell us about its religious origins; this appears in paragraphs where Doña Benigna's behaviour is compared to that of a holy state of perpetual penance, suffering inflicted on the body for the sake of helping others: "looked like a Santa Rita of Casia who walked through the world of penance... Only the crucifix and the wound in the forehead."³ Within this vein, we can find other religious references. When Doña Paca rebukes Doña Benigna for her techniques to get money, Doña Paca believes Benigna has no dignity to resort to "entangle/truck people" in order to get money. Doña Benigna makes reference

¹ Jo Labanyi, *Gender and Modernization in the Spanish Realist Novel* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2000), 4.

² Luciano García, "Introduction to *Misericordia*," in Benito Pérez Galdós, *Misericordia* (Cátedra: Madrid, 2004), 29

³ Pérez Galdós, *Misericordia*, 77.

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to God in which she explains that she was created by Him, but does not speak of whether God made her behave that way. She is also compared to animals, since she is referred to as a sparrow that forages to survive: “Yo no sé si tengo eso; pero tengo boca y estómago natural, y sé también que Dios me ha puesto en el mundo para que viva, y no para que me deje morir de hambre. Los gorriones tienen pico.”⁴ (I do not know if I have that; but I have a mouth and a natural stomach, and I know that God has placed me in the world to live, not to let me starve. Sparrows have beaks). But on the other hand, at the end of the novel, Doña Paca fires Doña Benigna, although she had remained economically sufficient as she has received an inheritance and no longer needs her as a source of livelihood. At this time she was already rich when she discovers that the money that came from Doña Benigna resulted from begging, so she dismisses her and treats her with *scorn*. Doña Benigna's indignity makes a religious reference to scripture (Bible), which says that doing well has a divine origin. This appears only she makes a comment which clearly alludes to the divine origin of generosity in Doña Benigna's behaviour. However, later in the story there appears a character named Doña Guillermina, who helps the poor, and she is compared to Doña Benigna although in this case the negative aspects are mentioned as being poor and sinful, while the virtues are highlighted in Doña Guillermina's behaviour who has been neither poor nor sinful. According to García Lorenzo, in his introduction to *Misericordia*, Doña Benigna has a duty towards others, and their selfless actions are an act of Christianity, in which morality is based on the act of understanding that you will not get anything back.⁵ According to the same author Ignacio Correa considers solidarity from Doña Benigna's point of view as “a journey into the ultimate goal of the imitation of Jesus Christ [...] the path of begging followed by Doña Benigna is a path that leads to sanctification and becomes an angel that makes her superior to other people.”⁶

These few religious references on the origin of altruism in Benigna's behaviour are not conclusive about the origin of the characters' altruistic behavior. Therefore, we can consider the animal-biological aspect of Doña Benigna and the rest of the characters which states that this behaviour is a genetic inheritance. We might add that it could also be due to cultural background, moral values and standards of behavior that come from society. The behavior of Doña Paca is the opposite of Doña Benigna's who shows interest, selfishness, without moral

⁴ Pérez Galdós, *Misericordia*, 100.

⁵ García, “Introduction to *Misericordia*,” 46.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 46.

standards in order to get her debts paid and take advantage of the “weakness” of Doña Benigna to get all the money, while even knowing that she is a maid and with limited financial resources.

But why is morality abundant in Doña Benigna’s case and very scarce in Doña Paca’s? Morality is a set of standards and values that govern a society. According to Durkheim, individual morality is determined by society. For him solidarity is a moral fact and arises from collective consciousness; but with the modernization of the nineteenth century this social solidarity has disappeared. Individuals of that society accept these rules and implement them and even institutionalize them by including them in the legal system of the community. But also the acceptance of these standards by the members of this group has to be done; they apply them to their personal lives and to other issues. In addition, moral subjects decide about arising disputes producing official morality and personal morality and rejecting them when the need arises. The modern individual is no longer subjected to nobleness and needs to enjoy his freedom. As a result seeking maximum possible happiness in life and trying to reduce sufferings is what counts most. It seems that the behavior of Doña Benigna expresses no explicit statement about morality of actions, and simply acts as if these actions were already given by the character. Doña Benigna is a poor woman, she works as a maid for families as is the case at hand. Right from the first moment in the novel, she is defined as different from the others in the group of beggars, begging every day in the churches of Madrid. She is respectful of the rules and very submissive. She accepts the rules established by the beggars on the distribution of alms that are set hierarchically according to seniority in the job. It seems that this gentleness is part of her simple character, with no conjectures or depth of thoughts throughout the novel, as she wins the respect of her fellow traders and only seems to be showing “informal” but not bordering rudeness, with blind confidence.

Doña Benigna moves within various human groups. The first is the poor begging in front of the churches of Madrid and set rules on the distribution of alms given by the parishioners leaving the church. There is a group behaviour towards competition for the best alms but within established hierarchy for the deal; so that the oldest get the lion’s share. Benigna belongs to this group and maintains compliance with the ruling hierarchy. It provides a moral; “a tacit authority” that older youth is strong and weak. When the young rebel, conflicts appear in the group. According to Galdós, characters are involved in hierarchy that is reversed and remains altered, as we see two characters: Casiana is a harsh character, that is one of the oldest in the group *La Burlada*, unruly and criminal that belongs to the

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group of rookies. In addition, group members have a competitive behavior while Doña Benigna has a non-combative nature with respect to the group structure, but fighting for survival or to help people.

But what is the origin of the good character of Doña Benigna and why is it different from other poor ones? In the narrative description of the character appears through external signs such as voice, hands, good manners and facial expression.

While this paragraph refers to Doña Benigna's education, there appear no clear explanations about her education, or how it was acquired. Doña Benigna moves heaven and earth in their first action for her mistress, hard to get this "duro" (the money of the time) to pay multiple debts of hers. Doña Benigna is desperately seeking this and after a thousand adventures she gets it, to have it act like an animal protecting its prey / food from other predators: "Y salió disparada, las monedas metidas en el seno, temerosa de que alguien se las quitara por el camino, o de que se le escaparan volando."⁷ (And shot out, coins tucked within, afraid that someone are wiped down the road, or that he escaped flying). And although it will be verbally reprimanded by her mistress Doña Benigna seems to support these humiliations and yet to receive nothing in return.

Science offers us several hypotheses regarding this cooperative behavior. Sociobiology is a science that draws parallel affinities between animal and human behaviour and studies the biological function of social behaviour which establishes an individual relation to other congeners, among these behaviors are: aggression, territoriality, altruism and mate selection. Edward O. Wilson, the founder of sociobiology, stated in an interview that altruistic behaviour is due to our biology, our brain is made this way. Our biology makes us feel satisfied when we perform an altruistic act:

*Certainly that but also you just feel good when you do something that is right... when you do something brave, when you take care of others, when you are honest... you feel good whether you are a devout Christian or secular humanist, it's because your brain is wired that way.*⁸

There is controversy about the genetic origin of morality. Authors such as Edward O. Wilson considered that altruism is an evolution through natural selection.⁹ Gómez Caminero presents sociobiology as a discipline that claims that

⁷ Pérez Galdós, *Misericordia*, 94.

⁸ Robert Wright, "Interview to Edward O. Wilson" (Meaningoflife.tv., 24 Feb. 2007).

⁹ Edward O. Wilson, "The morality of the Gene," in *Issues in Evolutionary Ethics*, ed. Paul Thompson (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), 154.

altruism exists because it nourishes the genes of social issues. Natural selection acts on the individual and not on the group: reproductive success is something that gets an individual who is able to pass on their genes to the next generation. Humans spend a lot of energy in getting their goals and in the case at hand; altruism has no other purpose than reproduction and perpetuation of our species.¹⁰

On the other hand, M. Ruse tells us that, as the famous scientist Charles Darwin, author of *The Origin of Species* in 1895 said that our morals, our altruistic nature, is a feature that helps us in the struggle for survival and reproduction. Moreover, Richard Dawkins in his famous and controversial book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) studied the biology of selfishness and altruistic behaviour. He first argues that although traditionally for the theory of evolution, an important thing was the good of the species (group) currently is not, since what matters in evolution is the good individual (the gene). Also, he does not intend to argue that morality is based on evolution, just shows how things have evolved.¹¹ The basis of his ideas is that altruism is not given for the sake of the species, the group, which would be sacrificed for the sake of this group, but there is an outstanding selection, in which the individual's acting selflessly goes against what genetics dictate and that culture plays a very important role passed from one generation to another.

Among the Doña Benigna altruistic acts we can notice the childcare of Doña Paca, when children are seriously ill. After this sacrifice Doña Paca does not thank her and this causes a rift in their relationship. In here we can notice that there is more than an altruistic behavior by Doña Benigna. The sacrifice that she makes is not only to help children but to help her emotionally. Doña Benign is lonely and needs love that is supposed to be provided by the children.

On the other hand, Doña Benigna seems to hold the whims and scorns Doña Paca for emotional issues. It seems that self-deception occurs to maintain their self-esteem in what is called relationship of "reciprocal altruism." According to the scientist Robert Trivers reciprocal altruism is based on individual cooperation, hoping that the other does the same too.¹² Trivers also posits the idea of the logic of self-deception. According to him, the "self-deception evolves in the service of deceit. Self-deception provides at least two benefits to deceive another. It is more effective, because the truth is hidden deeper and more efficient, because

¹⁰ A. A. Caminero Gómez, "Fundamentos biológicos de la conducta" (Departamento de Psicobiología, UNED. April 2004), <http://www.uned.es/psico-1-fundamentos-biologicos-conducta-I/orientaciones/cap012.htm>, 1.

¹¹ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University Press: England, 1989), 2.

¹² Ginés López Puerte, "Sobre el altruismo biológico," *La caverna de Platón* (April 2007) <http://www.lacavernadeplaton.com>, 1.

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consciously lying is cognitively expensive, and has at least part of the contradiction is less unconscious mental energy.”¹³ But to avoid self-deception risks lower self-esteem.¹⁴ Therefore we can conclude that from the genetic point of view of altruism, it seems that Doña Benigna sacrifices for the good of the group but cannot preserve their species because she has not had children. On the other hand, the sacrifice for the good of others makes the group (the family of Doña Paca) survive until another source of survival (the inheritance of a family) appears. Doña Paca survives on two things: caring by someone outside the group (Doña Benigna), and also other solidarity by someone who belongs to the group by blood filiation (family).

It might be added that perhaps altruism of Doña Benigna, besides having an emotional character, is also “reciprocal altruism.” Although she never says she expects no material gain in return, Doña Paca shows all the money to Doña Benigna to pay her debts. She promises that she will return her money with benefits when she receives the money out of inheritance: “Give me, give me everything you have, Benigna, and God will grant you everlasting glory, I’ll refund you when cousins from Ronda pay me the... you know... it’s a matter of days.”¹⁵ Giving money is said to be a relationship between two states; it is a community of interests.

At the end we can notice that Doña Paca does not return the money nor does she thank Doña Benigna for what she has done to her and to her family. Doña Benigna expected cooperation from Doña Paca but this has not contributed in “reciprocity”; so personal interests have prevailed.

So far, we have seen how altruism in Doña Benigna’s case could have a religious or biological configuration, but it is not clear that these might be the causes behind her behaviour, clearly noticeable in her acts. Her altruism can yield emotional or material benefits, which are higher in terms of the degree of delivery, without expecting anything in return, and could provide an explanation beyond biology or religion; a cultural explanation for their moral actions. According to Francisco J. Ayala culture is one possibility, and that moral norms are not determined by a biological process but by cultural tradition and principles that are products of human history. The assessment of moral codes or human actions must

¹³ J.P.M. Camacho, “Entrevista a Robert L. Trivers,” *Evolución, Revista de la Sociedad Española de Biología Evolutiva* (Universidad de Granada. April 2007) www.sesbe.org, 7.

¹⁴ Camacho, “Entrevista a Robert L. Trivers,” 8.

¹⁵ Pérez Galdós, *Misericordia*, 108.

take into account biological knowledge. And to decide what should be accepted as moral codes, biology alone is insufficient:

*Moral norms are not determined by biological processes, but by cultural traditions and principles that are products of human history. The evaluation of moral codes or human actions must take into account biological knowledge. But to decide which moral codes should be accepted, biology alone is palpably insufficient.*¹⁶

The moral code of Doña Benigna is a contradiction: On the one hand, it is sacrificed and is deeply concerned and affected by the situation of Doña Paca's family, specifically in terms of concerns about her daughter: "All this was the occasion of new desires and musings for Doña Benigna, who loved dearly the owner of the house, and could not see her hungry or in need without trying to help her instantly according to her means."¹⁷ But on the other hand, the morals wobble as she has developed the habit of a "pilfer" the money that gets your love handles when making the purchase. Here readers notice a contradiction between virtue of her altruistic acts and the armholes of vice of the pilfers.

It means that the author in the story uses the word "pilfer" as a synonym for stealing. The term "pilfers" is less guilty and carries a connotation about stealing as a term. So, it could be inferred that the selection of this particular word is used to lessen the severity of the theft inviting the readers not to give much importance to her acts, and not to produce a contradiction with her altruistic nature. It would be a great failure and a loss of credibility in her solidarity actions. In contrast to the use of this word, the negative acts are justified because they have to help others, which in this case seem to be not of much merit, as Doña Paca is ruined by poverty in managing her own economy.

As we have mentioned, perhaps altruism of Doña Benigna is a consequence of culture. In all cultures, there are different moral systems that determine society. In the case we are referring to, we must take into account that the moral system is changing in the society in which the novel was set. The punishment that was previously considered as normal and accepted by all is now turning into a violation of "human rights." Culturally, altruistic or selfish behavior can be explained by different moral or philosophical conceptions. Psychological egoism, ethical egoism and utilitarianism are some of these philosophies about human behavior. Psychological egoism is based on a theory of human nature by individual acts; ethical egoism is a theory that is about how humans should behave. In both

¹⁶ F. J. Ayala, "The Biological Roots of Morality," in *Issues in Evolutionary Ethics*, ed. Paul Thompson (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), 314.

¹⁷ Pérez Galdós, *Misericordia*, 118.

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theories, human beings seek their personal interests.¹⁸ Therefore, we can apply these theories to the behavior of both benign and Doña Paca. In Doña Paca's case, we clearly see this personal interest, while in Doña Benigna's case two levels of interest arise: the money, to pilfer and beg to have an economic livelihood and this one is deeper than helping Doña Paca and her family. But perhaps "utilitarianism" is what Doña Benigna practices. This is practiced to achieve the greatest happiness for the greatest possible number of people. At the same time, she is altruistic as she seeks the good of a community based on the approval or disapproval of the actions which rely on the increase or decrease happiness about the party concerned. "We should judge actions right or wrong depending on whether they cause more happiness or unhappiness."¹⁹ We can say that Doña Benigna is seeking happiness for others, but she also seeks her own happiness. Solidarity actions are giving happiness to these people, not only a material one, but also a spiritual one. Doña Benigna helps the poor living in slums. She moves in search of her companion's alms Almudena blind and sees a very poor family and helps with the little she has. She is also supportive of her blind friend Almudena who lives in very bad condition.

She also helps people in poor conditions: this looks like if Doña Benigna were a utilitarian cream that turn the poor to be happy for a moment in an animal community defined as "hive". The narrator introduces us to the poor as animal groups who have to live in community structure of an animal society due to their economic condition. Moreover, their solidarity actions seem to follow the precepts by which utilitarian goodness of Doña Benigna is a natural property of her character. Furthermore, Doña Benigna is offering her actions for several people to benefit from: Doña Paca and her family, the blind Almudena, and the poor of the slums.

She is helping species and society. The benefit of the species and society are part of the principles of naturalistic ethics: biological naturalism occurs when helping their own kind, and sociological naturalism when helping and thus making benefits for society.

The story introduces us to a feisty benign, positive, relentless humane character in quest for livelihood, sacrifice of her few assets for the benefit of others. The character is considered as an angel sent to help those who benefit from her. She is almost perfect except for her poor condition.

¹⁸ James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (McGraw-Hill: New York, 1999), 82.

¹⁹ Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 105.

In conclusion we can say that altruism of solidarity actions for Doña Benigna hinder Doña Paca selfishness that dominates in a decadent society that has lost its social privileges while struggling to survive and maintain the same social and economic status. Both Doña Benigna actions and Doña Paca's disrupt the expected social behavior. The Spanish society is transforming the old regime to evolve into the creation of "Spanish man" with free and equal individual opportunities. The moral development of the individual is one of the foundations of his birth and Benito Perez Galdós's narrative raises a debate about the morality of solidarity actions in Doña Benigna's case, as opposed to the selfishness of the other characters struggling to survive.

In this debate there are three positions at the origin of altruism: the religious origins: the will of God and the pursuit of biological holiness: altruism and conservation of the species from perishing while ruled by our biology and genetics benefit interest; moral or cultural in which happiness is the end of this altruism. There is no clear conclusion but the intersection of these points with the three suggestions. Clearly, the controversy continues to have been raised after more than one hundred years when the story was first written. This novel has always provoked controversy and debate, without unanimously clear and satisfactory answers.

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