

Book Review by

Mitch Hall, Ph.D.

***Altruism: The Power of Compassion
to Change Yourself and the World***

(New York, Boston, London: Little,
Brown and Company, 2015)

by

Matthieu

Ricard

Translated by Charlotte

Mandel and Sam Gordon

The original French edition of this 850-page book was entitled *Plaidoyer pour l'altruisme*, which would translate as *The Case for Altruism*. The French title modestly invites readers to reflect on the merits of the author's advocacy for altruism. The subtitle of the North American edition sets a different tone, possibly for marketing purposes. The words "power" and "change" are dynamic and action-oriented, whereas "plaidoyer" is more reflective. The English subtitle appears designed to appeal to readers of self-help books and to activists for social change, as well as to those already acquainted with the author's work. Matthieu Ricard is well-known, in different circles, as a best-selling writer, a speaker whose talks have been viewed by millions of people on the Internet, a Buddhist monk in the Tibetan tradition, a former

cellular geneticist, a participant in fMRI studies in the field of contemplative neuroscience, a French-language interpreter for the Dalai Lama, and a practical altruist who founded and oversees Karuna-Shechen, “an international non-profit humanitarian organization providing health care, education, sustainable development, and cultural preservation throughout the Himalayan region,” helping “underserved communities in remote areas that have little or no other access to these vital services” (p. 699).

Altruism is a lucid, cogently reasoned, highly referenced work of amazingly deep, encyclopedic erudition and critical analysis. The 43 chapters of the book are organized into five sections: (1) What is Altruism?, (2) The Emergence of Altruism, (3) Cultivating Altruism, (4) Contrary Forces, and (5) Building a More Altruistic Society. For each topic addressed, the author reviews the literature, as relevant, from an array of fields, including developmental psychology, neuroscience, cultural anthropology, sociology, ethology, evolutionary biology, ecology, medicine, economics, history, peace and conflict studies, philosophy, nonviolent activism, spiritual traditions, and more.

The book is an engaging, inspiring read. It would have been helpful if it were indexed, but that would have added to its cost and already considerable length.

Matthieu Ricard challenges the Western cultural bias, most pronounced in the US, toward cynicism about human nature, individualism, competition, selfishness, materialism, consumerism, and profits over ethical principles. Among “the champions of selfishness,” he cites Ayn Rand and Sigmund Freud. Regarding his treatment of the former, he inserts this disclaimer, “...the fact that she made such a mark on American culture, which in turn exercises great influence over the rest of the world, forces us to consider this phenomenon, as embarrassing as it may be” (p. 303).

In the Introduction, following a brief overview of his intellectual journey, Matthieu Ricard reflects, “So my experience has taken place at the confluence of two major influences, Eastern Buddhist wisdom and Western sciences” (p. 4). The book provides ample evidence that the heart of his message lies in the former which is supported by his masterful integration of extensive, up-to-date findings from the latter. Quotations and references to Buddhist sources, themes, and teachers are few yet central, whereas the bulk of the book is comprised of coherent interpretations of the scientific evidence for the author’s contentions and arguments.

This is a great book. It addresses the most significant issues of our age, such as the urgent needs to protect

the environment, to restructure the economy, to reduce inequality and eliminate poverty, to reduce violence and end war, to build cultures of compassion, kindness, and nonviolence, and to do what one can on a personal level to cultivate one's own genuine best self. No single book can encompass all there is to be said on any of these areas, let alone so many of them, yet Matthieu Ricard has made significant contributions that I hope will inform and inspire many researchers, activists, teachers, students, and spiritual aspirants in the service of a greater good through a "daring altruism" that brings personal fulfillment along with it. As Matthieu Ricard affirms, "Real happiness is entwined with altruism, since it is part of an essential kindness that is accompanied by a profound desire that everyone can flourish in life. It is a love that is always available, and that stems from the unchanging simplicity, serenity, and strength of a good heart" (p. 692).

Review written in Oakland, California
October 9, 2015