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INTRODUCTION

The Philanthropic Athenian?

Athenians in the classical period (508–322 B.C.) were drawn to an image of themselves as a compassionate and generous people who rushed to the aid of others in distress, at home and abroad. Litigants in the popular courts appeal to this ideal when they call on large panels of jurors collectively to intervene and help them against their unjust opponents with a favorable verdict. Speakers delivering funeral orations for the state's war dead portray Athenians as valiant rescuers of their Greek neighbors from mythical times on. Tragedians bring on stage mythical instances of Athenians helping desperate suppliants from other states. Orators addressing the Assembly sometimes invoke this tradition of helping others when urging their audiences to vote in favor of intervention abroad. In light of how prominently this heroic image of Athenians as noble helpers figures in public discourse, we can have little doubt that this was a central element of civic ideology. It is reasonable to ask, however, what relation this image bears to actual Athenian behavior at home and abroad and to what extent it simplifies or distorts Athenian attitudes toward helping others.

This study focuses on how helping figured in Athenians' relations with their fellow citizens, their city, and other Greek city-states rather than on the role of helping in the more intimate relationships of family members and friends. The latter subject has drawn considerable scholarly attention in recent decades in work on the Athenian family and friendship, and there is a general consensus that Athenians, like other Greeks, were under strong pressure to help their family members and friends.[1] When family members or friends helped one another, they acted in accord with the affectionate nature of these relationships and with the high level of reciprocity they entailed. The place of helping outside these intimate circles, however, is more problematic and controversial. I argue, contrary to much recent

[1] The bibliography on helping among friends and family is collected at the start of Chapter I.

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scholarship, that Athenians felt little pressure as individuals to help fellow citizens whom they did not know and, consistent with this, did not feel strongly obliged as a group to help peoples of other states through collective action.

In exploring helping and its limits in an Athenian context, I propose that Athenians distinguished sharply between their obligations to help their kin and personal friends on the one hand, and their responsibilities to fellow citizens outside this intimate group on the other. Although Athenians viewed the helping of strangers as noble and laudable, for the most part, they did not see this as obligatory, and in practice they were pragmatic and cautious in extending help to fellow citizens. I argue that this is, in fact, consistent with a democratic ideology of citizenship that placed a premium on citizens leaving each other alone as free and equal persons rather than on their engaging in mutual support and that emphasized the importance of the helping relationship between citizen and city rather than among individual citizens. In addition, I seek to show that, if the obligation of Athenians to help fellow citizens was fairly tenuous, their responsibility to intervene to assist the peoples of other states was even more tenuous. Notwithstanding Athenians' attraction to an ideal image of themselves as noble helpers of other states, a distinct pragmatism prevailed in the city's decisions concerning whether and how to intervene even in support of its closest friends and allies.

In advancing these arguments, my goal is not to paint a dark picture of the Athenian character but rather to come to a more nuanced understanding of it. It is doubtful, in fact, that other Greeks were any more benevolent than Athenians toward their fellow citizens or those of other states.[2] The relatively large body of source material for ancient Athens, however, allows us to study helping in an Athenian context closely and to explore the interplay of ideals and realities, as well as the tensions and contradictions between these. Rather than view disjunctions between ideal and reality in these matters as evidence simply of hypocrisy on the part of Athenians, I suggest that these attest to the complexity of their attitudes toward helping and the circumstances in which it was called for and to an ongoing conflict for Athenians between generous impulses and more selfish ones. By examining how Athenians, individually and collectively, responded to this conflict in practice and how they conceptualized and represented their responses, we can come to better understand the place of

[2] I also do not mean to suggest that Athenians failed to live up to some modern standard of charity or altruism; the scholarship of helping behavior in modern societies (see note 5) attests to the complexity of helping and the motivations behind this in a contemporary context.

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helping in the Athenian experience. If, as we shall see, Athenians tended to err on the side of caution when it came to intervening on behalf of others in the areas on which this book focuses but nonetheless thought the best of themselves as helpers of others, this is itself significant for understanding Athenians and how they came to terms with problematic aspects of their shared experience.[3]

Consideration of this topic is timely in light of recent scholarship that makes the case from various vantage points that Athenians were kinder and gentler at home and abroad than previously thought. Three works in particular have advanced an optimistic view of Athenian attitudes toward helping and their impact on Athenian behavior.[4] Rachel Sternberg in *Tragedy Offstage: Suffering and Sympathy in Ancient Athens* (2006), building on a growing body of scholarship concerning the history of emotions in antiquity, investigates helping behavior in several spheres and advances the case that Athenians were more compassionate than scholars have acknowledged. In her view, Athenians were under considerable pressure to help not only their kin and friends but also, within certain parameters, fellow citizens, with whom they enjoyed friendly relations (*philia*) (177, 180). Gabriel Herman, in *Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens: A Social History* (2006), goes much further than this, portraying Athens as a close-knit and harmonious community in which citizens, behaving in a manner similar to family members in other societies, acted altruistically toward one another (347–59; 375) and mutually supported each other as individuals and as households to “a remarkable degree” (389). Polly Low, in *Interstate Relations in Classical Greece: Morality and Power* (2007), takes up the question of helping and ideals of helping in Athens’ relations with other states as part of her broader inquiry into the nature of Greek interstate relations. She observes that the ideal of “helping the wronged,” which Athenians invoke sometimes in connection with life within their city (173, cf. 25), appears prominently in the Athenian and Greek discourse of international relations (183–5). Low takes this as evidence of a norm of helping others outside as well as inside the polis (186) and suggests that this had a real impact on interstate relations (210; 254–5).

[3] This disjunction may also reflect a common human tendency of people to overestimate their own generosity toward others; social psychologists speak of this as a “holier than thou” effect (see Epley and Dunning 2000 and Balcetis, Dunning, and Miller 2008). On the limits of self-assessment in general, see Epley and Caruso 2004; Dunning 2005; and Alicke, Dunning, and Krueger 2005.

[4] Earlier general discussions of the role of helping and charity in the Greek world include Bolkestein 1939 and Hands 1968.

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Although I take up and challenge these positions in detail through the course of this book, a few preliminary observations are in order here concerning the problematic nature of these claims. First, their empirical basis is in my view questionable. It is difficult to find in our sources much substantial evidence of Athenians helping fellow citizens outside their circle of family and friends; it is even more difficult to find evidence of Athenians exposing themselves to any great risk or sacrificing their collective interests to help other states. Second, the idea that Athenians were, as fellow citizens, bound to one another by friendship (Sternberg) or kinship (Herman) and therefore were under pressure to engage in mutual support is open to challenge. Where Athenian sources envision such connections among citizens, they present these as a reason for social harmony and the pursuit of common objectives, not as a basis for fraternal helping among citizens. Third, the rather limited nature of helping among fellow citizens within the city argues for caution in assessing the significance of the language of "helping others" in interstate rhetoric; if Athenians were not inclined to go out of their way to help fellow citizens, were they likely collectively to be drawn to do so for citizens of other states in peril?

The study of helping and altruism in classical Athens presents numerous challenges. An initial hindrance is that "altruism" is a vexed term in modern debates concerning human nature and behavior and is all the more so in the discussion of ancient Athens. A standard dictionary definition of "altruism" is "devotion to the welfare of others, regard for others, as a principle of action; opposed to egoism or selfishness" (*OED*, 2nd ed.); however, scholars in diverse fields continue to debate whether truly unselfish behavior is possible because, arguably, one can find regard for direct or indirect benefit to self in any action.[5] Given the challenges inherent in proving the existence of "pure altruism," some scholars set themselves the more modest goal of identifying behavior that is relatively unselfish – that is, more other-oriented than selfish; indeed, one can view "behavior as running along a continuum, with pure self-interest and pure altruism as the two poles and modal or normal behavior, including quasi-altruistic acts, distributed between them" (Monroe 1996: 7).[6] Some scholars argue, however, that we do not need to take into account an agent's motivations

[5] On this debate, see Sober and Wilson 1998: 1–13; Batson, Ahmad, and Stocks 2010; Batson 2010. For recent discussions of "prosocial" behavior in its diverse facets and the motivations behind this, see Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, and Penner 2006; Stürmer and Snyder 2009; Mikulincer and Shaver 2010.
[6] Cf. Dover 1974: 224 and Zanker 1998: 76.

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in identifying altruistic behavior because outcomes are more important than motivations.[7]

In light of the conflicting views of scholars working outside the field of classics concerning what constitutes altruism, it comes as no surprise that classicists diverge in their application of the term to ancient Athens. Gabriel Herman (2006: 348), for example, minimizes the importance of motivation, maintaining that any act involving self-sacrifice for others qualifies as altruistic and thus "an act may be called altruistic whether or not it is performed in the expectation of some form of reward."[8] More frequently, however, classicists have taken altruism in its more common sense of selfless helping and asked whether there is evidence for this in Greek culture.[9] Christopher Gill (1998), for example, observes: "In Stoicism . . . there are, on the face of it, strong grounds for characterizing their thinking about other-benefiting motivation in terms of altruism, and of a sort which, like some modern forms of altruism, is directed at *anyone*, not just those specially connected with oneself" (325). Gill stresses, however, that the Stoics viewed helping others within a framework of solidarity and reciprocity (325–7; cf. 314).[10] David Konstan argues that we can find evidence of an ancient concept of altruism before the Stoics in the sphere of friendship, which he describes as a primarily affective relationship in which "*philoi* are presumed to act out of an altruistic desire to be of benefit to each other" (1997: 82; cf. 2010: 236). According to Konstan, Aristotle, in his view of *philia* and of friendship in particular, has "a full-fledged concept of altruism comparable to the modern ideal" even though it does not entail universal charity; Konstan posits that "it is enough for altruism that we behave unselfishly in regard to some people" (2000: 5).[11]

In this scholarly discussion, the problem of what constitutes altruism in the eyes of moderns makes it difficult to reach any consensus concerning

[7] Evolutionary biologists, for example, employ a concept of altruism that focuses on self-sacrificing behavior that benefits others: see Ridley and Dawkins 1981 and Sober and Wilson 1998: 17–54.

[8] In Herman's view, therefore, wealthy Athenians who perform liturgies for the city qualify as altruists, even if they carry these out in pursuit of personal honor (347–52, 395).

[9] On the difficulties involved in seeking selflessness in a Greek context, see Dover 1974: 224; cf. Bolkestein 1939: 156–70; Hands 1968: 26–31.

[10] Gill concludes that "Greek thinking about the social norms of reciprocity and solidarity provides the primary context for understanding Greek thinking about other-benefiting motivation" (328). For an optimistic view of the place of "other-concern" in ancient ethical theories, see Annas 1993: 223–6.

[11] Konstan is arguing here against Gill 1998: 307; cf. Zanker 1998: 80. Altruism directed only toward certain persons might be termed "particularistic altruism," that is, "altruism limited to particular people or groups deemed worthy because of special characteristics, such as shared ethnicity or family membership" (Monroe 1996: 7).

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the presence or absence of altruism in an ancient context. There is some risk that the debate may become one over modern terminology and that this may hinder our inquiry into ancient attitudes and behaviors. This study therefore speaks more of "helping behavior" and the diverse motivations behind it than of "altruism." This has two advantages. First, "helping behavior" is a more neutral designation than "altruism," which carries so much scholarly baggage, and it is also a broader term: it seems reasonable to say that altruistic action represents a special subcategory of helping behavior (Dovidio and Penner 2004: 247; cf. Dovidio et al. 2006: 22–7). Second, this terminology avoids the possible anachronism that may be inherent in the application of "altruism" to an ancient context; after all, altruism is not a Greek word but a modern coinage that may reflect modern ways of thinking better than Greek ones.[12] To speak of "helping," in contrast, is in keeping with the Athenian vocabulary of assistance, which focuses on the action of rendering help without implying much about the motivations behind this.[13] Indeed, as we shall see, Athenians appear to be less interested than moderns in the purity of motivations behind helping, and seem relatively untroubled by such action arising from a blend of selfish and noble considerations.[14]

On occasion, however, this study does invoke the term "altruism," in the most common modern sense of selfless (or nearly selfless) behavior. I do so in the title of this book because the idea of selfless helping is not completely alien to Athenians. Indeed, we shall see that Athenians sometimes envision the possibility of helping that is unselfish, notably when public figures characterize their generous behavior in these terms and when Athenians speak of their extraordinary collective helping of other Greeks. Although these claims are self-aggrandizing and do not accord well with what we know about Athenian behavior, they are significant as evidence of at least an idea of what moderns might label "altruism." In these contexts, my practice is to note the similarity of the special sort of helping behavior claimed to modern notions of altruism but not to press the connection further.

Another challenge to assessing the place of helping in classical Athens is that our ancient sources are limited and problematic. First, most of

[12] "Altruism," which was coined by Auguste Comte (1798–1857), first appears in English in 1853 (*OED*, 2nd. ed.); cf. Gill 1998: 308 n. 5; Dixon 2008.

[13] On the Greek vocabulary of "helping," see Bolkestein 1939: 95–102. βοηθέω and ὠφελέω and their cognates are especially common to denote "helping" in Athenian sources, as we shall see.

[14] Athenians were highly attuned to the role of self-interest in individual and group decision-making: see Christ 2006: 15–44. On the readiness of Greeks to acknowledge a multiplicity of motivations behind generous action, see Dover 1974: 224–6.

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the relevant source material is literary, including texts of orations that were originally delivered before popular audiences and circulated later in written form, and historical and philosophical works composed primarily for an elite reading audience. Every statement in these sources has to be evaluated in light of the constraints of genre, authorial intent and bias, and accommodation to audience expectations. Oratory provides us with our best access to popular attitudes and ideologies because orators were under pressure, in seeking to win over mass audiences in the Assembly, law courts, and at state commemorations of the war dead, to adapt their message to their audiences' political and social assumptions.[15] Historical and philosophical works are more idiosyncratic and frequently tell us more about the perspectives of their elite producers, many of whom are critical of the Athenian democracy, than of widely held beliefs and values.[16] Nonetheless, they provide an interesting and often instructive counterpoint to the stances taken by orators before mass audiences.

Second, our source material for classical Athens is largely confined to the period ca. 430–322 B.C., and even within this period, there are significant gaps in the coverage of the sources. Although this makes it difficult to write a comprehensive political history of Athens for this period, chronological gaps in the record present less of a challenge to studying Athenian values and beliefs, which do not appear to have changed dramatically in this relatively stable period for the city. While we must remain sensitive to how specific historical circumstances may shape elements of the record, it is legitimate to treat our sources for Athens from 430 to 322 synchronically as we seek out general patterns in Athenian values, attitudes, and ideologies.[17]

This study begins by looking closely at the evidence for helping behavior among fellow citizens in classical Athens (Chapter I). Five representative areas in which citizens might engage in helping are considered: help rendered to wounded hoplites in the field, assistance to the poor, care of the sick, bystander intervention in violent episodes, and helping in litigation. This body of material suggests that although Athenians could feel concern for others in a variety of circumstances, feelings of pity and compassion

[15] On the invocation and exploitation of social norms in Athenian oratory, see Dover 1974: 8–14; Ober 1989: 43–9; Christ 1998a: 6; Roisman 2005: 1–6; Hunt 2010: 7–10. The fact that orators were largely members of the elite may skew the types of benefactions that they parade before popular audiences, but they were still under pressure to take into account popular norms in presenting these.

[16] On ancient critics of the Athenian democracy, see Ober 1998.

[17] On this general methodological principle, see Dover 1974: 30; Ober 1989: 36–8; Hunter 1994: 6–7; Christ 1998a: 4–6; Roisman 2005: 1.

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did not necessarily translate into action. Athenians, in fact, appear to have felt little obligation to help fellow citizens outside their circle of kin and friends. Although Athenians no doubt sometimes helped strangers who sought them out and needed only limited assistance, they were reluctant to become involved in others' problems where this might expose their persons or property to substantial risks. Consequently, individuals looked first and primarily to their own family members and friends for support in time of need. The city provided support for some needy persons, but this was fairly limited, and those without a strong personal support network might well find themselves left to their own devices.

Although this low expectation of helping among fellow citizens may seem surprising and at odds with the apparent cohesion and solidarity of Athenians as a people under the democracy, this is consistent with the place of helping in democratic citizenship (Chapter II). Public discourse in Athens has little to say concerning mutual helping among citizens. It insists that democratic citizens refrain from doing harm to each other, but it does not suggest that they are obliged to help fellow citizens in distress or hardship; it calls on citizens to get along with one another in a spirit of concord (*homonoia*) but does not expect them to go so far as to engage in mutual support. Athenian public discourse makes it clear, in fact, that the primary locus for democratic helping is in the mutual helping relationship of citizen and city. The city not only encouraged citizens but required them to assist the fatherland by carrying out their basic civic obligations, including military service and, in the case of wealthier individuals, performance of liturgies and payment of the war tax. Other citizens – frequently members of the elite – voluntarily took on the more exceptional helping roles of public speaker (*rhētōr*) in the Assembly or volunteer prosecutor in the courts. The city for its part helped its citizens by providing them with the conditions under which they could thrive as individuals, and it could also be called on to pay back its citizen helpers with reciprocal support in the form of honors or other manifestations of gratitude (*charis*); the latter is most striking in the Athenian courts where litigants vaunt their record of helping the city and call on large panels of jurors, as representatives of the city, to render them help in the form of a favorable verdict.

This helping relationship between jurors and litigants is the focus of the next part of our study (Chapter III). Litigants regularly call on jurors as members of the Athenian community to intervene and help them in their time of legal need and rescue them from the wrongs they have suffered. In so doing, they represent the courts themselves as venues in which Athenians can collectively help individuals in their distress. Litigants, drawing on the language and imagery of bystander intervention in street violence in

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Athens, vividly represent their trials as crimes-in-progress to which jurors are witnesses and plead that they should not just stand by and do nothing but rather "run to their rescue" (βοηθέω) and save them with their votes. If Athenians, as individuals, were reluctant to intervene in street violence against fellow citizens, jurors through their collective verdicts in the courts could enjoy the idea that they were playing a heroic role without having to put themselves at any real risk. This popular way of representing the law courts as venues for helping among citizens tells us something important about how Athenians conceptualized the role of law courts and also how they envisioned their democratic community as one that supports and protects individuals.

Finally, this study turns to the question of helping in Athens' relations with other Greek states (Chapter IV). Athenians frequently asserted in public discourse that a distinctive feature of their city was its readiness to come to the rescue of wronged Greeks. Yet even the Attic funeral orations, which enthusiastically advance this image of the city in the remote mythical past, find it challenging to apply this paradigmatic view of the city to more recent history and betray at times that helping others is closely linked with the city's advancement of its own reputation and power abroad. A survey of historical writers in the classical period suggests that the Athenian history of helping other states was a checkered one in which the city exercised considerable caution and prudence even when it came to supporting close friends and allies. This picture of the city is confirmed by Demosthenes' deliberative oratory, which invokes the Athenian ideal of helping the wronged but stops well short of suggesting that the city should sacrifice its own interests to help others; indeed, pragmatic considerations, rather than humanitarian ones, dominate Demosthenes' arguments in favor of Athenian intervention abroad.

How we assess Athenian attitudes toward helping bears directly on our understanding of many facets of the Athenian experience: personal ethics and behavior, the responsibilities of democratic citizenship, the city's support of individuals under the democracy, and Athenians' collective relations with the peoples of other states. In exploring helping both as ideal and reality in an Athenian context, this book seeks to illuminate democratic Athens and the values and experience of its people. At the same time, it hopes to contribute to the study of the role of helping in other historical societies by drawing attention to helping and its representation as reflections of a culture's social and political circumstances.

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1

HELPING BEHAVIOR IN CLASSICAL ATHENS

An initial and fundamental question for assessing the place of helping in the Athenian experience is how much citizens actually assisted one another in time of need, distress, or crisis. To answer this, we must examine our fragmentary ancient record carefully and distinguish between often broad and vague public claims concerning acts of helping and documented instances of helping behavior; the former attest that helping might be deemed admirable by a broad public, which is not surprising in Athens or in any human society, whereas the latter provide evidence of social practices and a context for evaluating public claims and posturing concerning these. This chapter explores the extent and limits of helping behavior in Athens and argues, contrary to the claims of some recent scholarship, that this was largely confined to relatives and friends and did not extend much to fellow citizens outside this intimate circle. This has important implications for understanding not only Athenian social values and behavior but also, as we see in the next chapter, democratic citizenship and the responsibilities that went with it.

Most scholars would agree that within the family, Athenians were expected as a matter of course to provide mutual support in daily life and in times of crisis, and to do so (ideally at least) without stopping to reckon the costs and benefits of this.[1] It is also widely accepted that outside the family, friends were expected to help each other, in keeping with both the affectionate and reciprocal nature of their relationship.[2] A guiding principle of behavior for Athenians and other Greeks was "Help friends, Harm enemies," with particular emphasis on the former: failure to help friends in need was more likely to draw social condemnation than failure

[1] See Dover 1974: 273–6 and Millett 1991: 127–32. On inability to help one's own family as intolerable, see Isoc. 14.55 and Pl. *Grg.* 483b.

[2] See Blundell 1989: 31–3 and Konstan 1997: 56.

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