

Matthew R. Christ, *The Limits of Altruism in Democratic Athens*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. x + 215. ISBN 978-1-107-02977-4.

Altruism is not exactly what the ancient Athenians came to be known for, and Matthew Christ's (henceforth C.) recently published book makes no attempt to challenge this appraisal. On the contrary, as its title suggests, it attempts to show how limited altruistic behavior may have been in classical Athens, in which it is explicitly aligned against the recent trend of appreciating the humane, the rational and the compassionate in the Athenian experience, as seen in R. Sternberg's *Tragedy Offstage* (Austin 2006) and above all G. Herman's *Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens* (Cambridge 2006).

The argument of the book unfolds with a clear progression, beginning with helping and altruism among individuals (Chapter 1), through the relationship between individual and community (Chapter 2), and concluding on the level of interstate affairs (Chapter 4). While Chapter 3, dealing with forensic discourse, may seem to upset the logic of this arrangement, its placement in the study is nonetheless in every respect justified, not the least since it provides a very original and significant contribution to our understanding of Athenian litigation.

The main argument in Chapter 1 is that helping behavior between individuals was in Classical Athens limited to one's intimate circle of friends and relatives; other than that, it was every man for himself. In the courts for instance — as C. has argued in greater detail in his *Litigious Athenian* (Baltimore 1998) — volunteer prosecution on behalf of strangers is virtually unheard of, whereas synegorical support in such cases was open to suspicions of base motivations. Similarly private charity is scantily attested in our sources, and furthermore C. finds the members of the Athenian elite more inclined to boast about their mandatory financial services to the community (liturgies) than their voluntary support of their less well-to-do fellow citizens. Some other areas ('helping fellow soldiers' and 'nursing the sick') are treated in a more cursory manner: more as a polemical appendix to Sternberg than a full discussion on its own. Whereas C.'s minimalist approach seems valid enough, the dearth of evidence in both fields (as he himself observes) precludes any definite conclusions. The most substantial argument in this chapter aims at drawing limits to the concept of bystander intervention, a phenomenon examined in depth by V. Hunter (*Policing Athens*, Princeton 1994) and Sternberg. Here C. is at his best when he argues that the Athenians were unwilling to take substantial risks on behalf of strangers (in which he largely concurs with Sternberg's assessments). His case studies, however, seem to rely too much on inferences and arguments from silence (emphases mine): 'neighbors *may have heard* the noisy whippings of Archippus no one came to intervene' (29); '*it looks as though* Hagnophilus (...) simply chose to maintain a safe distance' (31) '*apparently* no one came to Pittalacus' rescue' (32); '*no claim is made* that they actively intervened' (33).

In Chapter 2 C. examines four areas in which the citizens could or were expected to offer help to the community: military (conscription), financial (liturgies), political (addressing the Assembly) and judicial (volunteer prosecution). The common

element here is — not unexpectedly — a considerable degree of self-interest. The orators in lawsuits unabashedly seek gratitude from the juries for both their military and liturgic services (although these two were mandatory). Such protestations — though by no means absent — appear less blatant in connection with the litigants' history of addressing the Assembly, whereas in cases of volunteer prosecution self-interest not infrequently becomes manifest in their explicit vindictiveness. Drawing from a wide array of already well-established arguments, this chapter persuasively makes the case that helping relations between individuals and community, as they emerge from the public discourse of classical Athens, were based on an openly acknowledged principle of reciprocity rather than disinterested (altruistic) patriotism.

Chapter 3 revisits the realm of litigation in what may very well be the most interesting and original idea presented in this study. Its main premise is that in the extant speeches the litigants of both sides tend to represent the trial at hand as a 'crime in progress', of which they themselves are, of course, victims. This provides an admirable contextual frame for the peculiar pattern of addressing the juries in the Athenian forensic discourse, with frequent calls for 'help' (*boēthein*), and imprecations not to 'overlook' (*perioran*) the harm suffered by the speakers. The juries are, in other words, cast in the role of 'bystanders' and asked by the quarrelling parties for intervention — a metaphoric 'bystander intervention' and obviously one entailing little if any substantial risk. One might, of course, wonder, how does this square with the argument downplaying the significance of this phenomenon in real life. C.'s answer to this is that in the discourse of the orators 'helping' is transformed into a 'communal ideal', the proper place for which, however, are no longer the streets but the courts of Athens.

The final chapter takes the idea of pragmatic, non-altruistic helping to the level of Athens' interstate relations. Here C. argues that 'Athenians were strongly drawn to a noble ideal of helping others but no more inclined in reality to altruism in interstate relations than was any other Greek state' (176). The ideal is articulated in epideictic oratory, whereas the historical writings of the classical period are mined for clues as to the actual motivations behind the Athenians' foreign policies. Greek political rhetoric itself is marked with contrasting attitudes towards this topos: the deliberative speeches of Demosthenes display a considerable degree of 'prospective pragmatism', heavily relying on the question of expediency (even more so And. 3, mentioned only briefly in this context at 134, n.37), whereas his highly politicized forensic defense, *On the Crown*, represents recent history in the spirit of 'retrospective idealism', giving again the pride of place to the idea of helping the wronged (Hyperides' *Against Diondas*, substantial fragments of which were recently discovered, could also throw some light on this manner of 'rewriting the past').

The book, as we are told in the Acknowledgments, has been a couple of years in the making. In that time two of its chapters (1 and 3) have been published as separate articles, and I only wish they were a bit more seamlessly integrated with the rest. For instance, the survey of ancient theories of civic ideology (50–67), with its particular emphasis on the ideal of peaceful coexistence (*homonoia*) rather than active support of one another, would have been, to my mind, better placed in Chapter 1 than 2. An even more patent illustration of this problem is the indispensable to any such study

discussion on the relevant vocabulary and phraseology (in this case: helping), administered here piecemeal and at an uneven rate, the most substantial argument given no earlier than Chapter 3 (98f., with notes), while the Introduction offers the reader nothing more than a brief footnote (6, n.13).

There is also the question of sources. Unlike in his earlier *Bad Citizen* (Cambridge 2006), here C. is much more sparing when it comes to tragedy. The only play which gets some attention is Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, and contrary to what the dust jacket might seem to promise, the *Philoctetes* is mentioned only once — in a footnote (16, n.20). Tragedy, however, is a source no study of the Athenian civic ideology can afford to ignore, and that especially when it comes to a problem so abundantly treated in this genre as helping. Virtually all aspects of this phenomenon, as examined by C., reverberate in the texts of the extant plays; even such down-to-earth problems as bystander intervention can be illuminated with the use of some tragic passages (as the Herald/Creon-scenes of the *Heraclidae* and the *Oedipus Coloneus*).

These few reservations notwithstanding, this is a thoroughly enjoyable book, nicely produced and well edited, providing much food for thought and sensible conclusions drawn from a vast array of sources and the author's expertise in the relevant fields.

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