Yes. Okay, that was easy, but why is true altruism possible? To find out, we’ve got to go back to humanity’s first beginnings. Through evolution, different surviving species were given certain desirable and useful traits that helped them get by in nature. Large predators like lions and tigers got vicious claws, snakes and other reptiles got venom, some small frogs and plants got poison to ward off predators— and you get the idea. What did humanity get, though? We don’t have fur to keep out the cold, or gills to swim underwater, or the ability to run 50 miles per hour, or great strength to kill an unsuspecting gazelle in the wilderness, but we have become easily the most fearsome creature on planet Earth. We literally breed peppers to have a stronger defense mechanism against us, and then eat them anyway with that in mind. We keep the most dangerous predators on Earth in enclosures for our own amusement. We do things like jump down from the sky or climb up massive mountains because we are so bored with our lives being so devoid of conflict.

We literally have to regulate our fellow humans to stop them from eliminating entire other species from existence. We can punch holes in mountains. We can create new rivers where one didn’t exist before. We can cross the entire earth in a day. We have literally been to space, and yet, in a fight, a human would lose time times out of ten to something like a lion. Being smart or having opposable thumbs won’t do it alone. One smart human can’t chase down buffalo, or fight a pack of wolves. That’s why we, as humans, have tribe mentality. It gives us both our best and worst traits. Evolutionarily, forming into tribes is extremely advantageous as with teamwork, humans can “punch far above their weight” when they get together. Today, it seems less important, but perhaps could not be more so. We subscribe to our own tribes in daily life.

Republican or Democrat? Pepsi or Coke? What car do you drive? What clothes do you wear? Who is in your friend group? Did you like Suicide Squad? Well, no, nobody liked Suicide Squad, but the point is, we still put ourselves into tribes even though we don’t call them “tribes”
anymore, and that’s why true altruism is possible. “But Baerett”, I hear you ask, “doesn’t that mean that true altruism isn’t possible? Doesn’t that mean that we’re just following our biological stimulus?” Well, no, but I’m getting to that. Let’s look at how we, as people, respond to the positive stimuli that our brains provide us when we do something “good” (evolutionarily speaking). The most clear example to go on is sex. That’s something that inherently humans like because of the high positive stimulus, however, although this stimulus to procreate does guide us towards bad decisions, it’s not like we can’t ignore it. Reasons ranging from a partner’s insanity to simple lack of a condom can stop a person from engaging in a sexual act. Additionally, the positive stimulus isn’t the only reason humans have sex. Perhaps it is to have kids, or simply to show affection, but the point is, if we lived in a world where sex gave no feeling one way or another, people would still do it.

It is a similar situation with altruism. Are there situations where people help each other purely for the positive stimulus of helping someone? Absolutely! During around my Freshman year (if I remember correctly) I used to get Starbucks coffee each day, and every once in awhile, I would pay an extra ten dollars to cover the cost of the person behind me in the drive-thru. Was that pure altruism? Nope, not even close. It was 100% for the simple feeling of going about my day thinking, “hey, I did a good thing and I’m a good person”. I mean, it’s not like I was truly helping someone in need. If the person behind me couldn’t afford their coffee, they wouldn’t order. Just this last June in Scottsburg, Indiana, this happened 167 times in a row. Each person had their meal paid for, and in turn paid for the person behind them. It only ended because the store closed. Was this real altruism, though? No! Because, again, each person entered the drive-thru with enough money for their order. They saw that their order was paid for, and, already being willing to spend the money, they paid it forward and felt good about it for the rest of the day. That’s not to say that this is necessarily a bad action, but it’s not a good one either.
It’s just neutral, and somewhere down the line maybe there is a poor person who can afford their meal, but could really really use the money, and they would break the chain and benefit, much like one of those tooth cleaner shrimp that lives in the mouth of a shark. The shark is not virtuous by helping the shrimp, but it’s not as if the shark is evil for simply allowing the shrimp to benefit off him when it’s no cost to him.

What is a truly altruistic action, then? Well, it’s not something we want to do, but as we’ve established, we as humans are capable of overriding our biological instincts and make our own decisions. This part is important because if we want to do it anyway, then we’ve got the whole shark-shrimp situation on our hands. It’s not truly virtuous because we’re not giving anything up to do it. It’s got to be a hard choice. In fact, most times, you’re not even sure that it is the altruistic decision. You may even feel guilty about it. This is a good sign. World leaders make these kinds of decisions all the time. “Yes, we can take out this ISIS leader, but there are possible civilian casualties”, is a phrase their ears have grown weary of. In this situation, although it may seem odd, assuming said world leader isn’t some empathy-less sociopath and that this is a hard decision for them, either decision they make is the altruistic one. Why? Because the loss of human life with either option weighs heavy on their heart. They will sleep easy with either choice. They will never be able to convince themselves that it was the right choice.

This is how you can be sure that their decision is the altruistic one: when both choices are wrong. It’s weird, it’s ugly, but it’s the only way to be sure that they’re not just doing it so that they can rest easy or consider themselves a good person. Of course, I say that, but in absolute truth, there is no surefire way to know that a person has no selfish component of a decision. An Egoist could easily make the point that even in a hard scenario, the person is just choosing the
one that makes them feel the least bad, but which theory we choose to believe is up to us—because as human beings, we have free will.