

Altruism And Selfishness

Blithering Genius

2015 April 13

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1 Defining Altruism And Selfishness

This is how I define “altruism” and “selfishness”:

- **Altruism:** Acting for the benefit of others.
- **Selfishness:** Acting for your own benefit.

These definitions match the common usage of the words. They are as simple and clear as possible.

Of course, like all definitions, they depend on the meanings of other words. So, now we need to dig a bit deeper.

They both depend on the definition of “benefit”. Selfishness and altruism are relative to a definition of value: what is good or bad for an individual. There are different types of altruism and selfishness, depending on how we define “benefit”.

Here are some ways that “benefit” could be defined:

- **Biological:** Reproduction is the measure of value.
- **Psychological:** Desire is the measure of value.
- **Energetic:** Energy is the measure of value.

Whether an action is altruistic or selfish depends on which definition is used. An action that is altruistic when viewed energetically could be selfish when viewed biologically. For example, parenting is energetically altruistic but biologically selfish.

We also need to clarify the meaning of “for”. What does it mean to do something for the benefit of X? Does it mean only that X benefits from the action, or does it mean that the action was intended to benefit X?

This distinction matters, because actions have many effects, not just the intended effect. Almost any action will benefit some and harm others. For that reason, I define altruism and selfishness in terms of the intent or purpose of the action, not its effects. To say that an action is for the benefit of X is to say that it has the intent or purpose of benefiting X.

For example, when I buy groceries at the store, my action benefits the owners of the store, the employees of the store, the producers of the goods that I buy, and various other people. However, my reason for buying groceries is not to cause those effects. It is to satisfy my own desires. Thus, buying groceries is a selfish act, even though it benefits others. It has a selfish purpose.

2 Judging Altruism And Selfishness

To judge an action as altruistic or selfish, we have to specify its purpose, function or intention. To simplify things, I’m going to use the term “purpose” for the goal of an action, whether it is consciously intended or not. Actions have purposes. They are done to produce some effect. The notion of purpose implies a value-system in which achieving the purpose has positive value for the agent. I will also use the term “agent” whether the doer is conscious or not.

With that in mind, I make the following claims:

1. Biological altruism cannot evolve. If it exists for some reason, it will be selected against.
2. Psychological altruism does not exist. Any voluntary act is based on the desires of the agent, and is thus psychologically selfish.
3. Energetic altruism can and does exist. If it is a choice, then it is proximately governed by psychological selfishness. If it is an evolved behavior (conscious or not), then it has a biologically selfish function.

3 Why Biological Altruism Cannot Evolve

The argument for claim 1 is very simple. Evolution creates reproducing machines. Biological forms are selected for their contributions to reproduction. Reproductive altruism would be eliminated by natural selection.

3.1 Evolution Selects For Selfishness, Not Altruism

Suppose that there are two genetic variants in a population, S and A, that have different behavioral strategies. Organisms of type S are reproductively selfish: they act only toward their own reproduction. Organisms of type A act to benefit other members of the population. The S individuals benefit (reproductively) from the actions of A individuals. The A individuals do not benefit (reproductively) from the actions of S individuals. So, the S population has a net reproductive benefit from the A population, while the A population has a net reproductive loss. It follows that the S population will increase at the expense of the A population, until the A population disappears.

Selfishness beats altruism.

This claim is hard for many people to accept, because it conflicts with their moral intuitions. But it is a trivial implication of evolutionary theory. If it were false, then evolutionary theory would have to be discarded.

Unfortunately, the term “altruism” is sometimes used in confusing ways by evolutionary biologists. Two confusing uses of the term are “kin altruism” and “reciprocal altruism”. Neither is biological altruism, by my definition.

3.2 Kin Altruism Is Misleading

Kin altruism is acting for the benefit of children or close relatives. Most kin altruism is parental care: parents taking care of their own offspring. Helping one’s offspring is biologically selfish, because it is instrumental to reproduction. Some kin altruism involves children helping parents or siblings. Helping parents or siblings is not directly instrumental to reproduction for the helper, but it is a trait that benefits a parent when expressed in children, so it can be selected for.

“Kin altruism” is a confusing term, because it is applied to biologically selfish behaviors. “Kin investment” is a more accurate term.

Generally speaking, biological traits are selected for their contribution to the reproductive fitness of the individual, not for altruism toward genetically similar individuals. If you were energetically altruistic toward others who share your genes, your behavior would be very different. You share about 99% of your genes with other humans. You share a significant percentage of them with most animals and plants. If you cared about others based on your genetic similarity to them, you would be willing to kill your own child to save five sea cucumbers. But of course, that’s not how people behave. Every day, we eat organisms that share a large percentage of our genetic code.

People often point to bees as an example of altruism in nature. In fact, bee behavior is entirely explained by biological selfishness. A bee hive is not a society. A bee hive is a family with some unusual genetic relationships that make it act almost like a single organism.

See Bees are Not Social.

Many people believe that kin altruism is the basis of society, but that is false. Society is based on cooperation between selfish individuals for their mutual benefit.

See Game Theory and Society.

3.3 Reciprocal Altruism Is Cooperation

Unfortunately, some biologists call cooperation “reciprocal altruism”. That is very misleading. Cooperation is selfish, not altruistic.

I can't find the origin of the term, but it was made popular by the paper The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism by Robert Trivers, published in 1971.

In that paper, he gave this definition of altruism:

Altruistic behavior can be defined as behavior that benefits another organism, not closely related, while being apparently detrimental to the organism performing the behavior, benefit and detriment being defined in terms of contribution to inclusive fitness.

Note that he says “apparently”. He goes on to describe examples of cooperation, not altruism.

Cooperation can evolve, because it is selfish. There are many examples of cooperation in nature. Male and female birds work together to build a nest and raise their offspring. Algae and fungi live together in a lichen. A wolf pack hunts together. Cooperation depends on reciprocity, and there must be some way to create trust between the cooperators.

4 Why Psychological Altruism Is Impossible

Now I will make the argument for Claim 2: that psychological altruism is impossible.

It follows simply from the definition of the terms. If you act voluntarily, you are (by definition) doing what you *want* to do. Intentional actions are based on desires.

4.1 Choices And Conflicting Desires

You might occasionally say something like “I didn't do it, even though I really wanted to”, but that is because you have conflicting desires. Suppose that someone offers you a slice of pizza, but you are on a diet, and so you don't eat it. You have the desire to eat it, but you also have a stronger desire to not eat it. In that situation, you might say “I really wanted to eat the pizza”, but that's not the whole truth. Taking both desires into account, you didn't want to eat it. You did what you wanted to do.

You have different types of desires, and they can be in conflict, but your choices are always based on your desires. When desires conflict, the stronger desire wins out.

You do what you want to do.

Why do we sometimes want to help others?

4.2 Sometimes We Crave Approval

One reason is that we crave the approval of others. Primates are small-group animals. For millions of years, our ancestors lived in small groups of less than 100 individuals. Our emotions are still mostly adapted to the ancestral condition of living in small bands or villages, in which everyone knows everyone else. In that environment, it was very important to be accepted and liked by others. We are emotionally adapted to create cooperative relationships with others. We want to be liked and accepted. A smiling face makes you feel good.

4.3 Sometimes We Cooperate With Others

Like all behavior, social behavior is driven by emotions. We have special emotions that evolved to mediate social relationships. Those emotions evolved as biologically selfish mechanisms to extract energy from a social environment by cooperating with others.

Social emotions are not altruistic. We did not evolve to be nice. We evolved to live in societies, and maximize individual success in those societies. Generally speaking, people are friendly and prosocial only to the extent necessary to get what they want. If someone does not reciprocate your kindness, you will probably stop being nice to them.

Our ancestors stored value in the brains of others, in the form of goodwill. Social approval is a sign that you have good credit, and can cash in some of that goodwill for favors. Today, you can store money in a bank, and so the emotional approval of others has less practical importance. Modern civilization is based on explicit ideas, such as laws, money and citizenship, rather than emotions. But we still have the emotions of our ancestors, and so the goodwill of others still feels important. For our ancestors, it was essential to survival.

Cooperation is an exchange of work. Each side does something for the other. Both sides can benefit by exchanging work, either because they have different abilities, or because their combined actions can do something that neither can do alone.

Society is a work-exchange system, in which many individuals exchange work with each other. The individual invests work in society, and receives work from society. This could take the form of helping out your friends and receiving favors in return. Or it could be working for a wage that you can use to buy the products of other people's labor. Either way, it is an exchange.

Society is not based on altruism. It is based on cooperation. It is a system of selfish individuals exchanging work for their mutual benefit. To the individual, society is a tool. Like any other tool, society is a way to increase the energetic efficiency of work. The members of a society are using it for their own benefit.

5 Energetic Altruism

Now for claim 3. Energetic altruism does occur. If it is a choice, then it is proximately governed by psychological selfishness. If it is an evolved behavior (conscious or not), then it has a biologically selfish function.

5.1 The Transfer of Energy From Parents To Children

The main form of energetic altruism is the transfer of energy from parents to children. Parents are often energetically altruistic toward their children. Parental investment in offspring is biologically selfish, because it is instrumental to reproduction. Reproduction is not just creating offspring. It is having offspring that live to reproduce themselves.

In many species, parents (especially mothers) protect and support offspring. In humans and most mammals, this behavior is caused by the emotion of parental love, which is instinctive. Parents bond with their children, and empathize positively with them. If your child is in pain, you feel bad. If your child is happy, you feel good. Parents are motivated to work for the benefit of their children. This is psychologically selfish, and it has a biological function.

5.2 The Transfer of Energy Between Sexual Partners

Sexual cooperation occurs in some species. It often involves net energetic altruism from the male to the female, but this is a “payment” for reproductive services. The male invests energetically in the female, and the female invests in their offspring. Sexual cooperation is biologically selfish.

In humans, sexual cooperation is based on the emotion of sexual love. Sexual love is different from parental love. It is conditional on reciprocity. Male love is conditional on fertility (beauty) and sexual fidelity. Female love is conditional on male protection and support. Each side must fulfill its role in the relationship. Sexual love is psychologically selfish, and it has a biologically selfish function.

5.3 Maladaptive Transfers of Energy

Energetic altruism is sometimes caused by the misfit of our social emotions to the modern environment. Our emotions are adapted to small societies, and do not work perfectly in modern civilization. This causes some energetic altruism in situations where reciprocity is unlikely. We are occasionally nice to strangers who will never pay us back. However, kindness toward strangers is relatively rare. We pretend to be much nicer than we actually are.

6 Conclusion

The belief that humans are altruistic is part of our culture. So is the belief that society is based on altruism. These are moral myths: shared delusions that hide the reality of human nature and society. These myths have even been projected onto nature, via the moralistic fallacy. Biologists have tried to find altruism in nature, or explain how altruism could evolve. Philosophers have tried to rationalize these myths with moral theories. This is all delusion.

Human nature is biologically and psychologically selfish. Energetic altruism can occur, but it is always psychologically selfish, and it reflects some biologically selfish function (although not always perfectly). Society is based on cooperation, not altruism.