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On the Origin of Altruism

How do humans actually behave when faced with the decision to help others? The innate desire that compels humans to help is called altruism by psychologists. Through this feeling, humans transform from a selfish animal to a more compassionate and caring person. Some psychologists believe that this feeling stems from nature itself. Despite the fact that some altruistic acts originate from the pressures of society, altruism predominantly comes from the evolutionary functions, the willingness to keep the group, and the empathy link.

Before a case can be made for the causes of altruism, altruism must first be defined. Most leading psychologists agree that the definition of altruism is “a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another’s welfare” (Batson 111). The only way for a person to be truly altruistic is if their intent is to help others before themselves. However, the only thing humans can see are other’s actions, and so, selfish intent may seem the same as altruistic intent. Alas, the only way that altruism can be judged is through hypothetical intent. We must conclude that only specific intents can be defined as altruistic, and as intent emanating from nature benefits the group while other intent benefits the individual, only actions caused by nature are truly altruistic.

One proof for nature as the foundation of altruism can be found by studying more basic life forms and relating them to humans. There are cases where ants will willingly die by suffocation to seal the anthill from foreign attacks. There is also the honeybee’s sting, which rips

out the honeybee's own internal organs, and has been described as "instruments of altruistic self-sacrifice. Although the individual dies, the bee's genes, shared in the colony of relatives, survive." (Rushton 141). This behavior proves that even the most fundamental forms of life willingly lay down their lives for the benefit of society. Because death is the ultimate sacrifice, as it is the "most complete and permanent change", no action that directly leads to death can possess selfish influences (White 233). As these basic species who exhibit altruism tend to do better in the animal kingdom, and as humans are arguably the most powerful species, we can conclude that humans evolved so that altruism would be apparent, leading to the betterment of the entire population. (Liu and Chang)

Altruism is often seen in the benevolent acts that family members express towards one another. Because of the significant amount of genes we share with our kin, the survival of a family is prioritized equally to the survival of the individual. Family members tend to behave more altruistically towards each other as they understand that the survival of one is equivalent to the survival of all. "Parents (adults) are in a maximally favorable position to dispense inexpensive aid to offspring (eggs) that maximally resembles the parents genetically", and so, behave altruistically towards their offspring (Alexander 462). As altruism "involves a loss of individual fitness, [it] can evolve only by group selection" (Nunney 228). Therefore, we can see that nature's force of the survival of the group is a primary driving factor for the appearance of altruism.

Lastly, another definitive explanation for natural causes of altruism is that empathy is the force that drives altruism. It is through the link to others that inspires the need to help them. Empathy "evokes altruistic motivation directed towards the ultimate goal of reducing the needy person's suffering" (Batson 115). However, empathy is deeply rooted in nature. The act of

feeling other's pain even exists within primates like chimpanzees. (O'Connell, 398) Research has uncovered that the human brain is hard-wired to light up in areas of pain when those around are in pain (Singer et al). Therefore, altruistic acts can be more or less a biological reflex instilled in us. If no altruism is shown, humans would show symptoms of a negative reaction: guilt. Guilt is very important as it is primarily driven by empathy; humans do not feel guilty towards people they are not empathetic towards. Guilt also acts as a natural backlash if we do not behave altruistically. The positive incentive of empathy coupled with the potential for negative backlash from guilt is nature's way of forcing humans to behave altruistically.

Even though there has been much proof for a natural cause of altruism, some scientists believe humans are altruistic because they hope society will notice them and reward them. Unfortunately, this conclusion is faulty, as the reward from society seems to be the primary goal in this "reciprocal altruism", and therefore this type of behavior does not correspond to our accepted definition. (Trivers 35) Instead of being selfless, this behavior encourages helping yourself, and will be able to turn quickly based on the situation. In fact, when society "is most in need of prosocial[sic] behavior, cooperation based on reciprocal altruism will collapse" (Gintis 163). Other altruistic acts that seem to be 'taught' by society are similar in intent. For an act to be accepted by society, one's intent is directed towards acceptance, and therefore, towards their own goals (Jensen 4). As this type of intent would not count to be truly altruistic, it is unable to support the causes of altruism.

Through this paper, an analysis on the foundation of altruism has been conducted, and it has been found that nature, not nurture, is the true cause of what psychologists call 'altruism'. This search for the cause has not been futile, as through it we have gained a better understanding of what sets humans apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. It is not our society that pushes

us towards this behavior, but how we live. While others may hold out on the case for nurture, pointing at reciprocal altruism, the arguments of evolutionary altruism, group altruism, and the empathy-altruism link verify nature as the root of altruism.

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