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Survival Of The Selfish: Natural Selection And The Myth Of Altruism

Kyle O'Shea

Altruism, in its purest sense, can be defined as an unselfish regard for or devotion to the welfare of others. An altruistic act is one in which the person or animal benefitting from the act is the only one benefitting from it, and the person or animal performing the act gains nothing or is even harmed by the act. Truly altruistic acts are completely void of selfishness. One would like to believe that altruism could exist in its purest form; however, this devotion to the welfare of others cannot and does not exist in nature over time.

Charles Darwin, the father of evolution, was a major proponent of the idea that true altruism cannot persist throughout generations. His theory of natural selection determined that organisms only behave in certain ways if it benefits their own survival. In this way, all behavior must contain some degree of selfishness since species need to be selfish in order to survive.

The behavior of honeybees provides one challenge to this theory. Honeybees sting predators in order to protect the queen bee, which leads to the death of the stinging bee. This behavior may be considered altruistic, since the bee dies from protecting another bee; however, from the species' perspective, this behavior is selfish. The bee, although it dies protecting its queen, is protecting its own genes. The stinging bee is genetically related to its queen bee; the queen bee is essentially the sister of the stinging bee. By protecting its queen, a bee ensures that its own genes will be passed on to the next generation, and thus it survives genetically. Overall, the bee's stinging could still be seen as an altruistic act. The bee sacrifices itself for its queen, which is definitely an unselfish regard for the welfare of another. If the bee's act is seen as selfless, then the argument could be made that altruism can and does exist in nature. However, Darwin's theory shows that altruistic acts would lead to the extinction of a species, and therefore cannot be continued over time.

If animals really did help each other with no regard for their own lives, they would quickly die out. However, animals are motivated to help

each other when it is beneficial to the survival of the species as a whole. Honeybees sting predators because it allows them to survive as a species.

Humans, on the other hand, are motivated to help others when helping others will benefit them in ways other than survival. A pedestrian may give money to a homeless man “because it is the right thing to do;” doing something for such a reason could be considered emotionally fulfilling. Although the act can be considered a good deed, it cannot be considered altruistic, because at least some level of self-fulfillment was involved in the decision to give money. As Darwin explains in his *Origin of Species*, “Natural selection will never produce in a being anything injurious to itself, for natural selection acts solely by and for the good of each. No organ will be formed, as Paley has remarked, for the purpose of causing pain or for doing an injury to its possessor.”¹ According to Darwin, natural selection would not allow altruism to persist in nature over time because it would be injurious to a species and likely cause it to go extinct. A man will not selflessly donate money to charity at the expense of his happiness and livelihood over time because doing so would lead to the man’s own death.

Altruism cannot exist over time. However, natural selection suggests that altruism may have at one point existed in nature. Altruism may have existed in a gene, but species with that gene died out because non-altruistic genes prevailed over altruistic genes, or individuals with altruistic genes sacrificed themselves for individuals with non-altruistic genes. This theory provides for the argument that there are certain situations in nature in which altruistic acts can occur. However, these acts could not be continued over time because they would ultimately lead to the death of altruistic individuals or species.

Instead of donating a reasonable amount, a man could donate all of his money to a homeless man on the street. This would not be beneficial to the man, since he now has no money and will struggle to comfortably survive as a result. Imagine all the man’s money goes to the homeless man. In terms of Darwin’s theory, the man has altruistic genes and the homeless man does not. The non-altruistic homeless man benefits from the altruistic man, and the altruistic man dies. As a result, non-altruistic genes persist and altruistic genes go extinct.

Altruism does not and cannot exist in its truest form over time

1 Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, first British edition (1859), pp. 201.

because animals are intrinsically motivated to do that which will lead to survival, whether it is survival of the individual or the species as a whole. Humans are somewhat more complex in their reasoning, and although behaviors may not be solely for survival, they are generally behaviors that improve one's quality of life.

For example, the man that gives money to a homeless man on the street may not be promoting his own survival, but he does receive a feeling of fulfillment, which in turn improves his own life. This can be simplified to say that the man has traded money for self-fulfillment. If this is true, then all good deeds can be simplified to trade agreements, in which case they are not altruistic because the giver receives something in return. All good deeds are intrinsically fulfilling, and if they weren't then there would be no reason for animals to perform such deeds. If animals really were selfless, they would not survive because they would be more concerned with the well being of others than with themselves. They would be trading something for nothing, and would eventually lose everything, including their lives. As explained by natural selection, trading something for nothing is not a trait that would persist in a species, and so altruism could not persist in nature.

Humans as a species are biologically predisposed to act selfishly and in the interest of self-preservation. As a result, humans are incapable of acting purely altruistically because it would lead to their own extinction. Other animals behave in the same way, and only act selflessly when it results in positive reinforcement or is in the interest of the species as a whole. True altruism cannot exist in the long-run because it would lead to the death of species.