Social Learning and Human Cooperation

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Abstract

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In recent work I have defended a three-stage model of the evolution of human cooperation. The first is a transition from great ape rugged individualism to the mutualist foraging of mid-Pleistocene hominins. The second is was a transition from mutualist foraging to reciprocation-based forager economies of the latish Pleistocene. The third was the expansion of collective action in the transition to complex societies; a transition that began around the Pleistocene-Holocene boundary, and is probably tied to the establishment of farming. I have argued that managing reciprocation-based forager economies imposed new cognitive demands, and exposed foragers to increased conflict risks. I have further argued that the appearance of physical symbols in the archaeological record (beginning around 100 kya) is a symptom of these demands and risks. In this paper, I argue that social learning (in a broad sense) played a crucial role in this second transition, enabling humans to evolve to social and cognitive tools they needed to manage economies of reciprocation. The normative life of humans is a culturally evolved response to the changed foundations of forager life.

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