
Why there might not be an evolutionary explanation for psychological altruism

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Abstract

Session: Psychological Altruism from a Biological Point of View - Some Recent Perspectives (Christine Clavier, Justin Garson, Armin Schulz, Elliott Sober, Chandra Sripada, Stephen Stich) Following Batson and Sober & Wilson, I will use "psychological altruism" for the claim that people have ultimate (or non-instrumental) desires for the well-being of others. Behavior is psychologically altruistic if it is motivated, at least in part, by such an altruistic desire. The first claim I will defend is that it may be premature to seek evolutionary explanations of psychological altruism, since it is far from clear that psychological altruism *exists*. Batson and colleagues have set out what is perhaps the best case for the existence of psychological altruism. However, their work has focused almost entirely on a cultural group – WEIRD American college students – who are known to be outliers in many psychological tasks. If psychological altruism is a culturally local phenomenon, then it is far from clear that we should expect an evolutionary explanation. The second claim I will defend is that almost all of the psychological work on altruism is compatible with the hypothesis that the ultimate desire motivating putatively altruistic behavior is actually a desire to comply with norms. The third claim I will defend is that the work of Boyd, Henrich and others has provided a compelling account of the evolution of norm psychology which suggests that non-self-interested, group-beneficial norms should be widespread, though the details should differ from culture to culture. This is *not* an account of the evolution of psychological altruism, but it does provide an evolutionary explanation of the behavior that may have been mistakenly taken to be altruistic.

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