Altruism, Egoism, or Neither? The Evolution of Psychological Capacities for Helping Behaviour

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Abstract

Session: Psychological Altruism from a Biological Point of View - Some Recent Perspectives (Christine Clavien, Justin Garson, Armin Schulz, Elliott Sober, Chandra Sripada, Stephen Stich) In this paper, I assess the role that evolutionary theory can play in the debate about the plausibility of psychological altruism. In particular, I try to resolve a specific kind of argumentative impasse that has been reached in evolutionary theorising concerning psychological altruism: the fact that egoistic architectures can evolve so as to be behaviourally indistinguishable from altruistic ones. This indistinguishability stems from the fact that any behaviour that could result from an ultimate desire for the well being of others – what 'altruism' is typically taken to mean – could just as reliably result from an egoistic ultimate desire (say, for the maximisation of one's own pleasures) that is coupled with a suitably 'sticky' belief (say, that helping others is the best way to maximise one's own pleasure). Given this, I then present a new evolutionary argument suggesting that the latter kind of egoistic helping behaviour is evolutionary unstable. This instability derives from more general facts about when it is adaptive for an organism to rely on representational mental states (like beliefs and desires) when deciding what to do. Specifically, the adaptive benefits of representational cognition vis-a-vis reflexes lie in its ability to streamline complex decision problems in a specific way. In turn, this suggests that, evolutionarily, the reliance on 'sticky states' in the determination of helping behaviour will be merely a temporary stepping stone on the way either to full blown altruism or to reflex-determined helping behaviour that is neither altruistic nor egoistic.

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