
Preference altruism: a conceptual link between economics and evolutionary biology

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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)

Abstract: An increasing number of researchers in economics argue that humans behave more altruistically than classical economic theories allow for. The most common form of altruism discussed in this literature is labelled "strong reciprocity" (SR), which is the combination of a predisposition to reward others for norm-abiding behaviours, and a propensity to impose sanctions on others for norm violations (Fehr & Fischbacher 2003). Evolutionary explanations (usually cast in terms of group selection theory) are proposed to account for the emergence and maintenance of this behaviour. First, I'll argue that conceptual clarification of "strong reciprocity" is needed in order to overstep its unsatisfactory level of generality. Second, I'll propose the notion of "preference altruism" as a candidate link between economics and biology, and explore its epistemic virtues for developing connections between neo-classical economics theory and evolutionary biology.

In the literature, SR carries two related but distinct meanings. At times, it refers to "behavioural altruism", which involves bearing some cost in the interest of others. At other times, SR denotes "preference altruism", which refers to other-regarding preferences contained in humans' utility functions (Clavien & Chapuisat 2013). These two meanings are close but not equivalent to the psychological and the biological versions of altruism (Sober & Wilson 1998).

At first glance, one might think that "behavioural altruism" (similar to the biological use) is the most promising link-concept between economics and biology. After analysis however, "preference altruism" (closer to psychological altruism) proves more helpful. I'll show examples of population genetics models, based on kin selection theory, that investigate altruistic preferences.

References:

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Sober, E., & Wilson, D. S. (1998). *Unto others: The evolution and psychology of unselfish behavior*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.