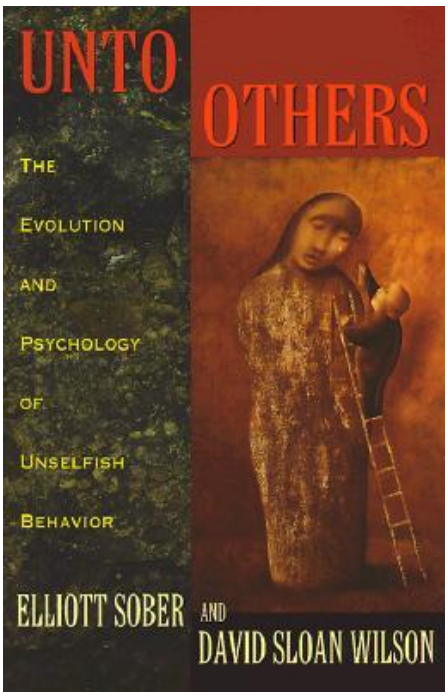

Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior

Elliott Sober , David Sloan Wilson

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Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior Elliott Sober , David Sloan Wilson No matter what we do, however kind or generous our deeds may seem, a hidden motive of selfishness lurks--or so science has claimed for years. This book, whose publication promises to be a major scientific event, tells us differently. In *Unto Others* philosopher Elliott Sober and biologist David Sloan Wilson demonstrate once and for all that unselfish behavior is in fact an important feature of both biological and human nature. Their book provides a panoramic view of altruism throughout the animal kingdom--from self-sacrificing parasites to insects that subsume themselves in the superorganism of a colony to the human capacity for selflessness--even as it explains the evolutionary sense of such behavior.

Explaining how altruistic behavior can evolve by natural selection, this book finally gives credence to the idea of group selection that was originally proposed by Darwin but denounced as heretical in the 1960s. With their account of this controversy, Sober and Wilson offer a detailed case study of scientific change as well as an indisputable argument for group selection as a legitimate theory in evolutionary biology.

Unto Others also takes a novel evolutionary approach in explaining the ultimate psychological motives behind unselfish human behavior. Developing a theory of the proximate mechanisms that most likely evolved to motivate adaptive helping behavior, Sober and Wilson show how people and perhaps other species evolved the capacity to care for others as a goal in itself.

A truly interdisciplinary work that blends biology, philosophy, psychology, and anthropology, this book will permanently change not just our view of selfless behavior but also our understanding of many issues in evolutionary biology and the social sciences.

Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior Details

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From Reader Review Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior for online ebook

Phoenix says

Group Fitness

The main idea of the first part of the book is that altruism is a quality, in an evolutionary sense, that enhances a group's ability to survive. Do groups operate and evolve as if they are single organism in the same logical sense that plants and animals evolve and operate as a collection of differentiated cells? Certainly some groups have maintained coherent stability for long periods of time. However the majority of evolutionary biologists, which include such luminaries as Richard Dawkins, have treated this proposition as an anathema equivalent to heresy. They argued that the basis for altruism is no more than self interest in wanting to propagate one's own genetic material. The authors criticize this view as stretching The Selfish Gene idea so far that it becomes tautological. The authors also object to Dawkins insistence that altruism be pure, with no benefit and likely to the detriment of the individual committing the altruistic act, countering that degrees of self interest do not invalidate altruism as a separate motive. Nor can it be claimed that individuals either accurate calculators of future benefits accruing or that they are sufficiently convinced of the results. (pp241) And yet another problem is agreement on what defines a group vis a vis the relationship of individuals to it.

The difficulty the authors run into is that they present the gist of mathematical modelling (ie: the Price and Hamilton equations) but fail to explain them thoroughly enough, potentially alienating both the mathematically literate who would prefer a more rigorous treatment and a popular audience who would likely be more comfortable with less. For the former I'd recommend Mathematical Models of Social Evolution: A Guide for the Perplexed by McElreath and Boyd and Axelrod's The Evolution of Cooperation. Briefly, groups of pure altruists (such as Al Cap's Al Capp's Shmoos) are easy prey for purely selfish individuals. However by allowing skeptical altruists into the mix (the example offered is Anatol Rapaport's strategy of Tit for Tat), the group gains resilience against unscrupulous exploiters. And while altruism can be innate, it can also be a learned behaviour. Axelrod's model allows for changing strategy over time.

The second part of the book considers matters of philosophy and psychology, proposing 4 motivational models - hedonism, egoism, altruism and their own view which they briefly label relationism, with examples of experiments used to test for each. Chapters 6, 7 and 9 lean heavily towards the philosophical. Most people reject pure altruism as it is easy to generate counter examples, as Hume notes, reason is capable of overriding passion, but here again purity should not be a requirement. Pure hedonism, the concern only for the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, (masochists invert the relationship) fails because it relies on solipsism wherein the external world is merely instrumental. An egoist, according to the authors, is also inwardly directed , but is is much more amenable to delayed gratification of desire. (pp226). Both are easily distinguished from altruism, which is usually defined as seeking the good for others, however altruistic motives do not always equate to morally good behaviour. The authors illustrate with Shakespeare's Iago as someone who seeks the destruction of Othello for the good of society, however because his means and ends are malevolent we consider him more egoist than altruist, though he himself might not. Doctors and guards in concentration camps were trained to overcome their revulsion for the "ultimate goal of helping the Volk".

Overall a good approach to an interesting controversy in evolutionary biology that is moderately fair to the opposing side. The discussions are robust and the authors introduce a number of useful sources including HRAF, a Yale based anthropological database comparing the practices of some 600 different cultures which can be used as a test of their conjectures. IMV Sobel and Wilson are essentially correct in their conclusions

supporting a pluralistic model. Surprisingly they leave out Maslow's hierarchy of needs in their chapters on psychology which gives a good multi-level rational for pluralistic motivation. Taking this further, a good argument can be made that the mechanism that has evolved is neither inherently selfish nor altruistic but behaves as software that can and does emulate either behaviour or both as the circumstances arise.

Recommended!

Fred R says

Perhaps as strong a case as can be made for group selection.

The second half, in which the co-authors attempt to determine whether or not humans are "really" selfish, is fine enough for philosophers but caviar to myself and the rest of the general.

Andrew Feist says

as powerful as science books come. up there is Guns germs and steel, Descartes' Error, consciousness explained, and how the mind works. amazing book

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Janet Eshenroder says

Group selection has been shunned since the 1960s as a means to explain group dynamics and individual behavior such as altruism. It was replaced by selfish-gene, kin selection, egotism, and hedonism explanations, none of which (in and of itself) totally and successfully explains altruistic behavior. Elliot Sober presents a well-reasoned treatise for reconsidering group selection as one of several explanations for both evolutionary altruism and psychological altruism. "We think that multilevel selection theory provides the beginning of a unified framework within which the legitimate claims of individual-level functionalism, group-level functionalism and antifunctionalism can each be given their due."

I can appreciate that humans are complex and we rarely understand our deepest motivation for our actions, multiple needs may conflict, and culture can dictate how one responds. In other words, a pluralistic approach would be more reliable for truly explaining the evolution and continuation of unselfish behavior. Within a group, altruistic individuals may not fare well against selfish individuals, but groups with a minimal number of altruistic individuals are shown to do better competing against groups heavily weighed towards the selfish.

The first half of the book is heavy on population genetics. The few courses I took in genetics I remember population genetics being everyone's least favorite subject. While I got the hang of it by the second semester, I am not well-versed enough to say any more than the mathematics seemed reasonable and well-presented. While explanations in layman's terms help explain the basic concepts,a background in science would probably be helpful for lay readers. The second half delves into logical analysis of psychological altruism. Again, though the points are explained for lay people, I could only say it seemed reasonable. I am not well-versed enough in logic to critique the actual logic used. I did get the impression that Sober presented a detailed and thorough argument.

I understand from my husband that this book and its theory were criticized by scientists who claimed that kin selection would cover the same points, and since kin selection is a simpler explanation (Occam's Razor) there is no need to reintroduce group section. I feel the arguments used for a multiple system approach makes more sense and am inclined to believe the detractors are still immersed in the 1960s mindset.

Liza May says

My cousin Elliott's book! Brilliant!

Bob Nichols says

The authors challenge a prevailing view that discounts the role of the group in the evolution of altruism (i.e., individuals act for the good of the group). Given the emphasis on the "selfish gene" in modern evolutionary theory, the challenge is to explain our clearly evident altruistic behavior. (1)

Drawing from Darwin's observations in "The Descent of Man," the authors believe that altruism evolved through inter-group competition. The group that had the strongest cooperative tendencies (including a mutual willingness to sacrifice oneself on behalf of the group) outcompeted groups that were weaker with these tendencies. This allowed these groups to prevail and to produce progeny with these group-strengthening traits, thereby spreading them throughout the population. The end result is a human nature that contains both individualistic motivations (pleasure and pain) and the altruistic, other-regarding traits. This is what the authors call a "pluralist" human nature. (2)

The authors' reliance on Darwin's group selection theory is problematic as it still does not explain how an altruist's genes are passed along when the altruist dies prior to reproduction. (3) Is it possible to reinterpret the evidence the authors put forward regarding the origins of altruism? (4) With genetic reproduction as the starting point, mechanisms exist within us to care and support (direct) genetic progeny (5) that leads to an increase in other-regarding altruistic behavior. (6) Viewed this way, reciprocal altruism starts at the beginning. The genes of the parent benefit by moving to a new (body) vehicle and the genes in that vehicle benefit by being supported by the seemingly altruistic behavior of the parents (nurture, protection). Then, just as the body is an extension of the genes, the parents and then the group become a Dawkins' extended phenotype: the mutual benefit package extends to the group. As the struggle for survival is with the environment in general (for food, defense against hostile animals as well as other groups, and shelter against the elements), the same "genetic contract" pertains: the individual genetic vehicle needs the group to survive, and all of those social and tribal emotions that Darwin discusses are evolution's means to support survival. The motive force is not to benefit the group as the authors argue, but to promote the selfish gene's survival. The group, in effect becomes the extended parent because it is in the genetic interest of each group member to ensure the survival of their respective genetic progeny. The individual and group are now no longer two separate entities but are merged, in effect, into one single "genetic unit." (7)

The authors argue that all human kind exhibits egoistic (hedonistic pleasure and plain) and altruistic (sympathetic, cooperative) behavior. This reflects their multi-selection (individual-group) theory, but is it not possible that people vary, considerably, in these tendencies? Isn't it consistent with the authors' (and Darwin's) variability argument that there are twin poles of human nature: other-regarding nurturers on one pole and self-regarding egoists on the other, with a good percentage of humankind falling in between? (8)

Within this range, there is also room for Trivers' reciprocal altruism, though here it's helpful to distinguish between those who are other-regarding because they are either nurturers by nature (identifying the others' interest as their own), or cooperate for utilitarian, reciprocal benefit.

This alternative way of looking at the "Unto-Others" argument also avoids the sand trap in the authors' argument that all humans have both an altruistic and egoistic nature, which is not supported by history or common sense. Many do, but many don't. Both poles of behavior work as an evolutionary survival strategy: the other-regarding pole for reasons argued here and the self-regarding pole that works especially well in unequal power and dominance situations, or when combined with deception and manipulation.

1. Evolutionary theorists explain altruism's origins through kin selection (supporting direct or indirect kin) and reciprocal altruism (helping others to receive help in return). In a review of "Unto Others," Robert Trivers, the initial articulator of reciprocal altruism and a critic of group selection, writes that "Selfish behavior is expected under classic natural selection, altruistic behavior is not."

2. The authors call this as their multi-selection theory. In addition to selection operating at both the individual and group level, they argue that a third, non-genetic factor, culture, is also at work. "Natural selection based on cultural variation has produced adaptations that have nothing to do with genes," they write. I did not understand their argument. Clearly, there's a near-infinite variety of cultural practices, but these rest on an underlying biological structure, a need for individuals to forge tight group bonds, hence, the social instincts and "altruistic" tendencies that the authors argue are present in all groups.

3. The authors write that "each altruist behaves in a way that decreases its own number of offspring and increases the number of offspring of a single recipient in the population."

4. Altruism can be explained by Trivers' reciprocal altruism and by the parental and filial affections noted by Darwin, and by the individual's dependence on the group for survival. Robert Trivers writes that the individualist selection theory is not incompatible with other-regarding behavior. "Equating 'selfish' with 'self-promoting' or 'self-benefiting' is a perverse use of language," he writes. "We do not say of someone who loves his children, helps his family and friends and treats his neighbors with respect, 'What a selfish brute he is,' yet all of these traits may be genetically self-benefiting." Also, other-regarding behavior can be seen as an extension of parent-child relationships. As Darwin writes, "The feeling of pleasure from society is probably an extension of the parental or filial affections…With those animals which were benefited by living in close association, the individuals which took the greatest pleasure in society would best escape various dangers whilst those that cared least for their comrades, and lived solitary, would perish in greater numbers. Darwin also writes: "As man advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all the members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extended to the men of all nations and races….[And] Sympathy beyond the confines of man, that is humanity to the lower animals, seems to be one of the latest moral acquisitions."

5. The indirect kin part of the inclusive fitness argument is a problem. How does "care" jump across non-direct genetic lines? As the earliest groups may have consisted of largely kin, might the extended kin explanation for altruism in the "inclusive fitness" argument be spurious?

6. The authors' definition of altruism (self-sacrificing on behalf of the group) is overly constraining. Presumably, most cooperative, other-regarding behavior can occur without the loss of life. This counters the authors' (and Darwin's) assertion that "It should be obvious that selfish types always have more offspring

than altruists and will be favored by natural selection." Isn't it possible for such other-regarding behavior to evolve because it benefits individual survival, thereby allowing these tendencies to have been passed along to succeeding generations (see footnote 4)? This is also a problem with the definition of altruism. It excludes self-interest, even though there's a reciprocal benefit to both the parent's genetic progeny and the genetic vehicle itself.

7. This by itself does not explain the intense tribalism that Darwin saw, unless of course other groups were always competitive and therefore hostile as he and Sober-Wilson argue. But perhaps it's not this at all. Perhaps the "genetic merger" of the individual and the group is so tight that it, like a cell, functions as a unit, viewing the outside world as something to be used or something to guard against. Certainly, there was group versus group hostility, but what about co-existence or even cooperation for mutual benefit ("reciprocal altruism" in another form)?

8. Intriguingly, the authors refer in a footnote to W.D. Hamilton's suggestion "that a single gene might influence both the expression of altruism and some other trait that causes the altruists and nonaltruists to sort nonrandomly into groups."

John Wylie says

This book was the voice in the wilderness when group selection was in the academic penitentiary.
