

The Nature of Human Morality

Can it all be explained by nepotism and direct and indirect reciprocity, or by some other combination of social strategies that is consistent with evolution?

1. The problem I take up here (and that was taken up in the volume edited by Hammerstein on Genetic and Cultural Evolution of Cooperation) is reconciling evolution and morality – cooperativeness and evolution, reciprocity and evolution, altruism and evolution. Is anything other than nepotism and direct and indirect reciprocity required to explain human sociality? Is it simply impossible to reconcile the seemingly different views of human beneficence that are thought to exist in evolutionary biology and religion? Is there a category of human morality appropriately termed "strong altruism" which lies outside present evolutionary theory or knowledge?
2. I argue that the answer to all these questions is no: that existing major categories of social cooperation and beneficence are capable of explaining all of human sociality. I suggest that the reason there is an implication in the Hammerstein volume that indirect reciprocity cannot explain the more difficult aspects of human sociality is that neither indirect reciprocity nor human sociality in general is sufficiently well understood.
3. One reason it is difficult to understand human sociality is that it is the most complicated topic known in the universe (the complexity of the human brain and its obviously extensive involvement in sociality are alone sufficient to support this assertion). To us this feature of human sociality is deceptive because we are evolved to carry out all of the different facets of human sociality on an ordinary everyday basis, and we cannot easily understand the extent or contributions of non conscious aspects of our own social behavior. As the culture anthropologist Leslie White once remarked, expecting an anthropologist to locate pattern within his own culture would be like expecting a fish to discover water. And while we presumably couldn't do an analysis of human sociality unless we were at least as complicated as ourselves, for at least two reasons it is a major difficulty that, as humans, we have to analyze the traits we are using to do the analysis: (a) we are biased on account of our participation in human sociality and the fact that much of the patterning of our sociality is not in our consciousness, and even some of that which is conscious is difficult to get straight, and (b) the nature of society has changed dramatically and confusingly in the last few centuries. Because of the second factor, it helps the would-be analyst to have experienced a wide range of current human social systems and behavioral situations, and to have a reasonable understanding of the nature of human sociality during most of human evolution. We can't expect to do a good job of analyzing human sociality if we don't understand all of its different facets, and don't know how to function well within it.
4. I'll start by arguing that altruism is a potentially confusing term for the kinds of acts characteristic of cooperation and morality. The introductory term should be beneficence, and the system therefore is better termed reciprocal beneficence than reciprocal altruism. Altruism always implies a net loss, yet our goal is to discover how beneficence can lead to gain. Whether a beneficent act results in a net loss or a net gain should therefore be

considered separately because the point is to identify all the ways that beneficence can be rewarded, so as to find out whether and how it can be consistent with an evolutionary process in which reproductive success has been the successful goal, whether conscious or non-conscious.

5. Beneficence involves costs to the donor and benefits to the recipient. These costs and benefits of beneficence can be (and probably always are) tallied, whether consciously or non-consciously, by the beneficent person, the recipient of the beneficence, observers of the interaction, or others who acquire direct or indirect knowledge of the interaction. Observers, of course, can later become participants. Consequences arising from all of these calculations must be considered in judging who loses and who gains from beneficent acts.

6. Return payment (reciprocity) for beneficence can be:

(a) sought or demanded promptly or instantly. Although this minimal-risk, "strictly business" reciprocity also occurs in "dumb animals" such as many ungulates, we can assume that employing it in human sociality carries certain risks that are not typical in other species.

(b) left flexible with respect to timing. This response gives the recipient of beneficence the possibility of reciprocating when it is less or least expensive to him or her, which should be considered to increase the value of the original benefit, at least when there is no expectation that reciprocity can be demanded at the behest of the original benefactor.

(c) desired (or virtually required) by the benefactor to be left unreciprocated, but with a promise of reciprocation. As noted above, this situation may imply that the recipient of beneficence will remain prepared to extend beneficence to the original benefactor (and/or the benefactor to demand it) whenever the original benefactor desires, meaning the reciprocator is willing to return the favor even when it is extremely expensive to himself. This is a good definition of friendship – friends are willing providers of social insurance – in effect, they promise it when they allow themselves to be considered friends. Understanding friends as sources of social insurance enables us to understand why people do not like others whom they wish to be their friends to reciprocate instantly, even if the debt is paid in full with interest. Insistence on immediate repayment, by either party, is virtually a denial of friendship.

8. At still another level of morality, donors do not tally the costs of their own beneficence but are led to be beneficent, and to continue being beneficent, by the effects on the recipient; they measure the value of their own beneficent acts by the apparent value of the beneficence to the recipient. This behavior can bring net benefits to the beneficent individual if persons other than the actual recipient of the beneficence witness it and also value it according to its effect on the recipient. Or they can value it by the willingness of the benefactor to give help even when it is expensive for him or her to do so – that is, if it appears that the benefactor does not wait until it is inexpensive to give benefits but rather gives them when they are needed by the recipient (an aspect of valuing beneficence by its effects on the recipient rather than its cost to the benefactor). Benefactors in this situation become heroes. Presumably, however, it is important for observers to know if the benefactor had already become a friend (a social insurer) of the particular person helped. This knowledge provides possibly relevant information for observers who might be

deciding whether to engage in a particular kind of reciprocity with the observed benefactor. If such beneficence is restricted to actual friends, the benefactor is a less desirable target as a potential partner in reciprocity, except when actual friendship is likely to develop. It should be noted that heroes have more significance than as merely potential partners in reciprocity; they are used to call attention to the value of group-helping behavior, therefore to stimulate heroism in others, and to support changes toward higher "levels" of morality within the group.

9. At the "ultimate" level of morality, individuals are not only indifferent to costs of beneficence but strive to maximize the benefits of cooperative or beneficent acts. This level will work, for example, when all of the interests of the individuals in a community are identical, which will happen whenever no one can change groups and the individual's success depends on the success of the group. Everyone will gain from looking for all possibilities to help others and then helping as much as possible, limiting help only by possibilities that too much or misdirected help by individuals will impair future helping by those individuals sufficiently to damage the overall cooperative efforts of the collection of individuals in the community. An example is the genes in a genome, between meiotic events in sexual organisms, and all the time in entirely asexual organisms. The reason humans differ from genes is that they go back and forth between this situation (as in defense from extrinsic attack or other dire hostile forces) and situations in which individuals are required to be self-sufficient – when they survive and reproduce mainly according to their own personal behavior within the group. Constant oscillation between these two extremes I believe has driven the evolution of complexity in the human psyche as well as our enormous investments in parental care, hence, the value of biparentalism (and monogamy), infant altriciality, and the long human juvenile life during which rapid learning prepares the juvenile for late adulthood in the complexity of human sociality.
10. It is curious that small societies of networks of genetic relatives, in which differential nepotism is the main or sole kind of social cooperation, represent a surprisingly apt model for the generation of a society like our own, currently involving very large communities of mostly non relatives that seem to run on systems of direct and indirect reciprocity, with differential nepotism greatly diminished and limited. But we must be careful to make this comparison accurate, because kin recognition, and therefore tendencies to engage in differential nepotism, are socially learned. This means that even in today's societies we may be treating people within our social communities as particular kinds of relatives and in effect engaging mostly in differential nepotism.
11. There are actually two contributing factors in movement toward the "extreme" kind of morality described in #9 above: (a) groups are small enough and social enough that no one can get away with being a free rider because everyone knows everyone else's business and (b) difficulty in changing groups, so that success of individuals depends on the success of the group..
12. Extensive differential nepotism sets the stage for the above kind of society: indeed, it operates virtually the same as the above kinds of society except that relatives of differing relatedness presumably will be treated differently. Once the ability to recognize a variety of different relatives arose, it became a within-community (within kindred or clan or society) kind of competition that would never go away. This fact is surely of very great significance because it

provides an endless way of gaining within even small social groups in which everyone is related, and therefore to some extent continues to drive the evolution of complexity in human social life.

13. The human psyche is so complicated, then, because (a) humans oscillate between being able to change groups and not being able (just as genes do, but with considerably less regularity and pattern), (b) human sociality includes a complex mix of differential nepotism and reciprocity, and (c) the most significant enemies of human groups are other human groups, which provide a strong selective force for increasing intellectual capabilities – of precisely the sort that can be used to outwit other humans.

14. To summarize, when groups are closed, meaning no one can change groups, everyone in the group has the same interests (except when there is differential nepotism within groups). In such a situation, everyone gains by unlimited beneficence within the group – indeed, unlimited beneficence that develops so as to involve the greatest possible benefits to the recipients, therefore also to the group as a whole.

15. The objection that will be raised about these kinds of morality is that they do not prevent free riders. They do not penalize those who shirk their duties to be beneficent. But they do, so long as (a) the group is so small and intimate that free riders are detected and acquire reputations that cause them to be discriminated against, which can hurt them even in a group as described in #13 above and (b) it is difficult or impossible to change groups. [I need to work out in some detail when free riders can make it in the human social groups of history, and what the consequences are.]

[It is ironic that Dawkins described genes as "selfish" when they actually represent the opposite of our usual concept of selfish, at least with respect to the genome as a whole between the group-restructuring events of meiosis. (Try to detail more about the similarities and differences between genes in genomes and individuals in societies.)]

16. I have to work on falsifying propositions for these ideas. An example is that one should expect that people will show less enthusiasm for a person who seems to value his or her beneficence according to either its expense at the time of the act or the accolades received for it, as opposed to seeming to value it primarily for the benefit accruing to the recipient. Example: If we paid attention to Jimmy Carter's participation in Habitat for Humanity and believed we could see that he got his greatest pleasure from excitement, pleasure, and improvement in life afforded the people who end up with the houses, we ought to like him better than if we believed he received his greatest pleasure from people congratulating him on how wonderful it is that he does this when, especially as an ex-president, he obviously "doesn't have to" – or if we discovered that he began it because he hoped to receive a Nobel Peace Prize, or some other award for it. A second expectation is that the extent to which people are virtually indifferent to the expense of their helping of others, and everyone seems to be this way toward everyone else should correlate with the extent to which the society is small enough and intimate enough that everyone knows a great deal about everyone else, and everyone else's social behavior, and the group is difficult to enter or leave. Maybe a little more surprisingly, and therefore more significantly, within such socially intimate and ultimately helpful societies we should also expect extremely strong sanctions against individuals who show the slightest tendency not to meet the

expectations of virtually unlimited helping of others. Perhaps the extreme ostracism of certain religious sects is an example, as is the surprisingly negative attitude toward evidence of free riding that one often encounters within an otherwise astonishingly congenial and cooperative community. If these correlations don't exist, my hypotheses, as stated, have to be wrong.