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Introduction to Special Section, "The Biology of Psychological Altruism"

One of the longest running philosophical debates about the human mind is the debate about psychological altruism: are people ever driven by purely selfless goals or are they always moved to action, in some "ultimate" way, by their selfish interests? Over two millennia ago, the Chinese philosophers Mencius and Xunzi wrestled over this question; several hundred years ago, the English philosophers Thomas Hobbes and Joseph Butler fought over the same topic. Even with tools of contemporary psychology and philosophy, this debate admits of no easy resolution (Stich et al., 2010).

We can state the problem of altruism somewhat more rigorously by appealing to two distinctions. The first is the distinction between ultimate and instrumental desires. Some of my desires are instrumental, in the sense that I possess that desire only because I believe that satisfying it will lead to the satisfaction of some other desire. My desire to earn a paycheck is instrumental if the only reason I want a paycheck is because I want to make my rent this month. Some desires, however, are non-instrumental, or "ultimate." The second distinction is between self-regarding and other-regarding desires. This is a distinction regarding the content of one's desires. Some of my desires are about my own welfare, and some of my desires are about the welfare of others. Using these distinctions, we can phrase the problem of altruism in the following way: do people ever have *ultimate, other-regarding desires*? Or are all of our ultimate desires self-regarding?

One might think that there is little new to be said on this well-worn debate. However, we think that this would be a grave error. Evolutionary biologists now have the conceptual tools to analyze several types of helping behaviors and to think about their evolutionary roots. More specifically, in our opinion, Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson (1998) have brought about a significant advance in the altruism debate by relying on evolutionary considerations. They argued that altruists would be more reliable at raising children (and engaging in other kinds of adaptive helping behaviors) than psychological egoists; given the importance of raising children to individual fitness, they inferred that it is more likely that natural selection gave us such a motivational architecture than an egoistic one.

However, we also think that Sober and Wilson's innovative argument for psychological altruism did not receive the attention it deserved. In particular, although Sober & Wilson's (1998) book triggered substantial discussion amongst philosophers of biology, most of those philosophers focused their attention nearly exclusively on Part I of that book, which deals with biological altruism rather than psychological altruism (though see Stich 2007; Stich et al. 2010; Schulz 2011; Garson 2015). We hope that this collection of essays will help to correct that imbalance: Sober and Wilson's work, directly or indirectly, informs all of the essays in this collection. More generally, we hope that this collection will show the relevance and importance of biological considerations in tackling the problem of psychological altruism. What follows is a very brief overview of the five essays in the collection.

Stephen Stich argues that, given recent work in anthropology, it is not clear that humans, as a whole, are altruistic. He further argues that it is not clear that it is at all useful to ask about what factors influenced the evolution of altruism: this may not be a trait that has an evolutionary history of its own.

Justin Garson argues that the idea of psychological hedonism is ambiguous. It may be interpreted as a thesis about the content of one's ultimate desires, or a thesis about the mechanism by which one's desires are reinforced. He holds that the latter thesis can provide a conciliatory position on the traditional debate.

Armin Schulz argues that, in at least some contexts, altruism is a more a cognitively efficient—and thus, a more adaptive—way of making helping decisions than egoism. However, he further argues that, sometimes, considerations of cognitive efficiency also favor helping psychologies that are neither altruistic nor egoistic.

Christine Clavien and Michel Chapuisat survey the burgeoning literature on altruism in behavioral economics, and argue for the evolutionary plausibility of a specific utility function, *Homo hamiltoniensis*. They argue that in addition to altruistic desires, humans may have ultimate desires regarding the common good.

Grant Ramsey lays out a space of altruism concepts, and suggests that there is not one thing that all of the different types of altruism have in common. Rather, different types of altruism can be seen as different ends on a (multidimensional) spectrum.

All in all, we hope that the present collection of essays can be used to make some progress in the long-standing debate surrounding psychological altruism. In the process, we also hope to bring out the value of appealing to evolutionary biology in the investigation of traditionally psychological or philosophical questions.

References

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