

CAN COSMOPOLITAN IMPARTIALITY BE NATURALIZED?

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Abstract

This paper sets out asking what is to be gained from grounding the pursuit of a cosmopolitan morality in the evolutionary history of our morals, namely, by ascertaining some of the natural constraints under which normative ethical theory must operate. In Section II, I review two major forms of altruism: kin-based and reciprocal altruism. Experimental evidence is cited to support the view that biological altruism involves a carefully self-interested calculation to enhance adaptive fitness to the social environment. In Section III, I explain that, in natural selection, these self-interested calculations about relatedness and reciprocation don't happen consciously, but rather, almost instantaneously, as heuristics. These heuristics are advantageous to the organism and thus, over time, hardwired to its 'emotional framework'. Emotional contagion, guilt, envy, and inequity aversion are covered as examples of the emotions at work in altruistic behavior. What can ethical deliberation on cosmopolitan morality adopt from a naturalistic examination of the evolution of altruism? According to situationists, what we do is best explained by inherent tendencies to respond to features of our situation. The pursuit of cosmopolitan morality via the evolutionary history of altruism reiterates this situationist conclusion, and

seems to carry a recommendation for polity: to adjust our environment in response to findings about human nature as to better correspond with our proposed moral ends.

I

World citizenship, *kosmopolis*, and its obligations provide a considerable challenge for moral philosophy. It's not a new challenge by any means, but its global version is of an unprecedented dimension: i.e., the problem of partiality in ethical decision-making. Since the earliest formulations of the Golden Rule over twenty-five centuries ago with Pittacus of Mytilene and Confucius, partiality has been identified as a significant obstacle toward the realization of ethical ends. Think also of the guiding precepts of the major deontological, consequentialist, and contractarian approaches to ethics: they all seem to have in mind a move toward impartiality: e.g. the categorical imperative, the greatest happiness principle, or the Rawlsian original position.¹ In any case, impartiality is a prominent feature of the 'moral point of view,' whatever be the ethical theory from which it is obtained.

For reasons some normative and some strictly prudential, no sensible worldview will expect pure impartiality from a subject's ethical decision-making. First of all, as evinced by human history, several kinds of partiality are unavoidable, partiality to oneself, to one's family, to one's country, to people with whom we share interests or experiences. This alone would not be enough to resist the imperative for moral impartiality, but as I said there are also (more important) normative reasons to do so. Arguments to this effect are varied while they typically defend that there are some forms of partiality which are, at the least, morally permissible. According to this view, ethics – as the question about what life one should lead – must concern itself with moral responsibilities as well as with the proper cultivation of life or *eudaimonia*. 'Flourishing,' 'well-being,' 'happiness,' or whatever else one might translate *eudaimonia* as, demands on most accounts some level of partiality to oneself (if nothing else, to the extent that is necessary to take time and effort to develop the *arete* that Aristotle had discussed). According to the Aristotelian conception of ethics as 'the life well lived,' 'the cultivated life,' we will have to admit the individual's preference towards those beliefs and practices she holds dear. I hope only to suggest that, although the relationship between impartiality and moral thought is well-established, for one to

¹ There are surely many more examples, as well as at least one clear counterexample: Ayn Rand's objectivism.

give priority to one's own life is, besides inevitable, in certain circumstances desirable for the project of ethics as eudaimonia. (The more interesting normative question, a question that will remain outside of this paper, is: Just how much and what kind of concern for self is constituent of eudaimonia?)

In the effort toward a cosmopolitan morality – the morality of the citizen of the world, she who acknowledges the fundamental and equal moral worth of every human life – a similar problem of partiality to what I have outlined above arises. If the great moral precepts have fallen short of advancing a sense of cosmopolitan responsibility, it is not because these are *bad* ideals. It is rather because, in everyday deliberation, we entertain a multiplicity of interests and factors, personal and impersonal, moral and non-moral. Thus, our decisions, even the different decisions issued by one same moral agent, reflect varying degrees of partiality and impartiality. It is hard to imagine a human life that weren't like this. Of course, this is not an insight secret to philosophy. For Freud, Darwin and Nietzsche, this is the very paradox of the human condition: that we are at once, in the flesh, avaricious and libidinous, and in the mind, interested if not committed to live civilly with others. In this paper, I will want to draw on this common interest of the ethical project and the natural sciences in the human condition, tackling some of the questions it has raised to the evolutionary ethicists and moral psychologists of recent decades.

At first glance, the very idea of 'evolutionary ethics' may seem paradoxical. We are all familiar with the disagreeable connotations of evolutionary theory – survival of the fittest, competition for scarce resources – a reality which doubtless clashes with the soaring ambitions of moral philosophy. The commonplace view is that evolution is, by and large, amoral; however, through the findings of biologists, primatologists, and evolutionary psychologists, I will suggest that this view doesn't capture the *whole* story. In the animal world, there are brilliant examples of cooperation and altruism which many have thought provide an invaluable perspective from which to understand the moral behaviors we humans exhibit. Why we respond to other people's suffering *at all*, or why we give up something for nothing, in what cases and to what degrees; these are questions that are continuing to receive attention in the realm evolutionary ethics and moral psychology. This reconciliation of evolutionary theory and ethical philosophy, if the empirical findings of the former can enrich the conceptual analysis of the latter, will bear witness to Kwame Anthony Appiah's proposal that true philosophy can, and should, be experimental. Appiah (2008, p. 32) asks:

What happens when moral theory is called before the tribunal of psychology—when fact interrogates value? Will the blurring of boundaries advance the aims of ethics or lead to its eclipse? There are many such questions but they funnel into one. Can moral philosophy be naturalized?

This is the kind of question I would like to ask here. What happens when cosmopolitan morality is called before the tribunal of evolutionary biology? Or when we ground ethical philosophy in evolutionary history of moral sentiments? Can we have a *naturalized* account of global impartiality? To try, at least, is important as Owen Flanagan (1991, p. 32) reminds us:

Make sure when constructing a moral theory or projecting a moral ideal that character, decision processing, and behavior described are possible, or are perceived to be possible, for creatures like us.

This task of understanding the natural constraints under which normative ethical theory must operate I should think demands proper consideration of the evolutionary history of our moral makeup, biological and the psychological dimensions of human moral behavior, the task which here I will be concerned with. If indeed evolutionary biology and psychology can advance moral philosophy, we will begin to conceptualize, in the realistic and empirically-informed way Flanagan had suggested, the possibility of a cosmopolitan morality.

II

Scientific research pertaining to this question begins by affirming the basic truths of natural selection – survival of the fittest, self-interested competition for resources of land, mating and food – and then asks: if this is so, where does altruistic behavior come from?

Roughly understood, altruism is self-sacrifice for the benefit of others. Of course in evolutionary biology, sacrifice and benefit are measured in terms of reproductive success; so that altruistic behavior is one that enhances the reproductive success of others at a cost to one's own. Moral behavior insofar as it seeks to promote the greater good, involves sacrifice to one's own personal good too. Thus, to track the evolution of altruistic behavior is to examine the origins of at least one important subset of morality, i.e. group welfare. If we can allow this curtailed definition, let's move on to a brief overview of the two categorical answers in evolutionary ethics to the question 'whence altruism?'

Kin-based altruism Robert Wright (1995, p. 157), in his classic *The Moral Animal*, asks us to consider "a young ground squirrel that has not yet produced any offspring and that, upon sighting a predator, gets up on its hind legs and delivers a loud alarm call, which may

attract the predator's attention and bring sudden death." From the perspective of natural selection as it was understood in its first hundred years, this behavior is totally irrational. Having no offspring to save, dying for the sake of other nearby squirrels is, as Wright calls it, 'evolutionary suicide' (and for our purposes, an unmistakable instance of the purest altruism!).

Why would the squirrel sacrifice its life for the sake of others if what matters, according to natural selection, is self-preservation? As it turns out, the squirrel that makes a suicidal emergency call is carefully acting out a longstanding adaptation. All organisms, squirrels included, eventually die. Therefore, as British biologist William D. Hamilton (1963) pointed out, what matters over time (in the evolutionary time frame, i.e. over thousands or millions of generations) is how *genes*, and not particular organisms, fare. The reformulation of this idea to the effect that what seems altruistic from the perspective of the organism is selfish on the level of the gene later made Richard Dawkins known for his monograph *The Selfish Gene*. As Dawkins clarifies, the title is not to be taken literally: the genes are, of course, not intentionally selfish. There is a much simpler explanation: it is genes that are conducive to the survival and reproduction of copies of themselves that thrive. For this to obtain though, they have to obey evolutionary logic, which means that kin-based altruism has a roughly formal pronunciation: the cost of altruism c must be less than the benefit to the recipient b times the degree of relatedness r (that is to say, $c < br$). Perhaps in the spirit of parody of this computation of familial love, J.B.S. Haldane famously uttered:

Would I lay down my life to save my brother? No, but I would to save two brothers or eight cousins.

The squirrel's suicidal emergency call, sharing food with one's siblings, or Haldane's famous example – jumping into a river to save a drowning child – are behaviors that can be explained with this principle of kin-based altruism. So, we can, after all, make perfect evolutionary sense of the kind of altruistic behavior which tends to arise in communities where the average degree of relatedness to neighbors is high. As Robert Wright (1995, p.160) sums it up, "for better or worse, the literal kind of brotherly love is the kind we have."

Reciprocal altruism This shrewd but altogether disheartening reduction of altruism is thankfully not complete. In everyday life, animal and human, there remain frequent manifestations of altruism (of what Darwin referred to as 'social instincts') that could not find an explanation in the above theory of kin-based altruism. How these social instincts

arose has puzzled evolutionary theorists, as it had puzzled Darwin himself while he wrote *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*. He realized how unlikely it was that moral, unselfish behavior could increase fitness or perpetuate ones genes. So he proposed that “as the reasoning powers and foresight became improved, each man would soon learn from experience that if he aided his fellow-men, he would commonly receive aid in return. From this low motive he might acquire the habit of aiding his fellows; and the habit of performing benevolent actions certainly strengthens the feeling of sympathy;” and then added that, “habits, moreover, followed during many generations probably tend to be inherited” (Darwin, 1871, pp. 163-4). In 1966, George Williams wrote *Adaptation and Natural Selection*, wherein he proposed that there was no reason why doing favors with the hope of reciprocation had to involve a ‘conscious motive’. The development of moral sentiments in humans need not have anything to do with improved ‘reasoning powers and foresight,’ as Darwin had thought. Take the following example from the fieldwork of notable primatologist Frans de Waal.

In an experiment with chimpanzees, May and Georgia, two low-ranking females, were examined in their food-sharing practices. May would keep the best branches to herself, but was generous with the rest of her food; while Georgia would keep as much of the food as she could for herself. Later, if she didn’t have food, she would have to solicit for a long time, while if May did not have food, she was easily supplied by others (deWaal, 2005, pp. 207-8).

Something very similar probably happened in human communities. As Matt Ridley (1998, pp.107-8) discusses, in the Ice Ages mammoth hunting in the northern grasslands introduced to humanity the notion of a public good: “Sharing the meat was not just encouraged – it was impossible to prevent. A dead mammoth was essentially public property.” If a hunter went to the trouble of killing big game (aided, of course, by other hunters), he would enjoy, like May, both (i) the social benefits that come with being known as a reliable reciprocator and (ii) the assurance that if he was ever hungry, his fellow tribemates would feed him and his family. The pith of reciprocal altruism, in de Waal’s (2005, p.208) words:

This is the beauty of reciprocity: generosity pays.

From an evolutionary perspective, what these forms of altruism have in common is that they are fitness-enhancing. The genes that foment them have a selective advantage, and

this is the main reason why today, after eons of evolutionary history, these traits are as common as they are. From an ethical perspective, however, we are left understandably disappointed. Not that there should be no gain to the benevolent altruist, but that, if there is one, it should not form explicit part of her intention. If her reason to sacrifice something – be it food or chances of survival, (or, why not, money) – is purely to play the odds of gaining something *even greater* in return, then it is hardly a heart-warming moral choice, it seems rather like a self-interested calculation.

III

Fortunately for the aims of moral philosophy, this is not the case. Calculations about relatedness and reciprocation don't actually happen in the minds of organisms, or let's say, they don't *have to*. You don't have to be a math whiz to obey the laws of natural selection or, what is often called, evolutionary logic. After eons of evolutionary history, these relatively accurate calculations about risk, inclusive fitness, etc, happen almost instantaneously in the form of heuristics. So, heuristics surface, with the outward form of 'emotional responses', guiding our everyday moral reactions. I'll now briefly cover the four central moral sentiments at work in altruism.

Emotional contagion Darwin (2007, p.216), perplexed by the prevalence of the social instincts, wrote, "Many a man, from whose eyes no suffering of his own could wring a tear, has shed tears at the suffering of a beloved friend." Over a century later, we have sufficient evidence to defend the claim that emotional contagion – this curious behavior which had perplexed Darwin – is a neurological fact, moreover, that it "resides in parts of the brain so old that we share them with animals as diverse as rats, dogs, elephants, and monkeys" (deWaal, 2005, p.187). Apes reveal emotional contagion when they console forlorn losers demanding attention after a fight. We humans do this too when we go to the movies and feel quite intensely what the characters in the movies feel, or even, when we simply see others yawn.

Guilt In a study conducted in 1966, test subjects who believed they had broken an expensive machine were more likely to volunteer for a painful experiment *if the damage had been noticed* (Wallace and Sedalla, 1966). This rather dismal account of guilt led Robert Trivers (1971) to conclude that the intensity of one's guilt depended not as much on the extent of one's misdeeds as on who knew or may readily have known about them. As when we make eye-contact with a weary beggar asking for change, we don't seem to feel as guilty not giving as we do *being seen not giving*. In evolutionary terms, this 'moral' sentiment is

quite useful, as it signals behaviors that make us look like bad reciprocating altruists. In our ancestral environment, where just about everyone encountered was someone we were likely to encounter again, it was essential to shape our conduct to be known by others as reliable reciprocating altruists.

Envy In expressing guilt, the passerby defends his reputation as a good reciprocator, but what does the beggar accomplish in feeling envious of the well-to-do *promeneur*? The evolutionary origin and moral utility of envy have been topics fringing on oblivion. However, recently, Marc D. Hauser (2007, pp.282-3, emphasis added) put forth a noteworthy hypothesis about these:

Envy is useful, serving a key role in survival, motivating achievement, serving the conscience of self and other, and *alerting us to inequities that, if fueled, can lead to escalated violence*. Since envious people are a source of threat, addressing their concerns may be one way to avoid escalation and redress the imbalance.

If guilt functions to publicize corrections in one's reciprocating habits, envy warns the offender that others have spotted her gaffe. Anticipating and showing resentment are, thus, two sides of one same advantageous trait, its evolutionary source being conflict avoidance.

Inequity aversion Envy is a threat especially when it is contagious. Remember Maura Burke who in 1993 won a £3 million Irish national lottery and refused to share any of it with her villagers. It was not long before Mrs. Burke began receiving death threats which forced her out of her hometown (Palmer, 1994 in Ridley, 1998, p.117). In Eskimo societies, hoarding wealth is taboo and people who, like Mrs. Burke, don't share their wealth are sometimes killed. The underlying logic, Marshall Sahlins (1972) has argued, is as follows: to accumulate too much is to refuse to share it.

Inequity aversion is also frequently seen in primates. In another experiment, de Waal placed two monkeys side by side, giving both of them cucumber equally and repeatedly as to simulate a state of equity. The monkeys seemed to be happily enjoying the food, until one of them began to receive grapes instead.

Upon noticing their partner's salary raise, monkeys who had been perfectly willing to work for cucumber suddenly went on strike. Not only did they perform reluctantly but they got agitated, hurling the pebbles and sometimes even the cucumber slices out of the test chamber. A food they never refused had become less than desirable (deWaal, 2005,

p.218).

In sum, inequity aversion, especially when paired with our other moral sentiments, can drive organisms to act in ways that contradict their individual biological interests, in order to maintain adequate levels of social cooperation and reciprocation. Central to what I think is the great lesson of the evolution of our moral sentiments for ethics is a passage from DeWaal's monograph here cited:

Empathy is intensely interpersonal. It is activated by the presence, demeanor, and voice of others rather than by any objective evaluation. Reading about the plight of someone who has fallen on hard times is really not the same as sharing a room with this person and listening to his story. The former situation may generate some empathy, but it's of a type that is not easily ignored. Why? For rational agents, the two situations shouldn't make a difference. But our moral tendencies evolved in direct interaction with others whom we could hear, see, touch, and smell, and whose situation we understood by taking part in it. We're exquisitely attuned to the stream of emotional signals coming from other people's faces and postures, and we resonate with expressions of our own. Actual people get under our skin in a way that an abstract problem never will (deWaal, 2005, p.197).

Much the same, I'll venture, can be said about our other evolved moral sentiments, i.e., guilt, envy, and inequity aversion.

IV

So what can the effort toward a cosmopolitan morality surmise from a naturalistic examination of altruism through its evolutionary history? To answer this question, let's set aside the business of morality for a moment, and look at another set of evolved behaviors: phobias. Think for a moment about the all-too-common arachnophobia. Here is its heuristic:

Check if it walks on four sets of legs. If it does, step back.

(Additionally, it summons a psychological and physiological set of reactions that we might call the feelings of fear or panic.) Well, only if threatened, will spiders bite; and of those, only some spider bites are fatal or near fatal. Nonetheless, we are inordinately fearful of spiders. This is because over millennia of inhabiting the environment of our evolutionary adaptedness, the fear of spiders was advantageous, since spiders were amongst our most serious threats. Something remotely like the above heuristic must have developed because it helped us get our genes into the next generation. Nowadays, a hardwired reaction of a similar sort to what are currently the greatest threats to human life – arguably, cars and guns – would be of far greater advantage to those living in urban environments (Ohman and Mineka, 2001).

As you might have predicted then, what I'm proposing is that the problem with our moral heuristics – empathy, guilt, envy, and inequity aversion – is much the same. While we can imagine that they worked very well when and where they were designed, this took place tens of thousands of years ago in a social environment – the hunter-gathering community – quite different from the global community that today's cosmopolitans owe consideration to. Of course this is not to say that these are *bad* moral sentiments we have, all the contrary. (Besides, we are stuck with them!) But rather, that they are bad *as heuristics*, since the conditions under which they are triggered are fundamentally unsuitable for the task at hand. Our moral heuristics, as de Waal pointed out, were designed for heavily interpersonal, iterated interaction. By nature, we are empathic only with those with whom we come into close contact, and the majority of the world population we never do come into contact with. Thus, a majority of the members of our global community just don't set off our moral heuristics and we treat them as such. It would be better if in our urbanized, physical environments, cars and guns set off our fear mechanisms just like it would be better if in our current global, social environment, *impersonal* relations across physical boundaries, bereft of the 'presence, demeanor, and voice of others,' could do something to solicit our moral sentiments.

So, in synthesis, what can cosmopolitan morality gain from this examination of impartiality? How does *cosmopolitan impartiality* fare? We have looked at evolutionary biology to answer questions about the evolution of altruistic behavior and interrogated moral psychology to find out how it is that such altruistic behavior *happens*, that is, what triggers it. We might be tempted to conclude that cosmopolitan morality, which undeniably demands a significant degree of impartiality toward our fellow *kosmopolitês*, is a lost battle. This is not the position I will take here (not least because the history of humankind is the history of humans resisting and channeling these biological and psychological tendencies). However, this empirical knowledge about human altruism illustrates one of the important challenges to the establishment of a cosmopolitan morality and issues a methodological suggestion: to admit a situationist view of morality.

The situationist view says that what people do is best explained not as much by character traits or by practical rationality, but by systematic tendencies to respond to (often overlooked) features of their situation. Not that these tendencies are insurmountable, but if, as Flanagan had suggested, when we devise moral theory we should pay attention to natural constraints which describe what is possible, there is reason to think we should also

consider natural tendencies which describe what is probable.

Recasting impartiality and altruism as situationist phenomena unveils a clear avenue for ethical-political action. In the words of Appiah (2008, p.124),

the more we learn about how the feelings that shape our acts are triggered, the more we can adjust the environment to make sure they aren't. What is equally important, many tendencies of our nature evolved to produce behavior we can endorse. Discovering what triggers these tendencies can allow us to make desirable behavior more frequent, too. In each case—as we dared to hope [...] psychology can serve ethics.

What's important here is that knowledge about human biology and psychology is knowledge about the operant conditions of the human sciences (including moral theory), which are the result of an extremely slow process we refer to as evolution. The same way they developed slowly to become the way we know them, they will be slow to adapt into their new environment (infinitely slower than the environment to which they adapt will itself be changing!) So slow, in fact, that we best consider them *un*-changing. So, in looking for solutions to today's moral problems, of which one of the greatest is undoubtedly the establishment of a cosmopolitan morality, we should keep in mind the alternative Appiah suggests: to adapt our environments to us. If we can't amend our biology and our psychology to match our environments, perhaps we can adapt our social environments to encourage behaviors that match our proposed moral ends, and in thinking about how to do so, adhere to the constraints outlined in the natural sciences.

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