



Why there might not be an evolutionary explanation for psychological altruism



Stephen Stich

Department of Philosophy & Center for Cognitive Science, Rutgers University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 21 November 2015

Keywords:
Altruism
Psychological altruism
Daniel Batson
Norm acquisition
Cultural evolution

ABSTRACT

The existence of psychological altruism is hotly debated in the psychological and philosophical literature. In this paper I argue that even if psychological altruism does exist in some (or all) human groups, there may be no purely evolutionary explanation for existence of psychological altruism.

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When citing this paper, please use the full journal title *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*

1. Introduction

From Hobbes to the present, philosophers have debated whether humans are capable of psychological altruism, and as psychology, economics and other social sciences developed, scholars working in those disciplines have joined the fray. For much of the four centuries since Hobbes, the dominant view among both philosophers and social scientists was that people are *not* capable of psychological altruism. But in recent decades, the prevailing opinion seems to have shifted. While there are still voices to be heard on both sides, many philosophers and social scientists now think that humans can and do sometimes act altruistically.¹ This has led to an increased interest in the evolutionary explanation of psychological altruism.² If humans have the capacity for psychological altruism, it seems important to ask how this capacity evolved? While I applaud the quest for an “ultimate” explanation of psychological altruism, I think its focus may be too narrow. For it may be the case that while psychological altruism exists, it does not have an evolutionary explanation, at least as such explanations are traditionally conceived. My goal, in this paper, is to explain why it

might be the case that psychological altruism has no purely evolutionary explanation, and to draw attention to the sort of empirical work that will help us decide the issue. But before getting to any of this, a fair amount of scaffolding will be needed. The first job is to say what I *mean* by “psychological altruism.”

2. Psychological altruism and evolutionary altruism

As Sober and Wilson rightly stressed in *Unto Others* (1998), contemporary discussions of evolution and altruism are all too often impeded by unclear or ambiguous terminology. One crucial distinction to note at the outset is between two very different conceptions of altruism, which, following Sober and Wilson, I'll label *psychological altruism* and *evolutionary altruism*. Here is how I will be using these terms:

A behavior (or a behavioral disposition) is *evolutionarily altruistic* if and only if it decreases the inclusive fitness of the organism exhibiting the behavior and increases the inclusive fitness of some other organism. To a rough first approximation, inclusive fitness is a measure of how many copies of an organism's genes exist in future generations.³ “Behavior,” in this definition, is to be interpreted very

E-mail address: stich.steve@gmail.com.

¹ For valuable discussions of the history of the debate, see Batson (1991), ch. 1–3; MacIntyre (1967); Sober & Wilson (1998), ch. 9.

² See, for example, Kitcher (2006), Schulz (2011), Sober & Wilson (1998) ch. 10, Stich (2007).

³ Some authors, including Sober and Wilson, prefer an account of evolutionary altruism that invokes individual fitness rather than inclusive fitness, where individual fitness is, roughly, a measure of how many descendants an organism has.

broadly—so broadly that amoeba and even plants can behave. A behavior or an action is *psychologically altruistic* if and only if it is motivated by an ultimate desire for the well-being of others. This account needs further elaboration since it invokes some philosophically freighted jargon. But even without further clarification, it should be clear that psychological altruism and evolutionary altruism are quite distinct phenomena. It is, after all (logically) possible for an organism like a paramecium or a petunia to exhibit evolutionary altruism even though it has no mind at all, and thus can't have any ultimate desires. It is also (logically) possible for an organism's behavior to be psychologically altruistic but not evolutionarily altruistic. If, for example, some of a mother's actions are motivated by an ultimate desire for the well-being of her child, those actions are psychologically altruistic, but they are not evolutionarily altruistic, since they are likely to increase the mother's inclusive fitness.

Psychological altruism is the sort of altruism that moral philosophers have traditionally been concerned with. And since it will be center-stage in this paper, we'd do well to elaborate on the definition offered above. A first question is how we are to understand the notion of a desire *for the well-being of others*. This is a hotly debated topic that raises some deep and challenging issues about the nature of well-being.⁴ But for our purposes, I think a few examples will suffice. Desires to save someone else's life, to alleviate someone else's pain, to cure someone else's illness, or to make someone else happy all count as desires for the well-being of others. The claim that people sometimes have desires of this sort is not controversial. What is controversial is whether these desires are ever *ultimate* desires. If they are, then Hobbes and others, who deny the existence of psychological altruism, are mistaken. Since the notion of an *ultimate desire* looms large in the debate, some clarification of that notion is in order.

The intuitive idea is that a desire is *ultimate* if the object of the desire is desired for its own sake, rather than because the agent thinks that satisfying the desire will lead to the satisfaction of some other desire. This can be made more precise by appeal to one interpretation of the traditional notion of practical reasoning. On this interpretation, practical reasoning is a causal process via which a desire and a belief give rise to or sustain a new desire. That new desire, along with a second belief can give rise to yet another desire, and so on. If this causal chain produces a desire for a "basic" action—the kind of desire that causes bodily movement without the mediation of further desires, the result is an action.⁵ Fig. 1 is a depiction of the process that will prove useful in what follows.⁶

To make this account of practical reasoning a bit more intuitive, let's consider an example. Suppose I want an espresso. Let that be DESIRE 2 in Fig. 1. Suppose further that I believe that the best place to get an espresso is the Starbucks on George St.—that will be BELIEF 2. Together, these cause the formation of DESIRE 3, the desire to go to the Starbucks on George St. If I believe that the best way to get to the Starbucks on George St. is to take the elevator to the street level (BELIEF 3), I will form the desire to take the elevator to the street level (DESIRE 4). Though that is not a desire for a basic action, it should be clear how the process can continue until we reach such a desire—the desire to touch the Ground Floor button in

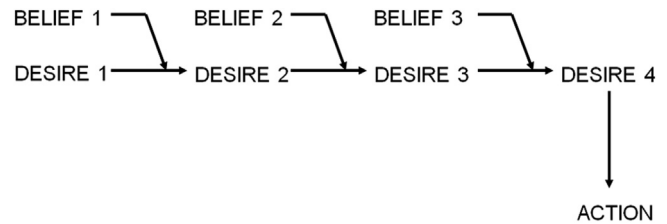


Fig. 1. The process of practical reasoning.

the elevator, perhaps—and I'm on my way to Starbucks to get my espresso.

Desires that are formed or sustained by practical reasoning are *instrumental desires*. But obviously, if we are to avoid circularity or infinite regress, there must be some desires that are not instrumental. Those desires, which are *not* the product of practical reasoning are *ultimate desires*. So, in the very short practical reasoning chain in Fig. 1, DESIRES 2, 3 and 4 are instrumental; DESIRE 1 is ultimate. As noted earlier, those on both sides of the debate over psychological altruism agree that people often have desires for the well-being of others. But those who deny the existence of psychological altruism insist that *all* such desires are instrumental. And while those who defend psychological altruism grant that *some* desires for the well-being of others are instrumental, they maintain that there are also some *ultimate* desires for the well-being of others. Thus both those who deny the existence of psychological altruism and those who defend it would find the pattern of practical reasoning displayed in Fig. 2 to be unproblematic. But the two sides disagree about the pattern of practical reasoning displayed in Fig. 3. Those who defend the existence of psychological altruism insist that episodes of practical reasoning like this occur, while those who deny the existence of psychological altruism maintain that they do not.

3. Should we seek an evolutionary explanation of psychological altruism?

The critics of psychological altruism maintain that people do not have ultimate desires for the well-being of others, and thus that patterns of practical reasoning like the one illustrated in Fig. 3 never actually occur. If the critics are right, then obviously constructing and evaluating evolutionary explanations of psychological altruism would be a fool's errand, on a par with seeking an evolutionary explanation of mental telepathy or X-ray vision. Over the last three decades, however, psychologists have assembled an increasingly impressive body of evidence suggesting that the critics

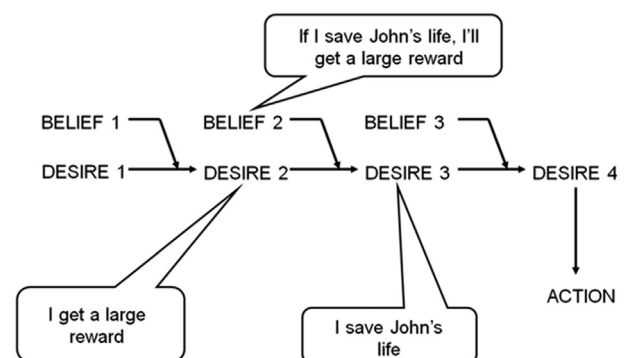


Fig. 2. A pattern of practical reasoning that both critics and defenders of psychological altruism find unproblematic.

⁴ Kahneman, Diener & Schwarz (1999) is a wide-ranging collection of papers on the issue. For an insightful discussion of the literature, see Haybron (2008).

⁵ For a classic elaboration of this picture of practical reasoning, see Goldman (1970).

⁶ In Fig. 1, and throughout this paper, I adopt the simplifying assumption that practical reasoning is a process in which *one* belief and *one* desire lead to the formation of a new desire. Though this assumption makes exposition easier, it is clearly unrealistic. Often several beliefs and/or several desires will jointly cause the formation of the new desire.

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