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## Prospects for a Naturalistic Ethics

I

Naturalism means many things to many people, and the views that advertise themselves as ethical naturalism are only slightly less diverse. The most prominent versions of ethical naturalism on the contemporary philosophical scene tend to draw inspiration from Darwin and Hume, to suppose that recent investigations in primatology, neuroscience, and general evolutionary theory have buttressed Hume's thought that human beings have a capacity for other-directed sentiments, a capacity that provides the basis for ethics.<sup>1</sup> But while this may be part of the story, it is, I think, only a part.

I propose to think of ethical naturalism as a two-part claim. First, the ethical practices of contemporary human groups have a long history, one that involves the emergence under natural selection of various emotions and psychological capacities, as well as a socio-cultural evolution of stories and prescriptions, exemplars and ideals, sanctions, rewards and systems of education. Second, the philosophical issues that arise concerning our ethical practices, substantive questions about what we should do, as well as concerns about the status of those practices, are best approached through an understanding of the main features of this history. As you might already suspect, a corollary of this latter

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<sup>1</sup> An admirably forthright presentation of this approach is de Waal (2006). I give a detailed response to de Waal's proposals in Kitcher (2006).

claim is that many well-known philosophical proposals about ethics need substantial revision once the long route to our current position is recognized.

In what follows, I shall try to explain the history as I think we should currently understand it. I will then attempt to draw out some implications for discussions in ethics.

## II

At some point in our evolutionary past, before the hominid line split off from the branch that leads to contemporary chimpanzees and bonobos (possibly quite a long time before), our ancestors acquired an ability to live together in small groups that were mixed in terms of sex and age. That achievement required a capacity for altruism.

It is important to distinguish two types of altruism. An organism *A* is *biologically altruistic* towards a beneficiary *B* just in case *A* acts in ways that decrease its own reproductive success and increase the reproductive success of *B*. For a century after Darwin, there was a deep puzzle about how biological altruism is possible. During the past fifty years, however, that puzzle has been solved. As William Hamilton showed, biologically altruistic actions directed towards kin can promote the spread of the underlying genes. Moreover, as Robert Trivers, Robert Axelrod, and (again) Hamilton, argued, when organisms interact with one another repeatedly, biological altruism exhibited on some occasions can gain dividends from future reciprocation.

Biological altruism has little direct import for our understanding of ethics. In this domain, the appropriate notion is that of *psychological altruism*. I shall say that *A* is a *psychological altruist* towards *B* in circumstance *C* just in case:

- (i) in circumstances  $C^*$  like *C* except for the presence of *B*, *A* would adopt different preferences, emotions, or intentions, and the preferences, emotions, and intentions formed by *A* in *C* are more closely aligned with those *A* attributes to *B* than are those adopted in  $C^*$
- (ii) the closer alignment of *A*'s states (the preferences and so forth) is caused by *A*'s attribution of similar states to *B*;

- (iii) this closer alignment is not causally dependent on any hope of satisfying some preference or fulfilling some goal that is common to  $A$ 's psychological life across  $C$  and  $C^*$ .

These conditions are somewhat pedantic ways of saying that psychological altruists are organisms that respond to others, in the sense that the psychological states that incline them to action become more closely aligned with what others want, when those others are present, from the way they would have been when the others were absent; that this comes about because of the perception of what those others want; and that it is not the result of some attempt to satisfy a selfish wish that is independent of the other.

Psychological altruism has a number of different dimensions. The *intensity* of the altruism is expressed in the degree of alignment, in the altruist's movement from the desires and intentions it would have had in the absence of the beneficiary. The *scope* of the altruism is measured by the range of contexts and accompanying attitudes with respect to which this alignment takes place. The *range* of the altruism consists in the size of the set of potential beneficiaries. Finally, the *accuracy* of the altruism is determined by the extent to which the altruist is able to identify the psychological dispositions of the beneficiary.<sup>2</sup> The hypothesis I want to advance is that the origins of primate social life in mixed-age, mixed-sex, groups depended on a capacity for *some* response to the perceived wants of *some* conspecifics in *some* contexts, at *some* level of accuracy in assigning those desires.

I will defend this hypothesis by starting with what I take to be a relatively straightforward example of psychological altruism. It is clear that mothers with dependent young sometimes act towards their offspring in ways that are biologically altruistic, whose evolution can be understood in terms of Hamilton's concept of kin selection. Nor is it difficult to suppose that the behavior is produced through responses that are psychologically altruistic in the sense I have given. Staunch egoists may protest that there is some selfish desire that the mother

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<sup>2</sup> I ignore further complications, such as the fact that altruism is sometimes paternalistic, aligning  $A$ 's preferences not with those that  $B$  is taken to adopt, but with those that  $A$  thinks  $B$  would adopt if  $B$  saw the situation as  $A$  does.

is really satisfying, but I do not know any even remotely plausible story of what this desire might be.<sup>3</sup>

Matters are quite different when we turn to interactions with unrelated organisms. In this case, the scenarios for the evolution of biological altruism generate a straightforward egoist hypothesis. For if a tendency to helping organisms who are not kin is favored under natural selection, because the loss incurred on one occasion will be made up by future reciprocation, then it is hardly unreasonable to suppose that the organisms involved can foresee this. Of course, if they engage in mutual aid on the basis of their foresight, then they fail to count as psychological altruists in my sense.

Contemporary treatments of the evolution of cooperation typically focus on the iterated Prisoner's Dilemma, and they have established many interesting results about conditions under which cooperation can become established. Yet for understanding the springs of primate sociality these treatments are doubly inept. First, as just noted, they cannot address questions about the psychological mechanisms behind the cooperative regimes. Second, they assume an extraordinarily unrealistic framework for the crucial interactions. It is, I think, absurd to suppose that cooperation evolved because, long ago, our primate ancestors were taken two-by-two, and locked into long runs of interactions with exactly the same Prisoner's Dilemma structure, before being released and reassigned to another partner.

Some years ago, I suggested that we could achieve greater realism by thinking of the crucial interactions as optional (see Kitcher 1993). Organisms can engage in joint behavior, opening the possibility of cooperation but also of becoming victims of exploitation, or they can decide to act by themselves. Unfortunately, this is only a modest step in the direction of realism, for it continues to presuppose that groups in which sociality evolved already had something like a stable population from which potential partners could be drawn. The real question cuts deeper: How do organisms of different ages and different sexes become sufficiently tolerant of one another's presence to share the same region with one another?

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<sup>3</sup> In Sober and Wilson (1998), Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson review various possibilities. I think they are right in rejecting the egoist suggestions, but that the rejection can be done more simply.

To address this issue, we need a much more complex scenario than the familiar Prisoner's Dilemma. I shall suggest an abstract version of a hypothesis proposed by the primatologist Richard Wrangham (Wrangham 1979). According to Wrangham, we can understand the different forms of sociality among the Great Apes, by starting with the character of the principal food resources, considering female foraging strategies as adaptations to the distribution of those resources, and taking male behavior to accommodate the patterns of activity of females. More abstractly, let us suppose that a number of organisms, of different levels of strength, have to acquire resources that are distributed across a region. When the organisms are few and the resources plentiful the world is Rousseauian — there are no conflicts and no organization of the population. But population growth will eventually produce a situation in which conflicts abound, and in which the weak find it hard to survive. If all organisms pass through a juvenile stage at which they are weak, they will find it advantageous to team up. It is not hard to show that coalitions will be expected to form, that there will be an escalation of coalition-building, and an eventual stabilization, when an organized population comes to dominate the region.

The Coalition Game is a mathematically-intractable, many-player game. Even given vast amounts of information about the pertinent parameters of a specific version, you could not find a best strategy — or even do much to discriminate rival strategies. Calculation is no better than a blind guess. From my perspective, however, that is a good thing. For I think our evolutionary ancestors were faced with versions of the Coalition Game, that, as juveniles, they had to team up with one another, and that those who did so had acquired psychologically altruistic tendencies. Perhaps these tendencies resulted from the importation into a new context of the same kinds of concern for others already present in the context of parental care; perhaps those juveniles whose emotions responded to some of their fellows in something of the same way that the mother responds to the needy young were able to form associations — or to make friends — in ways that led to success in the Coalition Game.

That such tendencies exist among our closest evolutionary relatives is now, I think, beyond dispute. For two, among a host of striking examples, I draw on the work of the greatest primatological observers of recent years. Jane Goodall records the behavior of a female chimpanzee, Little Bee, who, over a period of months, remained behind the

troop to accompany her partially paralyzed mother, and who regularly obtained food that she would subsequently share (Goodall 1986). De Waal tells the story of an adolescent chimpanzee, Jakie, who behaved altruistically towards an older, retarded, female, Krom. Early one morning, these two were the only troop members in the enclosure. Some tires had been hung on a pole extending from the climbing frame, and, during the night, it had rained, so that the innermost tire (the one next to the frame) was filled with water. Krom wanted to remove this tire, and tried unsuccessfully to do so by pulling on all the tires. When she gave up, frustrated, Jakie, who had observed her efforts, approached the frame, removed the tires one at a time, carefully lifted off the water-filled tire, and presented it to Krom. In both of these instances, we can see just that accommodation of preferences and intentions to the perceived wants of others that is highlighted in my account of psychological altruism, and in neither instance is there any plausible egoistic hypothesis about some background desire that the agent is aiming to satisfy.

My hypothesis is that tendencies to this sort of psychological altruism first made the formation of association possible, and that, under the conditions of the Coalition Game, allowed for organisms of mixed sex and age to live together, forming a pool of potential partners for optional interactions.<sup>4</sup> Relatively limited types of psychological altruism made possible the genre of primate sociality we share with our evolutionary cousins, the chimps and the bonobos.

### III

If our ancestors had remained within the confines of this type of society, there would be nothing like the human ethical project as we know it — and nor, for that matter, would there be anything like human life as we know it. Groups of chimpanzees are limited in size, and, although they endure as relatively stable units, signs of strain are often obvious. The

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<sup>4</sup> Thus, at this stage, we can start to introduce the familiar style of evolutionary modeling in terms of Prisoner's Dilemma. It would still be more realistic to do so within the framework of optional games, and also to focus on the complex ways in which social status can be formed and reputations acquired. I shan't pursue these matters here.