Evolution of altruism: Sober and Wilson

TAXONOMY. As Sober and Wilson present the debate, there are three options: hedonism, altruism, and pluralism. Hedonism here is 'egoistic' hedonism, the view that humans care ultimately about their internal states of pleasure and pain. It's important to note that, in philosophical literature, 'hedonism' is often taken to be a non-egoistic view. It may be 'ethical hedonism', the idea that only pleasures and pains are good or bad. Or it may be a (non-egoistic) 'psychological hedonism', the idea that people ultimately desire pleasure and pains, whether their own *or* someone else's. [296]

Sober and Wilson argue that hedonism is the main alternative to altruistic pluralism—the view that at least some of our desires are other-directed. Hence, which view is more plausible from an evolutionary perspective? [297]

THE PROBLEM STATED. Sober and Wilson propose to evaluate altruism and hedonism against the chances of their respective biological evolution. We are comparing altruistic motives and hedonistic motives, and we ask whether evolutionary pressures (ultimate causes) were likely to result in the evolution of one or the other. [298]

Sober and Wilson are at pains to clarify that they don't mean that all behaviours are explainable in evolutionary terms. No doubt there are cultural influences too (and importantly, random ones too, we might add). From the examples they give, however, it remains unclear how to draw the line in general. A vanilla proposal is to say that the more general patterns of behaviour are amenable to evolutionary explanations, and the less general ones are less so. [298]

However, Sober and Wilson also insist that even the universal patterns of behaviour need not be explained by evolution. And they are similarly emphatic that their argument has nothing to do with 'genetic' explanations, let alone the dreaded genetic determinism. These are large and explosive issues. Personally, I am sceptical about all of these caveats and the way they are formulated. In any event, they are not essential to the main argument. [299] [300]

Sober and Wilson's main example is parental care. They assume that people typically want their children to do well. This is not to deny that some people and some cultures have fairly different ways of treating their children. This may be due to cultural conditions or even to natural selection. Sober and Wilson plead agnostic about this. They insist that the difference between humans and non-humans in parental care is due to natural selection. [301–302]

Therefore, is the desire of the well-being for your children an altruistic or a hedonistic (egoistic) desire?

OUTLINE OF THE ARGUMENT. The question we ask is: given that there is a certain behaviour (extensive parental care), which proximate mechanism (motivation) is more likely to evolve in the course of evolution? [308]

As the example of marine bacteria shows, there are three criteria we should use in our *ex post facto* 'prediction': availability, reliability, and efficiency. Let's ignore the further details of the marine bacterium example and go straight to the parental care. [305ff]

There are, then, three alternatives: (HED), (ALT), and (PLUR). The bulk of Sober and Wilson's argument is devoted to showing that (HED) is much less reliable in providing parental care than (ALT), and then also that (PLUR) is more reliable than (HED). The former argument builds especially on the function of pain. The latter builds on multiple pathways. [312, 319]

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