

Does altruism exist? by David Sloan Wilson.

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Amazon review title: “Selfishness beats altruism within groups. Altruistic groups beat selfish groups. Everything else is commentary”

Wilson asks what altruism is. The word was coined by the Frenchman Comte, who was attempting to form a humanist alternative to Christianity. It failed. Wilson concludes that our preference for some thoughts and feelings over others is based primarily on the actions they produce. There is no other reason to privilege thoughts and feelings that count as altruistic over those that count as selfish.

This reviewer’s interpretation is that actions must be assessed in terms of their effect, not their motives. However virtuous supporting vaccines or ending carbon emissions make a person feel, their actions should be judged by the net benefit or detriment to the human condition.

Wilson’s question is, how could altruism have evolved, given that selfish individuals have an unmistakable advantage over the unselfish?

Evolution’s first foundational principle is that natural selection is based on relative fitness. Evolution favors organisms that are most successful in passing on their genome. By the simplest measure, having the most direct descendants.

A silverback gorilla who dominates his harem will have more offspring than the lesser, albeit perhaps nicer, males in the group. Selfishness should pay off. As they say on Wall Street, “Greed is good.”

But the simplest measure is not best. Genes exist within a gene pool, among brothers, sisters, cousins and shoestring relations.

Wilson writes that “The second foundational principle is that behaving for the good of the group typically does not maximize relative fitness within the group.” Altruistic behavior, which benefits the collective, is seldom optimal for the individual practicing it.

Yet altruism did evolve among humans, and the societies that most practice it seem to be the most successful. Wilson’s book unravels this conundrum.

Groups exist at several levels. Multilevel selection is another relatively new idea. Selection operates at the level of the individual, the family, the clan the tribe the nation. What works for the individual may not work for the family. What works for the family may not work for the clan. In wartime, impressing young men into the Army is good for the nation but not good for the individual or his is family.

Along the way Wilson cites several groundbreaking observations that have been adopted by evolutionary biologists during recent decades, some so new as to still be fighting for acceptance.

There was a major disagreement fifty years ago between the proponents of “group selection” including another Wilson, E.O. Wilson of Harvard, and individual selection per Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and others. Is the unit of evolutionary selection the individual or the group of which the individual is a part? The group selection argument appears to have won out.

Wilson (David Sloan) introduces the major concept is evolutionary transitions, rare and transformative events in evolutionary history.

This concept was originally invoked to explain the origin of nucleated cells (perhaps via inclusion of one microorganism within another) and was later generalized to explain the first bacterial cells (mitochondria as

previously free-living organisms), multicellular organisms, eusocial insect colonies and possibly even the origin of life itself. An interesting tidbit about eusocial insects - The total biomass of bees, wasps, ants, and termites equals that of all other species of insects. Group selection has been a very successful strategy.

E. O. Wilson states as the fundamental theoretical problem of sociobiology that “The evolution of group-level functional organization cannot be explained on the basis of natural selection operating within groups. On the contrary, natural selection operating within groups tends to undermine group-level functional organization.”

Therefore, “Group-level functional organization evolves primarily by natural selection between groups.”

E. O. Wilson’s key concept is “functional organization”. When a group of organisms is functionally organized, its members coordinate their activities for a common purpose, just like the organs of an organism and the parts of a can opener. A group that is extremely well organized could even be called a superorganism, a metaphor with a venerable history in philosophical, religious, and political thought.

Social insects are obviously functionally organized. Non-human mammals are functionally organized by sex, at times somewhat within sex.

Major evolutionary transitions have three hallmarks. The three Wilson names build towards higher complexity, both within the organization of individual organisms and the social organization of individual organisms. They lead towards functional organization within and among organisms.

Hallmark number one: First, they are rare events in the history of life.

Second, major evolutionary transitions have momentous consequences once they occur.

Third, the suppression of disruptive forms of within-group selection is only partial and not complete. Pure organisms, whose lower-level elements work 100 percent for the common good, do not exist. One of the most important discoveries in evolutionary biology during the last few decades has been to realize how much a multicellular organism is a highly regulated society of cells that is elaborately organized to withstand an onslaught of cheating and exploitation from within.

Something is functionally organized when its parts work together in a coordinated fashion to achieve a given end. Human being are without a doubt the most functionally organized of species. We could no more survive on our own than an ant separated from its colony. Wilson writes “We are evolution’s latest major transition.

“Alone among primate species, we crossed the threshold from groups of organisms to groups as organisms. Other primate species cooperate to a degree, sometimes to an impressive degree, but disruptive within-group competition for mates and resources is still a strong evolutionary force. Even the cooperation that does take place within primate groups often consists of coalitions competing against other coalitions within the same group.

“Our ancestors managed to suppress disruptive forms of within-group competition, making benign forms of within-group selection and between-group selection the primary evolutionary forces.”

Wilson observes altruism at work in common pool resource groups, which manage the commons - things like forests, pastures, that must be used in common, cannot be easily privatized. Nobel prize winner Eleanor owned Ostrom, Eleanor Ostrom identified eight core design principles required for common pool resource groups in a worldwide database to effectively manage their affairs.

1. Strong group identity and understanding of purpose.
2. Proportional equivalence between benefits and costs.
3. Collective choice and arrangements.

4. Monitoring
5. Graduated sanctions. Transgressions need not require heavy-handed punishment.
6. Conflict resolution mechanisms.
7. Minimal recognition of rights to organize.
8. For groups that are part of larger social systems that must be appropriate coordination among relevant groups.

Wilson does not go into the question of whether such CPR groups can work in groups with radically diverse membership. This reviewer would observe that the streets of San Francisco and Portland are indeed commons, and they are not being well managed because the parties using them have no common beliefs to bind them.

Wilson refers to Barbara Oakley's "[Pathological Altruism](#)," which describes misplaced and destructive altruism. This reviewer would note that the altruism of deinstitutionalizing the mentally ill, providing housing for the homeless and refusing to incarcerate habitual criminals is pathological.

Likewise, Wilson does not address the problem of pathological altruism among native Europeans. We are being overrun this week by Arabs in France who are rioting. The same has happened in Sweden, Germany, and other places. Whereas Europeans may have a global notion of altruism, the immigrants' is specific to their ethnic group. As my title suggests, the lower level of altruism and group selection dominates. Europeans are giving ground.

Wilson writes "Yet religions typically do not draw upon altruism at the level of thoughts and feelings to motivate altruistic actions, as strange as this might seem." All religions offer a quid pro quo for prosocial activity. In Christianity it is the promise of going to heaven, and of being esteemed by your peers. Whatever religious belief may have contributed to the level of altruism practiced by its adherents, the motives are selfish. Per Wilson "Religion portrays "all actions as win-win or lose-lose. This portrayal is false as a factual description of the world, but religious worldviews depart from factual reality in so many ways that we shouldn't be surprised when they do so in this particular respect."

Wilson's concluding chapter is quite unsatisfying. He speaks of group selection at the global level. Evolution is a matter of competition between populations, but at the global level we have no competitors. The idea of ultimate fitness at the planetary level does not make sense. We are not competing against other planets. The stark reality is there are, and will remain, competing groups of humanity at some lower level. Altruism is real, but it will not lead to utopia.