

ALTRUISM FOUND: DAVID SLOAN WILSON'S MULTILEVEL EXPLANATION

A review of *Does Altruism Exist? Culture, Genes, and the Welfare of Others* by David Sloan Wilson. New Haven: Yale University Press (2015). 180 pages. ISBN 978-0-300-18949-0 (hbk).

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In *Does Altruism Exist? Culture, Genes, and the Welfare of Others*, David Sloan Wilson, Distinguished Professor of Biological Sciences and Anthropology at Binghamton University, takes up the debate concerning multilevel natural selection. Biologists usually explain evolution of traits and behaviors by recourse to natural selection at the level of genes. Multilevel selection, of which Wilson is a proponent, posits natural selection not just at the level of genes, but at the level of organisms, populations, species, and so on. According to Wilson, the ‘central problem of sociobiology’ (p. 21) is how to explain the evolution of group-level functional organization on the basis of natural selection, given that natural selection within groups tends to undermine group-level functionality. If selfish organisms outcompete altruists, why do any altruists remain?

Wilson vacillates between different definitions of altruism. He begins with one shorn of cost considerations: ‘Altruism is a concern for the welfare of others as an end in itself’ (p. 3). At other points, he includes cost: ‘When Ted benefits Martha at a cost to himself, that’s altruistic, regardless of how he thinks or feels about it’ (p. 9). When he includes cost considerations, Wilson makes sure to argue that the magnitude of the cost is not paramount. A worker bee delivering a suicidal sting to an intruder differs from a scout bee performing a tree cavity search only in the magnitude of the cost; both are acting altruistically. The difference is one of degree, not of kind. Wilson also wants the definitions to include both individual and group effects: ‘Let’s call a behavior *selfish* when it increases relative fitness within groups and *altruistic* when it increases the fitness of the group but places the individual at a relative fitness disadvantage within the group’ (p. 22).

If considered at different levels of abstraction and from different perspectives, an action can be both altruistic and selfish. Our typical conception of these terms, your authors suspect, is that if an action benefits the self, regardless of at what remove and regardless of whether it benefits others, it is not altruistic. The question for Wilson is whether in his relative definition, which vacillates

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between individual and group considerations, we see our own understanding of the concepts. Is Wilson's altruism what we mean when we say altruism? If not, is the problem one of translation, or is it one of genuinely distinct concepts?

Wilson describes an experiment in which three groups of water striders were assembled as follows: one group contained females along with a mix of sexually aggressive and passive males, while the other two groups contained females with either sexually aggressive or sexually passive males. In the group containing both types of males, the sexually aggressive ones, as one would suspect, produced far more offspring than did the sexually passive ones. The surprising result came from the other two groups: the group with only passive males produced more offspring than did the group with only aggressive males because the aggressive males were so aggressive that they did not allow the females to properly feed, and thus the females produced fewer eggs.

To sum, within a single group of water striders, selfish males did better: they fertilized more eggs and they produced more offspring. In time, natural selection would eliminate passive water striders. However, groups containing passive water striders produced more offspring in total. In time, groups containing higher proportions of passive water striders would eliminate groups containing higher proportions of aggressive water striders.

Wilson has an easily accessible style. Even in a work like *Does Altruism Exist?*, ostensibly addressed to non-scientific and scientific readers alike, you do not get the sensation that pith has been left out. Wilson provides a limpid explanation of multilevel selection and a convincing account of the evolutionary reason for altruism's existence. He succinctly sums this latter result: '[s]elfishness beats altruism within groups. Altruistic groups beat selfish groups' (p. 23). This is an exciting conclusion to the extent it explains the evolution of a behavior – altruism – that seemingly is evolutionarily disadvantageous.

In the second half of *Does Altruism Exist?*, Wilson attempts to persuade that altruism also has many benefits for individuals. He claims that if people are altruistic, they will be 'happier' (p. 147) and will experience 'positive effects' (p. 127). The logic, if there is any, is that individuals may be worse off on account of being altruistic, but the group will be better off and the individuals, in turn, may come to be better off.

Relative success and relative failure have psychological impact. A human individual who on Tuesday is worse off relative to his neighbor than he was on Monday will take this fact into account. Whether consciously or by unconscious effect, costly behavior impacts the human mind. For the group which has no consciousness, greater or worse relative fitness does not register. There may be concerted movement in the direction of greater fitness, but success and failure do not have qualitative character for the group.

The success of groups containing altruists is not certain, of course. Particular traits evolve and particular groups persist because of natural selection – and also because of luck. There is a stochastic element to the success altruism seems to promise. A group comprised of many altruists may lose out to other groups, ones made up of even more altruists. A group comprised of all altruists may still lose out because of luck (a large meteorite impacts the earth where the group resides). For these individuals, it is hard to say that they are better off for having been altruists. Indeed, it is illogical to say that they are anything. They are, after all, dead.

‘The great problem of human life,’ writes Wilson, ‘is still organizing society so that it functions at a larger scale’ (p. 143). Politics certainly are an important part of human life, but we have yet to see a convincing account that increasing the magnitude of group functionality is the great problem of human life. Personal achievement, feelings of love – these have been and still are the sources of greatest human suffering and joy. In a work considering the tension between group and individual interests, Sigmund Freud wrote, ‘One can hardly be wrong in concluding that the idea of life having a purpose stands and falls with the religious system’ (see Freud, 1961). If individuals are to decrease their own fitness, if they are to put off selfish desires, it will be for reasons cousin to those promised by the world’s major religions. That consciousness persists after death. That altruists will live again and will be rewarded, sating selfish desires in the end.

If there is something special about animal and human consciousness, then any tallying of arguments for altruistic behavior must take individual consciousness into account. Natural selection moves matter along, grouping it into ever larger and more complex functionalities. Consciousness may be a brief quiescence in this endless evolutionary march. Animals, including humans, surely struggle to maintain consciousness. Death does not destroy matter; it reorganizes matter. But death does destroy consciousness. Any organism aware of this will balk at the command for altruism. Selfishness, so it goes, serves existence.

REFERENCES

- Freud, S. (1961). *Civilization and Its Discontents*. (J. Strachey, Trans.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. (Original work published 1930).