

PHIL 480: Seminar in the History of Philosophy
Building Moral Character: Neo-Confucianism and Moral Psychology

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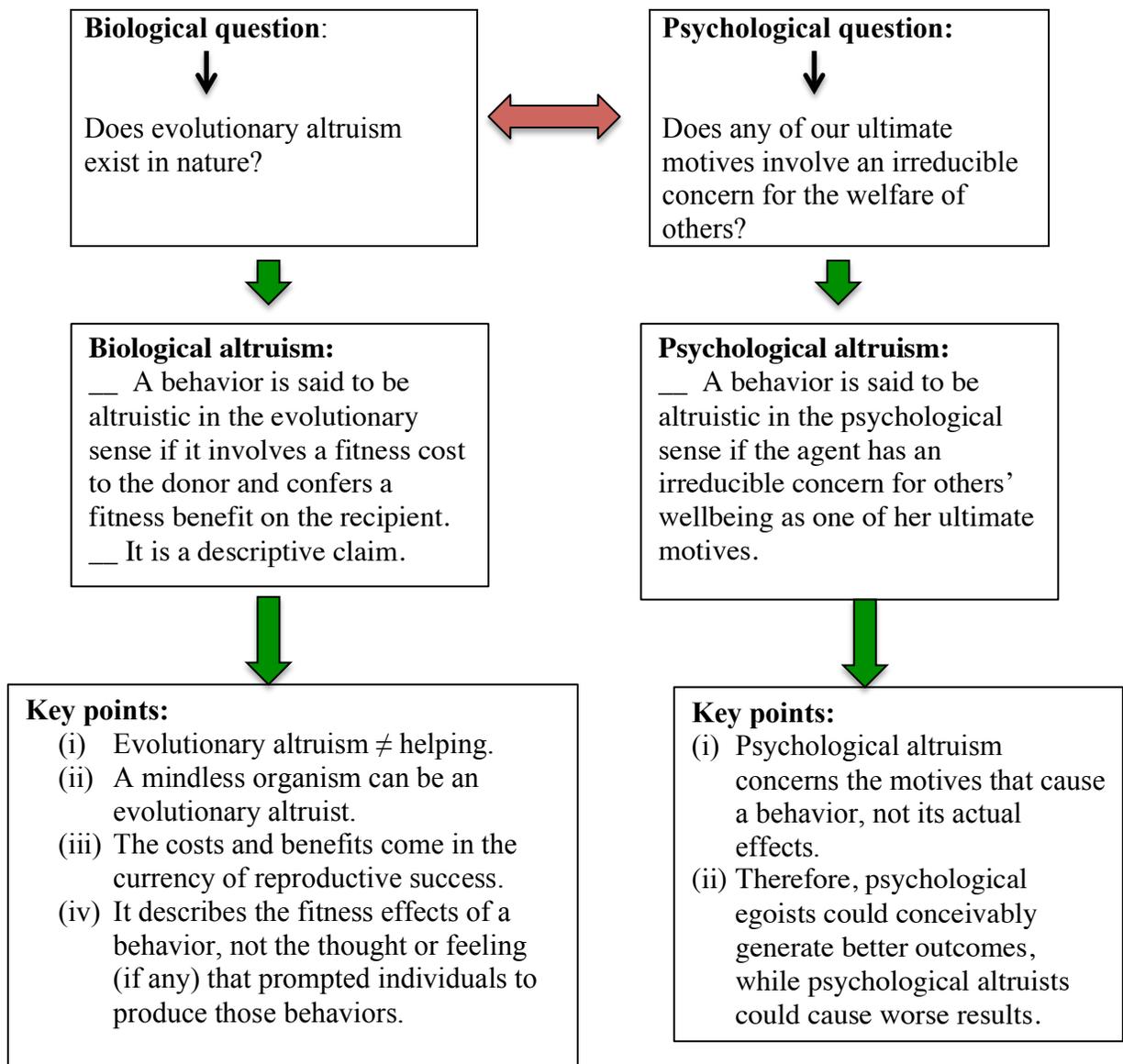
[Handout #21]

Sober & Wilson, “The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior”

§ Main Theses:

1. Group selection is a conceptually coherent and empirically well documented cause of evolution, and it has been especially important in human evolution.
2. Human beings have altruistic ultimate motives.

§ Biology versus Psychology of Altruism



§ Evolutionary Altruism

Tension between natural selection and evolutionary altruism:

1. By definition, altruists have lower fitness than the selfish individuals with whom they interact.
2. Natural selection eliminates traits that diminish an individual's fitness.
3. Therefore, natural selection should eliminate altruistic behavior/traits.

Darwin's Hypothesis of Group Selection:

__ Some traits evolve not because they benefit individuals' fitness within a group, but because they enable the group to compete against other groups. Human morality is one such traits.

Sober & Wilson:

__ Random sampling of 25 societies show that human beings are a group of selected species.

__ Cultural norms always require individuals to avoid conflict with each other and to behave benevolently towards fellow group members.

Sober & Wilson's view:

1. In many organisms, individuals choose the individuals with whom they interact.
2. Altruists seek out other altruists.
3. Therefore, human societies promote the evolution of altruism.
4. In an altruism-normative society, being altruistic actually has a better chance of success, while being a free-rider would have to pay the cost.
5. Therefore, in such a society altruism is actually better for the individual – it evolves into a selfish trait.

§ Psychological Altruism

Psychological Egoism	Psychological Altruism
All of our ultimate desires are self-directed. Whenever we want others to do well, we have these other-directed desires only instrumentally; we care about what happens to others only because we think that their welfare has ramifications for ourselves.	Some of our behaviors have an irreducible concern for others' wellbeing as one of our ultimate motives.

S wants _____ (m) solely as a means to acquiring _____ (e) if and only if S wants (m), S wants (e), and S wants (m) only because she believes that obtaining (m) will help her obtain (e).

e.g. Sam and Sally want to adopt an orphan because they want to have kids and orphans are easier to adopt.

e.g. Sam and Sally want to adopt an orphan because they want to feel good about themselves, and adopting orphans can make them feel good about themselves.

e.g. Sam and Sally want to adopt an orphan because they want to help reduce the number of homeless children, and orphans are homeless children.

Sober & Wilson's view:

___ **[motivational pluralism]:** People have both egoistic and altruistic ultimate desires.

___ Motivational pluralism has greater evolutionary plausibility.

___ Psychological motives are “**proximate mechanisms**” – If certain forms of helping behavior in human beings are evolutionary adaptations, then the motives that cause those behaviors in individuals also must have evolved. Our motives/desires/beliefs are proximate mechanisms that generate helping behaviors.

§ Application to Ethics

1. Morality is not a mere redundant overlay on the psychologically altruistic we may have. Social function of morality is to get people to do things that they would not otherwise be disposed to do, or to strengthen dispositions that people already have but in weaker forms.
2. Morality is a group adaptation – it benefits the group.

§ Summary of 480: Competing Theories about the Foundation of Humans' Ethical Altruism

- A. [**Batson**]: Human altruism is based on the sentiment of empathy. Empathy arousal causes people to have altruistic ultimate desires.
- B. [**Trivers**]: Ethical altruism is derived from evolutionary altruism in the form of reciprocal altruism – you scratch my back and I scratch yours. Therefore, the biological foundation of ethical altruism and many of our moral sentiments (friendship, shame, guilt, moral indignation, etc.) is self-interested.
- C. [**Darwin**]: Altruism is derived from evolutionary altruism that is aimed for *group selection*. The group that promotes altruistic norm has better fitness than other groups.
- D. [**Sober & Wilson**]: Ethical altruism is derived *both* from evolutionary altruism that favors group selection, *and* the implementation of social norms. Social norms convert highly altruistic traits into traits that are selfish. Individuals have psychological altruistic motives that evolved as “proximate mechanism.”
- E. [**Social Contract Theory**]: Ethical altruism has nothing to do with biological altruism. It is the result of implicit social contract – rational people would prefer having altruism as a social norm. Cultural norms impose social controls.
- F. [**Nietzsche**]: Altruism is the design of the weaker population in humanity, who would want protection and good will of others. It is a form of slave morality. “An altruistic morality - a morality in which self-interest wilts away - remains a bad sign under all circumstances. This is true of individuals; it is particularly true of nations. The best is lacking when self-interest begins to be lacking. Instinctively to choose what is harmful for oneself, to feel attracted by disinterested motives, that is virtually the formula of decadence.”

§ Questions for reflection:

1. If our helping behavior is actually rooted in the evolution process and we are equipped with “proximate mechanisms” in our psychology to be altruistic, then do we still get credit for our helping behavior? Wouldn’t altruism be more morally praiseworthy against the biological makeup of psychological egoism?
2. If we, as human beings, all have what it takes to be moral (our altruistic bent, our empathy as disposition, our moral sentiments such as shame and disgust, our moral sense of right and wrong), then what makes individual moral agents *stand out* from the rest of the crowd?
3. How do we explain the psychological shift from “parents’ natural care for their offspring” to “people’s natural empathy toward a total stranger”? If the former is based on kin selection, then is the latter simply based on group selection?
4. We have a dilemma: on the one hand, we want to have some biological bases for our moral sentiments so that we can say humans are moral creatures; on the other hand, we don’t want to have human morality be rooted solely in human biological makeup such that our moral acts are only instinctual acts. How do we establish an objective ground for human morality without taking the morality out of human morality?