

ary, functional trend or effect. In some cases the mean can be golden, but in other cases the common is vulgar. One of the most fascinating things about our species, and at least as fascinating to an evolutionary biologist as to anyone else, is that we humans, not any science, decide what we are to consider good, what that means, and whether we will pursue it.



The Importance of Practical Understanding for Altruistic Behavior

Jonathan R. Goodman

Abstract

In this paper I present a revised view of altruistic behavior, whereby neither intention, nor effect, nor their combination, is sufficient for distinguishing altruistic behavior. On this view, a behavior is altruistic to the extent that it signals an intention to benefit another at a cost to oneself, irrespective of actual intention or effect. This understanding yields interesting but sometimes counterintuitive implications; for instance, a particular behavior intended to be altruistic that has a positive effect on the intended recipient is not necessarily altruistic. One of the features of this view is that a practical understanding of the nuances of particular social circumstances is a necessary criterion for acting altruistically; this is shown with examples of gift-giving intended to be generous that fail to qualify as altruistic on this conception. Two corollaries of this view of altruism are proposed: first, an altruistic signal is designed to elicit costly behavior from recipients and observers; second, honestly altruistic signaling is more likely to benefit the agent than deceitful signaling.

I. Introduction

In this paper I propose a revisionist view that altruistic behavior should be understood as a signal designed to elicit beliefs and costs from others. While the accepted definitions in philosophy and biology provide sufficient criteria for a behavior qualifying as altruistic within these respective fields, neither explains how and why agents are perceived to be altruistic in any possible circumstance.

Altruism, sometimes defined in ordinary language as “selfless concern for others,” requires, on this view, that a person intends to help others without ulterior motive, for example by making an anonymous donation to a poor person or group the giver does not know. Yet it is unclear what the sufficient criteria are for behaving altruistically: one can intend to be altruistic and do nothing, one can misunderstand the etiquette in a particular culture, and so forth.

In biology, on the other hand, where the sufficient criterion for altruism is benefiting another individual at a genetic cost to oneself – for example by foregoing a meal so that someone unrelated to one can eat – it’s possible to intend to hurt others and to inadvertently help them, and yet for that action to qualify as altruistic.

Both definitions, I argue, while useful for scientific inquiry, inadequately capture the necessary criteria for one's behavior to qualify as altruistic: practical understanding of culture, or in the case of animal populations in which reciprocal altruism is observed, the correct following of socially learned rules. If an agent understands a culture well, she is able to interact with others in a way that raises the likelihood that her intentions will be perceived as altruistic. She is able to skillfully send a signal about her willingness to help others, from which observers make a judgment about her character.

Viewing altruism as a signal also links the philosophical definition with the biological: the signal itself is an effect which is determined in part by an agent's intentions. Yet while those with good practical understanding are able to successfully communicate their intentions to behave altruistically, selfish people with practical understanding are able to manipulate others using this signaling system. What we call *altruism*, I argue, is exploitable for Darwinian purposes.

II. Altruism as intention

In philosophy, altruism is often defined by an agent's intention. Nagel (1969/1979), for example, argues that an agent is altruistic insofar as she intends to act in the interests of others. If someone makes a gift to another person intending to be generous and without ulterior motives, she is behaving altruistically, implying that intention can be a sufficient condition for altruistic behavior.

Yet if I try to make a gift to someone without considering my interests, and instead consider hers only, it does not necessarily follow that I behave altruistically. This can be demonstrated by comparing "behaved altruistically" with "was honest." If I intend to be honest and inadvertently tell someone something untrue, saying "I was being honest when I told you that untruth" implies only that I intended to be honest, or rather that I was sincere.

If, similarly, I intended to give someone a gift and mistakenly gave that person an empty box, it would be inappropriate to say "I was behaving altruistically when I gave you that empty box." Even if my interests or intentions are not called into question by the recipient of my intended gift, I would be guilty only of having altruistic intentions, though I would not have behaved altruistically.

Using the agent-focused definition of altruism, the analogy

Altruism: Altruistic behavior as Honesty: Veracity

elucidates this point. Honest or altruistic intention may be a necessary criterion for veracity or altruistic behavior, respectively, but neither is sufficient for either outcome. We distinguish "honesty" from "sincerity" in the same way that we distinguish an agent's intention to be altruistic from her behaving altruistically. This does not suggest a flaw in Nagel's definition of altruism, but rather that the intention-based definition does not provide a sufficient criterion for altruistic behavior.

Even if it is possible, furthermore, to know another agent's intentions, it is impossible to prove her intentions, so if honest/altruistic intention were sufficient for veracity/altruistic behavior, there would be no way to verify whether any action or utterance – under any circumstance – were altruistic or honest. There is always a chance that an agent is deceiving us about her intentions, showing a divorce between an agent's intention to be altruistic and the qualification of the resulting behavior as altruistic.

III. Altruism as effect

Another common definition of altruism found, for example, in Hamilton (1972), involves only the effect of a behavior. If an agent intends to do something for her own benefit and accidentally benefits someone else, she behaves altruistically. Dawkins (1979) uses the example of a pride of lions: if a lion develops tooth decay and the rest of the pride is able to eat more, the lion is altruistic only because the effect of his behavior (not eating) is more food for the others.

Assuming this definition generalizes to other species, any agent's behavior qualifies as altruistic insofar as the actions thereof are beneficial to others to a greater degree than to oneself. If an agent's fitness could be quantified, the degree to which her fitness is reduced and others' increased determines whether a behavior is altruistic. This definition countenances a circumstance where altruism is involuntary: a person may be forced to help someone else at her own expense, a behavior which, regardless of cause, qualifies as altruistic in this sense.

The “biological” definition of altruism is therefore incompatible with the “philosophical” variety. If we substitute honesty for altruism again, it's possible for one to be accidentally honest by inadvertently telling a truth, even if others know one intends to lie. In the ordinary sense, therefore, there are cases where one might meet the criteria of altruism in the biological sense and fail to behave altruistically.

The analogy

Altruism: Altruistic behavior as Honesty: Veracity

fails if a definition of altruism as effect is used. Hamilton's definition implies that one can be forced to be altruistic, or to be altruistic accidentally; the same is not, however, true of honesty. The “effect” definition, while suitable for evolutionary biology, does not provide a sufficient criterion for altruistic behavior.

IV. Altruism as intention and effect

The failure of the agent-focused and biological definitions of altruism to give sufficient criteria for altruistic behavior may create the illusion that combining the two definitions is sufficient. If we say an agent behaves altruistically insofar as she intends to help others without ulterior motive and she has positive effects on the intended recipient(s), all examples discussed thus far will qualify as altruistic. The box I give to someone else cannot be empty, and whether I am forced into being generous is irrelevant if I intend to be so anyway.

Yet even this combined definition does not provide necessary or sufficient criteria for altruistic behavior. I might intend to give someone a gift that benefits the recipient without behaving altruistically by violating the social norms of gift-giving. If I am under the impression that the attendees of some party are bringing small gifts, and bring a small gift myself, it is possible that I will bring a disproportionately small gift that will stand out as cheap and ungenerous.

I might also fail to understand how gift-giving, the etiquette of which depends on context, is done appropriately in a foreign culture: someone who comes to many Western cultures, for example, might be surprised that his gift of paper money is received strangely at a party where other guests bring wrapped gifts. Someone who brings expensive non-Kosher meat into a religious Jewish person's house is likely to offend that person, even if her intentions in bringing the gift are generous. In many cases gift-giving will not be considered altruistic, for example if a gift is given only out of etiquette-following; it is the intention attributed to the giver, either because of the generosity of the gift or the manner in which the gift is made, that determines whether the act of giving is altruistic.

In these situations – or in any similar example – it is possible that I both intend to act altruistically and have a positive effect on a recipient without behaving altruistically. This possibility suggests a flaw in the approach all three definitions take to providing necessary or sufficient criteria for altruistic behavior.

One must also have practical understanding of how to behave altruistically: my knowledge of appropriate execution of actions directly influences how my behavior is perceived. This is similar to Wittgenstein's (1953) discussion of understanding, where he argues that an individual does not understand a pattern only because she is able to continue it, but because of the social circumstances under which she is learning to follow the pattern. The learner understands only when her ability to follow the pattern is recognized by others, and her ability to reproduce the pattern is alone insufficient for her saying "I understand how to go on."

A similar argument is valid for altruistic behavior: an agent must understand how to apply the rules of gift-giving appropriately within a particular set of circumstances. One should bring a gift appropriate for the party one is attending: a boat is an inappropriate gift for a 10-year old's birthday party, and yet perhaps not inappropriate from one world leader to another. The person who brings expensive meat to a religious Jewish person behaves altruistically only if she recognizes the customs the person practices.

Learning the nuances of gift-giving is contingent on understanding a culture and the practical rules thereof; the claim that altruistic intention and positive effect are together necessary or sufficient for altruistic behavior is, therefore, unsound.

V. Altruistic behavior as a signal

The preceding arguments suggest that the criteria determining whether a behavior qualifies as altruistic are distinct from intention and effect. For a behavior to be altru-

istic, the agent must be perceived to properly execute the cultural rules associated with altruistic behavior or under particular circumstances. The agent sends a signal – a verbal or non-verbal communication about her tendency to help others – to those around her: she is altruistic in this circumstance, eliciting a reaction from others directly or indirectly. When a behavior is perceived to be altruistic, observers make a judgment about the agent’s character that may benefit her.

If altruism is viewed as a signal about one’s tendencies to bestow a benefit on others at a cost to oneself, intention and effect cease to be necessary criteria for behaving altruistically. An agent may send this signal inadvertently, intentionally, or deceitfully: while it may be required that she intends to act altruistically or that she has an altruistic effect, neither is necessary.

Frank (1988) argues that the conviction one holds about one’s honest intentions correlates positively and directly with the likelihood that others will believe one is genuine. The well-known example of tipping a waiter at a restaurant one has no intention of visiting again suggests this view is correct: there is no economically defensible reason to tip except that one believes, for whatever reason, that one should do so. Tipping well under this circumstance signals to others one’s belief that one ought to tip. While any particular instance of this behavior is unlikely to benefit one in the future, the signals sent to others may, together, determine how one’s traits are perceived in a population. This may indirectly benefit the agent if she is treated better because of her altruism.

Yet dishonest signaling of this variety is more likely to benefit the agent if executed correctly. Someone who understands her culture well is able to exploit this signaling system only for personal gain. Honest altruistic signaling may therefore be an example of the “handicap” principle described by Zahavi (1975): it may cost less to an agent to fake an altruistic signal than to communicate one genuinely, suggesting that altruism will be faked whenever someone believes she can successfully deceive.

It does not follow, however, that honest altruistic signaling is always a handicap, or that a particular agent will either always attempt to deceive or always signal honestly. Individuals differ only in the circumstances under which they will deceive, rather than in some binary sense where a particular individual always intends to deceive or be honest (Trivers, 1971). In a setting where other agents are likely to help one another – or at least where there are sufficient deterrents to prevent deception – altruistic signaling will not be a handicap. The cost of behaving altruistically may be counterbalanced by the risk of one’s intended deception being detected. Conditional honesty is therefore probably favored, though the conditions are grounded in circumstance rather than the perceived odds of reciprocity alone.

Honest signaling is, for example, less likely if one is further removed from those with whom one interacts. Consider a system in which individuals representing institutions succeed only when their work-output receives approval points from others working within the same system. Receiving many approval points for one’s work is beneficial for one’s career and institution, making points invaluable for any individual. The institutions one represents are, furthermore, competing for scarce resources, so individuals

representing these institutions have several self-interested reasons to ensure their own work receives more points than those of their colleagues. The system is regulated, but only enough to ensure that illegal activity, such as bribes, blackmail, and so forth, does not take place.

A system like this will inevitably lead to particular individuals developing methods of exploitation, including (perhaps) the formation of cooperative groups that give approval points only to one another, repeatedly giving oneself approval points wherever one can, paying money to increase one's output, and so forth.

Workers can behave altruistically or exploit one another. Granting approval points is a cost: one takes a risk when one grants points to another's work – particularly that of an unestablished worker – because it can damage one's reputation to approve of work judged by others to be poor quality. It may also damage one's status to grant approval points if one's institution loses out on resources because of one's generosity. Most importantly, individual workers may grant approval points only when they expect to receive many in return: granting approval points – an ostensibly altruistic behavior – therefore becomes such a complicated enterprise that one must make an exact calculation before deciding when and why to do so.

If a system described in this example is possible, it follows that under conditions where “altruism” can be used with sense, deceptive or exploitative behaviors will be more successful if agents are further removed from one another, and, further, that practical understanding allows one to exploit a complex system for personal gain. A researcher, due to greater odds of detection or perhaps more compassion due to proximity, may be less likely to exploit this system – for example, citations in academic literature – if she is working directly with a junior author, if she worries that her self-interest will be found out, or if she believes that one ought not to exploit the system.

VI. Possible counterexample

1. *“A behavior's effect necessarily has practical understanding built into it. If I fail to behave altruistically because I misunderstand conventions, I fail to meet the effect criterion.”*

This use of effect is distinct from that used by biologists, which requires only that a material cost be incurred by the agent and a material gain be accepted by the recipient. This objection requires that practical understanding falls under a behavior's effect, which only incorporates the arguments made in this paper, rather than falsifies them.

2. *“Using the signal view of altruism, one can behave altruistically inadvertently or because one is forced to. How can this definition be excluded from the objections made to the biologist's definition?”*

These problems are irrelevant to the signal definition only because the biologist's definition requires that animals cue one another rather than signal. Cueing does not imply an associated intention, so an animal might behave altruistically – using the biologist's definition – even if others know one intends not to be altruistic. The signal defi-

dition includes, though does not rely upon, an agent's intention: one cannot be altruistic where others know one is behaving self-interestedly. This implies that to send an altruistic signal, others must form a belief about the agent's intentions – though the agent's intentions are not sufficient criteria for others to form this belief.

3. *“Animals do not signal in this way if they do not display reciprocal behaviors with non-kin.”*

This paper's argument does not apply to animal populations where reciprocal altruism is not observed. If an animal's helping another can be explained only by kin selection, the animal's behavior is nepotistic, and altruism has no sense in this circumstance. The signal definition of altruism – and therefore altruism generally – is senseless in communities where reciprocal behaviors to non-kin are not found. It may be, however, that without understanding the cues animals send to one another in the contexts in which they are sent, it is impossible to determine whether an animal perceives another's behavior as altruistic.

It is essential to the signal definition of altruism that the benefits of sending this signal can outweigh the costs to an agent. If – in a population of animals where indirect reciprocity is found – an agent benefits directly or indirectly from altruistic signals sent, then the trait of sending altruistic signals will be selected for (Lahti, 2011). The signal itself is therefore more important than the cost to the agent or the benefit to the recipient; it will be selected for socially even if there are high immediate costs to an agent.

4. *“One can always deceive oneself about whether one is behaving altruistically, so every signal is potentially false.”*

It is enough, for the purposes of this paper, to say that the degree to which one believes that one is behaving out of altruism directly influences the signal sent to others. Whether one is deceiving oneself about one's intentions is therefore irrelevant.

VII. Conclusion

This paper makes the following claims: neither intention, effect, nor intention and effect provides sufficient criteria for altruistic behavior. Whether one behaves altruistically, on the revisionist view presented in this paper, depends on the signal one sends to others: practical understanding of culture is the necessary criterion for communicating one's altruistic intentions effectively.

This signal view implies that altruism and altruistic behaviors can be exploited to benefit an agent while minimizing the cost to oneself. Practical understanding of how to behave altruistically is, therefore, a method for exploiting moral systems for Darwinian purposes. This pattern of behavior is more likely – for example with academic publishing – if one is further removed from those with whom one interacts. It should be taken as a great irony that one can abuse one's medium for publishing about morality and altruism to benefit oneself and to exclude others.

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Comments on Goodman

Jacob Sparks

Goodman presents objections to the standard philosophical and biological accounts of altruism. Philosophical definitions of altruism depend on intentions: one behaves altruistically when they *intend* to benefit another at a cost to themselves. Biological definitions of altruism, in contrast, depend on effects: one behaves altruistically just when they *in fact* benefit others at a cost to themselves (regardless of their intentions). Goodman proposes an alternative account: one acts altruistically when one *signals* their willingness to benefit others at a cost to themselves. Altruism, on this view, depends not on intentions or effects, but on what the action communicates. Goodman claims that this account is superior to the others: it helps to explain the importance of cultural competency for acting altruistically, it gives a clear explanation of how we can *know* when someone is acting altruistically, and shows how altruism might be explicable in Darwinian terms.

What purpose is a definition of altruism meant to serve? Most philosophers who give an account of altruism are interested in asking normative questions: Is altruism a virtue? What reasons are there to sacrifice for the sake of others? Do we have obligations to act altruistically? Biologists, in contrast, see altruism as a puzzle: how can we explain the altruistic behavior we observe in broadly Darwinian terms? Because of their different aims, philosophers and biologists usually work with different notions of ‘cost’ and ‘benefit.’ Biologists will understand these concepts in terms of reproductive success. Philosophers will understand them in terms of some theory of well-being: pleasure, preference satisfaction, objective lists, etc. The connection between these two accounts of ‘cost’ and ‘benefit’ is not clear. It may be that the pleasure etc. covaries with reproductive success or not. At any rate, given their different aims and different ways of understanding key terms like ‘cost’ and ‘benefit,’ it’s no surprise that philosophers and biologists have different working definitions of altruism.

What should we make of Goodman’s proposal in light of these different aims? If we understand altruism as Goodman recommends – as any behavior that *signals* one’s willingness to sacrifice in order to benefit others – will that lead us to a better understanding of the normative reasons to be altruistic and will it help to explain the emer-

gence of altruistic behavior?

Goodman claims to have given a *better* definition of altruism. But to see the value of his proposal for biology, we should instead see him as having introduced a distinct concept to help *explain* biological altruism. Perhaps the really puzzling behavior – sacrificing to benefit others – can be explained by the biological benefit of *signaling the willingness* to sacrifice. Such a proposal is certainly intriguing and may be part of the explanation of altruistic behavior. But we have not *replaced* the old biological concept with a new and improved version. One needs to retain that old biological concept to state the thesis that demonstrates the importance of Goodman’s signaling account.

Likewise for the philosophic question: we should not understand Goodman’s proposal as the suggestion that we abandon the concept of altruism as an intention to sacrifice for the sake of others and *replace* it with Goodman’s signaling account. Instead the suggestion must be that we can *use* the notion of *signaling a willingness to sacrifice for others* to help to explain our normative reasons to intend to be altruistic. *Signaling a willingness to sacrifice for others* gives us a reputation as an altruist. Since people tend to reciprocate, such a reputation can benefit us. Insofar as we have reasons to benefit ourselves, we have reasons to signal our willingness to sacrifice for others. And for those of us who have trouble with large scale deception, we won’t be able to signal our altruism without actually intending to be altruistic.

This might partly explain our normative reasons to intend to act altruistically. But it probably isn’t the whole story. If it were, our reasons to intend to be altruistic would be *contingent* and *instrumental*. E.g., if it turns out that we can fool others into believing our altruistic signal without actually intending to be altruistic, or if earning a reputation for altruism won’t result from our intention to act altruistically, or if such a reputation won’t benefit us, then we’ll have no reason to actually be altruistic. This seems to get the value of other people’s well being wrong. In general, our reasons to benefit others are not contingent on whether or not we ourselves will be benefitted in return.

George Price is said to have been disturbed by the implications of his famous formula. Whatever we call altruism, Price thought, is ultimately a product of some selfish evolutionary mechanism. Late in his life, Price was driven to increasingly desperate altruistic behavior, giving away all his wealth and possessions to strangers and, ultimately, taking his life.

Assume that Price was disturbed by the thought that the value of his altruism was undermined by its evolutionary origin. From one perspective, Price’s worry seems to rest on an unfortunate mistake. No fact about the origin of our altruistic behavior could have anything to do with the value of our altruistic behavior. To think otherwise is to forget the difference between behaving altruistically (Goodman’s biological altruism) and having altruistic intentions (Goodman’s philosophical altruism). It’s true that facts about the origin of our altruistic intentions can affect the value of those intentions. For instance, if you intend to act altruistically only *because* you want some reciprocity, that might impugn the value of your altruistic intention. But just because reciprocity (or selfishness genes etc.) *explains* how altruistic behavior arose, it doesn’t mean that

such behavior isn't valuable. It's important not to see philosophic altruism and biological altruism as competitor accounts of a single concept. If one did, then one couldn't avoid Price's despair.

Likewise, signaling altruism doesn't compete with philosophic or biologic altruism. Keeping them separate is essential to asking certain normative questions. Are my reasons to act altruistically (or to intend to do so) derived from my reasons to signal altruism? It's also essential for asking certain biological questions: Is the biological benefit of altruistic behavior (or intention) a function of the biological benefit of signaling altruism? These are interesting and important questions raised by Goodman's paper and they shouldn't be lost amid claims about the insufficiency of biological or philosophical accounts of altruism.

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Moral Perception and Morally Relevant Perception

Jacob Sparks

You might bear witness to some injustice, but can you witness the injustice itself? At first glance, it's tempting to say "yes." Sometimes we see things that provoke an immediate judgement that some act is wrong just as we sometimes see things that provoke the immediate judgement that e.g. the book is red or that our friend is angry. It seems like we *perceive* the injustice just as we *perceive* the redness or the anger. Natural as that position is, some reflection might give us pause. Do we really *see* injustice? Isn't it more accurate to say that we *see* e.g. the innocent man being punished, and then we *infer* that what is happening is unjust?

The dispute, between those who think that there is a genuine kind of moral perception and those who think that no such kind of perception is possible, is the topic of this paper. Many authors dismiss the idea of moral perception with little fanfare. As an initial example, consider this passage from Sidgwick:

[T]hough probably all moral agents have experience of such particular intuitions [i.e. moral perceptions], and though they constitute a great part of the moral phenomena of most minds, comparatively few are so thoroughly satisfied with them, as not to feel a need of some further moral knowledge even from a strictly practical point of view...[S]erious doubts are aroused as to the validity of each man's particular moral judgements: and we are led to endeavour to set these doubts at rest by appealing to general rules...(Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, Bk I, Chapter VIII, §3 p. 100)

There is a distinction implicit in Sidgwick's remarks between immediate moral judgements which might *arise* from perception and perceptual moral knowledge. Sidgwick rightfully grants that sometimes we find ourselves with strong moral judgements that appear to arise immediately, i.e. they do not seem to be the product of any reasoning process. We simply see what's going on and we think, "that's wrong!" But admitting that phenomenon does not mean, according to Sidgwick, that we have per-

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(To Navigate to Articles, Click on Author's Last Name)

ACADEMIC ESSAYS BY PHILOSOPHERS

† Clayton Shoppa, "Neurobiology, Intention and Decision." p. 3

Comment by David C. Lahti. p. 7

† Jonathan R. Goodman, "The Importance of Practical Understanding for Altruistic Behavior." p. 10

Comment by Jacob Sparks. p. 17

† Jacob Sparks, "Moral Perception and Morally Relevant Perception." p. 19

Comment by Jonathan R. Goodman. p. 28

† James S. Freeman, "Teleological Concepts in Evolutionary Theory Applied to Human-Directed Evolution." p. 30

Comment by Clayton Shoppa. p. 39

A BIOLOGIST'S REFLECTION ON CULTURAL EVOLUTION

† Kathleen Nolan, "From Leviathan to Saint: When and Why Did Our Feelings About Whales Change?" p. 41

Comment by Ian S. Maloney. p. 48

Contributors, p. 50

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