

The Selfish Gene

Paper review

by Nazli Ilgit Yucel

The paper that I've read is the introduction of the book "The Selfish Gene" by Richard Dawkins.

Darwin made it possible for us to give a sensible answer to the curious child whose question heads this chapter. ['Why are people?'] We no longer have to resort to superstition when faced with the deep problems; Is there meaning to life? What are we for? What is Man?

The argument of this book is that we, and all other animals, are machines created by our genes.

After explaining Darwin's theory, writer starts to point out what is "selfishness" and what is "altruism" To begin with; he gives the example of a Chicago gangster, connecting this example with our genes that have survived, in some cases for millions of years, in a highly competitive world. At this case, writer believes that a predominant quality to be expected in a successful gene is "selfishness" After this point, he explains what this book is "not" about, that is "not about advocating a morality based on evolution", "not an advocacy of one position or another in the nature/nurture controversy" and "not a descriptive account of the detailed behavior of man or of any other particular animal species"

Before going any further, he gives the definition of "Welfare"; which is defined as chances of survival even if the effect on actual life and death prospects is so small as to seem negligible. The behavior of Blackheaded gulls is a good example for this term. It is quite common for a gull to wait until a neighbor's back is turned, perhaps while it is away fishing, and then pounce on one of the neighbor's chicks and swallow it. In terms of selfishness, selfish behavior may simply consist of refusing to share some valued resource such as food, territory and sexual partner.

About the term altruism, the commonest and most conspicuous example is done by parents, especially mothers towards children. Also, it is commonly seen in animal species like; many small birds, when they see a flying predator such as hawk, give a characteristic "alarm call" upon which the whole flock takes appropriate evasive action. There is indirect evidence that the bird who gives the alarm call puts itself in special danger, because it attracts the predator's attention particularly to itself. But, even in the group of altruists, there will almost certainly be a dissenting minority who refuse to make any sacrifice. If there is just one selfish rebel, prepared to exploit the altruism of the rest, then he, is more likely than to survive and have children. Each of these children will tend to inherit his selfish traits. After several generations of this natural selection, the "altruistic group" will be over-run by selfish individuals, and will be indistinguishable from the selfish group.

If only the individuals in a group had the gift of foresight they could see that in the long run their own best interests lay in restraining their selfish greed, to prevent the destruction of the whole group. We may frequently behave selfishly as individuals, but in our more idealistic moments we honor and admire those who put the welfare of others first. Often altruism within a group goes with the selfishness between groups. This is a basis of trade unionism.

When I read this text from this book, I was so excited and interested that I searched more about it and I read the detailed summary of the whole book. One of the most obvious points I derive from Dawkin's book is the idea that whatever its scientific interest (which is considerable), it demonstrates the separation of modern science from the sorts of questions which interested Socrates. Dawkins is much given to moral and social commentary. Thus, in Dawkins's book the way in which the new scientific method both enriches and limits our understanding is, in many respects, much more stark and obvious than in Darwin.

Very broadly, selfish gene ideology can be described as; every creature, in the long-run, acts to maximize the number of its descendants. Any creature which does not act this way will eventually be out-bred by those who do. While a creature may have enough for its own needs the number of descendants it can have is bounded only by the resources around it. Hence creatures are generally insatiable.

This may seem wrong for humans, who have free will and are not mere programmable automaton, but in fact humans make logical decisions to satisfy their emotions, and human emotions are as murky and as illogical as any of those found in their animal counterparts.

The purpose of evolution is not, as Darwin suggested, survival of the species, it is simply the survival of the information in the genes of the individual. The individual is almost irrelevant to the genes - they are useful containers of the genetic code, but are in the final analysis expendable, and can be cast away if doing so can cause a greater reproduction elsewhere.

Life and evolution is pattern reproducing for no other reason than this: patterns which are good at reproducing tend to reproduce themselves - other patterns do not. The behavior we see in living things is simply behavior which has a history of causing replicating the patterns. The genetic code dictates behavior and behavior changes the success of the replication process. The genetic code which causes behavior which causes a more replication of the pattern becomes more prevalent.

This is what we call survival of the fittest. We talk about *purpose of reproduction* or *the purpose of evolution* because it helps to explain behavior and to focus on the process, but in fact it has no more purpose than a group of random numbers.

We are used to things moving in a certain direction because they have a purpose - a wild animal goes hunting *because* it is hungry, for the *purpose* of finding food. Evolution too appears directed. Animals develop fur for the *purpose* of keeping warm and so on, but this does not mean that there truly a purpose behind it - just a mechanism which makes it happen.

Selfish Gene Theory regards the visible organism (the cat, human, flower, amoeba or whatever) as the *host*. It is like a big lumbering robot whose purpose is to replicate the genes it carries in its cells. This is the essence of selfish gene theory. All common characteristics of living things have their roots in this phenomenon, including humans.

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