

## II Egoism: Empirical and Quasi-Empirical Issues

### Which desires are egoistic?

The problems with William's I-desire criterion:

- (i) some desires might be agent-relative without being egoistic (I want *my* child to do well).
- (ii) some deontological moral motivations might be agent-relative (I want that *I* don't tell lies).

Perhaps the best way is to characterize egoistic desires negatively: they are those that involve insufficient attention to the needs of others. (By this criterion Robinson Crusoe couldn't have been an egoist.) Perhaps there is no good analysis; a common problem in philosophy.

### Unconscious motives

Even for Freud it is unclear that the unconscious motives are really egoistic. Contemporary psychology recognizes plenty of unconscious motives. But they are not obviously egoistic. In fact most are too domain specific for notions of egoism and altruism to have much application.

### Evolutionary Arguments

An argument for thinking that altruists *must* do worse compared to egoists, and so must in time be eliminated from the population:

Suppose that altruism benefits the whole population, at a cost to those who practice it. Accept for the sake of argument that the benefit benefits the whole population: indeed even for the altruists themselves it outweighs the cost to them. Still, the *net* benefit to the egoists will be greater, (since they are paying no costs), and that gives them comparative advantage. Comparative, not absolute, advantage is what matters in a competitive situation. So the egoists will win out in the long-run.

A possible explanation: Simpson's Paradox

Imagine that 90 women and 10 men apply to a department with a 30% acceptance rate. This department does not discriminate and therefore accepts 27 women and 3 men. Another department, with a 60% acceptance rate, receives applications from 10 women and 90 men. This department doesn't discriminate either and therefore accepts 6 women and 54 men. Considering both departments together, 100 men and 100 women applied, but only 33 women were accepted, compared with 57 men.

Sober and Wilson *Unto Others*

Conditions for getting Simpson's paradox effects:

- (i) there must be isolated groups;
- (ii) the groups must vary in their proportion of altruists;
- (iii) those with more altruists must have more offspring;
- (iv) the groups must come together again to form a pool from which new groups form, keeping the same proportions.

How realistic are these conditions? The most obviously problematic is the last. But perhaps this is not so strange. Imagine people choosing who they want to associate with: altruists want to associate with altruists, and exclude egoists. There is some experimental work that suggests that in some non-human populations Simpson's effects emerge (e.g. Wade's work on tribolium beetles); but it doesn't seem very common.

## Empirical Work

There is good evidence that people in laboratory conditions do behave altruistically. Some of this is simply short term altruism for long term benefit: tit-for-tat in the prisoner's dilemma. Typically this involves reputation effect. (Why do there need to be an unknown number of plays?) But there is good evidence that in addition people are strong reciprocators: i.e. they reward altruism and punish egoism even when there is no long term benefit to be gained (in single-shot games with no reputation effect).

Should an evolutionary explanation be given of this? Not obviously since it seems to be learned behavior. And there is evidence that this is so: it differs across different societies; it is more prevalent in older individuals, or those who have played more games. Of course people need to be of the type that enables them to learn evolutionary behaviour. But maybe that is not something that needs to be explained directly by the benefits conferred on the whole population by altruism. What is really needed is some tendency to conformity. And there might be many reasons why that is selected for.