

# TAWP LECTURES: THE MANY FACETS OF ALTRUISM

Day 1, January 19th, 2011  
Joel Velasco

# AGENDA

- Lots of distinctions and clarifications
- Does biology undermine genuine altruism?
- Ethics and altruism

# WHAT IS ALTRUISM?

- Is giving to charity an altruistic act?
- On the motivational view, ask why you gave. Was it because you wanted to help others? Or because you wanted to impress someone?
- On the behavioral notion, ask about the consequences of giving. Who was made better off? By how much? Did the charity just squander the money?

# MAKING KEY DISTINCTIONS

- Does altruism require sacrifice (even if just opportunity cost)?
  - A company's CEO wants to sell healthy nutritional supplements for distribution in 3rd world countries. Scenario 1: he wants to help prevent malnutrition. Incidentally, he is going to make a lot of money.
- Does altruism require altruistic motives?
  - A company's CEO wants to sell healthy nutritional supplements for distribution in 3rd world countries. Scenario 2: he wants to make a lot of money. Incidentally, it will help prevent malnutrition.

# DEFINING ALTRUISM

- On the handout are some abstract descriptions of cases to try to separate motives from outcomes.
- In cases 1-3, your motives vary but you always do what is actually best for you.
- In cases 1\*-3\* your motives vary but you chose to do something other than what is actually best for you.
- I am also curious to know what you think the relationship between selfishness and altruism is and how this relates to morality.

# BIOLOGICAL ALTRUISM

- Biological Altruism is really quite different
- A behavior is altruistic if it costly to the actor and beneficial to the recipient - where cost and benefit are measured in terms of fitness.
- Standard examples include sterile insect castes, predator alarm calls, food sharing, etc.
- Stealing someone's birth control to use it yourself is biologically altruistic.

# DOES GENUINE ALTRUISM EXIST?

- In so far as there is a question at all, it isn't about behavioral altruism, but motivational. (Biological altruism is a different issue to be dealt with tomorrow).
- Psychological Egoism is the view that as a matter of fact, all ultimate desires are self-regarding. If we help others, it is only because that is a means to some other end of ours.
  - Notice that genuine spite, or the desire to harm or punish another, also runs counter to P. E.

# PSYCHOLOGICAL HEDONISM

- Hedonism is a special kind of Egoism. It says that as a matter of fact, what we aim at is always pleasure (or the avoidance of pain).
- Hedonism is usually thought to be undermined by things like the experience machine - more generally, by preferences for states that you will never know about (like fame after death, insurance for loved ones, etc.)
- But Egoism is broader.



# PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

- Even though Psychological Egoism is more flexible than Hedonism, it is still extremely restrictive. It says that as a matter of fact every action is done on the basis of only self-regarding motives.
- So even one example of genuine altruism is a counterexample to the thesis.
- Surely some examples of apparent altruism aren't really altruistic, but P.E. says none are.

# ANY PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISTS OUT THERE?



Jeremy Bentham (at UCL)

# PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

- Perhaps the most common argument for P. E. is the ‘you did it because you wanted to’ claim. But it is a trivial fact that the motives of the actor belong to the actor (I can’t act on Bob’s motives).
- Defenders of P. E. claim that this is a fact about human nature not a trivial fact about what we mean by ‘act’ or ‘motive’. It is supposed to be a fact about the content of our motives - that they are about our own welfare as we see it.

# PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

- Showing that some examples of apparent altruism could be selfish (like jumping on a grenade because you believe in the afterlife) is not a great argument for P. E.
- While this isn't an argument for P. E., it does lead to a worry. How could we ever know that some particular act was altruistic? Could we ever determine the truth of hedonism or egoism or motivational pluralism?

# PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

- Joey's response to Pheobe that her actions were not altruistic because she got a benefit from them is not complete.
- The 'yes, you helped others, but helping others makes you feel good' leads to a causal question: Did you help others because it made you feel good? Or is that a side effect?
  - And notice that pluralism is consistent with mixed motives - P. E. is not.

# TESTING PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

- We can (usually) tell either a selfish or an altruistic story about any particular action. But even if we can't tell what an actor's motives were in a particular case, that doesn't mean there is no fact of the matter about them.
- And just because you can tell a story in two ways doesn't mean each way is equally plausible.
  - And while asking somebody 'why did you do that' is not proof of their motives, it surely can be evidence.

# TESTING PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

- Future psychology or cognitive science may be able to test motives more directly than we are able to now.
  - On day 3 we will look at some evidence from experimental economics
- Sober also suggests an evolutionary argument for motivational pluralism: it is very likely that natural selection would favor humans having motives directly tied to the welfare of others rather than always having selfish motives.

# SELFISHNESS AND BIOLOGY

- The typical assumption in the literature is that since natural selection will favor traits that increase reproductive fitness, then natural selection will favor selfishness over altruism.
- The idea is “Nature, red in tooth and claw” (from Tennyson, *In Memoriam, A.H.H.*), “The Law of the Jungle”, etc.
  - This is why it is called “the puzzle of altruism”.



# SELFISHNESS AND BIOLOGY

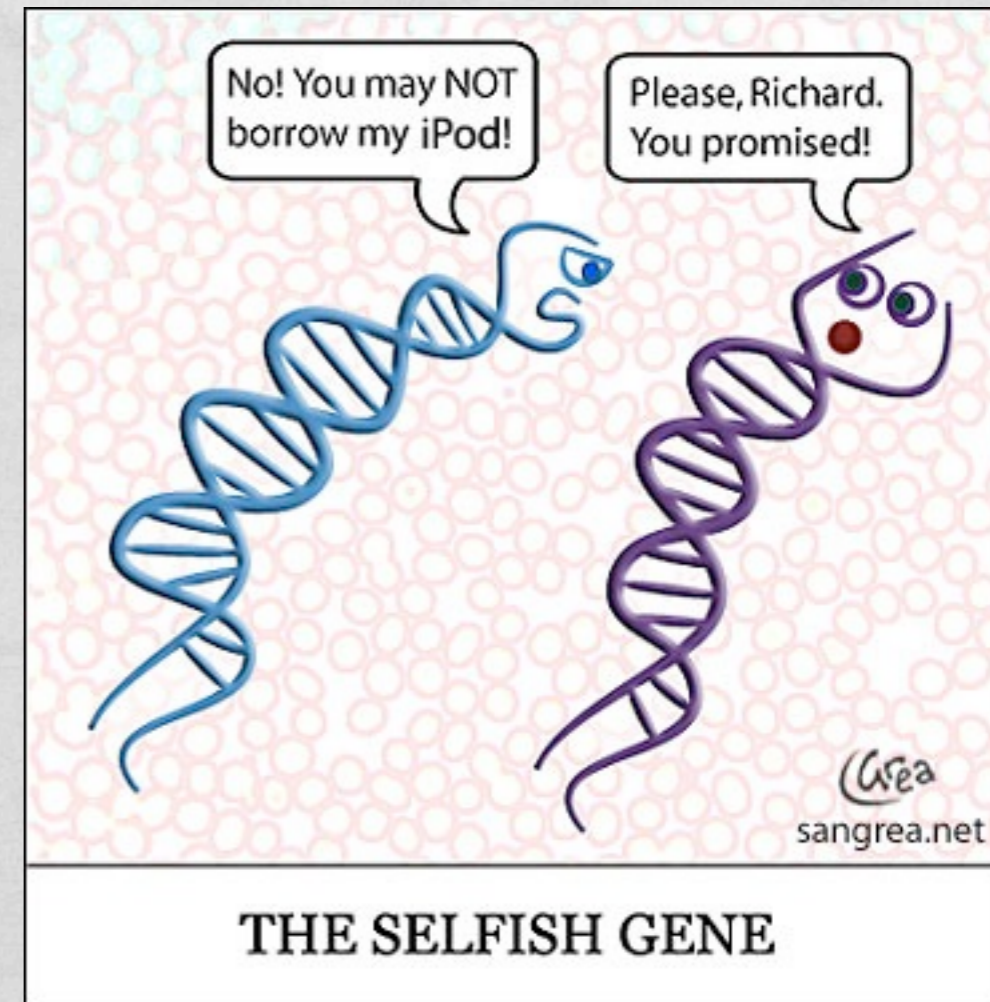
"No hint of genuine charity ameliorates our vision of society, once sentimentalism has been laid aside. What passes for cooperation turns out to be a mixture of opportunism and exploitation... Scratch an altruist and watch a hypocrite bleed."

- Michael Ghiselin, *The Economy of Nature and the Evolution of Sex* (pg. 247)

# ETHICS AND BIOLOGY

"Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish. Let us understand what our own selfish genes are up to, because we may then at least have the chance to upset their designs, something that no other species has ever aspired to do."

Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (p. 3)

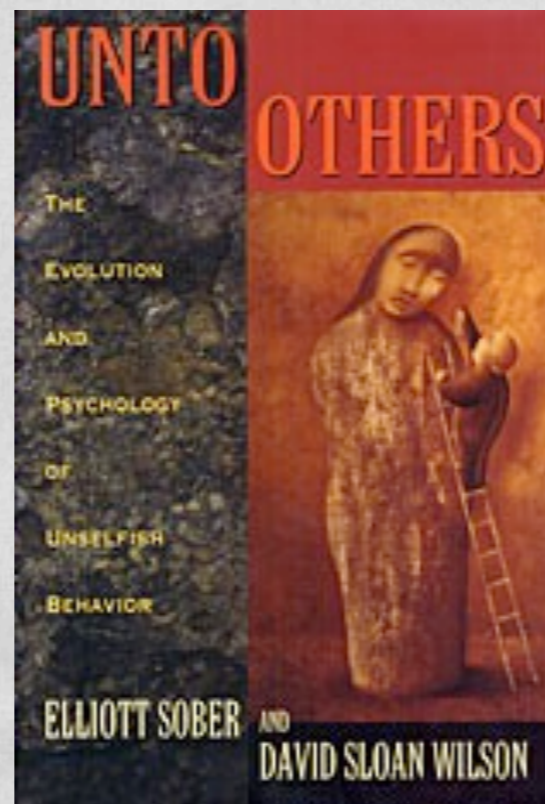


# EVOLUTION AND MOTIVES

- If we are considering other-directed motives as altruistic, there isn't any obvious connection between evolution leading us to do things in our own outcome based interests and having self-directed motives.
- This is even more obvious in the case of reproductive fitness. For example, having altruistic motives to help your spouse might be a very good way of enhancing your reproductive fitness. Caring about your children also has obvious fitness benefits.

# THE EVOLUTION OF MOTIVES

In Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior, Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson suggest that natural selection would act to make us motivational pluralists.



# THE EVOLUTION OF MOTIVES

- In Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior, Sober and Wilson suggest that natural selection would act to make us motivational pluralists.
- For example, natural selection favors parental care. Parents do a better job of this if they actually care about their children's wellbeing.
- Caring about your mate is sometimes a good bet as well.
- And if you want people to treat you well, genuinely caring for them will often be better than selfish calculations.

# THE EVOLUTION OF MOTIVES

- Certainly, there is no guarantee that evolution must favor pluralism. In general, evolutionary considerations involve at least:
  - **Availability:** are there psychological mechanisms for other-directed motives available for selection to act on?
  - **Reliability:** is being selfish a more reliable path to increased fitness?
  - **Efficiency:** is being selfish a more efficient (less costly) path to increased fitness?

# THE EVOLUTION OF MOTIVES

- Tomorrow we will also discuss the possibility that while some other-directed motive does strictly speaking lower your personal reproductive fitness, it might nevertheless evolve.
  - By group selection (multi-level selection theory)
  - By kin selection (inclusive fitness theory)

# ETHICS AND ALTRUISM

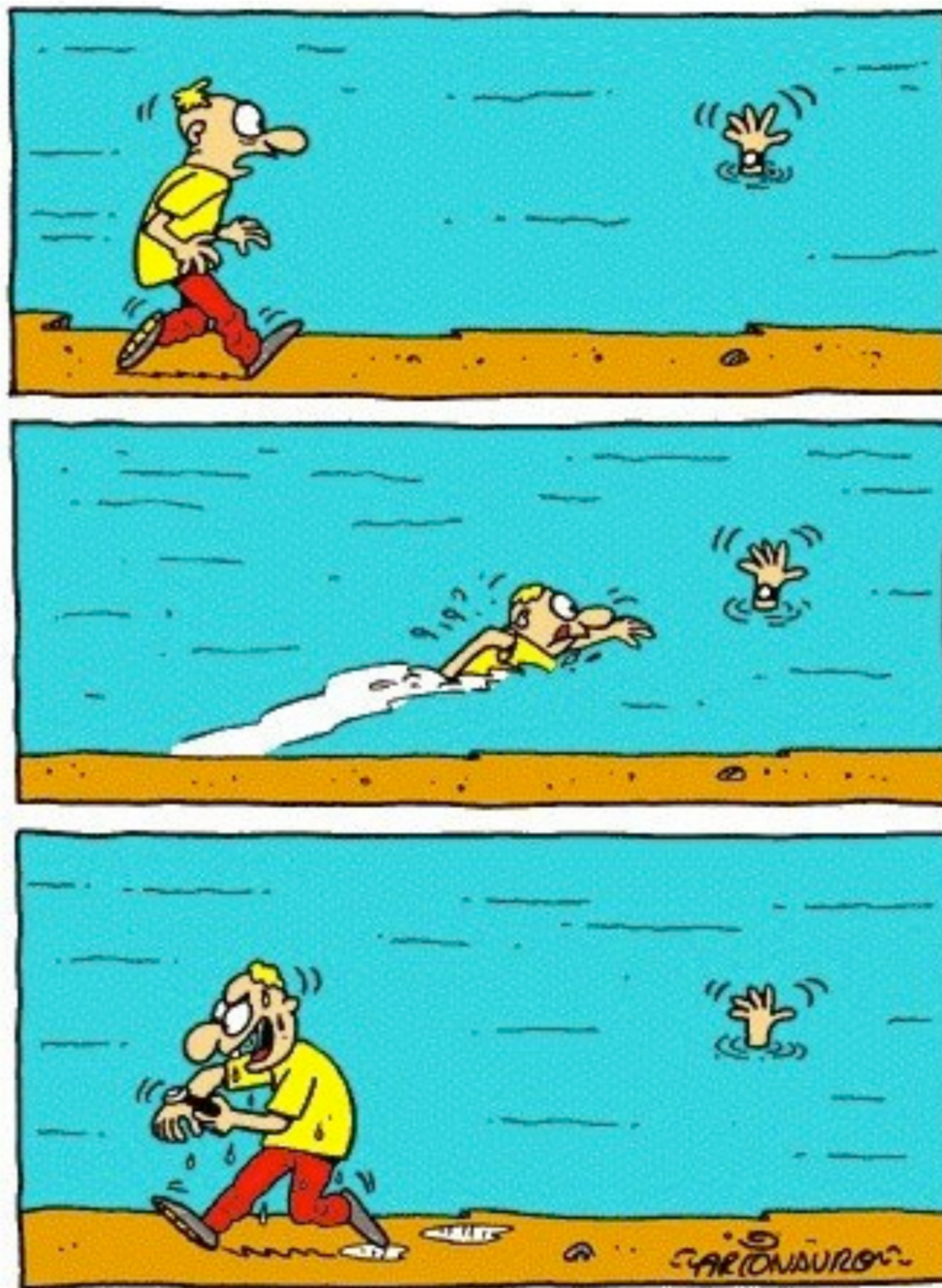
- Questions about our actual behavior are descriptive claims.
- But we can also ask normative questions: Should we be altruistic?
- Standard moral theories assume that consideration of others is morally obligatory.
  - For example, Utilitarianism says that everyone's interests - your included - count equally.



# DOES MORALITY REQUIRE ALTRUISM?

- Obviously views that imply that there are no moral requirements imply that altruism is not morally required.
- Ethical Egoism says that there are moral requirements. Namely, it is morally obligatory to pursue one's own self-interest. It is okay to help others, but not at a cost to yourself.

# Egoist in Action?

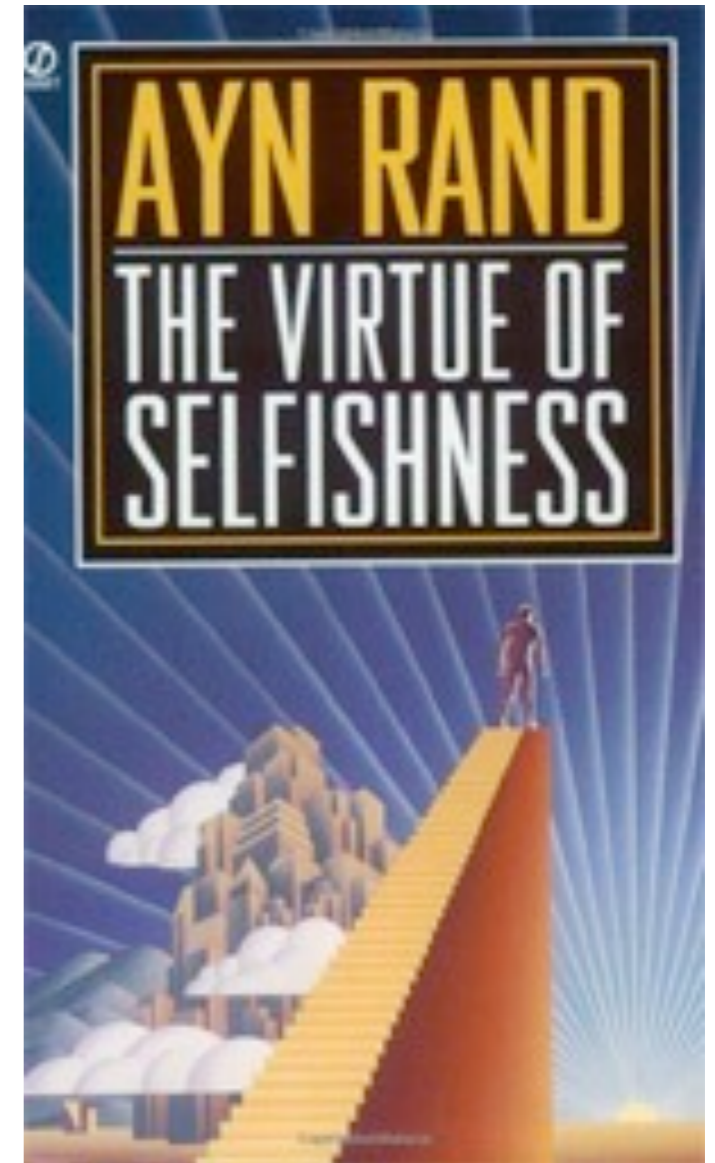
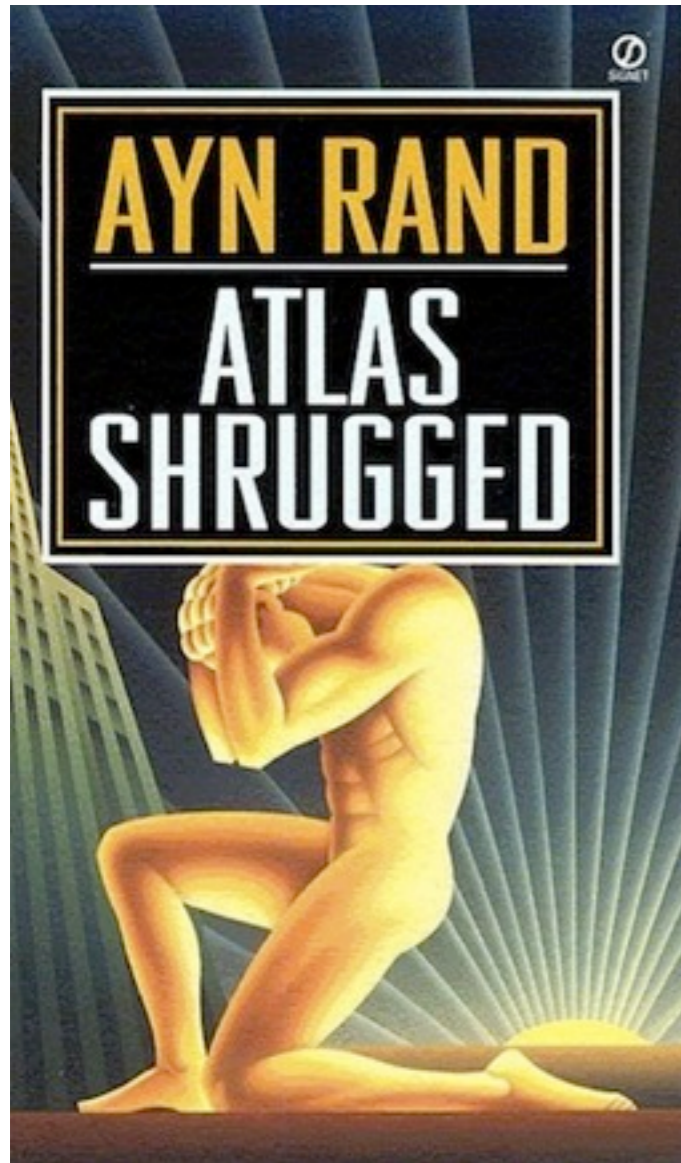


# ARGUMENTS FOR EGOISM

- Claim: If everyone were egoists, we would all be better off. Therefore we should be egoists.
  - This is an argument from concern for the general welfare - not an argument for egoism.
  - Also, it is obviously false that we would all be better off.

“If any civilization is to survive, it is the morality of altruism that men have to reject”

“The achievement of his own happiness is man’s highest moral purpose”



# AYN RAND'S ARGUMENT

- The Ayn Rand argument - the ethics of altruism doesn't respect the individual. Also, we have strong individual rights to pursue our own happiness and no one has rights against us.
- Rachels is a bit unfair to Rand since she means something extreme by "altruism".
  - But Rand's "argument" is really bad as an argument for egoism -- alternate views allow that you care about yourself as well.

# ARGUMENTS FOR EGOISM

- Rachels lists a third argument for Egoism - that it explains common sense morality (be good to others so they will be good to you).
  - As far as I can tell, this isn't even an argument for egoism. And it clearly doesn't explain common sense morality anyway since that includes the idea that morality is sometimes opposed to self-interest.

# ARGUMENTS AGAINST EGOISM

- Rachels believes that the main refutation of E. E. is that it is unacceptably arbitrary. But there is obviously a possibly relevant difference between the actor and everyone else.
- But Ethical Egoism seems to allow things that are clear cases of wrong doing - say killing others to make money for yourself. Rachels suggests this might be begging the question, but I would be unwilling to even consider the possibility that Rachels' examples are morally required.

# OUR SELFISH NATURES

- Standard moral theories assume that consideration of others is morally obligatory.
- For example, Utilitarianism says that everyone's interests - your included - count equally.
- Many of those who claim that we are by nature selfish, claim that this is morally a bad thing. Ethics is about overcoming our inner natures.
- But are we naturally selfish? And what does this mean?



# FOR TOMORROW...

- Under what conditions (if any) would we expect biologically altruistic behaviors to evolve?
- Historically, going back to Darwin, biological altruism was explained by group selection. But group selection fell out of favor in the 1960s.
  - First, we will examine why group selection has fallen out of favor.
  - Then we will briefly look at the current status of the “levels of selection” debate.

# FOR DAY 3...

- On day 3, we focus explicitly on humans.
- Humans appear to be behaviorally altruistic quite often -- though much of this behavior can be explained via norms which is sometimes thought to undermine its altruistic nature.
- Is there a biological explanation for these behaviors such as group selection or cultural selection?
- Does this shed any light on our question about psychological egoism and motivational altruism?