

# On some implications of evolutionary psychology for the study of preferences and institutions<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

In many economic interactions, for instance in firms, the standard approximation of strict self-interest is inadequate to modeling human behavior. A scientific theory of preferences, grounded in evolutionary psychological and biological theory, can avoid resort to ad hoc assumptions. Evolutionary theory is supported by a growing body of data including new results in experimental economics. It holds that the evolved human nature includes an ability to solve social dilemma problems through reciprocity and punishment of cheaters. Treating realized preferences as phenotypic expressions with both environmental and genetic causes will also allow economists to study the impact of institutions on preferences. © 2000 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

Darwinism was once taken to imply that the process of biological competition can spare no sentimentality for unselfishness or indeed, for sentiment itself. The most ruthless, self-seeking, and rational organisms will survive, while weaker members of their species will fall by the wayside. Darwinism and the economics of the century that followed *The Origin of Species* appeared to entail kindred social theories, in which human moral pretensions were set aside and the natural competitiveness of the species claimed its full due.

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Edgeworth's dictum that "The first principle of economics is that every agent is actuated only by self-interest"<sup>1</sup> was thought by many to be Darwin's as well.

Darwin (1871) himself had been interested in both sentiment and altruism. But while this fact was known to some careful readers, it took many decades before the cooperative dimension of social interaction emerged as a central focus of biology and allied social sciences. This new focus is exemplified by the work of biologist Robert Trivers in the 1970s, political scientist Robert Axelrod and biologist William Hamilton in the 1980s, and psychologist Leda Cosmides and anthropologist John Tooby in the 1990s, although other important contributors could be cited.<sup>2</sup> Theorists of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology take as their starting point the idea that it is genes, rather than the organisms that bear them, that engage in the struggle for survival. From an evolutionary standpoint, survival of several replicas is better than survival of any one copy. Organisms not predisposed by their genes to invest resources in bearing and (where immaturity at birth requires it) nurturing offspring will make poor agents for "replication-minded" genes. Any undue propensity to shirk on investments in reproduction and nurturing, should it appear by the serendipity of mutation, will be selected against, since the genes in which the new propensity is encoded will leave fewer copies in future generations. More broadly, propensities to invest resources in helping close kin, who share a significant fraction of one's own genes, will pay off in evolutionary terms.<sup>3</sup>

### *1.1. Altruism and reciprocity: not all is self-interest*

The universality of maternal and, more broadly, of kin altruism across human cultures is an illustration of the fact that organic evolution can produce organisms that are not strictly self-interested. But more remarkable and of at least equal importance to economics and other social sciences is the phenomenon of reciprocal cooperation among *nonkin*. Sympathies among nonkin are arguably rare or shallow, or where they exist, they might be supposed to arise through a "misplaced" diffusion of kin altruism. Yet in the small band-like societies that are believed to have constituted the environment of most of human evolution, propensities to cooperate with other group members and to react with anger toward nonreciprocators of cooperation may have been genetically favored. Large-brained hominids who repeatedly interacted would have learned to recognize one another's behaviors and to seek out others known to behave cooperatively when engaging in interactions with positive sum payoffs (for instance, sharing meat from hunting excursions character-

<sup>1</sup> Edgeworth (1881).

<sup>2</sup> See Trivers (1971), Axelrod and Hamilton (1981). In this note, we concentrate especially on the field called evolutionary psychology. See Barkow et al. (1992), Buss (1995), and for an accessible popular treatment and further references, see Wright (1994). Evolutionary psychology forms part of a broader set of evolutionary approaches that includes the well-known work of Dawkins (1989), the sociobiological approach of Wilson (1978), and the coevolutionary approaches of Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman (1981), Lumsden and Wilson (1983), Boyd and Richerson (1999), and Durham (1991). We also mention in a later note but do not discuss at length the group selectionist variant represented by Sober and Wilson (1998). Finally, we do not attempt to review exhaustively past discussions of sociobiology by economists; for a wide-ranging treatment, see Hirschleifer (1977).

<sup>3</sup> The mathematics of selection for kin altruism was first developed by biologist Hamilton (1964); a discussion with applications for economics is provided by Bergstrom (1996, pp. 1905–1908).

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