Sociobiology & Ethics

Dawkins, Mackie & Midgley
Richard Dawkins: Sociobiology & Altruism

- “The Selfish Gene” - survival of gene is more important than that of individual
Dawkins & the Selfish Gene

- Dawkins on BBC: *The Selfish Gene* is not about selfishness!
- [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9DC09lDye4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9DC09lDye4)
- [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VC-3e8BUyHw&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VC-3e8BUyHw&feature=related)
- [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7slOLyn4kn8&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7slOLyn4kn8&feature=related)
Dawkins & the Selfish Gene

- Dawkins argues against the conventional “survival of the species” and for the survival of the gene – we are “gene-machines” and our primary function is the perpetuation and reproduction of gene types.
Dawkins’ Law

- Dawkins version is *not* about a ruthless competitive “survival of the fittest” individuals.
Dawkins’ Law

Dawkins also rejects group selection ala Kipling’s version: "The strength of the Pack is the Wolf and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack."
For Dawkins, discussions of the good of the group or even species is inadequate in an evolutionary account of altruistic behavior.

Individuals, groups and species “are as genetic units too temporary to qualify for natural selection.” (Mackie, p.34)
“Darwinism is not a theory of random chance. It is a theory of random mutation plus non-random cumulative natural selection. . . . Natural selection . . . is a non-random force, pushing towards improvement. . . . Every generation has its Darwinian failures but every individual is descended only from previous generations' successful minorities. . . . [T]here can be no going downhill - species can't get worse as a prelude to getting better. . . . There may be more than one peak.”

(— Richard Dawkins, *Climbing Mount Improbable*)
Dawkins’ Law

- Dawkins claims that this theory better explains why some will sacrifice for the perpetuation of a genetic legacy.
But what about those who are not immediately related to us? Dawkins suggests ... (w)ithin a community a specific kind of altruism may turn out to be the best for the perpetuation of the genetic type. Dawkins uses an example is based on a population infected by something negative. It might be birds *parasitized by a particularly nasty kind of tick which carries a dangerous disease*. But no matter what this torment might be, one single individual cannot help itself. The birds are dependent on other birds to get rid of ticks, at least those on their heads.

Dawkins’ Law

- Three populations of “tick birds”
  - Grudgers
  - Cheaters
  - Suckers
- Grudgers exhibit most \textit{evolutionary stable strategy}; Their genetic package will continue.
Dawkins’ Law

- But what about our altruistic acts towards complete strangers?
- Dawkins discusses a kind of “misfiring” (p.192) of the selfish gene mechanism which mistakenly produces kinship behavior.
Dawkins Beyond Genetics: The Role of Reason

- In Dawkins’ next book, *The Devil’s Chaplain*, he argues that survival of the fittest is a pretty brutal life, and that humans may be able to do considerably better given that we have developed reason.

- See Dawkins with Peter Singer on BBC:
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYYNY2oKVWU
  - [start at 16.26 minutes – to 19 minutes into the program].
“Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passed it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain....”
...As my colleague N.K. Humphrey neatly summed up an earlier draft of this chapter: `... memes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically. When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell. And this isn't just a way of talking -- the meme for, say, "belief in life after death" is actually realized physically, millions of times over, as a structure in the nervous systems of individual men the world over."

from Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Chap.11
Mackie argues that Dawkins has missed how evolutionary stable strategies may be a third sort of replicator – like genes and memes – and function as a "self-reproducing feature of groups." (p.37)
"...there is no simple transition from 'is' to 'ought,' no direct argument from what goes on in the natural world and among non-human animals to what humans ought to do.... We cannot simply apply to the human situation conclusions drawn from biological models." (pp.38-39)
Care for others is not a biological imperative of a gene nor is it a kind of misfiring – there is a far more likely and simpler explanation of this behavior.
Midgley: Critique of Dawkins

- For Midgley, we care for others not for our own sake or the sake of a gene but for the sake of others...
- We’re raised in groups and through this experience we learn to care about how others in our familial groups feel.
Midgley: Critique of Dawkins

- Caring for strangers is not a misfiring but a temporary adoption of the other as an “honorary relative.”
- This adoption often begins as curiosity but then morphs into care.

Hiker finds Debra Collins alive in Fall Creek Park
By Alia Wilson FELTON

With an injured ankle, four layers of clothing and a downed tree for shelter, Debra Collins survived six nights in the woods until a man and his son found her off an unmarked trail in Fall Creek park about 11:30 a.m. Saturday.

Joachim "Joe" Deguara and his 7-year-old son, Dylan, wanted to get out of the house this weekend, and when they learned Friday that a neighbor was missing, they decided to see what they could do.