

Evolutionary Explanation and the Ideal of Altruism:
the Incommensurability of the Christian Love Command

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Abstract: The integration of an evolutionary origin of human behaviors with the capacity to symbolically idealize seemingly unattainable and paradoxical concepts such as altruism (e.g. devotion to others' interests as an ethical principle leading to self-sacrifice and forgoing genetic progeny) is an imperative for theories of biological adaptation and for understanding our religious yearning for transcendence. Our ethical and spiritual attraction to aesthetics, purpose, and altruism as self-sacrifice seem to be rooted in these two pursuits. By understanding how biological adaptation has created a mind that yearns, in a social setting, for religious transcendence we are led to idealizations of behavior beyond our capability. Of all creatures on earth, we seem to uniquely yearn for perfection of behavior, purpose, and utopian ideals. Is altruism a result of both biological processes and cultural influence, particularly religious ideals of behavior?

I will explore whether or not evolutionary explanations of altruism show that self-sacrificial behavior is a biological adaptation, a transcendent and unattainable ideal, or some combination of the two. Using adoption of non-relatives as a model, I will test if adoptive behavior is altruism as defined or if sociobiological explanations sufficiently show them to be egoistic at some level. Explanations of animal and human adoption (in traditional or modern societies) *are mostly* amenable to evolutionary explanations. As a result, the best one can say about most adoption practices with respect to self-sacrifice is that they exhibit pro-social behavior, not altruism as defined above. In those few cases where adoption *appears* genetically altruistic, the behavior is most often explainable as maladaptive "rescue" behavior. However, exceptions still do exist: celibates who adopt.

Thus most adoptions can be seen in light of pro-social behavior at best or maladaptation at worse. *And yet*, we still idealize the concept of adoptive altruism (genetic self-sacrifice), admiring the rare celibates willing to sacrifice reproductive imperatives to raise others' children. Therefore, altruism can be realized within a few who develop within a religious environment emphasizing the transcendent. It appears that our ability to *symbolically idealize* altruism within a religious context makes us unique considering that our ability to biologically achieve it seems limited. Provided we continue striving to meet the ideal, we will always have hope even if that hope is rooted in an eschatological future rather than a present reality.

Keywords: Adoption, Agape, Altruism, Christian love, Evolution, Mother Theresa, Sociobiology

Introduction: Altruistic behavior (e.g. devotion to others' interests as an ethical principle leading to self-sacrifice and forgoing genetic progeny) is an evolutionary puzzle. Concepts like competition, struggle for existence, and survival of the fittest seem solid bases for natural selection of individuals who are reproductively successful. Cooperation, pro-social behavior, but especially altruism, seem opposed to it. Once behavior for-the-good-of-the-species (Wynne-Edwards, 1962) was rejected, sociobiology explained cooperative behavior in terms of inclusive fitness based on gene selection (Hamilton, 1964), and pro-social behavior in terms of reciprocity based in game theory (Axelrod and Hamilton, 1981). Sociobiologists regard these explanations as sufficient to explain cooperative and pro-social behavior in animals (Alcock, 2001; Wilson, 1975). Altruism (as defined above), especially in humans, still needed explaining.

Sociobiological explanations worked for *most* human behavior that appeared to be self-sacrificial (evaluating behavioral outcomes not motives), but was really pro-social or cooperative when considering whether or not progeny were produced. Rare but notable exceptions still occur in self-sacrificing saints and celibates. Here, evolutionary explanations seem insufficient.

The brain architecture for cooperation and pro-sociality may have arisen via evolution to help us love family and friends, but its capacity to idealistically conceptualize transcendent behaviors such as the love command of Jesus seems to go beyond biology. These idealistic behaviors can lead to personal and genetic sacrifice thus apparently denying the biological mechanisms (survival and reproduction) that originally may have developed the brain architecture capable of obtaining them. Even Christ recognized that to die for a stranger is rare (John 15:13) as did Paul (Romans 5:7).

Adoption as Altruism? A behavior that might be a parsimonious example of altruism (self-sacrifice from a genetic perspective) is adoption of non-relatives. Dawkins calls it a double mistake: the adopter fails to reproduce and she frees others to do so (Dawkins, 1976). How *do* we explain a "Mother Theresa effect" where individuals adopt unrelated children rather than have their own? We should first determine if Dawkins' claim is true. Adoption may provide benefits.

Studies of animal adoption show that their reproductive fitness is unharmed since most animal adoptions result from kin selection or reciprocity (Avital et. al. 1998). With humans the explanations for adoptive behavior appear similar with the possible exception of infertile couples in industrial cultures – people rarely abandon genetic relatives or reciprocating friends when they adopt (Chambers, 1975). Silk (1990), defines three possible hypotheses for human adoption behavior (Table 1). One hypothesis is that adoption is not influenced by evolutionary adaptation but reflects learned cultural beliefs about the value of children and the nature of kinship (Durham, 1992). If true, one should find greater inconsistency in patterns of adoption across cultures. With the minor exception of some socially-engineered industrial societies, we find considerable homogeneity (Silk, 1990).

If, on the other hand, adoption is evolutionarily adaptive, one would expect adoption to be more common among genetic relatives or reciprocating non-relatives. Even in industrial cultures, one might expect that adopting parents would be limited to those who are infertile and are forced to adopt non-relatives.

A third possibility is that the attraction to neonatal features is behavior shaped in a different environment than the current one but is mis-directed in industrial societies. In

presumed ancestral hunter-gatherer societies, caring for any child within these small, often related, groups would run a high likelihood of maximizing at least inclusive fitness or enhancing reciprocity. The desire to nurture children may be due to a proximate neuro-endocrinology that is stimulated visually by neonatal features: large head, high forehead, receding jaw, large eyes. Brédart and French (1995) showed that human neurology seems primed to accept anyone's baby as our own. They found that a child could not be correctly identified as belonging to either parent preferentially. In monogamous societies, extra-pair copulations occur 9-30% of the time with most timed for optimum conception. Concealed ovulation as well as confusion over paternity keeps a cuckolded provider present. Continuing the deception, females attribute resemblance of a child to the male provider rather than themselves, especially in his presence (Daly and Wilson, 1982; Regalski and Gaulin, 1993). Finally, humans seem predisposed to love those who exhibit familial cues. These cues can be phenotypic resemblance, paternity belief, even symbolic genealogical links forged by familial metaphors as seen in religious groups (e.g. referring to parishioners as brothers or sisters) (Davis and Daly, 1997; Wilson, 2002).

Data collected from traditional cultures show that adoption is explainable by inclusive fitness and reciprocity (Silk, 1980). Data collected since Silk's rejection of Sahlin's (1976) claim that adoption reflected altruism continue to support non-altruistic explanations (Damas, 1983). In industrial cultures, however, the adoption of non-relatives occurs. This has followed the demise of extended families and the non-availability for adoption of nieces, nephews, and cousins (Silk, 1990). Adoption practices in the U.S. are affected by the artificial engineering of families by social workers (Ruark, 2002). Despite this social engineering, the demographics show that sociobiological hypotheses are supported. Bonham (1977) showed that 70% of all adoptions were made by infertile couples. However, only 4.5% of *all* sterile/subfecund women decide to adopt (Table 2). Only 0.98% of fertile women adopted. Within this cohort, fertile women with one child made up a very small proportion (0.055%) of adopters. Fertile women with two or more children were more likely to adopt than those with one child (0.925%) perhaps because they already have a full complement of genes in the next generation and an adoptive child represents a minor burden. These results are as expected from an evolutionary viewpoint. Women who know, or believe, they are fertile wait until they have a full complement of genes in the next generation (two or more children) prior to adopting.

Bonham also found that even within a socially-engineered society like the U.S., adoptions by relatives were quite high (about 50% -64% of adoptions). When non-relatives were adopted, 84% are under 11 months old. This result, coupled with the fact that so few women with fecundity problems choose adoption as a solution, suggests that adoption of non-relatives is quite rare even in socially-engineered societies. The adoptions that do take place can easily be explained by the mis-directed adaptation hypothesis: a proximate behavior that causes us to desire children but that no longer has the evolutionary effect of maximizing reproductive success of the adopter.

Does the small minority of fertile women with one biological child who adopt (eleven of nearly twenty thousand) display altruism? After all, they do not have a full set of genes in the environment. To answer that question, we first must determine if they benefited in some way from the adoption. Did they gain resources by adopting a second child that could be used to benefit the genetic progeny? Are the grandchildren from the

biological child favored over those of the adopted child? These questions were not answered by the researchers.

Finally, Silk (personal communication), stated that fertile couples choosing to adopt in lieu of having children are "rare and limited to people with religious or political motivations to serve the children." An adoption advisor for a church-related adoption agency stated that such "couples are referred to as having a 'rescue mentality'; the social drive to adopt is often not strong enough to maintain it when the rigors of child rearing hit; these couples make the least motivated parents."

Interpretation: With rare exceptions, the data show that Darwinian explanations are sufficient in both traditional and industrial societies to explain adoption. In traditional societies, adoption is explained by inclusive fitness and reciprocity mechanisms. In industrial societies, these mechanisms are at work as well as proximate ones that operate by using ordinarily adaptive behaviors that are now mis-directed. Adoption does not appear necessarily to be altruism as defined.

This does not mean, however, that adoption *cannot* be a form of altruism. Altruism appears to exist in other contexts, such as celibates who never reproduce but adopt and raise others' children. Evolutionary hypotheses seem insufficient for these examples. Biology explains reciprocity and inclusive fitness; cultural transmission helps explain pro-social and cooperative behaviors; symbolic thinking explains group inclusiveness. But to explain rare behaviors of saints and celibates it seems we need more than biology, cultural transmission, or symbolic families. We need to explain *these* behaviors as a function of our capacity to idealize. Some might call this misdirected behavior or an anomaly; to do so begs the question. What could explain such behavior even if rare?

Idealized Behavior: The Christian love command is an example of an evolutionarily unstable strategy – one that does not promote survival and reproduction. Nothing is adaptive about a religion that calls for a person to reject family (Luke 9:60-62) and self (Matt 16:24). What motivates an individual to carry out the Jesus love command rejecting even reproductive imperatives by adopting and being celibate? Perhaps the ability to idealize being one with God (or the cosmos) underlies such behaviors. The ability to no longer have a sense of self and become part of a "universal one" seems to supercede genetic survival in the form of offspring (Newberg and d'Aquili, 2001).

In Meisinger's (2000) presentation of Burhoe's scientific theology, he points out that humans have both a biological and a cultural nature. Mediation between this duality is the enigmatic function of religion. The idea that somehow altruism is "written into the fundamental nature of human reality" (Hefner 1993, 208) and has a foundation "in ultimate reality . . . [with] an intrinsic ontic character" (Meisinger 2000, 769) may be the case. However, this seems only possible if we postulate a supernatural being with the ultimate purpose of bringing all things into oneness with itself in a future of harmony. However, such a being must apparently pull this feat off using creatures who are more concerned with fulfilling an original blessing to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:22; 1:28) – a poetic but ironic rendering of the foundation of all evolutionary theory: to maximize reproductive success!

In his explanation of altruism (Jesus' love command of agape in John 15:13 and I John 3:16), Meisinger concludes that altruistic love (laying down one's life for another including self-sacrifice at the genetic level) cannot "spring from" inclusive fitness or

reciprocity – biology is insufficient to explain the altruistic ideal of saints and celibates. Sacrifice for unrelated persons and enemies, adopting rather than reproducing – these are very evolutionarily unstable strategies that require belief in supernatural conditions of “ultimate reality.” Even adoption is mostly selfish, non-sacrificial behavior. But then there are still those rare saints and celibates. It seems that only if we postulate such saintly behavior is “nothing but” an element of a mystical mind (formed when such mysticism was advantageous for survival) can we eliminate the requirement of the supernatural.

Perhaps humans are capable of conceiving ideals (e.g. a perfect love, a perfect being, ultimate purpose) due to a brain infrastructure that comprehends metaphysical concepts such as the quest for meaning and fulfillment – or purpose (Meisinger 2000, 769). Such a brain may envision these ideals best within a religious culture that promotes altruism. In opposition to this, Dennett (1991) would call these *qualia* and liken the ability to idealize to an evolutionary adaptation no longer serving a useful function . . . much like our craving for sweets now makes us overweight, a maladaptation. However, it seems that a purposeful ontology allows the human mind to operate with a greater sense of meaning than such nihilism provides. Hefner looks at sociobiology as providing data on how God used evolution in divine creation and will continue to use it in *creatio continua* to allow humans as created co-creators to bring the cosmos into an eschatological fulfillment (Meisinger 2000, 771-2) – a purpose. Perhaps idealizations such as altruism are one step in fulfilling that purpose.

Biological evolution may provide the infrastructure which allowed humans to have the capacity for idealization, even to engage in cooperative behavior; culture may build upon that infrastructure to expand cooperation toward pro-social behavior and even altruism. But it seems religious ideals of behavior are needed to complete our evolution (*creatio continua*). In the Christian tradition this requires that one strive to conform to Christ’s self-sacrifice for the world. Emulation of such selflessness, even if its fulfillment can only come via grace in an eschatological future, allows one to “find our deepest harmony with our destiny” (Meisinger 2000, 774). Effectively, altruism provides us with a hopeful purpose even in the face of what may actually be an absurd universe. Provided it also encourages us to act, rather than sit like Thessalonians waiting for a future, we may be able to help usher fulfillment in to succeed wherever Humanism fails.

Table 1 – Evolutionary hypotheses used for adoption

- A. Adoption as Adaptation
 - Inclusive fitness and Reciprocity
 - Enables female fertility or increased mate access to males
 - Increased economic resource access/social acceptance
- B. Adoption as Mis-directed Adaptive Behavior
- C. Adoption as Cultural Phenomenon

Table 2 – Adoption statistics

Female Cohort		Number in Cohort	Number who Adopted	
Sterile/Sub-fecund	0 children	7,010	302	(4.31%)
	1 child	3,246	155	(4.78%)
Fecund,	0 children		0	
	1 child	19,992	11	(0.055%)
	2 or more		185	(0.925%)

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