

Philosophy 501
Essay #7
5 November 2004

The task is to compare and contrast three of the authors in the book on the question of whether human actions are always selfish. By “selfish” I mean thinking or acting primarily - or only - with reference to oneself. The three authors I’ve chosen are Richard Dawkins, Stephen Jay Gould, and James Rachels.

I think that first it would be helpful to try to give a capsule of each person’s thought, at least what we can know of it from the selections in the book. Dawkins conceptualizes individuals as “survival machines.” He believes in natural selection and says that it is the genes that control the survival machine in such a way that it is able to make the best use of its environment - including the use of other machines as part of that environment. He reasons that a survival machine will not just kill its competitors indiscriminately because it may be that such an action - especially in a large and complex system - may end up benefiting some other machine instead of itself. He uses a cost-benefit framework to explain how this applied (at the gene level??!!). He appears to be saying that if we show restraint, it is still an action that is purely for our own benefit,

Stephen Jay Gould says we shouldn’t blame our animal past for what we see as dislikable in our natures - aggression, brutality, and so on. This forces a dualism in which our finer impulses are thought to come from our rational mind (that unlike other animals, only we possess). Gould also says that natural selection means that organisms act only in their own self-interest - so how to account for altruism? How can anything other than selfishness evolve as a biological trait of behavior? Gould answers by referring to the theory of kin selection. Although a certain action may look “unselfish” (I step into the path of a bus to save my child), I am really acting on the impulse to save my genetic potential, as it were. He believes that altruistic tendencies could also have evolved biologically, but he doesn’t really go into the morality of actions, per se.

James Rachels asks why we are not more altruistic when we can be. He doesn't look at why we behave as we do, but how should we behave. Do we have any duties towards other people? He looks at the idea of ethical egoism, which says that each person should pursue his or her own self-interest exclusively. This turns out to be not as selfish a matter as it sounds. When he examines the arguments in favor of ethical egoism, they seem to endorse a kind of altruism that sounds suspiciously like the Golden Rule. In the course of pursuing your own self-interest, you are not prohibited from actions that help others; in fact, you might find that on occasion, it is to your advantage to help someone else.

Turning to the question of whether human actions are always selfish, I think that Dawkins would say yes, Gould would say not necessarily, and Rachels would say no - but it may depend on how you interpret a behavior in the end. Let me think of a selfish act. Let's say that at a communal dining table, there is only a small amount of chicken soup with dumplings for four people to share. The Dawkins character would take as large a helping as he felt he wanted, irrespective of the fact that someone was not going to get any due to his action; the Gould character would make sure that he helped his daughter to the largest helping at the expense of his own; and the Rachels character might try to give himself the largest helping, but would retreat if the other two started to threaten him, reasoning it would be better to be hungry than dead (he might also wait his chance to grab the bowl from the daughter while her father's back was turned OR team up with the father and daughter to wrest the bowl away from the first man.) This scenario would change for the Dawkins man if there were more, large hungry men at the table. In that case, his "cost-benefit" analysis (performed lightning fast in his mind) might dictate that cooperating with the others for a more equal distribution contributed more to his self-interest than taking more than his share. In this case, even though it may look like altruism and sharing, the impulse for the behavior is selfish. The Gould character looks to be behaving altruistically (making sure his child gets fed before himself), but he

is acting in his self-interest in trying to keep her fed. In Gould's view, even our altruistic actions may have evolved through natural selection if they favor the passing on of one's genes. This is much harder to see in an isolated incident like this example. It also doesn't explain why we perform altruistic actions for strangers, or for people with whom we are not related.

The Rachels character has the same impulse to act selfishly if he is really hungry, but if he is operating out of the ethical egoism theory, he will moderate his behavior if the situation seems to be more advantageous to him to take less, but still get some.

I'm not sure I have chosen the authors carefully for this comparison to be successful. Dawkins does not deal with whether actions are moral or immoral, ethical or unethical. He uses such a micro unit (the gene) and seems to invest it with anthropomorphic sensibilities - as if a gene is thinking or performing cost-benefit analyses! The overt proponents of selfishness (Hobbes, Ayn Rand and Tara Smith) were not of interest to me, so you might say that I indulged MY selfish preferences for Gould, Rachels, and Dawkins at the expense of a cogent essay that would hold together.