

Family And Society

Emotions, Society, And Cooperation

Blithering Genius

2014 April 14

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1 Relationships and Emotions

Humans have the capacity to form different types of relationships, which are mediated by emotions. We can divide these relationships into two categories: family and social. They create two types of structure: family and society. The family is held together by the pair bond between a man and a woman, parent-child bonds, and (to a lesser extent) sibling bonds. Society is held together by cooperative relationships, and (for large-scale societies) some degree of coercion.

Behavior is driven by emotions. Sexual emotions cause us to seek mates and form sexual relationships. Parents bond with children, and are motivated to protect and support them. Social emotions cause us to seek cooperative relationships with others and avoid conflict. Emotions cause us to self-organize into families and societies.

2 Attraction And Attachment

The sexual emotions can be divided into attraction and attachment. Attraction can be further subdivided into sexual attraction (aka “lust”) and a more holistic attraction that I call “adoration”, which is also called “falling in love”. Lust is simply physical attraction to another body. Adoration is the desire to be with someone. It is an attraction to the person as a whole, usually with the intent of forming a long-term relationship. The function of adoration is to focus your attention and efforts on a single individual, to bring about a lasting relationship rather than a fleeting liaison.

Once you are in a sexual relationship, you tend to become attached to the other person. Attraction brings people together. Attachment keeps them together. Attachment is usually called “love”. Love is a simpler emotion than attraction. It is generated by skin-to-skin contact. Intimate contact causes attachment. Love is more than just the desire to be with the other person. It is also an empathetic identification with the other person. It causes people to take care of each other.

3 Parent-Child Relationships

Parents and children also love each other, but in a different way. Parents bond with their children, and are motivated to take care of them. Children also bond with their parents, but are not as motivated to take care of them. Again, these emotions have biological functions. Taking care of children is instrumental to reproduction. The parent-child bond directs a flow of energy/work from parents to their children. Love causes energetic altruism. Parents work for the benefit of their children. In doing so, they are working toward their own reproduction.

Love is always asymmetric to some degree. In a sexual relationship, the man is energetically altruistic toward the woman (in most cases). In a parent-child relationship, the parent is energetically altruistic toward the child. This asymmetry is mostly determined by neoteny, aka “cuteness”. Women are cuter than men. Children are cuter than adults. Neoteny consists of the shape and proportions of the face, the size of the body, and the pitch of the voice. Our emotions recognize and respond to neoteny in loving relationships. Energy flows from the less neotenous to the more neotenous, generally speaking.

There is nothing unfair about this arrangement. A man is working toward his own reproductive interests by protecting and supporting the woman he has sex with. Parents are working toward their own reproductive interests by protecting and supporting their children. This energetic altruism is reproductively selfish.

4 Love

Love is not altruism. Love is part of a selfish reproductive strategy.

Love can also direct energy flows between other family members, but to a lesser extent. The main flows of energy are from man to woman and from parent to child.

When male parentage cannot be established, males will compete over females, rather than transferring energy to offspring. In most mammal species, males only invest in mating, not in protecting or supporting offspring. Investment in offspring requires some way to identify one’s own offspring, such as a pair-bond with sexual fidelity. This is another example of how energetic altruism is linked to reproduction.

People can form parent-child bonds with pets, especially animals that are cute and cuddly. This is an example of how emotions are heuristic, and don't always generate adaptive behavior. In the past, cats and dogs had the function of killing mice and rats, but today most pets are simply energetic parasites that attach to their hosts through emotions. A pet is an artificial child.

Some people believe that energetic altruism exists at larger scales, such as an ethnic group or race. They believe that altruism is based on shared genes, rather than family relationships. This is not true. An ethnic group or race is not a family. It is not held together by love, or anything else. We are selected to reproduce, not to serve the "interests of our genes" in some abstract sense.

Love is tied to reproduction. Flows of energy are tied to flows of genes.

5 Society And Cooperation

Society is based on cooperation.

Outside the family, we do things for others because we expect something in return. You may not be consciously aware of it, but your brain has an accounting system that keeps track of favors given and received. You naturally like people who have helped you in the past, and dislike people who have harmed you. If someone has not reciprocated your kindness, you will feel cheated or betrayed. Those emotional responses cause you to create and maintain cooperative relationships. We naturally exchange labor with others.

Society has many benefits for its members:

- It reduces conflict locally between individuals.
- It reduces the variance of individual outcomes over time.
- The division of labor makes labor more efficient.
- Production is often more efficient at larger scales.
- Groups can do things that individuals cannot.

5.1 The Reduction Of Conflict

The reduction of interpersonal conflict is a very important reason to cooperate. The simplest form of cooperation is "live and let live": not harming someone in exchange for him not harming you. This is an exchange of the absence of negative work (harm) for the absence of negative work. I call this "passive cooperation" to distinguish it from active cooperation, in which positive work (help) is exchanged for positive work. Passive cooperation is very important, because it eliminates certain risks, and it allows people to live together.

5.2 The Reduction Of Variance

Reduction of variance is another reason to cooperate. Suppose that you are a prehistoric hunter. On any given day, you might kill something, or you might not. If you don't, then your family goes hungry that day, unless you have stored food. Storing food requires additional work, and it is not always possible. If you don't kill an animal for a long time, then you and your family will starve. However, if several hunters share their kills, then they can generate a more regular flow of food for all of them. By cooperating, each person's family can eat almost every day.

How is this cooperation arranged? The social accounting system in each hunter's brain functions like a bank. It keeps track of credit and debt. When you do a favor to someone, you make a deposit in your account in his brain. When he does you a favor, you make a withdrawal. Credit is extended, but only for so long. A hunter who never pays back his debts will become socially isolated.

5.3 The Division of Labor

Division of labor is another reason to cooperate. Generally speaking, it pays to specialize. A group of people can produce more by dividing production tasks among different individuals. For example, one person in a village could specialize in being a blacksmith. Instead of producing food for himself and his family, he produces tools, and trades them for food that others produce with those tools. This arrangement benefits the whole village. Without it, there could be no iron tools, because no individual would have the time to maintain a forge. The iron tools enable more efficient food production.

5.4 Economies Of Scale

Economies of scale are another reason to cooperate. Large-scale production allows for greater specialization of labor and employment of capital. For example, a watermill or windmill is an efficient way to grind grain. It takes a lot of labor to build and run such a mill. It is not worth doing just to grind the grain of one farmer. But it might be very efficient for a thousand farmers. Above a certain scale, it has an energetic profit. Many production methods are only profitable at large scales.

5.5 Groups Can Do Things That Individuals Cannot

Finally, a group can do things that a single individual or family cannot do. One example is killing a large animal, such as an elephant. Now, you might be thinking that you can kill an elephant by yourself with a gun. However, it takes a complex economy to produce a gun. By yourself, you can't kill an elephant unless you get really lucky with a single spear throw, before you get trampled to death. It takes a group effort to reliably kill a large animal, such as an elephant or lion.

The most important group effort is warfare. An individual cannot defend himself against a group, nor can he successfully attack a group. So, he must either join a group or be destroyed by one. The existence of groups forces everyone to join a group. Thus, society creates the need for society.

We cooperate because it increases the efficiency of labor, not because it is a "nice" thing to do. Cooperation is selfish, not altruistic.

6 The Dynamics Of Cooperation

How does cooperation emerge, and how is it maintained?

6.1 Tit-For-Tat

Cooperation can emerge by "tit-for-tat", based on the emotional accounting system. Suppose that you do a small favor for someone. If he reciprocates by doing you a favor, then a virtuous cycle of exchanging favors can emerge. If he does not reciprocate your attempt at friendship, then you

don't like him and won't do further favors for him. By trial and error, people who interact on a regular basis will develop a network of cooperative relationships.

The tit-for-tat principle applies to exchanges of negative labor as well. If someone harms you, he is doing work against you, rather than for you. Being harmed makes you angry. We instinctively reciprocate harm with harm. By reciprocating both help and harm, you teach those around you to help you, not harm you. This creates the incentives that encourage others to cooperate with you, rather than compete with you.

6.2 Association

Cooperation leads to association. You naturally want to associate with your friends, and avoid or destroy your enemies. Cooperation attracts. Competition repels. Long-term association is also necessary to develop bonds of trust, so cooperators tend to stick with those they know and trust, while avoiding strangers. Thus, individuals following the tit-for-tat strategy naturally coalesce into small, localized groups that are inwardly cooperative and outwardly competitive. That is the origin of society.

If you scattered people randomly across a landscape, they would naturally form into small, cooperative groups. Those groups would then either move apart to minimize competition or fight over resources if there was nowhere to go.

6.3 Group Agency

The next step in the emergence of social order is the creation of group agency. Group agency is the ability for a group to act in a coordinated way toward a common goal. Group agency is based on the same fundamental principle of tit-for-tat, except that the exchange is between the group and the individual. Each individual member of the group contributes some labor toward a group effort, and receives a reward from the group for his labor. Like exchange between individuals, exchange between the individual and the group is a means to increase the efficiency of labor.

7 Conclusion

I could go into more detail on how complex social structures emerge, but I'll save that for another time. I'll just recap the main points:

- Human relationships can be understood as flows or exchanges of work/energy.
- Family relationships are based on love, which is tied to reproduction. Love can be energetically altruistic, but the energetic altruism is based on reproductive relationships, and has a reproductively selfish function.
- Social relationships are based on cooperation: exchanging work for mutual benefit. Cooperation is energetically selfish, not altruistic.