

Kognitionspsychologie II: Session 9

Motivation: Cooperation and Morality

Maximilian Theisen, FS 2025

May 6, 2025

Semester Overview

#	Date	Topic	Instructor
1	18.02.2025	Emotion: What is an emotion?	Mata
2	25.02.2025	Emotion: What is an emotion? (continued)	Mata
3	18.03.2025	Emotion: Neural bases	Tisdall
4	25.03.2025	Emotion: Regulation	Mata
5	01.04.2025	Emotion: Well-being	Mata
6	08.04.2025	Motivation: What is motivation?	Mata
7	15.04.2025	Motivation: Extrinsic vs intrinsic motivation	Mata
8	29.04.2025	Motivation: Neural bases	Tisdall
9	06.05.2025	Motivation: Cooperation and morality	Theisen
10	13.05.2025	Applications	Mata
11	20.05.2025	Wrap-up and Q&A	Mata
12	03.06.2025	Exam (DSBG Neubau)	
13	21.07.2025	Repeat Exam (Biozentrum)	

Today's Session



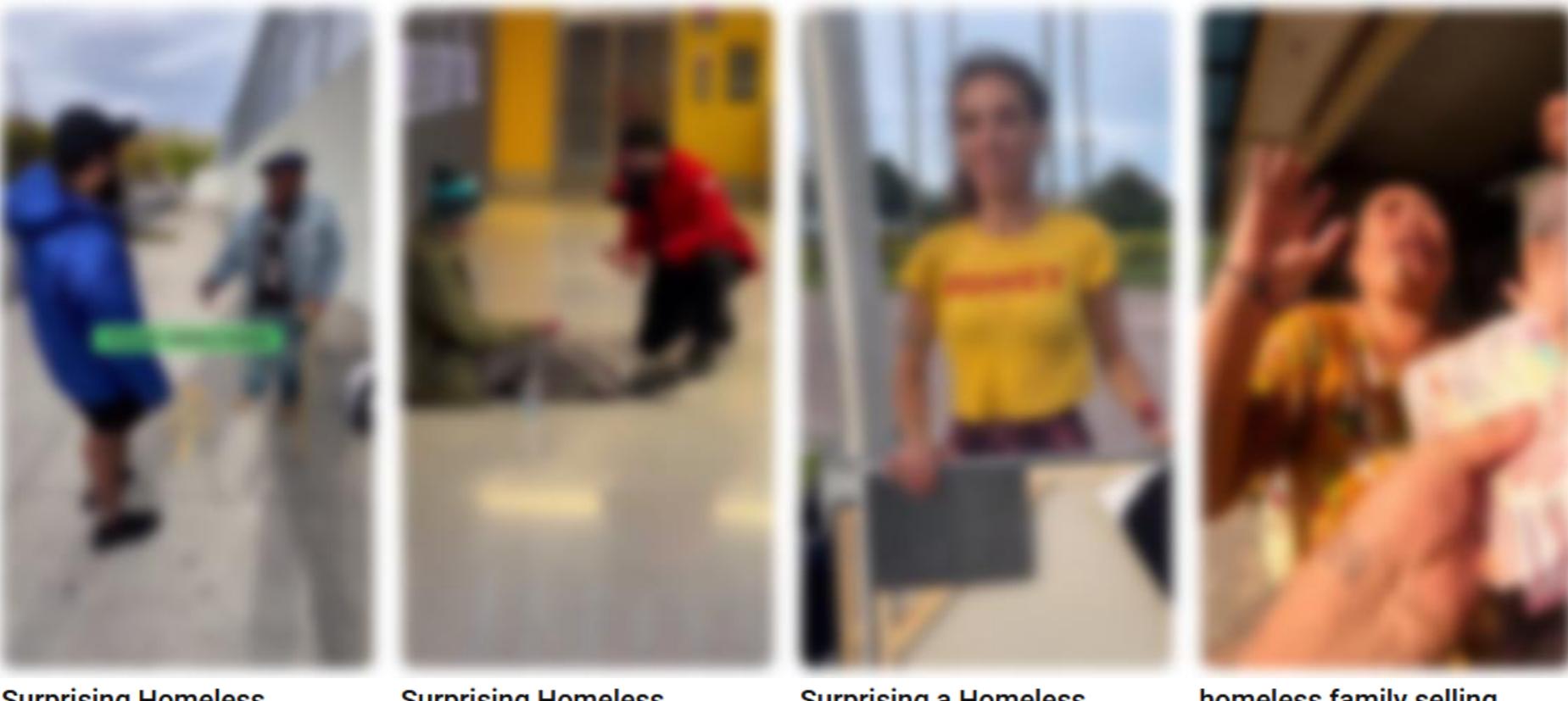
Psychological
Egoism



Evolution of
Cooperation and
Morality

Learning Objectives for This Session

- Discuss how traditional motivational theories explain selfless behavior
- Understand the central ideas and concepts behind psychological egoism
- Discuss the empirical challenges in identifying whether people have ultimately selfless desires
- Understand how non-human Great Apes' social lives differ from ours
- Understand how two evolutionary steps shaped cooperative and moral inclinations in humans



**Surprising Homeless
Man With \$3,000!**

266.072 Aufrufe

**Surprising Homeless
Man And He Said THIS...**

810.463 Aufrufe

**Surprising a Homeless
Artist with Painting ...**

7,1 Mio. Aufrufe

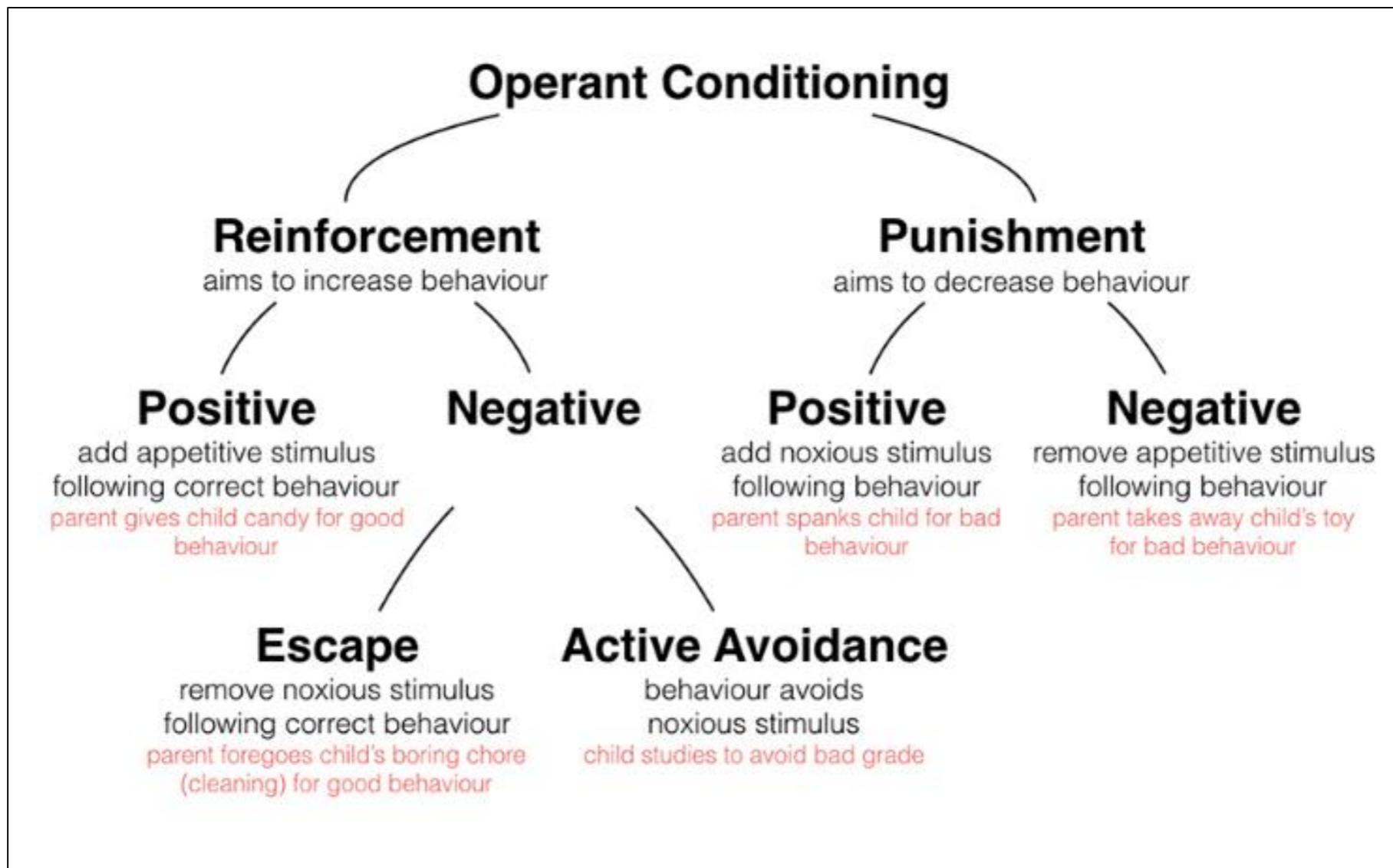
**homeless family selling
rice on street gets ...**

14 Mio. Aufrufe

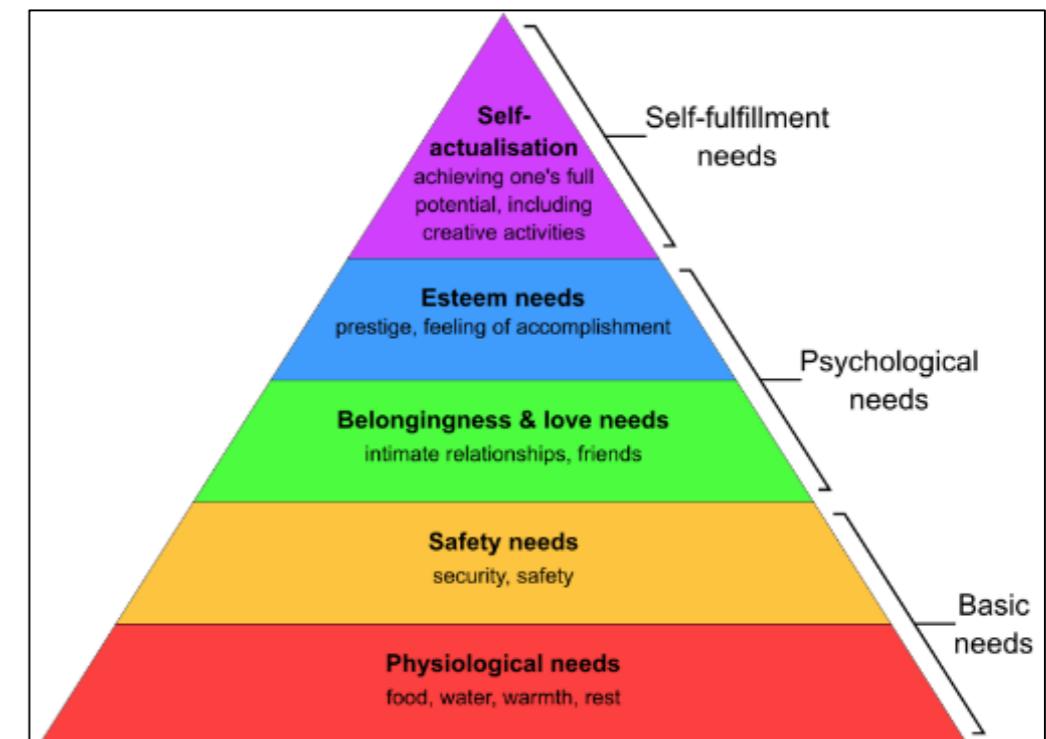
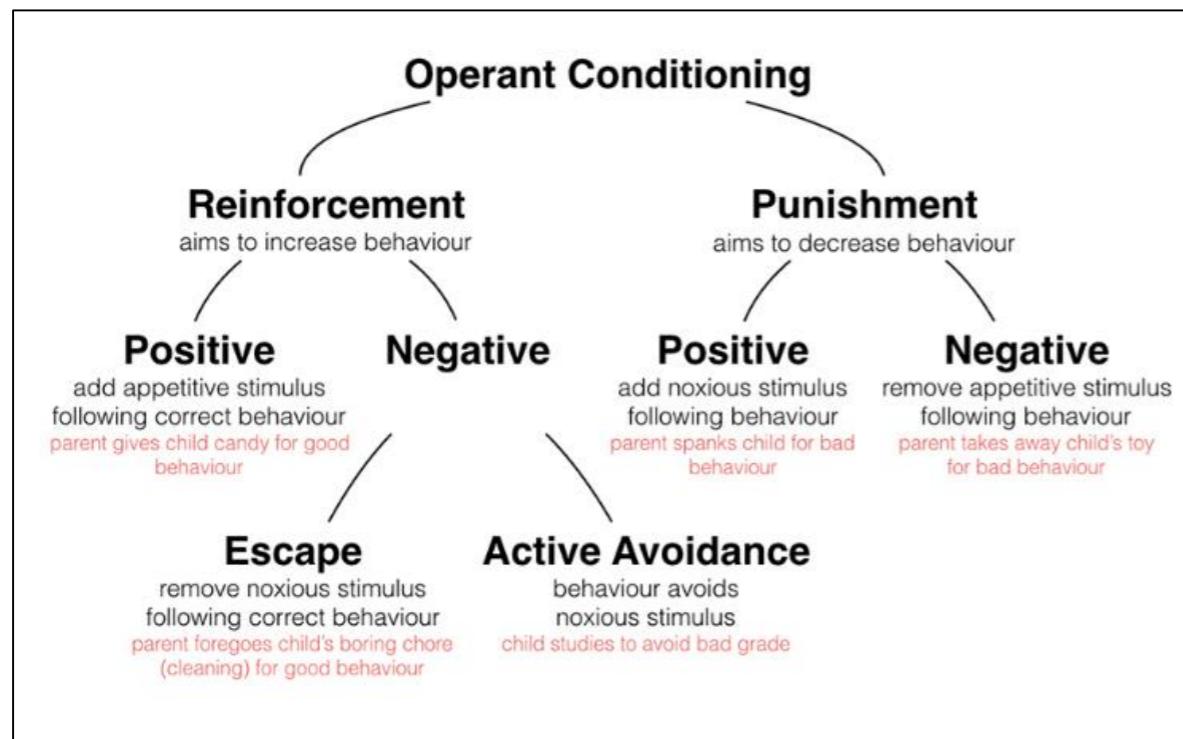
https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=surprising+homeless

Psychological Egoism

Is Motivation Always About Oneself?



Is Motivation Always About Oneself?



Is Motivation Always About Oneself?

Some acts seem to be motivated by selfless desires. Acts that are motivated by such desires are called altruistic.

The grid contains four cards:

- Hjälp mig i kampen mot hjärncancer.** (1.4 Tsd. Spenden) - A man with a shocked expression. 560'029 kr gesammelt.
- Hilfe für Kevin und Morris – Unterstützung nach dem Verlust** (1.3 Tsd. Spenden) - Two young men in a hospital bed. 25'085 € gesammelt.
- Support Happy Cat Sanctuary After Tragic Fire** (15.5 Tsd. Spenden) - A man with a cat on his shoulder. 781'235 \$ gesammelt.
- Honoring Austin Metcalf: Help His Family Heal** (5.7 Tsd. Spenden) - Two young men. 285'899 \$ gesammelt.

I Donated a Kidney to a Stranger. You Might Consider It Too.

The National Kidney Foundation says about 90,000 people in the U.S. need a kidney, and 12 people die every day while waiting for one.

MARCH 24, 2025 BY RYANN COULES



Photos courtesy: Ryann Noelani Coules



I threw myself on to an exploding grenade

'There was a pinging noise, familiar to anyone who's ever pulled the pin from a grenade. I had walked into a tripwire'



‘I had perhaps four or five seconds until detonation, and I counted them down in my head.’
Photograph: Mark Chilvers for the Guardian

<https://www.gofundme.com/>
<https://www.buildon.org>

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/nov/27/threw-myself-on-exploding-grenade>
<https://www.hawaiibusiness.com/i-donated-a-kidney-to-a-stranger-you-might-consider-it-too/>

How do traditional motivational theories explain such acts?

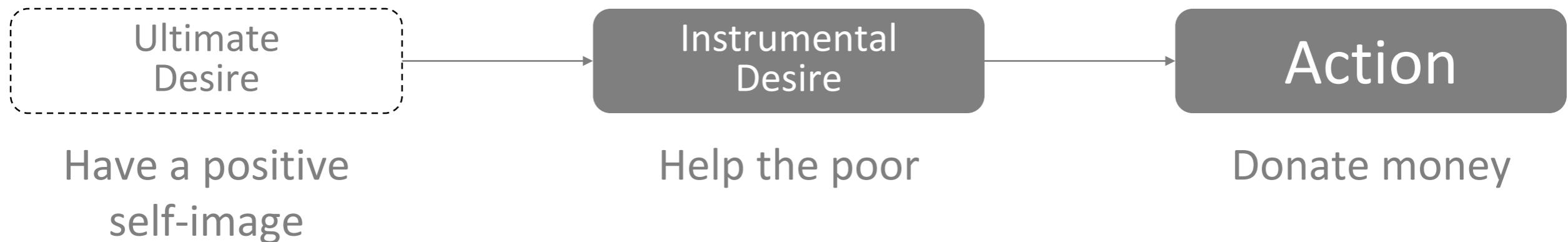


Psychological Egoism

“Psychological egoism [...] is the view that all voluntary action is motivated by self-interest, or, to put it another way: we always act selfishly. The opposing view [...] is the view that not all voluntary actions are motivated by self-interest.”

Tiberius, V. (2023), Moral psychology. A contemporary introduction (2).
Routledge, p. 42.

Psychological Egoism



Instrumental desires: “An instrumental desire for x is a desire that depends on a further desire for something else to which x is a means.”

Ultimate desires: “An ultimate desire is a desire for something for its own sake, not because it is a means to anything else.”

Are people ever motivated by
ultimately selfless desires?

How could you test this?



Psychological Egoism: Evidence for instrumental desires in helping

Happy to help? A systematic review and meta-analysis of the effects of performing acts of kindness on the well-being of the actor[☆]

Oliver Scott Curry^{a,*}, Lee A. Rowland^{b,e}, Caspar J. Van Lissa^{c,f}, Sally Zlotowitz^d, John McAlaney^b, Harvey Whitehouse^a

ABSTRACT

Do acts of kindness improve the well-being of the actor? Recent advances in the behavioural sciences have provided a number of explanations of human social, cooperative and altruistic behaviour. These theories predict that people will be 'happy to help' family, friends, community members, spouses, and even strangers under some conditions. Here we conduct a systematic review and meta-analysis of the experimental evidence that kindness interventions (for example, performing 'random acts of kindness') boost subjective well-being. Our initial search of the literature identified 489 articles; of which 24 (27 studies) met the inclusion criteria (total $N = 4045$). These 27 studies, some of which included multiple control conditions and dependent measures, yielded 52 effect sizes. Multi-level modeling revealed that the overall effect of kindness on the well-being of the actor is small-to-medium ($\delta = 0.28$). The effect was not moderated by sex, age, type of participant, intervention, control condition or outcome measure. There was no indication of publication bias. We discuss the limitations of the current literature, and recommend that future research test more specific theories of kindness: taking kindness-specific individual differences into account; distinguishing between the effects of kindness to specific categories of people; and considering a wider range of proximal and distal outcomes. Such research will advance our understanding of the causes and consequences of kindness, and help practitioners to maximise the effectiveness of kindness interventions to improve well-being.

Psychological Egoism: Empathy-Altruism-Hypothesis

- Empathy-helping-relationship: Empathy boosts prosocial behavior (Yin & Wang, 2023)
- Empathy-altruism-hypothesis: (Batson, 1987)
 - Empathy should only increase other-concerned desires but not self-concerned desires
 - If empathy boosts prosocial behavior, then prosocial behavior is motivated by other-concerned/selfless desires
 - Psychological egoism is false

Psychological Egoism: Empathy-Altruism-Hypothesis

Alternative interpretation:

- Negative state relief model: (Cialdini et al., 1987)
 - Seeing someone suffer puts us in a negative state (distress, sadness, guilt, ...)
 - Empathy increases the intensity of these emotions, thereby increasing the ultimately selfish desire to relieve us of that state
 - The empathy-helping-relationship is explained by the increased selfish desire to reduce the distress of not helping
 - Psychological egoism might still be true

Psychological Egoism: Empathy-Altruism-Hypothesis

Emotion
2018, Vol. 18, No. 4, 493–506

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1528-3542/18/\$12.00 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/emo0000375>

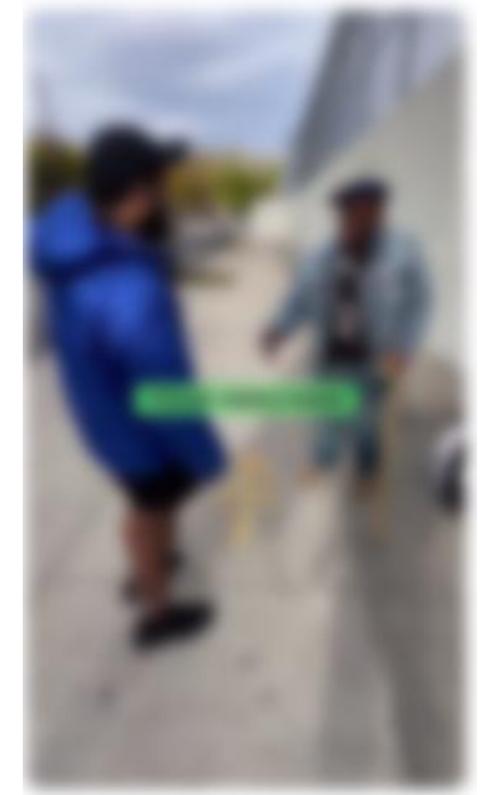
Digital Altruists: Resolving Key Questions About the Empathy–Altruism Hypothesis in an Internet Sample

William H. B. McAuliffe, Daniel E. Forster, Joachner Philippe, and Michael E. McCullough
University of Miami

Researchers have identified the capacity to take the perspective of others as a precursor to empathy-induced altruistic motivation. Consequently, investigators frequently use so-called perspective-taking instructions to manipulate empathic concern. However, most experiments using perspective-taking instructions have had modest sample sizes, undermining confidence in the replicability of results. In addition, it is unknown whether perspective-taking instructions work because they increase empathic concern or because comparison conditions reduce empathic concern (or both). Finally, some researchers have found that egoistic factors that do not involve empathic concern, including self-oriented emotions and self–other overlap, mediate the relationship between perspective-taking instructions and helping. The present investigation was a high-powered, preregistered effort that addressed methodological shortcomings of previous experiments to clarify how and when perspective-taking manipulations affect emotional arousal and prosocial motivation in a prototypical experimental paradigm administered over the Internet. Perspective-taking instructions did not clearly increase empathic concern; this null finding was not due to ceiling effects. Instructions to remain objective, on the other hand, unequivocally reduced empathic concern relative to a no-instructions control condition. Empathic concern was the most strongly felt emotion in all conditions, suggesting that distressed targets primarily elicit other-oriented concern. Empathic concern uniquely predicted the quality of social support provided to the target, which supports the empathy–altruism hypothesis and contradicts the role of self-oriented emotions and self–other overlap in explaining helping behavior. Empathy-induced altruism may be responsible for many prosocial acts that occur in everyday settings, including the increasing number of prosocial acts that occur online.

Psychological Egoism: Summary

- Psychological egoism is the empirical claim that all voluntary action is ultimately selfish
- Difficulty: How do we know a desire is ultimate?
- Relationship between empathy and helping suggests motivating role of other-concerned emotions



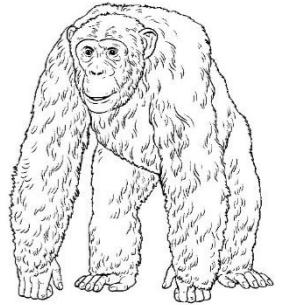
Surprising Homeless
Man With \$3,000!
266.072 Aufrufe



Evolution of Cooperation and Morality

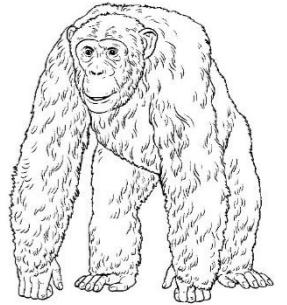
Excursion: Altruism among kin

- Not individuals but their genes are the object of natural selection
- Altruism towards individuals with shared genetic information (kin) indirectly benefits the reproduction of some of the actor's genes
- Simplified: “We help related individuals because it is good for the reproduction of our genes.”
- But what about non-kin-altruism?



Cooperation in Great Ape Societies

- Social life of nonhuman great apes is characterized by rule of dominance
- Those who get what they want are those with the most physical force
- Helping and cooperation is also part of great apes' social lives, but only under specific circumstances

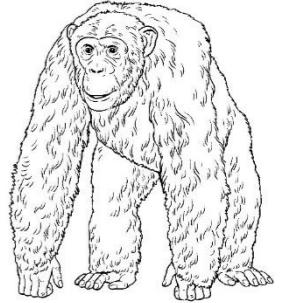


Cooperation in Great Ape Societies

Helping:

- Low-cost: Chimpanzees show spontaneous, targeted helping behavior towards humans and other chimpanzees
- High-cost: Costly helping and sharing (e.g., food) follows reciprocity or kinship

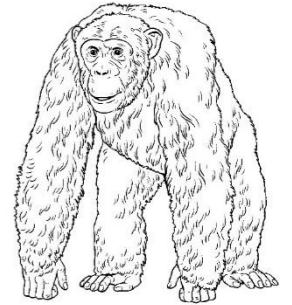
Cooperation in Great Ape Societies



Collaboration:

- Chimpanzees, in contrast to other monkey species, collaborate with nonkin for fights
- Chimpanzees forage almost always individually
- Rare exceptions: Coordinated hunts for small monkeys
- Not interested in joint goals or activities but aware when they need to collaborate for their own goals

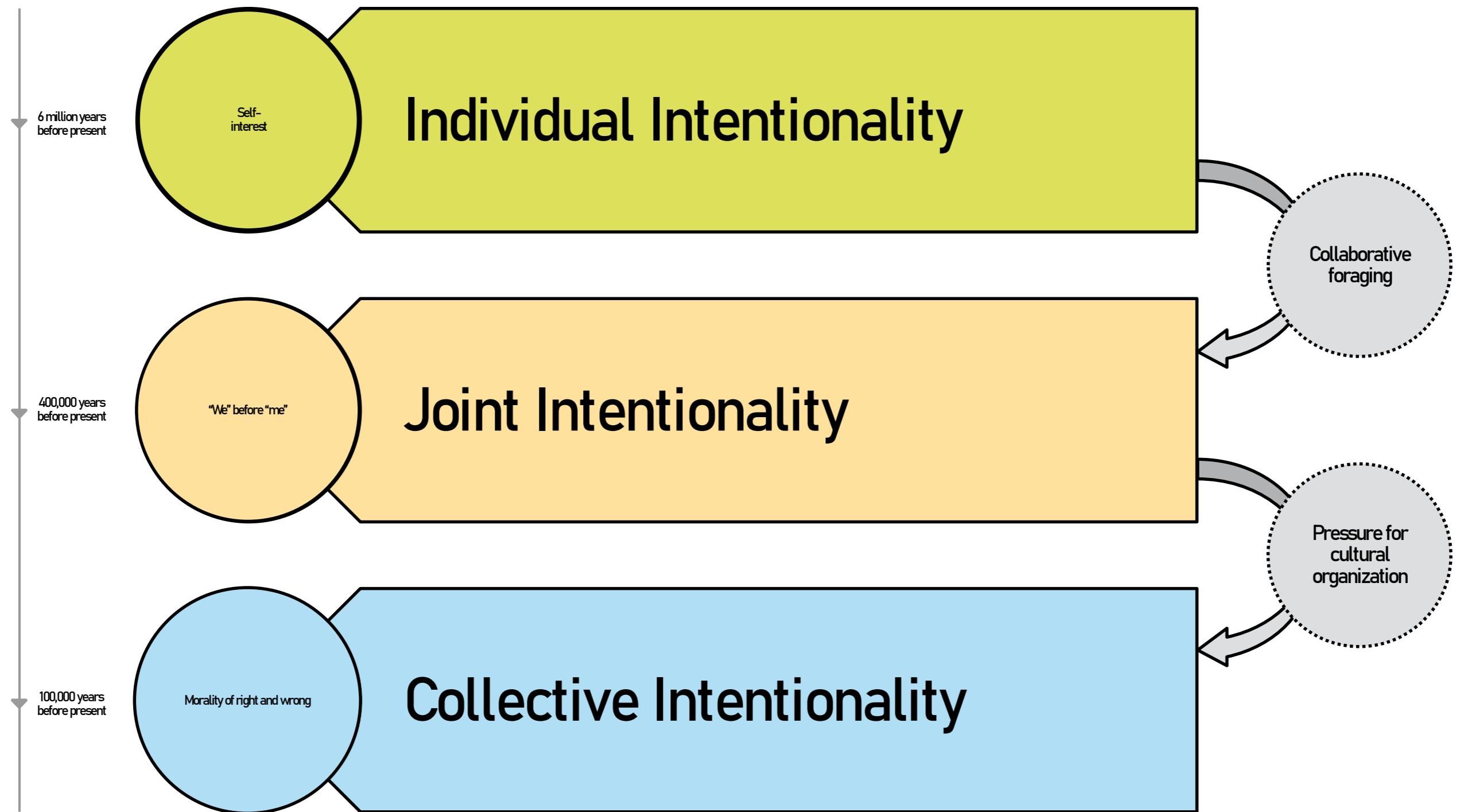
Cooperation in Great Ape Societies



Cooperative Organization of Human Societies

Substinance	Collaborative foraging, including 10-50% of time for helping each other
Property	Property rules are accepted and enforced by society, wide-spread culture of food sharing
Childcare	Collaborative childcare, where mothers do the majority of work but others are involved as well (up to ~50%)
Communication	Active teaching of children, informing others of things that might be interesting <i>to them</i>
Politics	Egalitarian foraging groups, social competence instead of physical dominance
Norms	Public social and moral rules that “everyone knows”, third-party enforcement of rules (individual and institutional)

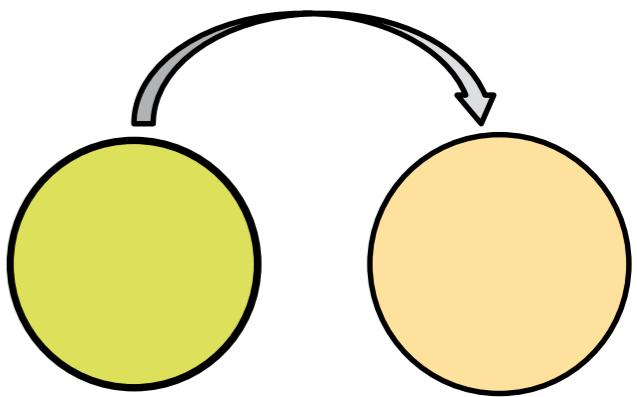
Two Evolutionary Steps: The Interdependence Hypothesis



Thomasello & Vaish (2013)

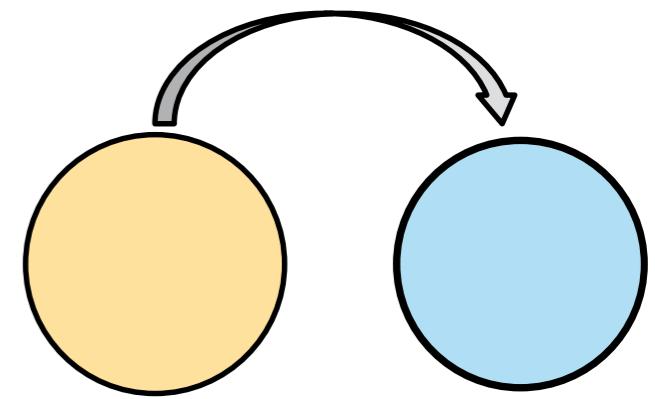
Illustrations: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-origins-of-human-morality/>

First Evolutionary Step: Collaborative Foraging



- Changes in ecology required humans to become collaborative foragers
- Individuals became interdependent with one another (joint intentionality): If the other is in trouble, it is good for me to help them
- Social pressure: Being perceived as a good collaborator becomes important
- Result: Individuals help those with whom they are interdependent, share collaborative spoils, feel answerable to others for being a good partner

Second Evolutionary Step: Pressure for Cultural Organization



- Increasing competition between human groups
- Groups increase in size, collaborative functioning becomes even more important
- With increasing group size, more and more interactions are not based on personal interaction history of the individuals but on group membership alone
- This requires collective understanding of the norms of the group
- Actions are regulated by agent-neutral, impersonal social norms
→ Morality

Does this align with your
understanding of morality?



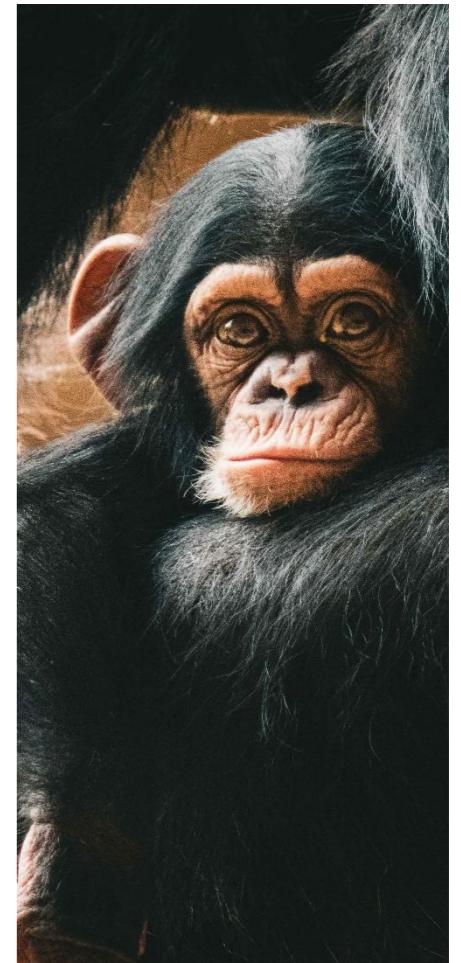
Assuming a parent's desire to care for their child
is the result of evolutionary processes:

Is this desire *ultimately*
selfless?



Evolution of Cooperation and Morality: Summary

- Nonhuman great apes' social life is characterized by physical dominance and reciprocity
- Two evolutionary steps toward „ultracooperative“ human societies:
 - Need to forage collaboratively, joint intentionality between partners
 - Competition between groups, growing group size, collective intentionality



Key (Mandatory) Reading on the Evolution of Cooperation and Morality

Tomasello, M., & Vaish, A. (2013). Origins of human cooperation and morality. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 64(1), 231–255. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-113011-143812>



Origins of Human Cooperation and Morality

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Annu. Rev. Psychol. 2013. 64:231–55
First published online as a Review in Advance on July 12, 2012
The *Annual Review of Psychology* is online at psych.annualreviews.org
This article's doi: 10.1146/annurev-psych-113011-143812
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Keywords

altruism, fairness, justice, evolution

Abstract

From an evolutionary perspective, morality is a form of cooperation. Cooperation requires individuals either to suppress their own self-interest or to equate it with that of others. We review recent research on the origins of human morality, both phylogenetic (research with apes) and ontogenetic (research with children). For both time frames we propose a two-step sequence: first a second-personal morality in which individuals are sympathetic or fair to particular others, and second an agent-neutral morality in which individuals follow and enforce group-wide social norms. Human morality arose evolutionarily as a set of skills and motives for cooperating with others, and the ontogeny of these skills and motives unfolds in part naturally and in part as a result of sociocultural contexts and interactions.

(Optional) Reading on Psychological Egoism

Tiberius, V. (2023). Moral psychology. A contemporary introduction (2nd edition). Routledge.

