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Non-Human Cognition

Altruism in the survival of the fittest

If life is all about "survival of the fittest", if it is all about organisms compete to pass through their best DNA, if whether a creature can only survive by being the strongest and most powerful (Call, 1998)? Moreover, if that is indeed the natural order, then there is no room for the weaker (Call, 1998). "If I have more than anyone else, it is only because I am better and stronger" (Agar, 2016). Arguably, there is something wrong with this viewpoint because in this context, "fitness" does not mean how much power you have, but it is about the effectiveness or reproductive success of a genotype or a trait (Ariew & Lewontin, 2004). However, lots of organisms reproduce just fine with weaker traits like being relatively slow and weak. This reproduction depends on how an organism interacts with its environment and never with just a trait alone (Rumble et al., 2009). So, if an organism can get more from the environment by cooperating with other organisms than individuals acting alone, you have got a place where mutations that promote cooperation will be reproductively beneficial (Rumble et al., 2009). If animals do not just look at one another as objects but rather as beings that can have value to them (De Waal, 2014), there might be some room for genuine altruism.

A classic example of altruism in nature could be from biology professor Bernd Heinrich in 1989. One day when he was hiking, he came across a bunch of ravens feasting on a dead moose. He noticed that they made loud calls that attracted even more ravens. This behaviour seemed quite strange because, until that point, they thought that animals defended their food and not recruit other animals to share it (Dingfelder, 2006). However, what seemed to be a selfless act had selfish benefits. The young ravens were in a territory of older ravens; by bringing other juveniles together, they avoided being driven away from the area (Andrews, 2013).

Other animals show protective behaviour toward there group. Meerkats, for example, are more likely to look out for predators when there are pups present (Santema & Clutton-Brock, 2013). However, scientists questioned whether, with this sentinel behaviour, the primary goal is to protect their group or if it is for their own preservation. Nevertheless, after further testing, the results showed that individual meerkats are not just on guard for their safety, but that there is a sudden increase in protecting others when there are pups around—adding altruistic motivations for their behaviours (Santema & Clutton-Brock, 2013).

It seems that animals are often only altruistic for their survival and that true altruism is not very common because it would not make much sense biologically (Martin, 1992). However, if even in the evolution of the "survival of the fittest" organism produce cooperative traits (Rumble et al., 2009) and we humans have some room for generosity and the capacity to act for another individual's good (de Waal, 2014), social sentients animals should have it too.

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