

David Sloan Wilson, *Does Altruism Exist? Culture, Genes and the Welfare of Others*, Yale University Press, 2015, 180 p.

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This book belongs to a special series –Foundational Questions in Science- which has been published by the John Templeton Foundation to investigate crucial scientific concepts and their philosophical background. As the first book of this initiative, “Does Altruism Exist?” puts its finger on the age-old debate extending from ancient to modern times in many branches- economics, social psychology, sociology -. In this respect, the question of whether altruism exists or not is a multi-faceted current discussion and one at the same time that is proving difficult to find a solution for. Professor David Sloan Wilson has been studying evolutionary theory and how it applies to all aspects of life in his non-profit organization-The Evolution Institute- and he is a distinguished professor of biology and anthropology at Binghamton University. The aim of professor Wilson and his team is to search for solutions to real-world problems. Therefore, in this book, the question has been tried to be cleared up with an evolutionary approach in terms of action and the context of everyday life (Wilson, 2015, p. x).

For two decades, altruism had been a popular concept in many disciplines. Many researches have been trying to highlight what altruism means and which motives promote altruism. As a fundamental human concept of, it is said that altruism is a concern for the welfare of others is contrary to human nature which is alleged to be selfish. The idea of self-interested human nature is not a new argument. Besides, the altruistic side of human nature is not a recent issue. From Aristotle to Kant, human beings have concerns for the welfare of others. Moreover; in religions and religious thought, we should treat others in the way we wish to be

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treated– “love thy neighbor as thyself” from Leviticus or Golden Rule; “Do unto others as you would have them do unto others”. Altruism is not only an expression of human love, but also an expression of love of God. To put it briefly, altruism is a crucial concept in all aspects of human life.

This book consists of ten sections, with each one having a different scope on the issue. While the reflections of altruism in different areas can be found from the fifth part –psychological altruism- to the final chapter of the book, the first half of the book is about the evolution of altruism in action. At the beginning of the book, the author divided altruism into two parts. One is the level of action and the other is the level of feelings and thoughts. In the first chapter, altruism in action is put under the spotlight as behavior that results in a benefit to others at the cost of the benefactor. In addition, the scope of action is related to group-level functional organism. Thus, it shows that the society acts organ-like with altruistic action for achieving a common purpose. We can observe this reality in hunter-gatherer society as well as the modern one owing to a division of labor (Wilson, 2015, p. 9). From this point of view, the question “Does altruism exist” brings a new question “Does a functionally organized human group exist?” The author and his colleague, Nobel prize winner Elinor Ostrom asserts that human groups can manage their limited resources with a specific design-including eight criteria¹- for preventing social dilemmas as a functional group. How is a functional group organized? To answer this, the author would say “by a cultural evolution as well as genetic evolution”².

Before drawing the frame of the evolution of altruism, there are some foundational principles which are widely accepted by evolutionists. Here is the first one: natural selection depends on relative fitness contrary to the mainstream economics’ postulation of the absolute wealth maximization purpose of homo-economics (Wilson, 2015, p. 19). At this point, we put emphasis on behavioral economics as a more realistic branch of economics that accepted the importance of relative measure and so positional concern². For evolution theory, the crucial point is how

1 Ostrom defined Common Pool Resources (CPR) managements with eight design principles; 1- well defined boundaries (strong group identity) 2- congruence between appropriation and provision rules and local conditions 3- collective-choice arrangements 4- monitoring (auditing by norm-abiding observers efficiently) 5- graduated sanctions (this sanction may even be gossip) 6- conflict-resolution mechanisms (these can be easily accessible and at low cost) 7- minimal recognition of rights to organize 8- nested enterprises (groups should be a part of larger social systems and related with each other) (Ostrom, 1990, p. 90).

2 Positional concerns is about people’s concerns for their relative positions in society. From Veblen (1899), Duesenberry (1949) to Robert Frank (1985) and Easterlin (1995), positional concerns have

much more you reproduce instead of how well you reproduce. The second principle is that while the agent acts for welfare of group, it does not maximize the relative fitness of the agent, there is a trade-off. As an intermediate result, these principles undermine the group-level functional organization (Wilson, 2015, pp. 19-21). On the other hand, in all aspect of life, we can observe the evolution of altruistic action. In this respect, there must be another principle. It is natural selection between groups. The author's motto is "selfishness surpasses altruism with-in the group on the other hand, altruistic group prevails over selfish group". Evolutionary variances, in different levels of populations allow the population to remain varied in a nutshell.

Chapter four holds the title "From nonhumans to humans". The author summarized that we are the latest major transition as a species. We upgraded the level of groups as organisms from groups of organisms. In some primate species, destructive competition with-in group is still a strong evolutionary force. The part of major evolutionary transition is a kind of social control that prevents destructive competition with-in groups and permits the group-beneficial forms of competition (Wilson, 2015, pp. 48-49). On the other hand, tackling the societies as one person is a reflection of the methodological individualistic approach resulting from a paradigm shift architected by Margaret Thatcher. Notwithstanding, our history has been comprised of relationships between groups from trade, war, hunting, mental activities, symbolic thought to language. The fossils record shows us that we are evaluating as unions in small groups in the way of genetic evolution and cultural evolution together from agricultural revolution through to the modern times. Small transitions in selection process can lead up to major transitions e.g. cooperation between strangers or our distinctive cognitive abilities to transmit culture. Consequently, the functional organization of human beings is crucial and relies on altruism.

In the chapter titled "Altruism and economics", it is stated that mainstream economics, claims to have a market and society which belong to agents having no idea about the welfare of the society in their minds. It means that altruism is not a necessary institution for a society in mainstream economics. In addition, the invisible hand metaphor requires a society that can suit two criteria. One is that society should be identified as one collective unit. The other one is that the members of

been investigating as conspicuous consumption, relative income or neighbour effect in briefly (Solnick & Hemenway, 1998, p. 375). It shows us that we are sensitive to situation of others which is compatible our evolutionary relative states.

society do not have any concern for the welfare of society. According to the author, these are merely valid for nonhuman groups (Wilson, 2015, p. 105). While some mechanisms are coordinated by conscious intentions, others come up beneath conscious awareness. Tocqueville mentions that villages seem to constitute of themselves and are perfect examples of natural association. With agricultural society, coordination and exploitation problems occurred and new mechanisms were needed. Thus, cultural evolution of Homo sapiens –not homo-economicus- developed solution mechanisms and alternatives in time. Therefore, Adam Smith was right about self-organized societies but basing this on self-interested agents was a historical mistake (Wilson, 2015, pp. 108-109).

Mainstream economics assumes that economic man is self-interested and tries to maximize his utility in every time and place. There is a restricted human nature identification and leaves no room for moral or social action. As it is understood contrary to the reality of existence of altruism, economics asserts rational and selfish people represent real actors in life. “Laissez faire, laissez passe” economy bares rational actor “homo-economics” metaphors to homo sapiens and natural selection. Therefore, individual competition is supported theoretically by excluding altruism and the scope of group selection. In “Does altruism exist”, altruism is grounded in evolutionary theory and Ostrom’s Common Pool Resources (CPR) design as a group-level functional organization. Besides, group selection alone is not a sufficient process to generate altruistic action, it must be handled with cultural selection. In economics, the issue of altruism as a deviation from homo-economicus and has been examined under behavioral economics. According to the common view in behavioral economics, altruism is based on kin selection-inclusive fitness which collides with Wilson’s perspective. The author emphasizes that if we try to elicit altruism and the underlying mechanism regardless of group level, we are obliged to trace inclusive fitness. This means that we have degraded altruism to a selfish gene view which was so popular in the 80’s revealed by Richard Dawkins. As an outcome of inclusive fitness and kin selection, altruism turns into reciprocity – I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine- (Dawkins, 2001, p. 140; Wilson, 2015, p. 32). As an empirical example, D. S. Wilson made an investigation with public school students in 2006. The Project named DAP was about the expression of prosociality as terms of social supports that the students took from family, neighbor, church, and school in the city of Binghamton. While the researchers hypothesized prosociality would be expressed proportional to the correlation coefficient for shared genes, which is 1 for identical twins, 0.5 for full siblings and decreasing further regarding people being genetically unrelated, the results showed that the expression

of prosociality correlation coefficient was 0.7 which is higher than full siblings coefficient. Therefore, we can not explain the trait by only kin selection (Wilson, 2015, pp. 115-121).

As a consequence, the question “Does altruism exist” is answered as “yes, but not enough”. To understand altruism and underlying mechanism, group selection should be handled with cultural selection. When we use the proximate mechanism, we should also reckon with the ultimate mechanism. This work discusses the evolutionary side of altruism exhaustively. It has a limpid and fluent language, at the same time it refers to many aspects of the issue from religious to planetary altruism. On the other hand, the author does not mention the gift relationship as an exchange system of ancient civilizations though the system supports this approach. Karl Polanyi who is a well-known economist, strongly emphasizes the economic activities as an inherent part of social and cultural relations in contrast with methodological individualism (Polanyi, 2014, p. 93). After all, for a researcher as well as any intellectual who is interested in altruism, the book is so enlightening and puts forward an alternative and dissimilar view from the familiar evolutionary explanation. For behavioral economists studying the issue of altruism, Ostrom’s CPR and group selection opens a new window into the experiments in this area and reveals varied motives. To make the world better, altruism is indispensable for functionally organized human groups.

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