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Self-Sacrifice for Unrelated Individuals: Further Considerations

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Palmer and Palmer (this issue) argue that existing evolutionary accounts of altruism (i.e., kin selection, reciprocal altruism, and group selection) do not explain certain aspects of traditional ethical codes, such as self-sacrifice for unrelated individuals. They also assert that the “rare aberration” argument (e.g., Teehan, 2010) cannot account for why altruists are portrayed to be moral exemplars, and offer examples of self-sacrifice to refute the argument that actual acts of self-sacrifice are so rare that they do not warrant an explanation. Finally, Palmer and Palmer present an alternative explanation based on parental manipulation that may account for some occurrences of altruism, including self-sacrifice for unrelated individuals prescribed by the *Kanun*.

Palmer and Palmer seem to offer a reasonable, alternative, evolutionary explanation for why some traditional codes of ethics advocate self-sacrifice for unrelated individuals. However, self-sacrifice for unrelated individuals may be motivated by several, non-exclusive reasons. In this comment, we identify and address theoretical concerns, including: 1) the actual occurrence of self-sacrifice for unrelated individuals, 2) the rare aberration argument, 3) parental manipulation as an alternative explanation for self-sacrifice, such as prescribed by the *Kanun*, and 4) modifications of traditional codes of ethics to encourage sacrifice for unrelated individuals.

Actual occurrence of self-sacrifice for unrelated individuals

Palmer and Palmer comment that “all of the talk about *besa* was just talk” (e.g., Schloss, 2004). They argue that this is unlikely to be correct, given the evidence that self-sacrifice does occur. They point out the thousands of Jews who claimed to have been saved by Albanians during World War II. However, we are not convinced that the evidence presented by Palmer and

Palmer is sufficient to refute the aberration argument. The authors assert that “it is impossible to know exactly how many Albanians risked the lives of themselves and their families to rescue Jews”. We rather state the opposite: It is impossible to know exactly how many Albanians *did not* risk the lives of themselves and their families to rescue Jews.

It is probable that there are far more Albanians who *did not* help Jews than who *did* help them – simply because humans are built by ruthlessly selfish genes (Dawkins, 1976). In fact, history is rife with stories of selfish behavior. During the Cold War, Americans who turned in supposed communists gained the benefits of being considered patriots and moral exemplars. It is not surprising that some Americans sold out even their relatives. Recently, many Europeans refused to host Syrian refugees, for the sake of their own social welfare. Therefore, self-sacrifice for unrelated others may be infrequent enough that it qualifies as an aberration, an error of evolved machinery of the mind. When it has occurred, it seems to be confined to very specific cases (e.g., “Righteous among the Nations”), and often entails very specific behaviors – maybe even a rare aberration, as suggested by previous evolutionary scholars (e.g., Teehan, 2010).

Self-sacrifice as rare aberration

One of the explanations for this sort of altruism is that such behaviors reflect the outcome of an evolutionary “glitch” (i.e., a rare aberration; Teehan, 2010). Palmer and Palmer state that such an argument cannot account for why such people are “so often portrayed to be moral exemplars that inspire others.” More generally, and according to Palmer and Palmer, it cannot account for why such “traditional codes of ethics requiring apparently unfit forms of sacrifice (e.g., sacrificing one’s life in battle) may be wide spread, if not universal”. However, apparently maladaptive forms of sacrifice (such as sacrificing one’s life in battle) might have selfish motives, such as the promise of compensation (e.g., pension, prestige); and those who sacrificed

themselves for the sake of the others may be considered moral exemplars simply because such anomalous behaviors – the pure altruistic behaviors – benefit others.

Because altruistic behaviors benefit others, individuals who perform them are often regarded as heroes and moral exemplars; and because they benefit others, many forms of folklore, literature, and art facilitate the transmission of traditions that encourage sacrifice for others. This does not mean that individuals are seeking to become moral exemplars by sacrificing themselves for others. It also does not mean that all individuals who took the oath of *besa* to follow the *Kanun* are in fact prone to perform such acts. Therefore, we are not convinced that the rare aberration argument cannot be among the valid evolutionary explanations for such acts of self-sacrifice.

Parental manipulation as an alternative explanation

Palmer and Palmer offer parental manipulation (Trivers, 1974) as an explanation for self-sacrifice for individuals who are neither close kin nor a co-member of a social group. According to Palmer and Palmer, parents are expected to encourage an offspring to value full siblings as much as himself or herself – as parents are equally related to all their offspring. Similarly, grandparents are expected to encourage a grandchild to value cousins as much as himself or herself – as grandparents are equally related to all their grandchildren. We argue that it may not have been ancestrally advantageous for parents to encourage an offspring to value cousins as much as himself or herself, because the offspring's cousins are less related to the parents than is the offspring. Similarly, it may not have been ancestrally advantageous for grandparents to encourage a grandchild to value *second cousins* as much as himself or herself, and so on. Therefore, parental manipulation, if extended past a single generation, embodies an intergenerational conflict of interests. The question is: What are the ancestral advantages for

parents to encourage an offspring to value co-descendants (with the exception of full siblings) as much as himself or herself, if such co-descendants (e.g., first or second cousins) are not equally related to parents as the offspring is?

Modifications of traditional codes to encourage sacrifice for unrelated individuals

Palmer and Palmer suggest that the “traditions exhorting sacrifice for others occurred during a period when all individuals consistently were co-descendants” and “this allowed for traditional codes of ethics to be modified ... to encourage sacrifice for even unrelated individuals in other groups who are unlikely reciprocators”. They argue that, in ancestral environments, individuals interacted most often with genealogically close co-descendants; in the modern world, because we live in larger social groups, individuals are less likely to be genetically related to members of the social groups to which they belong.

Such differences between ancestral and modern environments did not modify human proneness to sacrifice the self for others (i.e., co-descendants), but may have led to the modification of traditional codes of ethics, to encourage sacrifice for unrelated individuals. However, it is not clear *why* traditional codes of ethics may have been modified to encourage sacrifice for unrelated individuals. If the mechanism underlying such codes of ethics is *specifically* the proneness to perform self-sacrifice for co-descendants, then why have such codes of ethics – which can be modified during transmission – not been modified accordingly, i.e., to *specify* sacrifice for genealogically close co-descendants rather than for unrelated individuals?

Conclusion

In an engaging and fascinating paper, Palmer and Palmer seem to identify a reasonable, alternative, evolutionary explanation for why some traditional codes of ethics encourage self-sacrifice for unrelated individuals. However, we argue that some existing evolutionary

explanations are plausible, and that Palmer's and Palmer's explanation is not in conflict with them. For instance, as suggested by Palmer and Palmer, individuals might follow this code of ethics because it is consistent with the proneness to self-sacrifice for others. However, some individuals might take the oath of *besa* to follow the *Kanun* because they secure the benefit of social acceptance, and they did not expect and neither did they intend to sacrifice themselves for unrelated individuals. Also, individuals might follow *besa* as a culturally-supported aberration to perform extreme altruistic behaviors – behaviors that made them moral exemplars because of the bevy of benefits bestowed on others.

References

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