

Book Review

From Helping to Hand Grenades: Setting the Bar for Altruism

A review of *Kindness in a Cruel World: the Evolution of Altruism* by Nigel Barber, Prometheus Books, 2004.

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In *Kindness in a Cruel World: the Evolution of Altruism*, Nigel Barber suggests that “Kindness exists, but it struggles to stay afloat on an ocean of cruelty that is the default condition for organisms competing for existence on this planet” (p. 9). The main premise of Barber’s book is that humans inherit a capacity for altruism that can be enhanced or diminished through nurture. Barber suggests that the core of this capacity evolved through kin selection and is reflected in parental investment. From this center, altruism ripples outward in concentric circles to reciprocity between members of ingroups, systems of cooperation in societies, and relations among nations. However, the larger the circle, the weaker the altruistic dispositions. In supporting this model, Barber adduces a potpourri of evidence drawn from a wide array of disciplines, including evolutionary biology, economics, political science, history, social and developmental psychology, game theory, anthropology, and neuroscience. By and large, this book is a good read for lay people and students, but we fear evolutionary psychologists will find many of the analyses simplified and compartmentalized, and some of the conclusions overgeneralized and sensationalized. We were also disappointed by Barber’s failure to define the central construct of the book, altruism, in a consistent manner, and his tendency to use the word to refer to quite different phenomena.

The contents of the book

Divided into four parts, this book encompasses a large number of topics ranging from those dealt with by mainstream evolutionary psychologists to those with less direct relevance to the evolution of altruism, such as white collar crime and the sexual behaviour of priests and nuns. The four sections of this book are organized as follows.

Altruism in man and beast. In the first section, Barber offers a brief introduction to Darwin’s theory of natural selection, then goes on to describe

Hamilton's model of kin selection, interpreting the self-sacrificial helping behaviours of social species such as bees and spiders in terms of mechanisms that evolved through this process. Barber suggests that "altruism in the sterile honeybee is no different from altruism of a parent towards offspring" (p. 70).

Barber accounts for helping among strangers in terms of reciprocal altruism. He reviews arguments for and against the idea that the alarm calls of Belding's ground squirrels qualify as altruistic. In considering the evolution of reciprocal altruism in human beings, Barber emphasizes the significance of emotions such as guilt, shame, and moral outrage, arguing that reciprocal altruism works best in small groups (e.g., hunter gatherers) in which individuals can enhance their fitness by working together and trading perishable goods.

Finally, Barber explores an apparently altruistic profession largely overlooked by evolutionary psychologists, suggesting that "heterosexual priests who refrain from sexual intercourse with women could be considered reproductive altruists if their renunciation of heterosexual expression contributed to the welfare and reproductive success of others..." (p. 96). However, acknowledges Barber, there are many selfish reasons for choosing chastity. Barber ends this discussion by offering a lengthy overview of the history of celibacy in the Catholic Church, which includes evidence that many heterosexual priests were in fact not chaste.

Growing up to be good. In the second section, Barber considers the development of altruism in children, focusing on self-awareness and the emotions that stem from it, such as embarrassment, pride, and shame. He argues that although non-human species such as dogs may seem to experience moral emotions, they "are not self-aware so they cannot have an abstract appreciation of their effects on others" (p. 102). The ability to think about oneself, Barber argues, enables a person to go against his or her natural selfish tendencies, which to Barber is the "essence of morality."

In examining the roles of nature and nurture in the determination of altruism, Barber suggests that parents (he implies a mother and a father.) constitute the moral compass of children. He argues that when this compass points children in the wrong direction, they may grow up to become criminals. In a discussion of altruism among thieves, Barber advances a "genes-load-the-gun, environment-pulls-the-trigger" type of model, attributing the relatively low crime rates of small communities to familiarity and detectability. Invoking the classic prisoner's dilemma game, Barber suggests that criminal acts are equivalent to defections in which individuals advance their own interests at the expense of their communities.

Overall, Barber argues that evolved mechanisms that give rise to altruism are activated through parental investment. If parents invest too little, they will create poorly socialized individuals who grow up to be deviants, and in extreme cases, psychopaths.

The social impact of kindness. In the third section, Barber considers the link between altruism and health. He discusses the relationship between the neurotransmitter oxytocin and pair-bonding, reviewing evidence that people are more

likely to help others if they have a neurochemical bond of affection with them, and that a physically close relationship with an adult early in life promotes normal brain development and health. Barber adduces evidence from Harlow's classic contact comfort studies and orphanage studies conducted in the early part of the twentieth century in support of the idea that people first learn to be social through touch. Touch-deprived monkeys (and children) grow up to be hostile towards peers.

According to Barber "early physical contact is also important for developing social trust, which is a vital component of altruism" (p. 176). Social trust mediates the expansion of the concentric circles of altruism, from relations among family members to relations among strangers. Barber reviews research on such charitable acts as donating blood and rescuing Jews during the Holocaust. He discusses the phenomenon of in-group identification, or "groupishness," and reviews classic social psychological studies on conformity.

As we can all attest, altruism for our fellows is often absent. Barber ponders how we can explain such incidents of selfishness and cruelty as the failure of bystanders to intervene in emergencies, road rage, child abuse, infanticide by mothers, and sexual abuse of children by parents, strangers, and priests. In accounting for such incidents, Barber takes the reader on a rather long digression regarding the heinous history of the Catholic Church, then examines the underpinnings of hostile driving practices. He considers several reasons why hostile drivers are different from the "normals" of society, and opines that "Many [hostile drivers] have antisocial personality disorder, a comparatively rare problem, that makes it difficult to conform to social rules and obey laws" (p. 294).

Kindness and politics. In the final section, Barber considers how we can "tap" evolved propensities to altruism, arguing that our evolved psychological adaptations for cooperation have the ability to "unite strangers or stir up international conflicts" (p. 303). He examines warfare among hunter-gatherer societies, boiling the problem down to ingroup and outgroup biases, which Barber claims may be extremely difficult to overcome. Our cultural evolution from hunter-gatherer tribes to sprawling urban metropolises has created new challenges for our species: "With increased economic development, and increased social complexity, greater conformity is required" (p. 310).

Urban environments, according to Barber, give rise to serious problems such as disease epidemics, terrorism and pollution. Barber interprets global pollution in terms of a prisoner's dilemma in which selfish individuals defect and humanity pays the price. Barber argues that the reason why the United States refused to sign on to the Kyoto accord is because the accord left the door open for cheaters by supplying exemptions to underdeveloped countries. He offers an explanation for why other large nations, such as Russia, decided to support the accord, suggesting that evolved mechanisms render humans short-sighted with respect to the environment.

Barber closes his book by asking, "How can the existence of evil people be reconciled with adaptations for altruistic behaviour" (p. 357)? In answering this question, Barber discusses the sources of such egregiously selfish crimes as murder

and rape as well as white-collar crimes. In the end, Barber concludes that, "Nature is red in tooth and claw unless it is restrained by adaptations of altruism" (p. 368).

An Evaluation

Clearly, *Kindness in a Cruel World* touches on many topics. Considered by themselves, Barber's discussions of most issues are engaging but they tend to lack depth. Regarding the human capacity for altruism, Barber offers an array of mini-conclusions, some of which seem inconsistent with others, and he fails to tie them together in a systematic way.

These problems become apparent in the book's introduction. Barber opens by acknowledging that it might be difficult to persuade readers that people are naturally altruistic in view of so much evidence that they behave in evil ways, then goes on to argue that "none of these manifestations of evil minimizes the altruistic motive that springs eternal in the human breast" (p. 9). Why not? What does Barber mean by "*the*" altruistic motive? Or by "springs eternal"? And if this statement is valid, why would kindness struggle to "stay afloat on an ocean of cruelty that is the default condition for organisms competing for existence on this planet" (p. 9). If Barber means that humans have evolved to behave in both kind and cruel ways, we would agree. If he means that dispositions to behave in evil ways cannot compromise altruistic motives, we would disagree and point out that this conclusion is inconsistent with the conclusions he draws about cheating and defection in prisoner's dilemma types of games. We look for clarification and justification of this conclusion, but none is forthcoming, at least in any organized manner.

Later in the introduction, Barber alludes to violent criminals who behave in depraved ways, and concludes that "some individuals are indeed born without the capacity to develop a conscience (Others fail to develop sensitivity to persons because of the brutalizing conditions of their childhood.)" We are unaware of any evidence that people with antisocial personalities are '*born*' without the *capacity* to develop a conscience. However, there is evidence that childhood trauma can, and does, have a profound effect on children, leaving some children in a seemingly permanent state of 'arrested emotional development' (Perry et al., 1995; Joseph, 1999). Such evidence minimizes the altruistic motive that springs eternal in, at least, the breast of those with antisocial personalities.

In discussing determinants of criminality, Barber concludes that, "Criminals are clearly distinguished by genotypes and family environment that reduce their altruistic tendencies and make them more likely to put their selfish interests before the good of the community" (p. 134). Where is the evidence for distinct genotypes? And what of those who "rob from the rich" to "give to the poor?" Is altruism purely defined by "acts" or does intent matter? Is it appropriate to put civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther Kings Jr. who break laws in order to change them in the same category as murders and rapists? Many attempts have been made over the last century to find a genetic link to crime. We do not know of any that have succeeded.

Toward the end of the introduction, Barber asserts that, “In poor countries, youngsters are generally much more concerned with the welfare of others than is true of wealthy countries like our own. The reason is simple: much is asked of them” (p. 14). Although there is evidence that children from small rural communities assume more responsibility for caring for their younger siblings and doing household chores than children from more urban environments, this evidence does not establish that children from wealthy countries have any less concern for, say, the welfare of their parents or schoolmates than children from poor countries do. It is misleading to account for complex behaviors by attributing them to simple causes. If only it were the case that parents could endow their children with a concern for the welfare of others simply by asking much of them!

A theme that repeatedly pops up throughout this book is the deleterious effects single parenthood is presumed to have on children’s moral development:

Single parenthood is a major risk factor for crime. Thus, historical increases in crime have been strongly correlated with increases in single parenthood (p. 150).

Children raised without their fathers live in a less healthy manner and experience poorer health throughout their lives, on average...[which] can produce a decline in altruism...and an increased risk of becoming a criminal. (p. 176).

Children of divorced parents are more likely to “suffer from anxiety and depression, to experience alcoholism and drug addiction, to get in trouble with the law, and to have conflictual relationships with intimate partners and children of their own” (p. 276).

We know that incidents of crime are correlated with age, race, region, sex, socioeconomic status, parenting practices, social support and many other variables that, in turn, are correlated with single parenthood. And we know that that correlation does not equate to causation. Still, the underlying message that emerges from Barber’s discussion seems to be that single parenthood produces criminals. We find this conclusion uncomfortably overgeneralized. How much of the variance is accounted for by single parenthood when other factors are controlled? What is it about single parenting that disposes some children to crime? Why do the children of most single parents turn out just fine? Indeed, why do some become exemplars of morality?

To Barber’s credit, he frequently qualifies the overgeneralized statements he makes in one part of his book when he revisits the issues in other parts. For example, when Barber discusses the assistance that siblings render to one another in hunter-gatherer societies, he writes, “Such help is not always an unmixed blessing because of

rivalry between siblings. Thus !Kung children left in charge of younger siblings may abuse them. In rare cases they even attempt to drown them. This means that young helpers have to be supervised carefully” (pp. 31-32). This leaves the reader with two seemingly contradictory conclusions.

What is Altruism?

The subtitle of Barber’s book is, “The Evolution of Altruism.” The conclusions one reaches about the human capacity for altruism will depend on how one defines the construct. Set the bar low, and it will be easy to achieve; set it too high, it will be impossible. It is often unclear where Barber is setting his bar. In the introduction, he defines altruism as “actions that help another individual at some cost to the altruist.” This definition leaves several important questions unanswered. Do behaviors that proffer help to others at “some cost,” but with a net gain, qualify as altruistic? What kinds of cost count: material losses, pain, losses in reproductive success, diminished propagation of genes? Are altruistic behaviors defined solely in terms of their consequences, or do intentions matter?

Barber implies that if there is a payoff in helping someone, then the helping behavior may not qualify as altruistic (p. 9). He goes on to assert that if a behavior is “predicated on evolved moral emotions like empathy and shame, it is “really” altruistic. But why? Behaviors stemming from these emotions could reap net benefits. Barber then goes on to assert that the “only requirement for altruistic tendencies to evolve is that they should generally increase the biological success of individuals expressing them” (p. 10). So, it would seem, behaviors that help others at a net gain to the “biological success” of the helper qualify as altruistic. On this definition, there really is little challenge in establishing that people are altruistic (i.e., that they behave altruistically). Yet, a few pages later, Barber asserts “An altruist is one who puts the survival or reproduction of another individual before his own” (p. 19). If Barber is defining “biological success” in terms of reproductive success, how could tendencies to put the biological success of others above one’s own increase the biological success of those who express them? Although there may be solutions to this problem, depending on how one defines biological success, or fitness, Barber does not offer any. Indeed, he does not even acknowledge that there is a problem.

Types of Altruism

Related to this issue, Barber includes different kinds of helping behaviors in the same “altruism” category (as do many other evolutionary theorists). In the introduction, he classifies parental care as altruistic. Later he classifies reciprocity and cooperation as altruistic; and still later, heroic self-sacrifice. He insists that “military service is altruistic, in the sense that the combatants sacrifice their personal welfare for the good of others.” Although all these behaviors may qualify as altruistic when altruism is used as an overriding, or umbrella, concept, it is important to attend

to and acknowledge their differences. Evolutionary theory leads us to suspect that they stem from mechanisms that evolved through different processes and are designed in different ways. In our view, a great deal of the confusion in Barber's book and, more generally, in the literature on the evolution of altruism, could be clarified by distinguishing among three types of altruism—genetic altruism, biological altruism, and psychological altruism—and recognizing that they are all different from cooperation and reciprocity.

Genetic altruism. Genetically altruistic behaviors serve to propagate the genes of others at the expense of the alleles possessed by those who emit the behaviors. Put another way, genetically altruistic behaviors reduce an individual's inclusive fitness. This type of altruism seems inconsistent with principles of natural selection.

Biological altruism. Biologically altruistic behaviors serve to enhance the individual fitness (survival and reproductive success) of other individuals at an expense to the fitness of those who emit them. Such behaviors may evolve through kin selection. Animals may sacrifice their individual fitness to enhance their inclusive fitness. Although such behaviors are altruistic at an individual and biological level of analysis, they may be selfish at a genetic level. (Indeed, if they are not selfish at the genetic level, they constitute a major challenge to the theory of evolution!) In some circumstances, the best way for an individual to propagate his or her genes is to help others who possess copies of them.

Psychological altruism. In everyday discourse, people use the word altruism differently from the ways in which evolutionary theorists use it. Psychologically altruistic behaviors serve to enhance the profit and pleasure, or fulfill the psychological needs, of other individuals at a cost to the profit and pleasure of those who emit them. As explained by such theorists as Batson (2000), Nesse (2000), and Sober and Wilson (2000), there is no necessary connection between evolutionary (genetic or biological) and psychological forms of altruism:

As we once heard Richard Dawkins provocatively but accurately point out, an allele that produces bad teeth in horses (and leads to less effective grazing and more grass for others) is an example of evolutionary altruism. Similarly, an allele that leads one to smoke cigarettes, which may cause impotence, birth defects, and early death, is also an example of evolutionary altruism; it reduces one's procreative potential, thereby providing relative reproductive benefits to others. Most people interested in the existence of altruism are not thinking about bad teeth in horses or smoking cigarettes; they are thinking about psychological altruism. (Batson, 2000, p.207)

Cooperation and reciprocity. Cooperative behaviors, including those that evolutionary theorists since Trivers (1971) have called "reciprocal altruism," entail making short term survival and reproductive sacrifices in order to enhance one's long term interests, and thus need not be genetically, biologically, or psychologically altruistic. In some conditions individuals can foster their interests by coordinating their efforts with others and engaging in social exchanges that reap gains in trade. As

Barber points out, in order for mechanisms to evolve that dispose individuals to cooperate, the mechanisms must contain antidotes to cheating.

Conclusion

The take-home message of this book is that children inherit both selfish and altruistic propensities that may be stifled or encouraged by the ways in which they are raised: "...altruism is comparable to physical fitness. We cannot expect children to become athletes without any opportunity for physical exercise. Neither can we expect them to help others if they receive no training in altruism...our evolutionary history has...provided us with altruistic motives that grow stronger from exercise" (p. 15). We concur with this general conclusion, but did not find the case Barber advanced in support of it organized as coherently or argued as persuasively as we believe it should have been.

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