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Book Review

Looking for Kindness in Most of the Wrong Places

A review of *Kindness in a Cruel World: The Evolution of Altruism* by Nigel Barber. Prometheus Books: Amherst, NY, 2004. ISBN 1-599102-228-2.

by

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What do commercial fishermen, holocaust rescuers, mall shoppers, tax payers, blood donors, nuns, serial mercy killers, John Dillinger, and people who obey traffic laws all have in common? According to Nigel Barber, they are all engaged in acts that support the thesis that there is "an evolved propensity for altruism in human beings" (Barber 2004: 355). Here in lies both the strength and weakness of *Kindness in a Cruel World: The Evolution of Altruism*. The strength of this book is the incredible scope of topics covered. In addition to the subjects just listed, Barber discusses such things as changes in brain chemistry resulting from physical contact with others, road rage, global warming, prisons, child rearing practices, and the collapse of Enron. Although the book only touches on the literature relevant to each subject, it serves as a stimulating starting point for those who want to apply evolutionary theory to these areas. The weakness of this book is that it exaggerates the altruism and kindness in many of these behaviors in an attempt to convince readers that humans are more altruistic than they thought. This is not to say that the book's thesis is false, it is only to say that a stronger case for the extent of human kindness could have been made if the book had focused its search in a different direction.

As the similarity of titles suggests, comparisons with Matt Ridley's 1996 book *The Origins of Virtue: Human Instincts and the Evolution of Cooperation* are unavoidable, and such a comparison reveals why so many of Barber's supposed examples of altruism fail to be convincing. Both books are based on the evolutionary concepts of kin selection and reciprocal altruism as put forth in the

1960s and 1970s, and readers of Barber's book may be disappointed to find little discussion of the many studies done on the evolution of altruism since the publication of Ridley's book. Both books also rely heavily on examples from current events and an informal writing style to make these basic evolutionary concepts relevant and accessible to the general public. There is no question that Barber's plethora of contemporary examples is impressive. Whether or not his informal writing style (e.g., "Jesus liked to hang out with Mary Magdalene", p. 72) is effective depends on personal taste. However, the most important similarity between the two books is that they devote most of their pages to examples of reciprocal altruism. The difference between the two books lies in the point they draw from these examples.

Ridley focused on the first part of the phrase "reciprocal altruism" in order to emphasize that reciprocal altruism is not really altruism at all when viewed over the long term because all participants reap benefits from reciprocity. In contrast, Barber focuses on the second part of the phrase to argue that the widespread occurrence of mutually beneficial reciprocal altruism is really evidence that humans are altruistic. He begins this argument by defining altruism in a way that makes it possible to ignore the reciprocal part of reciprocal altruism: "Altruism is defined as actions that help another individual at some cost to the altruist" (Barber 2004: 9). This definition allows an action to be classified as altruism as long as it involves *short term* costs to the actor even if these costs are offset by future benefits as a result of reciprocity. Anticipating the objection that such acts are not really altruistic, Barber asserts that even when altruism is reciprocated ". . . altruism *is* real, in the sense that it is predicated on evolved moral emotions like empathy and shame" (emphasis in original, Barber 2004: 9). That is true, but reciprocal altruism is also predicated on such emotions as anger, suspicion, and moral outrage that cut off altruistic actions when they were not likely to be beneficial to the actor over the longer term. Hence, although it is true that emotions like empathy that evolved as a means to regulate reciprocal altruism can be "tapped" (see Barber 2004: Chapter Ten) to produce nonreciprocal forms of altruism, so too can emotions of anger and suspicion be tapped to produce new forms of selfish behavior. Emphasizing one set of these emotions more than the other to support the view of humans as altruistic does not seem to be justified. Barber also points out that forms of altruism that are usually reciprocated sometimes produce "no delayed benefit of any kind" (2004: 10). This is also true, but long lists of actions that only exist because they were usually reciprocated are not likely to convince people that humans have a previously unappreciated evolved propensity for altruism. The weakness of Barber's argument can be seen in his example of the dangerous occupation of commercial fishing. I predict few readers will agree with Barber's claim that working on a commercial fishing boat is an example of "altruism" simply because "the rest of us benefit in some way

from the self-sacrifice of [such] brave people" (2004: 217) even if "such altruism is motivated by financial gain" (ibid.).

Barber's quest for a greater understanding of human kindness is an important one, but it would have been more successful if he would have noticed the similarity between the words "kin" and "kind." While reciprocal altruism is an explanation of behaviors that only appear to be altruistic when viewed over the short term, human kinship is characterized by acts that fit Barber's definition of altruism when viewed over any time period. Of course Barber realizes that kinship behavior, including parental care, is altruistic (2004: 201). However, like so many evolutionists, barber sees kinship as only referring to the close kin that typically make up the kin identified in modern industrial cultures. This causes Barber to search for altruism primarily in the reciprocity that occurs among groups of non kin in modern societies. A much better place to find previously unrecognized forms of altruism is to focus on traditional cultures where kinship, and kindness toward kin merely because they are kin, was extended to even very distant kin until the traditions producing this pattern of behavior began to deteriorate (Palmer and Steadman 1997).

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