

## Ethics and Altruism in the human evolutionary history

In this new JASs forum, our readers will find an account of the lectures from the international meeting “Ethics and Altruism in the human evolutionary history”, organized by the ISItA in collaboration with the *Università di Roma “La Sapienza”* (Rome, May 25th 2007; <http://www.isita-org.com/isita/Meetings.htm>). The meeting was organized to discuss how different fields of knowledge look at the relations between Ethics and Altruism, with the final aim of providing new stimuli for future research aimed at uniting scientific (biology and anthropology) and humanistic (philosophy, psychology and cultural anthropology) disciplines in the field of Darwinian evolutionary theory.

Despite the controversies surrounding methodological and disciplinary definitions, a discussion of the relations between Ethics and Altruism from an anthropological standpoint may be useful when considering the biological and cultural implications of the presence of *Homo sapiens* in the *systema naturae*. Our conviction is based on two main considerations. Firstly, even with the recent and impressive advances in the molecular and neurological fields, any attempt to understand the human behaviour solely based on biological factors would be an oversimplification. Secondly, to take into consideration Ethics and Altruism according to an anthropological approach inevitably means having to consider the issues of the relations between historical and biological timescales, eliminating all anthropocentric biases while becoming aware of the consequences of our own actions within and upon ecosystems. Consequently, this shifts the focus from “us in our evolutionary history” to “the evolutionary history of our species”.

Charles Darwin had already pointed out some implications of the theory of evolution in any discussion of morals in his first considerations regarding changes occurring in living species. According to this idea, human acts may be regarded as the product of instinctive motions shared by all humanity. A biologically-based view of human behaviour has been developed in sociobiology. This has produced a broad philosophical debate, contributing to the dawn of “evolutionary ethics”. Substantial contributions have been provided by Comparative Psychology and Primate Ethology. However, an explanation of human behaviour in evolutionary terms cannot be presented as the only possibility at hand. Even the most committed advocates of evolutionary theory, such as Richard Dawkins who considers genes as the main actors in evolutionary processes, acknowledge that humans are able to become conscious of their actions and escape from the mechanisms produced by evolution. This also concerns aspects of procreation, which should be especially shaped by biological causes. Other scientists, like Jared Diamond, envisage that moral norms do not simply derive from evolutionary processes but are influenced by socio-cultural factors and are strictly linked to the environments in which populations have lived.

### A glimpse of the contents

The contributions to the forum focus on three main questions:

- 1) How can we explain altruistic behaviour in humans and other Primates?
- 2) What can our evolutionary history tell us about ethical behaviour and altruism?
- 3) Is the predisposition to judge human actions as good or bad the product of social structures or has it been directly shaped by natural selection?

*Fiorenzo Facchini* (Università di Bologna) suggesting the requisites for the definition of ethical behaviour and altruism, defining a clear-cut boundary between humans and other animals due to presence/absence of “awareness”, and focusing on evidence of altruistic behaviour in the course of human evolutionary history. *Augusto Vitale* and *Enrico Alleva* (Istituto Superiore di Sanità, Roma) extend the discussion to some examples of altruistic behaviour in animals other than Primates and point to the possible differences between studies conducted in captivity and in natural populations. They also warn us about biases and expectations inherent to the researchers themselves, that might influence, if not distort, interpretations of behavioural studies. The contribution of *Alberto Oliverio* (Università La Sapienza, Roma) is concerned with the potential of new methodologies and new results (e.g. the identification of mirror neurons) for the empirical study of the relationships between brain and mind, such as empathy and moral judgements. *Bonaventura Majolo* (University of Lincoln, UK) familiarize us with some attempts to go beyond the classical concepts of inclusive fitness and reciprocal altruism through the introduction of indirect reciprocity, multi-level selection, and reputation. He also introduces two classical behavioural models, the banker’s paradox and the prisoner’s dilemma, explaining how altruism may influence the final outcome of the interaction among individuals. *Gabriele Schino* (Enea, Roma) analyses two of the best known behaviours of Primates, grooming and agonistic coalitions, whose evolution seems to have depended on reciprocal altruism. He focuses on the usefulness of meta-analytical techniques to gain new insights into these topics. Finally, *Orlando Franceschelli* stresses the role of Darwin in the process of the naturalisation of man and the mind started by important philosophers such as Spinoza and Hume, and in the establishment of the idea that our intellectual and ethical capacity can be explained by the evolutionary genealogy of *Homo sapiens*.

Readers can find summaries of other contributions to the meeting at the web page <http://www.isita-org.com/isita/meetings>. These include the opening lecture of *Francisco Ayala* of the University of Irvine, California (Evolution and morality: altruism, cultural and biological), the provoking intervention of *Cristiano Castelfranchi* of the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche (Is an altruistic mind possible?) and the contribution of *Antonello La Vergata* (Università di Modena – Reggio Emilia) which faces the issue of the relations between Ethics and Altruism from a historical perspective.

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