

Nicholas Humphrey

Introduction: Science Looks at Fairness

IT FALLS TO ME, IN INTRODUCING THE FIRST SECTION OF THE CONFERENCE, to make the obvious—but all important—point that the word “fair” has a double meaning. On the one hand, we say a situation is fair when we can see that it is well balanced in an *objective* sense—when, for example, things are distributed evenly, symmetrically, or in a stable configuration. On the other hand, we say a situation is fair when we judge it to be well balanced in a *moral* sense—when things are distributed in ways we ourselves consider good, beautiful, or just.

As it happens, we typically judge a situation to be morally fair when we can see it is as a matter of fact objectively fair. We say indeed that “fair is fair.” But this connection between moral and objective fairness is presumably a contingent and not a necessary one. There would be nothing—in logic—to stop someone considering an objectively unfair situation to be a morally fair one.

It would not be illogical, but—as the papers that follow show—it would be deeply inhuman. These papers, by pioneers in the new field of scientific ethics, bring the perspectives of ethology, anthropology, and experimental economics to bear on people’s (and monkeys’) sense of fair play as a psychological trait. And they combine to show how deep it goes: how human beings—following closely in the steps of their animal ancestors—universally equate objective fairness with moral fairness. Sure, there are local individual and cultural variations. But the lesson is clear that it is in the nature of human beings to value objective fairness—to work for it when they have the chance to do so and to expect

others to work for it too. The fairness trait is in effect a “moral instinct”: fair play is in our genes.

However, in that case, we have to ask, as scientists, what evolutionary cost-benefit calculation can have put it there? What adaptive function is the sense of fairness serving?

Moral philosophers have long relied on analytic arguments to establish what the rules should be: seeking to define what fairness *must* be on a priori grounds. But asking the evolutionary question brings into sharp focus the question-begging nature of the classical arguments. Kant’s “categorical imperative,” Bentham’s “Golden Rule of do as you would be done by,” Mill’s “greatest happiness principle,” Rawls’s “original position behind a veil of ignorance”—presumably none of these cut much ice with natural selection.

Natural selection can only act a posteriori. If there has indeed been selection for the sense of fairness, then it must have been the *consequences* of individuals behaving in objectively fair or unfair ways that counted toward evolutionary success.

As scientists, then, we have to try to discover just what those consequences are (or were). It is revealing to see how the different papers in this section address this issue. But there is certainly a common theme in what they find: namely, that when an individual behaves unfairly—or, at any rate, when he is *seen* to behave unfairly—he runs a high risk of being punished, albeit at some cost to the punishers.

Going against what I just said, this may be just the place where evolutionary science does after all have something to learn from philosophy—and especially from Rawls (though see what de Waal has to say). For evolutionary theory continues to have a problem with explaining behaviors whose benefits are spread indifferently across the group—and “altruistic punishment” of unfair behavior would seem to be just a case in point.

True, *pace* Rawls, there is no point in pretending that in real life individual human beings start behind a veil of ignorance as to where they will be placed in the social order (nor individual monkeys for that matter). However, it can plausibly be argued that individual *genes* do

start behind just such a veil, because individual genes cannot possibly predict what kind of body they will end up in or what other genes' fate they may be tied to. So, if Rawls can deduce a priori that fair play all round is what a person should commit himself to when he does not know whether he is likely to be numbered among the more or the less fortunate, evolutionary theory might borrow exactly this argument to make the case for fairness-promoting genes.

None of the papers that follow actually make this case for a Rawlsian account of how “ignorant genes for fairness” might have been selected. But they provide just the kind of evidence we need to test this—and better?—ideas.