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Three Perspectives on Altruism

Introduction
The concept of altruism has long been one of vital importance in ethics. It is bound up with questions of human understanding and motivation as well as with questions concerning the form and origins of human social life. In this paper, I discuss three perspectives on altruism. I begin by describing two modern perspectives on altruism and their connection with two old traditions of philosophical thinking. The first perspective is Leda Cosmides’ and John Tooby’s thoughts on altruism. According to them, altruism consists of a mental reasoning mechanism by which we calculate how to act in order to maximize fitness when dealing with others. I contrast their view with Frans de Waal’s thoughts on altruism as consisting of a mental mechanism of empathic imagination. Cosmides’ and Tooby’s as well as de Waal’s perspectives are expressive of two problems. 1) The reliance on an economic model of interpersonal relations. 2) The view on interpersonal understanding as consisting of an ability for analogical imagination. By reflecting on various examples of the natural and social form of our life I question the above mentioned perspectives and point at alternative ways of understanding altruism. In this context I also bring in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s thoughts on pain, primitive reactions and language.

Tooby and Cosmides on altruism as a transaction
According to Cosmides and Tooby, the human mind has, over thousands of years, adapted so that we have become the social and moral beings of today. Through evolutionary history, we have developed a mental skill of reasoning how to act optimally in our dealings with others. All such dealings are formed so that they tend on the whole to enhance fitness (the propagation of copies of the agent’s alleles in subsequent generations). Cosmides and Tooby describe this as a social contract theory.

Social contract theory is based on the hypothesis that the human mind was designed by evolution to reliably develop a cognitive adaptation specialized for reasoning about social exchange. [...] From an evolutionary point of view, the design of programs causing social behavior is constrained by the behavior of other agents. More precisely, it is constrained by the design of the behavior-regulating programs in other agents and the fitness consequences that result from the social interactions these programs cause.1

The fitness enhancing systems of reasoning to which our human minds have adapted, Cosmides and Tooby describe as “evolutionarily stable strategies” or “ESS”. According to them all our social engagement has evolved because it has proved to be an evolutionarily stable strategy. If our social engagement with others would not enhance fitness it could not have survived for thousands of years, is their thought.

[...] An evolutionarily stable strategy (ESS) is a strategy (a decision rule) that can persist in a population because it produces fitness outcomes greater than or equal

to alternative strategies (Maynard Smith, 1982). The rules of reasoning and
decision making that guide social exchange in humans would not exist unless they
had outcompeted alternatives, so we should expect that they implement an ESS. 2

In another article John Tooby, Leda Cosmides, Aaron Sell, Debra Lieberman and Daniel
Sznycer conclude that altruism is the outcome of a nonconscious mental mechanism whereby
we calculate how to cooperate with others. They note that human beings tend to be more
altruistic towards their family than towards other people. This they define as “kin selection”.
Kin selection is, according to them, an evolutionarily stable strategy that enhances fitness.
Tooby et al. also speak in this context of a “welfare trade-off ratio” or “WTR”. By a “welfare
trade-off ratio” Tooby et al. mean a mental mechanism or a “variable” that regulates how
much I ought to help others in order to gain certain benefits for myself. This variable can be
“upregulated” when we are dealing with genetic relatives.

[N]atural selection should have designed the human motivational architecture to
embody programs determining how high one’s welfare trade-off ratio toward
other individuals should be set. [...] kin selection theory tells us that, all else equal,
WTR should be upregulated for close genetic relatives, motivating us to help kin
more and harm them less than we otherwise would.3

The degree to which we make “sacrifices” for others is dependent on a “kinship index” or
“kin selection”. People also use a “welfare trade-off ratio” index in order to calculate “how
much a particular person is willing to sacrifice his or her own welfare for yours”. Important to
note here is also that Tooby et al. think of these systems of reasoning as occurring
nonconsciously.

[T]he welfare trade-off ratio, WTR is an internal regulatory variable expressing
how much you value j’s welfare relative to your own. Its value is nonconsciously
expressed in many decisions you make throughout the day—how much chocolate
you leave for j, how loud you play your music when j is trying to work, whether
to clean up the mess or leave it for j, whether to call home to let j know you will
be late. It is computed by a system, the welfare trade-off ratio estimator, that takes
into account a specific array of relevant variables [...]4

Cosmides and Tooby follow a pattern of thinking that can be traced to Thomas Hobbes’ in
thinking that human social life can be described in economical terms grounded on a social
contract.5 However, for Hobbes the social contract was a theoretical explanation of the origins
of society, but not centrally an internalistic mentalistic one nor a mathematical biological one.
The linkage between a mathematical, economical and biological perspective comes later, with
William D. Hamilton and John Maynard Smith. Hamilton argued that an organism’s survival
ought to be understood according to “inclusive fitness”. By inclusive fitness Hamilton meant
that an organism’s genes has higher chances to survive if the organism cooperates with

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2 Cosmides and Tooby p.70 The work that they cite by Maynard Smith is: J. Maynard Smith, Evolution and the
3 J. Tooby, L. Cosmides, A. Sell, D. Lieberman, D. Sznycer, “Internal Regulatory Variables and the design of
Human Motivation: a Computational and Evolutionary Approach” in Handbook of Approach and Avoidance
relatives or with other organisms of the same species. This Hamilton thought to be an explaining factor for why certain species are altruistic. Hamilton writes for instance:

The social behavior of a species evolves in such a way that in each distinct behaviour-evoking situation the individual will seem to value his neighbour’s fitness against his own according to the coefficients of relationship appropriate to that situation.\(^6\)

Following Hamilton’s thoughts on inclusive fitness, John Maynard Smith introduced the thought of “evolutionary stable strategies” and argued that “kin selection” and “group selection” are such basic evolutionary stable strategies. J. M. Smith also introduced the economical principle of game theory to his reflections on evolution. Cosmides’ and Tooby’s thinking largely follow this line of thought.

**De Waal on altruism as spontaneous care**

Frans de Waal’s perspective on social life and on altruism differs from Cosmides’ and Tooby’s perspective. De Waal is skeptical of a transactional perspective where we fulfill other people’s wishes in order to gain personal advantages. He sees ape and human life as a shared life where we often naturally and spontaneously help each other without wanting anything in return.

There is in fact so much evidence for altruism in apes that I will pick just a handful of stories to drive home my point [...] At our primate center, we have an old female, Peony, who spends her days with other chimpanzees in a large outdoor enclosure. on bad days, when her arthritis is flaring up, she has great trouble walking and climbing. But other females help her out. For example, Peopny is huffing and puffing to get up into the climbing frame in which several apes have gathered for a grooming session. An unrelated younger female moves behind her, places both hands on her ample behind, and pushes her up with quite a bit of effort, until Peony has joined the rest.\(^7\)

De Waal has numerous descriptions like this one of how apes spontaneously help each other without requiring anything in return. He sees altruism as spontaneous emotional responsiveness that evolves naturally as we grow up with others. “Since expressions of sympathy emerge at an early age in virtually every member of our species, they are as natural as the first step.”\(^8\) The fact that others care for us is a natural aspect of how we grow up and develop emotional responsiveness to these others.

De Waal’s perspective can be seen as linked with a different tradition than Cosmides’ and Tooby’s. de Waal follows a tradition of thought that can be traced back to Adam Smith’s philosophy. According to Smith, human beings have a natural inclination to form social bonds and relations and to feel compassion for others.

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner.

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\(^7\) de Waal 2009, p.105

That we often derive sorrow from the sorrows of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane, though they perhaps may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility. The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it.  

Smith thinks we spontaneously care for others without requiring anything in return. We are simply affected by others. Think again of Tooby’s and Cosmides’ description of such acts as calling home to let one’s family know one will be late. Instead of describing this as a “trade off” response, one could say that calling home to let one’s family know one will be late, is an expression of spontaneous considerateness and care. It is usually not a decision we make on the basis of a calculation, nor is it because we expect something in return that we call home. Very often it is simply something we do because otherwise the family would get worried. It is a response that in itself is expressive of the close relation. Smith thinks we spontaneously care for others without requiring anything in return. In a similar sense also Darwin thought of human beings as well as many animals to have a natural “social instinct” and inclination to help each other.

... the social instincts lead an animal to take pleasure in the society of its fellows, to feel a certain amount of sympathy with them, and to perform various services for them. The services may be of a definite and evidently instinctive nature; or there may be only a wish and readiness, as with most of the higher social animals, to aid their fellows in certain general ways.

A bit later he also writes:

The feeling of pleasure from society is probably an extension of the parental or filial affections, since the social instinct seems to be developed by the young remaining for a long time with their parents; and this extension may be attributed in part to habit, but chiefly to natural selection.

When Darwin here talks of natural selection he does not mean “the survival of the fittest”. On the contrary, he saw it as a central feature of natural selection that animals have natural “social instincts”. In line with Smith, Darwin considered the natural tendency to feel sympathy as central for human morality.

Edward Westermarck was also strongly influenced by Smith.

For my own part I maintain that Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is the most important contribution to moral psychology made by any British thinker, and that it is so

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10 Smith does not specifically use the word ‘altruism’, as there was no such word at the time when he was writing. The French term *altruisme* was first introduced into philosophical theory by Auguste Comte in his *Catéchisme Positiviste* (Paris: Carilian-Goeury and Vor Dalmont, 1852), and this term was translated as ‘altruism’ in Richard Congreve’s English rendering of the text (*The Catechism of Positive Religion*, trans. Richard Congreve (London: Chapman, 1858)). Smith’s thoughts on compassion are, however, similar to Comte’s perspective on altruism, inasmuch as Comte does not think of altruism as being based on selfish purposes.
in the first place on account of the emphasis it lays on the retributive character of the moral emotions.\textsuperscript{13}

Like Darwin, Westermarck supported an altruistic perspective on nature rather than a purely egoistic one. Westermarck also thought that emotions are retributive in kind.

The moral emotions are retributive emotions. A retributive emotion is a reactive attitude of mind, either hostile or kindly, towards a living being (or something taken for a living being), regarded as a cause of pain or pleasure.\textsuperscript{14}

To sum up then, one can say that there are two traditions of thoughts when it comes to altruism. On the one hand, the economical-mathematical-biological perspective and on the other hand the emotional perspective. Smith’s, Darwin’s, Westermarck’s and de Waal’s emotional perspective might appear more straightforward and sensible. However, it is not evident that Cosmides and Tooby would feel that their emotional perspective constitute a counterargument. When Smith, Darwin, Westermarck and de Waal state that our compassionate responses are not based on our trying to gain benefits, Cosmides and Tooby might reply by saying that of course we often respond compassionately in ways that do not appear to involve calculation; it is simply the case that these calculations occur nonconsciously. I shall return to reflect on these questions a bit later in this paper.

**Sympathy, empathy and analogical imagination**

Instead of explaining our care for others as based on a nonconscious reasoning mechanism for fitness enhancement, Adam Smith sees compassion as connected with our capacity to imagine ourselves in the other’s situation. This shows in his thoughts on sympathy. By sympathy, Smith does not mean compassion but any kind of imaginative experience of another person’s feelings that cause us to be emotionally moved by the other. This is, in modern terms, called “empathy”. The explanation for our spontaneous reactions of compassion must be sought in the function of our mind and in our capacity to imagine how others feel.

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them.\textsuperscript{15}

Smith’s explanation of moral sentiments consists in an argument from analogy. Sympathy is simply the effect of our capacity to imagine ourselves in the other’s shoes. This effect can in

\textsuperscript{13} Westermarck *Ethical Relativity*. 1932 p. 71
\textsuperscript{15} Smith, pp. 11-12.
turn make us feel compassion for the other person’s misery. Edward Westermarck thinks
along similar lines as Smith:

Our retributive emotions are, of course, always reactions against pain or pleasure felt by
ourselves; this holds good of the moral emotions as well as of anger, revenge, and
gratitude. The question to be answered, then, is, Why should we, quite disinterestedly,
feel pain calling forth disapproval because our neighbour is hurt, and pleasure calling
forth approval because he is benefited?
That a certain act causes pleasure or pain to the bystander may be due to the close
association that exists between these feelings and their outward expressions. The sight of
a happy face tends to produce some degree of pleasure in him who sees it; the sight of the
bodily signs of suffering tends to produce a feeling of pain. In either case the feeling of
the spectator is due to the fact that the perception of the physical manifestations of the
feeling produces the feeling itself on account of the established association between
them. 16

According to Westermarck, my seeing another person’s bodily expressions causes me to
associate these expressions with certain feelings; thereby I feel these feelings myself. This
explains, according to him, why we are inclined to help another person when he is in pain.

Frans De Waal thinks along similar lines, that human beings and apes have the capacity
to imagine how other people feel. He uses, however, the expression “empathy” instead of the
expressions “sympathy” or “retributive emotions”. 17 According to de Waal then, first we
simply have a tendency for what he calls “emotional linkage” or “emotional contagion”.
Eventually we also develop the capacity to see that others have separate perspectives on
reality. This is part of what it means to feel empathy.

When the emotional state of one individual induces a matching or closely related
state in another, we speak of ”emotional contagion” [...]. With increasing
differentiation between self and other, and an increasing appreciation of the
precise circumstances underlying the emotional states of others, emotional
contagion develops into empathy. Empathy encompasses–and could not possibly
have arisen without–emotional contagion, but it goes beyond it in that it places
filters between the other’s and one’s own state. 18

This capacity for empathy is, according to de Waal not something that can be explained as
deriving from social competition, but derives from a need for cooperation. Human beings as
well as apes have a natural inclination to become emotionally affected by others because we
ha a natural need to cooperate.

I am personally convinced that apes take one another’s perspective, and that the
evolutionary origin of this ability is not to be sought in social competition, even if
it is readily applied in this domain (Hare and Tomasello 2004), but in the need for
cooperation. At the core of perspective-taking is emotional linkage between
individuals–widespread in social mammals–upon which evolution (or

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16 Westermarck 1932, p.96
17 De Waal’s strong emphasis on bodily reactions has, I think, more in common with Darwin than with Smith
and Westermarck. However, the difference is more a difference in focus than a difference in theoretical
perspective; Darwin and de Waal being more biologically oriented while Smith and Westermarck are more
devoted to explaining the social and moral form of human life.

development) builds ever more complex manifestations, including appraisal of another’s knowledge and intentions.\textsuperscript{19}

This “emotional linkage” leads eventually to a more advanced capacity to imagine another’s perspective, something de Waal calls empathy. De Waal thinks interpersonal understanding originates from an analogical bodily responsiveness (or imitation) that eventually leads to analogical imagination. This analogical ability to imagine enables us to feel compassion for others.

[...] at the core of the empathic capacity is a relatively simple mechanism that provides an observer (the “subject”) with access to the emotional state of another (the “object”) through the subject’s own neural and bodily representations. When the subject attends to the object’s state, the subject’s neural representations of similar states are automatically activated. The closer and more similar subject and object are, the easier it will be for the subject’s perception to activate motor and autonomic responses that match the object’s (e.g., changes in heart rate, skin conductance, facial expression, body posture). This activation allows the subject to “get under the skin” of the object, sharing its feelings and needs, which embodiment in turn fosters sympathy, compassion, and helping.\textsuperscript{20}

I agree with de Waal that it is a common feature that we are emotionally affected by others and that a kind of emotional contagion often occurs. But the question is whether this can be understood as expressive of an analogical mental mechanism, as de Waal describes it. And the question is also whether compassion can be understood in this sense as deriving from analogical imagination.

To begin with, let us reflect a bit on an example of emotional contagion. Think about what it can mean to play some simple game with a baby such as peek-a-boo. One could say that the child is affected by the parent’s joy and that emotional contagion occurs. Likewise one could say that the parent is affected by the child’s joy. But on the other hand there is something more to this. They are in the game of peek-a-boo sharing a moment of joy. From de Waal’s description of emotional contagion it appears that one person is emotionally affected by the other but that the feeling itself is something individual. It appears that there are two people who have the same private feelings but that the shared form of playing, that we play together, is not a part of what the experience means. In reality, however, when we play a game together it is this playing together that is fun. It would not be the same feeling of joy if the child was playing alone. De Waal’s perspective on emotional contagion is problematic because he thinks all our experiences are basically private individual phenomena. This makes him unable to really see what it means to share an experience with another.

However, by this I do not want to say that Smith, Westermarck or de Waal do not at all see that human beings (as well as apes) enjoy being together. For instance, de Waal talks of attachment between mother and child as a central feature.\textsuperscript{21} But the problem is that de Waal tends to explain such forms of closeness as a function enhancing analogical imagination.

The same way of thinking can also be seen in de Waal’s (ans Smith’s and Westermarck’s) thought that compassion derives from analogical imagination. The idea that compassion is based on the use of an analogical method of imagination is expressive of a

\textsuperscript{19} de Waal, p. 72. The work that de Waal cites by Hare and Tomasello is: B. Hare and M. Tomasello, ‘Chimpanzees are more skilful in competitive than in cooperative cognitive tasks.’ \textit{Animal Behaviour} 68, 2004, pp. 571-581.

\textsuperscript{20} de Waal, pp.37-38.

\textsuperscript{21} See De Waal 2009, p. 68.
tendency not to see the difference between a first person perspective and a second person perspective when we talk about sensations. The thought is that the second person perspective on sensations is a kind of copy of the first person perspective. Ludwig Wittgenstein is critical of this way of thinking. In Zettel he writes:

“Putting the cart before the horse” may be said of an explanation like the following: we tend someone else because by analogy with our own case we believe that he is experiencing pain too.—Instead of saying: Get to know a new aspect from this special chapter of human behaviour—from this use of language.

A bit earlier he also writes:

It is a help here to remember that it is a primitive reaction to tend, to treat, the part that hurts when someone else is in pain; and not merely when oneself is—and so to pay attention to other people’s pain-behaviour, as one does not pay attention to one’s own pain behavior.

Wittgenstein does not think of compassion as something based on our ability to imagine having similar sensations of pain as the other. On the contrary, he talks of how our reaction to tend to other people’s pain is just as basic a feature in our life as tending to one’s own pain; it does not derive from analogical imagination. He also points out that we do not pay attention to our own behavior when we are in pain as we do when others are in pain. Wittgenstein is here also criticizing the thought that the word pain would refer to an inner sensation that we from a first person point of view have privileged access to. The argument from analogy builds on such a thought of privileged access to our own inner states while we do not have such access to other people’s inner states. It also builds on an epistemological conception of knowledge and understanding where knowing something means to have information about something rather than doing something. Instead of thinking of concepts like imagination and attention as basically epistemological concepts Wittgenstein shows them to be concepts that gain their meaning in our responding to the other. This also means that these concepts have a moral form. In Philosophical Investigations Wittgenstein writes: “How am I filled with pity for this man? How does it come out what the object of my pity is? (pity, one may say, is a form of conviction that someone else is in pain.)”

In Zettel he writes: “Only surrounded by certain normal manifestations of life, is there such a thing as an expression of pain. Only surrounded by an even more far-reaching particular manifestation of life, such a thing as the expression of sorrow or affection. And so on.” One could say that de Waal and Wittgenstein have different perspectives on what counts as “natural” in human life. For de Waal it is important that our bodies resemble each other and that our minds work in similar ways. This he thinks enables us to understand each other and respond to each other. For Wittgenstein on the other hand it is with the background of a broad shared pattern of life, a life where we naturally share close relations with others and where we then also respond to each other in various ways, by for instance sorrow or affection; that the concept of pain has meaning. The concept of pain is not based on a private inner experience.

Even if de Waal often has a good sense for the natural and social character of human life, and even if his reflections on the likeness between the social life of animals and human

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23 Wittgenstein, §540.
beings often is striking; he is caught in a problematic conception of interpersonal understanding as based on analogical imagination that follows a classical line of thinking found also in Smith, Darwin and Westermarck. Smith’s and Westermarck’s thoughts on retributive emotions is expressive of the similar inability to see the difference between a first person perspective and a second person perspective. They are unable to see that we do not necessarily respond to another person’s pain because we feel the same as the other, but we respond to the other because this other who is in pain. They are also unable to see that our responsiveness cannot be explained in terms of analogical imagination. This makes them unable to really see what it can mean to share a human life with others, to share an experience with another, to respond to another’s suffering, to talk with another, to grow into a close relationship with another, or to feel separate from another.

**Eating**

Another aspect of de Waal’s thoughts on altruism are his thoughts on cooperation. J.C. Flack and de Waal describe food sharing among chimpanzees:

> Food sharing is known in chimpanzees [...] It is an alternative method to social dominance and direct competition by which adult members of a social group distribute resources among themselves. Most food sharing requires fine-tuned communication about intentions and desires in order to facilitate inter-individual food transfers.\(^26\)

They further explain this food sharing: “[T]he reciprocity hypothesis—proposes that food sharing is part of a system of mutual obligations that can involve material exchange, the exchange of social favours such as grooming and agonistic support, or some combination of the two.”\(^27\) Flack’s and de Waal’s thesis is that animal social engagement can be understood as patterns of reciprocal emotional responsiveness useful for the group and that those patterns have evolved for that reason. They also see such reciprocal responsiveness as a basic pattern in altruism. The basic factors that unite human beings have to do with, on the one hand, the fact that we are able to imagine how others feel and, on the other hand, our need to cooperate, for instance by sharing food. Flack’s and de Waal’s conception of cooperation is reminiscent here of Cosmides’ and Tooby’s transactional perspective; exchanges of favors are efforts to fulfill another person’s desires, whatever these desires may be. And they are carried out in order to secure certain benefits.

But leaving that aspect aside, there is another feature of the account offered by Flack and de Waal that I want to reflect on some more, namely how they describe eating. Think about how Flack and de Waal talk about ‘food sharing’. Is it a good description of what it means for human beings to eat together, to describe this as a method of social exchange of favors? And is this the only or most basic description of what it means to eat together? When human beings eat together it is often a way of spending time together, being together. We do not simply exchange food in order to cooperate; we eat together. That is, for human beings eating cannot be described as mere exchanges of favors. Eating together has a different meaning than eating alone has. I agree with Flack and de Waal that eating together is a natural feature of our life and that sharing food is of practical importance. But their portrayal of this as an exchange of favors is problematic. In fact, our ways of eating together are often


\(^{27}\) Flack and de Waal, p. 5.
expressive of the self-evident way in which our lives are intimately woven together in multifarious ways. There is a sense in which we share a meal with our children, where this is so self-evident that it cannot be understood as cooperation or as an exchange of benefits. Sharing meals brings meaning to the whole situation. At the same time, the fact that we share meals is expressive of our sense of responsibility for the other. This is a responsibility that cannot be understood without acknowledging the importance of our shared presence for each other in eating together. This presence shows itself, for instance, in the fact that we often spontaneously talk with each other and listen to each other while eating.

According to Flack and de Waal communication is used in food sharing in order to “facilitate inter-individual food transfers”. I agree that talking while eating can be of practical importance, such as me telling you to pass the salt. However, the fact that we often talk while we eat also often has a non-practical character. We simply talk because we are together. Our spontaneous readiness to talk with each other is an expression of our presence for the other. In this sense there is something similar in how we can be drawn into playing peek-a-boo with a child and in how we are often spontaneously drawn into conversations while eating with others. This may be something neither of us decides to do; and it has no further purpose. But it is expressive of how we can be there for each other. This form of spontaneous presence is in itself expressive of a moral sensitivity towards the other; an ability to be drawn into her life, to take her life seriously.

Of course there can be situations where people do not talk with each other while eating. In some families it might be even more of a rule that they do not talk while eating. There can be various reasons for this. One reason can be that the married couple is deeply fed up on each other. In such situations a cold manner of talking merely in order to “facilitate inter-individual food transfers” might also take place. But my point above has been to say that even if both animals and human beings might sometimes share meals in a transactional manner, and even if both animals and human beings sometimes communicate simply in order to exchange benefits while eating; these are not any more basic or more natural ways of eating than the ways we can enjoy eating together. Nor do these transactional ways of eating and talking explain the multifarious ways we share a life with each other and find meaning in being together.

Wittgenstein writes: “Commanding, questioning, storytelling, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing.”28 One thing Wittgenstein suggests here is that it is problematic to think of human nature as if the natural part of it only consisted in our doing practical things in order to survive, while language is thought of as a “cultural” feature extraneous to it. Wittgenstein sees talking as a feature of our lives that is no less natural than eating. But it is not only that eating and talking both are natural, as if these still were separate aspects of life. What it means for human beings to eat cannot be separated from the fact that we share meals and that we commonly spontaneously talk while we eat. In this sense our physical needs largely get their form and meaning from the fact that we live a shared life with others, and a shared life full of talk. Another thing he suggests is that it is problematic to think of language as basically a practical tool. Wittgenstein mentions such things as chatting, storytelling and playing, that is, ways of talking and doing things that do not have a specific goal but are rather forms of being with others. For Wittgenstein, our practical actions are not in any sense more basic or more natural than our non-practical ones. Nor is a practical use of language, such as exchanging information, more basic than a non-practical one such as chatting, or joking, or storytelling.

In his later work, *The Age of Empathy* (2009) de Waal seems, however, to acknowledge the fact that eating cannot simply be described as an exchange of favors. There he notes that

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apes not only help each other out when trying to get food but they also sit down and eat together. He asks:

... could it be that they just love to eat together? If both monkeys are rewarded, they will sit side by side munching on the same food. Do things taste better together than alone, the way we are more at ease having dinner with family and friends?  

De Waal then draws the following conclusion.

Perhaps it is time to abandon the idea that individuals faced with others in need decide whether to help, or not, by mentally tallying up costs and benefits. These calculations have likely been made for them by natural selection. Weighing the consequences of behavior over evolutionary time, it has endowed primates with empathy, which ensures that they help others under the right circumstances. The fact that empathy is most easily aroused by familiar partners guarantees that assistance flows chiefly toward those close to the actor.

Despite that de Waal notes that apes (and humans) enjoy eating together, he is unable to really see what it means to grow into a close personal relation, and how our eating together is part of this growth of the close relation. For him the fact that we can enjoy eating together is expressive of empathy which in turn is useful for survival since it makes us assist the ones that are close to us. I have earlier in this paper questioned de Waal’s thoughts on empathy. I have also above tried to show that the social elements of our lives cannot be understood simply as consequences of the needs for practical cooperation. Our practical help and care are, on the contrary, an integral part of a larger pattern of acknowledging each other as persons. What it means to understand a child’s physical needs cannot be separated from our acknowledging this child as someone to be with also in other ways, someone to eat together with, someone to chat with, quarrel with, and tell stories to, someone with whom we share a future life and a history. This relation cannot be understood in terms of empathic analogical imagination, nor can our social relations be well understood as motivated exclusively by our physical or biological needs.

The child becomes progressively initiated into forms of life that those around it engage in and follow out continually; and this is possible because the child, as a result of its natural constitution, is a potential sharer in these forms of life and needs to be made an actual sharer in them by being constantly treated as one. In a word, the child comes to communicate by being communicated with.

The idea of choice
I shall now return to reflect once more on Cosmides’ and Tooby’s idea of altruism as transactions. Two features are central in their transactional perspective. First, human interpersonal encounters are described as if these were always based on individual preferences. That we engage in social interaction is something we do because it is useful for our own survival and fitness. Second, Cosmides and Tooby also describe our transactional reasoning as taking place on a nonconscious level. This unconscious level of reasoning they think of as a kind of mathematical reasoning function that governs all our social engagement.

30 Frans de Waal, ibid, p. 115.
31 Hamlyn, Perception, Learning and the Self: Essays in the Philosophy of Psychology, p. 106
All social engagement is thought of as taking the form of exchanges of benefits. But how are these two features to be understood? Cosmides and Tooby defend their view of a nonconscious mental transactional reasoning function by referring to certain empirical evidence or examples from ordinary life. Some such examples were mentioned in the beginning of this paper; “[…] how much chocolate you leave for j, how loud you play your music when j is trying to work, whether to clean up the mess or leave it for j […]”. Surely we do often think in these lines, but does this prove that there is an underlying nonconscious mental function of fitness reasoning taking place? It seems to me that these are only a bunch of examples described in a one-sided manner. However, Cosmides and Tooby also refer to certain empirical observations of “primitive” people. With the example of how a “primitive” !Kung San woman reasons about food exchanges they want to point to the natural as well as universal forms of economical reasoning in social situations.

When Agent X provides a benefit to Agent Y, triggering the expectation in both that Y will at some point provide a benefit to X in return, a social exchange relationship has been initiated. Indeed, within hunter-gatherer bands, many or most reciprocity interactions are implicit.32

To illustrate their point, Cosmides and Tooby then offer the following quotation from Nisa, a !Kung San gatherer from Botswana who was interviewed by Marjorie Shostak:

If a person doesn’t give something to me, I won’t give anything to that person. If I’m sitting eating, and someone like that comes by, I say, “Uhn, uhn. I’m not going to give any of this to you. When you have food, the things you do with it make me unhappy. If you even once in a while gave me something nice, I would surely give some of this to you.”33

Commenting on this passage, Cosmides and Tooby then add:

Nisa’s words express her expectations about social exchange, which form an implicit social contract: If you are to get food in the future from me, then you must share food with me. Whether we are San foragers or city dwellers, we all realize that the act of accepting a benefit from someone triggers an obligation to behave in a way that somehow benefits the provider, now or in the future.34

I do not want to deny that these ways of thinking of food sharing might be found anywhere among human beings, but the question is whether the example proves that there is an underlying nonconscious economical pattern of reasoning in all social engagement? Cosmides and Tooby seem to think that anything that is done among hunter gatherers must prove the feature to be a basic natural feature of all human reasoning. My impression is, however, that the woman quoted above is bitter as anyone sometimes can become bitter on others. This is a woman who has become fed up on sharing her food with others because others have sometimes not shared their food with her. But that a person sometimes grows bitter does not prove that this is how we all nonconsciously “work” socially. Her comment is not proof of

34 Cosmides and Tooby, ibid.
some general, natural, underlying social pattern of reasoning merely because she lives a life as a hunter gatherer. Nor is the fact that all people around the world sometimes become bitter proof of the absolute basically transactional function of social life. There are also a lot of people in the world that are not bitter, and probably there are also !Kung San people who are not bitter all the time. Besides, when a person becomes bitter we usually do not say that she behaves naturally. But we might say that she has become sick in her heart. Cosmides and Tooby think the example of a “primitive” person’s reasoning proves the general and natural transactional form underlying all human social engagement. However, this way of taking “primitive” people as proof of some basic underlying pattern of thinking is problematic.

Cosmides’ and Tooby’s nonconscious transactional perspective is also connected with a predilection for an economic jargon when describing human relations. So they talk about “kin selection”, “welfare trade-off ratio” etc. when describing our care for family members. These expressions are thought of as describing general underlying behavioral patterns. Our ordinary relational words such as “child” or “parent” are thought to gain their meaning from these underlying economical behavioral patterns. These economical expressions build, as I mentioned earlier, on a conception of human relations as based on individual preferences. The idea is that we can choose to take any kind of attitude towards another person’s life, provided this attitude benefits our own chances of survival. Other people’s lives are in this sense secondary to my own life. However, K.E. Løgstrup writes: “The other person is in such a real sense a part of our world that it is in fact awkward to refer to him or her as “the other person” rather than as one’s child or spouse.” As Løgstrup notes, the words “child” and “spouse” do not mean “second person”. In this sense there is a big conceptual difference between Cosmides’ and Tooby’s use of expressions such as “kin selection” and on the other hand Løgstrup using the word “child”. The word “child” implies a human relation where the child is involved in a certain way of living with others, sharing days and years in close relations, and where there are people who talk with and care for this child. These ways of sharing a life is internal to the self evident form our responsibility for the child takes. From a perspective where all interpersonal relations are described as based on personal preferences it will not be possible to understand what it means to grow into a close relationship with another. Nor can our responsibility for one another be understood from such a perspective.

Think also about what it means to say that a person is dying. This is not simply a neutral description of the person’s physical state. It is a moral description; when we say that a person is dying we also usually say that there is nothing more we can do to help him survive. At the same time, that a person is dying and that we cannot help him to survive usually does not mean that we leave him. The awareness of another person’s coming death often makes us attend to him in a special way. It especially often makes the dying person’s close ones attend to him. We try to make his last days as bearable as possible; we try to ease possible pain, we help practically, but we also talk, we share meals together, and we often share thoughts and memories about life and about loved ones. By this I do not mean that we necessarily always help our close ones or other people that are dying. Family relations can sometimes be deeply injured, filled with years of quarrel that tear people apart. People can also wish for the death of another and kill others. But these attitudes are in no sense more basic than the ways we often do care for others. I am trying to say three things here. First, the word “child” cannot be understood from a perspective where interpersonal relations are thought of merely as transactions. Second, words such as “birth”, illness and “death” largely get their meaning from our standing in close personal relations to others. Third, our understanding another person’s physical needs is largely integral to our acknowledging the person also in other ways, such as our talking with her and listening to her. Conceptions of altruism that do not

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acknowledge these three aspects will not be able to show the natural form of our shared human life.

**Literature:**


Brian Hare and Michael Tomasello, “Chimpanzees are more skilful in competitive than in cooperative cognitive tasks.” *Animal Behaviour* 68 (2004), pp. 571-581.


