

COMMENTS ON GEORGE WILLIAMS'S ESSAY ON MORALITY AND NATURE

by Sarah Blaffer Hrdy

Abstract. Although there is no questioning the heroism of those who "rebel against the selfish replicators" their task seems very nearly insurmountable. I question whether anyone can formulate a broadly acceptable moral system that will not in some respects be constrained by the legacy of generations spent as selfish and kin-selected replicators.

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C. P. Snow once observed that "If baboons learned to talk, the first words they spoke would be stiff with moral indignation." This was in *Time of Hope* (Snow [1949] 1960, 359), first in the "Strangers and Brothers" series, in which Snow explores human motivations and the world of modern science, as well as the threat of world or, in any event, human destruction posed by that fatal combination. *Time of Hope* was written in the period just after World War II when neither Snow nor anyone else knew much about baboon social behavior. Yet Snow was as prescient in his predictions about baboons as he was about the future course of nuclear disarmament.

Based on what we now know, baboons probably do have self-interested expectations about how other baboons ought to behave. "Indignation" or outrage might not be such a farfetched way to describe the response of a baboon whose social expectations are betrayed. What is relevant about these expectations in the context of George Williams's (1988) catalog of morally objectionable practices found in nature is just how different these expectations are going to be for male and female, high- and low-ranking baboons.

As we know from the work of Jeanne Altmann, Tim Ransom, Barbara Smuts, and others, savanna baboons forge close associations with one or more individuals of the opposite sex, sometimes termed

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“friendships.” There is a great deal of reciprocity, and Smuts was astounded to realize one day that what she had previously interpreted as unprovoked attacks by males against some hapless female passerby were in fact probably an act of retaliation against a specific female who had dared to challenge one of his “special friends.” Here is the proverbial loyalty and memory of the elephant. From one female’s point of view, the male’s behavior is vindictive and dangerous; from the other’s, merely “loyal to a fault.”

Again, take the case that Williams mentions of adultery by females. Similar to most mammals, male baboons find it distressing (as manifested by frequent glances, irritable pacing, nervous yawns) to watch a dominant male co-opt one of their special friends when she is sexually receptive. From his point of view such behavior by a female who had just hours before solicited and mated with him might well be viewed as adultery. However, from the female’s point of view this could simply be one more tactic to promote the survival of her offspring, if indeed former consorts are more likely to assist in the protection and rearing of infants, and are less likely to kill them. What from the male’s point of view is an act of betrayal, from the female’s perspective can be construed as maternal devotion.

No informed person could sensibly turn to nature for templates in moral matters, and no one makes this point more persuasively than Williams does. Yet the examples cited here should serve to remind us that some of the traits we consider fine moral qualities, as well as those we deem despicable, are represented in nature. Furthermore, it is no accident that Williams, and indeed all humans, find certain traits laudable, others nasty, still others neutral. Why do we find it admirable to nurture children but not tadpoles? Why is it illegal to murder people, but merely a commercial venture to cut down scarce Central Valley oaks? The answer of course is that the generators of these moral questions are themselves humans. Indeed, we would be hard put to come up with a species-neutral or truly universal moral system. At present I see no way of getting around the intrusion of biology and ecology into our moral systems. Moreover, even on the occasions that, like Robert Frost (a quintessentially selfish man), I find myself “clever enough to beat my nature,” the clever nature and higher moral sense that aspired to beat that nature were shaped not only by a Christian upbringing but to a considerable degree by nature as well.

Hence, I question whether Williams or anyone else can come up with a broadly acceptable moral system that will not in some respects be constrained by the legacies of selfish and kin-selected replication. For better or (almost certainly) for worse, I doubt that there are very many members of my species prepared really to meet the challenge we set up

for ourselves when we admit the selfishness of nature, and fewer still who could actually sustain for long the will to win the war against worse-than-immoral cosmic processes. There is then no questioning the real heroism of those who truly do "rebel against the selfish replicators," but if and when these heroes emerge, the rest of our race will regard them with wonder, puzzlement, and occasionally admiration.

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Notice

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