Altruism and normative bargaining

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Abstract: Explaining altruistic behavior may require expanding the bargaining framework. In particular, accommodating altruism may require greater emphasis on bargaining under normative rather than actual conditions. Fleshing out the account of resource-rational bargaining under normative conditions raises important questions for future research.

Some elements of human altruistic behavior may require expansion of the bargaining framework to explain. Humans make significant sacrifices for the sake of nonhuman animals and members of future generations, although neither party can bargain with us. Humans also sacrifice for the sake of others with limited bargaining power, such as the distant poor. How might these phenomena be explained by resource-rational bargaining?

One proposal would be to view these elements of altruistic behavior as outside the scope of the resource-rational bargaining account. Certainly, as Levine and colleagues stress, all accounts have some limitations, but this would be a sizable limitation of the account. It is worth asking whether more can be said about altruism on a bargaining account.

A second proposal would be to offer an evolutionary explanation of altruistic behavior. For example, Levine and colleagues suggest that the sense of moral duty to provide for one's children "originates in `blind' adaptive processes rather than agreement-based reasoning."

In some sense, there is an evolutionary explanation for most stable features of human cognition. This explanation may be sufficient when no more detailed cognitive explanation is available. But much altruistic behavior draws robustly on capacities for reasoning and learning, motivating the search for a complementary cognitive explanation of the process and terms of altruistic decisionmaking. For example, we need to explain why human attitudes towards nonhumans have shifted radically on a timescale of centuries or even decades.

A third proposal would be that altruistic behavior results from a resource-rational approximation to non-altruistic behavior. While this explanation may work in low-stakes cases, it is unlikely to explain why someone would devote their life to campaigning for the rights of nonhumans or future generations.

A fourth proposal would be that altruistic behavior results from bargaining over general rules. For example, the rich may agree to welfare policies on the understanding that one day, they too may be poor. But again, this proposal is unlikely to explain altruistic behavior

towards future generations or nonhumans. We do, after all, know that we are neither future people nor elephants.

A promising proposal would be to discuss bargaining under normative assumptions. For example, Levine and colleagues suggest that some types of altruism may result from Rawlsian bargaining under a veil of ignorance. If, for example, we do not know which generation we will be born to, then we have reason to ensure that all generations face good prospects.

This is precisely how contractualism has traditionally been understood. All leading philosophical theories of contractualism deal with bargaining under normative rather than actual conditions. For example, instead of bargaining in our own self-interest we might aim for bargains that no one could reasonably reject (Scanlon 2000), or which could be adopted behind a veil of ignorance (Rawls 1971) And instead of conceiving narrowly of the participants to bargaining processes, we might expand the moral circle (Singer 1981) to view those who cannot actually bargain as important contributors to the bargaining process.

Enriching the resource-rational bargaining account to cover bargaining under normative conditions raises important questions that future work should aim to answer. First, what triggers bargaining under normative rather than self-interested conditions? Second, what mechanisms underlie bargaining under normative conditions and how do they relate to mechanisms for self-interested bargaining? Finally, what kinds of normative assumptions are involved in bargaining? How do they arise, grow and change?

Answering these and similar questions will put us in a better position to understand the nature and implications of the resource-rational bargaining account. It will also put the bargaining account in greater contact with existing contractualist theories, which have viewed bargaining under normative conditions as an essential part of contractualist moral theory.

References

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