

Phil*2000
Philosophy of Biology (2017)
Reflection 1 on Chapter 1 of *The Selfish Gene*.

Due Tuesday, January 17 by 2:00 pm.

Please submit using the Dropbox function of Courselink

I think that students will find it interesting to read Dawkins' introduction to the 30th anniversary edition (now ten years old, but still insightful). He recounts various reactions to the book and its title. He also offers some interesting reflections on the heuristic benefits of "gene-level personification." That is, of asking questions like: "If I were a gene, what would be the best way for me to persist and spread over successive generations?" Notice that Dawkins defends the idea that gene-level personification "comes to exactly the same conclusion" (p. xiv) as organism-level personification. This is something to keep in mind as we move forward: Why does Dawkins equate the evolutionary "interests of particular genes with the interests of an entire organism? In other words, why doesn't he recognize these as two distinct levels of selection whose evolutionary interests can sometimes come into conflict?

Reflection Questions

1. On page 5, Dawkins distinguishes his biological definition of the altruism/selfishness distinction from a psychological version of the distinction. The difference, he explains, is that the biological version applies to behaviour (to be precise, it applies to the consequences of a behavioural pattern on fitness), whereas the psychological definitions of altruism/selfishness apply to motives. That is, to the intentions with which some action is executed.
 - a) Briefly define "biological altruism" and explain how it differs from psychological altruism.
 - b) Provide an example of a behaviour (actual or hypothetical) that is psychologically altruistic but biologically selfish.
 - c) Provide an example of a behaviour (actual or hypothetical) that is psychologically selfish but biologically altruistic.
2. Briefly explain the process of group selection as Dawkins describes it on page 9.
3. On page 10, Dawkins presents an argument against group selection. Please reconstruct this argument in your own words. This should involve an outline of each logical step in his argument. Feel free to reconstruct the argument in point form, rather than as a written paragraph. Sometimes students find it helpful to number the individual premises and to explicitly identify the conclusion (e.g. "P1... P2.. C")
4. Please identify one question that came up for you while reading this chapter.