

UNDERSTANDING LIVING SYSTEMS

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Quotes relevant to “Selfish Genes”

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Can a Gene be Selfish?

You might think this is simply a problem of semantics, but it is important in understanding what genes do. A gene cannot be selfish if it is simply part of something else that is the purposive entity – the organism. Only the purposive entity could be considered selfish. Genes do not and cannot make choices; organisms can and do. You might also think that ‘selfish gene’ is simply a colourful metaphor. If that is so, then it is a powerful misrepresentation of the concept of selfishness, which can only be attributed to wilful beings performing deliberate acts. Yet it is a seductive argument: we are selfish because of our genes, since we exist to pass genes from one generation to another. As Dawkins writes, the genes are ‘manipulating it [the organism] by remote control’.

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The difficulty of providing an acceptable definition of a gene is the key to a surprising proposition. The problem can be put in one simple question: do genes exist? This may seem an absurd question. Yet it is a necessary one — because genes do not exist in the way that is often assumed or thought. In large part the gene is illusory, at least in the sense that there is not a gene for this and a gene for that. Nor are genes directly causal of function.

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As much as our genes are involved in the function of our muscles, they do not determine the direction of travel. This behaviour is not in our genes, and nor can genes determine the nature of our behaviour. For example, there are no genes specifically for designing an aircraft, or for deciding to be an elite athlete or a musician. Similarly, they make us neither selfish nor altruistic. Genes have no moral compass.

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If there is a privileged level of causation, then it lies at the psychosocial level and not at the level of genes. This is the level at which wilful agency is initiated and organisms can be genuinely selfish or altruistic. In truth you cannot be selfish if you do not have the choice to be altruistic, which is why selfishness cannot be applied at a genetic level, neither metaphorically nor literally.

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Even the idea of selfish genes is an example of how ideas may influence behaviour. This of course is its danger; but at the psychosocial level we have discourse, we argue, we consider, and we may put in place arrangements that regulate our behaviour to reduce conflict and enhance cooperation

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Mutual Benefit is Not Selfish

The gene-centric view is that there is no genuine altruistic behaviour because cooperative behaviour provides mutual benefit. In that view it is at best 'reciprocally generous' in a 'you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours' kind of way. It is also argued that behaviour determines the preservation of genes in a 'gene pool', the ultimate cost-benefit analysis as the primary determinant of evolution and of living things. It is as if genes are a currency by which success or fitness is measured. Yet success depends on the organism itself, and there is no direct causation between genes and the characteristics of the organism on which fitness depends. If there were genes for selfishness there would have also to be genes for altruism, selflessness and cooperation. This is nonsense, because much of this behaviour is cultural and is passed on from group to group and is fostered within the group. Ways of deciding what is right and wrong with behaviour is not written in our genes. We do not switch genes from one thought to another. There is not a gene for selfishness when we decide to be selfish, but to be definitively selfish we must make or have such a choice.