

**From:** Victoria Stodden <[REDACTED]>  
**To:** Jeffrey Epstein <jeevacation@gmail.com>  
**Cc:** "[REDACTED]" <[REDACTED]>  
**Subject:** "A cooperative species: Evolutionary models and the Pleistocene human condition"  
**Date:** Mon, 16 Nov 2009 20:01:48 +0000

---

I can't make this talk since it's at harvard but, again, made me think of you.

----- Forwarded Message

We'll hear from Professor Sam Bowles (Sante Fe Institute). His talk is titled "A cooperative species: Evolutionary models and the Pleistocene human condition" (abstract below). Should be great!

Dave

<http://www.santafe.edu/~bowles/>

abstract: Drawing on my forthcoming book (with Herbert Gintis) I will provide an empirically based explanation of the emergence and proliferation of distinctly human forms of cooperation. There are many models of this process, all of which "work" from a mathematical standpoint; the question I will address is which ones might explain the evolution of social behaviors under the conditions that humans experienced during the Late Pleistocene.

If, as both experiments and natural observations suggest, many humans are genuinely altruistic, then the puzzle is not the one addressed by many economic and biological models, namely why self regarding individuals would act as if they were unselfish when they really are not. Rather it is to explain how the species evolved so that a substantial fraction of its members would act altruistically, meaning that they undertake actions which if abandoned would raise their payoffs (either material or genetic).

The most plausible explanation is that humans (then, as now) occupied environments that made cooperation among substantial numbers of individuals essential to survival – in predation, risk pooling, defense. Because altruism was essential to cooperation in groups of significant size, groups with a preponderance of altruists exploited these gains to cooperation and did better in competition with other groups. Four distinctly human characteristics contributed to this outcome by lessening the selective pressures against altruists within groups and heightening the stakes of group competition in which groups with many altruists were favored.: a) food sharing, monogamy, and other forms of reproductive leveling within groups; b) low cost and contingent punishment of deviant individuals; c) the capacity to internalize social norms and to build institutions to teach altruism; and d) frequent and lethal intergroup competition favoring groups with more altruistic members. The fact that other species do not exhibit this suite of characteristics may explain the distinctively moral and cooperative nature of humans.

Between-group competition favored not only altruistic individuals but also group level institutions supporting the above practices. Thus culturally transmitted institutions co-evolved with culturally and/or genetically transmitted individual behavioral predispositions. The empirical plausibility of this interpretation is based on climatic, genetic, archaeological, ethnographic and other data suggesting, for example that ancestral groups were likely to have been genetically sufficiently different one from another and that environmentally induced crises and warfare were significant causes of mortality working to weed out groups with few altruists.

The same evidence raises serious doubts about an alternative explanation, namely that contemporary (genuinely or seemingly) altruistic behavior is common because our ancestors lived under conditions – closed communities descended from a recent common ancestor– in which these behaviors were individual fitness enhancing, and we did not adjust our behavior as these conditions changed.

when: 4:00pm Monday 16th November 2009

where: 1 Brattle Square 6th floor

map: <http://www.ped.fas.harvard.edu/location/>