

## Is Selflessness Real?

Several contemporary biologists have argued that apparently selfless human behavior is actually a kind of selfish activity that our genes impel us to carry out. For example, Desmond Morris suggests that when a man rushes into a burning house to save his daughter—or if an old friend or even a complete stranger rescues the child—he is actually saving an organism that contains or, in the case of the friend or stranger, may contain his own genes. We have developed these protective behaviors so that our genes can survive and be passed on to future generations. Thus, helping behaviors are genetically selfish: they are mechanisms that our genes have evolved to ensure their own survival.

*The man who risks death to save his small daughter from a fire is in reality saving his own genes in their new body-package. And in saving his genes, his act becomes biologically selfish, rather than altruistic.*

*But supposing the man leaping into the fire is trying to save, not his daughter, but an old friend? How can this be selfish? The answer here lies in the ancient history of mankind. For more than a million years, man was a simple tribal being.... [T]he chances were that every member of your own tribe was a relative*

*of some kind.... [In saving your old friend] you would be helping copies of your own genes.... Again ... genetic selfishness.*

*[Moreover, when man] was tribal, ... any inborn urge to help his fellow men would have meant automatically that he was helping gene-sharing relatives.... But with the urban explosion, man rapidly found himself in huge communities, surrounded by strangers, and with no time for his genetic constitution to alter to fit the startlingly new circumstances. So his altruism inevitably spread to include [complete strangers].*

### QUESTIONS

1. What do theories of evolution such as that proposed by Desmond Morris imply about our human nature?
2. Could all human behavior be explained in terms of genes?
3. If Morris is right, does it make sense to say that humans are or are not selfish?

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Source: Desmond Morris *Manwatching, A Field Guide to Human Behavior* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977), 153–154.