

A Situationist View on Reciprocity

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The vast majority of human beings regularly engage in reciprocal altruistic behaviors with non related conspecifics. Yet, do evolutionary biologists have a satisfactory theory of reciprocity? In view of the literature, one could be tempted to answer affirmatively to this question, but one would be wrong. Incitations to reciprocate exist when past behaviors convey information about future behaviors. In evolutionary models, it is the implicit assumption that individuals can only play consistent strategies that forms this incitation, because a single defection then signals future defections. However, this hypothesis is not biologically justified. Consistency of social behavior is a product of evolution that needs to be explained, not a legitimate *a priori* assumption.

In the present work, based on game theoretic modeling, I propose an alternative explanation. Humans can be in various situations with respect to each others. A defection is thus interpreted as a signal that one would not benefit from a particular social exchange. And, because situations have some inertia, a single defection thus signals that one will probably defect in future rounds too, which makes it rationale to reciprocate. Conversely, because defections are interpreted in such a way, it is not sensible for one to defect when one would benefit from social exchange. In conclusion, I claim that it is the inertia of individuals' situations, and not chiefly the inertia of individuals' personalities, that forms the logic of consistency in social behavior, and thus founds the incitation to reciprocate.