

Ibn Khaldun on Solidarity (“*Asabiyah*”) - Modern Science on Cooperativeness and Empathy: a Comparison

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Abstract

Understanding cooperative human behaviour depends on insights into the biological basis of human altruism, as well as into socio-cultural development. In terms of evolutionary theory, kinship and reciprocity are well established as underlying cooperativeness. Reasons will be given suggesting an additional source, the capability of a cognition-based empathy that may have evolved as a by-product of strategic thought. An assessment of the range, the intrinsic limitations, and the conditions for activation of human cooperativeness would profit from a systems approach combining biological and socio-cultural aspects. However, this is not yet the prevailing attitude among contemporary social and biological scientists who often hold prejudiced views of each other's notions. It is therefore worth noticing that the desirable integration of aspects has already been attempted, in remarkable and encouraging ways, in the history of thought on human nature. I will exemplify this with the ideas of the fourteenth century Arab-Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun. He set out to explicate human cooperativeness - “*asabiyah*” - as having a biological basis in common descent, but being extendable far beyond within social systems, though in a relatively unstable and attenuated fashion. He combined psychological and material factors in a dynamical theory of the rise and decline of

political rulership, and related general social phenomena to basic features of human behaviour influenced by kinship, expectation of reciprocity, and empathic emotions.

Kinship - reciprocity - empathy: Evolutionary sources of altruistic behaviour

One of the central anthropological problems is the biological basis of altruistic behaviour.¹ It encompasses a wide range of 'prosocial' activities that are primarily directed to the well-being of others or the interests of the group as a whole. It underlies the cooperativeness of the species *homo sapiens* exceeding by far that among animals in extent, complexity, sophistication and variability; the corresponding capabilities and dispositions are therefore expected to be encoded, however indirectly and rudimentarily, in human DNA. And yet the degree, range and mode of expression is highly culture-dependent, and variable among individuals within a given culture, being strongly influenced by social factors. It is not that certain behaviours are genetically determined whereas others are culture-dependent; rather, genetic dispositions provide for capabilities, boundary conditions and constraints, thus setting the stage for cultural and social factors to operate. Therefore, an adequate understanding eventually requires a systems

approach taking both biological and social factors into account. But this is not yet the prevailing attitude; in fact, the intellectual level of discourse is much higher *within* biological and *within* social science than *between* the two fields.

As for the contribution of evolutionary biology, an explanation of “altruistic” behaviour seemed relatively easy as long as evolutionary forces were assumed to operate on groups or even species. On this assumption, the evolution of genetically-encoded cooperative dispositions could be explained because they served the aggregate fitness of the group. However, it is now widely accepted that selection with respect to biological “fitness” operates primarily on individuals (or, more precisely, on individual genes and combinations of genes) rather than on the group. Under these auspices, altruism is more difficult to explain in evolutionary terms. If most members of a group cooperate, increasing the fitness of other group members at the expense of the fitness of the individual, an occasional occurrence of a mutant giving rise to a genetical disposition to *defect* would endow its carrier with *increased* fitness and thus the gene encoding for *defection* would spread in the population; therefore, a general disposition toward cooperativeness would not be evolutionarily stable. How could altruism evolve nevertheless?

Two main reasons have been identified.² First, cooperation between close relatives can be evolutionarily stable, because genes encoding dispositions toward cooperation can survive, if not in the individual carrier acting altruistically, then in the relatives carrying the same genes as the altruistic actor. They would thus increase in number within the population. Such dispositions for cooperation may extend towards individuals sharing socialization, whether they are genetically related or not, because kinship is statistically correlated with familiarity. Secondly, there can be “reciprocal altruism”, with cooperation reducing one’s fitness compensated by reciprocal cooperation by the partner leading to an increase of one’s fitness later. There is an extensive literature on the conditions for reciprocal altruism to evolve, analyzed in terms of

game theory.

It is obvious that altruism among relatives as well as cooperation based on expectations of reciprocity are strong motives in human society, but it is also evident that human solidarity and other forms of altruism cannot be fully explained on this basis. One reason is that the standard explanations provided by evolutionary biology do not sufficiently consider the role of empathy.³

Human empathy, the capability of feeling vicariously the needs of others and of sharing emotions of suffering and joy, anxiety and hope, includes cognition-based empathy, taking others’ perspectives and playing others’ roles.⁴ In terms of evolutionary theory, the capability of human empathy while based on rudiments of empathy in non-human primates, may have evolved, in its cognition-based form, as a by-product of the basic human capability for strategic thought.⁵ The latter requires representations of one’s own possible future states for assessment of their emotional desirability, but also the representation of possible states of others including *their* emotional assessments, allowing anticipation of *their* behaviour. This is best achieved if representations of *others* are connected to *one’s own* emotional centres, similar as self-representations are. The capability of strategic assessment affects the fitness of the individual, so no group selection needs to be involved. It is therefore plausible that the evolution of the human brain has established such linkages.⁶ However, a secondary effect is that it elicits empathic emotions. This, in turn, may lead to behaviour aimed at relieving pain and achieving well-being of others, ultimately for the sake of one’s own positive emotions; empathy, including cognition-based empathy, is a motive of altruistic, including cooperative, behaviour. Though genetic evolution is expected to attenuate altruist helping behaviour in favour of the egoistic outwitting of others, socio-cultural effects may contribute to stabilizing the dispositions toward altruism at a moderate average level. In this, the motive of establishing reputation within larger social groups may play a major role, as does the internalization of values

in the course of education. The human potentials evolved up to some prehistoric stage proved to be of such widespread applicability that their evolutionary origin does not exhaust the scope of development in subsequent cultural diversification and history. This applies to human language, symbolic representation, representations of the self in one's own mind and strategic thought, and it may apply to cognition-based empathy and other sources of human prosocial behaviour as well.

Empathic altruism and common sense are real but limited resources of human nature, to be activated by moderate and considerate means. In modern societies that require rapid adaptation to social change, an adequate understanding of the range as well as the limits of cooperativeness is essential for realistic and at the same time empathic responses to social challenges. The biological boundary conditions of human cooperativeness cannot be upset by ideological or moralistic arguments, but the variety of expression as demonstrated in the historical and cultural record is very large. In dealing with these problems, contemporary science can draw on extensive and detailed knowledge in evolutionary biology and the social sciences including psychology, but the relatively weak and often prejudiced relation between these two fields is an obstacle to a better understanding of human altruistic behaviour. In the history of thought on human nature, there are revealing examples of the integration of different aspects into one perspective. One may recall Epicurus' philosophy of pleasure, generalizing from immediate sensual experience to time-integrating friendship and peace of mind; or Schopenhauer's notion of innate compassion as the main source of human altruism. In this essay, I will demonstrate the integration of biological and social aspects in the thought of one of the most impressive figures in the history of scientific thought, the fourteenth century Arab-Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun. One of his basic concepts is "*asabiyah*", group solidarity. According to Ibn Khaldun it arises naturally in groups of common ancestry, but is extendable to groups with social ties beyond common descent, including clients and

allies in larger political units. He insists, however, that such extended *asabiyah* is relatively unstable and endangered by gradual corruption, especially in affluent urban societies.

Ibn Khaldun's "*asabiyah*":⁷ A systems approach to human cooperativeness and group solidarity

Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) was born and grew up in Tunis as a descendant of an aristocratic family that had emigrated from Moorish Spain. He was a scholar of history and law, with a wide field of interests. He frequently changed posts and employers. The ups and downs in his career included intrigues, imprisonment, and escapes. At the age of 43, he found a sponsor allowing him a four-years' retreat in a castle near what is now Oran, where he wrote his major work, the "*Muqaddimah*", the introduction to history. Later on, he assumed high offices and positions as a judge in Cairo, a city he found fascinating ("he who does not know Cairo, does not know the power of Islam") as well as irritating ("people live as if the final judgment were postponed indefinitely").

At the beginning and the end of his career, he came in close contact with the political powers challenging the Maghreb in the West and in the East: Aged 32, he negotiated, in Sevilla, with Pedro the Cruel on a peace treaty with Castilia; aged 68, he was ordered to accompany Egypt's sultan to Syria, which was being invaded by Timur Lenk, only to find himself and some of his associates left behind in besieged Damascus. The most brutal of the Mongol invaders arranged a meeting with the famous scholar on the other side.⁸ Let down by rope from the wall of Damascus, Ibn Khaldun told the conqueror what he wanted to hear, escaped the sack of Damascus under the enemy's protection, was gracefully released and eventually returned to Cairo, where he died a few years later.

It is his introduction to history, the *Muqaddimah*,⁹ on which his fame is based. Toynbee called it the "greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any

place” - and even with less enthusiasm, giving post-modern scepticism and scholarly ifs and buts their due, it is hard to overlook that Ibn Khaldun’s were ingenious perspectives on motives and dynamics of social processes, intellectually equal to the best of European thought in these fields.

Ibn Khaldun searched for general rules applying to historical and social processes, to be explained in terms of elementary human dispositions. However, he also realized that there are singular historical events that cannot be easily subsumed under generalized theories, when “a great change takes place in the world, such as the transformation of a religion, or the disappearance of a civilization, or something else willed by the power of God” (Rosenthal / Ibn Khaldun, 1969, p. 115).

And yet, most changes do follow rules, which Ibn Khaldun sets out to specify. In particular he focusses attention on cyclic processes of the rise and fall of “dynasties”, that is, elite power-groups. The rise of a dynasty is the result of “*asabiyah*” (“solidarity”, “group feeling”, “social cohesion”), implying a willingness to cooperate, which is particularly strong in small political units, such as tribal groups of nomads. Its basis is biological - common descent. The resulting solidarity is an obvious and undisputed part of human nature:

“Compassion and affection for one’s blood relations and relatives exist in human nature as something God put into the hearts of men. It makes for mutual support and aid...” “One feels shame, when one’s relatives are treated unjustly or attacked, and one wishes to intervene between them and whatever peril or destruction threatens them” (Rosenthal / Ibn Khaldun, 1969, p. 98).

However, it is not common descent itself that generates *asabiyah*; it results from common socialization. A stranger proving common descent by document will not automatically be accepted, whereas biologically unrelated clients and allies can be integrated to share group solidarity.

“The affection everybody has for his clients and allies results from a feeling of shame that comes to a person when one of the neighbours, relatives, or a blood-relation in any degree is humiliated. The

reason for it is that a client-relationship leads to close contact exactly, or approximately in the same way, as does common descent... A pedigree is something imaginary and devoid of reality. Its usefulness consists only in the resulting connections and close context” (Rosenthal / Ibn Khaldun, 1969, p. 98, 99).

Asabiyah can even arise as solidarity within large anonymous groups, in particular, when those who feel oppressed follow the revolutionary call of a charismatic leader:

“Sometimes leadership goes to some person from the lowest class of the people. He obtains *asabiyah* and close contact with the mob for reasons that fate produces for him. He, then, achieves superiority over the elders and people of the higher class when they have lost the own *asabiyah* support” (Rosenthal / Ibn Khaldun, 1969, p. 293/294).

Thus, although common descent in tribal communities is the source of solidarity, it is extendable to unrelated but familiar people, with whom social life and experiences are shared, and this can be the basis of political power even in large urban communities. However, such extended *asabiyah* is attenuated and potentially unstable, and this, in turn, is a main cause of the rise and fall of political systems. *Asabiyah* in larger communities leads to a concentration of power, often resulting in kingship. In the long run this power - unless used with atypical moderation and consideration - destroys the solidarity with the people subject to rule, and eventually causes the fall of the dynasty.

The economic correlate of this cyclic process is the increase and decrease of the material basis of social life. Ibn Khaldun explains this with respect to taxation.

“At the beginning of a dynasty, taxation yields a large revenue from small assessments. At the end of the dynasty, taxation yields a small revenue from large assessments ... When the dynasty follows the ways of Islam, it imposes only such taxes as are stipulated by the religious law, such as charity taxes, the land tax and the poll tax ... When the dynasty continues in power, ... qualities of moderation and restraint disappear ... Their customs and

needs become more varied, because of the prosperity and luxury in which they are immersed. As a result the individual imposts and assessments ... increase in order to obtain a higher tax revenue ... Eventually the taxes will weigh heavily upon subjects and overburden them ... The assessments increase beyond the limits of equity. The result is that the interest of the subjects in cultural enterprises disappears ... Therefore many of them refrain from all cultural activity ... Finally civilization is destroyed, because the incentive for cultural activity is gone ... If one understands this, he will realize that the strongest incentive for cultural activity is to lower as much as possible the amounts of individual imposts levied upon persons capable of undertaking cultural enterprises. In this manner such persons will be psychologically disposed to undertake them.” (Rosenthal / Ibn Khaldun, 1969, p. 230/231).

The familiarity of such arguments in contemporary discussions on economic policies cannot detract from Ibn Khaldun’s originality in designing a dynamic systems theory that combines material and psychological factors and makes implicit use of non-linear dynamics to explain cyclic processes.

Central to these thoughts is the intrinsic instability of political power. The unilateral power of the rulers is more or less an illusion; in fact the relation between rulers and those being ruled is reciprocal. Rulers can sustain the solidarity of the ruled only by empathy with their needs and emotions, and this is what rulers rarely take into account.

“The interest subjects have in their ruler ... lies in his relation to them. Royal and [other forms of] governmental authority is something relative [a relationship between ruler and subjects] ... If rulership and its concomitants are of good quality, the purpose of government is most perfectly achieved. If rulership is good and beneficial, it will serve the interests of the subjects ... If the ruler continues to keep a forceful grip on his subjects, group feeling will be destroyed. If the ruler is mild and overlooks the bad side of his subjects, they will trust him and take refuge with him ... The concomitants of good

rulership are kindness to, and protection of, one’s subjects ... To be kind and beneficent toward them is part of being mild to them and showing an interest in the way they live ...” (Rosenthal / Ibn Khaldun, 1969, p. 152/153).

The importance of empathy is implicit in many other aspects of Ibn Khaldun’s writings as well. A noteworthy example is his observation that a good political leader should be neither too stupid nor too clever. Excessive intelligence and cleverness renders him incapable of understanding normal people; he then tends to make demands on his clients that they can neither comprehend nor meet.

“An alert and very shrewd person rarely has the habit of mildness ... The least of the many drawbacks of alertness [in a ruler] is that he imposes tasks upon his subjects that are beyond their ability, because he is aware of things they do not perceive and, through his genius, foresees the outcome of things at the start ... The quality of shrewdness is accompanied by tyrannical and bad rulership and by a tendency to make the people do things that it is not in their nature to do. The conclusion is that it is a drawback in a political leader to be [too] clever and shrewd. Cleverness and shrewdness imply that a person thinks too much, just as stupidity implies that he is too rigid. In the case of all human qualities the extremes are reprehensible and the middle road is praiseworthy” (Rosenthal / Ibn Khaldun, 1969, p. 153/154).

Medieval texts such as Ibn Khaldun’s provoke the standard questions of historical relativity: Can we interpret incoherent segments of translated work as general insights into social behaviour and social systems? The answer, I think, is “yes” in the case of Ibn Khaldun’s approach to social dynamics. His writings are based on specific philosophical presuppositions, political ideas, and historical experiences of the fourteenth century Maghreb, but my essay is not concerned with the evaluation of Ibn Khaldun as a historian, nor with tracing of components of his thought to predecessors, nor with understanding the culture of medieval North Africa, but with the scope, limits and intricacies of human cooperativeness in general. Ibn Khaldun’s

interest is, to a considerable extent, political, dealing with the acquisition and maintenance of power, especially of kingship, on the basis of the social values of a Muslim society. However, specific conclusions in this field require general insights into the scope, sources and limitations of human cooperativeness, and this is a central topic of his theory of *asabiyah*.¹⁰

Human cooperativeness: Integration of biological and socio-cultural aspects

Ibn Khaldun considered a level of cooperation and solidarity as prerequisite for the well-being of a community. A main source of prosocial attitudes is biological, based on common descent in families and tribes, but the scope is extendable to people who are familiar without family ties, who share socialization. However, the farther group solidarity is extended, the more unstable and weak it is. Its persistence depends on reciprocity and empathy. Ruling classes in affluent societies often indulge in the illusion that they can rule without the consensus of the ruled. Then, in fact, *asabiyah* is rapidly lost, and this is the kiss of death to rulership, which is then replaced by a new regime. Social systems, he insisted, flourish most if human altruism is recruited by mild and restrained political means, which respect the limits of altruism from the outset.

Ibn Khaldun's notes agree surprisingly well with more elaborate and formalized modern concepts on the roots of human cooperation in descent, familiarity, reciprocity, and empathy. The agreement cannot be contingent, but results from a combination of intelligence, exceptionally wide and diverse experiences, social and political expertise, and a capability for conceptual generalization. In terms of philosophy of science, it is remarkable to which extent basic anthropological and sociological insights can be obtained by this combination. Though Ibn Khaldun could not draw on modern evolutionary theory or on experimental sociology and psychology, his style of thought favoured a systems approach in a rather modern sense of the

term, combining what we call biological and social aspects of human nature. It is this capability and willingness to integrate that, in retrospect, appears as his most creative contribution to understanding human cooperativeness¹¹.

Modern science in general, and evolutionary biology in particular, aims at a deeper understanding and explanation of the basic conditions of human cooperativity which have been analyzed in phenomenological and historical terms by Ibn Khaldun. However, in the present, a realistic assessment and recruitment of cooperative dispositions also requires overcoming prejudiced separation of sociobiology from the humanities. In my view, the *origins* of basic human dispositions are within the scope of modern evolutionary theory. According to the theory, selection operates primarily on individuals, not groups or species, but additional effects of group selection are not altogether excluded, and the selection of general psychic dispositions may allow for side effects in favour of altruistic cooperativity (Sober and Wilson, 1998). As already mentioned, general human capabilities are not exhausted by the functions that gave rise to their selection. This may apply, in particular, to cognition-based empathy. Its neurobiological basis, the linkage of representations of others with one's own emotional centers, could evolve because it upgraded the quality of strategic thought, thus improving the fitness of the individual; but side effects were empathic emotions directing prosocial behaviour towards the well-being of others. Such surplus features of neurogenetic evolution may have been stabilized and further developed under the essential influence of socio-cultural factors, be it in conjunction with or independent of further genetic changes.

Some major implications of these notions agree fairly well with Ibn Khaldun's much earlier thoughts on "*asabiyah*". It appears that dispositions of altruistic cooperativeness and other forms of human behaviour directed toward the well-being of others are a limited but real and very valuable resource in human societies. Though rooted in biologically encoded features of the species man, their

expression depends on specific socio-cultural activation. Excessive moralistic demands are counter-productive. The resulting group solidarities can be used or misused. Their proper, constrained and realistic recruitment is a major determinant of the quality of life provided by human societies.

Notes

- 1 Formal definitions of altruism vary widely (Eisenberg, 1982, p. 3-6) and are not always better than preconceived informal notions. Altruism implies behaviour directed to the well-being of others or the interests of the group as a whole, at the expense of one's own interests. For concepts of altruism to apply to human beings as they are, too stringent criteria for "true" altruism are not helpful. Only liberal concepts allowing, for instance, for the actor's emotional rewards resulting from altruistic behaviour governed by empathy, or conscience, may contribute to our understanding of the scope and limits of human cooperativeness. The term "prosocial behaviour" preferred by some authors is almost synonymous to liberal concepts of altruistic behaviour.
- 2 The two standard explanations of the evolutionary basis of altruism, kinship and reciprocity were originally proposed in the papers by Hamilton (1964), p. 1-52 and Maynard-Smith (1964), p. 1145-1147, with respect to "inclusive fitness"; and in the papers by Trivers (1971), p. 35-57 and Axelrod and Hamilton (1981), p. 1390-1396, with regard to reciprocal altruism. The generalization of this concept toward the establishment of reputation is due to Alexander (1987).
- 3 The social and psychological aspects of human altruism with an emphasis on the role of empathy are treated by, among others, Eisenberg (1986).

- 4 The biological basis of human emotions and of distinctly human cognitive and social capabilities is treated by Davidson and Sutton, 1995, p. 217-224, and by Povinelli and Preuss (1995), p. 418-424.
- 5 Reasons for considering empathy a source of human altruism that evolved as a by-product of strategic thought are explicated, and discussed in the context of neural development, in two articles of the author (Gierer, 1998a,b).
- 6 Capabilities of self-representation, representation of others, strategic assessment and empathy are expected to involve widely dispersed features of connectivity of the neural network. Nevertheless, a limited amount of genetic change, consistent with the relatively rapid evolution of homo sapiens could suffice for the generation of such capabilities in the course of human evolution. This is because the genetic control of brain development involves hierarchical and combinatorial mechanisms; therefore, novel combinations and modifications of existing regulatory genes coding for the implementation of the functional features of the neural network may initiate the evolution of additional algorithmic capabilities of the brain.
- 7 For analysis and explanation of Ibn Khaldun's work, see, for example, Kamil Ayad (1930); and Al-Azmeh (1982). Ibn Khaldun's theory of the cycle of regimes is the subject of a chapter in Springborg (1992), p. 270-275.
- 8 Fischel (1952) provided a commented translation of Ibn Khaldun's autobiographical notes on his encounter with Timur Lenk.
- 9 To the Western reader, Ibn Khaldun's introduction to history is readily accessible in the translation by Rosenthal (1969).
- 10 In this respect I do not agree with radically relativistic lines of thought claiming that history is to be understood exclusively in the

cultural context of the past and that apparent similarities of past with present patterns of thought and actions are nothing but illusions which can be dissolved by careful professional historical analysis. Why should one hesitate to look for general insights on human social interactions by studies of fourteenth century North African society with emphasis on the relatively large role of internal self-organization in the absence of external rule and domination? Admittedly, insufficient consideration of cultural contexts may lead to dubious conclusions; but in terms of systems' theory too much emphasis on particular details may obscure interesting general features rather than uncovering and elucidating them. Evolution has generated a common biological basis underlying human cognition and behaviour, establishing the range as well as the limits of cultural diversity; in my view, Ibn Khaldun's approach contributes to the elucidation of this hidden basis. I thus agree with Tibi (1996) who emphasizes the general validity of insights of Ibn Khaldun into the nature of human socialization, supporting his views by relevant references to the literature. Lacoste (1966), while criticizing generalizations of Ibn Khaldun's historical analysis of the Maghreb in relation to the history of other societies, nevertheless stresses insights into social dynamics and their relevance for the understanding of later colonialism. Even an outspoken critic of attempts to read Ibn Khaldun out of context (Anderson, 1983, p. 263-273) is satisfied with considering *asabiyah* a primitive element of specifically human relations which can, at the same time, be an impediment to the cohesion of diverse parts of a society. Accepting the "primitive" element as based on the biological evolution of the human species up to the stage of hunters and gatherers, and adding the dynamic features of social systems as analyzed by Ibn Khaldun, Anderson's view is not entirely different from mine. Without denying specific cultural

elements, my article seeks to show that Ibn Khaldun's ideas are related to those elements of human social interactions which are common to man as a species.

- 11 It is remarkable and somewhat surprising that Ibn Khaldun, despite the thoroughly rational, comprehensive style of his ideas on human nature and society, adopted a critical if not negative attitude towards 'falsafa', the line of Islamic philosophy aiming at a rational understanding of nature. He considered philosophical sciences as detrimental to religious faith; it is the duty of the Muslim "not to do what does not concern him. The problems of physics are of no importance for us in our religious affairs or our livelihoods. Therefore, we must leave them alone The science of logic contains things that are contrary to religious laws and their obvious meanings.... It has only a single advantage, namely, that it sharpens the mind ... The student of logical argument is able to master the habit of exact and correct arguing and deducing.... It also affords acquaintance with the doctrines and opinions of the people of the world. One knows what harm it can do.... Whoever studies it should do so only after he is saturated with the religious law and has studied the interpretation of the Koran" (Rosenthal / Ibn Khaldun (1969), p. 401-405. Ibn Khaldun was aware of the decline of Arab-Islamic philosophy at his time, and of the flourishing of scientific studies in Christian Europe: "..... Civilizing activities stopped in the Maghrib and in Spain. The sciences decreased with the decrease of civilization.... Scientific activity disappeared there, save for the few remnants that are controlled by orthodox religious scholars ... We hear now that the philosophical sciences are greatly cultivated in the land of Rome and along the adjacent Northern Shore of the country of the European Christians. They are said to be studied there again and to be taught in numerous classes. Existing systematic ex-

positions of them are said to be comprehensive, the people who know them are said to be numerous, and the students of them very many. God knows better what exists there” (Rosenthal / Ibn Khaldun 1969, p. 375).

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