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## This Week

- 4 Mirror Defect Blurs Hubble's Vision
- 4 Passive risk: EPA loads anti-smoking gun
- 5 Urban smog control: A new role for trees?
- 5 Simulated liquids point to new solutions
- 6 Nations to ban ozone-harming compounds
- 6 Florida 'circles' may be ancient fisheries
- 7 Rodents and telescopes: A squirrely issue
- 7 Ringing to the beat of the solar cycle
- 11 Shuttles grounded by two sets of leaks

## Research Notes

- 12 Astronomy
- 12 Behavior
- 15 Biochemistry
- 15 Biomedicine

## Articles

- 8 Uneven Inheritance

Cover: In the classical genetic view, children inherit an equal dose of DNA from each parent. But geneticists are now accumulating evidence that significant numbers of children receive uneven genetic contributions from their two parents. That disparity — sometimes involving an entire chromosome, sometimes just a few genes — may explain several inherited disorders that could result from a lopsided distribution of chromosomes during cell division. (Illustration: Randy Fletcher)



## Departments

- 2 Books
- 3 Letters

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## Letters

### Altruism and selfishness

In "Getting Out From Number One" (SN: 4/28/90, p.266), researchers seem to have overlooked an obvious conclusion: Making "sacrifices" for the sake of a small group is merely another form of rational self-interest.

Many times one's best interests lie with the group. If one makes a small contribution to the group, even if it may cause one to suffer some loss or inconvenience, one may be preventing greater loss in the future, including ouster from the group. If the group consists of, say, hunters, then the possibility of having to hunt alone might well mean death.

Linnda Caporael's experiments merely show that some people think their best chances for a greater return mean giving up their money, while others assume that keeping their money will at least ensure safety, and probably maximize their profit when others give up theirs.

A more convincing argument could be made if these researchers could show that people or

"lower" animals often made sacrifices that bore no possibility of any selfish returns.

*K. A. Boriskin  
Bellingham, Mass.*

**Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins** says we should teach ourselves altruism because we are born selfish. I think the very fact that he says this is evidence that it may not be so.

If altruism were not inherent in our nature, I don't see how we could even conceive of it, let alone think it is something good that we should force ourselves to do against our nature. Nor would it be the frequent subject of moral and philosophical thought throughout history.

Human beings are probably inherently selfish, but I think it is just as probable that we are also inherently altruistic.

*Stanley Becker  
Long Beach, N.Y.*

**Psychologist Linnda Caporael** suggests man is more social than selfish. She points

out a reason for more study when noting that soldiers give up their lives more frequently for comrades than for country.

The most important factor in that is already self-explanatory. When making that most crucial decision of life and death, the immediacy and visibility of the motivations are all-important. That is why valor is less frequent on foreign soil than in the homeland. Also, every good military commander knows that the presence of a flag or banner is crucial for the motivation of the troops. Additionally, the blood of a comrade has much more immediacy and visibility than the ethereal principle of "good of country" even when that principle is represented by a symbol.

Thus it is that small groups have more impact on behavior than large. It is the clarity of their immediacy, and not the rationality involved in looking at all of the consequences.

*Greg Mattson  
Palm Springs, Calif.*

*Letters continued on p.13*

JULY 7, 1990

3



**Butterfly Alphabet**, a poster showing all the letters of the English alphabet and the Arabic numerals, appeared on the cover of *SCIENCE NEWS*, 6/16/90. Kjell Sandved photographed the amazing forms on the wings of moths and butterflies. This spectacular full-color 18" x 24" poster is now available for just \$10.00. Order yours today. We'll include the *SCIENCE NEWS* article describing the poster's origin.

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Letters continued from p.3

**Political scientist Jane Mansbridge** says, "The key question concerns the contexts in which people are most likely to put good of others ahead of their own." I might ask: *Which* people? It has been suggested that people cluster into two distinct groups with opposing attitudes and belief systems regarding altruism.

Ken Wilber, writing in *Up From Eden* (1981, Shambala), discusses the different belief systems held by Democrats and Republicans regarding social good and evil. The Republican view, he says, comes from the Thomas Hobbes perspective: Goodness is repressed evil. By this, Wilber means that the individual is, at core, a beast which society must hold in check by the imposition of force. This perspective, according to Wilber, holds that "man is born nasty, and the good you get out of him is only by suppressing the beast. And if repression breaks down, the devil breaks out."

The Democratic view, on the other hand, holds that evil is repressed good. This view runs through humanistic psychology and philosophy. In this view, Wilber says, "men and women are born free, open and loving, but are simply taught and tutored by a repressive society to hate, to manufacture ill will and to choke off all loving and cooperative impulses."

In a natural disaster, you will find some people who risk their lives to save others and other people who engage in looting abandoned homes and stores. It is my belief that it takes *two* social theories to explain human behavior, not one.

Bill Sturgeon  
 Petrolia, Calif

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