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Big Questions Topic Analysis

Resolved: Humans are primarily driven by self-interest.

The Big Questions debate series, generously funded by the John Templeton Foundation, gives students the opportunity to explore and investigate the questions that shape our human existence and experience. Students do this by researching deeply, thinking critically about, and revising constantly arguments about human nature, science, and philosophy. The 2018-2019 Big Questions topic is, *Resolved: Humans are primarily driven by self-interest.*

This topic analysis, used in conjunction with the Big Questions 2018-2019 Evidence Packet, is meant to introduce to you many of the aspects of the scholarly debate on this topic. This brief will explore the questions that you will be asked to answer by your opponents and your coaches as you prepare to consider the topic at hand. This topic analysis is not comprehensive and cannot substitute for informed research. Rather, view it as an introduction to the rough contours of the debate you are likely to see throughout the season – and as a jumping off point for smoothing out those contours with your own research and critical thinking.

Definitions

The first task is to define the terms of the debate – to determine what the resolution actually asks. These definitions themselves are likely to be subjects of debate. Defining some terms narrowly may advantage one side of the debate, while another term broadly construed tilts the balance to the other side. As such, controlling the intellectual terrain that is relevant is an important aspect of building your case.

"Humans"

Though not as fundamental a question as in the previous topic, the question of what we mean by "humans" could still be important for debates on this topic. The main questions will come not from *defining* a human, per se, but from *specifying* the extent of the burden placed on the affirmative. If by "humans" we mean every human being, living or dead, a single counterexample would suffice to prove that humans are not primarily driven by self-interest. On the other hand, if by "humans" we mean that the average person is driven primarily by self-interest, the job of the affirmative becomes much easier.

A second level of this definition is whether debaters should consider "human" in the most biological sense, disregarding societal pressures that affect how humans act. This definition may be well-used by the affirmative to argue that human's primary drives are not that different from other primates, which do not, generally, display altruistic behavior. If "human" is instead considered more holistically, including the intellect and reasoning capabilities of the human person, perhaps because humans sometimes make what appear to be altruistic decisions after consideration that includes more than instinct could benefit the negative. Deciding how broad to make the definition of "humans" can help either side to make their arguments stronger.

"Primarily"

The adjective in the resolution is sure to be the subject of many debates. "Primarily" can mean 'first,' as in our first instinct (Merriam-Webster). On this basis, the affirmative could argue that even if human beings sometimes act altruistically, their first instinct is to survive – a self-interested motive. Primarily can also mean 'for the most part' (Merriam-Webster). Here, the negative could argue that in order for the self-interest drive to be "primary" it must be stronger than all other drives, either individually or collectively. "Primary" can mean "principal," leading the affirmative to claim that they must only prove that it is the most important drive, not that it is necessarily stronger than all the others (Black Law Dictionary). Each of these definitions changes what each side is trying to prove, making controlling the definition of this word of – primary – importance.

"Driven"

Since the word "primarily" is modifying the word "driven," the two work together to determine the balance of ground in the debate. "Driven" can mean "having a compulsive quality" (Merriam-Webster). This definition lends itself to a debate about instincts and genetics, rather than reason and morals. If, however, driven means "propelled or motivated by something," the debate can focus more on the goals and aspirations of humans, rather than their natures (Merriam-Webster). If the latter definition wins out, it could be easier for the negative to claim that people *intend* to be self-less, so even if they are being driven by evolution or biology to be selfish it doesn't matter. Alternatively, the

affirmative could argue that our aspirations to be seen as good or kind are actually the driving force.

Determining what are and are not “drives” of human action is a complicated question given that “drives” cannot be directly observed. Thus debates about this definition are sure to – drive – a good deal of the discussion.

“Self-Interest”

This definition will be an important crux of nearly every debate. Indeed, the majority of debates will probably be about whether actions can be proven to be self-interested or altruistic. Determining how broad to consider things self-interest changes the method of inquiry of the debate substantially. While “a perspective on self-interest that would be useful for purposes of large-scale empirical study cannot be one that views the advancing of self-interest as anything that helps a given individual get what they want at a given moment,” this perspective may be useful to evaluating the question from a more philosophical view (Weeden and Kurzban 17). These are just a few of the questions that the definition of “self-interest” raises. As such, many levels of the definition are likely to come into play:

- Most Basic Level: Self-interest is, at its most basic, “a concern for one’s own advantage and well-being” (Merriam-Webster). Operating from even this most basic definition, however, still opens up a great deal of interpretation. Does this definition mean that altruism requires NO concern for one’s own well-being? Are only uncalculated, reckless acts of helping and charity truly selfless? Alternatively, does “one’s” own advantage mean NO concern for other’s advantage or well being? Indeed, similar definitions make total disregard for others a part of the definition: “regard for one’s own interest or advantage, especially with disregard for others” (Dictionary.com)
- Evolutionary Definitions: The common understanding of evolution as “survival of the fittest” would seem to suggest that “self-interest” would be whatever causes oneself to be most likely to pass on genes. But theories of ‘inclusive fitness’ argue that evolution drives people to prefer the passing on of genes similar to theirs – making them willing to sacrifice for close kinsfolk (Scott-Phillips, Dickins, and West 11). Does this still qualify as “self” interest, since it ultimately achieves a personal goal? What if “inclusive fitness” is expanded to include a tribe, a race, a nation?
- Social Definitions: Economics and political science have their own view of self-interest. They often view people as “utility maximizers,” making the most of what they have to achieve their goals. However, those goals are not necessarily well-defined. If a stable family life is a goal, and a person maximizes their utility to achieve it, is that utility maximization self-interested? If a person maximizes their utility and realizes that they

have spare resources after reaching their peak, is donating those resources to another self-less?

These are just a few of the dozens of views of self-interest that can and will be discussed throughout the year. Choosing a view that supports your arguments will be greatly in your – interest.

Affirmative Arguments

The affirmative has many avenues to approach the topic of self-interest. A great deal of both social and physical science is based on the assumption that human beings are essentially self-interested, so the topic has been studied, discussed, debated, and researched for years.

The affirmative can frame the debate in several ways to its advantage. First, it can attempt to place the burden of proof on the negative by arguing that the resolution does not require them to prove that self-interest is the ONLY motivation for action, but that it is the PRIMARY motivation. Second, the affirmative can argue that, since motivation cannot be measured, the judge should accept the simplest explanation – and then argue that survival instincts and self-interest are simple ways to explain a great deal of human action.

Perhaps the most obvious argument comes from evolutionary biology. The basic idea of evolution is the survival of the fittest, not the survival of the kindest. If a “self-sacrificing” gene did exist, then it would not be around long enough to be passed on to the next generation. Those with “self-interest” genes would surely have taken advantage of the altruists and survived while the altruists died out. The basic human (and animal) drive for survival may be evidence enough of this theory. After all, humans experience “fight or flight” instincts, not “fight, flight, or forfeit your advantages” instincts. Evidence from neurobiology will also serve the affirmative well here.

Beyond biology, social sciences provide evidence that humans are self-interested. Economic models that use self-interest as an assumption are far from perfect – but the fact that they operate fairly well is evidence that, in the aggregate, the assumption holds. Similar models in political science and sociology also perform tolerably well and thus lend credence to the idea that humans must act the way these models assume they do – self-interestedly.

Psychology especially contains a great deal of evidence in favor of the self-interest (psychological egoism) model. When put in laboratory situations, humans often act exactly as one would predict self-interested actors to behave. When abstracted from the pressing realities of real life, humans will often make decisions as if they are the only one that matters.

Of course, the affirmative will have to defend itself from a wide variety of attacks from the negative. One of these attacks will certainly be to provide examples of seemingly selfless

acts and demand that the affirmative explain how these acts can coexist with a self-interested humanity. The affirmative will have to be quick-thinking to describe how the individual examples are either ultimately self-interested or are insufficient to overcome the primacy of self-interest as a motivation.

Negative Arguments

The negative can draw on a vast store of literature that has attempted to portray humanity not as self-interested by as cooperative, altruistic, and kind. This literature often directly responds to the assumptions and arguments of those who argue that humans are essentially selfish, making it especially useful in a debate setting.

Just as the affirmative has many avenues to make framing arguments, so does the negative. Perhaps the most powerful framing argument for the negative, however, is that the burden of proof placed on the affirmative should be large. The negative should argue that the affirmative must prove that humans are, in all situations, acting for themselves. Expanding the definitions of each word in the resolution will generally play to the negative's advantage, making the statement broader and thus harder to defend.

In terms of major areas of argument, the negative has access to the same basic areas as the affirmative. In terms of evolution, arguments about inclusive fitness (described above in the "Evolutionary Definitions" section) will likely be popular means of attack. The negative may also wish to introduce "Cultural Evolution," the idea that those who are fittest to live in community are more likely to survive than those who make themselves disliked by other members of the community. Coupled with arguments about how young children appear to be conditioned to help other altruistically (suggesting that altruism is a biological, not simply social drive).

Social sciences also provide arguments to the negative. Determining on one's tolerance for model error, models built on assumptions of rationality and self-interest may not perform as well as the affirmative claims. No model is perfect, and perhaps a misunderstanding of human drives can explain these errors. Additionally, many experiments designed to show human self-interest often fail outright. Though proponents of self-interest often have methodological explanations for these failures, the negative should attempt to frame these failures as proving the very thesis can't possibly be true.

Psychology also has much to say in favor of the negative. Many experiments establish that humans are very interested in fairness and may sacrifice their own self-interest to maintain a fair outcome. Humans also appear to get satisfaction from helping others. These psychological drives may work against the affirmative's case.



Finally, the negative will almost certainly have to defend itself from arguments that seemingly selfless actions can always be assumed to benefit the individual on some level. By attempting to frame the debate in terms of proximate intentions (what the individual

THINKS they intend) rather than the ultimate (what the individual may be ACTUALLY driven

by) the negative can make this method of attack much weaker.

Conclusion

The debate you are about to enter has many aspects and has been debated by scholars for centuries. There is a great deal to digest and critical review. This review has given an overview of some of the most robust areas of the debate. Use it as a map to guide the beginning your research, then follow the research where it carries you. Happy debating!

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