Unethical evolution of social entities

*"There is something of a
charlatan in everyone who succeeds,
in whatever matter."*
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Summary

Complex modern societies require an extended network of specialized workers and organizations (social entities) that play an active role in satisfying the demands of the community. Social entities compete with each other for specific resources (e.g., commercial companies for customers, politicians for votes, TV programs for rating, scientists for funding) with rules that mimic Darwinian natural selection. Social entities explore the landscape of possible strategies to survive (variation principle). Unsuccessful entities disappear as the winning ones drain the available resources (fitness principle). Fruitful strategies are copied and improved by competing entities (heredity principle). The struggle for resources forces the entities to explore all sorts of strategies that do not always follow ethical principles. Without clear limitations to the acceptable survival tactics, entities will explore fruitful unethical approaches depleting the available resources. Therefore, it is necessary to promote the elaboration of ethical codes for each specific social entity to limit the available strategies for competition.

Introduction

Complex modern societies require an extended network of social entities to satisfy the necessities of the inhabitants. In this note, social entities refer to all sorts of individuals and organizations that play an active role in fulfilling the demands of society. For example, commercial companies for supplying goods and services, TV programs in providing entertainment and information, politicians in governing the country, scientists in carrying out research to foster knowledge, and so on. I will argue here that these entities evolve following a Darwinian selection that diverts them from their original social goals.

The survival of the fittest is at the core of the natural selection proposed by Darwin. Although the theory was developed to account for the evolution of living organisms, the conditions to undergo evolution can be formulated in more general terms (Bouchard, 2011). For example:

- 1- A set of entities can explore a landscape of states or conditions (principle of variability)
- 2- The entities are immersed in a scenario that allows only entities in adequate states to prevail (the principle of differential fitness in a given scenario)
- 3- The information for an entity to prevail (to be in a winning state) can be transmitted among entities (the principle of heredity)

In other terms, natural selection will favor the prevalence of entities carrying successful strategies (fitness) that are explored within the landscape of available possibilities (variability). The capacity of spreading of these strategies (heredity) and the limitation of resources will eliminate the less successful ones.

These principles are present in all living organisms populating an environment. Any life form carries the information needed to assemble complex mechanisms in order to keep it away from thermal equilibrium using available free energy. However, the reproduction of these organisms tends to drain the available resorts (for example, the free energy in the form of light or food). Only creatures with victorious strategies will prevail and the information for their organization - coded in their genomes- will pass from parents to offspring.

Along eons, living beings have explored the more diverse strategies to survive in all possible environments on earth. Cooperation is one of the relevant strategies developed. From biofilms in bacteria to organized societies in insects and humans, cooperation stands as a powerful way to persist (Wilson, 1975).

Cooperation requires the development of unselfish attitudes among the cooperating organisms. Generosity and cooperation are at the roots of our moral principles. Either because they are imprinted in our genes as an evolutionary advantage or heavily shaped by culture (FitzPatrick, 2021), the ethical principles governing the behavior of the individuals belonging to society are fundamental for the coherence of any human group (Curry et al., 2019).

For thousands of years, humans lived within simple hunter-gatherer bands. Agricultural settlements around 12,000 years ago fostered the organization of large human groups in complex societies that continued growing to the present day (Johnson and Earle, 2000). Food, goods, health, entertainment, education, and a plethora of necessities shared by the individuals of a society are covered by the action of organized groups, commercial companies, and independent workers.

Competition among social entities

Public needs generate conditions for the appearance of one (or more than one) social entity to cover each specific necessity. In a competitive society, not all social entities formed are selected by the public and they need to compete with each other. I argue that the rules for this competition are somehow similar to those at work in Darwinian natural selection. Diverse social entities compete for specific limiting resources and explore the landscape for possible strategies to survive (variation principle). Unsuccessful entities disappear as the winning ones exhaust the available resources (fitness principle). Winning strategies are copied and improved by competing entities (heredity principle).

Examples

Entities: commercial companies

Limiting resource: customers

Entities: politicians

Limiting resource: votes

Entities: TV programs

Limiting resource: rating

Entities: scientists

Limiting resource: funding

Dimensions of the strategy landscape

To be successful, an obvious possibility is to optimize the way social entities satisfy society's needs. This will attract and provide customers, votes, ratings, or funds to the corresponding social entities and it will make them successful and enduring.

However, other dimensions that are not related to the welfare of society are also available to explore; for example, cheating and deceiving (pretending they are satisfactorily fulfilling a necessity when they are not). They may also overcome competition with corporative associations or by building large monopolies and many other game plans that contribute to use the available resources without efficiently fulfilling their role in society.

Ethics does not limit the strategy landscape of social entities

Social entities emerge as a way to cover different necessities of the members of society. In turn, these units are formed by the organization and specialization of citizens, which share ethical principles

Even so, the fierce fight for resources forces the entities to explore all sorts of strategies. If an entity does not explore efficient approaches that are available to others, it will disappear as the resources are consumed by the competitive one.

Ethics impose moral behavior to the individuals forming part of the entities, but not to the entities themselves. Expecting otherwise is naïve. Sooner or later, unethical members of an entity will explore winning strategies that do not follow moral rules and will prevail draining the resources for other entities that reject unethical approaches.

Preventing unethical strategies

Society needs to limit the availability of strategies in order to prevent the development of entities that do not fulfill their original goal. Obvious tools for this are the laws that regulate the behavior of all sorts of entities (civil code for commercial entities, for example). Moreover, the members of the society that perform similar functions (for example the members of a medical association) usually establish a set of ethical principles to guide their associates. Unethical behavior is condemned and punished in an attempt to prevent the development of unethical strategies for competition.

Competition in business has grown to a global scale. Commercial companies are constantly forced to go over their survival strategy in order to endure. Not surprisingly, ethics in business is a major issue. Scimago Journal & Country Rank (Scimagojr.com) lists five scientific journals about ethics and business revealing the importance of studying and analyzing the tendencies in this field.

Social entities related to communication and entertainment also need to explore new strategies to capture the attention of the public. The search is not always guided by moral principles. Two scientific journals are dedicated to exploring this interesting field. The ethics behind reality shows on TV has been questioned several times (Mast, 2016). However, these shows are expanding and they are mimicked from country to country.

Politicians need to fight for votes. An excellent and honest candidate will not stand a chance to serve the community if he/she is not elected. The strategies explored by politicians are not always ethically acceptable. In fact, most people will accept that politicians are expert liars. There is abundant literature in this respect, including the XVIII century satiric book "The Art of Political Lying" (Arbuthnot and Swift, 1874). Curiously, specific ethical codes limiting the behavior of politicians made by consensus among politicians are rare.

Scientists also undergo high pressure to obtain funds for research. The classical aphorism "Publish or Perish" describes the pressure to publish in order to prevail in the academic world (Angell, 1986). The temptation to publish with low standards of honesty, objectivity, and

integrity is one of the reasons underlying the reproducibility crisis in experimental research (Fidler et al., 2017). Scientific journals and academic institutions have tightened controls and imposed explicit ethical codes to fight the increasing cases of misconduct among researchers.

Speed of evolution

The evolution of social entities has some characteristics that make the evolutionary process extremely fast. Biological evolution is limited by the way a prosperous strategy is transmitted (unidirectional transfer from parents to the offspring). In addition, the set of available game plans is limited to combinations or mutations of genes already present in the population. These available strategies are explored randomly, without a specific aim. In contrast, information about available approaches and the more efficient ones are transmitted among social entities back and forward, and with a clear aim of improving definite aspects of the survival strategy. In a globalized world with fast access to information, social entities are evolving at an unprecedented speed. This imposes a enormous challenge to the way unethical strategies can be limited by laws and behavioral codes, which need to be continuously updated.

Perspectives

I argue that competition and prevalence of the fittest play a key role in the fast evolution of all sorts of social entities. However, I agree that other processes are also shaping social entities. The possibility to overcome competition by corporative associations or by building large monopolies was mentioned before. Evolution may also occur following cultural changes or variations in social needs not related to competition.

Notwithstanding, this note stresses the importance of recognizing the pressure to develop unethical strategies in social entities. It also points out that it is unrealistic to expect that the moral value of the individuals forming the entities will be sufficient to prevent deviation from ethical approaches. Therefore, it is necessary to promote the elaboration of ethical codes for each specific social entity in order to limit the available strategies for competition. These codes must be flexible and need to be upgraded continuously, as the creativity of social entities will explore unexpected approaches that may improve the services to the community or maybe not.

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