

IELTS Foundation Reading 5

Reading: Read the text and choose the correct letter, A, B, C or D.

The Unselfish Gene

A psychologist gives his view on how humans became self-centred

There has long been a general assumption that human beings are essentially selfish. We're apparently ruthless, with strong impulses to compete against each other for resources and to accumulate power and possessions. If we are kind to one another, it's usually because we have ulterior motives. If we are good, it's only because we have managed to control and transcend our innate selfishness and brutality.

This bleak view of human nature is closely associated with the science writer Richard Dawkins, whose 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* became popular because it fitted so well with-and helped to justify-the competitive and individualistic ethos that was so prevalent in late 20th-century societies. Like many others, Dawkins justifies his views with reference to the field of evolutionary psychology. Evolutionary psychology theorises that present-day human traits developed in prehistoric times, during what is termed the 'environment of evolutionary adaptedness'.

Prehistory is usually seen as a period of intense competition, when life was such a brutal battle that only those with traits such as selfishness, aggression and ruthlessness survived. And because survival depended on access to resources – such as rivers, forests and animals – there was bound to be conflict between rival groups, which led to the development of traits such as racism and warfare. This seems logical. But, in fact, the assumption on which this all rests – that prehistoric life was a desperate struggle for survival – is false.

It's important to remember that in the prehistoric era, the world was very sparsely populated. According to some estimates, around 15,000 years ago, the population of Europe was only 29,000, and the population of the whole world was less than half a million. Humans at that time were hunter-gatherers: people who lived by hunting wild animals and collecting wild plants. With such small population densities, it seems unlikely that prehistoric hunter-gatherer groups had to compete against each other for resources or had any need to develop ruthlessness and competitiveness, or to go to war.

There is significant evidence to back this notion from contemporary hunter-gatherer groups, who live in the same way as prehistoric humans did. As the anthropologist Bruce Knauft has remarked, hunter-gatherers are characterized by 'extreme political and sexual egalitarianism'. Knauft has observed that individuals in such groups don't accumulate property or possessions and have an ethical obligation to share everything. They also have methods of preserving egalitarianism by ensuring that disparities of status don't arise.

Questions 1-4

Choose the correct letter, A, B, C or D.

1 What is the writer doing in the first paragraph?

- A. setting out two opposing views about human nature
- B. justifying his opinion about our tendency to be greedy
- C. describing a commonly held belief about people's behaviour
- D. explaining why he thinks that humans act in a selfish manner

2 What point is made about Richard Dawkins' book *The Selfish Gene*?

- A. Its appeal lay in the radical nature of its ideas.
- B. Its success was due to the scientific support it offered.
- C. It presented a view that was in line with the attitudes of its time.
- D. It took an innovative approach to the analysis of human psychology.

3 What does the writer suggest about the prehistoric era in the fourth paragraph?

- A. Societies were more complex than many people believe.
- B. Supplies of natural resources were probably relatively plentiful.
- C. Most estimates about population sizes are likely to be inaccurate.
- D. Humans moved across continents more than was previously thought.

4 The writer refers to Bruce Knauft's work as support for the idea that

- A. selfishness is a relatively recent development in human societies.
- B. only people in isolated communities can live in an unselfish manner.
- C. very few lifestyles have survived unchanged since prehistoric times.
- D. hunter-gatherer cultures worldwide are declining in number.