First Assignment

Due: Monday March 4th, submit using the Stellar site.
Length: Around 2000 words (i.e. five or so pages)
Answer all questions, giving them roughly equal weight.

1. It is commonly held that all acts must be in some sense egoistic; that whenever we perform an apparently altruistic act we are really acting in our own interests. Getting clear on this claim requires getting clear on what egoism is: we need to provide a good definition. In class we examined various definitions of egoism, all of which were attempts to cash out what we normally mean by the word, but all of which were vulnerable to objection. Provide your own definition of egoism, explaining what motivates it, and how it captures what we normally mean by the notion. (You may end up endorsing one of the definitions that we looked at, but if so you should explain why it is not really vulnerable to any objections that were raised.) Provide a parallel definition of altruism. Do the two definitions partition human actions (i.e. are they exhaustive and exclusive) or can there be actions which are both egoistic and altruistic, or neither? I am assuming that the definition you give should leave it as an open possibility that there are non-egoistic actions; but if you really think that it is a necessary or a priori truth that there are none, you will need to defend this claim. (If you do not think that any definition of egoism can be given, explain why not, and explain how far you think we can get in glossing the notion: what sufficient or necessary conditions can be identified. These will form the basis of the account that you will use in answering the following questions.)

2. Taking your definition of egoism, examine whether the two empirical literatures that we have looked at (one from social psychology, typified by the work of Batson, and one from empirical economics, as discussed in the Fehr and Fischbacher paper) show that there are some actions that are not egoistic. If they are not egoistic are they altruistic?

3. Suggest some further experiments that would indicate, given your definition, whether there are some acts that are not egoistic. (This will be especially important if you think that the existing experiments do not show that there are; but even if they do, try to think of ways that that could be established more clearly.) If, on your definition, egoism and altruism do not partition, outline some ways that we could test for altruism. Note that if your definition does not allow for the possibility that egoism is false, then that thesis is unfalsifiable. So you will need to say why any apparent falsification will not in fact be one.

4. Examine whether the evolutionary arguments have any bearing on egoism as you have defined it. Is there reason to think that a tendency to perform non-egoistic actions could not have evolved, or, at least, that there would be strong evolutionary pressures against them? How might one respond to such worries?