

Better Angels and Worse Impulses¹

You are amazing, moral people! You send money to faraway continents, for people you will never meet, just because they need help. You do your share of tasks, even when it would be easy to shirk. You are generous to people who will never be able to reciprocate your generosity, like people near the ends of their lives, habitat for humanity clients, and waitresses in restaurants that you will never visit again. You sacrifice your time and effort on behalf of others and invest yourself emotionally in their welfare. In short, you are truly altruistic. You should be very proud of yourselves!

Of course, you aren't above giving yourself the benefit of the doubt when it comes time to do your tax return, are you? What about those pens you pick up at work? How about when credit is being assigned for a successful team project? You don't often complain when you are given more credit than you deserve, do you? I suppose that you think that it just makes up for all the times when you were denied the credit that you earned, right? Uh-huh. Let's be candid, there is no denying that sometimes you treat other people as just a means to an end. In fact, I think every one of you can think of an occasion in which you were downright selfish. You should be ashamed of yourselves!

So which is it: are we basically altruism or basically selfish? This question is important because everyone's life is better when people act unselfishly. Understanding what makes us act the way we do can help us choose altruism rather than selfishness.

There has been a long history of disagreement on this question. One position holds that people are inherently selfish and that the only thing that can make us act morally is belief in gods who punishment misbehavior and reward virtue. This position is widespread today among many conservative Christians and Muslims. The opposing position argues that selfishness and anti-social behavior are purely the products of culture and can be counteracted by social and political reforms. This second view draws on a tradition started by Jean Jacques Rousseau, who held that human beings are born moral and become immoral only because of the decadence of civilized life. The second view is popular among hippies, counterculture advocates, and proponents of humanistic ethics.

The view that I will argue for this morning is that neither of these extremes is correct. Instead, I claim (1) that every person is equally equipped by evolution for both altruism or selfishness, (2) that modern

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evolutionary theory can explain why we have this dual nature, and (3) that social psychology can show what factors lead us to choose between acting altruistically or selfishly. I believe that these insights from science can help us to follow our better angels rather following our worse impulses.

Let's start our story in the Israeli city of Haifa, where a pair of troublemaking American social science researchers got interested in a chain of private day-care centers.² The researchers noted that when parents failed to pick up their children by closing time, a teacher would have to stay late until a parent arrived. They decided to study the effect of imposing fines of about \$5/child per incident on parents who picked up their children after closing time. So, how much do you think late pickups went down after the fines were imposed. Was the change more or less than 50%? In fact, the frequency of late pickups actually went *up* after the fines were imposed! How could that happen? The psychologists' answer is that we interact with the world in two distinct modes: a social mode and a pragmatic or market mode. In the social mode, we take into account the interests and welfare of others, whereas in market mode, we choose actions based on self interest.³ Before the experiment, parents usually picked up their children on time because they were operating in a social mode with the teachers: they respected the teachers' right not to be forced by rude parents to engage in unpaid extra work. Once fines were instituted, however, parents shifted into market mode because they felt that fines were a payment for the time of the teachers who had to stay late. This replaced the moral weight that they had formerly placed on the teachers' rights with a simple market calculation: was a delay worth the fine.

Duke behavioral economist Dan Ariely illustrates the difference between these social and market modes with the following scenario: suppose that at the end of a long pleasant Thanksgiving dinner at your mother-in-law's house you pull out your wallet and say, "Mom, for all the love you've put into this, how much do I owe you? Do you think \$300 would do it? No, wait, I'll give you \$400." He imagines wine glasses toppling over, the mother-in-law turning beet-red, nieces bursting into tears, and your spouse making you sleep on the coach for a month afterwards.⁴ The problem with offering money at the end of a family dinner is that introduces market norms into a strictly social situation.

Back at the day-care center, things only got worse. After a few weeks, the fines were eliminated, but

2 Gneezy, Uri and Rustichini, Aldo, A Fine is a Price. *Journal of Legal Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1, January 2000.

3 S. Pinker, *The better angels of our nature: why violence has declined*, Viking (2011) pp. 623-631.

4 *Predictably irrational: The hidden forces that shape our decisions*. By Dan Ariely, HarperCollins: New York, 2008.

the parents didn't go back to picking up their children on time. Instead, they became even *less* likely to pick their children up on time because not only did their market mentality persist, now but there were no fines either! The moral seems to be: be careful about pushing people from social to market mode, because it can be hard to get them to shift back!

Our ability to shift between social and market modes, and to operate in social mode in some contexts (such as with one's spouse) and market mode in others (such as in the business world) suggests that altruism and selfishness are basic human capabilities. Real altruism is not an illusion. It's easy to list heroes who risked or sacrificed themselves for others, not because they were indifferent to their *own* welfare, but because they couldn't be indifferent to *others*. How about Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, who saved tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews by issuing protective passports and whose reward was execution by the Soviets; Paul Rusésabagéna, a Rwandan hotel manager who saved over 1,000 Tutsis and Hutus during the 1994 genocide; and Mother Theresa, who devoted her life to comforting the poorest of the poor in Calcutta despite suffering, as we now know, from painful qualms about her religious faith. They were awesome, weren't they?

On the other hand, some of the most monstrous crimes are committed by people operating in a purely pragmatic mode, indifferent to the welfare of those affected by their actions. Last summer I gave a talk about the kind of evil that is motivated by ideology, revenge, and other motives that have a strong moral component. Perpetrators motivated by ideology or revenge may feel that it would be wrong *not* to strike out at their victims. By contrast, the harm caused by people who are simply not operating in social mode is often less spectacular but probably more common. Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker describes this form of harm as "*predation*" and gives as examples:

Romans suppressing provincial rebellions, Mongols razing cities that resist their conquest; free companies of demobilized soldiers plundering and raping; colonial settlers expelling or massacring indigenous peoples; ... warring nations bombing enemy cities; ... criminals killing an eyewitness to a crime.⁵

In Book Nine of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus casually mentions that when the winds took him to Ismarus:

5 Pinker at 510.

I sacked the town and put the people to the sword. We took their wives and also much booty, which we divided equitably amongst us, so that none might have reason to complain.

I invite you to reflect on how remarkable it is that Odysseus simultaneously operated in Social Mode with his men, carefully respecting their right to an equal share of newly widowed or fatherless women and other booty, but in Pragmatic Mode with regard to the inhabitants of Ismarus, whose interest in not being murdered or raped is never even hinted at.

Now, this dual nature of human behavior has given rise to a cottage industry among psychologists and behavioral economists trying to identify what factors control when we are moral and when we are pragmatic. To explore this work, let's move from the Bronze-age Aegean to disco-era New Jersey for an experiment examining whether devoting one's life to God tips the balance toward altruism.

In the early 1970s, 67 Princeton Theological Seminary students were recruited for what they thought was a study about religious education and vocation. They answered personality questionnaires and were then told that they were going to give a brief talk in a nearby building. Half were asked to talk about their suitability for various jobs, and half were asked to talk about the parable of the Good Samaritan. The students in each half were handed a map to the building and then assigned randomly to a low, medium, or high lateness condition by being told that they had plenty of time, or would be late if they didn't go "right now," or were already very late. On the way, they passed an experimental confederate lying on the sidewalk doubled over, eyes closed and coughing. The test was whether each student would stop and help the apparently sick man. What are your guesses about the following:

- What percentage of the students stopped to help? Greater or less than 75%?
- Did the subject of the talk they were supposed to make affect the likelihood of stopping?
- Did their degree of lateness make a difference?

In fact, on average just 40% stopped to help; some actually stepped over the apparently sick man. The subject they were supposed to talk about had a huge effect: 53% of Good Samaritan speakers, but only 29% of job-fitness speakers, stopped to help. But the degree of lateness had an even bigger effect: only

10% of students who thought they were late stopped, where 63% of no-hurry students did so.⁶ So it seems that acting morally takes some presence of mind. If you are running late, or if you thinking about a speech you are about to give about yourself, you are less likely to act altruistically, whereas if you are not in a hurry or if you are thinking about the moral obligation to help needy strangers, you are more likely to be compassionate.

Let's move forward a decade and 1100 miles west to the University of Kansas, where psychologist Daniel Batson exposed experimental subjects to a fake learning experiment in which an fake participant named Elaine (who was actually an actress) was repeatedly shocked (male participants watched David get shocked). As each session proceeded, Elaine became increasingly upset, but the real participant was given a choice: either leave and not have to listen to Elaine's cries of pain, or *take her place* for the remainder of the experiment. I invite you to spend a moment asking yourself whether you would be willing to be painfully shocked in order to spare a stranger pain. Would you, or wouldn't you? Would it matter how you felt about the stranger?

Batson and his colleagues had a hunch that your choice would depend on whether you share the same values and interests as the person being shocked. So, they told the subject that Elaine either shared their values and interests, or instead had very different values interests. Sure enough, when the participants felt that they were similar to Elaine in outlook and values, they substituted themselves for her, whereas if they felt different from her, they would simply leave.⁷

In these and countless other experiments, social psychologists have shown that we have the capacity for both altruism and selfishness, and that subtle social factors can toggle us back and forth between a Social Mode and and Pragmatic Mode. But *why* is this true? How can we make sense of this in terms of what we know about the world and in terms of our religious commitment as UUs? To answer this question, let's move from modern Kansas to the very beginning of the human story.

Every culture has its own creation myths. There are myths that feature World-trees, Cosmic-eggs, Whale riders, Earth-divers, Ravens, Gods with a thousand heads, Goddesses whose labor begets the

6 Darley, J. M., & Batson, C.D. (1973) "From Jerusalem to Jericho": A study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 27, 100-108.

7 Pinker, *supra*, at pp. 583-584.

continents, and the Judeo-Christian seven-day world fabrication. But for most modern citizens of Western industrialized nations, the *world's* creation story is the Big Bang, and the *human* creation story is Darwinian evolution through natural selection. Darwin delayed publication of *Origin of Species* for 15 years because he realized that *his* creation story was sure to upend all the *other* human-origin stories. And indeed, 154 years later the religions of the world are still struggling to fully assimilate the insight that human beings were produced by the same undirected process that produced all other species.

UUs are usually less conflicted over evolution than adherents of more conservative or fundamentalist religions. In fact, the UUA states that “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science” are a source of UU religious guidance. But even UUs must struggle to understand the connection between our evolutionary origins and our religious commitments.

No puzzle about human origins is greater than the question of how *altruism* could have evolved. Darwin's basic insight is that traits that lead to greater likelihood of survival and reproduction will tend to become more widespread, and those that lead to lower likelihood will diminish. Clearly, being altruistic must confer a selective advantage when we were evolving, but generations of evolutionary scientists have found it very hard to figure out how that could happen.

Imagine, if you will, a saber-toothed cat attempting to enter the cave full of tasty hominids. All will be eaten unless someone takes a spear and chases it off, although the person who does this risks serious injury. Suppose that Ogg and Thak each have spears. The more altruistic and brave one may bravely chase off the cat but die from his injuries, leaving the more selfish and cowardly one to father the next generation's children. If this scenario is repeated generation after generation, there should eventually be no one left but selfish cowards.

Darwin himself was acutely aware of this problem and suggested a possible solution: perhaps natural selection operates not just on individuals, but on *groups* as well. There is little doubt that the Tribe of Altruists would have an advantage over the Clan of Selfish Cowards, so Darwin hypothesized that the competition between groups might have created a selective pressure in favor of altruism. The problem is that within each Tribe of Altruists there would be a tremendous selective pressure in favor of

hypocrites who let their brethren do the sacrificing. As recently as 2008, the consensus among evolutionary scientists was that the group-selection hypothesis was a rare example of a bad call by Darwin.

In a remarkable change, the view that altruism has evolved at least in part through group-selection is now gaining wide acceptance. To understand how this change in opinion came about, I'd like to take you from the Stone Age to the Cold War, when research in the newly invented discipline of Game Theory was promoted by Pentagon strategists pondering how to beat the Soviet Union. Game theory is the discipline for which John Nash won a Nobel Prize while fending off the hallucinations depicted by Russell Crowe in the film "A Beautiful Mind."

The Game-Theory model that is most relevant to evolution, called the Prisoner's Dilemma, involves two individuals each having to choose to be selfish or to cooperate. Suppose, for example, that Ogg and Thak agree that they will attack the saber-toothed cat together. If both follow through, they can defend the cave, though at some individual risk. Both Ogg and Thak realize, however, that if one holds back at the last minute, the other will bear most of the risk of being injured. On the other hand, if he attacks and the other holds back, then he will bear the all risk. Either way, the best thing is to agree to attack together, but then at the last minute hold back and let the other take all the risk. Unfortunately, if Ogg and Thak both reach the same conclusion, neither will attack the cat, and both will get eaten. It's a dilemma because if both sides do the rational thing, everyone loses (except the cat). There's no solution to the dilemma unless Ogg and Thak are faced with the same choice repeatedly. In that case, each may realize, for example, that if the cat keeps coming back, they will both be better off keeping the other alive, even if it means a risk to themselves, or they may be afraid that if they betray the other their reputation will suffer.

In the 1970's a Michigan social scientist Robert Axelrod held a famous computer tournament in which he solicited strategies for the Prisoners Dilemma in which outcomes were numerical scores, rather than being eaten or spared by a carnivore, and there were many rounds of interactions between players. After publishing the results of the initial tournament, Axelrod held a second tournament which attempted to simulate evolution by rewarding winning strategies with increased reproductive success, just like in real evolution. Submissions came from the Rand corporation, the Pentagon, and other

sources of Cold War strategic expertise. Amazingly, the best strategy in both tournaments was also the simplest. Called Tit-for-tat, this strategy consisted on playing fair, but retaliating proportionately against cheaters. Analysis showed that Tit-for-tat wins because it cooperates with other cooperative strategies but doesn't allow itself to be exploited by cheaters. Cheaters do well at first, taking advantage of patsies, but when the patsies die out, the cheaters have no one left to exploit, so they gradually lose out to cooperators like Tit-for-tat.⁸

This astonishing result, that cooperation is more effective than predation even in a simulated state of nature in which there is no God to reward the virtuous or punish evildoers, triggered a wave of research among economists, social psychologists, and mathematical biologists that continues to this day. Researchers have developed increasingly complex and realistic models of evolution that take account of such factors as reputation, mistakes, memory limits, and random events. Summarizing this work in 2011, Mathematical Biologist Martin Nowak said:

[T]here is now a wide range of evidence, both experimental and theoretical, to show that [group selection] is a ... fundamental process that permeates all of evolution, from the emergence of the first cells to the behavior of social creatures such as humans.

At the same time that theoreticians were perfecting their computer models, the man who once described himself as a Georgia boy who came north to find work but is better known as one of the world's most famous biologists, Harvard Professor E. O. Wilson, was reaching a similar conclusion based on field work on social insects, like ants, bees, and termites. For decades biologists thought that the self-sacrificing behavior of social insects—like kamikaze honey bees, who kill themselves to protect the hive—wasn't really altruistic because the workers are genetically identical to each other, and sacrificing yourself for your identical twin isn't really altruistic (this may come as a surprise to human identical twins). After decades as a leading critic of group selection, Wilson dramatically swung around to the opposite view. As he explained in his 2012 book, *The Social Conquest of Earth*:

[S]election among genetically diverse individual[s] ... promotes selfish behavior. On the other hand, selection between groups of humans typically promotes altruism among members of the

⁸ Axelrod, Robert. (1984). *The Evolution of Cooperation*. New York: Basic Books.

colony. Cheaters may win within the colony, ... but colonies of cheaters lose to colonies of cooperators. ... Individual-versus-group selection results in a mix of altruism and selfishness, of virtue and sin, among the members of a society.⁹

And so, my friends, our travels through time and space have brought us to the current scientific consensus that we are the product of two distinct evolutionary forces: the first selecting for self-interest, the second for altruism. Sometimes self-interest and altruism happily coincide, and we can do well by doing good. But more often, self-interest and the interests of others conflict and one or the other must yield. The tug of war we sometimes feel between doing the right thing and doing what's best for ourselves is built into us by evolution itself.

We've seen how we flip back and forth between a social mode, in which we are altruistic, and a pragmatic mode, in which we are selfish, and heard how evolutionary scientists have developed a convincing explanation of why this is true, so I'd like to move to the third issue: how can we help ourselves and others choose altruism rather than selfishness? In my view, the factors identified by social science can be divided into two categories that I call "Group Awareness" and "Cultivated Empathy."

By *Group Awareness*, I mean being reminded that we share norms with other people who would approve or disapprove of our actions based on whether we follow those norms. For example, being reminded of moral codes has an immediate, significant effect on peoples' inclination to cheat. This includes: reminders of God, even for people who don't believe in God; reminders of Honor Codes, even at institutions like MIT and Yale that have no honor codes; and reminders of the Ten Commandments, even though virtually no one can remember what the commandments are.¹⁰ Even putting a picture of a pair of eyes on a refrigerator significantly increases compliance with an honor-system for paying for tea and coffee.¹¹

Now, does it make any sense at all that being reminded of unknown or non-existent moral rules, or of a God you don't believe in, or seeing refrigerator eyes, could improve our behavior? Has anything that

⁹ Wilson, Edward O. (2012). *The Social Conquest of Earth*, W.W. Norton & Co.

¹⁰ Ariely, supra, at 39-52.

¹¹ <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/press.office/press.release/item/?ref=1151491586#.Uc7wWVNQ1oc>

we've talked about up to this point explain it?

I think that the answer is “yes, it makes sense.” We don't need to memorize moral rules to know wrong from right because we have been engineered by evolution to know the difference. What we need is to be reminded to operate in *moral* mode rather than in *pragmatic* mode. We can easily supply the honor code, but only do so if we are reminded to act morally, such as by being watched by people who judge us, or if there is a proxy for human observers, such as a God who watches us, or a refrigerator with eyes that makes us feel like we are being observed, or even a reminder that our community has standards that *could* be in an honor code. Each of these pushes us into a moral mode in which we internalize the *perspective* of those who observe and judge us. That's *Group Awareness*.

Cultivated Empathy is about recognizing the similarity of others to ourselves and valuing them as ourselves because of that similarity, like the experimental subjects who offered to endure painful electric shocks in place of Elaine. We can see the importance of cultivated empathy by the fact that genocides are often preceded by propaganda that seeks to portray the victims as separate and less than human, like cockroaches or vermin.¹² This propaganda is a kind of cultivated non-empathy. By contrast, the UU principle of “the inherent dignity and worth of every person” is a powerful expression of Cultivated Empathy.

This morning we've gone from an Israeli day-care center to the ruins of Ismarus to Princeton, from hominid cave dwellers to the Kansas home of Elaine, the serial simulated shock victim, to cold-war game theoreticians and Harvard entomologists. This circuitous path has finally brought back us to familiar ground: the key to finding the better angels within ourselves is recognizing that the differences that divide us are insignificant compared to the inherent dignity and worth we share with every other person. Our sojourn ultimately reaffirms that a just and compassionate world depends on our commitment to make ourselves, our children, and each other understand that we share standards of fairness, respect, and honesty; that how we act even in small things matters; and that we have an obligation to hold each other, as well as ourselves, to a high standard of behavior.

May we always be aware of the humanity that we share with each real world Elaine whose cries of pain

12 Samantha Power. (2002). *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, Harper Collins.

can be quieted only by someone brave enough to take some of that pain onto themselves; every day-care worker inconvenienced by a thoughtless parent; every helpless civilian cowering beneath the predatory gaze of invading soldiers; and every dirty, coughing stranger sprawled on the sidewalk smack between us and that coveted job interview. Don't step over him, because it is only when we fully embrace our shared humanity that we can truly follow our better angels.

So be it.