“Me” First or “We” First?

Literature and Paleomorality

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Contents

In the beginning there was a thermonuclear war, as a consequence of which the Djanks and Druzhkies "had destroyed themselves and, madly, all other inhabitants of the earth."[1] Thus begins Bernard Malamud's allegorically realistic beast fable, *God's Grace* (1982). What follows is planet-wide Armageddon: tsunami floods, radiation everywhere, and the implosion of the biosphere so catastrophic that even cockroaches perish. Only one man, paleontologist Calvin Cohn, eludes the Bomb by working at the sea bottom. In the afterglow of the holocaust, he and Buz-a young chimp prodigy he discovers on the surface vessel-shipwreck on a tropical island.

Like many other post-apocalyptic protagonists, Cohn takes it as his duty to rekindle civilization from nuclear ashes. But there is a problem. As God rumbles from on high, piqued at finding him alive, he is the only human to survive the Second Flood. Unfazed, Cohn transfers his promethean designs onto Buz and others of his kind who begin to appear on the island. The Lord seems to approve for, equipped with an artificial larynx, Buz miraculously masters human speech. No less miraculously, he teaches it to others (for morphological and anatomical reasons, apes cannot vocalize like humans do).

A new world Adam, Cohn gives names to the newcomers and, displaying a resourcefulness that would make Robinson Crusoe proud, proceeds to engineer a chimpanzee society. Not to replicate the errors of the past, in lieu of a political constitution he lays down seven Admonitions for the post-human age in the hope of steering his communards toward a better life. Daily he lectures to the grooming apes on history, sociobiology, and altruism. Impatient at the pace of progress, he even monkeys with evolution by begetting a child with a "womantically" lisping female, Mary Madelene.

Yet the more he educates the apes under the Schooltree and presses them to obey the dictates of brotherly love, the more nature rears its head, dragging the community towards anarchy. Little by little, the quasi-Edenic garden-on which even insect-pollinated trees get pollinated in the absence of insects-devolves into a primeval jungle. Hostility, racism, and eventually cannibalism write the closing chapters of the communal history. In the final scene, the prodigal son Buz leads captive Cohn up the mountain to slay him in a reversal of the story of Abraham and Isaac. At last, humanity is no more.

Horrified that Ecclesiastes' sun that also rises may be made of runaway neutrons, Malamud questions our degree of autonomy from the ancestral Homo, insofar as the latter is the progenitor of so many behaviors of the modern human. This anthropological-not to say sociobiological-perspective is no mere poetic licence. A lifelong professor of literature, in preparation for the novel Malamud became a student of evolution, primatology, paleoanthropology, and evolutionary psychology, reading everything from Louis Leakey's Unveiling Man's Origins to Jane Goodall's In the Shadow of Man.

In a radical step for a writer of fiction, he even spent a year at the Stanford Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, absorbing the essentials of within-group and between-group selection. Having done his homework, he makes a case in God's

[1] Bernard Malamud, God's Grace (New York: Avon, 1982), pp. 3–4. All subsequent references are to God's Grace, unless indicated otherwise.

Grace that evolution is an ideal vantage point from which to contemplate human society and morality.

I

In the decades preceding God's Grace, Malamud had jump-cut from writing about a late-comer baseball sensation, Italian petty hoodlum turned grocer, tsarist Jew and libidinous college professor to an earn his wings angel, Black Power militant, middle-aged biographer of D. H. Lawrence, and other equally unpigeonholable creations. On the way, he had experimented with everything from impressionist imagism to stream-of-consciousness to almost scientifically rectilinear prose. But if he had been taking creative chances all his life, in God's Grace he is gambling for the jackpot.

It is not even that he populates the story with sapient chimpanzees, a 500-pound Jewish gorilla, and an irascible God who enjoys pelting Cohn with lemons as a reminder of who is the boss of all bosses. But, in a new variant on the "last couple on Earth," he has his hero copulate with an ape who bears him a humanzee baby which is subsequently killed and devoured by other chimps. Meanwhile, this lunacy is textured out of a kaleidoscope of genres, from the evolutionary parable to post-apocalyptic survivalist drama and theosophical burlesque.

These protean designs proved too much for the critics. Most poohpoohed Malamud's turn toward fantasy, clearly expecting another melancholy serving of matzo-ball realism. Many asked aloud why a National Book Awardee and Pulitzer Prize winner would sabotage his career with so lowbrow a fare as a beast fable.[2] Few paused to acknowledge that fantasy, especially with allegorical overtones, boasts a pedigree stretching from the Sanscrit Panchatantra and the Arabian One Thousand and One Nights to Spencer's Faerie Queene-to say nothing of Aesop, La Fontaine and Br'er Rabbit.

"I write fantasy," Malamud shrugged off the barbs, "because when I do I am imaginative and funny."[3] And funny he is, even if it is all slapstick sometimes. When Cohn contends with the Almighty, only to be knocked senseless by a pillar of fire in front of the petrified apes, Buz declares the spectacle, ahem, a knockout and casually inquires about the next episode. Much of Malamud's comedy owes, in fact, to such intermingling of high drama and almost Pythonesque irreverence. It may be the end of the world, but it is deflated by the rolling vernacular in which Cohn and Buz negotiate their priorities.

[2] For typical reviews, see John Leonard, "God's Grace. By Bernard Malamud," New York Times 23 August 1982, C18; Alan Lelchuk, "Malamud's Dark Fable," New York Times 29 August 1982, A1. The latter's confusion of baboons with chimps and chimps with gorillas, respectively, puts the quality of these reviews in perspective.

[3] In Lawrence M. Lasher, ed., Conversations with Bernard Malamud (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), p. 38; see also p. 112.

"Not all of us are eager to be reminded how close man has come, through his own madness, to the end of time," pointed out the author. "So, I wanted a little laughter in this serious book."[4] Try as you might, however, to look on the bright side of life after doomsday, memento mori is never far from sight. Cohn's island may be the new cradle of life, but it is littered with bones of animals that perished in the Second Flood. Just like the paleolithic fossils he painstakingly excavates near his cave, they foreshadow his own mortality and the extinction of the human race.

All allegories feed on symbols, ur-tales and archetypes, and God's Grace is no exception. Not surprisingly, the encyclopedic (not to say Miltonic) range of its intertextual hyperlinks begins with the Bible, especially the book of Genesis. At various points in the story Cohn becomes God, Adam, Cain, Abraham, Jacob, Noah, Moses, and Job, to name a few. At other times he cameos as Everyman, suffering redeemer Jesus, protostoryteller Homer, and stranger-in-an-estranged-land Gulliver. Most of all, he is Robinson Crusoe and the latter's prototype, Alexander Selkirk, who eked out several years on a barren island off the coast of Chile.

Another trove of allusions comes from Shakespeare, whose Works Cohn salvages from the sinking vessel. At once an island Prospero to Buz's Caliban and a Julius Caesar to his Brutus, Cohn also reprises the role of "Womeo" in his star-crossed union with Mary Madelyn. Other allusions radiate to some of the iconic narratives of modern culture. One such is Golding's Lord of the Flies, in which an island commune degenerates into ritualistic murder. Another is Orwell's parable of talking animals who struggle to wrest power from the human. Another still is the manmade apocalypse in Cat's Cradle-and behind all looms The Planet of the Apes, with its cast of sapient, English-speaking chimps.

Yet the parallels go only so far. If Malamud's chimps are the new meek to inherit the earth, they look like God's second mistake-if only he would admit it. If only. The Almighty who presides over the Second Flood is autocratic and short-tempered. As the biggest player on the globe, he enjoys cowing Cohn with divine muscle and thunder. Yet he is also a dispenser of grace, however stingy it may appear to the survivors. Having misspent his assets on unregenerate humanity, he is willing to re-invest them in the great apes. After all, they survive the holocaust even though, being morphologically like humans, they should have perished.

Better still, he creates a lush island on which they can try their hairy hand at civilization. Despite dismay at Cohn's survival, he even dispatches a Samaritan gorilla to save him from sure death of radiation. Why? The answer lies, perhaps, in Cohn himself. He has always been short and, after the radiation sickness, his bowed legs get even more crooked, chimp-fashion. Like his protégés, he is trim and muscular, and prolonged exposure to the sun leaves him with a deep brown tan. Losing his hair, he grows a short beard and, to complete the picture, becomes a devout fructivore.

[4] Conversations, p. 132.

The transformation externalizes Cohn's chimp-like traits. But one day the metaphor turns into reality when the island becomes haunted by an albino ape believed to spell trouble for the community. Ultimately, suggests Malamud, this is what we are: white apes chained to our adaptive heritage. Cohn's own makeover is completed in a vote with which Buz and his conspecifics make him honorary chimp. Indeed, before they grow estranged, Buz affectionately calls him "Dod," even as the young ape begins to cultivate the air of a master scholar.

Both father and son epitomize Malamud's favourite character type: the apprentice. Vying with each other, they vie with their moral limitations no less, so much so that even their names reflect this struggle. Before he is rechristened by Cohn, Buz's original name is Gottlob or Gottlieb, God's Beloved. Before he changes it to Calvin, Cohn's own name is Seymore. This conversion from See-More to one of the sternest dogmatists in religious history foreshadows the blind spots he will exhibit in the island protectorate, notwithstanding all his intelligence and adaptability.

The adaptive value of intelligence is unquestionable. It is the best solution for surmounting the contingencies of life on earth. But even though mental agility and plasticity enabled us to become the top predator of all times, they've exacted a heavy price. In Consilience, E. O . Wilson diagnosed it as a psychological exile of humankind.[5] Some of our inner unrests, pathologies, and neuroses, proposed the sociobiologist, may be the toll levied by evolution for cutting us to the front of the line. Seeing how badly we behave toward each other and even toward ourselves, was the toll worth paying?

To pay for the evolutionary ratchet that drove the intelligence explosion in the early hominids, we may have mortgaged our future. The same big brains that served us so well against predators, glaciations, food shortages, and any other ecological IQ-tests, are responsible for the nuclear means of exterminating life on earth-and for the lack of political will to ensure we can't. Viewed in this light, shared intentionality, which begot intelligence, which begot culture, which begot science, which begot the H-bomb, may be the ultimate Trojan horse.

Added to this, we have culture, an evolved mechanism that allows us to effect responses more rapidly than genes alone can. But culture can be massively maladaptive. One nuclear war can undo aeons of selection for intelligence. "I worry about technology rampant," confessed Malamud on many occasions. "I fear those who are by nature beastly."[6] To the extent that we cannot shed the adaptations that occasionally make us behave like proverbial beasts, that fear will always be real. But are we really doomed to the mercy of our biological appetites-the four F's of evolutionary survival: fighting, fleeing, feeding, and reproduction?

The question of freedom has dominated Malamud's fiction since his first novel to the last. In God's Grace it returns as a parable on moral freedom and the biological nature of Man. Who was really responsible for the nuclear war and the Second Flood: the

[5] Edward O. Wilson, Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge (New York: Knopf, 1998), p. 224.
[6] Conversations, p. 68; see also p. 113.

Almighty or humankind fashioned in his image? Who really failed in Cohn's commune: the self-serving man or the all-too-human apes? What is a human being: a moral and therefore culpable agent or a muppet agitated by God's invisible strings?

The savage primitive, selfish and self-serving, is the familiar face of Man for whom civilization is merely a napkin with which to dry out the fangs. But wait a minute. Aren't we a little more two-faced than that? Aren't human beings capable of remarkable feats of cooperation, coordination, and collaboration? Even waging war requires millions of individuals to act in concert, each critically dependent on another. True, this is not yet altruism, but it is a radically different type of behavior from "every man for himself."

Moreover, full-bloodied altruism is not hard to find even on the battlefield. The 2008 headline about a Royal Marine who threw himself on a grenade to save his mates is just one of many examples of such seemingly maladaptive behavior. The incident was as incredible as its denouement. Even as his buddies dove for cover, a reservist lance corporal in an Afghanistan reconnaissance patrol jumped onto the tripped booby-trap grenade to absorb the blast with his pack and body armour. The gods were smiling that day for, incredibly, he suffered only severe shock and a nosebleed.[7]

Naturally, not all that glitters is gold. Willing to give up his life for his mates, the soldier was a willing participant in military ops in this corner of the Middle East. It is erroneous, or at least overly generous, many moral philosophers would argue, to speak of altruism the radius of which is so narrow. If Cohn's eutopia is anything to go by, Malamud agrees. George, the black gorilla, is the object of relentless hatred by the chimps, with the Jesus-loving sophisticate Buz in the lead. A passel of emaciated baboons become a meat market for the otherwise civilized chimps.

Baboons, rants the alpha-male in a verbal analogue of a Hitler moustache glued to the lip of a Southern redneck, "are dirty, stinking, thieving monkeys, interfering into everybody's business. They breed like rats and foul up all over the clean bush. If we don't control their population they will squat all over this island and we will have to get off" (p. 224). If his rationale is as grotesque as it was in the Third Reich and in the Jim Crow Dixieland, so are the behaviors it attempts to justify. The mere proximity of the "black" monkeys drives the supremacist chimps into a frenzy of predation at the end of which they polish off every morsel of bushmeat stripped from a baboon child.

Caught red handed, one chimp soldier who has only been following orders defends himself: "Esau told us that baboons don't belong to our tribe." To Cohn's exasperated reproof that God wants all to live at peace with strangers, he counters: "What for?" (p. 212). The chimps clearly put no stock in the proverbial golden rule of all moral codes: Don't do onto others what is hateful to you. In this they are only too human. German colonists in Namibia-to take only one example-also denied the humanity of the indigenous Herero people, calling them baboons while exterminating them left and right in the first genocide of the twentieth century.

[7] "Marine Threw Himself onto Grenade," online.

II

Before violence and aggression scuttle the communal experiment, Cohn sets up seven Admonitions on the face of a mountain. These quasi-Mosaic edicts are to safeguard the principles that the social engineer sees as essential for a politically just and spiritually enlightened society. Like the Christian injunctions against the seven deadly sins, they are a distillate of the dual nature of his endeavour. On the one hand, they reflect the nobility of his eutopian aspirations. On the other, by the very fact of being posted, they testify to the need to redirect the truant onto the path of virtue.

> (1) We have survived the end of the world; therefore cherish life. Thou shalt not kill.
>
> (2) Note: God is not love, God is God. Remember Him.
>
> (3) Love thy neighbor. If you can't love, serve-others, the community. Remember the willing obligation.
>
> (4) Lives as lives are equal in value but not in ideas. Attend the Schooltree.
>
> (5) Blessed are those who divide the fruit equally.
>
> (6) Altruism is possible, if not probable. Keep trying. See 3 above.
>
> (7) Aspiration may improve natural selection. Chimpanzees may someday be better living beings than men were. There's no hurry but keep it in mind (p. 198).[8]

In interview after interview, Malamud cited his formative influences to be World War II and the Holocaust, the continuing racial strife in America, and the threat of nuclear war. Political and sociopolitical, all these concerns are reflected in the blueprint for the primate community. The spectre of nuclear winter, lit by the embers of atomic blasts, drives the First Admonition. The Second Admonition replaces the Christian mantra "God is love" with an elliptical reminder that God is the ultimate unknown. So much for invoking his will as an excuse for bigotry and war-or for arming American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan with rifle sights stencilled with biblical references.

With Russia and the U.S. separated only by 85 kilometres of Bering Strait, the Third Admonition is a reminder that ICBMs have shrunk the world to the size of a neighbourhood. Grafting the Schooltree onto the biblical Tree of Knowledge, the Fourth exhumes the ghosts of John Scopes and the 1925 Monkey Trial. The Fifth Admonition to distribute resources equitably rings with especial force in the United States where the wealth of the top 1 percent exceeds that of the bottom 95 percent.[9]

[8] Revised here, substantial parts of this and the next section appeared as "Of Morality, Proverbial Wisdom, and Bernard Malamud's God's Grace," online.

[9] See Peter Swirski, Ars Americana, Ars Politica (Montreal: McGill-Queens's University Press, 2010), and Peter Swirski, ed., I Sing the Body Politic: History as Prophecy in Contemporary American Literature (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009).

The Sixth goes after the geopolitical divisions that often limit the right to peaceful coexistence only to those who share our patch of dirt.

The Seventh Admonition, however, seems different. Talking about natural selection, it veers away from politics and anything else we might term "culture." Or does it? Malamud leaves no doubt that the alleged divide between the alleged genetic determinacy and the alleged indeterminacy of cultural expression is a red herring. Thus his protagonist lectures "on natural selection-the maximization of fitness, someone had defined it-a popular subject with his students. It promised possibilities if one made himself-or in some way became-selectable" (p. 187).

If the apes wish to become more selectable, they can do something about it instead of waiting for adaptive behaviors to grind themselves out over eons. Put differently, social engineering can guide natural selection in a co-evolutionary pas de deux. Culture is, after all, an adaptation. For a very long time now, it has been changing the genetic character of human populations via multi-level selection. On second thoughts, Cohn's lecture about the road to eutopia being paved by social engineering and evolution is far from an anomaly. All seven Admonitions make as much sense from a sociopolitical as from a sociobiological point of view.

The First Admonition reflects the core precept of moral codes worldwide: thou shalt not kill. Naturally, from the biblical Yahweh commanding the Israelites to smite their enemies to modern nations butchering one another for democracy, killing has always been legitimized under certain circumstances. Self-sacrifice is an established fact, but altruistic tendencies are on the whole less intense than the impulse for personal survival. If people get hungry enough, they eat each other. If newly dominant males kill the displaced leader's offspring, they have equally adaptive reasons for doing so.

Against this background Malamud's beast fable is once again nuanced and true to life. The raid on Cohn and the butchery of his child are perfectly consistent with predation, signifying that deep down the chimps may regard the human as a different species. Conversely, if they see Cohn as a chimp, their behavior makes equal adaptive sense. By deposing the dominant male and by getting rid of his progeny they induce Mary Madelyn into estrus. Significantly, throughout all this, the apes are murderous but highly cooperative. Their behavior is not prosocial but it is highly social.

The Second Admonition attempts to prise morality away from doctrinal religion. Historically, religion worldwide has been a flashpoint for hatred and intolerance, fragmenting us into sects and factions, only to pit one against another. For results, look no further than the colonial settlement of the Americas or, in our times, India and Pakistan. And yet, religion can also be the source of one of the most inclusive tribal identities. In this case, however, the marker is not genetic but cultural.

The evidence is clear. Religion can act like a centripetal force, herding disparate individuals toward the common centre. There is no one blood-family on earth that is a billion strong, but there are more than a billion Catholics (roughly the same as atheists) united under the Fisher Ring. With God as the overarching tribal leader, religious systems paper over the genetic differences of the believers. Black and white

Methodists, Ashkenazi and Coptic Jews, Iraqi and Saudi Shiites kneel side by side because-even as they fence off non-believers-their religions promote cultural group identity.

The Third Admonition is the moral golden rule, vividly paraphrased by a Pashto proverb: Pinch yourself to find out how much it hurts others.[10] It is there to counter the adaptive distinctions we always make between the in-group and out-group. From corals to shoaling fish, ants, termites, rodents, flocking herbivores, and primates, not to even mention species that aggregate in family groups, social and colonial animals dominate the world. To survive alongside one another, all must have evolved ways of determining friend from foe and of knowing what to do with either.

Morality evolved to harmonize in-group attitudes, and is therefore biased in favour of those who are with us. As David Berreby documents in Us and Them (2005), sharp distinctions between those who are insiders and outsiders are bred in our genome. Social animals are often xenophobic and hostile to strangers of the same species who live outside the territorial and social boundaries of the group. It is far from a matter of giving trespassers the evil eye. Individuals who stray into others' territory open themselves to attacks that may be lethal. "Unprovoked" aggression of this sort has been reported for almost all social species.[11]

The Fourth Admonition reflects the demands of intelligence, culture and social life. Human evolution selected for prolonged childhood, the longest in any animal that ever lived. The Fifth fosters prosocial behavior through emphasis on egalitarianism and resource sharing. Individual fitness is one thing, but behaviors good for me are seldom good for the group. The thing is, groups also compete with one another, and the more cooperative they are, the better chance they stand of outcompeting the competition. This yin-yang of multilevel selection means that the "selfish gene" cannot be the whole story.

This is not to say that there is a gene for cooperative behavior, let alone for altruism. But the conceptual nucleus of modern biology has long been taken to be synonymous with Dawkins's famous meme. We are survival machines, wrote Dawkins, programmed to replicate our twisted strands of genetic code. We may do so with the aid of the group or even by contributing to the welfare of the group, but with the ultimate goal of multiplying copies of our DNA . If acts of altruism and selflessness occur on the way, they occur only to the extent that they serve the continuation of the gene beyond the individual currently carrying it.

The Sixth Admonition does not merely encourage a reinterpretation of the selfish gene in more prosocial terms-it demands it. Prosocial behavior is, after all, compatible with self-serving behavior, even though they may frequently be only reluctant bedfel-

[10] Eastern Iranian ethno-linguistic group; today the language of Pashtuns is found mostly in Afghanistan and some provinces of Pakistan.

[11] Edward O. Wilson, Sociobiology: The New Synthesis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 249; David Berreby, Us and Them: Understanding Your Tribal Mind (New York: Little Brown, 2005).

lows. Far from being maladaptive, self-sacrifice has emerged from the same adaptive pressures that produced more self-oriented forms of social exchange, such as favouring kinfolk and reciprocal back-scratching. There is, in short, no need to look outside evolution to explain why "me first" is not always an enemy of "we first."

The Seventh Admonition reinforces this message by stressing the interplay between genetic and social factors. Biology has moved on from the days when Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton, framed the nature-nurture dialectic. Today his thesis and antithesis look more like the 1948 Escher lithograph of one hand drawing another in a closed loop. This is because, in all likelihood, gene-culture coevolution was the twin Rolls-Royce engine that lifted hominids from the plains of Africa to the heights of scientific, artistic and material sophistication we enjoy today.

How did it happen? Even if the details are still subject to debate, some facts are beyond doubt. The most evident among them is that people are adapted for culture in ways that apes are not. The crucial difference here is our adaptation for understanding other agents as agents, i.e. intentional beings. This allows us to share a point of view-and thus information-by drawing attention to intention. Evidence suggests, in fact, that, in conjunction with theory of mind, this shared ("we") intentionality is what drove human cognition. The result? The "ratcheting up" of learning skills and the explosion of culture.[12]

The key factor in cultural evolution is its fantastic rate. Molecular genetics shows that Homo sapiens separated from apes some six million years ago. Fossil record suggests that for the next four million years we continued as very ape-like australopithecines. Our uniquely human ability to attribute beliefs and intentions is therefore likely less than two million years old. This is a very short time for any cognitive adaptation to emerge. On the other hand, something did manifestly alter primate cognitive selection in spectacular ways. You are the living proof of that. What was it?

Given the speed and the ratcheting effects of this cognitive evolution-perhaps we should say revolution-there is really only one agent of change to fit the job description: culture. Material and symbolic culture is, after all, influenced by biological imperatives and, in turn, biological traits are influenced by cultural selection. Without culture in the picture, conclude Richerson and Boyd in Not By Genes Alone (2005), "we can't explain why our societies are so different from those of other primates, the emotional

[12] For cultural "ratcheting," see Michael Tomasello, et al., "Cultural Learning," Behavioral and Brain Sciences 16 (1993): 495–552; Michael Tomasello, "The Human Adaptation for Culture," Annual Review of Anthropology 28 (1999): 509–29; Michael Tomasello and H. Rakoczy, "What Makes Human Cognition Unique? From Individual to Shared to Collective Intentionality," Mind and Language 18 (2003): 121–47; and Michael Tomasello, et al., "Understanding and Sharing Intentions: The Origins of Cultural Cognition," Behavioral and Brain Sciences 28 (2005): 675–735. Of course, chimps and bonobos have some culture: they teach their young how to use tools to crack nuts (though they don't keep tools but get new ones each time), they hunt cooperatively, and they exchange sex for monkey meat; however, they display little shared intentionality.

salience of tribal-scale human groups, or their importance in social organization and social conflict."[13]

Genetic variation among groups-especially mixed groups-can't explain variation in group behavior. The experience of partitioned nations, from (East) Germany to (North) Korea to (Northern) Ireland, is unequivocal in this respect. So is cross-cultural adoption, whereby children effortlessly adopt the new culture and not that of their genetic parents. Nor can ecological factors be the answer. First of all, all environments on Earth have by now been altered by culture, so that even if the hypothesis were right, it would be wrong. Secondly, the ecological hypothesis would predict similar behaviors in similar environments, which is not always the case.

This is not to say that ecological factors do not ever select for behavior. Harsh environments regularly produce raiders-look at the Vikings. Seasonal environments yield cultural adaptations to do with food preservation and storage. Arid ecologies promote group behavior necessary to complete irrigation systems. On the other hand, in Not By Genes Alone Richerson and Boyd provide a series of examples which cannot be accounted for by purely ecological factors. Among them the Dinka and *Nuer* tribal customs and patterns of domination, or Yankee vs Southern excitability and culture of honor, are by now canonical.

Genetic and cultural selection have walked hand in hand since at least the early Pleistocene. The result is civilization as we know it: Fatman and Little Boy, the Big Mac, the Lindy hop. That still leaves the question of what evolutionary mechanism acted as the cognitive ratchet. The recently discovered mirror neurons-so-called in distinction to "canonical" neurons-look more and more like a link between natural selection and the evolution of culture. This is because, as we are learning, mirror neurons directly detect and simulate other people's cognitive and emotional states.[14]

That's right: cognitive and emotional states. Take a triadic structure: you, me, and an object-or some relation between objects, or anything else-you want to draw my attention to. Intentional actions and indicated structures, as it turns out, speak directly to our evolved brains. The latter detect intentions even before "we" do, and process them with unerring alacrity. It is not, in other words, a case of "humankey see, humankey do." Eerily, mirror neurons are attuned to intentions behind movements, the purpose of gestures. You could say that they understand their meaning in terms of goal-directed actions.[15]

At the cortical level, the brain does not work by tracking motor activity. It does not work, in other words, in terms of extending a forelimb and closing digital protrusions around a tapered cylinder resting a couple of feet away. It works in terms of reaching for

[13] Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd, Not By Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 235.

[14] Guiseppe di Pellegrino, L. Fadiga, L. Fogassi, V. Gallese, and G. Rizzolatti, "Understanding Motor Events: A Neurophysiological Study," Experimental Brain Research 91 (1992): 176–80.

[15] Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia, Mirrors in the Brain: How Our Minds Share Actions and Emotions (Oxford: Oxford Univeristy Press, 2008), p. 124.

a banana in order to eat it. How do we know? Because when the exact same action is repeated in another context-for example, miming the original gesture without actually grasping anything or even without intending to-nothing in the brain fires and nothing activates. Somehow our evolutionary "wet" chips are able to grasp other intentional beings' minds.

It is important to remember that all this happens without any reflective or inferential mediation. It is an automatic and immediate cortical understanding in the heat of the moment-a looking-glass reflex of our evolved brain. But there is more. The discharge of these neurons is eerily similar when actions are performed and when they are merely observed. Mirror neurons are voyeur neurons, primed to activate whether you burn yourself with scalding water or whether you only witness my own injury and distress. And it is not just cognition, either.

When I see you frown, look around and spread your hands while elevating your shoulders, I can reasonably surmise that you are puzzled or lost. But a long time before that I am ready to offer help, because my brain-to be precise, my visceromotor system-understands and feels your discomfort before "I" do. It's the ultimate case of what-you-see-is-what-you-get. When I see your pantomime of helplessness, my brain not only knows that you are disoriented or discomfited, but feels it. This is crucial because morality hinges on empathy, on the capacity for putting yourself in other people's shoes.

Training is one conduit of moral virtue. Aristotle spent years pounding the precepts of goodness into Alexander, who then went to pillage most of the known world. Be that as it may, the rudiments of morality appear to be preloaded into humans. Empathy, the feeling of the feelings of others, is after all the foundation-to many philosophers a precondition-of altruism.[16] Altruism, in turn, is the foundation of groupish behavior and thus of society as we know it.

Naturally, in everyday parlance altruism comes bundled up with goodness. Not so in biology, where it is defined operationally rather than in reference to any intrinsic features. Regardless of the motives behind it, if an action that benefits others is costly to the performer, it is considered altruistic. This can include even paradigmatically hostile or aggressive behavior. Bees that die after stinging, or army ants that get eaten before their numbers can overwhelm the prey, are highly altruistic but hardly benevolent. Both are out to kill. Just because actions benefit someone else's survival, they must not, therefore, be regarded as good in some transcendent moral sense. By the same token, however, selflessness must not be excluded from the overall economy of social life.

Economists, political scientists and sociologists often reduce us to rational utility maximizers, conspicuously leaving out the human dimension, the capacity for disinterested self-sacrifice. To gauge what is wrong with this picture, we need look no further

[16] Frans de Waal, and Robert Wright, Christine M. Korsgaard, Philip Kitcher, Peter Singer, Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

than Adam Smith. Commonly hailed in America as a prophet of wealth-maximizing laissez-faire, Smith was more nuanced a thinker. Not only did he publish a whole book on altruism but he maintained in The Theory of Moral Sentiments that Man has capacities "which interest him in the future of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it."[17]

Armed with these caveats, let us look at altruism again. Suddenly it seems to be everywhere. Far from an esoteric trait of the likes of St. Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa, benefiting others at cost to self dominates the social landscape. Granted, just because we are all altruists does not mean that all instances of self-sacrifice are equal. But there is no denying that, sometimes at least, we act out of other-directed motives. Or is there?

Cynics can always find alternative reasons for even the most altruistic acts. A soldier smothering a fragmenting grenade with his body earns, after all, not only posthumous fame and decoration, but a pension for his family. On this interpretation, his apparent altruism might be a roundabout kind of kin selection. The esprit de corps, frequently expressed as a "brotherhood in arms"-especially in the case of small, tightly knit, front-line units-could also activate self-sacrifice as a sublimated form of "kin" selection.

But what about families who report felonious relatives to the police in the knowledge that the latter will be sent away for life or to the chair? Theodore John Kaczynski, aka *Unabomber*, was not apprehended as a result of a years-long FBI investigation. Rather, his blood brother recognized the terrorist's writing style and opinions in the latter's manifesto and tipped the Feebs. What was in it for him, in the absence of financial reward? Heartlessness does not explain anything since, in many cases, families turn in kin whom they love and support during the trial and later in jail.

This counterevidence may be, however, missing the larger point. As Janet Radcliffe Richards points out, if you raise the bar too high no one will ever be able to jump over. A Doubting Thomas, who always suspects everyone's motives, writes even the possibility of altruism out of the social equation. In contrast, Richards's implicit and Donald Broom's explicit position is that self-sacrifice is far from incompatible with selfinterest.[18] Naturally, moral philosophers may find much amiss with this thesis. Genuine morality, they will remonstrate, demands an extension of the willing obligation to the entire human race.

Wouldn't it be nice? I put more stock, however, in Remarque's comment (echoed by Stalin) that for most Homo sapiens a single death is a tragedy, while a million deaths is a statistic. We would have to be a very different species to empathize with abstractions (such as "humanity") with the same intensity that we empathize with personal acquaintances. Not to mention that by these standards, a Martian anthropologist would conclude that almost all people are immoral, given that most of us ordinarily

[17] Adam Smith, The Theory of Moral Sentiments (Edinburgh, 1759), p. 9.

[18] Janet Radcliffe Richards, Human Nature After Darwin: A Philosophical Introduction (London: Routledge, 2000); Donald M. Broom, The Evolution of Morality and Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

limit the radius of our good will to an inner circle of family, neighbors, and associates. So do, for that matter, chimps and bonobos.

Even more to the point, our Martian would see human and animal morality as continuous, however far removed from each other on the spectrum. Not the same, of course-not by a long shot. He would not conclude that moral judgments that apply to the Nuremberg trials should apply to animal predation or aggression. But neither would he waste his time dusting our frontal lobes for God's latent fingerprints. Human morality, he would conclude, is as much a consequence of evolution as is our brain architecture, anatomy, our propensity for counterfactual thinking, or even our proverbs.[19]

III

Morality is a trait emergent because of a basic fact of existence. Just like many other organisms, we have always needed others of our kind in the struggle for survival. The position that evolution made us moral could not, however, be more at variance with the Christian view that people alone possess moral sense by the grace of God. According to the church, even as it makes us human, morality separates us from animals-even those closest to us, the great apes. Moral sense could never be mistaken for moral instinct. We are our primate cousins' cousins, but not when it comes to altruism.

Nonsense, counters Malamud, making the relation between evolution and morality the backbone of the Admonitions. Not for nothing does his hero urge the apes to "evolve into concerned, altruistic living beings" (p. 146). Moral sense is not a veneer that somehow (and how exactly?) emerged via non-evolutionary processes. We are altruistic as a consequence of the same selective pressures that have made us egocentric. Adaptively, it is not difficult to see why. Cooperative and altruistic units tend to outperform self-oriented individuals. As the Spanish proverb says, Three helping each other are as good as six.

And herein lies the rub. Egoism betters our fitness but altruism betters group fitness. Something does not add up, and this something has an analogue in Gödel's incompleteness theorems. The brilliant if highly eccentric mathematician proved that no system past a certain (low) threshold of complexity can be shown to be consistent. It could, in other words, be utter nonsense and you would never know-unless you climb to a hierarchically higher level. Therein, indeed, you can prove to your satisfaction that the first one is trustworthy. But if you think you just got out of paying for lunch, forget it.

The second level lets you verify the consistency of the first, but at a price. Now to determine that the second floor is soundly constructed, you need to climb to the third;

[19] See Peter Swirski, Of Literature and Knowledge: Explorations in Narrative Thought Experiments, Evolution, and Game Theory (London: Routledge, 2007).

for the third to the fourth; and so on, ad infinitum. It is a variant on the chicken-and-egg regression. To make your chicken hatch consistent eggs, you have to verify that the chicken itself is in working order, which means verifying the egg from which it came from, and so on and on. Nature iterates this yin-yang architecture independent of scale because, at its most fundamental, mathematics is a fractal.

Why bother? Because multi-level selection is another fractal. Think of it as a recursive function of two evolutionary vectors: pro-individual and prosocial. When competition between individuals gets suppressed, between-group selection emerges as the primary agent of change. But even as cooperation suppresses the "me first" vector for the sake of "we first," competitive behavior reappears at the next level up in the biological hierarchy. From eukaryotes all the way up to the earth's biosphere, all the intermediate stages iterate this yin-yang architecture.[20]

One factor that would seem to cast doubt on multi-level selection is inter-group migration in primates (and presumably in early humans). If groups are so fluid as to be practically nonexistent from the genetic standpoint, there is little for group selection to work on. Unlike apes, however, we cooperate with and within units that far transcend family groups or even the 100–150 strong forager-hunter band sizes. Instead of relying on genetic markers, cultural group identity relies on symbols-language, customs, ideology, religion, and so on. As such, it is largely independent of inter-group migration.

Groups with a higher coefficient of altruism will tend to outcompete rivals and spread the groupish genes. Self-serving behavior has not, of course, ceased to exist. Far from it-if only because my interests are best served if all except me are altruistic. At every level "me first" behavior is therefore kept in check by the local police. At the lower levels, for instance, the job is handled by the immune system. Most of the time our cellular organelles, their aggregates (cells), and their aggregates (internal organs) do work well as a team, which is good because their "heave ho" has to synchronize if we are to live.

Naturally, aggregates of organs that we call human beings also engage in competition against other aggregates. Still, even players on a probasketball team who vie for individual fame and contracts unite to compete against other teams. Guess what? The yin-yang vectors reappear at the next level up. Teams of players who competed against one another as the Knicks and the Sixers unite into Team USA to compete against other national teams. In principle, this process could go on forever because its architecture is so fundamental (as for Gödel's theorem, in my opinion, it holds true everywhere in the universe).

Egoism twins with altruism within a group, which twins with competition against other groups, which twins with altruism within groups of groups, which twins with competition against other groups of groups, and so on, independent of scale. Multi-

[20] David Sloan Wilson and Edward O. Wilson, "Rethinking the Theoretical Foundation of Sociobiology," Quarterly Review of Biology 82 (2007): 327–48.

level selection permeates our lives because it is a fractal present at every level of existence. This includes, notably, the level at which we daily forge our destinies: the world of people and societies, of selfish prerogatives and social norms. And if our selfish prerogatives and social norms appear to be in constant tension, it is because they mirror the vectors that shape our lives.

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