

CHAPTER 4

“The Better Angels of Our Nature”

We opened the last chapter with Adam Smith’s famous remark about the self-interest of the butcher, baker, and brewer. It’s fitting to open this one, then, by noting that Smith stopped well short of contending that selfishness is the *only* element in people’s nature. Quite the contrary, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) he wrote: “How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane, though they perhaps may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility. The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it.”

Rising to the occasion

On the morning of March 2, 2005, a forty-five-year-old sales manager named Anthony Blaskoski left his home in a suburban subdivision in Elburn, Illinois, to drive to work. Not far from home, he realized that he’d forgotten his cell phone and turned his car around. When he left his house for the second time, he noticed dark smoke coming from another part of his development and drove out of his way to investigate. Arriving on the scene, he found a woman whom he’d never met standing outside of her burning house. When she told him that her husband and daughter were still in the house, he phoned 911 on his cell phone, handed the phone to the woman, and entered the house to look for them. Unable to see anything and choking for air from the thick black smoke, he came out to catch his breath, then reentered the house from a different door. After a short time, he came upon the foot of an adult man and began trying to pull him to safety, but the man

could not be moved easily, and Blaskoski needed to catch his breath again. “The smoke was so black, you could not see your hand in front of your face,” he later said. “You really, really couldn’t breathe.” After stepping out for another breath of air, Blaskoski plunged back into the house, going directly to the spot where he’d found the leg, which turned out to be that of one William Gunderson. He was able to pull Gunderson out and administer CPR, but since no rescue workers had yet arrived, he went back into the house again to look for the Gundersons’ five-year-old daughter. Unfortunately, he couldn’t reach her. When firefighters arrived, they found the little girl in a closet on the second floor. She died a day later. Blaskoski himself was taken to the hospital to be treated for smoke inhalation and an injured shoulder.

The Gundersons lived a mile and a half from Blaskoski, and he had never met them. What made him risk his life to try to save two people whom he’d never met? “It’s just acting on instinct,” he explained when a reporter asked him. “You find out someone is in danger or hurt and you think, ‘What can I go do?’” How many people would do what Blaskoski did? Probably not many. The Carnegie Hero Fund Commission of Pittsburgh awarded Blaskoski one of about one hundred hero awards it gives out every year to “civilian[s] who voluntarily” risk their lives “knowingly, to an extraordinary degree while saving or attempting to save the life of another person.”

The fact that such an award was conferred implies that Blaskoski’s behavior wasn’t commonplace, though it is neither unique nor necessarily the most impressive example of its kind. While this chapter was being written, a twenty year old from the ex-urban community of Harvard, Massachusetts (not far from where I live), suffered an apparent seizure and fell onto the subway tracks at the 137th Street Station in New York City as a train approached and as horrified people looked on. In the wink of an eye, a fifty-year-old construction worker named Wesley Autrey leapt to the tracks, placed his body on top of the younger man’s, and pressed him into the trough between the tracks, with perhaps two inches of clearance as the train passed over them. The action seems unbelievable enough without commenting that Autrey, a black American living in Harlem, had left his own four- and six-year-old daughters on the platform to perform this feat and that he risked his life for a perfect stranger who was white and affluent. When deluged with offers of rewards and invitations to appear on television interview programs, Autrey kept things in perspective, remarking in a low-key manner, “I’m going to take these fifteen minutes of fame and run with it.”

Even when mankind's dark side is most ascendant, isolated acts of compassion and moral bravery sometimes break out. In the spring of 1994, the plane carrying the president of Rwanda back from Hutu-Tutsi peace negotiations in neighboring Tanzania was shot down as it returned to the country's capital, and extremist Hutu leaders signaled their militias to begin attacking and killing members of the country's Tutsi minority. The modest UN peacekeeping force stationed in the country was overwhelmed and ordered by UN headquarters to withdraw, leaving only a small number of observers. As the violence that would end up taking the lives of at least eight hundred thousand Rwandans escalated, a Senegalese member of the UN observation team, Mbaye Diagne, ignored orders to avoid intervening. Carrying out a series of independent rescue missions, he managed to save the lives of hundreds of Rwandans. Nothing could deter him from his efforts until one day, as he drove back from one of his outings towards UN headquarters in Kigali, his jeep was hit by a mortar shell, taking his life.

Some Rwandan Hutus also undertook to save Tutsis, as well as moderate Hutus whom the militias were targeting for being "too weak." The most famous Rwandan rescuer is the hotel manager Paul Rusesabagina, whose bravery in saving more than 1200 Tutsis and moderate Hutus within the walls of his hotel by bribing Hutu soldiers, petitioning local officials, and repeatedly risking his safety is depicted in the 2004 movie *Hotel Rwanda*. But others also did what they could to save people.

Damas Gisimba was the director of an orphanage in Kigali that housed sixty orphans at the time the genocide began. He turned it into a shelter for roughly four hundred people, risking his life repeatedly by refusing to allow militias to enter. When he realized he could no longer keep the militias away, he risked his safety by attempting to win protection of the orphanage by government officials, despite their own complicity in the genocide. With the help of an American aid worker who had himself refused to evacuate when almost all other foreigners left Rwanda, Gisimba succeeded in getting those sheltered at the orphanage evacuated to a more secure location, where they waited out the remaining months of violence safe from harm. On a smaller scale, a sixty-seven-year-old widowed Rwandan midwife named Therese Nyirabayovu prevailed upon her children to help her hide eighteen people who were being sought by the militias. Together, Nyirabayovu and her family stood up to repeated searches, questioning, and the throwing of a grenade at their house.

When the Israeli memorial to the Holocaust, Yad Vashem, asked survivors to provide documentation of individuals who had incurred significant personal

risk to help prospective victims of Hitler's extermination camps to escape their fates, it received verifiable reports not only about a few now well-known heroes, such as Oskar Schindler and Raoul Wallenberg, but about more than twenty-three *thousand* other named individuals, including more than 6,000 Polish, 5,000 Dutch, 3,000 French, 2,000 Ukrainian, and 1,500 Belgian citizens.

Common helpfulness is often the norm

Finding thousands of righteous souls in the midst of an evil of such magnitude is encouraging. But people don't have to risk their lives to cast doubt on the assumption that we humans are selfish from head to toe. The fact of the matter is that the inclination to help rather than harm isn't difficult to document on average days in everyday lives. A motorist arriving from a side street hoping to enter a line of traffic that continues without break is offered a way in with a wave from a sympathetic driver he's never met. A man holds a door open for a mother accompanied by small children, an individual carrying packages, or an elderly person.

A traveler who'll never return to a restaurant tips a waitress. A cashier smiles in a more-than-perfunctory way, wishing you a nice day far out of earshot of her supervisor. A customer offers a cheerful or sympathetic expression to a cashier, who looks beat from her long, boring day.

In fact, the notion that people always and exclusively pursue their own interests can be countered by almost any example of strangers helping or simply desisting from doing harm to other strangers. When we ask someone if they can tell us the time or point us towards a particular destination, we routinely assume that whatever time or direction they respond with will reflect their best knowledge of the matter. But what incentive do they have to be truthful? Citing such examples, the economist Amartya Sen argued that traditional economics takes the notion of self-interest to absurd lengths. Sen challenged readers to ask themselves whether the following interaction seems to be a good depiction of ordinary life:

Two strangers encounter one another on a city street. One is looking for a train station where he has a train to catch. The other is walking the few blocks he needs to go in order to mail a letter. "Where is the railway station?" the first asks. "There," responds the second, pointing at the post office, "and would you please post this letter for me on the

way?” “Yes,” the second says agreeably, but determined to open the envelope and check whether it contains something valuable as soon as he is out of the first one’s sight.¹

To be sure, just how confident people feel of their ability to trust strangers varies from one society to another. A survey carried out among thousands of respondents in dozens of countries asks the question: “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?” The respondent is asked to choose between two answers only: either “Most people can be trusted” or “You can never be too careful when dealing with others.” In a recent administration of this survey in the United States, almost seventy-nine percent of respondents chose “Most people can be trusted.” When the same question was asked in Mexico, only forty-two percent chose the trusting response.² We’ll want to look, later, at what might account for the very different levels of trust exhibited in these different countries. For now, the point is that in a large number of societies, considerable numbers of people feel that the default inclination of others whom they encounter is to share an honest set of directions, tell the right time, and perhaps even watch your package for a minute if they promise to do so. It’s quite reasonable to assume that these perceptions reflect everyday experiences that run counter to the most extreme form of a doctrine of strictly self-serving behavior.

That warm feeling in your chest

One afternoon in 1996, a woman and her daughter were enjoying watching a football game in which the girl’s older brother was playing when the girl suddenly complained of feeling ill. By the time the mother had driven the girl, who had until that moment seemed to be a healthy eight years old, to the local emergency room, she had gone into acute liver failure.

Hours later, with the girl unconscious and kept alive on life support, the parents, who hadn’t even imagined the crisis the previous evening, realized that her situation was hopeless and thought to ask themselves what good could come from their tragedy. They asked their pediatrician whether some of her still healthy organs could help other children. Within days, half a dozen others had been given new leases on life thanks to the girl’s heart, lungs, and kidneys and “new eyes to see” thanks to her corneas.

Even more significant for our quest to understand human nature than the parents' altruistic thoughts in the midst of their tragedy may be the way that others reacted to it. Years later, after more than twenty-four years in his practice, the young girl's pediatrician was asked by his own daughter what had been the most memorable moments in his career. He then told her of the incident, his eyes welling up with tears. It wasn't so much his patient's death that had stuck him, he said, as it was the parents' wish to give the "gift of life" to others in their own moment of tragedy. The story's power to touch an emotional chord struck radio producers, who broadcast the daughter-father interview on public radio, touching the emotions of tens of thousands of listeners as they prepared their dinners or drove home from work.³

How are we to reconcile the human capacity for kindness and the human tendency to be moved by stories of unusually kind deeds with the conception of human beings as strictly self-interested calculators of their own advantage? Don't even try, Adam Smith would have said; the purely selfish depiction is a hopeless caricature. "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others."

A University of Virginia psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, showed a short film about Mother Teresa to one group of experiment subjects and short comedies or documentaries about less emotionally engrossing topics to other subjects. He found that many of the subjects shown the Mother Teresa film expressed a sense of awe and inspiration and a desire to help others and that significantly more of the subjects in "the Mother Teresa treatment" subsequently volunteered to work at a humanitarian charity organization.

Haidt argues from this and other evidence that there's a universal human emotion, which he calls "elevation," that's a response to "inspiring beauty of human action or character" and that manifests itself in every culture. Just as there are universal physiological signs of anger, sadness, and other emotions identified by scientists who study the association of such emotions with specific facial muscles, posture, and heart rate, so, Haidt says, there are distinct signs associated with "elevation," including a warm feeling in one's chest.

Haidt situates his work in a field called "positive psychology," which has among its goals "to bring about a balanced reappraisal of human nature and human potential." He writes, "We can grant that people are capable of perpetrating great cruelty upon one another, but we must also grant, and study, the ways in which people are good, kind, and compassionate towards one another."⁴ In a

book entitled *Born to be Good*, a University of California at Berkeley psychologist, Dacher Keltner, argues similarly that positive emotional engagement with others, including empathetic and helping behaviors, measurably enhances the individual's health and emotional well-being, a sign that evolution favored such social tendencies due to their survival value in ancestral times.

In another study, Haidt asked his subjects to write about the bodily changes, thoughts, and action tendencies or motivations produced by any of five possible situations, of which one was “a specific time when you saw a manifestation of humanity's ‘higher’ or ‘better’ nature.”

Most often, respondents who chose this situation wrote of a time when they saw someone give help to an individual who was poor, sick, or stuck in a difficult situation. One story involved seeing a young man ask to be let out of a group car ride without explaining why and then help an elderly woman he had just noticed by the roadside shoveling snow from her driveway.

Another individual described being moved by seeing many people come to visit and support his family while his grandfather was dying. He remembered these feelings after more than five years and cited them as having influenced his decision to become a doctor.

Nice work if you can get it

The example of the young man deciding to become a doctor after being inspired by others' caring suggests that we may want to take a look at occupational choice as one way of investigating the impact of principles besides “self-love” on the way in which people conduct themselves. Earning a living may be a necessity, and that's undoubtedly the principal motivator of work for most people, but many who get satisfaction or pleasure from interacting with others or helping others find ways to blend making a living with meeting those other needs. Probably, you yourself can think of at least one person in your extended family or circle of acquaintances who chose their occupation, or who gave up one line of work for another, with such aims in mind. A computer programmer who becomes a pediatric nurse, an investment analyst who switches to studying social psychology, a stockbroker who becomes an elementary school teacher—one knows of such stories, but just how exceptional are such instances of social motivation influencing work choices?

One way to make a start on answering this question is to look at the World Values Survey, an international study of social attitudes from which comes the

measure of trust attitudes in the US and Mexico that we mentioned above. Begun by University of Michigan Sociologist Ronald Inglehart in 1981, by 2005 the World Values Survey team conducted interviews with 92,000 respondents in sixty-two countries representing every major region of the world. Answers to one of the questions included in the year 2000 surveys conducted shed light on what people care about most in their choice of occupation. The interviewers asked: “Now I would like to ask you something about the things which would seem to you, personally, most important if you were looking for a job. Here are some of the things many people take into account in relation to their work. Regardless of whether you’re actually looking for a job, which one would you, personally, place first if you were looking for a job?” They also asked “Which would you place second?” The main alternatives offered were: (a) a good income, (b) a safe job with no risk, (c) working with people you like, and (d) doing important work. Although the answers have large subjective components and don’t tell us, for instance, just how much pay or job security a person would sacrifice for more of the alternative attribute in question, the way the answers vary from country to country, between women and men, by income, and by education level, are suggestive.

In the US and Canada, forty-four percent of women and forty-one percent of men listed doing important work (option d) as the factor most important to them, while in a group of Latin American countries (Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, and the US-linked commonwealth of Puerto Rico), the corresponding shares choosing (d) were twenty-three percent and twenty-four percent, and in a set of African countries (Niger, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe), they were ten percent and eleven percent. Together, choices (c) and (d) (working with people you like and doing important work) accounted for about fifty-eight percent of first answers for women and fifty-four percent of first answers for men in the United States and Canada versus thirty percent and thirty-two percent in the Latin American countries and thirteen percent and fourteen percent in the African ones. Since the US and Canada have high incomes (averaging about \$42,000 per person in 2010), the listed Latin American countries have middle incomes (averaging a little under \$13,000 in that year), and the African countries have very low incomes (averaging less than \$1,000), a conjecture that springs to mind is that as more of a country’s people live safely above the threshold of economic survival, a larger proportion of them can indulge, or at least think of indulging, tastes for work that they find satisfying or meaningful, not simply remunerative and secure.

The responses also suggest that in countries in which people are least hard-pressed by economic necessity, women tend to value the social (and societal) dimensions of work more than men do. This follows not only from the US and Canadian numbers, but also from European responses: in a set of five high income European countries (Germany, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and the UK), forty-six percent of women listed either option (c) or option (d) first, whereas only thirty-nine percent of men did so.⁵ But in sub-Saharan Africa, where women are often principal breadwinners and are more likely to be economically subordinated to their husbands, it was the men who in larger numbers chose the non-economic responses, though the difference is small.

The idea that “liberation from economic necessity” might increase the weight given to factors other than financial compensation is also supported by grouping respondents by income class. Among the American and Canadian respondents, those in the bottom fifth of the population by income had only about a thirty-three percent chance of listing “doing important work” as their principal consideration, while those in the top fifth listed it about fifty percent of the time. Similarly, for the Latin American respondents, around eighteen percent of those in the bottom fifth by income prioritized “doing important work,” while as many as forty-three percent of people in the top ten percent of income earners did so.

The effect of education resembles that of income, probably in part because it helps to determine income but possibly also for other reasons. Looking only at those with university degrees, we find that fifty-seven percent in the United States and Canada, fifty percent in the high-income European countries, and forty percent in the Latin American countries listed “doing important work” as their first concern. In contrast, among those who began but didn’t complete secondary school, forty-seven percent in the US, twenty-seven percent in the European countries, and twenty-three percent in the Latin American ones listed this factor first. In Latin America, just fifteen percent of those with a primary school education only and just thirteen percent of those with no formal education reported “doing important work” to be a priority.

We can’t be certain that these responses reflect what those surveyed really believe or would act upon as opposed to what they thought would make a favorable impression on the interviewer. But if there’s enough truth in the responses, and if the differences among countries are indeed due more to income and education than to culture, then the answers given to the interviewers can be seen as strongly suggesting that a substantial proportion of people, possibly the majority, consider

socially meaningful and socially connected work to be highly desirable when not in conflict with basic economic survival. Some people may always be attracted to whatever activity they can earn the most in, but increasing numbers may be looking for ways to contribute to society, to express or develop their interests, and to interact with others in the course of their workdays, even if it means earning less.

The wages of virtue

Some jobs appeal more than others do to those seeking to help people or to find work meaningful to them in other ways. A study conducted at Harvard's Graduate School of Education found a large gap in earnings between teachers and those with the same level of education working in non-teaching jobs. In 1998, twenty-two- to twenty-eight-year-old teachers in their sample holding bachelor's degrees earned an average of \$21,792, which was twenty-seven percent less than peers in non-teaching fields. Asked to explain why they chose teaching over other professions, none of the teachers interviewed for the study mentioned salary or financial rewards; instead "they talked about the value of meaningful work, the appeal of working with children, and the enjoyment of pedagogy and subject matter." A twenty-three-year-old elementary school teacher stated, "I feel like I'm really giving something. I feel like what I do is important, which is important to me." A thirty-three-year-old elementary school teacher, who'd left her previous job as an accountant, explained her choice by saying, "I need to enjoy what I'm doing. I need to feel useful. It seems to fulfill all of my needs, and I hope I'm doing the same for the kids." A male teacher who left a career as an industrial chemist said teaching gave him "the personal reward of doing something good." A high school teacher said, "I need to be doing something that involves working with people. I wouldn't be happy doing anything that didn't."⁶

Pure research is another field in which motivations other than the financial can play a part in occupational choice. The enjoyment of learning, teaching, and, in the some cases, the hope of contributing something more to society draws tens of thousands to study for advanced degrees so as to enter teaching and research in universities and research institutes instead of more lucrative careers. In his paper titled *Do Scientists Pay to be Scientists?*, the economist and management professor, Scott Stern, identified a large set of research scientists who'd chosen lower-wage jobs in research organizations that permit employees to pursue and publish their own research on topics of their choice, even though they'd been offered higher-paying jobs in more commercially oriented research organizations

that dictate research topics and control the output. On average, the pure research jobs paid twenty-five percent less, leading Stern to conclude that scientists are indeed willing to pay for the privilege of doing pure science.

Even the decision to enter the academic field of economics, which analyzes most decision-making from the standpoint of self-interest, reflects a voluntary surrender of potentially higher earnings for the sake of the autonomy and perhaps a social contribution from research and teaching. Although market competition has driven the salaries of those teaching in university economics departments above the salaries of counterparts in other social science and humanities disciplines, many teaching economists seem to reveal, by way of their job choice, a preference for earning forty or fifty percent less for the privilege of training Ph.D. students in an academic economics department, instead of earning higher pay for teaching MBA students in a business school or working for an investment bank. Students of economics professors entering successful careers in banking and finance, where Ph.D.s are not required, frequently end up earning many times more than what their former teachers are paid.

Economists who study labor markets recognize that job compensation may consist not only of wages and of benefits like health insurance, but also of desired job characteristics, such as work that's more challenging, that allows more autonomy, and so on. According to the theory of "compensating wage differentials," we should expect that, comparing two workers with similar education and other characteristics, the one who accepts a more dangerous, boring, or otherwise undesirable job receives higher monetary compensation, while the one who takes a more pleasant or satisfying job receives lower pay since some of her compensation takes the form of safety, interest, pleasantness, or job satisfaction. In one early study of the issue, economist Alan Matthios wrote: "Nonmonetary factors are likely to be an important part of total compensation for many jobs. Nurses, for example, often explain how the rewards from helping others help to compensate them for their hard work."

Matthios studied data on 652 less-educated and 785 more-educated individuals who were asked to state whether any of eighteen nonmonetary factors helped to explain why they took their current job and which of these factors was the most important. The factors included "represented a challenge," "liked that kind of work," "status," "chance to help others," and "convenient hours." Consistent with compensating differentials theory, Matthios found that pay was better explained by considering *both* standard factors like education and gender *and* non-pecuniary

factors like “challenge” and “chance to help others.” Specifically, to explain what determines how high or low a given worker’s money earnings are, he used the statistical method of multivariate regression analysis and found that less than a quarter of the variation of wages in his sample could be explained by factors like education and gender, whereas about a third of that variation, or an additional nine percent, could be explained when the nonmonetary factors (“challenge,” “chance to help,” etc.) are also accounted for. Although explaining only a third of the differences in earnings might seem unimpressive, it is in fact quite respectable in studies of this kind, since many factors that might be important, including intensity of effort and realized skill as opposed to educational credentials, are missing from the available data.

In discussing the World Values Survey data of various countries, I noted that more-educated individuals seem to attach more importance to intangible aspects of work. Matthios also found support for this proposition from the data in his study. Moreover, he found that the item “chance to help others” was statistically one of the most significant nonmonetary factors at work. By his estimate, workers who reported “chance to help others” to be an important factor in their choice of jobs were earning an average of three percent, or in dollar terms \$641, less than otherwise comparable workers.⁷ A critic of markets might point to this as proof that “capitalism punishes those with good intentions.” Maybe so, but the point for present purposes is that the study’s findings indicate that many are willing to sacrifice money for the opportunity to help others, a fact clearly at odds with the assumption that self-interest is the one and only real human motive.

Parents, beware!

America’s colleges and universities, while well supplied with students laying the groundwork for careers in business, finance, and high tech, are also full of young people hoping to play their part in saving the planet, alleviating Third World poverty, eliminating discrimination, and other noble causes. Many of those who chose to study law or medicine or to enter into scientific research also cite a desire to help people or society as important motivators. The danger that children sent off to college for forty thousand dollars a year might forsake more remunerative paths for alternatives that appeal to their idealism is a real one, and before paying their first tuition bills, parents should perhaps be warned that many of the best universities will actually *help* their kids to find their way into careers in social entrepreneurship, social service, and social change. Harvard has a Center

for Public Interest Careers, Brown has a similar center, and its career services office, like those of Columbia, University of Pennsylvania, Cornell, Dartmouth, and other schools, offers information about “Careers for the Common Good,” including access to websites like www.idealists.org.

It’s not true that idealists fail to find employment, but it does seem that they pay a price.

For example, the University of Pennsylvania’s career services office reported that 2006 graduates who had found employment reported an average salary of a little more than \$46,000, varying from an average of less than \$32,000 for those choosing jobs in the not-for-profit, social service, and health sectors to more than \$55,000 for those finding work in the financial services sector. While fully fifty percent of employed graduates had taken jobs in the high-paying financial services or consulting sectors—average salary \$54,797—twelve percent went into nonprofit, social service, and health; twelve percent went into teaching (average salary \$35,292); and four percent went into government (average salary \$33,750). Twenty-eight percent of the school’s graduates took jobs that earned them more than a third, or about \$20,000, less than their fellow students. Similar numbers—spun less controversially, of course—were reported on the career service websites of Princeton, Cornell, and other elite schools.

Even students who choose more traditional and lucrative career paths aren’t necessarily devoid of social concerns. A May 2006 article in *The Lawyer* stated: “Many study law because they have a strong interest in justice, including social justice. Many also have a strong sense of community and want to be able to give something back.” Accordingly, involving young attorneys in *pro bono* work is considered a good way for law firms to attract and keep good attorneys! A 1985 survey of motivations for choosing a career in law, conducted for the American Bar Association, concluded: “A concern for social justice and a long-standing desire to be a lawyer were the dominant motivations, followed by financial considerations and job security.” There are Legal Aid Societies in numerous US cities and states in which lawyers donate their services to provide legal help to the indigent.

That’s not to say that most practicing lawyers find it easy to maintain and exercise their earlier idealism. An article in the *Boston Globe* in January 2004 discussed “the progressive law movement” which, the article said, “posits human and spiritual values as an essential but ignored part of law practice.” The article

quoted a discouraged lawyer who said, “I chose this profession because I wanted to be of service to people and to our greater society. But I didn’t feel the system I found myself in encouraged that. The whole environment was very toxic.” Numerous organizations for lawyers have sprung up in response to such concerns, the article said.

A similar mix of “helping inclinations” with desires for financial and job security influences decisions to enter medicine. The website of the American Association of Medical Colleges advises students who are considering going to medical school to ask themselves four questions before making this career choice. The first two are: “Do I care deeply about other people, their problems, and their pain?” and “Do I enjoy helping people with my skills and knowledge?” A survey asking doctors why they choose medicine as a career included among its top eight reasons “the joy of helping and taking care of others.” As with law, medical students and doctors with social justice concerns form numerous programs and organizations focusing on bringing care to underserved populations within both rich and poor nations, raising public awareness of the health consequences of war and pollution, and so on. Of course, many doctors, like lawyers, find it difficult to sustain their idealism once the financial and managerial problems of maintaining a busy practice in a complex environment set in.

Volunteering

In addition to their choice of paid work, many demonstrate concern for others by performing volunteer work. One of the most dramatic, as well as best-known, examples of professionals putting social values into practice is the organization Doctors Without Borders. At any given time in recent years, the organization has had more than four thousand volunteers and staff members from developed countries working in some seventy developing countries, including such dangerous and inhospitable environments as those of Somalia, western Sudan, and Chad. About a thousand of these volunteers are physicians who, instead of earning a six figure salary and working in a comfortable, sterile environment in a country with an average of one doctor per two to three *hundred* people, have signed on for six-month stints sleeping in adobe huts or tents, going without a hot shower or bath for weeks at a time, living amidst the unpredictability and danger of civil wars, and receiving a stipend no bigger than the salary of a supermarket check-out worker—all this to help out in places with a hundred times as many patients per doctor. Benefits include a guarantee to be airlifted out in a medical emergency, or,

if necessary, to have one's remains repatriated. For this, some doctors, nurses, and other volunteers sign on again and again.

Doctors Without Borders isn't the only organization of its kind. In 1987, American doctors based in Boston, Massachusetts, established Partners in Health with initial projects to help the poor in Haiti. Within two decades, the group was carrying out health care work, also training and involving hundreds of local health care workers, in Haiti, Rwanda, Lesotho, Russia, and other countries. It played a leading role in bringing medical care to the million and a half Haitians displaced by the massive earthquake of January 2010. Over and above work with such high-profile organizations, thousands of doctors from the United States, Canada, and other wealthy countries volunteer weeks, months, or years of their careers to work in poor country settings under a wide variety of arrangements, including ones sponsored by religious organizations.

Right now, more than seven thousand American volunteers are serving in the Peace Corps in more than a hundred countries. They include recent graduates of the best US colleges and universities, but also mature adults (the average age of Peace Corps volunteers being twenty-eight). Some seventy thousand others are participating in various forms of service within the United States, in AmeriCorps. Both organizations pay living allowances and provide only a few modest benefits after service.

Much larger numbers of people volunteer their services regularly on a part-time basis. Recent surveys in the United States suggest that about twenty-eight percent of adults do some volunteer work in a typical year, helping to tutor or mentor children, collecting or distributing food, providing transportation, and engaging in fund-raising activities. Many do volunteer work in organizations that provide activities, values training, and mentoring to youth, including 4-H clubs, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, YMCA, YWCA, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and youth sports leagues. Others are volunteer firemen or participate in the charitable and service activities of groups like the Elks, Kiwanis, Knights of Columbus, Rotary, Masons, and Shriners. While the median time volunteered was only fifty hours, about twenty-eight percent of those reporting some volunteer time contributed between one hundred and five hundred hours in the year in which they were surveyed. The organization Independent Sector estimated their combined work hours as being equivalent to about nine million full-time jobs.

Donating time to political campaigns and participating in elections provides still another example. True, individuals stand to benefit, at times, from the policies

favored by the candidates for whom they work. But some people support candidates whose policy positions they believe are right, even though they aren't in their own private interest (for instance, some wealthy individuals who favor higher taxes on the rich). More important to gauging how selfishly people behave is the fact that according to traditional economic theory, rational and self-interested individuals would judge working for a political cause or candidate to be a waste of time because in a large country, state, or city with millions of voters, any one person's efforts have a negligible chance of changing the outcome. The individual will enjoy the benefit (or sting) of her candidate's victory (or loss) regardless of whether she involves herself in the campaign, so enjoying (or suffering) it while saving more time for other things is the only rational choice. The same analysis implies that no one will ever bother to vote, a fact we'll want to return to later on.

The point, for now, is that the people concerned would not be acting rationally if they were perfectly selfish yet went out and devoted hundreds of thousands of afternoons and weekends to making calls, knocking on doors, and handing out leaflets on behalf of the candidates and causes they support. The same applies to the millions who incur the cost to go to the polls and vote, including many in poor and politically unstable countries who devote hours, and sometimes even risk their lives, to participate in elections. The existence of genuine concern for causes and the presence of true public-spiritedness among significant numbers of people can make sense of these otherwise mysterious behaviors.

Far more unpaid time, of course, is devoted by parents to the care of their young children, and to other types of care among family members. Since altruism within the family is so much a part of the fabric of nature (as discussed further in the next chapter), such unpaid service, at least among genetically related individuals, might be set aside as not worth noting in an inventory of exceptions to the rule of self-interest. But the millions who care—sometimes for years—for a disabled spouse aren't as easily dismissed using this kind of logic. There probably isn't much of a genetic payoff to caring for elderly parents, either, as millions do today.

Also puzzling, from the standpoint of the self-interested "economic man" assumption, is the fact that millions of people in countries around the world actually raise as their own children who are not their biological offspring. In recent years, between one and two percent of children added to American families each year are genetically unrelated adoptees, with between a fifth and a half of these being adopted from other countries and substantial numbers being of different race (as defined in government statistics) from that of the parents. Similar levels

of foreign adoption and interracial adoption occur in other high-income countries. In poor countries, where social and private insurance systems are weak to nonexistent, children are still viewed as a means of ensuring some care to a parent in old age. But why would strictly selfish people in much richer countries bring unrelated strangers—including helpless infants who need to be fed, bathed, clothed, and have diapers changed—into their homes?

Donating money

Apart from time, people contribute money to help others in need. Even after paying more than a quarter of their earnings in taxes, a non-negligible part of which go to fund assistance to the indigent, elderly, and disabled, some eighty-five to ninety percent of American households are estimated to make charitable donations in a typical year. In 2005, for example, the Giving USA Foundation estimated that a total of \$199 billion was donated by private individuals, including a little under six billion donated to help the victims of the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the October 2005 Pakistan earthquake, and Hurricanes Rita and Katrina. The \$199 billion figure works out to some \$663 per person, or about two percent of total personal income, with some giving much larger and others smaller proportions.

Experts note that the impulse to give behaves in a maddeningly irrational fashion. Sympathy can be easily aroused by the image of a single needy child, while reports of millions of needy can fail to stir the emotions. Thus, psychologists found that people donated more money when told it was to help a very poor child in Mali named Rokia, whose photo was shown to them, than when told it would help some of the several million victims of famine in need of immediate relief in her country. This may remind Americans with longer memories of the saga of a child, “baby Jessica,” who fell into a well near her home in Texas in 1987. Seven hundred thousand dollars was donated in short order by people riveted to their TV sets as rescuers worked for more than two days to free her.⁸ But, however frustrating to those trying to raise funds for pressing needs, the fact that this widespread kernel of human empathy behaves so irrationally is clear evidence that the urge to help isn’t just a matter of grandstanding or of calculated self-interest; rather, it’s part of an empathetic quality that’s hardwired into human nature.

For another example, consider again the hefty proportion of college students who, as noted a few pages back, were busy laying the groundwork for careers in business, finance, and the like. Oddly enough, quite a few of them attempt to “give back” once they’ve acquired some wealth. An immediate example is the

billions of dollars that alumni donate to their old colleges and universities. Of course, a cynic can argue that such donations are exercises in ego gratification; they purchase prestige for the donor while perpetuating elitist institutions that can give out only so many entry tickets into an upper class lifestyle. But an objective appraisal would have to take into account the billions that go to providing financial aid to students from low-income families, to supporting medical education and research, and to making possible some of the world's best research in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Many billions are also donated annually to other nonprofit institutions, including hospitals, museums, cultural institutions, and community welfare organizations.

For a selfish world, "doing good" has a curious cachet sometimes. Consider the Livestrong yellow rubber wristbands Nike sells as a fundraising tool for the Lance Armstrong Foundation. Providing support to people with cancer, the bands acquired immense popularity among young people in many countries after their launch in 2004. So did the "(Red)" products, sold by companies like Apple Computer (red iPod) and The Gap in 2006, with proceeds going to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria. Obviously, companies like Nike and The Gap find participation in such campaigns both profitable in the short run and good for their images and thus profitable in the long run, as well. And most of those who purchase and sport the products are simply jumping on a bandwagon that allows them to project rectitude and hipness with a modest outlay of money.

It may in fact be impossible to prove that the vast majority of acts of kindness, generosity, and magnanimity are done for anything more than to win other people's approval or to gain a relatively inexpensive image boost in one's own eyes. But even if that relatively downbeat view is correct, the facts in question still can't be dismissed or used to prove that human nature is self-serving through and through. After all, if there were nothing but selfishness in our nature, wouldn't people simply laugh at generous acts and see them as a sign of feeble-mindedness? Instead, most people seem to admire, respect, or feel inspired by virtue, as nothing demonstrates more clearly than the fact that most of us wish to believe that we ourselves have some virtue, that we're worthy of others' admiration. As Adam Smith wrote in *Theory of the Moral Sentiments*: "Man naturally desires not only praise, but praiseworthiness; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of praise." This is easier to explain if we adopt the more complex view of human nature discussed in detail in the next chapter than if we adhere to the one-dimensional assumption of pure selfishness.

Cooperation around the world

The tendency to cooperate, work together, and help others is exhibited to a greater or lesser degree in virtually every society. Evidence gathered by anthropologists suggests that it's not only old but nearly universal, and thus it is likely to be a part of the human genetic make-up.

In one example, anthropologists studied a tiny group, called the Ache, who roamed an area of broadleaf forest in eastern Paraguay before being peacefully contacted by members of the outside society and beginning to live in permanent settlements in the 1970s. The Ache (not to be confused with the people of the similarly pronounced Aceh region in northern Sumatra, Indonesia) typically lived in groups consisting of fifteen to sixty individuals (the average being in the upper thirties) and moved camp frequently, sometimes every day, sometimes every few days or every week. When some of the remaining forager groups among the Ache were studied in the 1980s and '90s, wild game made up almost eighty percent of their daily caloric intake. A typical hunter was found to acquire about four kilograms (a little under nine pounds) of meat on an average day, but he also had about a forty percent chance of acquiring nothing on any particular day, so that, in the absence of food storage possibilities, his family depended on the practice of food sharing among members of the band.

According to anthropologist Kim Hill of the University of New Mexico, upon returning from the hunt, the male Ache hunter often left any game he had procured at the edge of the camp. There, it was collected by his wife or other women to be cooked. Once ready, the cooked meat was divided by an older male, not the hunter, who handed out pieces to each family that was due a share according to Ache practice. If anyone was passed over, the divider was reminded of this by other band members, but never by the passed over individual or family themselves. All adult members receive equal shares, except that the hunter himself usually does not eat from his own kill. Similar kinds of food-sharing have been documented in forager societies in Australia, Africa, and elsewhere. Interestingly, it's more common when the food in question is more difficult to procure, more prized, and when cooperation is involved in obtaining it, whereas easily foraged plant foods are usually retained by the gatherer or the nuclear family.

That such behaviors go back a long way in our pedigree is also suggested by observations of food sharing among non-human primates. Accordingly to a description of hunting parties of chimpanzees in Taï National Park in the Ivory Coast, the animals "arrive at a task division in which individual hunters perform

different but complementary actions. Some of them drive the prey; others encircle them or block their escape to a distant tree. If meat is the incentive for working together, Taï chimpanzees should also share readily. Such indeed proved to be the case, particularly with regard to adult males. Rather than taking meat into the trees, where beggars can be avoided, Taï chimpanzees typically form feeding clusters on the ground, where there is room for everyone.”⁹

There’s little indication that these animals share out of pure altruism. Primatologist Frans de Waal, who argues that the origins of human moral nature can be traced back to prehuman ancestors, describes instead a complex balance of competition for rank within the band, shifting alliances, and exchange of favors, including access to food and sex. Yet social harmony is also a goal that chimp and ape “power-brokers” seem, however selfishly, to seek. So amidst the complicated picture of scorekeeping and give-and-take in the societies of our closest living relatives, there are indications that concepts of fairness and emotions like empathy are making themselves felt.

What’s indisputably unique about human beings, however, is our capacity to sacrifice, and to fight, for people whom we’ve never met. We alone expend effort for causes, for abstractions. Although many who enlist in armies do so under coercion, social pressures, or economic duress, and although actions in the midst of war are said to be almost entirely driven by small-group dynamics, there’s at least sometimes an element of real voluntarism in the decision to enlist. This is strikingly illustrated by the case of the Spanish civil war of 1936–39, during which thousands of volunteer fighters from other countries, including almost three thousand Americans, ten thousand French, and ten thousand Scandinavians, came to Spain of their own volition to fight for the abstraction of democracy or anti-fascism. Almost ten thousand of them fell in battle. Whereas those fallen may have seen themselves as “merely” *risking* their lives for their cause, human beings sometime even sacrifice themselves with certainty, as was the case with Japanese Kamikaze fighter pilots in World War II and suicide bombers in recent years.

Turning back to more garden-variety sacrifices, estimates suggest that at least some three percent of Americans, or about nine million people, donate blood with some frequency. While that process is quite safe, it typically requires up to forty-five minutes of the donor’s time on site, at least one good needle prick, and the possibility of slight light-headedness in the immediate aftermath. Worldwide, enormous amounts of blood are donated to be on hand for the medical emergencies of unknown strangers. Less numerous than blood donors are those who

volunteer to have whole quarts of bone marrow drawn from their hips, a process that takes hours, has been described as being excruciatingly painful when not done under general anesthesia, and that commonly leads to headaches, nausea, and light-headedness lasting a day or more, with local pain and discomfort often lasting up to three weeks. More than two thousand people a year made such donations in the United States during the late 1990s through 2001, many of them to unrelated individuals.¹⁰

Still more remarkably, at least a few thousand worldwide don hospital gowns each year and are wheeled into operating rooms to have part of a healthy liver, or one of their two kidneys, removed in order to keep an individual with a failing liver or kidneys alive. In 2006, for instance, 864 Belgians, Dutch, Germans, and Austrians donated a kidney, 365 of these being to biologically unrelated individuals (including 269 spouses).

Not by bread alone

We needn't look towards the most extreme cases to recognize that enormous numbers of people devote appreciable amounts of their time and resources to ends other than their own physical well-being or accumulation of wealth. Vast amounts of labor have been expended throughout history on projects bearing no obvious relationship to the material welfare of those concerned: the construction of temples, cathedrals, and mosques. This work was undertaken not for anyone's shelter or physical sustenance, and not—or at least not always—for the aggrandizement of a ruling or priestly class, but often to a significant degree for pure aesthetic expression and for the glorification of transcendent beings or spiritual guides. The better part of the world's great architecture has had a religious purpose, a sizeable chunk of the world's wealth is in the hands of religious institutions, and considerable numbers of adults are employed in religious occupations, serving as priests, nuns, ministers, imams, Catholic and Buddhist monks, and full-time religious scholars. US Bureau of Labor Statistics and Census numbers suggest that one in every four hundred employed Americans are in the clergy—implying that others are contributing to support their religious work.

Of course, some of these investments of effort into causes seemingly unrelated to self-interest can be traced back to self-interest thanks to the peculiarly human ability to form beliefs that push the calculation of costs and benefits to a realm beyond the one present to the senses. Large numbers of people, that is, believe that their self-interest isn't limited to their fortunes on this earth. People's

investments in raising their probability of religious salvation and of a propitious rebirth or afterlife are arguably every bit as self-interested as is their planting of a drought-resistant crop as a hedge against famine or their offering of service or gifts to a powerful patron in the expectation of protection. It's also perfectly consistent with self-interest to spend time petitioning invisible powers for wealth, health, and happiness if you think those powers exist. Polls have repeatedly shown that large majorities of Americans believe in life after death, with more than seventy percent replying affirmatively to the question "Do you think there is a heaven where people who have led good lives are eternally rewarded?" And political elites have exploited, for their own ends, people's confidence in their ability to intercede with the gods at least since the first temples were established in the ancient Near East some four thousand years ago. Not only the accumulation of fortunes by religious hierarchies, but the use of their alliance with these hierarchies by rapacious emperors and monarchs, are perfect examples of human selfishness.

As in the case of charitable donations, though, these signs of self-interest are clearly not the whole story. In particular, cynical rulers and clerics may have used religion to induce passivity and wealth transfers to religious and state institutions, but what aspect of human nature allowed the elites of the last two millennia to induce reverence in the faithful using images of mild and saintly figures like Buddha, Jesus, and Francis of Assisi? Shouldn't a world of selfish brutes have been receptive only to archetypes of physical strength (say, Zeus or Thor)? To make sense of what we observe, it helps to posit that something along the lines of Haidt's "elevation" is part of our natures, after all.

There are also aspects of the religious impulse that seem to satisfy needs of other kinds: for affiliation, for meaning, and to be part of something greater than oneself. In this respect, devotion to religion shows little difference from devotion to other causes, for example to social, political, or even aesthetic ideals. The individual who devotes his life to achieving equality for women, justice for an oppressed group, the protection of civil liberties, the preservation of cultural treasures, the perfection of technique on the piano or violin or in his own voice, or the arrangement of a garden according to the principles of Zen is finding meaning in seeking a goal that has no direct bearing on his physical comfort or safety, state of nutrition, or number of offspring. With all of the time, energy, and resources that human beings devote to causes and activities that do them no earthly good, there's ample basis for questioning the assertion that each of us cares at bottom only about our own material wealth and gain.

To your health

Perhaps the most definitive evidence that human beings are not meant to be disconnected islands are findings by medical researchers suggesting that people require social connections for their very survival. The facts that married men live longer than their unmarried counterparts, for instance, and that people with strong family and/or friendship networks are healthier than those without, are by now widely familiar to anyone who picks up a newspaper or magazine. Studies of such matters are almost always possible for scientists to question on methodological grounds: How can one be sure that it's marriage that causes longevity, rather than relative health making it more likely that a person is married? But thorough analysis of dozens of independent findings have lent support to the conclusion that being well situated within a social support network is beneficial to cardiovascular health, to the functioning of the endocrine system, and to immune system function.¹¹ Indications that the companionship of a pet is associated with better health outcomes are also of this kind, as are favorable health outcomes associated with the petting of specially trained dogs by psychiatric patients, elderly nursing home residents, and others. These and related findings support the notion that human beings have an innate need for relationships with other warm-blooded and sympathetic living things.

Such observations also might be linked to results from the new body of happiness studies that were mentioned in Chapter 1. In theory, economics is more concerned with human well-being than with income, *per se*, and treatises by economists often claim to use income as a proxy for well-being, happiness, or satisfaction only because those concepts are more difficult to measure. In recent years, though, some economists have decided to take self-reported, subjective measures of happiness and to investigate their correlations with economic outcomes, such as earnings and employment, as well as with things like health and the status of marital and other relationships. A consistent finding is that people's perceptions of their own happiness are much better predicted by their satisfaction with their relationships than by their income and that income seems to matter mainly for its impact on one's position *relative to* others—that is, earning more than ninety percent of people in your society makes you neither more nor less happy at one hundred thousand dollars a year than at fifty thousand dollars a year. These findings seem to align well with the above and other indications that we're at least as much social as we are economic animals. Indeed, perhaps more often than not, economic success is mainly sought as a means towards achieving social ends (influence, attractiveness to potential mates, leisure to enjoy activities with others).

Conclusion

It was easy enough to fill Chapter 3 with evidence that people act in their own self-interest in lots of settings. This was found to be true not only in the polite sense that people try to get good deals in business by not paying their workers more than the market forces them to pay, for instance. We also found it to be true in ways that cross the line into physical brutality and worse.

Despite that, it wasn't difficult to fill the present chapter with similar indications that many people display concern for others or act for the sake of abstract principles and causes. Even for as narrow a purpose as describing our economy, we'd be overlooking quite a bit, we found, if we ignored the roles that concern other than the chooser's material wealth play in choice of occupation, volunteer work, charitable donations, religious activity, and more. Most people seem to admire those who are helpful to others, and their desire to think well of themselves propels them in a similar direction. People constrain their self-interest often enough that Amartya Sen's depiction of a meeting of hyper-opportunists was immediately recognized as satire. And the fact that in well-functioning societies most people stick to the polite side of self-interest, rather than crossing the line into darker acts, also suggests that forces beyond pure self-interest are often at work.

But just what is the balance between the aspects of human motivation and human nature that these two quite different chapters have explored? Is there even a human nature that can be known? And if so, what investigative strategy might reveal it to us? We'll confront these questions squarely in the next chapter and with that begin to get to the heart of our exploration of what stands between us and the better world of which people have for so long dreamed.

Notes:

1. Adapted from Amartya Sen, "Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioural Foundations of Economic Theory," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6, no. 4 (1977): 317-344.
2. From the World Values Survey, which is discussed further, below.
3. "A Girl's Gift of Life, Recalled by Her Doctor," *Morning Edition*, NPR (July 8, 2006). Available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5587031>.
4. Jonathan Haidt, "Elevation and the Positive Psychology of Morality," in *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2003): 275-289.
5. The responses reported here for European countries are for the 1995 wave of the World Values Survey, whereas the rest of those mentioned are for the year 2000.
6. Edward Liu et al., "Barely Breaking Even: Incentives, Rewards, and the High Costs of Choosing to Teach," (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2000).
7. Alan Matthios, "Education, Variation in Earnings, and Nonmonetary Compensation," *Journal of Human Resources* 24, no. 3 (1989), 456-468.
8. Deborah Small, George Loewenstein, and Paul Slovic, "Sympathy and Callousness: The Impact of Deliberative Thought on Donations to Identifiable and Statistical Victims," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 102, no. 2 (2007): 143-153.
9. From Frans de Waal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
10. National Marrow Donor Program, 2001 Biennial Report of the National Bone Marrow Donor Registry.
11. Bert N. Uchino, John T. Cacioppo, and Janice K. Kiecolt-Glaser, "The Relationship between Social Support and Physiological Processes: A Review with Emphasis on Underlying Mechanisms and Implications for Health," *Psychological Bulletin* 119 no. 3 (1996): 488-531 and Bert N. Uchino, *Understanding the Health Consequences of Relationship* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).