

BETTER AND WORSE ANGELS, AND THEIR INVISIBLE HANDS

Frederick Turner

In his essay “New Work for Invisible Hands” Richard Cornuelle evokes Adam Smith’s metaphor of the invisible hand, but challenges us to consider it in terms of our communal rather than our commercial activities. Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” is invisible for two reasons. One, of course, is that as a collective, gradual, and multitudinous process of what we would now call distributed computation, it would necessarily be imperceptible as a whole to its participants, and its results in terms of pricing would seem almost miraculous. When the stock market rises and falls, the language we use to describe it is not unlike the way the Greeks described the apparently arbitrary and unpredictable behavior of the gods, who were naturally invisible to humans except when they revealed themselves to the occasional hero or attractive princess. The market, like the god Mercury from which it gets its name, works in its mysterious way its wonders to perform.

But there is another aspect to that invisibility, which is that the workings of the market are deeply paradoxical in a way that is opaque to our moral intuitions. The results of the market process are demonstrably of enormous benefit to humankind (despite the unwelcome effects of its “creative destruction” and the disastrous penalties attendant upon nonparticipation in it). Yet the great good the market does is accomplished not so much by means of the better angels of our nature as by some of the worser ones: greed, fear, envy, covetousness, vanity, “mimetic desire” (Girard 1965), the desire for victory over one’s neighbor, and so on.

But here a profound problem arises. If we judge an activity by its source or seeds or maxim rather than by its results or fruits or unintended side-effects, the market must be evil, as left-wingers—and all right-thinking people who do not understand economics—in their heart of hearts believe. If the drivers of the market are private acts of selfish overreaching, then the market itself is tarred with that brush.

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What makes this conundrum worse is our own modern theories of morality. Post-enlightenment ethics makes intentionality the sole datum of moral judgment. We have prided ourselves on having freed ourselves from the ancient superstitious categories of pollution, ritual purity, taboo, shame, magical powers and virtues, and special divine favor or election. We take into account only intended consequences. In so doing, we get rid of any communitarian basis for telling good from bad, and we substitute the private conscience and the private act of decision. Good intentions make an act good; bad ones make it bad. So, given our human incapacity for cognitive dissonance, the good the market does either cannot exist, or we all agree to not notice it, and it becomes socially and culturally invisible. Good side-effects of selfish action—the creation of whole new worlds of human experience and fulfillment by the likes of Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jeff Bezos, Sam Walton, and Steve Jobs (who did not do these things out of the goodness of their hearts)—are quickly cut off from their hidden and abominable origins. The hand is invisible because we do not wish to see what it is made of.

Harnessing Selfish Drives

The genius of the modern free market is precisely that it harnesses our nastier selfish drives to power a collective search for the best use of resources, a search that is irreplaceable in meeting all the practical needs and desires of humankind. Michael Polanyi (1998) points out that other self-organizing, quasi-evolutionary, polycentric systems such as science and the body of common law practice are, like the market, competitive, with the potential for all the vengeful, ambitious, acquisitive cunning that we find in the market. If the good we are after is reputation or distinction, we can be no less ruthless in its pursuit than if it is money—indeed perhaps more, since *thymos* and *amour-propre* are more immediately engaged. To Polanyi's list of such systems we might add that brilliant invention of the framers of our Constitution, which likewise harnesses faction, competition, ambition, greed, and backbiting to the service of freedom, peace, justice, and prosperity.

Even our better angels now seem to have a rather questionable ancestry. Game theory demonstrates how cooperative behavior can emerge in a nonzero-sum game as a by-product of rational coalition-forming, and moral-like behavior can result from the requisite policing of group solidarity. Living organisms adapt so that the whole world becomes for them a nonzero-sum game, in which they compete at cooperating in such practices as symbiosis, commensality, predator-

prey-primary producer balance, and ecosystem preservation. Evolutionary biologists and ecologists are now showing with exquisite precision how altruism can arise in groups even when the individuals in them do not share the same genes. Evolutionary psychologists and neuroscientists are exploring the way that human moral sentiments, with their mechanisms of brain chemistry, can make us do things that serve our group rather than ourselves, and thus in the long run statistically serve ourselves better, though this result may, and even should, be invisible to us. Let not the right hand know what the left is doing (Churchland 2012, Wright 1995, Skyrms 1996, Sober and Wilson 1999, Wilson 2012).

None of this in any way discredits or refutes belief in the better angels of our nature. We really, and provably, do have innate capacities for empathy, love, self-sacrifice, devotion to truth or beauty, and service to a higher cause. The existence of sociopaths is the exception that triumphantly proves the rule; we can only see how good people usually are when we find someone so damaged as to be neurologically unequipped for goodness. If the good qualities, the better angels, may have emerged from the genetic fixing of a species-wide selection for a sort of coalitional market behavior, this in no way alters the fact that once goodness emerged, it was as real in its own terms as any physical object or event. Indeed, the reflection that our better angels have shady pasts and antecedents may be a healthy inoculation against spiritual pride. To push the thought further, we are perhaps in the presence of a greater miracle than any episodic divine intervention could be: that the world-game is set up so richly and generously that zero-sum ruthlessness is very hard to succeed at, and generosity is rewarded generously. Milton says that the intent of divine providence is “out of evil still to bring forth good”—a paradox with a satisfyingly divine style.

Encouraging Better Angels

If our better as well as our worse angels are equally part of our biopsychological inheritance, a major question emerges, which is at the very heart of the philanthropic enterprise and which Richard Cornuelle has addressed perhaps more cogently than any other writer. The question is this: as Smith, Polanyi, and others have pointed out, we have devised systems admirably designed to bring good out of evil, to harness the worse angels of our nature to good ends, but where are the equivalent systems for bringing *good* out of good, for putting the better angels to work in a self-organizing, polycentric, and synergetic way?

Almost everyone in the thinking philanthropic community is well aware of the appalling inefficiencies, perverse incentives, duplications of effort, counterproductive outcomes, and wasteful chaos of the world of charitable activity. No method has yet been found to make charities as automatically accountable as business firms are. The philanthropic equivalents of profits and prices are elusive. “Accountability” is proving, at least in my own field of education, to be something of a disaster. And central, dirigiste organization is no better at ordering the chaos than it was in replacing the market in the socialist countries. Only the most convinced statist still believe that governments can do any better—that the housing projects are any better than the slums with their soup kitchens. If the State is designed to make the better angels unnecessary, to make philanthropy obsolete by a planned welfare system, it has signally failed. What, then, will serve for our better angels as the market serves for our worsers ones?

Our model of good ethical behavior may itself be part of the problem. Again paradoxically, the radical individuality of the personal conscience as the fundamental principle of ethics emerged just at that moment in the Enlightenment when the market came to be recognized as a force for good. Perhaps the modern ethics of the pure individual choice was a German philosophical reaction against what Kant and his followers regarded as the smug pragmatism, grubby materialism, and ignoble respectability of English and Scottish Enlightenment morality, with its tolerance of base motives and pursuit of social approval. In our Kantian-infused ethics, the truly good act must be purged of self-serving, prejudice, favoritism, emotional reward, social comfort, and animal pleasure. Though its maxim must be purely abstract and universal, its choice must be made in the inviolate and Spartan inner sanctum of the individual soul. The moral beauty of this idea and ideal has since become the core of philanthropy’s belief system, and it may be antithetical to the collective, local, contingent, unplanned, and massively interactive needs of a truly self-organizing system—the kind of system that might do for love what the market does for desire.

Limits of Community

Much of this problem has already been recognized, but the solutions proposed still perhaps borrow too much from the market’s (and the other polycentric systems’) knack of bringing good out of evil. Devices such as the British practice of knighthoods and honors for great philanthropists, the naming of prominent hospital or college buildings for benefactors, and public awards

ceremonies for the virtuous, are all useful ways of putting vanity, *thymos*, and “big-man” potlatch dominance instincts to work. But our question here is not how to effectively harness the bad angels, but how to harness the good ones.

Let us look at how pure anthropological theory might help toward a solution. There does indeed exist a human system that maximally harnesses our good angels: the primal hunter-gatherer band. Many scholars and scientists have pointed out the singular socio-psychological efficiency of human groups or teams of up to around 200 members—army platoons and companies, orchestras, ships’ crews, faculty departments, theater companies, small businesses, sports team organizations, law firms, scientific research teams, extended families, villages, and so on. Apparently a human being can know well up to about 200 people and can be aware of the personal obligations he or she owes to each one of them. No sincere person can really mean the greetings on all of his or her Christmas cards if the mailing list is more than about 220. If one thinks about it, this ability to keep straight in one’s brain one’s relations with 200 persons as complexly wired as oneself, and to have a pretty good idea of what each of those persons owes each other person, is an astonishing natural feat of computation. Evolutionary psychologists attribute the prodigious acceleration in size of the human neocortex in the last half-million years largely to the adaptive demands of this “political” activity.

This cognitive feat is accompanied with a full suite of emotions and passions appropriate to the maintenance and success of the band or company—loyalty, comradeship, empathy, self-sacrifice, trust, and desire for others to excel as well as oneself (see Haidt 2012, for a refreshingly nonpartisan perspective on such virtues). The band system is massively interactive and (because of gossip, among other things) informationally transparent, so that the nonlinear dynamical capacities for threshold-crossing and collective invention that we find in polycentric systems are fully deployed. The beauty of this human adaptation is that it extends the kind of instinctive attachment that we (along with most other social animals) feel for our kin in such a way that we can cooperate in the same uncalculating way with people who are not closely related to us by blood.

Indeed, institutions such as money and common law may well have emerged as mechanical substitutes for this natural polycentric talent when groups got above about 200. In my opinion, Plato’s and Aristotle’s praise for civic politics is actually a kind of nostalgia for the old and normal Greek *polets*, which probably had not more than about 200 free adult male citizens out of a total population of

about 3,000 (roughly that of Plato's and Aristotle's birthplaces, Aegina and Stageira). The startling difference between their conception of politics and our own, where politics is associated with the lowest forms of demagoguery, bribery, slander, corruption, conspiracy theorizing, self-deception, hypocrisy, Tammany-Hall vote fraud, and so on, may be simply the difference between a community of 200 and a community of 200 million. Aristotle and Plato were living in a grotesquely inflated *poleis* of up to half a million during the Peloponnesian war—an Athens with perhaps 30,000 free citizens, with all the political nastiness that we read about in Thucydides. The philosophers must have been deeply and painfully sensible of the difference without fully comprehending its simple source, which is the sheer incapacity of the human brain to have intelligent moral and emotional relations with more than about 200 people.

Athens was indeed developing, under the radar, systems of banking and currency that would one day, combined with more sophisticated bureaucratic and legal organization, make possible the miracles of the modern marketplace, with its quasi-natural creativity and fertility and its enforced neighborliness. But that marketplace is, as we have seen, powered by the worser angels. The beauty of the politics of Plato and Aristotle was that it harnessed our better angels and, in so doing, left us an ideal of civic virtue for which we still pine.

Scaling Philanthropy Down

The implications for philanthropy might be enormous. Perhaps philanthropy can grow an invisible hand of its own, the hand of the better angels, if it can somehow recreate the *poleis* of about 200 persons—whether among its donors, its beneficiaries, or its own team organization. In this light, institutions such as charity balls and celebrity charity auctions may be more than fluff and excuses for status display, because they invoke our willingness to participate selflessly and enjoyably in the solidarity of a little synthetic *phyle*. In other words, we need an anthropology of the charitable community and the charitable team. The personal dimension may be as vital on the small scale as it is corrupting on the large scale. The very things that corrupt democratic government, legal procedure, and science—friendships, favors, cronies, nepotism, gifts, and so on—may be appropriate if properly deployed in a charitable organization, as they are in a village or a jazz band. Instead of trying, as so often happens, to “scale up” a successful charity, we should scale it down to where true comradeship can exist.

I can see many risks and dangers in this approach, though its logic seems clear. It might imply a critique of large charitable organizations. Perhaps we would want to reorganize the world of charity to (voluntarily!) break up larger organizations. Perhaps we would want to develop a set of principles that the resulting “bands” of emotionally-connected individuals would aim at, something like the principles of fair practice that the market had to work out for itself through those long ages of civilizational development.

The oxytocin brain-rewards of affectionate sharing have their dark side, of course: the more we bond with our companions, the more we reject the out-group. So perhaps we should expect the kind of grudge-match competition among band-sized charities that we find between sports teams. But this presents a further opportunity to harness the worse angels: philanthropy publicists might proclaim the results of their charitable contests, statistics, “trades,” and strategies as sportswriters do, and thus attract more participation and funding. In fact, this is already beginning to happen on some of the philanthropic sites I follow on the internet. And the boasting and vaunting is taking on an encouragingly counterintuitive shape, as befits the better angels: the boasters are broadcasting not only their successes but their failures and mistakes, in proof of their sincerity and trustworthiness.

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