

Introduction

My mother wasn't always a thief. She wasn't really the criminal type. Rebellious, yes—a crook, no—at least not before my father left us. But very good people do bad things sometimes when their luck has run out and nobody's looking.

My deadbeat father skipped town without warning. The shame was worse than the poverty. This was back in the late 1950s, when broken homes weren't common yet, making us pariahs, have-nots, *desgraciados* in our affluent L.A. suburb. My mother had struggled to keep us afloat but could not prevent the humiliation. She wept when the electric company cut our power. She cursed when we lost our car and the phone. She begged the landlord not to evict us when the welfare checks ran out and the five of us were eating matzoh brei—basically, crackers and eggs—on paper plates by candlelight for dinner.

Ida, my mother, was losing it. When a neighbor offered her a job at Super Fair, a weirdly moral-sounding local department store, she jumped at the extra cash and began to work from 4 to 6 a.m., stocking shelves and pricing inventory. My mother slipped out before dawn every morning, while the four of us were still in bed. I can still recall the sound of the screen door slamming, and the strangeness of her new routine. I also remember my sisters becoming less snarky and bitter around that time. After the advent of Super Fair in our lives, mysterious gifts began to appear. Joyce was now wearing brand-new tennis shoes (I noticed because I certainly wasn't). Marcia's battered old purse was replaced by a tangerine-colored item with tassels. Belle, my baby sister, now sported a festive pink snuggly, appliquéd with clowns and balloons. And finally—with what appeared to be fishes- and- loaves magicianship—my mother produced

a navy blue coat like the one I had begged for on my birthday, but which was, she had said, beyond our means.

Where did it come from? I wanted to know.

Ida said it had been on “layaway.” Now I was positive that she was lying. We had lots of things on layaway—stuff my mother had set aside in stores till she could manage to pay them off, which hadn’t happened in quite a while. This coat had never been laid away. This realization—the atrocious fact that my mother was lying—threw a bombshell into my eight-year-old psyche and brought me to the first ethical crossroads of my life. Should I tell her that I knew she was pulling my leg? Or shut my mouth and enjoy the booty? Should I admit to my well-meaning mother that this moral betrayal had robbed me of parental trust? Or should I keep my mouth shut and just be grateful that she had tried to make me happy?

I thanked her for the coat and said nothing. My mother stopped working at Super Fair soon afterward and found a job as a civil servant. After that our family had more money; Ida’s thieving career had been flukish and brief. It was a flukishness that paid off in the end, though. My troubled conscience over that purloined coat helped to turn me into a lifelong seeker, someone who questioned truth obsessively. If my mother was a shoplifter what, for instance, did that make me? Could behavior actually be designated evil if it sprang from love? Was I a criminal for accepting her gift? Was it wrong—even sinful, perhaps—to benefit from the fruits of a crime? Or did sin not even *exist*, technically speaking, when no one was around to report it? I felt arrogant, dirty, sorry, and grateful. I also felt deflowered. An ideal had been torn from my budding ethos, forcing me to acknowledge a conflict I was probably too young to face; namely, that the facts of a situation could lead to (at least) two different conclusions *at the same time*. My mother could be a wonderful person who did a cockamamie thing. I could be a thief for saying nothing. My sisters could be accomplices for loving their goodies. All of these things could be true at once. But how was this possible? It all got jumbled up inside me. Thinking about it made

me feel sick. It also made me curious.

I became a compulsive seeker. Seekers are peculiar people. We always think there's some mind-blowing truth waiting right outside our field of vision. We're driven by the earnest belief that right, precise questions will open the doors of truth to us. Liberating secrets will be revealed. Seekers are sometimes delusional, but we're also sincerely interested, and like most sincerely compulsive people, our drivenness can lead to wondrous discoveries. This childhood blue coat forced me to wonder—vigorously—about who I was and what constituted right and wrong; how opposite, simultaneous truths could be grokked. This made me reflect on the paradox that where opposites met, wisdom might, indeed, be born if a person learned to hold them in balance. This embracing of contradictory truths, without one canceling out the other, was said by the wise (whose books I began to devour) to be the essence of wisdom itself. My mother was both good and bad; I both loved her and disliked what she'd done; I then repeated variations of her crime on a few occasions, and regretted it afterward. My sisters were coconspirators who kept their feelings to themselves in the end. All of the things were true.

“Nothing human is foreign to me,” said Terence, the Roman philosopher, and he wasn’t kidding. We’re kaleidoscopes of contradictions, Satyricons of lust, greed, and hatred, rationalizers of fairness and justice, idolaters, cheaters, and fakes—not to mention hypocrites—with hearts that long to be divine. We are moral platypuses with seemingly mismatched parts who manage to come up with healthy eggs. Pulled in opposite directions, we search each day for some sort of middle path, a balance point, to navigate our way through this obstacle course. We ask ourselves the Holy Question: How ought we to live?

Wisdom, in the sense that I mean it, has nothing to do with perfectionism. It doesn’t pertain to idealism either, or pretending to be better than we are. “You do not become good by trying to be good, but by finding the goodness that is already within you, allowing that goodness to emerge,” a wise man told me. “But it can only emerge if something fundamental shifts in your state of consciousness.” That shift is what this book is about.

We are born, each of us, with a moral organ—humankind’s crowning glory. “Two things fill the mind with ever increasing wonder and awe,” Kant wrote in his *Critique of Practical Reason*. “The starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” This “organ” isn’t a literal thing (though its parts literally reside in the brain); it’s an innate faculty similar to our human genius for language, mathematics, and art. In the two hundred thousand years since humans branched off from apes to create a new species, this moral organ came into existence to enable our ultrasocial species to live together in relative peace. While it is true that “the world is on fire” with conflict stemming from hatred, anger, and greed, as the Buddha said, it is also true that more acts of kindness, tolerance, forgiveness, and patience transpire on any given day than the mostly bad things that make the paper. “The sum total of goodness vastly outweighs that of meanness,” science writer Daniel Goleman told me when we met for an interview. “The ratio

between potential and enacted meanness holds at close to zero any day of the year.” Although humans inherit a biological bias that permits us to feel anger, jealousy, selfishness, and envy, we inherit an even stronger tendency toward kindness, compassion, cooperation, enthusiasm, nurture, and love, especially toward those in need. In spite of the horrors (and the newsroom shibboleth that “if it bleeds, it leads”), the truth remains that most of us are fundamentally ethical most of the time in most of the ways that truly matter.

For carnivorous primates, this is nothing short of a miracle. Wisdom-wise, humans are works in progress. Still, this moral organ's potential will impress even the most pessimistic. Your greatest surprise may be to learn that it is primarily emotions that enable morality. Contrary to what we've been taught in a left-brained, logic-obsessed culture, emotions, not reason, are the bedrock of ethical life; without them, the most rational human being cannot be empathic or morally sound. You'll learn that our ethical lives are dictated by complex, moment-to-moment interactions between the most ancient part of the brain—the limbic system that houses emotion—and the most recently evolved part, the neocortex, where reason, language, and analysis are created. The neocortex is also where the moral imagination—our ability to step outside of ourselves and into the feelings of others—takes place. The understanding of what it means to suffer not only our own pain, which anything with a rudimentary nervous system can do, but also the pain of others, has long been considered the distilled essence of our humanity. Altruism, which comes from the Latin root *alter*, or “other,” could not exist without this distinction.

Our moral organ has five primary foundations. Similar to our language faculty, which enables us to learn parts of speech—juggling nouns, adjectives, and verbs into sentences that mean something greater than each word alone—and may even be beautiful—the moral faculty derives wisdom, as well as meaning, from its own quintet of values. These universal moral foundations appear to have remained the same throughout recorded history according to psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who first popularized this theory. From the Kung bushmen to a Boise soccer mom to a Japanese stock trader pounding the pavement, they are universal:

- First, we're concerned with *harm and care*. As “communitarians under the skin” who survive through interconnection, and dislike seeing or feeling the pain of others, we have especially keen moral emotions related to threat as well as nurturing. This foundation underlies kindness and all forms of emotional and physical succor and protection.
- Second, we're devoted to *justice and fairness*—the rules of reciprocity, autonomy, reputation management, revenge, and punishment that enable us to live as individuals in groups. This foundation generates laws and rights and depends on an underlying, unavoidable, sometimes self-centered belief in just deserts.
- Third, we depend on *in-group loyalty* for our survival. This foundation engenders patriotism, tribal pride, and self-sacrifice for the community; it's also why we automatically treat out-group members differently than our personal cohorts, *and always worse*. Loyalty is crucial to ethics, but in-group favoritism is also our nemesis as it underlies tribal conflict, war, and aggression.
- Fourth, we care about *authority and respect*. As hierarchical animals with pecking orders to consider, we have a strong, instinctive attraction toward leadership and the respect of elders, as well as a reverence for tradition. This foundation is both an enormous help, as when “good” authority figures lead us to higher ground, and a moral hazard, as when power mongers dupe us with charisma or we allow ourselves to forgo ethics in favor of obedience to questionable people or causes.
- Fifth, we have an innate, elevating need for *purity and sacredness*. This foundation, rooted in our central moral emotion—disgust—turns us from animality toward the divine, and explains our perennial taste for religion (of which some forty thousand have been created to

date). Like the four other moral receptors, this hunger for purity can be abused when an individual, nation, or faith plays on our disgust reflex by portraying enemies as morally impure, as in the case of anti-Semites and homophobes.

As we get to know this moral organ, it's helpful to remember that the first two foundations—harm/care and justice/fairness—concern themselves with the protection of *individuals*, while the three others serve the purpose of binding the *group* together.

In the same way that, as toddlers, our aptitude for language allowed for verbal acquisition before we determined how we would use it, or what particular language we would speak, so our universal moral grammar predisposes us to ethical choices without our full knowledge or understanding of what those choices will be. While the five innate principles I just described guide our moral judgments, they are largely inaccessible to conscious awareness. Having a strong moral reaction and being unable to rationally explain that reaction is what Haidt calls “moral dumbfounding”—further proof that emotions, and not reason, shape our moral impulses. Let's say that a woman is cleaning out her closet and finds an old American flag. She doesn't want the flag anymore, so she cuts it up into pieces and uses the rags to clean her bathroom. Does that feel wrong to you? If so, why? How about eating the family kitten that was run over by a car in front of your house? You've heard that cat meat is an epicurean delight in China; why not whip up some pussy lo mein? Most of us are disgusted by these suggestions—we find them wrong, unsavory, obnoxious. But *why* do we feel this way, exactly? Reaching inside for rational answers, we find nothing but feelings posing as facts. This is how moral dumbfounding works.

To make ethical life even more of a breeze, these five foundations—hardwired inside our skulls when mastodons still pounded the earth—depend largely on perceptions that have little to do with the actual situation at hand. Our moral choices depend on what we *think* or *feel* has happened, not on what really occurred. Interpretation is everything. The moral sense is just as prone to illusion as the rest of our senses, easily misled by filters ranging from language (think of euphemisms) to appearance (think of sheep's clothing), to imaginative gymnastics of innumerable, self-deceiving kinds. To function properly, the moral faculty must interface accurately with other mental capacities—memory, attention, language, vision, emotion, and beliefs. Because it relies on specialized brain systems, damage to these systems can lead to deficits in moral judgment. When the brain is compromised, from birth or through accident, ethical ability suffers proportionately.

No two people make identical ethical choices because no two brains are exactly alike. We know this because the past twenty years have been a watershed time for neurology. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) has enabled us, for the first time in history, to study the human body *in the act of feeling*—the moral science equivalent to putting a foot on the moon. This has given us a laser-beam look into how our ethical choices are made. Thanks to the fMRI machine, we now know that many of our behaviors, even morally loaded ones like altruism and rudeness (previously believed to be under our conscious control), are caused by unconscious automatic physiological responses. What's more, we know that people can't really stop themselves from making up post hoc explanations for whatever it is they've just done for unconscious reasons. Fallible though we may be, however, we're not just apes with better hairdos. Homo sapiens are superior moral beings altogether, and here are the gamma waves to prove it.

Based on findings in evolutionary biology, cognitive psychology, anthropology, economics, linguistics, and neurobiology, we're reaching a level of self-transparency beyond our wildest imaginings. Crucial blind spots are being illuminated, including why we allow ourselves to cheat, but just so much; why we overestimate our virtue and underestimate the power of situations to bring out our Mr. Hyde; why, as the Germans say, "When the penis gets hard the mind goes soft"; why residents of flat places like Texas tend to be conservatives while individuals who live near water tend to be liberal; how men and women differ morally; why children are such good con artists; why non-abstinent, right-wing Christian teenagers are less likely than atheists to wear condoms during sex; and why we're so hopeless at predicting what will make us happy. These and myriad other riddles are being solved by neurologists and psychologists.

Two discoveries, in particular, are amping up this revolution in moral science. The first is "neuroplasticity," the discovery that our brains and behavior can be resculpted with practice. Once believed to be isolated lumps of gray matter cogitating between our ears, our brains turn out to be more like interloping Wi-Fi octopuses with invisible tentacles slithering in many directions at all times, constantly picking up messages we're not aware of and prompting reactions in ways never before understood. Contrary to the old wives' tale that humans are born with a fixed number of brain cells that only diminish over time, our bodies produce *one hundred thousand* new brain cells every day until we die. This has radically altered how psychologists think about personal change. While much of our behavior is hardwired from birth and ratified by the culture we live in, there's far more room for resculpture through practice than the old leopard-and-its-spots cliché would have us believe.

The second great boon has come with the discovery of mirror neurons. In 1995, a neuroscientist at the University of Parma, Giacomo Rizzolatti, identified the mechanism whereby empathy (and a host of other behaviors) is communicated *physiologically*. The sole purpose of mirror neurons is to reflect what we see in the world around us and imitate it, instantly—literally “bringing the outside inside”—in order to harmonize with our environments. These “empathy neurons” (or “Dalai Lama neurons” as one brain scientist calls them) match up our inner reality with the world around us, helping to dissolve the barrier between self and other (the goal of most wisdom traditions, coincidentally). In order to know other people, nature provided us with a mechanism for *becoming* other people—at least a little bit. This does not happen deliberately; mirror neurons are a subconscious, body- to- body communication network that makes social life possible. They help to undergird moral behavior first learned in our infancy, smiling when our mother smiles, absorbing empathic tendencies from the way our parents care for us. Have you ever wondered why seeing a yawn makes you yawn too, or witnessing someone weeping automatically brings a tear to your eye? Mirror neurons are the answer. They are our primary physical means of stepping outside our own skin.

Humans share a need for self- transcendence. Wisdom traditions agree on this point as well. Our moral organ helps us to escape the hell of self- centeredness by learning to bridge opposing truths— our needs and those of others—thus becoming “bigger” people. Psychologist Peter Singer refers to this self- extension as “expanding the circle.” This call for empathic expansion has never been more urgent. We wince at images of our own greed—the polar bear stranded on a sheet of ice no bigger than a Winnebago. We’re disgusted by our own moral failings and recognize the need to dispel them. In the years since 9/11, with industrial waste from China blanketing the western coast of California and nuclear weapons in Pakistan, nothing seems more

important than this circular expansion. With the decoding of the human genome, our species has become capable of enormous good, such as curing diseases, as well as great potential evil, as with human cloning. Since uncovering many of nature's hitherto secret blueprints, we've become "increasingly important subcontractors in the work of Creation," Lance Morrow writes, assuming greater and greater responsibility for good and evil in the world. As one scientist suggested to me, in fact, "At some time in the future, we will have to decide how human we wish to remain."

We know how paradoxical we can be, how wayward, selfish, and blinded by passion; how easily our reasoning minds can dupe us. We know that we are, indeed, “predictably irrational,” as behavioral economist Dan Ariely writes, and we are well aware of how hopeless we can be at foretelling the outcomes of our own oddball choices and self-contradictions. Americans have watched our national level of well-being sink by half in the past fifty years. It hardly seems accidental that moral science is exploding simultaneously with global endangerment and declining happiness stats. There’s a tick-tocking urgency behind this coincidence, a perfect storm of destructive and instructive forces assaulting our moral consciousness. Alongside our deepening knowledge of what makes us good is an increasing awareness of what makes us monstrous. We know that while goodness may be universal, it is also fragile. We’re all too aware that while empathy can be easily aroused, it can also be quickly forgotten. “Human goodness appears when we least expect it, under conditions that are little understood and difficult to create,” we’re reminded by psychologists Anne Colby and William Damon. “It can arise in settings that seem devoid of anything but sheer evil [and] vanish in the midst of fortune and happy companionship.” Political scientist James Q. Wilson expresses this even more bitingly: “We are softened by the sight of one hungry child, but hardened by the sight of thousands.”

This is not because we're secretly malevolent. Human contradictions have nothing to do with original sin or the presence of some corrupting, unkillable serpent slithering through the garden of virtue. This is an essential point. Western culture has bequeathed to us a fairly horrendous image of our inherent nature. Sigmund Freud, who almost single-handedly defined the psyche for a majority of people in the West, made declarations about humanity that are enough to put anybody on Prozac. "I have found little that is good about human beings on the whole," complained our first scientist of the mind. "In my experience, most of them are trash." I beg your pardon? People care about their brethren, Freud actually believed, "in order to gratify their aggressiveness, to exploit [their neighbor's] capacity for work without recompense, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him." No kidding?

When the notion of the "selfish gene" was misappropriated from a book about biology, this downcast view appeared to be backed up by the discovery that our chromosomes themselves were inherently vicious. Scientists have been trying to set the record straight ever since. "Evolution is a process that systematically favors selfishness," one biologist wrote. "*But evolutionary theorists define selfishness in significantly different ways from people who make moral attributions* [italics mine]. There is no necessary connection between psychological and genetic forms of selfishness." Please read those sentences twice. "Those who see fit to maximize their profit and pleasure at the expense of others may well fail to propagate their genes," this scientist continued. "On the other side of this coin, those who are willing to sacrifice their interests for the sake of others..."

may well propagate more of their genes than those who are not.” In spite of such expert protestations, there’s been a widespread, perverse refusal to acknowledge what Richard Dawkins (who coined the phrase “selfish gene”) actually meant. Frans de Waal, one such critic of the evil- gene school, compared this irrational belief to imagining a species of meat- eating animals who’ve managed to trick themselves out of a taste for flesh. How could humanity have “unearthed the will and strength to defeat the forces of its own nature,” asked de Waal, or duped itself into being something it wasn’t, “like a shoal of piranhas that decides to turn vegetarian?” The misanthropes didn’t have much of a clue.

There’s been a widespread, superstitious fear in our culture that if we were to err too far on the side of self- approval—as a general way of seeing ourselves—the species would tip irreversibly into the wanton abyss. “Never forget”—the slogan of those who fear that the Holocaust will be repeated if we glance away from its memory— becomes, all too easily, “never forgive.” This is the danger of negative focus; it fulfills self- prophetically. Any therapist worth his hundred bucks, even a Freudian, will tell you that healing and wisdom come from locating our *strengths* and building upon them. This is not a denial of evil. It’s just a smarter approach to promoting goodness, considering how the brain works. Ralph Waldo Emerson, America’s first self- help author, was saying this back in the 1880s. “Do not waste yourself in rejection, nor bark against the bad, but chant the beauty of the good,” wrote the author of “Self- Reliance.” Sholem Asch, the Jewish writer, agreed: “It is of the highest importance not only to record and recount, both for ourselves and for the future, the evidences of human degradation, but side by side with them to set forth evidences of human exaltation and nobility. Let the epic of heroic deeds of love, as opposed by those of hatred, of rescue as opposed to destruction, bear equal witness to unborn generations.” Since our brains are wired to learn through suggestion, mirroring, repetition, and

guidance—not self-hatred—“elevation” (a newly identified emotion that we will explore at length later) is a more effective path for encouraging positive self-awareness.

The positive psychology movement, begun by Martin Seligman in the late 1980s, was seminal in shifting public discourse from what's wrong with us to what's right. This movement has provided a much-needed counterbalance to the overpathologized, half-empty-glass refrain of a narcissistic culture obsessed with its own darkness. Seligman argued that psychology had lost its way; that the mental health field had become obsessed with the dark side of human nature and blinded us to what was good, noble, brave, even occasionally selfless, in ourselves. Doctors had the DSM (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*) to define our maladies, but psychologists didn't even have a language with which to talk about the upper reaches of our psychology. Years of research helped Seligman create a diagnostic list of six human character virtues—wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence—as well as three dozen sub-traits (the idea that temperance includes forgiveness, humility, prudence, and self-regulation, for example). Our ethical bag of goodies began to open, including the self-transcending emotions of wonder and awe.

Elevation—the emotion of being uplifted—explains a lot about why our species has thrived in spite of extreme destructiveness. This is a fascinating point. If it weren't for the power of elevation, Barack Obama would not be in the White House. Grassroots movements in general would lose their power to prevail against the odds. Positive psychology has shown us that humans gravitate toward the good and the hopeful. The truth convinces us most of the time. We're magnetized, as a species, by beauty. Indeed, goodness, truth, and beauty form a golden triangle of human ideals—the things that make life worth living. In the presence of beauty, goodness, and truth, we find ourselves illuminated, connected to something larger than ourselves. In the words of Descartes, “This great light in the intellect generates a great propensity in the will.” This is because “the brain is preset for kindness,” as Daniel Goleman tells me. We are

rewarded, inwardly, by loving; it's different from feeling aversive in the world. We aspire to be better people not for some abstract reason but because we long for a good life and the wisdom to enjoy it. A good life is one based on self- understanding, which leads to deeper connection to others, which leads to dedication to something greater than (but not excluding) individual happiness. "An ethical life is one in which we identify ourselves with other, larger, goals, thereby giving meaning to our lives," Seligman insisted when we spoke. Not only do less selfish people tend to be happier, they also live longer and have better physical health than their self centered counterparts.

This book will show you how and why. While we are certainly ethical creatures in progress, and struggle daily to bridge selfishness with compassion, our native inclination—“the herd instinct in the individual,” as Nietzsche called it—falls decisively on the side of connection. Good people—meaning the vast majority of us who do as little harm to others as possible—not only live longer but leave more offspring. This process, repeated through thousands of generations, is what pumped our neocortex to such freakishly large proportions. Evolution has proved, incontestably, that “a group of cooperative altruists will outcompete a group of selfish cheaters,” as moral psychologist Marc Hauser writes. This is why values such as honor, altruism, justice, compassion, and mercy have come to define human aspiration. The Greeks had a word for such aspiration— *arete*—meaning excellence, virtue, or goodness, especially of a functional sort. “The *arete* of a knife is to cut well. The *arete* of an eye is to see well. The *arete* of a person is goodness,” explains Jonathan Haidt.