It's in our nature to be good. *Hugh Millar* UK

When we say someone is a good person or acts in a good way, we mean his character or behaviour meets with our approval, which is another way of saying we derive or anticipate some pleasure or benefit from it. But as Tim indicates in his introduction, to hope to see such character or behaviour in others is by no means to commit to personal virtue. The question whether 'I' or any of us should be individually good is a harder one to answer. Why not just be bad, if it seems to promise more fun or greater benefit?

Perhaps we should begin by remembering that not everybody in the philosophical world thinks this question has any meaning. The determinist may not consider it useful to spend much time wondering whether or not he should be good. I'd want to argue that would be a mistake. I have met a few determinists, but none who didn't criticise the Government, or an errant colleague. The point here is not whether the world is predetermined, but whether humans, when they're not in the philosophical study, actually believe they make free choices that affect the course of events. If in practice they do believe this, they will be willing to accept responsibility for their actions. That is all that is necessary for the attribution and acceptance of moral responsibility. Do I think I could be good? Of course I do. The question therefore stands: 'Why should I be good?'

My approach here is grounded on facts of the world, raising immediately the dictum attributed to David Hume, that we can never derive an 'ought' from an 'is'. Pay that no attention. Hume never said it. Here is what he did say:

> In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, it's necessary that it should be observed and explained.

What I hear in this is Hume chiding fellow philosophers for what he sees as their inappropriate elision of fact and value, and asking only that they supply reasons that might connect the two. This is his challenge, to find the link between the 'is' and the 'ought'. I think we can meet that challenge.

Here is that other Hume dictum, even more famous:

> 'Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and should never pretend to any other office but to serve and obey them.'

Hume's 'passions' are those non-rational motivating drivers of our behaviour. They often clash, of course, pulling us in different directions, sometimes into danger. Reason serves to help us calculate whether, to what extent, and by what strategy each may safely be gratified, or perhaps, for the time being, restrained. Hume's claim that human behaviour is driven at a level deeper than reason is an insight that we may think inspired the opening sentence of his friend Adam Smith's 'The Theory of Moral Sentiments':

> How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature which interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derive nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it.

So here is a fact. It is a fact of observation, which would commend it to Hume. And it is a fact with moral relevance to my actions. The happiness of at least some others being necessary to me is explanatory of my intuition that I ought not to act in ways that are destructive of that happiness.

The moral relevance of facts about human nature is picked up more recently by Thomas Nagel.

Nagel reports a tale he got from Stuart Hampshire when they were colleagues at Princeton. Hampshire happened to be with military intelligence around D-Day in WW2 and was assigned to interrogate a French collaborator. The Resistance, who had captured the collaborator, was prepared to let Hampshire interview him, but required that afterwards the fellow would be shot, by them, as was the norm for collaborators. When Hampshire saw him the prisoner insisted he would say nothing unless Hampshire promised he'd subsequently be handed over to the British, not returned to the French. But Hampshire could not find it in himself to give such false promise. The prisoner said nothing, and was indeed shot by the French. Another philosopher

later observed the story showed Hampshire had been a poor choice for the assignment. Nagel, however, tells this tale to illustrate how a deontological prohibition against killing the innocent, breach of promise or betrayal can block an act that would prevent a greater evil or produce a great good. When it does block such an act, he points out we are likely still to feel the reason to promote the good, which made it tempting to violate the prohibition. He believes the conflict is not just a philosophical artefact, but arises naturally because humans have both types of moral intuition. He argues, and I agree, that this fact of the world must have relevance in anybody's moral philosophy.

Note what is being said here. Consequentialism, deontology, virtue ethics, divine commandment – these are not rivals in some Olympic competition in moral theory. They are the elaborations of feelings that run simultaneously, tugging us sometimes in different directions. We prize virtues like honesty and generosity. We also care about the consequences of our actions, and yet feel at the same time we have a duty, for example, to treat others as we would wish to be treated by them. There are feelings, sentiments, impulses, drives – but definitely no supreme moral principle. If there exists any valid general approach, it is to be discovered not in the triumph of one overarching theory but in an understanding of the teleology of our various moral intuitions. Let us ask, with Aristotle, what ends do they serve?

It takes genius to recognise the significance of hitherto overlooked facts. Adam Smith, writing a hundred years before Darwin, when so many facts of the world lay undiscovered, could have had no idea whence comes our human need to see happiness in others. But he was smart enough to spot this fact and its central philosophical significance. More facts are now in, and what they show is that connected reason and basic moral sentiment are widely distributed in non-human animals.

- Vampire bats fly out at night seeking food in the form of blood, sucked from the vein of a larger animal. Sorties are quite often unsuccessful, and the bats are not equipped to survive long without feeding. Gerald C Carter has shown that these bats commonly regurgitate their food to share with fellows who've returned hungry from a sortie, but if and only if the receiver has a history of sharing. To operate this conditional altruism the bats must know each other individually, along with the sharing history of each. That takes more than your average bat memory, and Carter points to an unusual bump on the vampire bat's forehead as possibly housing the required extra brain volume.

- Diana Reiss works with dolphins. She employed reward – a piece of fish – for good work, and sometimes a 'time-out' sanction in which she walked away from the pool and stood for a few seconds with her back turned on her dolphin. She reports finding this sanction usurped and deployed against her by one of her dolphins whenever she inadvertently fed the animal a gristly piece of fish. Disapproval of somebody's behaviour, expressed unambiguously, by an animal.

- Irene Pepperberg taught Alex, an African grey parrot, more than 100 words, and to count and recognise colours and shapes, by rewarding him with banana slices and nuts. The bird displayed impressive cognitive facility in his accomplishments, but also, she reports, in his relationships with humans. Sometimes, when banana seemed insufficient acknowledgment of his achievement, Alex would ferociously fling the banana slice back at the trainer.

- Frans de Waal has a wonderful TED talk in which he includes video of a Capuchin monkey entirely satisfied when rewarded for a completed task with a slice of cucumber, unless he has previously seen a companion given a grape for the same task. In which case he throws the cucumber back with apparent contempt, then dances and bangs the wall of his enclosure in unmistakable anger. Moral protest, from an animal.

  De Waal shows clips in which a pair of chimpanzees cooperate in a task where two ropes need pulling simultaneously in order to draw a heavy board bearing food within reach of their enclosure. When it is arranged that only one of the animals comes to the task hungry the cooperation still happens, but it requires persistent coaxing of a favour by one chimpanzee of the reluctant other. De Waal speculates that the favour is granted in expectation of future reciprocity, an early step, he suggests, in the direction of moral behaviour.

  In a further video elephants are set the same challenge. It being hard to envisage a board too heavy for a single elephant to move on its own, a rope is

this time looped around the apparatus, so that a pull on one rope-end will deliver only the rope. The elephants had no trouble cooperating to pull together on their assigned rope-ends. On a later occasion one elephant was brought up before the other, to check whether it understood the task well enough to realise it would have to await the arrival of its companion before pulling on the rope. Not only did the elephant demonstrate this understanding, but, entirely unforeseen, it devised an astounding new strategy. It simply put its foot on its rope-end, and waited. When the second elephant arrived, it saw what was needed and pulled on its rope as before, delivering food to both elephants. The first elephant, its foot not having moved from the end of its rope, hadn't done any work, but happily took the food. It saw it didn't have to be good, at least not every time! Occasional freeloading is an available, if not very admirable, moral strategy. De Waal is explicit that he sees such animal behaviour as presaging the human moral sentiment. He postulates two moral pillars both observable in his animals, empathy and care, and has written extensively in defence of the philosophical implications of this view, rejecting the idea that moralising is a rational activity which had to await the arrival of human cognition and language, and supporting the opposing view, that human cognition facilitated the elaboration and sophistication of evolved emotional drivers of normative behaviour which pre-date our cognition and are manifest in many non-human animals.

- You may think anecdotes about exotic animals from far away come close to satisfying one of Hume's criteria for scepticism about the report of a miracle. Well, here's an example that should be familiar to us all. Marc Bekoff, for 32 years Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Colorado, has written of his work with canines – wolves, coyotes, but also domestic dogs. He points out that anybody who's owned a dog has seen the animal solicit play by crouching on forelegs while standing on hind legs – Bekoff uses the term 'bowing'. Bows are used almost exclusively during play. They are highly stereotyped so the message 'Come play with me' or 'I still want to play', is always clear. Even when an individual follows a play bow with seemingly aggressive actions such as baring teeth, growling or biting, their companions demonstrate submission or avoidance only 15% of the time, suggesting they trust the bow's message that whatever follows is meant in fun. Trust in one another's honest communication is vital for fairness in play and, more broadly, for a smoothly functioning social group. For humans, I'd suggest trust, the keeping of promises, is the quintessential moral virtue.

- If you're still not sure whether animals have been shown to have any kind of moral sense, read Sue Savage-Rumbaugh's report of her team's work teaching two bonobos, Kanzi and Panbanisha, and a Chimpanzee, Panpanzee, to communicate in English. They did so by pointing to word-signifying lexigrams mounted on a board. All three animals learned to use words in sentence-like combinations, including, she claims, the words 'good' and 'bad' applied appropriately in context.

  Sadly, despite all the evidence to the contrary, some of us continue to see animals as mere biomachines. To such a view I can only pose the question: 'Is your dog usually happy to see you?' If you answer, 'I don't believe a dog can ever be happy', I would have to give up. For the rest of us, I think the roots of morality are shown to be apparent in non-human animals.

  Here are two short quotes from Darwin himself, both from 'The Descent of Man'.

  On animal happiness:

  > Happiness is never better exhibited than by young animals such as puppies, kittens, lambs etc, when playing together like our own children.

  And on the importance of groups:

  > Those communities which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish best and rear the greatest number of offspring.

  Isn't it clear where this is leading?

- Philosopher Patricia Churchland references de Waal's work. She argues mammals feel moral intuitions because of how evolution shaped the brain. Maternal attachment to children was selectively advantageous. 'Attachment begets caring and caring begets conscience,' she writes. Churchland is interested in the underlying neurochemistry, prompted by an initial insight from an unexpected quarter. Two species of vole in North America are named for

their habitats, the montane vole and the prairie vole. In the montane vole, male and female meet, mate, then go their separate ways. But with the prairie vole they meet, mate, and then they're bonded for life. Neuroscientists wanted to know, is there a difference in their brains that might account for this divergent behaviour? Indeed there was. It turns out the density of receptors for a special neurochemical, oxytocin, is much higher in the prairie vole brain. Oxytocin has been shown to be important for feeling 'bonded' – a prerequisite for empathy.

- And for us humans, Sir Harry Burns, a Glasgow surgeon, now professor of public health at Strathclyde University, was Scotland's Chief Medical Officer for nine years. In that role he was concerned, with others like Sir Michael Marmot, Kate Picket, Richard Wilkinson, with the societal inequalities that correlate with a longevity difference of up to 20 years between the populations of proximal parts of the same economically struggling city, be it Glasgow, Liverpool, or Manchester. Burns researched the physiology. His finding: scans reveal different brain structures in children who've had successful early experience of control, as compared to children whose chaotic, unpredictable, early environments have of necessity limited their experience of control. The former group shows physical expansion of the hippocampus and the pre-frontal cortex, brain parts important for learning and control, accompanied by atrophy of the amygdala, the part which triggers the more primitive fight-or-flight response. If I for any reason needed to find a sample of persons with larger amygdalae, a simple stress test would immediately pick them out. Or maybe I could just look in a prison. The moral significance is obvious.

These facts remind me as a member of a cooperating species with a strong drive to choose life over death, that a choice for life commits me rationally to adequate deployment of the relevant biological and cultural tools, including not only my senses and cognition but also my sentiments and capacities for caring, generosity and fairness. How brief would be the rest of my life without the everyday support of others with knowledge and skills beyond my own! I depend on a community, members of my family, my town, my country, my profession, my clubs and societies, perhaps my political party or religion. I should remember these folks, and their importance to me. I should care about them. Nothing I aspire to do can be accomplished without their help, whether they drive buses, make pencils, or design iPhones. Their strength, individually and collectively, is my strength, their weakness my weakness.

Alas, it is so easy to forget. My selfish impulses are strong and urgent, and have their own importance to my survival. My community was there yesterday, and will be there again tomorrow. I acknowledge its importance, but I'll attend to it later, if I remember. That is not enough. Successful societies have taken measures to protect themselves. Historically, norms have been rigidly enforced and selfish gratification harshly discouraged. We do not like to see freeloading and we are biologically equipped to spot and deal with it quickly. On the other hand, we admire and remember socially useful traits, like trustworthiness or generosity or fair dealing. Reputations built on consistent display of virtue are as gold, but easily lost. Norms are important. They give scope for showing - and observing – acts of care and concern for others. People do watch. In the extreme, the social ostracising of norm-breakers can be fatal, whether in canines, apes or humans. Institutions – most notably religions - have been erected over centuries to develop, curate, teach and enforce social norms.

Religion's influence has waned. Those of us unable to credit its fact-claim about life after death or historic divine intervention may nonetheless see that its 'long retreating roar' leaves a worrying imbalance in the tension between claims of self and group. We're not talking here only of our own behaviour – we are invested in the effective functioning of our wider society and thus in the behaviour of all of its individual members. Reflection on the current elevation of personal gratification may prompt the question: have we abandoned at our peril our engines of social conformity?

Anyway, here is my conclusion: Disappointingly, there is no algorithm to generate the right thing to do in every dilemma. My moral intuitions are feelings, not calculations. There is something in my nature impelling me not only to walk, talk, and think, but also to interest myself in the fortunes of others and to appreciate justice, honesty, generosity and compassion. Moreover, I now understand how these latter feelings serve as tools to build and keep the group cohesion essential to my and everyone's individual fulfilment. I am, I can do, nothing without my group of others. And so I should

look after these others, to maintain the relationships on which I depend. Not only is it of my nature to do so, it is my rationally obvious obligation, implicit in my choice for life over death. That is why I should be good.

References

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