

Caring about something larger than yourself

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In my last post, I said that in order to address the listless guilt, step zero is believing that you can care about something, and step one is finding something to care about. This post is about step one.

There are many different ways to care passionately about one thing or another. Parents in particular are usually good at step one, and often care strongly about the welfare of their children. Others care strongly about their family, or the environment, or what-have-you. Many others claim to care about all humanity or about all sentient life.

On the other hand, some people have significantly more trouble caring about big things. They don't have any children to die for and they don't see the point in caring about everyone, and yet many of them still possess the listless guilt. When I suggest to such a person that they address their guilt by searching their motivations and finding something to care about, the response, more often than not, is simply "Why?"

This post is for them.

In order to answer, I'm going to talk about *my* answer to this "why?". Before we continue, I stress that my answer is not

the only one, that my cause is not the only one, and that I endorse anyone's desires to pursue whatever it is they care deeply about, regardless of their cause. As with previous posts, don't treat this as a sermon about why you *should* care about things that are larger than yourself; treat it as a reminder that you *can*, if you want to.

I often encounter people who don't care much about humanity at large (or the future of sentient life), but seem vaguely curious as to why somebody would. When I suggest that it is possible for them, too, to care about things greater than themselves, the most common response by far, is "sure, but why would I want to do that?"

Why fight for humans? Why care about the fate of the Earth, or the fate of people we will never meet? Why care about the callous species that invented war and torture? Why care for people at large, when most of them are stupid or annoying or members of the wrong political party or possessing of incorrect beliefs? Most humans are *annoying*, so why would you possibly want to care about them?

I have encountered many people who claim that they only care for their immediate friend group.

Now, if you *actually* only care about your immediate friend group, then be it not upon me to change your preferences.

Yet, in my experience, people who *think* they only care about their immediate friend group tend to be confused.

One friend of mine insisted that he only cares about the people he's close to, while simultaneously putting privacy concerns (e.g. privacy of communication over the internet) very high on his priority list. When I asked why, he claimed (after some exploring) that it's because he cares about the autonomy and freedom of people in general. Noticing the inconsistency, he quickly added that he only cares about autonomy and freedom for the masses *because of the pleasurable feeling this creates within him*; it was of course a *selfish* desire, and he *still* only cared about the people close to him. (That was in fact the conversation where I first concocted the allegory of the stamp collector.)

What's going on, here? One thing, I think, is a tendency to confuse *feelings* with *caring*. Most people only have strong feelings of affection for their close friends, and they don't have feelings that are nearly so strong for nameless strangers, and so they conclude that they must not care about strangers. They forget that feelings and caring are separate things! I reassure you that I, too, have deeper feelings for people close to me than for strangers — but I still care about the strangers anyway. In fact, I suspect this is true of nearly everybody who claims to care about humanity at large. Courage isn't about not being afraid, it's about being afraid and doing the right thing anyway; and similarly, caring isn't about being overwhelmed by emotion, it's about not having the emotional compulsion and *doing the*

right thing anyway. It's possible to both lack deep feelings of affection for strangers *and still care for them nearly as much as you care for friends.*

This is at least one reason why I think people tend to insist that they don't care about strangers, but it still doesn't answer the "why." Even once people admit it's *possible* to start acting like they care about humanity at large, they still tend to wonder why in the world they would ever want to do such a thing.

And I can't tell you whether or not you want to do this. But I can tell you why *I* wanted to do this, and at least help you understand why someone would.

We humans are reflective creatures: we get to examine what we feel and what we care about, and choose to change ourselves. As it happens, when I reflect upon myself and my desires, I find many that I approve of, and some that I don't.

I, like many, spend a large chunk of time frustrated by other human beings (especially when they fail to read my mind). I have unconscious biases against people who don't look sufficiently similar to the people I grew up near. I automatically bristle at members of my outgroup. I'm uncomfortable around vast segments of the population. And yet, *at the same time*, I care about all people, about all of Earth's children, about all sentient life.

Why? In large part, by choice. My default settings, roughly speaking, make it easy for me to feel for my friends and hate at my competitors. But my default settings *also* come with a sense of aesthetics that prefers fairness, that prefers compassion. My default feelings are strong for those who are close to me, and my default sensibilities are annoyed that it's not possible to feel strongly for people who *could have been* close to me. My default feelings are negative towards people antagonizing me, and my default sensibilities are sad that we didn't meet in a different context, sad that it's so hard for humans to communicate their point of view.

My point is, I surely don't lack the capacity to feel frustration with fools, but I *also* have a quiet sense of aesthetics and fairness which does not approve of this frustration. There is a tension there.

I choose to resolve the tension in favor of the people rather than the feelings.

Why? Because when I reflect upon the source of the feelings, I find arbitrary evolutionary settings that I don't endorse, but when I reflect upon the sense of aesthetics, I find something that goes straight to the core of what I value.

Because when I reflect, I see that I am an inconsistent mess of a brain born of a long and blind evolutionary process, full of desires and feelings and fears that capture everything I hold dear, and also a bunch of arbitrary junk that was kind of tacked on there. In making me, Time coughed up a *reflec-*

tively unstable mind: the causal process of my past constructed me to value everything I value, and some things that I (upon reflection) don't.

So I look upon myself, and I see that I am constructed to both (a) care more about the people close to me, that I have deeper feelings for, and (b) care about fairness, impartiality, and aesthetics. I look upon myself and I see that I *both* care more about close friends, *and* disapprove of any state of affairs in which I care more for some people due to a trivial coincidence of time and space.

And I am constructed such that when I look upon myself and find inconsistencies, I care about resolving them.

So, why do I care about humanity? Because, for me, resolving this inconsistency is easy. My strong feelings are in conflict with my quiet aesthetics, but when push comes to shove, the quiet aesthetics win hands-down. To me, the feelings look like they are arbitrary remnants of the tribal days, while the aesthetics look like they are echoes of my deeper values. I know which one *I'm* more loyal to.

This is not a knock-down argument, by any means. One person's *modus ponens* is another person's *modus tollens*, and some people, looking upon themselves, would prefer to forgo a sense of fairness and impartiality instead of choosing to care about strangers. But I, and many others, don't *want* to care only about our friends. We feel more loyalty to our aesthetics than our default feelings — and so the choice is easy.

Caring about others may sound great in theory, but for jaded and cynical people (who can't stand interacting with idiots), the points above probably aren't enough.

And you know what? It can be *really hard* to muster any feeling of caring for humans, even if you've decided that you want to.

It's too easy to look at them and see the tarnished, ugly, greedy, stupid species.

It's too easy to look at individuals and see idiots.

(I have this feeling too, sometimes.)

But here's something strange:

Imagine you've had a pet dog that you've raised from a puppy, and grown close to over the course of a decade. Imagine somebody napped your dog and started harming it, for fun.

How would this make you feel? How much would you like to find this person, and bring them to justice?

Most people are able to feel a much larger burst of empathy and caring for suffering animals than for suffering humans.

Imagine you're being mugged by a homeless man in an alley. Someone notices, comes to help, push comes to shove, they scare the man off, and then ask if you're all right. Now imagine a stray dog growling at you in an alley. Someone notices, comes to help, kicks the dog when it won't back down, scares it off, and asks if you're all right.

Does it feel inconsistent to you, the difference between the way you feel for mistreated animals, versus the way you feel towards mistreated humans? Does it seem strange, how easy it is to like dogs, how difficult it is to like men?

You may, of course, conclude that you actually don't like men. But you don't *have* to. You can, as before, listen to the quiet sense of aesthetics that is in conflict with your default feelings. Why are our default feelings hooked up how they are? I can't say for sure, but here's a theory:

An influential version of social theory is the 'Machiavellian Intelligence' hypothesis (Byrne and Whiten 1988; Whiten and Byrne 1997). Social interactions and relationships are not only complex but also constantly changing and therefore require fast parallel processing (Barton and Dunbar 1997). The similarity with Niccolò Machiavelli (1469—1527), the devious adviser of sixteenth-century Italian princes, is that much of social life is a question of outwitting others, plotting and scheming, entering into alliances and breaking them again. All this requires a lot of brain power to remember who is who, and who has done what to whom, as well as to think up ever more crafty wiles, and to double bluff the crafty wiles of your rivals

— leading to a spiralling arms race. 'Arms races' are common in biology, as when predators evolve to run ever faster to catch their faster prey, or parasites evolve to outwit the immune systems of their hosts. The notion that some kind of spiralling or self-catalytic process is involved certainly suits what Christopher Wills (1993) calls 'the runaway brain', and this idea is common among theories that relate language evolution to brain size.

(Sue Blackmore, The Meme Machine)

I mean, look at us. Humans are the sort of creature that sees lightning and postulates an angry sky-god, because angry sky-gods seem much more plausible to us than Maxwell's equations — this despite the fact that Maxwell's equations are *far* simpler to describe (by a mathematical standard) than a generally intelligent sky-god. Think about it: we can write down Maxwell's equations in four lines, and we can't yet describe how a general intelligence works. Thor *feels* easier for us to understand, but only because we have so much built-in hardware for psychologically modeling humans.

Our brains are hard-wired to see human-like agents *everywhere*. Cartoons work: we see them as people (and attribute feelings to them) despite their simplicity. We see intentionality everywhere — religious folks have no trouble finding apparent affirmation that their mundane actions are part of some grand plan, superstition runs rampant, and many different types of mental disorders (schizophrenia, mania, etc.)

are characterized by delusions that either everybody is against you or that your entire life has been carefully engineered — symptoms of a brain over-eager to see things in terms of human plots and schemes.

When we look at humans, we see them as plotters or schemers or competition. But when we look at puppies, or kittens, or other animals, none of that social machinery kicks in. We're able to see them as just creatures, pure and innocent things, exploring an environment they will never fully understand, just following the flow of their lives.

If you back a puppy into a corner and frighten it, and it snaps at you, it's easy to feel a wave of compassion rather than hatred.

But when a *human* snaps at you, the social machinery engages. It's easy to get stuck inside the interaction. When a human is backed into a corner and lashes out, we tend to lash back.

Which is why, every so often, I take a mental step back and try to *see* the other humans around me, not as humans, but as innocent animals full of wonder, exploring an environment they can never fully understand, following the flows of their lives.

I try to see people in the same way I would see a puppy, reacting to pains and pleasures, snapping only when afraid or threatened. I try to see the tragedies in humans who have

been conditioned by time and circumstance to be suspicious and harmful, and feel the same compassion for them that I would feel for an abused child.

I look at my fellow humans and strive to remember that they, too, are innocent creatures.

Someone told me once that, in order to feel compassion for others, it's useful to visualize them as having angel's wings. I think there's something to this. There's something powerful about looking at people and seeing the angels that never had a shot at heaven — though I prefer to see not angels, but monkeys who struggle to convince themselves that they're comfortable in a strange civilization, so different from the ancestral savanna where their minds were forged.

Some use 'animal' as a derogatory, and may think that it's demeaning to try to see humans as animals instead of people. For me, the opposite is true, for the same reason that it's easier to feel compassion for a homeless dog than a homeless man — it helps me, to detach my automatic impulses to see other humans as competitors or allies or enemies, and just look at them the same way I would look at a kitten, as a pure creature possessing of the same wonder and innocence.

Why do I care about humans and humanity, about Earth and all its children, about all sentient life? How can I say I do given that I, too, often feel more strongly for friends than strangers, and more compassion for dogs than men?

When I look upon myself, I see a tension between what I feel and a sense that my feelings are ill-calibrated. When I look closer, I find that the feelings are calibrated in ways I don't endorse, in a tribal setting, where it was important to love the ingroup and hate the outgroup. But when I look at the sense that those feelings are ill-calibrated, I find *good* reasons, and a sense that this is *actually* what matters, that it is not arbitrary but valuable.

And so for me, "why care?" has an easy answer.

Let me stress again that you don't have to resolve your internal tensions in the same way I do. Your answer to "why care?" might be "I don't." You might side more with your current feelings over your deeper sense of aesthetics, or you might have very different feelings and aesthetics. Either way, if you *listen* to that internal sense of friction, if you use your feelings as a guide rather than an answer, if you figure out why you feel and care as you do, and reflect upon your reasons, and separate feeling from caring, and choose to care about what seems right and good to care about —

then you may find that "why care?" has an easy answer for you, too.