

CHAPTER 6

The roots of morality: why are we good?

Strange is our situation here on Earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: that man is here for the sake of other men - above all for those upon whose smiles and well-being our own happiness depends.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

Many religious people find it hard to imagine how, without religion, one can be good, or would even want to be good. I shall discuss such questions in this chapter. But the doubts go further, and drive some religious people to paroxysms of hatred against those who don't share their faith. This is important, because moral considerations lie hidden behind religious attitudes to other topics that have no real link with morality. A great deal of the opposition to the teaching of evolution has no connection with evolution itself, or with anything scientific, but is spurred on by moral outrage. This ranges from the naive 'If you teach children that they evolved from monkeys, then they will act like monkeys' to the more sophisticated underlying motivation for the whole 'wedge' strategy of 'intelligent design', as it is mercilessly laid bare by Barbara Forrest and Paul Gross in *Creationism's Trojan Horse: The Wedge of Intelligent Design*.

I receive a large number of letters from readers of my books,* most of them enthusiastically friendly, some of them helpfully critical, a few nasty or even vicious. And the nastiest of all, I am sorry to report, are almost invariably motivated by religion. Such unchristian abuse is commonly experienced by those who are perceived as enemies of Christianity. Here, for example is a letter, posted on the Internet and addressed to Brian Flemming, author and director of *The God Who Wasn't There*,⁵⁶ a sincere and moving film advocating atheism. Titled 'Burn while we laugh' and dated 21 December 2005, the letter to Flemming reads as follows:

You've definitely got some nerve. I'd love to take a knife, gut you fools, and scream with joy as your insides spill out in front of you. You are attempting to ignite a holy war in which some day I, and others like me, may have the pleasure of taking action like the above mentioned.

The writer at this point seems to come to a belated recognition that his language is not very Christian, for he goes on, more charitably:

However, GOD teaches us not to seek vengeance, but to pray for those like you all.

* More than I can hope adequately to reply to, for which I apologize.

His charity is short-lived, however:

I'll get comfort in knowing that the punishment GOD will bring to you will be 1000 times worse than anything I can inflict. The best part is that you WILL suffer for eternity for these sins that you're completely ignorant about. The Wrath of GOD will show no mercy. For your sake, I hope the truth is revealed to you before the knife connects with your flesh. Merry CHRISTMAS!!!

PS You people really don't have a clue as to what is in store for you ... I thank GOD I'm not you.

I find it genuinely puzzling that a mere difference of theological opinion can generate such venom. Here's a sample (original spelling preserved) from the postbag of the Editor of the magazine *Freethought Today*, published by the Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF), which campaigns peacefully against the undermining of the constitutional separation of church and state:

Hello, cheese-eating scumbags. Their are way more of us Christians than you losers. Their is NO separation of church and state and you heathens will lose . . .

What is it with cheese? American friends have suggested to me a connection with the notoriously liberal state of Wisconsin - home of the FFRF and centre of the dairy industry - but surely there must be more to it than that? And how about those French 'cheese-eating surrender-monkeys'? What is the semiotic iconography of cheese? To continue:

Satan worshipping scum . . . Please die and go to hell ... I hope you get a painful disease like rectal cancer and die a slow painful death, so you can meet your God, SATAN . . . Hey dude this freedom from religion thing sux ... So you fags and dykes take it easy and watch where you go cuz whenever you least expect it god will get you ... If you don't like this country and what it was founded on &C for, get the fuck out of it and go straight to hell . . .

PS Fuck you, you comunist whore . . . Get your black asses out of the U.S.A. . . . You are without excuse. Creation is more than enough evidence of the LORD JESUS CHRIST'S omnipotent power.

Why not Allah's omnipotent power? Or Lord Brahma's? Or even Yahweh's?

We will not go quietly away. If in the future that requires violence just remember you brought it on. My rifle is loaded.

Why, I can't help wondering, is God thought to need such ferocious defence? One might have supposed him amply capable of looking after himself. Bear in mind, through all this, that the Editor being abused and threatened so viciously is a gentle and charming young woman.

Perhaps because I don't live in America, most of my hate mail is not quite in the same league, but nor does it display to advantage the charity for which the founder of Christianity was notable. The following, dated May 2005, from a British medical doctor, while it is certainly hateful, strikes me as more tormented than nasty, and reveals how the whole issue of morality is a deep wellspring of hostility towards atheism. After some preliminary paragraphs excoriating evolution (and sarcastically asking whether a 'Negro' is 'still in the process of evolving'), insulting Darwin personally, misquoting Huxley as an anti-evolutionist, and encouraging me to read a book (I have read it) which argues that the world is only eight thousand years old (can he *really* be a doctor?) he concludes:

Your own books, your prestige in Oxford, everything you love in life, and have ever achieved, are an exercise in total futility . . . Camus' question-challenge becomes inescapable: Why don't we all commit suicide? Indeed, your world view has that sort of effect on students and many others . . . that we all evolved by blind chance, from nothing, and return to nothing. Even if religion were not

true, it is better, much, much better, to believe a noble myth, like Plato's, if it leads to peace of mind while we live. But *your* world view leads to anxiety, drug addiction, violence, nihilism, hedonism, Frankenstein science, and hell on earth, and World War III... I wonder how happy *you* are in your personal relationships? Divorced? Widowed? Gay? Those like you are never happy, or they would not try so hard to prove there *is* no happiness nor meaning in anything.

The sentiment of this letter, if not its tone, is typical of many. Darwinism, this person believes, is inherently nihilistic, teaching that we evolved by blind chance (for the umpteenth time, natural selection is the very *opposite* of a chance process) and are annihilated when we die. As a direct consequence of such alleged negativity, all manner of evils follow. Presumably he didn't *really* mean to suggest that widowhood could follow directly from my Darwinism, but his letter, by this point, had reached that level of frenzied malevolence which I repeatedly recognize among my Christian correspondents. I have devoted a whole book (*Unweaving the Rainbow*) to ultimate meaning, to the poetry of science, and to rebutting, specifically and at length, the charge of nihilistic negativity, so I shall restrain myself here. This chapter is about evil, and its opposite, good; about morality: where it comes from, why we should embrace it, and whether we need religion to do so.

DOES OUR MORAL SENSE HAVE A DARWINIAN ORIGIN?

Several books, including Robert Hinde's *Why Good is Good*, Michael Shermer's *The Science of Good and Evil*, Robert Buckman's *Can We Be Good Without God?*, and Marc Hauser's *Moral Minds*, have argued that our sense of right and wrong can be derived from our Darwinian past. This section is my own version of the argument.

On the face of it, the Darwinian idea that evolution is driven by natural selection seems ill-suited to explain such goodness as we possess, or our feelings of morality, decency, empathy and pity. Natural selection can easily explain hunger, fear and sexual lust, all of which straightforwardly contribute to our survival or the preservation of our genes. But what about the wrenching compassion we feel when we see an orphaned child weeping, an old widow in despair from loneliness, or an animal whimpering in pain? What gives us the powerful urge to send an anonymous gift of money or clothes to tsunami victims on the other side of the world whom we shall never meet, and who are highly unlikely to return the favour? Where does the Good Samaritan in us come from? Isn't goodness incompatible with the theory of the 'selfish gene'? No. This is a common misunderstanding of the theory - a distressing (and, with hindsight, foreseeable) misunderstanding.* It is necessary to put the stress on the right word. The selfish *gene* is the correct emphasis, for it makes the contrast with the selfish organism, say, or the selfish species. Let me explain.

The logic of Darwinism concludes that the unit in the hierarchy of life which survives and passes through the filter of natural selection will tend to be selfish. The units that survive in the world will be the ones that succeeded in surviving at the expense of their rivals at their own level in the hierarchy. That, precisely, is what selfish means in this context. The question is, what is the level of the action? The whole idea of the selfish gene, with the stress properly applied to the last word, is that the unit of natural selection (i.e. the unit of self-interest) is not the selfish organism, nor the selfish group or selfish species or selfish ecosystem, but the selfish *gene*. It is the gene that, in the form of information, either survives for many generations or does not. Unlike the gene (and arguably the meme), the organism, the group and the species are not the right kind of entity to serve as a unit in this sense, because

* I was mortified to read in the *Guardian* ('Animal Instincts', 27 May 2006) that *The Selfish Gene* is the favourite book of Jeff Skilling, CEO of the infamous Enron Corporation, and that he derived inspiration of a Social Darwinist character from it. The *Guardian* journalist Richard Conniff gives a good explanation of the misunderstanding: <http://money.guardian.co.uk/workweekly/story/0,,1783900,00.html>. I have tried to forestall similar misunderstandings in my new preface to the thirtieth-anniversary edition of *The Selfish Gene*, just brought out by Oxford University Press.

they do not make exact copies of themselves, and do not compete in a pool of such self-replicating entities. That is precisely what genes do, and that is the - essentially logical - justification for singling the gene out as the unit of 'selfishness' in the special Darwinian sense of selfish.

The most obvious way in which genes ensure their own 'selfish' survival relative to other genes is by programming individual organisms to be selfish. There are indeed many circumstances in which survival of the individual organism will favour the survival of the genes that ride inside it. But different circumstances favour different tactics. There are circumstances - not particularly rare - in which genes ensure their own selfish survival by influencing organisms to behave altruistically. Those circumstances are now fairly well understood and they fall into two main categories. A gene that programs individual organisms to favour their genetic kin is statistically likely to benefit copies of itself. Such a gene's frequency can increase in the gene pool to the point where kin altruism becomes the norm. Being good to one's own children is the obvious example, but it is not the only one. Bees, wasps, ants, termites and, to a lesser extent, certain vertebrates such as naked mole rats, meerkats and acorn woodpeckers, have evolved societies in which elder siblings care for younger siblings (with whom they are likely to share the genes for doing the caring). In general, as my late colleague W. D. Hamilton showed, animals tend to care for, defend, share resources with, warn of danger, or otherwise show altruism towards close kin because of the statistical likelihood that kin will share copies of the same genes.

The other main type of altruism for which we have a well-worked-out Darwinian rationale is reciprocal altruism ('You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours'). This theory, first introduced to evolutionary biology by Robert Trivers and often expressed in the mathematical language of game theory, does not depend upon shared genes. Indeed, it works just as well, probably even better, between members of widely different species, when it is often called symbiosis. The principle is the basis of all trade and barter in humans too. The hunter needs a spear and the smith wants meat. The asymmetry brokers a deal. The bee needs nectar and the flower needs pollinating. Flowers can't fly so they pay bees,

in the currency of nectar, for the hire of their wings. Birds called honeyguides can find bees' nests but can't break into them. Honey badgers (ratels) can break into bees' nests, but lack wings with which to search for them. Honeyguides lead ratels (and sometimes men) to honey by a special enticing flight, used for no other purpose. Both sides benefit from the transaction. A crock of gold may lie under a large stone, too heavy for its discoverer to move. He enlists the help of others even though he then has to share the gold, because without their help he would get none. The living kingdoms are rich in such mutualistic relationships: buffaloes and oxpeckers, red tubular flowers and hummingbirds, groupers and cleaner wrasses, cows and their gut micro-organisms. Reciprocal altruism works because of asymmetries in needs and in capacities to meet them. That is why it works especially well between different species: the asymmetries are greater.

In humans, IOUs and money are devices that permit delays in the transactions. The parties to the trade don't hand over the goods simultaneously but can hold a debt over to the future, or even trade the debt on to others. As far as I know, no non-human animals in the wild have any direct equivalent of money. But memory of individual identity plays the same role more informally. Vampire bats learn which other individuals of their social group can be relied upon to pay their debts (in regurgitated blood) and which individuals cheat. Natural selection favours genes that predispose individuals, in relationships of asymmetric need and opportunity, to give when they can, and to solicit giving when they can't. It also favours tendencies to remember obligations, bear grudges, police exchange relationships and punish cheats who take, but don't give when their turn comes.

For there will always be cheats, and stable solutions to the game-theoretic conundrums of reciprocal altruism always involve an element of punishment of cheats. Mathematical theory allows two broad classes of stable solution to 'games' of this kind. 'Always be nasty' is stable in that, if everybody else is doing it, a single nice individual cannot do better. But there is another strategy which is also stable. ('Stable' means that, once it exceeds a critical frequency in the population, no alternative does better.) This is the strategy, 'Start out being nice, and give others the benefit of the doubt. Then

repay good deeds with good, but avenge bad deeds.' In game theory language, this strategy (or family of related strategies) goes under various names, including Tit-for-Tat, Retaliator and Reciprocator. It is evolutionarily stable under some conditions in the sense that, given a population dominated by reciprocators, no single nasty individual, and no single unconditionally nice individual, will do better. There are other, more complicated variants of Tit-for-Tat which can in some circumstances do better.

I have mentioned kinship and reciprocity as the twin pillars of altruism in a Darwinian world, but there are secondary structures which rest atop those main pillars. Especially in human society, with language and gossip, reputation is important. One individual may have a reputation for kindness and generosity. Another individual may have a reputation for unreliability, for cheating and reneging on deals. Another may have a reputation for generosity when trust has been built up, but for ruthless punishment of cheating. The unadorned theory of reciprocal altruism expects animals of any species to base their behaviour upon unconscious responsiveness to such traits in their fellows. In human societies we add the power of language to spread reputations, usually in the form of gossip. You don't need to have suffered personally from X's failure to buy his round at the pub. You hear 'on the grapevine' that X is a tightwad, or - to add an ironic complication to the example - that Y is a terrible gossip. Reputation is important, and biologists can acknowledge a Darwinian survival value in not just being a good reciprocator but fostering a *reputation* as a good reciprocator too. Matt Ridley's *The Origins of Virtue*, as well as being a lucid account of the whole field of Darwinian morality, is especially good on reputation.*

The Norwegian economist Thorstein Veblen and, in a rather different way, the Israeli zoologist Amotz Zahavi have added a further fascinating idea. Altruistic giving may be an advertisement of dominance or superiority. Anthropologists know it as the Potlatch Effect, named after the custom whereby rival chieftains of

* Reputation is not confined to humans. It has recently been shown to apply to one of the classic cases of reciprocal altruism in animals, the symbiotic relationship between small cleaner fish and their large fish clients. In an ingenious experiment, individual cleaner wrasse, *Labroides dimidiatus*, that had been observed by a would-be client to be diligent cleaners were more likely to be chosen by the client than rival *Labroides* that had been observed neglecting to clean. See R. Bshary and A. S. Grutter, 'Image scoring and cooperation in a cleaner fish mutualism', *Nature* 441, 22 June 2006, 975-8.

Pacific north-west tribes vie with each other in duels of ruinously generous feasts. In extreme cases, bouts of retaliatory entertaining continue until one side is reduced to penury, leaving the winner not much better off. Veblen's concept of 'conspicuous consumption' strikes a chord with many observers of the modern scene. Zahavi's contribution, unregarded by biologists for many years until vindicated by brilliant mathematical models from the theorist Alan Grafen, has been to provide an evolutionary version of the potlatch idea. Zahavi studies Arabian babblers, little brown birds who live in social groups and breed co-operatively. Like many small birds, babblers give warning cries, and they also donate food to each other. A standard Darwinian investigation of such altruistic acts would look, first, for reciprocation and kinship relationships among the birds. When a babbler feeds a companion, is it in the expectation of being fed at a later date? Or is the recipient of the favour a close genetic relative? Zahavi's interpretation is radically unexpected. Dominant babblers assert their dominance by feeding subordinates. To use the sort of anthropomorphic language Zahavi delights in, the dominant bird is saying the equivalent of, 'Look how superior I am to you, I can afford to give you food.' Or 'Look how superior I am, I can afford to make myself vulnerable to hawks by sitting on a high branch, acting as a sentinel to warn the rest of the flock feeding on the ground.' The observations of Zahavi and his colleagues suggest that babblers actively compete for the dangerous role of sentinel. And when a subordinate babbler attempts to offer food to a dominant individual, the apparent generosity is violently rebuffed. The essence of Zahavi's idea is that advertisements of superiority are authenticated by their cost. Only a genuinely superior individual can afford to advertise the fact by means of a costly gift. Individuals buy success, for example in attracting mates, through costly demonstrations of superiority, including ostentatious generosity and public-spirited risk-taking.

We now have four good Darwinian reasons for individuals to be altruistic, generous or 'moral' towards each other. First, there is the special case of genetic kinship. Second, there is reciprocation: the repayment of favours given, and the giving of favours in 'anticipation' of payback. Following on from this there is, third, the Darwinian benefit of acquiring a reputation for generosity and

kindness. And fourth, if Zahavi is right, there is the particular additional benefit of conspicuous generosity as a way of buying unfakeably authentic advertising.

Through most of our prehistory, humans lived under conditions that would have strongly favoured the evolution of all four kinds of altruism. We lived in villages, or earlier in discrete roving bands like baboons, partially isolated from neighbouring bands or villages. Most of your fellow band members would have been kin, more closely related to you than members of other bands - plenty of opportunities for kin altruism to evolve. And, whether kin or not, you would tend to meet the same individuals again and again throughout your life - ideal conditions for the evolution of reciprocal altruism. Those are also the ideal conditions for building a reputation for altruism, and the very same ideal conditions for advertising conspicuous generosity. By any or all of the four routes, genetic tendencies towards altruism would have been favoured in early humans. It is easy to see why our prehistoric ancestors would have been good to their own in-group but bad - to the point of xenophobia - towards other groups. But why - now that most of us live in big cities where we are no longer surrounded by kin, and where every day we meet individuals whom we are never going to meet again — why are we still so good to each other, even sometimes to others who might be thought to belong to an out-group?

It is important not to mis-state the reach of natural selection. Selection does not favour the evolution of a cognitive awareness of what is good for your genes. That awareness had to wait for the twentieth century to reach a cognitive level, and even now full understanding is confined to a minority of scientific specialists. What natural selection favours is rules of thumb, which work in practice to promote the genes that built them. Rules of thumb, by their nature, sometimes misfire. In a bird's brain, the rule 'Look after small squawking things in your nest, and drop food into their red gapes' typically has the effect of preserving the genes that built the rule, because the squawking, gaping objects in an adult bird's nest are normally its own offspring. The rule misfires if another baby bird somehow gets into the nest, a circumstance that is positively engineered by cuckoos. Could it be that our Good Samaritan urges are misfirings, analogous to the misfiring of a reed

warbler's parental instincts when it works itself to the bone for a young cuckoo? An even closer analogy is the human urge to adopt a child. I must rush to add that 'misfiring' is intended only in a strictly Darwinian sense. It carries no suggestion of the pejorative.

The 'mistake' or 'by-product' idea, which I am espousing, works like this. Natural selection, in ancestral times when we lived in small and stable bands like baboons, programmed into our brains altruistic urges, alongside sexual urges, hunger urges, xenophobic urges and so on. An intelligent couple can read their Darwin and know that the ultimate reason for their sexual urges is procreation. They know that the woman cannot conceive because she is on the pill. Yet they find that their sexual desire is in no way diminished by the knowledge. Sexual desire is sexual desire and its force, in an individual's psychology, is independent of the ultimate Darwinian pressure that drove it. It is a strong urge which exists independently of its ultimate rationale.

I am suggesting that the same is true of the urge to kindness - to altruism, to generosity, to empathy, to pity. In ancestral times, we had the opportunity to be altruistic only towards close kin and potential reciprocators. Nowadays that restriction is no longer there, but the rule of thumb persists. Why would it not? It is just like sexual desire. We can no more help ourselves feeling pity when we see a weeping unfortunate (who is unrelated and unable to reciprocate) than we can help ourselves feeling lust for a member of the opposite sex (who may be infertile or otherwise unable to reproduce). Both are misfirings, Darwinian mistakes: blessed, precious mistakes.

Do not, for one moment, think of such Darwinizing as demeaning or reductive of the noble emotions of compassion and generosity. Nor of sexual desire. Sexual desire, when channelled through the conduits of linguistic culture, emerges as great poetry and drama: John Donne's love poems, say, or *Romeo and Juliet*. And of course the same thing happens with the misfired redirection of kin- and reciprocation-based compassion. Mercy to a debtor is, when seen out of context, as un-Darwinian as adopting someone else's child:

The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath.

Sexual lust is the driving force behind a large proportion of human ambition and struggle, and much of it constitutes a misfiring. There is no reason why the same should not be true of the lust to be generous and compassionate, if this is the misfired consequence of ancestral village life. The best way for natural selection to build in both kinds of lust in ancestral times was to install rules of thumb in the brain. Those rules still influence us today, even where circumstances make them inappropriate to their original functions.

Such rules of thumb influence us still, not in a Calvinistically deterministic way but filtered through the civilizing influences of literature and custom, law and tradition - and, of course, religion. Just as the primitive brain rule of sexual lust passes through the filter of civilization to emerge in the love scenes of *Romeo and Juliet*, so primitive brain rules of us-versus-them vendetta emerge in the form of the running battles between Capulets and Montagues; while primitive brain rules of altruism and empathy end up in the misfiring that cheers us in the chastened reconciliation of Shakespeare's final scene.

A CASE STUDY IN THE ROOTS OF MORALITY

If our moral sense, like our sexual desire, is indeed rooted deep in our Darwinian past, predating religion, we should expect that research on the human mind would reveal some moral universals, crossing geographical and cultural barriers, and also, crucially, religious barriers. The Harvard biologist Marc Hauser, in his book *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong*, has enlarged upon a fruitful line of thought experiments originally suggested by moral philosophers. Hauser's study will serve the additional purpose of introducing the way moral philosophers think. A hypothetical moral dilemma is posed, and the difficulty we experience in answering it tells us something about our sense of right and wrong. Where Hauser goes beyond the philosophers is that he actually does statistical surveys and psychological experiments, using questionnaires on the Internet, for

example, to investigate the moral sense of real people. From the present point of view, the interesting thing is that most people come to the same decisions when faced with these dilemmas, and their agreement over the decisions themselves is stronger than their ability to articulate their reasons. This is what we should expect if we have a moral sense which is built into our brains, like our sexual instinct or our fear of heights or, as Hauser himself prefers to say, like our capacity for language (the details vary from culture to culture, but the underlying deep structure of grammar is universal). As we shall see, the way people respond to these moral tests, and their inability to articulate their reasons, seems largely independent of their religious beliefs or lack of them. The message of Hauser's book, to anticipate it in his own words, is this: 'Driving our moral judgments is a universal moral grammar, a faculty of the mind that evolved over millions of years to include a set of principles for building a range of possible moral systems. As with language, the principles that make up our moral grammar fly beneath the radar of our awareness.'

Typical of Hauser's moral dilemmas are variations on the theme of a runaway truck or 'trolley' on a railway line which threatens to kill a number of people. The simplest story imagines a person, Denise, standing by a set of points and in a position to divert the trolley onto a siding, thereby saving the lives of five people trapped on the main line ahead. Unfortunately there is a man trapped on the siding. But since he is only one, outnumbered by the five people trapped on the main track, most people agree that it is morally permissible, if not obligatory, for Denise to throw the switch and save the five by killing the one. We ignore hypothetical possibilities such as that the one man on the siding might be Beethoven, or a close friend.

Elaborations of the thought experiment present a series of increasingly teasing moral conundrums. What if the trolley can be stopped by dropping a large weight in its path from a bridge overhead? That's easy: obviously we must drop the weight. But what if the only large weight available is a very fat man sitting on the bridge, admiring the sunset? Almost everybody agrees that it is immoral to push the fat man off the bridge, even though, from one point of view, the dilemma might seem parallel to Denise's, where

throwing the switch kills one to save five. Most of us have a strong intuition that there is a crucial difference between the two cases, though we may not be able to articulate what it is.

Pushing the fat man off the bridge is reminiscent of another dilemma considered by Hauser. Five patients in a hospital are dying, each with a different organ failing. Each would be saved if a donor could be found for their particular faulty organ, but none is available. Then the surgeon notices that there is a healthy man in the waiting-room, all five of whose organs are in good working order and suitable for transplanting. In this case, almost nobody can be found who is prepared to say that the moral act is to kill the one to save the five.

As with the fat man on the bridge, the intuition that most of us share is that an innocent bystander should not suddenly be dragged into a bad situation and used for the sake of others without his consent. Immanuel Kant famously articulated the principle that a rational being should never be used as merely an unconsenting means to an end, even the end of benefiting others. This seems to provide the crucial difference between the case of the fat man on the bridge (or the man in the hospital waiting-room) and the man on Denise's siding. The fat man on the bridge is being positively used as the means to stop the runaway trolley. This clearly violates the Kantian principle. The person on the siding is not being used to save the lives of the five people on the line. It is the siding that is being used, and he just has the bad luck to be standing on it. But, when you put the distinction like that, why does it satisfy us? For Kant, it was a moral absolute. For Hauser it is built into us by our evolution.

The hypothetical situations involving the runaway trolley become increasingly ingenious, and the moral dilemmas correspondingly tortuous. Hauser contrasts the dilemmas faced by hypothetical individuals called Ned and Oscar. Ned is standing by the railway track. Unlike Denise, who could divert the trolley onto a siding, Ned's switch diverts it onto a side loop which joins the main track again just before the five people. Simply switching the points doesn't help: the trolley will plough into the five anyway when the diversion rejoins the main track. However, as it happens, there is an extremely fat man on the diversionary track who is

heavy enough to stop the trolley. Should Ned change the points and divert the train? Most people's intuition is that he should not. But what is the difference between Ned's dilemma, and Denise's? Presumably people are intuitively applying Kant's principle. Denise diverts the trolley from ploughing into the five people, and the unfortunate casualty on the siding is 'collateral damage', to use the charmingly Rumsfeldian phrase. He is not being used by Denise to save the others. Ned is actually *using* the fat man to stop the trolley, and most people (perhaps unthinkingly), along with Kant (thinking it out in great detail), see this as a crucial difference.

The difference is brought out again by the dilemma of Oscar. Oscar's situation is identical to Ned's, except that there is a large iron weight on the diversionary loop of track, heavy enough to stop the trolley. Clearly Oscar should have no problem deciding to pull the points and divert the trolley. Except that there happens to be a hiker walking in front of the iron weight. He will certainly be killed if Oscar pulls the switch, just as surely as Ned's fat man. The difference is that Oscar's hiker is not being used to stop the trolley: he is collateral damage, as in Denise's dilemma. Like Hauser, and like most of Hauser's experimental subjects, I feel that Oscar is permitted to throw the switch but Ned is not. But I also find it quite hard to justify my intuition. Hauser's point is that such moral intuitions are often not well thought out but that we feel them strongly anyway, because of our evolutionary heritage.

In an intriguing venture into anthropology, Hauser and his colleagues adapted their moral experiments to the Kuna, a small Central American tribe with little contact with Westerners and no formal religion. The researchers changed the 'trolley on a line' thought experiment to locally suitable equivalents, such as crocodiles swimming towards canoes. With corresponding minor differences, the Kuna show the same moral judgements as the rest of us.

Of particular interest for this book, Hauser also wondered whether religious people differ from atheists in their moral intuitions. Surely, if we get our morality from religion, they should differ. But it seems that they don't. Hauser, working with the moral philosopher Peter Singer,⁸⁷ focused on three hypothetical dilemmas and compared the verdicts of atheists with those of religious people.

In each case, the subjects were asked to choose whether a hypothetical action is morally 'obligatory', 'permissible' or 'forbidden'. The three dilemmas were:

- 1 Denise's dilemma. Ninety per cent of people said it was permissible to divert the trolley, killing the one to save the five.
- 2 You see a child drowning in a pond and there is no other help in sight. You can save the child, but your trousers will be ruined in the process. Ninety-seven per cent agreed that you should save the child (amazingly, 3 per cent apparently would prefer to save their trousers).
- 3 The organ transplant dilemma described above. Ninety-seven per cent of subjects agreed that it is morally forbidden to seize the healthy person in the waiting-room and kill him for his organs, thereby saving five other people.

The main conclusion of Hauser and Singer's study was that there is no statistically significant difference between atheists and religious believers in making these judgements. This seems compatible with the view, which I and many others hold, that we do not need God in order to be good - or evil.

IF THERE IS NO GOD, WHY BE GOOD?

Posed like that, the question sounds positively ignoble. When a religious person puts it to me in this way (and many of them do), my immediate temptation is to issue the following challenge: 'Do you really mean to tell me the only reason you try to be good is to gain God's approval and reward, or to avoid his disapproval and punishment? That's not morality, that's just sucking up, apple-polishing, looking over your shoulder at the great surveillance camera in the sky, or the still small wiretap inside your head, monitoring your every move, even your every base thought.' As Einstein said, 'If people are good only because they fear punishment, and hope for reward, then we are a sorry lot indeed.' Michael

Shermer, in *The Science of Good and Evil*, calls it a debate stopper. If you agree that, in the absence of God, you would 'commit robbery, rape, and murder', you reveal yourself as an immoral person, 'and we would be well advised to steer a wide course around you'. If, on the other hand, you admit that you would continue to be a good person even when not under divine surveillance, you have fatally undermined your claim that God is necessary for us to be good. I suspect that quite a lot of religious people do think religion is what motivates them to be good, especially if they belong to one of those faiths that systematically exploits personal guilt.

It seems to me to require quite a low self-regard to think that, should belief in God suddenly vanish from the world, we would all become callous and selfish hedonists, with no kindness, no charity, no generosity, nothing that would deserve the name of goodness. It is widely believed that Dostoevsky was of that opinion, presumably because of some remarks he put into the mouth of Ivan Karamazov:

[Ivan] solemnly observed that there was absolutely no law of nature to make man love humanity, and that if love did exist and had existed at all in the world up to now, then it was not by virtue of the natural law, but entirely because man believed in his own immortality. He added as an aside that it was precisely that which constituted the natural law, namely, that once man's faith in his own immortality was destroyed, not only would his capacity for love be exhausted, but so would the vital forces that sustained life on this earth. And furthermore, nothing would be immoral then, everything would be permitted, even anthropophagy. And finally, as though all this were not enough, he declared that for every individual, such as you and me, for example, who does not believe either in God or in his own immortality, the natural law is bound immediately to become the complete opposite of the religion-based law that preceded it, and that egoism, even extending to the perpetration of crime, would not only be permissible but would be recognized as the essential, the most rational, and even the noblest *raison d'être* of the human condition.⁸⁸

Perhaps naively, I have inclined towards a less cynical view of human nature than Ivan Karamazov. Do we really need policing - whether by God or by each other - in order to stop us from behaving in a selfish and criminal manner? I dearly want to believe that I do not need such surveillance - and nor, dear reader, do you. On the other hand, just to weaken our confidence, listen to Steven Pinker's disillusioning experience of a police strike in Montreal, which he describes in *The Blank Slate*:

As a young teenager in proudly peaceable Canada during the romantic 1960s, I was a true believer in Bakunin's anarchism. I laughed off my parents' argument that if the government ever laid down its arms all hell would break loose. Our competing predictions were put to the test at 8:00 A.M. on October 17, 1969, when the Montreal police went on strike. By 11:20 A.M. the first bank was robbed. By noon most downtown stores had closed because of looting. Within a few more hours, taxi drivers burned down the garage of a limousine service that competed with them for airport customers, a rooftop sniper killed a provincial police officer, rioters broke into several hotels and restaurants, and a doctor slew a burglar in his suburban home. By the end of the day, six banks had been robbed, a hundred shops had been looted, twelve fires had been set, forty carloads of storefront glass had been broken, and three million dollars in property damage had been inflicted, before city authorities had to call in the army and, of course, the Mounties to restore order. This decisive empirical test left my politics in tatters . . .

Perhaps I, too, am a Pollyanna to believe that people would remain good when unobserved and unpoliced by God. On the other hand, the majority of the population of Montreal presumably believed in God. Why didn't the fear of God restrain them when earthly policemen were temporarily removed from the scene? Wasn't the Montreal strike a pretty good natural experiment to test the hypothesis that belief in God makes us good? Or did the cynic H. L. Mencken get it right when he tartly observed: 'People say

we need religion when what they really mean is we need police.'

Obviously, not everybody in Montreal behaved badly as soon as the police were off the scene. It would be interesting to know whether there was any statistical tendency, however slight, for religious believers to loot and destroy less than unbelievers. My uninformed prediction would have been opposite. It is often cynically said that there are no atheists in foxholes. I'm inclined to suspect (with some evidence, although it may be simplistic to draw conclusions from it) that there are very few atheists in prisons. I am not necessarily claiming that atheism increases morality, although humanism - the ethical system that often goes with atheism - probably does. Another good possibility is that atheism is correlated with some third factor, such as higher education, intelligence or reflectiveness, which might counteract criminal impulses. Such research evidence as there is certainly doesn't support the common view that religiosity is positively correlated with morality. Correlational evidence is never conclusive, but the following data, described by Sam Harris in his *Letter to a Christian Nation*, are nevertheless striking.

While political party affiliation in the United States is not a perfect indicator of religiosity, it is no secret that the 'red [Republican] states' are primarily red due to the overwhelming political influence of conservative Christians. If there were a strong correlation between Christian conservatism and societal health, we might expect to see some sign of it in red-state America. We don't. Of the twenty-five cities with the lowest rates of violent crime, 62 percent are in 'blue' [Democrat] states, and 38 percent are in 'red' [Republican] states. Of the twenty-five most dangerous cities, 76 percent are in red states, and 24 percent are in blue states. In fact, three of the five most dangerous cities in the U.S. are in the pious state of Texas. The twelve states with the highest rates of burglary are red. Twenty-four of the twenty-nine states with the highest rates of theft are red. Of the twenty-two states with the highest rates of murder, seventeen are red.*

* Note that these colour conventions in America are exactly the opposite of those in Britain, where blue is the colour of the Conservative Party, and red, as in the rest of the world, is the colour traditionally associated with the political left.

Systematic research if anything tends to support such correlational data. Dan Dennett, in *Breaking the Spell*, sardonically comments, not on Harris's book in particular, but on such studies generally:

Needless to say, these results strike so hard at the standard claims of greater moral virtue among the religious that there has been a considerable surge of further research initiated by religious organizations attempting to refute them . . . one thing we can be sure of is that *if* there is a significant positive relationship between moral behaviour and religious affiliation, practice, or belief, it will soon be discovered, since so many religious organizations are eager to confirm their traditional beliefs about this scientifically. (They are quite impressed with the truth-finding power of science when it supports what they already believe.) Every month that passes without such a demonstration underlines the suspicion that it just isn't so.

Most thoughtful people would agree that morality in the absence of policing is somehow more truly moral than the kind of false morality that vanishes as soon as the police go on strike or the spy camera is switched off, whether the spy camera is a real one monitored in the police station or an imaginary one in heaven. But it is perhaps unfair to interpret the question 'If there is no God, why bother to be good?' in such a cynical way.* A religious thinker could offer a more genuinely moral interpretation, along the lines of the following statement from an imaginary apologist. 'If you don't believe in God, you don't believe there are any absolute standards of morality. With the best will in the world you may intend to be a good person, but how do you decide what is good and what is bad? Only religion can ultimately provide your standards of good and evil. Without religion you have to make it up as you go along. That would be morality without a rule book: morality flying by the seat of its pants. If morality is merely a matter of choice, Hitler could claim to be moral by his own eugenically inspired standards, and all the atheist can do is make a personal choice to live by different lights. The Christian, the Jew or

* H. L. Mencken, again with characteristic cynicism, defined conscience as the inner voice that warns us that someone may be looking.

the Muslim, by contrast, can claim that evil has an absolute meaning, true for all time and in all places, according to which Hitler was absolutely evil.'

Even if it were true that we need God to be moral, it would of course not make God's existence more likely, merely more desirable (many people cannot tell the difference). But that is not the issue here. My imaginary religious apologist has no need to admit that sucking up to God is the religious motive for doing good. Rather, his claim is that, wherever the *motive* to be good comes from, without God there would be no standard for *deciding* what is good. We could each make up our own definition of the good, and behave accordingly. Moral principles that are based only upon religion (as opposed to, say, the 'golden rule', which is often associated with religions but can be derived from elsewhere) may be called absolutist. Good is good and bad is bad, and we don't mess around deciding particular cases by whether, for example, somebody suffers. My religious apologist would claim that only religion can provide a basis for deciding what is good.

Some philosophers, notably Kant, have tried to derive absolute morals from non-religious sources. Though a religious man himself, as was almost inevitable in his time/' Kant tried to base a morality on duty for duty's sake, rather than for God's. His famous categorical imperative enjoins us to 'act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law'. This works tidily for the example of telling lies. Imagine a world in which people told lies as a matter of principle, where lying was regarded as a good and moral thing to do. In such a world, lying itself would cease to have any meaning. Lying needs a presumption of truth for its very definition. If a moral principle is something we should wish everybody to follow, lying cannot be a moral principle because the principle itself would break down in meaninglessness. Lying, as a rule for life, is inherently unstable. More generally, selfishness, or free-riding parasitism on the goodwill of others, may work for me as a lone selfish individual and give me personal satisfaction. But I cannot wish that everybody would adopt selfish parasitism as a moral principle, if only because then I would have nobody to parasitize.

* This is the standard interpretation of Kant's views. However, the noted philosopher A. C. Grayling has plausibly argued (*New Humanist*, July-Aug. 2006) that, although Kant publicly went along with the religious conventions of his time, he was really an atheist.

The Kantian imperative seems to work for truth-telling and some other cases. It is not so easy to see how to broaden it to morality generally. Kant notwithstanding, it is tempting to agree with my hypothetical apologist that absolutist morals are usually driven by religion. Is it always wrong to put a terminally ill patient out of her misery at her own request? Is it always wrong to make love to a member of your own sex? Is it always wrong to kill an embryo? There are those who believe so, and their grounds are absolute. They brook no argument or debate. Anybody who disagrees deserves to be shot: metaphorically of course, not literally - except in the case of some doctors in American abortion clinics (see next chapter). Fortunately, however, morals do not have to be absolute.

Moral philosophers are the professionals when it comes to thinking about right and wrong. As Robert Hinde succinctly put it, they agree that 'moral precepts, while not necessarily constructed by reason, should be defensible by reason'.⁸⁹ They classify themselves in many ways, but in modern terminology the major divide is between 'deontologists' (such as Kant) and 'consequentialists' (including 'utilitarians' such as Jeremy Bentham, 1748-1832). Deontology is a fancy name for the belief that morality consists in the obeying of rules. It is literally the science of duty, from the Greek for 'that which is binding'. Deontology is not quite the same thing as moral absolutism, but for most purposes in a book about religion there is no need to dwell on the distinction. Absolutists believe there are absolutes of right and wrong, imperatives whose Tightness makes no reference to their consequences. Consequentialists more pragmatically hold that the morality of an action should be judged by its consequences. One version of consequentialism is utilitarianism, the philosophy associated with Bentham, his friend James Mill (1773-1836) and Mill's son John Stuart Mill (1806-73). Utilitarianism is often summed up in Bentham's unfortunately imprecise catchphrase: 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation'.

Not all absolutism is derived from religion. Nevertheless, it is pretty hard to defend absolutist morals on grounds other than religious ones. The only competitor I can think of is patriotism, especially in times of war. As the distinguished Spanish film director

Luis Bunuel said, 'God and Country are an unbeatable team; they break all records for oppression and bloodshed.' Recruiting officers rely heavily on their victims' sense of patriotic duty. In the First World War, women handed out white feathers to young men not in uniform.

Oh, we don't want to lose you, but we think you ought to go,
For your King and your country both need you so.

People despised conscientious objectors, even those of the enemy country, because patriotism was held to be an absolute virtue. It is hard to get much more absolute than the 'My country right or wrong' of the professional soldier, for the slogan commits you to kill whomever the politicians of some future date might choose to call enemies. Consequentialist reasoning may influence the political decision to go to war but, once war is declared, absolutist patriotism takes over with a force and a power not otherwise seen outside religion. A soldier who allows his own thoughts of consequentialist morality to persuade him not to go over the top would likely find himself court-martialled and even executed.

The springboard for this discussion of moral philosophy was a hypothetical religious claim that, without a God, morals are relative and arbitrary. Kant and other sophisticated moral philosophers apart, and with due recognition given to patriotic fervour, the preferred source of absolute morality is usually a holy book of some kind, interpreted as having an authority far beyond its history's capacity to justify. Indeed, adherents of scriptural authority show distressingly little curiosity about the (normally highly dubious) historical origins of their holy books. The next chapter will demonstrate that, in any case, people who claim to derive their morals from scripture do not really do so in practice. And a very good thing too, as they themselves, on reflection, should agree.