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People Are More Generous Than You May Think

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Are human beings fundamentally good or fundamentally bad? Are people mostly generous, or are they mostly selfish?

Over the centuries, many of our leading lights have taken the view that people are basically selfish. Machiavelli argued that people are deceitful, ungrateful and covetous. Classical economics is based on the idea that people relentlessly pursue their self-interest. “The average human being is about 95 percent selfish in the narrow meaning of the term,” the economist Gordon Tullock once wrote. In his book “The Selfish Gene,” the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins argued, “We are born selfish.” In the public at large, only 30 percent of Americans say they can trust the people around them, suggesting quite a grim view of human nature.

But what if this dark view of our nature is not true?

In a recent experiment led by the psychologists Ryan J. Dwyer, William J. Brady and Elizabeth W. Dunn and the TED curator Chris Anderson, 200 people in seven nations around the world were each given \$10,000, free, and then reported how they spent the money. Did they keep it all themselves? No. On average, the participants spent more than \$6,400 of it to benefit others, including almost \$1,700 on donations to charity. Of that prosocial spending, \$3,678 went to people outside their immediate household, and \$2,163 was spent on strangers, acquaintances and donations to organizations.

People used the money to take friends out for meals or to support families that had lost loved ones or to support an organization that provides construction training to marginalized people. Sounds pretty generous to me.

But wait a second, the cynic says. Maybe they were just spending that way so they could selfishly win status and applause. Not likely. Some of the people in the experiment were told to record their spending on Twitter, and the rest were told to keep their spending private. There was little difference between those who publicized their outlays and those who didn't.

Overall, the researchers concluded that people find it rewarding to spend money on others.

This study is not an outlier. Over the past few decades, social scientists have devised many situations in which research subjects are given the chance to behave either selfishly or cooperatively.

In his book “The Penguin and the Leviathan: The Triumph of Cooperation Over Self-Interest,” Yochai Benkler of Harvard summarized the findings. In any given experiment, he reported, about 30 percent of the people do, indeed, behave selfishly. But, he continued, “fully half of all people systematically, significantly and predictably behave cooperatively.”

Benkler stepped back to hammer home the core conclusion from this vast body of research: “The point is, across a wide range of experiments, in widely diverse populations, one finding stands out: In practically no human society examined under controlled conditions have the majority of people consistently behaved selfishly.”

Humanity hasn't thrived all these centuries because we're ruthlessly selfish; we've thrived because we're really good at cooperation.

But suppose you're a nice person and you have to compete with ruthless, selfish bastards. Aren't you forced to play by the rules of dog eat dog? Well, not necessarily. For his book “Give and Take,” the organizational psychologist Adam Grant identified other-centered people in organizations (the givers) and self-centered people, the ones who are always on the lookout for what they can extract for themselves (the takers). He found that many of the low-performing workers were givers. They allowed themselves to be walked over, taken advantage of.

But when Grant looked at the top performers in organizations, he found that givers dominated those ranks, too. These givers had golden reputations, wider social networks, better relationships — people wanted to work with and collaborate with them. It's best to be a giver who knows, in extreme cases, how to stand up for oneself.

I'd say that a lot of our public thinkers have vastly underestimated the importance of the moral and social motivations woven into human nature. We tip at restaurants we'll never return to. We leap to help one another during natural disasters. We yearn not only to be admired but also to be worthy of admiration.

I'd say that many of our public thinkers have wound up creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. By telling people that they are innately selfish and surrounded by others who are innately selfish, we have encouraged one another to magnify the selfish side of our natures.

I'd also say that we in the West draw too sharp a distinction between gifts and transactions. In his classic essay "The Gift," the sociologist Marcel Mauss argued that many cultures do not make this stark distinction. In those cultures, people see themselves embedded in a network of material, social and spiritual care. People give one another a hand; they lend one another an ear; they borrow and lend. They see these exchanges not as cold, zero-sum transactions but as ongoing supportive and reciprocal relationships.

Finally, I'd say we in the West have gone overboard in building systems that try to motivate people by appealing mostly to their economic self-interest. We build inhumane systems in which material incentives blot out social and moral incentives. And we've made ourselves miserable along the way.

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David Brooks has been a columnist with The Times since 2003. He is the author of the forthcoming book "How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen." [@nytdavidbrooks](https://twitter.com/nytdavidbrooks)

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