



Heroic parents, because culture matters

Patrick Riordan SJ

In a large society, what motivates any person to behave in a way that benefits the common good when individual rationality might suggest that one is better off by not cooperating? Patrick Riordan SJ suggests that civilised societies are made up of people who, as a result of a cultural formation process, do not value their individual advantage ahead of the good of all.

On the same day that I read of the heroism and unselfishness of NHS staff and in particular the staff in care homes, the bank sent me messages warning of scammers taking advantage of the lockdown to defraud trusting victims and advising greater care in handling cards and accounts. Generous commitment to the good of others is found in our societies alongside the willingness to deceive and take advantage of innocents. We are asked by some to recall and emulate 'the spirit of the Blitz' shown by Londoners, but we are reminded thereby of the black-marketeers who thrived during the hardships suffered by many in that period.

Goodness and badness, virtue and malice, cooperation and exploitation – all coexist in our societies and have done so throughout our history. A recently published book is receiving a lot of attention because it strives to highlight the goodness of humanity, countering literature that emphasises the opposite, the undeniable inhumanity expressed in the history of vice, violence, war, domination and exploitation. Rutger Bregman in *Humankind: A Hopeful History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020) makes the case that

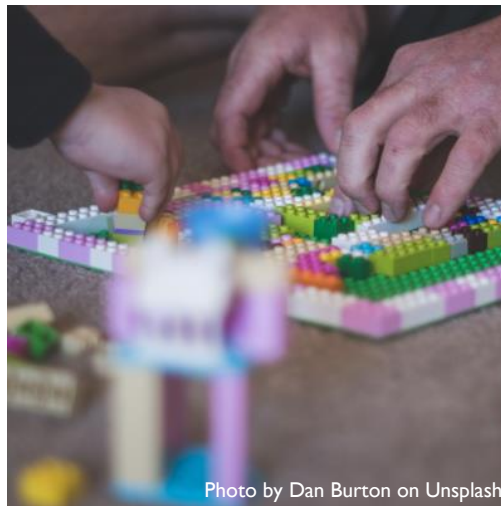


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humans, for the most part, are decent; supposed evidence to the contrary is challenged in detail. He notes the polarisation in the philosophical literature, for instance between Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Hobbes sees political order and the civilisation it engenders saving humans from a life in the state of nature that is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short', and Rousseau by contrast sees society as the source of corruption of the naturally good human. The debates continue, taking various forms in different contexts, as in the debates of nature versus nurture in psychology or education. Bregman will not be the last to reactivate the question of human goodness, innate or acquired.

With our theological resources of doctrines of sin and grace we may be tempted to translate these debates into theological ones, and mirror the polarisation into extremes: human nature wounded by original sin versus human nature completely corrupted by sin; justification that elevates the human versus justification as juridical imputation that leaves human nature in its depravity.

Of course, there is a value in such debates, whether theological or philosophical, but it is also helpful to consider the problems we humans create for ourselves by being good, and by being good at what we do. There is a growing literature to help us with this approach. For instance, in the context of Pope Francis' *Laudato si'*, on care for the planet as our common home, much use is made of what is called the tragedy of the commons.¹ A commons shared by many (grazing land, water supply, the seas and their stocks of fish, *etc.*) is destroyed because each commoner acting independently calculates rationally how best to use the commons for her own advantage. Even in the context of a regulation to conserve the commons, each one reasons: 'if I cut back my use and nobody else does, then there is no point in my doing so: I would suffer a loss that benefits no one; but if everybody else cuts back on their use, then my overgrazing or overfishing will cause only marginal harm and no one will suffer a loss'. From the perspective of individual rationality, it makes no sense to accept constraints: whatever the others do, the individual does best by defecting. Hence the use of 'tragedy' in the dramatic sense: there is a flaw in heroes that leads to their self-destruction. In the tragedy of the commons, the flaw is in the very precious human strength of rationality understood in terms of achieving benefits to the actor. It is not the only inherent flaw in our constitution: Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* reminds us that the hunger for justice can be destructive, unless modified by mercy; his other Venetian play, *Othello*, exhibits the dangers of too much love, if not tempered by wisdom. Of course, moral fault, sin, can make such situations worse, but the hunger for justice and the passion of love in themselves are not bad or wrong – we do not have to assign blame or find fault. But we can learn of the risks posed by our strengths, our virtues, and take measures to minimise them.

Elinor Ostrom and other authors have shown how the care of the commons can be managed in small-scale, traditional societies so that the threat of tragedy, at least from the source of excessive individual rationality, cannot arise.² All commentators acknowledge that distinctive issues arise once the human population has grown and different societies must live as neighbours in an increasingly crowded space. Where the other appears as a stranger, or as a member of a different tribe or linguistic group, one can no longer rely on the shared norms of the home group or on the standard sanctions of shaming to ground one's attitude of trust. The question then becomes how trust can be fostered and sustained in large-scale groups.

There are great advantages to be had from large-scale group cooperation, as the affluence of our developed societies demonstrates. Even in the face of major threats such as the Covid-19 pandemic that exposes the vulnerability of our complexity, we have to rely on large-scale cooperation in treating victims, managing the spread of the disease and seeking remedies in vaccines or treatments. The risk of free-riding increases with the growth of complexity: the temptation to enjoy the benefits of cooperation (the NHS for instance) without sharing the costs through taxation increases. Hobbes's proposed solution of the sovereign who enforces the rules is our societies' typical resort, but with the evident result that it does not work. Compliance with the law, avoidance of prosecution, was not enough to prevent the 2008 credit crisis in our complex financial systems that had disastrous consequences for the real economy. Compliance with the law is not sufficient to ensure that corporations who make their profits in the national economy contribute their fair share via taxation to the costs of maintaining social order. A strong state monitoring system did not prevent the collapse of Carillion, the company subcontracted to deliver state services. External policing is not a reliable means of guaranteeing the levels of trust required in large-scale cooperation as found in our developed Western societies.

David C. Rose in his book *Why Culture Matters Most* (Oxford University Press, 2019) locates the solution to the dilemma in what he calls 'culture'. Culture amounts to the set of tastes and beliefs that are formed in a generation of a society before they have developed the rational capacities of discrimination and choice to determine for themselves what they want. Rose places a lot of weight on the training that young children receive from their parents, a training that inculcates tastes and forms the habits of willing and thinking such that character is shaped. Young people who are cultured in his sense are guided by a sense of duty that morally constrains what they might even consider as options for action. Free-riding on the cooperation of others can be minimised if people hold the view that it is wrong opportunistically to take advantage of others' goodwill at the expense of the common good. 'What's in it for me?', or 'what do I stand to lose?' are not then the spontaneous reactions of those invited to make an effort in a common project.

A pre-rational formation of trust enables widespread forms of cooperation and reduces transaction costs. Such trust can counter the dynamics of individual rationality that points agents to their golden opportunities, occasions when they can exploit the benefits of cooperation without getting caught and paying a penalty. In large-scale societies there is not the spontaneous sympathetic identification with the other, who might be victim of harm, since the anonymous mass that bears the costs of free-riding is not any nameable person.

Almost as if he were responding to Bregman's optimistic account in *Humankind*, Rose insists that it is not a matter of 'either-or' but that humans have both good and bad impulses. 'Creating civilization is not about making people willing to act on their good impulses. ... Civilization, instead, depends on making people unwilling to act on their bad impulses. The closer a society can get to having people not act on bad impulses – that is, to having a very

strong ethic of duty-based moral restraint – the more civilized the society will be, the higher will be its level of social trust, and the more it will support mass flourishing' (151). Rose has little confidence in the power of moral advocacy, preaching at people and trying to persuade them to be good, and argues instead for the cultural transmission of values and duty in early childhood. 'Culture ... allows one generation to determine the prevailing moral beliefs of the next generation' (68).

It follows that the large-scale cooperation and its benefits in any society at a particular time are reaping the fruits of investment made by earlier generations in child-rearing and the transmission of culture. This is often taken for granted and in danger of neglect, not least because the costs of investment in the next generation borne by parents are not going to deliver benefits directly to their own children when adults. Society at large will be the beneficiary, so here we find another case of a commons, cared for or neglected. The failure of parents to make the investment in the inculcation of moral restraints in their children results in a deterioration and disintegration of the institutions of a high-trust society, but only in the course of time, once the generation of children who had not acquired the duty-based moral constraint are themselves adults. In the course of the intervening years, enough of the formed culture from earlier generations is around to carry the institutions. But repairing the damage arising from a loss of culture will not be done quickly: it, too, will be a matter of generations, but where will the motivation for the relevant investment be found when the characters who can recognise the scale of the damage lack the cultural resources to act?

There is some evidence that people in government and their advisors were initially reluctant to rely on direct action imposing restraints in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, preferring to rely instead on 'nudge theory'. As Tony Yates reported in *The Guardian* in early March, the reason the government decided it was not yet

time ‘to close schools or ban large gatherings is that “fatigue” could set in – meaning people will grow tired of the bans and find ways around them’.³ It seems that expectations of reluctance to comply on the part of the population delayed the imposition of restrictions. But the experience has been, despite some exceptions, that the public has predominantly abided by the restraints imposed, so that the lockdown has largely worked to save lives and protect the NHS.

Following Rose’s analysis of the importance of culture, perhaps as well as recognising the contributions of NHS and care staff we should also acknowledge our great indebtedness to previous generations of parents who have successfully transmitted the culture of moral restraint to their children, now the adult population. And in addition, should we not also bear in mind the important contribution of parents of young children today, now obliged to spend more time at home with them in lockdown, for their heroic contribution to the common good in ensuring that the next generation of adults will also be capable of duty-based restraint?

David Rose should have the last word: ‘... society gets the behaviour it wants not by forcing people to do or to not do things, but by instantiating values that incline them to want to do or not do what is best for society’ (166).

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¹ Garet Hardin, ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’, *Science* 162.3859 (1968) 1243-1248.

² Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/13/why-is-the-government-relying-on-nudge-theory-to-tackle-coronavirus> accessed 13 May 2020.