

'Natural Law' column number two, by Michael Price (uncorrected proof)
To be published in *Global Custodian*, late summer 2010

Don't Blame Darwin

At the height of the recent financial crisis, I participated in a debate on BBC Radio 4's *The Moral Maze*. It quickly became clear why the producers had invited me. They assumed that I, as an evolutionary psychologist, would defend the position that the selfish behavior that helped cause the crisis was the inevitable product of *homo sapiens*' true biological nature. My perspective would, they thought, make a convenient foil for those guests who wished to argue that because human nature could be overcome via socialization, such catastrophic selfishness could have been averted.

Why have Darwinians come to be seen as the champions of human selfishness? Partly because Darwin's original theory does in fact emphasize that individuals will be chiefly concerned with their own survival and reproduction; those who aren't will lose out in the competition to get progeny into the next generation. More recently, Richard Dawkins' landmark and still-influential 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* has been misinterpreted by many to be an endorsement of individual selfishness. Distressingly, according to the documentary *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, Dawkins' book was Jeffrey Skilling's favorite strategy guide.

Regarding Dawkins' book as a sanction for selfishness is slightly ironic, because the book's central idea is actually drawn from biology's most important theory of altruism. This is William Hamilton's kin selection theory, which states that Gene X can replicate itself by directing the individual who carries it to be altruistic towards other carriers of Gene X. This theory is usually used to explain altruism between close relatives, but Hamilton was also making a more general point, one which has since been elaborated upon by many biologists: selfishness at the genetic level can cause altruism at the individual level. Often, the best way that individuals have of promoting their own genetic interests is to cooperate with others – not just with kin, but also with friends, teammates and colleagues.

Because cooperation among individuals is just a product of selfishness among genes, it makes little sense to see it as "less Darwinian" than selfishness. On the other hand, it may make even less sense to argue that because people are naturally cooperative, they are also naturally nice in general. As Robert Bigelow wrote in the *The Dawn Warriors*, "a hydrogen bomb is an example of mankind's enormous capacity for friendly cooperation". Building a complex weapon requires intense cooperation, and people often cooperate most effectively when they want to destroy an enemy.

So if Darwinian theory can account for both selfishness and cooperation, what does it suggest about promoting cooperation in organizations? Most importantly, it suggests that we need to dispose of the idea that evolved human nature is something that must be transcended, via socialization, in order for cooperation to flourish. Human nature is not something that can be smothered into irrelevance by simply shovelling on the socialization. Any socialization

process that encourages cooperation will be bound to fail, unless it meshes with the ways in which evolution actually designed people to cooperate.

And what do we know about how people are designed to cooperate? The research on this topic is vast and complex, but a few generalizations can be made. First, cooperation requires individual sacrifice, so people cooperate only when they can obtain some personal reward (economic or reputational) from doing so. Second, if they can get away with obtaining this reward without paying the costs of cooperation – that is, if they can “free ride” with impunity on others’ contributions – then they often will. Third, if people think that their efforts are benefitting free riders at least as much as themselves, then they’ll get angry and stop cooperating; people are not adapted to enjoy subsidizing their own exploitation, so in order to make cooperation adaptive for individuals, an organization must detect and penalize employees who take more than they deserve. Finally, because people are individuals first and cooperators second, if they are to act for the good of the company, then their interests must be aligned with the company’s long-term goals. Otherwise, they’ll take advantage of opportunities they have to benefit themselves at the company’s expense.

We can’t overcome human nature by simply socializing people to always play nice. But if we embrace Darwin’s theory instead of blaming it, then we can understand what it takes to make cooperation adaptive for individuals, and we can design organizations that successfully harness our cooperative instincts.