

## Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

C. Nathan DeWall and David G. Myers

*Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal Current Directions in Psychological Science. Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications, and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.*

### Selfish Genes or Native Prosociality

by David G. Myers

[Zaki, J., & Mitchell, J. P. \(2013\). Intuitive prosociality. \*Current Directions in Psychological Science\*, 22, 466–470.](#)

Okay, class, question of the day: “Deep down, in our hearts, is human nature more *good* or *evil*? Pick a side, and then list psychological theory and evidence that seems to support your answer.” (Alternatively, randomly assign students to make a case for human nature as inherently good or evil.)

Ask this question of your class, perhaps followed by small group discussion, and chances are you will get takers on both sides, each for seemingly good reasons.

### The Selfish Heart

Psychology students will likely offer some familiar examples of humanity’s disposition to evil. Several streams of psychological science point to the human capacity for greed, bigotry, and violence.

1. *Evil situations.* Experiments (think Sherif, Milgram, and Zimbardo) have put nice people in evil situations to see whether good or evil prevails. Often, evil pressures overwhelm good intentions, inducing people to conform to falsehoods or capitulate to cruelty. Nice guys often don’t finish nice.
2. *Selfish genes.* Evil situations may corrupt individuals, but, as Donald Campbell (1975a, 1975b) argued in his original sin-affirming APA presidential address, “Genes predisposing a self-saving selfishness” will win the evolutionary competition — a point famously emphasized by Richard Dawkins’s 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*. Even seeming altruism may arise from gene-promoting reciprocity or kin selection
3. *Selfish behavior in social dilemmas.* As the tragedy of the commons and various laboratory games have illustrated, and as B. F. Skinner emphasized, self-interest motivates much behavior, even when it undermines our collective well-being. When allowed to distribute a windfall between themselves and a stranger — uncashed casino chips, in one Las Vegas street experiment — the self-serving behavior of study participants would not have surprised Donald Campbell (Winking & Mizer, 2013).

4. *Self-serving bias*. People perceive and present themselves in self-inflating ways. Moreover, ingroup biases and group polarization can magnify individual egoism. The result may be what theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1932, p. xii) viewed as a “collective egoism, compounded of the egoistic impulses of individuals.”

### The Prosocial Heart

Students will surely also identify indicators of human virtue. Holocaust survivor and APS Fellow Ervin Staub has devoted his career to studying *The Psychology of Good and Evil* (the title of his 2003 book). Human nature has given us both appalling genocide *and* astonishing generosity.

Psychologists have long emphasized our capacity for good.

1. *Humanistic psychology*. Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow argued that people are basically good and endowed with actualizing tendencies. Each of us is like an acorn, primed for growth and fulfillment unless thwarted by an environment that inhibits growth. “I do not find that this evil is inherent in human nature,” said Rogers (1981). Given growth-promoting conditions, “I have never known an individual to choose the cruel or destructive path.”
2. *Group selection?* In competition, contends one group of evolutionary psychologists, groups composed of mutually supportive altruists will survive and spread their group-serving genes (Wilson & Wilson, 2008).
3. *Self-giving compassion*. Asking nothing in return, people will offer directions, donate money, give blood, volunteer time — helping behaviors that altruism researchers seek to explain.
4. *Empathy-induced altruism*. When observing another’s suffering, we often empathize, and then we help — even when our helping is anonymous. Genuine “empathy-induced altruism is part of human nature,” concluded Daniel Batson after 25 experiments (1999, 2011). We are social as well as selfish animals.

### The Prosocial Brain

Jamil Zaki and APS Fellow Jason P. Mitchell (2013) weigh into this ancient debate about our essential human nature with their beautiful (and easily accessible) essay on our deeply prosocial nature. They suggest asking students: Is our inclination toward selfishness as natural as eating chocolate, while prosociality is like eating brussels sprouts — something people may force themselves to do?

They argue that prosociality comes as naturally as eating chocolate. Prosociality is intuitive. Consider: Intuitive behaviors:

1. occur quickly, even in the face of distraction;
2. are enabled by brain systems that operate automatically; and
3. develop earlier in childhood than does conscious control.

Prosocial behaviors meet these three criteria.

1. In both experiments and real life, *prosocial decisions are made more quickly than selfish decisions*. Recipients of the Carnegie Hero awards typically have reacted to crises in an instant, without counting the cost. And time pressures and distractions that minimize reflective thinking actually *increase* prosocial behavior.
2. Neuroimaging studies show that *prosociality engages brain systems associated with intuitive reward-seeking* more than brain areas associated with self-control. Moreover, as Paul Zak argues in *The Moral Molecule* (2012), oxytocin enhances costly caring and helping.
3. *Spontaneous prosocial behaviors appear naturally and early* — by 18 months of age — while conscious control functions kick in between 22 and 48 months.

## Conclusion

Human nature may be corruptible by transcendent evil situations, driven by selfish genes, and vulnerable to pride. These things being so, we need to strengthen restraints on our native selfishness, argued Campbell. “Let us try to *teach* generosity and altruism,” agreed Dawkins (1976, p. 3), “because we are born selfish.” Assuming selfishness, governments tax our incomes rather than trusting our voluntary generosity. And parents and character educators socialize children to delay gratification, to develop their self-control of selfish impulses, and to replenish the energy needed for self-regulation. To restrain self-gratification, we teach children social norms such as reciprocity and social responsibility. We admonish them to do what may not come naturally: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

But such “original sin” is only part of the story. For in other ways we are “little less than the angels.” Sometimes, note Zaki and Mitchell, we are advised to restrain our reflexive prosociality: “In the event of a sudden change in cabin pressure, please put on your own mask before assisting others.” We are, from the time of our earliest social behaviors, automatically disposed to empathize with, and to help, one another. We are intuitively prosocial.

## References

- Batson, C. D. (1999). Addressing the altruism question experimentally. Paper presented at the Templeton Foundation/Fetzer Institute Symposium on Empathy, Altruism, and Agape, Cambridge, MA.
- Batson, C. D. (2011). *Altruism in humans*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Campbell, D. T. (1975a). The conflict between social and biological evolution and the concept of original sin. *Zygon*, *10*, 234–249.
- Campbell, D. T. (1975b). On the conflicts between biological and social evolution and between psychology and moral tradition. *American Psychologist*, *30*(12), 1103–1126.
- Cardaciotto, L., Herbert, J. D., Forman, E. M., Moitra, E., & Farrow, V. (2008). The assessment of present-moment awareness and acceptance: The Philadelphia mindfulness scale. *Assessment*, *15*, 204–223.
- Dawkins, R. (1976). *The selfish gene*. New York: Oxford.

May, R. (1982). The problem of evil: An open letter to Carl Rogers. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 22, 10–21.

Niebuhr, R. (1932). *Moral man and immoral society*. New York: Scribner's.

Rogers, C. R. (1981, Summer). Notes on Rollo May. *Perspectives*, 2(1), 16.

Williams, M., Teasdale, J., Segal, Z., & Kabat-Zinn, J. (2007). *The mindful way through depression: Freeing yourself from chronic unhappiness*. New York: Guilford Press.

Wilson, D. S., & Wilson, E. O. (2008). Evolution for “the good of the group.” *American Scientist*, 96, 380–389.

Winking, J., & Mizer, N. (2013). Natural-field dictator game shows no altruistic giving. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 34, 288–293.

Zak, P. J. (2012). *The moral molecule: The source of love and prosperity*. New York: Dutton.

January 31, 2014