March 2016

The Social Generalist's Dilemma

Melvyn L. Fein
Kennesaw State University, mfein@kennesaw.edu

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Social Generalists

We humans are social generalists. That is, we are both a social and a generalist species; a fact that has enormous implications for how we live—not all of which are constructive. Many of the most persistent problems we face can be traced to this concordance. The interaction between them creates tensions that express themselves in difficulties that have no easy solutions—and in some cases none at all.

First, we are generalists. Unlike Koala bears that eat eucalyptus leaves and little else, we are omnivores. We will consume almost any food. All sorts of plants and animals can assuage our appetites, with very few either too poisonous or unappealing to be devoured in a pinch. This means we can subsist in many different environments. As a result, while the Koalas would go extinct if their favorite tree disappeared, should our preferred cuisine vanish we would simply switch to something else.

Closely related to this ability is our flexibility in obtaining nourishment. Unlike anteaters, our biological equipment is unspecialized. Whereas they sport a mouth and tongue designed specifically to reach deep into termite mounds in order to impale their favorite meal, our hands and limbs can be set to multiple functions. While most carnivores boast fearsome fangs and lethal claws, our puny teeth and dexterous fingers are more versatile. They allow us both to gather nutritious roots and devour tasty rabbits.

This might not seem to make sense, but thanks to the nimbleness of our digits and the agility of our brains we can use and construct tools to compensate for our biological deficits. Consequently when conditions change, we can modify the devices needed to capture our quarry. We do not need to be as strong as lions or as fleet afoot as cheetahs to fill our bellies. Indeed, we are so good at developing new weapons that we can kill almost any creature we desire, while at the same time warding off any predator that might regard us as a meal.

There is an important caveat, however. Our personal limitations compel us to depend on other humans when we engage in the hunt. Although tools are essential, by themselves, they would not allow us to survive. Weapons, such as spears, become truly deadly only when used in conjunction with other humans. Like wolves, we team up to track down and dispatch prey. When we do, we can come upon our victims from multiple directions; thereby adopting strategies that outwit and out-maneuver our quarry.

Thomas Hobbes (1956) conjectured that in a state of nature it would be every person for him/herself. Each would selfishly seek to accumulate as much goods as he/she desired. This would have precipitated conflicts that amounted to a war of all against all, with life becoming "nasty, brutish, and short." Only the good sense of our ancestors in devising a social compact to protect us from ourselves enabled us to live in harmony. In other words, being social was conceived of as a recent development.

Of course, it wasn't. Archeological evidence reveals that even our hominid forebears lived in groups (Tattersall, 2012). They survived in a hostile environment by banding together in small troops. In fact, this propensity permitted them to endure a harsh evolutionary apprenticeship. The evidence suggests that our ancestors became human on the plains of East Africa. One problem, though, was that this environment was unstable. It alternated between savannah and forest as the glaciers advanced and retreated in Europe. As a result, our forebears had to be agile. They had to modify their habits as the circumstances demanded.

An upshot of this was a proclivity for food sharing. If one member of a band had better luck in obtaining sustenance than others, he or she could bail the rest out by distributing the bounty. The fact that we are bipedal facilitated this by enabling us to carry foodstuffs long distances. Similarly, our control of fire permitted us to cook what we caught. This allowed us to utilize more items than our puny digestive tracts would otherwise withstand. Yet cooking too was a social activity. Some would hunt and gather while others took the time to convert what was acquired into a serviceable form (Wrangham, 2009).

All in all, a combination of our individual and social capacities translated into a marvelous adaptability. While we are not completely malleable, the range of our variability is enormous. The diversity is on display worldwide. Around the globe we eat different diets, dress in diverse clothing, reside in dissimilar abodes, move about by assorted means, partake in varied family arrangements, engage in a multitude of occupations, and design sundry governmental structures. What is more, we are forever modifying how we do things as challenges arise.

The Dilemma

None of the above should be surprising. Indeed, we moderns take pride in our suppleness. As we look about, we see the fruits of our dexterity. Unprecedented wealth and technological sophistication have even allowed us to send people into space. Around us, the affluence engendered by millennia of progress convinces us that we can achieve nearly anything we set our minds to. With the aid of science and enlightened governments we can collectively produce a virtual heaven on earth.

Except that we have not. Wherever we look, we discover unresolved problems. Domestically, we encounter inequalities and exploitation. Crime and violence persist on our streets, while single mothers struggle to raise children on their own. Disagreements about how to provide medical care or to protect our environment bedevil our politics, as do questions about how to mange the national debt. On a personal level, we worry about getting good jobs or finding suitable mates. Although we may be reasonably happy, we wonder if we will ever achieve the success we crave or provide adequately for our old age.

Internationally, things are little better. War and injustice stalk the globe. Nations do not seem to know how to get along, with genocide and vilification a customary means of doing business. Statesmen promise that they will bring about a stable world order, but somehow this never arrives. Instead we get posturing and incompetence. Can the "best and brightest" rescue us from the threat of annihilation? The odds are not promising.

Many people bank on continued *progress* to extract us from these predicaments. They assume that someday history will culminate in the triumph of rationality and good will. And yet it never has. Religious fundamentalists and Marxist gurus insist that they know the path to salvation. Nonetheless it remains beyond our grasp. Why is this so? Why haven't our superior intelligence and caring dispositions overcome the difficulties we encounter? After so many millennia, answers should presumably have been found.

Unfortunately, there is a dilemma built into our social generalist nature. The very qualities that have enabled us to survive as a species have also ensured that some problems will never be solved. There is a contradiction at the heart of how we transact business that cannot be completely resolved. Social scientists and reformers have alleged that either capitalism or socialism is fatally flawed by internal inconsistencies, but the problem goes deeper than that. It is lodged in the mechanisms that allowed us to become successful in the first place.

Social generalists, in order to achieve their aims, must do two essentially incompatible things. They must be flexible, but they must also be stable. Put another way, they must be able to change, but also to remain the same. The essence of being a generalist is that is possible to switch from one way of surviving to another. Without this elasticity, it would be impossible to make the requisite adjustments. Modifying how we earn a living depends upon being able to do different things at different times. Hence, if our behaviors were unduly restricted by our genetic inheritance, we would be unable to embrace viable alternatives. Instead, we would be rigid and vulnerable to unforeseen threats.

But we are also social, which demands stability. If we humans are to work together, we must be able to predict what our companions will do. While this consistency does not have to be perfect, it must be sufficient so that people can anticipate what will be required of them. Consider role partners, perhaps a husband and wife.   If each never knew what to expect of the other, how could they collaborate to make a comfortable home? If neither ever knew who would cook dinner or do the grocery shopping, it would not be long before they went hungry. A

surprise every now and then can be stimulating, yet a regular diet of them is disconcerting. Too many make life so erratic as to generate perpetual anxieties. Is this why people marry—or stay married?

If we turn our attention to the hunting parties of our ancestors, it becomes evident that a lack of stability would have made the chase unsupportable. Hunters must know what to expect of their colleagues. If a plan calls for them to hurl their spears simultaneously, they must be able to count on the reliability of their fellows. If they could not, if their collaborators spontaneously wandered away to smell the flowers, not only would their prey get away, but they would be in mortal danger. Although they might get away with this upon occasion, over the long haul it would be disastrous.

The same applies in the modern factory. Industrial facilities cannot operate effectively if the participants are unable to coordinate their contributions in a predictable manner. If the workers who provide the engines decide to go on a picnic, those who install them into the chassis are left high and dry. Marx (1967) suggested that under communism, people could go fishing in the morning and report to the plant in the afternoon, but if they did this at their personal discretion, it would not be long before the company went bankrupt. Even in a university, if professors and students did not turn up at an appointed time and place, soon there would be no classes or learning.

Stability is therefore as necessary as flexibility for social generalists. Without elasticity they could not make needed adjustments, but without social cohesion they could not put them into operation. If only one member of a team changed and the others did not, then what the one who did will not mesh with the others. However sensible his/her modification, if there were not compensatory modifications by his colleagues, it would be wasted. Just like putting wheels designed for a tricycle on a bus, it would not have the intended effect.

The difficulty is that achieving tandem modifications is problematic. Although one person may be prepared to change, others may not. Nor may the

adjustments of these others harmonize with the initial change. Effective coordination takes time to arrange. This slows things down, even if all concerned desire a change. In fact, the greater the prospective transformation, the more probable the ensuing paralysis. Significant alterations can be made, but not as quickly, or smoothly, as might be desirable.

Unfortunate Consequences

The social generalist need for both flexibility and stability has several unfortunate consequences. Would-be reformers tend to imagine that if they can conceive of a social corrective, it can be implemented. This is untrue for multiple reasons. Often genuine problems cannot be readily fixed because the tensions generated by social generalist's dilemma interfere with adopting an effective strategy. Despite a broad-based desire for improvements, a common approach may be out of reach.

Three complications quickly arise. First, the parties may be confused about what they personally want. Second, they may disagree about what should be done to achieve what they desire. Third, they may choose non-rational means of deciding on the appropriate strategies. These are not epiphenomena, but are built into the mechanisms that maintain social cohesion. Genetically developed methods for reconciling competing demands for flexibility and stability ensure that mistakes will be made and needs will remain unfulfilled.

If this sounds counter-intuitive, that evolution should have arrived at a more effective means of reconciling these difficulties, it must be remembered that genetics works with the means available. We humans might have been able to move faster if we were born with wheels, but as mammals our starting point dictated that we would have limbs. Similarly, although it is theoretically possible to evolve behaviors that seamlessly incorporate flexibility and stability, this has not proved the case. Thus, while the mechanisms at our disposal provide a modicum of harmony, it is far from complete.

As to the confusions that bedevil our species, our desires are frequently out of sync. Often we want incompatible things. More particularly, we may want both change and stasis. As it happens, we are biologically equivocal. On the one hand, when circumstances make us uncomfortable, we dream of an ideal solution. Then when this answer starts to take shape, we long for what we left behind. Give us something new we say, but let it not deprive us of the familiar. As Freud suggested, we are frequently ambivalent. We want opposite things and want them now. This propensity is derived from our personal histories and also from our social generalist legacy.

In sum, there may be no single policy to which we are unambiguously prepared to commit. Our values change, our tactics are modified, and our circumstances mutate. Even how we feel when we arise in the morning can decide us to take a different tack. Likewise, observing what others have can motivate us to want that too.

Given this inconsistency, it would be odd if we were interpersonally consistent. In fact, the discrepancies between what different individuals want makes for greater discord. We humans do not always have the same interests. What satisfies the needs of one may offend another. Life is not an unending series of zero-sum games, but neither is it an everlasting day at the beach. In many instances some people win, whereas others lose. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1968) wrote of the General Will, that is, about what all people want in common, but there is no such thing. While individuals agree on some things, there are always others about which they disagree. Hence when it comes to deciding how to reconcile our need for flexibility and stability, it is certain that there will be differences.

Not only will there be differences, there will be conflict. What one person wants to change, another wants to defend. Rather than a pacific assembly in which they reason together, a violent altercation in which both seek victory may ensue. Indeed, the more important the discordant goals, the more vigorous the resulting contention. People are sometimes forced to capitulate to superior force, but rarely do so graciously. This usully generates a fresh grievance that also cries out for

7

resolution. While there may be resting places where the parties tentatively accept a new reality, there is no final destination where their desires are completely sated and their differences evaporate.

Lastly, even the methods people employ to achieve their goals leave much to be desired. Far from rationally calculating what would meet their respective needs or settle nagging disputes, people utilize means destined to create further problems. Straightforwardly computing, in the manner of a utilitarian costs-benefits analysis, the optimal way to balance competing requirements for flexibility and stability is impossible. There are far too many variables, most of which are unknown and unknowable. Just as Herbert Simon (1947) maintained with respect to organizational decisions, we are condemned to "bounded rationality." We must make do with something other than logical precision because, given the complexities of the challenge, there is no alternative.

Neuropsychologists such as Antonio Damasio (2005) have reached a similar conclusion. They note that as a high-powered as our brains are, they do not possess the computing capacity to deal with so many alternatives. Instead we use what amount to make-dos. In ordinary circumstances, we utilize our emotions to narrow our choices and speed the selection process. Our affects, as it were, summarize a great deal of data so as to make it manageable. In most cases this is perfectly satisfactory, although, as we know, an excess of passion can result in disastrous errors.

With respect to social cohesion, we resort to analogous mechanisms. Here too we make recourse to evolutionary solutions incorporated into our biological equipment. Social scientists are wont to assume that the ways societies are organized are entirely plastic, but this is untrue. While we possess a great deal of latitude in developing social institutions, these are limited by "instinctive" predispositions. Some basic patterns constrain our choices and make us vulnerable to non-rationality. Emile Durkheim (1933) was thus on the right track when he hypothesized that mechanical and/or organic solidary alternatively maintain social cohesion.

He, however, did not go far enough. The means through which we maintain social order are more complex. They include multiple cultural and structural mechanisms that enable us to work harmoniously together. On the cultural level, cognitive, normative and ritual behaviors allow people to interact in ways that are predicable, yet flexible. On the structural level, personal attachments, social roles, property exchange, and hierarchy serve the same purpose. These social domains organize how we conduct ourselves, as well as whom we do this with.

For the most part, these mechanisms function fairly well. Nevertheless, there are inescapable glitches. Our fluctuating needs and interests are such that they can never be fully reconciled and therefore our instinctive modes of squaring them are not foolproof. Indeed, these instruments introduce problems of their own. The causal links that enable us to maintain social integrity have worrisome side effects. Often the source of pseudo-rationality, they initiate tensions and stresses over and above those they tamp down.

This non-rationality is not the same as irrationality. The term *irrational* is a pejorative. Partisans use it to accuse their opponents of being stupid. These others evidently come to the wrong conclusions because their brains are sub-standard. In the case of non-rationality, however, no such mental defect is at work. To the contrary, people's mental and emotional faculties are operating normally. Unfortunately, this sometimes results in conduct that, were it logically calculated, could be construed as dumb.

Were a dearth of intelligence involved, we might attempt to re-educate the offenders or make sure that only persons with a high IQ did the choosing. Nonetheless, with regard to the mechanisms that help us deal with the social generalist's dilemma this is rarely possible. What goes wrong is not attributable to personal shortcomings, but to the mechanisms available to overcome them. In short, the ways we evolved to deal with the dilemma produce dilemmas.

Hierarchy

We humans are a hierarchical species (Fein, 2012). In every society, people rank themselves in comparison with their peers. Particularly in regard to power we regularly wish to outdo others. Moreover, we wish this superiority to be acknowledged. We want others to defer to us, thereby recognizing our dominance. The fantasy of ruling the world, or at least of being its king, is widespread. It is not the monopoly of a few corrupt individuals who have not learned the virtues of egalitarianism.

By the same token, we hate to be inferior. Virtually all of us want to be winners rather than losers. As a result, we sometimes fantasize about a world in which everyone is on a par. This way we would not have to worry about losing because it would be impossible for anyone to out-rank us. It is from this impulse that visions of complete equality arise. Nonetheless, in the real world this is untenable because every one of us participates in making it so. Either we strive to get ahead, or, failing that, we submit to those who succeed. In either case, our behavior provides the substance of hierarchical constancy. It is what converts ranking systems into stable social structures.

Nonetheless, our hierarchies furnish essential services. They would not have developed in our environment of evolutionary adaptedness had they not. Among other things ranking systems permit imperative coordination (Dahrendorf, 1968). When someone is acknowledged as superior to others, this person is able to issue directives others are apt to follow. Without this, large-scale projects would be unworkable. Skyscrapers' would never rise nor bridges span great rivers if every worker did as he/she pleased. All must conform to the same plan for it to be realized. But this is possible only if it is imposed from above. This is the same sort of coordination that was required of group hunters writ large.

Hierarchies also provide internal and external protection. Within a group, individuals deemed more powerful are able to impose order (de Waal, 2001). They can suppress conflicts much in the manner of Hobbes' Leviathan. Likewise, with

regard to outsiders, a respected leader can organize a competent defense. His or her fighting abilities coupled with a talent for organization can improve the odds against potential aggressors. More controversially, hierarchies distribute scare resources. Those at their apex are able to protect what they have while overseeing what others obtain. This reduces a source of friction about which Hobbes was concerned.

Hierarchies are likewise a source of social motivation. A desire for superiority can provide the impetus to outperform others. So can a desire to control scarce resources for one's own benefit. Just as Davis and Moore (1945) alleged, an ability to reward people for uncommon effort motivates them to make these exertions. Lastly, because we are biological creatures, we are concerned with the fate of the next generation. Therefore, as Darwin (1974) observed, we engage in selective mating. Women, in particular, make themselves sexually available to males who have demonstrated their hierarchical prowess. This may not be fair, but it is not for nothing that rich men are judged more attractive than poor ones.

How then are hierarchies constructed? What in-born devices enable some individuals to rise compared with others? The central mechanism is the test of strength. People compete to see who is stronger. What constitutes a strength varies with what is socially useful, but the range is broad. Physical strength counts, yet mental dexterity counts for more. Being able to make successful plans of action is usually more valuable than doing the heavy lifting. Likewise of enormous value are political skills. Because a group of individuals can almost always out-compete a single person, those who are able to attract and motivate others are accounted powerful.

The winners of contests for priority thereby acquire a reputation for being potent. Others who are aware of their accomplishments tend to defer to them. Rather than challenge them and lose, they back down such that winners do not have to keep proving their mettle. Over time, multiple contests between multiple players develop into a rough consensus about who out-ranks whom. This is confirmed in acts of submission and superiority. Often symbolic, these displays obviate the need for perpetual conflict.

In fact, in Gesellschaft societies, such as our own, symbolic displays of power often displace its concrete demonstration. In a world where most people are strangers, direct observations of tests of strength are rarely possible; hence we resort to signs of power. This allows for deception in that how we dress, speak, and present ourselves can all be manipulated (Goffman, 1959). From this it follows that non-functional mistakes can be, and are, made.

As a consequence, hierarchy is a source of error and abuse. Although ranking systems provide flexibility and stability, they also produce the reverse. Leaders are able to impose constancy by asserting their authority and flexibility by enforcing change. But they can do the opposite by demanding unneeded conformity or pointless social modifications. Similarly, followers can both conform when they shouldn't and rebel counter-productively. As human beings, we make mistakes about many things, including when to change.

Hierarchical Dysfunctions

Societies differ in the amount of social mobility that they permit. Some are rigid, whereas others more flexible. On the inflexible end of the spectrum, caste systems expect individuals to remain in the positions into which they were born. At the other extreme, at least theoretically, are the social class arrangements of democratic market systems. Here merit is supposed to allow individuals to rise as high and rapidly as their talents permit. In between, estate and patrimonial systems allow limited mobility—even though this is discouraged. Meanwhile socialist and communist supposedly foster egalitarianism; although this has never been achieved in practice.

In any event, we humans endorse conflicting ideals about how hierarchies should be organized. Some societies and individuals assume that rigidity is the only viable source of interpersonal security. Like Hobbes, they believe that those in power should not be challenged. Because these leaders are presumably the best and the brightest, they should be allowed to exercise unrestrained authority. John Locke (1959) disagreed. He argued that if monarchs did not abide by the social contract,

they could be deposed. Aristocratic preference remained, but it was to be modified as social requirements dictated.

Contemporary Liberals favor a more egalitarian approach. They want to use the government to even out inequalities. Like Thomas Jefferson (Mapp, 1987), they do not believe some people are born with saddles on their backs, whereas others enter the world equipped with spurs on their heels. All are born equal, endowed with identical rights and, in a just community, with identical opportunities. Abilities should therefore be cultivated so that the most talented can rise—but not so high that they lord it over the less able. Anarchists go further. They assume that we do not need hierarchies, which would enable us we escape the curse of anyone ever being superior to anyone else.

Evidently, what is deemed the worthiest sort of ranking system varies from the most stable to the most flexible. Instead of recognizing that both are necessary, albeit difficult to merge, commentators opt for one extreme or the other. This is thought to solve the problem, whereas it does not. In the one case, it fosters rigidity and in the other chaos, thereby exacerbating the problem (Chirot, 1986).

Whatever the hierarchical system, it must allow for opposite contingencies. It must sometimes enforce conformity even when persons resist it and at others foster unsettling changes. To begin with, hierarchies must be capable of modification. We humans are neither immortal nor infallible. We get injured, we get sick, we die, and we make dreadful blunders. No hierarchy can ensure that those at its summit will not need to be replaced. This is consequently a source of tension. Those at the top generally need to be respected if they are to exercise effective authority. But they cannot be respected so unconditionally that if they die or become incompetent, they cannot be supplanted.

This need produces conflicting dispositions. Those on top are usually inclined to protect their position, while those below them are inclined to be either submissive or rebellious. In fact, the same person may at one point be compliant, then, when conditions change, transform into a striver. This Janus faced character is

part of the human condition. It is one of the reasons why we can be ambivalent. Wanting to win, but knowing we must often hold back, we are torn between opposite strategies. More confusing still is that it is not always obvious when these approaches should be turned on or off.

As a result, most persons protect their positions, whatever these happen to be. Sometimes they do this by defending the status quo. Thus, they guard against insurrections if they are on top and avoid challenges to authority if they are on the bottom. When this is the case, stability overrules flexibility in that people resist threatening changes. At other times, they press for transformations in order to improve their status. Perhaps, they attempt to be innovative in the hope that this will enhance their strengths and enable them to win contests for priority. They might, for instance, devise novel technologies that can be translated into financial rewards. Or, if they are living in feudal times, they can practice their jousting skills so as to win the tournaments that will raise their status. Or they can use religion or ideology to organize followers who in their enthusiasm raise the standing of their leaders. When it comes to inventiveness in the service of hierarchical advancement, we humans are remarkably adept.

In any case, rigid stability can be enhanced in the form of arrogance among those in power. Individuals who exercise social control may assume that this is so because they are smarter and more insightful than others. Even if they have inherited their positions, they conclude that their bluer blood guarantees sounder judgment. Accordingly they may refuse to listen to advice from their inferiors. Rather than admit they might be wrong—and therefore weak—they convince themselves they have nothing to learn. As a result, they are prone to error; especially when ingenious responses are called for.

Undue rigidity may also follow from a leader's insecurities. Uneasy rests the head that wears the crown (Ludwig, 2002). Unruly subjects have been known to challenge the best of rulers. Why then shouldn't someone who knows his limitations be concerned? For some, this translates into paranoia and tyranny. Many rigid systems (the Soviet Union comes to mind) have been imposed for this

reason—even when those in charge pose as reformers. Because no one, no matter how strong, is always able to win when challenged, this sort of inflexibility is a constant threat.

At the other extreme, losers also enforce excessive stability. They too can oppose useful change. Naturally, they do so for different reasons. One is fear. Those who are weak know they are vulnerable. As a result, they seek to reduce this hazard by making sure not to offend those who have the power to punish them. They grovel; they are obsequious; they are unimaginative. Thus, when Joseph Stalin was terrorizing the Russian people by killing them in the millions, he was idolized by his vassals (Montefiore, 2004). He was regarded as their protective father; hence it was impossible to conceive of a world in which he was not issuing ukases. Ordinary Russians obeyed happily, and reflexively, because the alternative was chilling.

Members of the lower classes also impose excess rigidity by refusing to use their brains. Leaders are supposed to be planners, whereas the led are expected to execute these plans. Followers are therefore discouraged from being innovative. Indeed, even if they are, because they lack authority others are disinclined to follow their lead. The upshot is that many poor people do not see the point of honing their intelligence (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Why seek a better education when there is no payoff? Consequently, they find school boring and apply their energies elsewhere. In the end, given their ignorance and oppositionalism, they seem dumber than they are. Inclined to avoid what they do not understand, they reinforce the status quo.

Meanwhile inappropriate flexibility too can flow from the nature of hierarchies. We see this at the top of the heap when leaders assume they can do anything they want. In overestimating their power, they imagine that any order they issue will be obeyed and have the outcomes they desire. Even though strong leaders can have profound effects, e.g., when Constantine promoted Christianity in the Roman Empire, they also arouse disapproval and/or generate fiascos. Thus the Pharaoh Akhenaten in promoting monotheism provoked the wrath of the priestly establishment. Hence, when he died they expunged his reforms (Silverman, 2003).

Napoleon likewise went too far in seeking to impose his power. In so doing, he activated the coalition that brought him down. He also overplayed his hand in invading Russia, ultimately condemning his Grand Army to ignominious defeat in its lethal snows (Lyons, 1994). Later Stalin too misjudged the Russian winter and built a canal to the White Sea the proved unusable because of the permafrost. As for Mao Tse-Tung, he unleashed a war against sparrows that instead of increasing the food supply initiated a famine (Pantsov and Levine, 2012).

The poor, while not noted for their flexibility, can likewise go too far in making unfortunate decisions. They may ignore physical and social constraints in an effort to assert their independence. We see this in crime where, thanks to a lack of control, they impetuously take chances that result in incarceration (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1999). We also see this in drug use where they ignore the lethal effects of banned substances so as to obtain emotional release from the painful weight of their social defeats.

All in all, the mechanisms that produce hierarchy can backfire. Instead of protecting people from internal and external threats, they introduce new hazards. Rather than coordinate beneficial projects, they facilitate destructive ones. In place of motivating people to greater effort, they induce them to engage in damaging activities. As for distributing scarce resources, this can be done so clumsily as to unleash violence rather than contain it.

The upshot is that a biologically evolved means of providing social cohesion can have centrifugal effects. The inevitable tensions between a need for stability and flexibility become too great. One or the other oversteps its bounds and creates more havoc than it prevents.

Morality

We humans are both so selfish and such effective killers that the need to tame our impulses requires more than one means of control. If we are to collaborate on group projects, and do so flexibly, we need multiple methods of constraining ourselves. Thanks to our intelligent tool use, we are, each of us,

formidable creatures. Any one is capable of dispatching any other if frustrated. Restraint therefore requires what Freud (1953-1974) called over-determination. Complimentary mechanisms are essential if we are to retain our strengths while subordinating them to collective ventures.

Morality is such means (Fein, 1997). No human society is without some sort of moral code. The rules applied to keep people from tearing the social fabric apart differ from place to place and time to time; nonetheless there are always such rules. There need to be because our interests differ, while our ability to pursue these is potent. Were incompatible desires not checked, they would set off unceasing struggles for dominance. Hierarchies address this by reinforcing the power of individuals charged with suppressing conflict. Unfortunately, they, even when well intentioned, cannot be everywhere. They cannot be present at every confrontation, nor does any human possess so much vigor that he/she can suppress every flare up.

Something else is needed to maintain the peace—and morality fits this bill. It can be virtually everywhere because every member of the community is recruited to enforce it. Moral rules are strongly enforced proscriptions (Sumner, 1960). They inform people of what they are not supposed to do and then sanction violations. There are punishments for breaking the rules and rewards for upholding them. Thus, individuals and groups offended by a transgression step in to suppress it, as do persons upon themselves.

In order for this to work, moral rules must be respected. People have to be willing to follow and enforce them. If they are not, what were purported to be *rules* are not—they are suggestions. This means that moral prescriptions have to be internalized. The motivation to impose them must come from within and be so potent that it endures for long periods. If not, the stability necessary to keep the peace will be absent. Unlike hierarchical enforcement, which is external, morality's power derives from its personal dependability. Unless its rules are predictably imposed, from without *and* within, they cannot command the deference to reduce conflicts.

Nonetheless, moral rules must also be flexible. What is proscribed may need to be altered if circumstances change. Hence rules applicable to a rural agricultural society may not be suitable for an urban industrial one. For instance, ancient Egypt did not require rules against plagiarism, while ours does. Nor are attitudes toward abortion likely to be the same in communities where infant mortality is high versus those where parents can count on their offspring surviving them. In short, morality must not only be dependable; it must be appropriate.

Here again we have a conflict between flexibility and stability. Both are needed, but how are they to be simultaneously sustained? That there is a disparity is apparent in the long-standing dispute between absolutists and relativists. The former insist that moral rules are eternal and inviolable. They are regarded as either the sacrosanct commandments of an omnipotent deity or the consequences of natural law. Meanwhile the latter argue that moral rules are socially constructed (Westermarck, 1960). For them, it follows that these can be deconstructed and replaced. It also follows that moral mandates are confined to the communities that create them; ergo they are valid, and only valid, within them.

How then can these competing interpretations be reconciled? Can morality be understood in a way where its rules are both constant and amenable to modification? Although this may appear to require squaring the circle, it can be achieved. A tri-part theory of morality does this. By observing how morality operates, it explains the apparent contradictions.

First, moral rules are not what they seem (Fein, 1997). They are not fully consistent imperatives that are encapsulated in unchanging verbal formulations. To the contrary, they are informal and paradigmatically learned. While we employ interjections such as "Don't lie!' or "Lying is wrong!" these are not as unambiguous as they appear. Do they, for instance, mean that no untruth should ever be uttered? Of course not. There are many instances where deceiving people is not only acceptable, but mandatory. Should we tell aunt Mary that her dress makes he look fat? Or should we be tactful? Do we honestly inform the Gestapo we are hiding Jews in the cellar or mislead them when they come to our door? Hopefully, the latter.

Moral rules may seem explicit; yet they are not. They are riven through and through with unstated exceptions. Is taking a pen home from the office theft? Is padding an expense account a mortal sin? Is telling a telephone solicitor that our mother is unavailable to come to the phone a crime? Most of us would say no because we learn the qualifications to moral rules by way of examples. Although we have been exposed to injunctions we are apt to conflate with the rules, what matters is what is sanctioned and what is not. Rewards and punishments inform us of what is genuinely required. Nonetheless, these are discovered via models (Bandura, 1976). We watch what people do, not merely what they say, and it is from this that we draw conclusions.

Yet examples are inherently ambiguous. Different people interpret them differently. Despite this difficulty, however, we utilize them because they provide flexibility and stability. No verbal rule, no matter how finely crafted, can anticipate every contingency we wish to proscribe (Howard, 1995). Nor will everyone agree on every particular. We therefore need ambiguity. We must have the space to make unanticipated adjustments. These vary from time to time and person to person, but if we pay allegiance to joint verbal formulations, we can act as if we agreed. This makes it possible to sustain the same rule, even though it is applied in different ways. In sum, this capacity overcomes the social generalist's dilemma; although it also occasions disputes when understandings differ.

As for more extensive modifications, we require another means of doing so. Should abortion be legal? Is sex before marriage acceptable? Or cohabitation? Or single parenthood? Informal rules cannot be stretched to paper over every quarrel. Significant differences demand more potent solutions. These are furnished by moral negotiations. When disparities in what the rules should be become glaring, those on opposed sides coalesce into activist alliances. Then they energetically seek to convert others to their opinion. Instead of splitting the differences, they attempt to quash the opposition. We see this in the abortion controversy where the pro-life faction wishes to outlaw the procedure, whereas the pro-choice faction insists it be legal in every manifestation.

Moral negotiations are therefore polarized and vigorous. Because the parties care about the resolution, they fight for their preferred solution forcefully, but not always fairly. A good guy/bad guy mentality emerges where it is imperative that the bad guys be routed. Tactically, they are considered so bad that anything they say must be disregarded. Indeed, to be seduced by their blather would be unforgiveable. On the other hand, it is essential that one's allies heave to the party line. Any chink in the collective armor, any concession to the opposition, might lead to defeat. As a consequence, moral factions demand orthodoxy. They also go to extremes. In order to attract support, they purify and simplify their programs. They become idealists (Fein, 1999). This means that if they are against abortions, these must be outlawed in every instance, whereas if they are for them, they should be available on demand. If you disagree, you are the enemy and must be destroyed.

Added to this is the third leg of the tripartite theory. Morality is emotionally charged. The sanctions whereby it is enforced are largely affective. While we use corporal punishment with children and invoke legal remedies with adults, on a day-to-day basis with adults it is feelings that keep people in line. Not just feelings, but intense feelings. When someone breaks an important rule, we get angry. We get very angry. We become morally indignant (Fein, 1997). This might not seem very compelling, but it is. Strong emotions frighten us—especially anger. They threaten us with substantial penalties and therefore we take heed. Rather than risk being injured, we comply. Although anger can lead to counter-anger and this can escalate into violence, for the most part we are so alert to the disapproval of others than we rein ourselves in rather than take a chance.

Also implicated in enforcing moral rules is guilt. Guilt, as opposed to anger, is internal. It is anger turned inward. When we violate a standard that we uphold, we may punish ourselves for this transgression. Our conscience bothers us and we suffer pangs of remorse. Moreover, because this agency is within us, we cannot escape it. As a result, it can be effective in achieving compliance. Other emotions too have this effect. Shame and disgust, which originate from the outside, are also internalized. Then, rather than experience embarrassment or be ostracized, we

conform. Similarly compelling are threats of a loss of love. We humans, especially as children, are so desirous of love that the prospect of its withdrawal can be devastating. We fear being left to our own devises and therefore submit.

Emotions, however, get out of hand. When extremely intense, they mutate into a dangerous form (Cannon, 1929). Anger becomes rage and fear terror. Once this occurs, our ability to think clearly is disrupted. We may become violent or flee we know not where. Either way, the controls that morality generally imposes fly out the window. People engage in behaviors that tear their communities apart rather than bind them together. This makes morality a double-edged sword. Under ordinary circumstances, it is facilitates social cohesion, whereas in dire straits it can do the opposite.

Given these mechanisms, morality can both provide social solidarity or undermine it with passionate grievances. Most of the time, there is sufficient agreement that a moral consensus operates as if it were absolute. Because the rules are routinely enforced, they seem permanent. And because they are internalized, they appear to be beyond question. Yet when societies are changing, particularly when these are major changes, morality becomes a source of contention. Rules are modified, but not without discord. This provides flexibility at a cost. In a sense, moral prescriptions are socially constructed; nevertheless this is not without limits or angst. Existing standards cannot be altered with the snap of a finger, nor are a society's codes immune to external revision. For the most part, morality is stable and therefore predictable, but it is also plastic enough so that it can be adjusted if the need is great. As such, it underwrites social cohesion, while introducing a source of tension. This too is an aspect of the social generalist's dilemma.

Moral Dysfunctions

To say that morality introduces tensions while maintaining stability is an understatement. That which might go wrong can be devastating. Thus, an extreme flexibility that disrupts an institutionalized constancy can wrench a community apart. In accommodating to novel conditions, the mechanisms for doing so may

21

threaten its existence. Oddly, plasticity can be initiated by countering one set of absolutes with another. In order to move what seems immovable and equally immovable alternative may be brought to bear. The resulting clash can be so jarring that neither side survives.

Morality can also be excessively rigid. It can insist that changes not be made even when they are imperative. In an effort to ensure that bad things don't happen, people insist on conduct that has makes them worse. Intense pressures may ensure that even minor violations are severely punished. Accordingly, more pain is created than prevented.

As importantly, the clash between flexibility and stability can be disruptive. The battle to determine which of two perspectives will prevail can be so violent as to depopulate entire communities. The Thirty Years War provides a stark example (Parker, 1984). Fought to decide whether Catholicism or Protestantism would dictate religious dogma, a third of Germany's population was annihilated.

Paradoxically the mechanisms that allow moral rules to be both stable and flexible often produce conflicts more brutal that those they seek to prevent. Orthodoxies that attempt to enforce conformity provide a case in point. They usually insist there is just one way to defend social harmony. A deviation is regarded as subversive. If allowed to stand, it would tear down the moral edifice and therefore cannot be tolerated. Those upholding such values thus resort to fire and lead to guarantee there will be no slippage.

Once the Catholic Church considered itself the guardian of European morality. It stood between salvation and the flames of hell. This task was deemed so critical that it endorsed crusades to spread its mandate. One of these was against the Cathars. Righteous armies enthusiastically set entire French villages to the torch so as to expunge their heretical congregations. Then the Church instituted an Inquisition to root out the remaining nonconformists and save their souls by incinerating them in auto de fe's. Later this same tool was employed to eliminate witches believed to be in league with the devil. The upshot was that many cranky

old women lost their lives so that Roman authority would not be challenged (Trevor-Roper, 1967).

There have been many instances where what is generally considered immoral are condoned to uphold a moral cause. Excess flexibility is also responsible for inflicting a surfeit of pain. Morality, because its standards may feel onerous, is often burdensome. People chafe at its restrictions and contend that they must judge what is right for themselves (Wolfe, 2001). Marriage—why it is just a piece of paper that shouldn't restrict a person's freedom. Sexual mores—why they are outdated efforts intended to rob people of the pleasures of the flesh. These rules can safely be ignored, including those against crime, because poor people are merely evening the odds against them.

In recent years, efforts have been made to encourage diversity (Wood, 2003). It is assumed that all moral standards are equivalent and therefore equally acceptable. As a corollary of relativism, it is maintained that no one has a right to judge how others live. Not only is this up to them, but the ensuing variation enriches our lives. Hence if some women believe it is their right to be single mothers, they should not be scorned. That such tolerance condemns millions of children to lives of despair must not enter our calculations. Nor does the fact that some communities condone violence and others discourage education.

Oddly, idealism overdoes both stability and flexibility (Fein, 1999). In taking the goals of moral negotiators to extremes, it promotes strict orthodoxies at the same time that it extends the realm of the possible beyond its limits. While idealism has an aura of being ultra-moral, we must never forget that Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot were idealists. Each had a purified vision he sought to impose on his countrymen. Hitler believed in the superiority of the German people, which he defended with the sword. Stalin was devoted to communism; hence he sent opponents to the Gulag. Pol Pot would not allow intellectuals to undermine his egalitarian yearnings, so he constructed pyramids of their skulls.

Idealism tends to demand the impossible and then promote it by lethal means. The moral vision, whatever it is, must go unchallenged. Nor can it remain unfulfilled. Thus the ideal, even if it is a fantasy, is imbued with a theoretical stability. It must remain inviolate; free from meddling. Equality must thus be total equality. Freedom must be complete freedom. There are to be no exceptions and no modifications. Never mind that for a hierarchical species total equality is unattainable. Never mind that individuals with differing interests must be prevented from injuring one another.

Sadly, because these ideals are impossible, those who sponsor them are destined to be frustrated. Then in their distress, they engage in frenzied efforts to prevail. Yet because the denouement is unattainable, the excesses mount up. In the worst cases, societies implode. They collapse under the pressures to change by engaging in fanaticism. This seems to have been the fate of the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

As social generalists, we humans have accomplished amazing feats. Our ability to work together and to change what we do has enabled us to colonize the ends of the earth. Starting from as few as twenty thousand individuals seventy thousand years ago, we have exploded across the globe (Tattersall, 2012) now numbering seven billion and climbing. We have tamed deserts, crossed seas, and vaulted into space. This is a remarkable and unprecedented development.

These successes would not have been possible if we had not been able to reconcile our concurrent need for stability and flexibility. Something has therefore gone right. Nonetheless, we have not always been able to resolve our differences. Catastrophes have occurred. Societies have undergone wrenching turmoil such that some have collapsed. The tensions introduced by conflicting needs do not always arrive at an amicable settlement. The very process of attempting to devise solutions sometimes precipitates crises.

Stability and flexibility have not always been balanced. Indeed, there are times when this is not feasible. Oftentimes we humans imagine that one day we can

devise a form of social organization that satisfies everyone. Prone to idealism and confident in our mental acuity, we assume we can find an ultimate solution. After all, we have come this far; why shouldn't we come a bit farther?

Nonetheless, the social generalist's dilemma is part of our heritage. The tensions it portends result from incompatible objectives. Just as our ability to talk moved our larynx into a position where food sometimes goes down the wrong pipe, evolution has forced us to pay a price for our novel abilities. Even if it is possible to resolve operational differences, the mechanisms through which we do so are fraught with dangers. Our social life is a minefield that requires constant vigilance. Improvements are possible, but not inevitable. We must therefore remain alert to the pitfalls contained in our very nature.

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