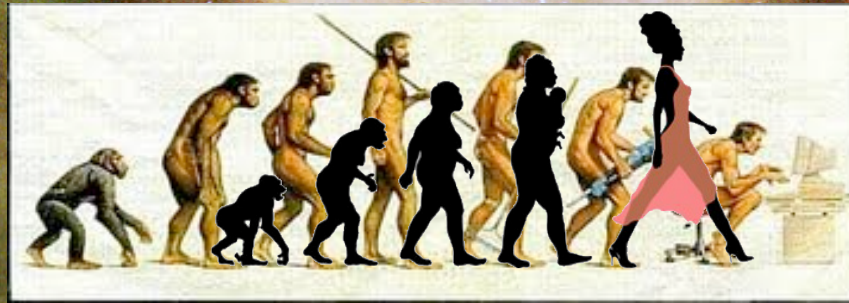


Human Salvation in the Epic of Creation



Human Salvation in the Epic of Creation

- **An Exploration in Christian Naturalism**
- Karl E. Peters
- “Epic of Creation” Course, Zygon Center
for Religion & Science
- November 26, 2012

- Based on “Human Salvation in an Evolutionary World,”
Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science, December
2012. An earlier version is at www.karlpeters.net

Main Ideas

- **Salvation** = State of **Dynamic Wholeness**
Personal, Communal, Planetary--this world.
- **Humans** evolved to be **ambivalent**.
 - **Multi-causal** understanding of human behavior-- Doing Bad, Good, and Nothing
- Salvation through **Jesus** as a **Religious Genius** (Darwinian Approach). "Moral Exemplar Theory."
- **Christlike living** following Jesus in the **dimensions of spirit, wisdom, and politics.**

Salvation as Dynamic Wholeness



Being Saved to Dynamic Wholeness

- **preventing** evil--an individual, group, society, or even the planet from being disrupted, impaired, or destroyed.
- **rescuing and restoring** individuals and communities to well-being and well-functioning.
- **maintaining** individuals and communities in the restored dynamic harmony.

What are We?

Evolved Human Ambivalence

Human nature . . . is inherently multidimensional and the same applies to chimpanzee and bonobo nature. . . . Being both more systematically brutal than chimps and more empathic than bonobos, we are by far the most bipolar ape. Our societies are never completely peaceful, never completely competitive, never ruled by sheer selfishness, and never perfectly moral. Pure states are not nature's way.

Frans de Wall, *The Inner Ape*, p. 233.

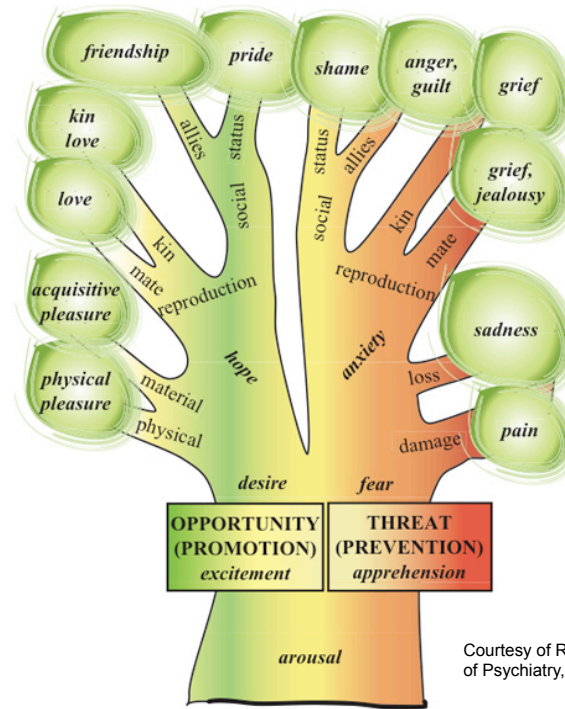
In-Group--Out-Group Selection: a Fundamental Problem

- Primates (Humans) evolved through Natural Selection--reproductive success in the surrounding environment.
- A part of the natural environment was other primate (human) groups.
- Those genetic variations of brain and behavior that supported in-group cooperation and defended against outgroups contributed to human reproductive success.

Emotional Ambivalence

- **“Emotions are . . . a set of body-rooted survival mechanisms that have evolved to turn us away from danger and propel us forward to things that may be of benefit.”**

Rita Carter *Mapping the Mind*



Courtesy of Randolph Nesse, Professor of Psychiatry, University of Michigan.



Multiple Causes of Behavior

Melvin Conner following Nikko Tinbergen



Remote or **Evolutionary Causes**: natural selection that determines an individual's genome (individual variation).

Intermediate or **developmental causes**: embryonic/maturational processes, early environmental effects (first three years of life), ongoing environmental effects, e.g. social reinforcement.

Immediate **physiological causes**, such as hormones, brain structure with neural circuits and transmitters, and immediate **external causes** from the environment that trigger the behavior.

Is this man a Psychopath?



PSYCHOPATHS

- How Many?
 - 1% of the American population
 - 25% of people in prison
 - 10% of people on Wall Street--a conservative estimate.
- What are they like?
 - Clever, charming, manipulative, conning, impulsive, anti-social
 - **Lack of empathy**

Almost Psychopaths

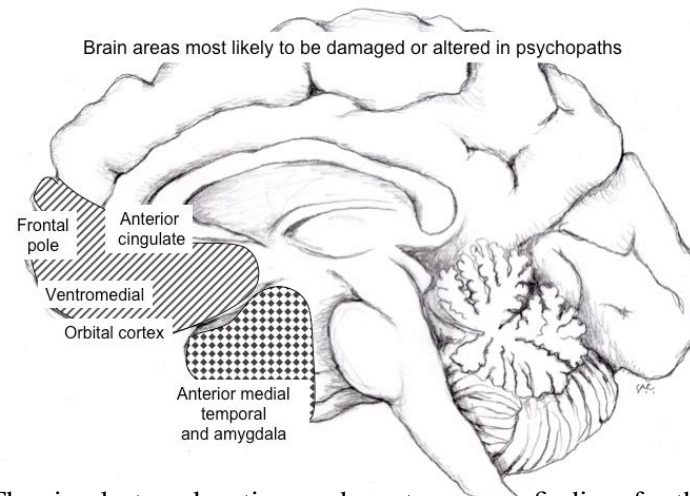
Ronald Schouten and James Silver *Almost a Psychopath:
Do I (or Does Someone I Know) Have a Problem with
Manipulation and Lack of Empathy?* Center City, MN:

Hazeldon. E-book, 2012

- 15% of the general population are are estimated to be “almost psychopaths.”
- Almost psychopaths include spouses, coworkers, bosses, neighbors, and political leaders, [clergy? teachers?].
- People who possess charm, glibness, and **a lack of empathy.**

Multiple Causes of Psychopathy

- Poor nurturing in first three years, especially when there is “toxic stress.”
- MAO Gene regulates serotonin deactivation
 - Short version = less serotonin deactivation and hence more aggression.
- Prefrontal Lobe (Orbital Cortex) and Amygdala interaction.



“The simplest explanation, and most common finding, for the biological basis of psychopathology especially associated with impulsive and violent behavior is that the individual has incurred significant damage to the orbital cortex and adjacent parts of the prefrontal and anterior temporal lobe.”

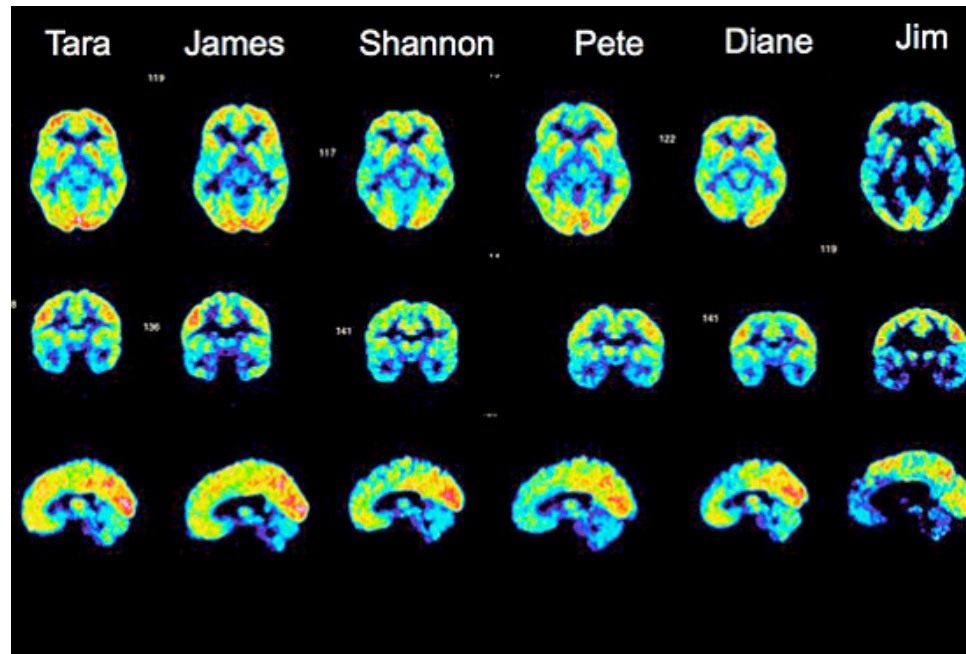
Jim Fallon, 2006. “Neuroanatomical Background to Understanding the Brain of the Young Psychopath.” *Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law*. 3:341-367.

Jim Fallon: University of California Davis
Professor of Neuroscience and Psychiatry

- Brain and Alzheimers
- Criminal psychopaths
- Murderers in his family on his fathers side
- What about his own immediate family?



- Only one person in the family had the variant of the MAOA gene associated with violent behavior
- and also an inactive orbital cortex like the murderers he had been studying.





Yet, he was not a murderer or even a violent man. What was different? He says that he was raised in a loving family. "I had a charmed childhood; I was never abused. No one's done anything bad enough to turn me into a killer," "It shows that your genes are not a jail sentence" (Bold 2010).

First Three Years of Life

- Toxic stress + lack of nurturing support
- Can contribute to poor brain development.
- Like muscle development, use it or lose it or don't develop it.

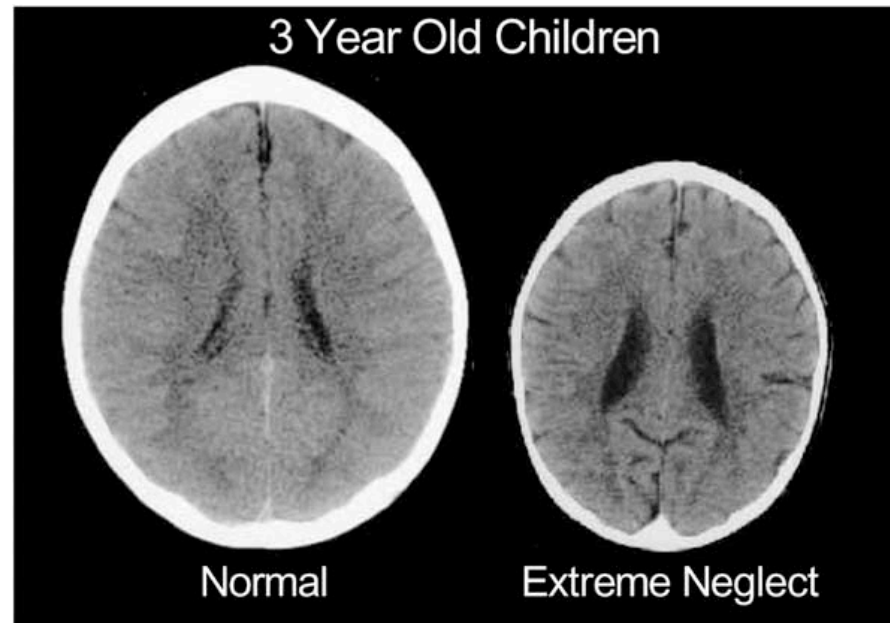


Figure 1. Abnormal brain development following sensory neglect in early childhood. These images illustrate the negative impact of neglect on the developing brain. In the CT scan on the left is an image from a healthy three year old with an average head size (50th percentile). The image on the right is from a three year old child suffering from severe sensory-deprivation and neglect. This child's brain is significantly smaller than average (3rd percentile) and has enlarged ventricles and cortical atrophy. (Bruce D. Perry "Childhood Experience and the Expression of Genetic Potential," *Brain and Mind* 3: 79-100, 2002.)

We Are Not Psychopaths, but Most of Us Are often Bystanders

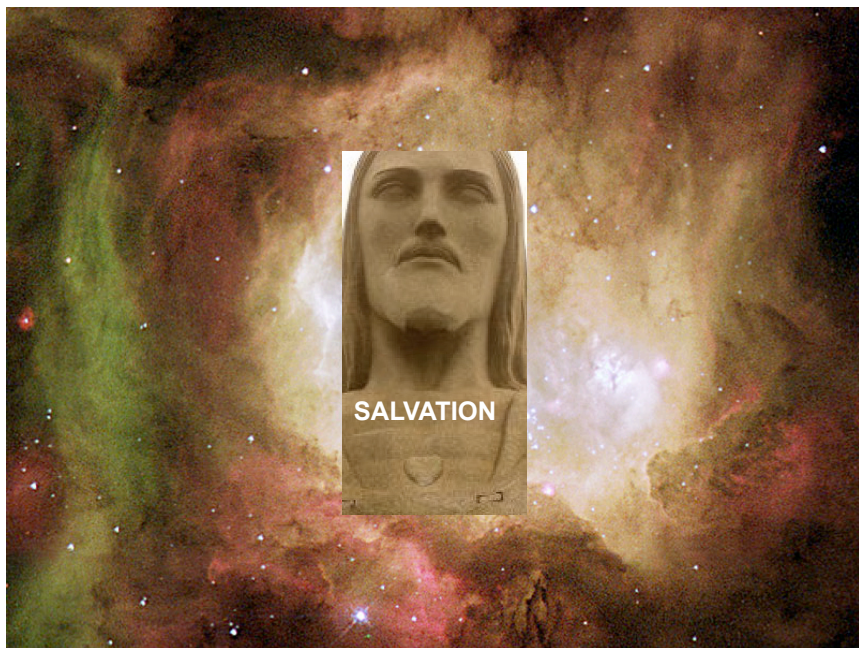
- The core of the bystander problem is that we humans have evolved to have self-protective emotions and behaviors as well as pro-social ones.
- Both were selected in part because they facilitated in-group cooperation against out-group competition.

Fear

- A fundamental evolved emotion is fear--especially the fear of strangers. Children after six months show indications of fearing strangers, which works for their self protection.
- Such fear can also be awakened when we confront people who are obviously different from us.
- Research by Mark Levine and colleagues shows that “bystanders are more likely to help victims who are described as in-group as opposed to out-group members” (Levine et al. 2002, see also Levine et al. 2010).

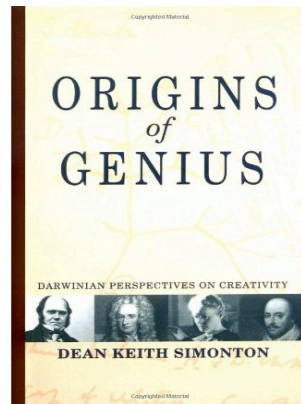
Summing up: Doing Good, Bad, and Nothing

- Following Melvin Konner, I've been suggesting there are Multiple Causes.
- The responses must also be multiple.
- What can Christianity contribute?



RELIGIOUS GENIUS

- Many **metaphors for Jesus**: Rabbi, Light to the Gentiles, Christ Crucified, Prince of Peace, and Liberator
- Could “Religious Genius” be a metaphor today in the context of an evolutionary, naturalistic world?

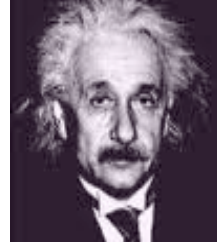
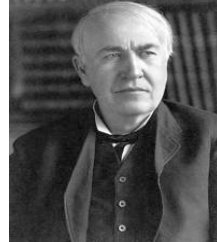


- Donald T. Campbell's
- Blind Variation, Selection, Retention Model (BVSR)
- Originality and Usefulness

“Little C” creativity in daily life

“Big C” creativity = Genius

“



The Three Most Influential People in History--Michael Hart, 2000



Is it demeaning to call Mohammed
or Jesus a genius?

Significance of Jesus

Walter Wink and Marcus Borg

- **Context -- the Roman Empire** as a brutal domination system
- Comparative Religion Analysis
 - **Dimension of Spirit** -- Jewish mystic “centered” in God.
 - **Dimension of Wisdom** -- alternative wisdom of universal, unconditional love.
 - **Dimension of Politics** -- “Jesus’s Third Way” non-violent revolutionary for justice.

Jesus and Rome



Two Palm Sunday Processions

- Borg writes that the opening act of Jesus's week is the Palm Sunday procession. This was not the only procession at that time. Each year at Passover, the Roman governor Pilate rode into Jerusalem with his armed forces from the West, from the governing city of Maritima on the Mediterranean coast, to guard against things getting out of hand among the Jews. Jesus came into Jerusalem from the East. The biblical texts tell us that this was not accidental. It was a procession that Jesus planned. According to Borg, "His decision to enter the city as he did was what we could call a planned political demonstration, a counter-demonstration. The juxtaposition of these two processions embodies the central conflict of Jesus's last week: the kingdom of God or the kingdom of imperial domination . . . two visions of life on earth" (Borg 2006, 232).

Christlike Living

- Dimension of Spirit--prayer and meditation.
- Dimension of Wisdom--alternative wisdom of universal, unconditional love.
- Dimension of Politics--non-violent protest and resistance.

Christ-like Living: Spirit Dimension,

- **Hesychia**, Orthodox Christianity. An interior practice of living in stillness and silence
- Find a place with no distracting sounds.
- With eyes closed, repeats “Lord Jesus” rhythmically, perhaps with the aid of a prayer rope or one’s own breathing.
- “Let go” of the multiplicity of disconnected and conflicting thoughts that arise from our conscious and unconscious minds.
- One finally reaches “true inner silence or hesychia,” in which there is no internal speaking but instead listening.
- The response is identical with the unceasing prayer of the saints. It is entering “into the life and act of God” (Ware, 2000, 89-102).



Christ-like Living: Spirit Dimension

- “**Centering prayer**” Roman Catholic Christianity--a method designed to turn off the ordinary flow of thoughts and open oneself to the presence of God.
- Assume a comfortable position and choose a one or two syllable word, a “sacred word” with the “intention of opening yourself beyond thoughts, images, and emotions.”

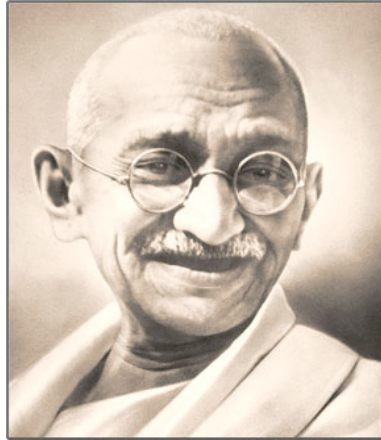


- In the beginning, let the sacred word pass very gently into your imagination, “as if you were laying a layer of cotton.”
- Whenever you become aware of any conscious perceptions, return to the sacred word.
- Then let yourself pass beyond the sacred word “into pure awareness,” “into union with that to which the word points--the Ultimate Mystery, the Presence of God, beyond any perceptions that we can form. . . .” (Thomas Merton)

Meditation Increases Desire to Alleviate Suffering

- One study compared novices who did compassion meditation for two weeks at thirty minutes a day with a group that reframed suffering experiences with techniques of cognitive-behavioral therapy.
- The suffering experiences were sounds of distress the participants heard during their practices.
- The results were
 - Significant brain changes in the meditators, including
 - Decreased activation of the amygdala and with this a decrease of personal distress.
 - Increased activation in areas of the prefrontal cortex associated with goal-directed behavior.
 - Instead of becoming depressed by sounds of suffering, compassion meditators developed a strong disposition to alleviate suffering (Davidson with Begley 2012, 223).

Examplars of Non-Violent Resistance out of Universal Love for Justice



Exemplar of Non-violent Resistance out of Universal Compassion for Justice



**Salvation in an Evolutionary World View
Helping to Make Everything Dynamically Whole**

