

## CHAPTER I

*The Paradox of the Charitable Terrorist*

At New York's Grand Central Station recently, a Muslim woman was physically attacked and injured for wearing a hijab, while bystanders watched and refrained from interfering (NBC New York 2016). Such daily news stories may sometimes prompt us to remark that people "ought" to be better than they are. But this complaint remains vacuous unless something in human nature is capable of motivating us to do what we "ought."

The human sciences, whether empirical, phenomenological, or "post-modern," often address this problem by focusing on altruistic and cooperative emotional tendencies that occur naturally – either innately or through socialization. I want to push back against this approach. Superficially, it seems "natural" to focus on such emotions. After all, action must be motivated. Moral psychologists standardly say that "ought implies can": There is no point in saying that someone who can't swim ought to save a drowning person. In the same way, an "ought" that can't be motivated is either meaningless or false.

The "why be moral?" problem (Nielsen 1989) is a variant of this same challenge. What is it in our human makeup that motivates us to *care* about the effects of our actions on other people? Is it merely a socially conditioned habit? Is it a mutually calculated cooperation for purposes of self-interest, as Hobbes believed? Is it a feeling of empathy toward specific individuals with whom we happen to identify? Or is there something more than that? Philosophers and psychologists for the past century or more have relied on "naturally altruistic emotions" such as nurturance and social bonding to answer this question. Given the survival value of cooperation, they theorize that humans have adapted by developing a natural desire to be helpful. In short, we ought to be moral because we naturally want to.

But this way of thinking about moral psychology can lead ethical thinking down a dangerous rabbit hole. If we can't do anything other than what our altruistic (or malevolent) emotions drive us to do, then ultimately

the only moral guidance we can expect is “Do whatever you are already motivated to do.”

In other words, “Do whatever you want.” Such a moral system seems frustratingly vacuous, even pointless. At the end of the film *Baby, the Rain Must Fall*, we hear the song lyric “Wherever my heart leads me, that’s where I must go” as the main character is being led away in handcuffs. Is there not a more promising path than “You should do X whenever you are naturally motivated to do X?” We might as well say “Be altruistic if and only if you feel like it, and be malevolent whenever you feel like it.” Even a sociopath could cheerfully follow this injunction.

Luckily, naturalism doesn’t need to bet its entire hand on the notoriously fickle “altruistic emotions.” Contemporary emotion researchers like Jaak Panksepp (1998, 2000, 2011), Doug Watt (2000), and Nico Frijda (2006/2007) have noticed that the search for moral meaning, like any other everyday truth-seeking activity, is energized not only by empathic instincts or social conditioning, but also and more importantly it is grounded in a basic exploratory drive. An exploratory drive means that we want to know what the truth is about reality (and in principle this would include sociopolitical and ethical reality), *independently* of whether we are instrumentally rewarded for seeking it, and also independently of whether we happen to feel altruistic or nurturing in a particular instance (see especially Panksepp 1998, p. 145 and *passim*).

Panksepp connects this relatively independent exploratory drive to what he calls an innate “SEEKING” system in the brain (Panksepp uses the all-caps to indicate a term of art in his nomenclature of basic emotion systems in the brain). The SEEKING system includes (among other tendencies that we will get to later) a desire to explore, simply in order to discover the truth about our world. Although widely distributed in the brain, this system uses specific brain areas and specific combinations of neurotransmitters that are altogether different from those used by other emotional brain systems. The exploratory drive naturally leads to curiosity (see Ellis 1995, 2005) as well as a tendency to “appraise” environmental contexts even before any specific goal has been set (Frijda 2006/2007, esp. pp. 78ff; Salmela 2014). This innate, unconditioned motivational system can lead to what the earlier psychologist Robert White (1959) called a “drive toward mastery” – a non-derivative desire to understand the environment and “master” our own self-motivated actions relative to the world as we grasp it. An exploratory drive would motivate us to seek the truth, and yet – importantly for our purposes here – would not predetermine *what* we believe to be true.

The *independence* of this exploratory drive – the fact that it is not derivative from any other emotion system or social reinforcement – has a crucial philosophical implication. Adherence to ethical principles might extend further than merely behaviors driven by cooperative or benevolent emotions. Naturalistic ethical theorists may not need to relegate moral beliefs exclusively to the realm of emotional feelings at all, whether innate or learned. Such beliefs might actually have *truth value*. Our moral comportment might then be driven by the results of ethical thinking, even when such results run contrary to any combination of desires or survival instincts *other than* the demands of the exploratory drive itself.

It is true, of course, that some people, at least a great deal of the time, don't *experience* themselves as caring much what the truth is about moral issues. But what I want to argue is that in many cases people are thinking of "moral" issues as a narrower category than the more general question as to "what we ought to do" *per se*. What some people designate as "moral" values are thought of by others as "non-moral values." The only clear difference, I will argue, is that "moral" values involve the harm or well-being of other valuing creatures. Rather than thinking in terms of "moral" principles, some people regard such behaviors simply as "being civil" or "being helpful." Other times, people have already presupposed (for whatever reasons) that there is no truth regarding "moral" issues – or that there is no truth that they don't already know. But if they did think there was moral truth to be discovered, an independent exploratory drive implies that they would be curious, because the desire to explore the truth extends to all domains that inherently require our attention, except when suppressed by the conflicting emotions that we will also be discussing here.

To be sure, not everyone is equally interested in exploring all the *same* aspects of reality. Some are more interested in chemistry or physics than music or math or philosophy. But when an aspect of reality *necessarily demands* a judgment, we have a natural interest in knowing what is actually true; we don't just automatically believe whatever we want. And the realm of value and meaning, I will argue, inevitably does call for our attention. At the same time, I argue that our experiential *awareness* of this basic truth-seeking interest results from a net summing, beneath the surface, of interacting and equally powerful conflicting motives – just as the experience of green can result from a net summing of blue and yellow. The motive to explore the truth often does come into conflict with other emotional tendencies that are equally powerful.

Frijda uses the term "action readiness" (p. 26ff and *passim*) somewhat similarly to Panksepp's notion of innate emotional-behavioral dispositions,

especially the SEEKING system. In Frijda’s estimate, we appraise situations in terms of their action potential, relative to the action readiness that we *already have*. “The emotive states are not mere wishes. They are actual, embodied states, or states on the verge of embodiment in action, *to be released when circumstances permit*” (p. 27, italics added). These action readinesses, as they play out in complex interactions with specific real-life situations, trigger what Frijda calls “passions” to act in certain ways, sometimes to achieve a goal, but sometimes just for the sake of exercising the action pattern itself.

Some of these action patterns comprise exploration of reality. Frijda borrows Charlotte Bühler’s term “*Funktionslust*” – roughly, actions that serve as their own reinforcement without the need for instrumental reward – to designate this type of action readiness (Frijda 2007, p. 78 and passim; see also Bühler 1931). This concept of *Funktionslust* is highly suggestive of Panksepp’s SEEKING system – a physiological emotion system that energizes a desire to activate ourselves toward exploration of our world, not necessarily to seek pleasure maximization even indirectly as an outcome. Panksepp concludes that this kind of innate motivational system triggers emotions and behavior patterns independently of hedonistic reward. One result is that we are designed to seek the truth, even though the truth sometimes may not lead to any ulterior reward – at least, it may not reward the individual member of the species on that occasion. So, even though Frijda’s “appraisal theory” differs in some ways from Panksepp’s “basic emotion” approach, they are in remarkable agreement on the issues that are relevant for our purposes. Higher animals are motivated to act *upon* their environment, not just react *to* it.

The new research in emotional neuropsychology may actually somewhat vindicate those who resisted strict “reinforcement” theories during the twentieth century, including White as well as Otto Rank (1936/1978), Carl Rogers (1951, 1961), Rollo May (1950/2011), K. G. Montgomery (1954), J. J. Gibson (1986), and Eugene Gendlin (1962/1997, 1978/1982). Recent naturalistic understandings of the brain tend to back up those departures from exclusively hedonistic reductionism – especially if by “hedonistic reinforcement” we mean instrumental rewards *external to the behavior itself*.<sup>1</sup> SEEKING behavior is its own reinforcement. The desire to know the truth is not merely a conditioned skill set in the service of other emotions; it is an innately grounded motivation in its own right. Panksepp, who has run several research labs studying the emotional brain and the affective behavior of mammals (including neurological studies of humans), explicitly repudiates explanations based entirely on reinforcement theories such as

behaviorism (1998, pp. 147–150). In the final analysis, Gendlin (1978/1982) suggests that the motivation to explore both our affective qualities and their environmental referents is a difficult, nuanced process, and can't be entirely understood in terms of instrumental hedonistic outcomes.

Because some motivations are independent of external rewards, we will also find as we proceed that the SEEKING system not only motivates the search for truth. It also grounds a continually present affective quality of “zest for life,” which in turn enables everyday feelings of “inspiration” in a mundane but crucial sense. Panksepp et al. (2014) speak of clinical depression as the absence of a feeling of “enthusiasm,” which is rooted in the SEEKING system. (The evidence for this view includes brain scans and chemical manipulation of neurotransmitters in various experimental and clinical settings, as summarized extensively by Panksepp 1998, Panksepp et al. 2014, and other sources.) This feeling of wanting to act and to live is necessary to avoid clinical depression, independently of hedonistic considerations. Depression is not just sadness, sour disposition, or “dysthymic affect” – the “ain't it awful” feeling that we all have from time to time, which can be quite normal and functional. More than that, it includes a lack of motivation to take action as opposed to mere reaction. The depressed person can't feel the value of any achievable outcome strongly enough to motivate taking an initiative.

So the same emotion system that creates curiosity and the desire to explore reality also grounds the *intensity* with which we *value* any potential actions we might take, or their potential results. Because the intensity of valuing is a function of inspiration, I will argue that the SEEKING system also fuels the inspiration to try to act “in accord” with any values we believe we have discovered – and again, this would include moral values. But paradoxically, the *questioning* of why we take what we take to have value is also part of the exploratory drive, which in turn is another part of the same innate and independent SEEKING system. The same system that undergirds questioning also enables the feeling of inspiration.

The term “value” can be used in different senses. One of the important senses that concern us here is the one that is derivative from *but not reducible to* a subjective experience of valuing something. “X has value,” when used in an objective sense, can be taken to mean that any rational being with a capacity for empathy *would* value X if attention were directed to X. In this sense, X usually has to do with the value of sentient beings and their well- or ill-being. This issue will be unpacked more precisely in Chapter 4.

It seems counterintuitive yet true that the same SEEKING system whose dampening is most likely to result in *depression* is precisely a system that

functions relatively independently of other systems, including those involving *hedonistic reward*. On a purely hedonistic model, one might expect that eating enough potato chips should alleviate the sadness of depression, but it fails to do so, ultimately because the pleasure of the potato chips mostly affects a different brain system that is largely irrelevant to the depression – a separate PLEASURE/PAIN system, as we will discuss in the next chapter.

In Panksepp’s assessment, what defines the SEEKING system as a *separate* system is that it doesn’t need to be instrumentally rewarded in order for the relevant exploratory and attention-directing behaviors to be elicited. On the contrary, certain self-motivated behaviors, including exploration, are consistently orchestrated by endogenous and unconditioned combinations of brain areas and neurotransmitters, distinct from and not derivative from other emotional brain systems, such as the one that Panksepp refers to as the PLEASURE/PAIN system. We know this because of neurological studies involving deficits of one or another brain system, as well as by observing the action of neurotransmitters in the various emotion systems (for example, Frijda 2006; Panksepp 1998; Ellis 2005; some behavioral studies supported this idea of an independent exploratory drive as far back as Montgomery 1954; Harlow 1950; and Kagan and Berkun 1954).

On the other hand, even if there is a natural exploratory drive, it often would come into conflict with equally powerful incentives to confabulate, or simply to wear blinders to block out inconvenient or potentially disturbing truths, especially in the face of fear and anxiety. Both empirical and experiential analyses bear out this common-sensical notion of “motivated selective attention.” We often temporarily abandon our truth-seeking tendency for various emotional reasons.

In fact, when we act immorally or subscribe to harmful ethical and social viewpoints, the new trends in emotion research call into question the common assumption that such moral lapses result simply from a deficit of empathy or “fellow feeling.” The problem instead may often stem from a *selective suppression of the exploratory drive*.

Specifically, the exploratory drive can be selectively suppressed in certain quite circumscribed contexts when applied to the intellectual contemplation of moral and social questions (if I may use “intellectual” in a general and non-grandiose way). The proponents of Arian superiority, however intelligent or educated they may be, fail to ask themselves some of the most critical questions about the factual and logical basis of their theory – questions that seem obvious to others.

Hence the paradox of the Ku Klux Klan terrorist who conspires to assassinate civil rights leaders on Saturday, and then gives generous charitable

donations to his church on Sunday morning, perhaps also volunteering at a local soup kitchen in the afternoon. The KKK Grand Wizard of Georgia (see Federal Bureau of Investigation 1964), for many decades, owned and operated Stone Mountain Park purely as a generous public service, free of charge and at considerable expense to himself (New York Times 1993). The Klan, the White Citizens Councils, and other such racist organizations were supported by charitable and public spirited leaders of many Southern US communities.<sup>2</sup> Many of them served on the committees of charities like the American Legion, the Community Chest, and the Legion's Honor Society (Luce 1960, p. 35ff). Many routinely tithed 10 percent of their income to their churches and organized programs to help the poor or the hungry, sometimes helping even poor African-American families. Obviously, these otherwise good people had no shortage of empathy and compassion – except when their entire philosophical worldview was threatened. On my view, that is when the exploratory drive is most quickly and *selectively* suppressed, and thus critical thinking – with corresponding selectivity – is severely diminished with respect to the particular philosophical issue at stake, as well as all logically interconnected beliefs and attitudes. The suppression of the exploratory drive, when it occurs, tends to be sculpted in bas relief against an otherwise intelligent background – more with a scalpel than with a butcher knife. The charitable person usually becomes a terrorist only in specific circumstances – most often a situation in which an entire moral worldview is threatened.

Such moral lapses can't be explained merely in terms of conformism, as highlighted in studies by Duriez and Soenens (2009), among others. Duriez and Soenens, working in Belgium, show that sheer conformism accounts for only a small part of the intercorrelations between "Authoritarian Personality," "Social Dominance Orientation" (SDO), and "Racism" (each measured by a separate questionnaire). Instead, the *extent* to which racism, SDO, and Authoritarianism Personality correlate depends largely on the extent to which Authoritarian Personality per se is passed down from parents to children – as measured by the intergenerational correlations with regard to Authoritarian Personality. Similarly, Carl Bell (1978, 1980) finds only very modest connections between conformism and racism, but with a much stronger connection to narcissistic disturbance.

So in our example of the White Citizens Councils, something *prior to* conformity had to explain why the upstanding citizens who formed the Councils would choose to consort with the seedier elements of white supremacist culture in the first place. Why choose *that* particular group to conform to? Beyond mere conformism, Duriez and Soenens suggest that

certain structures of *belief formation* are favored by certain people in certain specific contexts. Irrational tendencies such as racism and authoritarianism spring from belief systems that correlate with these particular patterns of thinking. Only after a significant mass of people have *already* developed a certain way of thinking can others then adopt it for merely conformist reasons.

It is true that people sometimes act in harmful and cruel ways just because they want to follow the orders of an authority figure, as in the famous Stanley Milgram experiments (for example, Milgram 1974). But we will see as we proceed that this authoritarian tendency itself is rooted in a momentary selective suppression of the exploratory drive, which triggers some people (by no means all, nor in all circumstances) to refrain from questioning the authority’s commands. In the Milgram studies, subjects would naturally have questioned the authority’s command to deliver an “extremely hazardous” electrical shock possibly leading to “severe bodily injury,” had not the exploratory drive been suppressed in that instant. Beyond the mere observation of simple authoritarianism, we need to understand why people sometimes succumb to this tendency, and other times don’t.

In fact, some replications of the Milgram experiments fail to correlate willingness to deliver the shock with measures of authoritarian personality at all. Instead, the subject positively empathizes with the experimenter more than with the other “subject” who is in a different room, and therefore elicits less empathy (Bräten 2013, p. 158ff). To be sure, some people are more susceptible to this random manipulation of their empathy than others, but I want to argue that the explanation requires more than understanding a lack of empathy *per se*; it requires delving into the person’s overall set of moral principles and the seriousness with which they have been thought through.

Even the “negativity bias” hypothesis – that a tendency to hyperactivate the brain’s *fear* circuits correlates with racism and other such irrational moral sentiments (Hibbing et al. 2013) – is only a small part of the story. It fails to account for the phenomenon of the charitable KKK terrorist, whose negativity bias is activated only in highly selective circumstances. Many racists can also be quite open and friendly, as evidenced by the failure to significantly correlate racism with a lack of “agreeableness” as measured by the Big Five personality inventory (Hodson et al. 2009). In fact, in the Hodson et al. study, “agreeableness” actually correlated *positively* with “Right Wing Authoritarianism.” The specific times when sentiments like racism, prejudice, and generally harmful philosophical attitudes are

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*selectively* brought out, I will argue, are the times when a person's entire presupposed worldview is in danger of being shaken.

Some might say that racism and xenophobia stem simply from “clannism,” which is just a natural human tendency – that people “naturally” are hostile toward those who are outsiders to the group, and therefore tend to see the outsiders as valueless. But this everyday assumption is not actually supported by anthropological evidence, which shows a good deal of fluidity among primitive tribes (for example, see Langness 1977). In fact, people migrated frequently from one tribe to another, and daughters were required by the tradition of exogamy to marry outside of their clan. Many traditional cultures included a moral principle of hospitality toward outsiders, as well as intertribal games similar to our modern Olympic games. The natural need to be cautious toward strangers seldom led to mutual hostility until agriculture, land ownership, and overshooting of population niches became prominent about 15,000–20,000 years ago (Olson 2002). Skeletal remains prior to that point show little evidence of wounds from warfare, despite the occasional murder (sometimes resulting from “vendetta” retaliation as a necessary means of law enforcement). These observations don't entail a “noble savage” notion, but simply that early humans suffered from the same internal conflicts that we all do.

What I am proposing here is that exaggerated clannism, when it does occur, results like many other moral tensions from an internal conflict between two equally natural tendencies. On the one hand, the exploratory drive motivates us to think about value issues (including moral ones) and ask ourselves whether the truth implies that all valuing creatures deserve our consideration – at least *prima facie*, or “all else being equal.” Even the welfare of animals apparently was taken into account by early humans, who are generally believed to have said prayers of apology to animals that had to be killed for food (for example, see Graham Harvey 2005).

The opposing tendency is more complex, resulting in a real-time partial blockage of the natural human desire to think coherently about moral issues – not the *ability*, but rather the *desire* to do so. This more complex selective blockage of the exploratory drive, just at the specific point when exploration begins to threaten prior moral assumptions, calls for careful study. In the process, we should always remember that the brains of the earliest homo sapiens were genetically almost exactly the same as our brains are today (granted a tiny admixture in modern humans of Neanderthal and other early human species). So the facile notion that intelligent, thoughtful systems of morality are a development of “modern civilizations” must always be questioned. I will argue on the contrary that moral

thinking is largely a natural aspect of the development of the human brain through childhood and adolescence, although this natural moral development through brain growth can be somewhat tweaked by environmental experience. Peter Zachar (2000a) explores from a clinical psychology perspective the way these biological factors, even though rooted in brain function, can also be socially tweaked, or even influenced by “talking therapies.” Even natural biological brain growth shows a good bit of situational “plasticity.”

I am not suggesting that the suppression of the exploratory drive is an all-or-nothing, or even a personality trait. On the contrary, we all suppress it to varying degrees in various circumstances. The fact that we all sometimes *selectively* suppress it is partly why social and political questions are so interesting, and why critical dialogue in this realm is so indispensable. Our own vulnerability to such foibles is also a reason why delving seriously into moral psychology can be disturbing or even threatening. We may discover that some of our own unconscious presuppositions are rooted in quicksand. At the point when this threat erupts, the questioning function of the prefrontal brain areas (described by Luria 1980, Posner 1990, and others) suddenly becomes deliberately quiet. In everyday, experiential terms, we momentarily go into a partial “brain freeze,” and then try to recover from the feeling of confusion by simply returning to our previous commitments. We will explore later some studies indicating that this type of momentary “brain freeze” is often reflected in the mutual inhibition of different brain systems when they come into conflict with each other.

The Klansman’s selective suppression of the exploratory drive – thus a dampening of his desire to seek the truth in certain specific contexts even though he might be an excellent rocket scientist or auto mechanic – might be expected to extend beyond questions about individual conduct in narrowly circumscribed situations. Threats to the coherence of his overall worldview would necessarily extend also to a defensive posture regarding more general beliefs that go into a person’s entire *interconnected* understanding of reality as a whole. In the attempt to maintain coherence with a previously formed worldview, this selective exploratory-drive shutdown could include broader social, political, and even religious elements. The Bible and even the theory of evolution must be interpreted in ways consistent with a theory that rationalizes racial domination, for example. Once such a convoluted belief system has taken shape, complete with all the ad hoc hypotheses needed to prop it up, the same process could then indirectly influence views about purely scientific topics such as global warming or the biology of homosexuality – anything that threatens the coherence