

Chapter 1

In the Beginning

... For I was hungry, and ye gave me no meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me not in; naked, and ye clothed me not; sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

—Matthew 25:42–43¹

In April 2017 came news of the discovery in Morocco of a long-lost cousin. This was not the first, but the fifth relative to show up in the last few years. The human family, it turned out, is much bigger . . . and much older . . . than we had thought previously. The new findings are possibly 300,000 years old—about 100,000 years older than the oldest as-yet-discovered “human.”

At the end of the previous century, people still believed the simple “out of Africa” story. Its hero was a single species of human . . . perhaps descended from a single mutant. The *Homo sapiens* tribe survived and spread all over the world, adapting to local conditions as necessary. At least the story was easy to remember.

But it wasn’t true. In the last few years, anthropologists have identified several other human species. The first, already well known, was *Homo neanderthalensis*, presumed to be our closest relative. There are enough bones around, so we have a pretty good

idea what he looked like—heavier than modern humans, perhaps smarter, and often depicted with red hair.

The surprise came when scientists traced a small percentage of the modern human genome to these Neanderthal ancestors. Europeans and Asians, but not Africans, all have a Neanderthal swinging from their family trees.

Then it came out that there were several other skeletons in the closet. *Homo naledi* was discovered in South Africa in 2013. *Homo denisova* was found in Siberia in 2010. *Homo floresiensis* was uncovered in Indonesia in 2003. And the latest bones found in Morocco were very close to human, too.

If we were planning a large wedding, we would have one heck of a party! Some of these guys were . . . well . . . real animals!

All but one of the branches of the family have died out. And not all may have left us on friendly terms. Many of these relatives lived in the same place and at the same time as *Homo sapiens*—aka us. So far, the DNA record shows a connection between us and Neanderthals, as well as Denisovans. As for the others, we wouldn't be surprised to find that they got up to hanky-panky from time to time, too, and that there are traces of still other human species in us all.

So what? It's none of our business who did what to whom out in the woods. But we are exploring the origins of civilization—how it came to be and what it means to our modern, civil society. What we notice first in the human record is not the Eros that brought different humans together, but the Thanatos that had them go for each other's throats.

Arguing with God

It is one thing to kill people you don't know, simply because the *federales* command it. But what is it when you kill your own children because God tells you to do so? Yahweh, Abraham's god, told him to kill his only son, Isaac. Abraham was ready to do it, too. He had a knife in his hand when an angel told him to stop, that it was just

a test. God was looking for a few good men who would do His bidding, including killing their own kin for His sake.

Arguing with God is a play written by a friend, John B. Henry. It is the story of the Jews . . . and their long, difficult relationship with their god. It is the theme of the Old Testament, before the coming of Christ. But it is told in contemporary language, leaving the audience to make the quick connection: “The chosen people” of antiquity become the one, “indispensable nation”—the USA—of today.

God chose the Jews to be his standard bearers—apparently because they were willing to do outrageous and appalling things in His name. He sent them off to kill and conquer. And no angel intervened. Instead, God Himself goaded on the killers and was upset when they left the job only half done.

In the book of Deuteronomy, for example, we have the story of the annihilation of the Canaanites. It was not enough to conquer territory. God ordered the Israelites to “not leave alive anything that breathes” and to “completely destroy them.”² And not just the fighting men. He wanted to snuff out women, children, beasts of burden . . . even household pets.

John B. Henry grew up the son of an Episcopalian minister in Virginia. By the time he left home, he had read the Bible cover to cover seven times. But it was only when he reread it as an adult, he says, that the violence of the Almighty came fully into focus. He was shocked.

The Old Testament recounts one act of murder and genocide after another. The Lord Jehovah was not content to shoot off a few hundred rounds in a nightclub, murder a few dozen school children, or stab a few passersby on the street in London. He’d take out an entire town.

Here is what Genesis tells us destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah: “brimstone and fire . . . from the Lord out of heaven.”³ In Deuteronomy 29:23, Moses later described what it looked like:

²³*The whole land will be a burning waste of salt and sulfur—nothing planted, nothing sprouting, no vegetation growing on it. It will be like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboyim, which the Lord overthrew in fierce anger.*⁴

At God's suggestion, the Israelites exterminated the Amalekites, too. From the book of 1 Samuel 15:8:

⁸He took Agag, king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword.⁵

The book of Ezekiel 9:4–6 further reports:

⁴The Lord said to him, "Go through the midst of the city, even through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations which are being committed in its midst."

⁵But to the others He said in my hearing, "Go through the city after him and strike; do not let your eye have pity and do not spare. Utterly slay old men, young men, maidens, little children, and women, but do not touch any man on whom is the mark; and you shall start from My sanctuary."

⁶So they started with the elders who were before the temple . . .⁶

And when God was displeased with His people, He practically exterminated them, too.

"Seven days from now I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and I will wipe from the face of the earth every living creature I have made," He says in Genesis 7:4.⁷

Arguing with God is meant to make audiences wonder about America's place in the world and its connection to God. But it made us wonder about God Himself. What kind of god would urge his people to destroy their neighbors?

The God of the Old Testament is a tribal god in a win-lose world. His role was to assure the survival and prosperity of His chosen people.

After escaping from Egyptian captivity, the Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years. It was during this time that Moses handed down the Ten Commandments, with "Thou Shalt Not Kill" prominent on the list.

Then, arriving in the land of milk and honey, the sons of Abraham had to take the milk and honey away from their owners, who

were reluctant to give them up. Here, we quote extensively from the book of Joshua:

Joshua 6:21–24:

²¹And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword.

²²But Joshua had said unto the two men that had spied out the country, Go into the harlot's house, and bring out thence the woman, and all that she hath, as ye swore unto her.

²³And the young men that were spies went in, and brought out Rahab, and her father, and her mother, and her brethren, and all that she had; and they brought out all her kindred, and left them without the camp of Israel.

²⁴And they burnt the city with fire, and all that was therein: only the silver, and the gold, and the vessels of brass and of iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the LORD.⁸

Joshua 8:25–29:

²⁵And so it was, that all that fell that day, both of men and women, were twelve thousand, even all the men of Ai.

²⁶For Joshua drew not his hand back, wherewith he stretched out the spear, until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai.

²⁷Only the cattle and the spoil of that city Israel took for a prey unto themselves, according unto the word of the LORD which he commanded Joshua.

²⁸And Joshua burnt Ai, and made it an heap forever, even a desolation unto this day.

²⁹And the king of Ai he hanged on a tree until eventide: and as soon as the sun was down, Joshua commanded that they should take his carcase down from the tree, and cast it at the entering of the gate of the city, and raise thereon a great heap of stones, that remaineth unto this day.⁹

Joshua 10:24–43:

²⁴And it came to pass, when they brought out those kings unto Joshua, that Joshua called for all the men of Israel, and said unto

the captains of the men of war which went with him, Come near, put your feet upon the necks of these kings. And they came near, and put their feet upon the necks of them.

²⁵*And Joshua said unto them, Fear not, nor be dismayed, be strong and of good courage: for thus shall the LORD do to all your enemies against whom ye fight.*

²⁶*And afterward Joshua smote them, and slew them, and hanged them on five trees: and they were hanging upon the trees until the evening.*

²⁷*And it came to pass at the time of the going down of the sun, that Joshua commanded, and they took them down off the trees, and cast them into the cave wherein they had been hid, and laid great stones in the cave's mouth, which remain until this very day.*

²⁸*And that day Joshua took Makkedah, and smote it with the edge of the sword, and the king thereof he utterly destroyed, them, and all the souls that were therein; he let none remain: and he did to the king of Makkedah as he did unto the king of Jericho.*

²⁹*Then Joshua passed from Makkedah, and all Israel with him, unto Libnah, and fought against Libnah.*

³⁰*And the LORD delivered it also, and the king thereof, into the hand of Israel; and he smote it with the edge of the sword, and all the souls that were therein; he let none remain in it; but did unto the king thereof as he did unto the king of Jericho.*

³¹*And Joshua passed from Libnah, and all Israel with him, unto Lachish, and encamped against it, and fought against it.*

³²*And the LORD delivered Lachish into the hand of Israel, which took it on the second day, and smote it with the edge of the sword, and all the souls that were therein, according to all that he had done to Libnah.*

³³*Then Horam king of Gezer came up to help Lachish; and Joshua smote him and his people, until he had left him none remaining. ³⁴And from Lachish Joshua passed unto Eglon, and all Israel with him; and they encamped against it, and fought against it.*

³⁵*And they took it on that day, and smote it with the edge of the sword, and all the souls that were therein he utterly destroyed that day, according to all that he had done to Lachish.*

³⁶*And Joshua went up from Eglon, and all Israel with him, unto Hebron; and they fought against it:*

³⁷And they took it, and smote it with the edge of the sword, and the king thereof, and all the cities thereof, and all the souls that were therein; he left none remaining, according to all that he had done to Eglon; but destroyed it utterly, and all the souls that were therein.

³⁸And Joshua returned, and all Israel with him, to Debir; and fought against it.

³⁹And he took it, and the king thereof, and all the cities thereof; and they smote them with the edge of the sword, and utterly destroyed all the souls that were therein; he left none remaining: as he had done to Hebron, so he did to Debir, and to the king thereof; as he had done also to Libnah, and to her king.

⁴⁰So Joshua smote all the country of the hills, and of the south, and of the vale, and of the springs, and all their kings: he left none remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the LORD God of Israel commanded.

⁴¹And Joshua smote them from Kadeshbarnea even unto Gaza, and all the country of Goshen, even unto Gibeon.

⁴²And all these kings and their land did Joshua take at one time, because the LORD God of Israel fought for Israel.

⁴³And Joshua returned, and all Israel with him, unto the camp to Gilgal.¹⁰

Joshua 11:9–23:

⁹And Joshua did unto them as the LORD bade him: he houghed their horses, and burnt their chariots with fire.

¹⁰And Joshua at that time turned back, and took Hazor, and smote the king thereof with the sword: for Hazor beforetime was the head of all those kingdoms.

¹¹And they smote all the souls that were therein with the edge of the sword, utterly destroying them: there was not any left to breathe: and he burnt Hazor with fire.

¹²And all the cities of those kings, and all the kings of them, did Joshua take, and smote them with the edge of the sword, and he utterly destroyed them, as Moses the servant of the LORD commanded.

¹³But as for the cities that stood still in their strength, Israel burned none of them, save Hazor only; that did Joshua burn.

¹⁴*And all the spoil of these cities, and the cattle, the children of Israel took for a prey unto themselves; but every man they smote with the edge of the sword, until they had destroyed them, neither left they any to breathe.*

¹⁵*As the LORD commanded Moses his servant, so did Moses command Joshua, and so did Joshua; he left nothing undone of all that the LORD commanded Moses.*

¹⁶*So Joshua took all that land, the hills, and all the south country, and all the land of Goshen, and the valley, and the plain, and the mountain of Israel, and the valley of the same.*

¹⁷*Even from the mount Halak, that goeth up to Seir, even unto Baalgad in the valley of Lebanon under mount Hermon: and all their kings he took, and smote them, and slew them.*

¹⁸*Joshua made war a long time with all those kings.*

¹⁹*There was not a city that made peace with the children of Israel, save the Hivites the inhabitants of Gibeon: all other they took in battle.*

²⁰*For it was of the LORD to harden their hearts, that they should come against Israel in battle, that he might destroy them utterly, and that they might have no favour, but that he might destroy them, as the LORD commanded Moses.*

²¹*And at that time came Joshua, and cut off the Anakims from the mountains, from Hebron, from Debir, from Anab, and from all the mountains of Judah, and from all the mountains of Israel: Joshua destroyed them utterly with their cities.*

²²*There was none of the Anakims left in the land of the children of Israel: only in Gaza, in Gath, and in Ashdod, there remained.*

²³*So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD said unto Moses; and Joshua gave it for an inheritance unto Israel according to their divisions by their tribes. And the land rested from war.¹¹*

Whew! In this section of the Bible, we also get another verb . . . now almost forgotten: smite, smote, have smitten. Without smiting and slaying, history would have disappeared.

But that's how you get ahead in a zero-sum game. Do unto others good and hard, before they do unto you.

Glancing ahead, the hypothesis of this book is that something big happened 3,000 to 2,000 years ago. A big change.

A revolutionary change. The biggest change in history. A new god was in town. It was the change from win-lose to win-win . . . from theft to barter . . . from force to persuasion . . . from brute politics to civilization . . . from rape to seduction . . . from credit and gift-giving to hard money and double entry bookkeeping . . . from tribalism to universalism . . . from forced collectivism to voluntary collectivism . . . and from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

Most important, it was a change in public attitudes . . . and myths.

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” said Jesus of Nazareth. The Jewish sage Hillel, his contemporary, said almost the same thing, but in the negative: “That which you don’t want someone to do to you, don’t do to them.” Win-win, in other words.

This was a radical innovation, perhaps the biggest and most important one ever. In evolutionary terms, it was a mutation. But it was a rare one . . . and a successful one. Today, with one major exception (which we will address in another chapter), and millions of minor ones, most of the world operates most of the time on win-win deals.

But let us step back further. We will see that slaying and smiting began long before Moses crossed the Red Sea. We will see also the context in which slaying and smiting made sense.

Ignoble Savages

There are two opposing views of prehistory. In one, the noble savages lived at great remove one from another; violence was limited. In the other view, prehistoric people were drenched in each other’s blood.

Man, in his present form, has been around for 200,000 to 300,000 years. We believe we can divide that into two parts. The first stage—prehistory—lasted many thousands of years. In that stage, the idea of “murder” didn’t exist. There was, perhaps, no word for it. As we will see more fully later, humans are unique in the animal world in one important way: we have words. Words fill our minds and shape our world. And each word is an idea . . . a myth . . . a meme.

In the beginning, there was no murder. And no right or wrong. Killing was normal. We survived by killing animals. And before the advent of what we call “civilization,” killing other humans was presumably more often a badge of honor than a mark of shame. People took great pride in killing others, often keeping their scalps or skulls as souvenirs. In one tribe in New Guinea, for example, men wear elaborate makeup and gaudy decorations. But they are only allowed to do so after they have killed someone. Many other tribes had similar customs, where full participation in mating and other adult privileges were reserved for those who had proven themselves—by killing.

Readers will note that this point of view is unpopular with a broad swath of scholars, politicians, and the public. Since the time of the eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, it has been common to think of indigenous, pre-civilized, prehistoric peoples as untainted by the corruptions of modern life. They were believed to have a “purer” form of human community, unadulterated by the contrivances of civilization, including its words. And they were considered “freer,” unshackled by the restraints of more advanced societies.

According to Freud (and many others), the distinguishing feature of civilization is restraint. In the course of this little book, we will discuss the various restraints needed for civilization to take place. We will give our definition, or theory, of civilization. And we will look at why the principles, requirements, and rules of civilization are more than cultural prejudices or consciously imposed laws.

In the beginning was the word. That is, the first restraint of civilization is language. No law commands you to speak a language. But if you want to take part in civilized life, you must communicate . . . following the rules of language. It’s no good to blab out whatever you want. You must stick to the program.

That was the first thing the ancient Greeks noticed about the people they called “Barbarians.” They didn’t speak a civilized language. Instead, they just seemed to be barking at each other . . . “bar . . . bar . . . bar . . .” That is, at least by some accounts, how the Barbarians got their name.

But words are not neutral, clean, information-carrying vessels. They are metaphors, images, myths, and lies. And as man furnished his mind with words, he created a world that did not—objectively—exist.

For example, as soon as you invent the word “murder,” you have introduced a whole new concept, unknown in the animal world—morality. So, too, does “Thou Shalt Not Steal” suggest an idea of property rights that does not exist without human imagination and mythmaking skills. The prohibitions against murder and theft require a whole, elaborate décor of right and wrong.

Human civilization requires these restraints, for reasons that will become more obvious as we continue. It also needs restraints of other sorts—money, manners, and common laws, for example. And perhaps writing. Each one of these things limits what we say and do. We are no longer wild. We are tame. Our actions are limited. And so are our thoughts, through words and myths, directed into acceptable channels. As we will see, no declaration by any king or dictator forces these rules on us. This is the “strain of civilization,” as philosopher Karl Popper described it.¹² It is a restriction on what we can and cannot do. Within these limits—as with the rules of language—we can accomplish much more than without them. They are chains, but they leave us free to operate in a much broader, more productive way. Not that we can take credit for these things, as if we invented civilization. We did not. Instead, it invented us.

And before we go further, it is only fair to stop and warn you, Dear Reader, that this next section may be more demanding than usual—of reader as well as of writer. So, if you want to get off the bus here, there will be no hard feelings.

First, because the going might be rough. And second, because you might not like very much where we end up. And third, because once you get there, you may not be able to ever come back. This is a one-way ride.

“Oh, people are funny,” said our driver, taking us from the airport in Dublin, Ireland, to a hotel in County Waterford. It was a long journey, giving him plenty of opportunity to express himself.

“See that highway . . .” He pointed to a turnoff. “It’s the road to Limerick. The engineers had all done their work. The planning was done. Contracts were let out. The bulldozers and trucks were all lined up. And then, a local farmer asked: ‘What about the fairy tree?’

“Now, you ask anyone, and they’ll tell you they don’t believe that nonsense about fairies and the spirit world. But down deep, we all believe.

“So, they had millions of euros already set aside to build the road. But nobody would cut down the fairy tree. I can just imagine the conversation.

“‘Sean . . . you cut it down.’ ‘No . . . Paddy, you cut it down.’ ‘Nooo . . . Ronan, you’re a good man with a chainsaw . . . Go ahead and cut the damned tree down.’ ‘Look, if you want it cut down . . . cut it down yourself.’

“Nobody wanted to cut it down. Because there would be a curse on whoever did. In the end, they had to reroute the road.

“And probably, on some level, they don’t really believe in the spirit world. But nobody wanted to put the curse to the test.

“That’s the way it is with a lot of things. What we say we believe is not always what we really believe.”

Whence cometh these peculiar beliefs? The hardware we know as “human”—the bones and the meat—was apparently developed by billions of years of adaptation and mutation . . . and perhaps divine intervention. We don’t know exactly how or why it worked the way it did . . . but it delivered to us the wrecks we know as “human beings.”

And you are perfectly within your rights to fill in the missing knowledge by saying: “God created man.” And perhaps He did. If so, you can blame Him or praise Him. But the process by which He made us appears remarkably “hands off.” That is, the bone record looks like a lot of fumbling and bumbling . . . trial and error—the same process we see in the rest of the natural world. From Lucy—the female primate who was supposed to be mother to us all—to all manner of knuckle dragging bipeds . . . From monkey to man—with plenty of dead ends, false starts, and mutant ninja turtles along

the way—the process can be described as “evolution,” even without knowing exactly how it works.

The more interesting and controversial point is this: the human software was created in more or less the same way. Why do we think what we think? Why do we smile? Why do we shake hands, or say please and thank you? Again, there are oceans of ignorance on the subject. But on our little patch of dry land, the process that gave us our thoughts, our instincts, and our emotions looks a lot more like evolution than any other word we can think of.

When we fall in love, we don't do so because we think it would be a good idea to fall in love. We don't do it because there is a falling-in-love contest we want to win. We don't do it because someone tells us we should, or because we'll earn more money if we do. Instead, we do it because we're programmed to do it.

We didn't think our way to falling in love any more than we thought our way to having five fingers rather than seven, or to wanting to eat fried foie gras rather than raw sewage.

But we do fall in love. Our most powerful instincts and emotions are engaged in a way that has very little to do with what we think. Or, to put it another way, we think what our instincts and emotions lead us to think. We think she's pretty. We think she's smart. We think she's sexy.

But why do we bother to think any of these things? “The mind is just the heart's dupe,” wrote author André Gide.¹³ Your thoughts are brought to bear as your instincts and emotions—your heart—command, not the other way around.

What you think is what your software tells you to think. Of course, there's room for “creative” thinking . . . or thinking “outside the box” . . . coming up with ideas that seem to be contrary to your basic instincts and well-being. And sometimes, you are faced with choices your brain has to figure out, more or less, on its own.

You may even think that falling in love is not such a good idea. You may decide not to marry and not to have children. You may come to believe you can jump off a cliff, flap your arms, and fly. You think . . . and, therefore, you are flying! You don't do yourself any

favor with this sort of fantasy. But you do the human race a useful service—you eliminate your DNA from the gene pool! That software, in other words, is taken off the shelf.

The population that exists today is the product of people whose parents probably fell in love, wanted to have children, and didn't jump off the cliff. And their software—made up of instincts, emotions, social conventions, and traditions—is our software.

The restraints of civilization are part of our software, too. But they are fairly new. They exist not because we were smart enough to invent them, but because those who couldn't, or didn't, take them on have been killed or marginalized.

Greek- and Roman-era writers had a culturally biased view of civilization, rooted in the deepest, most atavistic, and most disastrous part of our software. The difference between Barbarians and civilized people was simple: it was the difference between them and us. "We" are civilized. "They" are not. A "Barbarian," from the Greek word *barbaroi*, simply meant a non-Greek. When writers undertook to define the critical difference more carefully, they claimed the Barbarians lacked dominion over themselves. The tribes to the north and the east were ruled, they believed, by "temper and insatiable desires." That is, the Barbarians didn't submit to the fetters of civilization.

Polybius, the Greek historian who accompanied the Roman general Scipio in his conquest of the Carthaginians, described Barbarians:

*They lived in unwalled villages and had no knowledge of the refinements of civilization. As they slept on straw and leaves, ate meat and practiced no other pursuits but war and agriculture, their lives were very simple and they were completely unacquainted with any art or science. Their possessions consisted of cattle and gold, since these were the only objects which they could easily take with them whatever the circumstances and transport whenever they chose.*¹⁴

It was as if, he said of the Gauls, "fortune had afflicted the whole race . . . with a kind of epidemic of aggression."¹⁵

Alas, the Romans of the fifth century found it impossible to stop the Barbarians from crossing the Rhine into the empire. The best they could hope for, they said, was to turn these new immigrants into new, Romanized men . . . who would reject impulsivity and instead rely on rational thought and calm reflection. It was a tall order. And a bad bet. You could take a Barbarian out of the forests, but you couldn't take the forest out of a Barbarian.

Tervingians, Merovingians, Salian Franks, Rhenan Franks, Goths, Vandals, Huns . . . the Veneti, the Anares, the Boii, the Lingones, the Senones, and many other tribes too numerous to mention . . . turned on their hosts, massacred and enslaved them, and laid waste to most of Europe west of the Rhine, and much of North Africa, too.

Two steps forward. One step back. Or two. It takes thousands of years to make a civilized man. And even then, *Homo sapiens* himself doesn't change much. He still looks like a wild man of the forests. He often acts like one, too.

Generally, we respect the rules of language and property, as well as those of social and commercial intercourse. But Rome wasn't built in a day. And civilization is not like turning on a light. It's not either on or off. Just as there is no switch that causes a complete shift from pre-civilized codes to those of the civilized world, nor is there anything that prevents a little civilized behavior from creeping into otherwise barbarian cultures. Many pioneers and captives told of being treated well by American Indians. Some captive European women married native men, had children with them, and when "rescued," refused to return to the "civilized" world.

In *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau writes:

[N]othing is so gentle as man in his primitive state, when, placed by nature at an equal distance from the stupidity of brutes and the fatal enlightenment of civil man [. . .] he is restrained by natural pity from needlessly harming anyone himself, even if he has been harmed.¹⁶

This view is probably both correct and absurd. The savage was largely untethered by the ropes and reins of civilization. But he was

far from noble. Eyewitness and expert testimonies show the indigenous peoples of whom we have historical records to be violent, brutish, and cruel. The archaeological record, too, suggests violence was a much bigger part of life before the arrival of civilization. The records from both sources tell us pre-civilized people were given to murder, mayhem, torture, and cannibalism. Not to mention slavery, rape, and massacre.

Even as recently as November 2018, an American missionary set out to bring the Christian faith to Sentinel Island's natives in the Bay of Bengal. They appear to have killed him soon after he set foot on the island; and we doubt they felt they had done anything wrong.

This was hardly shocking. We have enough bones from the Late Paleolithic and Neolithic periods to see that killing was common. One ancient boneyard, Cemetery 117, on the east bank of the River Nile in northern Sudan, shows signs of a massacre 13,000 to 14,000 years ago. Many of the almost 60 skeletons discovered there have arrowheads embedded in them. We don't know what happened, but we can be pretty sure the damage was not self-inflicted. Half the skeletons are female; they are probably not deaths from a battle. In Turkana, Kenya, meanwhile, there are numerous 10,000-year-old human remains with evidence of major traumatic injuries, including obsidian bladelets in the ancient bones.

Californian anthropology professor Mark Allen studied the record of prehistoric hunter-gatherers in the central part of the state. Looking at fragments of bones from the last 1,000 years, he came to the conclusion that violence was a way of life. His research showed that more than 1 in 10 males suffered some form of violent trauma—a rate not even reached among soldiers in World War II. Among females, the rate of violent trauma, as measured by the bone records, was 1 in 20. In the fourteenth century, at Crow Creek, in what is now South Dakota, the homicide rate was up to 60%.

We turned to *North American Indigenous Warfare and Ritual Violence*, edited by Richard J. Chacon and Rubén G. Mendoza, for

further illustration. We will just quote various passages, more or less at random:

The objective of surprise attacks and battles was to kill as many of the enemy as possible: men always, and usually women and children as well. (p. 19)

Inuit warriors attacked the group of O mushkegok people, mostly women and children and the elders, while the men were hunting. . . the Inuit descended from their hiding place and attacked the camp, killing all the elders and the children and the women. (p. 37) The Inuit make war on all their neighbors, and when they kill or capture any of their enemies, they eat them raw and drink their blood. . . (p. 37)

The Cree [. . .] when their enemies fall into their hands they scalp them. They tear off the skin which covers the skull and they put as many marks of themselves as they have taken scalps. (p. 39)

Cree war parties attacked Inuit on the eastern coast of Hudson Bay: 1707, 1728, 1730, 1735, 1736, 1738, 1755, 1757, 1766, 1767, 1770, 1774, 1777, 1781, 1782, 1783, 1791, and 1793 . . . (p. 51) Warfare between the Cree and the Chipewyan was intense and violent . . . (p. 57)

The skeletal evidence shows trauma in the form of depressed skulls, fractures from club blows, facial and anterior tooth fractures, defensive forearm and outer hand injuries, and decapitation. (p. 60) 40% of the individuals recovered in the Prince Rupert Harbour area were found to have fractures to the limbs and spine . . . (p. 62) Warfare is postulated to have been endemic across the northern Southwest in the 13th century. (p. 116)

Human death is necessary to give the sun energy. (p. 120)

The archeological record indicates the pre-contact [before the arrival of Europeans] war in the northern midcontinent was a part of everyday life. (p. 130)

The pattern is consistent and clear [. . .] About 16% of several hundred burials showed signs of having died a violent death, with evidence of decapitation, scalping, blunt force trauma, and arrow points embedded in bone . . . (p. 139)

Raiders virtually decimated the population of a large fortified village [. . .] The mutilated bodies of nearly five hundred villagers were recovered . . . (p. 140)

Conflicts were not limited to particular kinds of societies, however they might be classified [. . .] Anybody, regardless of age or sex, could fall victim to an attack; nobody was spared [. . .] Weak and debilitated people who were least able to fight or flee were most likely to be killed

[. . .] Ambushes were the most common form of attack . . .
(p. 185)¹⁷

On and on . . . page after page. Whenever archaeologists dig up bones in North America, they find evidence of a dog-eat-dog world inhabited by humans. If the implied murder rate in much of the past—about 10%—were today’s rate, some 30 million people in the U.S. would die violent, nonaccidental deaths. Even in Baltimore, one of America’s most murderous cities, a 10% murder rate would be shocking and appalling. There, only about 300 of the city’s 600,000 population die violently every year. Of the 6,000 deaths there last year, 5% came about violently.

Responsible scholars draw back from sweeping generalizations. No one knows what prehistoric life was like . . . or even if it was uniform enough, over hundreds of thousands of years and thousands of different cultures, to permit generalizations at all. But the bone records, as well as anthropological studies of primitive tribes, tell the tale: In the distant past, violence was common.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead, after a lifetime of studying primitive tribes, guessed what public life was like for most humans during the hunter-gatherer stage: if you met someone from a different tribe, your first instinct—as demonstrated by the aforementioned Sentinel Islanders—was probably to kill him. There is a good reason to think this was so: it was probably the smart thing to do. There were only so many fat birds and slow deer, and only so many women. If your tribe were to survive and prosper, it could not “create” more wealth. It had to take it away from someone else. And even if your tribe was fat and happy, with no ambition to take anything from anyone else, you were still well-advised to annihilate other tribes whenever you could. Otherwise, it was just a matter of time before you were attacked.

Generally, there was no such thing as win-win, in other words, in the primitive world. Man, a part of nature, had his place. He hunted. And he was hunted. He killed animals to eat. It is not much of a leap to think that he killed humans, too.

It is indisputable that proto-*Homo sapiens* came into contact with other human species. In one cave in Siberia, for example, remains of three different human species have been found—Neanderthals, Denisovans, and *Homo sapiens*. All competed for the same game . . . the same hunting grounds . . . and, perhaps, the same shelter. The disappearance of these rival species could have “natural” causes. But what would be more natural, in the prehistoric world, than murder? And, perhaps, cannibalism. Even as late as the sixteenth century, when Europeans spread throughout the world, they found cannibalism was still widely practiced.

There were times, surely, when tribes could expand without eating their competitors. The movement into empty continents and islands, for example, permitted large population increases without intra-species competition. In the space of a few thousand years, however, Australia and the Americas filled up. The easily hunted megafauna—giant sloths, flightless birds, and odd creatures such as the glyptodon—were exterminated. Then, it was back to zero sum. And that was, more or less, what the first Europeans found when they arrived in these new lands. The local tribes were in constant warfare with one another.

Within their own tribes, there is no reason to think that Native Americans, for example, were particularly bloodthirsty. But even colonial-era tribes were likely engaged, often with unbelievable ferocity, in long, protracted wars for dominance and territory.

Revenge was a powerful, and logical, motive. If you knew that another tribe would seek revenge—perhaps like Donald J. Trump vowing to hit back “ten times as hard”—you would have to think twice before attacking. And if you attacked, you would want to be sure that your target was not merely damaged, but exterminated. Typically, all males were killed—even infants. Women were taken as slaves and concubines. No one who might seek revenge should be left alive.

There were peaceful tribes in some areas, and groups of tribes that had worked out peaceful alliances with each other. But they were fleeting. As far as we know, peace was based on convenience rather than deeply held “myths” or moral values. Again, as far as we know, there was no concept of murder and no “rule” against killing someone from another tribe (though there were compensatory systems and ritualized warfare in some places to prevent excessive bloodshed). The reader will see, as we get deeper into our subject, that moral values and “myths” are more likely the product of convenience than the other way around. The rule against murder, for example, arose after the Neolithic Age for a very simple reason: murder ceased to pay. But we’ll get to that later.

The most recently inhabited large land mass—New Zealand—provides some interesting evidence. The islands were discovered and settled only about 700 years ago by a handful of Polynesians. DNA and oral traditions both suggest that these founders numbered no more than about 400 people, probably all from the same tribe, and presumably traveling in small boats.

It does not take much imagination to think these first settlers enjoyed a good romp over both islands, exterminating the large moa bird by the year 1300 or so. During the early years, we imagine there was little reason for one group to compete with another. The “sum” was not zero . . . not even close. It was apparently unlimited. No group had to give up anything for another group to expand. But wealth, power, and status are relative, not absolute. And the history of the Spanish conquest of the New World suggests that the early immigrants to New Zealand probably fought with each other anyway. Even with an entire continent to conquer, and only a handful of Spaniards to do the work, new arrivals nevertheless often found their fellow conquistadores to be their most lethal enemies.

In New Zealand, the small group of pioneers who first encountered the islands was able to expand to 100,000 people, as estimated by the English when they arrived in the mid-1700s. By then, the Māori—as the descendants of the first settlers came to be known—were at each other’s throats. The “indigenous” people had formed into rival tribes and built extensive forts to protect themselves from

each other. In 1642, Dutch explorer Abel Tasman, the first white man to see the islands, named his first port of call “Murderers’ Bay” (now Golden Bay) after he was attacked there by the Māori. Early missionaries were appalled by the almost unrelenting violence—murder, rape, beatings, war, reprisals, and slavery. It must have been like Baltimore! Cannibalism was common, too—the ultimate win-lose proposition.

Europeans brought new technology, including the musket. This tipped the balance of power in favor of those locals who got their hands on them first. By 1835, a tribe of Māori armed with muskets attacked their distant cousins, the Moriori tribe on Chatham Island, and practically annihilated them. By 1901, there were only 35 Moriori left on the island.

“Thou Shalt Not Kill,” proclaims the Commandment. The Māori didn’t seem to get the message. Why not kill? Is it because God said so? Whose god? In the long period of human prehistory, at least after the debut of the Neolithic Age, it appears that killing others paid off. The killers gained an advantage.

If you live in a zero-sum world, there is no obvious incentive not to kill. If you kill, you are arguably better off. There’s one less hunter to compete with . . . one less man who might kill you . . . and one less man to muscle out of the way so you can have access to females. Like a shareholder after a buy-back program, the sum will be shared by fewer people. But this logic probably doesn’t apply within a tribe. Members of a tribe may be necessary to ensure each other’s survival. The gatherers gather. The hunters hunt. The women bear children. The men fight off predators and usurpers. All share similar DNA, culture, myths, and food. The loss of a fellow tribesman may be a loss to everyone in the tribe, perhaps imperiling the entire group.

Within a tribe, there are rules and customs that help the group survive. In times of famine, for example, the old and young may be abandoned. Food may be rationed, with the biggest portions given to the young men needed for hunting or protection. Superstitions and myths may help tribe members avoid any temptation to jeopardize their survival.

Even in modern times, under stress, groups of people revert to uncivilized behavior in which the codes of acceptable action are more consistent with the barbarous past. In modern times, the hyperinflation in Germany in the 1920s, and again in the immediate aftermath of World War II . . . in Nanking, when the Japanese captured the city . . . in Naples, after the German army left. . . in the prisoner of war, work, and extermination camps—extraordinarily unchristian and uncivilized things took place. In German camps, for example, starving Soviet prisoners were reported to have routinely fought over the corpses of their dying comrades, tearing the meat off the bones before the bodies were dragged away.

Back in Paleolithic or Neolithic times, the rule against murder, if there was one, probably didn't extend very far. Even today, murdering foreigners is not regarded with much revulsion. Early in Donald J. Trump's presidency, for example, a team of Navy Seals was sent into a village in Yemen at night to steal some laptop computers. A firefight broke out. Apparently, up to 30 civilians, including women and children, were shot dead . . . and one Navy Seal lost his life. The U.S. media focused much attention on the dead Navy Seal . . . and almost none on the dead foreigners. More broadly, America's wars in the Middle East are said to have caused as many as 1 million deaths in the region. Almost no one in the U.S. is even aware of this number; few care.

Economist and philosopher Adam Smith highlighted this phenomenon, suggesting that an Englishman would be more aggrieved by the loss of his little finger than by the death of 100,000 people in China. Steven Pinker, though, believes we are now a better species, and that almost no one today—if he had the choice—would consciously choose a finger over 100,000 Chinese lives. Perhaps. With the world watching and enough anesthesia, a person may surrender a finger to save the multitudes. But what if he had to cut it off himself, with no one to praise him for doing it or to criticize him for not doing it?

Strangers are not “us.” They are “them.” They are a different tribe. Most Americans know that more than 50,000 U.S. troops died in the Vietnam War; very few know or care that 40 times as many

Vietnamese may have died. Today, murder is frowned on almost everywhere, but when foreigners are killed, there is little sense of outrage or loss.

But our guess is that Pinker is more right than wrong. Little by little, over thousands of years, the macroeconomic context changed. Returns to killers must have begun to decline. Cooperation became relatively more profitable; the sum expanded and, eventually, killers could no longer compete. Today, we still have killers. But killing is prohibited by law and custom, as well as religious and social taboo. Perhaps more important, it is not profitable. The killer rarely gets to keep his victim's property . . . or his women. He has no need for revenge killing either; he has the government to do that for him.

Even the idea of "murder" may be more modern than we realize. Would Moses have brought down a tablet banning murder if it had already been a no-no? Which brings us back to our question: What's so bad about killing people? We kill animals. Why not humans?

Morality Pays

The central idea of this book, in its crudest and simplest form, is that economics leads morality, and that the transition to a win-win world beginning about 4,000 years ago brought modern morality with it. American journalist Robert Wright probably has it backwards when he says, "memes which manage to pass through this gauntlet of cultural selection, and come to characterize whole societies, often encourage non-zero-sum interaction."¹⁸

More likely, the success of win-win deals set the imagination to work to craft explanations, rules, and myths. As anthropologist Franz Boas explained, "It seems to be one of the fundamental characteristics of the development of mankind that activities which have developed unconsciously are gradually made the subject of reasoning."¹⁹

This is not a new idea. Nineteenth-century philosopher Karl Marx and many others were on the case long ago. Marx thought

economic changes were the real source of both political and moral developments.

And American economist Mancur Olson described how morality evolved; he explained that ethical rules lagged economic developments. “Morality is what used to pay,” he wrote.²⁰

Marx and his followers then made an extraordinary and unfortunate leap. From the insight that morals are driven by circumstances (power relationships, technology, and broadly, economics), they jumped to the staggering assertion that “bourgeois” morality didn’t matter, and that they could change both the economy and morals at will. Reconfiguring economic and political systems to their liking, they thought they could dispense with the process by which they had been created and the hidden insights they carried within them.

But neither the economy nor the moral system was ever fully subject to their conscious designs. They could design a new economy, but it wouldn’t do what an economy should do—make it possible for people to get what they want. They could insist on a new moral structure, too—but, entirely synthetic, it would soon be shown to be immoral.

This is probably a good place to step back and look more fully at the point we are making.

To that end, we turn to one of the big bestsellers of recent years—a book by the aforementioned Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. Right off the bat, we know the author thinks we have a nature, and that it has good and bad angels somehow attached to it. But the gist of the book is that violence has been in decline for a long, long time.

Pinker’s contribution to this discussion is to prove it. In this, he does a masterful and thorough job. Drawing on bone records, anthropological studies, police statistics, history, folk tales, and art, he uncovers levels of past violence—as illustrated in this chapter—that modern readers will find shocking. The ancient world was unbelievably brutish and dangerous. He shows an unsteady, but unrelenting, decline in murder rates everywhere. And not just murder rates. Rape, theft, slavery—all forms of violence have become less common.

The shocking part is how common they once were. In some places, in some periods, you were more likely to be killed than to die from natural causes. Also shocking are the other forms of violence in the ancient world—tormenting animals, torture, and cruel and unusual punishments. We will not bother you, gentle reader, with the descriptions of the many torture devices used in the old days; apparently, there is a community of aficionados who collect them. And it seems there were always people willing and ready to use them—to inflict pain . . . to extract confessions . . . or simply for amusement.

After reading a few hundred pages about the atrocities committed by our ancestors—or suffered by them—we are delighted to discover that not only are these practices in sharp decline, but the appeal of them has also mostly disappeared. That is, they've gone out of style. Somewhere along the way, man has developed a sense of empathy for his fellow human beings. Most people no longer delight in the suffering of others—nor even of animals. We no longer want to set cats on fire or cut off the noses of people who annoy us. Bull baiting, bear baiting, gladiator combats, stoning people to death, burning at the stake, breaking on the wheel, the Iron Maiden—most are not just illegal, but unimaginable. Even in the movies, if a man kicks a dog early in a film, you know he'll probably be dead by its end. Something has changed; generally, we no longer appreciate the use of violence, unless it is far away and used on strangers, out of sight. That is probably how the pilot and bombardier of the *Enola Gay* were able to sleep at night after incinerating 185,000 innocent people; they saw no one die.

But why has the attitude to violence changed? Pinker is an optimist who believes in the perfectibility of man. He guesses that it is a triumph of reason. He believes the Enlightenment encouraged an awareness of what we do and a consideration of the likely consequences, not just for ourselves, but for others, too. According to this line of thinking, evil is merely an error. As we become more thoughtful and more knowledgeable, it will gradually disappear. He believes, too, that governments have contributed to this decline in violence. They gradually gained a monopoly on the

use of violence, and they—especially democracies—use it more sparingly.

Our own guess, which we develop more fully in a later chapter, is that government violence is a different sort of violence. It is controlled and systematic . . . and then episodic and horrendous. Taking on the task of punishing and deterring “bad” behavior, government has probably helped to reduce private sector violence. But while it inhibits private sector theft, for example, it institutes a system of exploitation that separates far more people from far more money than freelance thieves ever could. Today, in America, for example, the practice of civil forfeiture alone costs citizens more than private thievery.

And while the government prevents and deters people from killing one another privately with Smith & Wesson handguns, it develops nuclear bombs, tanks, artillery, and huge standing armies trained and equipped to kill millions of people as a matter of public policy.

A further guess is that civilization and the decline in violence are mutually reinforcing parts of the same phenomenon, and that both are the natural consequence of what is called “gentle commerce.” Where that expression came from, we don’t know. But it describes what happens when people beat their swords into plowshares. Then, rather than kill one another in a zero-sum quest for success, they find they can get ahead by producing things with which they can trade.

Producing and trading—rather than murdering and stealing—sets in motion a whole train of ideas, attitudes, and customs that are, by nature, nonviolent. That is, they are perforce voluntary, as all win-win deals must be. Thus, they are “gentle” rather than brutal.

It is no coincidence that this gentleness surged over the last 4,000 years. There were probably hundreds or thousands of codes, memes, ideas, and moral recommendations available during this evolutionary period. “Do unto others . . .” survived; it worked.

Then, the desire to please customers, coworkers, and employers leads to much more than the division of labor, economic progress, and a greater economic surplus. First, it leads to the basic elements

of civilized commerce—property rights, money, and communication. Later, it leads to the trappings we mistake for civilization itself—smiles, handshakes, art, manners, and modern morals. The earliest writing samples we have, for example, are neither poems nor government proclamations; they are sales records memorializing win-win deals.

Once win-lose deals no longer paid off as they used to, man looked for ways beyond brute force to dominate . . . to be cool . . . to feel superior. Our most fundamental drive—beyond survival itself—is not wealth; it is mating. “It is the ultimate goal of almost all human effort,” wrote German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer of sexual desire.²¹

Sociobiologists say money is just a “status marker” and status markers are substitutes for genetic markers, signaling suitability for parenting. In a win-lose, zero-sum world, the use of violence was relatively straightforward and conclusive. The male who was able to get in a dominant position—whether by physical strength or group manipulation—had access to the most females. Later, in the win-win, positive-sum world that arose after the agricultural revolution, he needed to develop wit as well as strength, and an elaborate system of status markers, to replace the more conclusive use of force. That is why, today, the rich movie star probably has more mistresses available to him than the poor bodybuilder.

“The tireless pursuit of social status, even of conquest,” writes Robert Wright, “has ultimately elevated the human condition, allowing more and more people to live, on balance, better lives.”²² Today, most of our efforts to gain status are focused on becoming richer, smarter, more knowledgeable about Chinese porcelains and chess champions, and so forth. But humans spin out an intricate lace of status markers. They are capable of finding status in just about everything . . . and often, in contradictory ways. One may feel superior because he drives a big, expensive car. Another feels superior because he doesn’t. One feels superior because he is muscled-up. Another says the muscleman is a moron; he reads books instead.

All of this modern human “software” can best be understood not as the product of the Enlightenment or a moral awakening, but

as the product of cultural evolution, in which social innovations adapted to the new positive-sum world. And while it would be nice to think that the death rate was in irreversible decline, thanks to the conscious efforts of enlightened governors, it may not be so. There was an explosion of state-supported violence in the early twentieth century. Since then, most of the wars have been small and fake-ish. But that could change in a matter of seconds.

This is not a very popular point of view, either. Evolution has no mind, no meaning, no purpose, and no destination. What's more, cultural evolution leaves little room for human conceits. Smart people, for example, like to think they can use their brains to craft a better public life, just as they do in their private lives. If they can figure out how to make indoor plumbing work, they reason, surely, they can also fashion a better society.

Secular authorities like to see themselves as the source of wealth and power . . . as well as the arbiters of right and wrong. They think they are the custodians of the economy and they are essential to the prosperity of the people under their supervision. They claim to manage it for the benefit of the public—through regulation, taxation, and fiscal and monetary policy. Meanwhile, many religious people believe that murder is immoral because God said so. They think moral rules are divinely inspired, handed down to us by prophets who had some inside track with the Almighty.

If that were so, and it might be, you still wonder why God would take so long to announce what would seem to be universal and timeless rules. Moses waited until the Egyptian *séjour* was at an end before coming down the mountain with the Ten Commandments. Was it okay to murder people before then? It doesn't seem likely, not if the rule were timeless and universal. So why didn't God say something sooner? Not that we are second-guessing God. Rather, we are second-guessing our fellow men, whose views of history, religion, economics, and morality we regard as too simplistic to be accurate . . . and yet, not simple enough.

“Thou Shalt Not Kill” is a simple rule. Great exceptions are made, of course, even where it is generally honored. Babies not yet

born may be murdered in most places. Criminals are often put to death. And, of course, enemy soldiers, even quasi-soldiers, such as “terrorists” . . . who wear no uniforms, have no military training, and even, in some cases, are incapable of doing much real mischief because they are blind or confined to wheelchairs . . . can be killed with no due process, no declaration of war, not even a warning.

The idea of “immorality” is a recent invention. It presumes an awareness of time and of the concept of consequences. It suggests an awakening to the notion of cause and effect; what you do today may have something to do with what happens tomorrow.

There are two types of moral rules. The first is merely an observation wherein past, present, and future are connected in a disagreeable, finger wagging kind of way. “If you don’t save for your retirement, you’re going to be in trouble,” says the responsible spouse. “If you keep smoking like that, you’re going to end up in the hospital,” says the doctor.

The second type of moral rule is deeper and more abstract. It involves the idea of “right” and “wrong” in some way that goes beyond the likely, observable consequences. This is the key “consciousness” on which civilized life ultimately rests, the recognition of the connections between things that happen now and those that may, or may not, happen in the future.

The contribution of the Christian religion is largely to extend the cause and effect into the afterlife. So, even if you are not collared by the *gendarmes*, you will still pay for your crime later. Is it true that you could delight in Heaven or burn in Hell, depending on what you do on Earth? We don’t know; but like so many other myths, it could be best to think so.

Even today, there are some people with little grasp of time. The Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert, for example, reportedly have only an incipient awareness of cause and effect. They eat when they are hungry. They mate with whomever they please, whenever they please. They sleep when they are sleepy. They have no creation myth, no religion, and no sense of extended time, neither remote past nor life after death. Anthropologists who studied them were

surprised. It seemed almost impossible that such people have survived so long with no progress toward civilization. They guessed that they had perhaps lost their “culture” when they were chased into the bush by other tribes or European invaders.

Even among civilized groups today, tribe-based moral systems have not been abandoned completely. In April 2018, this story appeared on the news website *Mondoweiss*:

Rabbi Ophir Wallas of the Bnei David Military Mechina was caught on video teaching young would-be soldiers that Israelis are, from the halachaic point of view, permitted to wipe out Palestinians, and that only fear of massive retaliation prevents that.

“The laws of a mitzvah war, a war of occupying the Land. Even if I don’t conquer Gaza right now, [conquering it] is part of my ability to settle the Land of Israel, so it is also a part of the mitzvah of conquering the Land. And therefore it follows, there’s no other way; like, we’d have to kill them all. Because this is the difference between the Law of the Persecutor and mitzvah wars. [. . .] A mitzvah war of conquering the Land, which is not limited to saving the people of Israel from their enemies, according to some of the Rishonim, I could, on the face of it and by the essential law, destroy, kill and cause to perish all of them. I will not do so, because if I were to do so, and reject international treaties, then the State of Israel shall perish, unless we shall witness a miracle of miracles—and one must not trust in a miracle. And that’s the only reason I won’t do it.” [As translated by Yossi Gurvitz.]²³

A few months later, Israel’s parliament passed into law a bill that defined the country as an exclusively Jewish state. It was a move right out of the Old Testament. Or 1930s Germany. The new law echoed the Nazis’ 1935 “Race Laws,” which were designed to protect “German blood and German honor.” The Germans made citizenship the exclusive right of ethnic Germans; the new Israeli law declared the country to be the “homeland of the Jewish people” who had an “exclusive right to national self-determination in it.”²⁴

This example is a modern expression of the ancient, pre-civilized myth illustrated in the Old Testament. What is especially unusual

about it is that it is so obvious and unvarnished. Generally, modern governments tart up the old “us versus them” myth in the hot pants of “national security,” manifest destiny, or some other claptrap.

An Introduction to Bad Guy Theory

In the world of finance, abundance—not scarcity—is the bigger risk. Nothing ruins people faster than getting too much money with too little effort. Few bank robbers, lottery winners, or sports stars can resist the temptation to extravagance, luxury, and excess. In a few years, they’re broke.

But if “too much” is a problem in the money world, perhaps it is a problem in the political world, too? Power corrupts. Perhaps it is true what they say about absolute power, too. By May 2018, in Israel, the rot seemed well-advanced. Israeli troops fired on a crowd of demonstrators, hitting at least 1,300 of them. A few Jewish intellectuals with their sense of shame still intact thought they had gone too far: “We’ve gone over to the dark side,” they said to themselves. “We’re becoming decivilized.”

Why some people are more civilized than others is a subject for debate. It may be that “civilized” people have a more developed, abstract, moral sense. More likely, what they don’t do to others is, generally, what they’re afraid may be done to them. It is not abstract virtue that makes us good, in other words; it is fear of jealous husbands, determined creditors, and the Huns.

But what if we knew they could do us no harm? What if you were a giant in a race of Pygmies? What if you had an AK-47 . . . and your enemies had BB guns? What would happen to your civilized restraint then?

Going over to the dark side seems to be what people do from time to time, when the coast is clear. They get out the thumbscrews and the water boards. They slaughter without fear of retribution. They lie, cheat, and steal without worry—because they can get away with it.

Had Israelis become the bad guys? In Israel itself, some thought so. Recalling a more innocent era, writer and politician Uri Avnery wrote:

I was a member of the National Military Organization (the “Irgun”), an armed underground group labeled “terrorist.”

Palestine was at the time under British occupation (called “mandate”). In May 1939, the British enacted a law limiting the right of Jews to acquire land. I received an order to be at a certain time at a certain spot near the sea shore of Tel Aviv in order to take part in a demonstration. I was to wait for a trumpet signal.

The trumpet sounded and we started the march down Allenby Road, then the city’s main street. Near the main synagogue, somebody climbed the stairs and delivered an inflammatory speech. Then we marched on, to the end of the street, where the offices of the British administration were located. There we sang the national anthem, “Hatikvah,” while some adult members set fire to the offices.

Suddenly several lorries carrying British soldiers screeched to a halt, and a salvo of shots rang out. The British fired over our heads, and we ran away.²⁵

But now, the gun is in the other hand. Palestinians demonstrate. Israeli snipers do not shoot over their heads.

Here’s Jeremy Scahill, founding editor of *The Intercept*:

Israel has once again conducted a premeditated, full-scale massacre in broad daylight, in front of the cameras of the world. Once again, it took place in Gaza.

On May 14, Israeli snipers and other forces gunned down more than 60 Palestinians, and wounded thousands of others, including civilians, journalists, and paramedics. [. . .]

Among those killed by Israeli forces was an 8-month-old infant. Her name was Laila al-Ghandour. They also killed at least seven other children and a man in a wheelchair, and that man had lost his legs after they had to be amputated following an earlier Israeli attack.²⁶

There is nothing, specifically, you have to do to be civilized. But there are some things you shouldn’t do. Killing people is one of them.

Among the comments arising from the Gaza incident were some pointing the finger at the USA. The U.S. president's daughter and son-in-law (Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner) seemed to approve of the Israeli government. Rather than condemn the killings, the U.S. blocked an international investigation. Had Americans become "bad guys," too?

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the U.S. stood alone. It was the "end of history," author Francis Fukuyama suggested.²⁷ America was number 1 . . . the *ne plus ultra* of the twentieth century. By comparison, the whole rest of the world was just one big "sh*thole."

America's only plausible enemy—equipped with both industrial age factories and nuclear-age warheads—was the Soviet Union. And it gave up the competition—it even ceased to be the Soviet Union—in 1991. Still, America's military spending continued to increase, rising, by 2018, to twice its level 30 years before. By comparison, the rest of the world had beaten its swords, its BB guns, and its slingshots into plowshares. And now, with such a big difference in military spending, U.S. foreign policy could be economically and elegantly described in three words: "We're America, bitch."²⁸

Power was unbalanced and disproportionate. It was all take, with no give. It was live . . . but not let the other guy live. The U.S. could invade Iraq; the Iraqis couldn't invade America. The U.S. Army and the CIA could target extremists for drone assassination; but back in the homeland, Americans slept in peace.

Therein lay the fatal temptation . . .

Iran hasn't invaded another country since the Achaemenid dynasty went on a spree in the fourth century BCE. Since then, it's been invaded by almost everyone able to do so—Mongols, Russians, English, Muslims, and, in 1980, U.S.-backed Iraq. In the 1950s, the country also endured a *coup d'état*, organized by the U.S. Its democratically elected president was replaced by a CIA puppet.

And today, Iran is considered such a bad *hombre* that U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo read it the riot act on May 21, 2018. The Associated Press followed the story:

The Trump administration on Monday demanded that Iran make wholesale changes in its military and regional policies or face “the strongest sanctions in history,” as it sought to turn up heat on Tehran after President Donald Trump’s decision to withdraw from a landmark nuclear deal. [. . .]

Unless such a treaty can be reached, Pompeo warned that Iran would face tough sanctions that would leave it “battling to keep its economy alive.” [. . .]

“These will end up being the strongest sanctions in history by the time we are complete,” Pompeo said . . .²⁹

President Trump followed up in July in a tweet inspired, no doubt, by the history of the Assyrian conquest, warning that the Iranians would “suffer consequences the likes of which few throughout history have ever suffered before. We are no longer a country that will stand for your demented words of violence & death. Be cautious!”³⁰

Moses, bringing the law down from Mount Sinai, announced 10 things Jews needed to do to keep themselves in God’s good graces. But Pompeo demanded 12 changes of the Iranians. We don’t recall Iran ordering the U.S. to make even one change, let alone 12 of them. Is that because the U.S. is already perfect . . . or because the Pentagon spent an amount equal to the entire Iranian defense budget every eight days?

Power has rules of its own. Win-win reciprocity isn’t one of them. When you can throw your weight around without worrying about someone else’s weight being thrown at you, what’s to stop you?

Nature, like civilization, needs balance. Harmony. “Too much” upsets it. Instead, it thrives on limits, restraints, and corrections. When there is “too much,” something has to give. Otherwise, nature tips over into chaos and buffoonery. And when a nation has too much power, like a child who has had too many desserts, it becomes insufferable.

After the Cold War ended, the U.S. was master of the field . . . unopposed . . . on top of the heap. It could have brought its troops home and cut its military spending in half . . . or more . . . restoring some measure of balance with the rest of the world. It could have taken

up the America First slogan, minding its own business and being a good neighbor to other countries. It could have balanced its budget, paid off its debt, and devoted its time, money, and energy to building a great country.

Instead, with no debate in Congress, it took another path.

And now, all over the world, it bombs, sanctions, and assassimates . . . bullying, bossing, and bamboozling small countries that can't protect themselves. But who drones America's "extremists" in Kentucky? Who assassinates "insurgent" leaders in California? Who imposes sanctions on America?

The U.S. has invaded 84 countries since its founding. Modern Iran: zero. The U.S. has weapons of mass destruction . . . and has proven that it is ready to use them; it dropped an atomic bomb twice—both times on civilians. No other country has used atomic weapons in an act of war. Iran has no atomic weapons. The U.S. had troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, within easy striking distance of Iran. Iran has no troops in Mexico or Canada. So, who's the bad guy?

The whole idea of "bad guys" as a focus of U.S. foreign policy came after the fall of Baghdad to U.S. troops and George W. Bush's famous "Mission Accomplished" speech on a U.S. aircraft carrier in 2003. The war was won. But it went on. And on the shifting sands of the Middle East, amid the shifting focus from one religious, tribal, sectarian, or political group to another, military spokesmen couldn't keep up. They began referring to the enemy *du jour* as simply "the bad guys."

But who, really, were the bad guys? Our myths tell us that what is good for the goose is good for the gander. But the gods know better. If the goose is big enough, and powerful enough, the gander can just watch out.

People come to think what they need to think when they need to think it. And when people have a vastly disproportionate amount of military power, they soon find reasons to use it. They begin to see bad guys everywhere. Readers of our own daily blog—*Bill Bonner's Diary*—illustrated the point. They thought they knew not only what happened in Gaza that day, but why it happened. They thought they could look into black hearts and see corrupted souls—even from

thousands of miles away. The Palestinians were fiends from Hell, said one reader:

When faced with a screaming horde of fanatics who want to exterminate your existence, do what it takes. Be glad that Mexico is not dominated by Islamists.

They had blood dripping from their hands, said another:

A significant number of Palestinians killed were unquestionably identified by independent sources as terrorists.

They were mass murderers, said a third:

They intend to kill indiscriminately and create a 5th column within Israel to destroy it.

In other words, they all deserved to die. They, not the Israeli gunmen who shot them down, were the evil ones. No charges were ever filed. No evidence presented. No verdict rendered. And no sentence pronounced. But the protesters got the firing squad anyway. That's the advantage of power—you don't need to hold a trial. And you never need to say you're sorry.

By the spring of 2022, the Bad Guys du Jour were the Russians. The press, the public, Congress, the President—all agreed; the Russkies deserved to be killed. And every press report brought applause. We were told they were badly led . . . undersupplied . . . and failing, up and down the line.

Were they really worse than their adversaries—the Ukrainians? What made them worse? Should the Donbas be allowed to go its own way? Should the borders of Ukraine remain forever as they were set by the Soviet Union's great leaders—Lenin, Stalin, and Khrushchev? But that's another nice thing about Bad Guy Theory; you don't have to ask questions. The Russians are bad guys; that's all you need to know.

Looking into their own hearts and minds, Americans see saints in the mirror and angels dancing on the White House lawn.

Foreigners probably see something else. Some might look back, for example, to America's bloody campaigns against the Cherokee or the Sioux . . . to its invasions of Mexico or Nicaragua . . . or to its conquest of the Philippines. U.S. troops took over the Philippines after a fake battle with Spanish forces (the two armies agreed to a mock battle in Manila to justify the handover to Americans rather than to the natives).

"Hooray," said the Filipinos. "America is a beacon of independence. Now, we will be independent, too."

It was still very early in the twentieth century. But the U.S. was already woozy; the imperial juice was going to its head. Instead of handing over the Philippines to the "brown people," the white people back in North America chose to hold onto their colonial prize.

Alas, the ungrateful inhabitants resisted. As many as 1.5 million of them—mostly civilians—died as a result of fighting, massacres, concentration camps, and disease.

American soldiers told the tale in their letters home:

The town of Titatia was surrendered to us a few days ago, and two companies occupy the same. Last night one of our boys was found shot and his stomach cut open. Immediately orders were received from General Wheaton to burn the town and kill every native in sight; which was done to a finish. About 1,000 men, women and children were reported killed. I am probably growing hard-hearted, for I am in my glory when I can sight my gun on some dark skin and pull the trigger.³¹

Back home, Americans had little doubt who the bad guys were. They backed their boys in the field, as they always do. But a few had second thoughts. In his diary, Mark Twain referred to American soldiers as "our uniformed assassins." He described the war as:

. . . a long and happy picnic with nothing to do but sit in comfort and fire the Golden Rule into those people down there and imagine letters to write home to the admiring families, and pile glory upon glory.³²

After a week or so of this kind of thinking in our daily blog, we were set to heave it over the side, like a fish too small to meet the legal limit. Readers didn't appreciate it. But reading our mail . . . followed by a restless night . . . we decided to look further. And then, we saw it more clearly—slimy and hideous. Bad Guy Theory (BGT) is the updated version of tribe-based morality. It maintains that there are some people who are good, and others who are bad. The good ones think they can spot the bad ones . . . and that they have the right and duty to kill them, because . . . well . . . they're up to no good.

Many of our readers believed BGT was essentially correct; they knew damn well who the bad guys were . . . and thought your author was an SOB for suggesting otherwise. Wrote one, referring to Muslims, Persians, or Palestinians (we're not sure which):

If they could, they'd kill you, me and our families.

We have some personal experience. We lived in Paris for many years and knew, casually, some Iranians. We had dinner with them once or twice in their apartment in the 16th *arrondissement*. Never once did they go for our throats with a butcher knife.

Another reader thought our suggestion that even good people sometimes do bad things was out of line:

You owe all of your subscribers an apology.

This reader was particularly annoyed by our suggestion that dropping an atomic bomb on civilians was perhaps not a civilized thing to do. (We'll come back to that in a minute.)

BGT is as ancient as the Old Testament. Each generation, each culture, each tribe has had its bad guys. The neighboring village. The nation over the mountains. Spartans. Yids. Queers. Reds. Bourgeois reactionaries. Mensheviks. Kulaks. Intellectuals. Gypsies. Heretics. Papists. Prods. Huns. Gooks. Kafirs. Cathars. Sorcerers. Insurgent Filipinos. Rebels. Slaves. And bog-trotting, mouth-breathing Paddies. They all deserved to die . . . and all got the death sentence. Not that they necessarily did anything wrong. But their

thoughts . . . their beliefs . . . their intentions and motivations marked them as bad guys.

But how could you know what was really in people's hearts and minds? Use the rack and thumbscrews to find out! Or don't worry about it. "Kill them all," said the Count of Citeaux before the massacre at Béziers in 1209. "God will sort them out."

As already noted, the God of the Old Testament seemed ready for any sort of mayhem. But Jesus had another idea. He didn't care what group you were part of. He didn't seem to care what you had done in the past either; it was what you did now and in the future that counted. "Go forth and sin no more," said He to the bad gal who was about to be stoned to death.

Common law also emerged gradually and organically from the swamp and blood of prehistoric life. It, too, turned away from BGT. Justice was blind. Were you a Jew? Were you a Muslim? Were you a believer . . . or a sinner? It hardly mattered. Instead, the judge wanted to know where you were on the night of the 23rd . . . that is, he wanted to know what you had gotten up to, not who you were. You were judged on the basis of your actions.

So let us look at the action that brought our readers to grab a rail, feathers, and pitch and come looking for us.

Grave Misgivings

On August 8, 1945, Nagasaki, Japan, was still intact. Its citizens were living on short rations. They were mostly old men, women, and children—the young men had already been drafted into the army. If we had been able to look into their hearts and minds, we probably would have found that they wished the entire American nation would drop dead. It was because of it, they reasoned, that they were dying of disease and hunger, lacking food, fuel, clothing, and just about everything else.

It was onto these people that Harry Truman dropped the second atomic bomb.

They were “bad guys,” said the U.S. press. They “supported the war,” said God-fearing Americans. Besides, it “saved our soldiers’ lives,” said Truman.

Dwight Eisenhower, then supreme commander of the Allied forces in Europe, disagreed. He recalled in a 1963 interview that:

. . . it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing . . . I voiced to him [War Secretary Henry Stimson] my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary, and secondly because I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives.³³

William Leahy, the president’s chief of staff, wrote in his diary:

It is my opinion that the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender. [. . .] My own feeling was that in being the first to use it, we had adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages. I was not taught to make war in that fashion, and wars cannot be won by destroying women and children.³⁴

Even the Uber Bomber himself, Major General Curtis LeMay, was against it:

The war would have been over in two weeks without the Russians entering and without the atomic bomb. The atomic bomb had nothing to do with the end of the war at all.³⁵

So was Admiral Chester Nimitz, who had beaten the Japanese fleet and chased them back to the home islands:

The Japanese had, in fact, already sued for peace before the atomic age was announced to the world with the destruction of Hiroshima and before the Russian entry into the war . . . The atomic bomb played no decisive part, from a purely military standpoint, in the defeat of Japan.³⁶

And what about America's top commander in the Pacific, General Douglas MacArthur? President Nixon recalled:

*[General Douglas] MacArthur once spoke to me very eloquently about it, pacing the floor of his apartment in the Waldorf. He thought it a tragedy that the bomb was ever exploded. MacArthur believed that the same restrictions ought to apply to atomic weapons as to conventional weapons, that the military objective should always be limited damage to noncombatants . . . MacArthur, you see, was a soldier. He believed in using force only against military targets, and that is why the nuclear thing turned him off . . .*³⁷

So, what to make of it? Who were the bad guys? You decide.

But keep in mind that for every person who thinks he can tell the good guys from the bad ones, there must be hundreds of broken bones . . . thousands of broken hearts . . . and a million sorry souls roasting in Hell . . . wishing they had never tried.

