

Cheaters (Automatically) Never Prosper

David N. Green, 2016

It is common for people to have an understanding that humans have something special in their make-up, specifically related to the brain, cognition, or just overt behaviour, that makes them stand-out from the other animals on Earth. In one presentation [1] this has been referred to as "The Human Spark", where a number of specific phenomena are noted as adding to that Spark, such as language, complex emotions, and our ability to think about the future. Another more specific human phenomenon that has piqued the interest of this author is "cheater detection", and this will be the focus of further discussion below, after some additional background related to evolution of the Spark.

Charles Darwin apparently realized he could not leave discussion of the brain out of his work on the Theory of Evolution. [2] He was however reticent to discuss development of brain capability, and therefore the mind (and indirectly the soul), in his desire to avoid offending the religious. This caused him to delay his publication for many years after it was essentially ready, and then also to mention the brain and psychological evolution only at the very end of his treatise. Nevertheless, the field of Evolutionary Psychology [3] has subsequently developed, formalizing principles on which one may base further study of human behaviour. One of the principles states that most of what the brain does is in the subconscious realm; our brains, and autonomous thinking, happens without us even trying.

Human emotions are an aspect of this autonomous brain processing. Emotions give us the ability to efficiently, quickly, and with fair accuracy, make decisions that would otherwise be difficult. A classic capability is our tendency to subconsciously detect cheating in a system; we automatically see what is not equitable. [2] Man tends to live in groups, and a valuable aspect of a working social group is that there is a positive contribution by each member. For instance, after the hunt (or other foraging), there would be a sharing among the group. If a member does not put effort into the hunt, and seems to consume more than he put in, the others easily notice and resent it, and will probably take actions or precautions with regard to that member in the future.

This detection of the cheater is very quick and automatic. It is a survival brain process that requires negligible conscious thought, and yet can result in immediate repercussions against the laggard; we want to cut them out, or get back at them somehow. Perhaps in modern times we might tally-up contributions over long periods of time, for a more balanced evaluation in our more complex societies, but this cheater detection nips anti-social behaviour in the bud, which was probably important when we were surviving day-to-day. There are classic experimental procedures to illustrate this cheater detection instinct that people have, such as the Wason Selection Task [4], however one can also see this automatic process in modern daily interactions. For instance, note that some people are very attuned to how many tasks they have received in a project meeting, or more importantly, that they quickly identify and call-out those who received no tasks. As another example, note that many people are keen observers of who contributed to a shared restaurant bill, and most especially they seem highly aware of – and can't help saying something about – those who did not contribute.

We have considered how cheater detection would seem to be an evolved and now innate emotional response to inequitable contribution by an individual to a group. While this aspect of psychology would

seem to have evolved with us, and served us well in the day-to-day struggling groups in which it seems we lived for thousands of years, it is curious to consider whether such an emotional response should or should not be accepted as the norm in our larger and more complex societies today. If someone fails to contribute, should we penalize quickly, or let the system absorb the deficit over a longer term, for other more advanced social justice reasons. It may be time for this author to look into taking a first course in moral philosophy, or even sociology, which might be as surprisingly interesting as studying the evolution of the soul has been.

[1] "The Human Spark" lecture, L.W. Hamilton, Soul Beliefs course, Rutgers University.

[2] "Evolutionary Psychology" lecture, A. Grysman, Soul Beliefs course, Rutgers University.

[3] "Evolutionary Psychology: A Primer", L. Cosmides and J. Tooby, University of California.

[4] "Reasoning about a rule", P.C. Wason, Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology, 1968.