The Bracing, Empty Self versus the Open, Heart-Minded Self

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The anthropologist, Colin Turnbull (1984), contrasted his British upbringing with African Mbuti (Bambuti) children, a non-industrialized foraging society (with few possessions) whom he studied. The Mbuti represent the type of society similar to that in which the human genus spent 99% of its history: small-band hunter-gatherers. When reaching adolescence, Mbuti children brim with skills, full of confidence in their ability to meet any life challenge, ready to embrace the transition to adulthood. In contrast, left with uncaring nannies most of the time, subjected to physical punishment, and his feelings largely ignored, Turnbull approached his own adolescence empty and uncertain, ripe for bullying by teachers and peers.

According to Cushman (1995), the "empty self," like that described by Turnbull, is a common outcome in the USA today, partially propelled by a history of migration and mobility but also by psychological theory and practice. I think much has to do with how adults have "turned away" from children's wellbeing (not only in the USA). When families and communities are distracted and stressed, they do not provide young children with the intensive supportive care they evolved to need. Once a child is traumatized, it is difficult to reestablish the species-typical trajectory for development. And a distorted trajectory is often passed on to subsequent generations through epigenetic or extra-genetic inheritance.

Starting perinatally, the sense of self is an emergent property, an outcome of biosocial experience, based in the development of implicit socioemotional intelligence. Neurobiological studies today are supporting the general insight from psychoanalytic theory that the self is initially shaped through experiences with caregivers. As humans are dynamic systems and highly immature at birth, it is not surprising that early experience has longterm effects on wellbeing, sociality and morality.

One of the key aspects of early life is how much caregivers follow the built-in needs of the baby (e.g., the need for nearly constant physical intimacy and quick comforting responsiveness to signals of distress). This is not a mother-only or mom-and-dad-only endeavor—it requires a consistent, responsive set of caregivers through early childhood; three or four loving adult companions seems to be ideal.

The ongoing (emotional and physical) support that caregivers provide communicates to the young child the trustworthiness of his body signals and the safety and supportiveness of the world. Consistent responsiveness leads to a self highly secure and deeply rooted in the social landscape, who skillfully derives pleasure from and prosocially contributes to the community.

When caregivers are not ongoingly supportive (e.g., isolating the baby from touch and calming comfort), the child's foundational neurobiology and sense of living forms around a sense of danger (Sandler, 1960), along with a sense of rejection or negation (Litowitz, 1998). Sandler suggested that the sense of danger develops into cynicism or anxiety, or, in any case, into an adult with little trust or confidence in the world. The self harbors a sense of abandonment and badness, apparent in insecure attachment, which subconsciously flavors life experience and propels behavior to avoid those feelings with neurobiological inflexibility ("stiffness" of the mind or heart).

When children start out with experiences that undermine their species-typical becoming, their moral motivations too are shifted. They move away from favoring relational attunement (peaceful engagement), the predomi-

nant moral orientation visible in societies that provide young children with what they evolved to need-- small-band hunter-gatherers. Instead, with early emotional abandonment (conveyed by caregiver absence, socially and physically), motivations become oriented away from social and communal commitment. Detachment from intimacy is practiced and, over time, preferred-- an orientation that mainstream USA culture now considers to be normal. Toxically stressed, the child automatically shifts to favoring social and moral self-protectionism. Missing is the flexible and adept sociality that was central to human evolution.

Self-protectionist societies breed self-protectionist individuals who consider it normal to be narcissistic, selfish, and ruthless for one's own ends. And non-virtue, or vice, becomes part of the social institutions self-protectionist adults build. As Derber (2013) points out, the USA has become a sociopathic society, one that "*creates dominant social norms that are antisocial—that is, norms that assault the well-being and survival of much of the population and undermine the social bonds and sustainable environmental conditions essential to any form of social order.*" Such a society is governed by sociopathic institutions that advance institutional self-interest at the expense of harming citizens and the society at large. The win-at-any-cost, profits-over-people attitudes and behaviors at the top of such social systems trickle down to the rest of the populace, infusing hyper-individualism and conversational narcissism throughout the social landscape.

Like Sylvan Tomkins (1965), I think adult worldviews start in babyhood, biosocially constructed by parents immersed in a particular social system and worldview, which they pass on through their treatment of the child, influencing the child's neurobiological capacities for sociality, morality and wellbeing.

Early life can set one up for an open or bracing attitude towards others. Resonating with open heart-mindedness is fostered by companionship care. In contrast, the bracing empty-self results from lack of supportive care (e.g., patterns of being left alone in distress, physical isolation) or from later trauma.

Humans evolved with an developmental niche that matches up with the maturational schedule of the child (the longest of any animal), building capacities for virtue from the ground up. When the niche is undermined, the natural development of virtue is thrown off kilter.

When things have not gone optimally in childhood, we can take charge of our own healing in adulthood, by revamping our habitual moral orientations and learning to resonate with compassion instead of fear. Further, though we may always harbor woundedness, we can at least ensure proper nurturance of the next generation.

Although people have different definitions of virtue, most focus on getting along well and wisely with others. For example, Aristotle included "social fittedness" as a necessary characteristic (Nussbaum, 1988). But, as we are learning in this era of human-caused planetary crisis, we must expand the notion of virtue to *living well with the earth and its creatures,* cooperating with the "more-than-human world" (Abram, 1996). Though rare among the powerful in dominant societies today, a virtue inclusive of non-humans is normal in first-nation communities. Clearly, with nearly every locale and lifeform on earth under duress from human activity, inclusive ecological virtue is widely needed. And now.

You can read more about these ideas, which takes hundreds of pages to explain, in my recent book, Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality: Evolution, Culture and Wisdom (Norton, 2014), winner of the 2015 William James book award from the American Psychological Association.

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