NEW HAVEN – I admit that it is an unusual way to see the world, but, when reading the newspaper, I am constantly struck by the extent of human kindness. The newest bit of good news comes from The Center on Wealth and Philanthropy at Boston College, which estimates that Americans will give about 250 billion dollars in individual charitable contributions in 2010, up several billion from last year.

People donate their blood to strangers, travel on humanitarian missions to places such as Haiti and the Sudan, and risk their lives to fight injustice elsewhere. And New Yorkers have grown accustomed to reading about subway heroes – brave souls who leap onto the tracks to rescue fallen commuters and then often slip away, uncomfortable with attention or credit.

As a psychologist, I am fascinated by the origin and consequences of such kindness. Some of our moral sentiments and moral motivations are the product of biological evolution. This accounts for why we are often kind to our own flesh and blood – those who share our genes. It also can explain our moral attachments to those we see as members of our immediate tribe.

There is an adaptive logic to being kind to those with whom we continually interact; we scratch their backs, they scratch ours. But there is no Darwinian payoff to sacrificing our resources to anonymous strangers, particularly those in faraway lands.

The explanation for our expanded morality comes from intelligence, imagination, and culture. One powerful force is the use of language to tell stories. These can motivate us to think of distant people as if they were friends and family.

The vicarious experiences generated by Greek tragedies, televised sitcoms, and newspaper stories have all played an important role in expanding the scope of moral concern. Another factor is the spread of ideologies, both secular and religious, that encourage us to care for distant others, that persuade us to expand our kindness beyond our immediate circle.

Even the much-maligned force of capitalism might make us nicer. A recent study of 15 diverse populations, reported in the journal Science, found that the societies that treat anonymous strangers most fairly are those with market economies. As Robert Wright has emphasized, as people become increasingly inter-dependent, the scope of moral concern expands accordingly.

Nobody would argue that we are losing the distinction between those who are close to us and distant strangers. I can’t imagine that this would ever happen. An individual who didn’t distinguish between his or her own child and an unknown child in a faraway land – who felt the same love and the same obligation toward both – would hardly be human anymore. What has happened, though, is that the distinction between “us” and “them” is not as sharp as it used to be.

The effects of our kindness are not zero-sum. Those who receive charity have their lives improved, but those who provide it also benefit. It feels good to be good. Indeed, one recent study found that spending money on others is more rewarding than spending it on oneself. It’s not just short-term pleasure: those who donate wealth and time to others tend to be a lot happier in their entire lives than those who do not. The paradoxical finding here is that one great trick to being happy is to forget about being happy and instead try to increase the happiness of others.

All is not sweetness and light, though; morality is more than compassion and charity. As moral creatures, we are driven to enforce justice.

Experimental economists have found that people will sacrifice their own resources to punish cheaters and free riders, and will do this even to anonymous strangers that they will never again interact with – a behavior dubbed “altruistic punishment.” There is a pleasure to this as well. Just as giving to someone in need elicits a positive neural response, so does taking from someone who deserves it.

This is the flip side of charity. We are motivated to be kind to anonymous others, but we are also motivated to harm those who treat these anonymous others badly. This can drive our powerful impulse to deal with distant evils through sanctions, bombings, and war. We want these wrongdoers to suffer.

The problem that arises is that our gut moral feelings are poorly attuned to consequences. The patterns of charitable donation to foreign countries often have more to do with the salience of news reports than to actual considerations about where the money is most needed. And laboratory findings show that people will continue to punish even if they are well aware that doing so is actually making things worse. It is not difficult to see the consequences of this in the real world.

The extension of human morality is a wonderful development for humanity, but it would be even better if it were tempered by cold-blooded rationality.
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