

# From dark hearts comes the kindness of mankind

January 22 2013

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The kindness of mankind most likely developed from our more sinister and self-serving tendencies, according to Princeton University and University of Arizona research that suggests society's rules against selfishness are rooted in the very exploitation they condemn.

The report in the journal *Evolution* proposes that altruism—society's protection of resources and the collective good by punishing "cheaters"—did not develop as a reaction to avarice. Instead, communal disavowal of greed originated when competing selfish individuals sought to control and cancel out one another. Over time, the direct efforts of the dominant fat cats to contain a few competitors evolved into a community-wide desire to guard its own well-being.

The study authors propose that a system of greed dominating greed was simply easier for our [human ancestors](#) to manage. In this way, the work challenges dominant theories that selfish and altruistic social arrangements formed independently—instead the two structures stand as evolutionary phases of group interaction, the researchers write.

Second author Andrew Gallup, a former Princeton postdoctoral researcher in ecology and evolutionary biology now a visiting assistant professor of psychology at Bard College, worked with first author Omar Eldakar, a former Arizona postdoctoral fellow now a visiting assistant professor of biology at Oberlin College, and William Driscoll, an ecology and [evolutionary biology](#) doctoral student at Arizona.

To test their hypothesis, the researchers constructed a [simulation model](#) that gauged how a community withstands a system built on altruistic punishment, or selfish-on-selfish punishment. The authors found that altruism demands a lot of initial expenditure for the group—in terms of communal time, resources and risk of reprisal from the punished—as well as advanced levels of cognition and cooperation.

On the other hand, a construct in which a few profligate players keep like-minded individuals in check involves only those members of the community—everyone else can passively enjoy the benefits of fewer people taking more than their share. At the same time, the reigning individuals enjoy uncontested spoils and, in some cases, reverence.

Social orders maintained by those who bend the rules play out in nature and human history, the authors note: Tree wasps that police hives to make sure that no member other than the queen lays eggs will often lay illicit eggs themselves. Cancer cells will prevent other tumors from forming. Medieval knights would pillage the same civilians they readily defended from invaders, while neighborhoods ruled by the Italian Mafia traditionally had the lowest levels of crime.

What comes from these arrangements, the researchers conclude, is a sense of order and equality that the group eventually takes upon itself to enforce, thus giving rise to [altruism](#).

**More information:** The paper, "When Hawks Give Rise To Doves: The Evolution and Transition of Enforcement Strategies," was published online Jan. 11 by the journal *Evolution*.

Provided by Princeton University

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