What Can the Titanic Tell Us About Human Nature?

Peter Diamond

_Titanic: Facts and Perceptions_

When the *Titanic* sank, approximately 1,509 of its 2,214 passengers perished. A majority of them died because the ship carried lifeboats for only half the people on board. By all accounts, most died either by drowning or of hypothermia, since the temperature of the water was -2º C (28º F), in which death occurs in about fifteen minutes. The survival rate for men was 19%, for women 72%, and for children, 50%. Most survivors were first class passengers, followed by second class, and finally third class. Six of the seven children in first class survived, and all of the children in second class survived, but only about 31 percent were saved in third class. (There is no definitive number for the people aboard the Titanic, nor for those who survived. These figures are taken from Henderson.)

What can we conclude from these statistics? Evidently the legendary rule of the sea—women and children first—prevailed in most cases. But why? Was it because people are naturally altruistic, even in time of disaster? Perhaps. But there was nothing altruistic about the White Star Line’s decision to provide lifeboats for only half its vessel’s passengers, or to declare in a promotional flyer for the *Titanic* and her sister ship, the *Olympic*, that “as far as it is possible to do, these two wonderful vessels are designed to be unsinkable,” when it certainly knew otherwise (Behe 2). Nor was there anything altruistic about allowing first class passengers relatively easy access to the lifeboats, while the majority of the passengers were mostly left to find their own way alone through the maze of passages that separated steerage from the boat deck (Lord 56).
If we turn to reports of individual behavior, we find stories of heroism and cowardice, of chivalry and stoicism, of meanness and stupidity. Walter Lord’s 1955 bestseller, *A Night To Remember*, provides a full range of such stories based on interviews with over sixty of the survivors. We read of a wave of men rushing one of the lifeboats, only to be beaten back by a seaman with a tiller. The seaman was abetted by Fifth Officer Lowe, who “pulled his gun and shouted, ‘If anyone else tries that, this is what he’ll get!’” He fired three times along the side of the ship as the boat dropped down to the sea.” We read of J. Bruce Ismay, Chairman of the White Star Line, becoming a chameleon of sorts to survive: at first panicked and imperious, then a willing member of the crew, and finally, a coward claiming a seat in one of the lifeboats. We read of Isidor Strauss, the co-owner of Macy’s Department Store, begging his wife Ida to “get into a lifeboat and be saved,” and of Ida refusing to be separated from her husband (Lord 74-75). We read of Captain Smith bravely remaining on the bridge as the ship goes down, and later holding a child in the water (Lord 82). And lastly, we read of the lifeboats, one, piloted by Lowe, attempting to rescue those in the water, but most others unwilling to make the attempt. “In boat after boat,” writes Lord, the story was the same: a timid suggestion, a stronger refusal, nothing done. Of 1,600 people who went down the *Titanic*, only 13 were picked up by the 18 boats that hovered nearby” (Lord 103. Lord’s figures are not entirely reliable, but the point he makes is not open to question.)

But even Lord suggests that we should take at least some of these stories with a grain of salt. Eyewitness accounts are often unreliable, and mostly self-serving. Indeed, Lord found that “about 70 percent *more* men and 45 percent *fewer* women went in the [life]boats than even the most conservative survivors estimated. Plus the fact that the boats pulled away with 25 percent fewer people than estimated” (Lord 151). Perhaps the *Titanic* disaster merely confirms that human
behavior is nothing if not various, and that we have an overwhelming desire to see what we want to see in ourselves and in others when we are disposed to look. As Steven Biel points out in *Down With the Old Canoe*, “Americans understood the disaster according to concerns they already felt, hopes they already harbored, beliefs and ideas they already held and were struggling to preserve” (Biel 7). For example, the often-repeated stories involving first-cabin heroism traded on a set of chivalric fantasies that “allowed men to reconcile ‘feminine’ morality—kindness, tenderness, self-forgetfulness—with ‘masculine’ aggressiveness—bravery, physical strength, agency. The role of ruler and protector carried with it the duty of manly self-sacrifice.” Men who transgressed those categories and refused such obligations were branded in the popular press as perverts and cowards. When a steerage passenger named Daniel Buckley was believed to have claimed a seat in a lifeboat by dressing as a woman, he was said to have “set for men a new standard by which to measure infamy and shame” (qtd. in Biel 27). Similarly, panic among the passengers was explained in terms of class, ethnic, and racial characteristics. Biel quotes an editorial from the *Atlanta Constitution* claiming that the disaster proved the supremacy of the white race and justified its imperialist policies: “’The Anglo-Saxon may yet boast that that his sons are fit to rule the earth so long as men choose death with the courage they must have displayed when the great liner crashed into the mountains of ice, and the aftermath brought its final test” (qtd. in Biel 48).

**Theories of Human Nature**

In short, the available evidence from the *Titanic* disaster suggests that we often behave in ways that benefit others, even at some cost to ourselves. But why? Are we in fact psychologically predisposed to behave altruistically? Or are we blank slates on which culture and education draws our character, for better or worse? The survival rates of women and children appear to support the former explanation; but the culturally biased explanations of those facts appear to support the latter. Is there a way to judge between them?

The blank slate theory of human nature is usually attributed to the seventeenth-century English philosopher, John Locke, who argued that the mind should be considered as a blank sheet of paper until it is furnished by experience, which varies from person to person. Locke’s theory was a particularly effective way to undermine the legitimacy of the church and of king’s divine right to rule, both of which were held to be self-evidently true. The doctrine of the blank slate has proved to be immensely influential, extending far beyond the realm of political theory. The social sciences generally have sought to explain human behavior as a product of the socialization of children by culture and education (Pinker 2002, 6).
Locke's theory is not without rivals, however. An earlier English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, famously argued that all humans are naturally self-interested. "No man giveth but with intention of good to himself," Hobbes argued, "because gift is voluntary; and of all voluntary acts, the object is to every man his own good; of which, if men see they shall be frustrated, there will be no beginning of benevolence or trust, nor consequently of mutual help" (Hobbes 209). Hobbes' doctrine, like Locke's, was motivated by the desire to eliminate superstitious beliefs and practices that he believed were responsible for political hardship, though in Hobbes' case the hardship was that of civil war, not tyranny. Hobbes' theory, now called egoism, has also proved to be very influential, especially among contemporary political economists.

We may not be blank slates, but we may not necessarily be egoists, either. Over two thousand years ago the Confucian philosopher, Mencius, argued that we are naturally altruistic. No one, he said, "is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others." To prove his point, he imagined a young child about to fall into a well. Anyone would be moved to save the child through compassion, he argued, "not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child" (Mencius 2A6). Of course, Mencius recognized that people often fail to act benevolently. Poor judgment may intervene, as in the case of the king who spared the life of a sacrificial ox because he could not bear to see it suffer, and ordered an unseen lamb killed instead. Mencius points out that the king's thoughtlessness caused more of his poor subjects to go hungry than would otherwise have been the case (Mencius 1A7). Or the absence of a nurturing environment may cause people to descend into wickedness. Mencius drew an analogy between the moral barrenness of society and the deforested slopes of Ox Mountain. Although the mountain is
without any vegetation, this was not its true nature. A lush forest once covered its slopes, but years of tree lopping and overgrazing reduced the mountain to its present barren state. Mencius insisted that viewing Ox mountain in its present denuded condition gives us no clue as to its true nature. By analogy, pointing to the apparent lack of benevolence, which appears to be the norm among people, gives us no clue as to their true nature (Mencius 6A8).

Locke, Hobbes, and Mencius each produced contrasting explanations of human nature that might be used to account for the range of behaviors attributed to the people aboard the Titanic. To be clear, all three philosophers would agree that people often help others, or act in terribly selfish or even irrational ways as a result of the circumstances they find themselves in; but they differ over why this is the case. Locke would claim that a perfectly adequate explanation of the full range of human behaviors can be constructed from experience alone, without recourse to fictitious and politically dangerous innate faculties or ideas. Perhaps. But the German philosopher, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, had a neat retort to Locke. Leibniz repeated Locke’s motto, “There is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses,” then added, “except the intellect itself” (qtd. in Pinker 2002, 34). Something in the mind must be there prior to experience if we are to analyze other people’s behavior as something other than matter in motion. But what?

Hobbes’ theory that humans are rational, self-interested actors by nature can account for what we know of the passengers’ behaviors aboard the Titanic, provided we are willing to grant that 68% of them acted irrationally. For Hobbes believed that it is always irrational to sacrifice one’s own life. Incidentally, he did not regard all sacrifice for others as irrational; but he did hold that there is a limit to rational altruism, and that limit is the sacrifice of one’s life. From this standpoint, those who chose to remain on board may well have acted on the apparently rational assumption that they would be rewarded in the afterlife for so acting; or they may have erroneously assumed that they faced a greater chance of survival by remaining on board; or they may be have been in the habit of acting selflessly with respect to the members of their families; or, finally, they may have calculated that death is better than allowing others to believe they acted shamefully. Of course, if we posit at the outset that it is never rational to sacrifice one’s life, then all those who remained aboard acted irrationally, by definition. But if the meaning of “irrational” must be stretched to accommodate the likely intentions of the overwhelming majority of people, then we may object that Hobbes’ account of human motivation is simply implausible.

Mencius’ theory, which is grounded in common human experience, may offer the better standpoint from which to understand the behavior of the Titanic’s passengers. His theory can be broken down into three central claims. First, there are in human nature spontaneous impulses or feelings, which he likens to “sprouts” that germinate in us without having to be learned. Mencius believed that there are four of these impulses—the feeling of commiseration, the feeling of shame
and dislike, the feeling of deference and compliance, and the feeling of right and wrong. They are not yet virtues, but provide the natural foundation for the development of the virtues. Their development, he claimed, is abetted by a feeling of pleasure as well as a state of well-being in the individual (Mencius 2A6). Second, in contrast to Hobbes, Mencius held that human dignity and self-respect may be stronger even than the will to survive. “There are ways of remaining alive and ways of avoiding death to which a man will not resort,” he said. When food is given with abuse, a beggar will starve rather than accept them (Mencius 6A10). Third, Mencius contended that we can develop the full potentialities of the human constitution only if the mind weighs alternatives and is capable of choosing between our various appetites and moral impulses. For what looks or feels benevolent may not be genuinely so. He gives the example of a government official who occasionally uses his carriage to take people across local rivers. But he could have spent his time more wisely if he built footbridges instead (Mencius 4B2) (Graham 24-31).

Mencius is not the only philosopher to have argued that humans are innately benevolent. In the eighteenth century, English and Scottish philosophers argued that people have an innate moral sense that leads them to approve of benevolent acts and disapprove of narrowly selfish or harmful ones. David Hume also relied on a thought experiment to support his claim, asking if “any man, who is walking along, [would] tread as willingly on another’s gouty toes, whom he has no quarrel with, as
on the hard flint and pavement?” (Hume 226). He assumed we would all say “no.” Thought experiments and examples drawn from daily life of the sort Mencius and Hume relied upon are effective in appealing to our moral intuitions, but their value remains largely anecdotal. Is there a way to determine whether there really are innate propensities in human nature of the sort they describe?

Experimental psychologists argue that the moral sense may be rooted in the design of the human brain. Summarizing the recent work in the field, Steven Pinker explains that “people everywhere, at least in some circumstances and with certain other folks in mind, think it’s bad to harm others and good to help them. They also have a sense of fairness ... they value loyalty to a group ... they believe that it is right to defer to legitimate authorities ... and they exalt purity, cleanliness and sanctity while loathing defilement, contamination and carnality” (Pinker 2008, 4). These five moral spheres are universal, a product of evolution, and are manifest in the behavior of people across the globe. The first of these moral propensities may well resolve the “Trolley Problem,” a thought experiment devised by the moral philosophers Philippa Foot and Judith Jarvis Thompson that has some relevance to understanding the behavior of the self-sacrificing Titanic passengers. The problem involves an out-of-control trolley car bearing down on five men working on the track, oblivious to the danger. Imagine yourself at a fork in the track, able to pull a lever that will divert the trolley onto a spur, saving the five but killing one person working on the spur. Most people say they would be willing to pull the lever. Now imagine yourself on a bridge overlooking the tracks. The only way to stop the trolley is to throw a heavy object onto the tracks. Is it morally permissible to push the fat man standing next to you off the bridge? Pinker tells us that most of the 200,000 people from a hundred countries who answered this question on a web-based questionnaire said “no,” but were unable to justify their choice. Neuroscientists explain that evolution has left us with an instinct that prevents us from manhandling an innocent person, prior to any rational calculus regarding the number of lives that are at stake (Pinker 2008, 5).

If reasoning ability is not sufficient to motivate moral action, then what is? Psychologists have hypothesized that people are often motivated to help others who are perceived to be suffering and that the mechanisms involved are primarily affective. Perhaps because moral norms vary by culture, class, and historical era, it has long been assumed that morality is learned in childhood. But psychologists now suggest that morality, like language, is a legacy of evolution, and (as Mencius suggested) is better described as emergent than as learned (Haidt 825-26). While our moral intuitions are innate and therefore universal, their relative importance varies across cultures. For example, the moralizing impulse that we in the West direct toward finding justice is channeled elsewhere to other spheres. Consider the Japanese fear of nonconformity (community), the dietary restrictions of Orthodox Jews (purity), and the anger at demeaning the Prophet among Muslims.
“In the West, we believe that in business and government, fairness should trump community and try to root out nepotism and cronyism. In other parts of the world this is incomprehensible” (Pinker 2008, 9).

The cultural variety of our moral judgments may also support Hume’s claim that reason’s main job is to formulate arguments that support one’s intuitive conclusions. We like to think that when we have a conviction, there are good reasons that drove us to adopt it. But psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that moral reasoning is far more often a post hoc construction intended to justify automatic moral intuitions (Haidt 823). We should not be surprised, therefore, that anti-suffragists argued that the behavior of the Titanic’s male passengers demonstrated man’s natural role as protector and provider; or that nativists reasoned that the heroes were all white males, and that those who tricked their way onto lifeboats were invariably “Italian,” “Japanese,” “Armenian,” or “Filipino” (Biel 25-26, 49).

Of course, the fact that we may be innately disposed to altruistic behavior does not entail that everyone will always sacrifice themselves for another’s good. But neither does the thoughtless greed of White Star Line’s directors, or the egoism of the Titanic’s panicked survivors prove that we are ruthlessly self-serving. Indeed, there is abundant evidence to suggest, as the behavior of most of the Titanic’s passengers and crew demonstrates, that people have a built-in moral sense that leads us to act altruistically, even though we are not always aware of its operation.
Works Cited

Behe, George. “How Titanic Became ‘Unsinkable.’”


