

## Book Review – *The Good Life: Wellbeing and the New Science of Altruism, Selfishness and Immorality*

by Graham Music. Routledge Press, New York, NY, 2014, 256 pages, ISBN-13: 978-1848722279.

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One might wonder why a journal committed to research and theory related to neuromodulation would want to review a book that is essentially about ethics and morality in the 21st century. The reason is that the author does an excellent job of integrating some of our most recent findings about the brain into his discussion of the “science of altruism, selfishness and immorality.”

Music is a child and adolescent psychotherapist at the Tavistock and Portman Clinics in London, UK, and an adult psychotherapist in private practice. He does a yeoman’s task of bringing together research and findings as diverse as attachment, neuroscience, ethics, history, evolutionary biology, sociology, and psychology. He weaves his way through these diverse topics following a developmental path mirroring human development in order to examine what all of these fields of study might tell us about human beings’ capacity for compassion, altruism, selfishness, and immorality in our current times and what this might bode for our future. In a nutshell, he asks: Can we hope to accomplish the “Good Life” given our current state?

Music begins his journey by asking the fundamental question of whether humans are primarily and naturally good and kind, or if are we basically selfish and motivated only by what we can get to satisfy our needs and desires. He presents the research and theoretical literature that supports each point of view and seeks to walk the fine line of holding some of each position in his conclusions for going forward in his discussion of human development and the possibilities for the ethical “Good Life.” Music tells us in his introduction that he has three primary reasons for writing this book. The first is his own curiosity about the human situation. He is aware, as

I hope we all are, that we can be quite different people at different times. I can be very kind and generous one moment—and cruel and heartless the next. Have the latest developments and research across the various domains of human knowledge helped us to better understand how that might be? The second is his work as a psychotherapist. His work with children who have experienced significant trauma has provided him with glimpses into both the worst and the best of the human condition. He has seen children (and adults) who have been too damaged to ever be able to truly live a “fulfilled” life. He has also witnessed the incredible resiliency of the human spirit and its ability to recover from horrific experiences and, through human bonding and loving care, be fully restored and functional loving people. The third reason is linked to his observation that the western world seems to be moving in a less humane and connected direction, leaving increasing numbers of people disconnected and diminished and just so many cogs in the wheel of economic growth and Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

The book proceeds to examine in a logical and well-articulated fashion the steps necessary to ask and answer the questions required to try and accomplish the overarching concern. He begins by fine-tuning the discussion as to whether humans are primarily destined for good or just a “part of brutal nature.” This leads him into a discussion of attachment and how dependent development and connection depends on those initial connections, and then to a discussion of empathy, stress, impulsiveness, self-regulation, and aggression. He carefully links each topic to psychological, developmental, and neurological research and understanding.

These initial chapters might be said to explain the rootedness of our potential for living a life of connection and satisfaction in our birth and early development internally and through our external connections. The remaining chapters move this examination out into what we might describe as the adult world of real relationships and consequences. Here he discusses such topics as aggression and psychopaths, emotion and reason, cooperation and competition, reputations and shaming, and his penultimate chapter “consumerism, society and our divided brain.”

This was for me one of the most striking and disturbing chapters. One paragraph may serve to highlight why:

We are all capable of moving into either more competitive or caring states of mind. As we have seen, the extent to which we do either is influenced by early experiences and family life, and also the kinds of work environments, communities and societies we inhabit. In competitive environments we are more likely to see others as rivals, compare ourselves with them and make judgments. When people feel compared to others, irrespective of whether these comparisons are positive or negative, then several days later they are less empathic

and prosocial than control groups (Yip and Kelly, 2013). The huge amount of data on the devastating effects of inequality on levels of trust underscore this (Wilkinson 2005; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). (Music, 2014, p. 170).

In the end, Music’s book seeks to encourage all those who resonate with his concern that perhaps the world is not headed in a direction that will lead us to the enhanced and more possible place of connection, intimacy, and community but rather towards a place of increased suffering, disconnection and inequality. It is his hope and mine that reading this book might serve as an impetus and motivation to seek to find ways to correct our course so that we can indeed have a chance to live the “Good Life.”

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