

## The unmitigated gall

A character in Walt Kelly's cartoon strip *Pogo*, riffing off the once-familiar opening sentence of Julius Caesar's commentaries on his Gallic Wars ("All Gaul is divided in three parts"), opens his speech to a political convention by declaiming, "The unmitigated gall is divided in three parts – greed, cruelty, and stupidity." (It turns out that he has picked up the wrong sheet of paper and is reading an old letter he once wrote to a creditor.) This amusing travesty of Caesar's famous line identifies, advertently or inadvertently, three qualities that we do not share with any other species in the animal kingdom. Stupidity cannot sensibly be said to characterize creatures that are genetically hardwired to follow their instincts. In the face of environmental challenges, this biological determinism may render them disastrously incapable of adapting to the new conditions; but they are relying upon a genetic program that has a record of success stretching back millions of years, so we consider them unlucky, not intellectually deficient. Greed is unknown among animals – having attained a sufficiency, they rest from their labors rather than push on to try to accumulate a superfluity. And cruelty is a very recent human invention, a product of cultural evolution with no component of biological predisposition. Animals never engage in deliberate torture; and intra-species violence, excepting only male contests over sexual

access to females in heat, is extremely rare. When mammals kill, either to eat or to out-compete rivals in the reproductive sweepstakes, it is done without malice; and such must have been the case with our own violence toward each other in the days of the hunter-gatherer bands.

Cruelty came about only when tribalism "graduated" from the real dependence of the members of small bands on each other to the fictitious solidarity among citizens of tribal nations. Torture originated sometime after the agrarian revolution and the coalescence of groups containing hundreds, then thousands, then millions of members. This cultural evolution altered human nature dramatically and forevermore. A demagogically trumped-up loyalty to the artificially engendered in-group was cemented by the religious mores, whereupon orthodoxy became mandatory and heresy came to be regarded as worse than murder. Perpetrators of dissent and purveyors of disloyalty were now regarded as enemies, not only of their neighbors and of the state, but of the very basis of human life, and thus deserving of a fate worse than death. Tribal unity was the greater good necessitating the torture of anyone who disturbed it. The public's enjoyment of the spectacle when the heretics were led to the stake put the stamp of righteousness on the burning. The pleasure taken from the sufferings of the condemned certified the justice of the procedure.

The unmitigated gall of greed, cruelty, and stupidity makes a cogent introduction to the subject of evil. In attempting to raise decent children, we might think that the unacceptability of these three behaviors is patent. Surely we need only define them and give our offspring a few examples to be sure that they are inoculated against them. But the recent history of our country should give us pause. Sometime in the 1980s, the

slogan "Greed is good" gained currency – acquisitiveness run rampant was no longer a character *flaw*, but merely a character *trait* – one that propped up the free market. After the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, torture was adopted as a tool in the armamentarium assembled to defeat evil; and cruelty to prisoners became an instrument of state policy, with polls consistently showing that 2/3 of the American public approved. Stupidity was renamed "moral clarity"; the Republican Party began to see an alarming number of its primary victories awarded to the dumbest candidate in the field. These winning politicians were thought by the voters who supported them to be grounded in tried-and-true values rather than bereft of intelligence and historical perspective. Their simplemindedness was interpreted as solidity – a kind of sincerity of the inarticulate. When, as Thucydides wrote almost 2500 years ago, words change their meanings, so that greed, cruelty, and stupidity become re-defined as American business, national defense, and straight talk, our children must have both good values and good independent judgment to avoid the general corruption, and one more quality besides – the courage to stand alone against the herd.