

Killer Angels

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How can we reconcile “survival of the fittest” versus “the meek shall inherit the earth”? I hear they are fighting about evolution versus creationism in Kansas again—a debate dominated by creationists who believe in social and economic Darwinism but not biological Darwinism. That is one way to frame the debate, I suppose, but it does not require divine intervention for the meek to inherit the earth. There is an adaptive advantage to cooperation. In evolutionary terms, the question is whether the future of mankind will be decided more by competition or by cooperation.

Great. I have finally figured out how to be a fashionable writer—this is now an apocalyptic tale.

We are inundated by apocalyptic scenarios. I wish I could understand why. Causation does not seem to be the center of interest. It does not matter whether the end of the world is coming by reason of zombie, asteroid, nuclear holocaust, climate change, alien invasion or virus. The end-of-world stories are dominated by masses of “people” who become an inhuman mob engaged in a frenzy of killing versus a small band of humans who become the focus of our attention as we watch them struggle to survive, poised between cooperation and competition.

Of course, most of these “entertainments” may simply be an easy way to blow people to bits in graphic detail because there seems to be an appetite for that sort of thing. I am going to pretend there is something more interesting going on because, otherwise, there is nothing to say—and writers have to have something to say.

[Let me step outside the narrative for a moment and simply say I believe that when the asteroid hits there will be more people cooperating to survive than killing each other to survive.]

I am thinking of writing an apocalyptic novel or screenplay based on a story that occurred to me as I was reading Kurt Vonnegut’s short story, “Report on the Barnhouse Effect,” which happens to be the first short story published by Vonnegut. It originally appeared in the February 11, 1950 issue of *Collier’s* but it can be found in the anthology, [Welcome to the Monkeyhouse](#). In Vonnegut’s story, Professor Barnhouse figured out how to channel the psychic power of his mind to rid the world of all weapons of mass destruction. In my story, the protagonist is a genetic researcher who wants to isolate the genetic markers that make some people aggressive, competitive and mean and some people meek, cooperative and nice. Being a geneticist, he naturally assumed those behaviors were controlled by heredity rather than environment.

Unfortunately, while doing the genetic research, he accidentally created a virus that targeted people with the aggressive, “mean” gene. Mean people all over the world began dropping like flies trapped in an icehouse. The virus wiped out about half the world’s population. There was

no way to know for certain, but it seemed to hit survivalists particularly hard—none of them survived. Once the virus took up permanent residence, there was a decided adaptive advantage in being nice. The meek finally inherited the earth.

But the story does not end there. What kind of world did the meek inherit?

To answer that question, my story uses Forrest Gump, James Kirk, Abraham Lincoln, Buster Kilrain and Joshua Chamberlain.

It starts with Lincoln's First Inaugural Address:

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

[Can I just pause to say no one writes like that anymore? Damn, he was good.]

The story continues with a transcript from *Star Trek*, "Enemy Within" (the original series). A transporter malfunction separated Kirk into two apparently identical selves—one nice, rational and cooperative; the other mean, aggressive and competitive:

Kirk: What's the matter with me?

Spock: Judging from my observations, Captain, you're losing the power of decision.

McCoy: You have a point, Spock?

Spock: Yes. Always, Doctor. We have here an unusual opportunity to appraise the human mind, or to examine, in Earth terms, the roles of good and evil in a man: his negative side, which you call hostility, lust, violence, and his positive side, which Earth people express as compassion, love, tenderness.

McCoy: Are you aware it's the captain's guts you're analyzing?

Spock: Yes, and what makes one man an exceptional leader? We see indications that it's his negative side which makes him strong, that his evil side, controlled and disciplined, is vital to his strength.

Spock: [to Kirk] Your negative side removed from you, the power of command begins to elude you.

Kirk: What is your point, Mr. Spock?

Spock: If your power of command weakens, you'll be unable to be captain. You must be prepared for that.

Kirk: [talking about Kirk's negative duplicate] I have to take him back... inside myself. I can't survive without him. I don't want him back. He's like an animal, a thoughtless, brutal animal, and yet it's me... me.

McCoy: Jim... you're no different than anyone else. We all have our darker side. We need it! It's half of what we are. It's not ugly. It's human. Human. A lot of what he is makes you the man you are. God forbid I should agree with Spock, but he was right. Without the negative side, you couldn't be the captain. Your strength of command lies mostly in him.

Kirk: What do I have?

McCoy: You have the goodness.

Kirk: Not enough. I have a ship to command.

McCoy: The intelligence, the logic. It appears your half has most of that, and perhaps that's where man's essential courage comes from. For, you see, he was afraid, and you weren't.

In the film, Gettysburg, based on the historical novel, The Killer Angels, the grizzled sergeant, Buster Kilrain, speaks with his college educated Colonel, Joshua Chamberlain:

Chamberlain (quoting Hamlet): "What a piece of work is man: how noble in reason; how infinite in faculties and form and movement; how express and admirable; in action how like an angel. Kilrain: "Well, if he's an angel, all right then... But he damn well must be a killer angel. Colonel, darling, you're a lovely man. I see a vast great difference between us, yet I admire you, lad. You're an idealist, praise be. The truth is, Colonel... There is no 'divine spark'. There's many a man alive no more of value than a dead dog. Believe me. When you've seen them hang each other the way I have back in the Old Country. Equality? What I'm fighting for is to prove I'm a better man than many of them. Where have you seen this 'divine spark' in operation, Colonel? Where have you noted this magnificent equality? No two things on Earth are equal or have an equal chance. Not a leaf, not a tree. There's many a man worse than me, and some better... But I don't think race or country matters a damn. What matters, Colonel... is justice—which is why I'm here. I'll be treated as I deserve, not as my father deserved. I'm Kilrain... And I damn all gentlemen. There is only one aristocracy... And that is right here. [points to his head] And that's why we've got to win this war."

Gump was debating whether we have a destiny or whether life is an accident—not a far cry from creation versus evolution—when he said: "I think maybe it's both."

If man is an angel, he must be a killer angel.