Chapter 4

Morality and Contemporary Civilization: A Dual Process Approach

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates if System 2 (analytic system) can revise or suppress the negative outputs of System 1 (intuitive system) by natural experiment in history. Two periods are picked up in this chapter: the 17th century when there was a decline in war, torture, cruel punishment, and religious persecution, and the time after World War II when there has been a decline in war, genocide, and violence with growing awareness of human rights. In short, the outputs associated with strong emotion are less likely to be revised, and an effective way for revision is to use a story to trigger the theory of mind in System 1. This is also discussed in the frame of distinction between deontic moral judgment and utilitarian moral judgment. Finally, it is proposed that a good story should be elaborated by System 2 and be prevailed so that it arises emotions (sympathy) of System 1 and drives people for the better-being future.

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INTRODUCTION

It is commonly claimed that morals and ethics have been lost in contemporary civilization. As we become increasingly competitive in this industrial society, we are less likely to experience sympathy and exhibit warmth toward others. An influential idea in this regard stems from the notion of the “noble savage,” originally proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. According to this concept, people in hunter-gatherer societies were nonviolent in nature, and immoral, aggressive behaviors have been acquired in the course of the development of civilization in general and weaponry in specific. This notion was empirically supported by Mead’s (1935) reports about the primitive people in Samoa.

However, the empirical basis of Mead’s take on the “noble savage” was seriously criticized by Freeman (1983). He pointed out many defects in Mead’s anthropological research in Samoa: Mead did not speak the Samoan language and her perspective was skewed by her belief that this primitive society could be compared to Eden. The “facts,” as understood by Mead, were not verified by follow-up studies in Samoa. Daly and Wilson (1988), who attempted to analyze who commits murder, under what circumstances, and for what purposes from the perspective of human evolution, demonstrated a decrease in the number of murders from the time of hunter-gatherers to the contemporary world. For example, in industrial countries, there are about 10 murders per million people in a year. However, there were about 300 among the San of the Kalahari, known as the least aggressive of the hunter-gatherers. The concept of the “noble savage,” therefore, is just a nostalgic myth. Furthermore, according to Pinker (2011), people today are less violent (fewer murders and wars and less cruel punishments) than those in the past.

As morality is culturally relative, it is difficult to make a comprehensive judgment regarding which cultures or in which times people are more moral. However, we can identify some markers of immorality: murder, violence, fraud, discrimination, and so on. Pinker (2011) points out that wars decreased concurrently with the decline in discrimination after World War II. These trends are observed in most parts of the world, including Japan. According to statistical data, the number of crimes, including murder, violence, and theft, has decreased since World War II. While this can be partially attributed to the development of scientific criminal investigation, it is also likely that public education has made people more familiar with moral values.

In this chapter, I discuss these social changes in terms of dual process theory. Dual process theorists posit that human thinking involves two kinds of mental processing: System 1, which is generally reliable but can lead to fallacies and biases,
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