



Robert Pollack
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Hit and Run

By Robert Pollack, Professor of Biological Sciences



There is a common notion among many of my most dedicated colleagues in the sciences that bad behavior is simply the result of ignorance, and that given enough facts, anyone would be certain to act well. But as any serious religious person would tell you, evil does exist, and it is not the same as ignorance.

On the Friday after Thanksgiving, on a clear, warm, blue-sky morning in Manhattan, my wife and I were walking across the ground-zero of high-end New York tourism, from the west side of Fifth Avenue and 59th Street past the golden statue of General Sherman on his horse to the south-east corner of Central Park, when I was hit by a horse and carriage.

I was crossing from the island of the statue of Sherman, to the corner of the park itself, and found myself in the street, facing a very wide deep puddle, with a horse-drawn carriage coming toward me at a trot. Figuring the driver would not come right at me I hesitated to jump into the puddle to avoid him. But he did come at me, either obliviously or intentionally, and so at the last minute before impact I did at last try to leap into the puddle.

I was an instant too late. The horizontal beam that links the carriage to the horse caught me at the junction of my upper arm and chest. Though my memory of what happened next is only episodic, it includes the experience of being hit, then of being in the puddle on my hands and knees, unable to draw

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breath without making a hideous roaring sound, then breathing, standing up, being confused, being led by my wife to a bench next to the park wall, sitting dazed, and then having my wife decide to walk me to a cab.

The cab got us to four blocks west to the Roosevelt Hospital Emergency Room very quickly, certainly more quickly than had she called 911 and waited for an ambulance. The ER was efficient, with staff at once attentive and concerned. The receiving nurse sent me through triage to a bed without delay, my wife was allowed to stay with me, and there a very young attending physician examined me. My O₂ level was near 100%, but my pulse was racing, and my blood pressure was high, and so I was asked to rest on a bed while waiting for X-rays.

I was given Tylenol, and my wife was able to get me blankets so I could get out of wet clothes; I was very clammy. X-rays showed neither bone breaks nor fractures. A sonogram of my midsection excluded internal bleeding, my pulse and blood pressure returned to near-normal levels after a few hours, my severely bruised bicep was bandaged, and I was sent home to recover.

I have made this personal story the subject of my Director's letter simply because the event did not bring out the best in anyone but my wife and the staff of the emergency room. None of the hundred or so people seeing this incident taking place feet from them and in broad daylight, helped either her or me. Nor did the buggy-driver give my wife his license number when she asked him for it. I was, in short, the victim of an 1880s version of a hit-and-run accident, and at the same time the dehumanized object of mild interest to many dozens of close bystanders.

I was in that sense, also the subject as well as the observer, of an experiment. The standing crowd of tourists who watched me flounder and choke were the control for this experiment, as my wife and the ER staff who helped me were the experiment itself. And the results are clear: if you have a prior sense of right and wrong, and if that sense includes in it an obligation to help someone whether a close person or a stranger is not relevant here then you will act well under duress; and if not, not.

Let me generalize: there is a lot of suffering and pain in this world, most of it wholly undeserved. Sometimes some people say it is their job to ameliorate that suffering; most of the time most people say, it is none of their problem so long as they are not suffering themselves. Lying in the Roosevelt Hospital Emergency room, reflecting on how it was that one set of strangers were so kind to me, and the others so cold, I did not see how the difference could possibly be due to ignorance: everyone saw me in pain, and with equal clarity.

The issue of what is right, and of what one must do, is wholly undetermined in nature and wholly independent of education. Good and evil, right and wrong, are both real choices, and people do in fact have their freedom to choose one or the other, for no data-driven reason at all. Their different choices did not in either case emerge from nature, nor did either choice need to be justified as a fact uncovered by science.

But as I reflect a few weeks later, in only slight pain on my near miss with what in the words of Jane Kenyon's great poem certainly could have been otherwise, I am even more certain that the question of what is right and good, must remain an issue for us all, despite our inability to find data that justify moral values. And because it must, the question of “science and religion” has to be seen not as a debate, but as a single question: what shall we all do with our science-based knowledge of nature, and why shall we do it?

Shall we stand aside to see what happens when someone suffers in a moment like the one I went through, or shall we intervene unbidden, to help keep that moment at bay? We may differ in our answers, but it remains the right if not the only first question we should ask ourselves.

Here at the CSSR, every conversation, every program and every course we are responsible for, exemplifies the necessity, primacy and gravity of this choice. If you agree with us that our work is worth supporting for that reason as well as for any educational effect we may have, then I hope you will lend us your support in any way you see fit.



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