

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Born To Be Good: An Interview with Dr. Dacher Keltner

June 19, 2016



The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Hello. Welcome to The Seekers Forum Guest Interview series. Today we're talking to Dr. Dacher Keltner. Dr. Keltner is a social psychologist and one of the world's leading experts on the morality of everyday life and the importance of pro-social emotions such as love, sympathy and gratitude to human wellbeing. Dr. Keltner is a professor of psychology at the University of California Berkley, as well as co-director of the Greater Good Science Center and the author of a wonderful book called "Born to Be Good, the Science of a Meaningful Life." We talked about empathy, we talked about the importance of self-awareness to the spiritual path, as well as to our own ethical and moral wellbeing.

MM: Welcome, Dr. Keltner. Thank you so much for joining me today. I'm a huge fan of your work and I'm really looking forward to talking to you about "*Born to be Good*" and other research that you've been involved with, so thanks so much for joining me.

DK: It's great to talk with you, Mark.

MM: Thanks a lot. I wanted to start out with a general question about how it is that emotion prompts moral behavior. That's a radically new idea for a lot of folks who believe that they're actually thinking themselves into their own behavior. Can you give us a general explanation of how emotion is the foundation of moral and ethical response?

DK: Sure. Well this is exactly what I do, Mark, and after a long time in western thought beginning really with Plato and moving on to people like Emanuel Kant, our tradition has tended to, in a way, be very suspicious and skeptical about the passions and the emotions. I think maybe just to disrupt it from problematic behaviors, but what we've come to are new signs of emotion supporting the idea that we evolved to really form social relationships which were probably the most important thing that we achieved as a species, in terms of our survival and reproduction, and emotions, like compassion and gratitude and awe and embarrassment and laughter, help us build strong communities.

MM: So, in other words, we've evolved to be socialized creatures who care for one another and that's how we've survived and that's why emotion is the underlying foundation for why we make the sorts of choices we do. That's what you're saying?

DK: Exactly. And you know, Mark, when you put this in the evolutionary context and think about the small groups that really define the social context for evolution, they're reviewing the moral problem that emotion helps solve, like how do you take care of a vulnerable offspring – critical to survival. How do you share food? And we have emotions like anger that center on unfair allocations of resources. How do you make sure that people honor the social contract and the morals and conventions that define society, including evolved emotions like embarrassment and guilt that help us kind of be aware of when we've transgressed and make sure that we don't do it again. So really, emotions map onto and help us be aware of the central moral problems of social living like harm and justice and conventionality.

MM: But isn't it true that emotions can also be very deceptive, and there is such a thing as moral illusion and moral dumbfounding, which I was fascinated to read about. Which seems to contain

vague keys to self-understanding if we could understand how moral dumbfounding works, wouldn't that move us toward more conscious decision-making?

DK: Yeah, so moral dumbfounding is easiest when you have these gut feelings of right and wrong – if I have a gut feeling that people, in that example, shouldn't have incestuous sex, but when you set up situations that get people could sort of pit that gut feeling against their more complex understanding of what's right and wrong in the scenario that produces moral dumbfounding, it's the thought that incestuous encounters described in a way that if people are consenting adults and just want to try something, right? So you have a conflict between what is perceived at a cognitive level of would be inappropriate and then what we get confused about when we talk about incestuous sex, we become confused and I think that good example speaks to the importance of really consulting the gut feelings that we have that are often in conflict with more recent forms of culture, right? And those gut feelings will give us a good sense of, in the evolutionary sense that we've talking about, what we think is right and wrong.

MM: But we obviously can't – right – so you're saying that we have to measure – we have to gauge those gut feelings against what we understand rationally things like racism and let's say you have a gut reaction against people of color and clearly that's not the moral response – so how can we use the awareness of how this works to make better decisions in the moment?

DK: Well what this example speaks to, Mark, is this really interesting way in which we as humans in a culture evolve, which is we have these ancient feelings about right and wrong. About I shouldn't be generous to people who are really different from me. And then we as a culture evolve certain new principles like the principle of universal human rights. And so we are constantly intentioned between these gut feelings and then these new ideas and principles that produce states moral dumbfounding. And I really think every person, if they think about the meaningful life, should really sort of arrive at a sense of what their core unifying principles are that helps us resolve these tensions and for me, Mark, it's really been this idea called the “greater good,” which came out of utilitarian philosophy, which is try to make any tensions between new cultural principles and old gut feelings – try to arrive at a place where your actions promote the wellbeing of as many people as possible.

MM: And so it's really moving beyond the small self and the kin group to consider a more global vision of how what we do affects the greatest good?

DK: Yeah, and you know a lot of moral psychologists like John Hyde and Josh Green who have worked out of this tradition that you've been outlining for us of older emotional intuitions about right and wrong vs. cultural ideas, really suggest that one of the great challenges that evolution did not equip us to meet was the including of people into our circle of care who were different from us – like racial differences or ethnic or sexual differences, and that really is the challenge of culture. You see this in the rights of those across history that we have a very default tendency to divide us from them and we have to think of cultural notions that transcend that tendency.

MM: And if runs counter to the idea that what is natural is always positive, doesn't it? I mean we live in this age where we kind of idealize nature and obviously we are nature but there's such

a thing as the naturalistic fallacies that I've read about as well. So how does that work in terms of what you're saying around how culture can counter nature?

DK: Well it very much – this discussion – really suggests that we have to be very aware of what you're talking about with the naturalistic fallacy, that what is therefore determines what should be. You know what is; it is that we feel a lot of compassion towards vulnerable beings but should be really something that society should democratically debate and arrive at ideas about. You know what is, you know regrettably, and there's studies that show if I see a face that is of a slightly different ethnic background than mine, the fear region of the brain lights up – this is work by Susan Fiske and colleagues, that's what is – that I distrust people who are different but what should be, is what we should collectively assess as a society to really arrive at a principle of social organization, and what we've done is more to move away from that what is to an idea of universal human rights. So this is a very productive way to frame contemporary morals debates and social change.

MM: I love what you write about Jen and the Jen ratio. Could you explain to the listeners what you mean by Jen ratio?

DK: Thanks for asking about that, Mark. Both in “Born to be Good,” and my more recent book “The Power Paradox,” one of the things that “Born to be Good” is about is the evolution of human goodness and that relates to happiness, and “The Power Paradox” is about how do we use our power in good ways instead of abusing it, like people so often do. It begs the question, both those books, that you've been asking me, Mark – which is well, that's great – use the power for good. How do you know what is the good action? And in “Born to be Good” I wrote about this thing called the Jen ratio and Jen is the Confucianism principle – and I know you're interested in a lot of these Eastern philosophies – and Confucius wrote about this principle of humanity which is called Jen. And through Jen, we bring out the good in others and we do not bring out the bad in others. And so what I propose is that any action you're engaging in will bring you more happiness, will bring you a deeper sense of purpose and it will bring you more power if it has a high Jen ratio. If it brings out more good in others, which would put in an numerator of this ratio, and it brings out less bad in others in the denominator, and I think it's a good way to think about your contribution to society.

MM: That's fascinating. And it reminds me also of the happy face advantage, which Paul Ekman, who you worked with I think coined it. Could you explain what the happy face advantage is, Dacher?

DK: Mark, if I know what you're referring to, what it is, there are a lot of sad faces or negative emotion expressions. So you can see a happy face from hundreds of feet away because of just how it changes the appearance of the face, and so it's a very powerful signal that probably evolved to great good will and cooperation in context, right? That's why we smile at each other and do these polite gestures in public settings to really ensure through the happy face advantage that we're triggering cooperation and good will in others.

MM: And yet there are so many different kinds of smiles aren't there? We can detect an insincere smile from a hundred yards away.

DK: Yeah, and so my lab's been very actively looking at all the different kinds of smiles from the flirtatious smile to the loving smile to the desirous smile to the embarrassed smile, proud smiles – and also different ways we vocalize positive emotion with the voice. So we've kind of moved beyond just the happy face to all sorts of signals of goodwill and cooperation.

MM: How does a person who feels disempowered and stressed out, inhibited, how can they move towards power and effectiveness in the world?

DK: Well, that's been a really hotly investigated question mark for a lot of reasons. So, imagine you're a parent and your child isn't feeling like she has a lot of voice in a class, or imagine you're at work and you want to kind of want to make a difference and rise in the ranks to get more responsibilities. What the studies are showing is – you know, people like Cameron Anderson – there are really simple ways you can gain more power. You can really speak up and be a little bit bold. I love reading about Ella Baker, the great civil rights activist, and she was just always bold and just speaking up. You can be sharing, you know, and a lot of studies are starting to show that may be counterintuitive, that we gain the esteem of others and the power through sharing resources, sharing ideas, sharing encouragement. We can gain power by trusting gratitude and there are really cool studies about how that works. So, I think the broader way to think about how we gain power in any situation is to really focus on the interests of other people and ways of lifting them up, and you will gain power.

MM: Fascinating. You mean gain power because your self-respect will go up and because your weight's in the greater good. That is empowering.

DK: Yeah, exactly. And this is coming out of anthropology and organizational clients and studies of economic behavior that social groups – and we're a very group-oriented species, reward pro-social people with esteem, status and power – so find a member of, say, my department or my neighborhood, and I give things and help the strength of that neighborhood. And it lifts other peoples' interests up, everybody around is going to respect me more and have more esteem for me, and I end up having more power. Groups give power to those who are generous.

MM: Just to play devil's advocate a bit, how do you then explain someone like Donald Trump? You know, folks who seem to rise in power the more contemptuous and withholding they are. How do you explain that, as a psychologist?

DK: Sure, well, it is a very timely question for not only the United States but the world – like how does a psychopathic, Machiavellian like Donald Trump have any say in the world. I think the scientific answer is there are multiple pathways to get power, right? There's sort of a pro-social pathway that actually is one of the most important pathways to power, in our hunter/gatherer society.

And then there are other strategies such as Machiavellianism and taking people down and humiliating others, and that works in select context. It has worked thus far for Trump and the very unusual Republican primary, but what we're seeing more broadly – and this has been documented by people like Alice Eagly – is that we in the last forty or fifty years, our culture has

moved a little bit away from the coercive top-down Machiavellian model of power to a more collaborative model, and so there's still room for the Trumps of the world to gain notice and gain esteem. But we are moving slowly toward this more collaborative process model of power, so there's always tension and conflict.

MM: Beautiful. And that leads me to my last question about collaboration and pro-social power, Dacher. How do you see the morality of the future? When you look ten years, twenty years down the line, as a moral psychologist, what are the big changes you see on the horizon?

DK: Mark, what a deep question. So you know I wrote "Born to be Good" because I think it articulated something that has changed in the moral substance of our society, which I do really believe that, current headlines and Donald Trump notwithstanding, that we are becoming more compassionate. And that is part of our evolutionary heritage, which is, we care about the rights of more people than we have at any other time in human history. We care about the conditions of other species; we care about the conditions of plant species. The essence that Peter Singer wrote about – the great challenge of expanding our circle of care – and we have made a lot of progress, although I will note that the criminal justice system in the United States is a disaster on that criterion.

But, along with that expanding care for human rights, the future's problem is inequality and I'm sure you would have intuited this – this is why Bernie Sanders is so popular – you know we have thirty years of data showing that inequality is at historic highs. In the last chapter of "The Power Paradox," my new book, I describe a new science of what inequality does to our nervous systems and it hurts our stress response, our immune system. We have new data showing romantic partnerships are less happy in times of inequality, racism rises, so that's the central moral problem going forward in the future and my gut feeling is we will solve it.

MM: Well from your mouth to God's ears, you're such an uplifting writer and teacher and it's great to talk to you today. I appreciate it so much and this is going to be so inspiring for a lot of people. Thank you so much for your time.

DK: Thank you, Mark. I loved finding out about your career and what an amazing journey you've been on.

MM: Thank you, sir. I'll talk to you again soon.