

# Can Human Instincts Be Controlled?

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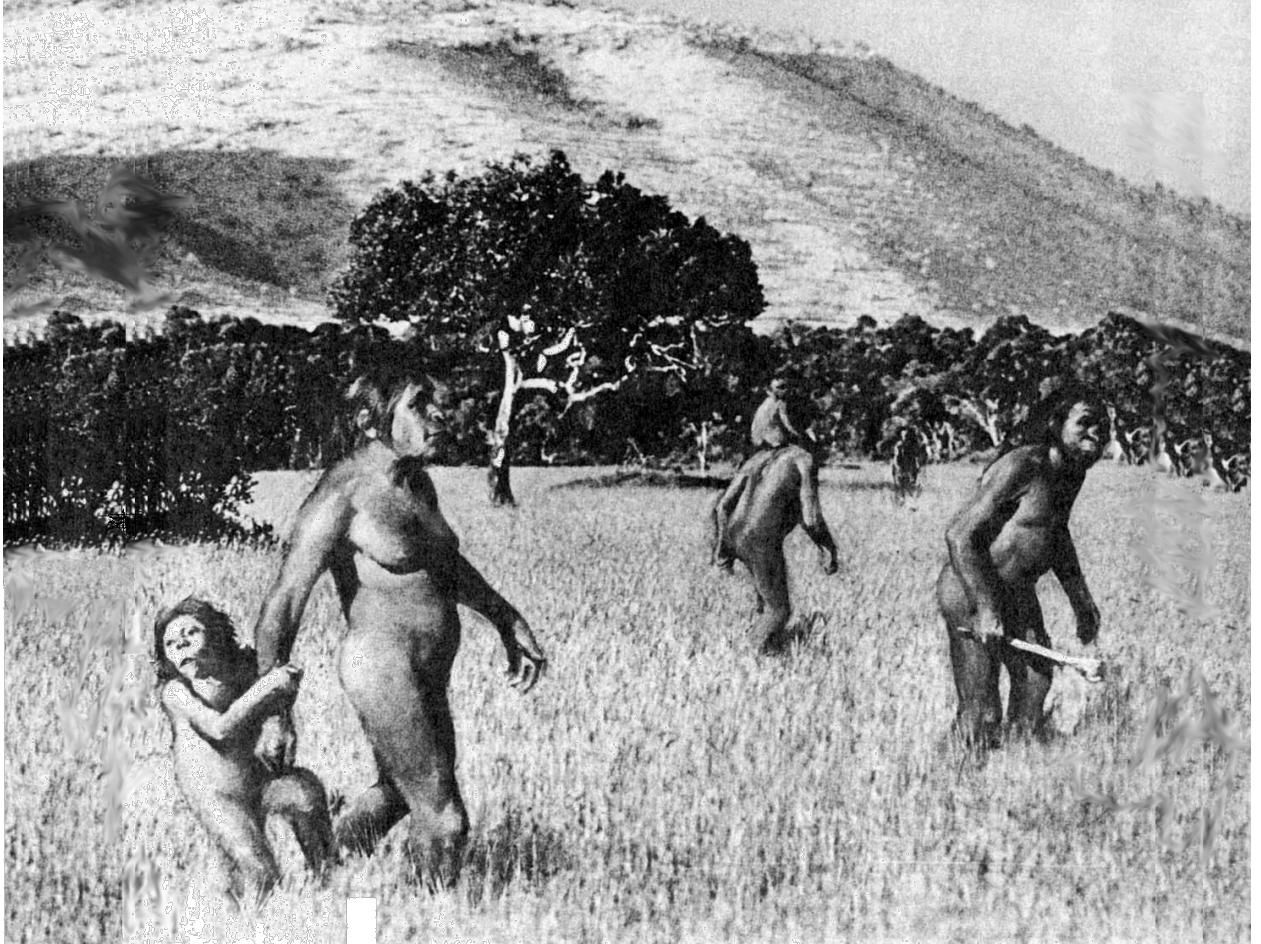
**Abstract.** Like all animals, humans have instincts, genetically hard-wired behaviors that enhance our ability to cope with vital environmental contingencies. Our innate fear of snakes is an example. Other instincts, including denial, revenge, tribal loyalty, greed and our urge to procreate, now threaten our very existence. Any attempt to control human behavior is bound to meet with resistance and disapproval. Unless we can change our behavior, humans are facing the end of civilization. Our problem has several elements. (1) We have invented economic and social systems that encourage greedy behavior, and we have actually institutionalized runaway greed. (2) We are in a state of complete denial about the growth of human populations. (3) Earth's finite resources simply cannot support 7.6 billion of us in the style to which we'd like to live. (4) We must make a choice between quantity and quality of human life. (5) To head off the inevitable collapse, we can no longer wait and merely react but we must become proactive. We must find ways to control dangerous human instincts, especially denial, revenge, tribal loyalty, greed and our urge to procreate.

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People have an instinctive fear of snakes. We are afraid of snakes because humans evolved alongside these creatures, many of which are dangerous. This fear saved the lives of our ancestors and became hard-wired innate behavior, also known as instinct. Similarly we possess many other instincts that were adaptive during most of human history. Our immense propensity for denial enabled prehistoric humans

to cope with menacing situations, but today we use denial to avoid confronting reality, especially overpopulation (a word that has become politically incorrect). Tribal loyalty and revenge made sense when we lived in small tribes, but both these instincts now threaten our very existence.



Human instincts evolved long ago when we lived off the land as hunter-gatherers and took refuge in simple shelters like caves. Although our instinctive behaviors were [adaptive](#) then (that is, they enhanced our ability to survive and reproduce), many do not work so well in modern man-made environments. Our brains appear to be organized in ways that promote such duality (download Morrison's "[Evolution's Problem Gamblers](#)"). In fact, some of our instinctive emotions have become extremely serious impediments now threatening our very survival. Let us focus on denial, tribal loyalty, revenge, greed, and procreation. Any attempt to control human behavior is bound to meet with resistance and disapproval -- however, we have reached the point where we have no alternative.

For example, greed must certainly have been [adaptive](#) for early cave dwellers. In times of scarcity, a greedy caveman who refused to share his food stores during an ice age or at the onset of winter would have been more likely to survive and hence would have enjoyed higher fitness (reproductive success) than a generous one who shared his limited resources with the less fortunate. Natural selection programmed us to be selfish. Greed is a natural human instinct -- we are all selfish and greedy at heart, and for sound evolutionary reasons. Humans invented money and institutionalized runaway greed, allowing others to become billionaires -- what sense does it make to have more than you can actually use?

Similarly, tribal loyalty and revenge made sense -- if another caveman messed with your tribe, you bashed him over the head and he was unlikely to do it again. Such instincts worked to our advantage when we were cavemen, but have become dangerously maladaptive in today's man-made artificial world. Revenge makes no sense when one contemplates pushing a red button to set off nuclear explosives that will destroy yourself as well as your enemies. Likewise, an instinctive urge towards tribal loyalty was useful when we lived in small bands, but such loyalties are now exploited to pit nationalities, political parties and religions against one another, often leading to deadly confrontations.

Humans explain events and phenomena in two very different ways. One approach to knowing (common sense) involves thinking and is objective, based on making repeatable observations that allow us to predict nature and future events -- this rational logical approach to knowing led to scientific methodology. Another, very different, non-objective mystical approach to "knowing" (faith-based) is based

primarily upon the invocation of supernatural explanations, bolstered by authorities who claim to have special access to supernatural sources. This irrational non-scientific approach, championed by religions of all kinds, has helped many humans accept and cope with things they have no power to change or difficulty understanding rationally, such as unexpected deaths, other misfortunes, or natural disasters. Unfortunately, the power conferred on religious leaders has often led to serious abuses and resistance to accepting the rational understanding of the functioning of nature as demonstrated by new scientific discoveries. These two diametrically opposed ways we interpret and "know" about our environments have contributed to the regrettable past and modern day conflicts between science and religion.

Human intelligence has also evolved so that we have remarkably good abilities to detect intentions of other humans in social interactions. We seem to have a propensity for superstitious mysticism and a tendency to emphasize explanations that invoke intention over those based on sheer mechanism, situation, or circumstances. Indeed, humans may be predisposed to see intentions in their friends and enemies. Similarly, we attribute conscious thought and intention to the actions of non-human animals (anthropomorphism). For example, predators want to kill us and prey want to escape from us. We even look for meaning and purpose in inanimate things such as the climate or the universe. Thus a destructive storm is interpreted as having occurred because people strayed from religious tradition or did something wrong and needed to be punished.

Everyone, religious or not, relies on objective rational thinking to



handle problems encountered in everyday life. Thus, we all know we must eat to stay alive, things fall down not up or sideways, we seek to avoid collisions when driving, balance our budgets, etc. Remarkably, people switch back and forth between rational knowing to mystical faith-based “knowing” with ease. Natural selection has organized our brains in ways that promote such duality (Morrison 1999; Trivers 2011; Pianka 2015). Natural selection molded our emotions and instincts, including setting aside the right half of our brain for storage of subconscious irrational information. Rational logic and common sense reside in the left half of our brain along with speech. Morrison (1999) argues that this duality effectively gave the irrational right side of our brains invisible control over the rational left side:

“To properly accommodate this vital streak of insanity in an increasingly rational brain it was first necessary for people to perceive, quite accurately, that their genetic imperatives -- instincts, feelings and desires -- represented a source of considerable wisdom and 'super-natural' power; and second, to believe, less accurately, that this inner source had its roots in an invisible world of super-intelligence, a mystical world that lay beyond rational comprehension.”

“Under the spell of our carefully programmed 'spirituality', we cannot help falling in love, yearning for idealised sexual gratification, nurturing our children, forging tribal bonds, suspecting strangers, uniting against common enemies, and on occasions, laying down our lives for family, friends or tribe.” [Morrison 1999]

People enjoy and thrive on mysticism as illustrated by the huge success of the Harry Potter books. We train our children to believe in age-specific mythical creatures, starting with the tooth fairy, Easter bunny, and Santa Claus (“Papa Noel” in Brazil). One father decided it was time to break the news to his 12 year-old son who still believed in Santa Claus. When he told the boy there was no Santa Claus, his smart kid got a gleam in his eye and said “Oh, I get it,

there's no God, either!" Then, Daddy had to quickly backtrack and reassure his son that God was indeed real. Kids are expected to outgrow the tooth fairy, Easter bunny, and Santa Claus, but never the myth of a benevolent deity. That one is supposed to endure throughout life. Religions occupy a very special place in the irrational right side of our brains adjacent to our carefully programmed feeling of 'spirituality'! Any challenge to a devoutly religious person's faith meets with adamant opposition, even physical hostility.

Interestingly, music resides in the irrational right side of the brain in the same place where language and speech reside in the rational left side (Broca's area). Music evokes powerful emotions in humans and is exploited by our leaders to arouse us into action: thus national anthems evoke patriotism and are used to inflame our tribal instincts as we go into insane wars. Religious and political fervor is exploited similarly as religious and political groups are pitted against each other. Sports fans form similar opposing groups using their team's theme song to elicit passion.

We are born into a given skin color, nationality, language, religion, and culture -- all are accidents of birth but have profound effects on our lives and the societies we live in. Indeed, taken together they determine which side you'll be on in the next war! Few people are able to shift from their birth group to another. The rules of a level playing field dictate that people will always want to emigrate from an impoverished birth group into another that enjoys a higher standard of living. Governments discourage illegal immigration. Oceans and border patrols reinforce boundaries and maintain heterogeneity and disparities between national groups.

The driving force behind all living entities is Darwinian [natural selection](#), or differential reproductive success. Unfortunately, natural selection is blind to the long-term future -- natural selection rewards just one thing: offspring. It is a short-sighted efficiency expert. Individuals who leave the most genes in the gene pool of the next generation triumph -- their genetic legacy endures, whereas those who pass on fewer genes lose out in this ongoing contest. One of our most powerful instincts is the urge to procreate, which manifests itself in different ways in males than in females. Males simply want lots of sex whereas females are programmed with nesting behaviors that involve a safe home place for their family (of course, [sexual selection](#) is much more complex than that one sentence brief synopsis). Primitive humans did not even know how



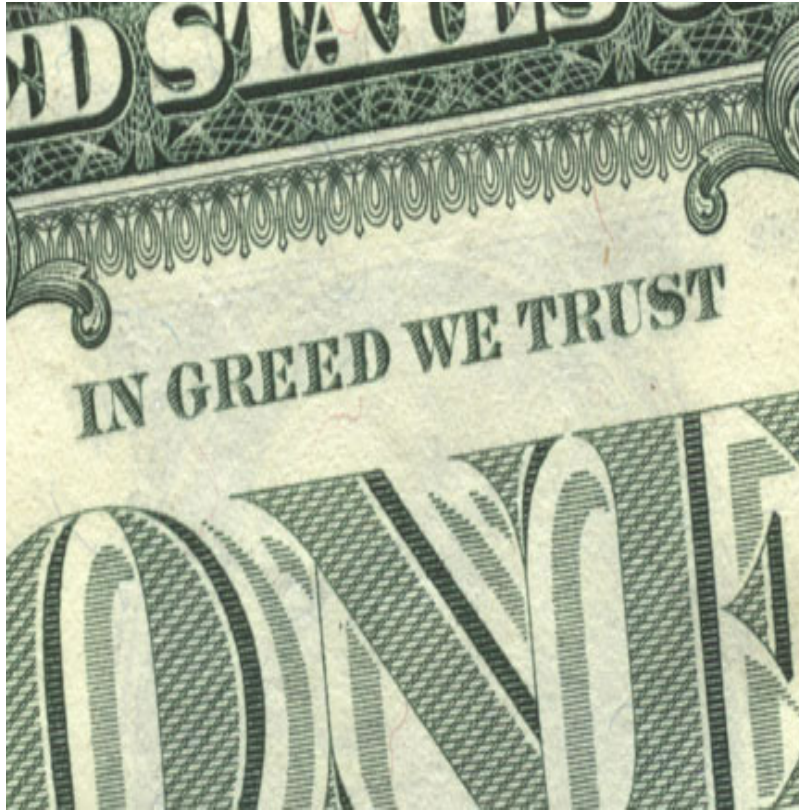
babies were formed, but nevertheless they made them. By favoring parts that fit and nerve endings that tingled in just the right places, natural selection, that ultimate puppet master, made certain we'd reproduce. Huddled together with our furs during winters and the long ice ages, two became three. Hence we are programmed to have instincts to breed. And breed, we do, in fact, we are much too good at it for our own good, all 7.6 billion of us. If we don't stop reproducing soon, human civilization is doomed.

Some humans, unfortunately the most successful from the perspective of natural selection, combine greed with breeding and have [obscenely large families](#). Rather than be celebrated on [TV](#), such people should be social outcasts, ostracized



from society, because they are stealing other's rights to reproduce. Earth simply doesn't have enough resources to support all of us in the style to which we'd like to become accustomed. Moreover, resources such as [water](#), [land](#), and [food](#), are finite, whereas human populations are always expanding, steadily reducing per capita shares. People are encouraged to think that resources are ever expanding when the opposite is true. We are in a state of total [denial](#) about the overpopulation crisis -- instead of confronting reality, people only want to relieve its many symptoms, such as shortages of [food](#), [oil](#), and [water, global climate change, pollution](#), disease, loss of biodiversity, and many others. Overpopulation is a near fatal disease that cannot be cured by merely alleviating its symptoms. "Take an aspirin, get a good night's sleep, and come back in the morning." Unless we face reality and reduce human populations, we are in for a world of hurt and even greater human misery. Of course, eventually, our population must decrease, but we could lessen the upcoming misery by taking action now. Unfortunately, most people are unlikely to be proactive and are much more likely to procrastinate until they are forced to react.

Competition is ubiquitous wherever resources are in short supply. Plants compete for light and water. Fungi and microbes compete for nutrients. Animals compete for food and space. Competition leads to



greedy behaviors. Humans have institutionalized greed -- we allow, even encourage, runaway greed. Our political and [economic systems](#) facilitate greed. Greed is the underlying driving force for both capitalism and entrepreneurship. Our banking and insurance companies, coupled with the formation of limited liability corporations have allowed greed to

explode. [Corporations](#) control politicians, who pass legislation that allows tax evasion and assures obscene corporate profits.



Nevertheless, some of Earth's greedy enemies can be identified -- overpopulation, banking and economic systems, insurance companies, corporations (especially pharmaceutical companies and big oil), and corruption in governmental officials, to mention a few of the most important.



Early on, the framers of our American economic system intended to control corporate privileges and powers tightly. They wanted to subjugate corporations to democratic

oversight and to exploit these regulated institutions as infrastructure for building canals, roads and bridges. At issue was who would control authority to grant corporate charters (Nace 2003). The subject was discussed at length and voted on in the Constitutional convention, but because the states were opposed federal control, the final text did not include any mention of corporations. States were given the power to charter corporations, but sparingly, because corporate power was seen as a potential threat to democracy (Nace 2003). The Supreme Court of Virginia ruled that a charter should not be given if the applicant's "object is merely private or selfish; if it is detrimental to, or not promotive of, the public good." Limited corporate powers were given for specific public projects like toll roads, bridges, canals, and banks. Incorporation was denied if it smacked of monopolistic power, and if not, charters were limited in spatial and temporal scope as well as activities allowed. Charters were revoked if transgressions occurred. Such restrictions on corporate powers were gradually lifted, especially by small states in need of revenue like New Jersey and Delaware. Railroads became powerful monopolies. Today's corporations have superhuman powers: they live forever, know no spatial or temporal boundaries, and can shape shift and rename themselves at will.

We have designed an economic system that has allowed greed to

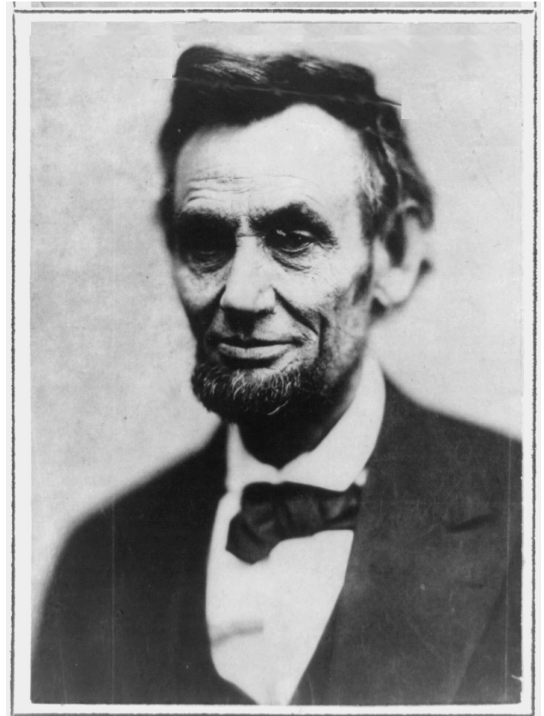
explode. Corporations now exist solely for whatever profits they can make and as such, they are inherently greedy at heart. Corporations have no conscience and because they are not people, they do not qualify to have constitutional rights despite the Supreme Court's [Citizens United decision](#) that recently gave them such powers (indeed, America no longer enjoys a democracy but with that court decision, it has become a corporacracy -- Chomsky 2010).

Corporate executives are paid obscene salaries and are not personally liable for activities they oversee. Corporations control politicians, who pass limited liability legislation and laws that allow tax evasion, both of which assure obscene corporate profits. They may well also control judges. Our Supreme Court's absurd ruling gave corporations unlimited power to buy politicians. Corporations cannot be abolished because we can't live without them, but we must find ways to restrict corporate privileges. Obscene CEO salaries should be a thing of the past. CEOs should be held liable and should pay exorbitant taxes. Corporations should not be allowed to evade taxes by moving offshore. Corruption in corporations must no longer be tolerated -- we cannot allow them to own our judges and politicians, and politicians must become more responsive to opinions of average citizens. Executive and political privileges must be eliminated. Politicians should not enjoy all the special perks they have given themselves -- they should have the same health insurance as the rest of us and should ride in tourist class alongside us in public conveyances. As public servants, their bank accounts should be on-line in the public domain for their constituent's to examine.

Our culture has institutionalized runaway greed as illustrated by the

stock market: it is designed to assist Wall Street executives to profit from small investors who buy shares of corporate stocks hoping to grow their investment. Instead, each time the market crashes small investors lose while larger investors manage to gain at their expense.

With amazing prescience, in 1864 Lincoln said, “corporations have been enthroned and an era of corruption in high places will follow . . . until all wealth is aggregated in a few hands and the Republic is destroyed.” He also said “America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.” Runaway human greed now threatens our very future and must somehow be controlled. Any attempt to control greed will be strenuously opposed, especially by the rich and powerful. Indeed, it may prove to be impossible to overcome such destructive human instinctive behaviors.



As a wise woman from a third world country once said at the UN: “If the rich countries refuse to share their wealth with us, we will certainly share our poverty with them.” We need a more egalitarian society with assured health care, shelter, food, and water for all. What’s the point of having more than you can actually use? No one should own more than he/she could earn with his/her own effort and skill. One way to reign in greed might be to set an upper limit on



income so that nobody could become obscenely wealthy. One practice that contributes to or even drives much economic growth is usury: we should seriously consider limiting or even abolishing interest.

Form **1040** Department of the Treasury—Internal Revenue Service  
**U.S. Individual Income Tax**

For the year Jan. 1–Dec. 31, 2005, or other tax year

**Label**  
(See instructions on page 16.)  
**Use the IRS label.** Otherwise, please print or type.

**Presidential Election Campaign** Check here if you, or your spouse if

**Filing Status** 1  Single

**L  
A  
B  
E  
L  
H  
E  
R  
E**

Your first name and initial

If a joint return, spouse's first name and initial

Home address (number and street). If you have a separate home address, you must file a separate return for that address.

City, town or post office, state, and ZIP code

Our tax laws need to be revised and our economic system must be changed radically. Taxes would escalate to 99.9% with rising incomes. Instead of getting a deduction for each dependent, we should tax people for having

children. Taxes on the first child would be moderate, but they would escalate rapidly so that nobody could afford to have very many children. This would reduce population growth and discourage irresponsible parenthood. Unwanted children and juvenile delinquency would diminish. We should impose a similar taxation scheme on vehicles, graduated by size and fuel efficiency. Hopefully, combined with high fuel prices, such taxes would eliminate pickup trucks, SUVs and Hummers. This would conserve diminishing fossil fuels and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Many other changes are needed, for example, solar water heaters should be mandatory in this new world. But all such changes only provide symptomatic relief, temporary by their very nature. We must confront our life threatening disease and reduce our population. If there were fewer of us, the average quality of life for each could be improved.

Our [economic system](#) is based on the principle of a chain letter: “grow, grow, grow the economy.” Ponzi schemes like this cannot work for long in a finite world. We must replace the archaic concept



of an ever-growing economy with a sustainable one in equilibrium where each of us leaves the planet as it was when we entered it (Solzhenitsyn 1974; Daly 1991, 1997; [Nadeau 2008](#)).

John Stuart Mill (1859) pointed out that wise people have seen this coming for a long, long time:

“I cannot . . . regard the stationary state of capital and wealth with the unaffected aversion so generally manifested towards it by political economists of the old school. I am inclined to believe that it would be, on the whole, a very considerable improvement on our present condition. I confess I am not charmed with the ideal of life held out by those who think that the normal state of human beings is that of struggling to get on; that the trampling, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other’s heels . . . are the most desirable lot of humankind . . . It is scarcely necessary to remark that a stationary condition of capital and population implies no stationary state of human improvement. There would be as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture and moral and social progress; as much room for improving the *Art of Living*, and much more likelihood of its being improved.”  
(my italics).

Mill wrote that over 150 years ago -- it’s basically a statement about how a stationary world can be desirable. In a stationary world, you don't have to worry about inflation, bubbles bursting, stock market crashes, or survival kits. A stationary world is sustainable and the world stays the same from day to day, so that we can focus in on things that really matter and plan for future generations. Let’s take Mill's advice and get to work on improving the “art of living”. Let's be proactive and show some concern for our afterlives: let's save something for our grandchildren (our afterlives).

## **Acknowledgments**

Students in my freshman human overpopulation crisis seminar class helped me distill these ideas down. I thank Professor Lawrence L. Espey

for commenting on the manuscript.

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## **Links**

[Anthropocentrism](#)

[ERP: Arrogant Ignorance and Blind Optimism](#)

[Diamond: "The Worst Mistake Humans Ever Made"](#)

[Reg Morrison's "Evolution's Problem Gamblers"](#)