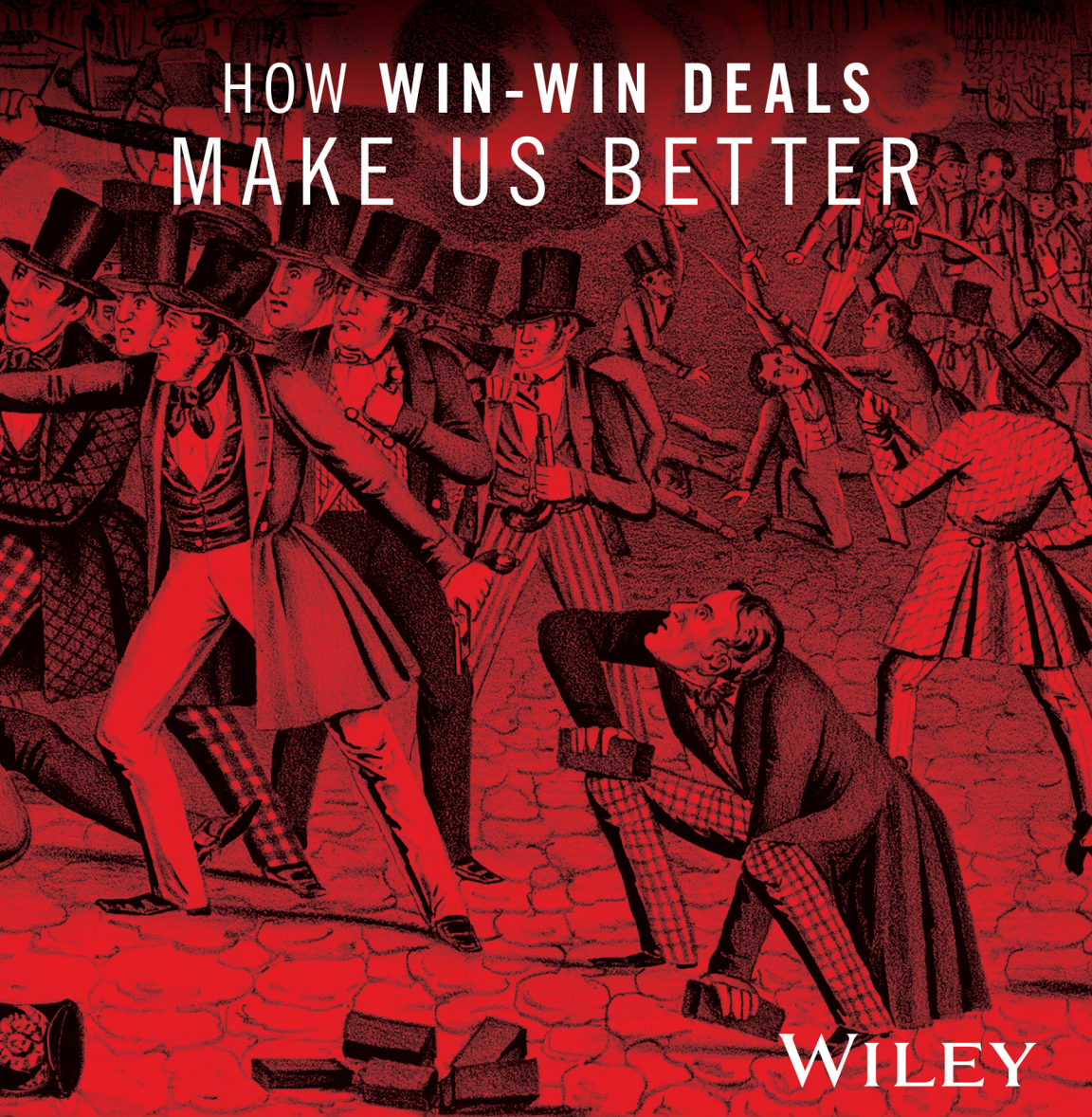


WILLIAM BONNER

# UN-CIVILIZING AMERICA

HOW WIN-WIN DEALS  
MAKE US BETTER



WILEY



# Un-Civilizing America



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*How Win-Win Deals  
Make Us Better*

William Bonner

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# Introduction

*“It is forbidden to kill; therefore all murderers are punished unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets.”*

—Voltaire

**H**istory doesn't tell us who made the first falafel . . . or how Cleopatra felt when Marc Antony kissed her on the lips. But it does tell us that the Elamites slew the people of Uruk and the Amorites slew the Sumerians. Then, the people of Uruk slew the people of Kish. Or was it the other way around? In any case, at least the Bible is clear about it: Cain slew Abel.

And take a look at the Kennewick Man, a human skeleton discovered in Washington State in 1996. He lived around 9400 BCE. He died when another human shot him with an arrow.

The royal tomb at Ur, one of the oldest cities in the world, shows the pattern was already well developed in 2600 BCE.

Discovered at that site during the original excavation in 1922 was a wooden box with a frieze carved into it. This “Standard of Ur” depicts an army of soldiers, horses, and war chariots attacking an

unidentified enemy. Soldiers are run down by the chariots. Others are led before the king to be sent into slavery, tortured, or executed.

On a stone stele discovered not far away in southern Iraq, it is recorded that Eannatum, king of Lagash, conquered the city of Umma.

On this “Stele of the Vultures,” as it is called, we see the victorious phalanx marching over the bodies of the defeated enemies . . . with buzzards picking at the severed heads underfoot. That was in 2450 BCE. By then, this sort of thing had already been going on for at least a thousand years . . . and it was just beginning.

Another stele from 200 years later shows the victory of Naram-Sin, an Akkadian monarch and the grandson of King Sargon of Akkad. He fought the Lullubi, a people with an unknown language, thought to be pre-Iranian, who had come down from the Zagros Mountains. He won, of course. Otherwise, the stele would be dedicated to the Lullubi king. There he is, Naram-Sin, larger than life, leading his warriors to victory . . . with the enemy pleading for mercy.

These are among the first records of civilized warfare. Alert readers will be quick to notice that “civilized warfare” is oxymoronic. That contradiction is at the heart of the present work.

When you set out to write a book, you know where you begin. But you don’t know where you will end up. As you think and study, your ideas evolve. As the philosopher Yogi Berra put it: “You’ve got to be very careful if you don’t know where you are going, because you might not get there.” Sometimes, you end up somewhere you hadn’t intended to go. But often, it is where you ought to be.

My goal was to attack the crooked timber of mankind with a chainsaw. I intended to write a book called *The Public Spectacle*. In it, I would cut into the lurid and fantastic space where public life takes place.

We all spend a good deal of our lives there . . . Newspapers and TV shows are devoted to it . . . It controls many of our thoughts . . . It takes up our time and money . . . It kills millions, imprisons millions, and shackles hundreds of millions to the toxic illusions of public life. But few people have done much careful thinking about it.

Not that I was going to approach the subject in a serious or academic way; that was far more work than I was prepared to undertake. But at least I could make the chips fly and have a few laughs.

The resulting book is not the product of diligent scholarship or even careful study. Don't be surprised to find loose ends and contradictions. And don't hold your breath for precision, either. As you get deeper into the book, you will find out why.

Besides, more serious books on similar subjects, with similar conclusions, are available. Steven Pinker has a masterful tome, *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, with a much more thorough treatment of the origins and decline of violence in human life. William von Hippel takes up the subject of cooperation in his marvelous book, *The Social Leap*. Robert Wright's *Nonzero* does a better job of describing the evolution of a win-win society. And John Gray has thought much more deeply about the philosophical implications in his book *The Silence of Animals*. All deserve a careful reading.

This book was supposed to be merely a collection of insights, observations, and playful guesses from someone who is trying to connect the dots—sometimes right, sometimes wrong . . . and always in doubt.

But what has emerged is something that has turned out to be more serious, and less funny, than I expected. The comedy is there. But there is something else, too. The same capacity for mythmaking that makes public life such a hoot is also what makes civilization possible.

As we will see together, the public space—where civilization takes place—is a world that can only exist if people are willing and able to imagine things that don't exist, believe things that aren't provably true, and do things that don't really make sense for them, individually, in any conscious, immediate, or logical way.

Why else, in 1812, would 700,000 Frenchmen and their allies give up their wine and sausages, forego the warm, late-summer sun on the Seine and Rhine . . . and say goodbye to the coquettish smiles of their *filles* and *fräulein* . . . so they could join Emperor Napoléon's

war, tromp 1,000 miles across the barren steppe to freeze their *derrières* off in a fight to the death with barbarous Cossacks?

Why else would Americans spend \$7 trillion to fight a “War on Terror” when there is statistically less chance of coming to grief at the hands of a terrorist than of choking to death on a filet mignon?

Why else would people believe that Pharaoh was a god . . . that alcohol should be outlawed in twentieth-century America . . . or that educated Cambodians should be forced to move to rural villages, where they could learn to be subsistence farmers?

These ideas are called “memes” by technologically inclined authors. Richard Dawkins, for example, suggests they are very much like viruses that seek only to replicate themselves in the fertile mush of our minds. Once there, they direct our thoughts and behavior.

Given that I have trouble turning on a television, I prefer to call them “myths”; an older word that fits more elegantly into my more literary approach. As we go on, we will also see that Dawkins’s “meme” concept is not really suited to our hypothesis anyway. Our desire to do win-win deals with one another doesn’t come from a “meme” that has somehow found a home in our brains. More likely, the success of win-win deals caused the brain to invent a myth . . . or a meme . . . to help make sense of it.

This is not meant to diminish the power of the idea, of course. Wherever it comes from, once an idea is anchored in the public space, it tends to shape our other ideas, and our conduct, too.

Many people, for example, think “democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.” This could be the result of observation. Or a successful meme. Or a myth, invented to protect us from other, less successful forms of government.

But we don’t know whether a democracy is better. Its virtues cannot be tested. No one even knows what it means. “Better” can mean almost anything. For the concept to have any meaning at all, you have to know what “democratic government” is, too. And that is another compound abstraction given life by our imaginations.

In other words, government, along with every other thing of “importance” in the public space, is dependent on shared myths. Not necessarily true or false . . . good or bad, these myths are

multilayered, complex, and fluid. They give rise not merely to the form of government you choose, but—at some level—to the existence of government itself.

You can find many proofs of “government”—in elections, police, wars, taxes. You can go to Washington and see government buildings . . . and meet people who are paid to work for “the government.” You can get a check from “the government.” You can get very mad at “the government.” You can get put in jail by “the government” . . . or killed by it. But governments would disappear immediately if we stopped believing in them.

And you can’t see “the government.” You see people. You see uniforms (actually, what you see are colors . . . and things you interpret as fabrics, worn by moving things you interpret to be people). You see things going on . . . which you believe—in an elaborate confection of fraud, fantasy, and fact—are connected in some way to “the government.”

The government is untouchable, intangible, and abstract. From its parts . . . its effects . . . and its works, you can infer that there is something going on, which you can call a “government.”

But there could be other explanations for the phenomena you experience. You might just as well believe that all the things you see—thought to be related to “government”—are actually the paraphernalia of a giant film or stage production, like *The Truman Show*, where “government” employees and politicians are being portrayed by actors working in a huge set. Or it could be a red-pill dream world, like *The Matrix*, where all the sensations and thoughts arise in your own drug-fueled imagination.

Proof that government exists usually comes from its actions. “German Army Attacks Poland,” *The New York Times*’ headline from 1 September 1939 might have said. The sentence would be meaningless without the existence of governments. But while reality can give a sentence meaning, a sentence cannot create reality.

Unless you believe it. Then, it brings forth a reality of its own. In this case, it suggests the existence of a “government” that organizes events and directs the movement of people and inanimate objects.

That also requires that you believe in the existence of a “country”—whatever that is—known as “Poland,” which has some connection to a specific parcel of ground. But the Bavarian Alps did not attack the Polish Tatras. The Rhine did not assault the Warta. In other words, the “government” and “country” inferences are just interpretations; they are explanations for phenomena that may, or may not, be related.

If you wanted to see what really happened, you would strip away the inferences and look at it as a chipmunk might have seen it. A group of people did something. These people were dressed in similar get-ups, suggesting some sort of group allegiance. They carried objects . . . and traveled in other objects.

Most of the people on both sides of the action—in the “countries” we know as Poland and Germany, neither of which would exist without the imaginations of many of the people in them—probably had no idea what was going on. When informed, most were probably puzzled . . . appalled . . . excited . . . or indifferent. Certainly, the chipmunks were indifferent. The weather and growing seasons went on as before. The beer still fermented at the same rate. The nuts still fell from the trees.

As near as we can tell, everything continued as before . . . except where people did something different because they believed they were “at war” with people they had never met. Being “at war,” too, required a whole panoply of ideas, none of which could be tested or proven. Some, at least on the surface, were outrageous and preposterous.

What did the typical German have against the typical Pole? Why would he want to kill him . . . or risk being killed by him? There was no easy answer. Instead, a person in favor of the “at war” hypothesis needed to come up with evermore incredible explanations, dipping deeper and deeper into the magic well.

He might, for example, make reference to Germany’s need for “living space” to justify a *Drang nach Osten* policy. But why would the well-fed *bürger* from Köln believe such an amazing claim? How much “living space” did the typical German need? Where was he living now? Where was the evidence that more living space was

needed? Why didn't he simply rent or buy, like every other honest citizen?

Adolf Hitler, a self-taught, quack economist, thought Germany couldn't feed itself. He proposed a solution: stealing underused land from the Poles. He even compared it to the Americans' taking of North America from the natives.

But had Adolf verified any of his suppositions—that the land mass of Germany was insufficient for its population . . . that additional output couldn't be had by further investment in agricultural modernization . . . that the Poles' land could be brought into cultivation economically . . . that Germans would want to farm in Poland . . . that they couldn't buy the land they wanted, or simply buy food grown by others . . . that food grown in Poland could be brought to market in Germany . . . and so on?

Of course not. And even if all these things were indisputably true, why was it a concern of the government? German families wanted automobiles, too. Was the government to begin manufacturing them? Since when was the government—which had never produced a single grain of wheat or raised a single hog—in the business of directing German agricultural output?

Or perhaps, in his search for an explanation, an observer might draw on Nietzsche's idea of the "superman." He might claim that Germans were *übertmenschen*, who were not bound by the normal constraints of polite, civilized society. Like celebrities today, as former U.S. President Donald J. Trump might put it, they could do whatever they want.

There was certainly no evidence for this claim, however. It could not be tested. It could not be proven. Nietzsche himself denied it. He despised the common German *volk* and claimed that he was actually Polish!

Poor Nietzsche. He saw the limitations of the tribal "us" . . . the deceit that runs through much of modern public life. He knew that only a few—the natural elite—could be supermen. "Us" had nothing to do with it.

The individual had to rise above the herd . . . He had to avoid groupthink . . . He had to stand out by thinking more

clearly—especially by seeing through the lurid fantasies of tabloid patriotism. Few individuals, and only the most courageous, could make the grade. Otherwise, mediocrity, swinish instincts, and cheap, me-too morality would drag him down to the level of the masses.

How it must have troubled Nietzsche's eternal rest when crackpots like Hitler, and his own sister, Elisabeth, took up the idea—and applied it to the lumpen! It was the exact opposite of what he had preached. And yet, there was the Führer himself, visiting Nietzsche's public archives in Weimar—not once, but several times. And there was Nietzsche's own sister, recruited by rascals and used to promote a woebegone project, setting up a super-race of scoundrels and dim-brained dupes in the Paraguayan wilderness.

And yet . . . there, too, on the backs of these fantasies, charged a “nation” of some 80 million people. This was extraordinary, not just because so much time, energy, and resources were committed to an absurd cause, but also because Germany had been among the most civilized of the Earth's countries, and now, it was launching itself on a thoroughly barbaric enterprise.

I set out to explore the manure-rich soil where these ideas take root. That is, I intended to map out the “public space.” This space did not exist at all for most of our (humans) time on Earth. There were no newspapers. There was no TV. Public spaces—where you could encounter new people, ideas, and products—didn't appear until fairly recently. The ancient agora, the public square, of Athens is reliably dated to only 700 BCE.

Public meeting and marketplaces are much older, of course. They arose with civilization, trade, and sedentary living arrangements. In the Greek agoras, the thoughts and concerns of publicly minded people were debated. But these discussions were probably limited to relatively few people. And you had to be physically present in the square to take part. No one tweeted the key ideas. No CNN featured the latest comments. And for the average person, the public space was still a relatively minor part of life.

It was in fifth-century Athens that Pericles made a public spectacle of himself. His funeral oration made very modern use of the

public space, both physically and politically. He invoked the shared myths of the community to rally his fellow citizens to support a foolish war. When that war was over, Athens had been captured, with much of its population having been killed or sold into slavery.

Crucially, no widespread public space existed during the millions of years in which we evolved into the people we are now. So it is not at all surprising that we are not equipped to deal with it.

Instead, we tend to view this new space as though it were no different from the spaces in which we lived when we came down from the trees. Back then, we can guess—though we have no way of knowing it—a man’s imagination didn’t need to be so active. He lived too close to the edge; he couldn’t take his eyes off the here and now. Chased by bears . . . or desperately searching for dried-up berries . . . he probably had little time to compose a sonnet or to wonder about the categorical imperative. Nor did he have any illusions about the people he lived with.

Anthropologists tell us that early tribes were rarely much bigger than 150 people. Everyone knew everyone else—personally. Election slogans were unnecessary. People surely had their delusions and myths, but they were probably not very elaborate . . . and much more subject to correction.

Instead, what early man knew was generally backed by personal experience or tradition. He may have had plenty of monsters, fairies, and spirits in his imaginary world. They must have entertained him, and perhaps warned him away from dangerous adventures (“Don’t cross the river . . . there are dragons over there”).

But his public space was extremely restricted. With too little surplus food . . . too little extra time . . . and too many threats to his existence, he couldn’t afford too many expensive delusions.

If he had the time to think about it, he, like his descendants, may have come to think that he needed to build pyramids . . . sacrifice his children . . . worship gods . . . make war . . . or vote in elections. But these things take time and resources. And larger public spaces.

Only when there was more of a cushion between him and the rigors of everyday life could he afford these luxuries. And a surplus only appeared as he switched to new methods of earning his

daily bread. Then, with crops and goats to draw on, his numbers increased, and what we know as history emerged. And it was a bloody mess.

The “cradle of civilization,” the vast swaths of Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt that constituted the Fertile Crescent, is strewn with details in bone, rock, and writing. And yet, the story is mostly about uncivilized behavior between nonconsenting adults. That is, it is not a history of “what happened,” for there were an infinite number of things happening. Instead, like today’s newspapers and TV, even the earliest histories are accounts of the most notable events taking place in politics.

The region has been invaded countless times. Each time, heads rolled. Study it too carefully, and your head begins to wobble, too . . . you are soon lost in the countless details.

But what luck! Walking through the airport bookstore in Buenos Aires, we happened upon a special issue of *National Geographic* on the history of Mesopotamia—only 158 pages, including pictures.

We all know something of the history of Mesopotamia. Some of it is in the Old Testament. Slay, slew, have slain . . . without the Bible, we wouldn’t know how to conjugate the verb. Which would be a shame; it seems to be the most important verb in the history of the entire Near East. The nouns are many, varied, and nuanced. But the verbs are nearly always the same—slay, slew, have slain.

And here, for convenience, we give you a broad-brush history of the Fertile Crescent region:

- Around 3700 BCE – the first Sumerian civilization appears
- 2900 BCE – the “first old dynasty” is in charge
- 2750 BCE – the “second old dynasty”
- 2350 BCE – the Akkadian Empire
- 2112 BCE – the Paleo-Assyrian Empire
- 1650 BCE – the Hittite Kingdom
- 1450 BCE – the Hittite Empire
- 1000 BCE – the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Empires.

There. Now you know less than you did before. Because history only tells part of the story. And not the important part. As Henry

Ford put it, history is mostly “bunk” because the public space is full of fake news, loopy opinions, and fraudulent ideas . . . all of which lead to the disastrous events compiled as “history.”

A person who is ignorant of history knows nothing. But at least his ignorance is unblemished. The person who knows something, on the other hand, often has negative knowledge. That is, he thinks he knows something, but what he knows is either untrue or so sketchy and misleading that he really knows less than nothing.

Reaching for a broader and more controversial point, to know some history, you must put into your brain a public spectacle narrative that is, in whole or in part, counterfeit. Your brain can never contain the totality of what happens. It can only grasp a piece of it . . . and then, only after it is shorn of the many links and connections that bind it to the real thing.

History pulls out a few details and focuses on them as if they were the only—or, at least, the most important—part of what happened. To “know” this history, you must ignore the many more complexities, ironies, and contradictions that cast doubt on it. So, the more you know, the more of the real past you must deny. And what you end up with is myth.

The part of history that *doesn't* get into the history books is the most interesting part. Monuments, broken bones, and carved steles tell us about the win-lose deals in the public space—the invasions, the battles, and the wars. The win-win deals—the private ones, made willingly, leaving both parties better off—are forgotten.

We are told, for example, that Tilgrath-Pileser conquered all the lands of the Amarru, Biblos, Sidon, and Arvad. He was a big winner. He said so himself. But who learned to weave? Who figured out how to irrigate fields and operate sluices and water gates? Who invented the wheel? Who did the things that really matter to us?

What a shame that history—like the daily news—is so focused on violence. It leaves the casual reader with an unbalanced and unhealthy view of life. He presumes that the important part of life is the public part . . . where the Russians, North Koreans, and terrorists are all out to get him!

He thinks they might slay him at any moment. Better to slay them first, he says to himself! Even in his career and personal life, he is likely to get the wrong idea. Like Donald Trump, he is likely to think that for him to win, someone else must lose.

Killing had been going on for a long time before the first grain of wheat was planted in Mesopotamia. Mankind previously lived in small groups and followed tribal instincts. Man's closest relative—the chimpanzee—still lives in tribes, attacks other tribes, and rips outsiders apart. It's a good guess that most of man's prehistory was similar. Groups attacked other groups when they could . . . and defended themselves as best they could.

But as the communities grew larger, “public life” grew, too. And with it grew new kinds of knowledge, new ideas, and new codes of conduct. In the Battle of Qadesh, two Mesopotamian invaders—Hittites and Egyptians—confronted each other. It occurred in 1284 BCE, in what is today Syria. It was a huge battle for the time, with as many as 47,500 soldiers and 3,500 war chariots.

Personal courage, charisma, and raw energy could not hold together an army so large . . . or keep it in the field for months at a time. It took organization, discipline, and a sense of purpose. While some of this was supplied by brute force, as we will see later, public myths played a big role. Soldiers and administrators had to believe they were part of something larger . . . tolerable, if not just . . . and inevitable.

But as the myths that made large-scale warfare possible evolved, so did other myths of an entirely different sort. Some of them shriveled and died when daylight hit them. Others put down deep roots and bore fruit. It is these different myths that ultimately drew our attention and became the chief interest of this book.

“Thou Shalt Not Slay” was handed down by Moses as God's law, for instance. Had this restriction been taken seriously, it would have brought the history of Mesopotamia and the Levant to a halt. The wars and conquests made possible by the public myths of the first sort would have ended thanks to this myth of the second sort. But like Eros and Thanatos, love and hate, win-win versus win-lose, the two sorts of myths are in constant conflict.

Besides, the words left some room to maneuver—did Moses' new law outlaw "murder" and not "killing"? And "Why should we care what the god of the Jews has to say?" In any event, there was enough slack to keep the wars going.

The prohibition against murder—like all Moses' Commandments—is not a tribal prescription. It is directed at individuals. It is a private, moral rule. Even non-Jewish and non-Christian people now generally follow it. They believe there is a reason not to kill others that goes beyond formal, written law. At a practical level, they fear they may be arrested and put in jail. But that is only a possibility because so few people put it to the test. When the trumpets sound, and killing becomes widespread, the police join in (as we will see more clearly later). Kill one person, and it is a crime. Kill 1,000 people, and it may win you a medal of honor.

Look more closely, and you see that the express law against murder is a result of a deeper prohibition. In other words, there would be no chance of getting arrested for murder unless murder were against the law. But it is only against the law because there is some mythic, deep-seated abhorrence of it.

Whence cometh this abhorrence? Was it the result of some moral awakening? Did reasoning lead us to it? Or religion? Perhaps you really do go to Hell if you murder someone. This is possible, but not provable. Some people—impressed by neither law nor religion—believe the prohibition against murder is simply a "good idea" and a "good rule to live by" . . . that it represents some basic, ineluctable progress of humanity.

Does it? Again, there is no way to know. But the prohibition against killing appears to be useful. It allows people to come and go, to their work, to their schools and shops . . . secure in the knowledge that most, if not all, will get home safely. In short, it is one of the myths that make modern civilization possible, even if we can't prove it is true or know whence it came.

This insight—that the myths that thrive in public spaces . . . often dopey and absurd, but sometimes useful or essential . . . are worthy of further study—changed the focus of this book. Instead of mocking the public space itself, along with the myths and delusions

you find there, we have directed much of our exploration to the myths that make civilization possible. How are the myths of civilization different from other myths? What is it that makes people “civilized”? What turns them into brutes?

It is easy and enjoyable to make fun of the fools and knaves you find in the public space. But the public space is also where you find civilized life. Without shared myths, civilization wouldn't be possible. Of course, neither would large-scale warfare, genocide, or the U.S. Congress.

How do you know which myths are beneficial to civilization? How do you separate the “civilized” from the “warfare”? How can you tell a useful myth from an appalling lie? What is “civilization” anyway?

Those are the questions I take up. You will have to judge how well I have succeeded in answering them.

A few final notes:

First, this book is not meant as a definitive work on civilization; I'm not that crazy or conceited. Instead, it is merely an exploration of civilization's foundations. With pick and trowel, we poke and dig . . . looking for broken shards and crumbled bones. We hope to find the bedrock, where the barbarous past ends and our civilized era begins.

Nor is there any illusion here about solving problems or building a better, more civilized future. It's hard enough to figure out what is going on. Improving it is expecting too much. Besides, once you begin meddling, you are no longer paying attention; you become a part of the thing you were trying to observe. Pretty soon, you're no longer seeing straight. If we can just manage to pass along a tiny, honest peek at civilized life, we will consider our mission complete and the book a success. We leave it to others to do with it as they please.

Readers will also note that we are from Baltimore, Maryland, which provides many rich examples of public space grotesquerie. And we travel frequently. That is neither here nor there, as far as our subject is concerned, but it—and our observations along the way—often provides illustration and context for our remarks.

And one final note: You'll notice that we have switched to the first person plural. None of the ideas in this book are entirely original. Even those that are relatively novel were discussed with others—including other members of the family . . . or readers of our blog, *Bill Bonner's Diary*—always with much helpful or absurd feedback.

Ideas are never the product of a single mind. Nor do they have any real existence until they are out in the open, shared with others. “We” is simply a recognition of the contributions of so many people, over so many centuries . . . so many books and news articles . . . and so many conversations. Many of these ideas and contributions came from unknown sources . . . some alive, some dead. Some insights come unbidden in an offhand, easy manner. And some are the result of a lifetime of dreadful pain and suffering. For all of them, “we” are grateful.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill Bonner". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Bill Bonner



# Chapter 1

## In the Beginning

. . . *For I was hungry, and ye gave me no meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me not in; naked, and ye clothed me not; sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.*

—*Matthew 25:42–43*<sup>1</sup>

**I**n April 2017 came news of the discovery in Morocco of a long-lost cousin. This was not the first, but the fifth relative to show up in the last few years. The human family, it turned out, is much bigger . . . and much older . . . than we had thought previously. The new findings are possibly 300,000 years old—about 100,000 years older than the oldest as-yet-discovered “human.”

At the end of the previous century, people still believed the simple “out of Africa” story. Its hero was a single species of human . . . perhaps descended from a single mutant. The *Homo sapiens* tribe survived and spread all over the world, adapting to local conditions as necessary. At least the story was easy to remember.

But it wasn’t true. In the last few years, anthropologists have identified several other human species. The first, already well known, was *Homo neanderthalensis*, presumed to be our closest relative. There are enough bones around, so we have a pretty good

idea what he looked like—heavier than modern humans, perhaps smarter, and often depicted with red hair.

The surprise came when scientists traced a small percentage of the modern human genome to these Neanderthal ancestors. Europeans and Asians, but not Africans, all have a Neanderthal swinging from their family trees.

Then it came out that there were several other skeletons in the closet. *Homo naledi* was discovered in South Africa in 2013. *Homo denisova* was found in Siberia in 2010. *Homo floresiensis* was uncovered in Indonesia in 2003. And the latest bones found in Morocco were very close to human, too.

If we were planning a large wedding, we would have one heck of a party! Some of these guys were . . . well . . . real animals!

All but one of the branches of the family have died out. And not all may have left us on friendly terms. Many of these relatives lived in the same place and at the same time as *Homo sapiens*—aka us. So far, the DNA record shows a connection between us and Neanderthals, as well as Denisovans. As for the others, we wouldn't be surprised to find that they got up to hanky-panky from time to time, too, and that there are traces of still other human species in us all.

So what? It's none of our business who did what to whom out in the woods. But we are exploring the origins of civilization—how it came to be and what it means to our modern, civil society. What we notice first in the human record is not the Eros that brought different humans together, but the Thanatos that had them go for each other's throats.

## Arguing with God

It is one thing to kill people you don't know, simply because the *federales* command it. But what is it when you kill your own children because God tells you to do so? Yahweh, Abraham's god, told him to kill his only son, Isaac. Abraham was ready to do it, too. He had a knife in his hand when an angel told him to stop, that it was just

a test. God was looking for a few good men who would do His bidding, including killing their own kin for His sake.

*Arguing with God* is a play written by a friend, John B. Henry. It is the story of the Jews . . . and their long, difficult relationship with their god. It is the theme of the Old Testament, before the coming of Christ. But it is told in contemporary language, leaving the audience to make the quick connection: “The chosen people” of antiquity become the one, “indispensable nation”—the USA—of today.

God chose the Jews to be his standard bearers—apparently because they were willing to do outrageous and appalling things in His name. He sent them off to kill and conquer. And no angel intervened. Instead, God Himself goaded on the killers and was upset when they left the job only half done.

In the book of Deuteronomy, for example, we have the story of the annihilation of the Canaanites. It was not enough to conquer territory. God ordered the Israelites to “not leave alive anything that breathes” and to “completely destroy them.”<sup>2</sup> And not just the fighting men. He wanted to snuff out women, children, beasts of burden . . . even household pets.

John B. Henry grew up the son of an Episcopalian minister in Virginia. By the time he left home, he had read the Bible cover to cover seven times. But it was only when he reread it as an adult, he says, that the violence of the Almighty came fully into focus. He was shocked.

The Old Testament recounts one act of murder and genocide after another. The Lord Jehovah was not content to shoot off a few hundred rounds in a nightclub, murder a few dozen school children, or stab a few passersby on the street in London. He’d take out an entire town.

Here is what Genesis tells us destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah: “brimstone and fire . . . from the Lord out of heaven.”<sup>3</sup> In Deuteronomy 29:23, Moses later described what it looked like:

<sup>23</sup>*The whole land will be a burning waste of salt and sulfur—nothing planted, nothing sprouting, no vegetation growing on it. It will be like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboyim, which the Lord overthrew in fierce anger.*<sup>4</sup>

At God's suggestion, the Israelites exterminated the Amalekites, too. From the book of 1 Samuel 15:8:

*<sup>8</sup>He took Agag, king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword.<sup>5</sup>*

The book of Ezekiel 9:4–6 further reports:

*<sup>4</sup>The Lord said to him, "Go through the midst of the city, even through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations which are being committed in its midst."*

*<sup>5</sup>But to the others He said in my hearing, "Go through the city after him and strike; do not let your eye have pity and do not spare. Utterly slay old men, young men, maidens, little children, and women, but do not touch any man on whom is the mark; and you shall start from My sanctuary."*

*<sup>6</sup>So they started with the elders who were before the temple . . .<sup>6</sup>*

And when God was displeased with His people, He practically exterminated them, too.

"Seven days from now I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and I will wipe from the face of the earth every living creature I have made," He says in Genesis 7:4.<sup>7</sup>

*Arguing with God* is meant to make audiences wonder about America's place in the world and its connection to God. But it made us wonder about God Himself. What kind of god would urge his people to destroy their neighbors?

The God of the Old Testament is a tribal god in a win-lose world. His role was to assure the survival and prosperity of His chosen people.

After escaping from Egyptian captivity, the Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years. It was during this time that Moses handed down the Ten Commandments, with "Thou Shalt Not Kill" prominent on the list.

Then, arriving in the land of milk and honey, the sons of Abraham had to take the milk and honey away from their owners, who

were reluctant to give them up. Here, we quote extensively from the book of Joshua:

Joshua 6:21–24:

*<sup>21</sup>And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword.*

*<sup>22</sup>But Joshua had said unto the two men that had spied out the country, Go into the harlot's house, and bring out thence the woman, and all that she hath, as ye swore unto her.*

*<sup>23</sup>And the young men that were spies went in, and brought out Rahab, and her father, and her mother, and her brethren, and all that she had; and they brought out all her kindred, and left them without the camp of Israel.*

*<sup>24</sup>And they burnt the city with fire, and all that was therein: only the silver, and the gold, and the vessels of brass and of iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the LORD.<sup>8</sup>*

Joshua 8:25–29:

*<sup>25</sup>And so it was, that all that fell that day, both of men and women, were twelve thousand, even all the men of Ai.*

*<sup>26</sup>For Joshua drew not his hand back, wherewith he stretched out the spear, until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai.*

*<sup>27</sup>Only the cattle and the spoil of that city Israel took for a prey unto themselves, according unto the word of the LORD which he commanded Joshua.*

*<sup>28</sup>And Joshua burnt Ai, and made it an heap forever, even a desolation unto this day.*

*<sup>29</sup>And the king of Ai he hanged on a tree until eventide: and as soon as the sun was down, Joshua commanded that they should take his carcase down from the tree, and cast it at the entering of the gate of the city, and raise thereon a great heap of stones, that remaineth unto this day.<sup>9</sup>*

Joshua 10:24–43:

*<sup>24</sup>And it came to pass, when they brought out those kings unto Joshua, that Joshua called for all the men of Israel, and said unto*

*the captains of the men of war which went with him, Come near, put your feet upon the necks of these kings. And they came near, and put their feet upon the necks of them.*

<sup>25</sup>*And Joshua said unto them, Fear not, nor be dismayed, be strong and of good courage: for thus shall the LORD do to all your enemies against whom ye fight.*

<sup>26</sup>*And afterward Joshua smote them, and slew them, and hanged them on five trees: and they were hanging upon the trees until the evening.*

<sup>27</sup>*And it came to pass at the time of the going down of the sun, that Joshua commanded, and they took them down off the trees, and cast them into the cave wherein they had been hid, and laid great stones in the cave's mouth, which remain until this very day.*

<sup>28</sup>*And that day Joshua took Makkedah, and smote it with the edge of the sword, and the king thereof he utterly destroyed, them, and all the souls that were therein; he let none remain: and he did to the king of Makkedah as he did unto the king of Jericho.*

<sup>29</sup>*Then Joshua passed from Makkedah, and all Israel with him, unto Libnah, and fought against Libnah.*

<sup>30</sup>*And the LORD delivered it also, and the king thereof, into the hand of Israel; and he smote it with the edge of the sword, and all the souls that were therein; he let none remain in it; but did unto the king thereof as he did unto the king of Jericho.*

<sup>31</sup>*And Joshua passed from Libnah, and all Israel with him, unto Lachish, and encamped against it, and fought against it.*

<sup>32</sup>*And the LORD delivered Lachish into the hand of Israel, which took it on the second day, and smote it with the edge of the sword, and all the souls that were therein, according to all that he had done to Libnah.*

<sup>33</sup>*Then Horam king of Gezer came up to help Lachish; and Joshua smote him and his people, until he had left him none remaining. <sup>34</sup>And from Lachish Joshua passed unto Eglon, and all Israel with him; and they encamped against it, and fought against it.*

<sup>35</sup>*And they took it on that day, and smote it with the edge of the sword, and all the souls that were therein he utterly destroyed that day, according to all that he had done to Lachish.*

<sup>36</sup>*And Joshua went up from Eglon, and all Israel with him, unto Hebron; and they fought against it:*