

Books

Don't Even Think About It

By George Marshall

Review by Andrew J. Hoffman

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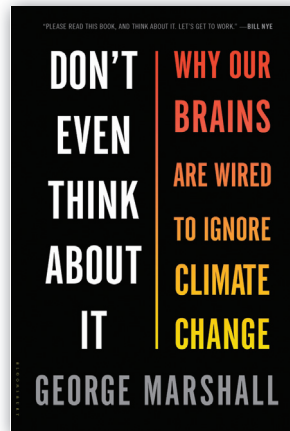
A Climate of Mind

REVIEW BY ANDREW J. HOFFMAN

Anyone who cares about climate change has to be tired of the vitriolic tirades that masquerade as public debate over that issue. Climate change has become a rhetorical contest akin to a sports match, with each side seeking total victory—often through the cynical manipulation of fear, distrust, and intolerance. No wonder the public is confused. And more important, no wonder there is such a sharp divide between the views of the scientific community and the opinions of the general public. Of the 11,944 peer-reviewed articles on the topic published between 1991 and 2011, 97 percent endorsed the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change position that climate change is happening and that humans are causing it. Yet only 63 percent of Americans “believe that global warming is happening,” according to a 2013 poll conducted by scholars at Yale University. What accounts for the discrepancy?

George Marshall offers an answer to that question in his expansive and engaging book *Don't Even Think About It*. The central theme of the book is that the climate change challenge before us is not scientific or technical; it's psychological. Marshall, founder of the Climate Outreach and Information Network, draws on a wide range of social science research to explain why we, as a species, would prefer not to think about climate change, its implications, or what our response to it should be. His central question, as the book's subtitle implies, is whether “our brains are wired to ignore climate change.” To answer the question, he discusses terror management theory, cognitive bias, the bystander effect, and other concepts developed by social scientists.

Two aspects of the book's format stand out right away. First, there are no references or citations. As an academic, I found



**DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT:
Why Our Brains Are Wired to
Ignore Climate Change**

George Marshall
260 pages, Bloomsbury

the absence of source notes frustrating. To my great relief, though, Marshall has posted nearly 40 pages of references on a dedicated Web page. In taking that approach, I came to realize, Marshall was practicing what he preaches. One theme of the book is that scholarly apparatus will not convince people to take climate change seriously. “Scientific data, although undoubtedly vital for alerting our rational brain to the existence of a threat, does not galvanize our emotional brain into action,” he writes.

Marshall, in short, is trying to appeal to readers on a personal and emotional level. His style is relaxed and conversational. He tells stories. And instead of simply citing the writings of scientists, psychologists, and activists, he actually talks to them. The book draws from interviews with a wide range of participants in the climate change debate—from conflicted scientists to aggressive skeptics, from thoughtful corporate executives to folksy Tea Partiers. He speaks with the climate change skeptic Marc Morano, who once wrote that scientists “deserve to be publicly flogged,” and he has lunch with the psychologist Daniel Kahneman, who tells Marshall, “I’m extremely skeptical that we can cope with climate change. ... A distant, abstract, and disputed threat just doesn’t have the necessary characteristics for seriously mobilizing public opinion.” (You won’t see that kind of statement in an academic paper!) Such quotations give the book a convincing punch.

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A second notable aspect of the book is its dizzying table of contents. There are 42 chapters, along with an extra chapter on the dangers posed by a 4-degree-Celsius rise in global temperature. (To avoid scaring readers away, Marshall wisely saves that chapter for the end of the book.) Each chapter is an easily digestible bite-sized chunk. But that format makes it hard to see the forest for the trees. It isn’t until his last three chapters that Marshall discusses solutions to the problem of climate change avoidance. So the preceding 39 chapters, which deal with the psychological barriers that cause avoidance, will leave readers feeling well informed but also increasingly hopeless. Those last three chapters are worth the wait, however. In the final chapter, Marshall lays out 49 “ideas for digging our way out of this hole”—a barrage of solutions for overcoming the psychological biases that stand in the way of confronting climate change.

In those final chapters, we learn (spoiler alert) that the answer to Marshall’s initial question is no: We are *not* hardwired to ignore climate change. But here is where I quibble with Marshall. He focuses on psychology—on the human brain and its evolutionary origins. But how much of our avoidance of climate change is not psychological but cultural? How much is nature, and how much is nurture? That’s a crucial distinction, because the task of changing psychological biases is different from that of changing cultural norms. The latter task, arguably, is easier than the former.

But this is a minor quibble. *Don't Even Think About It* brings an important perspective—that of the social sciences—to the debate over climate change and presents that perspective in an accessible and engaging way. The climate debate, Marshall demonstrates, is no longer about carbon dioxide and temperature-change models. It’s about biases, values, and ideology. It’s about the way that social and psychological filters lead us to practice motivated reasoning. Scientists will not have the final word in the public debate on this issue. Instead, people will continue to take positions that are consistent with their

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pre-existing values. For that reason, efforts to present ever-increasing amounts of data, without attending to those values, will only yield greater resistance and make a social consensus on climate change more elusive. ■

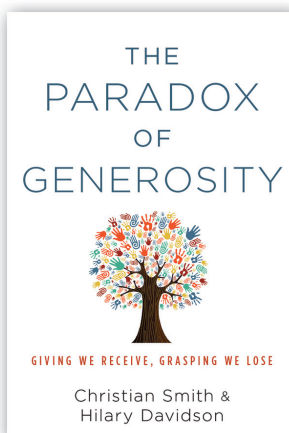
How Giving Keeps on Giving

REVIEW BY KIERAN HEALY

My bounty is as boundless as the sea,” Juliet says to Romeo. “The more I give to thee, the more I have.” In *The Paradox of Generosity*, Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson argue that giving works in just that way. The book, in fact, deals with two distinct paradoxes. The first paradox of generosity is that it’s good for those who practice it: The more you give, the better off you are. The second is that despite these benefits, relatively few people are especially generous. The purpose of the book, Smith and Davidson suggest, is not only to document the benefits of living a generous life, but also “to help less generous readers find their way to more generous life practices.”

To make their case, the authors rely on a survey of US adults that was conducted as part of the Science of Generosity Initiative. (Smith, a professor of sociology at the University of Notre Dame, is the principal investigator of that initiative. Davidson is a doctoral candidate in sociology at the same university.) They also did in-depth, in-person interviews with selected members of households that participated in the survey. Such a research design draws on the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative data.

Smith and Davidson convincingly show that self-reports of generosity are strongly associated with various good outcomes. Whether measured as tithing (that is, giving away 10 percent of one’s annual income), as volunteer hours, or as acts of “relational” kindness to friends and neighbors, generosity appears to coincide with



THE PARADOX OF GENEROSITY: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose

Christian Smith & Hilary Davidson
261 pages, Oxford University Press

happiness, good health, avoidance of depression, a sense of purpose in life, and a sense of personal growth. The self-reported nature of these measures raises an obvious issue. The book opens, for example, by drawing a contrast between people who tithe and those who do not. In the survey, 20 percent of all respondents said that they tithe. But when pressed to report specific donation amounts, only 2.7 percent of those polled indicated that they actually gave away 10 percent or more of their money each year. The inclusion of that question in the survey makes the authors’ claims about generosity more plausible. The survey does not investigate other measures of generosity (such as volunteering time), as thoroughly as it does tithing, however.

A more general issue involves establishing a causal relationship between generosity and the benefits allegedly associated with it. If generosity is a practical activity, engaging in it will have knock-on benefits and heterogeneous feedback effects that are intrinsically hard to pin down. Imagine that you start to exercise and find that doing so improves your concentration or your ability to sleep—qualities that, as it happens, make it easier to go to the gym in the mornings. The research design used by Smith and Davidson can show that these kinds of things really do tend to hang together, thereby providing support for any explanation of how that hanging-together process works. But if you want to know, say, what happens to people who exercise too much, or why so few people exercise, or whether

KIERAN HEALY, associate professor of sociology at Duke University, is the author of *Last Best Gifts: Altruism and the Market for Human Blood and Organs* (2006).

there are more and less effective ways to exercise, or whether it’s better to sort out your sleep schedule or your exercise routine first, then the approach taken in this book will be of less use.

For Smith and Davidson, such concerns are beside the point. In their view, the evidence that they have gathered strongly supports the conclusion that we do well by doing good. They acknowledge the relevance of feedback effects and other complexities, but emphasize the coherence of an overall pattern.

Sometimes they illustrate that coherence in a rather ham-fisted way, as when they contrast the lives of two fictionalized couples: Maddock and Grace live generously and end up happy, healthy, and fulfilled. Mort and Lilith, meanwhile, lead selfish, pinched, and friendless lives that culminate in an unhappy fate. Mort loses his job and contracts cancer. (“Very few people attend his funeral,” Smith and Davidson write.) Lilith smokes weed and cheats on her husband. (“Her final years in a nursing home prove to be not very pleasant,” the authors note.) “Moral judgment or wagging fingers is not the issue,” Smith and Davidson assert, but I have my doubts. Given the availability of more nuanced data—including the data presented in this book—it seems odd for them to sketch cartoons of this kind to make their point.

All the same, *The Paradox of Generosity* presents useful new data about the benefits of living generously. The book also suggests that Americans as a whole have plenty of room for improvement when it comes to giving behavior. As Smith and Davidson note, the surprisingly restricted practice of financial generosity has real consequences. “If the top 10 percent of most generous Americans were to stop giving money, the entire sector of society and economy based on voluntary financial giving would simply collapse,” they write. Increasing the number of people who lead generous lives, in short, will probably benefit not just those individuals, but also the organizations that depend on their goodwill. ■