

## Crime in a Post-scarcity Society

[Toby Russell](#), April 2009

“As a society gets larger and more competitive, both theoretical models [...] and empirical research [...] show that individuals become more anonymous and more Machiavellian, leading to reductions in altruism and increases in crime.”

“In England, after three generations in which the attempt was made to stamp out vagrancy by police measures of hideous brutality, the momentous admission was made that its cause was economic distress, not merely personal idleness, and that the whip had no terrors for the man who must either tramp or starve.” Religion and the Rise of Capitalism, R. H. Tawney, p260

“For a species which thrives on friendship and enjoys co-operation and trust, which has a strong sense of fairness, which is equipped with mirror neurons allowing us to learn our way of life through a process of identification, it is clear that social structures which create relationships based on inequality, inferiority and social exclusion must inflict a great deal of social pain.”

The Spirit Level, Wilkinson and Pickett, p213

“Property is nine-tenths of the law.” British legal saying

Perhaps the most controversial claim made by the [The Venus Project](#) is that society can function healthily absent law, that crime can be eradicated. It is hard to take such a bold claim seriously. Some humans – we tend to believe – are just plain bad, no matter what hopeful attempts are made to change them for the better. Even the most casual look at our history yields no shortage of aggression, conquest, murder, rape, fraud, theft, and other unsavoury behaviours. Crime would appear to be an endemic part of what we humans are. In this short article (one of [six satellite articles](#) to [this one](#)), I look at how accurate such an interpretation of history, and by extension, human nature, is. The usual caveat applies: I am no expert. The ideas laid out here are to encourage debate and further study, not browbeat people with some conclusion or other I fanatically adhere to.

Is committing crime a consequence of human nature? Yes, in that all human behaviours arise from human nature. Will we therefore be able to isolate the gene responsible for crime, switch it off and drive crime rates down to zero? No. In the same way that there is no gene for generosity or compassion, there is no [crime-gene](#), whose switching off makes a person law-abiding. Crime is of course far more complicated than that, as are genetics, and as is compassion: do animals other than humans commit crime? Can animals other than humans be evil? How do we get from genotype to phenotype, and what *exactly* are the pathways from genes to behaviour? Does it make any sense to attribute the human quality “selfishness” to a non-sentient gene? From the shallowest analysis we quickly see that crime is a very complex issue, and only has meaning in a social context.

So why say all human behaviours arise from human nature? Simply because they can arise from nowhere else. This statement does, of course, need to address the other side of the equation to more accurately reflect reality. A fuller definition might look like this (and will serve for the purposes of this essay): *Human behaviours arise out of the interaction between human nature and the environment.* And yet even this is an oversimplification. Determining precisely where human nature ends and environment begins is no small task. It is not unreasonable to characterise the entire universe as interacting systems unfolding in an unpredictable dance of expanding and contracting energies. While that's too cosmic for our purposes here, it might perhaps be helpful to bear in mind.

As natural as it seems to us, even [walking upright](#) is a behaviour that does not manifest in all circumstances where it physically could (in wolf-children for example), as is language use. It should be no surprise that [children raised](#) for long enough away from human society cannot become fully “human,” in the way we culturally and socially expect humans to be. For a human to live effectively in any civilisation is a process of socialisation, and *not in any way* the incorruptible, unstoppable outcome of our genetic make-up. By nature homo sapiens sapiens is, above all, a highly flexible and malleable species.

This is not to say that genetics are not significant. Of course they are. If they determine physical properties such as number of fingers and toes, eye colour, skin colour, etc., and if, furthermore, we increasingly recognise that the distinctions between “physical” and “mental” are not always obvious, then it is no great leap to connect genetics to behaviour – we certainly cannot have one without the other. What is unclear is how genetic make-up leads to particular behaviours. Even though many studies show heritability of things like aggression and intelligence, extraversion and sociopathy, their conclusions are based on statistical correlations rather than the “mechanics” of how, exactly, such behaviours come to be.

“[M]any of the empirical tools at our disposal have serious limitations in uncovering the links between genotype and phenotype.” (Karmiloff-Smith, Scerif and Thomas 2001)

Through which processes and influences must genetic predispositions pass before they become settled behaviours, and just how “settled” are those behaviours, how unchangeable?

To my mind, human behaviours are best understood as potentials of human nature, which come to fruition through the favourable interplay of genetic and environmental conditions. This interaction does not produce an unlimited range of possible outcomes, it imposes limits too: no amount of being raised by eagles – to imagine the impossible for a moment – will train a newborn human to fly. As flexible and adaptive as humans are, we are indeed constrained by our physical inheritance.

A simple though extreme thought exercise helps put the relative importance of genes and environment into some perspective. Imagine a sociopathic, paedophile rapist fathers identical twins on a kleptomaniac. Separate the twins at birth. Raise one in a wealthy, loving family, and give it the most wholesome and loving upbringing humanly possible. Raise the other in a specially designed, windowless room equipped with a robotic arm that takes care only of the child’s most basic physical needs. Populate the room with chickens, so that they are the only animal the child ever sees. How similar will these genetically identical human beings be by age four? By age seven? What hope for chicken-boy in human society thereafter?

A more scientific example of the relevance of environment is found in the following (lengthy quote):

“Crabbe, Wahlston, and Dudek (1999) set up a comparison of results from three different laboratories with serotonin neurotransmitter knockout mice. Each laboratory had identical strains of mice, with the experiments starting at the same time on the same day and under the same laboratory conditions as well as the same mouse feed and the same battery of postmutagenesis behavioral tests (including the water maze). The results were surprising. Compared to wild-type littermates, one laboratory’s mice showed more activity in the maze, the second laboratory less activity, and the third no difference in activity. These results only can be explained by minute differences in handling, the odor of the handlers, or the composition of the water supply. Recall that the strains used in each of the three laboratories were identical, and thus individual differences across groups were similar and therefore cannot explain the empirical disparities here. If such tiny differences such as handling or water composition can affect whether the serotonin knockout has an effect on subsequent behavioral outcome, considerable caution must be exercised when extrapolating from the mouse model to the human case.” Karmiloff-Smith, Scerif and Thomas 2001

So when considering how criminal behaviours come about, we must be careful not to remain too emotionally involved in the myths we tell ourselves about human nature. In considering crime we are obliged to focus our attention on human malleability. Compared to cats, for example, we are easy to train and manipulate, and capable of an astonishing variety of tasks. It is therefore an error to see “criminals” as one of many human “types,” just as it was to regard *homo ferus* as a “type.” Rather, we should see “criminals” as humans exhibiting particular behaviours, behaviours which are the logical consequence of certain environmental conditions – such as wide income gaps, or poor moral education, or scarcity and competition generally – acting on the particular human animal. As stated earlier, all behaviours arise from the interplay of the human animal with the conditions it experiences. Crime is no exception.

Since there is no sub-type *homo sapiens criminalus*, and since there is no specific crime-gene either, we can suggest, contrary to popular wisdom, that crime is *not* inevitable. We need therefore to take a fresh look at how effective current measures – prisons, punishments and laws – can possibly be. What does history show us? What does society show us? We have had a very, very long time “controlling”

criminal behaviour with a wide variety of punishments, from gruesome executions for the smallest indiscretions to community service. How successful have we been in eradicating crime from society? Why the [persistent correlation between income inequality and crime](#)? How successful have we been, at the popular level, in recognising the behavioural nature of crime? Hardly at all it seems (“tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime”), although there is a growing awareness that an intelligent, rational approach is sorely needed.

Justice as retribution – the emotional “eye for an eye” system – does not work, either as prevention or cure. History confirms this. Indeed, you can only support such a system if you believe crime is inevitable, that laws and punishments are not *really* about deterrent, but about *perceived* justice and appeasing the base (though understandable) desire for revenge. If you hold this opinion, keeping the social music more or less harmonious is more important to you than ridding society of crime. After all, there will always be crime, so why bother striving for the impossible?

All this is not to say that laws and punishments do not have some positive effect in inhibiting criminal behaviour. Although, the degree to which our obedience depends upon a system which delivers shelter, energy, education, food and water to sufficient numbers of people, needs to be considered when weighing law’s effectiveness. Were water and food suddenly to disappear from a well-functioning city, we all know how quickly its laws would be ignored in the ensuing fight for survival. Conversely, there would be less and less crime the more people were provided with what they need, both bodily, and in their sense of their own dignity.

Let’s take a brief look at crime statistics from the US and Japan – two countries very far apart from one other culturally, and in terms of income distribution – to get a small idea of crime's make-up. There are of course many hundreds of laws, and therefore many defined crimes which overlap, e.g. “assault” and “aggravated assault,” or “fraud” and “embezzlement.” I believe more general definitions are helpful to my objective here, and have grouped the statistics accordingly. In this vein we have: **violent/sexual crime** (from disorderly conduct all the way to serial murder), which I see as crimes against people’s bodies; and **property crime** (from petty theft to larceny).

(Crimes committed to obtain drugs must at root be related to money, since drugs aren’t free. The effects of drugs on judgement and self-control are profound, such that crime committed while under the influence of one drug or another can be considered similar to temporary insanity. The process of becoming addicted, of seeking out the buzz cocaine brings, or the numb nirvana of heroin, or the fuzzy haze of inebriation, is too complicated to be addressed here, but social factors of course play an enormous and decisive role. Seeing as it is not my intention to address every aspect of this vast topic, I will leave the issue of drugs with this platitude: the healthier the society, the healthier its citizens.

And crimes such as man-slaughter and others of accident or omission I will not address either, since these can mostly be designed out, or regarded as an inevitable part of civilisation, in that nothing is ever perfect.)

[In the US](#), the nation with the [highest income inequality in the developed world](#), from 1960 to 2007 **property crime** as a proportion of total crime has hovered at around 90%. (I calculated the percentages from the table I link too.) **Violent crime** takes up the remaining 10%.

[In Japan](#) the story is a little different (I’ve analysed the figures in the excel file entitled “28-2 Offenders Arrested...” found in the link provided). Looking at historical rates (1970-2004) and excluding data for traffic negligence, the following picture emerges. Up to the early eighties, violent crime (including offences such as indecency) as a proportion of total crime was considerably higher than in the US (steadily falling from ~30% in 1970 to ~15% in 1982). Thereafter the proportions are similar, with the 10:1 ratio more or less observed. Without getting bogged down in the possible cultural reasons for these differences, I feel I can safely say that the explanation will be societal rather than genetic.

If what I posit here is valid, namely that crime is an environmental, not a biological problem, and if the overwhelming preponderance of criminal activity is property related, we can suggest that the most rational way to minimise criminal behaviour is to alter the conditions that give rise to it. Shouldn't we design society to provide open access to the basics (shelter, energy, communication, education, health,

food, water, and transport)? Wouldn't that, in time, eradicate *all* property-based crime? This is of course not something to pull off the shelf, plug in and switch on, but rather a challenging direction to be pursued, *if* we are serious about tackling crime.

The fact is, the figures support such a move. One of the opening quotes of this essay references “The Spirit Level” (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009), a book bursting at the seams with data that tells a clear story: the more equally income is distributed across society, the healthier that society is. One of the key consequences of equal income distribution is more equal access to the basics of life, which helps foster dignity and self respect. If all members of society had equal access to all basics, there would be no basis for property related crime. Everyone would have what they need.

That leaves us with 10% of violent crime to address. Here I would like to refer the reader to a talk given by Steven Pinker called “[The Myth of Violence](#).” Contrary to the impression most of us have from watching the world through the lens of TV and newspapers, violence in Western Culture is on the decrease, and has been since the Middle Ages. I won't quote statistics here, but urge the reader to watch Pinker's compelling twenty minute talk. What matters after accepting the evidence is why violence is diminishing. There are bound to be many reasons, but the one that I think is most pertinent is the expanding circle of empathy, as we extend our feeling of sympathy for others from family out to village, to tribe, to nation, and beyond, such that modern humans can empathise with other species and seek to improve their welfare. Put simply, as our knowledge and awareness expands to take in the entire planet, so our readiness to do violence to others decreases. As our ignorance slowly shrinks, so we are less able to dehumanise those unlike us. This strikes me as a logical progression. So when we think of humans as irredeemably violent, and rightly point to wars and rape and torture etc. to support our view, we are failing to see a highly malleable animal reacting to particular complexes of environmental pressures. Our challenge is consciously to design our environment such that we no longer can be violent to one another.

Reducing crime to zero, on the other hand, is probably impossible, if we define crime as some form of antisocial behaviour. For example, in the paper I link to above ([Linda Mealey, 1995](#)), Mealey analyses the evidence for a strong genetic (phenotype) link to primary sociopathy (as opposed to secondary sociopathy, the more malleable form), a condition which is by definition immune to the pressures/influences of the socialisation process. That is, there is no “cure” – one which attempts to alter behaviour via social means – for primary sociopathy. Primary sociopaths are as they are for biological reasons, which both compel them to chase excitement, and render them incapable of caring about, or empathizing with, others. While this phenotype suggests at first blush the permanent presence of crime in all forms of society, I imagine a situation where the phenotype is identified early on, then directed into ventures and pursuits that satisfy its drives and needs. Indeed, Mealey ends her paper on a similarly positive note:

“To minimize the damage caused by primary sociopaths, the appropriate social response is to modify the criminal justice system in ways that obviously reduce the benefits and increase the costs of antisocial behavior, while simultaneously *creating alternatives to crime which could satisfy the psychophysiological arousal needs of the sociopath.*” [My emphasis.]

On the other hand, there is evidence in “primitive” cultures, cultures absent police and codified law, of strict adherence to whatever moral code is held to be appropriate. For example, the Aleoute Eskimos, as illustrated by Kropotkin (Mutual Aid, 1902) enjoy a virtually crime free life. The figures Kropotkin quotes are; one murder in 100 years in a population of 60,000, and of 1,800 Aleoute only one common law offence over a 40 year period. I don't believe genetics can explain these statistics. Could it be – to speculate out loud for a moment – that the phenotype we call sociopath is a biological consequence of many centuries of a particular set of cultural conditions? Might our scarcity-based, greed-oriented, atomised culture be an ongoing reward mechanism for the sociopathic type? I don't know, but stranger things have happened. An historical study of sociopathy across various and differing cultures would make an interesting study.

The idea, therefore, that one can design crime out of society, as opposed to accepting it as endemic and biological, is *not* idealistic. As suggested above, crime is a complex of societal and “instinctual” forces acting upon each other. In that it is a uniquely human problem, in understanding crime we need also to factor in our penchant for romanticising and mythologising ourselves, a penchant that is all too

evident everywhere we look; in newspapers, in film, in literature, in children's stories, in conversations down the pub, in scientific analyses, in politics, etc. We live in an echo chamber in which our untested opinions keep on coming back to us in a positive feed-back loop. In fact, the hardest part of dealing with the problem of crime rationally is weaning ourselves from these fantasies and dealing with the facts as they are. Only then can we move on to develop the ambition and self-confidence necessary to bring about real change.

Crime is not easy to define. For what it's worth I wrote this article with the following definition in mind: crime is the inevitable *human* consequence of having no full consensus on how to adhere to rules of good behaviour, nor even full consensus on what good behaviour is, *alongside* a general belief that only laws can minimise the damage done by this insufficient consensus. For my purposes here I think it uncontroversial to claim you need laws to have crimes.

That there will, of course, never be total consensus among all humans – since people have different sensibilities and desires – is healthy. Variety is more than the spice of life, it is an essential precondition for it to prosper and flourish. But these differences of moral sensibility need not – perhaps – forever and for always engender “crime,” nor need an absence of consensus necessitate denoting transgressions of these sensibilities as crimes.

We need also to bear in mind that crime is useful to us too – as long as we humans remain generally incapable of *constructive and creative* disobedience – as a tool for division, for keeping “us and them” tensions alive. Crime is “good” because it is a distraction. That we all suffer from it is, sadly, part of its appeal. Having an enemy is still part of our cultural expectations and needs. Until we develop the cultural wisdom to see beneath the yarns and myths we spin about heroes and villains, crime will be a necessary and handy part of our lives and psychology.

Never say never, and never say always – change is too pervasive. Crime is a human phenomenon, requires complex language and society to come into existence, is resolved disagreements codified to the victor's favour, with punishment and vilification attached. Will humans always seek to use the term “crime” to deal with actions that exceed some socially determined threshold? Or will we survive ourselves and figure out a more mature way of handling our differences? In short, can we *imagine* designing crime out of human experience? I can, but that alone don't mean diddly; *most of us have to*.

None of this means that we pronounce a resource-based economy on Monday, then, in high euphoria, disband all police and abolish all laws on Tuesday. Such end goals are safely, step by step, worked towards. [The Venus Project](#) is a direction to follow, not the slotting in of a pre-built society, then blindly hoping for the best. A post-scarcity world would be built as scientifically as possible, deploying only those solutions that benefit people generally, and discarding those that do not.

The Venus Project [proposes a society of abundance](#), where all material needs are provided to everyone, free of charge. In such a non-monetary system, there would be no property in the sense we understand it today. Without a medium of exchange, without personal property, with an appropriately designed education system, social stratification would be virtually impossible. Any that might arise – based on skills or interests or popularity or whatever – would not have the leverage and significance of today's class divisions. Only by placing human dignity and well being at the very forefront of society's decision making processes – rather than profit – do we have a chance of seeing just how civilised the human animal *can* be. Once we have rid from the factors influencing our behaviours *all* advertising, once a decent education including human inter-relationships and mutual respect has been set up, once the need for tricking people into thinking they will be sexier/smarter/cooler/younger by owning product X is gone, once nutrition and diet are governed by science and good sense, how then can criminal behaviour arise?

So the question we must answer is this: do we want to take crime seriously, as rational adults, and do something lasting about it, or continue instead to indulge in the myths we have written about ourselves as good guys and bad guys, forever suffering crime's fallout as a result. [A post-scarcity world](#) offers an elegant solution to the problem of crime. Our task is to test this idea open-mindedly, then work to make it real.

“[W]hen a person's public stance and private motives are both selfless but those motives came about because they once served the interests of his ancestors' genes, we have not uncovered hypocrisy; we

have invoked a scientific explanation couched at a different level of analysis. Color depends on properties of colorless molecules; solid objects are made of atoms that are mostly empty space. That does not mean that peacocks are colorless or that Gibraltar is a mirage. Similarly, selfless people designed by selfish genes are not selfish.” [Stephen Pinker](#)