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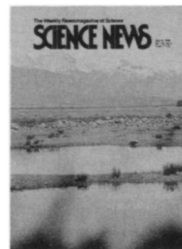
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Cover: A slow collision between India and Asia over the last 50 million years created the highlands of Tibet, the highest and largest plateau on Earth. In this shot of the Nianqingtangula mountain range in northern Tibet, the valley floor sits at an elevation of 4,600 meters (about 15,100 feet) and the ice-capped peaks rise an additional 2,500 kilometers. Aside from raising this plateau — often called "the roof of the world" — the continental crash also rearranged the entire face of southeast Asia, according to new geologic evidence gathered in China. (Photo: William S.F. Kidd/State University of New York at Albany)



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Letters

Altruism: The debate continues

Psychologist Linnda Caporael is quoted as saying, "The human mind/brain evolved for being social" ("Getting Out From Number One," SN: 4/28/90, p.266).

I do not agree. Just as man is omnivorous, so is he omnisocial. By this I mean he is capable of living in isolation like the panther and the mountain men of the frontier, or in groups like the buffalo. Not only does man have a choice, but because he can ask "why?" he is constantly evaluating reasons for being social or isolated and altruistic or selfish.

It was once easy for those who chose selfishness or isolation to retreat from — or be forced out of — society, but with the closing of frontiers this choice became far less available. Since man's basic nature allows him to choose, this frustration can make him dangerous to society. That places a much higher burden on society to make the lack of choice tolerable.

Richard S. Blake
East Falmouth, Mass.

Both our social and critical reasoning decision-making capabilities may have their earliest roots in the mammalian evolution of a dual food strategy, involving the choice between a cooperative strategy triggered by the sense of security evoked by an adequate food supply, and a self-oriented strategy triggered by the insecurity evoked by a poor supply. Under these conditions, cooperation would have enhanced survival for pregnant and nursing females and their young without threatening cooperating individuals. Survival groups may have been kinship groups for convenience, but cooperation was triggered by feelings of security and trust.

Primitive brain structures for weighing self or other probabilities in ambiguous circumstances were the beginnings of our reasoning capabilities. As the brain processes became more effective in making choices, the area of judgment expanded beyond food strategies, encouraging further brain development until, at a critical point in human evolutionary history, maximizing the brain's effective func-

tioning became as vital to the ongoing survival of the genome as maximizing reproductive success. Development of decision-making capabilities accelerated, and the area of decision-making freedom expanded until *Homo sapiens* evolved.

Aggressiveness, competitiveness and acquisitiveness — as well as empathy, compassion and the impulse to share — evolved as secondary triggers for more specific "self" or "other" responses.

With increasing awareness of the self as an autonomous decision maker, self-confidence and self-worth became additional factors. We each vary in the relative intensities of our self/other impulses, and these impulses are often in conflict. Cultures that emphasize individualism and undermine trust, security and positive self-feelings increase the likelihood of self-oriented behavior. Cultures that encourage other-concern increase the likelihood of cooperative behavior choices.

Marilyn M. Kramer
Lake Tomahawk, Wis.

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