

The compassion deficit

January 18, 2018

The morning Chris Sampson performed his extraordinary act of compassion began in ordinary fashion, as such mornings usually do. It was an April weekday, rush hour in Edmonton's Churchill LRT station, a drowsy crowd gathered on the platform. Mr. Sampson, a 27-year-old college student in the second year of an electrical apprenticeship, was standing by the elevators and listening to a podcast on earbuds when, farther down the platform, two men began fighting.

He edged closer to see what was happening. Then, as one of the men turned away, the second sucker-punched him in the head. The victim lost consciousness and fell onto the tracks as the warning bell clanged that the train was coming.

Mr. Sampson acted. He ran forward and leaped onto the tracks. When the man proved too heavy for him to lift, someone else hopped down to help him. The train was a few metres away, braking to a premature stop, when Mr. Sampson pulled himself back onto the platform. Then he went off to class.

People typically believe, as social psychologists have [repeatedly shown](#), that they are morally superior – more honest or generous – than their neighbours. But test those assumptions in experiments and our [morals shift](#) when it suits our interests or harden around faulty reasoning. Our [actions depend](#) on how others behave. The promise of a [good deed tomorrow](#) allows us, even if unconsciously, to behave badly today. We're easily [manipulated](#) by our environments. We might as well admit it: Our noble avatars tend to be controlled by pompous, cowardly, power-hungry jerks.