Explanations that are extraordinary both analytically and aesthetically share, among others, these properties: (a) They are often simpler compared with what was received wisdom, (b) they point to the truer cause as being something quite removed from the phenomenon, and (c) they make you wish you'd come upon the explanation yourself.

Those of us who attempt to understand the mind have a unique limitation to confront: The mind is the thing doing the explaining; the mind is also the thing to be explained. Distance from one's own mind, distance from attachments to the specialness of one's species or tribe, getting away from introspection and intuition (not as hypothesis generators but as answers and explanations) are all especially hard to achieve when what we seek to do is explain our own minds and those of others of our kind.

For this reason, my candidate for the most deeply satisfying explanation of recent decades is the idea of bounded rationality. The idea that human beings are smart compared to other species but not smart enough by their own standards, including behaving in line with basic axioms of rationality, is now a well-honed observation with a deep empirical foundation.

The cognitive scientist and Nobel laureate in economics Herbert Simon put one stake in the ground through the study of information processing and artificial intelligence, showing that people and organizations alike adopt principles of behaviors such as "satisficing" that constrain them to decent but not the best decisions.

The second stake was placed by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, who showed the stunning ways in which even experts are error-prone, with consequences not only for their own welfare but also for that of their societies.

The view of human nature that has evolved over the past four decades has systematically changed the explanation for who we are and why we do what we do. We are error-prone in the unique ways in which we are, the explanation goes, not because we have malign intent but because of the evolutionary basis of our mental architecture-the way in which we learn and remember information, the way in which we are affected by those around us, and so on. The reason we are boundedly rational is because the information space in which we must do our work is large compared to the capacities we have, including severe limits on our conscious awareness and our ability to control our behavior and act in line with our own intentions.

We can also look at the compromise of ethical standards: Again, the story is the same; that is, it's not the intention to harm that's the problem. Rather, the explanation lies in such sources as the manner in which some information plays a disproportionate role in our decision making, the ability to generalize or overgeneralize, and the commonness of wrongdoing that typifies daily life. These are the more potent causes of the ethical failures of individuals and institutions.

The idea that bad outcomes result from limited minds that cannot store, compute, or adapt to the demands of their environment is a radically different explanation of our capacities and therefore our nature. Its elegance and beauty come from its emphasis on the ordinary and the invisible rather than on specialness and malign motives. This is not so dissimilar from another shift in explanation-from God to natural selection-and is likely to be equally resisted.