

Our Better Nature: The Foundation of Humanity

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Abstract

“Against our better nature” is a term often used to describe evil and selfish actions. Despite the beliefs of some, humanity has a propensity towards goodness, and acting virtuously is in our nature. The theory of our innate altruism has been supported through years of scientific research, both biological and neurological, which suggests that humans evolved to cooperate with one another. Research also supports the notion that in the context of natural disasters, crises, and existential threats, humans tend towards cooperation. Furthermore, there may be an upstream chain of altruism that triggers a reciprocity behavior when individuals receive help during a disaster; they themselves are more likely to offer help to others in subsequent disasters. Additionally, the separate developments of organized religions around the world all share common themes of compassion and charity. Religion, like government, is a way humans have organized ourselves to encourage our “better nature” to manifest itself. Philosophers have also identified the separation between humanity and the rest of the animal kingdom as our instinct towards altruism. Holocaust survivors like Viktor Frankl describe the strength of love that motivated them when all other vestiges of humanity had been destroyed. Our species may be prone to greed and violence, but when deprived of external influences, we show our innate goodness, time and again. Thus, our fate as humans, and our survival as a species depends on our deepest, enduring instinct to act in accordance with altruism, cooperation, collaboration, empathy, and love.

Our Better Nature: The Foundation of Humanity

Perhaps the most debated and controversial subject of psychology, philosophy, science, and religion, the concept of human nature has countless different interpretations. The question that underpins most arguments appears simple: Are human beings predisposed to act cooperatively? As far back as ancient Greece, intellectuals have philosophized on our nature, and how it dictates the organization of societies. Humans are animals, and a social species. For our fragile bodies to survive, early humans had to live in groups and utilize pack hunting. For our entire existence, humans have had a propensity to cooperate, a biological fact supported by scientific research. From Darwin's theory of evolution to the studies of human altruism and hyper-cooperation, it's clear that we are programmed to work together. The very existence of the oxytocin hormone gives much credence to the claim that human nature is geared towards society. We are currently living in the advanced stages of our biological impulses. Nearly all humans today are governed by some sort of political structure and 7.79 billion people worldwide identify with a religion (Pew Research Center, 2015). At the barest level, government and religion are just ways we have facilitated interhuman collaboration in our attempts to make our systems palatable and lasting.

Human propensity to work together is not just supported by the study of our evolution and hormones. Leading modern philosophers have argued that man's purpose does not come from divine commandments, but from his own search for meaning. This search for meaning often becomes achieving psychological freedom through the overcoming of struggles and embracing of love. Even religion, which historically places humans into strict moral boxes, can be a vessel for cooperation. It is now commonly accepted that the foundational basis of humanity's unique level of culture, technology, and social interaction is our *ability* to act

cooperatively and altruistically with one another in our societies. No other species on Earth shares our combination of cognition and social community. Some claim that these traits have been manufactured through a combination of early developmental encouragement and a healthy fear of retaliation for nonconformism to this pre-established order. That is to say, our tendency to cooperate is developed via nurture rather than nature. However, scientific studies have suggested for decades that our propensity to work together is in our DNA and has been since we first evolved into Homo Sapiens.

Evidence from Science

In the last few decades, anthropologists have developed groundbreaking theories of human nature, namely the cooperative breeding hypothesis. Cooperative breeding is the act of non-parental individuals helping the mother or parents of a child in the tasks required to raise the child and keep it safe. Essentially the saying “It takes a village to raise a child”. The hypothesis postulates that humans cannot have evolved if we did not engage in cooperative breeding early on in our evolutionary existence.

The really distinctive feature of the human story is not longer childhoods per se but a larger mosaic of life-history traits that derived from cooperative breeding: bigger brains that are metabolically more costly than those of other apes; extended lifespans for females after they pass menopause; and peculiarly prosocial tendencies, especially where food sharing is involved, that distinguish humans from chimpanzees, bonobos, orangutans, and gorillas. (Hrdy, 2009, p. 275)

The ideas surrounding cooperative breeding are also supported by the Grandmother Hypothesis. Since the mid-20th century, anthropologists have hypothesized that the reason for early menopause in human females in comparison to total lifespan is for older females to provide

a support role in helping their daughters raise children. Females typically reach menopause much earlier than the decline of other physical and cognitive functions due to aging. That is to say, human menopause is far from a death sentence. This is in stark contrast to female Great Apes, whose menopause typically comes soon before the end of the average natural lifespan. This comparatively early in life human menopause makes sense when viewed through the lens of cooperative breeding. The presence of grandmothers and their care and foraging abilities accelerate the growth of children and hasten the weaning process, thus allowing mothers to more quickly produce additional offspring (Hawkes, et al., 1998). This early menopause in human females is an evolutionary way to provide a greater number of allomothers to support mothers and their children, which in turn lowers our mortality rates. Early menopause is certainly not a result of a social construct forcing us to be altruistic. Human female bodies have specifically evolved to encourage greater intercommunity social cooperation, which in turn leads to survival of the species.

In a more recent expansion of the hypothesis, researchers applied the idea of cooperative breeding to the development of emotionally modern humans.

In the case of the cooperatively breeding apes in the line leading to the genus *Homo*, reliance on care and provisioning from alloparents as well as parents conditioned dependent immatures to develop un-ape-like eagerness to monitor and care about the intentions of others, mentalize what they were thinking and feeling, and seek to ingratiate themselves with them, leading to the expression and refinement of otherwise latent ape potentials. (Hrdy, et al. 2020)

The importance of alloparental support in our ancestor's communities lead to the eventual neurological divergence from our Great Ape cousins; a distinction that we have maintained and furthered to this day.

There are additional neurological processes that support the idea that humans are inherently altruistic. The hormone oxytocin has long been linked to interpersonal feelings of connection, maternal behavior, and social bonding. Studies have shown the hormone to amplify the recognition of social cues (pup calls) in the brains of mice and form neural connections that impact the reaction of the mice to the social cues in the future. “Our hypothesis is that the virgin brain is a blanket of inhibition, and that pairing the pup calls with oxytocin allows the network to be reconfigured.” The amplifying effect created by oxytocin in the brains of mice could translate to the intense reaction most human mothers feel at the sound of a baby's cry. Oxytocin has also been found to affect the inhibitory neuron cells in the hippocampus in a way that increases our brain's focus on social cues. “Oxytocin improved signal transmission, almost doubling the ability of information to flow through the system”(Shen, 2015). Oxytocin essentially amplifies the human brain's reaction to social stimuli and streamlines the forming of interaction-reaction responses. The hormone's significant impact on our neurological processes reflects the innate propensity for social connection that most humans are born with.

Researchers at Harvard and Yale carried out a series of studies in hopes of determining if it is human instinct to act cooperatively, or if our altruistic actions only occur after reflection. In the brain, intuition occurs almost instantly, and reason and reflective processes take relatively longer. “In other words, do we cooperate when we overcome our intuitive selfishness with rational self-control, or do we act selfishly when we override our intuitive cooperative impulses with rational self-interest?” The researchers put 834 participants through 5 studies and used the

“prisoner's dilemma” and the “public goods game” to measure decision making time. These experiments put the participants in a position to choose between altruistic actions at a cost to themselves, or selfish actions at a cost to the group. “The results were striking: in every single study, faster—that is, more intuitive—decisions were associated with higher levels of cooperation, whereas slower—that is, more reflective—decisions were associated with higher levels of selfishness” (Ward, 2012). Studies have also found an upstream reciprocity effect for disaster victims. That is to say, disaster victims who receive assistance are much more likely to later reciprocate this assistance in a future disaster scenario, either directly or indirectly.

After all of the natural disasters we analyzed, upstream indirect reciprocity can be observed. This suggests that the propensity to help other people because of receiving help is robust in humans... This finding has important implications for understanding the mechanisms of helping behavior and designing interventions to promote cooperation and prosociality. (Obayashi, et al., 2023)

Science has proven that humans do respond to the “pass it on” effect and are much more likely to show compassion for others when they have been shown compassion themselves. This result only strengthens the assertion that humans, through the evolution of our biology and neurology, are hardwired to instinctively act altruistically.

Evidence from Religion

While the vast amount of scientific research supporting the theories that human nature is inherently cooperative is very compelling, most humans also view our nature through a lens of religion. According to the Pew Research center, about 7.79 billion humans subscribe to some religious belief. Many religions, such as Christianity, claim that humans are born “bad” or “sinful”, and only through good actions can we reach our purest forms, in spite of our selfish

nature. This high valuation of good works is apparent in other world religions too. In fact, most religions also have core tenets and values in common. In the book, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths: How the World's Religions Can Come Together*, the Dalai Lama writes that he used to see Buddhism as the world's purest and most sophisticated religion. However, through extensive travels and meetings with religious leaders of all types, the Dalai Lama's mindset expanded greatly. The Dalai Lama asserts that it is imperative for Buddhist disciples to learn from other religions while staying true to their Buddhist commitments (Harper, 2010). The Dalai Lama has come to see the great similarity that vastly different religions have running through them at their cores, writing

It is my fundamental conviction that compassion—the natural capacity of the human heart to feel concern for and connection with another being—constitutes a basic aspect of our nature shared by all human beings, as well as being the foundation of our happiness. (Harper, 2010)

The very existence of religion demonstrates humanity's attempt to give value and meaning to our propensity towards cooperation and altruism. No matter if the individual rituals of specific religions are different, most share core tenants that boil down to "be a good person".

Former nun turned religious author and theologian Karen Armstrong described how premodern humans viewed God and religion while interviewed on NPR: "Religion wasn't about answering questions we could answer perfectly well by our powers of logos, of reason and science. Religion was helping us to deal with aspects of life, facts of life for which there are no easy answers" (Gross, 2009). Religion, at its core, is a way for us to deal with our emotions and the battle between our instinct for cooperation, and our reason which sometimes compels us to

act selfishly. When asked “What do you think religion is for?” Armstrong explained that religion is meant to keep us close to our instinctual values of goodness:

Religion is about helping us deal with the sorrow that we see in life, helping us to find meaning in life... religious people are ambitious, they want to live generous lives, they want to live beyond selfishness, beyond ego. All the world’s religions say that the way to find what we call God, Brahmin, Nirvana... is to get beyond the prism of egotism, of selfishness... if we can get beyond that especially in the practice of compassion... we live much more richly and intensely. (Gross, 2009)

Is it not telling of our nature that humans all across the world have developed rituals, practices, and cultures centered around striving towards our innate goodness? The very existence of religion implies that we believe we can overcome the temptations of rational selfishness and must foster the goodness inherent within us.

Armstrong, who has written extensively about religion, left the Catholic convent after failing to feel a connection to God. Through decades of study and discussion with religious figures around the world, Armstrong’s thesis on religion echoes that of human nature.

Compassion is at the heart of all morality, of all religious systems, far more important than believing things or accepting orthodox views... all the world's faiths have developed their own version of what’s been called ‘The Golden Rule’: don’t do to others what you would not want them to do to you... that is the essence of faith. (Gross, 2009)

Religion is simply a system of human organization, like any government, that seeks to influence our actions and energy towards a common goal. For religion, the energy is directed into various types of prayer and ritual, but the common goal is very similar among all. A clinical

professor of sociology also sees the thread of similarity between world religions as being social organizations to promote cooperation. They write:

Consider that the golden mean is in all the world religions. There's reward and punishment present in all the world religions... An interesting thing that I found out is that the word religion actually means 'social bond.' I've asked pastors, 'Do you know what the word religion means?' and not one of them knew. Their whole life has been their religion, but they did not know what the word religio, or religion, means. So, we have to ask ourselves, is the religion creating a social bond? (Blaschke, 2021)

Perhaps, like the evolutionary development of alloparental support and early menopause, religion is an evolved trait in humans, borne out of necessity. Studies have found that humans are predisposed to search for patterns and greater meaning in life, which could be a driving factor towards believing in an omnipotent creator. Children, from all creeds, overwhelmingly believe that elements of the natural world were created by a higher power, according to studies from the University of Boston.

If you ask children why a group of rocks are pointy, for example, they say something like, 'It's so that animals won't sit on them and break them.' If you ask them why rivers exist, they say it's so we can go fishing. (Azar, 2010)

A psychologist at the Centre for Anthropology and Mind at Oxford University, found through research that toddlers explain the complex phenomena in the world as the supernatural and "God", even if raised outside of religion. Again, no matter the details of the individual religion, they all share common traits which are seemingly inherent to the human psyche.

What we're showing is that our basic cognitive equipment biases us toward certain kinds of thinking and leads to thinking about a pre-life, an afterlife, gods, invisible beings that are doing things — themes common to most of the world's religions... (Azar, 2010)

Two other psychologists wrote that in their research, nearly all religions, through various beliefs and rituals, are built on five basic moral tenets: “Do no harm, play fairly, be loyal to your group, respect authority and live purely.” (Azar, 2010). These moral foundations bear similarities to the tendencies found by scientists and anthropologists to have evolved in humans through biological necessity. Human survival requires a concerted group effort, one which is hardwired into us. Religion is the way many humans have ensured that their communities continue to follow our biological impulses towards cooperation through the paradigm of ritual and supernatural belief, a process not dissimilar to laws of morality from governmental bodies.

Evidence from Philosophy

Philosophers have also provided perspectives on the theory of human nature. Famously, 17th century philosopher Thomas Hobbes believed that humans were inherently self-interested and greedy animals, requiring an organized authority or state to keep us from savagery (Douglass, 2019). To his contrary a century later, philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau asserted that humans are by nature good and cooperative, and that it is “modern” governmental and economic structures that have turned us against ourselves (Douglass, 2019). In *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau emphasized that the separation between humans and other animals was our unusual ability to override our usual instincts of cooperation with advanced reasoning and turn to selfishness (Bertram, 2023). This notion of the ability of our intellect to overcome our impulsive “goodness” is supported by recent scientific research, such as the previously mentioned

psychology experiments at Harvard and Yale showing that our first impulse is altruism, an impulse which can be overridden by our relatively slower reasoning (Ward, 2012).

To Rousseau, humanity's fall from our natural instincts came with the organization of agriculture and industrialization, systems which encourage self-interest and profit, and only support cooperation insofar as it promotes one's own success (Douglass, 2019). Applied to a 21st century lens, it is clear that Rousseau saw the writing on the wall. Inequality is all too prevalent in our modern system of neoliberal capitalism, and the previous century was the bloodiest in history, with complex systems driving humans to mass violence. In Rousseau's view, perhaps it does not really matter what humanity's natural instinct is. We no longer live in a natural world, we live in an industrialized society which often encourages greed and selfishness. To return to Rousseau's idea of a pre-agricultural paradise, a near-extinction level event must occur, in which case humanity might not survive at all. For better or worse, the fate of humanity is likely stuck in the context of industrialized society. The question then arises: How can we shift our paradigm away from selfishness, and promote our natural inclination towards goodness on a societal level?

In Rousseau's distressing view of the current human condition, many are in search of some sort of meaning to their lives. With a societal structure often beyond our control, a Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist emphasizes the indomitability of our capacity for mental freedom in the 1946 memoir *Man's Search for Meaning*. In the deepest misery of the concentration camps during the Second World War, the surviving prisoners often turned to religion as a way to find meaning in suffering. Frankl writes:

The religious interest of the prisoners, as far and as soon as it developed, was the most sincere imaginable. The depth and vigor of religious belief often surprised and moved a new arrival. Most impressive in this connection were improvised prayers or services in

the corner of a hut, or in the darkness of the locked cattle truck which we were brought back from a work site, tired, hungry and frozen in our ragged clothing. (Frankl, pg. 59)

The concentration camps of the Nazi regime forced those few who were not chosen for the gas chambers into hard labor. Frankl and the others were, in a sense, removed from what Rousseau might call modern or industrialized society. Those suffering prisoners no longer had any capacity to dwell on anything but basic instinct. Through this agonizing dissolution of societal structure, Frankl was able to comprehend his true underlying human nature and values.

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth—that love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love.” (Frankl, pg. 63)

When so far removed the normal concerns of a modern society, Frankl found that he did not dwell on sex, embarrassment, pride, wealth, or any other now-superfluous concerns. The concentration camps were designed to strip the prisoners of their humanity, treating them worse than animals.

The majority of prisoners suffered from a kind of inferiority complex. We had all been or had fancied ourselves to be “somebody.” Now we were treated like complete nonentities... without consciously thinking about it, the average prisoner felt himself utterly degraded.”(Frankl, pg. 96)

When, through a horrendous situation, he was distilled into his fundamental humanity, Frankl became enraptured with the inherent human value of love. No matter how miserable and uncomfortable the circumstances are, human attitude does not have to reflect it. When all other

values lose importance, it is man's natural propensity for love and cooperation which survives and can sometimes thrive.

...everything that was not connected with the immediate task of keeping oneself and one's closest friends alive lost its value. Everything was sacrificed to this end. A man's character became involved to the point that he was caught in a mental turmoil which threatened all the values he held and threw them into doubt. (Frankl, pg. 79)

Below vanity, below selfishness, below sexuality, and below hatred, love is the foundation of human nature. Society is built upon this foundation of altruism through systems, rewards, and injustices. However, when all nearly other humanity is lost, love is found to flourish. Frankl's descriptions of the triumph of the human spirit, while suffering in grueling physical conditions, have enshrined his writing with the best of existentialist philosophy. The commitment to love and cooperation in the concentration camps is the exercising of his human free will. Despite being physically restrained, an abundance of energy and joy in the face of misery was a conscious choice made by Frankl, transforming into an enduring person (Aho, 2023). No matter the physical or social conditions, humans are able to be cognizant of our free will and will continue to act within our nature of goodness.

Conclusion

While the essential truth of human nature is heavily contested by those from all sides of the political, religious, and philosophical spheres, the evidence shows that human nature is ultimately good. This "goodness" manifests itself in the continued interpersonal altruism and cooperation demonstrated even in the most horrid of conditions. Scientific research has found that cooperative breeding and alloparental support are in our Homo Sapien DNA. The occurrence of relatively early in lifespan menopause in human females is our evolutionary way of ensuring

community support to children and young mothers. Even in our neurology, studies have found that our fast-twitch intuitive decisions skew towards cooperation. Beyond science, the existence of religion also implies our innate desire to be good. Theologians have drawn similarities from all major religions which emphasize the importance of interpersonal respect, compassion, and charity. Religion is our attempt to organize ourselves in a way conducive to our instinctual desires of community and love. Philosophers such as Rousseau see modern society as an impediment and diversion from our natural goodness, with modern humans tempted by vice and greed. Frankl's experiences in some of the worst conditions known to humanity gave him a perspective on our psychological foundations, discovering that when all worldly values and comforts have been stripped away, humans can only endure through acts of love and cooperation.

Despite humanity's history of evil, at our very core, we are good. Community exists as a way to organize ourselves into mutually beneficial positions of cooperation. Rousseau may be correct in his analysis that modern society has drawn us away from our instincts with systems designed to promote greed and selfishness for survival. However, humans have had the same DNA for hundreds of thousands of years, a foundation of altruism which cannot be fully erased by periods of unhealthy individualism and greed. Humanity is in a more precarious position now than any other period in history, as for the first time ever, our technology can allow us to create an extinction event with ease. The threat of nuclear exchange, combined with the increasing degradation of our environment, has many people worried that we are acting against our better nature. That may be true, but our human nature will eventually win. We may see current economic, political, and social trends continue in the short term, and there will be immense

suffering, but if we can avoid giving into our superficial emotions, our propensity for love and cooperation will manifest itself in the long run.

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