

Adaptability Amidst Adversity: Unraveling Human Nature's Core in Shaping our Future

Ben Graham

Department of Political Science, Diablo Valley College

POLSC 120: Introduction to Politics

Adjunct Professor: John Kropf

November 13, 2023

Abstract

The paper begins with a Virginia Woolf quote, outlining the ever-changing circumstances of nature, how nature is never fixed, and how humans act to adapt to this constantly changing lifestyle. It further establishes that the only unifying factor across all societies and time periods is our fundamental need to adapt to our environment. The paper continues by critiquing deterministic approaches to defining human nature from Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Hobbes, demonstrating the principle of moral relativism; it also demonstrates how morals change over time, further reiterating the principle that the only constant factor is human's fundamental acclimation and adaptation to our surrounding environment and time period. Furthering this point, it delves into how humans have created religion, and why; and how religion's multiplicities point to how it's a subjective experience, not an objective reality. It concludes by prompting the reader to consider how humans will inevitably adapt to the climate crisis by shifting the political and economic incentives away from private profit to global well-being.

Adaptability Amidst Adversity: Unraveling Human Nature's Core in Shaping our Future

“Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.”

Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* (1925)

Woolf captures the essence of human existence as a dynamic, ever-changing journey, resisting the rigidity of preordained paths. The human experience is not a neatly arranged set of predictable events, but an all-encompassing whirlwind, fostered by the almost completely unpredictable nature of the world we inhabit. Yet, throughout centuries of unpreventable natural disasters, disease outbreaks, environmental changes, political transformations, cultural evolutions, and economic shifts, humans have possessed a singular trait that defines our human nature: adaptability. Humans have used adaptability as the bedrock of our identity amidst the insurmountable variety of natural events, and these natural events are not static benchmarks of human history but dynamic challenges that demand responses as diverse as the events themselves. Adaptability is the luminous halo that envelops us, and it propels us beyond the boundaries of predetermined fate. However, in the 21st century, humans find themselves in yet another precarious situation: a climate crisis directly at odds with the political and economic status quo. So, how will we adapt?

This research paper examines how defining human nature by humans' adaptability transcends the simplistic narratives of inherent “goodness” or “badness” and uses the historical transformations of morality to explain how our inherent nature falls following our response to our changing environment, including the construction of religion. Further, the paper utilizes adaptability to understand the influence of governmental structures on our value systems.

Ultimately, this paper aims to prove how humans' instinctive nature to adapt necessitates political and economic change to combat the impending climate crisis.

A Critique of Alternative Theories: Why There Is No Inherent “Goodness” or “Badness” in Humans.

Two main philosophers emerge in the discourse surrounding the inherent “goodness” or “badness” of mankind: inherent “good”, Jean-Jacques Rousseau; and inherent “bad”, Thomas Hobbes.

Rousseau asserts that “we are born weak, we have need of help, we are born destitute... we have need of assistance; we are born stupid, we have need of understanding” (Rousseau, 1762). Rousseau posits that humans are born without knowledge, in desperate need of outside assistance, but most importantly, with the inherent capacity to understand and evolve into a “good” human being. While he argues that one must have a civil environment that enforces ethics in the youth, he asserts that each and every human being fundamentally possesses the ability to be “good”. Rousseau’s theories lay the foundation for his understanding of the need for a “social contract”. Rousseau claims that the confluence of private property and collective engagement led to social inequity, prompting the need for “The Social Contract”, where humans give up individual liberties in exchange for true political freedom that protects them from jealousy-motivated harms of others (Rousseau, 1762). The ethical foundations of inherent goodness, combated by the undue influences of private property, led to the creation of the Contract; and Rousseau’s impact is echoed in the modern era, implicitly backing the writings of some of the most influential governmental documents, like the United States Constitution, and even laying the foundation for Marxist ideology based on his observations of the negative effects of private property.

On the contrary, Thomas Hobbes argues in favor of defining humans as innately “bad”. Without a governmental body, Hobbes posits, societies would be “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes, 1651). Hobbes argues that humans are innately selfish and cruel and that the construction of a governing body that resolves disputes among citizens would ultimately establish order and abolish the anarchy and violence that result from humans acting on their inherent self-interested nature.

Both Rousseau and Hobbes see the government as a means to corral humans, but the delineating factor is based upon their contrasting beliefs on the inherent state of human beings. While Rousseau believes that the expansion of private property over individual freedom unduly divides society and necessitates a governmental structure, Hobbes distrusts the goodness that resides in mankind’s hearts, declaring that a government was needed as a correctional mechanism to keep humans from devolving into chaos. While diametrically different, both Rousseau and Hobbes establish universal understandings of human nature, seeking to define what underpins the morals, thoughts, and actions of humankind.

However, Rousseau’s and Hobbes’s assessments of humankind are limited by their Western perspective. While humans possess incredible capabilities for both benefiting and harming society, the “goodness” or “badness” of a human’s action is relative to their culture. Pioneering anthropologist Benedict pointed out that “the life history of the individual is first and foremost an accommodation to the patterns and standards traditionally handed in his community. From the moment of his birth the customs into which he is born to shape his experience and behavior” (Benedict, 1934). Ultimately, our ideas of “good” and “bad” are constructed with respect to our cultural values, not based on a universal, cross-cultural understanding of ethics. Hobbes was deeply influenced by the “horrors of the English Civil War up close” (Douglass,

2019), and as a result, developed a deep distrust of humans and reduced all humans to the label of “inherently violent” or “inherently cruel”. And while these observations were certainly accurate in assessing how violent humans could be, he failed to adequately reach beyond his experience to gain a holistic understanding of human nature. His experience both informed and inhibited his perspective, leading Hobbes to regard humans as savage animals that needed to be tamed. Like Hobbes, Rousseau’s environment altered his perspective on mankind. Rousseau spent the peak of his career (the 1750s-1760s) in the Geneva countryside or under the patronage of Luxembourg royalty, where his ability to formulate and propagate his beliefs was enabled by the graces of those around him (Bertram, 2023). His experiences with the cooperation and empathy of others largely developed his adoration for individuals’ goodness, influencing (and effectively skewing) his understanding of the inherent nature of man. Hobbes’ and Rousseau’s diametrically opposing theories on mankind’s inherent nature speak to how social and cultural experiences inform our understanding of the world around us. It is clear that our environment, regardless of how intellectually evolved we claim to be, constructs the lenses through which we see the world.

Historical Changes in Morality: How We Adapt to Be Temporally “Moral”

Beyond our direct environment and culture, the time period in which we live defines our moral standards. As pointed out by philosophy journalist Danaher, “There are two drivers of moral change: intellectual and material” (Danaher, 2019). Danaher illustrates how moral factors are driven by intellectual and material advancements. If a human develops a compelling argument against torture, and propagates this idea to persuade those around him, then this is an intellectually driven moral advancement; conversely, if there is a technological advancement that could extract information out of people without having to cause pain, then humans would opt for

capitalizing off this resource, and in turn, humans may develop a new moral advancement that redefines the morality of torture.

Intellectual and technological advances constantly challenge our status quo, prompting us to reevaluate our understanding of “morality”. The invention of the printing press in the 15th century challenged the existing authority of religious institutions by making literature more accessible to the masses; this technological advancement, which allowed for the dissemination of information to spread rapidly across Europe, coupled with the intellectual expansion of the laity’s ability to read, allowed for the masses— who had been otherwise kept in the dark regarding religious truths— to develop their own convictions and question the authority of the church (Eisenstein, 2019). It kickstarted the Protestant Reformation, which was a cross-national religious revolution that impacted the world beyond its temporal limits, while certainly redefining the morals of individuals in the 15th century. Further, the Industrial Revolution transformed societal structures and economic systems; while it increased the technological advancements of nations, it brought to light moral questions on labor, wealth distribution, and exploitation. Moral philosophers of the 18th to 19th centuries, the period in which the Industrial Revolution peaked, began to question the ethical principles of worker’s rights and wealth distribution, like Karl Marx (Thompson, 2016).

The change in morality is even seen in modern times with the advancement of artificial intelligence and automation in the 21st century (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). The rapid development of artificial intelligence has triggered profound shifts in the ethical landscape, prompting a reassessment of societal norms and moral principles. Like with how the deployment of AI algorithms in decision-making processes, ranging from criminal justice to hiring practices, raises critical ethical concerns. Automated systems may inadvertently perpetuate biases present

in historical data, leading to discriminatory outcomes. This challenges conventional moral standards related to fairness, justice, and equal opportunity (Caplan, 2018). And further, the increasing integration of AI in autonomous vehicles and military technologies introduces ethical dilemmas surrounding accountability and the potential for unintended consequences. As machines gain decision-making capabilities, questions arise about the morality of delegating life-and-death choices to non-human entities (Wallach & Allen, 2010). The integration of technology and intellectual advancements changes society's perceptions of morality; unequal developments on these fronts have led to starting differences in moral development from "first-world countries" to "third-world countries", which perpetuates a bias that industrialized countries are somehow more civilized, or moral, than undeveloped countries when in reality, their morality is simply a result of their technological advancement, not an innate difference in intellectual capability. It is clear that morals are not fixed, but rather at the whim of where we grow up and when; the only universal tie that connects all cultures, genders, socioeconomic statuses, and eras is our universal ability to adapt to our respective environments, acclimate to our culture's values, and attempt to fulfill them to derive a sense of moral fulfillment.

Why Religion is Not the Answer

Inherent in conversations about the basic nature of man is a fundamental keystone of human existence, religion. It is exclusively relied on, often blindly, and turned to as the ultimate solution to the investigation into the basic nature of man, but this analysis is fraught with factual discrepancies. Karl Marx, in his work "On Religion", established the cornerstone for comprehending how religion has been meticulously fashioned to withstand the severe impacts of political and social oppression. Marx's expression of religion as the "opium of the people" succinctly encapsulates the idea that it functions as a comforting remedy, serving to alleviate the

harsh realities imposed by oppressive governments. However, delving deeper into this framework requires acknowledging the multifaceted role of religion; it functions not only as an analgesic to numb suffering but can also emerge as a potent source of resistance and empowerment. Religion adapts, changes, and expands at every whim of the government it's regulated under, depicting that even the most widely considered "answer" to the nature of man lies subject to its circumstances.

William James, in "The Varieties of Religious Experience," explores the intricate psychological dimensions of religious beliefs, transcending Marx's socio-political perspective, showing the individual utilization of religion rather than simply blaming it on its circumstances. James unravels that when humans are placed under profound stress— whether by governmental oppression or individual hardship— they turn to religion to solve their problems, or rather, provide an explanation that is palatable in explaining their grievances. Each reason for one to turn to religion lies solely on the individual, and this reflects the personal and subjective nature of religious experiences, demonstrating that the psychological foundations of belief are inherently diverse and individualistic. So, when a group of people face similar plights— excessive hunger, starvation, unexplainable violences, oppression— they search for the antidote, the numbing agent. While religion may be, in some circumstances, an outgrowth of political oppression, it is determined solely by the vastly individualistic experiences of each believer, dissolving the notion that one religion— or rather all— are universal, but are rather deeply personal and actively demonstrate the adaptable nature of human spirituality.

Examining Peter L. Berger's sociological perspective, as presented in "The Sacred Canopy," widens our lens of analysis in a similar vein. Berger posits that religion operates as a symbolic framework, imparting meaning and structure to human existence. In the face of

political oppression, this symbolic structure becomes malleable, susceptible to manipulation by governments seeking to exert control over populations. Berger's insights shed light on the dynamic nature of religious narratives, illustrating how governments can cherry-pick interpretations to suit their political objectives. This manipulation not only underscores the adaptable quality of religion but also exposes its vulnerability to external influences. The interplay between religious symbols and political power unravels a nuanced relationship, where the flexibility of religious narratives serves as both a source of resilience and a potential avenue for exploitation by governing bodies.

Exploring diverse religions across the globe unveils a vibrant tapestry of beliefs and stories, challenging any notion of a singular, universally applicable answer to the core of human existence. The multitude of perspectives within different faiths not only highlights the cultural relativity of belief systems but also introduces a deep skepticism regarding the absolute truth of any single religious doctrine. The contrasting narratives both within and between religions not only imply that no single religion holds all the answers but also shine a light on the inherent subjectivity and flexibility of religious doctrines. This diversity not only rejects a one-size-fits-all understanding of human nature but also supports the idea that adaptability, expressed through the pluralism of religious beliefs, is an inherent and defining characteristic of humanity.

In contemplating the flexibility of religious beliefs, a compelling revelation surfaces: human nature is perhaps best characterized by its knack for adaptation and the construction of meaning rather than adherence to any fixed set of traits. The capacity of individuals and societies to shape and reshape religious narratives in response to changing circumstances reinforces the notion that adaptability and resilience are integral facets of human experience. Instead of portraying human nature through a static and rigid lens, the evidence from diverse religious

traditions suggests that adaptability, mirrored in the dynamic nature of religious beliefs, stands as a fundamental and defining characteristic of humanity.

The geographical context of religious origins isn't a mere backdrop; it actively sculpts the very foundations of belief systems. Delving into Vine Deloria Jr.'s "God Is Red" reveals the spiritual narratives of Native American tribes, where beliefs are not merely cultural reverence but a profound symbiosis with the natural world. This goes beyond an appreciation for the environment; it signifies a dynamic response to their geographical surroundings. It suggests that religious values are not only shaped by landscapes but are a living reciprocity, reflecting an intimate, adaptive relationship with the Earth. The geographical imprint on religious values extends beyond symbolism; it embeds spirituality within the tangible elements of the world.

Cultural context emerges as a dynamic force shaping the intricate fabric of religious values. Tu Weiming's exploration in "Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation" goes beyond an academic discourse; it's a journey into the intertwined nature of Confucian values and East Asian societies. Cultural context isn't merely a backdrop; it actively weaves the tapestry of religious structures. Confucianism, deeply ingrained in East Asian cultures, is not just a set of philosophical principles; it's a dynamic response to collective ethos. This perspective underscores that spirituality isn't an abstract concept, but a lived, adaptive expression intricately tied to cultural dynamics.

The temporal dimension, often overlooked, adds a layer of profound complexity to religious values. In Diarmaid MacCulloch's "The Reformation: A History," the exploration isn't a passive recounting of historical events; it's an immersive journey into how religious structures are shaped by the currents of time. The Reformation wasn't solely a theological revolution; it was a response to the socio-political dynamics of its era. This temporal perspective challenges the

notion of religion as a timeless entity. It underscores that religious doctrines are not static; they evolve, adapting to the demands and challenges of different historical epochs. The malleability of religious values across time highlights their dynamic nature.

Socio-political dynamics illuminate the intricate dance between religious structures and the circumstances that envelop them. Jan Assmann's exploration in "The Price of Monotheism" delves into the strategic symbiosis between political and religious power. It's not merely a historical narrative; it's an examination of how religious institutions become instrumental tools for political consolidation. This symbiotic relationship isn't coincidental; it's a calculated response to political needs. This perspective unveils that religious values are not only theological doctrines but strategic maneuvers within the broader socio-political landscape. It emphasizes that spirituality, far from being separate from power dynamics, is deeply entwined with them.

In the contemporary landscape, religions continue to be dynamic responses to the challenges of the present. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim's "Living Cosmology" introduces the concept of religious environmentalism, a movement responding to the urgent ecological concerns of our planet. This isn't just a contemporary trend; it's a manifestation of how religions adapt to grapple with the most pressing issues of our time. It showcases that religious values are not confined to historical contexts; they evolve to engage with the contemporary global challenges we face. This contemporary lens emphasizes that religious adaptability is an ongoing process, showing that spirituality is not a relic but a living force in the ever-changing circumstances of the world.

Spirituality, far from being a static relic of the past, is a dynamic force in perpetual dialogue with the ever-evolving human experience. As we navigate the intricate interplay of geography, culture, temporality, and socio-political dynamics, it becomes evident that religions

are not rigid dogmas but responsive entities, echoing the needs and aspirations of the societies that foster them. This dynamic nature of spirituality invites us to reconsider the conventional view of religions as fixed entities, prompting a more nuanced understanding that embraces the adaptability and resilience inherent in the religious tapestry. It beckons us to recognize that the pulse of spirituality beats not in isolation but in harmony with the rhythmic cadence of the world, fostering a continual dance between tradition and adaptation.

Conclusion

Humans are constantly evolving, working towards, and adapting to an obscure, indefinable yet higher level of morality. Like the semi-transparent envelope, the universal morality that underpins human life is not revealed, but meekly evident enough for humans to acknowledge they have a goal to work toward. And while we have made strides in reducing violence, condemning human rights abuses like torture or slavery, and ultimately reorienting our perspective on the ethical underpinnings of the world, we have not yet reached this philosophical Nirvana that we are so desperately working toward. But it is through the constant process of trimming the fat on what we deem “morally acceptable” that we can begin to carve an ethical future for all. As Woolf reveals, our experiences in life are not within our control, and they hover around us, constantly jabbing at us to evolve, change, and adapt. The beatdowns we face from life’s unpredictability’s ultimately lift us up, and we learn to adapt to a society that accommodates the turbulent changes nature brings. We have fought the unpreventable natural disasters, survived the disease outbreaks, endured the environmental changes, enacted the political transformations, experienced cultural evolutions, and initiated the economic shifts; and now we must do it again. Now, when presented with the existential threat of climate destruction, we must ask: how will we adapt?

While the higher classes of society have become comfortable with commodifying every aspect of our society, the lower majority has become increasingly discontent with private capital taking precedence over the well-being of the human race and the planet. We have been subjugated to adapt to a political and economic system that rewards turning natural resources into products sold on shelves, a system that rewards reducing infinitely complex, autonomous individuals to how much product or service they can produce, how fast they can produce or provide it, and for the lowest cost; our system reduces humans to a price tag or an obstacle in getting a company's financial baseline lower. It is not until our political and economic system incentivizes the conservation of the planet that we will begin to see true progress toward climate conservation. As the age-old Indigenous saying goes, "When the last tree has been cut down, the last fish caught, the last river poisoned, only then will we realize that one cannot eat money."

We cannot sit idly, patiently waiting for companies to stop polluting or praying for the ozone layer to fix itself. It begins with the recognition of the issue, instilling in every human on earth that the threat is real, imminent, and inevitable without change. It is only through recognition of the climate crisis that our inherent impulses of adaptability kick in, and effectively begin a unified movement toward climate safety. It will not begin until enough humans recognize that the governmental systems value profit over global livelihood that we will see a shift in our systems. It begins with knowing, and then breathing life into that recognition to give it a real-world impact. But it begins with you, and so now I must ask, "How will *you* adapt?"

References

- Assmann, J. (2009). *The price of monotheism*. Stanford University Press.
- Benedict, R. (1934). *Patterns of culture*. Routledge.
- Bertram, C. (2010, September 27). Jean Jacques Rousseau. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rousseau/>
- Berger, P. L. (1967). *The sacred canopy: Elements of a sociological theory of religion*. Anchor Books.
- Brynjolfsson, E., & McAfee, A. (2014). *The second machine age: work, progress, and prosperity in a time of brilliant technologies*. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Caplan, R. (2018). Algorithmic Accountability: A Primer. *Digital Benefits Hub*.
<https://www.digitalbenefitshub.org/resources/algorithmic-accountability-a-primer>
- Danaher, J. (2019, December 12). Philosophical disquisitions: What causes moral change? Some reflections on Appiah's Honour Code. *Philosophical Disquisitions*.
<https://philosophicaldisquisitions.blogspot.com/2019/12/what-causes-moral-change-some.html>
- Deloria, V. (1973). *God is red: A native view of religion*. Fulcrum Publishing.
- Douglass, R. (2019, May 30). Hobbes vs Rousseau: Are we inherently evil or good? *IAI TV*.
<https://iai.tv/articles/hobbes-vs-rousseau-are-we-inherently-evil-or-good-auid-1221>
- Eisenstein, E. L. (2012). *The printing revolution in early modern Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hobbes, T. (1996). *Leviathan* (R. Tuck, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1651)
- James, W. (1902). *The varieties of religious experience*. Longmans, Green, and Co.

- Jean-Jacques Rousseau. (2012). *Rousseau's Emile*. Hardpress Publishing. (Original work published 1762)
- Marx, K. (1867). *Das Kapital*. Verlag von Otto Meisner.
- MacCulloch, D. (2003). *The Reformation: A history*. Viking.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (1987). *On the social contract*. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. (Original work published 1762)
- Thompson, E. P. (2016). *Making of the English Working Class*. Open Road Media.
- Tu, W. (1976). *Confucian thought: Selfhood as creative transformation*. State University of New York Press.
- Tucker, M. E., & Grim, J. (2018). *Living cosmology: Christian responses to journey of the universe*. Orbis Books.
- Wallach, W., & Allen, C. (2010). *Moral machines: Teaching robots right from wrong*. Oxford University Press.
- Woolf, V. (1929). *The common reader*. [1st series]. Hogarth Press.