

Shadows of Our Essence: A Pessimistic Exploration of Human Nature and Destiny

Paniz Hosseini

Department of Political Science, Diablo Valley College

POLSC-120-9068: Introduction to Politics

Professor John Kropf

November 12, 2023

Abstract

In this paper, we will explore the complex and intricate interplay between human nature and the fate of our species. By navigating through the realms of political, economic, environmental, and psychological challenges prevalent in our contemporary world, we can have a better understanding of the issues at hand. Through the careful and critical examination of scientific, religious, and philosophical perspectives, the paper carefully dissects both optimistic and pessimistic outlooks, aiming to unravel the dichotomy of the “true” essence of human nature. Our primary quest is to answer the ancient question of whether human nature is inherently virtuous, paving the way for a brighter future, or whether it harbors darker aspects that might propel us toward extinction. By analyzing and studying the diverse aspects of our nature, and the works of many great thinkers from different cultures and fields of study, we can gain insight and a deeper understanding of the forces that contribute to shaping our collective destiny and fate.

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For as long as humans have existed, they have sought understanding and insight into the deeply complex nature and essence of our species, examining how it can shape the future and the fate of humanity as a collective. Considering the turbulent nature of our politics and the economy that is crumbling before our eyes, we can clearly witness the psychological and spiritual hardships that our society faces today. This is a sensitive time in history with many uncertainties leading us to the ancient question of whether we have a bright future ahead of us or if our species will drive itself toward extinction. Many scientists, philosophers, and religious figures with different outlooks and beliefs have made attempts to answer this question, while none can definitively predict our fate, their views, and claims, can provide us with a better understanding of our current circumstances. Some great thinkers such as Steven Pinker, have a more optimistic outlook on the fate of humanity due to the prominent presence of our morals and ethics and our need for love. a psychologist states, "...the main drivers were the nonpolitical ideals of reason, science, and humanism, which led people to seek and apply knowledge that enhanced human flourishing" (p. 412), shining a light on our righteous nature and our capacity for progress. He further explains that the natural pull toward science and reason may be the key to steering clear of complete devastation and brutal violence.

In contrast, some individuals hold more pessimistic views towards our ability to avoid extinction in relation to our human essence. For instance, Sapolsky a biologist, discusses a sense of aggression and dominance in our evolutionary past stating, "The biology of aggression and dominance is deeply embedded in our evolutionary history, influencing our social structures and interactions." (pp. 76–77). He emphasizes our primal need for assertion, and how it is deeply embedded in our evolutionary history to exert power, which in turn impacts our relationship with the world outside, as well as the nature of our connection with others. Other thinkers characterize

our species as selfish, chaotic, and destined for destruction. With every viewpoint inspected, every argument weighed, and each counterargument considered, a complete comprehension of our essence will emerge. Our objective is to analyze our inherent characteristics to unravel the mysteries of human nature in relation to our destiny.

The Scientific Realm

Our journey to understand the fundamental nature and essence of humanity in relation to the overall development of our species compels us to delve into the scientific world. This includes the exploration of our intricate biology, the impact of our evolving technology and artificial intelligence, and our alarming destructive tendencies to harm the environment. Delving into the optimistic perspective, we can find the argument presented in a psychology book, the author claims that despite our mistakes throughout history, our nature is not inherently evil due to our desire for progression and our need for harmony and beauty. In this book, Pinker suggests that our capacity for evil develops under the influence of external turbulences in areas such as politics, economics, environment, culture, or even social norms, rather than solely being based on biology or psychology, and not solely dependent on biology and psychology. Pinker emphasizes that these external turbulences, partake in shaping our behavior and actions, and as a result, our future. In his report, the author continues, “[i]n this way I find myself in agreement with the radical scientists who insist that we will never understand violence by looking only at the genes or brains of violent people. Violence is a social and political problem, not just a biological and psychological one. Nonetheless, the phenomena we call "social" and "political" are not external happenings that mysteriously affect human affairs like sunspots; they are shared understandings among individuals at a given time and place. So one cannot understand violence without a thorough understanding of the human mind.” (p. 317)

Pinker offers us an optimistic outlook and challenges the notion that humans are inherently evil according to our biology and genetics, but instead suggests that our inclination towards evil stems from changes in the external world while transcending the simple biological and psychological explanations. By examining and understanding these views, we can conclude that social and political aspects of our lives are a result of human creation and can be restructured meaning that interventions at this level can reduce violent tendencies and affect both our biological and social dimensions leading to a more peaceful and cooperative human nature.

On the flip side, a renowned biologist provides a pessimistic biological explanation as to why humans may act in violent and evil manners by stating,

Low serotonin didn't predict premeditated, instrumental violence. It predicted impulsive aggression, as well as cognitive impulsivity (e.g., steep temporal discounting or trouble inhibiting a habitual response). Other studies linked low serotonin to impulsive suicide (independent of severity of the associated psychiatric illness). (p. 77)

he uses biological factors, such as hormone levels, and specifically serotonin levels, to explain our violent tendencies, and challenges Pinker's belief that claims violence is rooted in social and political contexts. He further explains, "[t]hus, for our purposes, genes aren't about inevitability. Instead, they're about context-dependent tendencies, propensities, potentials, and vulnerabilities. All embedded in the fabric of the other factors, biological and otherwise, that fill these pages." (p. 265); supporting the notion that genes can to an extent explain our behavior, challenging the claim that the evil and violent nature of our species, can strictly be explained and understood through external challenges without the use of biology.

It is important to consider both the external and internal factors, to make better sense of our nature. According to a scientific article, the researchers agree with both Sapolsky and Pinker, stating, "[w]e emphasize that a social determinants approach is not at odds with the incorporation

of biological and psychological processes; rather, it recognizes the interplay between them in complex, dynamic systems, embracing a population approach that situates individuals in context.”(para. 18) This statement shines a light on the fact that our nature is shaped by a confluence of factors, meaning that we need to acknowledge the symbiotic relationship between the state of our environment and our biology, in order to have a deeper understanding of our nature.

As we contemplate the complex dynamics of our biological and environmental influences, a parallel discussion arises about the impact of the rapid advancement of technology by our species. Artificial intelligence, also known as AI, has been a topic of discussion in the past few years, shining a light on the benefits of technological advancements, in comparison to the risks that they could bring forth that could lead to catastrophic outcomes due to their uncontrollable nature and unpredictability of their rate of growth. according to an article about the benefits of Artificial Intelligence, AI can be used for the advancement of humanity stating, With the assistance of AI, research and data scientists are able to better analyze patterns, predict outcomes, and make adjustments in half the time. Information that would have taken months to collect now can be done in minutes if not seconds (para. 7).

This is apparent in the world around us where AI has revolutionized various aspects of our lives such as helping business operations, enhancing medical diagnoses, and many other useful benefits. As beneficial as AI can be in our lives, it is important to stay cautious of this technological advancement and the ethical challenges it brings forth. Some of these challenges include the potential misuse of this powerful technology, the invasion of our privacy, and the chance that this system may surpass our control and demolish humanity. An article about the threats of AI expands on this issue by stating, "The problem of misaligned goals... A superintelligence whose goal system, or 'values' for short, is misaligned with ours... could bring

about human extinction for the very same reason that construction workers routinely slaughter large populations of ants."(para.9) pointing at the fact that if our attempts to instill ‘values’ and ‘ethics’ into AI fail, we can face potential extinction. Just as our biology and environment impact our nature, the advancement of technology, particularly AI, also plays a role in shaping the future of our civilization. As we rely more and more on technology and machines to fix our problems, we become less connected to our human nature. The article further explains that as AI becomes more advanced, the risks of negative outcomes also escalate. The article, further describes the risks as catastrophic, highlighting that AI systems have a vastly different cognitive structure than ours, making them unpredictable with misaligned goals in comparison to human values. Another challenge the article puts an emphasis on is the difficulty of programming a superintelligent AI with the appropriate value system. Human nature with its moralities, laws, and cultures is complex, and for an AI to align with these values and to reach our intelligence level, it would need to adopt a deep comprehension of our nature, but as soon it surpasses our intelligence level, it ensures the possibility of humanity moving towards extinction.(Torres, 2017)

Another reason why our species could face extinction is environmental degradation, specifically climate change which is usually caused by human activities that lead to an increase in greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. According to a research article conducted by NASA, human activities, including the burning of fossil fuels such as coal and oil, and land clearing for agriculture and industrial activities linked to modern civilization, contribute to an increase in carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere having raised by approximately 50% since 1750, as well as an increase in methane and nitrous oxide. Human activity, influenced by selfish desires, is the main driver of changes in the atmosphere, ocean, and biosphere, leading to a rapid increase in global warming and environmental destruction. This should be alarming to everyone worldwide because according to a climate change article, “Climate change could directly trigger other

catastrophic risks, such as international conflict, or exacerbate infectious disease spread, and spillover risk. These could be potent extreme threat multipliers."(para. 20). shining a light on the deadly consequences of climate change, further explaining,

Climate change could reinforce other interacting threats, including rising inequality, demographic stresses, misinformation, new destructive weapons, and the overshoot of other planetary boundaries. There are also natural shocks, such as solar flares and high-impact volcanic eruptions, that present possible deadly synchronicities (para. 46).

The article points to the global catastrophic risk, and the probability of a 25% loss in the global population with a high possibility of systemic failure within a given timeframe, not only impacting human health and survival, but also introducing several economic, environmental, and political conflicts that lead to societal fragility, increasing our risk of total extinction.

Environmental degradation and uncontrolled AI growth among many other contributing factors influence the stability of our ecosystems while disconnecting us from our human nature, which can drive our species towards extinction.

The Religious Realm

The complex nature of humans and their potential for both darkness and light, cannot have a singular explanation, such as our biology, and must be examined through various interdisciplinary lenses that require the study of social constructs, religious belief systems, philosophical theories, and the understanding of the intricacies of human motivations that contribute to shaping individual and collective behavior. As evident in history, religion has played a crucial role in shaping cultures, political structures, and moral frameworks creating both a source of compassion, community, and empathy, and conversely, has at times acted as a catalyst for division, violent conflicts, and war. additionally, some religions have introduced

prophecies about apocalyptic narratives, painting a picture of chaos and destruction that bring forth the end of the world. A notable example can be found in the New Testament of the Bible,

There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people. (2 Timothy 3:1-5)

This foretells a period of destruction, chaos, moral decay, and societal issues that bring forth the end of times. Aside from Christianity, many other religions also propose apocalyptic outcomes for instance, Islam discusses the idea of Qiyamah also known as the day of judgment, referring to the end of days where all individuals will be judged based on their deeds and actions after the world comes to an end. These prophetic narratives have been subject to different interpretations with varying perspectives transcending religious boundaries, shining a light on our ongoing fascination with the fate of humanity, and how specific religious beliefs or their interpretations have led to violent events, imposing existential threats. The negative impacts of religion are heavily visible in the Middle East, affecting the politics and social structures in that region. According to an article about the conflicts in the middle east, "Religion has dominated politics in the Middle East for centuries and plays a significant role in the lives of individuals: their rights, opportunities, and social status are all impacted by it."(para. 2). This assigns religion as the dominant force in the middle east in terms of political influence and affects the quality of life and constitutional rights in the middle east region. The article further elaborates on the cause of many of these conflicts being based on the different interpretations of the Quran and other holy books. Iran is a prime example of this, utilizing its political and military power to spread religious dogma and extremism in the region. The government of Iran has created sectarian militias that

cause conflict in the Middle East to advance its selfish geopolitical interests in the region while exerting its political influence and power. The Iranian Government has targeted religious minorities, which in Iran include any religion aside from Shia Islam since the start of the Islamic revolution in 1979 with Khomeini gaining political power. Khomeini promoted these extremist ideologies even at the cost of using violence against the Iranian people. The article further explains another example of religious tensions in Iran, "During the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005 to 2013), a new discourse combining Farsi nationalism with Islam emerged. As a result, Arabs, Kurds, Christians, Baha'is, and Sunni Muslims suffered increased harassment, imprisonment, torture, and even death." (para. 15). The practice of this sort of behavior leads to the exile and deaths of many civilians today. (Cswpress, 2021)

Aside from the Iranian people being victims of these politically manipulative tactics, other minority communities in the region such as Jewish, Assyrian, Syriac, Armenian, and Yazidi have also been affected by similar religious and political tactics performed by the political elites who exploit religious sentiments to gain power, wealth and to further their political agendas. This issue does not end here, in fact, this has been happening for centuries due to the rich oil resources in the area and the historical religious conflicts between the Abrahamic religions in the area such as the Jews, Christians, and Muslims, as well as Shi'as and Sunnis, who share a common reverence of the holy land, Jerusalem, the capital of current Israel with many religious and historical sites for each faith. This contributes to the complexity and the entanglement of religion and politics of the region creating continuous conflict and war, as the article Cswpress. (2021) states,

Despite the fact that the three 'Abrahamic Religions' – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – share many spiritual and cultural similarities, the relationship between these religions in the Middle East has been shaped by competition, conflict, and resentment. this further

proves this point. Similar to the 9/11 attacks fueled by radical Muslim ideologies, the current Israel and Palestine conflict also harbors similar dogmatic religious themes contributing to the war. according to the article, these ideological narratives propagate hatred, providing a justification for the tragic events in the minds of both Muslims and Jews. Hardline governments on both sides seek to use these narratives to distract attention from numerous internal challenges (para. 5).

These religious guises are being used as a weapon to further certain political and financial interests of both sides, with Hamas terrorist militants aiming to destroy Israel through bombing thousands of civilians at a music festival, to Israel declaring war on Palestine at the cost of the lives of innocent civilians including children, who are currently experiencing genocide without a hint remorse. This showcases the darker side of the nature of our species by highlighting our ability to commit such murderous crimes and our capacity for violence specifically through the use of dogmatic religious narratives ingrained in extremist ideologies creating an “us versus them” mentality. Although almost all of these religions promote peace, they seem to not bat an eye when dehumanizing the “others” hinting at a sense of religious supremacy creating a continuous cycle of war, death, and destruction.

Through the use of weapons, and in extreme cases the unleashing of nuclear bombs, we could possibly face extinction. this provides a picture similar to the apocalyptic narratives in the Bible and the Quran, as evident in the case of Palestine being under attack today. Yet, there are some who are so wrapped up in their fabricated narratives, that they justify the mass murder of thousands of children and innocent civilians as a means to achieve their warped interpretation of righteousness and fairness. This attitude of “an eye for an eye” embodies the dark and dangerous aspect of humanity that is able to inflict pain onto others in the pursuit of perceived justice. Most religions, specifically Abrahamic religions, profess values of empathy, love, peace, and

compassion, however, a tragic paradox arises when people who have a distorted understanding and interpretation of righteousness and morality within religion abandon the core principles of their religions that promote the peace and harmony within societies. Due to this, the cycle of violence, as shown throughout history, will persist as long as humans occupy this earth, creating a destructive pattern that will have a ripple effect through future generations and may someday lead to our demise. As much as extremist views of religion have been the root cause of many conflicts, it has also been a source of hope and inspiration to many.

According to a religious article, “Religion may fill the human need for finding meaning, sparing us from existential angst while also supporting social organization, researchers say.” (Para.1) This means that humans always search for a sense of meaning to life that religion is able to provide with a framework for understanding our world and finding our purpose. The article continues to describe the fact that religion has been a part of every culture for the past 100,000 years, with more than 85 percent of the global population embracing a sort of religious belief. Researchers who study the psychology and neuroscience of religion are helping to explain why such beliefs are enduring. They're finding that religion may in fact play a foundational role in addressing existential questions and providing a moral compass and a sense of purpose and social cohesion. Religion is also known to bring people together through a shared set of beliefs, practices, and values, creating a sense of community within societies. Different faiths, specifically Christianity believe that people are born good, but have a tendency for evil when they turn away from God. The article continues to state the benefits of such beliefs, especially in terms of psychology and neuroscience, suggesting that religion is deeply rooted in human experience and the need for order in the midst of chaos emphasizing the fact that holding religious or spiritual beliefs could contribute to a healthier life, exhibiting a lower rate of

depression, and are less likely to abuse substances. Jordan Peterson, a prominent psychologist, covers the importance of choice.

Peterson (2020), states,

In other words, you decide to act as if existence might be justified by its goodness—if only you behaved properly. And it is that decision, that declaration of existential faith, that allows you to overcome nihilism, and resentment, and arrogance. It is that declaration of faith that keeps hatred of Being, with all its attendant evils, at bay. And, as for such faith: it is not at all the will to believe things that you know perfectly well to be false. Faith is not the childish belief in magic. That is ignorance or even willful blindness. It is instead the realization that the tragic irrationalities of life must be counterbalanced by an equally irrational commitment to the essential goodness of Being. It is simultaneously the will to dare set your sights at the unachievable, and to sacrifice everything, including (and most importantly) your life (p. 107).

In this book, the author expands on his optimistic perspective on religion, portraying a form of existential faith that helps us to overcome our nihilistic emotions by finding meaning through faith and proper behavior that affirms us as good. He promotes the belief in human goodness and our willingness to aim for our highest goals, no matter how unachievable they may be, providing a source of solace and transcendence through the power of faith and the belief in God even if it means sacrificing your own life. In his book, Peterson continuously expands on his optimistic perspective on religion, he argues that faith is not something that should be blindly accepted, instead, he proposes an approach that involves a nuanced understanding and commitment to pursue higher aspirations, ultimately creating a purposeful life.

The Philosophical Realm

Having examined the relationship between human nature with science and religion, we will now delve into the realms of philosophy by exploring fundamental questions that have existed for centuries. Through the exploration of existential inquiries, as well as delving into moral reasoning and ethical frameworks, we gain insight into true human nature and its underlying philosophy so we can have a better grasp and understanding of the choices that individuals or communities make that determine our future while shedding light on the dilemmas encountered by our societies and attempting to answer the ancient questions relating to who we are, the concepts of right and wrong, and the meaning of life.

While many philosophers and great thinkers have attempted to answer these questions, a few stand out, starting with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an important figure in political philosophy and moral psychology, who held optimistic views on the nature of humanity, and aimed to harmonize the freedom of individuals with the authority of state and laws that govern our lives as well as putting an importance on the effect of proper education on society. According to the article about a famous philosopher, “[w]e are good by nature and corrupted by society.” He claims that humans are inherently good in their nature portraying elements of love and compassion but can get corrupted through trials and tribulations of life and the influences of society leading to the emergence of deceptions, falsehood, and at times violence. He further explains, “[m]an is born free, and everywhere he is in chains” This is very relevant in our modern social, economic, and political endeavors and entanglements, criticizing the metaphorical chains, societal norms, as well as cultural and political expectations, while promoting social justice and rights for all humans, freedoms, specifically from material dependence, in the hopes of transcending from the corruption that has been laid upon us by the world around us. He believed that societies adopt deceptive natures through exposure to things such as theater and

philosophy that bring down the quality of our moralities and nature. He introduced the concept of “general will” which emphasizes the common desires of a population that promote the common good for everyone in the society rather than solely focusing on individual interests.

Another political philosopher who shares similar optimistic views on human nature and justice as Rousseau is Winston Churchill. Churchill states, "For myself, I am an optimist. It does not seem to be much use to be anything else." (para 8), further expanding on the fact that being good and optimistic along with adopting pessimistic outlooks, are conscious choices that all humans are faced with. This is by no means an endorsement of a naive optimistic view of humanity but rather refers to a practical approach to our lives. According to an article, as the prime minister of the United Kingdom, Churchill used his optimistic mindset to give a set of motivational speeches during World War II that boosted the morale, and the spirit of the British people, who then restored their hope and belief in winning the war referring to the power of our mindset and our will. Churchill believed that by being optimistic about our nature, life, and future, and through the power of our resilient and capable nature, we have the capacity to persevere and transcend as a species, even in the face of adversity and challenge. Another notable mention is the Chinese philosopher Confucius, who expressed a sense of optimism about humanity. An article about Confucius claims, "[o]ur greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall."(p. 5). Similar to Churchill, Confucius considers optimism as the key to overcoming challenges, mentioning that our resilient nature as humans can be used as an empowering driving force to overcome adversity painting a hopeful picture of a hopeful future for humanity.

In contrast, many philosophers and great thinkers throughout history have expressed their lack of hope for the future of our species and have proposed more pessimistic views on the “true” nature of humans. One of these great thinkers was Voltaire, who through critical analysis believed that humans and nature, and in turn the future of humanity were deeply rooted in

skepticism even expressing his cynical views towards the Idea of blind optimism in the face of adversity. He questioned the inherent goodness of humanity due to the flaws and imperfections that were visible in society as observed through suffering and injustice. An article about Voltaire's work claims, "Optimism is the madness of insisting that all is well when we are miserable," suggesting that a realistic approach to life would be better than overlooking the harsh realities that are thrown at us through the lens of religion, God, or other sources of blind optimism, emphasizing the importance of having a balanced view towards both the optimistic, as well as pessimistic outcomes and our potential for improvement or our downfall, indicating the complexity of our nature. His pessimistic view should not be mistaken with a passive acceptance of a bleak and hopeless outlook on our fate but should rather act as a warning and a call to action to change our ways through the alignment of our thoughts and actions with our desired outcomes and taking charge of our destiny. This highlights the importance of personal accountability and responsibility exerted by individuals in a society, on our road to prosperity, and the alleviation of human suffering, rejecting the notion of a divine plan. Like Voltaire, Nietzsche, a critical figure in the world of philosophy, also expressed his skepticism toward the inherent goodness of human nature, suggesting that instead of accepting our inherent flaws, we should strive to overcome our challenges by overcoming the dark side of our nature (Dan, 2017).

Nietzsche claims, "[m]an is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?" referring to our ability to improve and transcend beyond our current states through acknowledging and conquering our complex nature and taking action towards our goals as a society. Similar to Voltaire, he was not a fan of religion, claiming that "God Is dead" referring to the fact that God or traditional moral values, Christianity in particular, are not the answer to our problems and that humans themselves have the ability to overcome difficulties through creating their own values and morals as well as taking responsibility for their own

actions which he referred to as the “Will to power” emphasizing the importance of achieving the mastery of one’s self. He believes that “good” and “bad” as fixed moral absolutes, but rather as mere reflections of our conscious state within a society. Through navigating the multifaceted world of philosophy, and considering contrasting perspectives, it becomes clear that human beings are not utterly and inherently Good or evil, but rather a reflection of our beliefs and the state of our world. Through the study of the views of great thinkers such as Rousseau and Nietzsche, we can gain an understanding of our true nature and can use these learning objectives to navigate the path to the future.

Conclusion

In the exploration of the intricate interplay between collective fate and human nature through research in religious, philosophical, and scientific realms, we can notice the underlying darkness of our core essence. Although many great thinkers have pointed to the virtuous aspects of our nature which are undoubtedly visible, especially in young children, our attraction towards chaos and destruction is undeniable. Through the use of religious dogma, violence, and overall manipulation by the people in power, humans have shown over and over, their capacity to commit selfish and evil acts, which have led to environmental catastrophes, economic hardships, and cultural and psychological trauma that are apparent in our contemporary world. Religion on its own can be very helpful, but religious dogma in relation to politics and power can create one of the strongest weapons that has been used against humanity for centuries. Looking at the current state of Palestine, we can witness the genocide that is being committed against many women and children due to belief differences in the region, as well as the hunger for power, hinting at the possibility of a nuclear war that can lead to our extinction. Climate change and environmental destruction fueled by human disregard could be another reason why we might go extinct. Even if we fight against the nature of our darkness that leads to wars or environmental

catastrophes, we are not able to escape the uncontrollable nature and the rapid growth of our technologies, specifically AI. The attempt to create this form of technology that can surpass our level of understanding can turn AI against us, enhancing the chances of all humanity being wiped off of this earth. We are not necessarily born evil, but our capacity for darkness, and the effects of our environment, culture, and beliefs can lead us down the path of darkness, aggression, selfishness, and violence, and can potentially shape our destiny. Acknowledging and addressing the darkest aspects of our existence should not be observed as finite, fixed, and hopeless, but should rather be used as a tool to avoid making the same mistakes as our ancestors throughout history, and to take action towards change. The question revolves around whether, through our awareness and capacity for love and compassion, humanity can overcome its dark nature, and to be able to collectively divert from the path toward extinction. As much as we all want to create a better future, this research indicates that humanity may not be able to transcend beyond its barbaric and violent nature, as evident throughout history, and as evident in the wars that are taking place in our modern world.

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