

Why is it Important to Understand “Human Nature” in our times?

Human nature refers to a set of inherent characteristics which all humans share. (Wikipedia: Human Nature). Efforts to identify and understand these characteristics date back to ancient times. The issue of whether human nature is biologically hard-wired or formed by socialization and education is highly debatable. In any case, there are many good reasons for trying to formulate an objective understanding of human nature, not the least of which is, in doing so, we partly define who we are as individuals. But in our times, in the 21st century, it has become even more crucially important than ever for educated people to understand human nature because “human nature arguments” are frequently used to avoid responsibility.

An example of how the “human nature argument” is misused is when someone might say “I can’t do anything about ending war. War is part of human nature.” In saying this a person claims powerlessness and asserts that war is inevitable and unavoidable. Another example of how the “human nature argument” is misused would be if a husband goes out on his wife and then claims “I didn't mean to cheat, but it's just human nature for men to play around.”

Furthermore, in a discussion you might hear “You can't blame Wall Street brokers and bankers for being greedy; greed is just human nature.” “You can't criticize gun manufacturers for violence; violence is human nature.”

The “human nature argument” which these people evoke is not based on philosophy, or anthropology, or religion; it is an uninformed rationalization for immoral behavior.

Furthermore, in today’s America, market ideology is a distortion of an accurate understanding of human nature. This ideology saturates the airways, internet, and magazines. It conveys messages over and over, day in and day out, persuading us we are aggressive, competitive, and self-centered. Unless you had a chance to become informed on human nature, you would be misled to believe human beings are creatures we are not.

To be able to respond to people who use the “human nature” argument,” and to be able to evaluate advertisements, articles, and TV shows conveying market ideology, we must have a clear understanding of human nature.

The Webster’s Dictionary definition of human nature is “the essential essence of who we are collectively as human beings.” This means the traits, behaviors, and characteristics essential to what it is to be a human being as a matter of natural (usually biological) fact and which cannot be changed without making us other than the sort of being we are. Someone might also add that it is the hardwired structures that are innate in our biology.

Some people might have a broader definition of human nature and say that everything humans do is in our nature. Love is in our nature, hate is in our nature. War is in our nature. Peace is in our nature. Reflection is certainly in our nature. Lions can't reflect on whether to go vegetarian, and pandas can't decide to drop bamboo in favor of small rodents. If reflection is in our nature, then so is choice about our actions. And moralists assert that awareness, reflection, and choice are where morality lies.

To arrive at a clearer understanding of human nature we will survey historical attempts to explain it. The ancient Greeks, the world religions, the European Enlightenment thinkers of the 1600's and 1700's, and modern-day scientists all grappled with what is human nature. I will summarize their various perspectives here.

Greco-Roman Views of Human Nature

Philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome contemplated human nature and Plato's Republic provides insights into ways in which they viewed it. People are made of body and soul, the body is material and the soul is immaterial. The soul consists of appetite, spirit (courage), and reason. Reason and courage must control the appetites. The highest form of human existence is when people exercise their reason. People are fundamentally social and need others for physical and mental needs. Good should be reflected in an individual's actions.

Chinese Views of Human Nature (Confucian)

People are so social they must insure a stable and orderly social life. As the basis for this social life Confucius organized a system to make clear to everyone who should obey whom. In the family, wife should obey husband, children should obey parents, parents should honor ancestors and all people should obey the Emperor as he was viewed as the father of the civilization. People were supposed to be sensitive to other people's feelings and accommodate other people's wishes.

Indian Views of Human Nature (Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Sikh)

Human beings are part of a larger spirit called Brahman the supreme unity and eternal oneness of the universe. Human beings are part of the universal oneness itself. Humans are supposed to perform the duties of their caste in order to be reincarnated into a higher state.

African, European, and Middle Eastern Religions' Views of Human Nature (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrian, Manichean)

Human beings are God's creation. God created people in his image and he guides our lives in the destiny he has in mind for us. The book of "Genesis" in the Hebrew Old Testament contains a passage where humans were created "God said, "Let me make humankind in my image and likeness and let him have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, over all the wild animals and every creature that crawls on the earth." God created humans with a free will, but they must be guided by moral teachings. When a person does wrong, this wrong is a result of the evil in human nature which is brought out by the devil.

Enlightenment in Europe in 1600's and 1700's

Enlightenment thinkers believed in science and reason and provoked intense curiosity about human nature. This curiosity arose from the European voyages of discovery, the encountering of "primitive" peoples, and confronting new truths from the microscope and telescope. God receded into the background and philosophers wanted to understand how humans endured in a natural state before civilization. Many Enlightenment

philosophers concluded people possessed free will and reason, but disagreed on other human characteristics. Rousseau, Locke, and Montesquieu thought people were social, cooperative, considerate, unselfish and loyal in the state of nature, but Hobbes concluded people are aggressive, self-centered, greedy, and fickle. These philosophers asked “When evil exists, is it a result of evil in human nature or is it a result of evil in institutions?”

MODERN SCIENTIFIC VIEWS OF HUMAN NATURE

Biology

In the 1800’s Darwin’s theory focused on humans’ primate heritage and began a new period of questioning. From this came the modern scientific study of humans in fields as diverse as biology, anatomy, physiology, genetics, psychology, sociology and anthropology. From these fields have come modern theories of human nature. Primatology holds we are determined in our deep brain structures, our instincts, and our physical make-up by our primate heritage. Adherents of this thinking are E.O. Wilson, Richard Dawkins, and Richard Audrey. Barbara Ehrinreich believes fears and anxieties were hard-wired into human and pre-human species during millions of years when these species were vulnerable prey to wild beasts. She asserts that human fears and anxieties of an “other” (originally wild beasts), were later transferred to fear of other human beings.

Anthropology

Through a 6-million year evolutionary path, about twelve species in the human family tree evolved biologically and culturally from chimps and bonobos. The 12 species all extincted and modern humans are the only surviving species of this evolutionary path. All of the pre-human species were bipedal. Walking upright led to hands becoming free to use tools. The use of tools required eye-hand coordination and concentration which led to an increase in brain size. The increasing use of speech to name and describe features of the environment also led to the growth of the brain. Sociability allowed for collective learning. The growth of the brain and social interaction in bands stimulated the brain to a point where species in the genus Homo evolved to being highly conscious and intelligent.

From modern anthropological theories, it can be concluded that due to 6 million years of evolution, humans emerged hard-wired for tool use, speech use, sociability, and high levels of consciousness.

Psychology

Among the many different theories and schools of psychology, a few stand out for their efforts to explore human nature. **Freud** believed aggression was a major element of human nature which enables survival, but which is sometimes accompanied by violence. **Carl Jung** thought there was a collective unconscious which could imbue an enemy with hateful traits, traits which actually originated within oneself. **Alfred Adler** created theories about interpersonal struggles for social dominance. **Harry Stack Sullivan** said humans have fears and anxieties derived from inhibited communication which caused a tendency to strike out at those who are different. **Erik Erikson** said social ambiguity in a society can produce confusion in individuals and a tendency to follow misguided leaders. **Irving Janis** explored “group think” which derives from human beings’ social nature.

In 1941, John Dollard, Neal Miller, and other social scientists coined the "frustration-aggression hypothesis," arguing that violence and aggression are reactive, as distinct from

Freud's notion of them as proactive. In this view frustration leads to anger (as do hurt and fear, which are variations of frustration) and anger sometimes leads to violence.

CONCLUSION

While it is challenging to explore the subject of human nature, it becomes a necessity in our times due to the misuse of the concept to promote a fatalistic and defeatist outlook that prevents people from evolving morally. Human beings are much more than merely “self-centered, aggressive, and competitive”. Recent tendencies to misuse the concept of human nature prove what American philosopher Henry Miller said “Man has demonstrated he is master of everything -- except his own nature.”

What is your view of human nature?