

HUMAN NATURE

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh

What is human nature? It is often asked: are we born morally good, bad or neutral? This is obviously a philosophical question. But human nature is not philosophical or moralistic; it is functional. Human nature consists of behavioural characteristics to promote individual and species survival; in other words, it is possessed of basic instincts and innate structurations of the world. Rather than are we born with, among other things, the tendencies to be both self-preservational and solidaristic as required by the situation. That is because, for nature generally, the purpose of life is the continuation of life. This involves durability and reproduction. It is we who add meaning to life through what we choose to do with existence.

Instinct and Behaviour

The tendencies in question come into operation at different levels and in different ways, namely the immediate (oneself), the family (partner[s] and offspring), kinfolk (near relatives), and wider groupings (the clan etc). In the living world, a mammal, such as the human is, will thus seek to protect and provide for itself and likewise for others, as needs be. Originally, for us this meant gathering of food, foraging from carcasses, and predation of game, or defensive action. This could involve an individual or a family or a group. However, there could be conflict with other groups, especially when it was perceived as necessary to preserve one's own group; although this was never such as to endanger the species.

While 'group' initially amounted to a clan (really the extended family), it went on to become a tribe and, in time, evolved into the nation, its most potent expression. It can to a degree become civilizational (e.g. european) or even global (humankind). But the more it extends beyond

the nation, the weaker and shallower solidarity becomes, to the point of virtually not existing at all in some instances.

Compassion and Altruism

Predation in its most original and basic form involved hunting. In sophisticated society, predation in particular is socially transmuted into competition and achievement, occurring at times within the group or, alternatively, regarding other groups or elements thereof. It, along with the residual foraging tendency, also involves managed exploitation of animate and inanimate nature,

So, where does that leave the ideas of compassion and altruism? When we see somebody in distress and are moved to intervene in order to help, is that an autonomously genuine reaction or is it just behaviour directed by the instinct for group and therefore species survival? To a certain degree it is both. That is because, while we have a naturally solidaristic inclination, it can in fact be resisted for narrowly selfish reasons. To accept, and indeed cultivate it, and act accordingly, distinguishes the authentically compassionate from the mechanically responsive. Positive action is reinforced by the rational and consequentialist consideration that if we do not assist others, we cannot expect them to assist us. There is also the realisation that, in order to accomplish certain desired ends in society, one must cooperate and collaborate with others and thus protect them in fellowship.

Ethics and Human Sensitivity

The reasoned elaboration and codification of solidarity is what amounts to ethics. This process may thus be seen to rest on what is internally natural to humanity and requires no supernaturally external explanation, either by way of otherworldly command or threat of punishment from above.

However, solidarity can be enhanced by empathy and sympathy. The cerebral sophistication of the human is such that one is capable of appreciating how others feel (empathy) and this can lead to responsive feeling (sympathy). Moreover, 'I' understand that the 'other' I see as a person also sees 'me' as 'other'; likewise; that is to say, there is both mutual recognition and bilaterally reinforced self-

consciousness. This is important in countering any hesitancy to act in accordance with instinct; in other words, avoiding disharmony between the solidaristic drive and actual behaviour. Furthermore, cultured humans can mentally review and decide in detail on what ought to be done by way of morality. They are inherently possessed of what animals are lacking, namely intellect which complements another distinction, i.e. will. This is far from the Spencerian neoDarwinism of survival of the fittest which has been used in its crudest form to inspire eugenicist extremism and racist fascism.

What is also important in adult fraternal and sororal relations is the lasting effect of childhood nurture, in other words care and love - in the case of the human, *both instinctive and studied*. It is often said that those who have not been loved cannot love. And of course the reverse is also true; the more one is loved, the more one can love. The enhanced capacity to love, combined with ethical and imaginative reinforcement, is the hallmark of the human and makes for a civilized society.



Deviations

However, such capacities and reactions can vary from individual to individual not only in terms of degree, but also in regard to being altogether wanting. One has as usual to allow for sheer abnormality in nature whereby instinct itself is deficient or actually absent in some instances. It can also be atrophied by traumatic experience whereby people are brutalised. The psychological processes in propaganda through which persons can be objectified into nonhumans (e.g. as with the Nazis and the Jews) can further render fellow sensitivity void. The need to reify a designated enemy in war is itself an indirect confirmation of the instinct towards human solidarity; enemy personnel cannot be eliminated as ordinary people and therefore must be negated through a process of indoctrinational monsterising or dehumanising them.

In other words, the instincts concerned in humans are predispositions, not determinants, and our exercise of them, as reflectively thinking creatures, therefore involves a certain amount of deliberation and choice. That is to emphasise that there is in fact such a thing as will. Morality is not

thus simplistically reductionist and lacking in the dignity of conscious observance. There is also an aesthetic dimension to this for the cultivated person in that benevolence and its consequences may be discerned as beautiful and negligence and its results as ugly.

The Philosophical Question

Therefore, the philosophical dispute as to whether human nature is morally good, bad or neutral is a false one. As noted, we are delivered into life with both individual and solidaristic proclivities with the latter being interpretable in altruistic moral terms. Put in another fashion, innate solidarism is to an extent infrastructural to morality, which is a human invention. Of course, survival can also dispose towards aggression, as observed, depending on the individual or group circumstance.

Instinct generally, including sexuality, can, as appropriate, be affirmed, restrained or augmented by morality as rational beings devise, think fit and are capable of. However, in practical terms, ethical education need not be all that different however one construes human nature; promoting and adhering to a socially appropriate code, in whatever way it is justified, is essential for common human existence in the world as it has developed. This becomes internalised as the powerful force of conscience. It is where the 'human nature is bad' belief, in particular, leads to life-denying ordinances, such as in fundamentalist Christianity, with its dogma of original sin and so on, that damage is done.* That is where this involves suppression of instinct such as in the case of healthy sexuality.

In conclusion, we may not be born 'good', but we are born with leanings that can be positively moralised as well as developed and complemented so as to make us good people at the end of the day.

* (The basic idea of original sin is very old and was in fact adopted by the Christians, not invented by them, notably St Augustine. In the Western traditions, it goes back to the Orphic myth about the murder of Dionysus by the Titans and their subsequent incineration by Zeus following which humanity was formed from their ashes, thus with a component of evil as well as a potential for good in them. Christians are particularly inspired by the Hebrew Old Testament in tracing original sin at root to Eve plucking the apple from the tree of knowledge, that taken as resulting in a predisposition to evil, with the implication apparently being that

ignorance is good! And, of course, even that story was influenced by the oft-neglected Sumerian myth of Marduk killing the lesser god, Kingu, mixing his blood with the dust of the earth and shaping humanity from that.)
