
HUMAN NATURE: A CONTESTED CONCEPT

Are we inherently good or bad? Are we driven by reason or emotions? Are we selfish or altruistic? Is the human mind malleable or predisposed? These questions are highly contested and the answers to them far from clear. This is due not only to the array of different perspectives on human nature, but also to seemingly contradictory evidence. We need only scratch the surface of history to find confirmation that humankind is capable of incredible cruelty and violence. In Ancient Rome, for example, entertainment was provided by forcing people to fight animals and other human beings – often to the death. If this seems barbaric in the extreme, we thankfully also find tales of tremendous bravery and what would seem to be altruism. Today, unsung heroes risk their lives every day to save those of complete strangers. In short, the picture is a mixed one: “We seem to be part angel, part demon, part rational, part animal, capable of great glory and great tragedy”.¹

Indeed, the notion that human beings are part angel, part demon echoes Aristotle’s (384-322 BCE) conclusion that he who is content with his solitude must be “Either a beast or a God”.² Whether we are by nature good or bad is a central question in the debate on human nature. Philosophical as well as religious and spiritual traditions have answered the question in different ways. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) believed that humankind is driven by the passions or instincts linked to self-preservation.³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), by contrast, argued that human beings are by nature good and that any vices that they may have are attributable to the corrupting influence of society. What makes human beings distinctly “human” is their capacity for reason. In the Old Testament, humankind is portrayed as created in the image of God and, thus, inherently good. However, both Jews and Christians are in agreement that human beings fell from grace by failing to refrain from eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which left them adrift, alienated from God and in need of salvation.⁴

Another question that recurs in discussions about human nature is whether we are driven by emotions or rational thought. A major concern here is whether reason plays a role in our moral judgements. If so, do we engage in conscious reasoning before pronouncing a judgement or after the fact? David Hume (1711-1776) was the first modern philosopher to argue that we make moral judgements on the basis of emotional responses to situations or scenarios. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) held a different opinion. He argued that we make moral judgements through a process of conscious reasoning.⁵ In Kant's view, the evolution of humanity had followed a progression from being motivated by animal instincts to being driven by reason. For Aristotle, too, human beings are capable of living a "good" life by employing reason. Plato (427-347 BCE) held that human beings are driven by both passion and reason. How can we reconcile these seemingly contradictory faculties? Those who place greater emphasis on passion and survival instincts, such as fear, greed and sympathy, regard our biological heritage as more important than the environment in which we grow up, whereas those who give greater priority to our capacity for reason tend to attribute greater significance to culture and education or innate capacity – those things in the social world that shape the way we think and behave.

Whether we are primarily motivated by basic survival instincts or by the environment is central to conflicting views on the question of free will and determinism. The question of how free humanity is to change its nature appears time and again in discussions. According to John Locke (1632-1704), people are free to conduct themselves in accordance with the laws of nature. In this view, nurture is more important than nature in shaping our behaviour. As is mentioned above, Plato occupied the middle ground. While human beings were believed to be the product of their biological heritage, the environment was thought to play a predominant role in influencing behaviour. Existentialists, such as Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) argued that human beings have a radical free will – according to Sartre, "Man is condemned to be free".⁶ At the other end of the spectrum, Hobbes holds that it is nature that is the driving force.⁷ Others would argue, however, that although we may feel as though we are endowed with free will, this is illusory. Proponents of this position argue that because our desires and reactions are not always something that we can control, we cannot be considered truly free. Sigmund Freud's (1856-

1939) theory of pansexuality holds, for instance, that while people may think that they are making conscious choices, they are driven by subconscious motives.⁸ Sociobiologists, such as, for example, E.O. Wilson regard human beings as products of evolution.⁹ This distinction is important: if we are radically free to choose, we ought to be fully aware of what we are doing. However, if our genetic heritage shapes our mind and behaviour we ought to take this into consideration.¹⁰

How we answer the above questions determines how we answer whether humankind is capable of moral behaviour. In this context, moral behaviour is defined as behaviour consistent with a system of rules of correct conduct. Does true altruism exist or is all altruism based on self-interest? According to Hobbes, human beings are egoists, incapable of acting altruistically. This view would appear to be consistent with situations such as a mugging that takes place in broad daylight where bystanders look on but fail to intervene. This fundamental question has elicited different responses. For Kant, morality is the result of reason. Evolutionary approaches to human psychology and behaviour provide a very different answer. Altruism presents the Darwinian theory of natural selection with a problem, given that this theory is premised on the pressures of competition. Acts of altruism would appear to have no obvious advantage. Prairie dogs, for example, warn others of approaching danger by calling to them, thereby alerting a predator to their own presence and placing themselves at greater risk.¹¹ How is it possible to watch on television a group of young men being rounded up and summarily shot in the back of the head and take no direct action to bring genocide to a halt? Some sociobiologists, such as Wilson and Frans de Waal, argue that morality has developed from our social instincts.¹² Some evolutionary psychologists, such as Marc Hauser, have gone so far as to argue that human beings have evolved an innate moral instinct.¹³ This is interesting because it suggests that some basic moral criteria must be universal across divergent cultures. Yet, it also raises the question of whether, or the extent to which, human beings are deliberating moral agents.¹⁴

1.1. The Structure and Aims of the Book

This book sets out to do two things: first, it strives to reach an understanding of human nature, which ultimately offers the promise of liv-

ing a “good” life. Specifically, I ask the following questions: What motivates humankind? What is humankind capable of under certain circumstances? Do human beings possess an innate morality? In so doing, I engage with common points of reference in the debate on human nature. Drawing on insights from philosophy, psychology, sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, I put forward a more comprehensive view of human nature. However, discussions of human nature would be incomplete without considering the findings of neuroscience. I therefore use recent research in this rapidly developing field to go beyond the approaches to human nature in the above disciplines.

Second, this book explores some of the global and security implications of human nature as I conceive it. The way in which we approach security issues inevitably contains assumptions about what motivates human beings in particular circumstances, and how we attempt to address these issues is circumscribed by those assumptions. It is essential that we get these assumptions right. The cost of getting them wrong is paid in lives. I therefore set out some ways in which we might better facilitate political and moral cooperation, based on our present knowledge of the neuro-psychological impact of our neurochemistry.

In order to set the context for my own theory and to give the reader a sense of the main conceptions that influence thinking on the question of what makes us what we are, we begin by exploring some major theories of human nature. The book first sets out the main approaches to human nature. I refer to theories of human nature in a broad sense that includes philosophical, religious and spiritual, psychological and evolutionary approaches. Here, the main contours of the debate on human nature – are human beings good or bad, driven by passion or reason, constrained or radically free, moral or immoral – are addressed in greater detail.

I then present my own theory of human nature, which I call “Emotional Amoral Egoism”. I argue that the human mind is not a *tabula rasa*, or a clean slate, as Locke suggested. Instead, the human mind is what I call a *predisposed tabula rasa*, with predilections stemming from its genetic make-up that later will be influenced by the environment. Humankind’s genetic make-up is essentially a code for survival. Survival instincts are emotionally based and neurochemically mediated. I therefore take issue with those who argue that human beings are primarily motivated by reason. This does *not*, however, mean

that we should favour nature over nurture in the nature/nurture debate, or that we should conceive of human beings as prisoners of their passions. Even though we are in part motivated by our basic survival instincts, our environment – which broadly comprises our personal state of affairs, upbringing, education, and societal, cultural and global state of affairs – plays an important role in shaping our psyche and behaviour. Moreover, what distinguishes humankind from other species is our capacity for reason. We are therefore driven by both basic survival instincts and rational thought, although, alas, less frequently by the latter than we might like to imagine.

As is indicated, whether human beings are inherently selfish or capable of altruism is hotly contested. In my view, humankind is neither always moral nor always immoral, but can be either at different times. Human nature is governed by general self-interest and affected by genetic predisposition, which implies that there are likely to be limits to our moral sensitivities. In my view, altruism is in the final analysis driven by survival motives that are emotionally based. In this sense, my approach supports Hume's thesis. Recent neuroscientific findings confirm that we are primarily driven by our emotions rather than reason. Yet, since the human psyche and human behaviour are also the product of the environment, under the right circumstances and with deliberate effort, we are capable of acting morally, beyond the margins of what our genetic coding has primed us for.

In addition to considering who we are, I also briefly consider where we are going. Here, I look at how we can and are likely to be able to modify our psychological and physiological profile through biological and technological means. At some point in the future, we may have to deal with “the line between the human as a product of nature and the human as a fabrication of technology”.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, this has generated heated debate. “What distinguishes modern technology from all other types, both pre-modern and non-Western, is its exclusive focus on the perfection of technical procedures and processes that had historically been subordinate to technological norms and standards, usually of a moral, political, and religious nature.”¹⁶ Will technological advances alter what it means to be human?

Box 1 provides a summary of my general theory of human nature, “Emotional Amoral Egoism,” and briefly outlines some of its universal security implications.

Box 1

**Summary of “Emotional Amoral Egoism”:
A Neurophilosophical Theory of Human Nature
and its Universal Security Implications**

The enduring assumption that human behaviour is governed by innate morality and reason is at odds with the persistence of human deprivation, inequality, injustice, misery, brutality and conflict.

In my theory of human nature, which I have termed “Emotional Amoral Egoism”, I argue that human behaviour is governed primarily by *emotional self-interest* focused initially on survival and, once achieved, domination. These facets of human nature are a product of *genetically coded survival instincts* modified by the *totality of our environment* and expressed as *neurochemically-mediated emotions and actions*. Reason, reflection and conscious morality are comparatively rare. The human mind is therefore a *predisposed tabula rasa*, resulting from both an in-built genetic code for survival and the environment.

In my view, most human beings are innately neither moral nor immoral but rather *amoral*. They are driven by emotional self-interest and have the potential to be either moral or immoral, depending on what their self-interest dictates, and will be influenced in their choices by emotions and socio-cultural contexts. Circumstances will determine the *survival value of humankind’s moral compass* in that being highly moral in an immoral environment may be detrimental to one’s survival and vice versa. Indeed, our neuronal architecture is pre-programmed to seek gratification and “feel good” regardless of the reason. All apparently altruistic behaviour serves self-interest at some level.

This insight has profound implications for the *re-ordering of governance mechanisms at all levels* with a strong emphasis on the *role of society and the global system* in maximising the benefits of what I term *measured self-interest*, while minimising its excesses, because human beings cannot be left to their own devices to do the “right thing”. Such reform offers the best chance of facilitating *political and moral cooperation* through the establishment of *stringent normative frameworks and governance structures*, that best fulfil the potential of human beings to exist and evolve in peace, security, prosperity and possible serenity.

Further, *humanity must never be complacent about the virtues of human nature*. Therefore, everything must be done at all levels to prevent

Box 1 continued

alienation, inequality, deprivation, fear, injustice, anarchy and the loss of the rule of law. History has shown repeatedly that humankind is capable of unthinkable brutality and injustice. This is often a result of what I call *fear(survival)-induced pre-emptive aggression*, which may occur no matter how calm the situation appears, although it is not necessarily inevitable. Moreover, where there is injustice that is perceived as posing a threat to survival, humankind will do whatever necessary to survive and be free. In such instances, “might” (military or otherwise) may not prevail or be the optimal solution.

Human nature as we know it is, nevertheless, malleable and “manageable”. It may be radically modified as a result of advances in bio-, molecular, nano- and computational technologies. It will therefore be essential to establish a clear code of ethics regulating the use of these technologies sooner rather than later.

In 5 to 5.6, I discuss some of the global and security implications of my theory of human nature. This final part of the book first explores how prominent approaches to International Relations (IR) conceive of human nature and then outlines how my own theory may be situated in relation to them. I explain that my proposed general theory of human nature collapses the nature/nurture and free will/constrained dichotomies that tend to characterise the conceptions of human nature that inform major IR theories.

I then discuss the relevance of my own conception of human nature to a number of issues: identity construction and globalisation, xenophobia and ethnocentrism, ethnic conflict, moral cosmopolitanism and governance structures. In the era of globalisation, the transnationalisation of production and finance, as well as the development and spread of new technologies, have helped to bring about changes in collective identities and inter-civilisational relations. There is a growing discrepancy between major collective identities and traditional political and cultural boundaries.¹⁷ Since a main driver of human behaviour is ego – understood as that which negotiates between inner needs and social contexts, making humankind require a positive identity and a sense of belonging – this development has a number of implications. If ego may be considered to be a basic human need,¹⁸ then cultural disorientation is likely to negatively affect the human condi-

tion and human security at various levels. While wide-reaching cultural change as part of globalisation is having positive effects in terms of increased exposure to and awareness of other cultures, as well as better access to knowledge, thereby bringing about a greater degree of interconnectedness, the cultural dimension of globalisation is sometimes perceived as generating cultural homogenisation. In the latter case, people may feel that their traditional culture is in danger of being eroded. Since fear is another central and very powerful driver of human behaviour, responses may take the form of intolerance, xenophobia and extremism. It is therefore important to view the needs for belonging and a positive identity as basic human needs, and to develop appropriate policies and institutional structures to ensure that these needs are met. At the state level, for instance, this means promoting an inclusive society that is underpinned by institutions that make effective representation possible.

Globalising processes are also affecting and politicising inter-civilisational relations. The increased dispersion of people from diverse cultural contexts, instant connectivity due to new technologies, and the existence of economic and political inequalities mean that issues can be transnationalised more easily than in the past. Some issues may be perceived as an act of aggression against collective identities that define themselves as part of a broader civilisation. This can cause inter-civilisational tension and provide ammunition for those who wish to exploit such fears for their own purposes.

Changes in the global political and economic environment in the past few decades have also resulted in new waves of migration as people seek employment and greater opportunities outside their home country. In some regions of the world, the presence of newcomers has generated negative reactions from some factions in society. Exposure to negative stereotyping in the mass media, for example, may increase public support for policies targeted at minority groups in societies and for discrimination against them, which may be subtle or involve physical violence. In Europe, migration has been securitised (i.e., raised to the level of a security issue) since the mid-1980s, when migration became subsumed in a broader security continuum including other issues such as terrorism and transnational organised crime. The securitisation of migration is sometimes accompanied by xenophobia. Those exposed to xenophobia suffer from a reduction in security and do not enjoy a positive identity, at least in terms of the way in which

others define them. This means that a basic human need goes unmet, again with potentially avoidable consequences.¹⁹

Understanding the central dimensions of human nature may contribute to responses to migration that do not feed xenophobic reactions in society. Both the environment and our genetic coding are implicated in xenophobic reactions. Evolutionary approaches to human nature would attribute xenophobia to how we evolved from our ancestors. The argument is that human beings, like animals, have a tendency to be hostile towards strangers. Some argue that xenophobia may be something that people have developed to protect themselves against transmittable disease. A stranger might also represent a threat to a place or hierarchy and, therefore, be treated with hostility and suspicion. In both instances, fear of strangers may allow individuals and groups to thrive genetically. While the emphasis here is on genetics, culture is nonetheless recognised as influencing this genetic predisposition.²⁰

If we are better equipped to comprehend the drivers of human nature, we might also stand a better chance of preventing and alleviating conflict. Ethnic conflict, for example, is often perceived as the result of timeless hatreds. Viewed in this way, there is little that can be done to alleviate its causes. Preventing ethnic conflict from occurring may seem an impossible task. Thus, considering purely biological factors in a narrow way limits the degree of the possible. While humankind may be weighed down by its biological heritage, and we should not dismiss this out of hand, the environment has an important impact on the human psyche and human behaviour. Fortunately, we are capable of influencing the environment and, therefore, conflict. If we recognise that both our genetic predilections and the environment affect how and whether tension degenerates into violent conflict, we may be able to develop policies to prevent this from happening.

A better understanding of human nature may also help humankind to promote cooperation and moral behaviour at the global level. For centuries, politics has been shaped by the concept of state sovereignty, and allegiance to the political unit of the state has been shaped by nationalism. Today, however, national borders are more porous and, for many people, allegiances are not limited to the state. Globalisation is creating a “transnational social space”.²¹ Increased human mobility and interconnectedness mean that many people have to negotiate between multiple identities. The global society that is emerging is composed of great diversity and greater inequality, which

makes mutual recognition and respect imperative. Moreover, international norms have evolved in such a way that requires moral cosmopolitanism, which assumes that individuals belong to a single moral community. Yet, all too often, there appears to be a disparity between the moral principles we have developed and what we actually do. Biologically inherited behavioural traits may play a role in explaining this apparent gap.²² We need to find a normative arrangement that will better equip us to address together political, socio-economic and cultural issues. One of the difficulties that evolutionary theories highlight is the difficulty that we may have in acting morally towards “distant others”. This is by no means to suggest that we wish to justify people’s indifference to difference or the challenges to acting altruistically towards others with whom they have no direct contact. Culture may be able to cultivate a more altruistic attitude towards strangers, which is essential if we are to respect the dignity of others. If, as sociobiologists suggest, there may be limits to our moral sensitivities, then it is important to know about this because it will require a deliberate effort to promote moral cosmopolitanism, rather than assuming that we can rely on individuals to behave in an ethical way. We need to find a common basis on which we can cooperate.

Since the human brain is quite malleable, public policies and governance structures can influence the human condition and, as a result, the likelihood of insecurity and instability. What kind of governance structure would be required to enable humanity to prosper and to enhance global stability? Since our survival instincts inform a great deal of our behaviour, it is essential that people’s human rights are vigorously upheld. While there is a general consensus that human beings should not be subjected to torture or degrading treatment, basic human rights ought to extend to basic needs such as shelter and food. This means that human security, which is defined as the freedom from want and fear, ought to be promoted at all levels. Political processes and structures should be inclusive. Multilateral institutions, for example, ought to be more representative so that the evolution of the global order is the result of an inclusive and collective effort.

Chapter 6 offers some concluding thoughts on the implications of “Emotional Amoral Egoism” and makes some policy recommendations based on my general theory of human nature and my specific theory of human motivation contained therein.

Some may object to the claims that I make in the text. They may, for a variety of reasons (i.e., upbringing, experience, education)

see themselves or others as more rational, or more moral than my conception of human nature allows. However, my theory is intended to apply to the majority of human beings, not the minority. I have also kept the discussion of neuroscientific and philosophical issues general in order to avoid overwhelming the reader with technical detail and nomenclatures.