

# Human Nature

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The Reverend Roger Fritts

Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church

Bethesda, Maryland

“Human nature” are words that describe the character and personality traits with which most of us are born, as opposed to those we learn. An early description of human nature is found in Genesis:

. . . when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, . . . the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, . . . Therefore the LORD God sent the man forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.

The story of Adam and Eve forms the basis for the doctrine of original sin, a doctrine that many branches of Christianity hold as true. “Sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned,” said Paul in his Epistle to the Romans, writing about fifty-eight years after the birth of Jesus. More than three hundred years later Augustine interpreted Paul to have said that Adam’s sin was hereditary; because of Eve and Adam all of us are born sinners. Original sin, the idea that humans are born bad and must await

redemption, became a cornerstone of Christian theological tradition.

Unitarian Universalists do not teach original sin. We do not believe that through the sin of the first human couple we all became corrupted. Instead we have a much more positive view of human nature. We believe we are all born with reason, which helps us think and form opinions about God, ourselves, our neighbors and the world.

Before 1914, most Unitarians believed that human beings were born rational and good. A few of us because of bad upbringing learned to be mean and aggressive, but most of us kept the kindness and reasonableness with which we were born. As a result, we believed that human progress was inevitable. A key affirmation made by most Unitarians was “onward and upward forever.” The two World Wars undercut this optimism. One English Unitarian, G. K. Chesterton, became a Roman Catholic, and is reputed to have said after millions died in the First World War: “Original sin is the one doctrine of the Christian Church that is so self-evident it requires no proof.”

For more than ninety years Unitarian Universalists have struggled with the issue. Most of us want to be positive about human nature. We want to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, but when people do horrible things, they call into question our optimistic view of human nature. We struggle with the question: Are human beings innately aggressive or kind? Or are we some combination of the two?

Increasingly we turn to science to answer these questions. Using the same careful scientific observation that biologists use to study creatures (such as ants), biologists, anthropologists and other researchers are beginning to answer basic questions about human nature.

This scientific research into human nature got off to a bad start after the publication of *The Origin of the Species*. Darwin wrote about natural selection, the process by which individuals with favorable traits are more likely to survive and reproduce than those with unfavorable traits. People in power then claimed that their prejudice against others who were different from themselves had a scientific basis. The result was the eugenics movement. States forced sterilization of the mentally ill to prevent the “passing on” of mental illness to the next generation. Between 1907 and 1963, doctors forcibly sterilized more than 64,000 individuals in the United States.

By the 1960s most people considered the idea of engineering human nature by force sterilization, as morally repugnant. Many social scientists began to argue that we are born with a blank slate with no human nature. Many university psychology departments taught B. F. Skinner’s behaviorism. In 1970 at Arizona State University my introductory psychology class taught me how to train a white rat to pick up a marble in its mouth, climb to the top of a can and drop the marble in the hole in the can. This, my professor taught me, is how all animals including humans learn behavior. We were not born kind or aggressive. Depending on how adults reward children for certain behaviors, we learned either to be generous, or mean.

In the 1970s the intellectual climate shifted. Biologists who studied the behavior of insects, birds, fish and mammals suggested that they could apply the same approach to studying the human animal. In this way biologists could develop a scientifically based definition of human nature.

This movement has been given several names such as Neo Darwinism, socio-iology, evolutionary psychology, and genetic determinism. Edward Wilson, an expert at Harvard University in the study of ants, is a leader in this movement. In the 1970s

Wilson’s ideas were controversial, because they challenged the idea that human babies are born with a blank slate. Opponents feared that Professor Wilson’s ideas would lead to new efforts in the biological engineering of human beings, such as more forced sterilizations. Some were so fearful that they pored ice water on professor Wilson’s head.

Nevertheless, Edward Wilson began an intellectual revolution in the 1970s that has stimulated research on human nature by biologists and geneticists. Over the last thirty years most social scientists have abandoned the blank slate idea and acknowledged that our genes do influence human behavior.

So are we born sinners? In his book, *On Human Nature*, Edward Wilson says most aggressive behavior among members of the same species are the result of over crowding. Animals use aggression to gain control over food or shelter that are scarce or are likely to become so at some time during their life cycle. They intensify their threats and attacks with increasing frequency as the population around them grows denser. He says our instincts strongly predisposed us to slide into irrational hostility under conditions of overcrowding. This has two results. First the aggression encourages people to spread out. Second it raises the death rate, and lowers the birth rate. As aggression gradually increases in intensity, it operates like a tightening valve to slow and finally shut off the increase in population. When populations stabilize, killing stops.

Wilson notes that the home animal defends its territory far more aggressively, far more vigorously, than the invading animals. The defender, he says, usually wins over the invader, something our current political leaders are learning.

So, are we by nature sinful aggressors? It appears that most of us do not have within us a genetic code that causes us to be

aggressive killers. Still, it appears that human beings do have encoded within our brains a strong tendency to respond with hatred to external threats. We escalate our hostility with the goal of overwhelming the source of the threat.

Obviously, this instinct to defend our territory aggressively is no longer likely to ensure the survival of the human race. Now, to survive we must learn to control our instinctive desire to defend our territory violently and replace that desire by developing skills of diplomacy. In the interest of survival we need to understand our instincts and work to modify our behaviors so they serve human needs today, not the needs our ancestors had during the hundreds of thousands of years that we were hunters and gatherers.

So biology and anthropology suggests an answer to the question: are we by nature violent creatures? But what about the Unitarians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who argued that deep down humans are kind, loving creatures? Is the impulse that causes an actress to go to Africa to adopt a child, a learned behavior, or is this act of generosity coded in our genes?

Biologist Edward Wilson writes that unselfish behavior is found in all human societies. However, the question of whether human beings are good, is complicated by the fact that most of the time unselfish acts are not completely unselfish. When, for example, an actress adopts a child, she does so in part because of the pleasure she receives raising the child. Professor Wilson calls this soft core altruism.

Hard-core altruism is a purely unselfish act unaffected by any kind of reward. These hard-core unselfish acts are usually directed at our closest relatives. Most of us will give our lives to protect our children. The father of the child in Africa might be willing to make the ultimate sacrifice of giving his child away to a wealthy actress.

Living in desperate poverty, the father knows that this act of giving away his son increases the chances that the boy will survive. This is a hard-core unselfish act coded into our human nature. We will make enormous sacrifices for our immediate family without expecting any reward.

The remainder of our kindness, our generosity is essentially soft, that is we help others outside our immediate family in part because it meets our needs.

What we call evil, is most often the attempt of another human being to defend his or her territory in the face of scarce resources. What we call good is often mixed with selfish motives. We give to charities, we help other people because we believe we hope that these acts will also benefit us. The exception is when we do good acts to help our closest friends and relatives. Then evolution has programmed our brain to encourage us to act even if we receive nothing in return, even if our actions cause us to sacrifice our lives. This human nature developed in our ancestors while living in small tribes as hunters.

In our western religion, for centuries Christian theologians taught that humans were sinners, in need of redemption. Only a few religious leaders, such as the Unitarians and the Universalists presented a positive view of human nature. The world wars called into question this optimistic liberal religious view.

Meanwhile, Darwin published his ideas about evolution. Using Darwin's ideas of the survival of the fittest, some people developed a program they called eu-gen-ics. They justified the sterilization of thousands of people, by claiming that they were improving the human race.

Rejecting eugenics after the second world war, B. F. Skinner and others argued that humans are a blank slate at birth. They believed our environment determined our behavior.

In the 1970s the idea that biology and genetics could tell us about human nature reemerged. Today the old notions of human nature based on the Christian understanding of the fall of Adam and Eve are being replaced by the results of social biology, anthropology, evolutionary psychology and genetic research.

The German Jewish psychiatrist, Erich Fromm, offered an alternative interpretation of the story of the Garden of Eden. Fromm said the story is not about sin. Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden in harmony with nature but without awareness of themselves. Human history began with the first moment of self-conscious awareness. After eating from the tree of knowledge we saw ourselves for the first time. We saw ourselves as separate from nature. We saw ourselves as thinking individuals. The Paradise the first humans were expelled from was the Paradise of living in nature. That is the Paradise in which other animals still live. When our brains grew and we became self-aware we were expelled from Paradise. We are a product of nature and yet we transcend nature being endowed with reason and self-awareness. It is our fate to use, not just our instincts, but also our reason and our self awareness, to survive and to learn about the universe. Listen again to the old myth:

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did

eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, . . . And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.

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