

Human Nature
The Animal that Thinks it's Not
By
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During the very first sermon I gave as your minister, exactly eight years ago today, I told the story of having, then, recently been in a coffee shop with a friend whom the barista thought looked enough like me to ask if we were related. Being a philosopher, I was immediately perplexed about how best to respond. I knew, in the vernacular, she was asking if we part of the same immediate family, to which my answer should have been, *no*. Knowing, however, that all human beings are so genetically similar that we are all closely related and should be considered part of one family, I also thought the correct answer should be, *yes*. "As I understand it," I finally replied, "there's more genetic difference between two chimpanzees living in the same troop than there is between any two human beings living anywhere on the planet. So, yes, I'd say we are related."

"Huh?" The barista said.

"There's more genetic difference between two chimpanzees living in the same troop than there is between any two human beings living anywhere on the planet," I repeated, "So I'd say we are at least cousins."

"Oh," she asked, "Is that true?"

"Yes," I said, "As I understand it, the genetic line we come from is so narrow that all humans ever to have lived are very closely related, far more so than most species."

She took a couple of seconds to process what I'd just said, then replied, "But I don't believe we're monkeys."

"Huh?" I responded.

"I don't think we came from monkeys," she repeated.

"But you are a monkey," I blurted.

"What?" She asked.

"You are a monkey," I reiterated.

Just then one of her cohorts approached and asked, with a smile on his face, "Did you say she's a monkey?"

"Yes, we're all monkeys," I said, "Well primates, apes," I specified.

"We're ape-like," he argued.

"No, we're apes," I insisted, "classified by our brachiated shoulders, and the fact that humans, orangutans, gorillas, and chimpanzees all stem from a common ancestor, making us almost genetically identical."

Given that the coffee shop was just a couple blocks from the Southern Baptist seminary, I shouldn't have been surprised to learn all three of the baristas working behind the counter that day were students there, nor that my comments would end up sparking a short-lived

debate over evolution. One of them attempted to affirm her creationist beliefs by explaining, “You get your beliefs from a book and so do I.”

Another said, quite adamantly, “I will never believe in evolution! Never! No matter what anyone says!”

After I argued there’s much scientific evidence for evolution and that the Bible is meant to be a book of meaningful stories, metaphors, and myths, another commanded, “That’s it! This conversation is over!” So, I ordered a cup of coffee and sat down with my... relative.

I bring this anecdote up again today because it illustrates two points I want to make. Firstly, the trouble we have seeing ourselves as animals, as but one of the many different kinds of species on Earth. Secondly, it demonstrates this widespread notion that humans are somehow separate from nature is based upon religious beliefs, not science. In his 1956 bestseller, *The Art of Loving*, social psychologist Erich Fromm suggests this sense we are separate from the “animal kingdom” and feel we have “transcended nature,” that we have lost our “state of original oneness with nature,”¹ as he puts it, is one of the psychological problems each of us struggles to resolve. Humanity “can only go forward by developing [its] reason,” Fromm says, “by finding a new harmony, a human one, instead of the prehuman harmony which is irretrievably lost.”²

Almost paradoxically, our harmony with nature is lost because we are more conscious of our environment than most the other animals we share our planet with. Like other animals, we begin completely undifferentiated from our environments, so at one with the bodies of our mothers, that we have no consciousness or awareness of our own. It is only after we emerge from her womb and begin interacting with others and with our environments that we increasingly learn to differentiate ourselves from everyone and everything around us. We go from being part of others and the world to feeling apart from them, to being an individual.

When this happens, we begin to think dualistically about the world, that it’s a world of disunified things and beings that are separate from ourselves. This allows us to define everything in the world outside of their relational contexts. Remember in *Genesis*, where it says, “Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.”³ It’s interesting that this naming of the animals occurs right after Adam is warned not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and right before he does, just as toddlers first learn to speak by pointing their fingers and naming objects in their environments as the first mental steps toward becoming abstract thinkers. Yet in the very process of naming things, of defining them, we become separate from them. Then, after

¹ Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, Open Road Media, Kindle Edition, New York, NY, 1956, p. 6.

² Ibid.

³ *Genesis* 2:19-20

Adam and Eve partake of the forbidden fruit and learn to distinguish good and evil for themselves, to think abstractly about things beyond their immediate environment, they are expelled from their undifferentiated paradise to become fully differentiated beings, aware of their separation from others, other people, other creatures, and from the entire world in which they live. Consciousness certainly has its advantages, but it can also lead us to live entirely within our heads, as idealists or ideologues unwilling or unable to recognize the realities around us.

Taoism illustrates this same phenomenon with its familiar Yin/Yang mandala. In it we see a sphere of opposites, which is how human consciousness allows us to experience the world, as duality—black and white, hot and cold, true and false, good and evil. But the larger reality is *Tai Chi*, the Great Unity of all that is. This is why Yin and Yang have no discernable beginning or end and are ever flowing and changing into each other, even as each always contains a spot of their opposite, because they are related. The world is not cut in half, as our thinking minds must imagine it, but is one circle containing all things in unified relationship. “When we look into the heart of a flower,” Thich Nhat Hanh writes, “we see clouds, sunshine, minerals, time, the earth, and everything else in the cosmos in it. Without clouds, there could be no rain, and there would be no flower. Without time, the flower could not bloom. In fact, the flower is made entirely of non-flower elements; it has no independent, individual existence.”⁴

Many religions and mystics have recognized this deeper reality, that all is one, that we are part of All our Relations, yet it is more of a feeling we get than something our conscious minds can grasp. When we think about the world, we think as if we are apart from it. We think dualistically. “The experience of separateness arouses anxiety,” Fromm says, “it is, indeed, the source of all anxiety. Being separate means being cut off, without any capacity to use my human powers. Hence to be separate means to be helpless, unable to grasp the world—things and people—actively; it means that the world can invade me without my ability to react.”⁵

This may help explain why so many of us behave as if we are at war with the world, that we must have “dominion over it,” as *Genesis* says, or, as the philosopher Francis Bacon suggested, should torture “mother earth for her secrets.”⁶ From global warming to human warfare, the delusion that we are separate from others and Other often leads to much suffering and injustice. The Jewish philosopher and mystic, Martin Buber theorized this misguided objectification of others is the root of all evil, which we commit by turning a *You*

⁴ Hanh, Thich Nhat, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Riverhead Books, Berkley Publishing Group, New York, NY, 1995, p. 11.

⁵ Fromm, *ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶ Fox, Matthew, *Wrestling with the Prophets*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1995, p.4.

into an *It*, a subject into an object. “What, then, does one experience of the You?” he asks, “Nothing at all. For one does not experience it.”⁷

For Buber, it’s impossible for us to commit evil against others when we stand in an “I-You” relationship, rather than an “I-It,” relationship. Evil, for him, happens only when we objectify others, when we turn others, including other animals and beings, into objects, which justifies using them for our own purposes. “As long as love is ‘blind,’” he writes, “that is, as long as it does not see a *whole* being—it does not yet truly stand under the basic word of relation.”⁸ The basic word of relation to which he refers, again, is “I-You,” meaning us, together. So long as we stand in an “I-It” mentality, a mindset of separation, we cannot be in relationship. But even the “wicked,” he said, “become a revelation when they are touched by the sacred basic word [I-You].”⁹ So, for Buber, like Fromm, our challenge and task as human beings is to become related to the world again.

This is why, in addition to feeling anxious about our dissected world, “The awareness of human separation, without reunion by love—is the source of shame,” Fromm says. “It is at the same time the source of guilt and anxiety.”¹⁰ As with the barista I mentioned earlier, who became nearly panicked at the thought of evolution, the notion that we all originate from the same source, are part of the Earth, and are related to each other, the idea we are separate is upheld by religious views that claim humans are fundamentally flawed, because of original sin in Western religion, and because our human desires cause us to suffer according Eastern religion. Unlike any other creatures, humans alone are capable of committing good or evil because we expect ourselves to overcome our very nature by subduing our biological urges and instincts. Yet we need only grasp our relatedness to others, including other creatures and the whole world, to prevent our own desires and interests from being fulfilled at their expense. I and You, us, we, united by love—love being responsibility for the welfare of All our Relations; and recognizing that All *are* our Relations.

Sadly, it is no longer necessary for us to subscribe to traditional religious doctrines to believe human beings are innately flawed. We don’t have to believe in original sin or in the 2nd Noble Truth, that suffering is rooted in desire, to feel ashamed of ourselves. Even the most nonsectarian and secular among us are ready to ascribe the evils of the world to human nature. This is the issue I’m raising today, that we have been taught for so long that we are separate from nature and that our own human nature is innately flawed that we don’t trust it’s even possible to establish a society based upon I-You, because Buber’s basic word for relationship requires us to feel we are part of nature and that our own nature is one of love, not depravity.

⁷ Buber, Martin, *I and Thou*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann, Charles Scribner’s Sons, U.S., 1970, p. 61.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67f.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁰ Fromm, *ibid.*, 7f.

I've been reading an excellent science book lately, entitled, *Evolving Ourselves: Redesigning the Future of Humanity—One Gene at a Time* by Juan Enriquez and Steven Gullans. It's about the rapid evolutionary changes happening to our environment, to other creatures, and, on the microscopic level, to ourselves because of human activity. Some of it's good, some of it isn't, and some may yet lead to many unwanted and unintended consequences, like antibiotic resistant super bacterium. It's a good book I couldn't recommend more, but I do have an issue with its authors frequent use of the phrase, "unnatural selection" in regard to human activity. For this term, once again, insinuates what humans do is unnatural, or that we are interfering with how evolution is supposed to occur.

Yet evolution has always occurred through both creation and destruction of the environment, and often to the detriment of other species. Were it not for the destruction of the dinosaurs, it's unlikely humans would even be here. Even the tiniest of organisms can dramatically alter their environment, which is why we're ever trying to control and contain invasive species. About 2.5 billion years ago, our single-celled ancestors excreted so much oxygen that Earth experienced its first mass extinction and was on the verge of exploding and becoming a lifeless fireball. Fortunately, some cells adapted to consume oxygen and began excreting carbon dioxide instead, bringing things back into balance. Today we have the opposite problem. The point is, just because a species is destructive, doesn't mean it's not part of nature. In Hinduism the mother of creation, Kali Ma, is both compassionate and fearsome because she both creates and destroys.

In philosophy, the naturalistic fallacy refers to the presumption that what's natural is good and what's unnatural is bad. Just think of disease, tornados, poisonous snakes, and the like, however, and you'll recall that not everything natural is necessarily desirable. Likewise, human nature, as part of nature, like Kali Ma, is capable of both creativity and destruction, but the latter does not make us fundamentally flawed or separate from that which we sometimes destroy.

Historically, the Unitarian half of our liberal religion has offered another, more positive view of human nature to the world. Indeed, the first Christians were both Unitarian and Universalist in their beliefs. Unitarianism began as the belief Jesus was but a human being who brought dignity to all of humanity. Universalism began as a disbelief in eternal damnation, as disbelief that anyone is so fundamentally flawed that they deserve to be forever punished. It wasn't until the start of the 4th century, after Christianity was Romanized, and its rulers needed to control people, partly by making them feel ashamed of themselves, that the Church authorities made Unitarianism illegal, turned human Jesus, who had elevated humanity, into divine Christ who came, instead, to save us from our innate and original corruption. Rather than being based upon human dignity, Christianity became rooted in the notion of human depravity.

But Unitarianism, which had been forbidden for more than a thousand years, reemerged in Eastern Europe during the 16th century, as reformers like Michael Servetus, Ferenc Dávid, King John Sigismund, and Faustus Socinus, among other Unitarian thinkers, once again began rejecting the doctrine of original sin and uplifting Jesus's humanity, and humanity as a whole in the process. When a new breed of Unitarianism emerged in 18th century America, it almost immediately began rejecting the notion of human depravity. Rev. Charles Chauncy, minister of Boston's First Church from 1727 to 1787, strongly opposed the idea we must all be born again, preaching that, instead of being born in sin, human beings are born with the capacity for both sin and righteousness."¹¹ This idea, that our nature is at least partly good, was initially called *Arminianism*, but eventually became known as Unitarianism.

Later, near the start of the 20th century, the Unitarian minister, John Haynes Holmes, an early advocate of the Social Gospel, preached that religion ought not dwell upon "the supernatural and the miraculous"¹² but upon human welfare and our human agency to do good. Later, one of his younger associates, a Universalist named Clarence Skinner penned a statement adopted by the Universalist General Convention in 1917 that explicitly rejected the notion of human depravity, and later wrote that the starting point of liberalism must be a sense that, "at the core of human nature is something good and sound... [an] inherent moral capacity to choose the right..."¹³ A short time later Religious Humanism was born of Unitarianism, right here in our church, where its founder, John Dietrich, our minister from 1911 to 1916, first referred to his emerging beliefs as *Humanism*.

You see, our tradition has been different than most of western culture for the past 2000 years, because our most sacred beliefs are not based on shame, the kind of shame Fromm says can makes us feel separate from the world because it makes us feel disunited from love, which, again, is the ability and desire to take responsibility for the wellbeing and care of others and the entire world. I believe everything we do, everything we invent, all our machines and technologies, are part of natural selection. This doesn't make them necessarily good or bad, though today, more than ever, our human presence is causing tremendous destruction. The processes of evolution now require us to adapt by becoming more creative than we are destructive. But we can't do this if we don't recognize our relationship with the Earth and all our fellow creatures. We must realize that human nature is nature, and that we are part of nature, and that we are innately capable of doing good in the world, because goodness and love, the desire to care of one another and the Earth, is our nature.

¹¹ Robinson, David, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1985, p. 11.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 141.