

An Essay on Human Nature – or Should We Blame Ourselves for Environmental Problems?

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The modern world is a complex place, so much so that many of us long for a simpler one where black is black and white is white. This may partly explain the return to religious fundamentalism that is becoming prevalent in certain areas: a certainty that there is only one way to lead our lives, with simple rules and laws. It may also explain the current zeitgeist of a retreat from internationalism, with a certainty that all would be well if only we could manage things by ourselves: collaboration and compromise is just too difficult. This, of course, ignores the problem that, because humans are now so abundant across the planet, issues are global and can only be solved if we all work together to a common agenda.

Preventing runaway global warming is an example where such an approach is needed. Environmentalists tend to argue that many of the environmental problems we encounter have arisen because we are out of tune with nature, that we are now too divorced from natural systems. If only we could all 'go back to nature' all would be well: back to a Golden Age.

However humans have had a long evolutionary history so if we could go back, back to where? To when we first shaped stones? To when we learned that we could hit each other with sticks? Lit our own fires? Put on our first clothes? Made our first pots? Tamed our first dogs? Painted our first caves? Put on our first bangles, painted our faces or put a feather in our hair? First symbolised our thoughts in language? Or on stone or parchment? First banged a bone against wood? Or strung a gut? Built our first houses? Domesticated livestock? Cultivated our first crops? Made our first wine? Carried potatoes or maize to Europe?

In practice we have been diverging from other species for such a long time that 'returning to nature' becomes meaningless. We have tamed fire, carved stone, moulded soil, manipulated wood, turned animals into clothes, herbivores into livestock, plants into crops. These actions have in fact directed our own evolution: cooking, through use of fire, enabled us to have a shorter gut and non-protruding jaw, and perhaps it was our love of clothes that encouraged our nakedness. And we have never stopped in using our undoubted intelligence to manipulate the natural world to our own ends. We are probably incapable of stopping. It is not in our nature to do so. But what is 'our nature'? To find a clue to this it is necessary to delve into the characteristics of the natural world out of which we have evolved.

Fundamentally this is a planet of life in a universe that appears to be generally hostile to it. And over the aeons life has altered the world's climate and geology. James Lovelock in his Gaia hypothesis argued that life has maintained conditions suitable for its own continued existence. But I am not convinced. Over the billions of years of its existence, life has transformed the surface layers of the planet in ways it cannot have predicted – and then has had to put up with the changes it has unwittingly instigated.

For example the evolution of photosynthesis (the capture of light energy by plants) resulted in the atmosphere becoming oxygen-rich. The original single-celled organisms who first liberated all this oxygen could not know that it would result in climate and geological change on planetary scale – that, for example it would cause global cooling (snowball earth) through oxidation of the then abundant greenhouse gas, methane, or likewise, in the long-term convert the output of volcanoes from being methane-rich to being carbon dioxide-rich; or that the presence of oxygen would eventually allow a protective ozone layer to form and hence allow multi-celled organisms, including all animals, to evolve.

In the Carboniferous period, plant growth absorbed huge amounts of carbon and stored it underground into geological formations of coal, which we humans are only now releasing back into the air. Additionally, marine organisms with shells of calcium carbonate also removed vast amounts of carbon and stored it in what are now massive limestones. The arrival of terrestrial plants changed the whole pattern of rock-weathering, water cycling and gas exchange.

Life also has an internal dynamic. The first multi-cellular animals spent many millions of years happily growing and reproducing in a predator-free environment, until carnivores appeared and started eating them. Life would never be the same again! The harmony of life in the primeval Garden of Eden was upset a long time ago. Much, much later, when continental drift caused North and South America to join, the mammals from the north caused major extinction of the more primitive mammals of the south, a natural example of introduced species causing havoc.

The lesson from our geological past is that life has had to adapt to changes it itself has instigated. Hence it is the 'nature of nature' to have no forethought: it has to create work-around solutions to the problems it has itself created (which also applies to the sub-optimal design of the human body!). Life has also had to put up with extinction events every few hundred million years through no fault of its own, brought about by meteorite impacts and massive magma extrusions.

There are other characteristics of life which our early ancestors would have noticed, characteristics which would have shaped how we think and how we view the world. Often life comes across as 'a balance of contradictions'. For example, life depends on death: no animal can survive without destroying all or part of another living being. Plants also rely on the recycled nutrients from their dead predecessors and fungi, as saprophytes, rely on death to grow. Reproduction is associated with mortality: the world could not function if every spore, every seed, every egg, every born young survived. Most young are destined to die before maturity ('sacrifices to the food chain' to quote Gary Snyder).

Also there is a contradiction between predictability and unpredictability: compare, for example, the predictable facets of sunrise and sunset, lunar cycles, tides and seasons with the unpredictability of earthquakes, storms and floods. Related to this is that the world comes across as both discriminating and indiscriminating: illness, disease, ill-fortune or good luck can at times appear random, at other times selective of individuals. And the same features, water, sunshine or fire for example, can be both life-enhancing and life-destroying: snow can be soft and gentle or hard and dangerous. And in the natural world we see the coexistence of joy and pain: life is full of joy and energy; life is full of agony and fear. A dog running around happily with a half-dead rabbit in its mouth, or a cat playing with a mouse. The natural world can be beautiful. The natural world can be terrible.

Nature is thus full of contradictions which we began to notice as our reflective consciousness emerged but, although we noticed them we could not really explain them. And they appear to be fixed. For example, life has to depend on death – it appears to be the nature of nature. And, being unable to explain all this, we called nature 'God': a permanent 'presence' dictating the laws of nature but also full of psychological contradictions related to the contradictions outlined above – a 'totality of opposites' to use Jung's definition of God.

We humans cannot escape this biological heritage. We have evolved from nature and so we have inherited these contradictions: they have become part of our nature. Indeed, we are nature made conscious, for what else can we be? Our nature must in reality be a reflection of the wider nature of nature. This means that there is rarely anything new in what we do: life has already explored most of the behavioural possibilities. Are there any behavioural or societal or possibilities left? Witness, for

example, the vast range of mating habits of insects, many of which appear very deviant to us; the ten percent of birds which are homosexual; the artistic appreciation shown by bower birds; or the various types of insect society – some hierarchical such as bees and ants, some egalitarian such as pond skaters (with every other type of society in between).

With our large brain we are able to express all nature's behavioural possibilities within our own single species, either within an individual or across individuals. This is illustrated by all these possibilities now being embodied on the internet, from what we see as normal to what we would see as extreme. And we have no choice but to follow our nature which is, by any definition, a given, something inherited from the natural world, something we cannot change.

Only now that we have been successful, and significantly enlarged our population, is our enhanced intelligence appearing as a Faustian bargain: the use of fire follows through to our dependence on energy, which in turn affects the environment for all of us; likewise the wearing of clothes or the use of farming. But is this perhaps not the same pattern that life has always followed, not worrying about the impacts of its own evolution? Our global impact, whether habitat loss, species extinction, nutrient enrichment, pollution or climate change is merely one of a long line of biologically-induced planetary changes.

It would appear that life has had no moral position on all of this, is amoral. In nature, whether many plants and animals benefit from a mild winter or a favourable summer, or whether a whole hillside with all its plants and animals is destroyed by an earthquake, is not a concern of nature. A female spider, presumably, has no moral compunction about killing and eating the male after mating. A fox no moral compunction about eating baby rabbits. But we, as nature made conscious, can see both sides of the contradictions, and we decide that one course of action is to be preferred over another, particularly as it relates to ourselves. We believe in morality. We do not think it right, for example, that most of our children should die before reaching maturity, which is the case with most other species; other animals may not like it, but have to accept it.

The evolution of reflective consciousness gives us this realisation that nature is amoral and so puts us above nature: we are not happy that nature, by its very nature, can be cruel, that young are taken advantage of, that disease is unfair, that the injured are left by the herd to die. We do, however, like the 'good bits' – watching fox cubs at play, climbing the hills in glorious weather, walking the beach at sunset.

Hence one of the facets of human nature is that we make moral judgements about nature's approach: we become selective as to which bits of nature (which by definition includes our own nature) we think are 'good' and which are 'bad'. Morality has emerged. This, as Jung argues, makes us superior to God – we can see his imperfections. However in practice we do find it very hard to override our own imperfections: so being superior does not necessarily make us any better.

We see global change caused by us, such as pollution, loss of wildlife and climate change, as 'bad' and that caused by nature, if not good, at least as 'just what happens'. However the history of the planet suggests that life in the round will survive all self-induced changes, and humans, with a population numbered in billions, are unlikely to become extinct whatever happens from human-induced planetary change. In fact our species is more likely to survive the expected global warming than the global cooling (the next ice age) that might otherwise have happened.

How, then, do we solve the global problems we ourselves have brought about? Rather than grand visions and grand statements about changing the nature of society, I am in favour of the pragmatic approach favoured by Karl Popper in his book 'The Open Society and its Enemies': tackle each

problem as it arises on a case by case basis. This, after all, is how life has coped: as each environmental change occurs, self-induced or not, life adapts. We will have to use our creativity to invent work-arounds to the problems we ourselves have created.

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