Anark
Human Nature
Aug 28, 2019

Author script, video source: https://youtu.be/e27RVFxNOcc

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which birthed it. The difference will be decided upon whether we may build a society of hope or a society of cynicism. So reject learned helplessness, reject the defeatists and the other assistants to decay. Our best future shall only ever lie in the hands of the courageous and the eternally undeterred. We must build the structures of liberation that are needed so that we may find freedom from dominance forever. It is not only your own fate that you hold in your hands, it is the fate of many generations to come.

Introduction

The following is the script of the video I published on my channel Anark. If you would like to watch that video, it is here: https://youtu.be/e27RVFxNOcc

Minor edits have been made to the script to instead refer to itself as an essay instead of a video. Other than this, the content has remained the same and may be seen as a copy of the video, in text form, that can be distributed wholly in place of the video.

Solidarity forever.

Human Nature

This essay is on a topic that is, by all measures, contentious in every political community. But…it is contentious precisely because of its importance and bearing that in mind, I think it would be irresponsible for me to avoid it. In my experience, even if, after a long descent into political discussion, the person I am speaking with is on board with radical change and even if they agree with the critiques of capitalism, and even if they agree that the leftist vision is the correct one, they will still often express this one last compunction that prevents them from really allowing themselves to imagine a better world:

"I agree with you, okay?" they'll say, "capitalism is corrupt, socialism would be an improvement, and humans can't be trusted with unaccountable authority…but I just can't get over this feeling that human beings are inherently selfish, competitive, and brutish and that they'll just ruin this whole project with their greed."

So what is human nature?

This question of humanity's inherent nature is one of the oldest philosophical dialogues in recorded history, rooting all the way back to the Greeks and the Chinese, where both took for granted that humanity had such a nature. For this reason, their analyses largely centered around discussing what it was and how humanity might organize itself under its auspices. During the Enlightenment, however, a countervailing idea came into popularity. In this view, human beings were born without innate ideas and were instead formed by their circumstances. It has often been called the "blank slate" theory of human minds. This blank slate conception underpinned an entire generation of philosophical inquiry, enduring with only moderate critique until the discovery of genetics.

So we must ask: Is humanity a creature defined by its essential qualities and therefore shackled to them for all eternity? Or is humanity a blank slate, written upon by the quill of material conditions, unbridled by limitations to explore an infinite potential? The contention of this essay is that there are aspects of truth in both perspectives. Yes, there are some components of humanity which can be said to be attributable to their nature as a species, but there are also an enormous host of components that are erroneously attributed to human nature for the needs of the powerful and are, in reality, formed purely from humanity's interaction with the world. Above all, we will argue here, that humanity's most characteristic trait is this: adaptability through learning.

Now, a disclaimer: this is not to say that this trait is what defines each individual as human. A person is human by genetic fact. Further, individual humans can be both quite unadaptable and quite limited in their ability to learn. Instead, what we mean to say is that humanity as a species is most characteristically defined by its ability to adapt through learning. And, indeed, it can be said that a variety of other species share this trait, especially those that have high intelligence. But that is

population long enough for those that were left to build a better society. After that society was built, they no longer even produced dominators, nor did newcomers reintroduce the dominator's behavior. It has now been twenty years and Sapolsky's troupe still functions this way.

I contend we are not bound to a lesser fate than baboons. You see, it is not humanity's fate to be competitive and selfish, but nor will humanity naturally gravitate toward a nature of selflessness and cooperation if left completely to their devices. It should instead be said that a society of cooperation is one which is better fit to humanity's strengths; collaboration is a tool which allows humanity to overcome their communal obstacles, to focus upon discovery instead of incremental benefit, and to pursue the aspects of their being which bring the flourishing of the individual and society together.

We are a species with an intellect whose rival is seen nowhere in the animal kingdom. And that intellect guarantees that we can adapt far more quickly than any other animal on Earth. Why should we be burdened by the mal-adapted instincts of the few? Why should we wait around for the scales of justice to tip in our favor by chance? Humanity, gifted with such incredible intelligence, is a species able to conceive of a better future. More than that, we are gifted with the ability to create a better future, if only we can oust the dominators from their perches. Because…this society of ruthlessness, of selfishness, of greed and deprivation of other…it is simply not conducive to our nature.

Thus..while it may be true that our nature does not constrain us, it also does not guarantee our flourishing in the face of the dominators. A better future requires our intervention if we hope to see it. While our destiny could lie among the stars, so too could it lie here…stranded by the petty selfishness of the few…upon a dead planet; dominated by the mean-spirited, a species who could have spanned galaxies, relegated to live its remaining miserable centuries in the dead womb of the thing

very structures of cooperation which brought the revolution of ideas that the competitors exploited for their glory to begin with, are undermined. And instead of the scientist and the creative resting in luxury to uncover the next revolution, they are callously bound to the wheel of competition, distracted from their highest goal, and the progress of humankind is thus slowed to the snail's pace of an oligarch's revelation.

The Vicious Cycle

Let's return, for a moment, to the story we told about the baboons earlier. Robert Sapolsky was asked, when interviewed later, why he thought the baboon society had changed in such a drastic and enduring way after the die-off. Sapolsky said that, in the original troupe, when the new male baboons would enter, regardless of any pre-programmed genetic code, they were quickly inundated with the most violent and degrading treatment from the dominators of the group. Fearful of reprisal from the bullying baboons, females would refuse to mate with the new males or groom them. In witnessing this hierarchical society, the new baboons were trained on the requirements to survive: become a dominator or be outcast. But…once the bullies were gone, the new baboons that entered the troupe were no longer attacked and degraded. Instead, upon arriving, they were introduced to a reciprocal environment. Females, no longer threatened by the violent bullying baboons, could now freely choose their mates. The new baboons adapted to this way of life and flourished.

Baboons, considered one of the most violently dominant species of primate in existence, were able to completely change their social structure in an enduring way in extremely short order. And, most notably, it did not require that there be genetic preening to select some ideal peaceful baboon. It only required that the dominators were removed from the

the crux. Intelligence necessitates the ability to learn and the ability to learn increases the capability to adapt rapidly.

But one cannot be blamed for feeling that this dodges the question. When we discuss human nature, especially in the context we are interested in, what we are really asking is if humanity can better itself in a permanent fashion. Surely, given our knowledge of modern genetics, we must concede that some aspect of humanity lies unchanging as the tides shift around them. However, even if we assume it is true that humanity is somehow bound by its nature, who is to say that this nature is brutish and selfish?

The science certainly does not offer such a clear condemnation. For example, a study that was carried out in 2012 demonstrated that human infants as young as 15 months old had already developed a keen sense of right and wrong. To quote the Scientific American summary:

"To measure moral sentiments, researchers first had the children watch movies of an actor distributing food, either equally or unequally, between two people. Most of the toddlers spent more time looking at the unequal outcome, suggesting it surprised them by violating their basic sense of fairness. Next, every child picked his or her favorite of two new toys, and the researchers then asked the kids to share one of the toys. Of the infants who shared their favorite toy, 92 percent had also been surprised by the unfair outcome in the videos."

This, at an age when very little, if any, opportunity for learned behavior has presented itself.

And it cannot be said that our closest genetic cousin displays this brutish and selfish nature: the bonobo does not solve its problems through dominance and bloodshed. Quite the opposite, their disputes are solved by trading sexual favors, interpersonal conflicts are rare, and female bonobos are treated well despite their smaller stature. The bonobo even largely neglects tribalism, resolving problems that arise between groups nonviolently.

But we have to be fair: there are also extreme counter-examples among our genetic cousins, are there not? The baboon is known for its quickness to anger and its internal social hierarchy. All relationships within their troupes are brutally reinforced by the will of the patriarch and the chain of dominance that lies underneath him defines the way that all social interactions play out. The weak baboons are left to demure in the face of such force, while the strong vie for the patriarch's position through bloodshed and daily conflict. This may seem worrisome to those arguing for humanity's better nature. Indeed, it would seem it did not take extraordinary genetic variance to achieve this affair. But…let me tell you a story…

Robert Sapolsky is a professor of Biology and Neurology at Stanford who, for a period of time, staked out a position watching a troupe of baboons in eastern Africa. The baboons he came to observe, at first, were a very common sort: based highly on a dominance hierarchy, very male oriented, very violent. Shortly after, nearby to Sapolsky's troupe, humans began dumping their trash in an enormous pile. Baboons in the area began feasting on the trash that was being left there. Violence erupted at the site as they fought over the spoils and the strongest baboons continued to victor. But then…something happened.

Sapolsky noticed that many of the baboons were becoming horribly sick. It turned out that they had been accidentally eating meat infected with tuberculosis. It rapidly began killing all of the baboons in the troupe who were occupying the dump. And all of the dominator baboons? Well…they were the ones who had eaten the meat most, thus they began dying very quickly. The baboons that were left over began to display very different behaviors. Adult males ceased to quarrel and began practicing reciprocal grooming behavior. The males also began to respond in-kind to grooming from female baboons, an almost indecipherably rare act beforehand. Violence diminished

collective knowledge gained therein, that the progress of a few is made into the progress of the many. Cooperation is therefore the organizational structure of a society that focuses humanity's most productive instincts and capabilities toward their highest goal.

Cooperation, taking a view of humanity that is more than the sum of its individually reductive self-interests, is the mechanism by which we create what could be. Competition is a luxury born from the fruits of cooperation's labor, a hanger-on to progress who seeks out marginal benefits while the co-operators pioneer the next revolution. Competition, relegated to seek a vision of advancement predicated upon personal gain, can only ever hope to apply a more efficient application of what is. To truly innovate is to invite risk, something that business entities outside of idealized models seek to minimize to near non-existence. This was noted by the anarchist and biologist Peter Kropotkin in Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution:

"[…] if […] we ask Nature: 'Who are the fittest: those who are continually at war with each other, or those who support one another?' we at once see that those animals which acquire habits of mutual aid are undoubtedly the fittest. They have more chances to survive, and they attain, in their respective classes, the highest development of intelligence and bodily organization. If the numberless facts which can be brought forward to support this view are taken into account, we may safely say that mutual aid is as much a law of animal life as mutual struggle, but that, as a factor of evolution, it most probably has a far greater importance, inasmuch as it favours the development of such habits and characters as insure the maintenance and further development of the species, together with the greatest amount of welfare and enjoyment of life for the individual, with the least waste of energy."

Thus…in a twist which is perhaps most absurd of all, the competitor is in gradual self-sabotage. In the delusional pseudo-meritocracy that a society of competition creates, the

tion take place due to the commands of the monarchs; though they exploited the newfound inertia once humanity achieved it. Nor did the industrial revolution come about by the wishes of the lords; although they took credit for the insights of the great naturalists after they were grown to fruition. And neither did the digital revolution arrive at the command of the capitalists, although they now obfuscate the advancements of public researchers and wield their achievements as a cynical bludgeon to stymie calls for revolution.

In all eras, the power structures have crowed of the achievements that were had in the wake of their wars and plays for dominance and petty betrayals. For example, history uncritically repeats the notion that the Roman empire built vast networks of roads and erected metropolises in their wake. Surely they can be lauded for that. But the Roman emperors did not pioneer the knowledge of how to make roads or build cities. They simply commanded others to implement the knowledge that had been gained through the cooperation and hard work of others. That the Romans had to wait to holistically implement already existing technologies until they served the needs of military dominance and establishment of sovereignty, confirms the role of the powerful as the throttle, not as the great accelerator, of progress.

As highly intelligent beings, our minds are power-houses of observation, inspection, and analysis. Yet, quite contradictory to that nature, power structures seek to gate human knowledge, monopolize the results of observation and inspection, and preferentially orient all progress therein to the benefit of themselves. This leads to knowledge and insight being compartmentalized, leading to not only a weaker society, but also weaker individuals with less capability to overcome a variety of obstacles. It is by sharing knowledge that humanity shares the pre-figured ability to respond to obstacles, something that other species fail to do effectively. It is by cooperating with others who have embraced curiosity and spreading the

enormously. The female baboons were no longer oppressed or pushed to the sidelines and their society was both more civil and more stable.

This may have seemed like an astounding experiment to play out in front of someone in Sapolsky's circumstance. Sapolsky, however, feeling that his study had been ruined due to the mass die-off, moved away and began observing another troupe. However…he did return to them six years later. And six years after the die-off, the troupe had not changed its behavior. They still groomed each other in a way which was completely at odds with what "regular" baboons did, they still practiced a culture of cooperation, and they had not re-established the dominance hierarchy that is so supposedly characteristic of their species.

Now…from the perspective of the nature side of this debate, it may appear that nothing is amiss. Sure, it's a peculiar happenstance, but it's not absurd to imagine that the baboons with the most violent genetics had been weeded out and this would leave the more timid baboons to build their interpersonal relations afterwards. But here's the twist: only a single male from the original troupe that Sapolsky had left six years previous, still remained. This new society was formed with both old and new baboons. Thus this was not the result of genetic preening. Even these new baboons that had not been selected through the tuberculosis die-off, were now cooperating in the new societal structure. Baboons with zero presumed genetic predisposition to function in this new way had entered their society and adopted their structure of cooperation.

Arisen Without Guidance

In nature, species evolve ignorant of the mechanics of the universe. Yes, the fields and the animals and the trees all have their known place, arrived thereupon by countless generations of

struggle. But when an animal evolves forward, it is not known to them how everything functions, nor which is the best way to deal with the natural hurdles that stand in their way. Evolution is a very slow process and ecologies teach their lessons through cycles that span millennia, often quite ineffable to the things within them.

And indeed, humanity arose, as all other species, fundamentally victim to the natural universe's inherent laws. Eat or starve, drink or die of thirst, seek shelter or be inundated by the elements. As humanity rose to meet these demands, no instructions awaited them, either on how to best overcome their natural hurdles or on how to manage their expansion should they succeed. Humanity was then, in its ignorance, forced to decide for itself: how will we determine our collective future? What are desirable and undesirable actions? How might we enforce or encourage adherence to that list of actions? The answers to these questions would determine whether they, as a species, survived or went extinct. In this trial by fire humanity developed its intellect to produce an ideologically consistent tool and using that ideological tool was a way to effectively and efficiently rise above the pressures of the natural world.

But bearing the reality that no methodological response was set by nature, ideological conflict would naturally arise. Having been born from a universe that was such a harsh steward, some would choose the bandit's way, while others would rebel against this and choose safety in trust networks. The cooperators were the ones who formed the first societies. They settled and tended the land, their numbers providing safety from the brutal accumulation of the psychopath and the sociopath. Free to relax and to settle, the cooperators discovered the luxury of time and freedom from fear; and attendant with it: the time to seek knowledge and to endeavor towards its preservation.

This is why recorded human history coincides with the beginning of modern society. To record history requires a communal linguistic development, societal stability, and the application of a sort of methodology. If humans had formed themselves to the constrictions of competition and individual subsistence in the state of nature, there is no doubt each would have died shivering in their hovels and all of humanity's history would be lost to oblivion just as that of the tens of thousands of years of human history that now only exist in the inspection of archeological record.

But herein lies the ultimate tragedy of our nature: a species defined by extreme adaptability is also a species which can be transfigured into almost anything. Humanity lies in constant flux, a species whose identity is eternally malleable to redefinition. And those with power have quite explicit desires about how they might carry out such a redefinition, circumscribing it to forms of social organization contrary to the best interests of the many, serving only to vindicate the petty justifications of the powerful and their empty quest for power.

Therefore, even though cooperation may lie at the practical center of humanity's survival, in capitalism we are forced into the mold of the competitor. The central propaganda of a capitalist society is that now all humans are to include themselves in the rat race of selfishness and greed. No longer able to justify the orientation of power through the mechanisms of Divine Right or ruthless dictums of might-makes-right, competition has become the propagandistic fetish of the modern elite, an ideological foundation which justifies their placement in a false meritocracy, and they have thus created a society which perpetuates such a fetishization to the very masses who are deprived by it. The competitor, seeking to transmute humanity into the animalistic, individualist hunter, inherently drives to compartmentalize knowledge and reduce cooperation. After all, if knowledge proliferates, the competitor loses their edge.

But we did not hunt the mammoths as individualist hunters. We hunted them together, through the communal sharing of knowledge, by the mutual learning of skills, and the fluid coordination of necessary roles. Neither did the agricultural revolu-