

**WHAT IS THE NATURE OF HUMAN NATURE /  
MEANING OF HUMANITY?**

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Consider the title of this paper with what we know about these humans:

Osama Bin Laden  
Adolf Hitler  
Tiger Woods  
Bernie Madoff  
Marilyn Monroe  
Michelangelo  
Leonardo Da Vinci  
Elizabeth Taylor  
Mother Teresa

Abraham Lincoln  
Elvis Presley  
The Dalai Lama  
Condoleezza Rice  
Bishop Desmond Tutu  
Socrates  
Albert Einstein  
Nelson Mandella

## Historical Background

In the widening search for the origins of modern human evolution, genes and fossils converge on Africa about 200,000 years ago as the where and when of the first skulls and bones that are strikingly similar to ours. So this appears to be the beginning of anatomically modern Homo sapiens.

But evidence for the emergence of behaviorally modern humans is murkier—and controversial. Recent discoveries establish that the Homo sapiens groups who arrived in Europe some 45,000 years ago had already attained the self-awareness, creativity and technology of early modern people. Did this behavior come from Africa after gradual development, or was it an abrupt transition through some profound evolutionary transformation, perhaps caused by hard-to-prove changes in communication by language?

Now, the two schools of thought are clashing again, over the new research showing that occupants of Border Cave in Southern Africa, who were ancestors of the San Bushmen hunter-gatherers in the area today, were already engaged in relatively modern behavior at least

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44,000 years ago, twice as long ago as previously thought. Two teams of scientists reported these findings July 30 of this year in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

Since this early date for the San culture is close to when modern humans first left Africa and reached Europe, proponents of the abrupt change hypothesis took the findings as good news.

Richard G. Klein, a paleoanthropologist at Stanford University, said that the new evidence supports the conclusion that fully modern hunter-gatherers emerged in Africa abruptly around 50,000 years ago, and that the behavior shift, or advance, underlies the successful expansion of modern Africans to Eurasia.

At Border Cave, which lies in South Africa near the border with Swaziland, the international team of scientists analyzed a wealth of organic artifacts in the sequence of their development: bead and shell ornaments; notched bones, perhaps for counting; bone awls; thin bone arrowheads tipped with poison from toxic castor bean oil; and residues of beeswax, resin and possibly egg, which were probably used for hafting wooden handles to stone or bone tools. Regardless of the contending evolutionary interpretations, Chris Stringer, a paleoanthropologist at the Natural History Museum in London, said the evidence from Border Cave provided “the clearest links yet found between Stone Age materials more than 20,000 years old and the culture of extant hunter-gatherers.”

Darwin isn't required reading for public health officials, but perhaps should be. One reason that heart disease, diabetes and obesity have reached epidemic levels in the developed world is that our modern way of life is radically different from the hunter-gatherer environments in which our bodies evolved. But which modern changes are causing the most harm?

Many in public health believe that a major culprit is our sedentary lifestyle. Faced with relatively few physical demands today, our bodies burn fewer calories than they evolved to consume—and those unspent calories pile up over time as fat. The World Health Organization, in {SWC/3/00124989-1 SLS}

discussing the root causes of obesity, has cited a “decrease in physical activity due to the increasingly sedentary nature of many forms of work, changing modes of transportation and increasing urbanization.”

This is a nice theory. But is it true? To find out, Herman Pontzer, an assistant professor of anthropology at Hunter College, along with colleagues recently measured daily energy expenditure among the Hadza people of Tanzania, one of the few remaining populations of traditional hunter-gatherers. They asked, would the Hadza, whose basic way of life is so similar to that of our distant ancestors, expend more energy than we do?

Their findings, published in a professional journal in July 2012, indicated that they do NOT, and suggested that inactivity is not the source of obesity.

Their study used a technique that calculates the body’s rate of carbon dioxide production—and hence the calories burned per day—by tracking the depletion of two isotopes in an individual’s urine over a two-week period.

The Hadza live in simple grass huts in the middle of a dry East African savanna. They have no guns, vehicles, crops or livestock. Each day the women comb miles of hilly terrain, foraging for tubers, berries or other wild plant foods, often while carrying infants, firewood and water. Men set out alone most days to collect honey or hunt for game using handmade bows and poison-tipped arrows, often covering 15 to 20 miles.

That study found that despite all this physical activity, the number of calories that the Hadza burned per day was indistinguishable from that of typical adults in Europe and the United States. The study ran statistical tests, accounting for body mass, lean body mass, age, sex and fat mass, and still found no difference in daily energy expenditure between the Hadza and their Western counterparts.

Separate measurements showed that the Hadza burn just as many calories while walking or resting as Westerners do.

The study concluded that the Hadzas' bodies have adjusted to the higher activity levels required for hunting and gathering by spending less energy elsewhere. These findings add to a growing body of evidence suggesting that energy expenditure is consistent across a broad range of lifestyles and cultures. If we push our bodies hard enough, we can increase our energy expenditure, at least in the short term. Our bodies are complex, dynamic machines, shaped over millions of years of evolution in environments where resources were usually limited, our bodies adapt to our daily routines and find ways to keep overall energy expenditure in check.

If we want to end obesity, we need to focus on our diet and reduce the number of calories we eat, particularly the sugars our primate brains have evolved to love. We're getting fat because we eat too much, not because we're sedentary. There is much to learn from groups like the Hadza, among whom obesity and heart disease are unheard of and 80-year-old grandmothers are strong and vital.

### **Philosophic Analysis**

What is the nature of human nature? Confucius lived 551-479 BC and is considered one of the greatest sage's of classical China. Confucius, himself, did not write anything. However, after his death his followers collected as many traditions about him as they could. They wrote them down and these collected sayings are in a book titled The Analects.

Mencius has become the most famous disciple of Confucius and one of Confucius' doctrine developed by Mencius and one of his most famous teachings is that human nature is originally and essentially good, and our natural feelings like compassion and modesty can be cultivated into moral virtues. Hsun Tzu, younger than Mencius, was also a follower of Confucius

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who argued against the views of Mencius and claimed that humans are bad or evil by nature. At that time in culture by “evil” Hsun Tzu does not mean the Judeo-Christian notion of evil as rebellion against God. Rather, evil means “out of control” because of conflicting desires. By nature, humans are selfish, combative, envious, lecherous, and hostile. Education, training or socialization are necessary to control our natural (evil) passions and desires. According to Hsun Tzu then, people must be restrained from doing evil and taught to overcome their natural tendencies and become good.

These countering views were recorded and developed 390 to 238 BC. This debate is not new.

The Englishman Thomas Hobbes published his Leviathan in 1651, in the period of the English Civil War. It is famous as one of the classics of philosophy, arguing the need for a sovereign authority with an effective monopoly of the use of force to save people from the evils of “the state of nature” in which every individual is at risk from others. So, it is in each person’s self-interest for there to be such a government capable to enforce security.

This political conclusion is derived from premises about individual human nature. Human nature, in Hobbs’ view, is fundamentally selfish—each person’s desires are for his own survival and reproduction. This is an anticipation here of a crude Darwinism.

The Scotsman David Hume was a seminal figure in the enlightenment, the 18<sup>th</sup>-Century movement of thought that proposed reform of traditional thought and practice by the application of reason to human affairs. Hume’s magnum opus is the three-volume Treatise of Human Nature, written in his twenties.

Hume’s philosophy is strictly empiricist: he holds that all knowledge is about the world, including human nature, must be based on experience. Pure reason can prove results only about the abstractions of logic and mathematics. His Treatise is significantly subtitled, “An Attempt to

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Introduce the Experimental (i.e., Experimental, or Empirical) Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects (i.e., Theorizing About Human Nature).”

### **Psychological Analysis**

The emergence in the 1990s of a new wave of evolutionary thinking about human nature, especially in the sociobiological theorizing of Edward O. Wilson, stimulated a heated controversy that was as much political as scientific. Edward O. Wilson boldly claimed to have formed a new scientific discipline by applying the rigorous methods of population biology to complex social systems in insects and many other animal species. He provocatively proposed how his sociobiological approach could be applied to ourselves/humans. He aimed to show how the evolutionary biology and genetics of human beings could be applied to the large issues of social theory and philosophy. Wilson is an eloquent spokesman for the view that “the only way forward is to study human nature as a part of the natural sciences.” But where does that leave philosophy, religion, politics and literature you may ask.

Wilson’s opinion relevant to the feminist issues is he states, “The evidence for a long genetic difference in behavior is varied and substantial.” But how much is genetic, and how much is cultural, remain very controversial. Wilson also discusses alleged racial differences, concluding that, “Mankind viewed over many generations shares a single human nature within which relatively minor hereditary influences recycle through ever changing patterns between the sexes and across families and entire populations.”

Many disagree. From J.S. Mills in the 1800s and Karl Marx to Nancy Holmstrom of Rutgers University in 1982 conclude that “psychological differences between the sexes are most probably overwhelmingly social in origin.”

This debate will run and run: new evidence, new arguments, new social analyses keep emerging.

The most fundamental question in psychology, indeed all of social sciences, is: what is the nature of human nature? That's not my statement. It is the statement of Dr. David M. Buss, Professor of Psychology at the University of Texas. He goes on to say the dominant answer for the past century has been the "Blank Slate," the theory that the human mind comes equipped with little or no inherent structure. Each person's mind has been inscribed during development, according to this view, by parents, teachers, society, culture and media messages. The corollary is the doctrine of "Noble Savage," the theory that "humans in their natural state are selfless, peaceable, and untroubled," and that jealousy, greed, conflict and aggression are contemporary ills caused by the corrupting influence of civilization.

These core doctrines come in many guises—radical behaviorism, social constructionism, environmental determinism, and cultural determinism. In The Blank Slate, a book monumental in scope and scholarship, Professor Steven Pinker, a Professor of Psychology at MIT, shows that this dogma has long outlived its scientific warrant. Pinker argues that humans are not passive receptacles or empty vessels. Anyone who has reared a child knows this, but scientific theories sometimes lag behind what everyone knows. We know that we come equipped with an astonishing array of evolved mechanisms—innate fears of height; predators; evolved desires for particular mates; hostility towards out-group members; bias toward investing in children and kin; and many others. Professor Pinker injects calm and rationality in these debates, showing that equality, progress, responsibility and purpose have nothing to fear from discoveries about a rich human nature. He argues the doctrine of Blank Slate may have done more harm than good, it denies our individual preferences, replaces hard-headed analyses of social problems with



good-feeling slogans and distorts our understanding of government, violence, parenting and the arts.

An acknowledgment of human nature that is grounded in science and common sense, far from being dangerous, can complement insights about the human condition made by millennia of artists and philosophers.

“Human nature” is one of those things that everyone knows about and uses in their daily conversation, but that is difficult to define precisely. What is human nature?

The answer is both complex and remarkably simple. Every time we fall in love, every time we fight with our spouse, every time we enjoy watching our favorite television show, every time we get scared walking at night in a bad neighborhood where tough young men loiter, every time we are upset about the influx of immigrants into our country, every time we go to church, we are—in part—behaving as a human animal with its own unique evolved nature—human nature.

This means two things. First, our thoughts, feelings and behavior are produced not only by our individual experiences and environment in our own lifetime, but also by what happened to our ancestors millions of years ago. Our human nature is the cumulative product of the experiences of our ancestors in the past, and it affects how we think, feel and behave today. Second, because human nature is universal—sometimes shared by all humans, sometimes only shared by members of our sex—our thoughts, feelings and behavior are shared, to a large extent, by all other humans on the earth (or all other men or women). Despite the seemingly large cultural differences in various societies, our daily experiences are essentially the same as those of people on all continents.

Human behavior is a product of both our innate human nature and of our unique individual experiences and environment. Both are important influences on our thoughts, feelings and behavior.

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## **Politically Incorrect Truths**

As a part of my research, I discovered an article entitled “Ten Politically Incorrect Truths About Human Nature.” Like it or not, human nature is simply not politically correct. Here are only four.

### **1. *Men Like Blonde Bombshells (and Women Want to Look Like Them)***

Long before television, perhaps two millennia ago, women were dyeing their hair blonde. A recent study shows that in Iran, where exposure to western media and culture is limited, women are actually more concerned with their “body image” and want to lose more weight than their American counterparts.

Women desire to look like Barbie—young with a small waist, large breasts, long blonde hair and blue eyes—is a direct, realistic and sensible response to the desire of men to mate with women who look like her—and there is evolutionary logic for this.

Men prefer young women in part because they tend to be healthier than older women. One accurate indicator of health is physical attractiveness; another is hair. Healthy women have lustrous, shiny hair. Because hair grows slowly, shoulder length hair reveals several years of a women’s health status.

Men also have a universal preference for women with a low waist to hip ratio. They are healthier and more fertile than other women. They have an easier time conceiving a child and do so at earlier ages. Thus, men are unconsciously seeking healthier and more fertile women when they seek women with small waists. Blonde hair is unique in that it changes dramatically with age. Typically, young girls with light blonde hair become women with brown hair. Thus, men who prefer to mate with blonde headed women are unconsciously attempting to mate with younger, on average healthier, women.

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Women with blue eyes should not be any different than those with green or brown eyes. Yet preference for blue eyes seems both universal and undeniable—in males as well as females. One explanation is that the human pupil dilates when an individual is exposed to something that she likes. Pupil dilation is an honest indicator of interest and attraction. The size of the pupil is easiest to determine in blue eyes. Blue eyed people are considered attractive as potential mates because it is easiest to determine whether they are interested in us or not.

The irony is that none of the above is true any longer. Through facelifts, wigs, liposuction, surgical breast augmentation, hair dye and color contact lenses, any woman, regardless of age, can have many of the key features that define ideal female beauty. And men fall for them because their evolved psychological mechanisms are fooled by modern inventions that did not exist in the ancestral environment.

## 2. *Most Women Benefit From Polygyny<sup>1</sup>, While Most Men Benefit From Monogamy*

When there is resource inequity among men—the case in every human society—most women benefit from polygyny. Women can share a wealthy man. Under monogamy, they are stuck with marrying a poorer man.

The only exceptions are extremely desirable women. Under monogamy, they can monopolize the wealthiest men; under polygyny, they must share the men with other, less desirable, women. However, the situation is exactly opposite for men. Monogamy guarantees that every man can find a wife. Maybe less desirable men can marry only less desirable women, but that is much better than not marrying anyone at all.

## 3. *Most Suicide Bombers are Muslim*

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<sup>1</sup>Polyandry is the marriage of one woman to more than one man. Polygyny is the marriage of one man to more than one woman.

According to an Oxford University comprehensive study of this troubling yet topical phenomenon, while suicide missions are not always religiously motivated, when religion is involved, it is always Muslim. Why is this? Why is Islam the only religion that motivates its followers to commit suicide missions?

The surprising answer from the evolutionary psychological perspective is that Muslim suicide bombing may have nothing to do with Islam or the Koran (except for two lines in it). It may have nothing to do with the religion, politics, the culture, the race, the ethnicity, the language, or the region. As with everything else from this perspective, it may have a lot to do with sex, or, in this case, the absence of sex. What distinguishes Islam from other major religions is that it tolerates polygyny. By allowing some men to monopolize all women and altogether excluding many men from reproductive opportunities, polygyny creates shortages of available women.

So, polygyny increases competitive pressure on men, especially young men of low status. It, therefore, increases the likelihood that young men resort to violent means to gain access to mates. By doing so, they have little to lose and much to gain compared with men who already have wives. Across all societies, polygyny makes men violent, increasing crime such as murder and rape. Polygyny itself is not a sufficient cause of suicide bombings. Societies in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean are much more polygynous than the Muslim nations of the Middle East. They suffer from a long history of continuous civil wars, but not suicide bombings. The other key ingredient is the promise of 72 virgins waiting in heaven for any martyr in Islam. It is the combination of polygyny and the promise of a large harem of virgins in heaven that motivates many young Muslim men to commit suicide bombings. Consistent with this explanation, all studies of suicide bombers indicate that they are significantly younger than not only the Muslim population in general, but other non-suicidal members of their own extreme political organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah. Nearly all suicide bombers are single.

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4. *It is Natural for Politicians to Risk Everything for An Affair (But Only if They are Male)*

Powerful men of high status throughout human history attain very high reproductive success, leaving a large number of offspring (legitimate and otherwise), while countless poor men die mateless and childless. Moulay Ismail the “Bloodthirsty,” the last Sharifian Emperor of Morocco, stands out quantitatively having left more offspring—1,042—than anyone else on record, but he was by no means qualitatively different from other powerful men.

On the morning of January 21, 1998, as Americans woke up to the question many asked—“Why on Earth would the most powerful man in the world jeopardize his job for an affair with a young woman?” is, from a Darwinian perspective, a silly question. Darwinian historian Laura L. Betzig answers, “Why not?” Men strive to attain political power, consciously or unconsciously, in order to have reproductive access to a larger number of women. Reproductive access to women is the goal, political office is but one means. To ask why the President of the United States would have a sexual encounter with a young woman is like asking why someone who works very hard to earn a large sum of money would spend it.

What distinguishes Bill Clinton is not that he had extramarital affairs while in office—others have, more will—it would be a Darwinian puzzle if they did not—what distinguishes him is the fact that he got caught.

### **Conclusion**

Every mother, father, voter, politician, businessman, clergy, teacher, student, consumer, employee, employer, reader, writer, leader or follower after an unusual encounter with another person has turned to a friend and said, “What the hell was that all about?” That, my friends, is the nature of human nature.

And for years parents, particularly mothers, have explained to a child that it takes two to have a fight, and you do not have to be one. That, my friends, is the meaning of humanity.

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