

# 11 It's in our nature

The commonly held view of human nature is that we are fundamentally selfish. This opinion is reinforced by the tabloid press and reality TV programmes such as *Big Brother*. Meanwhile, populist philosophers such as John Gray state that we are no different from the lowest and most rapacious animals. We are not *homo sapiens*, but *homo rapiens*. Some scientists also suggest that self-centred behaviour is written in our genes.

Such points are neither historically, philosophically nor scientifically accurate. The fact is that humans must and do cooperate with others every day of their lives in order to survive and thrive. Because social relations are so complex and unpredictable they are often mystified. But without our social existence we cease to be human. Abandoned children nurtured by dogs and wolves without human contact fail to develop those qualities which define our species. They have the genetic potential to be human but cannot realise it on their own.

Our evolution and success in populating the world arose out of an interaction that began when we first hunted animals for food, clothing and shelter. We learned to make tools like spears and later domesticated animals. This began the differentiation of humans from other social groups of primates. The physiological potential for speech, interacting with the social need to communicate, led through natural selection to improved language skills. At the same time, the brain grew rapidly with an increasing ability to reflect upon, learn from experience and

subsequently to predict and plan. Constantly evolving, conscious, intentional, social action is what distinguishes us from other animals.

Throughout history, our human nature – the way in which we relate to each other and to the world around us – has changed. For example, in Britain today, it is mainly the rich who hunt animals – and as a cruel sport and not for food. Most people do not believe that witches exist and ought to be burned at the stake. Even under capitalism, child labour is illegal even though it persists in many poor countries. Forms of society have included the tribal, slaveholders and slaves, landowners and serfs and predominantly today, employers and the employed.

Our existence is contradictory in itself. The *individual* can only be formed out of the *social*. The tensions which inevitably arise in this relation between the individual and the social are deepened by our alienated existence under global capitalism. Our nature is affected by a world that is more intensely socialised than ever. In South East Asia, for example, women whose role in the family was strictly defined, now work in factories for transnational corporations.

Billions of people on the planet acting in a social way make and remake their lives everyday. This is no great mystery, but the stuff of everyday life. Getting up each day and going to work, looking after children, caring for the sick, shopping, being educated, paying bills, claiming benefits, enjoying ourselves – these are just some of the activities which we think about in advance and carry out in a socially conscious way every day of our lives.

There is nothing innately bad or good about human beings. They are as capable of acting in a selfless and heroic way as perpetrating terrible crimes. This wide range of behaviour makes human nature surprising and distinct. They arise from the way we are brought up and shape ourselves and are simultaneously shaped in a wider context. The conditions of the period in which we as individuals live can either encourage or discourage particular kinds of behaviour.

Our relationship to nature is primarily through other human beings starting with our parents and our mother's body. That relation is biologically determined. But even that simple and

seemingly eternal connection is being transformed, in that it can now be artificially, consciously, intentionally engineered. These and other aspects of scientific development have altered the relation of the social to the biological in new and unsettling ways. Increasingly though, in every area of our activity, we humans are acquiring the ability to choose our own future. We have within our power the ability to change things for the better. But there are some who are pessimistic.

### **The 'end of history'**

Coming from opposite sides of the Atlantic, two well-known analysts of the modern period, Francis Fukuyama and John Gray have advanced their ideas about the future of the human. Fukuyama is best known for his "end of history" thesis and Gray for his disillusionment with the new world order that arose as the 20<sup>th</sup> century ended. These top academics are deeply hostile to the idea that there could ever be any other social order than that which exists. But they express extreme disquiet about what is happening to the human, albeit from divergent standpoints. While Fukuyama puts forward panaceas to moderate the symptoms he describes, Gray debunks any illusory hopes and dreams. They take opposite positions on the issue of human nature. But in the end, both are hostile to the idea that human beings can do anything but adapt individually and socially, to what exists.

Fukuyama's book, *The End of History and The Last Man* was a response to the break-up of the Soviet Union. The assertion that history could come to an end coalesced comfortably with the view that the Soviet Union had been a communist or socialist state. It was shorthand for a mind-set which found its political expression in Reaganite America and in Thatcher's TINA statement – There Is No Alternative. Fukuyama, an adviser to the Reagan and Bush governments, is a professor of international political economy. He argues that history has a universal direction towards the realisation of a market economic system based upon liberal democracy.

Fukuyama lumps together the ideas of Hegel and Marx, saying that they both believed the evolution of human societies was not

open-ended but would terminate when human kind had achieved a form of society that satisfied its deepest and most fundamental longings. Both these German thinkers, in his view, put forward the idea that history would end. He claims that “for Hegel this was the liberal state, while for Marx it was a communist society”. But, in reality, Marx never suggested that history would come to an end – in fact, he looked forward to the end of class-dominated society which he described as a kind of “unconscious pre-history” and the *beginning* of a real human history, which could be consciously shaped.

A decade after his *End of History*, Fukuyama decided that his own theory was challenged by what he describes as “a monumental period of advance in the life sciences”. This realisation prompted him to write *Our Posthuman Future – Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*. He was now troubled by the way in which biotechnology in the wrong hands could re-shape the human for the worse. He is increasingly haunted by the ghost of the nihilist philosopher Nietzsche, who believed that human history is dominated by superhumans and the will to power – notions which later became associated with Fascist ideologies of a master race. Fukuyama is worried about forms of mass social control using pharmacology and gene-technological developments. He argues that these are already being used to iron out the diversity which characterises human individuality and temperament. In addition, he believes that the idea of a relatively fixed human nature and natural human rights go together. Lose one and you lose the other.

Today's world is measured against the dystopian visions conjured up in George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, published in the 1930s. “Huxley,” Fukuyama writes, “was right... the most significant threat posed by contemporary biotechnology is the possibility that it will alter human nature, and thereby move us into a ‘posthuman’ stage of history.” Fukuyama shows how drugs have become instruments of social control. This aspect of mass-prescribed drugs became clear in a 1998 study which showed that significant proportions of minority ethnic children between two and four years of age were being prescribed mind-altering medication. While

recognising that drugs can help people cope with mental problems, Fukuyama's comment is chillingly accurate: "Together, the two sexes are gently nudged toward that androgynous median personality, self-satisfied and socially compliant, that is the current politically correct outcome in American society."

He recognises that powerful economic interests are involved while noting that modern biotechnology could become a tool for "politically correct" ends. Fukuyama is concerned about dangers inherent in genetic engineering of various kinds, especially in relation to human beings. He points to the horrors of racist state-controlled programmes for selective breeding in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most notoriously in Nazi Germany but also the United States, Scandinavia and Australia. His chief warning should be taken seriously. The developments in biotechnology

will challenge dearly-held notions of human equality and the capacity for moral choice; they will give societies new techniques for controlling the behaviour of their citizens; they will change our understanding of human personality and identity; they will upend existing social hierarchies and affect the rate of intellectual, material and political progress; and they will affect the nature of global politics.

Fukuyama believes future advances in biotechnology could harm "our complex, evolved natures... and the unity and continuity of human nature, and thereby the human rights that are based on it". He is right to see this as an urgent question – having pointed already to the attempt to iron out different types of human personalities through mass drugs programmes. He proposes that countries should regulate technology politically at national and international levels. This is patent nonsense as is Fukuyama's call for regulation by the same governments who are encouraging the corporations. Regulation will not stop countries and commercial interests from carrying on with eugenics and biotechnology.

As a philosopher, like so many others, Fukuyama casts around for universals which define a permanent, unchanging human nature. This mistaken, Platonic approach, is based on the idea that we can pin down the definition of a thing by looking for

some features which are essential to its existence. Unable to move out of his self-constructed mental box, Fukuyama has to resort to the mystical Factor X: "When we strip all of a person's contingent and accidental characteristics away, there remains some essential human quality underneath that is worthy of a certain minimal level of respect – call it Factor X." Moral order, he states baldly, "comes from within human nature itself and is not something that has to be imposed on human nature by culture".

Discussing the relationship between human nature and politics, he writes: "The definition of the term *human nature* I will use here is the following: human nature is the sum of the behaviour and characteristics that are typical of the human species, arising from genetic rather than environmental factors."

But defining human nature largely by genes begs the question of what formed humans as a species in the first place. As natural organisms, we make our genes through a complex process of heredity *and* interaction with our natural and social matrix, which in turn shapes our behaviour, as recent science shows.

Those like Fukuyama, socio-biologist E.O.Wilson and psychologist Stephen Pinker, who define the human predominantly through the genes, ignore this social dynamic. This leaves us with a highly passive, pre-constructed, gene-driven view of human nature, which dovetails neatly with a conservative view of governments and classes in society.

But the dogma that we are genetically programmed only to be selfish and look after No.1 is challenged by new knowledge about the functioning of evolution itself. Biologist David Sloan Wilson's research into zooplankton, the tiny organisms eaten by whales, led him to study how group selection works. The fundamental problem of social life, Wilson found, is that "selfishness beats altruism within a group. But altruistic groups trump selfish groups". His work challenged the orthodoxy of self-interest that dominated the field. In an interview with *The Guardian* (24 July 2003), he said:

The individualistic perspective had taken a huge hold on the whole field. Explaining everything in terms of self-interest had become,

now, such a powerful metaphor that it could not be opposed. Individualism eclipsed groupism everywhere, in biology, in social sciences, and in everyday life... but now we have a sophisticated group selectionism that shows that societies can truly qualify as adaptive units in the same sense that individual organisms are adaptive units.

### **Humans as bad news**

In 2002 John Gray, Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics, published a collection of his thoughts under the title *Straw Dogs – Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*. The title is based on an epigram by an ancient Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, who stressed the indifference of nature to all creatures emphasising that humans are not central in the world. Lao Tzu recommends his disciples to do nothing (wu wei) and to let things take their natural course. He advises rulers to keep their subjects simple and passive. For him, history is simply the story of “conflicting needs and illusions and subject to every kind of infirmity of will and judgement”.

Gray prides himself on a grim form of realism, which strips away illusions we may have about our own selves and humanity. His aim is to debunk what he considers mistaken notions of liberalism, humanism and progress, to harden us up for the tough nature of the present, where the benign, providing functions of the state are being removed. He claims: “‘Humanity’ does not exist. There are only humans, driven by conflicting needs and illusions, and subject to every kind of infirmity of will and judgement.” A former Thatcherite, Gray would seem to back the ex-prime minister’s view that there is no such thing as society.

The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is put down to “the diffusion of knowledge”, rather than the conflicting interests of social classes, or national or ethnic groups. He mystifies technology and detaches it from its real physical development by human beings motivated by a desire to fulfil needs. “Technology is not something that humankind can control,” he writes. “It is an event that has befallen the world, and “mass murder is a side-effect of technology”. These are

ludicrous, one-sided assertions. They ignore the fact that technology is also used to save lives, travel and generally improve living conditions – as well as destroying property and killing other people.

Gray imposes a jaundiced spin on every aspect of human existence under the grandiose project of putting forward a new philosophy which places human beings in their rightful position – as he sees it – at the level of a “primordial slime”. Any hope of progress is yet another desperate illusion, just like science, we are told. Along with science, the idea of truth goes out the window. And along with truth, the hope of freedom. Justice is merely “an artefact of custom”, words which the present Home Secretary might well endorse.

The idea that history must make sense, he says, is just a Christian prejudice. This is a typical Gray aphorism, as facile as it is easily disproved. What about pre-Christian and non-Christian historians, for example?

Gray blames all the evils of unadulterated capitalism on humans themselves as atomised objects driven by self-interest and greed over which no one has any control. He turns the crisis-ridden aspects of the present into an eternal stigma, like the mark imposed by God on Cain in the Old Testament. Because he can see no alternative to the present, he says we are all reduced to barbaric forms of behaviour.

Philosopher Daniel Dennett has answered Gray's claim that humans are just like any other animal. In an interview in the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* (28 February 2003), he said: “I've read Gray's book. It's a panicky oracle. I kept thinking ‘why is he so unbalanced by what he thinks he has learnt from Darwin?’ It's not romantic exceptionalism to note the differences between the human species and other species. We're very different from other animals. Yes, we have failed projects, but no other species has projects and yes, we have a lot of failed projects. But we also have a lot of projects that work.”

Gray's rant against woolly humanism makes some valid points about the hypocrisy and false nature of abstractions about human rights used to cover up a multitude of sins perpetrated by corporations and governments. But his conclusions are based on

a simplistic and destructive nihilism which denies any, and all achievements made by human beings. *Straw Dogs*, in the end lashes out against humanism from a hopeless, disintegrating perspective.

### **Science and human nature**

The intense debate in philosophy and bio-ethics about these issues is driven by the possibility of human nature being altered in a more rapid and fundamental way than ever before. Two interconnected and complex systems interact in this process: our biological-genetic side and our social side – often described as nature and nurture. Who we are is the result of our individual selves making ourselves out of this raw material. Each human being, each individual creates her or himself, as Paula Allman has put it, in a process of humanisation. A futuristic leap in contemporary science is transforming our understanding of who we are and what we are and our ability to change ourselves. Genome mapping, cloning and artificial insemination, surrogate parenthood, neuropharmacology, the formation and functioning of the human brain, as well as the nature of the universe constitute an on-going scientific-technological revolution.

This dynamic is inseparable from changes in the way we live our everyday, social lives as individuals and as parts of the global workforce – from the way that people work to the widespread concern that things are at a crisis point for the planet and the life upon it. Of all these advances, control over human reproduction is amongst the mostly highly-charged issues. Few are indifferent to what happens to their inner biological selves, how their

#### **No getting away from it**

No political theorist, not even the completely historicist Marx, has been able to dispense with the problem of human nature: on the contrary all have found it fundamental to their construction of their world view. After all, if we want to give a normative description of society, how can we say how society ought to be organised unless we claim to know what human beings are really like?

*The Dialectical Biologist*, Richard Lewontin and Richard Levins

offspring are produced and who controls their reproduction. The cloning of Dolly the Sheep, for example, caused a major stir, especially when the implications of cloning for human reproduction became clearer. Germline choice technology (GCT) whereby people can genetically select features of their offspring excites controversy.

People can pay to change their bodies, and even their gender, through medical procedures, or buy babies on the Internet. Technologies such as visual mapping, DNA profiling and identity checks based on bio-metric data such as iris-pattern recognition, stimulate debates about our individual selves as well as methods of state control.

**Loads of synapses**

The number of human genes has been estimated to be at most about 1,000,000. The number of synapses [neuronal connections] in the adult human brain, however, is far more, some 1,000,000,000,000,000 – which is 1,000,000,000 times in excess of the basic genetic elements.

*The Private Life of the Brain*, Susan Greenfield

Neurologist Susan Greenfield, together with neural Darwinists such as Gerald Edelman, believes that the evolutionary approach to human consciousness – our unique ability to think rationally and to feel self-aware – is most appropriate. She describes this ability as the generation of inner resources or a higher-order consciousness. It can only grow “as the mind evolves, as cerebral inner resources are marshalled, as associations are built up within the brain in response to and retaliation to the relentless assault from objects and events in the world around us”. She stresses how in evolutionary terms, we can view emotions as processes where one is highly interactive with the environment.

All these developments indicate a growing capacity to understand ourselves and to act in an increasingly conscious, collective way. This is of extreme importance in answering all those who rail against what is described as an unchanging human nature or the degeneration of the species. Just as the world of

nature, organic and inorganic, operates through the interaction of predictable, law-governed processes which contain within themselves quantum and other uncertainties, so the thoughts and actions of humans as individual and social beings are also the sum of many histories. These “histories” are the result of decisions by each individual as well as chance occurrences. There are unknowns and alternative roads and actions in the life path or story of each individual as well as society.

**The greatest revolution of all**

We are poised for the greatest revolution of all – understanding the human brain. This will surely be a turning point in the history of the human species, for unlike those earlier revolutions in science, this one is not about the outside world, not about cosmology or biology of physics, but about ourselves, about the very organism that made those earlier revolutions possible.

Vilayanur Ramachandran, director of the Centre for Brain and Cognition at the University of California (San Diego), BBC Reith Lecture 2003

Complex histories come together and the outcome cannot be predicted in the same way as the addition of one chemical to another or the injection of fuel into an internal combustion machine. But, at the same time, human beings can and do discover the contours of tendencies, forces and developments which point to future possibilities. Based on this knowledge, we can plan what we do and act effectively.

How we understand our own role on the planet has acquired a greater importance than ever before. Humans as a species are able, both individually and collectively, to transcend blind subjection to forces they can neither understand nor control, through knowledge-driven activities, on a scale that is much greater than other animals.

Understanding history as a whole, in a co-evolutionary way is vital. Our present, class-ridden society still belongs to “pre-history”, in the sense that unconscious forces, whether of blind nature or capitalist economic anarchy, predominate. The struggle

against corporate domination of today's scientific and technological development poses new, important questions about our changing human nature.

Human beings as a whole cannot make history consciously, so long as they are trapped in social classes, in which the interests of one class prevail over another. Vast resources are expended fighting other human beings, rather than solving common problems. Humanity will only be able to direct and conduct its activities in a purposeful way when it overcomes domination by the restricted interests of increasing the wealth of a tiny minority. At that point we will enter the realm of real history.