

# ‘Well, that’s Human Nature!’

David Rhodes disputes the way this mantra is often used today.

This article is inspired by another thing that is often said at humanist group meetings – and something that bothers me! ‘That’s human nature’ is used as a reason for things being bad, or at least not as good as we would like. And also as a reason why things won’t change, so therefore it’s fanciful, and hopeless, to try to change things. Just three examples:

‘We know that modern capitalism is addicted to growth, which means insatiably using and destroying the world’s resources at the same time as increasing inequality. But that’s human nature because everyone always wants more than everyone else, and always has.’

‘We recognise that the climate crisis needs a change in our behaviour, especially when it comes to extracting and burning fossil fuels. But that won’t happen because human nature means that we won’t act for the benefit of others or for future generations.’

‘We discussed nuclear disarmament but that is too idealistic because human nature drives us towards threats of mutual annihilation.’

I don’t share this view of human nature, as I’ll try to explain later. But why am I disturbed? Two general reasons.

First, this view of human nature as, in a word, selfish, seems to be believed as an absolute that hardly needs justification. In reality it is a distorted view promoted by capitalism and is in the interests of capitalism with its emphasis on private profit and mass consumption. But the idea that it is somehow a universal given, not a cultural response, has widely taken hold. The trouble is that descriptions of character can be self-fulfilling. For example if we keep telling someone that they lack confidence, they are likely to end up lacking confidence. Similarly, if our culture keeps telling people that they are really selfish at heart, they will become more selfish. Or at least they will accept attitudes, laws, and policies that are based on the premise that people are selfish. And I don’t think that’s good.

Secondly, it discourages us from trying to make things better (which is part of the idea). Take the crisis of the destruction of our world’s resources. If I believe that human nature condemns us to be grasping and always wanting more, then I can just give up, say ah well, and continue my excess consumption on the grounds that everyone else will anyway. Quite easy really. But if I believe that human nature leads us to care about others and co-operate to give us all a better life, then this is challenging. It drives us to question what is wrong, and to do something. And that’s hard.

So much has been written about human nature – it’s quite an important thing. And I haven’t got anything original to say, but I want to make a few points that strike me as relevant. In the Enlightenment, the debate is epitomised by the contrast between Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Hobbes thought that human life in its natural state was ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short’, so the only way we can live happily is to submit to a sovereign state and use the free market as a way of controlling our natural brutality. Rousseau recognised that people in pre-agricultural societies (most of human history) lived healthy lives marked by a cooperative culture with a compassionate commitment to equality; it was the coming of private property, class division and state institutions that changed and enchained us.

Father Christmas gave me a copy of *Humankind – A Hopeful History* by Rutger Bregman (English translation, Bloomsbury 2020)). I certainly recommend it. A quick summary of 400 pages would be: despite what we are told and encouraged to believe, people are basically decent, caring and keen to help, especially in a crisis. Time and again the same contradiction appeared. On the one hand people overwhelmingly act with compassion and concern for others, even if it means their own inconvenience or risk. On the other hand, people believe that others are basically selfish and will



Young children will try to comfort a friend or sibling in distress  
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look after themselves first. There's a disconnect between belief and reality.

So why do we have this wrong idea about our fellow humans? Let's look at our *idea* of human nature for now, as opposed to what (if anything) human nature really is. Our ideas about human nature are determined by our culture; they are very much a cornerstone of how we see ourselves – and that's largely what culture is. Culture doesn't exist in the abstract. It is a characteristic of a particular society and of particular power relations, since the dominant culture is that of those in power.

Our late capitalist, consumer and growth obsessed, culture promotes two myths. The first is that wealth comes from competition, from people acting in their selfish interests. From wealth comes power, which is gained from being self-interested. And because capitalism thrives on selfishness, then capitalism is the natural system for universally selfish people; there's no alternative really. The second myth is that we need a strong state to keep the base behaviour of other people under control. Not me of course, but others – immigrants, protesters, criminals, welfare claimants, travellers, and so on – otherwise the fabric of our society will collapse. After all, civilisation is a veneer to keep our natures under control.

The culture of capitalism, then, promotes the idea of human nature as selfish because it justifies capitalism as the natural system for human nature, and it justifies the state apparatus as a way

of keeping us under control. Of course culture at all times contains minority, dissenting ideas. Now you may think that this view of human nature produces good results, and that capitalism is the best thing going for us. Fair enough. But in any event it is a big mistake to think that an idea promoted as part of a culture here and now represents some kind of universal, unchangeable truth. It doesn't.

By the way, and no time to go into this here, I have heard it argued that the idea of human nature as selfish must be true because it was also adopted as part of the culture of Soviet Communism. In fact, the history explaining why the democratic workers' soviets in the industrial cities were overwhelmed by dictatorial state capitalism is complex and lots of books have been written on this.

Maybe I should say briefly what I think about human nature in a few points:

- \* It is reasonable to say that there is such a thing as human nature;
- \* Our nature is based on the way that societies work to provide the means of living;
- \* Human beings are social beings – there is no such thing as a human being abstracted from their social circumstances;
- \* Human societies, and human labour, have depended on cooperation, solidarity and love for their flourishing;
- \* Certainly, people can act badly sometimes, often through ignorance or fear;
- \* Human nature is not static and human societies are not static.

My original intention was to map out how significant traditions – Christianity, Marxism, Humanism – tackle the idea of human nature. And to show that these traditions reinforce the view that a better future beckons when we can reassert a positive view of human nature. Maybe that's for another day.

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