

Human Nature, Part I

Rosh Hashanah Day Two, 2020

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Philosophers imagine a debate between Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Hobbes on human nature, with Rousseau believing that we are innately good and become corrupted through society, while Hobbes sees us as innately evil and selfish and requiring the regimentation of good government to keep us in order. The same polarity is found in ancient Chinese philosophy. The two most important Confucian sages, after Confucius himself, were Mencius and Hsün Tzu, with Mencius believing that we are innately good and become corrupted by society, while Hsün Tzu sees us as innately evil and selfish and requiring the training of education and culture to achieve goodness. Which is it?

The Harvard biological anthropologist Richard Wrangham explains, in his new book called *The Goodness Paradox: The Strange Relationship Between Virtue and Violence in Human Evolution*, explains that the Rousseau and Hobbes perspectives—he doesn't mention Mencius and Hsün Tzu—are both right and both wrong. We have evolved to inherit both instincts, being products of both nature and nurture. "The potential for good and evil occurs in every individual," he writes. "Our biology determines the contradictory aspects of our personalities, and society modifies both tendencies" (p. 6).

That's the cutting edge of anthropology and evolutionary biology and neuropsychology, but our ancient Rabbis already intuited as much. The Talmud, citing a teaching of Rabbi Nahman bar Hisda, notes that when Genesis chapter two tells about the creation of Adam and Eve, it says that God *formed* the human, using the Hebrew word וייצר with an unusual spelling of a double *yud*. This is to teach, this midrash tells us, that we were created with two *yetzers*, or inclinations, a *yetzer tov* and a *yetzer ra*, an impulse for good and an impulse for evil. You can picture it as those cartoon angels that pop up on either side of the character's head in children's shows. The Talmud understands that we are created with both, and not only that, but that we need both. Whether we use the tradition's vocabulary of design or the scientific vocabulary of evolution, the result is the same: our dual nature is part of what makes us human.

In another wonderful midrash preserved in the name of Rabbi Samuel bar Nahman, focus is directed at the words used in the creation account in Genesis chapter one where God concludes after the creation of humanity that the creation was *tov m'od*, very good, rather than just *tov*, good, as God remarked after the other days of creation. While modern commentaries understand the emphasized *very good* as referring to the totality of creation, the midrash of Rabbi Samuel bar Nahman suggests that God is referring to the double impulse or inclination of the human, the *yetzer tov* and the *yetzer ra*. That is, each one is good in itself, and together it is very good. That makes sense, the midrash explains, in terms of the good impulse, but how can we understand it in relation to the evil impulse? "Because," the midrash says, "Scripture is teaching that were it not for the impulse to evil, *yetzer hara*, one would not build a house, find a spouse, beget children or engage in commerce." The dual nature of our impulses, the way that we are both altruistic and selfish and always feel ourselves pulled in either of those two directions, is the way we are made, what makes us human.

The Rabbis' intuition of human nature is extraordinary. I found the same understanding in the wonderful book by the Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson, *The Social Conquest of the World*, a 2012 publication that summarized decades of research by the scientist who is credited with inventing the field of sociobiology. While Wilson takes a wee too many pages in grinding his axe against organized religion for my taste, he comes to an almost theological conclusion on his own in explaining the origins of the

human dilemma of good and evil. Human nature is explained by multilevel selection, he teaches us. Darwinian natural selection gets more complicated when we look closely at biological traits and patterns. There is individual selection, which favors selfishness and aggressiveness, but then there is group selection that favors groups, or biological societies, where altruistic individuals contribute to the needs of the society. Natural selection supports both traits, and in what Wilson calls the “iron rule of genetic social evolution...selfish individuals beat altruistic individuals, while groups of altruists beat groups of selfish individuals. The victory can never be complete,” he writes, “the balance of selection pressures cannot move to either extreme” (p. 243). Sounds very scientific, and not the kind of science you would expect to learn in, say, a Texas public school. So how does he get “almost theological”? Here’s another passage: “Individual selection is responsible for much of what we call sin, while group selection is responsible for the greater part of virtue. Together they have created the conflict between the poorer and the better angels of our nature” (p. 241).

We begin the cycle of each new year and lease on life, with the holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, by taking account of how we manage our inner struggles between our dual impulses of selfishness and altruism, the yetzer ra and yetzer tov. The fact that we all stand before our Maker on this Day of Judgment, this Yom Din, signifies that Judaism understands that we are not completely good or completely bad. That being human means living with that polarity and tension, finding the way to self-preservation while at the same time being a part of a community, and a world.

Over the months of quarantine due to covid-19 many have noticed how animals seem to be less fearful of us. The deer don’t run away as immediately as they used to. There are more birds. Even as I was working on this sermon on my deck a squirrel seemed to be playing with me, seeing how close it could get before I shewed it away. Maybe they were always there and we are only noticing them more now. But watching animals raises the perennial question of what it is that separates us from them, that makes humans unique. Many of the answers that have traditionally been offered have required modification because of research in animal behavior, especially of chimpanzees and bonobos, our closest relatives. According to the Duke psychologist the neuroscientist Michael Tomasello in his recent book, *Becoming Human*:

[In explaining] human uniqueness...the obvious first step is to establish exactly how human psychology differs from that of other primates—precisely how humans as individuals are unique. The difficulty is that over the past few decades empirical research has established that humans’ nearest living relatives, the great apes, possess cognitive and social skills highly similar to those of humans, including many that are seemingly relevant to cultural processes. For example, there is recent research demonstrating that at least some great apes (1) make and use tools, (2) communicate intentionally (or even “linguistically”), (3) have a kind of “theory of mind” [meaning, comprehending the intentions or thoughts of others], (4) acquire some behaviors via social learning (leading to “culture”), (5) hunt together in groups, (6) have “friends” with whom they preferentially groom and form alliances, (7) actively help others, and (8) evaluate and reciprocate one another’s social actions (p. 4).

Seeing aspects of ourselves in animals helps us refine our understanding of who and what we are. In many ways, as we commit ourselves to the liturgical challenges of the High Holidays, we strive to be mindful of our baser instincts, our yetzer ra, and refocus on refining and restraining, or what Tomasello calls “self-regulating” ourselves, something which humans do best. We are like our great ape cousins, but we are

more successful at building cultures and societies. The question that we return to each year as we gather together is what kind of society have we built? How can we be better?

Edward O. Wilson, whom I mentioned earlier, is the world's top expert on ants, or as he might call it, ant societies. Ants, Wilson tells us, are, along with humans, the most successful animals on the planet. We are the two great conquerors of the earth, and that is because both species have evolved to an extraordinary level of what he calls eusociality, the ability to work together. Tens of millions of ants can work together in a single colony, where they are able to fight off threats, gather food, care for the young and reproduce. The ants specialize functions between construction workers, food gatherers, nursery staff, soldiers, and of course, the queen. By such massive cooperation, a true instinctual altruism, the ants have prevailed where so many other species have failed. Wilson estimates that "there are a million times more ants in the world than humans, and in terms of mass, all the ants living on Earth weigh roughly as much as all the humans" (p. 117). On Rosh Hashanah, in the outdoors for those of us who are with me in person here, and all of us having spent more time outdoors in general because of the pandemic, we should take a moment to appreciate the grandeur of nature, and feel a little humility.

"Look to the ant," the Bible tells us in Proverbs 6, "study her ways and be wise." The proverb goes on to note how the ant stores its food supplies, but Edward O. Wilson explains that what makes the ants and other socially cooperating animals special is their protection of a nest, whether it be from predators, parasites or competitors. We learn to work together when we have something we care about, something that is important beyond our individual selves. While ants can be selfless by instinct, we learn to figure out what is the right thing to do. And we are the most selfless of all creatures. What makes humans unique among animals, according to Wilson, is "the degree that we attend to the sick and injured, help the poor, comfort the bereaved, and even willingly risk our own lives to save strangers" (p. 250). These are what Judaism teaches us are the attributes of God. In answer to the question of what it means to walk in God's path, for God does not have feet nor walk on paths, the Talmud responds that we do so by visiting the sick and injured, helping the poor, comforting the bereaved, and being kind to strangers. If a biologist like Edward O. Wilson can explain how such is in our nature as *Homo sapiens*, then we can understand what the Torah means when it says that we were created in the image of God.

Nature has endowed us with a yetzer tov and a yetzer ra, an impulse to good and evil, selfishness and altruism. While some selfishness, or what we might more politely call "self-care" is important, it is through service to a community, to others, that we achieve our true potential as human beings. Rosh Hashanah challenges us to keep sight of that goal. I will be speaking at Kol Nidrei about the importance of both self-care and community, especially given our experience living through a pandemic. On Yom Kippur morning I will return to this question of human nature, and how goodness prevails. I want to conclude today with the call of Rosh Hashanah to choose the good, the right path.

All this talk of science, of evolved traits, raises the question of how much choice we really have in how we behave. We have plenty of choice. I would like to read a short passage from Richard Wrangham's book, *The Goodness Paradox*, about the Penn psychologist Adrian Raine who specializes in neurocriminology. Raine was studying the brain activity in individuals accused of reactive and proactive aggression. Reactive aggression is what we would call a crime of passion, whereas proactive aggression is what we would call premeditated. As Wrangham tells it:

After Adrian Raine discovered differences in brain activity of men accused of proactive and reactive murders, he had his own brain assessed. His PET scans placed him closer to the proactive murderers and psychopaths than to the companion group of men not accused of murder. The result intrigued him. "When you have a brain scan that looks like a serial killer's

it does give you pause,” he said. He reflected on other similarities he shared with psychopaths, such as having a low heart rate. He decided he was lucky to have been nudged into his path as a researcher. He could easily have been a criminal. Genes can influence behavior; they rarely determine it (pp. 45-46).

Only we can determine who we become. Indeed, we become ourselves every day, but on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we take account of where we are. As I made note of yesterday, today we repent and pray, but it is only through determinative action in the ways of justice that we achieve who we are ultimately meant to be.

We have heard and will hear again the call of the shofar. Out of caution due to the pandemic, our shofar blowers, Dan and Ariel, are blowing the shofar away from us, directed over the lake. The sound is just as sharp as ever. But today, rather than fill the space of our sanctuary on Grove Street, the shofar sounds spread over this beautiful lake and out into the world. Let’s follow that sound, see where it points us, as it reminds us to follow our better natures, to achieve our potential, to start off this new year in the right direction. Shanah tovah.