

Science and Religion: Human Nature

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*Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to your likeness."
—Genesis 1:26*

Ancient Witness: Genesis 3:14-24

Today I continue my series of science and religion as we look at human nature through the lens of both. We are a species great potential for good and bad, capable of heinous violence but also of selfless love. Through the generations we have seen equal, democratic societies flourish, and we have seen autocracies emerge and spread. On one hand have seen brutal societies driven by the lust for money, domination and power of a few, manipulating others with lies, fear and anger. And on the other, we have seen societies dedicated to fairness, justice and the general welfare of all. History will judge us, as it has previous generations. What did we do to promote the flowering of one and to stop the malignancy of the other? Human nature is a mixed bag, and because of this, we need to muster all of our spiritual and moral resources to be eternally vigilant.

Evidence from molecular biology indicates that African chimpanzees and gorillas share more than 99 percent of their DNA with that of human beings (which would be comparable to the genetic kinship of horses and zebras). This evidence and fossil discoveries have led scientists to conclude that human beings and modern apes descended from common ancestors.

Some 4 million years ago, an apelike creature was walking around on two legs. In Ethiopia, Donald Johnson found the bones of a short female, who they called Lucy. She walked on two legs but had long arms and a brain size like that of the apes, while her teeth show that she was a meat eater. It appears that the move from trees to grassland encouraged upright posture and a shift to hunting, long before the development of a larger brain.

Homo habilis, who was discovered by Louis Leakey, lived over 2 million years ago, had a larger brain and chipped stones to make primitive tools. *Homo erectus*, about 1.6 million years ago, had a much larger brain, lived in long-term group sites, made more complicated tools and probably used fire. Forms of *Homo sapiens* were in Europe 500,000 years ago. The Neanderthals were in Europe 100,000 years ago. Cromagnons made paintings on cave walls 30,000 years ago. Agriculture goes back only 10,000 years. The earliest known writing, Sumerian, is 6,000 years old. The biblical patriarchs began 4,000 years ago. The exodus from Egypt was in 1280 BCE or about 3,000 years ago. Techniques for melting metal brought first the Bronze Age and then the Iron Age about 3,000 years ago. Ian Barbour writes:

The human brain itself incorporates this long history. At the base of our brains are the oldest structures, which we share with reptiles and birds; they control respiration, the cardiovascular system, and instinctive behavior, which is rigidly programmed genetically. The midbrain or limbic system, which we share with animals, controls our

hormones and emotional life (pleasure, fear, sex, hunger, and so forth). The outer layer or neocortex, which is prominent in higher mammals and humans, controls perceptual, cognitive and communicative processes. The neocortex makes possible more complex forms of language, learning and intelligence.

He concludes that both science and the biblical tradition see humanity as part of nature, but a unique part. Despite the presence of unconscious impulses, we are capable of rational reflection and intellectual creativity. Despite the constraints of genes and culture, we are able to take responsibility for moral choices.

Several people have been able to integrate the biblical view of human nature and morality with an evolutionary understanding of the universe. One of them is Rabbi Harold Kushner. His reading of Genesis 3, which has been commonly called “The Fall” in Christian theology, is a story “not of Paradise Lost but of Paradise Outgrown, not of Original Sin but of the birth of Conscience.” He wrote:

The account of Adam and Eve eating the great of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, as I see it, is a mythical description of how the first human beings left the world of animal existence behind and entered the problematic world of being human. It is the biblical account of evolution, seeing the difference between humans and animals in moral rather than in anthropological terms.

Here is what he means: Human life is much more complex and complicated than animal life because we are alert to the moral dimension of the choices we make. The more authentically human we are, the more complicated our lives become. Animals don’t have to make moral decisions. When it comes to killing for food, when it comes to mating, when it comes to protecting their young or sending them off on their own, animals are driven by instinct. Human beings, having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, find these issues much more complicated.

And so, with this increased complexity there is good news and there is bad news. On one hand, we can feel love, joy, hope, achievement, faithfulness and creativity in ways that animals do not. On the other hand, we can also feel loss, anxiety, frustration, jealousy and betrayal at levels animals will never know.

When we read verses 16 through 19, we can see how much more complicated life has become. Adam’s descendants would earn their bread by the sweat of their brow. This refers not only to physical labor but to the anxiety that seems to be an inevitable part of a person’s earning a living. Eve will find childbirth and child-rearing painful. For human beings, raising offspring is not just a matter of instinct. It can be slow, tedious and challenging work. What other animal deals with the complex issues of adolescence? Mating and sexuality are also much more complicated in human life. It has been pointed out that human beings are the only living creatures that make love face to face, because with human beings, sex is not only about the instinct to reproduce, it is about love, intimacy and shared pleasure. Human beings also have an awareness of their own mortality that animals do not. “Out of the dust you were taken, and to the dust you shall return.” With human life came increased complexity.

I agree with Kushner that the story of the Garden of Eden is *not* a story of the Fall of Humanity, but of the Emergence of Humankind. It is a story not of regression or slipping backward to a more imperfect state; this a a story of progression and ascent. He writes:

It is a story of the first human beings graduating, evolving from the relatively uncomplicated world of animal life to the immensely complicated world of being human and knowing that there is more to life than eating and mating, that there are such things as Good and Evil.

Someone once asked Charles Darwin whether there was still anything unique about the human being, and he answered, “Man is the only animal that blushes.”

Before they ate from the Tree of Knowledge, the story-teller makes a point of telling us that they were as naked as the rest of the animals, and like the animals, felt no shame. But once they rose above the animal level, they gained a sense of self-consciousness, a sense of being held to a standard that no animal is. Even as dogs can hear high pitched tones that we cannot, we hear cries of conscience to which animals are deaf. It was not so much that being naked was immoral, but that a person with a sense of morality knows the feeling of being scrutinized and judged.

And so human beings are creatures capable of recognizing the gap between what they are and what they can be expected to be, and of being embarrassed by that gap. We are the animal that blushes, and that makes our lives more complicated. So guilt and shame are part of the human experience. (Guilt is the judgement we pass upon ourselves; shame is the sense of being judged by someone else.) Psychiatrist Willard Gaylin writes,

Shame and guilt are necessary for the development of some of the most elegant qualities of human potential... They are not useless emotions. They signal to us that we have transgressed codes of behavior which we personally want to attain.

If we are the only creatures that blush, then a typical person cannot feel shame is less than completely human, not realizing a basic potential.

But it gets complicated. Carried too far, feelings of guilt and shame stop being useful and become harmful. It has been said, “A sensitive conscience is a fine servant but a terrible master.” Sometimes we jump from “I have done some wrong things,” to “I am wrong, unacceptable.” Human life is incredibly complex.

And so, is the evolution and emergence of the human life good or bad? The reviews are mixed. It is true that human beings do wrong things and are capable of cruelty and deceit far worse than any other creature. But human beings can be strong, creative, generous and self-disciplined. They can be loving, thoughtful and gentle, demonstrating care for others and the planet. They are created in the image of God, yet this image is sometimes hard to see and struggles to emerge.

In the end, I agree with Kushner, that the emergence of humanity was good. He has an alternative ending to the creation story that shows how uninspiring life might have been:

So the woman saw that the tree was good to eat and a delight to the eye, and the serpent said to her, "Eat of it, for when you eat of it, you will be as wise as God." But the woman said, "No, God has commanded us not to eat of it, and I will not disobey God."

And God called to the man and the woman and said to them, "Because you have hearkened to my word and not disobeyed My command, I shall reward you greatly." To the man, God said, "You will never have to work again. Spend all your days in idle contentment, with food growing all around you." To the woman, God said, "You will bear children without pain and you will raise them without pain. They will need nothing from you."

"Children will not cry when their parents die, and parents will not cry when their children die." To both of them, God said, "For the rest of your lives, you will have full bellies and contented smiles. You will never cry and you will never laugh. You will never long for something you don't have, and you will never receive something you always wanted. And the man and the woman grew up together in the garden, eating daily from the Tree of Life and having many children. And the grass grew high around the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil until it disappeared from view, for there was no one to tend it."

For me, I like the other ending in Genesis better. There is pain, but there is also a level of satisfaction and fulfillment that makes the pain bearable. Theologian Philip Hefner has said that we are God's *co-creators*:

We humans created in the image of God are participants and co-creators in the ongoing work of God's creative activity. We are being drawn toward a shared destiny which will ultimately determine what it means to be a true human being.

As human beings we have evolved from a state of instinct into the knowledge of good and evil. As a species, we have moved into a higher state of consciousness and awareness. And we can even deliberately co-create with God. We participate in our own evolution, for we have not arrived.

In Jesus and other spiritual masters, we see an even greater level of awareness; we see a higher level of evolution; we see true humanity realizing its potential; we see someone who was fully alive to the world; we see someone living in relatedness to all people and things; and in Jesus, we see someone awake to the presence of the Sacred.

What I'm talking about is a mystical experience which is the path of paradise. Not the mythical paradise from which the first humans were expelled, that would be regression. Rather this paradise is the awareness that God is always "walking in the garden" with us, that we are never separated. This paradise is the experience of oneness with God and the Universe.

Theologian Gerd Theissen once said that there is, indeed, a missing link between apes and true humanity, and this missing link is us. And so, for the sake of our brothers and sisters, for the sake of our species, for the sake of the planet, may we continue to evolve!

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)