A Post-Competitive Human Image

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A Post-Competitive Human Image

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Professor Michael Karlberg, author of Beyond the Culture of Contest, shares his radical thinking on human nature. His findings stand in clear contrast with the traditional, Enlightenment view of human beings as selfish, utility optimizing machines that function most efficiently when we allow the ‘invisible hand' of competition to create order. In this exclusive essay for Beyond One, he offers an alternative view of human nature that has profound implications for social change.

We live at a critical juncture in human history. Our success as a species, both reproductively and technologically, has radically transformed the conditions of our existence. Almost seven billion of us now live on an increasingly crowded and ecologically stressed planet. Under these new conditions, social norms and practices that may have been tolerable in the past are no longer sustainable.

People everywhere recognize this, and long for a more peaceful, just, and sustainable way of life; but many challenges stand in the way. Among these challenges are the cynical assumptions that many people make about human nature itself ? such as the assumption that humans are essentially selfish and aggressive and incapable of creating a better world for themselves.

The result is a paralyzing contradiction in human affairs. On the one hand, peace, justice, and ecological integrity are basic aspirations of the human spirit. On the other hand, the belief that human beings are essentially selfish and aggressive, and that we are therefore incapable of creating a more harmonious and sustainable social order, is widely and uncritically accepted. So here we stand, as a species, at this critical historical juncture, paralyzed by these contradictory sentiments.

Our self-perception is critically important as our assumptions about human nature color our views of the world in subtle but important ways, such as how much we trust others, or whether we are inclined toward co-operation or competition in a given situation. In fact, many of the social institutions that define the modern world ? such as our political, legal, and economic institutions ? have been built upon, or rationalized by, specific conceptions of human nature. They have been structured as competitive arenas that are supposed to harness all of that selfish and aggressive energy and channel it toward the greatest good ? or at least that's how the theory often goes.

Many of these characteristics are woven together into popular models of "the economic man" or "the political man" that have exerted considerable influence in our economic and political spheres over the past century. The problem with these conceptions of human nature is not that they are without any basis. The problem is that they are too partial and limiting. They only show part of the human picture. They are like caricatures ? selective and reductive exaggerations of our most unpleasant features.

Over time, these models can start to dominate our perceptions of the world. The more we invoke these models the more likely we are to begin mistaking them for reality itself. As we do this, these allegedly descriptive models sometimes end up becoming prescriptive models, telling us how we're expected to act. In time, social institutions are constructed around these prescriptions in ways that further encourage and reward these traits. In turn, this results in a self-reinforcing feedback cycle between these partial conceptions of human nature and our social norms and practices.

Clarity in self-perception

So how might human nature be more adequately conceived? Examining some of the most potent scientific insights that are beginning to emerge about human nature and human capacity we see that the world views of Adam Smith, David Hume and other Enlightenment thinkers that shaped our modern sense of self were too simplistic.

The first set of insights we need to look at are insights about co-operation and reciprocity. While popular caricatures of human nature often focus on competitive and aggressive instincts, a new consensus that is emerging is that humans are a uniquely cooperative species with profound capacities for reciprocity, empathy, trust, compassion, and a range of other pro-social attitudes and behaviors that enable us to accomplish truly remarkable things together.

Professor Michael Tomasello, Director of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, puts it this way: he says that "to an unprecedented degree, homo sapiens are adapted for acting and thinking cooperatively… and indeed all of human's most impressive… achievements ? from complex technologies to linguistic and mathematical symbols to intricate social institutions ? are the products not of individuals acting alone, but of individuals interacting" cooperatively. As they grow, human children are equipped to participate in this cooperative activity through "a special kind of cultural intelligence" comprising social and cognitive "skills and motivations for collaboration, communication, social learning, and other forms of shared intentionality" that are unique to our species (Why We Cooperate, p. xv-xvi).

Countless scientific studies are affirming this general view. Of course, we can't deny the existence of selfish, competitive, and aggressive instincts in people. Nor can we deny the horrendous ways that such instincts can play out on the world stage. But the point is that we are wired for competition and cooperation, aggression and compassion, selfishness and selflessness. The question we should be asking is how can we cultivate our latent capacities for cooperation and reciprocity much more widely and effectively than we currently do? This is becoming an urgent question that we should all be systematically and purposefully focusing our attention on, in our families, our schools, our communities, and our workplaces.

Another set of insights we need to look at are insights about the role that meaning and purpose play in human motivation. While popular caricatures of human nature often suggest that people are motivated primarily by material considerations, a careful re-examination of the subject suggests that humans can be just as motivated by a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives that is associated with the pursuit of creative excellence, with the drive to help others, with commitments to justice and equity, and with contributions to the advancement of civilization. In short, humans can be highly motivated by a range of causes that transcend material self-interest. As Daniel Pink puts it, "The most deeply motivated people ? not to mention those who are most productive and satisfied ? hitch their desires to a cause larger than themselves" (Drive, p. 133). "Humans, by their nature, seek purpose" (p. 208).

Again, this is not to deny the existence of material motivations. The point, once again, is that we are wired for both material motivations and non-material motivations ? or what most people throughout history have called spiritual motivations. Whatever words we use to refer to these intangible motivations, we need to recognize that efforts to construct a more just and sustainable social order will need to tap these motivations in profound ways. In this regard, another one of the questions we should be asking is how can we tap into such motivations much more widely and effectively than we currently do?

The third set of insights we need to look at are about the sources of altruistic and self-sacrificial behavior. For years, many popular economic, political, and psychological theories assumed that humans were basically egoistic and self-maximizing creatures. But these theories kept running into a problem when they were confronted with evidence of selfless and altruistic behavior. This behavior is an anomaly that egoistic theories of human nature can't easily explain. Over the years, many attempts have been made to stretch and bend these egoistic theories to explain away altruism as selfishness in disguise.

Yet many thoughtful scientists intuitively suspected there was more to altruism than self-interest in disguise. Among them was a political psychologist name Kristen Monroe, who decided to take a fresh look at altruism. Monroe defined altruism as "behavior intended to benefit another, even when this risks possible sacrifice to the welfare of the actor" (The Heart of Altruism, p. 6). She carefully examined the cases of 25 altruists, ranging from bystanders who risked their lives to save strangers in emergencies, to philanthropists who were inspired to give away much of their wealth, to Germans who sheltered Jewish strangers during the Holocaust. After analyzing the motivations behind all of these cases, Monroe found that prevailing explanations of altruism that were rooted in the self-interest paradigm were unable to explain these cases. Instead, she found that all of these cases had one common denominator. "Altruists," Monroe concluded, "have a particular perspective (or world view) in which all mankind is connected through a common humanity, in which each individual is linked to all others" (p. 206). "Altruists," she explained, "share a view of the world in which all people are one" (p. 198).

What Monroe is talking about here is a globally inclusive human identity ? a sense of the oneness of humanity ? that fosters a willingness to consider personal sacrifice in order to contribute to the well-being of others. It's the same dynamic that plays out in a healthy family, when parents are willing to make personal sacrifices for the wellbeing of their children or other loved ones. But in Monroe's study, these altruistic and self-sacrificing sentiments were directed at strangers, and they arose from perceptions of a globally inclusive human family.

Consider the profound implications of this insight. Some people believe that this sense of oneness of humanity is an abstract and distant ideal that can only be realized after a host of social injustices, inequities, and other material problems have somehow been solved. Yet, if Munroe and many other likeminded thinkers are correct, the opposite appears to be the case. The global problems we face will only be resolved as consciousness of the oneness of humanity is firmly established in our hearts and minds.

This consciousness is, in part, what releases the latent capacities for altruism and self-sacrifice that are the foundation of a more just and sustainable world order. So, again, one of the questions we should be asking is how can we foster this consciousness of our shared and interdependent humanity more widely and effectively?

In sum, science is now challenging the simplistic models of human nature that key institutions of the modern world have been built upon. This shift in self-understanding requires corresponding changes in our attitudes, behaviors, social norms, and institutional structures. These changes are essential if we hope to solve the social and environmental problems we are facing in the world today. It is therefore imperative that we look for ways to translate this more holistic self-understanding into a new social reality ? within our personal interactions, our family dynamics, our educational structures, and our governing institutions. The stakes are too high not to act. Only by learning how to translate these insights into practice will new social codes emerge that are adapted to the age of interdependence we are entering.

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