

Human Nature: Impediment to a Resource-based Economy?

[Toby Russell](#), October 2009

“Human nature is the concept that there are a set of characteristics, including ways of thinking, feeling and acting, that all normal human beings have in common.”

[Wikipedia](#)

“To ask what is fundamental human nature is to ask what a human being would be like without a culture. Such a question is meaningless, and cannot be answered. There is and can be no such thing as a human being without a culture.”

John Holt, *Instead of Education*, p114

Introduction

One of the commonest responses upon hearing the idea of a resource-based economy, is that human nature would doom it to almost instant failure. Humans are simply too greedy, too selfish, too lazy, too competitive, etc., to allow such a world to function. Putting aside for the sake of this article the fact that all a resource-based economy does, is provide a societal structure which has solved material problems, I would like to take a close look at what we mean when we wield the “Human Nature” card. As if an advocate tasked with planting reasonable doubt in the jury's minds, I ask various questions designed to expose how unthought-out our impression of human nature is. It is not my aim to prove anything definitively, but rather to suggest the knee-jerk, “group-think” understandings of human nature, genetics and behaviour are far too simplistic and ignorant to warrant any certainty that a resource-based economy has no hope of success. As ever the caveat *I am no expert*, but not being such does not preclude one from debate. Indeed, the more of us ordinary citizens engaging our grey cells in as open and unprejudiced a fashion as possible, the better.

Bad human!

Greedy, selfish, lazy, brutal. The Selfish Gene. The Crime Gene. Good person, bad person, rapist, murderer, saint, genius, idiot, ordinary. Whatever we are, we are so because of our nature. You can't keep a good man down, you can't hold a useless one up. Kill off the dregs, prevent the below average from breeding and one day only the best and brightest, all fifty of them, will be left to make the world a better place. We all know the story. The question is, is it a myth we have woven for ourselves in ignorance, or an accurate representation of the human animal?

I'll start with **greed**. What is it? [Webster's online dictionary](#) says:

“a selfish and excessive desire for more of something (as money) than is needed.”

I imagine this definition is what most people would have in mind when asked to define greed, i.e. “more than you need.” (Interesting to note that money is the thing offered as an example!) What I find unsatisfactory in this definition is the word “need.” “Need” is the foundation on top of which the definition of greed is built. Therefore, to establish an instance of greed, we must first know how much of a thing is *needed*. Not easy.

Not only do people have different needs – making judging each other difficult and arbitrary – those needs change with time; like a baby's need for sleep compared to that of a twenty-something. When it comes to money – to borrow Webster's example – being clear about how much is needed is close to impossible. The best we can say is that dollar amount X is needed to fund lifestyle Y. Whether or not lifestyle Y is needed is another matter. (And needed for what reason?) So measuring greed depends upon measuring need, and measuring need is tricky to say the least.

Are people greedy? They can appear so, I suppose, but what we actually mean when we call someone greedy is personal, dependent on a variety of learned moral sensitivities of which we are often unaware. For example, the amount of food we “need” depends on what we want to accomplish physically, which itself might depend on our metabolism, level of fitness and health generally. At the extreme end of this, research has shown that a starvation diet is what is “needed,” if you want to live say, 150 years. Longevity researchers have experimented with mice to prove this. In such a case your “greed” for years might oblige you to eat as little as possible, meaning eating more than a starvation diet could be described as greedy, based on the definition above. Needless to say, this makes very little sense to us, and sounds suspiciously like an idle word game.

So perhaps we should simplify things a bit. Couldn't we say we “need” an amount of food which leads to no excess body fat, fat being evidence of “too much?” Maybe, but again this is dependent on other factors, such as lifestyle, metabolism, the particulars of the diet, etc. Also important as a consideration is pleasure. Do we *need* pleasure? Do we *need* to enjoy our food? If we are prevented from enjoying our food, to what degree do we suffer? When we eat too much because we enjoy the meal, are we being greedy? Can we be greedy for pleasure? Your answer to such questions depends on what you have learned about pleasure from society. Can you get excessively more pleasure than you need? Again, people will have different answers.

One can't be greedy for everything, either. Breathing more air than you need is impossible; after dizziness sets in you can no longer breathe so aggressively. Being greedy for sleep would never mean you could sleep 24 hours a day every day, if being greedy for sleep makes any sense at all. And who drinks excessively more water than they need? It seems greed only applies to certain things. Is there a common factor to those things that can inspire greed?

I think there has to be an element of luxury to greed, and consequently am compelled to suggest that the word itself is pure social contrivance, since it is defined as “more than needed,” yet seems applicable to unneeded things only. Greed applies to those things we desire that are not necessary for survival, hence breathing and drinking water cannot produce greedy behaviours.

I suggest therefore that greed is a consequence of society acting on the human animal. When we are greedy for food, it is not the food as nutrition we crave, but maybe a socialised aspect of it; like taste, or crunchiness; or, on the biological side, the endorphin kick alleviating boredom or depression; or perhaps the association we have made with certain foods due to the influence of advertising, etc.

Imagine a baby biologically wired such that eating produces a huge endorphin rush, and fed predominantly fattening food. It will likely be socialised via the mixture of these elements to become fat, to become “food greedy.” It would not have been born this way. If the chain reaction of these elements is not arrested before a certain age, the obese adult will have a very difficult time changing the habit, of becoming “food ungreedy.” He or she will become greedy in the eyes of others, and fixedly so. Hence greed appears to be a part of human nature, when in fact the truth, as always, is more subtle and involved.

“Money greed” (and other greed related to possessions) is more complex still. For example, if a hoarder like Scrooge from Dickens' “A Christmas Carol” accumulates money but cannot spend it, we all recognise the behaviour as sick in some way, as compulsive, illogical, pointless, aberrant. Without delving into the many possible causes for such a sickness, suffice it to say that societal pressures, combined with particular experiences, will collectively be the explanation. There is *no* Scrooge gene. In the story, Scrooge is delivered a shock that cures him of his ways. Though a story, I am sure we all recognise how “true” it is. Even he, at a ripe old age, could have his behaviours altered. They were not hard-wired in his genes.

Shopaholics are likewise considered unhealthy in some way, as are all -aholics, by definition. Greed related somehow to money, to purchasing consumer goods and never being satisfied for long, is a social phenomenon. And while there may well be a certain heritability predisposing one to addictive

behaviours, they exist only in potential, not as fated certainties. Besides, -aholics can be cured (see Scrooge above, and, as but one example amongst many, the work of Alcoholics Anonymous).

In sum I find the Webster's definition of greed unsatisfying. Common usage of the word implies a natural human condition. It is a word used by many, but deeply considered only by a few. The claim some humans are greedy by nature, while seemingly true on the surface, does not survive close inspection.

Let's take the same line of inquiry with **selfishness**, that supposedly universal attribute of life on Earth. What does Webster say?

- 1 : concerned excessively or exclusively with oneself : seeking or concentrating on one's own advantage, pleasure, or well-being without regard for others
- 2 : arising from concern with one's own welfare or advantage in disregard of others <a selfish act>
- 3 : being an actively replicating repetitive sequence of nucleic acid that serves no known function <selfish DNA>; *also* : being genetic material solely concerned with its own replication <selfish genes>

I'd like to start with **3** and from there bleed into the preceding two, because **3** lies at the root of our topic: Human Nature, which is of course made of DNA.

It is odd, is it not, that a non-intelligent, non-sentient chain of proteins can possibly be considered selfish, or to have concerns pertaining exclusively to anything, let alone itself. A gene can have no notion of self. To my mind calling a gene "selfish" is like calling a brick selfish, or a painting, or the weather. Qualities such as selfishness and altruism are surely only applicable where such behaviour is displayed by an entity capable of awareness, or capable of both selfishness *and* generosity. Is not choice a precondition?

If an organism's function is replication and *only* replication, if it has no choice whatsoever other than to replicate itself, how can it be called "selfish?" Because it is simply incapable of selflessness, not only physically but also logically; because it cannot choose between two alternative behaviours, let alone others; because it cannot have any notion of a self to be concerned with, it cannot be selfish. Calling a gene "selfish" is therefore illogical, a semantic decision taken in the interests of a broader point. That broader point is of course that animals are selfishly concerned with procreation. However, to arrive at that assertion by climbing on top of the claim that genes are selfish, is spurious.

But are we selfish because we are driven by design to ensure propagation of our (selfish) DNA? This is a huge question which I cannot hope to answer to everyone's satisfaction. My simple goal here is to raise doubts. My first question with that aim in mind is this: What does it matter to an animal, at some higher level of awareness than blind impulse, whether or not its DNA survives its death? A male domestic cat, for example, cannot understand the future, does not concern himself with his offspring, is simply driven by inner urgings to plant his seed inside female cats. What it all means is lost on him.

Here again we have a similar scenario to the gene, do we not? We are describing a process where the organism has no choice, is incapable of choice, is incapable of comprehending even dimly the consequences of acting (or not acting) on its impulses. The whole thing is automatic. How can it then be either selfish or selfless? Indeed, you could equally well argue the tomcat is being generous to his species' concerns by dedicating time and energy to the struggle of ensuring his genes' continuation. After all, after he's dead, what does it matter whether he left behind any kittens with *his* DNA? Of course it doesn't; the procreation cycle is autonomic, even posing the question is absurd. An apple falling from a tree and waking a baby slumbering in a pram below is not selfish for disturbing the resting and over-stressed mother nearby, nor is the wind that loosened it, nor the weight of the apple. Where there is no choice there can be no use for the label "selfish."

I see a gaping black disconnect between autonomic processes on the one hand, and human socialised understandings of them on the other. We have a rich and complex language, one only recently exposed

to the scientific method. Consequently, we have the culturally inherited tendency of colourfully explaining for our own ends – be they financial or self-aggrandising or whatever – biological processes in human terms. How “nature” actually proceeds from chains of nucleic acids to self-aware behaviours, is an enormous question, one I am very unqualified to answer. However, I feel myself on safe ground when I say; all answers so far posited are controversial. The jury is out on this one. Certainty is not yet justified.

However, we can agree that to be capable of selfishness requires an ability to choose not to be so. Thus we come to the tricky the question of whether humans have any choice. Personally I believe they do. But many far more learned people than I would disagree. If you disagree with me too, for you the very notion of selfishness must evaporate; if no one has a choice, if no one is capable of overriding his or her “programming,” no one can be said to be either selfish or selfless. The words lose their usefulness for cats and humans alike.

Sociopaths offer us an opportunity to bring the issues these questions raise into sharper relief. A sociopath cannot be socialised to care what happens to others. They are incapable of empathy, of relating to others’ suffering. Does this make them selfish? I think not, because they are biologically incapable of altruism and selflessness. We perceive them as selfish because we are not similarly wired, have social sensitivities, respond to socialisation techniques that nurture our empathic abilities. To non-sociopaths, sociopaths appear excessively concerned with themselves, because non-sociopaths are capable of caring about others, and can be selfless.

We can think of cats as selfish, but because they are not human, we don’t get too bothered about it. We have a sense that judging them so is projecting something human onto them. Seeing sociopaths as selfish is a similar projection. Sociopaths are a type of human – biologically speaking – that can only be selfish, and are therefore, paradoxically, not selfish. The rest of us can be, because we can choose not to be.

We *learn* how to be selfless, but only because the ability lies in us in potential. Society pressures us in that direction (amongst others of course). If all goes well we leave, for example, the Terrible Twos behind us, no longer, at age five, throwing tantrums in supermarkets when denied the cereal we want. We learn how to share, how to compromise, how to make and sustain friendships. We learn to think of selfishness as something bad. We have culturally trained ourselves to think of selfishness as something bad, because we are a social animal. Being social demands of us cooperation and compromise. Selfishness gets in the way of that. Typically, the advantages of being social, of being capable of making and sustaining friendships and partnerships, has huge advantages over isolation. Scrooge, a selfish stereotype, was not a happy chappy.

In sum, I believe humans are not selfish by nature (whatever “by nature” means), but they can act selfishly. Selfishness is in us, but we train it out to the best of our ability. Typically, parents try to reward selflessness and punish selfishness, emphasising skills such a sharing, good manners and friendliness as valuable. This can only be because we are a social animal, capable of selfishness and selflessness both. Society on the other hand, being monetary, is [another reward mechanism entirely](#).

Laziness is up next, requiring another trip to [Webster](#):

“Etymology: perhaps from Middle Low German *lasich* feeble; akin to Middle High German *erleswen* to become weak
Date: 1549

1 a : disinclined to activity or exertion : not energetic or vigorous **b** : encouraging inactivity or indolence <a lazy summer day>
2 : moving slowly : sluggish
3 : droopy, lax <a rabbit with lazy ears>
4 : placed on its side <lazy E livestock brand>
5 : not rigorous or strict <lazy scholarship>“

Points **1a** and **5** are pertinent here. In the context of this essay, were people “lazy by nature,” no one would work unless they were paid to do so. Without a financial incentive – so the argument goes – folk would just laze around enjoying a life of idle pleasure, between bickering like children over who should do the work. Without monetary reward, civilization would grind to a halt due to good ol' Natural Human Laziness™.

The image of bickering children brings me to some questions. If they were lazy by nature, wouldn't they would start out that way? Why then do *all* babies need no financial incentive to learn how to crawl, walk and talk, each enormous challenges? Why do they pester their parents with endless questions, with a wilful determination to explore as much of their environment as possible, to help with the cooking, the cleaning, the ironing etc.? Why is it that laziness first sets in *after* they go to school? Might laziness be a reaction to enforced learning on someone else's timescale, and not some genetic composition? Is laziness in fact a kind of impotent rebellion, a sense that the freedom to shape one's own time and future has been stolen?

I believe the reason for much of the laziness we see around us lies in society's need for a predominantly obedient population, not a creative one. Of course creativity is a sought after quality, but obedience is more useful to society, generally speaking. After all, we can't all be artists*. And every now and then we need soldiers who don't reason why, not to mention a population permanently vulnerable to the manipulative skills of advertisers telling them to shop.

Biologically speaking, people do seem to have different levels of energy at their disposal. For example, there are some who function well on less than four hours sleep a day, while others claim to need twelve. While some people, on this evidence, are capable of more activity per day than others, does this mean some are lazy “by nature?” I don't believe so. Laziness must surely mean a reluctance to work *even though* the necessary energy is there, and not be a simple measure of energy levels. I take issue therefore with the second part of Webster's point **1a** above. Laziness not does not equate with low energy or vigour, but with the appearance of it.

Anecdotally, I have never met anyone permanently lazy. It is probably uncontroversial to say we are all lazy sometimes and active at others. We are inspired to engage in projects, or take on tasks, by different things. We have different interests. On person's fun is another person's tedium. I like writing. When it comes to writing you can hardly stop me, whereas fixing up car engines holds no interest for me at all. Were I a mechanic my colleagues would think me lazy I'm sure, and would be right too, in that my enthusiasm would be lower than theirs, my willingness to do more than the bare minimum non-existent. But it would not mean I were lazy by nature, just that my need to earn money had forced me to take on some job, in this example the wrong job for me.

When we meet people who seem interested in nothing, negative about everything, who are inspired by nothing, we recognise, do we not, someone whom society has failed, or perhaps someone clinically depressed. To *know* whether their “laziness” were genetic or societal, we would have to explore their history as well as conduct scientifically rigorous tests. Perhaps we might try to “cure” them of their laziness, by finding some hobby or interest they had not thought about. In the right circumstances, with the right technique and sensitivity of approach, we can imagine a “cure” being possible. We can imagine, and no doubt know of real world instances, where persistently lazy behaviours have been changed, and a person's life transformed. This would not be possible if laziness were genetic.

And yet for all this there is something very contextual about laziness. Male lions, for example, are often seen by us as lazy. They lie around while the women do all the work. Are the women resentful? I doubt they are capable of resentment. Do the male lions think themselves clever for getting the stupid females to do all the work? Highly unlikely. As with selfishness and greed, to be lazy requires some understanding of what it actually means. To call an animal, incapable of this subtle understanding, “lazy,” is to project our human comprehension of the lazy-diligent axis onto it. As words are learned in a social context, indeed can *only* arise in a social context, so the behaviours corresponding to those words are social. I do not mean by this that there is no useful correspondence between word and thing,

but that many words, particularly those referring to socially complex behaviours such as laziness, are purely social.

Laziness is negative, for example. This means hard work and diligence are good. Why? Why is bustling productivity good? Why is “doing nothing” bad? I don't know exactly, but my money is on social preferences and beliefs that have slowly and organically arisen directly from our ancestor's monumental decision to start farming. But *that* exploration is far beyond the scope of this article.

I don't intend to walk through every human characteristic and show ways of looking at them that suggest they are learned behaviours, not genetically generated impulses. I will end my inquiry with a brief look at **competitiveness**, and won't even trouble Webster on this one.

I learned recently that the Latin root of “to compete” means “to strive/seek together,” (*com + petere*). Bearing this in mind, to see Darwin's survival of the fittest as necessarily competitive reveals something about the process we tend not to see at first sight, namely that cooperation is also inherent in that ongoing struggle. I will make no attempt to deny that there is competition between humans, but will suggest that as social animals, cooperation is actually more descriptive of us.

An asocial, purely competitive animal could not come up with language, art, culture, or even living in groups. Look at stag beetles and tigers compared to ants and deer. Certainly deer squabble amongst themselves and the stags compete for mating rights, but not at the cost of the group. A social structure of some stability is the priority; any competition that takes place is constrained by its remit. As to whether cooperative tactics for survival are superior or inferior to competitive, a 19th century zoologist once took a sack full of ants to a field and emptied it there. The solitary insects ran for their lives, dropping what they were doing as soon as they noticed the ants' approach (Kropotkin, 1902). And aren't we humans the best of the best? Isn't our ability to work in groups a major reason for this?

With humans, an obviously social animal, matters are greatly complicated by our ability to meta-represent to ourselves, via language, myth and art, what we are. We seem to love mythologising ourselves, and unwittingly shape our behaviours in doing so, in a cultural process I think of as a huge echo chamber. For a large, ultimately unknowable complex of reasons, Western culture (and others I'm sure), at least at the moment, seems to value competition above cooperation. How long this remains the case is anybody's guess, but while it is so we will tend to see things in those terms – top dog, best of the best, he who dares wins, kill or be killed, and so on. This learned cultural thesis is like a filter we have a hard time taking from our eyes. It effects everything we see.

For what it's worth, I believe more and more of us are learning to see ourselves, indeed our species, in a different light. The cartoons of Pixar such as “A Bug's Life” and “Wallee,” the film *Babel*, and other efforts are, to me, evidence of a trend away from an “I'm all right, Jack” attitude, to a general concern for humans everywhere, a concern that crosses national borders and ethnicity. Should I be right – that an unintended but happy consequence of globalisation is a more open and sympathetic understanding of other cultures – I predict new myths and art representing ourselves to ourselves as cooperative. As this happens, it will encourage less competition and engender more cooperation, dehumanization will become less and less easy, and the boundaries between nations more and more blurred.

Conclusion

I have gone out of my way to show how difficult it is to track a clear path from genes to behaviour. I have attempted to plant seeds of doubt, in readers of this article, that human characteristics we think of as shared – such as laziness and greed – where “shared” means “hard-wired” – are in fact social phenomena. Human nature is our biological constitution. It is not a list of characteristics such as those discussed in this article, although I am happy to permit shared traits such as malleable and social. Wolverines, to take one example, possess neither of these attributes. The debate about human *nature*, the perception of it that prompts people to react negatively to the idea of a resource-based economy, is

really about *behaviour*. We are many years of study away from understanding exactly how behaviour is linked to our genetic make-up, from learning the pathways and mechanisms out of which human behaviour arises. Such an undertaking is far beyond my current abilities.

In the end it all comes down to the unavoidable clash of individual differences; the preferences, sensibilities and ideas we all have about “how things should be.” Whether people are lazy or greedy is a personal judgement based on a complex of socially acquired understandings of, and from, human society generally. A resource-based economy offers a structure which allows people to be different without leading to unnecessary conflict, one in which members of society are allowed to fashion their own lives in the way they see fit, without being dependent on others for permission or approval. Would such a society mean the end of terms such as greedy and lazy? I don’t know, but I sure would like to find out.

* There is much more to creativity than art and literature. Problem solving is creative. Doing anything in a new way is creative. Because school, by design, *tells* children what to learn and how to learn it, *tells* them what “the truth” is rather than training them how to arrive at sound conclusions independently, it cannot encourage creativity. Encouraging true creativity, which rests on independent thinking and challenging established ideas, must come at the expense of obedience. Is society's hunger for an obedient, unquestioning, often demoralised populace therefore the root cause of laziness? Might not another societal design yield considerably less of it?