

What can we say about human nature? Are people inherently selfish, mistrustful, and competitive? Or are we naturally cooperative beings inclined to bond with one another, who readily work toward a common good? Do humans, generally speaking, require threats of punishment to keep us from committing acts that harm others? And do we perform benevolently only when we expect to be rewarded?

In an interview with Sean Illing, writer and host of Vox Conversations, historian David Wootton takes the position that we, in the western world, inherited the vision of human beings as essentially self-centered and motivated primarily by greed and fear of pain, from the Enlightenment. While I don't think Wootton is denying that some positive things came out of the Enlightenment, prior to the Age of Enlightenment, he says (and I quote), “What mattered wasn't so much whether you succeeded or failed but rather what kind of person you were. It was about honor, self-respect, dignity, reputation, and a clear conscience. The idea was that one ought to cultivate and practice virtues for the sake of being virtuous, because the practice itself made you a better person. Obviously, not everyone lived up to these ideals, but this was the basic moral paradigm, and it was radically different than the individualistic, hyper-competitive culture we live in today.”

Wootton believes the paradigm of self-interest as essential to human nature originated in 16th century political philosophy, and he traces it through 17th & 18th century psychology to the field of economics and the phenomenon of market capitalism. (In other words, it's not that capitalism made us see ourselves this way.) He additionally credits the rise of modern science as a precondition-- which is to say that this emergent view of human nature would not have been possible without, to put it in his words, “the belief that the world — and people — could be reduced to predictable, law-abiding machines.” He says that, as capitalism was beginning to develop, the thinking was, “[W]e can modify behavior by tinkering with the system of

rewards and punishments. We can nudge people into doing what we want them to do by giving them small rewards or punishments.”

His argument, even in this relatively short interview, is more sophisticated than what I've detailed in a short space here, and I'll provide the link, in case you're interested.

[Paste into chat:

<https://www.vox.com/conversations/2019/1/23/18128942/enlightenment-psychology-science-david-wootton>.] The text also includes a link to the book by Wootton that spurred the interview.

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So, if this vision of humans as essentially self-centered is relatively new in the grand scheme of our existence, what of humanity prior to the Enlightenment? And is there anything that is *fundamental* to human nature-- Anything more like *bedrock*?

For this, we'll turn to the thinking of sociologist and physician Nicholas Christakis, who teaches at Yale, where he also directs the Human Nature Lab, and co-directs the Yale Institute for Network Science. His previous work as a medical doctor included a number of years working as a home hospice physician. His "On Being" interview with Krista Tippett, from which our second reading derived, originally aired on March 5th, 2020, and aired again more recently on June 10th of this year. I'll be drawing on content from this exchange, titled, "How We're Wired for Goodness," and I'll put the link for the episode into the chat box. [Paste into chat: <https://onbeing.org/programs/nicholas-christakis-how-were-wired-for-goodness/#transcript>.] You can also find information on several books by Christakis on this linked page.

Christakis, like Wootton, posits that there is nothing natural about an essentially negative view of human nature. But Christakis' interests lie not in trends over decades or centuries; but, rather, in what traits we share with our ancestors that are "constants," in that they've remained essentially

unchanged over 10,000 years or more. In other words, we're not so concerned, here, with historic, cultural, or technological forces. Christakis speaks of cultural and historical forces as an "overlay" or "veneer" lying atop a more fundamental understructure.

Christakis argues that, to survive and thrive, it's been beneficial to us, as a species, to live collectively; and that evolution has endowed us with qualities of social intelligence that are assets to living in connection with one another. This set of qualities-- or "social suite," as he calls it-- includes the capacities of friendship and love, cooperation, teaching and social learning; and, also, the ability to recognize one another as unique individuals.

Humans were also capable of selfishness, violence, cruelty, deception, and xenophobia 10,000 years ago, as we are now; but Christakis believes that these are less powerful and less important, in the panorama of human existence, than the capacities that hold us together. He says, "[I]f every time I came near you, you were mean to me, or you filled me with fake news, you told me falsehoods about the environment in a way that was detrimental to my capacity to survive in the environment, or you killed me, I would be better off living apart from you. But we don't do that. We live together. And so therefore, the benefits of a connected life must have outweighed the costs. And they did outweigh the costs. And the question is, how did that state of affairs come to be?"

I'd like to step back, here, and underline the fact that Christakis' emphasis is on collective, rather than individual, good. The question he's asking is: What makes a good society, and what makes people come together and build it? And he says that the characteristics of a good society, and the human characteristics that make it possible, are universal across cultures and ages. He says, "[T]here's really only one way to be social. And there are certain archetypical [sic] structures and ways of organizing society that we basically are innately programmed to manifest and that we can no more wake up and make a society inconsistent with those impulses than ants can wake up and make beehives. This is how we live socially. It's been

shaped by natural selection, and we are endowed with these capacities. And it takes a very powerful force to stop it.”

I'll return, later, to this issue of what it takes to stop it. Before we get there, I'd like to take a brief tour of these qualities which, while not, in all cases, entirely exclusive to humans, are nonetheless part of what make us distinctively human.

First, the fact that humans have an unusual faculty to form loving bonds with our mates: Christakis says, “We’ve been endowed with this capacity ... to form sentimental attachment to people we’re having sex with, whether it’s monogamous, polygynous, polyandrous; whether it’s straight or gay. You know, we could mate with each other, and many animals do that, but we don’t just do that.”

Secondly, we’re defined by our capacity for friendship. Christakis says, “We form long-term, non-reproductive unions with other members of our species. This is exceedingly rare in the animal kingdom. We do it, certain other primates do it, elephants do it, certain cetacean species do it-- we form friendships with unrelated people. It’s universal in human groups.”

Not only do we tend to love our mates and form long-term friendships with people with whom we don’t reproduce-- We also tend to be good toward people we don’t even know. Christakis describes it thus: “We cooperate with each other, altruistically. We’re kind to strangers-- again, to unrelated individuals. This is different than many other types of cooperation, which are also seen in other animal species, but often that cooperation is between genetically related individuals.”

To put it in terms of New Testament parable, the good Samaritan is actually a more common figure than the indifferent priest or Levite.

About our human propensity to pass on knowledge, Christakis says, “People take this for granted, but it’s actually unbelievable.” And he asserts, “[B]asically every animal can learn.... But we do something even more than that-- we copy each other, we imitate each other, we learn from each other,

which is rare in the animal kingdom, although it happens.... We set out to teach you how to build a fire. And this is exceedingly rare, but it's universal in us."

Personally, I'd never given much thought to how amazing it is that we're so naturally driven to teach others things that will help them survive and have better lives.

And, finally, there's our ability to recognize one another as unique individuals. Christakis points to the apparent paradox of our individuality being, in his words, "essential to our socialness." He contrasts the uniqueness of each of our faces to the relative sameness of, for example, our kidneys, which require more similarity, one to another, to function effectively. He says, "It's an evolutionary luxury that we are able to each have a different face.... [N]ot only do we all have different faces, but you can look out at a sea of faces, and you have the brainpower to distinguish one person from another, which is also an evolutionary luxury."

Although he describes this as an evolutionary luxury, clearly, to sustain long-term friendship, and other human relationships, it's critical that we easily and naturally differentiate one person from the next. Christakis says this "relates to our capacity to go down a level, to the level of individuals, to start seeing each person as a unique human being, not as a kind of member of a group."

In other words, individuality is essential to being social; *and* it's also critical to not being "tribal" in the sense of, "*They* all look alike."

I think it's significant that, to be social, we don't surrender our individuality; rather, we surrender our separateness.

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In the course of their conversation, Krista Tippett says, "[T]hese things are like genetic coding for the structure and function of our societal life. They're

like breathing; they're automatic, not socially engineered. And ... the social engineering cannot escape this social suite."

I said earlier that I'd return to what forces *are* powerful enough to suppress these capacities.

One force that can bring sufficient negative pressure to bear is mistrust that is planted deliberately and aggressively in a society. Christakis cites the example of the Stasi in East Germany, who managed to foment enough suspicion to erode trust and friendship, disrupting natural human bonds. Tippett, who lived in East Germany in the 1980s, qualifies this by stating that, while friendship was strongly impacted and protective boundaries constantly & reactively maintained, the impulse to friendship was never completely dismantled.

Another force that can threaten our impulse toward social good is isolation. At our present juncture, many people are increasingly isolated and, in that isolation, cast about, rather desperately, for something to give their lives purpose and meaning. This can be a formula for joining, and strongly identifying with, communities that pit themselves against other groups of people. Ironically, loneliness can thus produce a form of tribalism that wears down our wiring for positive social connection and building a good society.

Another force powerful enough to drive us apart is religion, if it emphasizes our separateness from those who don't share our beliefs and practices, or are otherwise different from us. When both natural impulses and reason are held not trustworthy, and are rendered completely subservient to a religious authority who's held to speak for the divine, our natural drive toward goodness may be overcome, as responsibility is ceded to the authority, and all other sources of moral guidance-- including, in some cases, a society's laws-- are afforded less weight.

While movements and trends such as these can seem all-encompassing, utterly compelling, and permanent from our perspective, as we live them,

Christakis refers to humans' proclivity to goodness encapsulated in the "social suite" as "super powerful forces acting below the surface" of such historical and cultural disturbances. He assures us, "There is no society on Earth that has an easy job of suppressing our innate tendencies to love, friendship, and cooperation."

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So, what does all this mean for us as Unitarian Universalists, and for our faith?

For one thing, this sounds a lot like Universalism, doesn't it? Not necessarily, of course, the Christian Universalism that says we'll all be saved in the sense of going to Heaven rather than Hell; but, to me, it seems an essentially universalist view.

It also suggests, to me, that we're on the right track to choose agreed-upon principles as the groundwork of our shared faith. If the foundational impulses that are good in us, that help us form and maintain good societies, are deep in our evolution, any notion that specific kinds of religious beliefs and practices are needed to be a good person and to have a good society is clearly misguided.

I feel a bit silly actually saying that out loud in a Unitarian Universalist service where I'm quite sure I'm preaching to the already converted; but I think, in terms of religion, this *is* the logical destination of where we've been going here this morning: No one's religion is actually required to promote a good society and to encourage us on a journey to being better people.

And this suggests a corollary: That freedom of religion and separation of church and state are a fine state of affairs..., which is worth noting because separation of church and state is under threat today, due, I believe, to lack of trust in human nature.

But, then, what good is religion? Well..., we're doing quite a few good things in the name of our faith, such as providing support for a search for truth; fostering a sense of meaning in life; building communities of like-hearted people; and providing channels for collaborative social responsibility. *And*, I think we can say that, when we join together as Unitarian Universalists and as congregations, and when we gather for services on Sunday morning, we're working to reinforce, facilitate, and promote this wiring for goodness.

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Before we conclude, since we've focussed so much this morning on collective goodness, in the broadest sense, I'll ask one more question: Does what you do, as an individual, matter?

Yes, it does..., in part because *goodness spreads*. Since his field of inquiry encompasses not only human nature but human networks, I'll quote from Nicholas Christakis one more time: "[W]hen you take an action in your life, what our work suggests is that you can affect dozens, hundreds, sometimes thousands of other people. When you act in a nice way to other people, when you teach other people things, when you are cooperative or loving or show concern for your community, these effects are magnified."

Let us go forth and do good work that will radiate outward like rings on a pond.