

Our Animal Roots

by Kate Jones, RFSPE

Philosophers are interesting people with imaginative worldviews that attempt to explain human nature, consciousness, and the very idea of life. Some philosophers disavow the existence of instincts in humans and that humans' animal roots still affect their behavior. They cling to the idea that human intellect and the ability of abstract thought, reason, and logic are the sole determinants of human knowledge, values, and conduct.

Perhaps, someday, humans will evolve into the ideal state of having enough mental control to rise above those primitive early programs, including unpredictable emotions, that served us through hundreds of millennia of survival on our unique planet. But we haven't yet. Many stages of evolution await us.

Evolution is fact, notwithstanding the great resistance by the religious to accept reality over their faith in creation. I have had interesting conversations with theocrats on this subject, including with Muslims, and I suggested to them the possibility that God's method of creation was through evolution... that evolution *was* the process of creation. I did not get burned at the stake for saying that.

It may well be that today's humans—*homo sapiens sapiens*—are at their most advanced stage of mental development, having evolved over 200,000 years or more. That evolution by selective development is a step-by-step process. The phenotype mutates from a hugely complex chain of causality, and our hugely complex DNA (how much of it is really junk?) is a blueprint that produces ever-different and unpredictable results.

All the stored residue of eons of evolution is still there, and events trigger their retrieval by association. Declaring that instinct does not exist in humans, and that only reasoning is available as man's tool of cognition, is wishful thinking.

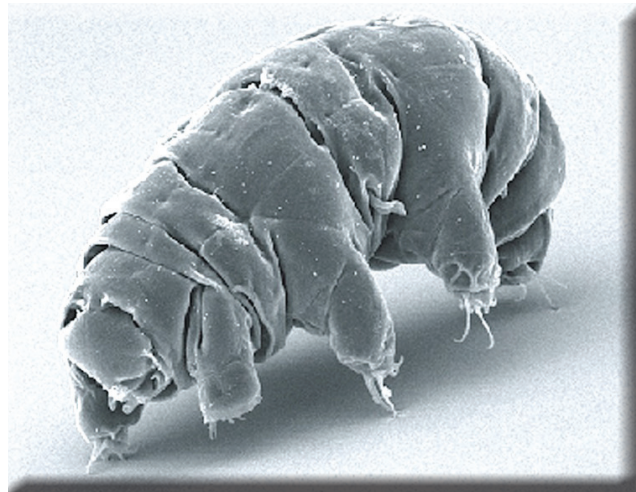


Image from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tardigrade>.

Some ideal man today may well be of that state of mind, a great rarity, a forerunner of what may await the human species over time. Are you one of them? Do you know anyone who is? Were some of the legendary ancients, like Aristotle, Socrates, da Vinci, and Newton, futuristically gifted?

Most people are not born with a capacity to operate only by abstract thought. In fact, any tendency in that direction is diagnosed as a syndrome or shortcoming. One obstacle to such an elevated state of mind is the almost universal predisposition of individuals to cling to what they believe is right.

How children learn—and want to learn—and react to stimuli, is all part of the DNA-provided autonomous program, not consciously selected until some level of self-awareness and introspection has developed.

All the previous linkages of our evolution are still there to build on. Depending on the circumstances of any individual's life, different responses will be evoked. It is a rare individual who has an independent-enough mind to examine everything dispassionately, calmly, without jumping to superficial conclusions, and who is not beaten down when embedded in the cultural milieu.

Imitation—becoming like those others who were there first with their code of conduct—is universal with lifeforms. Call it learning or indoctrination, it operates to replicate the template. And the emotional mechanism that is also built-in—our diagnostic system—senses and reacts to every nuance and stimulus to guide and protect the entity to fit in with the group or to cope with threats and rejection.

Just as behaviors and motivations are built up, so set-backs can trigger retreat to earlier levels of coping. “Walking it back” seems to be the fashionable way to describe this process. People will go back to an earlier way because it worked then and is more established, firmer—the way a tree trunk is stronger than a branch, and the way a cat will inch backwards up in a tree when the branch becomes too thin.

My point is that since all of our prehistory is still contained in our DNA, our subconscious will access those earlier lessons without any long process of abstract thought. It is an instantaneous, mostly emotional reaction. And whatever system of values has been internalized, the subconscious will access the associated and permitted responses, some of which may be in a subterranean region of the mind.

I know of almost no one who can introspect objectively about their emotions and “reasoning” process. Most people, if they can explain at all, will come up with justifications for whatever values they hold. No one wants to be told or shown that they are wrong.

So most people, who operate with their ancient evolutionary tools, rely on them as fallback or default settings and even then may need to pretend to be rational in certain situations while resorting to their more primitive conditioning the rest of the time—not as a moral failure but from the contradictory conditioning of their life.

Independent thinking is further handicapped by tribal conditioning. Collective social organization



Image from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chameleon>.

far precedes the philosophy of the autonomous individual, the free individual who can choose without being influenced by the crowd. From the earliest days of humans forming clans, tribes, and colonies, the group coexisted for mutual protection. And it was a natural byproduct that there would be an alpha male, stronger and smarter, who would be victorious in battles and get the most mates. That can be seen in the ubiquitous power of chieftains and various rulers, whether benevolent or tyrant. We see it even with animals that join in herds, schools, flocks, hives, anthills, etc. And we see it in the power of gravity where a large body controls smaller ones in orbits.

The idea of a leader and subjects is the oldest social structure. The notion that everyone is equal, or ought to be, with an equal voice and vote within the communal assembly, is a radical development and alien to all historical precedents. Calling it the “Enlightenment” parallels today’s political advocates who refer to themselves as “woke.” All similarity ends there, however.

Yet of all the forms of association that *homo sapiens* has explored, assuring each individual's freedom within a voluntary association for collaboration by mutual consent for mutual benefit would be the most life-nurturing system. We can compare it to the assemblage of all the cells in the body and their respective contribution to the whole. That it has not been fully achieved in society is due to the ancient baggage of tradition, cultural habits, and deeply embedded beliefs... in brief, the human software, or memes. Richard Dawkins, in using that concept as a parallel to "genes," the human hardware, was prescient.

Of all the great thinkers of the past 3,000 years, a Russian exile named Ayn Rand has made the most impassioned and logical case for individualism and the American principles of individual rights. Maybe someday the human race will be ready to work that ideal into its worldly relationships. Rand defended her reasoning in the strongest, even harshest, terms, and that was a turn-off for many people.

Rand talked of the "ideal man," and yet in over 1,000 pages of her novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, with hundreds of characters, there was only one. Sadly, she thought everyone should and could be that way if only they wanted to. She did not accept that most humans are shackled by how they are brought up and what is loaded into them as required thinking to match and please the group into which they are thrust. And they are trapped into joining or wanting to "belong" by the inborn algorithm of imitating, the process by which any creature learns.

Imitating all the details of behavior, language, food supply, even manner of walking, facial expressions, the allowed attitudes and preferences... all are transmitted by a stream of memes that infiltrate the brain. Few can resist such indoctrination if they have not been fortified, or freed, by exposure to critical thinking.

The reason not everyone thinks independently is that operating at even the most primitive and misguided level still works to get people through life, from the extreme of making them willing to suffer for a reward in a supposed afterlife, to being made to be willing to sacrifice (suffer) for the good of everyone else.

I was a very logical child, and this notion that suffering is good for you never caught on in my mind. The equation didn't work, of some suffering so others would not have to suffer. If everyone should suffer to earn their way into heaven, why did those others need to be relieved of their worldly suffering by others taking the burden? Oh, because Jesus died on the cross for all humanity. That math didn't work, either. And millions of people have that belief in their brains, because it's a sin to question any of it. What a wild card in the deck that is.

In my case, it was even worse. I was born an atheist, and already at the age of three, I refused to believe the stories I was told about invisible guardian angels and an invisible man named God who knew everything. Throwing in the Easter bunny when I was four was the final stroke against making me believe anything I could not test with my own perception. Of course, as a child, I was powerless to do anything about it, in school and church and the religious boarding school to which I was sent. I could only conceal my true thoughts and pretend to go along with the required routines.

The strength of "faith" is what must be overcome as the brain-lock that it is, and it cannot be done with contradiction. That merely strengthens the resolve and resistance. There are so many contradictions being rationalized by people who claim they believe "thou shalt not kill" and yet support all the wars and killings of people not of their own tribe (or belief system), whom they learn to hate because they are told to.

Yes, pseudo-self-esteem is certainly involved, like the feeling of "holier-than-thou." That is

why the “war on terror” will fail forever, as it merely builds greater and greater resistance and defensiveness, just the way the body’s immune system rises to fight infection and inflammation.

I compare ideas (memes again) to an invasion of infectious agents, which everyone carries in their minds and seeks to spread to everyone possible, preaching and teaching, telling and selling, insisting and persisting, with the power of rationalizing as each idea fights for its life. (Is that what this essay is doing?)

In the process of examining this phenomenon, I realized that the demand for suffering and sacrifice was a deceased parallel to the fact that output of energy is necessary to obtain values needed for life; that delayed gratification is an investment in obtaining future values; that everything has a price; that TANSTAAFL—“There ain’t no such thing as a free lunch.”

This applies to the simplest level, as when a lioness recognizes that she will not be able to chase down that gazelle, so she stops running; and it applies equally to the necessity of earning one’s living through work, by some means of value production to exchange with others.

“Work smarter, not harder” is a part of this basic formula. It may justify con artists in their deceit, however, and every other form of unethical behavior that ranges from simple thievery to rationalized genocide. The Golden Rule, with its respect for each individual’s equal value, is still not understood, accepted, and practiced. The earliest form of predatory instinct still operates.

Yes, I can see the process clearly, yet even I don’t have a cure. I will say that I am highly sympathetic to discussing ideas in an intelligently friendly, non-confrontational, non-preachy manner.

There is one point I do want to make, about the fallacy of “all or nothing” and “black or white” and “good vs. evil” and “you’re either with me

or against me.” There is no need to compromise with or surrender to evil. The problem is that anything not identical to one’s own doctrine is by definition evil and instinctively condemned. Yet there may well be reconcilable differences or innocent mistakes.

I would make the comparison here to the scientific method, which allows for new discoveries and proofs without throwing out all previous knowledge. Knowledge builds towards greater and better insights with each new discovery, incorporating all previous wisdoms. In science, we require evidence and proof, not just pretty beliefs. Finding error and correcting it happily is the enlightened method of advancing up the ladder towards greater knowledge, with less reason for hostile disputations.

How to discover data and integrate it *without contradiction* into previously stored knowledge, even if that means changing what was believed or assumed before, is a skill well worth honing. “Without contradiction” is the key to reducing stress and increasing peace of mind, of feeling good and pacifying those restless instincts that are forever on the job trying to protect us.

Someday, we may get further into the topic of memes and the theory that energy, just like matter, can have cohesion and structure and many manifestations. I’ll be exploring memes, which are the inhabitants of our cognitive software, and comparing them to the friendly or harmful microorganisms that make up our physical bodies. I will be continuing the search into the incredible tools provided in our DNA, looking in the subconscious and supraconscious levels for clues to the “operating system” that has evolved since the earliest one-celled creatures started this phenomenon we call life.

RECOMMENDED VIEWING: Carl Sagan’s, “Cosmos Episode 2: One Voice in the Cosmic Fugue,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kan20tk7VLc>. 