

Human societies are not governed by immutable instinct, as are most species below us. Because of our ability to think, Nature tells us little about how to treat each other. For example, we are not programmed to beat women, to murder neighbors, or to organize for war. We are not like ants, who are so programmed.

We are subject to many laws of nature, but less than our ancestors assumed. Experiments conducted on the behavior of babies have shown that even before they can speak, most babies are compassionate. They are distressed when other babies cry, and when even six-month-olds watch puppet shows, they dislike characters who hurt others and choose puppets who are kind to each other. (These experiments have been televised.)

Human babies do seem programmed to cooperate, and we do know that even our most ancient ancestors learned that cooperation rather than conflict helped them survive and thrive. We do seem wired for this behavior, but it can be modified by genetic mis-wiring or by man-made culture.

There is no one single human culture. Groups of human beings have devised many different ways of surviving. Some are more successful than others. For example, nomads, who have no system for waste disposal, depend upon constant movement to survive. When forced to settle in one place, they do badly until they are taught how to treat sewage and clean water by other cultures who have learned these things.

Phoenicians, an ancient trading culture which thrived for centuries, had a cultural custom of sacrificing (killing) every first-born baby to secure the favor of their very fierce gods. This so horrified the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Hebrews that they set upon genocidal wars to wipe out Phoenician towns. What started as commercial competition morphed into genocide, which was rationalized by their cultural horror of child sacrifice.

Human beings develop their cultures by choice (community unity) or under the direction of a powerful leader or class of leaders. It is not genetic that India developed a rigid caste system that they thought created social stability. It wasn't until centuries later that they recognized that it wasted talent and caused misery in their society.

Human societies are also influenced by geography. The ancient Egyptians had predictable annual flooding that brought rich topsoil and helped them feed their multitudes. Their society was generally placid and cooperative.

The Mesopotamian cultures (Babylon, Assyria) had a much less dependable geography. Their rivers and rainfall levels were unpredictable, which meant feast or famine, until they learned to develop irrigation systems. Their gods were reflective of their environments: unpredictable and angry. They developed fierce leadership and punitive societies. The Assyrians were noted for their blood-thirsty rampages. They conquered by cruelty, but were ultimately defeated by their more humane neighbors.

The most important characteristic of how human beings create societies and civilizations is that they can make changes, make things better. Culture is not hard wired, as is that of fire-ants. Our most ancient ancestors practiced human sacrifice to pacify angry gods. When a volcano erupted, people selected a virgin to throw into the volcano. The eruption eventually stopped, and they made the mental leap that their sacrifice worked. They eventually learned that this was ineffective and stopped doing it.

Societies can and do learn from each other, and they can be transformed by intelligent leadership. Some of the most ferocious and bloodthirsty cultures (the Mongols, for example) changed after their conquests were completed. Their earlier values vanished, and they adopted the more compassionate rules of their predecessors.

The most important thing to know about human societies is that over time, the most successful have come to dominate the world. In the modern world, human societies have morphed from savage and cruel to largely cooperative and compassionate. We have changed as a species, and in most ways, improved human behavior and life.

However, a more negative aspect of some cultures is resistance to change. Changes

almost always reap revolts and resistance from those who perceive themselves as losing something. We will discuss this in the next column, when we explore how American civilization has benefitted the world.

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