

# THE HUMANNESS OF THE HUMAN SPECIES

'The unique place of our species in the order of things is determined not by its animality but by its humanity'

by René Dubos

The cave man is in fashion, but for the wrong reasons. His unpleasant characteristics are being publicized and used to explain modern man's misbehavior. He is assumed to have been nasty and brutish, and since we have descended from him it is claimed that we are condemned to retain the worst aspects of his nature. This would explain our propensity to kill, even to kill our fellow men; the crassness of our social relationships; our pathological desire to dominate and spoil the environments in which we live. Jean Jacques Rousseau believed that human nature was intrinsically good until it was sullied by civilization. The fashionable view at present is that human nature was bad from the very beginning and civilization has only given wider ranges of expression to its fundamental bestiality.

My confidence in the future of our species is not due to ignorance of its failings. This confidence is based on two different but related sets of facts. First, the human species has exhibited for at least 100,000 years certain traits which are uniquely and pleasantly human and which are more interesting than those that account for its bestiality. Second, the human species has the power to choose among the conflicting traits which constitute its complex nature, and it has made the right choices often enough to have kept civilization so far on a forward and upward course. The unique place of our species in the order of things is determined not by its animality but by its humanity.

In view of the fact that human beings evolved as hunters, it is not surprising that they have inherited a biological propensity to kill, as have all animal predators. But it is remarkable that a very large percentage of human beings find killing an extremely distasteful and painful experience. Despite the most subtle forms of propaganda, it is difficult to convince them that war is desirable. In contrast, altruism has long been practiced, often going so far as self-sacrifice. Altruism certainly has deep roots in man's biological past for the simple reason that it presents advantages for the survival of the group. However, the really human aspect of altruism is not its biological origin or its evolutionary advantages but rather the fact that humankind has now made it a virtue regardless of practical advantages or disadvantages. Since earliest recorded history, altruism has become one of the absolute values by which humanity transcends animality.

The existence of altruism has been recognized as far back as Neanderthal times, among the very first people who can be regarded as truly human. In the Shanidar cave of Iraq, for example, there was found a skeleton of a Neanderthalian adult male, dating from approximately 50,000 years ago, who had probably been blind and one of whose arms had been amputated above the elbow early in life: he had been killed by a collapse of the cave wall. As he was forty years old at the time of his death and

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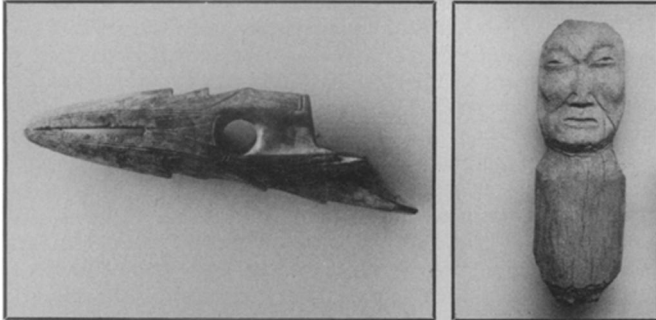
Rock engraving: Cave of Addaura (Sicily) c. 15,000-10,000 B.C.

must have been incapable of fending for himself during much of his lifetime, it seems reasonable to assume that he had been cared for by the members of his clan. Several similar cases which could be interpreted as examples of "charity" have been recognized in other prehistoric sites. In fact, one of the first Neanderthalian skeletons to be discovered in Europe was that of a man approximately fifty years old who had suffered from extensive arthritis. His disease was so severe that he must have been unable to hunt or to engage in other strenuous activities. He, also, must therefore have depended for his survival upon the care of his clan.

Many prehistoric finds suggest attitudes of affection. A Stone Age Tomb contains the body of a woman holding a young child in her arms. Caves in North America that were occupied some 9,000 years ago have yielded numerous sandals of different sizes; those of children's sizes are lined with rabbit fur, as if to express a special kind of loving care for the youngest members of the community.

Whether or not the words altruism and love had equivalents in the languages of the Stone Age, the social attitudes which they denote existed. The fact that the philosophy of nonviolence was clearly formulated at the time of Jesus and Buddha suggests that it had developed at a much earlier date. The Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," exists in all religious doctrines, even in those which have reached us through the very first written documents. It must therefore have an extremely ancient origin.

According to the teachings of the Persian prophet Zarathustra more than 2,500 years ago, "That nature only is good which shall not do unto another whatever is not good unto its own self." But since, still according to Zarathustra, the human soul is constantly a battlefield between beneficent and malevolent spirits, human nature is



Alutian harpoon head and wood portrait carving c. 25 B.C.

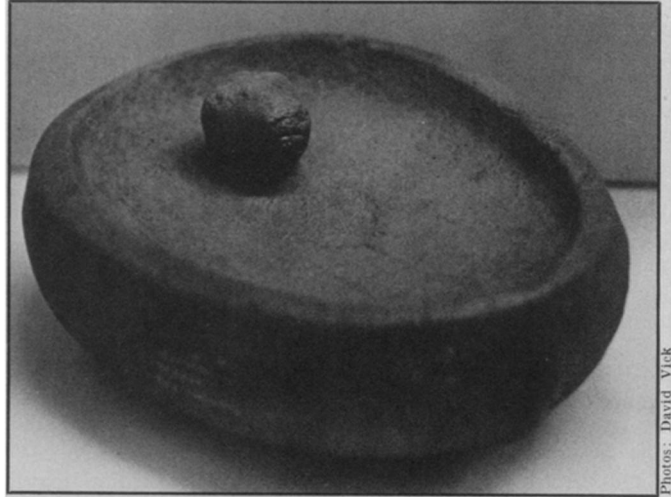
good only to the extent that it represses part of itself so as not to do harm to another person. Such an early belief in the need to repress the evil in human nature is a startling expression of the philosophy that being human implies choices. The uniqueness of humankind comes indeed from its potential ability to escape from the tyranny of its biological heritage. Instead of being slaves to their genes and hormones, as animals are, human beings have the kind of freedom which comes from possessing free will and moral judgment. We can repress our animality if we will.

Human beings can choose not only between good and evil, but also between other opposite traits of their nature. For example, they can follow their natural tendency to wastefulness and negligence or their desire for order and form. Adorning the body during life with pigments, feathers, and trinkets seem to have been a very ancient practice. What is more impressive, however, is that in the same Shanidar cave which yielded the blind Neanderthalian with the amputated arm, several bodies had been buried on beds of flowers and soft branches. At least eight different kinds of flowers, including relatives of such modern plants as hollyhock, grape hyacinth, and bachelor's buttons, have been found with the bodies. Since the plants could not have grown in the cave or have been carried by animals, the corpses must have been buried with wild flowers gathered from the hillside. Other Neanderthalian bodies found in southwestern France had been painted with ocher and adorned before burial with collars and arm rings made of shells. The Neanderthalian people therefore confronted death ritualistically and with concern.

The most spectacular evidence of early man's sense of order and form is of course Stone Age art. This includes much more than the statues known as Paleolithic Venuses and the famous paintings on the walls of caves. As far back as 100,000 years ago, many tools and weapons exhibit a quality of workmanship which transcends utilitarian needs. Many ordinary objects of stone, bone, or ivory are adorned with carvings of such exquisite delicacy that they can hardly be seen without a microscope. We do not know what Stone Age people tried to express through this workmanship which

we now regard as artistic, but it may not have been very different from what motivates some primitive people of the present time. The Australian aborigines have stated that their nonutilitarian activities can have many different purposes, such as performing rites of magic, commemorating a notable event, or simply doing something pleasurable. The search for beauty unrelated to practical ends seems to have been a fundamental urge and may thus be an absolute human value.

Stone Age people learned to manipulate their environment so as to better adapt it to their needs. But astounding as these practical achievements are, they are trivial in comparison with the abstract concepts developed during the same period. The practice of burying the dead and the presence of objects, food, and flowers at the burial sites imply abstract notions concerning life and death. The



South Alaskan carved stone lamp for heat and light. c. 25 B.C.

representation of animals, plants, and human beings by various artistic techniques implies an objectivation of the external world which was a decisive step toward the view that humankind is in some way outside nature. Old Stone Age people also learned very early to make abstract notations relating the phases of the moon to the development of plants and to the migrations of animals. Indeed, many other systems of symbols have been recognized in carvings on objects 20,000 years old.

These symbolic representations of natural objects and phenomena were probably at first related to such practical ends as hunting, fishing, and the gathering of wild plants. Eventually they probably facilitated the development of technologies such as those of agriculture. More interestingly, they must have led step by step to such more abstract concepts as belief in the existence of order and continuity in the universe. Concepts of this kind may be at the origin of the astonishing body of knowledge that is embodied in the construction of the megalithic monuments of Stonehenge in England and Carnac in Brittany, which antedate the Egyptian pyramids.

The uniquely human aspect of these primitive activities lies in the progressive evolution from practical and empirical knowledge into a system of scientific and philosophic abstractions. The emergence of humanity from animality consists precisely in this transmutation of utilitarian needs into an adventure of the spirit—an adventure which was not essential for the survival of humankind as an animal species, but one in which human beings have continuously and consciously been engaged since the Stone Age. □

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