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Human Nature Redux

Sometimes a big idea fades so imperceptibly from public consciousness you don't even notice until it has almost disappeared. Such is the fate of the belief in natural human goodness.

This belief, most often associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, begins with the notion that "everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man." Human beings are virtuous and free in their natural state. It is only corrupt institutions that make them venal. They are happy in their simplicity, but social conventions make them unwell.

This belief had gigantic ramifications over the years. It led, first of all, to the belief that bourgeois social conventions are repressive and soul-destroying. It contributed to romantic revolts against tradition and etiquette. Whether it was 19th-century Parisian bohemians or 20th-century beatniks and hippies, Western culture has seen a string of antiestablishment rebellions led by people who wanted to shuck off convention and reawaken more natural modes of awareness.

It led people to hit the road, do drugs, form communes and explore free love in order to unleash their authentic selves.

In education, it led to progressive reforms, in which children were liberated to follow their natural instincts. Politically, it led to radical social engineering efforts, because if institutions were the source of sin, then all you had to do was reshape institutions in order to create a New Man.

Therapeutically, it led to an emphasis of feelings over reason, self-esteem over self-discipline. In the realm of foreign policy, it led to a sort of global doctrine of the noble savage — the belief that societies in the colonial world were fundamentally innocent, and once the chains of their oppression were lifted something wonderful would flower.

Over the past 30 years or so, however, this belief in natural goodness has been discarded. It began to lose favor

because of the failure of just about every social program that was inspired by it, from the communes to progressive education on up. But the big blow came at the hands of science.

From the content of our genes, the nature of our neurons and the lessons of evolutionary biology, it has become clear that nature is filled with competition and conflicts of interest. Humanity did not come before status contests. Status contests came before humanity, and are embedded deep in human relations. People in hunter-gatherer societies were deadly warriors, not sexually liberated pacifists. As Steven Pinker has put it, Hobbes was more right than Rousseau.

Moreover, human beings are not as pliable as the social engineers imagined. Human beings operate according to preset epigenetic rules, which dispose people to act in certain ways. We strive for dominance and undermine radical egalitarian dreams. We're tribal and divide the world into in-groups and out-groups.

This darker if more realistic view of human nature has led to a rediscovery of different moral codes and different political assumptions. Most people today share what Thomas Sowell calls the Constrained Vision, what Pinker calls the Tragic Vision and what E. O. Wilson calls Existential Conservatism. This is based on the idea that there is a universal human nature; that it has nasty, competitive elements; that we don't understand much about it; and that the conventions and institutions that have evolved to keep us from slitting each other's throats are valuable and are altered at great peril.

Today, parents don't seek to liberate their children; they supervise, coach and instruct every element of their lives. Today, there really is no antinomian counterculture — even the artists and rock stars are bourgeois strivers. Today, communes and utopian schemes are out of favor. People are mostly skeptical of social engineering efforts and jaundiced about revolutionaries who promise to herald a new dawn. Iraq has revealed what human beings do without a strong order-imposing state.

This is a big pivot in intellectual history. The thinkers most associated with the Tragic Vision are Isaiah Berlin, Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, Friedrich Hayek and Hobbes. Many of them are conservative.

And here's another perversity of human nature. Many conservatives resist the theory of evolution even though it confirms many of conservatism's deepest truths.