Approaching Human Nature – and Needs – Empirically

I. Foundations

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Humanity differs dramatically from non-human social animals in its behavior and the organization of its ways of life. No other social species, for instance, organizes its ways of life (i.e., its social order) so variably or allows such an enormous scope for individual creativity/deviance. Human societies are remarkably flexible in comparison to the rigid social orders of other intelligent social species, such as lions, wolves, and even primates. This vast difference makes humanity a reality of its own kind and, therefore, a separate subject of study, which justifies the existence of social sciences and humanities: for social sciences, too, despite their name, do not focus on the many complex and highly differentiated societies that exist, from those of ants and bees to those of baboons and chimpanzees, but exclusively on human societies. Yet, it proved impossible to account for this difference by the difference of the human animal from other animals, or genetically.

Genetically, our species is different from other animal species to different degrees, clearly much more different from some than from others. But even species within our biological family – the primates – remain as drastically different from us behaviorally as are those on altogether different branches of biological evolution. Only 2% of the genome of our species, which we somewhat arrogantly and in ignorance of other animals' cognitive capacities call *Homo sapiens*, distinguish our animal nature from that of our closest genetic relative, the chimp. These 2 % must account for the different shapes of our and chimps' bodies and skulls, postures, distribution of bodily hair, the different organic diseases to which we and

they are subject, our different life spans and procreation patterns – all the things that separate two closely related species from the same family, such as horses and donkeys, lions and tigers, or chimps and orangutans, etc., from each other. Nothing is left in this small biological difference for the explanation of the vast differences on the behavioral level – the difference in the organization of our ways of life, which make humanity stand so completely out of the animal world.

But, if it is not our biology, then what? Comparative zoology provides an answer. While all other animals transmit their ways of life (primarily) genetically, we transmit our ways of life almost exclusively by means of symbols. This is a qualitative difference – a difference in kind, which puts us into a different category of being. This is what makes us human.

The process of genetic transmission is the process of life, the subject of biology. As animals, we are involved in this process and, as living beings, we share numerous biological needs with other animals. Like them, we must breathe and eat, like many of them, we must have shelter, like all the social animals, we must belong to a group, and so on – to survive as animals. Maslow's pyramid of human needs, which assumes that humanity is a biological species, only quantitatively different from other biological species, includes these. But, in addition to being animals, we are also something else. In addition to being part of the process of life and subject to its laws, we also participate in a different, autonomous process (that is, a process ruled by other than biological laws) – the process of symbolic transmission of our ways of life, which we call *culture*. Culture adds a dimension on top of our animal nature, superimposing another nature on it, so to speak. It is this other superimposed nature that makes us human. Human nature is cultural, in other words. To understand it, we must analyze culture.

The specifically human needs (which are different from animal needs which can be deduced from the nature of the

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life – organic, biological – processes, which may be largely the same for a whole branch of the phylogenetic tree or, to revert to the Linnaean terminology, a whole class of animals, such as mammals) can only be deduced from the nature of the cultural process, in general, and, because of the extreme variability of cultures, from the nature of specific cultures. With human needs created by cultures, it would not stand to reason that all the needs of people in Tokugawa Japan, Imperial China, or tribal Arabia, for instance, would be the same as the needs of citizens of modern democracies. All of the needs on the top of Maslow's pyramid (love, though not belonging, which is a need of all higher animals, such as mammals and birds; esteem; self-actualization) are such needs, characteristic only of specific – modern democratic – societies. Thus, none of the needs included in his pyramid can be called human, in the sense of being limited to humanity and universal within it, needs at all: the lower ones because they are animal needs, and the higher ones because they reflect not universal human nature, but only the nature of specific societies and are, therefore, historical.

Analysis of actual human nature – culture, that dimension of experience that is superadded onto the biological dimension, transforming animals into human beings and making humanity a reality *sui generis*, reveals that the only universal human need is the need for a clearly-defined identity. As I explain in detail in *Mind, Modernity, Madness: The Impact of Culture on Human Experience* (Harvard University Press, 2013), the failure to develop such an identity results in various degrees of functional mental illness, from anorexia through depressive and manic-depressive illnesses to full-fledged schizophrenia, when one loses the sense of self altogether and, with it, all possibility to function.

In distinction to organic mental illness (i.e., mental illness whose causes are organic), functional mental illness (which may express itself organically, but for which no organic causes have been found despite over two centuries of focused, well-funded, and intensive investigation) is a disease of the mind, not of the brain. The mind is a process, called into being by the nature of symbols – the fact that, unlike signs, their meanings change with the also ever-changing context, and thus need to be interpreted, or processed, by the brain. The symbols are taken from the cultural – symbolic – environment. Thus, mind can be defined as “culture in the brain,” or individualized culture, and likened to the more familiar and well-researched process of digestion (processing of stimuli from outside – food – in/by a biological organ, stomach). In distinction to the mental processes in animals (who do not have minds), the human mental process is, in other words, both biological and cultural.

While mind is the cultural process on the individual level, identity is the central process in the mind, on which other

specifically human mental processes depend. Identity is a cognitive map of one's socio-cultural terrain, with the position of the individual on this terrain vis-à-vis all of its components, analogous to cognitive map in an animal's brain of the organism's physical environment, and likely created by something of the nature of space cells, discovered in rodents. Its existence is a logical implication of human – cultural – nature. While the position of every wild animal organism in its intra-species environment is determined genetically (no healthy female mouse or wolf would ever assume a male role, for instance), precluding the need for an identity, the indeterminacy of symbols leaves the position of human individual equally undetermined and necessitates the construction of identity.

Identity-formation, though necessary, however, is easier in some cultural environments than in others. In traditional societies, broadly defined, the individual is born into a world, limited indeed culturally, but almost as strictly as an animal's world is limited genetically, and receives one's identity almost ready-made, inferring it from the narrow range of comparisons available in this world, determined by the religion and the social stratum into which one is born, and one's sex. By contrast, in modern – that is, essentially cut loose from tradition, secular, egalitarian, open – society, in which social mobility and change are legitimate and expected, the individual becomes one's own maker. The cultural environment presents to one's imagination virtually unlimited possibilities; one's identity becomes a matter of choice. The necessity of choice makes identity-formation problematic. The need – the one distinctive universal human need – is no longer automatically fulfilled, and rates of functional mental diseases, puzzlingly low in hierarchical and poor societies lacking individual freedom and controlled by tradition, in modern societies grow exponentially.

The postulation of the need for clearly-defined identity is therefore justified both logically (it can be deduced from the nature of the human – cultural – environment, that is, from human nature itself) and empirically (not meeting it undermines human life). The same can be said of numerous animal needs, but of no other specifically human need.

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