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Goodness, Survival and Flourishing

The Western world is still trying to come to grips with a history that extends past the 6000 years originally assumed by the Christian world into millions of years and integration with the evolving tree of life. The last 1% of human genus existence (around 10,000 years in mostly sedentary communities) represents an aberration in the history of humanity. Philosophical and practical approaches to living abandoned following natural laws and shifted against living cooperatively with the biodiverse community. Children in sedentary societies are raised in species-atypical ways and do not reach their human potential. As a result, adults have only a partial human nature and often feel distant from and superior to the rest of nature, leading to a detached destruction of the earth. Restoring goodness and flourishing requires returning to the laws of nature in child raising and living affectionately with the biocommunity.

It was not too long ago that being good went hand in hand with survival and with flourishing. In our ancestral context (99% of human genus history) prior to the dominance of settled, agricultural societies, humans lived in small, nomadic bands. These provided for the evolved needs of offspring and fostered normal-optimal development. Although mortality rates were high before age 15 (similar to before 1850 in Western societies), those who survived were intelligent in knowing how to live well on the earth and with others, including with other-than-humans. Being good was necessary for survival. One learned and followed natural laws or perished, whether laws for child raising, harvesting foods, or living cooperatively with the land.

Unfortunately, in the last 1% of human genus existence, philosophical and practical approaches to living have abandoned the following of natural laws and decided not to live cooperatively with the biodiverse community but instead to dominate it. As Daniel Quinn¹ put it, they no longer wanted to leave their fate to the gods, stopping evolutionary processes for themselves and deciding they were the pinnacle of creation/evolution. Among “civilized” nations generally, dominant cultural philosophies promote ideas of human separation from and even superiority to the rest of Nature. This has led to a cavalier attitude toward other-than-humans, to the mistreatment of all life forms (including human). Brute force is used routinely, even with babies. Misbeginnings in early life lead to the

1 D. Quinn, *Ismael*, Bantam, New York 1992.

underdevelopment of human capacities to do otherwise and an inability to live cooperatively on the earth. This leads to a wish for escape – for a salvation beyond this life – what else can one wish for when one does not understand the laws of one’s biocommunity, does not know how to live within it, and lacks the self-regulatory skills that allow for deep bonding to the human and other-than-human community? I briefly examine some of the causes of humanity’s current viciousness and absenteeism in relating as a partner to the earth and its entities.

1. Human Virtue

Often overlooked, Charles Darwin tried to counter now-pervasive views initially popularized by Herbert Spencer and others in the 19th century – that self-interest is a primary feature of human nature. In *Descent of Man*², Darwin pointed to the manner in which the characteristics of humanity’s “moral sense” evolved through the tree of life. Key evolutionary features of the moral sense include the social instincts, taking pleasure in the company of and feeling sympathy for others. Many phylogenetically older species display these characteristics. Accordingly he argued, humans do not *sacrifice* their natures when they behave morally, rather instead they *respond* to them.

But why then are there so many egoists and narcissists among us? Contrary to the assumption that Darwin’s “moral sense” is a set of genetic inheritances, empirical research is demonstrating how early experience and caregiver-child relationships shape the *type* of moral orientation an individual develops-egoistic or communal³. Genes are blueprints that must be deployed properly (epigenetics). It turns out that humans have more epigenetic development after birth than any other animal, making the postnatal environment fundamental to the proper development of personality and human nature.

Critical for the development of a moral sense is the evolved developmental niche, the nest humans evolved for their young⁴. All animals have nests for their young that form part of an extra-genetic inheritance corresponding to the needs and maturational pace of offspring⁵. Humans evolved to have the most helpless newborns with the longest maturation rate and so require a particularly intensive developmental system or nest for the young. The evolved nest (we call it the evolved developmental niche) was provided for over 99% of human genus existence which

2 C. Darwin, *The descent of man*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 1871/1981.

3 G. Kochanska, “Mutually responsive orientation between mothers and their young children: A context for the early development of conscience”, «Current Directions in Psychological Science», 11(6), 191-195, 2002. doi:10.1111/1467-8721.00198; Narvaez, 2014.

4 D. Narvaez, J. Panksepp, A. Schore, & T. Gleason, (Eds.) *Evolution, early experience and human development: From research to practice and policy*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY 2013.

5 G. Gottlieb, “On the epigenetic evolution of species-specific perception: The developmental manifold concept”, «Cognitive Development», 17, 1287–1300, 2002; S. Oyama, P.E. Griffiths, & R.D. Gray, *Cycles of contingency: Developmental systems and evolution*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2001.

occurred in small-band hunter-gatherer bands⁶. Intensive caregiving in early life includes soothing perinatal experiences, responsiveness to needs, nearly constant touch, extensive breastfeeding, and free play with multi-aged peers, which emerged with social mammals over 30 million years ago⁷. Human variations observed among hunter-gatherer societies also include positive social support for the mother-child dyad and multiple adult caregivers⁸. Developmental neuroscientific research and clinical findings demonstrate the impact of each nest characteristic on human development and wellbeing⁹. Human beings are self-organizing, biosocially constructed social mammals unlike any other animal.

When a baby's needs are ignored, wellbeing is undermined "all the way down" to neurotransmitters and immune system function. There are multiple sensitive periods for a host of systems that rely on the development of other systems during earlier phases. An impaired nest leads to a less than optimal trajectory physiologically. Psychosocially, the child learns from experience. Her needs ignored, the baby herself learns to ignore her needs, not developing the agility of a social call-and-response that shapes emotion systems to be smart and wise. Instead, she becomes easily dysregulated and necessarily self-centered. My colleagues and I find that the characteristics of the evolved nest influence a child's self-regulation, conscience, and empathy, capacities that shape social life in childhood but also in adulthood. Our studies indicate that missing nest components lead to a suboptimal pathway for sociality in children and in adults with not only worse health outcomes but also more self-focused moral orientations¹⁰. We can say that the capacity for virtue is undermined.

In their policies, practices and institutions, contemporary societies like the USA seem to have forgotten the needs of young children and how their formation influences the adults they become, including the nature of their morality. Historical shifts in child raising attitudes and practices have moved away from the original baselines for what I call the evolved pathway for building human nature and ecological virtue.

2. Virtue Development

The history and psychology of (mis)understanding virtue development is evident from Augustine to MacIntyre. For example, in *Confessions*¹¹ Augustine identified as

6 B.S. Hewlett & M.E. Lamb, *Hunter-gatherer childhoods: evolutionary, developmental and cultural perspectives*, Aldine, New Brunswick, NJ 2005.

7 M. Konner, *The evolution of childhood*, Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA 2010.

8 S. Hrdy, *Mothers and others: The evolutionary origins of mutual understanding*, Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA 2009.

9 D. Narvaez, Panksepp et al., 2013.

10 D. Narvaez, Wang et al. 2013; Narvaez, Gleason et al. 2013; Narvaez, Wang, and Cheng 2016; Narvaez, Wang et al., under review.

11 Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (transl. by H. Chadwick), Oxford University Press, Oxford, England, 1998.

original sin his babyhood desire for his mother's breast and his childhood preference to play instead of doing his lessons. We know now that these desires are built-in inclinations whose satisfaction lead to optimal development of children's brains and bodies. But Augustine's tainting of children's needs and labelling them essentially evil still marbles views of child raising. In the 20th century, behaviorist John Watson,¹² aiming to make psychology a hard science, took up the crusade against affection as president of the American Psychological Association. He applied the mechanistic paradigm of behaviorism to child rearing, warning about the dangers of too much mother love. Yet we know now how critical responsive loving care is for normal-optimal development (so much so that my colleagues and I control for it in all our empirical work to see if additional components of the nest matter – they do).

Thus, Western notions of virtue development have been skewed for some time, more recently emphasizing reasoning or top-down training of habits. Even among virtue theorists, the development of virtue is not fully understood. For example, in the beginning of his book, *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre¹³ set up a scenario where humanity had lost most of its scientific knowledge and pieced together the few fragments left. He used this as an analogy for lost moral knowledge. He assumed science to be about a knowledge base, when actually it is about a *process*-experimentation, deduction, peer review, converging evidence. Similarly, humans learn virtue not by memorizing rules handed down from prior generations but from the *processes* of lived experience and practices that build embodied understanding from the neurobiological ground up¹⁴, especially in early life when capacities for and intuitions about the social life are constructed. The baby learns reciprocity, empathy, resonance and intersubjectivity from deep routine practice that shapes neurobiological systems for internal and external cooperation. The foundations for virtue begin with the organization of biological and social self-regulation learned through experience of the "vitality contours" of social life¹⁵. In the rush for material wealth and possessions, many parents today have forgotten what our ancestors knew by following deeply evolved intuitions about child raising.

Although later in life people can learn "about" morality from rules people give them, they don't *know* it as "morality" (right and good truth) deep down unless it was lived and learned when it was scheduled for developmental maturation. This applies to empathy and autonomy curtailed by that empathy¹⁶. On the other hand, early *undercare* leads to coercion, which becomes required to live with others after natural virtue development was undermined. Forced to follow external rules,

12 J.B. Watson, *Psychological care of infant and child*, W. W. Norton & Co, New York 1928.

13 A. MacIntyre, *After virtue*, Duckworth, London 1981.

14 J. Piaget, *The moral judgment of the child* (M. Gabain, Trans.), Free Press, New York (1932/1965).

15 D. Stern, *Forms of vitality: Exploring dynamic experience in psychology, the arts, psychotherapy, and development*, Oxford University Press, New York 2010.

16 D. Narvaez, *Neurobiology and the development of human morality: Evolution, Culture and Wisdom*, W.W. Norton, New York, NY 2014.

individuals learn morality as coercion, first from others and when the rules are internalized, coercion towards the self. Top-down understanding and bottom-up habits are discoordinated so hypocrisy becomes normal and virtue rare.

In Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy, to be virtuous means to act in the right way and manner for the particular situation. I agree, though I would expand the circle of concern to the natural world. In our ancestral past ecologically – and socially – cooperative practices were necessary for individual survival¹⁷. This is no longer the case. Cooperation and communalism are no longer expected in some corners and not closely linked to individual survival. And so we live with a world full of undercared for and vicious individuals.

How do we know what is missing among those raised without the evolved nest? Different forms of intelligence are apparent in small-band hunter-gatherer communities, specifically, what I call *receptive intelligence*. This is initially critical formed in early life. Part of with an appropriate or species-typical early care is the right hemisphere, the seat of many self-regulatory but also socially-receptive systems¹⁸. Receptive intelligence allows one to be flexibly responsive in the moment rather than requiring a script or set of rules to follow. Humans evolved as movers within a dynamic social and natural world where receptive intelligence was vital. The vitality contours of moving with others in early life cultivates accurate perception and skills to live in and with one's culture. Moving through the landscape freely cultivates accurate perception and skills to live in one's local habitat. Movement supports the development of receptive attention rather unlike the imposed, focused attention and emotional detachment that is encouraged in typical Western settings¹⁹.

Ingold²⁰, among others, has described the ways of hunter-gatherers, who emphasize the type of learning and knowing that comes from exploring the natural environment (which characterized human learning prior to humanity's withdrawal from nature and lives spent mostly inside buildings). In describing the nomadic forager, Ingold says: "He must watch his step, and listen and feel as well. He must, in a word, pay attention to things, and adjust his gait accordingly. Thus in the very act of walking,

17 e.g., D.P. Fry, *The human potential for peace*, Oxford University Press, New York 2006; D.P. Fry, (Ed.), *War, peace and human nature*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY 2013. R.B. Lee, *The !Kung San: Men, women, and work in a foraging community*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1979; R.B. Lee, & R. Daly, (Eds.), *The Cambridge encyclopedia of hunters and gatherers*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2005.

18 A.N. Schore, *Affect dysregulation & disorders of the self*, Norton, New York, NY 2003a; A.N. Schore, *Affect regulation and the repair of the self*, Norton, New York, 2003b.

19 D.R. Loy, *A Buddhist history of the West: Studies in lack*, SUNY, New York 2002; I. McGilchrist, *The master and his emissary: The divided brain and the making of the western world*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT: 2009.

20 T. Ingold, To "human" is a verb. In A. Fuentes & A. Visala (Eds.), *Verbs, bones and brains: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Human Nature* (pp. 71-87), University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN: 2016; T. Ingold, *The perception of the environment*, Routledge, London 2016.

he is thrust into the presence of the real” (p. 80). Robert Wolff²¹ described his own experience, of what he called learning to be human. After several visits to his ‘guide’ with whom he would walk ‘aimlessly’ for hours waiting for something to happen, in frustration he decided just to be open to the life around him.

[I] stopped abruptly. The jungle was suddenly dense with sounds, smells, little puffs of air here and there. I became aware of things I had largely ignored before. It was as if all this time I had been walking with dirty eyeglasses – and then someone washed them for me; or as if I were watching a blurry home movie – and then someone turned the focusing knob. But it was more than that – much more. I could smell things I had no name for. I heard little sounds that could be anything at all.²²

Finally, after letting go of his preconceptions and opening himself up to the present moment, Wolff’s perceptions shifted. Much like James Gibson²³ described, immersion builds intuitive movement, patterns of interaction that fit the situation (affordances). In this way, receptive intelligence does not approach the world as a set of objects to be manipulated but involves embodied involvement with the changing patterns and nuances of particular situations.

According to an organic virtue orientation, many humans and their societies today are unfit as they destroy ecological systems locally and globally. What is the source of this unfittedness? I point to early life psychosocialneurobiological development. Many civilized humans today live in and create disconnected and vicious (non-virtuous) people and systems²⁴.

Over the course of several shifts in social organization over centuries, civilizations distanced themselves from an integrated relationship with the natural entities around them²⁵. The withdrawal was not only physical but also emotional. In fact, Western civilization adopted an oppositional relationship to nature that was typically accompanied by disgust. Such behaviors were visible most clearly in the written and reported accounts of Europeans encountering the “New World.” Early settlers seemed unable to honor the paradisiacal and biodiverse landscape they encountered, and instead were fearful of the “savage” wildness²⁶. They proceeded to destroy human and more-than-human life, as if evil or as useful for monetary gain. These behaviors and attitudes were foreign to the native peoples who never thought of moving against nature, feeling at home in nature, as if they

21 R. Wolff, *Original wisdom*, Rochester Vermont, Inner Traditions, 2001.

22 Wolff, 2001, p. 156.

23 J.J. Gibson, *The ecological approach to visual perception*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA 1979.

24 C. Derber, *Sociopathic society*, Paradigm Press, Boulder, CO 2013; C. Derber, & Y.R. Magrass, *Bully nation: How the American establishment creates a bullying society*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 2016.

25 P. Shepard, *Coming Home to the Pleistocene* (Shepard, F.R., Ed.), Island Press/Shearwater Books, Washington D.C. 1998.

26 K. Sale, *The conquest of paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian legacy*, Penguin Plume, New York, NY 1990; F. Turner, *Beyond geography: The Western spirit against the wilderness*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ 1994.

belonged to it. They sought (and still seek) to “maintain proper relationships with [natural] beings”²⁷. Life is perceived as an ongoing unfolding organic movement, a becoming, a “continuous birth... One is continually present as witness to [the] moment, always moving like the crest of a wave, at which the world is about to disclose itself for what it is” (Ingold 2011, 69).

To live well, one must have accurate perception. And for this, one must move through the habitat with capacities for and cultivation of receptive intelligence. As Shepard²⁸ writes, “Perception’s truest expression is its contiguity with nature, by which it influences the quality of life, our awareness of ecological integrity, and the connectedness of all things... that... defin[e] a group’s pattern of bodily movement and sensibility, the predisposition emerging from genetic past and early grounding, affecting every aspect of one’s expressive life”. Accurate perception may require deep immersion in one’s local landscapes so that one can deeply learn the ways of the more-than-humans there. To become a human being meant a child learned to live with a deep sense of connectedness and receptivity to other-than-humans, to fulfill their animal nature (traditional societies don’t consider children fully human until they have matured²⁹).

How is it that most people alive today have such a different orientation to the natural world? I think it comes back to the evolved developmental niche. When the niche is degraded or missing, a child cannot become a *real* human being. Their nature goes in the wrong direction. One might say that moderns typically become autistic (relationally awkward) in relation to more-than-human nature – growing away from receptivity through socialization, unable to hear, perceive, or understand more-than-human communications. “So long as we have limited direct experience of the creature in question, it is relatively easy to accept a cultural stereotype in its place, in this case animal-as-object”.³⁰ Lack of experience with real wildness makes the domesticated landscape seem like Nature, one that is controllable where humans can be in charge. As Robert Wolff noted, «By divorcing ourselves from Nature we have also removed ourselves from the wisdom that comes from living as part of What Is»³¹.

Organic virtue development takes a different route. Human beings are creatures of the earth. To be “fit,” creatures must follow the laws of nature within their ecological niches in ways that do not undermine future generations. What does this mean? Initially parents are responsible to be companions to their children in a way that enables the child’s respectful relationship to embodied self. Parents honor the baby’s needs for closeness, responsiveness and comfort. Babies are immersed in

27 T. Ingold, “On the social relations of the hunter-gatherer band”, in R. B. Lee & R. Daly (Eds.), *The Cambridge encyclopedia of hunters and gatherers* (pp. 399-410), Cambridge University Press, New York 2005, p. 409.

28 Shepard 1998, p. 149.

29 M. Sahlin, *The Western Illusion of Human Nature*, Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago 2008.

30 N. Evernden, *The natural alien: Humankind and environment*, 2nd ed., University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Ontario 1999, pp. 77-78.

31 Wolff, 2001, pp. 2-3.

supportive early care, facilitating the optimal shaping of their socioemotional and perceptive capacities³². A similar immersion occurs in the natural world, fostering ecological attachment.

If parents disrespect basic needs routinely, they establish habits of disregard toward all sorts of relational bonds: the child to embodied self, the child to parent, the child to the social world, the child to Nature. The isolated child does not learn to live within a fully-cooperative dynamic living social system. It is an easy step to a one-person psychological world in which individuals perceive everything as objects to be manipulated and, with extensive babyhood distress, as threats to the self. Human alienation represents broken, ignored, unacknowledged relationship and the lack of capacities for relational attunement. When adults do not provide the evolved early nest, they break the “natural laws” of child raising, which results not only in an underdeveloped individual but one who learns to ignore her own nature as well. Alienation from her own nature sets up an alienation towards nature generally.

To *not* receive the evolved nest in early life can be perceived as an injustice to a child, with serious ramifications for the child’s and humanity’s future³³. If brain and body system thresholds are established suboptimally in early years – not by trauma, but simply by not providing care that children evolved to need, then children may not reach their potential or become cognitively and socially underdeveloped. While such children may sometimes function well enough as adults, holding down jobs and raising families, they are not necessarily virtuous. They can be egoistic rather than communal. They can lack a sense of social responsibility, global citizenship and an inability to live wisely with the earth in mind. The children become the adults who run the world, perpetuating what they experienced, a disordered human development and a disordered world to go with it. The world becomes full of stress-reactive individuals who necessarily are anxiously self-centered, who learn to calm themselves with lives of emotional detachment, social domination, or endless consumption. They become adults whose cultural practices perpetuate the disordered ontogenetic cycle across generations.

3. Conclusion

Most humans are not flourishing and they are not good or virtuous. We live in a world where it is normal to disregard future generations, the wellbeing of the All. And so humanity has damaged the balance of the Whole. Unfortunately, the dominant culture compartmentalizes things, often missing the big picture. Families in the USA typically are so stressed they live in “emergency mode,” raising their children as if they live in a slave system. Most no longer understand how to

32 C. Turnbull, *The human cycle*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1984.

33 This refers to normative approaches to child raising that do not include abuse, which of course is prevalent and even advocated in civilized history. See L. deMause, *The history of childhood*, Psychohistory Press, New York, NY 1995; A. Miller, *For your own good: Hidden cruelty in child-rearing and the roots of violence*, Noonday Press, New York, NY 1983/1990.

remedy ecological imbalances, don't realize their importance or misunderstand how unusual the behavior of the dominant culture in the last millennia has been for the planet and the development of human nature.

What do we do? Of course we cannot and do not want to return to living as nomadic foragers. We can learn from the societies that "do it right"³⁴. These are primarily indigenous or first-nation societies. These societies have been much maligned or ignored by hegemonic Western scholarship even though several of these societies are known to have been around for tens of thousands of years (e.g., !Kung; Australian Aborigines³⁵).

These societies follow the evolved needs of the child and of the local ecology to build a virtue of connectedness and place. We can be more conscientious about ontogeny – how children are raised, how they are allowed to learn to live with their local landscape. Adults can develop receptive intelligence with the natural world³⁶. We can all learn anew to-be-at-home in our local landscape, helping the biocommunity to flourish. This is a way of life that intentionally virtuous.

Our homecoming as humans will come from learning ways of being attached to the local biocommunity as guardian. Learning again how to dwell intimately with the natural world may be the pathway back to wiser, more prudent and sustainable living and to our flourishing members of the biocommunity.

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34 T. Cooper, *A time before deception*, Clear Light Publishers, Santa Fe 1998; V. Deloria, *The world we used to live in*, Fulcrum Publishing, Golden, Co 2006.

35 M. Balter, "Ice age tools hint at 40,000 years of Bushman culture", «Science», 337 (6094), 512, 2012; R. Lawlor, *Voices of the first day: Awakening in the Aboriginal Dreamtime*, Inner Traditions, Rochester, VT 1991.

36 E. Young, J. Haas & E. McGown, *Coyote's guide to connecting with nature*, OWlink Media 8 Shields, Santa Cruz 2010.