

A Neuro-Philosophy of Dignity-Based Governance

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by Nayef Al-Rodhan



The duality mind-body has ancient roots in philosophy, most notably with Plato, Descartes and others. In dualism, mind and body are contrasted as two are different realms. However, the interaction between them has been approached from different philosophical perspectives. The [main views](#) through which this relationship has been explored are: interactionism (the view that mind and body, or mental and physical events, influence each other), epiphenomenalism (the theory that mental events are caused by physical events, but without influence on the physical – this theory has encountered a lot of criticism, however), and parallelism (the view that there is no causal interaction between the two realms).

Dualism has spurred a rich philosophical tradition and continues to be a subject of much interest. Some of the arguments for dualism have been similar to the arguments against physicalism, namely that the mind is immaterial, whereas the world is material. In the past decades, many previously-held assumptions about the mind were rebuked by [eliminative materialism](#), which is a revisionary view in cognitive science that strongly turns against the common-sense and folk psychology notions about the mind and mental states. Moreover, it claims that the earlier assumptions and categorizations of mental states are simply illegitimate because they depart from ordinary and everyday understandings of the mind, and have no support in demonstrable evidence provided by scientific insights, such as neuroscience.

In the 1980s, Paul and Patricia Churchland published a series of provocative works that forced philosophers to take eliminative materialism more seriously, especially after Patricia Churchland's 1986 book on [Neurophilosophy](#). The advent of neuroscience and the first glimpses into the intricate processes and neurochemical changes underpinning human thinking, meant that [assumptions about human nature](#) could be revisited from a new perspective, never-before available in the history of philosophical thinking.

Neurophilosophy of human nature and human dignity

Political philosophy has traditionally been concerned with and relied on various theories of human nature, which then informed theories about political order, states, and types of governments. These ranged from pessimistic views, seeing man as essentially egoistic and power-driven (e.g. Thomas Hobbes), or generous and perfectible (J.J. Rousseau), or defined by rationality (Immanuel Kant).

Neuroscience overturns many long-held claims about human nature and critical among these are findings concerning human emotionality, which is neither marginal, nor a stumbling block in human decision-making. Rather, extensive research demonstrates the central role of emotions and emotional processing in learning, cognition, memory, decision-making, learning and un-learning [automatic](#) responses to 'others' (such as different ethnic and religious groups etc). In other words, emotions and reason are not part of dual systems. To give just one example, [the human amygdala, which is the most researched brain structure involved in emotional processes](#), has been shown to be critical in the acquisition and expression of conditioned fear responses. Psychological arousal leads to activation of the beta-adrenergic receptors in the amygdala, which in turn leads to enhanced consolidation of memories for events that elicit arousal response. Events that provoke an emotional response, and which are believed to be important for future survival, are less likely to be forgotten.

Human experience is deeply influenced by emotions, which are mediated by neurochemistry.

Moreover, the brain structures involved in processing emotional responses intimately interact with other cognitive processes. A neurophilosophical understanding of human nature provides a more holistic and authoritative perspective on the human mind and what lies at the core of our 'thoughts' and 'feelings'. This has consequences beyond philosophy and is critical in devising governance paradigms that truly meet human needs and ensure social cohesion.

A neurophilosophical approach to human nature: emotionality, amorality and egoism

For the remainder of this piece, I want to focus on the importance of dignity-based governance. With insights from neuroscience, I previously proposed a theory of human nature as [emotional amoral and egoistic](#). What does this mean?

Emotionality, as mentioned above, is a defining trait of human nature because we are deeply emotional and, in fact, we are more emotional than driven by 'rationality'. Since emotions are so important, it also means that humans are vulnerable to manipulation by those who appeal to emotions. [Stress](#), for instance, impacts the prefrontal cortex and can impair working memory and goal-directed decisions, meaning that under conditions of acute stress we will tend to shift to more habitual paths, rather than dare to take risks or think about other long-term rewards. That is why, the human capacity to discern moral from immoral should not always be taken for granted, especially when individuals are confronted with fear and deprivation. It is often in such contexts that political leaders can easily capitalize on negative emotions.

Amorality is another defining characteristic. Humans are neither innately moral nor immoral, but amoral. The environment plays a critical role in how our moral compass shifts and fostering the right kind of social and political conditions will ensure that the best of our nature is allowed to thrive. The opposite is also true: conditions of violence, fear, insecurity, and poverty will induce more survival-oriented defensive or pre-emptive actions.

This is an important point and deserves clarification: although we are largely born as blank slates, to be 'written upon' in the course of existence, we are not entirely tabula rasa. A more accurate description would be what I previously proposed as a [predisposed tabula rasa](#): while we lack inborn notions of good and bad, we are predisposed in a fundamental way insofar as we are equipped with

survival instincts. It is in this sense that egoism (in 'emotional amoral egoism') manifests: humans are deeply, genetically hardwired for the survival of the self, which is a basic form of egoism.

Based on these defining characteristics of human nature, more clarity can be attained about the appropriate paradigm of governance, both domestically and internationally.

Lessons for governance

Looking at the character of human nature from an inwards perspective only is erroneous because there is little in our nature that is innate and finite. Rather, an outwards perspective is critical because it is in society and in the type of government in which humans live, that their human nature is molded and defined. Our environment will be therefore an important catalyst in shaping our moral compass, and the faults and virtues in our nature.

This neurophilosophical approach also reminds us that human nature is not static, but highly malleable, because our brains and neural circuitries are malleable. Humans can learn and unlearn even deep-seated norms and prejudices. For that, however, the type of governance model in which one lives is, again, critical.

In the 1990s, defenders of liberal democracy considered this to be the ultimate ideology that would ensure human thriving, not only because it sanctified individual freedom but also because it guaranteed political rights and empowered citizens to participate meaningfully in the public sphere. Having been revalidated following the ideological battle against socialism and communism, it seemed that we had reached a Hegelian final point in history, or "[the end of history](#)". This prediction failed to deliver on its promises. Despite its countless merits, liberal democracy, in its current form, in fact, presents [shortcomings](#) in the way in which it accounts for and engages with human nature. Even in the most mature liberal democracies, political freedom coexists with alienation, discrimination, injustice and marginalization. People can therefore have ample freedoms and at the same time be severely disempowered.

To foster the best in our nature, governance models must prioritize human dignity, not only political freedom. Dignity has largely been an absentee in indexes and indicators of good governance, but it is in fact the single best predictor of sustainable governance, which is, in turn, the best predictor for human nature being at its best. What I mean by dignity is much more than just the absence of humiliation. It is a more comprehensive set of nine critical needs that includes: reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation and inclusiveness.

Simply put, public policy must be developed in a manner that mediates between the three attributes of human nature, namely "emotionality, amorality and egoism", and the nine dignity needs listed above. Each of the three defining traits of human nature can be paired with three [corresponding dignity needs](#). Human emotionality must be balanced with reason, security and human rights. Reason, reflects how important dogma is for a society and to what extent public institutions accept true facts and reasoned arguments, as opposed to regimes that claim to hold the absolute monopoly on truth. Security is another requirement for assuaging human emotionality in that it limits the possibility of fear-induced and pre-emptive violence, which inevitably arises in conditions of prolonged violence and scarcity (human insecurity). A commitment to human rights is another fundamental dignity need, which can limit the excesses of emotionality by protecting against

degrading treatment and legally recognizing the equal worth of all in society. An important caveat here is that the guarantee of human rights must be authentic and impartial, and not be misused for concealed and twisted political machinations internationally.

Man's amoral nature must be balanced with: accountability, transparency and justice. Accountability is crucial because it enhances trust in the judicial system, which deters anti-social behavior. The judicial system must also be transparent and exclude any forms of discrimination. Justice is critical because it guarantees due process of law and protection of judicial rights, but it must work for all sections of societies without relativism or discrimination. When institutions function in a way that enhances social cooperation, it is far more likely that the human moral compass will veer towards more altruistic and high-minded behavior.

Egoism must be balanced by: opportunity, inclusiveness and innovation. Egoism is defined as self-interest manifested in basic predilection for survival and attainment of life goals. These three dignity needs respond to the human egoist trait in a basic and abstract sense. Opportunity is defined as the ability of a state to ensure that its citizens will be able to access resources and means for self-sustainability, and quite literally, survival. Innovation allows for creative, intellectual and scientific growth and is linked with egoism insofar as it enables the expression of the self and of one's authenticity, and ambition. Inclusiveness means creating policy mechanisms to root out marginalization, and in doing so, diminishes the resentment felt when one is left behind, which can easily sharpen one's egoism at the expense of others.

The connections between these dignity needs and human nature can be operationalized and verified in practice. A few years ago, I proposed a [dignity scale of sustainable governance](#), which broke down and quantified each of the nine dignity needs using a score from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning the indicator is completely absent and 5 meaning that the particular indicator (i.e. dignity need) is fully integrated into society. Not surprisingly, from the sample of 15 countries, the best-faring on the dignity scale were Sweden, Japan, and the United States – countries with ample mechanisms for social integration and cohesion, extensive opportunities, accountable institutions, and rule of law.

A neurophilosophical understanding of human nature as emotional, amoral, and egoistic has profound implications for political philosophy, governance, sustainable security, stability and prosperity, as well as for the philosophy of History. As mentioned in my [previous blog post](#), because human beings are largely 'unfinished' prior to socialization, no theory of human nature, of governance or of history can posit definitive conclusions. The circumstances we create domestically and globally will be the ones that will shape what gets enhanced or diminished in our nature, be it good or bad traits, as well as how societies and global politics evolve. The important takeaway is that the more we reinforce positive circumstances, the more we can expect positive outcomes.

[Prof. Nayef Al-Rodhan \(@SustainHistory\)](#) is a Neuroscientist, Philosopher and Geostrategist. He is an [Honorary Fellow at St Antony's College](#), University of Oxford, and Senior Fellow and Head of the Geopolitics and Global Futures Programme at the [Geneva Centre for Security Policy](#), Geneva, Switzerland. Through many innovative books and articles, he has made significant conceptual contributions to the application of the field of neurophilosophy to human nature, history, contemporary geopolitics, international relations, cultural studies, future studies, and war and peace.