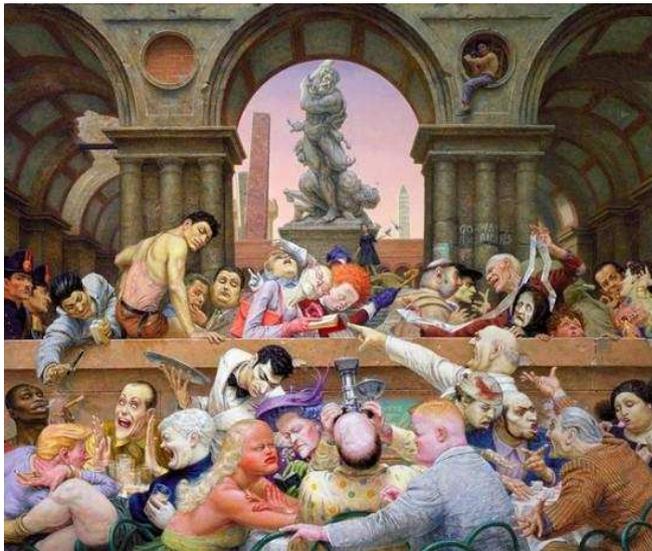


Who Are We: Neurochemical Man and Emotional Amoral Egoism

By Nayef Al-Rodhan

“Man will only become better when you make him see what he is like.”

Anton Chekhov



The levels of sophistication of science to date might not have managed to fully grasp ‘what man is like’ in neurobiological terms, yet Chekhov’s instinct was sound: acquiring an accurate portrayal of human nature is a prerequisite for creating conditions that respect human dignity and morality. Attempts at moral education which fail to take into account fundamental neurochemical elements of human nature, are bound to prove unsuccessful. In some cases, these may even have undesired effects as they can lead to unreasonable expectations.

Amorality of man

Cumulative intellectual history offers a wide variety of characterizations of human nature, from those that attribute to human beings a full set of innate ideas to the well-known Lockean tabula rasa. The discussions have also often oscillated between polar contrasts, presenting human nature as either fundamentally good or bad.

The origins of this debate go back to antiquity and various cultures and religions, and relatively recently to Rousseau and Hobbes. Rousseau posited that men, in the original state of nature, were basically good, unselfish and pure. In contrast, for Hobbes, in the state of nature man was intrinsically self-interested, acting for his own well-being and in a manner strictly determined by natural, pre-existent desires and needs to avoid discomfort. The implicit tone of these perspectives (optimistic vs. pessimistic) has informed political philosophy and theories of government for centuries.

While there is grain of truth in a number of these accounts, contemporary research, and neuroscientific insights in particular, adequately demonstrates that both of these extremes distort what is in fact the case, and that both share a common mistake: underestimating the significance of the neurochemical underpinnings of human nature. When this error is recognized, it immediately becomes clear that circumstance and background conditions inform moral development to a much greater degree than previously appreciated.

Rather than choosing between dichotomous notions of moral vs. immoral, I argue that humans are essentially amoral. The notion of amorality implies that we are neither products of pure free will, nor entirely of genetics. Humans are born with what I have called a predisposed tabula rasa, free of any innate ideas but possessing certain predilections for survival coded by genetics. Therefore, we come into the world with a set of basic survival instincts which do not operate as conscious motivators but more like inbuilt biological microchips tuning us for survival.

Several crucial aspects then weigh in our conduct, actions and propensity to act morally or immorally, of which the environment (such as education, or social and cultural context) and exogenous conditions are crucial. Indeed, man`s moral compass is greatly shaped by circumstances as little expectations of moral behavior can be inferred in immoral environments, where choosing moral actions would be detrimental to one`s own survival.

Egoism as the only innate endowment

The predispositional aspect of my neurophilosophical theory of human nature is informed by Darwinian selection pressure. The drive for survival of the self—a basic kind of egoism—is a principle motivation for human beings, as it must be for the evolutionary process to function. The presence of this survival instinct thus cuts against the idea of a truly blank slate.

The supposition of additional innate ideas, however, and in particular the advocacy of an innate morality is demonstrably false given the tendency of moral development to vary widely but predictably with regard to background conditions: were morality innate, we should expect to find, contrary to fact, that the most harrowing and most stable social circumstances contribute equally to the development of a moral compass and regard for human dignity.

The amorality of the untutored human beings thus leaves them significantly, though not entirely, at the mercy of the circumstances and social context in which they find themselves. To a large extent, therefore, our moral compass, guiding us to be good or bad, is shaped by our perceived self-interest at a given time. In this underlying framework of action, guided by self-interest, human motivation is further shaped by other environmental factors and emotionality. Emotionality is not a peripheral aspect of our human nature or an occasional distortion of it, but rather is formative in our development and constitutive of our moral lives and has clear neurochemical foundations.

The Centrality of Emotion

Human experience is mediated by emotions, and these emotions, in turn, are mediated by neurochemistry. This general observation is strengthened in a preliminary way through intercultural comparison of emotional expression, which demonstrates their similarity across social and cultural frameworks. It is further bolstered by contemporary neuroscience showing that emotions are fundamentally material and the neurochemicals responsible for these observed states can now be specified and described with a high degree of sophistication, although much more will be known in the future about their nature, diversity and mechanisms of action.

These findings lay the scientific bedrock for rethinking longstanding assumptions regarding the role of rationality and its dominance over emotions. On this traditional model, human beings conceived of as rational actors were only occasionally subject to flights of irrationality in those rare moments when emotions overtook them. Since at least Plato, this picture, which idealizes those with the greatest rational self-mastery, has been held up as the ideal. Kant's fixation with the law of rationality shares this inheritance. This stark divide between one's moral duty as rationally derivable and emotional human sympathies has left an indelible impression on Western moral philosophy. However, more recently, given our understanding of the frequency and power of emotional influence this basic structure began to be challenged.

As continues to be poignantly illustrated by theorists and scientists, it is very often the emotions, rather than rationality which determine human behavior. Demonstrations of this include now well-known neuroscientific experiments showing that decisions are often made before the fully conscious (and thus rational) mind knows what is being decided. Jonathan Haidt provides an apt description of this process in his metaphor of elephant and rider, where the emotional self is represented by the elephant, and rationality by the rider: if you wish to change the direction of the duo, the best strategy is to appeal to the elephant. This is not to say that the rider / rationality can never override the more impulsive elephant / emotions, but that the best science shows this to be the exception rather than the rule.

These accounts significantly harmonize with my concept of emotional amoral egoism. Haidt's example further softens the traditional dichotomy between emotionality and rationality to the effect that emotions should be understood as cognitive: emotional experience is deeply implicated in most of our thought-processes and inferences, rather than being an encumbrance to them.

Contemporary neuroscientific research has confirmed these ideas. When those areas of the brain—particularly the prefrontal-cortex (pfc)—are underdeveloped or damaged, the emotions associated with sociality are either severely truncated or absent altogether. Extensive evidence further shows that such individuals have little moral understanding or regard for morality broadly defined. These clear connections between the capacity to experience particular emotions and brain function, on the one hand, and between brain function and morality on the other, cement the inextricable nature of our neurochemistry and our moral/ socio-emotional capacities.

They thus serve to demonstrate that our neurochemistry is the lowest common denominator: the minimal endowment human beings have at birth both determines them to be initially geared purely for survival, but also leaves them highly susceptible to the influence of their respective environments. With this understanding of our human nature, as emotional, amoral and egoistic, we must weigh alternative policies and approaches to social organization, especially given the emotional and deeply visceral nature of identity issues. This will be critical if we are to improve our capacities for moral and political cooperation and generate sustainable domestic and global peace and prosperity. This can be achieved by reciprocity both at transnational and transcultural levels, through mutual respect, equality, justice and the guarantee of human dignity for all, at all times, and under all circumstances.

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