

# ON HUMAN NATURE

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Paul Gauguin, *Day of the Gods*, 1894

## False Idylls

It was more than two hundred years ago that the British empiricist David Hume tersely dismissed the supposed romance of exotic places. "Should a traveller, returning from a far country," he wrote in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, "bring us an account of men... wholly different from any with whom we were ever acquainted; men... who were entirely divested of avarice, ambition, or revenge; who knew no pleasure but friendship, generosity, and public spirit; we should immediately, from these circumstances, detect the falsehood, and prove him a liar, with the same certainty as if he had stuffed his narration with stories of centaurs and dragons, miracles and prodigies."

Centuars and dragons were already child's play in 1748, and they're all but forgotten today. Yet we have never quite outgrown the idea that, somewhere, there are people living in perfect harmony with nature and one another, and that we might do the same were it not for the corrupting influences of Western culture. Recall, for example, Margaret Mead's characterizations of life in Samoa. Mead

left Manhattan in 1925, hoping not only to advance the new science of human nature being founded by Franz Boas, her teacher at Columbia University, but also to confirm the South Seas idyll that had been popularized by the French post-Impressionist Paul Gauguin. Like the painter, Mead was especially interested in the island women; but whereas Gauguin was openly concerned with his own impressions of them, she expected to document *their* experience of growing up.

After completing her fieldwork, Mead returned home with the materials for *Coming of Age in Samoa*, perhaps the best-known work of popular anthropology ever written. Though the book described isolated instances of unhappiness, its overall theme was no disappointment to South Seas dreamers: Aggression and competition were virtually nonexistent, she implied. There was no stifling repression of sex or romance; free love was the norm. And adolescence—synonymous with stress and anguish throughout the Western world—was for island girls just a joyous coming of age.

Mead's characterization seemed to

bear directly on the question of how narrowly biology circumscribes human behavior. For if, in some cultures, young people could sail through this period of surging hormones, bodily metamorphosis, and shifting social roles with nary a strong breeze, then it followed that the biological inevitability of adolescent *Sturm und Drang* must be greatly exaggerated in other cultures—including our own.

*Coming of Age in Samoa*, a tiny part of Mead's lifework, really, was well received upon its publication, in 1928. But her characterization of Samoan life hasn't weathered the decades very well. Since the 1950s, various ethnographers, including Lowell Holmes, Bradd Shore, Paul Shankman, and Derek Freeman, author of the controversial *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*, have published evidence of a Samoa far more complex, and less paradisiacal, than the one Mead described. Indeed, their data established that crimes of violence, including rape, are not uncommon; that adolescent males commit a disproportionate share of these

crimes, just as they do in the industrialized West; that rank, prestige, and wealth are critical elements in the social system; that virginity is highly valued, at least among well-to-do girls (with suicide sometimes following the loss of it); and that, far from being perfectly calm, Samoan adolescence is subject to conflict, tension, and passionate outbursts of emotion. In short, Samoan life is not as different from our own as Mead, and many others, wanted to believe.

The Samoans are not the only people ever to disappoint us this way. Again and again, ethnographers have discovered Eden in the outback, only to have the discovery foiled by better data. That the resident innocents are invariably found to possess a full complement of failings surely reveals something about the laws of human nature. Yet, for some reason, anthropologists persist in trying to repeal those laws, or at least find exceptions to them.

The fantasy of the noble savage can be traced back at least to the sixteenth-century French essayist Michel de Montaigne, who contrasted the "wholly noble and generous" ways of Brazilian cannibals with the relative barbarism of Renaissance Europeans. Among the primitives, he proclaimed,

there is no sort of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no science of numbers, no name for a magistrate or for political superiority, no custom of servitude, no riches or poverty, no contracts, no successions, no partitions, no occupations but leisure ones, no care for any but common kinship, no clothes, no agriculture, no metal, no use of wine or wheat. The very words that signify lying, treachery, dissimulation, avarice, envy, belittling, pardon—unheard of.

However crude their lives, the cannibals were far from impoverished, he maintained, for "they still enjoy that natural abundance that provides them without toil and trouble . . . all necessary things. . . . They are still in that happy state of desiring only as much as their natural needs demand; anything beyond that is superfluous to them."

This sympathetic view, perverse though it must have seemed in 1580, gained enormous influence during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, not just among writers and philosophers but also with artists and composers. That it should eventually spill into science as well, and spawn a discipline devoted to the observation of aboriginal societies, is therefore not surprising. What *is* surprising is that modern practitioners of that discipline can still believe so earnestly in paradise. I can't claim immunity; I once discovered Shangri-la myself, among the !Kung people of the Kalahari Desert.

When I traveled to Africa during the 1960s, with a team led by the anthropologists Richard Lee and Irven DeVore, the !Kung had long been regarded as living embodiments of humanity's distant past. They were, after all, a society of hunter-gatherers—a surviving example of the kind of social group in which the human species is thought to have passed more than ninety percent of its history. Anthropologists thus assumed, reasonably enough, that the behavior of these unchanged few would shed light on humankind's evolutionary legacy. Yet, from the outset, observers of the !Kung had been painting a suspiciously rosy picture of them.

The earliest studies, begun during the 1950s by Lorna Marshall, an anthropologist affiliated with Harvard's Peabody Museum, had produced valuable ethnographic data. But the society those studies described was not unlike the one discovered by Margaret Mead in Samoa (or by David Hume in the fantasies of overly credulous travelers). One member of Marshall's team, her daughter, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, dubbed the !Kung "the harmless people" in a book by that title. And Marshall herself—despite having documented serious fights, as well as a fairly rigorous struggle for existence—concluded in *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae* that they "avoid arousing envy, jealousy, and ill will and, to a notable extent . . . achieve the comfort and security which they so desire in human relations."

The anthropologist Ashley Montagu, after reviewing the literature on the !Kung, had cast them in a similar light. Not only did he marvel at the gentleness of their child-rearing practices, and at their ability to keep the peace by exchanging gifts and words rather than dispensing punishment; he held up their ostensible pacifism as evidence that "no human being has ever been born with aggressive or hostile impulses, and [that] no one becomes aggressive or hostile without learning to do so." Montagu's reasoning was that there could be no exceptions to a universal law of human nature—that if one group of people were found to be utterly unaggressive, then aggressiveness could not possibly be an innate tendency. In two books, *Learning Non-Aggression: The Experience of Non-Literate Societies* and *The Nature of Human Aggression*, he balanced this claim partly on the backs of the !Kung, despite mounting evidence (which he himself acknowledged in the second book) that they were perfectly capable of violence, and even homicide.

Marshall Sahlins, an anthropologist at the University of Chicago, had idealized another aspect of !Kung life, glossing over the group's typical Third World health conditions to depict it as "the original

affluent society." Sahlins argued in *Stone Age Economics* that the !Kung and other hunter-gatherers, by desiring little, by limiting their accumulation of surplus, and by pursuing mutual interdependence rather than competition, had attained not just comfort but a sort of ideal wealth.

So my colleagues and I were not alone in our readiness to romance the !Kung. In our studies, we documented (or thought we did) a remarkable degree of economic and political equality, including equality between the sexes. Like Sahlins, we saw no evidence that the life of a hunter-gatherer was one of deprivation. And, like Lorna Marshall, we emphasized the idyllic nature of infancy and childhood. This was the focus of my own work. Predictably, I determined that the !Kung never physically punished their young, and I accepted this as proof that children can be successfully raised on nothing but tolerant, nurturing affection.

It was only as I followed the findings of my fellow fieldworker (and wife) Marjorie Shostak that I began to sense something was wrong with these characterizations. She had been encouraging individual members of the group—mostly women in their middle or later years—to talk at length about their lives. And these recollections (some of which were published in 1981 as *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*) created a picture of !Kung life somewhat different from those painted by ethnographers. Many of the women recalled being deprived of material things—including food—and their emotional tone revealed more frustration and anger than philosophical acceptance. Acts of violence were reported with disturbing frequency, sexual jealousy being a common incitement, and many of the women's stories suggested they were held to more exacting standards of marital fidelity than their husbands were. Rape was not unheard of among the !Kung, nor, it turned out, was the harsh punishment of children. One woman recalled being beaten as a girl, for breaking a container fashioned from the shell of an ostrich egg.

Of course, life history interviews are not perfect windows onto other cultures: people are notoriously selective—even deceptive—in describing themselves, and individual recollections, no matter how accurate, may reveal little about a society's shared experiences. But subsequent studies, based on precise, quantitative methods, seemed to confirm the darker side of !Kung life. Data amassed by Edwin Wilmsen, of Boston University, for example, revealed a clear pattern of seasonal weight loss in some bands. And my own studies documented a decline in children's growth rates after the first six months of life. Likewise, the statistics on illness and mortality collected by Nancy Howell, now at Stanford, hardly sug-

gested an "affluent society." Life expectancy, it turned out, was only thirty years: half the children died before adulthood, and most adults succumbed to infections long before reaching old age.

Bearing down on the separate question of whether the !Kung were really as peaceful as conventional wisdom held, Richard Lee reconsidered their homicide rate, and again the data indicated that hunter-gatherer life was far from idyllic. In fact, Lee found that the !Kung's rate far exceeded that of the United States, unless the U.S. rate was raised to reflect vehicular homicides and deaths from the Vietnam War. Previous observers had apparently taken the small number of homicides committed by the !Kung from year to year, together with their espousal of nonviolence, as proof that they just weren't killers. But if a society consists of only a few hundred individuals, even infrequent killings can add up to a high per capita rate. Lee determined that, within a population of fifteen hundred !Kung, there had in fact been twenty-two killings over five decades—about five more than the same number of New Yorkers would have been expected to commit over the same period. (All the homicides were the work of men, interestingly, and most stemmed either from vendettas or from conflicts over women.)

Early reports of the !Kung's egalitarianism fared well during this period of reassessment: investigators continued to find that decisions were made collectively and that social and economic rank were of little consequence in daily life. But relations between the sexes turned out to be far more problematic. Shostak found, on the basis of interviews and direct observation, that !Kung women enjoy considerable independence—that, for example, they determine their own activities in the daily quest for food—but that the behavior of !Kung men is often dominating and coercive, sometimes even violent. It also became clear that the !Kung's traditional system of marriage—in which prepubescent girls are commonly wed to grown men (including men who already have wives)—is anything but egalitarian. The age discrepancy gives husbands a certain authority over their young brides, and that imbalance can last for many years.

As for the harsh physical punishment of children, no ethnographer has yet reported witnessing it firsthand. But I would no longer assume on that basis that !Kung children are never hit—not when there are !Kung adults who vividly remember its happening to them. A more plausible hypothesis is that corporal punishment, because it is rare, makes an especially durable impression on !Kung children, and that parents use it to precisely that end.

By the end of the 1970s, then, our

!Kung had gone the way of Mead's islanders; all our sunny intuitions about human goodness and the state of nature were unsupportable. But even if the ideal society was not to be found in the Kalahari or the South Seas, might it not exist someplace else? The evidence is not encouraging. Consider, for example, what is known about two other societies (one nonhuman) previously thought to embody our lost innocence.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Ruth Benedict and Laura Thompson used the phrase "logico-aesthetic integration" to describe the remarkably harmonious societies they observed among the Pueblo Indians of the American Southwest. In subsequent studies, however, Esther Goldfrank, Dorothy Eggan, and others revealed the superficiality of this characterization. Discord was in fact ubiquitous among the Pueblos, both in their social relationships and in their attitude toward the spirit world. These twin hostilities stemmed in part from initiation ceremonies (apparently unknown to earlier investigators) in which adults dressed as gods seared the living daylights out of nine- and ten-year-old children while beating them severely. What held aggression in check was not love but repression: the Pueblos' child-rearing methods were so harsh that social harmony was virtually ensured—as was quite a bit of personal unhappiness.

The other example comes from the social behavior of the chimpanzee *Pan troglodytes*, one of our closest nonhuman relatives. During the sixties and early seventies, the famous ethologist Jane Goodall published numerous reports describing the chimpanzees of Tanzania's Gombe Stream Reserve as perfectly gentle and cooperative creatures. They exhibited lasting loyalty and love, according to Goodall, were exceptionally kind and nurturing toward their offspring, and lived in exquisite harmony with nature. It is clear from the tone of these early writings that Goodall viewed the chimps not only as scientific models for human evolution but, in some respects, as ethical models for human action. She even claimed to be raising her child according to their method.

In recent years, however, Goodall has compiled quite a different picture of the chimpanzee. Both directly and in the work of others, she has seen evidence of deadly fights between males, brutal beatings of females by much larger males, even the killing of infants by two adult females working together. Particularly startling was her discovery of conflicts in which a group of adult males from one community systematically assaulted and killed males in a neighboring band until it was decimated and the survivors were forced to abandon their territory.

Centaur and dragons, miracles and prodigies. This, alas, is the view we must take of the perfectly harmonious, perfectly happy society, whether it is discovered among Samoan islanders, !Kung hunter-gatherers, Pueblo Indians, or our nonhuman relatives. If people could live independently of one another, the dream of nature without culture, of life without strife or conflict, might well be attainable. The catch, of course, is that we could not exist in such circumstances: people, like nearly all other primates, have by sheer biological necessity been highly social throughout their evolution. In social groups, the possibility of mutual aid arises, but so does the reality of conflicting interests. And once interests clash, paradise is lost. Getting by requires compromise and restraint—the stuff of culture.

That anthropologists, even good ones, should sometimes be smitten by an exotic people is not really surprising; such infatuations, however inadequate as science, are an expression of the respect for other ways of life that has always been the soul of the discipline. Ethnographers have revealed, justifiably, in subverting the myopic world views of Europeans and Americans—in showing that much of what we take to be inescapably human seems that way only from a Western perspective. This cultural relativism—this respect for the rich variability of human experience—is anthropology's most important contribution. Unfortunately, though, to admire different ways of life is not necessarily to understand them. Admiration can do as much as contempt to shield us from subtle and unsettling truths.

If there is a lesson in what we now know about the Samoans, the !Kung, and our other would-be exemplars, it is that human nature cannot be reduced to one dimension, whether devilish or divine. What is most remarkable about these cultures is not their gentleness or brutality, their generosity or greed, their serenity or discontent. It is rather their complexity—their capacity for *all* these attributes. The Samoanist Bradd Shore has observed that the island's social system consists of an interplay between ideals (many of which Mead observed correctly) and the vicissitudes of everyday life. I suspect the same could be said of any society; however primitive or advanced. That doesn't mean that human behavior is lawless; it simply means that anthropology's task—to explain specific cultural variations in terms of general laws—is still far from completion. ●

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