



**The Western Illusion of Human Nature: With
Reflections on the Long History of Hierarchy,
Equality and the Sublimation of Anarchy in the
West, and Comparative Notes on Other
Conceptions of the Human Condition**

Marshall Sahlins

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Reflecting the decline in college courses on Western Civilization, Marshall Sahlins aims to accelerate the trend by reducing "Western Civ" to about two hours. He cites Nietzsche to the effect that deep issues are like cold baths; one should get into and out of them as quickly as possible. The deep issue here is the ancient Western specter of a presocial and antisocial human nature: a supposedly innate self-interest that is represented in our native folklore as the basis or nemesis of cultural order. Yet these Western notions of nature and culture ignore the one truly universal character of human sociality: namely, symbolically constructed kinship relations. Kinsmen are members of one another: they live each other's lives and die each other's deaths. But where the existence of the other is thus incorporated in the being of the self, neither interest, nor agency or even experience is an individual fact, let alone an egoistic disposition. "Sorry, beg your pardon," Sahlins concludes, Western society has been built on a perverse and mistaken idea of human nature.

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Bryn Hammond says

On a 'contempt for the human' in Western ideas, that infiltrates every area of thought because it is in our Greek underpinnings.

The Judeo-Christian tradition is often blamed for our negativity towards the species, and I've often wondered sadly (yet with hope) what we'd be without the concept of Original Sin, in our heads' history. But I've also been sick of ancient Greeks and their vaunted influence. I'm sorry – Sahlins is here asked to write in pamphlet-style, so I'll write a pamphlet-style review. Sahlins traces the condemnation of a thing called 'human nature' from the dog-eat-dog politics of Thucydides (hang on. Dogs don't actually eat dogs; nor do wolves behave in the manner ascribed to them in our age-old metaphors; and peoples who keep company with wolves don't see them as we do, either. This is part of his argument.) – through Original Sin, uninterrupted in our wicked-by-nature theories in sociobiology and the selfish gene; along the way he follows our politics as the perceived need to keep a lid on people, self-interest being our only motivation.

But the nature/culture split upon which these thousands of years are predicated is a thing of the West, not of the Rest. The majority of humankind do not see a war of tooth and nail between nature and culture, whether culture is the one corrupt and primitive nature innocent (Rousseau) or whether culture tames the ferocious beast that is man (Hobbes).

In most other societies, beasts aren't ferocious and neither is humankind, and the very notion of an unsocialised person, a pre-social state, is non-existent – because culture always was. Before homo sapiens. Even in animals.

This is an anthropologist's take on the negative view of the human, and its resultant cynicism, that runs through the Western intellectual tradition.

Like I say, it's a pamphlet series, where intellectuals are let loose to rant on the state of their disciplines. He takes them up on that and this can be quite humorous, at least if you're in sympathy with his views.

I am, and only reserve a star because I found the Greek part a slog, and I have no background in the American founding fathers (there's a large section on John Adams); and probably because I didn't need to be convinced of much in here. I see the consequences everywhere I turn, though, and to read this was a health-giving draught for my existential condition.

More in my line is his work on historiography, *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa*, where Thucydides' school is seen as a product of his culture, here described, although he thought he was depicting a universal 'human nature' in the politics of his day; he's contrasted with history elsewhere – Fijian, for a case study. I'm going there next.

Colin Bradley says

Fascinating connections drawn and ethnographic data presented. Fallacious argumentative structure and conclusions drawn.

Ryan says

An interesting and informal essay on the history of Western views of human nature. I appreciate Sahlins for calling out the cynical, self-loathing and essentialist views on this topic.

Grant says

I needed this

Zoonanism says

The later bits about non-western ideas of nature(referencing a series of animisms) which somehow its argued posit a different, non-exploitative approach, was pure bull. The brevity of the pamphlet and the series of thoughts linked was delightful

Anthony Buckley says

Prickly Paradigm Press has taken to printing “pamphlets”, shortish polemical works by important thinkers. This is the first I have seen, and it is pretty good. Its convoluted title is an agreeable spoof based on the titles of pamphlets from earlier times. The discussion itself, however, is no spoof.

Sahlins is an influential American social anthropologist, best known for a collection of essays, *Stone Age Economics*, dealing with hunters and gatherers. Here, he addresses a more abstract question, the relation between nature and culture. He asks if there is indeed a “human nature” that one can discuss separately from human culture.

The first half of his essay contrasts what he labels the Hobbesian and Rousseau-esque views of nature and culture.

The Hobbesian view is that man, by nature, is vicious, something that can be overcome only by developing culture. According to Hobbes himself, human nature can be controlled only when people subordinating themselves to an overarching authority. Sahlins shows that this "hierarchical" opinion had a more distant origin in Tacitus and especially in Thucydides's account of the Peloponnesian War. “If Thucydides seems Hobbesian, it is because Hobbes was a Thucydidean” p 10 However, Sahlins shows that there are others who

have taken the same line “The same politics of human self-contempt have been advocated by many famous and not-so-famous people” p14, and he quickly quotes Hesiod, Kant, Melville, Lincoln, and Nietzsche.

In ancient Greece, this view emerges as an opposition between the two ruling principles of equality and hierarchy. Sahlins elegantly shows that in egalitarian Athens Plato and Pericles had worried about the power of self-interest to overwhelm the good of the state. Before them, Anaximander of Miletus “had made the governing of self-interest by the interaction of equal and opposed forces the principle of good order in the whole universe” p25. This egalitarian alternative to hierarchy, he notes, is enshrined in the medical ideas of Hippocrates and Galen, whose notions of balance between the humours persisted into modern times.

In contrast to all this, Sahlins points to the Sophists and, indeed, to Aristotle, who thought that what was “natural” in human beings was “good”, thereby laying down a line of thought that, via Rousseau, still exists among the shampoo advertisers, ecologists and health-food-shop-owners of the present day pp33ff. This Rousseauesque view claims that culture is, at bottom, “artificial”, and that it distorted human nature.

So we have two sets of philosophy, tagged “Hobbsean” and “Rousseauesque”, both of which depend on an opposition between nature and culture, but which hold opposite definitions as to which is good and which bad.

Sahlins goes on to claim that there are other historically important versions of the relation between “nature” and “culture”.

One, found in Thucydides, but bobbing up in Freud, sees culture as a disguised form of man’s (bad) natural impulses which cannot be totally repressed.

Another, found almost universally, but seldom mentioned in western ideologies, is that in that most “natural” of human relations, kinship, there is amity. According to a version of this view, humanity (or maybe a particular society) is one big family, so, by recognizing our kinship one to another, we may discover our bonds of mutuality.

Sahlins also discusses the theory of medieval monarchy, as found in SS Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Augustine’s ideas of rule from above, and the necessity of controlling one’s base animal appetites (based in his notion of Original Sin), seems remarkably similar to the Hobbesian view. St Thomas found monarchy in everything, believing that whenever things are organized in a unity there is always something that rules the rest. “All bodies in the cosmos are ruled by one primary celestial body; all earthly bodies are ruled by rational creatures; in man, the body is ruled by the soul; in the soul, the irascible and concupiscible appetites are ruled by reason; while within the body proper, the members are ruled by the head or the heart – hence it is fitting that ‘in every multitude there should be a ruling principle’ And having noted a few paragraphs on that even bees have a king (sic), St Thomas concluded that all multiplicity is derived from unity”. Pp57-58

The American Founding Fathers (Sahlins quotes particularly John Adams) drew on the gloomy view found in Hobbes and Ancient Greek history but with the particular emphasis that human beings were atoms of self-interest. Madison in particular thought that the self-interest of different men should counteract each other, with ambition countering ambition. This model of society had ancient roots, but was supplemented by the natural model of Newton’s solar system with its checks and balances.

By the end of the eighteenth century, says Sahlins, the allegedly natural “self-interest beating in every human breast” was “well on its way to becoming a good thing”, though he is careful to note that even in modern times, self-interest never finally lost its taint of wickedness p84. The theory was developed by the likes of

Helvétius, Baron d'Holbach and La Métrie.

“By the twentieth century, the worst in us had become the best” p86 “What St Augustine had perceived as slavery and indeed divine punishment, man’s endless subservience to desires of the flesh, the neo-liberal economists, neo-conservative politicians and most Kansans take to be the bedrock freedom. (The antithesis between state power and self-interest remains, only now the self-interest is the good thing, the least government is the best government).”pp87-87 And as human beings are discovered to be “naturally selfish”, so this selfishness is imputed to other aspects of the natural world, in particular to the “selfish gene”.

Sahlins now takes us away from western societies into more exotic settings where animals and other natural objects relate to man differently from the patterns just discussed. For example, according to certain Maori notions, the entire universe - people, animals, plants, objects – are all kindred, descended from the primal parents, Earth and Heaven. The Chewong hunter-gatherers of Malaysia see themselves more closely related to certain familiar non-human persons, including plants, animals, objects and spirits, than they are to more distant humans who are “different people”. He mentions too the Dunne-za of British Columbia, whose views are somewhat Platonic, and for whom “events follow from the knowledge of them in dreams, myths and the like”. They too see animals, winds, rocks, and natural forces as “people” pp91-92. Sahlins remarks that “the ‘magical’ power of words and ritual performances may seem less mystical or at least less mystifying when it is realized that they are addressed to persons”p92.

Sahlins concludes that culture is the basis for human existence with biological species as secondary and conditional. The evolution of culture in the higher animals is prior, he says, to the evolution of the human species. It is not a new idea. Plato, for example, argued in the *Laws*, *Timaeus* and, *Phaedo* that the body, “secondary and derivative”, is subject to the soul: thus culture before nature. “Respectable biological opinion now has it that the human brain is a social organ: that it evolved in the Pleistocene under the ‘pressure’ of maintaining a relatively extensive, complex and solidary set of social relationships – which in all probability included kinds of non-human persons”, and he argues for the co-evolution of biology and culture. P106

“Regarding sex, for example, what is most pertinent to the relations between biology and culture is not that all cultures have sex, but that all sex has culture”p110.

“There is no such thing as a pre-social individual, no such thing as a human being existing before or apart from society. Humans are constituted, for better or for worse, within society, and variously so in different societies”. The “human essence”, he says, paraphrasing Marx, “exists in and as social relationships, not in some poor bugger squatting outside the universe” p109..

I shall finish with his quotation of a “golden passage” from the sage of the Scottish Enlightenment, Adam Ferguson. “If we are asked, therefore, where is the state of nature to be found? We may answer, It is here; and it matters not whether we are understood to speak in the island of Great Britain, at the Cape of Good Hope, or in the Straits of Magellan” p109

Thus Sahlins seeks to establish the truth of the here and now and the cultural as well as the biological reality of human beings. It is not perhaps the final word on the subject, but it is an elegant and interesting piece of work.

Malte says

It is a short pamphlet, easily read and effectively makes the point that the debate about human nature for the last 2500 years basically has not progressed from an argument between "bad and savage" or "good and angel-like", and a medicine, politics and metaphysics that accompanies both positions. You can appreciate that Sahlins reduced this foolish history to a short book (as it says in the preface, it is like a cold bath: one should get into and out of it as quick as possible).

The comparative notes are well inserted, e.g. his examples of kinship community, on which Sahlins concludes: "Natural self-interest? For the greater part of humanity, self-interest as we know it is unnatural in the normative sense: it is considered madness, witchcraft or some such grounds for ostracism, execution or at least therapy. Rather than expressing a pre-social human nature, such avarice is generally taken for a loss of humanity. It puts in abeyance the mutual relationships of being that define human existence".

Also, this seems to be a short version spread out from Antiquity to Modern Times of Sahlins' more focused project 'Apologies to Thucydides'.

Brian says

I re-read this like once a year to remind myself that not every philosophical tradition treats humankind as repressed, selfish, and violent, and that perhaps we don't need coercive structures to manage these allegedly inherent traits.

Emre Ergin says

Other than absurd references to (then contemporary) people like Rumsfeld, Clinton etc. which makes the target audience of the text not me, some American which is older, it was full of thought provoking ideas, and quotations. As an economist, I appreciate the reminder about *homo homini lupus* might actually be wrong, just as *homo economicus* might be.

Orde says

This is a pamphlet all right. But nonetheless it is worth reading. Sahlins retraces the idea of human nature in the West so familiar to us in its hobbesian form. There the Greeks, witnesses to the birth of western civilization already argue over man the dangerous creature that has to be restrained by the state. Thus it's always, all through history basically the question: Athens or Sparta? Rule of the equal (although still rather in its origin an aristocratic concept) or monarchy? Hobbes reads Thucydides and so did the Founding Fathers, the concept of original sin proposed by St. Augustin as a centerpiece of believe in the centuries to come makes for the Christian version of the same tale that man by nature is a menace to his fellow humans and has to be kept in check by the state. And does it matter to invoke Rousseau who claimed that only culture corrupts man who's good and solitary (and speechless) by nature? As the historical conditions of society change so does the way people think about modalities of dealing with human nature. There's a shift from monarchical schemes to such of balance. Now the so called realists claim that to suppress the different

passions wouldn't work but we must play them off against each other. Moral philosophy gets to become political economy... And finally in our day and age when it seems that this kind of philosophical discussion would just not be referred to in the post-ideological age Sahlins shows how the same idea returns in the design of evolutionary psychology and the selfish gene.

He then goes on to point out that there are other ways of perception of our place in the world in citing anthropological examples where there is no concept of a strict separation between what's a human and what's some other individual (for example animals or objects) or for that matter between nature and culture. But for me that excursion didn't really make for an all too interesting part although I understand how it serves his purpose to demonstrate that human nature is first and foremost cultural. It becomes sufficiently clear that our idea of ourselves is a historically shaped one and not a statement about nature itself. But I don't think that we can really choose so much. We are brought up or grow into a social setting which essentially operates under the assumption that we are all primarily asocial creatures that are programmed to maximize profit and enter into social relationships for exactly that reason (even if we don't always know it). This might not be the truth about the human nature and the almost infinite possibilities of shapes human life can assume but it certainly shaped the world we made up to live in and thus it can claim a certain plausibility. And at this point the mere history of mind becomes a history of society and its way of (re)production. But this you have to do without in reading this small book although Sahlins did show the way of that connection in his critique on sociobiology "The Use and Abuse of Biology".

Bob Reutenauer says

Marshall Sahlins is a challenge and a reward. He has a few short works in this great U of Chicago pamphlet series the "Prickly Paradigm Press" that he contributed late in his career. Sahlins, along with Eric Wolf, Sidney Mintz and Clifford Geertz were the anthropologists, all Americans, all died in past few years, that I was led to feast on as an anthropology student at UConn in the early 1980s. I always remember the word play sub-title of one of Sahlins's Polynesia monographs "Historical Myth and Metaphorical Reality"-- this history/anthropology mix of interpretive approach common to all four of these social/cultural theorists, less so with Geertz, made great impact on my interests to this day. This extended essay "Human Nature" is rewarding. Took valuable notes. As expected chock full of pithy powerful near aphorisms of scorn not quite disguising his deep concern about the balance of power in the conversation over the various "determinations" we humans point to about ourselves-- he goes against the grain, against the instrumental power of the Genetic: "seeming ability to explain all manner of cultural forms by an innate disposition to competitive self-interest"; the Economic: "autonomous individuals devoted singularly to their own satisfactions by rational choice"; and the latest Evolutionary Psychology: "making an all purpose social science of the selfish gene." As you would expect he backs this critique with a variety of ethnographic material-- the cultural other.. but not exclusively by any means. Sahlins goes deep into the West itself-- the classics, the christian, the enlightenment and manages a rigorous destabilizing of this "human nature." From Kant: "Man is an animal that requires a master" but the case is hopeless "as the master himself is an animal that needs a master." Enjoy!

Jason Williams says

It's one of the better cold baths I've taken. As a critical-cultural theory enthusiast, it wasn't all new to me,

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Founding Myth ?????????

Forrest says

Informative and engaging, even though the direct subject was the construction and evolution of the Western conception of human nature, I think it would have benefitted from a more in-depth account of other worldviews, and one based more in the experience/perspectives of members of those groups and somewhat less in anthropological texts.
