

VITAL TOPICS FORUM

On Nature and the Human

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ABSTRACT A major contribution of anthropological work has been to challenge a unitary theory of the human. In this *American Anthropologist* vital topics forum, a range of prominent anthropologists contribute to this challenge and provide musings on the human. The essays in this forum reflect diversity and unity of anthropological thought on human nature. Some note humans' connection to other primates, and others emphasize our distinction from ancestral patterns. Several reflect on cultural change, globally and locally, while others problematize what we might mean by, and who we include in, a "human" nature. The perception of humans constructing and being constructed by the world and the warning to be cognizant of our approaches to defining ourselves are central themes here. Our goal is to initiate a discussion that might reshape, or at least influence, academic and public debates.

Keywords: anthropology, human nature, academic and public debate

INTRODUCTION

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All studies of man, from history to linguistics and psychology, are faced with the question of whether, in the last instance, we are the product of all kinds of external factors, or if, in spite of our differences, we have something we could call a common human nature, by which we can recognize each other as human beings.

—Dutch philosopher Fons Edlers, opening the 1971 debate between Michel Foucault and Noam Chomsky on "Human Nature"

In the current historical moment, broad swaths of the U.S. public—as well as the U.S. academy—are engaging in heated debate concerning what it means to be "human." Many ask what lies at the core of humanity. Is it the Hobbesian beast prominent in current conservative discourse? The moral and cooperative animal increasingly proposed by some psychologists and animal behaviorists? The suite of adaptations, responding to a mythical Environment of Evolutionary Adaptation, heralded by some evolutionary psychologists? The products of social, political, economic, and historical contexts proposed by some culture theorists?

We could begin our discussion with the obvious point that the answer to this question is "none of the above." Since its beginnings, one powerful contribution of anthropological work has been to challenge any unitary theory of the human. Yet another equally long-standing body of anthropological work emphasizes overarching similitude, arguing that human bodies, languages, and cultures cannot be ranked over each

other. What can anthropological inquiry contribute to understandings of the human beyond these twin arguments of human difference and human sameness? Where beyond the frontier of the sameness–difference binary does "the human" lie?

Of late, psychologists, historians, political scientists, economists, and even philosophers have been in the public eye speaking about these issues of the human; anthropological voices have been muted in comparison. I propose we take this topic by the horns and advance a new public debate about it. Anthropologists have largely rejected the antiquated dichotomy of nature versus nurture in favor of dynamic understandings of social, biological, and historical complexities. Anthropologists can show that the line dividing the social and the physiological is arbitrary, that no human action or morphological trait exists in a vacuum, and that human history is the conjunctural and emergent product of social, physiological, morphological, symbolic, and historical interactivities.

In this *American Anthropologist* forum, I have invited a range of prominent anthropologists to "think aloud" in regard to these issues. I am particularly interested in anthropological rethinking of the human that move beyond either sameness or difference as the intellectual "punchline." What crucial insights can anthropologists provide to debates over "the human" beyond pointing to what we share, on the one hand, or what distinguishes us, on the other hand? How might such insights reshape academic and public debates over the human itself?

OFF HUMAN NATURE

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We have evolved into biocultural ex-apes.

Pre-Darwinian scholars of the Enlightenment tried to imagine a noncultural human condition, but we now know that we have been coevolving simply with stone tools for over 2.5 million years. Consequently, the quest to imagine a human condition without culture is simply the tortured dream of a hack *philosophe*. The fundamental contributions of anthropology to discussions of human nature are twofold: first, to situate such discourses within the broader intellectual framework of theories of descent, classification, and the cultural meanings of science; and second, to bound such discourses by the reliable knowledge of human origins—that is to say, by scientific rigor (Marks 2009).

One of the most extraordinary paradoxes of modern science is the way in which a pre-Darwinian concept (deriving the essential properties of the human beast) has been transformed into a Darwinian litmus test: if you don't believe sufficiently in the idea of human nature, then you must be a creationist (Konner 2002; Pinker 2003). But in an intellectual arena where facts are notoriously difficult to come by, one fact is certain: human nature is a politically contested turf. Anyone who pronounces on it, while simultaneously arguing that their pronouncements are disconnected from society and politics, is not to be taken seriously.

To imagine that we are nothing but apes, and to find human nature there (e.g., de Waal 2005; Wrangham and Peterson 1996), actually constitutes a denial of evolution. We evolved; get over it. In a classic midcentury synthesis, George Gaylord Simpson explained the problem with “nothing-butism”: “Such statements are not only untrue but also vicious for they deliberately lead astray enquiry as to what man really is and so distort our whole comprehension of ourselves” (1949:283). Evolution is the production of difference and novelty, and you are not your ancestors.

Apes were your ancestors, but the elision of identity with ancestry is reductive and political. Is each of us constrained by the abilities, achievements, gene pool, and history of our ancestors—or do we have the capacity to be different from them? That's an interesting “biopolitical” question. After all, the most consistent scientific invocation of human nature has been to explore, or, rather, to construct, limits to human social progress. Thus, by the end of World War I, a polarity had emerged among evolutionary biologists. Science From the Right believed that by rejecting Lamarckism (acquired characteristics, or “soft” inheritance), we could now see that we are all perpetually mired in our own germ-plasm, which in turn sets rigid boundaries on the possibilities open to the person, the race, or the species. In practice, this science has invoked a post-Darwinian human “nature” largely to mount a last-ditch defense of some form of hereditary aristocracy and

to oppose the doctrines of racial and sexual political equality (Cohen 2007; Galton 1869; Gobineau 1915; Herrnstein and Murray 1994).

Science from the Left, however, commonly sought non-Mendelian mechanisms for transcending our bestial ancestry. Even before the end of the 19th century, the first generation of European anthropologists was studying the mutable and adaptive qualities of human culture and human physical plasticity; it was for good reason that E. B. Tylor (1871:453) called anthropology “a reformer's science.” Quakers, however, would prove to be less worthy of attention as interlocutors than those quintessential chameleons and assimilators of the Left—the Jews (Garrett 1961; Putnam 1961; Sarich and Miele 2004; see also Lipphardt 2008; Schaffer 2007).

Thus, Paul Kammerer, who rose to fame (and later, infamy) on amphibian reproductive biology, drew biopolitical conclusions that went radically beyond his data: “Cannot the human race be taught to avoid acquired degenerate tendencies? Cannot the law I have laid down be applied and guide humanity to a higher level? I would suggest, first, that it be used to eliminate race hatred” (Jones 1923; Gliboff 2006). A noble thought, to be sure, but one that is more plainly rooted in human social facts than in the mating habits of toads. We should look to real anthropology, rather than to imaginary biology, to understand what it means to be a cultural, as well as a natural, being.

If, however, we mean by “human nature” what the first generation of anthropologists called “the psychic unity of mankind,” then it is possibly something real but methodologically daunting. It may well be true that “it is human nature to think in binary oppositions,” but such a statement certainly has more hermeneutic than biological value. Scientifically minded anthropologists have to be most suspicious of studies purporting to naturalize human social relations, for they tend to be ideologically the strongest while epistemologically the weakest. For example, I don't see how one can talk sensibly about xenophobia as human nature without confronting the constructed aspects of human groups. I also don't know what it means for evolution if 80 percent of people surveyed, or societies visited, answer a question in a particular way. Instead, the anthropologist in me focuses on the other 20 percent and wonders whether they are to be regarded as mutants or as apes.

WHAT IS A HUMAN BEING?

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What is a human being? What does it mean to be human? To the first question, we might answer: a species of nature, a particular subdivision of the primate order. But we tend to answer the second question differently. To be human, we say, is to transcend the world of nature, to be more than a mere organism. Thanks to this transcendence, humans can look into the mirror of nature and know themselves for

what they are. It is because of this duplicity in the meaning of the human that psychologists persist in the search for a universal architecture underwriting the capacities of the human mind while attributing the evolution of these capacities to a theory—of variation under natural selection—that only works because the individuals of a species are endlessly variable. This is not a mistake that anatomists would make. Every human being, for example, has a protuberance in the centre of the face with two holes that allow the inhalation and exhalation of air. We call it the nose. No two noses are alike: they vary among individuals and among populations. Yet no one conversant with modern biology would attribute these variations to developmentally induced inflections of a universal nasal architecture, identically keyed in to all humans. Did not Darwin finally refute the essentialist doctrine that for every species there exists a preestablished, formal template? Yet this is precisely the doctrine to which evolutionary psychologists appeal in their search for human cognitive universals. They do so because it is an epistemological condition for their science.

Nowadays, scientists assign all extant human beings not just to one species but to one subspecies, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, all other subspecies having become extinct. The accompanying rhetoric, however, reveals this to be no ordinary subspecies. Doubly sapient, the first attribution of wisdom, the outcome of a process of encephalization, marks it out within the world of living things. But the second, far from marking a further subdivision, is said to register a decisive break from that world. In what many have taken to calling the “human revolution,” the earliest representatives of the new subspecies were alleged to have achieved a breakthrough without parallel in the history of life, setting them on the path of discovery and self-knowledge otherwise known as culture or civilization. Human beings by nature, it was in the historical endeavor of reaching beyond that nature that they progressively realized the essence of their humanity. In their double-barreled, subspecific appellation, the duplicity that had always been implicit in the concept of the human was explicitly foregrounded. Referring neither to a species of nature nor to a condition of being that transcends nature but to both simultaneously, “human” points to the existential dilemma of a creature that can know itself and the world of which it is a part only through the renunciation of its very being in that world.

The recognition of the human is the product of what Giorgio Agamben calls an “anthropological machine” that relentlessly drives us apart, in our capacity for self-knowledge, from the continuum of organic life within which our existence is encompassed. This machine drives the project of Western thought and science. Not only does it generate the problematic of the universal and the particular, of sameness and difference, but it also ensures that it will never be resolved. To escape the impasse—to comprehend knowing as being, and being as knowing—requires us to dismantle the machine. The first step is to think of humans in terms not of what they are but of what they do. With José Ortega

y Gasset, we should say “not that man *is*, but that he *lives*” (Ortega y Gasset 1941:213). Humanity, Ortega tells us, does not come with the territory, from the mere fact of species membership or from having been born into a particular culture or society. It is rather something we have continually to work at. What we are, or what we can be, does not come ready made. We have, perpetually and never-endingly, to be making ourselves. That is what life is, what history is, and what it means to be human. To inquire into human life is thus to explore the conditions of possibility in a world peopled by beings whose identities are established, in the first place, not by received species- or culture-specific attributes but by relational accomplishment. Unlike the incongruous hybrids of biology and culture created by the anthropological machine, real-world humans build themselves, and one another, in the crucible of their common life.

HUMAN NATURE AND HUMAN CULTURE

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Is there something we can call human nature? Of course there is. Humans generally behave more like each other than they do like chimpanzees or gorillas. And, chimpanzees behave more like other chimpanzees than like gorillas or humans. However, this does not mean that differences among humans, especially in complex behaviors, can be explained mainly by genetic variation. In fact, among humans, most complex behavioral differences, unless specific genes can be identified for them, must be considered caused by what anthropology has defined as “culture.”

At the height of the eugenics movement, when most scientists espoused the idea that differences in behavior among different social classes and “racial” and ethnic groups were determined by heredity, Franz Boas (1911) developed the anthropological concept of “culture.” He introduced the then-radical view that these differences were the product of different histories, not different innate capacities. These differences brought about by different life histories, shared more within than among societies, led to different ways of dealing with the world and different worldviews. He introduced this novel use of the term *culture* not as another word for *civilization* but in a plural form to express that different societies exhibit distinctive cultures and that this underlies major differences among peoples. Unfortunately, anthropologists have forgotten the profound importance of this concept in understanding human behavior. This is unfortunate because it is perhaps the most important contribution of anthropology to modern science.

When attempting to ascribe differences among different individuals or groups to genetically fixed biological capacities, we must be extremely careful, for this implies that these differences are unchangeable. Historically, this has been the ammunition used by racists to impose inhumane treatment on many groups. Cultural, subcultural, and life

history-induced differences have been misunderstood and have often formed the basis of prejudices reinforced by pseudoscience and bad biology. As Boas (1916) asserted, “Unless the contrary can be proved, we must assume that all complex activities are socially determined, not hereditary” (Degler 1991:148). Alfred Kroeber also warned that until biological bases for behavioral differences are established and exactly defined, we must assume their nonexistence. If we do not, our work becomes “a vitiated mixture of history and biology” (1915:285).

A good example of this is the idea that humans are by nature aggressive or violent. Yes, we can be violent in certain contexts, and some people and cultures are more violent than others. But are these differences “caused” by environment or heredity? Are different homicide rates in New York, London, or Tokyo caused by biological differences in their inhabitants? I think not. To say that humans have a propensity for violence says nothing. We also have a propensity for nonviolence. In fact, the norm, or statistically more common behavior, within human groups is cooperation and among human groups is peace (Fry 2006). Violence, both within and among societies, is statistically abnormal. We must understand normal behaviors before we can understand statistically and behaviorally abnormal ones as well as the cultural contexts in which the latter occur. To focus mainly or only on rare, abnormal behaviors is a “5 O’Clock News” view of human behavior.

So what about human nature? As I said, I do believe human nature exists. However, for the most part, we have been studying it at the wrong level. Going back to my comparison between humans and chimpanzees, these two species behave differently because of their different natures. But at what level do these differences in nature occur?

Humans and chimpanzees are different in their neurobiology, and these differences structure the way they behave. Edmund Leach described how we might approach the study of underlying structures of behavior:

Quite simple mechanical models can have relevance for social anthropology despite the acknowledged fact that the detailed empirical facts of social life display the utmost complexity. . . . If I have a piece of rubber sheet and draw a series of lines on it to symbolize the functional interconnections of some set of social phenomena and then start stretching the rubber about, I can change the manifest shape of my original geometric figure out of all recognition and yet clearly there is a sense in which it is the same figure all the time. [1961:7]

In a similar vein, we might say that humans and chimpanzees are playing different games (chess and checkers but exceedingly more complex). Describing individual behaviors might not help us understand the ultimate rules of the game. It would suggest an enormous number of permutations. Once we knew the rules, however, it might be possible to understand all possible permutations, the totipotentiality of human or chimpanzee behavior, and the contextual meaning of the statistical distribution of those permutations. For example, studying one language would not allow us to understand the

neurobiology or ultimate rules of human language generally, and chimpanzees don’t have the neurobiology that enables human language. So far, for most complex behaviors, we are still just talking about statistical permutations. We need to start thinking about the underlying rules, the different lines on our rubber sheets.

CONTROLLED COMPARISON AS A TOOL FOR DISENTANGLING CONTINGENT HISTORIES

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Anthropologists have long had a powerful tool at their disposal: the method of “controlled comparison.” To this, anthropological archaeologists can add the additional advantage of studying cultural dynamics over the long term. These two tools—controlled comparison and long-term dynamic records of cultural change—can help us understand the ways in which cultures are shaped by external factors including the environment or are determined by factors intrinsic to *Homo sapiens*.

The Pacific Islands and their myriad cultures offer an especially salient region in which to apply controlled comparison in the context of long-term dynamic historical trajectories. Linguistic, archaeological, and bioanthropological research has established that the peoples and cultures of Remote Oceania (which includes Polynesia, eastern Melanesia, and most of Micronesia) had a common origin in the Lapita complex (ca. 1200–500 B.C.E.). The descendants of the Lapita peoples explored, discovered, and colonized a vast array of islands, ranging from tropical Fiji to temperate New Zealand, remote and isolated Easter Island, and subtropical Hawai’i. The cultures that subsequently developed on each of these islands all had common origins—hence, their ancestors shared cultural patterns ranging from kinship to cosmogony. Yet the Pacific Island cultures documented in ethnohistoric records and ethnographic fieldwork varied tremendously. These differences emerged over time as a result of the contingent, historical interactions among each human group and its particular environment (and here I must stress that I mean environment in a “total” sense, including demographic and social factors).

The space limits of this forum dictate that I limit myself to one brief example of how we can use controlled comparison and historical records in Oceania to understand human–environment interactions (but see Kirch 2010a for a longer account). Because “aggression” has long been central to debates over human nature, let us look at how institutionalized aggression (warfare) expressed itself within Polynesia. To the extent that there are “universal” patterns, we might hypothesize these to result from intrinsic human qualities, whereas differences would have to be ascribed to particular environmental contexts. Historical linguists confidently reconstruct a Proto Polynesian word, **toa*, which can be roughly glossed as “warrior.” So a lexically marked

category of persons skilled in martial arts was already present 2,500 years ago in the Polynesian homeland. But the specific ways in which aggression and warfare were expressed in later descendant societies varied remarkably.

On the small and resource-limited island of Mangaia in the southern Cook Islands, archaeological and paleoecological records reveal a historical trajectory of environmental degradation that led to intense competition and endemic conflict among social groups, especially for control of limited irrigation lands. Toa effectively controlled this small society through terroristic practices that included the taking and ritual consumption of human victims (this is documented both ethnohistorically and in the archaeological record). The political system had evolved away from a classic Polynesian model based on hereditary succession to a paramountship of war leaders, each overthrowing the next. Does Mangaian history validate a Hobbesian view of intrinsic human nature? In my view no, but it does demonstrate the extent to which human society is capable of sinking into sheer thuggery and terror when environmental conditions deteriorate past a certain threshold.

Now, contrast the role of war and aggression in Mangaia with that of another Polynesian society, Hawai'i, in which resources were not limited. The Hawaiian archipelago, with 16,000 square kilometers, offered a diverse landscape for both irrigated and dryland agriculture as well as rich marine resources. Here too, the ancient Polynesian social status of warrior, *koa*, played an important role in society. But as I have argued elsewhere (Kirch 2010b), the late Hawaiian polities were emergent archaic states, controlled by divine kings. In Hawai'i, *koa* were specialists drawn from the ranks of the chiefly class. Terrorizing the common people was not in the interests of the kings or their chiefly supporters, whose existence depended on a well-ordered and productive agricultural economy. Aggression was strictly curtailed and channeled into formalized combat between opposing armies whose kings sought to expand their territories. Whereas cannibalism is well documented in Mangaia, Hawai'i developed highly ritualized human sacrifice for the dedication of the kings' war temples. The two systems—each tracing its roots back to the same common ancestral origins—could not have been more different. In short, the nature of warfare in any society is not determined by human nature, it is the outcome of contingent historical interactions between society and its environment in the broadest sense.

Polynesia is especially well-suited to the use of controlled comparison and the direct historical approach. But these methods are broadly applicable throughout many other regions of the world. Through their use, anthropologists can contribute uniquely to the debate over what it means to be human.

HUMAN NATURE: ALWAYS CONTEXT DEPENDENT

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What is the nature of human nature? Are humans innately cruel and genocidal? Or are humans by nature cooperative and altruistic? Clearly, anthropological research across the globe and through span of human history teaches us that both genocide and altruism fall within the bounds of human nature. What is decisive in producing these outcomes is the context of human action.

If there is one great lesson that anthropology teaches, it is that human biology, human psychology, and human behavior are all context dependent. This enormous biological and behavioral flexibility—the ability to adopt different physiological, perceptual, and behavioral repertoires—has enabled humans to survive across the extremes of climate and habitat, from the frozen tundra to the burning desert. Humans are the only biological species to achieve such broad dispersal. This biological and behavioral flexibility enables humans to move from foraging camps to industrial cities and to supplement communication with ancestral spirits with communication via the Internet at speeds that outstrip the rate of natural selection, often within the course of a single lifetime.

Yet this is a lesson that people in the contemporary United States resist. In the glow that surrounds the success of the human-genome mapping project, people in the contemporary United States seem more determined than ever to believe that each facet of human biology and human behavior is hardwired—each trait programmed by a particular gene. Even the premier scientific journal *Science* shows a willingness to reduce the complexities of human biology and human behavior to elemental and immutable present-absent oppositions. From high blood pressure to math skills: you either got it or you ain't.

In earlier generations, biological determinism served as a social weapon; it legitimated and naturalized inequality—in health statistics, income, education, and professional achievement. Biological determinism justified the lack of effort to address the social bases of social inequality. In contrast, the new biological determinism is sometimes wedded to proposals to “customize” treatments for different genotypes. “Personalized” medicine will isolate and treat cancer-causing genes in individuals. Single-gender classrooms and schools will address sex-based differences in neurological and cognitive development. Ironically, such proposals may well accentuate, rather than eradicate, inequality by (1) devoting enormous sums of money to isolating and treating the individualized genetic components of biological and social malfunction rather than addressing the already identified environmental components of these problems and (2) creating, in some cases, different medical, educational, and other social “tracks” for individuals falling into different “biologically” defined groups.

Anthropologists may understand that biology, language, and behavior are mutually constituting. But I am afraid that this message is too subtle for public consumption. In addressing nonanthropologists, I would use cross-cultural and historical data to argue that human nature is variable in

its biological, psychological, and behavioral dimensions and is always context dependent. I would emphasize that, even within societies, individuals are molded biologically, psychologically, and behaviorally by their experiences. And finally, I would affirm that broad, flexible social institutions are needed to encourage all individuals to explore and cultivate their strengths and compensate for their weaknesses. These are superior to social institutions that classify individuals into narrow categories and treat them accordingly, even when such categories are established by “biological” criteria.

THE HUMAN NATURE OF DISABILITY

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Anthropology is well-known for its capacious and ever-expanding framework for understanding “human nature.” Given the centrality of diversity to our epistemology, why has the subject of disability not been a central topic for our discipline? Surely, this form of difference and the social hierarchies that often stigmatize it are a universal aspect of human life. As we have learned from studies of early and latter-day eugenics and histories of institutionalization, the label of “disabled” has been used to dehumanize populations across the globe. Such knowledge invites anthropological research on disability, daily life, and governmentality, work that should be used to “reshape, or at least influence, academic and public debates” over the human, as the editor of this inaugural forum suggests.

Unlike the categories of race and gender, from which one can only enter or exit very rarely and with enormous and conscious effort—“passing” or “transgendering,” for example—disability has a distinctive quality: it is a category anyone might enter in a heartbeat, challenging lifelong presumptions of stable identities and normativity. Of course, some will be more vulnerable than others because of poverty, war, and the vagaries of health and health care, but no social category is exempt from disabling experiences, however they are defined. As a circumstance that requires attention to subjectivity, cultural meaning, social relations, and the biological, disability seems a “natural” topic for anthropological study.

Disability’s continued marginality in our discipline is curious, given the exceptional quality of groundbreaking ethnographic studies to date. As anthropologist and disability scholars Devva Kasnitz and Russell Shuttleworth so tellingly have analyzed the situation:

Anthropology’s genuine fascination with otherness and the thickness of the ethnographic stance should be a boon to international disability studies. However, this promise is late in coming. [Kasnitz and Shuttleworth 2001:3]

Some reflection on the emergent work on disability in anthropology gives us cause for optimism. Space does not

permit a full review of the literature, but early influential books include: Robert Edgerton’s classic *Cloak of Competence* (1993), John Gwaltney’s *Drylongso* (1993), Nora Groce’s *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language* (1985), and Robert Murphy’s *The Body Silent* (1990). In 1995, the collection *Disability and Culture*, edited by Benedicte Ingstad and Susan Whyte, brought together comparative work in this emergent area; by 2007, Ingstad and Whyte’s second collection, *Disability in Local and Global Worlds*, brought the perspectives of new work on human rights, citizenship, and neoeugenics into conversation with case studies from around the globe.

Recent deeply reflexive ethnographies set in the United States have gained professional as well as public attention, such as Gelya Frank’s *Venus on Wheels* (2000) and Richard Roy Grinker’s *Unstrange Minds* (2007). Outside the United States, studies such as Karen Nakamura’s *Deaf in Japan* (2006) and Matthew Kohrman’s *Bodies of Difference* (on disability in China; 2005) reveal how a cultural category such as disability travels into the specificity of local cultural grids.

Like most of these authors, we hope to address both the discipline and broader audiences in our current research on cultural innovation and the emergence and social consequences of the category of learning disabilities in the United States. We are tracking how kinship, caretaking, and the life course are reconfigured when a child is diagnosed with a disability. As these families begin to recognize their commonalities and needs with others who share their difference, a new kinship imaginary is emerging, expressed through a variety of idioms. If social mores once dictated that family members with disabilities be hidden from view and stories about them silenced, our research strongly suggests that this cultural script is being revised on a daily basis, creating a sea change felt across multiple locations, from the intimacy of kinship to the public worlds of educational policy, scientific research, and popular media. And those living in the United States are not alone: the “public intimacy” now claimed by members of families and kinship groups with people with disabilities has become highly visible in other parts of the globe in recent years.

A year ago, during a discussion of Gail Landsman’s *Reconstructing Motherhood and Disability in the Age of “Perfect” Babies* (2008), our students raised these questions: Why isn’t disability being taught in every introductory anthropology class? Why isn’t it part of our graduate training? Clearly, the significance of disability’s lessons is not lost on the emergent generation coming into anthropology, perhaps in part because they grew up in a world in which disability was a fact of life and no longer hidden. They recognize that disability is a fundamental anthropological concern as an essential form of “human nature.” As our students have taught us, it’s time for our field to accept this challenge.

WHEN DID HOMO SAPIENS PEAK?

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In anthropology our story goes something such as this: human beings are primates who have evolved. Their evolution is manifested in increasing brain size and increased intelligence and symbolic activity.

Later on we find evidence of another creature who was named *Homo sapiens* by Linnaeus. In evolutionary terms, *H. sapiens* was a life form with fantastic potential: from creatures with limited ability to modify their environment to *H. sapiens* who in a relatively short time had the capacity to change the environment, to communicate through language, to populate the globe.

First, apart from noticing the obvious self-adoration, I was curious as to why humans use the term *sapiens* to refer to themselves, and later *sapiens sapiens*, and whether the *sapiens* (intelligent) part is still evolving or de-evolving. So for a time I went about asking people, “When did *homo sapiens* peak?” Three answers will suffice here. The biological anthropologist and the ecologist (interview, T. Milleron, 2000) said, “Just before agriculture was discovered”—some tens of thousands of years ago—because, prior to agriculture, humans were ecologically in balance with the planet. With agriculture began the increasing overutilization of natural resources, activity that now threatens the globe. A second answer came from a political scientist who said, “*Homo sapiens* peaked with Mozart,” indicating that for him artistic accomplishment was the most important measure. A third said that *H. sapiens* had not yet peaked, indicating that the species was still evolving, becoming smarter and more intelligent with the passage of time.

Several writers have addressed the issue of whether humans have been getting smarter or whether we’ve been getting dumber. In the 1930s, the historian, archaeologist, and philosopher R. G. Collingwood wrote a piece entitled “Man Goes Mad” (2005), critiquing the notion that men were getting wiser. Nobel Laureate Albert Szent-Gyorgy, a biologist who discovered the powers of vitamin C, wrote *The Crazy Ape* (1970), a short book about a strange animal: “In much of the world half the children go to bed hungry and we spend a trillion on rubbish—steel, iron, tanks. We are all criminals” (*New York Times* 1970:43). He doubted man’s survival in a world run by “idiots,” the *New York Times* headlines read (1970:43). In *Ishmael* (1993), a prize-winning book by Daniel Quinn, a young man in search of truth finds himself in an abandoned office with a full-grown gorilla. The tale is about Takers and Leavers and how we are killing the Earth along with ourselves.

The present may look quite different through the prism of the *longue durée*, offering new insights on what may be too close to notice (Nader 2008). Historical interpretations enter to challenge or solidify what we know from prehistory. How would one explain to an anthropologist from Mars that over the past one hundred years more of nature has been destroyed than in all prior history? Indeed, how would we explain “nuclear renaissance” to our ancestors who developed sophisticated renewable energy sources? Perhaps *H. sapiens* is not getting dumber, only getting dumber.

HUMAN NATURE IN THE AGE OF AVATAR

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What’s constant? What changes? All anthropologists ponder these fundamental questions. What’s human nature; how do humans vary across cultures? How and why do cultures change? Is globalization making people more, or less, alike? To the last question, one might argue either way. McDonald’s, Coca-Cola, IBM, FIFA, and Nike are worldwide brands. There is more transnational movement of people and their products now than ever before. People everywhere are more familiar with otherness, and in many settings difference has become a matter for pride and political mobilization. There may be as much diversity within contemporary nations as between them.

People living in the United States, for example, are more diverse ethnically and (arguably) more divided politically than ever before. The media, intertwined with commerce and politics, promotes both unity and diversity. The centripetal role of an internationally available CNN is balanced by the centrifugal force (within the United States) of such niche media as Fox News and MSNBC, which promote political polarization.

Recently I moved from a place where everyone I knew was a Democrat to a community in which Republicans predominate and where I regularly encounter views I used to imagine only in caricature. How, I wonder, can any reasonable person doubt that seven billion people, along with their animals and machines, have more impact on the environment than, say, 50,000 hunter-gatherers? How can people with college degrees believe that humans and dinosaurs once walked the Earth together or that the world is only 6,000 years old? Is politics in the genes? Do Republicans and Democrats literally see, hear, smell, feel, and taste things differently? Without a doubt, family background and other cultural forces play a role, but I wonder increasingly whether the dispositions that underlie political orientation (e.g., conservatism, flexibility, capacity for outrage or compassion) have biological roots.

In social settings here, Republicans and Democrats do manage to come together politely. CNN can mediate between Fox and MSNBC. Reds and blues may be equal fans of the films *Titanic*, *Star Wars*, or *Avatar*. Even there, however, there can be strong differences of opinion. Although I’ve yet to meet anyone who favored the Empire over the rebels in *Star Wars* (note that I’ve never met Dick Cheney), I have heard *Avatar* faulted for being antibusiness and antimilitary by some and racist and paternalistic by others.

I happened to see *Avatar* just as I started planning this essay. The film is about what it means to be human—and not human, although still “cultured” in the anthropological sense. It’s also about conflicting loyalties among humans—to nature, culture, science, enterprise, ethics, morality. It raises the issue of humanoid rights and of how much one should support one’s own race—the human—against another.

Avatar pits capitalist values against local ones—a conflict that proceeds on Earth as on Pandora. I worry a lot about the spread of selfishness, the erosion of community and civility, and the perhaps diminishing ability of local cultures to adapt to, resist, and survive the powerful forces and threats they face from outside.

In my work in Brazil (since 1962) and Madagascar (since 1966), I've seen the effects of two major causes of change: population increase and the shift from subsistence to cash. In Madagascar especially, I've witnessed how population growth fuels agricultural intensification, deforestation, and rural–urban migration. In both countries, I've been struck by the growing number of young people abandoning traditional subsistence in favor of seeking jobs for cash, but work is scarce, fueling migration. They enter the informal economy—often illegally. In Brazil, men who would have fished as their grandfathers did instead work locally in construction or tourism or they migrate. The lure of cash is strong. I never will forget my first sight of dozens of villagers in Madagascar destroying an ancestral resource, digging up a large rice field in search of precious stones, tourmalines, to sell. This is the most vivid illustration from my own field experience of the encroachment of cash on a subsistence economy.

As a general, four-field anthropologist, I still teach Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Franz Boas so that my students know the expression *tabula rasa*, the empty slate of human nature on which, the Boasians believed, culture could write almost any script. What cultural scripts will survive a hundred years hence? And if there is only one such script, or just a few, will it or they be based in human nature or human culture—or, almost surely, in both?

MORE THAN A HUMAN NATURE

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The essays in this forum reflect both diversity and unity of anthropological thought on human nature. Some open with recognition of humans' connection to other primates and others with a nod to our distinction from ancestral patterns. Several begin with a focus on cultural change, globally and locally, while others problematize what we might mean by, and who we include in, a human nature. We see a centralization of our species name, *Homo sapiens*, and even a note or two on the arrogance in calling ourselves “wise.” All share a concern with how and where this thing we call human nature may be leading us.

One can easily describe this forum as challenging the concept of a single, or simple, “human nature” as an erroneous and essentialist philosophy. Jon Marks reminds us that many seeking to identify our true nature via ancestral adaptations are practicing a “nothing-but-ism,” that evolution results in difference and variation, and that, thus, we are “biocultural ex-apes” rather than upgraded versions of our ancestors. The power of symbol, expression, self-awareness,

and the presence of human culture permeate these essays, as does a distinct warning with regard to our hubris and our tendencies to define ourselves into and out of the world we share with so many other beings.

The Vital Topics writers focus on human variation and complexity, a global and local species creating and created by the world they inhabit. Tim Ingold, invoking Ortega y Gasset, reminds us that it is not that humans are but, rather, that they live, create, and become. Robert Sussman cajoles us not to think about specific behaviors as evidence of our nature but instead to consider the totipotentiality of permutations in human action. Patrick Kirch demonstrates how peoples sharing a similar origin can result in radically different societies because of the contingent nature of our social and ecological histories, and Elizabeth Brumfiel emphasizes our understanding of the mutually constituting synthesis of biology, language, and behavior. Rayna Rapp and Faye Ginsburg reinforce these notions of diversity and human action, inviting anthropology to reshape our conceptualizations to include disability as a core part of our natural humanity.

We should also consider where living and creating, as humans, is taking us. Laura Nader chides our taxonomic arrogance and opines that, because of our actions, we may be “getting dumbed,” displaced from our self-enshrined pinnacle of *sapiens*. Conrad Kottak invokes *Avatar*, globalized corporate brands, and the lure of cash in rural–urban migrations to puzzle out how our diverse and rich social scripts will read in the not-too-distant future.

So, might these insights reshape, or at least influence, academic and public debates over the human? The perception of humans constructing and being constructed by the world, the centrality of diversity and contingency in becoming human, and the warning to seriously consider our often not-so-*sapiens* approaches to living and defining ourselves are central themes here. Consider taking these essays as jumping-off points to continue our discussions, to refine them, and to export them. Why not carry these notions, more frequently and vociferously, to other disciplines, especially those who have displaced anthropologists as central interlocutors on the human? Can't we distinguish ourselves by raising our voices and bridging the academic–public divide? Maybe. We can start by making sure we do not ignore our own voices and musings, that we use forums such as this one on nature and the human as well as our conferences, classrooms, and the public realm to keep these discussions alive, visible, and vital.

VITAL TOPICS FORUM COMBINED

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