

We've Misunderstood Human Nature for 100 Years

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By Kurt Gray

Dr. Gray is a social psychologist and the author of the forthcoming book "Outraged: Why We Fight About Morality and Politics and How to Find Common Ground," from which this essay is adapted.

One day in the summer of 1924, an anthropologist named Raymond Dart made an incredible discovery — and drew a conclusion from it about human nature that would mislead us for a century.

Dart was examining a set of fossils that had been unearthed by miners near the town of Taung in South Africa when he found the skull of a “missing link” between ancient apes and humans. It belonged to a juvenile member of the species *Australopithecus africanus* who was later nicknamed the Taung Child.

The skull conclusively demonstrated that Africa was the birthplace of humankind. It also seemed to reveal something sinister about human nature: There was a series of grooves etched in the bone, which Dart believed could be produced only by human-made tools. These marks convinced him that this young hominid had been butchered and eaten by another member of its tribe (perhaps a hungry uncle).

Our ancestors, Dart concluded, were cannibalistic killers. He argued that *Australopithecus africanus* represented a “predatory transition” in which our ancestors evolved from eating plants and fruits to devouring meat — and one another.

Dart’s thesis quickly became scientific consensus, and other anthropologists found facts to support the theory that humans evolved as ruthless hunters. For instance, we can run long distances (presumably to exhaust prey), throw objects with accuracy (to kill prey with spears) and work well together (to coordinate killing prey).

The idea that humans are natural-born predators was not just a scientific claim; it also found expression in the broader culture. In the 1954 novel “*Lord of the Flies*,” a group of school-age boys stranded on an island descend into savage violence, revealing their true nature. The 1968 movie “*2001: A Space Odyssey*” begins with a tribe of prehistoric apes — our ancestors — discovering how to use a leg bone as a weapon to assault one another. Today, self-help gurus argue that we should reconnect with our “ancestral lifestyle” of eating raw meat and organs.

The assumption that our nature is predatory colors our everyday life. We might generally believe that other people mean well, but as soon as someone causes us harm — like cutting us off in traffic — we assume that they intended it (it’s why we get so angry). The predatory assumption also shapes our perceptions of politics: The “other side” often seems ruthless, callous and happy to inflict harm.

In a 2022 [study](#) led by the moral psychologist Daniela Goya-Tocchetto, researchers found that Democrats and Republicans perceived their opponents’ policies — on issues such as taxation, gun control and environmental regulation — as driven by malicious intent. While people acknowledged the unintended, regrettable trade-offs in their own side’s policies, they believed the other side’s policies were deliberately harmful. When it came to debates about curtailing industry to protect the environment, Democrats saw Republicans as intentionally damaging the environment, while Republicans believed Democrats were actively trying to destroy blue-collar jobs.

There is a glaring problem, however, with the widespread assumption that humans are predators by nature: It’s wrong.

Start with Dart's finding. In the 1990s, the archaeologist Lee Berger and other researchers re-examined the fossils studied by Dart. The Taung Child bones had been found in a pile with butchered animal bones, suggesting the den of a human predator. But Berger also found eagle-like eggshells in this den. Why, he wondered, would humans go through the trouble to collect and eat eagle eggs, risking lethal falls for a tiny snack?

It seemed that Dart had discovered evidence not of human predation but rather of an ancient eagle nest, complete with discarded eggshells from hatchlings. A closer look at the "butchery" marks on the Taung Child corroborated this new theory: The pattern was consistent with the scraping of an eagle's beak. Modern-day harpy eagles can carry off small goats, and prehistoric eagles were certainly big enough to pick up a hominid child. That child had been prey.

Similar discoveries, such as hominid skulls punctured by the fangs of saber-toothed cats, support the claim that our ancestors (and not just their children) were more prey than predators. Our weak bodies also betray our original status as prey. Unlike true predators, we have teeth that are more suited for chewing plants and fruits, and our claws are laughable. Sure, we can throw things, but the sharpened sticks of early humans would barely annoy a large predator. And our ability to run far? Science shows that exhaustion hunting is historically rare.

Finding that hominids were hunted also implies that humans evolved with a prey mind-set, living in fear and constantly seeking protection. Anthropologists now believe that early humans spent many days worrying about predators — and most nights, too. Big cats, like leopards, hunt primates at night. Their eyes can see in darkness, while our eyes, evolved for detecting ripe fruit in daylight, cannot.

This picture of fearfulness is consistent with our understanding of human psychology. We're hard-wired to detect threats quickly and to stay fixated on places where threats once appeared, even after they have vanished. We fear that "child predators" will abduct our kids even when they are safer than ever.

Modern humans, ensconced in towns and cities, are now mostly safe from animal predators, but we are still easily frightened. Whether we're scrolling social media or voting for a presidential candidate, we all still carry the legacy of our ancestors, who worried about big cats lurking in the darkness.

Bearing in mind that our species is by nature more prey than predator is a good rule of thumb when interacting with people — and it could help soothe today's intense political animosity by increasing our sympathy for the other side. Just as you vote to protect yourself and your family, so do those who vote differently. The next time you feel angry at your political opponents, pause to think about how they might feel threatened. When people want to close the southern border, for example, it's usually not because they want to harm migrants, but because they want to protect against the perceived threat of crime and job loss.

Unless they see you as naïve, your political opponents probably view you as a predator. To help them understand your true motivation, consider explaining how your beliefs relate to your fears and your desire to protect yourself, your family, your community. You might start a political conversation by asking, "What worries you most about the future?" or "What makes you feel threatened?"

The answer is probably not "an eagle snatching my child" — but it might as well be.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/22/opinion/human-nature-polarization-predator.html>

A worthy corrective, I believe, to a lot of the warped anthropological literature we have inherited from "legendary" anthropologists full of agendas and egos. But I imagine Dr. Gray ran into space restrictions that prevented him from reckoning sufficiently with the fact that humans, as well as being perpetual prey, have always had to be carnivores too, "dining" when they are not "dinner" themselves, including the fact that "predators" have continually arisen within the human species preying upon their own kind. They recognize the "prey" mode their peers are in and take advantage of it. This is not just serial killers; these are a tiny fraction of the narcissistic sociopaths/psychopaths (fluent in demonic realms) who undermine efforts at civility and cooperative community, exploit weaknesses, and "hunt" the "naïve" oblivious to the designs upon them. To see the obvious, we need only look to POTUS and all those rallying around Trump looking to get in on the action when restrictive measures are dismantled. Mix in a few aliens infiltrating from other dimensions and you have Elon Musk and Donald Trump leading the way to orchestrated second-order cerebral bloodless cannibalism that would have made the Aztecs and Mayans envious, putting them to shame. TJB