

Emotional Amoral Egoism and its Implications for Understanding Conflicts

Written by Nayef Al-Rodhan

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NAYEF AL-RODHAN, FEB 28 2018

The nature of conflicts in the 21st century is characterized first and foremost by the influence of global factors on an unprecedented scale. The softening of political borders, greater interconnectivity, and increased cultural exchange, partly as a result of social media, represent tremendous opportunities for greater social and political justice. At the same time, they give rise to an increased capacity for fringe groups to engage in radicalization and recruitment, and a greater likelihood of violence associated with cultural or religious intolerance. Globalization has been used as an all-encompassing notion to describe these realities, but as a term it is contested and ultimately offers little in the way of explanation for the deeper factors shaping politics and international affairs.

In this shifting context, a clear, scientifically-based account of human nature is crucial to theorizing and developing policy. For all the complexity of the international system and its historical contingencies, the neurochemical underpinnings of human nature are significant determinants of action across circumstances. In other words, our neurochemistry is our lowest common denominator. In this essay, I thus turn to neuroscience to look for answers to some of the enduring questions about international politics and governance.

Neuroscience and the reappraisal of emotions

The role of emotions in human decision-making has been sidelined for a long time. The Platonic-Kantian tradition had posited rationality as both the definitive attribute of “man” and the basis of morality. However, this paradigm has been substantively challenged by contemporary philosophers, who have reached significant consensus in acknowledging the role of emotions. This critique could only be voiced with the insights conferred by neuroscience because it is evidence from neuroscience (although incomplete – the available evidence is conclusive) that demonstrates the neuroanatomical and neurochemical links between emotions and decision-making, among others. In the resulting interdisciplinary dialogue, both philosophers (such as Patricia Churchland, one of the pioneers of neurophilosophy, and John Searle) turned to neuroscience, and neuroscientists have started to contribute to philosophical debates (notable examples include Antonio Damasio with his seminar book *Descartes' Error*, and Maxwell Bennett).

Previous debates relied on observations and speculative arguments. With more authoritative force, neuroscience has demonstrated that moral judgments are realized within the emotional centres of the brain. Tools such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), have permitted us to understand human nature in a more profound way, by mapping and identifying brain regions and neurochemical reactions associated with certain mental processes. Important evidence converges towards an understanding of human morality intrinsically linked to emotionality.

Indeed, research into the brain shows that individuals devoid of or possessing severely limited emotions—whether by inheritance or as a result of accident—lack the sorts of moral intuitions and capacity for moral judgment present in individuals with normal emotional development. Moral philosophy in particular could not overlook such findings and has thus had to significantly move away from purely rationalist accounts. It is now acknowledged with little doubt that emotions play a central role in moral judgment and behaviour.

A common error that could arise from this development would be to consider that the fact of being neurochemically

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'conditioned' provides reasonable justification for diminished individual responsibility. The salience of emotionality in decision-making and our survival-oriented nature does confirm, to a large extent, the view that we possess innate predispositions. This hardwiring is, however, limited to survival: we are genetically predisposed to seek survival and those acts that maximize our chances of survival. Neuroscience also points to the incredible plasticity and malleability of the human brain and human dispositions. Everything from our upbringing to societal values and norms, and the systems of governance under which we live shape our behaviour.

The focus upon external conditions—from education to a basic provision of dignity and fundamental needs— is not only a free-standing moral imperative, but also a means of pursuing a 'Sustainable History'.

Emotional Amoral Egoism: a Brief Account

The same neuroscientific research demonstrates not only that rationality cannot be the common moral denominator among all human beings, but that there simply is no such common denominator, morally speaking. Nothing in neuroscience indicates that we are born either moral or immoral; a more pertinent description is that human beings are innately *amoral*. The development of a moral compass is mostly the result of formative events and experiences, and is thus largely contingent upon external circumstances. Our evolutionary inheritance does provide us with a narrow, minimalist set of motivational structures geared toward survival, but leaves further moral, religious, or cultural attributes entirely unspecified. This means that we are not an entirely blank slate, as John Locke suggested but a *predisposed tabula rasa*, born with a set of predispositions developed and passed on over the course of evolution. The main function of these predispositions is to gear us toward survival— a basic form of egoism. They are egoistic either because they concern our individual survival, or because they are invested in kin or group valuations on the basis of selection advantages that ultimately derive from egoistic concern. Apart from these hard-wired predispositions, our individual "tabulae" ("slates") are then written upon and shaped over the course of our existence.

How does this inform our understanding of contemporary public policy and conflict?

Our social and political existence today is, of course, more complex than that of our ancestors, involving various forms of cooperation, interaction and connectivity, which require a common platform upon which social harmony can develop. The means of achieving this is surprisingly simple, yet it remains a persistent challenge: accounting for human dignity and building dignity-based governance. Neuroscience suggests that dignity, more so than freedom (and democracy), is the most profound and pervasive of human needs. Indeed, political freedom is not always a guarantee of dignity; marginalization, extreme income inequality and various forms of disenfranchisement persist even in mature democracies, leaving large swathes of the population behind. Placing dignity at the centre of governance can reverse that trend, creating greater social cohesion and an opportunity for humanity to flourish.

This suggests that individuals can harmoniously co-exist only in circumstances where individual difference and dignity are given sufficient regard. This kind of social configuration is a fundamental tenet of a healthy pluralistic democracy.

The Emotional Amoral Egoism of States and Sub-State Actors

My neuroscience-based theory of human nature as inherently *emotional, amoral, and egoistic* can be further extended onto our understanding of states and international relations. As I have argued elsewhere, a closer reading of history and strategic culture reveals that emotionality has a determining role in state policies: Israel's deeply emotional view of its past, Russia's emotional account of its history, China's emotional attachment to its "century of humiliation", or the United States' narrative of its exceptionalism are just a few examples.

Evidence of the role of emotions in IR is widespread. Before the advent of neuroscience, the role of national idiosyncrasies in global affairs had a precursor in the so-called "national character studies" during World War II, a field that borrowed from anthropology. Today, neuroscience provides further grounds for looking at the interplay between emotions, decision-making, political ideologies, peace-building, and leadership. For example, divisive politics today, domestically and internationally, can be studied from a neuroscientific perspective from several

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vantage points. Examples include studies that explore in-group and out-group biases by looking at the transformations in the frontal cortex, or activity in the amygdala. Increasingly, scholars want to put the evidence from neuroscience to use in conflict resolution. It is telling that an event entitled “Empathy Neuroscience: Translational Relevance for Conflict Resolution”, organised by the British Academy in 2016, explored the controversial topic of the Palestinian-Israeli peace prospects from a neuroscientific perspective.

This understanding runs contrary to classical International Relations theory wherein a snapshot of power distributions and assumptions of rational actors were deemed sufficient to predict outcomes. The trouble with this classical formulation is twofold. First, power distributions can only be predictive in circumstances where other contingencies have very limited influence, but historical evidence clearly shows that minor contingencies can radically alter the course of history. Second, the presumption of rational actors cannot be supported for the reasons outlined above, so that Morgenthau’s injunction in *Truth and Power* to ‘put one’s self in the shoes’ of a political leader and assume he or she will act according to the dictates of rationality is generally unhelpful.

The mistake of classical Realism is not so much the analogy between the state and man – inferring that states’ behaviour has its origins in human nature and that, just like individuals, states are driven by the desire to dominate (“animus dominandi”), are selfish and pursue power-maximization at all costs. Rather, the underlying problem with the argument is one of substance, namely of an incomplete and broadly speculative account of human nature. Classical realism employed an understanding of human nature that was not based on empirical evidence, but rather on inferences and theories from various philosophical schools, which had also been speculative. Therefore, when Machiavelli or Hobbes – two classical authors that largely inspired the Realist theory of IR – described human nature in bleak terms, as prone to violence, aggression and best restrained by a strong leader, their account of human nature was not necessarily incorrect as much as incomplete, at least by the standards of the insights that neuroscience can confer today.

Neuroscience has debunked many assumptions about human nature in recent decades. While this knowledge is still incomplete, tools such as fMRI have already revealed a more complex picture of human nature, exposing, among others, some of the neural mechanisms which underlie moral decision-making, the connections between emotions and cognition, or the effects of trauma and memory on behaviour. Based on this unprecedented access into the human brain, neuroscience has identified the neurochemical representation of numerous human traits and behaviours. These neuroscience-based studies form a picture of human nature along the lines of *emotional, amoral, egoism*, a characterization that can be transposed to states. The goal of national sovereignty and survival is arguably the only immutable goal of any nation, and the only one that resists domestic turnovers and transitions in international affairs. States’ behaviour will otherwise fluctuate significantly, depending on interests, perceptions and other variables.

To analogize, in a game of chess where ‘A’ holds more power-players than ‘B,’ it might be tempting to make assumptions about the game’s outcome. The difficulty is that an assumption of “other things being equal” is rarely justified, so that perhaps ‘A’ will (emotionally) pursue a vendetta of matching piece for piece, rather than pursuing objectively sound chess strategy.

Emotionality thus introduces greater unpredictability into human affairs, and can often be identified as the root of state or sub-state conflicts. Stalin’s fatal foray into Korea is best understood as a consequence of his growing general paranoia and suspicions about Western plots for domination in particular, as the historian Tony Judt explained. Given the previously established strength of the Red Army and Stalin’s remarkable success in consolidating power, his emotionally-based strategic blunders altered what could have proved to be a very different trajectory in the latter half of the Cold War. Other historical examples can easily be cited, with both Napoleon and Hitler standing out. Napoleon’s ventures in Russia was arguably driven more by pride and hubris than by cold strategic calculation. The significance of individual, emotionally-driven acts, however, is not limited to negative cases of those responsible for wars or atrocities. Irrespective of shifting social and political sentiment, Gorbachev still might have maintained a hard line and sent tanks in response to any defectors from communist loyalty. When he did not, the impetus for change accelerated to the point that the movement became irreversible and walls came down.

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The emotional nature of reactions to political phenomena is also demonstrated by contemporary political events, notably the Syrian refugee crisis. The political, social and cultural backlash in countries accepting—or resisting the acceptance of—refugees brings the ultimately egoistic logic of in-group/out-group considerations into sharp focus. The influx of outsiders has been accompanied by a considerable rise of countervailing inward-looking calls for isolationism. These kinds of polarising emotive responses can exacerbate crises where a degree of common humanity is essential to formulating effective and lasting solutions. Appreciating how such tendencies can be explained within a framework of Emotional Amoral Egoism can thus help to unpick and go beyond judgments that are ultimately grounded in our ancestral predisposition to protect ourselves from outsiders.

Dignity-based governance

Neuroscience can and should inform policy-making because it can help us understand human nature with more insight than ever before.

Among the most basic of all human needs is recognition of dignity. Dignity is the best predictor of a successful outcome in governance because it is in itself a more inclusive concept. Dignity is not just the absence of humiliation, but a more comprehensive set of nine dignity needs: *reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation and inclusiveness*.

While not all conflict can be straightforwardly attributed to failures to achieve models of governance that prioritize human dignity, it is symptomatic of human nature that the likelihood of conflict will increase when this fundamental need is neglected.

The role of dignity was also highlighted in a UN report in 2014: “The Road to Dignity by 2030”. The understanding that dignity is critical in transforming the planet, from tackling global poverty to protecting the environment, is underscored by a fundamental premise, which is that at the centre of any governance mechanism are people.

Dignity must be the underlying objective of any policy for humanity to move further. This refers both to personal dignity, as well as to group identity. An important step further is for relevant regional and global actors to call for enhanced cultural education in school curricula, and work toward greater shared cultural understanding. So long as radical conceptual divides remain between ‘in groups’ and ‘out groups’, the threat of conflict and divisiveness will continue to cast a shadow over our collective future.

The *emotional amoral egoism* theory of human nature and the above-mentioned nine dignity needs can equally offer guidelines for conflict resolution. Conflict resolution has already integrated a wealth of behavioural theories and models but these approaches often relied on scenario-building exercises and less on hard evidence from neuroscience. The framework of emotional amoral egoism informs policy-makers about the more profound hardwiring of humans and the basic – yet often ignored – needs that can ensure they will engage in and sustain cooperative behaviour, even after prolonged conflict. Conflict resolution, like any process of social and political engineering, involves humans, and those same humans have their aspirations, prejudices and values expressed through neuroanatomical and neurochemical processes that can fluctuate. Because human nature is malleable, survival-driven, and pervasively emotional, conflict resolution that skilfully builds on these underlying premises can leave effective and durable results.

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