

# Can Human Instincts Be Controlled?

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**Abstract.** Like all animals, humans have instincts, hard-wired behaviors that enhance our ability to cope with vital environmental contingencies. Our innate fear of snakes is an example. Two other instincts, greed and our urge to procreate, now threaten our very existence. Any attempt to control human behavior is bound to meet with resistance and disapproval. Unless we can change our behavior, humans are facing the end of civilization. Our problem has several elements. (1) We have invented social systems that encourage greedy behavior, and we have actually institutionalized runaway greed. (2) We are in a state of complete denial about the growth of human populations. (3) Earth's finite resources simply cannot support 6.7+ billion of us in the style to which we'd like to live. (4) We must make a choice between quantity and quality of human life. (5) To head off the inevitable collapse, we can no longer wait and merely react but we must become proactive. We must find ways to control dangerous human instincts, especially our greed and our urge to procreate.

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People have an instinctive fear of snakes. We are afraid of snakes because humans evolved alongside these creatures, many of which are dangerous. This fear saved the lives of our ancestors and became hard-wired innate behavior, also known as instinct. Similarly we possess many other instincts that were adaptive during most of human history.

Human instincts evolved long ago when we lived off the land as hunter-gatherers and took refuge in simple shelters like caves. Although our instinctive behaviors were adaptive then (that is, they enhanced our ability to survive and reproduce), many do not work so well in

modern environments. In fact, some of our instincts have become extremely serious impediments now threatening our very survival.

Consider, for example, revenge. Revenge made ample sense when we were hunter-gatherers living in small clans or tribes. If somebody messed with you or your family and you took revenge, they were unlikely to repeat offenses against you. But now, in our crowded man-made world, some people actually contemplate pushing red buttons that will set off nukes and destroy our planet's life support systems. Such revengeful behavior at a global level is clearly insane.

Greed is another natural human instinct — we are all selfish and greedy at heart, and for sound evolutionary reasons. In times of scarcity, a greedy cave man was more likely to survive and reproduce than a generous one who shared his limited resources with the less fortunate. In short, we have been programmed to be selfish. Humans have institutionalized greed — we allow, even encourage, runaway greed. Our political and economic systems facilitate greed. Greed is the underlying driving force for both capitalism and entrepreneurship. Our banking and insurance companies, coupled with the formation of limited liability corporations have allowed greed to explode. Greedy speculators have driven up food and fuel prices. Corporations control politicians, who pass legislation that allows tax evasion and assures obscene corporate profits. Runaway human greed now threatens our very future and must somehow be controlled. Any attempt to control greed will be strenuously opposed. Unfortunately, it may not be possible to overcome human instinctive behaviors.

Primitive humans did not even know how babies were formed, but nevertheless they made them. By favoring nerve endings that tingled in just the right places, natural selection, that ultimate puppet master, made certain we'd reproduce. Hence we are programmed to have instincts to breed. And breed, we do, in fact, we are much too good at it for our own good, all 6.7+ billion of us. Early in our evolutionary history, when

mortality was high, humans had to reproduce rapidly or face extinction. But now we enjoy high survivorship and we need to control our reproduction. Our urge to procreate is one of our most powerful instincts and will be very difficult to suppress. Males simply want lots of sex whereas females are programmed with nesting behaviors that involve a safe home place for their family (of course, sexual selection is much more complex than that one sentence brief synopsis).

The driving force behind all living entities is Darwinian natural selection, or differential reproductive success. Unfortunately, natural selection is blind to the long-term future — natural selection rewards just one thing: offspring. It is a short-sighted efficiency expert. Individuals who leave the most genes in the gene pool of the next generation triumph — their genetic legacy endures, whereas those who pass on fewer genes lose out in this ongoing contest.

Some humans, unfortunately the most successful from the perspective of natural selection, combine greed with breeding and have obscenely large families. Earth simply doesn't have enough resources to support all of us in the style to which we'd like to become accustomed. Moreover, resources such as food, land, and water, are finite, whereas human populations are always expanding, steadily reducing per capita shares. People are encouraged to think that resources are ever expanding when the opposite is true. We are in a state of total denial about the overpopulation crisis — instead of confronting reality, people only want to relieve its many symptoms, such as shortages of food, oil, and water, global climate change, pollution, disease, loss of biodiversity, and many others. Overpopulation is a near fatal disease that cannot be cured by merely alleviating its symptoms. "Take an aspirin, get a good night's sleep, and come back in the morning." Unless we face reality and reduce human populations, we are in for a world of hurt and even greater human misery. If we do not control our own population, microbes will evolve and nasty pandemics will do it for us. Eventually, our population must decrease, but we could lessen the upcoming misery by taking action now. Unfortunately,

most people are unlikely to be proactive and are much more likely to procrastinate until they are forced to react.

Competition is ubiquitous wherever resources are in short supply. Plants compete for light and water. Fungi and microbes compete for nutrients. Animals compete for food and space. Competition leads to greedy behaviors. As a wise woman from a third world country once said “If the rich countries refuse to share their wealth with us, we will certainly share our poverty with them.” We need a more egalitarian society with assured health care, shelter, food, and water for all. What’s the point of having more than you can actually use? No one should own more than he/she could earn with his/her own effort and skill. Runaway greed is obscene.

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Some greedy enemies can be identified: overpopulation, banking and economic systems, insurance companies, and corporations (especially big oil), to mention just a few.

Our economic system is based on the principle of a chain letter: “grow, grow, grow the economy.” Ponzi schemes like this cannot work for long in a finite world. We must replace the archaic concept of an ever-growing economy with a sustainable one in equilibrium where each of us leaves the planet as it was when we entered it (Nadeau 2008; Daly 1991, 1997).

Corporations cannot be abolished because we can’t live without them, but we must find ways to restrict corporate privileges. Obscene CEO salaries should be a thing of the past. CEOs should be held liable and should pay exorbitant taxes. Corporations should not be allowed to evade taxes by moving offshore. Corporations must no longer be allowed to own our politicians, and politicians must become more responsive to opinions of citizens. Executive and political privileges must be eliminated. Politicians should not enjoy all the special perks they have given themselves.

We set a minimum income level and recognize poverty. One way to rein in greed might be to set an upper limit on income so that nobody could become obscenely wealthy. One practice that contributes to or even drives much economic growth is usury: we should seriously consider limiting or even abolishing interest.

Our tax laws need to be revised and our economic system must be changed radically. Taxes would escalate to 99.9% with rising incomes. Instead of getting a deduction for each dependent, we should tax people for having children. Taxes on the first child would be moderate, but they would escalate rapidly so that nobody could afford to have very many children. This would reduce population growth and discourage irresponsible parenthood. Unwanted children and juvenile delinquency would diminish. We should impose a similar taxation scheme on vehicles, graduated by size and fuel efficiency. Hopefully, combined with high fuel prices, such taxes would eliminate SUVs and Hummers. This would conserve diminishing fossil fuels and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Many other changes are needed, for example, solar water heaters should be mandatory in this new world. But all such changes will only provide symptomatic relief. We must confront our life threatening disease itself and reduce our population. If there were fewer of us, the average quality of life for each could be improved.

John Stuart Mill (1859) pointed out that wise people have seen this coming for a long, long time:

“I cannot . . . regard the stationary state of capital and wealth with the unaffected aversion so generally manifested towards it by political economists of the old school. I am inclined to believe that it would be, on the whole, a very considerable improvement on our present condition. I confess I am not charmed with the ideal of life held out by those who think that the normal state of human beings is that of struggling to get on; that the trampling, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other’s heels . . . are the most desirable lot of

humankind . . . It is scarcely necessary to remark that a stationary condition of capital and population implies no stationary state of human improvement. There would be as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture and moral and social progress; as much room for improving the *Art of Living*, and much more likelihood of its being improved” (my italics).

Mill wrote that almost 150 years ago – it’s basically a statement about how a stationary world can be desirable. In a stationary world, you don’t have to worry about inflation, bubbles bursting, stock market crashes, or survival kits. A stationary world is sustainable and the world stays the same from day to day, so that we can focus in on things that really matter and plan for future generations. Let’s take Mill’s advice and get to work on improving the “art of living.” Let’s be proactive and save something for our grandchildren.

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