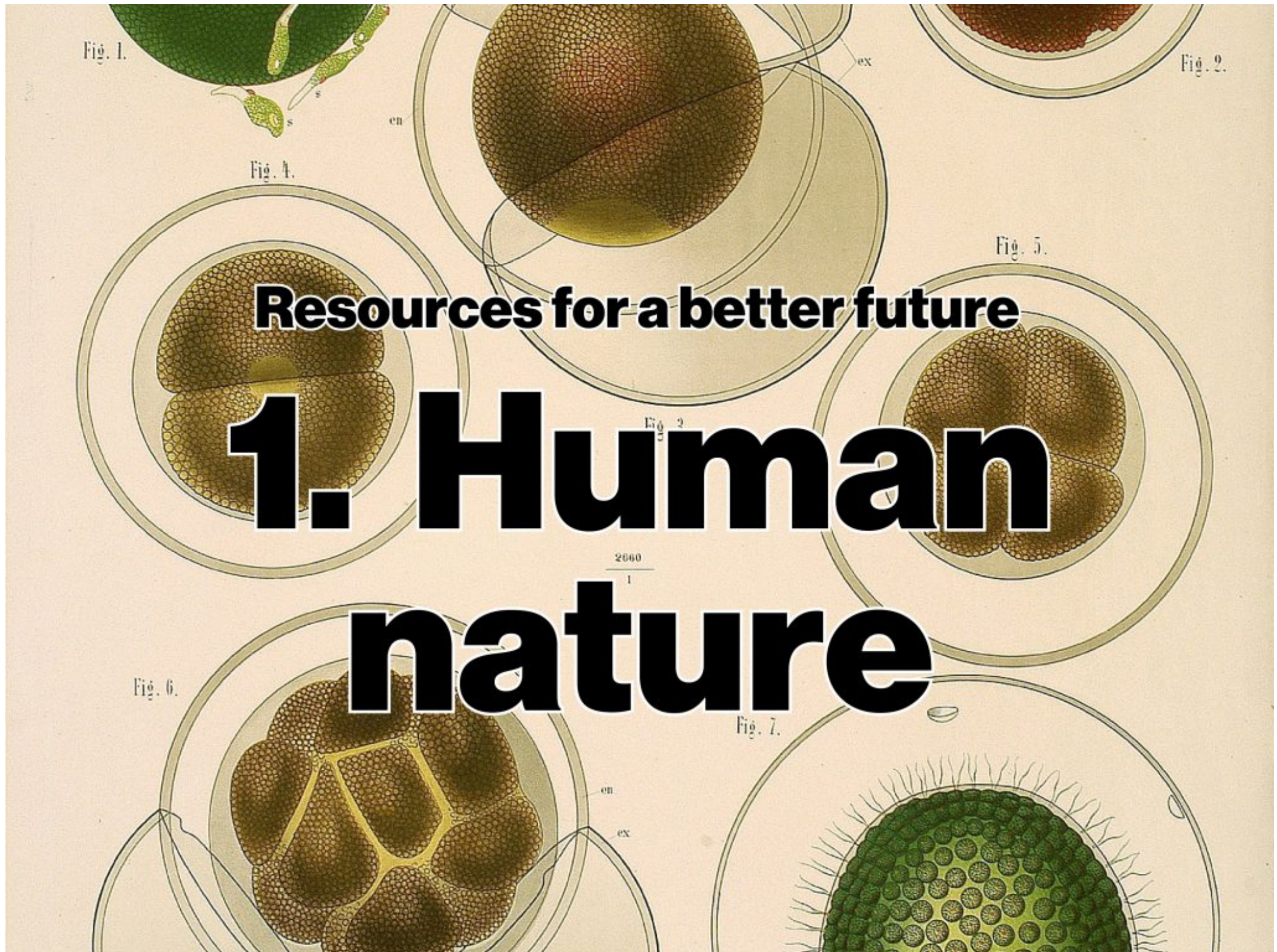


Human nature

In the first entry of our new glossary, Eleanor Finley argues that there is no human nature, only human potential

June 1, 2020



by Eleanor Finley

Note from the Uneven Earth editorial team: This entry is the first to be published within Uneven Earth's new *Resources for a better future* series: a glossary of crucial concepts in political ecology, alternative economics, and environmental justice. We are calling on experts and activists to help us put out easy-to-read, clear, and opinionated explainer of some of the most important issues. Anyone can write an entry, and we will help with editing to make them readable to wide audiences. The time is now to put forward concise definitions of key concepts, to explain our political position firmly and clearly.

What is “human nature”? How can we make sense of human beings as creatures which are part of the natural world? What makes our species distinct from others? People have been asking ourselves these kinds of questions for millennia. Aristotle, the classic Greek philosopher and harbinger of modern biology, famously characterized human beings as *zoon politikon*, a political animal that can deliberate collectively upon what *should* be in the world. Since the Industrial Revolution, it has become popular to define human beings in economic terms. So-called “man the toolmaker” alters his physical environment to suit his purposes. Yet, as we shall see, Aristotle’s ancient idea still resonates with much of what the science says about the human species today.

There is no single “human nature” or blueprint for organizing human life.

Anthropologists are scientists who study the human species from a holistic perspective, taking into account our biology, language, material culture (archaeology), social systems, and everyday life. Over the course of a century, anthropologists have amassed first-hand accounts of human societies from all over the world. We call this “ethnographic record”. The ethnographic record shows that within broad realms of “universals” like family and friendship, spirituality or religion, play and sports, politics, and production, the range of possibilities are endless. For this reason, anthropologists have long ceased trying to define “human nature” and instead focus on exploring the *human potential*. In other words, there is no single “human nature” or blueprint for organizing human life.

The idea of “human nature” nonetheless remains deeply lodged in our popular imagination about good and evil. Most often, people invoke the notion to justify an evil act or system of injustice. It is supposedly “human nature” to be greedy, for instance, or to exploit others. Although on the surface these expressions appear politically neutral, they are tautologies: “explanations” that merely repeat themselves. Why did men rape women, children, and other men? Why, because it was supposedly in their male nature to do so! Yet hardly explains why *some* men choose to rape and others don’t. It is equally in men’s capacity not to rape, so why bother blaming “nature” at all? Below the surface, statements about what is “natural” are really expressions about what we see as morally permissible. We invoke “human nature” as if to say, “These things will never change so don’t even try”.

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The debate about “human nature” is really a veiled way of talking about good and evil. To question the good of humankind is to question whether it is ethical to respect others. If we decide humans are bad, then we don’t feel bad treating them badly.

Thankfully, serious observation of human behavior points to precisely the opposite conclusion. Things are always changing, so you might as well try! While most species have evolved elaborate, yet confining physical adaptations like wings, beaks, or claws, human beings adapt through creativity and invention. Like dogs, cats, rats, pigeons, and many of the other species which have accompanied us across the globe, we are generalists who thrive in diverse environments. Flexibility is our hallmark as a species.

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Despite our powerful plasticity, human beings remain primates with a distinctive set of physical features which shape our overall embodied experience and life cycle. As primates, our eyes situate themselves at the front of the skull, affording us an acute sense of sight and the ability to see at great distances. We possess opposable thumbs and long, agile fingers that allow us to tinker with fine and delicate objects. In distinction from all other primates, our posture is upright, a capacity gained through mind-bogglingly sophisticated skeletal adaptations in our feet, ankles, legs, and pelvis. These are just a few of the distinctive human features that anthropologist Julian Steward refers to as “the biological constant”.

Amid our many remarkable features, the human brain is exceptional. Each human possesses a highly-developed prefrontal cortex or “frontal lobe”, a highly flexible supercomputer overlaid by the patterns of symbols and associations we call “culture” (dolphins, porpoises, and other advanced mammals possess highly developed frontal lobes, however, without a common language, it is impossible to know in any detail what their culture might be like). The frontal lobe allows us to recognize, remember, reason, imagine, solve problems, and to project our mind’s eye into the past and future. For example, it is the frontal lobe which allows us to recognize the meaning of a traffic signal and predict what will happen if we do not stop. Most importantly, the prefrontal cortex allows us to alter what we’ve learned and invent new patterns. It is not only how we interpret the meaning of stories and metaphors, but also how we create new ones.

There is no human nature, only a human potential.

The uniqueness of the prefrontal cortex is significant to any discussion of “human nature” because it means *there is no recognizable human life beyond the reach of culture*. Human infants literally cannot survive without years of sustained stimulation, love, and affection from caretakers. There is no human “nature” that can be separated from the society in which we live. In 1961 Marxist historian [Erich Fromm](#) writes that for Marx, man is characterized by a “principle of movement”. Under the influence of early anthropology, Marx understood that history is a dance between invention and determination. There is no human nature, only a human potential.

Aristotle approaches the same point, but from the other direction. By describing humans as “political animals”, Aristotle correctly implies that even the most seemingly abstract inventions like ethics, philosophy, and debate have an objective basis in the way our bodies are constructed. Our biology equips us to understand not only what is, but also what could *and what should* be. We are ethical creatures; we are nature debating, rationalizing, and thinking with itself.

Further reading suggestions:

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