

Basic Human Nature: Can It Be Changed?

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The Wall Street Journal:

“You can’t change human nature.” The old cliché draws support from the persistence of human behavior in new circumstances. Shakespeare’s plays reveal that no matter how much language, technology and mores have changed in the past 400 years, human nature is largely undisturbed. Macbeth’s ambition, Hamlet’s indecision, Iago’s jealousy, Kate’s feistiness and Juliet’s love are all instantly understandable.

Recently, however, geneticists have surprised themselves by finding evidence of recent and rapid changes in human genomes in response to the pressures of civilization. For example, fair skin allows more absorption of the sun’s ultraviolet rays necessary for the skin to make vitamin D. So when the northern Europeans, living in a climate with little sunshine, started to farm wheat, a food low in vitamin D, they evolved fair skin to compensate and get more of the vitamin.

So human nature may also have genetically evolved a bit in 10,000 years. People of European and Asian descent in particular have probably adapted to living more sedentary and crowded lives. But surely not very much. Eurasians’ general nature differs little from those whose ancestors were still scattered hunter-gatherers just a few generations ago: many Africans, Americans and Australians.

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