

My Profound Understanding of Human Nature

During my recent interview with Andrew Sullivan, he repeatedly accused me of being totally oblivious to the realities of human nature. In his view, I hew to an absurdly economistic view of what people are really like. In reality, people care about culture, identity, and community at least as much as they care about material consumption. Indeed, this is how practically everyone describes themselves, right?

False humility aside, I maintain that my understanding of human nature is far deeper than Sullivan's. Indeed, my understanding of human nature is nothing short of profound.

Like Sullivan, I am well-aware aware that human beings routinely *claim* to place supreme value on culture, identity, community, and so on. Unlike Sullivan, however, I refuse to take such hyperbolic claims at face value. Actions really do speak louder than words. And the vast majority of people who claim to place supreme value on culture, identity, or community show otherwise with their deeds.

In the interview, I presented Sullivan with a simple hypothetical. What do you say about a Christian who insists, "My religion is the most important thing in my life," yet never goes to church? I say this is mighty evidence that this self-styled Christian dramatically overstates her religious commitment. "Most important thing"? More like, "Thing of marginal importance at most." Sure, she could change my mind if she read the Bible for ten hours a week, or habitually discussed religion on social media, or spent Sundays knocking on neighbors' doors to ask them to adopt Jesus as their personal savior. But when someone puts little effort into something they claim is extraordinarily important to them, we should conclude that their self-description is false.

Why would a human being say such falsehoods? Sometimes they're consciously lying; more often, they're just too intellectually lazy to check their words for accuracy. Either way, their underlying motive is to say things that sound good – to yourself and other people. Why bother? To feel good about yourself – and persuade other people to feel good about you. Saying what sounds noble, and doing what feels pleasant: Now *that's* human nature.

What does this have to do with culture, identity, or community? Simple. If you passionately care about such things, you will pay a *lot* of time and money to get a heavy dose. If you are passionate about being Irish, for example, you will pay a sizable premium to live in an Irish community. If you are passionate about patriotism, you will be an active member of groups like the American Legion. If you are passionate about your community, you'll regularly volunteer to beautify it. Yet as we know, only a tiny minority of people do anything in this ballpark.

Yes, I know that humans are heterogeneous. People who voluntarily live in communes show by their actions that their community is deeply important to them. Yet the vast majority of people who don't voluntarily live in communes ipso facto show a lower level of commitment, with the median just a little above zero.

Can't we just express our deep commitments via voting? Absolutely not. In any real-world election, the probability that you change an electoral outcome is near-zero. For practical purposes, then, voting is talk, not action. Voting is on par with *threatening* to leave the country because your side loses an election. To count as action, you would actually have to follow through with your threat. Hardly anyone does.

You could reply, "Bryan, if you really had a profound understanding of human nature, you would keep your mouth shut about all this, because you'd realize that people hate hearing these ugly truths and aren't going to reform." Rebuttal: Normally I *do* keep my mouth shut about all this. I share my profound understanding of human nature with the rare minority of people who are genuinely curious about the social world. Self-selected folks like you, dear readers.