

# Large ant – college essay



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What is “human nature”? Do a natural set of behavioral paradigms govern our morals at the most basic level? And more importantly, are those prescribed behaviors inherently good, or naturally evil? The Large Ant by Howard Fast depicts human nature as leaning toward the latter. Many other artistic and literary works seem to take this position, arguing that because humans have the capacity to commit evil deeds, they must themselves be evil. In Fast’s view, humans are naturally selfish and xenophobic, reacting to the unknown with violence instead of simple curiosity.

This story, however, presents an overly cynical and unrealistic glimpse of human nature at its worst. Its arguments are often self-contradictory, and in the end, The Large Ant’s critique of human nature proves unjustifiably negative. The story itself begins in a non-linear fashion. The protagonist muses about the end of the world, and different scenarios that will bring about this end. He eventually reaches the conclusion that humans will wipe each other out. “We could find a way to feed any number of people and perhaps even a way to avoid wiping each other out with the bomb.” the protagonist mentions. Those things we are very good at, but we have never been any good at changing ourselves or the way we behave” (Fast, 150).

The story continues from there, with the protagonist narrating a series of past events. The action begins with the protagonist, a man named Morgan, relaxing alone in his isolated summer cottage in the Adirondacks. While reading in his bedroom, he notices an extremely large ant-like creature approaching him. Panicking, Morgan grabs the nearest object, a golf club, and beats the “ant” to death. After recovering from the initial shock, he decides to bring the deceased creature to the insect curator t the local

museum. The man's name is Bertram Lieberman, and, flanked by a government official and a senator, he tells Morgan the bizarre story behind the "large ant".

Lieberman begins by asking Morgan why he killed the ant. Morgan at first does not know how to respond; he considers the question irrelevant. After further prodding, Morgan admits he does not know why his first instinct was to kill the ant. It is then that Lieberman delivers one of the story's most memorable lines, and arguably its defining statement: "The answer is very simple, Mr. Morgan. You killed it because you are a human being" (Fast, 154).

Lieberman then shows Morgan eight similar specimens, all showing signs of being violently killed. Dissecting one, Lieberman shows Morgan tools that the "ant" carries in its thorax. It is explained that this, along with their large brains, proves the creatures to be intelligent. Their origin is unknown, but Lieberman seems to imply that these creatures are visiting from another planet. Lieberman also mentions that, as part of an insect hive-mind, these creatures likely have no conception of murder, and likely meant no harm. Morgan catches on, and asserts firmly that he had no idea that what he killed was an intelligent creature.

The story ends with Morgan and Lieberman speculating as to the repercussions to their actions, hoping that these creatures will not return with vengeful ambitions. The story raises many questions about human nature, and the question of why Morgan killed the ant is a very interesting one. Many of Lieberman's dialogue appears to provide elegant arguments for

the inherent violence of human nature. Upon closer scrutiny, however, the philosophical argument presented by this story is grossly oversimplified, one-sided, and even self-contradictory.

The most glaring inconsistency in the story's line of reasoning is the contention that the violent nature of Morgan's first response to the creature makes him evil. The logical framework of the previously mentioned quote - "You killed it because you are a human being" - breaks down when juxtaposed against a reciprocal statement. The truth is that one could equally say that Morgan is later able to recognize his wrongdoing and empathize with the creature because he is a human being. After all, which trait is more human than our ability to empathize? " Evolution bequeathed humans with a sense of empathy:" states

Stephen Pinker in his lecture, The Myth of Violence "...an ability to treat other peoples' interests as comparable to one's own. " This sense of empathy is not only restricted to our own species. As humans become increasingly civilized, we project empathy more readily onto life forms that don't necessarily share our sphere of common experience (Pinker, " The Myth of Violence).

The recent increase in the numbers of mainstream animal rights organizations illustrates this phenomenon handily. Therefore, is it not also " human nature" for Morgan to feel crushing guilt upon realizing that he has killed a living, intelligent being?

Upon remembering the face of the ant, Morgan feels that he has committed a great crime by killing this innocent creature. I keep trying to drag out of my <https://assignbuster.com/large-ant-college-essay/>

memory a clear picture of what it looked like, whether behind that chitinous face and two gently waving antennae there was any evidence of fear and anger. But the clearer the memory becomes, the more I seem to recall a certain wonderful dignity and repose. Not fear and anger. Morgan demonstrates the good in human nature by his ability to extend his circle of empathy to encompass a creature with which he likely shares no common bond of experience or emotion.

Another strange decision by the author is the denunciation of Morgan's initial fight-or-flight response to the ant's presence. By characterizing this natural instinct as evil, the author courts many ideological contradictions. Firstly, it must be recognized that the "creature" in question is not just referred to as an ant - its resemblance to an ant is described as being extremely uncanny. "It's the first time I saw an ant fourteen, fifteen inches long. I hope it's the last" (Fast, 154). Despite a gross dissimilarity in size, Morgan recognizes the creature as an ant.

By making the creature a "large ant" and setting the story during the cold war, the author invites a multitude of problems. Firstly, ants, as well as most insects, have many negative connotations in relation to humans. Ants are often aggressive and territorial, and will attack and bite people. Insects are also often associated with pestilence and disease and are seen as unclean in the west. The cold war setting also imbues the size of the ant with an ominous quality, by directly implying that a possible explanation for the ants could be that they're a result of atom bomb testing (Fast, 158).

Given this context, Morgan's sudden and violent reaction to the ant's presence is reasonable. While the ant makes no attempt to communicate its apparent intelligence, Morgan sees nothing but a potentially aggressive, radioactive insect. Even in retrospect, many would agree that Morgan's actions in a situation such as this present themselves as entirely justified. There is reason to believe that if the creature existed in a form that wasn't an analog of an already-existent animal, Morgan's reaction to it would have been different.

There also remains the glaringly existential question of how we define "good" and "evil". Lieberman illustrates this point himself: "The creation of a structure of good and evil, or what we call morality and ethics, is a function of intelligence - and unquestionably the ultimate evil may be the destruction of conscious intelligence" (Fast, 157). This line seems strangely superfluous within its context, and serves to undermine the story's moral. It touches on the fact that the concept of good and evil is a human social construct, but also calls it a function of intelligence.

This seems like a very broad anthropocentric stroke, by which the author assumes that any and all intelligent life must have the same sense of good and evil as a human being. One might reasonably infer that the ant-creatures have some drive toward self-preservation, but it is a robust assumption indeed that these ants would function within established human ethical paradigms. An equally founded (or unfounded) inference could be made to the effect that the ants would react with similarly instinctual violence were humans to appear in their territory.

The story ends on a purposefully ambiguous note as Fitzgerald, the government official, denies Morgan's suggestion to inform the general public about these creatures. "What then - panic, hysteria, charges that this is the result of the atom bomb? We can't change. We are what we are" (Fast, 158). This statement is perhaps the most damningly contradictory of all. Fitzgerald fails to recognize that Morgan's initial violent reaction to the ant's presence did not define him, and in fact was not based in conscious hatred.

Rather, Morgan's empathy for the ant after learning of its intelligence shows that humans can change. Who is to say that, if properly informed, the general public would not accept or at least tolerate this creature? It is a far less plausible assumption to assume that informed humans would rise up violently against another intelligent species. While a clever and well-written attempt to prove the inherent evil of human nature, the logical framework of *The Large Ant* invariably falls apart upon closer scrutiny.

The author does not make the necessary distinction between a startled fight-or-flight response and some deeper hatred for the unknown, and uses the two concepts interchangeably. Morgan's empathy toward the ant in retrospect is ignored entirely, as well as its possible implications as part of the good-versus-evil theme. The ant's terrestrial appearance muddies the waters further, along with the broad assumption that good and evil themselves are universally applicable concepts. These thematic issues show that *The Large Ant* is an overly negative and at times self-contradictory critique of the nature of good and evil in the human condition.