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Review of “In Search of Human Nature”

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Book Review

In Search of Human Nature, Mary E. Clark, New York and London: Routledge, 2002 ISBN: 0-415-28660-3 (pbk). 556pp, Bibliography, Index. \$31.95

Mary E. Clark begins her book with two questions, "Who do we think we are? What is human nature really like?" (p. 1) The title of the book and these first sentences lead the reader to believe that the book is intended to develop a theory of the nature of human beings. However, this is not what Clark does. Instead, she attempts to use information from the fields of biology, history, sociology, anthropology, economics, educational theory, conflict resolution, and other practical and professional disciplines to claim that a typical, modern industrial society does not satisfy basic human needs. As a result, her book attempts to accomplish much more than any author could possibly achieve in a work of this length. In fact, I do not believe that anyone would be able to provide an adequate discussion of these numerous topics within one single book. Consequently, she has set herself up for failure. Due to her attempt to discuss so many different things, Clark often offers a superficial treatment of the topics and succumbs to making generalizations that are false because they are too broad and lack supporting evidence.

In the introductory chapter, Clark develops two competing models of human nature. She contrasts the Western world-view, the "billiard ball" gestalt, of humans as independent and self-centered with "Indra's Net," a metaphor for connectedness and interdependency. She also lists a number of social ills that she attributes to the Western model. In this part of the book, she sounds similar to many feminist theorists who claim that an extreme focus on the individual, combined with a failure to recognize the social nature of human beings, provides us with an inadequate view. However, this discussion of the two gestalts does not unite the diverse topics within the book. Instead, a major portion of the book is devoted to advocating for social change. Her need for major change primarily is based on a rejection of contemporary "Western" ideals and ways of living. In some instances Clark provides some reasons for believing the claims that she makes. For example, in chapter one she points out that theorists advocating "selfish genes" are basing their views on a narrow, and flawed, interpretation of what it means to be better adapted according to an evolutionary perspective. She is right to claim that we have little reason to accept this "selfish" view of genes. (p. 55) However, much of the book is also a description of theories within the natural and social sciences that often seems inaccurate, oversimplified, or not clearly focused on a main theme.

Perhaps the best statement of the author's goal for this book is found in the first chapter. Here, Clark claims that her "philosophy of truth" is one that provides a "place for such crucial human experiences as complexity, feelings, meanings, and relatedness." (p. 52) Unfortunately, the rest of the book does not consistently relate back to this goal. In fact, the sheer number of topics that are discussed in the book makes it difficult to provide a theme that will tie all of them together well, and I see this to be its major

failure. In this first chapter, Clark also identifies three human propensities - bonding, autonomy, and meaning - and claims that these will "frame virtually all human social behavior." (p. 59) This view, although not consistently referred to throughout the book, is repeated in later chapters. The first two propensities, bonding and autonomy, probably receive the most discussion, and they are claimed to be both necessary, yet conflicting. Clark claims that the need for community (bonding) and the need for autonomy involve an internal and social struggle that must be carefully balanced. In this regard, she has accepted a prevalent view in Western thought, especially political theory. Clark does not seem to recognize that her uncritical acceptance of this conflict is a result of Western influences; the very influences that she primarily sees as destructive and unhealthy for individuals. In contrast to these Western views, she regularly praises traditional societies. In fact, she claims that traditional societies are so superior to Western societies that people "...if given a choice, will often choose poor villages over rich cities." (p. 394) What she fails to notice is that traditional cultures often do not have this view of a conflict between community and autonomy. Consequently, it is unclear how her praise of such societies fits with her view that all humans must resolve this conflict.

In chapter five, Clark briefly suggests a theory of mind that is highly controversial. According to Clark, the mind is "partly in my brain, but it is also partly out in the world, in the brains and actions of others, indeed, in the whole context that surrounds me just then." (p. 162) This is an unusual view of human beings. She further states that:

My mind extends beyond myself and my body out into my surroundings. Furthermore, that part of my mind that is in my head changes continuously, as synaptic relationships are constantly undergoing adjustments as the result of my ongoing experience, of my interactions with the environment.... My 'self,' then, extends beyond my individual body, and my mind is my body *plus all its relationships*. (p. 162)

This view that my mind is located within me and outside of me, that it is partially located within the minds of others, and that the mind is also relationships is very difficult to prove. Clark does not offer the evidence necessary to support such a view. Philosophers of mind would certainly want to hear more, but Clark does not provide an extensive discussion of this view of the mind and self. Since it certainly is not an obviously true description of the mind, further discussion and explanation is required.

Since this is representative of her treatment of other topics in the book, the philosophic interest of the book, as a whole, is minimal. Clark, especially in the later chapters, provides extensive historical discussions that trace a particular society over a period of time. For example, chapter nine provides a history of Germany and Japan that covers the years including World War II and chapter ten provides a short history of South Africa. There is no extensive analysis of this historical information or an attempt to directly relate it to the stated theme of the book. Clark does offer brief accounts of her view of what created problems within these societies, and she is particularly interested in the causes of violence and attempts at conflict resolution. Once again, her accounts are largely unsupported, which is to be expected when the author has taken on too big of a project. For example, she claims that both Germany and Japan experienced a sense of cultural inferiority that was externally imposed upon the members of those societies. (p. 318) Even if this is true, Clark does not provide a complete discussion of how such experiences affect human nature in general. Since many cultures have experienced superior attitudes from others, it is unclear what conclusions we are to draw from these two historical accounts.

In conclusion, Mary E. Clark has attempted to discuss more than can adequately be discussed with one

book. As a result, *In Search of Human Nature* does not have a clear focus and provides a superficial treatment of many of the topics within it. Those readers interested in the book as a means of furthering their understanding of the nature of human beings are likely to be disappointed.

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