Review of "Human Nature"

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Book Review | *Human Nature*

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This book is the latest volume in the Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement series, a twice-yearly publication consisting of papers delivered at conferences sponsored by the Institute. The topic of the June 2012 conference was human nature, and this volume contains twelve papers prepared for the conference—eleven by philosophers and one by a psychiatrist. The two-page preface states the importance and breadth of the topic of human nature and acknowledges the organizers of the conference and its contributors. It does not, however, describe any of the papers in the volume or explain their connection or their order in the volume. Some of the books in the Supplement series have an introduction that provides these services to the reader, and this book would have benefited from such an overview.

The papers seem to fall into four categories: human nature after Darwin, distinctively human traits, psychology and human nature, and historical studies. This review will summarize the content of each paper in each category and will close with an evaluation of the volume as a whole.

*Human Nature after Darwin* (papers 1, 4, and 8). In “Science and Human Nature” Richard Samuels argues that, in light of the findings of evolutionary biology, the traditional essentialist notion of human nature is no longer tenable. In the traditional essentialist view, all human beings and only human beings possess a set of intrinsic properties that define them as a natural kind and cause other properties associated with this kind (8). Samuels proposes that this theory be replaced with a “causal essentialist” view, which holds that human nature is “a suite of mechanisms, processes, and structures that causally explain
many of the more superficial properties and regularities reliably associated with humanity”; and the elements in this suite, which are to be empirically identified, need not be present in all human beings and only in them (20). An advantage of causal essentialism over traditional essentialism is that it captures how cognitive and behavioral scientists deploy the notion of human nature (27).

Stephen J. Boulter’s paper asks, in its title, “Can Evolutionary Biology Do without Aristotelian Essentialism?” His answer is that “far from being incompatible with essentialism, evolutionary biology in fact presupposes Aristotelian essentialism” (84). Aristotelian essentialism holds that there are “mind-independent middle-size things like minerals, plants, animals, and stars” and that “these items can persist through some changes, but not all” (83). Evolutionary biology holds that new species can be formed, that species can become extinct, and that species can undergo changes without passing out of existence—and none of these claims makes sense unless there are species with essences (95–100). Boulter concludes with a brief speculation on what these biological essences might be, suggesting that they are found not “in the genotype or the phenotype but in the species specific developmental programmes that map genotypes onto phenotypes” (100).

In her paper “Human Nature and Aristotelian Virtue Ethics,” Rosalind Hursthouse examines four arguments that have been given to show that evolutionary biology has undermined Aristotelian virtue ethics. The first argument is that there can be no virtue ethics because, as evolution shows, there is no human essence. Hursthouse contends that this argument fails because the validity of Aristotle’s ethics does not depend on his theory of essences; we can take his theory simply as being “obviously about us, us humans, in the same way that physiology is about us humans and the human genome project is about humans” (170). The second argument says that virtue ethics cannot stand because it is based on a concept of health, and evolutionary biology has no such concept. Hursthouse points out that some biological sciences, such as medicine and veterinary science, do have a concept of health (171). The third argument states that virtue ethics is impossible because human beings have evolved as “mess of irreconcilable powers and instincts” (184), and the fourth states that it is impossible because, with regard to their inherited ethical capacities, human beings are “varied in really serious ways” (186). Husthouse’s response to these two arguments is the same: If these claims about human beings are true, than they are problematic for any ethical theory, not just for Aristotelian virtue ethics (188).

**Distinctively Human Traits** (papers 3, 5, and 6). In “Human Nature and Grammar” Wolfram Hinzen argues that the distinctively human characteristic is grammar. Grammar is found in every human population and does not occur in any other species. It is a natural phenomenon and, as such, can be studied scientifically. Philosophers and biologists have largely ignored
the human trait of grammar and have failed to develop a science of universal grammar. But such a science “is the essential science that needs to illuminate human nature” (55). Hinzen contends that grammar is “mechanism behind the humanly specific forms of reference that there are, that are commonly assumed to be universal, and that describe the core elements of human rationality as philosophers have viewed them since antiquity” (81). Grammar, in short, “is the very basis of human rationality, and the cornerstone of our minds and nature” (81).

Hans-Johann Glock’s article “The Anthropological Difference” asks in its subtitle: “What Can Philosophers Do to Identify the Differences between Human and Non-Human Animals?” The quest for the “anthropological difference” is the search for fundamental feature, or set of features, possessed by all human beings and only by them, that sets us apart from other animals and is important to our self-image (109–110). Although evolutionary biology rules out the notion of an enduring human essence, it is nonetheless possible to explore what distinguishes currently existing human beings from currently existing animals (125). Glock argues that human beings have “a unique kind of social organization” and that the anthropological difference is to be sought in this realm (128). He contends that communication through language is what most distinguishes human societies from other animal societies (130).

Psychiatrist Tim J. Crow in “Paul Broca and the Evolutionary Genetics of Cerebral Asymmetry” cites French surgeon and anthropologist Broca’s twofold claim that the human brain is the most asymmetrical of all animal brains and that the faculty of language is what distinguishes us most from other animals. If this claim is true, cerebral asymmetry created the modern species Homo sapiens. (137). Crow argues that the genetic changes that led to human brain asymmetry, and subsequently to language, are caused by epigenetic mechanisms—that is, by mechanisms that produce modifications of gene expression without changes in the DNA sequence itself (143–144). The bulk of Crow’s article is a highly technical discussion of human genetics, complete with charts and diagrams, that covers topics such as sex chromosome aneuploidies, homologous regions on the X long arm chromosome and the Y chromosome short arm, and Xq21.3/Yp duplication.

*Psychology and Human Nature* (papers 2, 7, 11, and 12). In “Essentialism, Externalism, and Human Nature,” M. J. Cain (a co-editor of the volume) argues that psychological essentialism undermines a form of externalism that is widely accepted in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of language (29). Psychological essentialism is the theory that children have an innate commitment to the notion that things have essences. Externalism is the doctrine that the identity of a person’s concepts and thoughts depends on the environment; two people, for example, with identical brains who lived in different
environments would have different mental contents. Internalism, by contrast, holds that the identity of one’s concepts and thoughts is determined wholly internally, unaffected by the environment; two people with identical brains would have the same mental contents (33). Cain does not say that externalism is false, but simply that psychological essentialism shows that the content of our concepts and thoughts “is severely limited by our underlying mental states” and that these states “play a more substantial role in determining the content of [our] concepts and thoughts than is recognized by orthodox externalists” (41).

P. M. S. Hacker’s paper is entitled “The Sad and Sorry History of Consciousness: Being, among Other Things, a Challenge to the ‘Consciousness-Studies Community.’” Hacker points out that, in their discussions of the mind, ancient and medieval thinkers had no term for what we mean today by consciousness. When the English word “consciousness” arose in the seventeenth century, it meant sharing knowledge with another or being witness to something. The notion of consciousness as knowledge of one’s own thoughts began with Descartes and was developed by Locke. This doctrine led philosophers to conclude that one knows one’s thoughts with complete certainty (149–154). Hacker contends that since doubt is logically excluded from the content of one’s thoughts, it makes no sense to speak of certainty here. We have neither knowledge or ignorance of our thoughts, because these notions do not apply (155–156). The contemporary “consciousness-studies community,” which follows the Cartesian-Lockean tradition, is mistaken in its claim that conscious experience is knowing “what is like” for the subject to have the experience. Most experiences have no qualitative character at all; they are individuated not “not by reference to what it feels like to have them but by reference to what they are experiences of” (164).

In “Human Nature and the Transcendent” John Cottingham argues that a “restless drive to reach forward to something more” (233) is a fundamental fact about human nature. While there may or may not be a transcendental object (for example, God) that would satisfy this drive, “the demands of integrity, being sincere and true to the character of our own lived human experience, require us to reject deflationary or reductionist strategies for explaining away our transcendental urges” (235). Cottingham examines three aspects of our longing for the transcendent: cosmological, aesthetic, and moral. Cosmologically, we want an explanation for the existence of the universe; we are not satisfied with the claim that its existence is just a brute fact (237). Aesthetically, our transcendental urgings manifest themselves when “we seem to glimpse something of the beauty and significance of the world we inhabit” (240). Morally, we experience things like the goodness of compassion or the wrongness of cruelty as “fundamental core values that do not and cannot change” and are not reducible to the contingencies of history and evolution (246).
In her paper “Being Human: Religion and Superstition in a Psychoanalytic Philosophy of Religion,” Beverly Clack contends that psychoanalytic theories can make an important contribution to the philosophy of religion. This contention challenges the assumption of analytic philosophy of religion that the religious dimension of life can be assessed wholly according to rational criteria (256). But because, as psychoanalysis has shown, rationality is just one part of the psyche, an adequate assessment of religion must include religion’s way of addressing nonrational elements such as fears and desires (257). Clack argues that religion, like superstition, provides strategies for giving us reassurance, in a dangerous world, regarding our fears and desires (269). Religion, like superstition, does this by connecting the inner world with the outer world (274). It “offers stories, pictures and rituals which aid the attempt to engage with the struggles inherent in the continuing process of individuation” (278). The fears and desires that give rise to religion remain powerful forces “regardless of philosophical attempts to neutralize them” (279).

Historical Studies (papers 9 and 10). The first of the two historical studies is Sarah Patterson’s “Doubt and Human Nature in Descartes’s Meditations.” Patterson argues that Descartes uses doubt in his Meditations as a tool for cognitive reform. He does not want us simply to accept that there is a theoretical reason to doubt all our opinions, but wants us to actually doubt them and withhold our assent from them (191–192). Our false opinions date back to childhood, when we uncritically accept what receive from our senses and our teachers. These falsehoods “are so fundamental and pervasive that piecemeal correction is hopeless” (199). Cognitive reform, therefore, requires that we doubt all our opinions, all our sense perceptions, and all our judgments that affirm or deny the content of these perceptions (203–204). While Descartes establishes in his sixth and final meditation that physical objects reported by our perceptions do exist, he maintains that the truth about these objects is attained by the mind alone (210–211). In sum, it is only by doubting all our old opinions and relying on our mind that we can “reverse the bad habits of a lifetime and restore [ourselves] to our true nature as cognitive agents” (216).

In “The Sceptical Beast in the Beastly Sceptic: Human Nature in Hume” P. J. E. Kail relates Hume’s view of human nature to “the age-old sceptical trope of drawing comparisons between human thought and behavior with animal thought and behavior” (220). He compares Hume’s position here to those of two previous skeptics, Michel de Montaigne and Bernard Mandeville. All three thinkers compare human thought and behavior with animal thought and behavior, and proceed to question human superiority. Hume holds that the processes underlying human thought and animal thought and behavior are similar, and that our “causal reasoning is to be identified fundamentally with associational mechanisms that derive the beasts” (225). But Hume rejects Montaigne’s conclusion that human nature is wretched (227). Hume agrees with Mandeville that, in our pre-social state, we are less
adapted than animals to satisfy our many needs and desires, and that our adaptation is enhanced by living in society (229). But, unlike Mandeville, he thinks that a social environment can actually change our nature. For example, although we begin to act justly in society through enlightened self-interest, justice itself can become a motivation (in Hume’s words) “most deeply radicated in our internal constitution” (230–231).

The twelve papers in Human Nature are written by well-established scholars and present readers with thoughtful and interesting explorations of various aspects of human nature. One wonders, however, why Crow’s “Paul Broca and the Evolutionary Genetics of Cerebral Asymmetry” is included in a book intended for philosophers, since Crow presents a scientific hypothesis about the epigenetic basis for the development of language (which cannot be well understood without a considerable knowledge of genetics), rather than a defense of the philosophical claim that language is the defining human trait. The four topics covered in the volume are all important for the philosophy of human nature, and the authors ably defend their theses. The book would be kinder to its readers, however, if the papers were arranged by topic. As I mentioned at the outset, the book lacks an introduction. If the papers were arranged topically, the introduction could have explained the importance of each topic for the overall philosophy of human nature and discussed how the topics relate to each other. An introduction also could help readers by giving a brief summary of each paper and drawing connections among the papers on a given topic. But notwithstanding the inclusion of the paper by Crow and the lack of an introduction that gives guidance to readers, the book is a worthwhile resource for scholars of the philosophy of human nature.