

Inherent Nature Vs. Learned Nature

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Abstract

This paper takes an in-depth look at three different ways to analyze human nature. The analysis will begin with background assumptions about our nature but will then examine how the essentialist and nomological views of human nature will ultimately best describe our condition but will also be most descriptive in determining our fate. The analysis utilizes data from books and other print data from various sources which focus on religious, scientific, and philosophical viewpoints. It ends with a relatively optimistic view of our condition and argues for further research into this important topic.

Inherent Nature Vs. Learned Nature

In the study of human behavior, there are two conflicting pictures. On one hand, a human being can be seen as the result of its evolution, neurochemical state, and resultant fixed traits, transcendent of any other influence. On the other hand, a human being can also be seen as the result of its environment and culture, in which its nature would instead be shaped through context. These two conceptual frames form the basis of understanding the various takes on human nature. Unfortunately, there are about as many conceptions of human nature as there are humans, thus an exhaustive detailing of all conceptualizations is infeasible. For the purposes of this paper, and in the interest of brevity, only certain prominent conjectures on human nature will be used. In determining a 'true' picture of human nature, this paper is intended as an objective analysis of the varying theories and their implications, and as such, it makes no central claim as to which theory, if any, is the most objectively true. Rather, the positions offered by the given theories of human nature are to be seen as 'true' relative to their central claims. The combined consideration of the given central claims leads to a more desirable objective standpoint. All theories depicted are thus a relatively 'true' depiction of human nature, thus they still remain 'true' when put in conjunction in their analysis. It can be posited that the definitive 'true' human nature lies somewhere in this objective analysis.

The primary application of the varying takes on human nature is in determining what certain understandings imply. As per Stevenson et al, in the text *Thirteen Theories of Human Nature*, this analysis can be pictured as a 'diagnoses followed by a 'prescription''. With this, further conjectures are able to be made in determining the fate of humanity, and the potential actions which may be taken in order to optimize or prolong humanity. Currently, as a result of human activity, there are a number of problems which may lead to the end of humanity. What is

to be considered with these problems in relation to an understanding of human nature, is whether or not they can be avoided. This can be determined, even without a central understanding, through analyzing trends. In total, the goal of most major theories on human nature is to predict and prolong the longevity of human existence, through maximizing the benefit of actions that are able to be taken. Through analyzing the range of analysis on human nature, a ‘functional nature’ is established, by which the combined implications give the ‘truest’ insight on how humanity may progress.

Assumptions

As for how these conjectures view the fate of humanity, a few central assumptions must be made. First, scientific reasoning and inquiry will be assumed to be a justified means of discerning truth. Thereby, through observing trends under the two areas of thought discussed, it will be assumed that a functional model of human nature exists. As previously described, this functional model is in lieu of adopting any given definitive model. Thus, even the conflicting positions of ‘there is an absolute human nature’ and ‘there is no absolute human nature’ are encompassed by such an objective functional view, as both positions are definitive takes. It is then assumed that a ‘true’ human nature is somewhere between these takes. As a result of the adoption of this all-encompassing objective analysis, there are a number of resultant assumptions in the definition of the terms used. In determining the definition, or adequate conditions for what constitutes human nature, it must be determined what constitutes a human, and what would constitute a supposed ‘nature’ of humans.

There is no universally agreed upon set of conditions which, when met, constitute one being human, nor is there an agreed upon distinction in *which* humans, if any, hold the capacity for ‘human nature’ as it is understood. For this reason, this paper will, at least initially, assume a

purely taxonomic definition of human beings derived from evolutionary theory. As per Merriam Webster, this basic understanding of a human is to be “a bipedal primate mammal (*Homo sapiens*).” Though, in order for there to be the possibility of a ‘human nature’, it would have to stand that there is, somewhere, a functional distinction which differentiates homo sapiens taxonomically, and in which the individual human is still distinct. Specifically, there would still have to be a set of conditions or intrinsic properties that when satisfied constitute being human in order for this taxonomical definition to stand. So, in the interest of allowing further discussion, it will still be assumed that there exists, at least in this sense biologically, a reasonable definition for humans. Humans are assumed to exist. The primary difference in the pictures of human nature given, lies in whether or not this biology, or any other intrinsic property, constitutes a given ‘nature’ of humans.

As a result of the adopted method of detailing human nature, it will be assumed that any studies or findings given are indicative of a functional view of human nature, wherein they are to serve as relative facts.

The Essentialist View

To hold that humans, have intrinsic properties which in turn constitute a human nature, is the essentialist position. The frame of understanding by which this view of human nature is supported comes from Locke’s conception of ‘real essence’. As per Roughley’s (2021) detailing in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

According to essentialism thus understood, an essence is the intrinsic feature or features of an entity that fulfils or fulfil a dual role: firstly, of being that in virtue of which something belongs to a kind and, secondly, of explaining why things of that kind typically have a particular set of observable features. Thus conceived, “essence” has both

a classificatory and an explanatory function and is the core of a highly influential, “essentialist” theory of natural kinds, developed in the wake of Kripke’s and Putnam’s theories of reference.

An account of human nature that is essentialist in this sense would take the nature of the human natural kind to be a set of microstructural properties that have two roles: first, they constitute an organism’s membership of the species *Homo sapiens*. Second, they are causally responsible for the organism manifesting morphological and behavioural properties typical of species members (1.3).

Under such an understanding of humans, as being held in virtue of humanity and as a set of observable traits explaining the particular set of traits inherent to the species, it is implied that human nature can then be understood through understanding the microstructural properties supposedly inherent to humans. This is the goal central to the study of evolutionary biology and of behavioral neuroscience. The findings of these fields hold significant implications on the future of humanity, and as such are to be discussed further, though, there remains a flaw in designating them as essentialist. Roughley continues that, “[i]n such an account, the ability to pick out the relevant organisms is simply presupposed ... [t]he subtraction of the classificatory function of the properties in these conceptions has generally seemed to warrant withholding from them the label ‘essentialist,’ (1.3). Though, in the conceptualization of such an understanding, essentialism can still be held up if, rather than being a classification through having certain conditions met, it is instead an achieved state, as per Sober. In *Evolution, population thinking, and essentialism* (1980), Sober posits that:

The Darwinian doctrine of evolutionary gradualism makes it impossible to say exactly where one species ends and another begins; such line-drawing problems are often taken

to be the decisive reason for thinking that essentialism is untenable. However, according to the view of essentialism I suggest, this familiar objection is not fatal to essentialism. It is rather the essentialist's use of what I call the natural state model for explaining variation which clashes with evolutionary theory. This model implemented the essentialist's requirement that properties of populations be defined in terms of properties of member organisms. Requiring such constituent definitions is reductionistic in spirit; additionally, evolutionary theory shows that such definitions are not available, and, moreover, that they are not needed to legitimize population-level concepts (p. 350).

Sober's view of essentialism as it relates to an understanding of human nature allows for further analysis of the academic study of human nature and its implications. For, rather than having an absolute distinction of what humans are before trying to understand them, the research of human behavior is in and of itself a distinction of what constitutes humans and, as a result, their nature.

From this, the basis of sociobiology is founded. In the essentialist context, sociobiology is perhaps the pinnacle of researching humans, as it takes the objective standpoint that humans are subject to the same Darwinian laws of evolution as any other species, and as such humans and human social structures stand to be analyzed from a purely biological perspective. As the logic goes, the biological purpose for human intelligence lies only in the furtherment of the human genome. Put directly, there is therefore no intrinsic meaning behind human existence outside of promoting further human existence. As such, in determining human nature, the sociobiological approach seeks to prove the existence of, and subsequently identify, the innate biological motivations behind human behavior. Namely, factors such as sex, aggression, and altruism. Given the logical structure of understanding claims of human nature posited by *Thirteen Theories of Human Nature*, the sociobiological position can be understood as follows. As per

sociobiology's founding text, Edward O. Wilson's *On Human Nature*, the diagnosis of human nature can be found in the quotation, "Human emotional responses and the more general ethical practices based on them have been programmed to a substantial degree by natural selection over thousands of generations," (p. 6). Based upon this understanding, there are a number of influential findings on human nature, including claims that humans are inclined towards altruism, cooperation, and social hierarchy. The corresponding prescription to human nature can be found in the quotation, "To chart our destiny means that we must shift from automatic control based on our biological properties to precise steering based on biological knowledge," (p. 6). Wilson elaborates on the implications of this prescription on the sciences themselves with the position that "[i]n order to address the central issues of the humanities, including ideology and religious belief, science itself must become more sophisticated and in part specially crafted to deal with the peculiar features of human biology," (p. 204). Thus, sociobiology seeks to understand the intrinsic, often unconscious motivations of human behavior, which would then constitute a human nature. What then, are the implications of such an understanding? As per Wilson, in the adoption of this view, a few primary values must be held before any application of this understanding can be made. First, Wilson posits that genetic variation guarantees that 'extraordinary' individuals can come from anywhere in the human population, and as such "a correct application of evolutionary theory ... favors diversity in the gene pool as a cardinal value," he continues that, "we are justified in considering the preservation of the entire gene pool as a contingent primary value until such time as an almost unimaginably greater knowledge of human heredity provides us with the option of a democratically contrived eugenics," (p. 198). Wilson also makes the point that, most importantly, "[u]niversal human rights must properly be regarded as a third primary value," (p. 198). Sociobiology then, can act as a means of benefiting

humans, rather than a tool for oppression. For, the requirement of a seemingly impossible level of knowledge prevents the misapplication of an understanding of genetic fitness. Without these primary values, if any certain group of humans was deemed unsavory by a more powerful group which held a sociobiological perspective with dogmatic assumptions and flawed science, then objectively bad implications such as racism, ableism, or eugenics would be warranted. Thus sociobiology, if misinterpreted or applied without these cardinal values, can be dangerous. As such, the current implications of such understanding are largely academic. Though, with further progress in understanding, humans later on may be able to apply the concepts posed by sociobiology in the creation of an objectively better picture of humanity, which would then influence an objectively better system of human relations. This application, however, is very far removed from the present, and highly theoretical. Sociobiology's main position, if accepted, is as a foundation for the further study of humanity, and as such, the humanities, namely psychology, can be situated under its understanding. Although the cumulative findings of the humanities will not be elaborated on here, such findings would also apply to the implications of the essentialist view. As it stands, sociobiology simply calls for more research. (Wilson, pp. 6, 198, 204)

It should be noted that most of the main historical takes on human nature, such as those taken by Freud or the multitude of conservative positions on humans being inherently selfish, are included in the essentialist view. Though for the most part, these theories adopt substantial claims without substantial evidence, and as such, they are not detailed due to their lack of objectivity, and in the interest of brevity. It must be noted though, that such historical understandings have had major implications on current human society, and as such deserve to be explained in discussing current human affairs.

Nomological View

Diametrically opposed to the essentialist view, is the nominal view. The term nominalism is itself ambiguous; there is a degree of variation in its usage, thus it warrants definition. As per Rodriguez-Pereyra in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “[i]n one sense, its most traditional sense deriving from the Middle Ages, it implies the rejection of universals. In another, more modern but equally entrenched sense, it implies the rejection of abstract objects,” (Rodriguez-Pereyra, 2008). Thus, it can be seen as the antithesis to reductionism. To unpack this, a working application of nominalism would argue that any particular individual will have a set of properties, but that the grouping of individuals by this set of properties is not something which objectively exists. In the context of determining human nature, this can be used to create the thesis: there can be no objectively true or real human nature. Given this structure of thought, is it then possible to even begin to construct a frame for understanding humans? Well, the following is posited by MacLeod and Rubenstein in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

One strategy begins by giving an account of what makes a single individual, which we will call “Tom,” red. A minimal, but perhaps sufficient answer is to say that Tom is red because the predicate “is red” can be truly said of Tom. As for the predicate “is red” itself, it is just a particular string of words on a page (or this screen), or else a string of spoken sounds. Expanding this strategy, we get the view that two individuals, say Tom and Bob, are red simply because the linguistic expression, the predicate “is red,” is truly said of both. We account for commonality in nature by reference to individuals—in this case the individuals Bob and Tom, and also linguistic expressions such as the predicate “is red.” (n.d.)

Though, this structure of nominal thought is flawed in several regards. For one, it does not even begin to explain *why* an individual possesses a property, it rather just takes the position that an individual either does or does not possess a given property. Thus, it is not yet useful as an applied understanding of humans and their nature, as it simply makes the point that ‘humanity’ is but a reference to all individuals that possess the property of being ‘human’, and thus the term is only useful in the discussion of an individual human. This problem is addressed by trope nominalism as further discussed by MacLeod and Rubenstein:

For the tropist, ordinary individual objects can be conceived as bundles or collections of tropes; and an ordinary object, which is a complex particular, has a certain quality in virtue of having, as a member of the complex, a particular trope, which is that particular character. An apple thus is a complex of tropes—a red trope plus an apple-shape trope, plus a sweet trope, plus a crisp trope, and so forth. If the apple is red, that is because there is a red trope, a red individual, that is a member of that bundle or complex. Red is not a property the trope has; rather, the red trope is the red itself (n.d.).

This use of trope nominalism can be used in the discussion of human nature more functionally, as humans can be seen as a collection of tropes, one of which being human-ness, and thus to study ‘humans’ is to study this individual trope. This is distinct from essentialism, in that within this view of nominalism, all that is real is the individual instance, thus in the study of humans, humanness is just a conceptual trope. What is actually real, is the individual human. Thus, rather than humanness defining humans as per the essentialist view, nominalism posits that humans define human-ness. To further explore the faults of this theory as it applies to metaphysics is above the scope of this paper, though admittedly both theories are flawed. However, in the

interest of making any sort of point, it will be assumed that both have the capacity to stand as valid metaphysical analyses (MacLeod & Rubenstein, n.d.).

So, as it would apply to an understanding of humans, a nomological view would hold perhaps the broadest encompassment of what constitutes human nature, to the point that it has the potential to outright reject the existence of such a nature. It is important to note that nominalism goes counter to a lot of foundational metaphysical reasoning, and thus there is no central frame of nomological understanding as it applies to human nature. Rather, there are a variety of applied understandings. So, to explore such understandings, generally what is to be considered is that human nature is adaptable to all humans and thus just dependent on context. Therefore, a nominal understanding of humans often takes the position that human nature varies between major factors, most notably, in culture.

Such an application of nominalism can be seen in the field of cultural psychology. Similar to the relationship between essentialism and sociobiology, cultural psychology can be seen as the pinnacle of an applied understanding of nominalism. While this field may still adopt some universals and thus may still stand under an essentialist view, it is distinct from the essentialist view of human nature given its position on cultural relativism. As per Michael Cole's foundational text *Cultural Psychology*, Cole writes, "it would be nice if I could simply 'cut to the chase' and summarize current wisdom, the 'correct theory'. But what is 'really there' and how we come to know it (ontology and epistemology) constitute two sides of a single process of knowing, and I will have to deal with the two of them together," (Cole, 1996, p. 37). In his elaboration on these two aspects of understanding, Cole makes it clear that the goal of *Cultural Psychology* is the same as that of Wilson's *On Human Nature*, that is, both seek to understand the fundamentals of what may constitute human nature. Furthermore, Cole makes it

clear that the methodology taken in *Cultural Psychology* does not establish a dichotomy with the claims on nature's influence on humanity; rather, it runs in conjunction (Cole, 1996, p. 336).

Cole's methodology and findings however, run counter to that of Wilson, in that rather than human activity being driven by intrinsic motivators, Cole holds that human action is primarily relative to the factors of human culture. In both views, there may be a certain number of shared traits between human beings, but it stands that in Cole's analysis, there exists enough variability such that significant claims on human nature should require cross-cultural comparison.

Otherwise, he writes that without the analysis of culture, "such a position is uncomfortably reminiscent of the man who searches for his lost car keys only within the arc of light provided by the streetlamp, except that psychologists who fail to encounter culture in their carefully designed experiments declare, in effect, that the keys have ceased to exist because they are not under the lamppost." (Cole, 1996, p. 68). In this regard, the understanding that each human is innately biologically motivated is contracted by the understanding that each human may just as well be motivated by their cultural environment. In the application of this understanding, Cole remains adjacent to Wilson, in that *Cultural Psychology* diagnoses humans as "the bio-social-cultural product of a long co-evolutionary process," (Cole, 1996, p. 336). The corresponding prescription to this conclusion is again the adjacent claim that further understanding and development will lead to greater autonomy which can be used for maximizing human benefit. Nominalism as it applies to this theory, is then a means of holding the steadfast claim that there is considerable variability between humans, and that a reductionist theory should not stand. Regardless, what implications would such understanding have on the course of human existence?

Determining Fate

What is the point of the semantics and philosophical inquiry required to establish an understanding of human nature, if not the application of such an understanding on shaping the immediate future? As it stands, said immediate future does not look good for humans. Humanity faces threats such as nuclear warfare, biological warfare, chemical warfare, climate change, pollution, and disease, and this list is hardly exhaustive. Furthermore, it is posited by cosmologist Brandon Carter that given the probability of being a human observer today, it is unlikely that there will be a high number of human observers going forward (Leslie, 2008, p. 2). This is the Doomsday theory. Carter's argument is elaborated on by John Leslie in *The End of the World*:

He points out that if the human race came to an end within, say, the next two centuries, then quite a large proportion of all humans would have found themselves where you and I do: in a period of extremely rapid population growth which immediately preceded extinction (and probably helped produce it). If, on the other hand, the human race were to survive for another thousand centuries, then the late twentieth century would have been a period of human history occupied by (proportionately) hardly any humans at all: perhaps far fewer than 0.001 per cent of all the humans who would ever have been born. This ought to decrease our confidence that humankind will have a long future. (p. 134)

So, as it stands, humanity may soon cease to exist. Further, it may cease to exist due to human activity. But does the functional view of human nature give any insight into what can be done about such major factors?

The problems threatening human existence are easily identified. As for what is to be done about such problems, outside of the 'prescriptions' presented by the previously discussed structures of thought, a consensus is functionally impossible to reach, and as such it is for the

most part, beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all the ways in which humanity could be progressed or prolonged. As a result of the fact that there is no central understanding on how to deal with any such existence-based problems, there is no central picture of a best-case-scenario for humanity. Further, as per the take inherent to the essentialist view, there is not even the beginning of an objective best-case scenario, outside of the continuation of the biological drive to sustain the human genome. The question of ‘what humanity’s fate may be as a result of the human condition’ is then impossible to answer satisfactorily.

Even the few inferences that can be made with what has been established, are inconclusive. For one, if humanity is to die off within the next few centuries, and if the most likely ways in which this may happen occur due to human action, it can be construed that the human condition is one predicated on self-destruction. Though, this can only be proven if humanity destroys itself, which has yet to be seen. It must also be noted that the fate of humanity may have nothing to do with the human condition. As per theoretical physicist H.B. Nielsen: “We do not even know if there should exist some extremely dangerous decay of say the proton which caused eradication of the Earth, because if it happens, we would no longer be there to observe it and if it does not happen there is nothing to observe,” (Nielsen 1989, p. 452). Regardless of the likelihood of human annihilation, it cannot be concluded upon until it happens. Likewise, it can be construed that regardless of the likelihood of success, any given solution to an existence-level threat to humans may work. Although this position is anticlimactic, it is the most objectively true based upon the information considered. In the interest of avoiding a nihilistic conclusion however, perhaps an optimistic view on humans and their future would be for the best. For, it is projected that if humans survive the next few centuries, they are likely to survive far beyond them (Leslie, 2008, p. 134). With this in mind, if the pursuit of such an

understanding of human nature is to be deemed meritable activity, such work should be assumed to survive in order to have any sort of implications.

Conclusion

The 'true' human nature as it is thus understood, lies somewhere in between an inherent and learned nature. In essentially all regards, to try to understand humans is to adopt a flawed understanding, so an understanding between the possibilities of human nature is perhaps the most objectively true standpoint. This lack of conclusiveness on humans does lead to a wide variety in the application of thought to the fate of humanity, though assuming that the goal of understanding is to reach the greatest objective truth, this is an unavoidable factor. The future has yet to occur, and therefore trying to determine the fate of humans with certainty is largely an effort in futility. All that can be made are a series of conjectures. As for whether or not any of these conjectures will hold any truth in the indefinite progression of time remains to be seen. In holding human understanding as a worthwhile pursuit, one can only hope that humanity is able to progress to a more complete understanding in time. With that, an optimistic view on humanity's existence is perhaps the most useful interpretation, regardless of whether or not it is the truest, as it at least implies that current study is worthwhile.

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