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Human Nature in the Post-Truth Age

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We have come a long way since Leslie Stevenson published *Seven Theories of Human Nature* in 1974. Indeed, Stevenson’s critical contribution enlisted the views of Plato, Christianity, Marx, Freud, Sartre, Skinner, and Lorenz to analyze and historically contextualize what the term could mean.

By 2017, a seventh edition is available, now titled *Thirteen Theories of Human Nature*, and it contains chapters on Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Plato, Aristotle, the Bible (instead of Christianity), Islam, Kant, Marx, Freud, Sartre, Darwinism, and feminism (with the help of David Haberman, Peter Matthews, and Charlotte Witt). One wonders how many more theories or views can be added to this laundry list; perhaps with an ever-increasing list of contributors to the analysis and understanding of human nature, a new approach might be warranted.

How The Question Is Contested Today

This is where Maria Kronfeldner’s *What’s Left of Human Nature? A Post-Essentialist, Pluralist, and Interactive Account of a Contested Concept* (2018) enters the scene. This scene, to be sure, is fraught with sexism and misogyny, speciesism and racism, and an unfortunately long history of eugenics around the world. The recent white supremacist eruptions under president Trump’s protection if not outright endorsement are so worrisome that any level-headed (or Kronfeldner’s analytic) guidance is a breath of fresh air, perhaps an essential disinfectant.

Instead of following the rhetorical vitriol of right-wing journalists and broadcasters or the lame argumentations of well-meaning but ill-informed sociobiologists, we are driven down a philosophical path that is scholarly, fair-minded, and comprehensive. If one were to ask a naïve or serious question about human nature, this book is the useful, if at time analytically demanding, source for an answer.

If one were to encounter the prevailing ignorance of politicians and television or radio pundits, this book is the proper toolkit from which to draw sharp tools with which to dismantle unfounded claims and misguided pronouncements. In short, in Trump’s post-truth age this book is indispensable.

But who really cares about human nature? Why should we even bother to dissect the intricacies of this admittedly “contested concept” rather than dispense with it altogether? Years ago, I confronted Robert Rubin (former Goldman Sachs executive and later Treasury Secretary in the Clinton Administration) in a lecture he gave after retirement about financial policies and markets. I asked him directly about his view of human nature and his response was brief: fear and greed.

I tried to push him on this “view” and realized, once he refused to engage, that this wasn’t a view but an assumption, a deep presupposition that informed his policy making, that influenced everything he thought was useful and even morally justifiable (for a private investment bank or the country as a whole). All too often we scratch our heads in wonder about a certain policy that makes no sense or that is inconsistent with other policies (or

principles) only to realize that a certain pre-commitment (in this sense, a prejudice) accompanies the proposed policy.

Would making explicit presuppositions about human nature clarify the policy or at least its rationale? I think it would, and therefore I find Kronfeldner's book fascinating, well-argued, and hopefully helpful outside insulated academic circles. Not only can it enlighten the boors, but it could also make critical contributions to debates over all things trans (transhumanism, transgenderism).

Is the Concept of Essence Useful Anymore?

In arguing for a post-essentialist, pluralist, and interactive account of human nature, Kronfeldner argues for eliminating the "concept of an essence," broadening its conceptual reach with corresponding "three different kinds" of human nature, and that "nature and culture interact at the developmental, epigenetic, and evolutionary levels" as well as the ongoing "explanatory looping effects" of human nature. (xv)

Distinguishing between explaining *human* nature and human *nature*, the author has chosen to focus on the latter "which is an analytic and reflective issue about what 'having a nature' and 'something being due to nature' mean." (xvi) Instead of summarizing the intricacies of all the arguments offered in the book, suffice here to highlight, from the very beginning of the book, one of the author's cautionary remarks: "Many consider the concept of human nature to be obsolete because they cannot envision such an interactive account of the fixity aspect. It is one of the major contributions of this book to try to overcome this obstacle." (xvii)

And indeed, this book does overcome the simple binary of either there are fixed traits of humanity to which we must pay scientific tribute or there are fluid feedback loops of influence between nature and nurture to which we must pay social and moral attention. Though the former side of the binary is wedded to notions of "specificity, typicality, fixity, and normalcy" for all the right ethical reasons of protecting human rights and equal treatment, the price paid for such (linguistic and epistemic) attachment may be too high.

The price, to which Kronfeldner returns in every chapter of the book, is "dehumanization"—the abuse of the term (and concept) human nature in order to exclude rather than include members of the human species.

In her "eliminativist perspective" with respect to the concept of human nature, Kronfeldner makes five claims which she defends brilliantly and carefully throughout the book. The first relates to how little the "sciences" would lose from not using the term anymore; the second is that getting rid of essentialism alone will not do away with dehumanization; the third suggests that though dehumanization may not be eliminated, post-essentialism will be helpful to "minimize" it; the fourth claim is that "the question about elimination versus revision of the terminology used is actually a matter of values (rather than facts)"; and the fifth claim relates to the "precautionary principle" advocated here. (231)

The upshot of this process of elimination in the name of reducing dehumanization is admittedly as much political as epistemic, social and cultural as moral. As Kronfeldner says:

“Even if one gets rid of all possible essentialist baggage attached to human nature talk, and even if one gets rid of all human nature talk whatsoever, there is no way to make sure that the concept of being or becoming human gets rid of dehumanization. Stripping off essentialism and the language inherited from it won’t suffice for that.” (236) So, what will suffice?

Throwing the Ladder Away

At this juncture, Kronfeldner refers to Wittgenstein: “The term *human nature* might well be a Wittgensteinian ladder: a ladder that we needed to arrive where we are (in our dialectic project) but that we can now throw away.” (240) This means, in short, that “we should stop using the term *human nature* whenever possible.” (242) Easier said than done?

The point that Kronfeldner makes repeatedly is that simply revising the term or using a different one will not suffice; replacing one term with another or redefining the term more carefully will not do. This is not only because of the terminological “baggage” to which she alludes, but perhaps, more importantly, because this concept or term has been a crutch scientists and policy makers cannot do without. Some sense of human nature informs their thinking and their research, their writing and policy recommendations (as my example above illustrates).

In a word, is it possible to avoid asking: what are they thinking about when they think of human conduct? What underlying presuppositions do they bring to their respective (subconscious?) ways of thinking? As much as we may want to refrain from talking about human nature as an outdated term or a pernicious concept that has been weaponized all too often in a colonial or racist modality, it seems to never be far away from our mind.

In the Trumpist age of white supremacy and the fascist trajectories of European nationalism, can we afford to ignore talk about human nature? Worst, can we ignore the deliberate lack of talk of human nature, seeing, as we do, its dehumanizing effects? With these questions in mind, I highly recommend spending some time with this book, ponderous as it may seem at times, and crystal clear as it is at others. It should be considered for background information by social scientists, philosophers, and politicians.

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References

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