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Evolutionizing human nature

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ABSTRACT

Many have argued that the very notion of human nature is untenable given the facts of evolution and should accordingly be discarded. This paper, by contrast, argues that the notion can be retained in a coherent and modern way. The present account expounds on the view of human nature as a collection of species-typical psychological adaptations, and outlines how it can be understood in formally modeled computational terms. The view defended is also heavily developmental and connects directly with contemporary evolutionary developmental biology. Furthermore, the notion of human nature developed here allows us to abstract away from the obfuscating variability that manifests not only between individuals across ontogeny, but also cross-culturally and throughout time.

The view that there is a coherent notion of human nature has been attacked by philosophers (e.g., Buller, 2005; Hull, 1986). Perhaps one of the most frequently heard criticisms of the notion of human nature is that it implies an essentialist rendering. And if what one has in mind by the notion of human nature is indeed something along the lines of a rigid essentialism, then such a notion is untenable in light of Darwinian evolution. In this paper, I aim to approach the issue from a different angle and defend an alternative notion. To this end, I will propose and explicate an Evolutionary-Psychological Notion of Human Nature (EPNHN) in the hopes that it can provide us with an evolutionarily-grounded definition of what the notion of human nature could mean. Specifically, a notion of human nature that is informed by Evolutionary Psychology and modern evolutionary science more broadly can provide a workable conceptualization that is unencumbered by the outmoded essentialist understandings that many argue render the concept problematic.

In general terms, the view that there exists anything like a human nature was challenged once evolutionary thinking transformed our view of species. For one thing, evolutionary thinking upset the view of species as eternally fixed entities, replacing it with the view that species are instead mutable. The old view saw species as typological entities defined by a fixed set of traits. But the new evolutionary view of species held that there were no traits that defined species such that each and every member of a given species must possess all of its defining traits. For evolutionary mechanisms all but assured that there would always be one organism or more belonging to a putative species that did not possess one trait or more that typically defined that species. This new kind of "population thinking" therefore undercut the traditional view that species possessed fixed and clear-cut essences (Mayr, 2006). This had especially become apparent with Darwin's (1859) *On the Origin of Species*, if not prior to it with the work of Lamarck (1809).

Evolutionary approaches to psychology have a pedigree that extends as far back as Darwin (1871), and a number of attempts to bring evolution to bear on the discipline have been attempted in the intervening period. Prominent historical figures in the field, such as Freud and Piaget, also attempted to integrate various evolutionary considerations into their theorizing. For instance, as will be discussed later, the notion of "relative bargaining power" recently utilized by Evolutionary Psychologists has an historical antecedent in the work of the French biologist Félix Le Dantec (1911), who spoke of a similar "capacité de nuire" (ability to inflict harm). The present project attempts to continue the tradition of evolutionary approaches to psychology more generally, albeit in terms of the more recent approach of Evolutionary Psychology.

The account developed here will be an attempt to spell out what Evolutionary Psychologists might mean when they speak of a human nature—that is, insofar as they might aim to define and

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empirically discover our human nature. So, the EPNHN should also be viewed as a defense of what the overarching research program of Evolutionary Psychology ultimately might mean insofar as it speaks of, or alludes to, human nature. In developing and defending the EPNHN, the goal will not so much be to define a notion of human nature that coheres in every last detail with everything any Evolutionary Psychologist might have said about such a notion. Rather, the EPNHN should be seen as aiming to be at least broadly consistent with the general foundational tenets of the larger research program of Evolutionary Psychology (e.g., Pinker, 1997; Tooby & Cosmides, 2005). Moreover, most of the examples I give to illustrate the EPNHN will be similarly taken from Evolutionary Psychology. Interestingly, the EPNHN will also make some contact with the modular view of cognition advocated by some Evolutionary Psychologists.

1. Delineating human nature

To a first approximation, I claim that the basic entities that comprise human nature will be all of the psychological *adaptations*, in the evolutionary-biological sense of the term, which all humans tend to possess. To put the point differently, the EPNHN aims to proverbially carve human nature at its ontological joints—that is, to provide a view of human nature in terms of its most basic psychological units. And as the EPNHN sees it, those most basic psychological units are psychological adaptations that have been designed by natural selection.[1,2] This particular emphasis on adaptations can be construed as consonant with what Godfrey-Smith (2001) has dubbed "explanatory adaptationism", which stipulates that the most striking feature of the biological world is its apparent design, as embodied by the adaptations of organisms. In what follows, I will elaborate on and refine this first pass definition of the EPNHN.

1.1. Human nature as a homeostatic property cluster of psychological adaptations

The EPNHN can be viewed as an attempt to see human nature as a natural kind, and psychological adaptations, in turn, are to form the constituent components of that kind. Accordingly, we will need a framework of natural kinds, and to that end I propose to deploy the view of natural kinds as *homeostatic property clusters* developed by Boyd (1999). As it happens, this view of natural kinds has the added virtue of being a highly influential way of conceptualizing biological kinds. The homeostatic property clusters framework will illustrate what it might mean to say that psychological adaptations make up the basic constituents of human nature.[3] By viewing natural kinds in this way, it will permit us to (1) advance a notion of human nature that sees it as a natural kind; (2) claim that the collection of psychological adaptations that all humans tend to possess comprises the cluster of properties that constitute human nature; and (3) absolve our notion of human nature from having to satisfy the outmoded, pre-Darwinian notion of essentialism. Moreover, the homeostatic property cluster (HPC) view of natural kinds would also permit us to view each constituent psychological adaptation as itself a natural kind, as each such psychological adaptation can in turn also be seen as comprised of a HPC.

Crucially, as per the HPC view, it would not be necessary for all individual humans to develop all of the psychological adaptations that collectively make up human nature. For, very roughly speaking, an HPC rendering of human nature as a natural kind would assert that individual humans tend to possess the property cluster that makes up human nature in virtue of their belonging to the same species. As the HPC view would have it, individual humans would possess human nature because of the historical processes—specifically, in this case, a deep history of natural selection—that made it such that each human tends to possess a cluster of relevant traits, each of which tends to covary with the others. As an upshot of this, developmental anomalies, physical insults, genetic mutations, and so forth, which might result in various individuals failing to possess one or more of the psychological adaptations that make up human nature, would therefore leave the status of human nature as a natural kind untouched. Similarly, an HPC construal of human nature as a natural kind would not require each constituent psychological adaptation comprising human nature to possess all of the same properties in each of its instantiations. For instance, a cognitive adaptation for language might vary with respect to a given property across individuals, with one or more individuals lacking a given property that the others possess. Similarly, two or more individuals could possess a given property, yet differ in various respects in just how that property is instantiated. For example, the property of language comprehension might vary between individuals along one or more of its dimensions. So, the existence of variation between individuals, such as the sort noted above, does not foreclose a given adaptation from being a natural kind, since the HPC view can accommodate such variance.

Furthermore, a number of the psychological adaptations that make up our human nature as per the EPNHN could very well be largely or entirely conserved and therefore shared across various taxa (e.g., with our closest evolutionary cousins, the chimpanzees). Alternatively, a number of our species-typical psychological adaptations might be constituted in ways that are at least partially similar—that is, homologous—to psychological adaptations found in other species. In either of these cases—whether largely or entirely conserved, or homologous to varying degrees—all such psychological adaptations would nonetheless constitute a part of the HPC that comprises human nature as the EPNHN sees it. For, the EPNHN aims to encompass all of the species-typical psychological adaptations of humans rather than only those psychological adaptations which are in some sense unique to humans.

1.2. The EPNHN vis-à-vis alternative notions

Machery (2008) has recently proposed a nomological notion of human nature, one that he takes to counter various skeptical arguments.[4] Since the EPNHN is fundamentally grounded in psychological adaptations, it will, broadly speaking, fundamentally issue in nomological regularities just like the account sketched by Machery (2008). As it turns out, both the EPNHN and nomological notion share in common the fundamental point that what counts as human nature are all those, and only those, nomological regularities that humans possess in virtue of those regularities having a selective history. That is, both views count as human nature all, and only those, nomological regularities

[1] Use of intentional language at any point in this paper, such as the notion of "design", is merely a pragmatic means of facilitating explication and should in no way imply foresight on behalf of the evolutionary process, or the existence of a designer.

[2] I use the terms psychological adaptation and cognitive adaptation as essentially interchangeable.

[3] In his defense of the notion of human nature, Samuels (2012) also makes use of the approach to natural kinds set forth by Boyd (1999).

[4] Machery's (2008) nomological notion aims to provide an account of human nature in terms of law-like regularities (hence the term nomological).