WHAT'S LEFT OF HUMAN NATURE? A POST-ESSENTIALIST, PLURALIST AND INTERACTIVE ACCOUNT OF A CONTESTED CONCEPT

Maria Kronfeldner

Forthcoming 2018
MIT Press

Book Synopsis
February 2018

For non-commercial, personal use only.

Topic

The concept of human nature has always been an important issue, be it for philosophy, sciences or politics. In the 20th century, it has been severely criticized. From a scientific perspective, the concept of human nature has been criticized for relying on an outdated essentialism and a misguided nature-nurture divide. From a social perspective, it has been criticized since it furthers dehumanization, as part of which some people are regarded as less human.

This book takes these criticisms seriously and asks: **What could it possibly mean to talk about a 'human nature' despite these critiques?**

Ultimate goal

The ultimate goal of the book is revisionary. It aims at a constructive philosophical account of the perennial concept that humans have a 'nature'. Taking the above-mentioned criticisms into account, it aims to makes sense of **four core aspects** of the concept of human nature, namely species-specificity, typicality, fixity, and normalcy.

The resulting revisionary account of 'human nature' minimizes dehumanization and does not fall back to outdated biological knowledge about evolution, kind essentialism, and the nature-nurture divide. The account is **post-essentialist** since it eliminates the concept of an essence. It is **pluralist** since it defends that there are – in the world – different things that correspond to three different post-essentialist concepts. It is **interactive** since nature and culture are understood as interacting at the developmental, epigenetic and evolutionary level and since humans are shown to create their nature via explanatory and classificatory looping effects.

Approach

Since issues about outdated biological knowledge pertain to philosophy of science, this book is written from a philosophy of science perspective, but one that also takes the intricate connections between science and society into account, in order to bring dehumanization and normalcy in focus too.

The book includes **five analytic layers**: analyzing (a) the content, (b) the ontological status, (c) the epistemic roles, (d) the pragmatic functions, and (e) the essential contestedness of the concept that human beings have a 'nature'. Content

concerns which traits belong to human nature (e.g., whether rationality, the opposable thumb, etc., are part of human nature or not). Ontological status specifies whether human nature exists as something real, out there in the world. Epistemic roles specify whether the concept is used for classification, description, or explanation. Pragmatic functions specify why people care for the respective knowledge about human nature. Essential contestedness shows why it is unlikely that there will ever be an agreement in a society with respect to the content of the concept. The focus of the book is on (b)-(e).

Outline

The book contains three parts. It starts with an introduction of the analytic layers (a)-(e), basic assumptions about the expression 'nature', and assumptions about the expression 'human'. After that, the post-essentialist, interactive and pluralistic direction of argumentation is introduced.

In **Part I**, the book distinguishes and discusses three specific challenges that the concept of human nature faces. It is shown that, in a vernacular context, talk about 'human nature' leads to ethically unjustified dehumanization of people that are considered as being *not fully human*. This is called the dehumanization challenge. It is claimed that it is (d) the pragmatic function and not (a) the content that allows to understand the vernacular concept of human nature with its dehumanizing effects. As a scientific concept, 'human nature' has so far often relied on an essentialism that Darwinian evolutionary thinking shows to be wrong. This is labeled as the Darwinian challenge. A third challenge, the developmentalist challenge results from wrong assumptions about the nature-nurture divide that result in misguided claims that traits of humans are 'due to nature' alone, rather than due to the interaction between nature and nurture. The Darwinian and the developmentalist challenge mainly address (c) the epistemic roles of the concept.

The question that becomes pertinent in **Part II** is then: what's left of human nature, given these challenges? Can science maintain a concept of human nature that prevents dehumanization as much as possible and that does not rely on outdated essentialism or outdated beliefs regarding the nature-nurture divide? Different revisionary proposals in the contemporary literature will be compared and the respective pros-and-cons discussed, given (c) the different epistemic roles of the concept. The core thesis of this constructive part is best captured by a slogan: *human nature in the traditional, essentialist sense is dead, long live human natures – in a post-essentialist, interactive and pluralist sense*. This entails a realistic conclusion clarifying (b), the status of the resulting concepts: indeed, there *are* phenomena in the world that can legitimately be called a human 'nature'. Yet, different disciplines are in need of different kinds of post-essentialist, interactive concepts of human nature. Some disciplines will go for a classificatory concept, some for a descriptive concept, and some for an explanatory concept of human nature. Each of these concepts rescues different aspects of the outdated essentialist concept of human nature. Other revisionary proposals in the literature on human nature are too monistic since they *exclusively* defend either a classificatory, or a descriptive or an explanatory concept – as if there can be only one successful replacement of the essentialist, dualistic concept. By being pluralist rather than monistic, this book not only allows to regard a classificatory, a descriptive and an explanatory concept of a human nature as epistemically and ontologically *on a par;* it also solves problems other revisionary proposals have with respect to the concept these defend, e.g. how to interpret the typicality or fixity of human nature.

Part III addresses a couple of normative issues. The (d) pragmatic functions of using the concept come into focus again and (e) the essential contestedness of the concept is established. At issue is, first, what remains of the normative, emancipatory humanism that stands behind ideas, such as human rights, global justice, etc., given the pluralist, interactive and post-essentialist picture developed in Part II? Second, how should we *talk* about humans in order to prevent falling back to dehumanizing, essentialist thinking? Even if appropriately revised concepts are possible, it might still be argued that the term 'human nature' should be prevented as much as possible – to minimize dehumanization as much as possible. In reply to these questions, Part III defends three core claims: first, nothing in the post-essentialist, interactive and pluralist picture conflicts with a normative, emancipatory humanism; second, human nature is an essentially contested concept that will dialectically change with the people using it; third, we should indeed eliminate the language of human nature.

In sum: Part I is critical, Part II is focused on science and constructive, Part III connects results from Part II back to society and adds an eliminative finish.

Scope, relevance, intended audience, etc.

Scope

The book covers a debate in philosophy of science that started roughly in the 1980s and gained momentum recently. It nonetheless transgresses the boundary towards moral and political philosophy, mainly with respect to issues connected with dehumanization and human rights.

The scope with respect to sciences covered is general – including all sciences concerned with humans (sciences understood in the broad sense that includes humanities). Nonetheless, the book is anchored in the life sciences since 'human' is mainly (but not exclusively) taken to refer to the species *Homo sapiens*.

This book is unique in approach and scope:
- It has an analytic approach that distinguishes five layers of analysis and offers an in-depth analysis with a focus on the last four layers.
- It covers three contemporary main challenges simultaneously: the developmentalist challenge together with the Darwinian challenge and the dehumanization challenge.
- It offers a constructive-revisionary answer that keeps the balance between revision and elimination.
- It connects sciences and society, facts and values.

Relevance

Human nature is an intricate topic in the midst of a web of issues (e.g., evolution, heredity, essentialism, animal/human, variation, naturalness, enhancement, moral standing, racism, sexism, normalcy and flourishing) that transgress the usual boundaries between philosophy, sciences and politics. It is a perennial and 'hot' topic that attracts a lot of popular writing. If an idea is so entrenched and at the same time so much discussed, it is the task of philosophical analysis to raise the level of discourse in order to make an informed discussion possible that prevents the extremes that dominate popular discussions as well as paper-length interventions. Given the state of the art, only an in-depth coverage in book-length allows for a bigger picture that charts

the midway between scientifically outdated thinking about human nature and throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

Intended audience

The book is written from a philosophical perspective but not for philosophers exclusively. It should be of interest to academic scholars from the humanities, social sciences and the life sciences, as well as for the educated lay reader. For the experts from philosophy of science, Part I will be rather expository, but since the book is constructed in a modular manner, experts in philosophy of the life sciences can easily skip Part I.

Summary chapter-by-chapter

Preface
The topic is presented as including five analytic layers of discussing the concept of human nature: content, status, epistemic roles, pragmatic functions, essential contestedness. The three parts are introduced.

Introduction
Ch. 1. What's at issue
The introduction starts with some basic assumptions that concern the meanings of the term 'nature' and four aspects that reoccur with respect to concepts of human nature: specificity, typicality, fixity and normalcy. On that basis, a family resemblance of different concepts of human nature is postulated. After that, the connection to issues of the philosophy of the life sciences is introduced by justifying that the term 'human' either refers to a biological group category (e.g., *Homo sapiens*), labeled as 'humankind,' or to a socially specified group, labeled as 'humanity'. The two groups – humankind and humanity – are then presented as distinct but overlapping. It is made clear that the book mainly concerns humankind and that humanity is then addressed in Part III. Given the assumptions made and given the distinction between three different epistemic roles (classification, description and explanation), it is outlined how the account will ultimately defend that there are in the world – for each kind of group – *three natures*: a classificatory nature, a descriptive nature and an explanatory nature. The pluralism in this rests on the claim that different disciplines will utilize a different concept to say something salient about humans. The chapter ends with a brief justification why a fourth, i.e., a normative concept of a human nature, is decoupled from the post-essentialist, pluralist and interactive scientific picture that will be developed in Part II.

Part I: Three challenges
This part analyzes three standard challenges that the concept of a human nature faces in contemporary debates between science, philosophy and politics.

Ch. 2. The dehumanization challenge
Human nature is a concept that exists not only in science but also in society. In social contexts, it has a couple of pragmatic functions. One is dehumanization: some people are regarded as less human because they are less realizing human nature. By introducing dehumanization in a systematic manner, illustrated by a few examples,

mainly with respect to sexism and racism, the aim of this Chapter is to show that the vernacular concept of human nature is purely functional and socially perspectival: the content is exchangeable, but the function (to be used for dehumanization) remains the same; the content varies with the perspective of those who speak, i.e., those who regard themselves as human, and others as less human. On the basis of this, it is established that dehumanization is stronger if it combines with an essentialist concept of human nature. The dehumanization challenge is thus twofold: from the scientific point of view, the social perspectivalism in the vernacular concept needs to be overcome, to arrive at an objective concept of human nature. From the social point of view, dehumanization itself is the challenge: it needs to be overcome because it conflicts with basic ideas about equality, human rights and justice. Given that normalcy assumptions and essentialism make dehumanization stronger, the challenge becomes one of minimizing dehumanization as much as possible by getting rid of the normalcy assumptions and essentialism.

Ch. 3. The Darwinian challenge
Essentialism is challenged not only because of dehumanization. Within science, human nature has traditionally been conceptualized in an essentialist manner: a nature of a species is its essence. An essence is introduced as simultaneously playing a classificatory, an explanatory, and a descriptive-predictive epistemic role. After introducing the connection between essentialism, natural kinds and biological species, the Chapter reconstructs the anti-essentialist consensus in contemporary philosophy of the life sciences, a consensus that is based on the consequences of a Darwinian evolutionary theory, mainly with respect to the definitional role of an essence and with respect to the explanatory role of an essence. It is shown that, given Darwinian ontology, there are *no* necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in a biological species (fulfilling the classificatory role of an essence) that are at the same time (as required from an essence) fulfilling an explanatory role for the traits that are characteristic of the kind. This is the core of the Darwinian challenge. Given that biological species, such as humankind, do – according to the anti-essentialist consensus – not have essences in the traditional senses, the Darwinian challenge is ultimately to specify what's left of the concept of a *nature* of humankind if essentialism is eliminated.

Ch. 4. The developmentalist challenge
A third, developmentalist challenge against the concept of human nature stems from critiques of understanding ontogenetic development in a dualistic manner. It criticizes attitudes that regard phenotypic traits as being exclusively or predominantly 'due to nature' or 'due to nurture'. The Chapter introduces the nature-nurture divide by comparing its meaning and role in Greek antiquity with the so-called 'hardening' of the divide in the 19th century. That allows to show that 'nature' in such contexts means 'biologically inherited developmental resources'. On that basis, the Chapter defends that it was again a Darwinian way of thinking, this time the Neo-Darwinian anti-Lamarckism, which changed the way life is explained in a significant way. It gave rise to the modern nature-nurture divide, which includes a hardening of the divide that assumed that the causality between nature and nurture (or nature and culture) can be apportioned – so that traits can be said to be 'due to nature', or 'due to nurture'. The developmentalist challenge is an attack against that hardening. The claim is that the interaction between nature and nurture is so strong that an apportioning is not adequate – at the level of development (which is regarded as core level), at the level of epigenetic inheritance and at the level of comparing biological and cultural evolution. After introducing the so-called interactionist consensus, i.e., what is widely shared

about the mentioned interactions, the Chapter outlines what is controversial about it, to better see what results form it as a challenge for the concept of a human nature.

Part II: A post-essentialist, pluralist and interactive account
This part tries to rescue as much as possible from the battlefield. It is the core constructive part of the book. It takes the Darwinian challenge and the developmentalist challenge into account and develops from it a post-essentialist, pluralist and interactive account of different concepts of human nature. Each post-essentialist concept fulfills only one epistemic role (i.e., classification, description, or explanation), whereas the essentialist account had an essence fulfilling more than one epistemic role.

<u>Ch. 5. Genealogy, the classificatory nature and channels of inheritance</u>
This Chapter starts with five distinct traditional questions regarding a species' nature. It defends that given contemporary species concepts in evolutionary thinking, genealogy (ancestor-descendant relationships) is important for all five questions. On the basis of this, the claim is that genealogy grounds a classificatory nature of biological species, a claim that already David Hull made. Since species depend on homeostasis (i.e., mechanisms that guarantee stability over time), the different so-called channels of inheritance are compared with respect to their dynamic properties, i.e., with respect to how much stability they contribute. The claim with respect to that is that biological reproduction conveys a special stability of developmental resources, which is key for the homeostasis of a species. In a further step, the importance of genealogy (and the respective channel of biological inheritance) for explaining the development of typical traits of a species is outlined. The claim is: genealogy is indirectly, partly and non-specifically relevant for explaining the respective life form of a species because it is at the foundation of the channel of inheritance that guarantees a high stability. After that, the pluralism of three natures is introduced. The chapter ends with a historical and social contextualization of the importance of genealogy.

<u>Ch. 6. Towards a descriptive human nature</u>
After discussing why sciences need a concept of a descriptive nature, that concept is decoupled from the classificatory and the explanatory nature. Given that even the severest critics of the concept of human nature leave a version of the descriptive concept alive, disagreements in the current literature about the details of how to specify it exactly are addressed. The chapter first discusses what typicality actually means. Connected with that, it addresses whether typicality is necessary, given that species show polymorphisms (such as sex-specific traits). Are these part of the nature of a species? This question leads to an important issue about abstraction since – as I shall argue – via abstraction almost any trait can be made typical. Finally, various further qualifiers are discussed since typicality alone turns out to be not sufficient to have a descriptive concept of human nature that is narrow enough, i.e., sufficient to exclude habits such as 'to bury the dead' or 'to carry cell phones' as being *not* part of human nature. What is added to typicality, however, is presented as depending on disciplinary interest and similar perspectives. Yet, fixity of traits is a frequently recurring qualifier, at least in the scientific context of understanding evolution, heredity and development.

<u>Ch. 7. The stability of human nature</u>

This chapter explicates the alleged fixity of human nature as stability. Often, fixity is interpreted as innateness, but innateness looks at the developmental level only and is as contested as human nature, mainly because of the developmental challenge. Innateness is thus dismissed as an answer to the question what fixity of human nature means. It neither helps to solve the developmentalist challenge nor is it a concept that includes an evolutionary level of description and explanation. The next proposal that is reviewed is that one needs to add evolvedness (rather than innateness) to typicality: if a trait is typical and evolved, it is part of human nature. Even though this proposal, mainly defended by Edouard Machery, is on the right track, it is dismissed since it is still too broad, mainly because culture can evolve too. What is valuable about the proposal is that it points at the temporal dimension of a species' descriptive nature. The claim that is defended on the basis of this is that populations of individual organisms show typicality (similarity) not only in space (synchronically) but also over time (diachronically). The similarity over time is what I call stability. Given that there is a specific channel of inheritance, the biological channel (as introduced in Ch. 5), which is reliably providing a high stability, human nature in the descriptive sense is reconstructed as traits that are typical and reliably reoccur over time because of developmental resources that travel the channel of biological inheritance. Since this seems to directly fly in the face of the interactionist consensus, it is discussed how it is possible to claim that a trait is (in that sense) 'due to nature'. Abstraction is a central part of the reply.

Ch. 8. An explanatory nature
The descriptive nature has an explanatory counterpart. Human nature in the explanatory sense refers to those developmental resources that are typical and biologically inherited. To defend that claim two revisionary essentialist proposals – dubbed 'developmental essentialism' and 'teleological essentialism' – are reviewed and dismissed. These proposals claim to rescue an essentialist explanatory concept of human nature. The aim of these 'new' essentialisms is to prevent the problems of the traditional essentialism by utilizing the explanatory role of essences only. The claim against these essentialist proposals is that they both suffer from an intrinsicality bias. They are too dependent on the assumption that an explanatory nature needs to be internal to individual organisms. The suggestion is then to re-conceptualize the explanatory nature as being internal to a population, rather than to the individual organisms. The explanatory nature of humans is then specified as a population-level pool of developmental resources that travel the biological channel of inheritance. This populational explanatory nature is perfectly compatible with the demands that come from the Darwinian as well as the developmentalist challenge.

Ch. 9. Causal selection and how human nature is made thereby
Explaining human traits involves, as all explanations, an epistemic choice: some causal factors are ignored, while others are selected to be included in an explanation. The Chapter introduces an approach to causal selection that shows how normative stances (preferences and values) make causes first *visible* and then *real*: how our normative stances and values bias us towards certain kinds of explanations (e.g., explanations pointing to human nature) and how such explanatory endeavors – via explanatory looping effects – make the selected causes real. That way, the chapter can show that human nature in the explanatory and descriptive sense is not only interactive in the sense that nature and culture interact at the developmental, intergenerational and evolutionary level, as described in the standard critique summarized under the label 'developmental challenge'. Human nature is also interactive in the sense of an

explanatory looping effect: when one gives explanations of human life that point to human nature, this can influence humans in their behavior. Depending on whether people move 'in' or 'out' of the explanation, this stabilizes or changes human nature over time. This is how humans make human nature.

Part III: Normativity, essential contestedness and the quest for elimination
The reconstruction of an objective scientific picture of human nature that is post-essentialist, pluralist, and interactive in Part II does not reconstruct the normativity that is traditionally attached to the vernacular concept of human nature. It also ignores that the vernacular concept often refers to social rather than biological groups and what follows for use of human nature talk from the dehumanization challenge. These three topics are dealt with in this final part III.

Ch. 10. Humanism and normativity
Humanism is introduced as a view that insists that all humans are equal, subject to human rights and norms of justice. This clearly involves normative evaluations about how humans should live, i.e., how humans flourish. Where is all that normativity gone to, if it is not anymore part of the post-essentialist, pluralist and interactive account of human nature in the scientific, objective sense? After discussing the issue of moral standing (who belongs to the group of individuals that count for certain moral considerations), the Chapter discusses how the descriptive nature (as reconstructed in this book) can be of ethical importance to fix what is needed for human flourishing. This is then combined with the results of Ch. 9, leading to a dialectical concept of an ever-changing descriptive and explanatory 'looping' human nature. Finally, this dialectic concept is interpreted as an essentially contested concept: agreement on the content of an essentially contested concept is unlikely since it is essential to the concept to be contested.

Ch. 11. Should we eliminate the expression 'human nature'?
The final Chapter asks whether we should eliminate the term 'human nature'. Part II defended that there are post-essentialist, interactive concepts of human nature that are here to stay. Yet, the pluralism defended also means that the term 'human nature' has become ambiguous and redundant for describing the matters of facts scientists want to describe with the term 'human nature'. In addition, the risk of social harm following from using the expression 'human nature' is high, given the insights on dehumanization from Ch. 2. Even the post-essentialist human natures (the descriptive, explanatory and classificatory nature) can lead to dehumanization. On the basis of this and the insights from Part I and II, the Chapter shows that there are three balancing problems involved if one wants to decide whether the term 'human nature' should be prevented, given the post-essentialist, pluralist and interactive account. These balancing problems involve epistemic values that relate to the epistemic roles, as well as social values that relate to the pragmatic functions of the concept. Taken together, they lead to important trade-offs of values and consequences that allow to apply a precautionary principle. This then shifts the balance towards eliminating the language of 'human nature' from discourses in science as well as society. The concepts can stay, but the terminology should be prevented as much as possible.

→ Check it out here (about 300 pages):
https://mitpress.mit.edu/authors/maria-kronfeldner
or drop me a message at for the latest news: kronfeldnerm@ceu.edu