

Beyond Human Nature by Jesse J. Prinz

THE DEBATE AS TO WHAT extent genes or environment determines us rages on. As Jesse Prinz points

out in this lively, well-documented book, the controversy between nature and nurture dates back at least to Plato and Aristotle in the Fourth Century BC. Since the Nineteenth Century, when both biological inheritance and culture were first thought about scientifically, the sciences have taken up the debate, from the Nineteenth Century nativist psychologists, to the half-century of behaviorism in the Twentieth. Since the 1960s, the majority view has been 'it's in our genes'. Popular *naturist* (*sic*) books, such as those by Stephen Pinker, have inundated us.

Prinz's reader-friendly book is apparently geared to reach a similar audience. However, in contrast to Pinker he proposes that the pendulum of research lost momentum after the great swing to innateness, and is gaining energy in the other direction. Since the 1970s, prominent scientists such as Richard Lewontin have battled naturists such as Richard Herrnstein, inspiring copious research contesting innate, genetically-dependent tendencies. Plenty of studies reveal the shortcomings of naturism, and some strengthen the idea that our environment shapes our behavior more than our genetic programming does. Prinz asks for fair airtime for the other side, *nurturism*. He marshals plenty of evidence to batter down the past half-century of naturist ascendancy in his gentle, persuasive authorial voice. That evidence seems to indicate that genetic differences play a relatively insignificant role in gender, sex/love, language, intelligence, emotional make-up, morality, and mental illness. Rather, culture and upbringing contribute almost entirely to the acquisition of language; to the development of basic knowledge such as distinguishing colors, or life from nonlife; to one's comparative intelligence level (if such a thing can be measured); also to how women behave contrasted with men; to whom you are attracted to sexually; and even to the types of emotions you experience. Some facets of humanity, such as intelligence or gender, have for decades now been argued as being strongly environmental, even by erstwhile naturists such as Noam Chomsky. Language acquisition, by contrast, has long lain under the spell of genetics, ever

since Chomsky attacked B.F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* (1957) and presented the popular theory of an innate universal grammar. However, linguists, psychologists, and philosophers have uncovered difficulties an innate grammar view has in accounting for certain findings. For example, children seem to apply 'statistical learning procedures' to all kinds of tasks, such as "learning the sequence of muscle movements required for physical skills" (p.141). Yet statistical learning seems to explain many phenomena that Chomsky says typify language-learning's uniqueness just as well as an innate grammar theory does; for instance, the 'poverty of the stim-

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ulus' (children hear relatively few sentences to gather the amount of grammatical-structural information they do), or the childhood 'critical period' for learning a language (to become language users, children must experience a language before age six or so). If children apply statistical learning to most social phenomena, and such learning can explain language-learning as well, who needs a separate learning modality for language?

Problem Cases

Beyond Human Nature is most cogent on the facets of behavior that have inspired strong empirical research: intelligence and gender – subjects which are inextricably tied up with values of freedom and equality. The book becomes shakier when discussing mental illness and innate knowledge, if partly because, unlike gender and intelligence, these are not traits or capacities, so it is more challenging to pin down precisely what one is asserting to be innate (or not).

It remains unclear what 'innate knowledge' is: what are innate learning mechanisms in infants, and what is 'knowledge'? Children respond early to eyes, smiles, frowns, as though they have a sense of these features, even if that sense is not propositional ('that smile means you're happy'), and so is not knowledge in a narrow sense. There is far to go in this area, starting with an analysis of what 'knowledge' is here.

Like physical illness, mental illness has an epidemiology, and both types vary culturally. Prinz convincingly traces manifestations of mental illness to cultural differences, noting that some pathologies arise only in some cultures. Depression, for example, appears to be strongly correlated with levels of industrialization. But schizophrenia and bipolar disorder are more universal, and Prinz admits that these may be grounded in genetically-inherited predispositions. Prinz's attempt to trace the culturally variant pathologies to a population's learning to be mental ill – we in industrialized societies learn to be depressed – as a way to cope with (depressing?) circumstances, remains undemonstrated, possibly begging the question. Furthermore, if the culture is somehow unfit to supply a significant proportion of its members with what they need to thrive as human beings, what is there to learn to supply, as one would respond to scurvy by supplying vitamin C?

Morality seemingly differs cross-culturally too. Prinz claims, "we are not stuck with the values we learned... we can explore the possibility of moral reform" (p.329). Yet how can we do this unless there is some thing that morality is among us all, such that it can be reformed, for the group or the individual?

The Human Being As Conflict Zone

The stance that human beings are largely a construct of their culture as opposed to their biology faces two major problems: 1) It is as vague as saying, "We are primarily constructs of our biology"; and 2) By what criteria must one decide to take one stance rather than the other? Another important question is: What drives one to choose one or other stance? Is the choice a matter of ideology?

Early on, *Beyond Human Nature* mentions that some researchers (Matt Ridley, as well as Richerson and Boyd) have called for a truce between the two extremes of nature vs nurture. But the author dismisses the possibility of 'reconciliation', because once they declare a truce, "combatants... go on to emphasize one side at the expense of the other... Scientific debates are rarely

settled by compromise” (p.12). Apologists for either nature or nurture plead their side’s benignness, such as presenting their perspective as the one from which we may be able to cure mental illness. However, Prinz’s language – ‘combatants’, ‘reconciliation’, and my own, ‘truce’ – speaks of belligerence, power struggle; and a power struggle speaks of a drive to control. There is a vast, uncharted no-man’s-land between the extremes of what genes or what the environment shape in us, and here, everything we are as humans seems to be at stake. So who is to get to manipulate the species to do or become what? Which side is to control *Homo sapiens*? For instance, if one side of the debate prevails, that side may proceed to justify certain policies for humanity upon the assumption that, say, about 90% of what we are as humans (as if that could be quantified) is determined by nature (or nurture). Control of 90% of what makes us human would allow a very small margin of error for the controllers. However, what if the compromisers are right and human beings are about 50-50 shaped by nature and nurture? If one side attempts to shape the human race in this situation, the ratio makes the margin of error quite large. Nature’s influence of one dimension of humanity and nurture another dimension grow so inextricable and intricately mutually influential that manipulating human destiny would be nigh impossible, if not cruel and immoral. Prinz speaks of the cultural plasticity that humans would manifest if they were primarily shaped by culture. However, if humans are primarily gene-determined, manipulating genes would afford our species plasticity, while culture would be relatively more fixed. Both views informed prominent social experiments of the past century: on the naturist side, the Nazi or even U.S. Federal attempts to shape humanity via eugenic manipulation; on the nurturist side, the Soviet and Khymer Rouge (among other culprits) attempts to mold humanity via environmental, that is, cultural, manipulation. Yet, if humans are not determined by primarily either genes or culture, but by an approximate 50-50 mix, any such attempts at shaping humanity, even to our benefit, would be almost beside the point. Anthropological and psychological inquiries might benefit us more easily, via greater understanding. By better understanding ourselves, far from being ‘trapped’ in biology or culture, we could work at an individual level toward improving lives. For example, one could help the

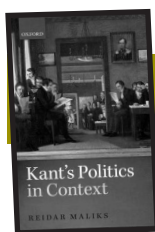
mentally ill far more personably by treating them individually than by forcing them into biological or psychosocial programs.

Despite these concerns, the book is an intelligent, winning, and brave incursion into territory long dominated by genetic determinism. Everyone interested in this debate – particularly open-minded supporters of genetic determinism – should read this thoroughly researched work, and be ready to meet its challenges.

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Lantz is what?

• Beyond Human Nature: How Culture and Experience Shape the Human Mind, by Jesse J. Prinz, W.W. Norton, 2012, 402 pps, ISBN 978-0-393-34789-0.



Kant’s Politics in Context by Reidar Maliks

“OUT OF THE CROOKED timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.” Thus wrote Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) in his *Idea for a General History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* (1784). The philosophy professor from Königsberg, known for his dense sentences in his three *Critiques* had a *Nebengeschäft*, or sideline, as a public intellectual. In this role he excelled in quotable quips and witty puns such as the above. It is this role which is the subject of Reidar Maliks’ book *Kant’s Politics in Context*.

Kant’s political philosophy commendably being the subject of a book-length study follows a perhaps belated recognition of his work as a political thinker. To be sure, others have engaged with Kant’s political thought, above all Hannah Arendt, yet as she said in her posthumous book *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (1992), “the literature on Kant is enormous, but there are very few books on his political philosophy.” This is still largely the case. Apart from Elisabeth Ellis’s *Kant’s Politics: Provisional Theory for an Uncertain World* (2008), we are still awaiting a comprehensive work on Kant’s political philosophy.

Maliks’ book does not however provide us with an understanding of the unity of Kant’s political thought. Indeed, it seems the author is more interested in uncovering

Kant’s motivations and private views than in understanding his remarkable and often prophetic political philosophy. To be sure, it is interesting to read how Kant engaged in debates with his erstwhile pupil, the romantic philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). While Kant clearly was interested in contemporary issues, his writings addressed other great minds. In *Theory and Practice* (1793) he crossed swords with Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). But apart from Herder, Kant’s contemporary intellectual adversaries were in an inferior intellectual league. The likes of Friedrich Bouterwek, Johann Benjamin Erhart and Friedrich Schlegel have hardly even become footnotes in the history of political philosophy (although the latter made a cameo appearance in *Monty Python’s* ‘Bruces’ Philosophers Song’).

Was Kant a major political philosopher? Notwithstanding the universally acknowledged genius of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and the perhaps equally masterful brilliance of the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), political writings like *What is Enlightenment?* (1784), *Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History* (1796), and even *On the Perpetual Peace* (1795), fall short of the detail that characterised great works of political philosophy such as Plato’s *Republic*, Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, or Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract*. And yet, when patching together his writings, political and otherwise, we see glimpses of the perspicacity that justly made Kant famous for his sharp analytical mind. It is as if we can see the contours of a not yet chiselled-out statue in the unpolished literary marbles he left behind.

What is so striking when reading about Kant’s politics in Maliks’ book about him is how *modern* he was, and how this most German of thinkers departed from the stereotype of the Teutonic *Meisterdenker*, and instead came close to the ideal of the British constitutionalist. This ideal is of “a constitution allowing the greatest possible human freedom in accordance with laws which ensure that the freedom of each can coexist with the freedom of all the others.” John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* (1859)? No – Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason*. What is even more remarkable is that this sentence was written eight years before the French revolutionaries penned the *Déclaration des droits de l’homme* (1789), where a similar phrase was used. It’s not surprising that the poet Heinrich Heine called Kant the philosopher of the French Revolution.

This quote from his first *Kritik* is also a