

This is a preprint of a chapter whose final and definitive form is published in: A. Fuentes and A. Visala (2017) *Verbs, Bones, and Brains: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Human Nature*, University of Notre Dame Press.

## What Is Human Nature For?

Grant Ramsey

Institute of Philosophy  
KU Leuven  
Belgium  
[grant@theramseylab.org](mailto:grant@theramseylab.org)  
[www.theramseylab.org](http://www.theramseylab.org)

During the battle of Iwo Jima in June 1944, Private First Class Jackylin Harold Lucas and three other U.S. Marines came under attack while making their way along a ravine. Upon seeing two grenades thrown near the soldiers, Lucas dove onto one grenade and pulled the other under his body, saving his companions from serious injury or death. Lucas survived, but his injuries were so grave that his companions left him for dead (Lucas and Drum 2006).

Lucas's act was one of spectacular and nearly suicidal altruism. What does such an act show us about our nature and the human capacity for good and evil? Perhaps it offers a window onto our true nature—a nature ultimately good, though susceptible to corrupting influences. Or perhaps it seems extraordinary precisely because we are greedy and violent by nature but can, in rare instances, rise above those instincts.

Questions about what human nature is and how we can learn about it are difficult to answer. They are difficult not just because humans are complex creatures whose behavior is deeply embedded in the cultural environment that they are a part of, but also because it is not obvious what a concept of human nature is supposed to do or what it is for. The concept of human nature is often used as a *normative* concept, one that can serve as a guide to action, showing us how we ought to behave. Less commonplace is an approach that seeks a *descriptive* account of human nature, one that characterizes what humans do and are disposed to do.

I argue in this essay that the normative and descriptive approaches are at odds and that we should not expect a single concept of human nature to play both roles. Furthermore, there are deep problems with normative accounts. They often ignore or contradict the contemporary scientific worldview, and they often merely reflect biases about how we ought to be and what we ought to do. Human nature in this sense becomes politicized and serves in arguments about the moral status of issues like homosexuality, abortion, or biomedical enhancement. Because of the

problems inherent in normative notions of human nature, I offer a descriptive alternative. My alternative attempts to align the scientific study of the human with human nature.

### **Normative Approaches and Their Discontents**

If humans are good by nature, then our goal should be to embrace our nature. If humans are by nature bad, knowing what our nature is could provide us with a warning of what we need to strive to avoid, what tendencies we need to overcome. Let's consider what such a target or warning could be and how we could learn about it.

A normative conception of human nature cannot be derived from simply studying humans and making generalizations about them. Doing this merely tells us what humans are like based on observable features. A normative notion of human nature must be about more than manifest behaviors; it must have a special force, one from which we are able to divine not just what we are, but what we are supposed to be like. The question, then, is, What sources can provide us with insight into a nature of this kind?

Normative conceptions of human nature are often religious in origin. For religions with sacred texts, we could perhaps gain direct insight into human nature by reading these texts. Many Christians, for example, take the Holy Bible and its doctrinal interpretations to be a unique source of knowledge about human nature. Consider the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

416 By his sin Adam, as the first man, lost the original holiness and justice he had received from God, not only for himself but for all human beings.

417 Adam and Eve transmitted to their descendants human nature wounded by their own first sin and hence deprived of original holiness and justice; this deprivation is called "original sin."

418 As a result of original sin, human nature is weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering and the domination of death, and inclined to sin (this inclination is called "concupiscence").

419 "We therefore hold, with the Council of Trent, that original sin is transmitted with human nature, "by propagation, not by imitation" and that it is . . . 'proper to each'" (Paul VI, *CPG* §16).<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p7.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p7.htm).

From this it is clear that due to original sin human nature is weak and that we are lusty (inclined to concupiscence), unjust, and apt to be ignorant and to suffer. And these traits are due not to our imitation of others but come directly “by propagation” from our descent from Adam. If this is our nature, then we might infer that we should acknowledge our ignorance, brace ourselves for the suffering that will come, and be wary of our concupiscence. This is, of course, to assume that concupiscence and ignorance are bad things, though these assumptions may be able to be justified from other passages from the Bible.

Although one can read normative interpretations of human nature from some religious passages, since they at times directly state what we are supposed to do and to avoid doing, there are difficulties with this approach to human nature. One difficulty is that religious texts often fail to provide a univocal, coherent picture of what we are or how we ought to be. For example, consider what the Bible says about the fate of the righteous.

Psalm 92:12: “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree.”

Isaiah 57:1: “The righteous perisheth, and no man layeth it to heart.”

It is difficult to know from this whether one should strive to be righteous. There are numerous other examples. Should one act altruistically and not hide this behavior from others?

Matthew 5:16 “In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

Matthew 6:3–4: “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Is it sometimes OK to lie or to judge others? Again, the Bible gives no single answer; different passages provide divergent answers.

If we interpret these biblical guides to action as providing insight into what kind of being we are (one that ought to be righteous, say), then they can be seen as a window onto our nature. And if this is the case, even if the Bible were the only sacred text, one would have to pick and choose passages to have a clear picture of who we are, how we should act, and what we should strive to become or to avoid. It would be hard for such picking and choosing not to merely reflect prior ideas about human nature instead of informing them. But the Bible is not the only sacred text—far from it. Christianity is not a unified doctrine itself, and it is certainly not the only religion with a creation story and something to say about human nature. Most religions have at

their basis a creation story, one that describes human creation and the mark that this creation has on human nature. The creation story endorsed by the Catholic Church is one among many. The picture given by the great Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita, to name just one example, is quite different from that of the Catholic Church. Thus to base human nature on one of these texts presupposes some justification for why the favored text provides the one true picture of human nature.

If the apparent inconsistencies quoted above are true inconsistencies and if such are a general feature of religious texts, then this internal inconsistency, combined with an absence of justification for holding that one and only one is the source of truths, makes it all but impossible to justify one religion or interpretation over another. Conceptions of human nature derived from religion might therefore often be a mere repackaging of one's prior beliefs and inclinations. This may mean that the normative human nature project is doomed. But before one reaches this conclusion, two other normative approaches should be considered, one with a foundation in evolutionary biology, another based on aesthetic preferences.

Evolution by natural selection produces natural functions or purposes in the world. The heart's purpose is pumping blood, despite the fact that it does many other things, such as making noise, burning calories, and taking up space in the chest. The reason that pumping blood is its purpose is that pumping blood is the trait that was selected for over its evolutionary history. Hearts that made noise or burned calories but failed to pump blood were not selected for; organisms with such hearts would be weeded out of the population.<sup>2</sup>

Hearts and other biological adaptations therefore have a kind of normativity; they have something that they ought to be doing. Perhaps, one might think, we could ground a normative conception of human nature on the normativity of natural selection. The benefit of such a conception of human nature is that it would be normative, yet based on objective scientific criteria, not on subjective interpretations of creation myths.

Despite the appeal of the evolutionary approach, it is not in fact a satisfying source of a normative conception of human nature. One reason is that natural purposes are purposes that parts of an organism have in virtue of the fitness contribution these parts provided to their ancestors. Teeth are for slicing and grinding food because of the contribution to biological fitness

---

<sup>2</sup> See Allen, Bekoff, and Lauder 1998.

that teeth playing this role had for ancestors. More generally, the normative character of natural purposes is of this kind: Parts of organisms have purposes in virtue of the ancestral fitness contribution of the parts to the whole. Thus, it does not make sense to ask what the purpose is of whole organisms. This is not entirely true: some organisms are grouped together into superorganisms that can act as biological individuals—ants in a colony or bees in a hive, for example. In these cases, there are distinct casts of insect, and it makes sense to ask what the purpose is of, say, a medium-sized worker in a particular ant species. But in species without specialized casts, it does not make sense to ask what the purpose is of the entire organism. Thus, if the normative character of whole humans—and not their parts—is sought, the naturally selected purposes will have little to offer.

To deny that human nature cannot be derived from natural purposes is not to deny that natural selection was a strong force in shaping human nature. Our nature is what it is to a large degree because of the selection pressures that operated on our ancestors. Our nature is thus evolutionary in this sense. But just because it is evolutionary in this sense does not mean that we can read a normative human nature off of the naturally selected function of our parts.<sup>3</sup>

If seeking a foundation for natural purposes in religion or evolution is unlikely to bear fruit, what other possibilities exist for deriving normative conceptions of human nature? One possibility is to base human nature on aesthetic preferences. In this case, we have a conception of how we would like humans to be and how we would like them to act. We label this human nature, and the normative force of human nature is thus derived from the difference between how we are and how we want to be. While I think that it can be a productive exercise to imagine how we would like humans to be, since this can provide a target for self-improvement, it seems wrong to label as human nature this ideal human nature. If anything, human nature should be considered that which we wish to mold into the ideal, not the ideal itself.

Deriving normative notions of human nature from religion, evolution, or our aesthetic preferences is thus problematic in one or more ways. This is not to say that we can never derive normative conclusions about our actions from premises about our nature. But such derivations would not be derivations from human nature alone. Instead, they would be based on normative premises plus nonnormative premises about our nature.

---

<sup>3</sup> See Allen, Bekoff, and Lauder 1998.

If the pursuit of normative human nature is unlikely to bear fruit, we should instead explore the possibility of a descriptive account of human nature. Such a conception understands human nature to be about what humans are like, not about what humans ought to be like.

### **Essences and the Challenges of Descriptive Projects**

Normative conceptions of human nature center on figuring out what it is we ought to be like, whereas descriptive accounts of human nature aim at characterizing what we are like. We have seen that there are problems with common ways of arriving at a normative account of human nature, but there are also challenges to producing descriptive accounts—challenges so difficult that some philosophers have even called for the abandonment of the concept *human nature*. I argue below that essentialist descriptive projects are indeed problematic but will offer a nonessentialist alternative.

The most straightforward descriptive account of human nature considers “human” to refer to the biological species *Homo sapiens* and “nature” to denote the essential properties of the species—properties necessary and sufficient for membership in *Homo sapiens*. The search for human nature, then, is just to find the essence of our species. In order for this account to work, species must have essences.

The problem is that the origin of evolutionary biology in the nineteenth century marked the demise of species essentialism. Darwin, in his *Origin of Species* (1859), made two important advances. One is the proposal that natural selection could be a strong and creative force in evolution, enabling the production of complex traits exquisitely adapted to their uses. The other is the idea that the history of life has a tree structure: there is one giant tree of life, and all the terminal branch tips represent extant individuals. Branches on this tree represent taxa such as species, genera, families, and phyla. Species and genera represent small branches, whereas more basic taxonomic divisions like phyla represent large, central branches.

Darwin spent the first two chapters of the *Origin* on the topic of variation. This was not merely to argue that there is sufficient variation in nature for natural selection to act on. Instead, Darwin wished to make a more fundamental claim about the nature of variation and the status of the taxonomic categories. For Darwin, the tree structure is real, but we have some liberty in the way we draw circles around the branches and provide them with names. This explains why different taxonomists will describe different numbers of species when studying the same

specimens. Although it may be that these taxonomists are making errors, it is also possible that they merely have different perspectives on how one should categorize nature's variation and draw species-level circles about the branches. For Darwin, the species category is not different in kind from higher-level genera or lower-level variations. Instead, variations are the fuel for speciation, and speciation can lead to new genera.

The Darwinian insight about the tree structure of the history of life has carried over into contemporary science. The dominant scientific way of reconstructing and analyzing phylogenetic trees is known as cladistics, and the trees they generate are called cladograms. For cladists, taxonomic names (species names or other taxonomic categories) are properly used to denote a branch point and all the descendant branches.

This all becomes important when we ask why a particular individual is a member of a particular species. The answer given to us by contemporary science is that the individual belongs to the species because it resides within a particular branch of the tree of life. It is not because it has certain intrinsic properties. Foxes generally have fur, four legs, a tail, and two eyes, but bearing these traits is not what makes them foxes. A fox is a fox if and only if it is a part of the fox branch of the tree of life. A hairless or one-eyed fox is just as much a fox as a stereotypical fox. The same is true of humans. Although humans typically speak a language and walk on two legs, no individual must exhibit these species-typical traits in order to be a human. And just as humans can be more or less typical, they do not similarly exist on a scale of more or less belonging to *Homo sapiens*.

The philosopher David Hull (1986) used the fact that species belongingness is based on existence in a phylogenetic tree instead of essential properties to argue that humans have no nature. His argument goes like this: The "nature" in human nature denotes an essence. The human species lacks an essence. Therefore, there is no such thing as human nature.<sup>4</sup>

In the face of Hull's argument, there are two responses one could give. One is to concede the soundness of his argument and try to suppress uses of "human nature," arguing that human nature should go the way of antiquated conceptions of chemical elements like the aether and phlogiston. The other response is to challenge Hull's argument, to argue that the first premise is

---

<sup>4</sup> The claim that species membership is not based on essences should be distinguished from arguments concerning whether or not species represent a natural kind. See, e.g., Ruse 1987; Boyd 1999.

false: The “nature” in human nature does not need to refer to an essence. Instead, there could be a nonessentialist conception of human nature.

There have been a number of attempts to create nonessentialist accounts of human nature.<sup>5</sup> A central challenge is how to deal with diversity and difference. If each one of us were exactly the same as each other, to characterize one of us would be to characterize all. Such a characterization could thus serve as a way of defining human nature. However, each of us is unique and each of us exists in a unique cultural milieu. To characterize one is to characterize all only if one paints with very broad strokes—strokes so broad that the interesting details of our humanness all but disappear.

There have been two main strategies for dealing with this problem. One is to find a way of picking out a set of core traits, each of which belongs to the majority of humans. This is the central tendency strategy: there is a set of traits that humans tend to exhibit. The philosopher Edouard Machery offers an account of this kind. For him, “human nature is the set of properties that humans tend to possess as a result of the evolution of their species” (2008, 323). Under this view, human nature consists of a set of traits. In this case the traits are delimited by two criteria: (1) they must be possessed by the majority of the species, and (2) they must be due to evolution and not merely learned.

This central tendency approach successfully avoids the pitfalls of essentialism and deals with the challenge of diversity by stipulating that not all individuals need to display a trait in order for it to be considered a component of human nature. But does the central tendency concept of human nature do for us what we want a concept of human nature to do? This, of course, gets back to our question of what a concept of human nature is for. If it is to be descriptive, to characterize our species and perhaps say how it differs from other closely related species, it is not clear that the central tendency approach is best. For one, it ignores traits that exist in only one sex. Female menopause is a quite interesting feature of our species. Why should this be excluded from human nature just because it is not exhibited by the majority of the species? Furthermore, the central tendency approach describes human nature in terms of an array of traits, not in terms of how these traits are related to one another. But an important part of our nature is how the traits are causally or temporally related to one another, which traits tend to

---

<sup>5</sup> See Downes and Machery 2013 for a recent collection of papers on human nature.



cluster together, and what the ordered sequence is in which they are typically exhibited. Because of these limitations of the central tendency approach, I have offered (Ramsey 2013) an alternative to this account, which I describe in the following section.

### **The Life History Trait Cluster Account**

Humans live their lives and exhibit traits over their life histories. Some traits like teeth or language are absent from babies but are usually present in adults. Many traits appear in a reliable sequence: adult teeth after baby teeth, baby talk before words, and words before sentences. By “trait,” I mean anything exhibited by the organism, including morphological traits (e.g., facial hair), intentional behaviors (e.g., shaving or talking), and behaviors outside of conscious control (e.g., digesting).

For every individual, there is the life they actually lived and there are the countless lives that they could have lived. For each of us, the particular way that we encountered the heterogeneity in the environment has had a profound effect on our life history outcomes. Had things unfolded differently in countless ways, I would not be here writing this essay. In fact, for each of us, there are an infinite number of ways that we could have lived our lives. This set of possible lives, despite being infinite in size, is highly constrained and is unique to each of us. Although I could easily have ended up being a biologist instead of a philosopher, I could not have sprouted gills and taken to the water, nor could I have built a chrysalis and metamorphosed into a butterfly. These outcomes are not a part of my possible life histories.

From the raw material of the set of possible life histories, conceptions of individual nature and human nature can be derived. Individual nature can be defined as *the pattern of trait clusters within the individual's set of possible life histories*. Each individual will have a distinct set of traits furnishing their possible life histories, and these traits will be arranged in a unique pattern. This unique pattern of traits is their individual nature: it defines what is impossible, provides probability values for what is possible, and shows which traits are linked to others and how they are linked.

Individual nature serves as a foundation for human nature. If you combine all the possible life histories from all the individual natures, then you will have an even richer set of possible life histories. The trait cluster patterns in this set constitute human nature. In other words, human

nature can be defined as *the pattern of trait clusters within the totality of extant human possible life histories*.

Let's now consider how this account of human nature differs from the central tendency accounts, what advantages it has over such accounts, and what challenges it faces. For a central tendency account, human traits are divided into two categories, those that are part of human nature and those that are not. The life history trait cluster (LTC) account, on the other hand, does not have two categories. All traits that exist in the space of life histories are a part of human nature. This might seem like the downfall of the LTC account—if it is so permissive, then surely it cannot provide any insight about human nature.

To see the payoff of the LTC account, consider what sort of human studies are conducted in the social, psychological, and biological sciences. What scientists are interested in, for the most part, is not whether or not humans possess a particular trait, depression, say. Instead, they are interested in discovering the patterns of expression of this trait: what sorts of genetic traits, lifestyles, or traumatic events are associated with depression? The human sciences, then, concern patterns of trait expression—what the traits are, how they are related to one another, and what their causal relations are. If the human sciences are studying human nature, then human nature should concern patterns of trait expression and should not simply be a bucket of traits. The LTC account precisely fills this role and makes human nature the subject of the human sciences.

If the LTC account allows human nature to be the subject of the human sciences, we should ask whether human nature plays the other roles we might want it to play. One role that human nature plays in the popular media is to explain or make sense of the presence of particular human traits. One sees headlines like “Juvenile Males Are by Nature Violent.” The usual implied contrast is that such behavior is due to our nature and not culture. One might (rightly) resist this dichotomy and point out that there are not isolated causal influences “nature” and “culture” that can act independently to cause a particular trait. Instead, behavioral traits are produced as a result of a complex interplay of various factors like heritable material, individual learning, and social learning.

These problems aside, we can ask how we can use human nature to explain the way traits are distributed across our species. Within the framework of the central tendency account, the focal question is whether the trait is a part of human nature. The problem is that the above claim is about a subset of our species, juvenile males. And since juvenile males are a minority, nothing

they alone do can be a part of human nature (since, at least under Machery's rendering, the trait must be exhibited by the majority). We could instead ask whether "violence" is a part of human nature, but the answer to this does not shed light on the question at hand. With the LTC account, on the other hand, we can investigate whether the traits "juvenile male" and "violent" are associated. Is there a robust association across cultural contexts, say? If so, what explains this? A concept of human nature that rests on trait associations, then, will lead to more productive answers to questions of this kind.

The study of humans is, to a large degree, the study of our traits and how they are associated. No two humans are alike, but they are similar in what traits they display and how they display them. As the philosopher Paul Griffiths (2011, 328) put it, "Humans have a shared nature in the way that vertebrate skeletons have a shared nature. There is structure to their diversity." The goal of the LTC account is to provide a framework within which we can understand and appreciate this structure.

Before concluding, there is one more concept that I would like to offer, that of *uniquely human nature*. Human nature can play the role of characterizing ourselves, but it can also be used to distinguish us from other species. Although human nature, as defined above by the LTC account, is simply an account of the nature of our species, it is uniquely human nature that can set us apart from other species. I will define uniquely human nature as *the subset of human nature that is unique to Homo sapiens*. Although it is human nature for females to lactate after giving birth, since these traits are robustly associated, this is also true of all mammals. Thus, while it is a feature of human nature, it is not a feature of uniquely human nature.

We now have a suite of concepts. There is the set of life histories that form the basis for individual nature. Then there is human nature, which is built out of individual natures. Finally, we have uniquely human nature, built out of human nature minus the nature of other species. These concepts allow human nature to rise out of a hidden inner core to be revealed as what scientists and humanists are studying when they are studying humans.

## **Conclusion**

We have seen that there are deep difficulties with the normative approach to human nature, and that one should be skeptical of those who are not engaging with the sciences in the pursuit of human nature. The account of human nature I offer above attempts to free human nature from the

occult realm and suggests that human nature can be seen in the manifest behaviors of fellow humans; to study human nature is no more than to study the patterns of human traits and their causes.

Extraordinary acts like Lucas diving onto grenades show that such acts are within the domain of human nature. But this does not reveal something hidden within each of us, for what is a part of human nature is not always a part of each individual nature. And such acts are a unique outcome of the particulars of the situation. Only by observing repeated instances of like behavior can we gain deeper insight into how pervasive it is within human nature. Finally, concerning the opening question of whether we are good by nature and corrupted by society, or bad by nature and tamed by society, if one takes the LTC view, these alternatives are difficult to make sense of. There is not a core nature prior to experience that we can point to as being good or bad, for culture, experience, and learning are woven into the fabric of life histories in a way that is impossible to unravel. All one can point to are good and bad outcomes and the dispositions that underlie them. We can investigate differences in how individuals are raised and associate this with a diversity of outcomes, but an unraised or uncultured individual does not exist and is therefore neither good nor bad. This view of human nature is liberating. While it acknowledges the infinite variation within our species, it points to constraints in this variation, and makes human nature observable in all acts, lowly and sublime.

### **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to Agustin Fuentes and Aku Visala for the work and care they have put into this volume. Thank you to Maya Parson and Michael Deem for taking time to carefully read and comment on earlier drafts of this chapter. This chapter was completed while I was on a National Endowment for the Humanities-supported fellowship at the National Humanities Center. I thank the NEH and NHC for their support. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

## References

- Allen, C., G. Bekoff, and G. Lauder. 1998. *Nature's Purposes: Analyses of Function and Design in Biology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Boyd, R. 1999. "Homeostasis, Species, and Higher Taxa." In *Species: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. R. Wilson, 141–85. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Darwin, C. 1859. *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. London: Murray.
- Downes, S., and Machery E. 2013. *Arguing about Human Nature: Contemporary Debates*. London: Routledge Press.
- Griffiths, P. 2011. "Our Plastic Nature." In Snait B. Gissis and Eva Jablonka (Eds.) *Transformations of Lamarckism: From Subtle Fluids to Molecular Biology*, ed. S. B. Gissis and E. Jablonka, 319–30. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hull, D. L. 1986. "On Human Nature." *Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association*, 2: 3–13.
- Lucas, J. H., and D. K. Drum. 2006. *Indestructible: The Unforgettable Story of a Marine Hero at the Battle of Iwo Jima*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
- Machery, E. 2008. "A Plea for Human Nature." *Philosophical Psychology* 21 (3): 321–29.
- Ramsey, G. 2012. "How Human Nature Can Inform Human Enhancement: A Commentary on Lewens's *Human Nature: The Very Idea*." *Philosophy and Technology* 25: 479–83.
- . 2013. "Human Nature in a Post-Essentialist World." *Philosophy of Science* 80 (5): 983–93.
- Ruse, M. 1987. "Biological Species: Natural Kinds, Individuals, or What?" *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 38: 225–42.