

# Louis P. Pojman, Who Are We? Theories of Human Nature

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Louis P. Pojman, *Who Are We? Theories of Human Nature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York 2006, xvi + 301 pp.

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“Human nature” is a key term in many contemporary debates, especially those revolving around issues like genetic engineering, abortion, homosexual rights, or evolution vs. creation. Moreover, human nature is frequently used in both a descriptive and a normative sense, with proponents of various and often mutually exclusive ideological agendas claiming that their conception of human nature not only accurately *describes* how humans *do* think or behave, but also *prescribes* how they *ought to* think or behave (homosexuality may be the clearest case of this). And yet, human nature is an idea that is extremely hard to pin down and apply intelligibly, as it is unclear not only which human traits – either individually or jointly – are necessary constituents of a *distinctively* human nature, but also whether such a thing as a distinctively *human* nature exists at all. This is why, when confronted with all the difficulties surrounding the idea of human nature, it seems reasonable to consult the opinions and views on human nature held by some of the most renowned thinkers in the history of philosophy. Some of these can now be traced more easily thanks to a book by the late Louis P. Pojman entitled *Who Are We? Theories of Human Nature*.

During his long and fruitful professional career, Professor Pojman taught philosophy at various universities in the United States and the United Kingdom (Oxford, Cambridge, Notre Dame, Dallas, Mississippi, New York). From 1995 until his retirement in 2004, he taught philosophy at the United States Military Academy at West Point. He wrote or edited more than thirty books and published more than a hundred articles in scholarly journals and anthologies. His philosophical interests lay mainly in ethics, applied ethics and political philosophy, but he also published significantly on the philosophy of religion and epistemology. He received numerous awards for his teaching work. Professor Pojman died on October 15, 2005.

Along with his book *How Should We Live? An Introduction to Ethics* (2005) and the anthology *Justice* (2005), *Who Are We? Theories of Human Nature* is one of Pojman’s last published works. The book consists of a preface and introduction followed by fifteen chapters devoted to various theories of human nature (stretching from early Biblical views to modern, scientifically oriented theories), and ends with a conclusion and glossary. The book is relatively comprehensive, more so than some similar recent books on the same subject such as, for example, *Ten Theories of Human*

*Nature* by Leslie Stevenson and David L. Haberman (4<sup>th</sup> edition, Oxford University Press, 2004). This is a textbook intended for use by philosophy students and teachers, with each chapter containing study questions and suggestions for further reading. Since a detailed presentation of the entire textbook would take up too much space, the following is just a brief outline of the main points from each chapter.

Chapter 1 presents Judaic and Christian views of human nature, as contained in the Old and New Testament. The central tenet of this view is that “humans are made in the image of God, free, responsible beings with dignity and authority”. However, “humanity has sinned” and people find themselves “alienated from God and in need of salvation”. This has led to a new covenant with humanity, as expressed in the teaching that eternal life is contingent upon the quality of one’s moral life here and now, especially such virtues as faith, love and hope (p. 24). Chapter 2 covers the Greek tradition on human nature, singling out the dispute between the Sophists and Socrates. Opposing the moral egoism and relativism of the Sophists, Socrates “developed a simple idea of human nature as centered in the idea that virtue is knowledge”, believing “that goodness leads to the highest happiness” and that we have an “innate, intuitive knowledge of moral truth” (p. 38). Plato’s theory of human nature is outlined in Chapter 3, on the basis of his six well-known theses or ideas: the theory of Forms existing apart from their objects; mind/body dualism; the doctrine of the immortality of the soul and the theory of recollection of innate ideas; the idea that reason should be our primary guide in life; the idea of justice as the holistic harmony of the soul (and also of the state); and the notion of the ineffable and mystical experience of the Good. Aristotle’s understanding of human nature – which is the subject of Chapter 4 – is a direct response to Plato’s dualistic views. According to Aristotle’s biologically inspired functional approach, everything in nature has its purpose (*telos*); and the human *telos* is “to live as worthy, moral-political citizens, using practical reason to solve our problems and resolve our conflicts of interest” (p. 70). Chapter 5 presents Augustine’s views on human nature, especially his understanding of evil as the absence of being, his defense of free will, his doctrine of love as the basis of ethics, and his idea of the great chain of being, according to which all reality is hierarchically ordered and ultimately connected to God. Chapter 6 presents two non-Western perspectives on human nature: the Hindu view, with its doctrine of reincarnation and of seeking resignation and tranquility, and the Buddhist view, with its emphasis on the Four Noble Truths (one of these being the escape from suffering and attaining nirvana in this life) and its denial of the existence of any essential self (*atman*).

Chapter 7 contrasts two classical theories of human nature: Thomas Hobbes' "conservative" theory, according to which humans are machines with a corrupt and selfish nature (so that only a "Leviathan", in the form of the central authority of a political state, can rescue them from their miserable "state of nature"), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "liberal" theory, which views humans as good in their true nature and only subsequently corrupted by society and civilization (the idea of the "noble savage"). Immanuel Kant's views on human nature are presented in Chapter 8, with particular emphasis on his Copernican revolution in epistemology and the role of the categorical imperative in his moral theory. Pojman's main point here is that "although Kant's theory of human nature is epistemically pessimistic [...], he is basically an optimist: humans, as rational beings, have inherent dignity through reason and thereby can know the moral law" (p. 135). The subject of Chapter 9 is the "pessimistic idealism" of Arthur Schopenhauer. By combining Kant's epistemology and Berkeley's theory of perception, Schopenhauer famously argued for a "noumenal" stance, claiming that "the world is my representation" (*Vorstellung*). The only "thing in itself" (*Ding an sich*) that we have direct access to is our individual will, which, however, inevitably causes us continual disappointment, frustration and suffering. For Schopenhauer, "aesthetic contemplation can enable us temporarily to transcend suffering, but the deepest and only abiding salvation comes in resigning one's self to the oceanic body of the world-soul" (p. 150).

Karl Marx's materialist and dialectical views on human nature are described in Chapter 10, in the context of central Marxist theses such as historical materialist determinism, class struggle, alienation, communism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, or religion as the "opium of the people". Briefly stated, Marx based his comprehensive theory of human nature "on historical materialist determinism, which defined culture and morality as functions of economics and described communism as inevitable" (p. 165). In Chapter 11, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic view of human nature is interpreted first in connection with his tripartite division of personality (id, ego and superego), and then further elaborated in the context of his two well-known theses regarding the unconscious and the sex drive ("pansexuality") as primary factors in the human condition. Also discussed are the rival psychoanalytic theories of Carl Gustav Jung and Alfred Adler, as well as some standard methodological problems concerning psychoanalytic theory. Chapter 12 is dedicated to three existentialist theories of human nature, namely, those of Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre. Apart from their strong emphasis on individual freedom and subjective, personal existence, a common feature of all existentialist thinkers is their endeavor to "serve as an important corrective to what they

perceive as overly rationalistic and reductionist views of human nature that tend to leave out an appreciation of the arts, imagination, passions, and emotions" (p. 199).

Chapter 13, on the Darwinian theory of human nature, records how Darwin's theory of evolution by means of natural selection shook the foundations of the traditional idea of the great chain of being, and of man as created in the image of God. It also highlights the current heated debates on the potentially far-reaching moral and political implications of contemporary evolutionary theory, particularly sociobiology. Chapter 14 is devoted to the contemporary philosophy of mind, and examines the ongoing dialogue between various approaches to the human mind, ranging from more traditional views like dualism and monistic idealism to contemporary versions of (monistic) materialism such as metaphysical behaviorism, reductive and eliminative materialism, and functionalism. The 15th and final chapter is directly connected to the previous one, and discusses the problem of free will as one of the central paradoxes of human nature. The crucial question here is: "Do we have free will, or are we wholly determined by antecedent causes?" After examining some standard arguments in favor of various positions in this area (determinism, libertarianism, metaphysical compatibilism) Pojman concludes that many questions remain open in this debate.

In assessing the merits and possible drawbacks of Pojman's book, one should bear in mind, first of all, that writing a historical survey of theories of human nature is not an easy task. It requires considerable knowledge of the history of philosophy, as well as a refined ability to select and portray those philosophers who represent the most important theoretical trends and "paradigm shifts" in the historical development of our understanding of human nature. A second problem with writing such a survey is that many authors, both classical and modern, seldom wrote about human nature as such, but rather primarily about particular features of the human condition (such as knowledge or morality), which we sometimes, for specific philosophical purposes, subsume under the heading of "human nature". In other words, certain philosophers' particular views on human nature must be carefully reconstructed by consulting their contributions to varied philosophical disciplines such as metaphysics, epistemology or ethics. Also, in the case of certain authors any particular views on human nature can only be assumed, and often we need to carefully distil their views on this topic from their wider philosophical thoughts and ideas. Finally, besides a great amount of knowledge about the history of philosophy in general, and about specific philosophical disciplines or authors in particular, writing a historical survey on theories of human nature also requires great skill and experience in producing texts for learning and teaching purposes.

(Pojman's book is obviously intended for these purposes, and should be evaluated as such.)

I believe it may safely be said that *Who Are We? Theories of Human Nature* fares pretty well in terms of all three of the aforementioned difficulties. It is abundantly obvious that Pojman was quite well-informed regarding the history of philosophy (including the history of Eastern thought), and so was able to write a historical survey on such an elusive subject as philosophical views on human nature. Each position is presented in a clear and easy-to-read manner, with the added virtue of portraying all the selected philosophers (and their ideas) in what is basically the "received view". Pojman wisely avoids entering into the numerous, often conflicting modern interpretations of various philosophers, as this would only make his book twice as long and less "user-friendly" than in its current form. (In any case, more demanding readers will be able to seek out more comprehensive approaches to particular philosophers by using Pojman's suggestions for further reading.) One possible drawback of Pojman's selection of philosophers is the omission of other fairly important contributions to the problem of human nature. For example, it seems to me that at least one chapter on historically influential figures like Descartes or Hume should have been included in this survey, especially since the intellectual traditions to which they belong (rationalism and empiricism) still largely demarcate the domain of many contemporary philosophical debates regarding the problem of human nature.

Throughout this book, Pojman successfully manages to provide a comparison of diverse views on human nature, highlighting the manner in which different philosophers have approached a general diagnosis of the human condition, the problem of the metaphysical character of human nature, the relationship of human nature to transcendent reality, the problem of free will, and the idea of human destiny. This comparison is also usefully summarized in the book's conclusion (see especially the table on pp. 276–277). Each chapter is written in a highly readable manner, beginning with a general introduction and fairly brief biographical details about each philosopher, and ending with a chapter summary, study questions, and suggestions for further reading. Pojman was obviously an experienced teacher who knew how to write textbooks that would be useful for both students and teachers. However, one possible criticism might be that certain chapters contain too many lengthy quotations from the original works (especially the chapter on Schopenhauer and, to a lesser degree, the one on Kant). Although it may sometimes be instructive to let classical philosophers "speak for themselves", in some cases (such as Kant) this may be counterproductive due to the fact that many such texts are not easily

accessible to modern readers (especially those inexperienced in philosophy).

Unfortunately, the book also contains a number of typographical errors. For example, the title of Schopenhauer's work *Parerga and Paralipomena* is repeatedly given incorrectly as *Parega* (omitting the second "r") and *Paralipomena*; on p. 132 we find "none human animals" instead of "non-human animals"; German nouns are almost always written incorrectly, without their first letters capitalized (e.g. *vorstellung* and *ding an sich* instead of *Vorstellung* and *Ding an sich*) or without the umlaut (e.g. *Übermensch* rather than *Überrnensch*). Some titles of books are also given incorrectly: for example, on p. 25 Thomas Nagel's book *Mortal Questions* is mistakenly referred to as *Mortal Luck*, while on p. 217 Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* has been rechristened *The Selfish Bird*. It should be emphasized, however, that these omissions and errors by no means diminish the great utility of Pojman's book, not only for undergraduate and graduate students and their teachers, but even for scholars with substantial experience in treating the difficult subject of human nature.

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