Virtues of the Nomological Notion of Human Nature

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Goal of this Talk

A good successor notion for traditional notions of human nature?
Successor Notions

1. Compatible with those advances in the sciences (i.e., evolutionary biology) that undermine the notions to be replaced (i.e., the essentialist notion of human nature).

2. Fulfill at least a subset of the functions the notions to be replaced were meant to fulfill.
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Take-Home Message

The nomological notion of human nature fulfills many of the functions the traditional notion of human nature was meant to fulfill.
1. The nomological notion of human nature
2. Five traditional functions of human nature
3. Causal explanation
4. Bounds on human flexibility
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A set of properties that (1) are necessary and jointly sufficient for being human, (2) are distinctive of the human species, and (3) causally explain the other properties of human beings.
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Human nature is the set of properties that humans tend to possess as a result of the evolution of their lineage.
Examples
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I. Description

One function of the notion of human nature is to characterize what humans are like.
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2. Classification

One function of the notion of human nature is *to distinguish humans from non-humans.*
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One function of the notion of human nature is to explain causally why humans are the way they are.
3. Causal Explanation

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“Human nature is stubborn and cannot be forced without a cost.”
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One function of the notion of human nature is to provide norms to assess behaviors, characters, ways of life, etc.
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While an Aristotelian human nature would be a cause of human characteristics, the nomological notion consists of these characteristics themselves—viz. effects.
Explanantia need not be causes.
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Classifying a phenomenon can provide an explanation of this phenomenon if the class is causal.
Because classifying by means of a causal class entails endorsing an explanatory sketch: One pragmatically implicates that a particular type of explanation is correct.

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Examples

Psychosomatic diseases

Adaptation
By asserting that some trait is part of human nature, one implicates that it can be explained evolutionarily and that a purely non-evolutionary (cultural/social) explanation would be wrong.
Strong Reciprocity and Human Sociality

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Human groups maintain a high level of sociality despite a low level of relatedness among group members. This paper reviews the evidence for an empirically identifiable form of prosocial behavior in humans, which we call “strong reciprocity,” that may in part explain human sociality. A strong reciprocator is predisposed to cooperate with others and punish non-cooperators, even when this behavior cannot be justified in terms of extended kinship or reciprocal altruism. We present a simple model, stylized but plausible, of the evolutionary emergence of strong reciprocity.
“We cooperate and punish without attending to possible benefits because this is part of human nature.”
Example: Strong Reciprocity

More ‘altruistic’ punishment in larger societies
Frank W. Marlowe¹,*, J. Colette Berbesque¹, Abigail Barr², Clark Barrett³,
Alexander Bolyanatz⁴, Juan Camilo Cardenas⁵, Jean Ensminger⁶,
Michael Gurven⁷, Edwins Gwako⁸, Joseph Henrich⁹, Natalie Henrich¹⁰,
Carolyn Lesorogol¹¹, Richard McElreath¹² and David Tracer¹³
Example: Strong Reciprocity

“Cooperating and punishing without attending to possible benefits is not part of human nature.”
The nomological notion of human nature can fulfill a (slightly) revised version of the explanatory function.
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The Issue

Can the nomological notion of human nature set bounds on human flexibility, in some way or other?
It is plausible that many traits that constitute human nature are *difficult* to modify.
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1. Epistemological: we do not know how to modify them.
2. Instrumental: modifying them may require much social and educational engineering.
3. Instrumental: modifying them may have undesirable consequences.
Example?

Parental love and kibbutzim (E.O. Wilson)
Mammalian and Primate Traits

Traits that are constitutive of human nature need not be specific to humans.

The development of mammalian or primate traits are unlikely to be sensitive to educational practices, cultural variables, etc.
Mammalian and Primate Traits

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Mammalian traits are likely to be genetically entrenched.
Example

Emotional expressions
Canalized Traits

At least some traits, and perhaps many, that are constitutive of human nature are canalized against the type of variation found in human cultures.

These traits will be resilient to some cultural and educational practices, and the variables influencing them won’t be obvious.
Upshot

The nomological notion of human nature can fulfill a version of the bound-setting function.
The nomological notion of human nature can fulfill many of the functions the traditional notion of human nature was meant to fulfill: It is descriptive as well as explanatory, and it sets some kind of bounds to human flexibility.
If Interested...

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