

Velasquez, Philosophy

TRACK 1: CHAPTER REVIEW

CHAPTER 2: Human Nature

2.1: Why Does Your View of Human Nature Matter?

Learning objectives:

- **To be able to define “human nature” and “psychological egoism”**
- **To explain how our views of human nature influence our relationships with other people, society, and the universe**

The most basic question in philosophy is: What kind of being am I? The answer to this question about human nature will affect how you see others and how you live.

Psychologists have considered the question of whether humans are self-interested, or whether unselfish considerations can motivate. Sigmund Freud, for example, held that humans are essentially selfish and aggressive—a view that was also endorsed earlier by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes. This view was also endorsed by Mark Mercer, who argued for **psychological egoism**—the theory that humans can only act out of self-interest. Mercer claims that introspection reveals that humans always act intentionally to benefit themselves.

If you believe that humans are self-interested, this will affect how you interact with others. It will also affect how you think society should be organized; would a self-interested society be better arranged along socialist or capitalist lines, for example? And it will affect how you interact with the universe; if people are material beings only, then you might think that death is the end of existence. If you do not believe this, then you might think that the material universe is a preparation for a spiritual life in another world and universe.

2.2: What is Human Nature?

Learning objectives:

- **To describe and critically value the rationalistic and Judeo-Christian views of human nature.**
- **To explain how Darwinism, existentialism, and feminism have challenged these views.**

Many people believe that there is life after death. Such accounts ask us to make some fundamental assumptions. First, they ask us to assume that human beings have a self; second, they ask us to assume that this self is different in form to the body. This is the Traditional Western view of human nature—and not everyone accepts it.

The Traditional Rationalistic View

The most influential version of the traditional view sees humans primarily as thinkers capable of reasoning. This view is represented in the work of Plato, who believed that humans consisted of appetite, reason, and a spirited element. Reason seeks what is good and right, the spirited element seeks to assert itself, and appetite involves desires. For Plato, the purpose and destiny of the soul is to be free of its body and ascend to heaven where it will be united with “Forms”—eternal and perfect ideals. For Plato, as opposed to Freud, Hobbes and Mercer, humans can control their appetites and their aggression through the use of reason; they are not ruled by self-interested desires. But the ability to exercise control in this way depends on one’s past choices; if a person gives in to his non-rational nature he will lose the ability to control it. For Aristotle, too, reason was also the highest power of humans—although while Plato held that the truth about human nature involved knowledge of another world of reality, Aristotle held that it only required knowledge of this world.

The Human Purpose

Aristotle emphasized that humans have a purpose, as do all living things. For Aristotle, as Plato, the use of reason is the purpose of human nature.

The Immaterial and Immortal Soul

Plato (but not Aristotle) emphasized the spiritual aspect of human nature. In the dialogue the *Phaedo*, Plato has Socrates argue that the self—the soul—is immaterial and so is immortal. This

is because, Plato held, we are engaged in the activity of knowing the Forms, something that a physical body cannot carry on.

Implications of the Traditional Rationalistic View

Aristotle claimed that if one group of persons was less rational than another they would be less than human, and could justifiably be enslaved by those who were more rational. If so, couldn't any form of exploitation be justified on these grounds? So, this view has significant implications. It has also influence another version of the Traditional view: The Judeo-Christian view of human nature.

Traditional Judeo-Christian View of Human Nature

According to the Christian tradition, humans are made in the image of God. The abilities to love and to know—will and intellect—are the defining characteristics of humans in the Judeo-Christian view. These are open to all, regardless of their level of rationality. For the Christian, the way to union with God is through emulating Jesus of Nazareth, in whom we find expression of the highest virtue: love. This view also fosters the idea of a moral self that can choose good or evil. This view is not, though, a denial of the rationalistic view; indeed, the early Christian St. Augustine agreed that that humans have an immaterial and an immortal soul and that soul is rational. But he maintained that humans could not overcome tendencies to do evil without the help of God, and he also emphasized the nature of the will, which is our ability to choose

between good or evil. The Christian view also agrees with the classical view that humans have a purpose.

In the modern world, the Rationalist and Christian views of the self have been challenged – especially by the science and philosophy of evolution.

The Darwinian Challenge

Charles Darwin proposed three key ideas. (1) That animals and plants are sometimes born by chance with features that are different from those of their parents that they can pass on to their offspring (“variations”), and that (2) because animals produce more offspring than can survive they must continuously compete with each other to stay alive. Finally Darwin argued for survival of the fittest, the notion that the random variations that an animal is born with can give it an advantage in the struggle for survival; animals with such variations are likely to pass them along to their offspring, while those without them are weeded out. This process can make animals gradually change into new species. This also applies to humans, who must too have evolved. This led to the disturbing realization that humans have not always been as they are.

Implications for the Traditional View

Darwin’s views have two implications. First, they imply that humans are animals and that the human ability to reason evolved from capacities among other non-human animals. Second, they undercut the view that humans are designed and have a purpose.

Darwin's Evidence

Darwin's theory, as contrasted with the notion that each species had been independently created by God, is supported by a number of forms of evidence. First, it explains why species can be classified into different groups that share common characteristics – namely, because they evolved from common ancestors. Second, it explains why species are geographically distributed over the earth. Third, bodily characteristics, such as structures and shapes, is best explained by evolution. Finally, the existence of the fossil record provides especially strong support for Darwin's theory. In sum, Darwin argues that his theory provides the best explanation for a number of distinct facts.

Responses to Darwin

Many have responded to Darwin. Most controversially, some have argued that his theory lacks definitive proof, and there is fossil evidence that is inconsistent with Darwinian evolution. Third, some attack his claim that there is no fundamental difference between the cognitive abilities of humans and of non-human animals.

The Existentialist Challenge

Existentialism holds that humans are whatever they make themselves to be. For Jean-Paul Sartre, humans are condemned to be free; they cannot rely on God, for He does not exist, nor on society to justify their actions. The consciousness of this freedom causes anguish; the most anguishing

thought of all is that we are responsible for ourselves. When we claim that something external to us is the cause of what we are we act in “bad faith”, which occurs when we pretend that we are not free.

This provides a profound challenge to the Traditional View; if it is correct, there is no such thing as a universal human nature.

The Feminist Challenge

Many feminists challenge that the Traditional view of human nature is sexist—it discriminates against women. Plato assumed that the soul and reason should rule over the body and its desires and emotions, while Aristotle claimed that women do not share fully in reason. The view that women are subordinate to men was echoed by Augustine.

Is this objection correct—are sexist views essential to the Traditional view? One response might be to claim that women are just as rational as men. Another might be to reject the view that reason is superior.

2.3 The Mind-Body Problem: How Do Mind and Body Relate?

Learning objectives:

- **Be able to say why dualism is so influential a view, and why it leads to the mind-body problem.**
- **Explain and critically evaluate the way materialism, identity theory, behaviorism, functionalism, and the computer view of human nature each try to solve the mind-body problem.**

To most of us it is obvious that we have a mind and a body. But, the mind's subjective consciousness is puzzling. Moreover, those who accept that the mind and the body are distinct are faced with a problem; how can a non-physical object interact with a physical one? Other people hold that only the physical exists.

The Dualist View of Human Nature

Rene Descartes held that the mind and the body were distinct, since we can conceive of the mind existing without the body. On this view, humans are made up of two substances. But this view faces the problem of how an immaterial mind can move a physical body, and how can a physical body affect an immaterial mind? Descartes held that since mind and body obviously interact there must be a point of contact between them; the pineal gland. Not everyone accepted this, Gottfried Leibniz held that the mind and body don't really interact at all, but only appear to, while Malebranche held that God synchronizes their apparent interactions.

The Materialist View of Human nature

Hobbes noted that the problem with dualism was that it held that there are two things in human nature. But, let us say that there is only one: the material body. The operations of the mind will then be explained in terms of the workings of the body. This view that processes such as thought and life are just physical or chemical processes is often called **reductionism**: the idea that we can completely understand one kind of reality in terms of another kind. It is, however, not clear how physical phenomena can produce mental phenomena.

The Mind/Brain Identity Theory of Human Nature

One kind of contemporary materialist view is the identity theory of the mind: that states of consciousness are identical with states of the brain. This view is held by J.J.C. Smart. But this might run into problems quickly. Brain states are publically observable, but mental states are not. Moreover, a mental experience has no location, no color, and no shape. So, how can brain states and conscious states be the same, since they are such very different things?

The Behaviorist View of Human Nature

Behaviorism is the view that mental activities can be explained in terms of behavior. For example, Gilbert Ryle held that mental activities could be explained in terms of the activities that they are associated with. Thus, to say that John knows that a chair is near is to say that he will behave in certain ways, such as sitting in it. But Hilary Putnam has argued that it is easy to come up with examples that show that behaviorism is wrong, such as when one acts as though one is in pain; one is not actually in pain, despite showing the appropriate behavior.

The Functionalist View of Human Nature

Another view of human nature is functionalism. This holds that we should explain mental activities and mental states as mediating between perceptual inputs and behavioral outputs.

Mental states and activities refer only to the functions they serve in the processes that connect our sensory inputs to our behavioral outputs. Functionalism allows that mental states can explain other mental states; a person's intention, for example, can be explained in terms of her desires and beliefs. The intention is then something that plays the role of linking the sensory stimulation to the desire to perform a certain action in light of it.

But the functionalist seems to leave something out; the inner conscious states that we are aware of.

Functionalism has led some philosophers to believe that the human brain is a kind of computer. Some have also argued that when computers can process inputs and outputs like the human brain does, they will be able to think. Alan Turing held that if a computer was so powerful that we could not tell the difference between its answers and those of a human being, the computer has a mind. John Searle opposes this view of human nature: using his Chinese Room thought experiment, he argues that computers lack consciousness. But Searle is not a dualist; he believes that humans are merely physical creatures; although the mental states that the physical states produce are not reducible to physical things.

Eliminative Materialism

Many philosophers believe that only matter exists. Given the difficulties faced by the monistic views outlined here, eliminative materialists hold that we should eliminate our belief in the existence of consciousness and mental states. These fictional realities, like the demons we used to think caused some mental disorders, and have no place in a science of the mind/brain

The New Dualism

New dualists hold not that there are two different kinds of substances in the universe, but that there are two different kinds of properties. These dualists hold that consciousness is not a physical feature of the world, but a nonmaterial property of it.

2.4 Is There an Enduring Self?

Learning objectives:

- **Explain why an ‘enduring self’ is so important for us and how it leads to the problem of personal identity**
- **Explain why it is so difficult to deal with the problem by appealing to the body, the soul, the memory, or the no-self view.**

The Traditional Western view assumes that you are the same person today as you were earlier in your life; it assumes that humans are selves that endure through time.

But we also sometimes say that a person has changed over time; if, for example her personality changed as a result of brain damage, or she suffers from Alzheimer's disease.

But, even aside from such cases, we need to know how it is that we can say that we are the same person throughout life. This is the problem of personal identity.

Maybe what makes you the same person across time is the persistence of your body. But, if this is the case we could never become new persons as a result of brain injury. Moreover, if this is what important then you could not survive your death. Finally, if brains were transplanted between people, wouldn't we want to say that the brain, and not the body, carried the self?

The Soul as an Enduring Self

The Traditional Western view holds that in each living human body is a soul; this is "me". Descartes held this view, holding that it was the continuity of his thinking mind that made him remain the same person "as often as" he exists. But, how do we know that a person's mind continues to be the same over time?

Memory as the Source of the Enduring Self

John Locke held that Descartes was mistaken, for if one soul migrated to another body and lost the memories that it formally had we would not say the person whose soul it was continued to

exist. From this, Locke concludes that what makes a person endure over time is memory. But in response to this Thomas Reid argued that Locke's view produced contradictions. For example, Tom at age 20 remembers being Tom at age 10, and so is the same person, Tom at age 30 remembers being Tom at age 20, but not being Tom at age 10. Thus, Tom at age 30 is both the same person as the person who was Tom at age 10, and is not the same person who was Tom at age 10! Also, what if I cannot remember everything that I did?

The No-Self View

Some views of human nature deny the existence of a self. Central to Buddhist thought is the idea that all things are composite and transient, and so nothing abides permanently as an individual. The self, like everything else, is in a constant state of flux and disintegration; it is transient. As a permanent entity, then, the self does not exist.

David Hume had a very similar view. He held that we cannot claim that there is an inner self because all we experience is a constant stream of sensations, and no determinate self.

These views do have problems, for it is not clear why we should be concerned with our future interests if they are correct.

2.5 Are We Independent and Self-Sufficient Individuals?

Learning objectives:

- **Describe the idea of an independent and self-sufficient self and explain why it is important to us.**
- **Compare how Aristotle, Hegel, and Taylor challenge the idea**

It seems obvious that parents should teach their children to be independent and self-sufficient, and shun conformity. People should also be true to themselves, and be free to live their own lives.

The Atomistic Self

These views are all based on the view of the self as atomistic, independent of others, and self-sufficient. For Descartes, for example, the real “me” is interior, and exist independently of others. Similarly, Kant held that the core of the real self is the ability to choose the moral laws and moral principles by which one should live one’s life.

The Relational Self

Charles Taylor suggests that there is another way of viewing the self; that who I am depends on my relationships; I need others to define who I am. Aristotle also claimed that humans are social animals, while Hegel argued that I cannot be who I am apart from my relationships to others; a

free and independent person is one who can choose what course his life will take, and we cannot develop this capacity unless others recognize and affirm our self-mastery.

Power and Hegel's View

The key idea, for Hegel, is that who you are ultimately depends on your relationships with others. The implications of this are profound; that we create strong and weak persons, for example, by the qualities we are willing to recognize in others. Thus, being powerful and powerless is a function of our relationships with others.

Culture and Self-Identity

Every person has a culture; Hegel argued that a person's culture is the mirror through which society shows the person who and what she is. Thus, there is no "real me" outside of the cultural context where I'm situated.

Search for the Real Self

Who is right, then? On the one hand we seem to be only what others make us. On the other hand, we seem to be independent selves with basic qualities that we are born with. Which are we? The choice here is important!

Chapter Summary

2.6 Historical Showcase

Plato

Aristotle

Confucius

2.7 Readings

Graham Greene, “The End of the Party”

Garrett J. Deweese and J. P. Moreland, “The Self and Substance Dualism”

John R. Searle, “The Mind-Body Problem”