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## Nature and culture

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Jeffrey Friedman

## NATURE AND CULTURE

Human nature was integral to political theory until Kant “cleansed” moral philosophy “of everything that can only be empirical and appropriate to anthropology” ([1785] 1956, 57). In Kantian and other versions of liberalism, considerations of human nature have either disappeared or have degenerated into the meaningless debates seen in recent years over whether “the subject” is communally constituted or antecedently individuated. In the meantime, however, data have become available that enable us to go far beyond the casual empiricism that was the only recourse of such students of human nature as Aristotle. Archaeology, neurology, social psychology, social anthropology, and Darwinian psychology have produced ample information about the nature of “man” that often stands in sharp contrast to the empirical conclusions reached by classical philosophers—conclusions that have, in our day, hardened into dogmas about the allegedly social, linguistic, or rational “essence” of humanity. If we are interested in evaluating the effects of modern, open societies on human well-being, it would seem imperative to bring these new data to bear.

Previous issues of *Critical Review* have explored some of the more directly political ramifications of modern anthropology. Daniel Dombrowski discussed some of the implications of ethology for political thought in volume 8, number 3; and in our special issue on nationalism (vol. 10, no. 2), Martin Tyrrell probed the apparently innate human tendency to divide into in- and out-groups. In vol-

ume 9, number 4, Robert Edgerton and Alexandra Maryanski discussed empirical evidence for viewing human beings as rather weakly social animals, whose fragile personal loyalties extend to a quite limited circle of family and friends.

In the present issue Maryanski considers whether language evolved to replace primate grooming, and whether this evolution would have imposed a sharp limit on the number of friendships we can tolerate—and thus whether it might be a source of severe psychological problems for beings like us, who evolved to be hunter-gatherers but who have come to live in very different forms of society. Jonathan Turner also, if incidentally, takes up the question of the origins of language, and in the process undermines the doctrine that language is a prerequisite of morality. Turner's larger project, however, is an eye-opening reconstruction of the source of the emotions that back up human moral codes. Keith Otterbein then considers whether precivilized human beings were peaceful or warlike, and delivers bad news for those who want to ground ethics on human nature but who also prefer peace to slaughter.

There are, however, other normative uses to which modern anthropology can be put. Rather than equating the naturally or "essentially" human with the good, we can attempt to evaluate, and possibly reform, our institutions and culture with an eye to the constraints and the needs generated by human nature, but without treating these natural features as necessarily normative. For instance, if happiness is independently posited as good, then by taking account of human predispositions, we may come closer to achieving this goal. But such an approach runs up against the cultural relativism dissected in this issue by Dennis Wrong. It may also conflict with recent attempts to use economic reasoning to solve every social puzzle. Russell Hardin's *One for All*, discussed below by Alex de Waal, is not an example of dogmatic rational-choice imperialism, but on de Waal's account it is nonetheless inadequate to explain the processes by which potentially hostile groups come to "exist." Yet rational choice theory is itself an attempt to take a hard-headed look at empirical human nature. In de Waal's view its error lies not in its naturalistic aspirations, but in its adherence to an a priori conception of what human nature is (namely, selfish)—one that, ironically, leaves too little room for that to which the relativist enemies of "human nature" give pride of place: malleable human mental constructs. But de Waal bases his alternative to a priori rational

choice theory not on the equally a priori conviction that there is only culture and no nature. Rather, he cites social-psychological findings about the natural human propensity to form groups as a possible basis for our susceptibility to politicians and intellectuals who eagerly construct cultural "identities."

Although they may seem distant from the traditional concerns of political theory, the opening essays by Frederick Turner, Donald Kuspit, and Nathan Kogan well illustrate the promise anthropology holds for rethinking modern politics. Kuspit views art as being charged with the mission of healing the ills of modernity—particularly capitalism. From this perspective he criticizes Frederick Turner's defense of bourgeois culture; Turner, meanwhile, finds Kuspit's critique of capitalist culture deficient because of its basis in an inadequate grasp of human (and nonhuman) nature. Whether capitalist culture is, indeed, psychologically unhealthy, and whether, if it is, it can be healed through art or through politics (see Kuspit's contribution to vol. 9, no. 4), are questions of obvious importance for political theory. Kogan's contribution is to give us some of the materials with which such questions can be answered, by discussing the evolutionary bases of our aesthetic capacities. This aspect of human nature is of equal political significance to the topics of the articles on more obviously political topics that follow—as long as our conception of the political is concerned with the satisfaction of empirical human needs rather than the vindication of a priori human rights. Human rights may, of course, play a vital role in meeting human needs. The determination of such rights, however, would seem to require a foundation in the empirical study of human needs, as opposed to the a priori basis they so often receive in liberal theory.

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