

Homo Religiosus: Linnaeus and Beyond

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THREE THEORIES OF HUMAN NATURE

by Mikael Stenmark

Abstract. In *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, Steven Pinker maintains that at present there are three competing views of human nature—a Christian theory, a "blank slate" theory (what I call a social constructivist theory), and a Darwinian theory—and that the last of these will triumph in the end. I argue that neither the outcome of such competition nor the particular content of these theories is as clear as Pinker believes. In this essay I take a critical as well as a constructive look at the challenge presented by a Darwinian theory of human nature—a challenge to the social sciences and the humanities and also to theology and more specifically to a Christian understanding of human nature.

Keywords: blank slate; Christian; Darwinian; evolutionary psychology; human beings; human nature; Steven Pinker; religion; social constructivism; standard social science model

In *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (2002) Steven Pinker argues that at the present time there are three competing views of human nature—a Christian theory, a "blank slate" theory, and a Darwinian theory—and that the last of these will triumph in the end.

Although he takes the first theory to be outdated, he nevertheless regards it as very influential in the sense that a lot of people have been Christians and many still are. Roughly speaking, this theory is, according to his own characterization, the view that human beings are made in the image of God and, unlike animals, have an immaterial soul and a free will yet also an innate tendency to choose to sin.

Mikael Stenmark is professor of philosophy of religion, Uppsala University, Box 511, 75120 Uppsala, Sweden; Mikael.Stenmark@teol.uu.se.

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Pinker believes that the “blank slate” theory is the view taken by most scholars in the humanities and social sciences. It is sometimes referred to by its critics as the “standard social science model” (Barkow, Cosmides, and Tooby 1992, 23). The name is apt because the founding fathers of social science (Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim) held it and because it has dominated the field ever since. In general terms, it expresses the idea that the human mind has no inherent structure and can be imprinted at will by society or the individual. The way we behave and the way we think is a matter of social conditioning and owes little or nothing to our biological nature.

In contrast, Pinker holds that there is an inherent human nature driving human events. Our genetic makeup has evolved over millions of years, producing an essential nature and thereby constraining our behavior patterns. A human being is not born with an empty mind, a *tabula rasa* or blank slate, like a white sheet of paper devoid of all characters that may later be inscribed by society or the individual. Rather, we are creatures whose minds are hard-wired at birth, more like sheets of paper preprinted with text.

Roughly described, this is the burden of these three theories of human nature. If Pinker is correct about the three competing views, the question we should ask is: Is human nature a social construction, a natural given, or a divine creation? Are we rising beasts, fallen angels, or blank slates? In this essay I take a look at the challenge presented by the Darwinian view—a challenge to the social sciences and the humanities but also to theology and more specifically to a Christian understanding of human nature. To what extent can Darwinian understandings of our origins or ancestry be used to explain human nature and behavior as it is now, and how might these insights be integrated (if at all) into the fabric of the social sciences, the humanities, and theology? Is the traffic one way only, or are there important things about human nature and behavior that biologists could learn from the social sciences, the humanities, and perhaps theology too?

Robert Wright speaks of this Darwinian challenge as a silent revolution taking place, as a paradigm shift, and of the unfolding of a new worldview. He calls the scholars involved the “new Darwinian social scientists” and writes that they “are fighting a doctrine that has dominated their fields for much of this century: the idea that biology doesn’t much matter—that the uniquely malleable human mind, together with the unique force of culture, has severed our behavior from its evolutionary roots; that there is no inherent human nature driving human events, but that, rather, our essential nature is to be driven” (Wright 1996, 5). Clearly Wright and Pinker believe that the Darwinian challenge will have profound consequences for our self-understanding, even for our whole worldview.

The labels *Darwinists* and *Darwinian social scientists* in this essay refer to those who maintain that explanations in terms of natural selection (and

related biological processes) provide the key to our understanding of human culture or at least are very important factors in that understanding.

THE HUMAN NATURE DEBATE

Ideas about human nature are controversial but nevertheless important, perhaps unavoidable. I think Pinker is correct that it seems impossible for people not to have a view of human nature. All of us have to anticipate the behavior of others, and that means that we have to make theoretical assumptions about what makes people tick: “A tacit theory of human nature—that behavior is caused by thoughts and feelings—is embedded in the very way we think about people” (Pinker 2002, 1). We fill out this theory by reflecting upon our own minds and thought processes, by watching other people’s behavior, by paying attention to what they say, and by assuming that they are like ourselves.

What is a theory of human nature?¹ More precisely, what do I mean in this context when I talk about a theory of human nature? As I use the notion, theories of human nature cover a wide compass, from ancient religious faiths and philosophical systems to theories developed in the sciences, the humanities, and theology. A theory, in this broad sense, is roughly a set of related claims or assumptions that say something about reality, or some part of reality, that goes beyond what is directly observable. Understood in this way, theories could be scientific theories, but they might equally be philosophical, political, or religious theories. They could be true or false, plausible or implausible, established or speculative, new or old, general or specific, factual or normative, explicit or implicit, but they all go beyond the evidence or the facts. They tell us more than we can see for ourselves.

So the theories I am concerned with attempt to say something crucial about human nature and human flourishing, what our proper relationship is to other beings and to the wider universe in which we exist. A theory of human nature attempts to state what the central features of human beings are. It gives an account of the human traits and propensities that we must take into consideration when trying to understand human behavior and human aspirations. A full-blown theory tells us who we really are, why we are here, where we come from, where we are going, and what we should value in life.

What I want to know, in particular, is how the three competing theories of human nature that Pinker identifies are related. Pinker thinks that the claims of these theories are in conflict and that at most one set of them is correct. But what precisely is the content of the three theories? We immediately face a problem here, because these theories could be and have been developed in different ways by different scholars. Pinker seems to ignore this problem almost completely, assuming in his characterization of the blank-slate theory that its advocates hold very much the same view for

roughly the same reasons. But they do not, and the same goes for Darwinists and Christians.

Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby's solution is to talk about the "standard social science model" of human nature, assuming, I take it, that "standard" signifies "frequently used" (1992, 23f.). Such a terminology allows derivation, so it is possible to conceptualize social science models that have a different content. Even if it is possible to develop a number of different versions of all three models or theories, I nevertheless try here to identify a mainstream version of each and compare them and at least suggest how they may compete or converge with each other. In short, I identify not merely a standard social science model that I call the *social constructivist theory* but also a standard Darwinian model that I call the *evolutionary psychologist theory* and a standard Christian model of human nature (and I speak of theories rather than models). Even if we can find other detailed theories proposed by social scientists, Darwinists, or Christians, I assume that many of their respective advocates would accept these "standard" theories, or at least something approximating them. This does not mean that I take these theories to be *the* social science theory or *the* Darwinian theory or *the* Christian theory of human nature, in the sense that this is what their adherents really ought to defend if they were orthodox or "true" social scientists, Darwinists, or Christians.

How then do we reconstruct these theories rationally? I suggest that we start by looking at how some of their proponents answer the following questions: Do human beings have a nature? If they have a nature, what nature do human beings have? Is human nature fixed or plastic?

I begin by comparing the social constructivist theory and the evolutionary psychologist theory before I turn my attention to a Christian understanding of human nature.

DO HUMAN BEINGS HAVE A NATURE?

It seems obvious that Pinker's evolutionary theory entails our having a nature, but do human beings have a nature according to the blank-slate theory? Pinker seems to be of two minds about this. He states that his whole book is against the "denial of human nature," but then, a few pages later, he says that "everyone has a theory of human nature" and moreover describes the blank slate as "that theory of human nature—namely, that it barely exists—[as being] the topic of this book" (Pinker 2002, x, 1, 2). More disturbing is that persons typically taken as paradigm examples of advocates of the blank-slate theory also appear to hold different views on this question. Margaret Mead writes: "We are forced to conclude that human nature is almost unbelievably malleable, responding accurately and contrastingly to contrasting cultural conditions" ([1935] 1963, 280). Jean-Paul Sartre claims: "there is no human nature. . . . Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" (1948, 30). According to Ruth Hubbard,

“‘Human nature’ does not describe people. It is a normative concept that incarnates historically based beliefs about what human beings are and how they should behave. It is questionable whether the concept of human nature means anything” (1990, 63, 70).

So here we have three advocates of the standard social science model making the diverse claims (a) that human beings do have a nature, (b) that human beings do not have a nature, and (c) that it is meaningless to talk about a human nature. Robin Headlam Wells and John Joe McFadden, when trying to characterize the contemporary debate, suggest that what “divides present-day thinkers is not a matter of different interpretations of human nature—though those still exist—but the question of whether or not it’s meaningful to talk about human nature at all” (2006, 1). They go on to mention that many postmodernists would hold such a view. However, although one could say many things about Durkheim, Mead, Clifford Geertz, and the other “standard” social scientists, they are undoubtedly modernist rather than postmodernist thinkers.

What should we make of all this? One solution is to say that this is not just one theory of human nature but several different ones that the critics have lumped together arbitrarily. As I already indicated, I think that this is true to a certain extent. But I also believe that Pinker, Barkow, and others are correct in that we must understand that there is a crucial difference between the cluster of theories of human nature often presupposed in the social sciences and the humanities and the cluster of theories that some biologists, evolutionary psychologists, and neuroscientists think should constitute the core of the new Darwinian social sciences.

Part of the solution to the problem is to recognize that the notion of human nature is ambiguous. *Nature* in the notion of human nature could be understood as nature (the natural world) in contrast to culture (the social world). By *culture* I mean human activities and creations such as literature, art, science, law, religion, morality, technology, economy, and politics. The notion of human nature would then refer only to that part of human beings that is biological or is the product of natural selection and that distinguishes us from other species. Human nature would then be the range of human traits and behavior patterns that are inborn rather than learned. If this is what is meant by human nature, and, moreover, if human beings are a product of culture, we might well not have a nature.

When Pinker writes that the blank-slate theory implies that human nature barely exists, he is probably understanding human nature in the way just described. There is not much biology and neuroscience in the standard social scientists’ account of human beings, so they assume that human (biological) nature barely exists. Durkheim writes, “Individual [human] natures are merely the indeterminate material that the social factor molds and transforms” ([1895] 1962, 106). This quotation seems to support Pinker’s conclusion.

However, nature in the notion of human nature can also refer to something else, namely, to *all* those properties—whether biological or social, moral, religious, and so on—that characterize human beings and distinguish them from other species or any other objects in the world. In this second sense nature applies not only to natural kinds or biological entities but also to artificial kinds and abstract entities such as numbers, propositions, or theories. Part of the nature of a table is to have legs, of a bicycle is to have wheels, and of money is to have economic value. It is in this second, broad sense that I use the notion of human nature, although we must keep in mind that some of the scholars or scientists I discuss use it in the first sense or oscillate between the two.

What I take to be the core thesis of the standard social science model or the social constructivist theory—namely that human traits and behavior are socially constructed in the sense that they are the product of cultural processes and not of biological processes—is compatible with the claim that we have a nature in this second sense. If we use the notion in this sense, human nature can be a product of culture, and Mead and other social scientists can meaningfully talk about a human nature yet still disagree with the Darwinian social scientists. As we have seen, however, not all advocates of the social constructivist theory agree; recall the quotations from Sartre and Hubbard. Or, when Michel Foucault writes that “nothing in man is sufficiently stable to serve as a basis for understanding other men” (1977, 153), this could be interpreted as a claim that we lack a common nature even in this second sense.

When explaining Foucault’s ideas and their relationship to postmodern literary theory, Wells and McFadden write: “Anti-essentialism—the belief that there is no such thing as a universal essence of human nature—is a core principle in much modern literary theory” (2006, 2). In contemporary feminist theory, Charlotte Witt observes that “showing a position is ‘essentialist’ can function in and of itself as a good reason for rejecting it” (1995, 321). Human nature is, rather, a myth aiming to impose “one particular set of male Eurocentric values on to the rest of the world” (Wells and McFadden 2006, 2). Peter Loftson describes this view as the idea that we are like varieties of onions, with layers of cultural accretions, the removal of which, were it even possible, would not reveal an inner core, or for that matter any core, that all humans share (Loftson 2001, 22).

We then have at least two strands within the standard social sciences, one maintaining that we do have a nature but that it is a product of culture or social conditioning and another claiming that there is no such thing as a universal human nature of any sort. I do not think that this is merely a verbal disagreement caused by the ambiguity of the notion of human nature. Let us therefore distinguish between a modern and a postmodern version of the social constructivist theory.

We can now say that both Darwinian social scientists and modernist social constructivists accept:

(SCEP1) Human beings do have a nature.

But the two camps disagree on the answer to the question of *what* nature human beings have—that is, on the extent to which it is a product of culture or is a product of biology—an issue to which we soon return. On the other hand, postmodern social constructivists deny the truth of (SCEP1) and maintain instead:

(PSC1) Human beings do not have a nature.

Wells and McFadden, as we have seen, believe that what divides present-day thinkers is not primarily the matter of different interpretations of human nature (a social construction or a natural given) but the question of whether or not it is meaningful to talk about human nature at all. Let us therefore address first this question: Do human beings have a nature? or, more radically, Is it meaningful to talk about human nature at all?

I think that the idea of human nature presupposes that human beings share a degree of commonality—that there is something meaningfully identifiable as a universal human nature. What would the content of this purported nature be? First, all humans belong to a particular species, *Homo sapiens*. Organisms belong to the same species if they are able to produce fertile offspring. Moreover, biologists would be quick to point out that the most distinctive anatomical properties of our kind are that we are the only vertebrate species with a bipedal walk, erect posture, and large brain (Ayala 1998, 36f.). Birds are bipedal, but their backbones are aligned horizontally rather than vertically. There is no creature on earth with a brain like ours. The brain of *Homo sapiens* is not just much bigger than that of every other species alive, if we take into account relative body size; it also is much more complex, which makes abstract thinking, categorization, and reasoning possible. Human beings are rational animals. What characterizes us is that we can develop different languages, tools, technology, science, literature, art, and moral and legal codes. These are distinctive human anatomical and social traits that make it possible to distinguish us as a kind, and thus as having a nature. They are independent of historical epoch, culture, ethnicity, sex, gender, age, class, political power, wealth, and so on.

If this is correct, human beings have a “species-nature”—a cluster of properties essential for belonging to the species *Homo sapiens*. These properties include being animals with bipedal walk, erect posture, and large brain who are able to produce fertile offspring only with other humans and who are toolmakers capable of rational and moral thinking, linguistic and artistic expression. If we have at least these properties as a species, we do possess a transhistorical core of being, contrary to what the postmodern constructivists believe.

Notice that when Mead writes that “we are forced to conclude that human nature is almost unbelievably malleable, responding accurately and contrastingly to contrasting cultural conditions,” this is also to attribute a property to *Homo sapiens* as a species ([1935] 1963, 280). It is to say that what is characteristic of human beings (and unique in comparison with other animals) is our plasticity. Human beings are like clay that can be molded by changing cultural and social conditions into almost any shape. Clay has this property—it is a part of its nature. It is a property that to a certain extent we have, too; it is part of our nature.

It therefore seems reasonable to talk about a human nature. What objections might postmodern constructivists raise against this account? One is that what I have developed is a very thin conception of human nature. This is true, but it nevertheless is sufficient to show that if these properties characterize us we do have a nature and, consequently, that it is not meaningless to talk about a human nature. A second objection is that this thin-nature view identifies what makes us different from other species, but what scholars in the social sciences and the humanities are interested in is how to understand human behavior in the variety of cultures in which people live. Unlike the new Darwinian social scientists’ view of human nature, the thin-nature view does not tell us much in this regard. This also is true, but it is beside the point; it does not show that no human nature exists.

A more serious difficulty is that there are exceptions among human beings to all of the properties I have identified as characterizing human nature. Not all human beings walk; some are unable to, and others are born without legs. Some persons are unable to talk, some cannot have children, and so on. Talk about a human nature (or essentialist generalizations) therefore is misleading. Let us label this the *exceptionalist objection*. John Dupré expresses one version of it when he writes:

What, if anything, is human nature? One philosophical tradition, regrettably revived recently, supposes that this phrase should refer to some real essence of the human species: an internal property of all and only humans that explains why they are as they are and why they do as they do. But we should all know now that even if there are some kinds of things that have essences, biological kinds are not among them. (Dupré 2003, 109)

The exceptionalist objection assumes that we are entitled to talk about the nature of things *only* if all things in that category have all of the properties identified as part of that particular nature. There need to exist necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for the notion of human nature to be useful for description and explanation. Perhaps essentialism entails that this requirement needs to be fulfilled, but do we have to accept essentialism to be able to talk about human nature or the nature of species?

For a start, biologists do not think that each and every individual of a particular species has to have all the characteristics of that species for it to be possible to talk meaningfully about the nature of that particular species.

I myself do not think it is necessary, either. Second, the definition of species-nature that I gave says only that there must be a cluster of properties essential for belonging to the particular natural or artificial kind. It does not say that every individual that exemplifies that nature has to have every one of the properties in this cluster. It is sufficient for any individual of a species to satisfy enough of, rather than all of, the properties in the cluster. The idea of a human nature does not and need not imply essentialism. If this is accepted, the exceptionalist objection cannot be used against the account of human nature developed so far.

Let us therefore leave the postmodern social constructivists behind and take the proposition “Human beings do have a nature” as a thesis of the standard social constructivist theory, and let us turn our attention back to the key question that these standard social constructivists and Darwinian social scientists disagree on: *What* nature do human beings have? What do we owe to our biological nature, and what do we owe to our social or cultural nature?

WHAT NATURE DO HUMAN BEINGS HAVE?

The core thesis of the standard social constructivist theory is that *human nature is a product of culture, or is socially constructed*. This does not, to me, imply that there is little or no human nature. Rather, it means that the properties of our nature are socially constructed and not simply naturally given. “Constructed” signals that there is something “made” about human beings. Human nature or human behavior is determined not by inherent nature but by society. Who and what we are is a consequence of learning and socialization.

In contrast, the core thesis of the evolutionary psychologist theory would be that *human nature is naturally given; it is the product of biological processes such as natural selection*. The properties of our nature are not socially constructed and potentially different in different cultures or historical periods. Rather, as Helena Cronin (2000) claims, “Certainly, human nature is fixed. It’s universal and unchanging—common to every baby that’s born, down through the history of our species.” We are all *Homo sapiens* and consequently have the same universal nature, namely, those properties that distinguish our species from other species.

However, the word *is*, as it appears in these two core theses, is open to two different interpretations. Albert Somit and Steven Peterson describe the social constructivist theory as implying human nature and human behavior to be *only* socially constructed or products of culture, but they do not describe the evolutionary psychologist theory as understanding human nature and human behavior to be *only* naturally given or products of natural selection. They take the former theory to deny that humans have any innate behavioral tendencies but not the latter to deny that humans have socially conditioned behavior, despite the fact that they write that

this change in scientific perspective entails a “near-180 degree shift in orientation” (Somit and Peterson 2003, 4). They certainly are correct in maintaining that if “humans have no innate behavioral tendencies” then “human nature is solely the product of learning and socialization” (2003, 4). But is this a reasonable interpretation of the social constructivist theory? When Leslie Stevenson presents the standard social science model, he maintains—and note his nuances—that the “founding fathers of social science (Marx, Weber, and Durkheim) held that, apart from a few obvious biological universals like eating, defecating, sleeping, copulating, birth and breastfeeding, most human behavior depends more on culture than on biology” (Stevenson and Haberman 2004, 220).

If Stevenson is correct, the social constructivist theory does not necessarily deny that human beings have any innate behavioral tendencies or that human nature is a product of natural selection. The theory certainly denies that *only* innate propensities influence human behavior and that human nature is *merely* a product of natural selection, but that is compatible with Stevenson’s nuanced interpretation of the social constructivist theory. I grant that Somit and Peterson may correctly characterize the view of *some* social constructivists, but Stevenson’s interpretation of the theory is the more reasonable. People in every age have shown, for example, the innate behavioral tendency to look for something to eat. Surely, most if not all social constructivists would not deny this. However, what, where, when, or how I or any other human being eats may be socially conditioned and may vary from culture to culture or over time. This means that the core theses can be expressed more precisely thus:

- (SC2) Human nature is essentially, but not solely, a product of learning and socialization, or is socially constructed.
- (EP2) Human nature is essentially, but not solely, the product of natural selection, or is naturally given.

The most reasonable interpretation of each of the theories also, as we have seen, entails the prior acceptance of:

- (SCEP1) Human beings do have a nature.

Thesis (SCEP1) means that one accepts at least what I have called the thin human nature view. Consequently I take the associated claim—that we are bipedal, erect-postured organisms with a big brain and that we are rational, toolmaking, moral, linguistic and artistic animals who are able to produce fertile offspring only with other animals of the same kind—to be consistent with each of (SC2) and (EP2), whereas (SC2) and (EP2) cannot both be true.

Theses (SC2) and (EP2) generate different scientific research programs when it comes to understanding or explaining human social behavior. What the “old” social scientists and the “new” Darwinian social scientists want

to know is why people behave as they do and why they say the things that they say. If thesis (SC2) is true, the best way to explain or understand human behavior is to appeal not to natural or biological processes but to social or cultural ones. This follows from the contention that human behavior depends more on culture than on biology. If thesis (EP2) is true, the best way to explain or understand human behavior is to appeal to natural or biological processes and not to social or cultural ones. This follows from the contention that human behavior depends more on biology than on culture.

To talk about human behavior in this way may be slightly misleading, because we must distinguish between (a) human nature (our naturally evolved or socially acquired psychology) and (b) the contingent behavior that results from it. Let us go back to Cronin (2000), who maintains that human nature is universal and unchanging—“common to every baby that’s born, down through the history of our species.” However, she also says: “But human behavior—which is generated by that nature—is endlessly variable and diverse.” How could there be any explanatory power or potential for prediction in any research program if any and every behavior were compatible with the thesis (EP2)? Does not the idea that we have a universal and unchanging nature entail that human behavior *cannot* be endlessly variable and diverse? Does not our nature put a limit on what we can do? Of course it does. Our nature makes it impossible for us to, say, swim across the Atlantic Ocean. So Cronin is exaggerating. But what she is driving at is this: “After all, fixed rules can give rise to an inexhaustible range of outcomes. Natural selection equipped us with the fixed rules—the rules that constitute our human nature” (Cronin 2000). The debate is all about the rules. But what are these “fixed rules”?

The idea is that behind our behavior (anything we do) we can find propensities or traits that give rise to our concrete behavior. Cronin exemplifies this by citing the universal propensity of males to be highly competitive and the propensity to develop adult diabetes. If we try to develop this idea in a theory-neutral way we might say that human traits are natural or socially acquired habits, propensities, characteristic tendencies, or inclinations in an individual, in a group of them, or in the species as a whole. Human traits are a manifestation of a tendency to think or act in a similar way in response to a variety of different situations. For instance, I could behave selfishly in a particular situation, thinking only about what is in my own interest without regard for the others involved. If one were to claim, however, that one of my personality traits is to be selfish, one would be saying something more than that I behaved selfishly in one situation. One would be saying that I have a tendency or a habit of behaving selfishly and with disregard for the interests of others in a variety of situations. This would then be seen as being part of my individual nature. Claims about traits may also be generalized. For instance, one could maintain that “men

are more selfish than women” or that “human beings are selfish.” I am suggesting that social constructivists do not necessarily have to deny the existence of these rules—these propensities or traits. They do have to claim that these traits are essentially the product of culture and not of nature.

So far I have not said anything about whether selfishness at the level of the individual, group, or species is a natural or socially acquired habit. If one thinks that human nature is primarily or essentially the product of natural selection, it is very likely that human selfishness is an innate biological propensity. Darwinian social scientists have indeed claimed not merely that humans are selfish, that is, have such a propensity, but also that their selfishness is a product of natural selection. Richard Dawkins writes: “Humans and baboons have evolved by natural selection. If you look at the way natural selection works, it seems to follow that anything that has evolved by natural selection should be selfish. Therefore we must expect that when we go and look at the behaviour of baboons, humans, and all other living creatures, we will find it to be selfish” (1989, 4). Such a view has consequences for society: “Much as we might wish to believe otherwise, universal love and the welfare of the species as a whole are concepts that simply do not make evolutionary sense. . . . Be warned that if you wish, as I do, to build a society in which individuals cooperate generously and unselfishly towards a common good, you can expect little help from our biological nature” (1989, 2–3).

A social constructivist account could include a denial of the idea that selfishness is a human trait, but it need not do so. What it would deny is that any human propensity to behave selfishly is natural; rather it would be seen as socially acquired. Selfishness would then be a socially conditioned propensity of *Homo sapiens* and not an innate biological one. On this view, in order to understand selfish human behavior we need to grasp not the processes of natural selection but the processes of cultural development and socialization.

IS HUMAN NATURE FIXED OR MALLEABLE?

Social constructivists and Darwinists agree that human beings have a nature but disagree about what nature they have. The core thesis of the constructivist theory is that human nature is primarily a product of society or culture. I suggest that another important thesis of the social constructivist theory, *the plasticity thesis*, is that

(SC3) Human nature (human traits or propensities) is not fixed but quite plastic.

To what extent can we alter human nature or a given set of human characteristics? Constructivists would answer that this is something we can do to a considerable degree. Mead talks about human nature as being “almost

unbelievably malleable, responding accurately and contrastingly to contrasting cultural conditions" ([1935] 1963, 280). Durkheim describes the biological aspect of human nature as "plastic predispositions" that social factors mold and transform. Humans are like clay that can be molded by changing cultural and social conditions into almost any shape. According to Durkheim, this human clay has some initial shape or predispositions but is soft enough to be shaped in significantly different ways by social factors ([1895] 1962, 106). People are given determinate form by the society or culture in which they are born, brought up, and live. There are at least two questions here that we need to consider: How easily can human nature be changed? and by whom?

Social constructivists seem to hold different views about how easily human nature can be changed. Marx, for instance, puts forward the view that there is no such thing as a fixed human nature; rather, human traits and behavior are reshaped by changing economic systems. In this sense he accepts the plasticity thesis. Socialists typically deny that human beings are naturally selfish, competitive, and aggressive; if they are, it simply reflects the particular economic system in which people find themselves. Thus these traits are seen as socially acquired habits or propensities. When the capitalist economic system changes and the classless society becomes a reality, people will cooperate and treat each other equally. Unselfishness and cooperation will then become the characteristics of human nature.

Compare Marx's view with those of behaviorist John B. Watson and existentialist Sartre. Watson writes: "Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief, and yes, even beggar-man, and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors" (Watson 1925, 82). Sartre's focus is not on external manipulation or exposure to certain kinds of stimuli but on individual freedom. Human traits and behavior are not about being formed by society or economic systems or, for that matter, manipulative scientists, but about how we freely form ourselves as individuals. What is distinctive of humans is that we are beings without form and with the ability to make of ourselves what we will. When it comes to human beings, existence precedes essence (Sartre 1948).

All three of these writers express the idea that human traits are plastic rather than fixed. Marx's belief that the plasticity of human nature is limited by prevailing economic structures seems to entail that human traits and behavior patterns would be difficult to change overnight or even over a person's lifetime. Watson and Sartre, although having different views of human beings in other respects, both seem to think that human nature can be changed quite rapidly. (It can happen so fast, according to Sartre, that he thinks that we should not talk about a human nature at all.) There is

thus room within the social constructivist camp for different ideas about the degree of plasticity of human nature.

The second question concerns *by whom* human nature can be changed. Here we can distinguish between more individualist and more collective views. Sartre's view is very individualistic—you and I as individuals are free to form ourselves—whereas Marx's view is that we are formed primarily by society. Although the constructivist theory could embrace an individualist vision of human nature, this is not how I interpret the standard version of it. I take the word *social* in *social constructivist* to denote the idea that we are born into a society, educated by it, and therefore formed by it. The standard social constructivist theory should not be taken to deny that we can ourselves shape our character and behavior patterns at all, but the emphasis is on the social rather than the individual aspect of plasticity. Human nature, even if it has some initial predisposition, can be molded by changing cultural and social conditions into many different forms. Human nature is “almost unbelievably malleable.” These are central claims of the standard social constructivist theory of human nature.

The evolutionary psychologist theory of human nature entails the opposite view:

(EP3) Human nature (human traits or propensities) is not plastic but quite fixed.

We have a set of naturally inborn capabilities and limitations that cannot readily be changed. The human mind has an inherent structure and cannot be inscribed at will by society or the individual. Pinker writes:

Throughout the twentieth century, many intellectuals tried to rest principles of decency on fragile factual claims such as that human beings are biologically indistinguishable, harbor no ignoble motives, and are utterly free in their ability to make choices. These claims are now being called into question by discoveries in the sciences of mind, brain, genes, and evolution. (2002, xi)

Human nature is not, however, fixed in the pre-Darwinian sense of having one shape once and for all. According to evolutionary theory, species are not stable. Natural kinds are not seen as having the immutable forms or essences characteristic of much pre-Darwinian biology and philosophy. *Homo sapiens* has evolved and, like any other species, will continue to evolve. Then again, there is no evidence of any species-modifying changes in our nature for at least the past 35,000 and probably 100,000 years. Therefore any development over the last few thousands of years could hardly have altered what we are or what our natural propensities are. Rather, human nature is universal and unchanging—“common to every baby that's born, down through the history of our species.” Our human minds and traits evolved in the late Stone Age to solve adaptive problems faced by our hunter-gatherer ancestors in the environment they inhabited. Human nature is in this sense fixed, but it could evolve in response to changes in the environment or in culture. It is just that such change takes a very long time.

Hence, the evolutionary psychologist theory does not entail a denial of the impact of the environment on us or on any other species. In fact the genes we have are the outcome of adaptation to a particular historical environment. The environment is important, but because human genes change very slowly and the human brain is genetically hard-wired to have particular psychological mechanisms or traits that cause thought and behavior, it follows that we cannot with great success change certain things in human society, because in general biological forces cannot be manipulated as easily as cultural forces. Human nature is essentially quite fixed.

There are further theses, beyond those already noted, that are part of the evolutionary psychologist theory or the social constructivist theory of human nature, and I hint at some of them in the subsequent discussion about a Christian understanding of human nature.

THE DIVINE ROOTS OF HUMAN NATURE

Pinker is clear on what we should think about Christian ideas of human nature. His verdict is that although a lot of people still are Christians, modern science has made it impossible for a “scientifically literate person” to accept the traditional Christian view of human nature (Pinker 2002, 2). I take this to imply that the Christian view is incompatible with science in general and with the evolutionary psychologist theory of human nature in particular. To be able to settle whether he is right or not, we need first to grapple with the core theses of this third theory of human nature.

Complicating the issue is that a Christian view of human nature is not a scientific or academic theory, like the social constructivist or evolutionary psychologist theory. It is not a view developed explicitly to explain human traits and behavior, because Christianity is a religion, not an academic research program. Nevertheless, Christianity has many things to say about human beings and in particular about people’s relationship to God. In saying these things, a picture of human nature emerges—or so I claim.

The primary source of the Christian view of human nature is the Bible, which begins with these words: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1 NRSV). “And God said: ‘Let there be light’ and there was light” (Genesis 1:3), and in six days God completed creation and pronounced it “good.” We then read, among other things:

Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man become a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26–28)

In these and related verses we find the background to a number of central Christian ideas about human beings, or what I call “theses” or “views.”

In Daniel Dennett’s terminology we have here a mind-first view—the idea that intelligence lies at the root of everything (Dennett 1995, 26f.). In the beginning was something with mind, namely God, who is, or at least is similar to, a rational, thinking agent, and this God is the creator of everything that exists. An intelligent God is seen as the ultimate source of all things. Consequently, reality consists of God and all that God has made. Another option would be a matter-first view—the idea that matter lies at the root of everything.²

So Christians maintain that human beings are created by God. We are made from the dust of the earth but have the breath of life infused by God. God has created not merely the heavens and the earth but also human beings. This is the core of the *creation thesis*:

- (1) We are created by God, that is, we are not merely the product of pure material processes but are (in one way or another) the product of an intelligent God.

The expressions “in our image” and “according to our likeness” are used of no other creature in the Bible, so there is something special about human beings compared to all other living things on the earth (Genesis 1:26, 5:1). Men and women are created in the image of God (the *imago Dei*). From these and other biblical passages Noreen L. Herzfeld concludes that “all human beings participate in the image of God, regardless of gender or generation, . . . only human beings are created in this image, thus they are distinguished from the nonhuman animals, and . . . human life is to be valued because of God’s image. However, none of these passages defines that image” (2002, 13).

The Christian theory therefore also contains a *uniqueness thesis*:

- (2) There is something special or unique about human beings because they are the only creatures on the earth that are created in the image of God.

Christians do believe that human beings are special in the order of created things, or have a significance that contrasts with that of the rest of nature. We are more than natural beings. As J. Wentzel van Huyssteen points out, the “basic theological conviction [is] that there is something about being human, even uniquely human, that is constituted by the relationship of ourselves and of our world, to God” (2006, 34–35). We have not really understood human beings until we have understood them in relationship to God.

Closely related but not necessarily identical with the idea of human uniqueness is what I identify as the *dignity thesis* of the Christian theory of human nature. It is a normative statement:

- (3) Human beings have a higher value or moral significance than other living things on the earth.

The uniqueness thesis says merely that we have a property or a set of properties that makes us different from members of other species. It could be that we are rational, moral, or linguistic animals depending on how this aspect of the idea of *imago Dei* is explicated. These properties (or something else) make us, according to the dignity thesis, more valuable than members of other species. *Homo sapiens* has a greater moral significance than other animals. I would say that the idea of *imago Dei* typically contains, implicitly at least, both the uniqueness thesis and the dignity thesis.

The picture presented to us in Genesis 1–3 is that the first human beings, Adam and Eve, freely chose to disobey God’s command. We among the creatures of the earth are special also in that we have the power to evaluate and decide between courses of action and to act on our own decisions. In this sense we resemble God, who freely chose to create the universe. We are morally responsible for what we decide to do. We are free to choose and to realize goodness or evil, and God will hold us responsible for our choices. Although some Christians have denied or limited this idea of human freedom, I assume the *free will thesis*, that

- (4) Human beings are created by God with a free will.

I take this thesis to be a part of the standard Christian theory of human nature, because without it it is hard to make sense of the Christian idea that we are responsible for our actions and that we can be blamed by God for choosing evil patterns of behavior rather than being loving, caring, and righteous. Hence a central Christian idea is also that we are moral agents. The *moral agent thesis* is that

- (5) Human beings possess capacities by virtue of which they can act morally or immorally, and thus they have duties and responsibilities.

Moreover, if God intended to bring into being creatures made in the image of God, we are planned by God to be here. It is not by pure chance that the universe exists or that we exist within it. There is a purpose to the existence of the universe and to human life in particular. This is the *inevitability thesis*, that there is a reason why we are here:

- (6) God intended to bring into being creatures made in the image of God, and human beings are therefore planned by God to be here.

The inevitability thesis is closely related to the *telos thesis*. There is not merely a reason why we are here; we are also here for a purpose. Alister E. McGrath states: “The term ‘image’ [in image of God] expresses the idea that God has created humanity with a specific goal—namely, to relate to God. We are thus meant to exist in a relationship with our creator and redeemer” (2006, 135). Keith Ward claims that humans “have a special

role in the universe, which is to shape it to express the glory of God” (1998, 152). We are planned by God to be here for a particular purpose: Human beings should love and obey God and also love one another. This is what we are made for. Because we have a particular nature, certain things are good for us, and among those things that are good for us is to love and obey God and to love each other. Moreover, part of our nature is that we have a calling, a role to play in and for creation. We are God’s deputies on earth. Humankind should be master of the other animals and should care for God’s creation. So the *telos thesis* is:

- (7) Human beings are planned by God to be here for a particular purpose, namely, to love and obey God and also to love each other, as well as being God’s deputies on earth.

Another core thesis of Christianity is that all human beings are sinners and consequently need to be saved. Jesus Christ, the son of God, through his death and resurrection, saved us from our sins so that our relationship to God might be restored. Humanity has sinned, and people find themselves alienated from God and in need of salvation. I suggest that we call this idea the *thesis of actual sin*:

- (8) All human beings are sinners and find themselves alienated from God.

Beyond that, many Christians also affirm the *thesis of original sin*, believing that the sin committed by the first human beings (Adam and Eve, or symbolized by Adam and Eve) is transmitted to subsequent generations, independent of free choice and personal responsibility, and entailing that even infants are sinners:

- (9) The sin committed by the first human beings is transmitted to subsequent human generations, independent of free choice and personal responsibility.

To see the difference between theses (8) and (9), let us imagine sin as an illness or disease. According to the thesis of original sin, this spiritual illness, sin, is something that the first human beings living on this planet experienced and that every human being since has experienced because the illness is genetically transmitted in such a way that every person born inherits it. Every human being has it from the very day of birth. If we stick with the analogy, sin is a totally dominant hereditary disease. The thesis of actual sin, however, commits one not to a particular account of the origin of the disease but only to believing that every human being will get the disease one day. It is like a cold: everyone gets one eventually. But it is different from a cold in that one cannot cure oneself; one needs medicine to become healthy again. Once sin has taken hold of us, we are unable, on our own, to break free from its grasp.

Is human nature transformed by this spiritual disease? Is it like a severe form of Alzheimer's disease in that large parts of the personality are affected, or is it more like colorblindness, in which the personality is intact but an isolated faculty is lacking? Or is it somewhere between the two? Roughly two lines can be detected in the history of Christian thought. According to the idea of the *total depravity of human nature*, there are no faculties or aspects of human beings not corrupted by sin. Humans are depraved in every part of their being. Others think that sin primarily affects one's relationship to God. People are inclined to serve their own interests rather than to love and obey God, and this self-centeredness means that they often fail to take into account their neighbor's interests and needs. Sin causes at least a *partial depravity of human nature*.

Both views entail that human beings have an inclination to sin, to be self-centered rather than God-centered. We are biased toward doing the wrong things. People have a free will but tend toward doing wrong rather than right. This would be true in any society we humans create because it is part of our corrupt universal human nature. Neither view entails that people could not do good things for the right reasons, but one way of understanding the two views about the depravity of human nature is to say that the former regards this as being more difficult than the latter does. In any case, I suggest that a part of the standard Christian theory is also a *thesis of a corrupt human nature*. The thesis of actual sin says that all human beings have sinned. The corrupt human nature thesis says:

- (10) Human beings have an inclination toward selfishness, evil, and destruction; there is a fatal flaw in our nature that makes us liable to sinful misuse of our freedom.

The Adam and Eve story in Genesis also reveals that human beings have a direct knowledge or awareness of God. Thomas Aquinas thinks that this faculty of direct awareness of God is affected by the fall, but he nevertheless believes that "To know in a general and confused way that God exists is implanted in us by nature" (*Summa Theologiae* I, q.2, a.1, ad 1). He is not alone in the history of Christian thought in holding such a view. McGrath even writes: "For many theologians, the essence of the human predicament is our deep-seated longing to be with God" (2006, 135). Human beings have an innate disposition to long for God. Similar ideas can be found in the New Testament. Paul writes: "Ever since the creation of the world [God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Romans 1:19–20 NRSV). John Calvin also claimed that there is a kind of natural knowledge of God. There is a sort of instinct, a natural human tendency or propensity to believe in God. More recently Alvin Plantinga has developed this idea, what Calvin calls a *sensus divinitatis*, or sense of divinity, suggesting that knowledge of God may not be innate in us, but

the “*capacity* for such knowledge is indeed innate, like the capacity for arithmetical knowledge” (Plantinga 2000, 173). Again, not all Christians would agree, but I take the standard Christian theory to include a *religious propensity thesis*:

- (11) Human beings have an innate or natural tendency to form beliefs about God, perhaps even to know some things about God, a disposition that is triggered in various circumstances.

Is there life after death, or do we just rot and disintegrate? Do human beings continue to exist after bodily death, as conscious persons in some form? The standard Christian answer is yes. We each shall exist in an after-life as the same person we were in our earthly life, and in the life to come we shall stand face-to-face with God. This concept has two main interpretations. The *disembodied soul view* is the idea that the immaterial soul of each human being, but not the body, survives death. The human soul is immortal.³ The *resurrection view* is the idea that the body too will be resurrected at a given time, not merely the soul. After death the body disintegrates, but at some point in the future God will raise it together with the soul and create the human person anew. Paul writes: “So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable . . . it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:42–44 NIV). According to Paul, one should hope for the resurrection of the body rather than for a disembodied immortality of the soul. More recently, the Christian theologian David H. Kelsey has written that “Having a body is essential to human nature. Having a *material* body is not essential; at the general resurrection we shall still have human nature complete, even if we come to have another kind of ‘body.’ But—and this is theologically crucial—*having had* a material body at some time is essential to human nature” (1985, 172).

Christians can hold one of these views and reject the other, or they can combine them. Aquinas claims that after death there is an interim period in which we exist as merely disembodied souls (in purgatory or the intermediate state) but that on the resurrection day our bodies will be raised and we shall be whole persons again. *The immortality thesis* is the overarching view here:

- (12) There is human life after death.

The *resurrection thesis* expresses a particular view of what we might be like in the life to come:

- (13) The human body will be resurrected at a given time, not merely the soul.

We shall have a body even when we are resurrected from the dead. It might not be a material body, but it is some kind of body. I take both of these

theses to be part of the standard Christian theory of human nature, although the first is the more fundamental one.

If all human beings are created in the image of God, this seems to entail a thesis about a universal human nature—we all have in common at least the property of being made in the image of God. This distinguishes us from all other species on earth. But Christians who accept the standard theory further add that we all share the properties of having a free will, a higher moral significance than the other animals, and a natural religious tendency. We also have the species-properties of being here on this planet for a reason, being immortal and sinners, and being subjects of God's saving grace.

These are not the only ideas about humanity found in Christianity, but I think it is sufficient that we focus our attention on these. Many Christians (although far from all of them) would accept these theses. If they, or at least some of them, are accepted, we have a *thick view of human nature*. This thick view is consistent with the thin view of human nature developed earlier. The question we face now is how the Christian view is related to the evolutionary psychologist and the social constructivist views of human nature.

TENSIONS AND OVERLAPS: SOME PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS

I do not think that all of these Christian theses of human nature are compatible with the evolutionary psychologist theory, the social constructivist theory, or a more general scientific framework. I do think that there are fewer problems here than Pinker believes. Moreover, I regard all three theories as having their own problems. Certain things in them need to be rejected, other parts need to be modified, and other parts can stay more or less as they are. I conclude this essay by offering some very preliminary thoughts about the interrelationships between the three.

I begin with a very general statement. Social constructivist theory, it seems, has little to say about most of the properties that the standard Christian theory identifies as part of our true nature. Indeed, the very fact that the latter entails a thick view of human nature appears to be in tension with the social constructivist approach. Clearly this is so when it comes to the postmodern version of the social constructivist theory, and probably also with regard to the modernist version. However, the degree of tension depends at least partially on how many of the properties that characterize the Christian theory are understood by its adherents to be social properties rather than natural ones. Recall that a core thesis of the social constructivist theory is that human nature is essentially but not solely a product of learning and socialization. Is sin then a product of bad learning and socialization? It could be seen as such if we accept the actual-sin thesis but probably not if we also accept the original-sin thesis. Are some of these properties

identified by the Christian theory neither natural nor social properties but of a third kind?

There seems also to be a tension between the standard Christian view and the third thesis of the social constructivist theory (SC3) that human nature is not fixed but quite malleable. Are not at least some of the properties of being made in the image of God—having a free will, bearing a higher moral significance than other animals, having a natural religious tendency but a corrupt nature, being on this planet for a reason, being immortal, being sinners, and being subjects of God's saving grace—of such a kind as to be fixed? For instance, even if society were to change drastically, would not all human beings remain sinners and perhaps still have a corrupt human nature? No matter what any program of social engineering might achieve, these properties would still be, according to Christian theory, essential to human nature. Or would they?

So much for general comment. Let us look at some of the details. I begin with the broader scientific and Christian frameworks before moving closer to their different accounts of human nature. A central feature of Christianity, as I understand it, is that it tells us something about a reality that underlies, interpenetrates, and goes beyond the empirical world. The key claim is that God exists. We have here a mind-first view. It is the Christian conviction that an intelligent God is the ultimate source of all things that exist. Janet Radcliffe Richards, like Dennett, thinks that evolutionary theory supports a different view, the matter-first view, which is the notion that matter lies at the root of everything (Richards 2000, 10f.). If they are correct, there seems to be a serious conflict on this issue between evolutionary biology and Christianity.

Much could be said on this, but because my focus is on theories of human nature I shall be brief. The claim appears to be that evolutionary theory undermines the Christian view that God has created the world and all living things within it. Clearly evolutionary theory undermines certain specific ideas about how such a God could have created the world and in particular living things. But if there is a God, it seems that this God could have accomplished the creation of this world in a number of different ways. Such a God could have chosen to create by means of the process of evolution. God could have set up the initial conditions, the primeval soup of matter and the laws of nature, with these conditions eventually giving rise to complex organisms, among them human beings. The creation thesis is therefore compatible with evolutionary theory as an account of the origin of life on earth. It is possible that we and all other living things are not the products of pure material processes but in some way or other the creations of an intelligent God.

The social constructivist theory has nothing to add on this point, but it is not unreasonable to assume that its advocates accept evolutionary theory as offering a correct account of the origin of living things on this planet,

even though they would maintain that it helps us very little in understanding human behavior and human society as it is now. However, one could say that their theory of human nature presupposes a mind-first view in one particular regard, namely, that when explaining social design or social complexity (the structure of societies) we need to take into account conscious intentions to be able to explain cultural phenomena. The social constructivist theory, then, might presuppose a mind-first view of culture. If so, teleological explanations—explanations that take into account the intentions or purpose of the individuals who act in certain ways in particular situations—have a role to play in a social constructivist account of human behavior.

But if Dennett and Richards are correct that Darwinian explanations are always nonteleological (in the sense that they have no recourse to conscious intentions) when called upon to explain biological complexity, if this model is applied to society—as the Darwinian social scientists attempt to do—it should entail that we make no appeal to conscious intentions to explain social or cultural complexity. Dawkins’s “gene-machine view,” as Richards calls it (2000, 56), illustrates this nicely. His idea is that we should not think about individuals as the key unit of evolutionary change and natural selection; instead, genes are the fundamental reproducers, the replicators, and organisms are the vehicles for these genes. “They [the replicators] are in you and in me; they created us, body and mind; and their preservation is the ultimate rationale for our existence. They have come a long way, those replicators. Now they go by the name of genes, and we are their survival machines” (Dawkins 1989, 20). “We are survival machines—robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes” (1989, v). The idea of intentional human agents has dropped out and been replaced by a causal mechanism, which is that the genes cause the human organism to react in such a way that the survival of the genes is secured. We do not need any more conscious intentions to explain social or cultural complexity. So there is a tension here between evolutionary psychologist theory and the Christian theory and social constructivist theory.

The uniqueness thesis of Christianity also appears to be more in line with the social constructivist theory than with the evolutionary psychologist theory, because the constructivist theory presupposes that there is something exceptional about us. Peter Augustine Lawler (2003) writes that “what we make of ourselves owes little or nothing to nature. There is no ‘natural law’ worth heeding, because we alone among the species have a mysterious but real capability to be other than natural beings.”

What social constructivists regard as distinguishing human beings from the rest of the animal world is that we are without much fixed form and consequently have the ability to make of ourselves what we will, or the potential to be molded by the social environment into many different forms

in a much shorter time frame than is necessary in the case of other animals. There is something exceptional about us. The reason why social constructivists think that we are exceptional may be different from the reasons Christians would give, but both seem to affirm a uniqueness thesis to a far greater degree than would the Darwinian social scientists.

The Darwinian social scientists emphasize the continuity between us and the other species; we are not fundamentally different from the other animals. Our nature and natural purposes are fully intelligible through evolution and are not really different from those of other animals. Recall that the difference between the Darwinians and the social constructivists is that the latter believe that we have evolved into a state where we are so much the creatures of our culture that our evolutionary origins can tell us little or nothing about what we now are, whereas the Darwinian social scientists think that an understanding of the evolutionary process that made us what we are is essential for understanding who we are, why we behave as we do, and why we (successfully or unsuccessfully) live in a society such as we do. Darwinian social scientists recognize that we are unique in the sense that some of the properties that we have as a species are possessed by no other species, but, they claim, we can still understand much or most of what human beings are and the causes of their behavior by studying other and related animals. In this sense there is nothing exceptional about us.

Related to these issues about uniqueness are questions about human freedom. One way to understand what is unique about us is to say that our distinctive characteristic is our freedom. We are free to make ourselves in the image of God or in the image of beasts or demons. As we have seen, the standard Christian view contains a free-will thesis. A determinist state is one in which everything that happens is entirely caused by what happened before. To say that human beings have free will is to say that more than one future is open to us. Our actions, or at least some of them, are not entirely caused by what happened previously. In any given situation, a human being could have acted differently had he or she chosen to, even had all the antecedent conditions remained exactly the same. According to the standard Christian view, human beings have this kind of freedom. Moreover, we are the only creatures that have this property.

Is there a conflict here between the standard Christian view and the evolutionary psychologist view? There certainly seems to be real tension in this area. Some Darwinian social scientists seem close to holding the view that human freedom is just an illusion. Recall Dawkins's opinion that we are "survival machines—robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes" (1989, v). According to Edward O. Wilson, "the question of interest is no longer whether human social behavior is genetically determined; it is to what extent. The accumulated evidence for a large hereditary component is more detailed and compelling than most persons, including even geneticists, realize. I will go further: it

already is decisive" (1978, 19). Moreover, together with Michael Ruse, he writes that "in an important sense, ethics . . . is an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate" (Ruse and Wilson 1993, 310; see Ruse and Wilson 1986, 186). So, at least the gene-machine view seems to be in serious tension with the free-will thesis. Some kind of genetic determinism appears to be proposed by at least some of the Darwinian social scientists.

What about the social constructivist theory? Does it affirm or presuppose the existence of human free will? Lawler's description of the theory, that it involves the idea that "we alone among the species have a mysterious but real capability to be other than natural beings" (Lawler 2003), may indicate that this is the case. I think that social constructivists or standard social scientists sometimes hold such a view and that they are rather more likely than the Darwinian social scientists to do so. But one possibility open to them is to maintain a *social* rather than genetic determinism and claim that we are forced to do what our society or some other set of cultural factors dictates. The idea would then be that although human behavior goes way beyond biology and genetics, it is nevertheless the case that our behavior is culturally determined. We may think that we have a free will, but the choices we make are entirely caused by previous social arrangements or by our upbringing.

It also could be a question of the *degree* to which biological or cultural factors shape our behavior. Perhaps this is a more fruitful way to express the difference between the evolutionary psychology theory and the social constructivist theory. Wilson clearly thinks that human behavior is an outcome more of biology than of culture. The social constructivist thinks that the opposite is true. But he or she could still be a determinist about human behavior. One may deny that we have a free will and instead claim that we are forced to do what our genes and/or society dictate. We then have a form of either a biological-cultural determinist view or a cultural-biological determinist view of human nature, depending on which of the two factors one believes to be the more influential determinant of behavior. (I am assuming here that free will and determinism are incompatible. Compatibilists would of course disagree.)

There are then two scenarios. As a rule, the particular individual human traits *T*, and behavior patterns *B*, expressed in circumstances *C*, are more determined by social factors than biological factors, but either social factors or biological factors cause *T* and *B*. This is the social constructivists' claim. The evolutionary psychologist's claim reverses the explanatory order of these factors. This is the first scenario. The second scenario is that a third factor is introduced, namely the free will of human beings. The free-will social constructivist would then argue that, as a rule, the particular individual human traits *T*, and behavior patterns *B*, expressed in circumstances *C*, are more influenced by social factors than biological factors, but *T* and *B* are also governed by the individual's free choices. The assumption

is that human freedom cannot be explained by or reduced to social or biological factors alone or to any combination of just the two. The same scenario, appropriately modified, is open to the evolutionary psychologists, although they seem to be more reluctant than the social constructivists to accept that human beings have a free will. In the first scenario there is a two-way, or polar, interplay between social factors and biological factors as the more influential determinant of human behavior. In the second scenario, there is a triangular interplay, where the mysterious capability of making free choices is added into the account of human behavior.

I suggest that we may interpret the Christian theory of human nature as entailing that when explaining human behavior we must take into account not merely the genetic makeup of people or the social environment in which they find themselves but also their free will, because part of human nature is the property of having a free will. This way of thinking about human nature seems to be in greater tension with the approach taken by the Darwinian social scientists than with the standpoint taken by the standard social scientists.

An interesting convergence between the Christian and the Darwinian view concerns the corrupt-human-nature thesis. Are people inherently bad? Is there a fatal flaw in our nature? In *The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are*, Robert Wright writes that “the idea that John Stuart Mill [and standard social scientists] ridiculed—of a corrupt human nature, of ‘original sin’—doesn’t deserve such summary dismissal” (1996, 13). A tendency to sin or to do evil or be selfish may be a fatal flaw in our nature that we cannot overcome by social engineering. Wright thinks that this is something that evolutionary psychology can confirm.

I have identified some tensions and convergences between the three theories but have not dealt in any depth with any of them. Much more careful scholarship needs to be undertaken in order to understand the relationship between these major theories of human nature. I hope that I have provided a helpful starting point for such research.

NOTES

I gratefully acknowledge financial support from The Swedish Research Council that made the writing of this essay possible.

1. I make no distinction here between a theory, a hypothesis, a model, or a view of human nature, even if such distinctions are possible.

2. Dennett adds some other elements as well, in particular certain ideas about design. I do not include these elements, for reasons that will become clear.

3. This is the idea that Pinker (2002, 1) thinks is *the* Christian understanding of immortality.

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