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# Ethics and Human Nature

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Not so long ago, if you wanted to start a barroom brawl at a philosophy conference all you had to do was to make the claim that a defensible ethical or political theory is necessarily constrained by some theory of human nature or other. Underlying the unease that some philosophers felt with any such claim was perhaps the belief that to allow such a claim would necessarily justify oppression or discrimination or deny human responsibility, meaning or purpose.<sup>1</sup> Making such a claim today about a connection between theories of human nature and ethics and politics might still start a fight but the claim-maker is likely to have more allies than would have been the case even, say, ten years ago.<sup>2</sup>

There are two basic positions in the debate over the relationship between conceptions of human nature and ethics/politics. On the one side there are those who view any attempt to ground ethics/politics upon a reasonably ‘thick’ conception of human nature as illegitimate, whatever the actual contours of the theory of human

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<sup>1</sup> See Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> Apart from Pinker’s *The Blank Slate*, we have Peter Singer, *A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution and Cooperation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000); Anthony O’Hear, *Beyond Evolution: Human Nature and the Limits of Evolutionary Explanation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999); Larry Arnhart, *Darwinian Natural Right: The Biological Ethics of Human Nature* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1998) and Francis Fukuyama, *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order* (London: Profile Books, 1999).

nature may be. Typically, such theorists tend to view human beings as being plastic with a nature (if one can use that word) that is infinitely, or at least largely, self-revisable. Francis Fukuyama notes that “for much of this century, the social sciences have been dominated by the assumption that social norms are socially constructed, and that if one wants to explain some particular social fact one must refer...to ‘prior social facts’ rather than to biology or genetic inheritance. Social scientists do not deny that human beings have physical bodies shaped by nature rather than nurture. But the so-called standard social science model asserts that biology governs only the body; the mind, which is the source of culture, values, and norms, is a completely different matter.”<sup>3</sup>

On the other side of the argument are those (myself included) who accept the necessity of a theory of human nature for an adequate grounding of ethics and politics though there may be deep divisions among supporters of this basic position as to what kind of theory best fulfils this grounding role.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I shall claim that an

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<sup>3</sup> Fukuyama, p. 154. See Frank Michelman, “Legalism and Humankind” in *The Good Life and the Human Good*, ed. Ellen Frankel Paul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). For an unusual and entertaining treatment of the difficulties encountered by theories in which ethics is not grounded in anthropology, see Joel Kupperman, “Ethics for Extraterrestrials,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 28 no. 4: 1991, pp. 311-320. For an effort at allaying the fears feminists might have vis-à-vis the claim that political action requires an anthropology grounded on a conception of human nature, see Judith W. Kay, “Politics without Human Nature? Reconstructing a Common Humanity,” *Hypatia* Vol. 9 No. 1 1994, pp. 21-52. On related topics see Christina Sommers, “The Feminist Revelation,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* Vol. 8 no. 1: 1990, pp. 141-158 and Nancy Holmstrom, “Human Nature” in *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy* ed. Alison M. Jagger (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). On the limitations of the philosophical anthropology underlying liberal political theory, see Susan Mendus, *Liberal Man in Philosophy and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> “There have been important recent advances in the life sciences, which have the cumulative effect of re-establishing the classical view that human nature exists and that their nature makes humans social

understanding of the concept of human nature is central to the enterprises of ethics and politics. because it indicates the effective limits of political and ethical debate and that, despite its centrality in ethics and politics (or perhaps because of it) the notion of human nature is essentially contentious.<sup>5</sup>

Some accounts of human beings posit them as being through and through plastic. As Rose, Kamin and Lewontin put it in their book *Not in our Genes*, which is largely an attempted refutation of the pretensions of sociobiology, “The post-1968 New Left in Britain and the US has shown a tendency to see human nature as almost infinitely plastic, to deny biology and acknowledge only social construction.”<sup>6</sup> But could

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and political creatures with great capabilities for establishing social rules. While the research in a certain sense does not tell us anything that Aristotle didn't know, it allows us to be much more precise about the nature of human sociability, and what is and is not rooted in the human.” Fukuyama, p. 138

<sup>5</sup> If the concept of nature is notoriously ambiguous, scarcely less ambiguous is the concept of human nature. While conceding the ambiguity of the concepts of ‘nature’ and ‘human nature’ Bertie Crowe both denies that the scholastics were unaware of the possible equivocations of the concepts and asserts that “it would seem essential to maintain that there is a ‘human nature’ which is the standard of natural morality.” M. B. Crowe, “Human Nature—Immutable or Mutable,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* Vol. 30: pp. 205-231; pp. 205-206. See also Christopher Berry’s monograph in the *Issues in Political Theory* series, entitled *Human Nature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986); and Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (London: Methuen, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Richard C. Lewontin et al., *Not in our Genes: Biology, Ideology, and Human Nature* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 10. For an early sociobiological account of human nature see E.O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (New York, Bantam Books, 1979), originally published by Harvard University Press, 1978. For another perspective on the implications of Darwinism for our view of human nature see Peter Singer, *A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution and Cooperation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000). Interestingly, Singer concedes that a Darwinian left should not deny the existence of a human nature nor should it insist either that that nature is intrinsically good or infinitely malleable. Anthony O’Hear in *Beyond Evolution: Human Nature and the Limits of Evolutionary*

human beings really be ‘almost infinitely plastic’? I believe such a position to be both implausible and untenable but I also hold, in agreement with Pinker,<sup>7</sup> that the perceived liberal necessity to hold such a position as a defence against discrimination and injustice is unnecessary.

The search for a single, simple characterisation of human nature appears to be a mistake. Strict definition by genus and differentia would be wonderful if we could get it but it appears to be beyond our grasp in regard to human beings. Even in the case of the material world surrounding us, seemingly uncontaminated by the processes of self-reference that bedevil human affairs, it appears that the search for a Theory of Everything is a search without end. Some eight hundred years ago, St Thomas Aquinas wrote in his little work *de Ente et Essentia* that even in the case of sensible things “the essential differences themselves are not known; whence they are signified through accidental differences, which rise out of the essential ones, as a cause is

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*Explanation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) argues that evolutionary theory fails to explain such distinctive human activities as the human appreciation of the beautiful, the human search for knowledge. For a defence of the (surprising) claim that a full-blooded Darwinian naturalism is compatible with a rejection of standard sociological conception of human nature, see Michael Smithurst, “The Elusiveness of Human Nature,” *Inquiry* 1990, pp. 433-445. For a more recent but similarly surprising claim that Darwinian biology grounds an Aristotelian-type ethics rooted in human nature, see Larry Arnhart, *Darwinian Natural Right: The Biological Ethics of Human Nature* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1998) and for an articulation of the relation of human nature to the creation and destruction of social capital, see Fukuyama’s *The Great Disruption*.

<sup>7</sup> See Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, Part III. Pinker goes so far as to say that “It’s not just that claims about human nature are less dangerous than many people think. It’s that the *denial* of human nature can be *more* dangerous than people think.” p. 139.

signified through its effect.”<sup>8</sup> It is one thing to claim that man has an essence or nature; this is an ontological claim: it is quite another to claim that we can come to know exhaustively what that essence or nature is; this is a matter of epistemology.

Despite ;this difficulty, however, there is nothing obviously idiotic in assessing the qualities and properties of a given species as being more or less essential to that species. We could consider those properties to be more essential that are, in some way, structurally or functionally effective throughout the whole of the animal’s activities or at least the greater part of them. In this way, man’s rationality is obviously more essential to him than his being two-footed or featherless.

If human nature is properly conceived of as a set of powers, tendencies, or capacities, then the notion of a limit necessarily comes into play for a capacity, if it is to be a capacity, must be a capacity for something relatively determinate.<sup>9</sup> The notion of constraint or limit is an inescapable corollary to the notion of human nature. Morality is tied to human interests and human properties and these constitute its limit.

If we can agree that the concept of nature as such is at least intelligible and grant the existence of a human nature, then the next question to answer is: Is human nature relevant to ethics and politics and, if so, how? There is a great deal of agreement that human nature is relevant to an adequate account of ethics/politics. Alan Ryan, for example, holds that moral and political arguments have, intrinsic to them, an account of human nature; Isaiah Berlin believes that the ideas of philosophers concerned with

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<sup>8</sup> St Thomas Aquinas *de Ente et Essentia*, c. 6. “In rebus enim sensibilibus etiam ipsae differentiae essentiales nobis ignotae sunt; unde significantur per differentias accidentales quae ex essentialibus oriuntur, sicut causa significantur per suum effectum.” Cf. In *Meta.* para. 1552.

human affairs depend upon on their conception of what man is and can be, and this central notion or image of the nature of man, which determines their picture of the world, is more important than the arguments used to defend their views; Alasdair MacIntyre claims that each form of social and moral practice has its own picture of human nature; while Roger Trigg claims that there is a single simple definition of human nature he is perfectly prepared to allow that ideas of human nature radically affect the kind of society we live in, believing further that without a conception of what it is to be human no one can say much about human societies or human practices — no human nature, no history, no politics, and no social anthropology; Rose, Kamin and Lewontin concede, perhaps somewhat ruefully, that the appeal to human nature has been characteristic of all political philosophies, while Henry Veatch and Joseph Rautenberg both hold that Aquinas and Aristotle held that ethical knowledge is based on a knowledge of nature, specifically a knowledge of human nature.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> We must remember that, as Aristotle notes in the *Metaphysics* (Book Theta), rational capacities (potencies) are actualisable in contrary ways whereas non-rational capacities are actualisable only in one way.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Ryan, *The Philosophy of Social Explanation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current* (Oxford, 1981); Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1998); Roger Trigg, *Ideas of Human Nature : An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1999; Richard Lewontin et al., *Not in Our Genes*; Henry Veatch and Joseph Rautenberg, “Does the Grisez-Finnis-Boyle Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?” *The Review of Metaphysics* Vol. 44: 1991, pp. 807-830. Russell Hittinger argues in “After MacIntyre: Natural Law Theory, Virtue Ethics, and Eudaimonia,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 29, No. 4: 1989, pp. 449-461, that while both the virtue ethicists (e.g. Hauerwas and Pincoffs) and the ‘new’ natural law theorists (Grisez and Finnis) are correct in identifying the limitations of modern ethics, their attempts to do moral philosophy without a theory of nature in general, and human nature in particular, fail. See

There appear to be as many definitions of man as there are men: We have been told that man is by his constitution a religious animal, a gaming animal, that he must always be trying to get the better of something or other. The definition ‘man is a social animal’ has met with general approval’ while his being a tool-making animal, a tool-using animal, a being formed for society and born to believe are popular descriptions.<sup>11</sup>

I have already suggested that the search for a single, simple, distinction, presumably embodied in a single, simple definition, is a mistake. But if these one-line accounts are unsatisfactory (at the very least because they can be at best partial even if true) how can we go about discovering a more adequate account of human nature? This raises the more general question of how we might come to know the nature of anything. Unless one accepts the possibility of some sort of mystical intuition, then (prescinding from Divine Revelation) the only way to grasp the nature of an entity is by observing its characteristic activities and reactivities; in short, if you want to know what something is, see what it does. So we move, then, in the order of discovery, from an entity’s characteristic activities and reactivities to the range of capacities that it must have if it is to be able to act and react in its characteristic way. Furthermore, if

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Mark C. Murphy, “Self-Evidence, Human Nature, and Natural Law,” *The American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 69 no. 3: 1995, pp. 471-484, who believes that there is a tension in Finnis’s thought between two distinct conceptions of natural law: one, which holds that the principles of natural law are self-evident and underivable, and another, which holds that the principles of natural law are grounded on human nature. Russell Hittinger, on the other hand, places Finnis (together with Germain Grisez) squarely among certain contemporary efforts to recover the core of such a common morality without explicitly relying on a theory of nature.

<sup>11</sup> The definitions are from, respectively, Edmund Burke, Charles Lamb, Baruch Spinoza, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Carlyle, Sir William Blackstone, and Benjamin Disraeli.

necessary (as it will be necessary in the case of those entities whose basic capacities are susceptible of more or less permanent modification) we must move from these modified capacities, which are the proximate source of the entity's activities, to the entity's basic unmodified capacities.

We are here concerned only with human nature as an originative source of ethical and political activity and not with a disquisition on philosophical psychology as such, and so we should begin our inquiry by looking at man's characteristic range of moral activities.<sup>12</sup> Here, however, it seems that we run into immediate difficulties. Different people choose different things, and the same person chooses different things at different times.

Is the field of human action characterised by chaos, or is it possible to discern some principles of order?<sup>13</sup> I do not believe that it is chaotic. I agree with Midgley when she claims that "we know that there have to be some things that are naturally more important, more central to human life, than others, and [we know how to] compare them. We are not really in the helplessly ignorant position philosophical discussions often suggest"<sup>14</sup>

Ethical agnosticism is a delicate plant that, like scepticism in general, can survive only in the hothouse atmosphere of the academy; ethical agnostics can remain agnostic only so long as they are willing to deny the validity of their own experience. Is there anyone who, having worked for some time in the expectation of being

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<sup>12</sup> It could be argued that all intentional human action is *ipso facto* moral.

<sup>13</sup> What I am hinting at here is the existence of what Alan Donegan has called the 'common morality.' Douglas B. Rasmussen, "Human Flourishing and the Appeal to Human Nature" in *Social Philosophy and Policy* Vol. 16 no. 1: 1999, pp. 1-43, argues that an Aristotelian account of human flourishing need not be over-specific in its delineation of various goods and virtues.

materially rewarded, would not be justifiably aggrieved if his pay cheque failed to materialise. And would this annoyance not turn to an angry claim of injustice if, upon inquiry, it transpired that the reason for the non-materialisation of the pay cheque was a playful whim on the part of his employer? Is there anyone who, seeing someone sticking pins into a baby just for the fun of it would not judge this to be reprehensible?

Still, even if we cannot hold that everything about human beings is in a state of constant flux, it is nonetheless true that human needs, desires, instincts, inclinations are very various and it seems unreasonable to hope that a satisfactory account of the good for man should arbitrarily select one of these co-ordinate goods as being *the* good above and independent of all the others. Midgley, once again, puts the matter clearly: “We want incompatible things, and want them badly. We are fairly aggressive, yet we want company and depend on long-term enterprises. We love those around us and need their love, yet we want independence and need to wander. We are restlessly curious and meddling, yet long for permanence. Unlike many primates, we do have a tendency to pair-formation, but it is an incomplete one....In dealing with such conflicts we have no option but to reason from the facts about our human wants and needs.”<sup>15</sup>

The picture that emerges is one in which the objects of human action and the human actions directed towards them are at once manifold and varied, and yet ordered, or at least capable of being ordered. If the objects of human action are so orderable, so too should the human actions directed towards them be orderable. There are many particular goods that can be chosen by us and yet it is important to us—that is, it is

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<sup>14</sup> Midgley, *Beast and Man*, p. 261.

<sup>15</sup> Midgley, *Beast and Man*, p. 190.

itself another good—that the selection of particular goods should be such that they do not clash with one another and cancel one another out. *The* good is sought in every limited and particular good and yet no particularised good can exhaustively express or contain it. There are always more and other goods necessarily excluded by our particular choices.

A tension can arise between the egalitarian position that goods are more or less equal in attractive power and the aristocratic position that some goods are intrinsically better than others and that, perhaps, some one good is the best of all. For Aristotle, in most of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the life lived in accordance with virtue according to a rational principle appears to consist of the proper integration of a range of particular goods. Towards the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* he seems to claim that reason has a specific object of its own apart from its role in ordering and integrating the choice of particular goods, this good being contemplation. But I see no ineradicable difficulty here. This is not an either/or situation—the positions are surely complementary. What I have called the egalitarian position already recognises implicitly the existence of different orders of good, for the good of integration is not a good on the same level as any of the goods integrated. The life of reason is, on the one hand, a life lived in such a way that the conflicting and quarrelling desires and needs are ordered in such a way as to maximise unity and integration and to minimise disunity and disintegration. And there is, obviously, not just one way of doing this, although it is clear that, in general, some ways of going about this are better than others, and that some ways of going about it are non-starters. But the integrationist or egalitarian approach to reason does not prevent it having its own special and unique excellence, which is its orientation towards truth for its own sake, what Aristotle calls contemplation.

Those ineluctably given aspects of our being that moderns call instincts or drives St Thomas calls ‘inclinations.’<sup>16</sup> He believes that there is an order of natural inclinations which can be quite generally categorised and that these inclinations are indicative of the range of objects and activities which will present themselves to us as goods, for good has the nature of an end, and so, all things to which man has a natural inclination are naturally apprehended by reason as good, and so as worthy of pursuit.<sup>17</sup> The first natural inclination to the good is based on that which is entirely common to all substances, and this is the inclination that each substance has to preserve itself in its own proper being according to its own nature. From the human perspective this inclination bears on all that has to do with the preservation of human life. The second natural inclination to the good is based on the nature that man shares with other animals. So, according to St Thomas, this inclination indicates a range of goods in regard to what nature has taught all animals, for example about the necessity

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<sup>16</sup> The inclinational nature of our knowledge of the natural law gives rise to one of Maritain’s purple passages: “I think that Thomas Aquinas’ teaching here should be understood in a much deeper and more precise fashion than is usual. When he says that human reason discovers the regulations of the Natural Law through the guidance of the *inclinations* of human nature, he means that the very mode or manner in which human reason knows natural law is not rational knowledge, but knowledge *through inclination*. This kind of knowledge is not clear knowledge through concepts and conceptual judgments; it is obscure, unsystematic, vital knowledge by connaturality or congeniality, in which the intellect, in order to bear judgment, consults and listens to the inner melody that the vibrating strings of abiding tendencies make present in the subject.” Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 91-92. This same passage in Maritain has been noted and utilised by Thomas A. Fay in “Maritain on Rights and Natural Law,” *The Thomist*, Vol. 55 No. 3, 1991, pp. 439-448.

<sup>17</sup> Arnhart, in *Darwinian Natural Right*, claims to locate twenty or so universal natural desires, universal because rooted in human biology.

for procreation and the nurturing of offspring. The third natural inclination to the good is based on man's specific nature as that is peculiar to him alone. The goods indicated by inclinations at this third level have to do with living in society and knowing truth about God, what we might term the practical and theoretical operations of reason. The goods corresponding to the three orders of inclination could be seen in terms of preservation; the preservation of all that is insofar as it is; the preservation of the species; the preservation of rational activity.<sup>18</sup>

It should be obvious that the levels of inclination range from pre-biological, through the biological, to the specifically human. The three levels could be viewed as a set of three concentric circles, with the biological nestling within the pre-biological, and the human, in turn, nestling with the biological. Though each higher level, each inner circle, is dependent upon the lower (outer), it is not reducible to any of them. This point is made by Thomas Szasz in the following way: "I submit that the concept of a distinctively human, normal, or well-functioning personality is rooted in psychological and ethical criteria. It is not biologically given, nor are biological determinants especially significant for it. I do not deny, of course, that man is an animal with a genetically determined biological equipment which sets the upper and lower limits within which he must function."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> It is interesting that St Thomas puts together under the rubric of the third natural inclination to the good, both the activity of theoretical reason *and* the activity of the practical reason.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Szasz, *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct*, rev. edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). Originally published in 1960.

To what extent are these natural inclinations and the good at which they aim fixed and unvarying?<sup>20</sup> It might seem that what is natural is just so and cannot be otherwise but, surprisingly, Aquinas allows that man's nature is, in a certain respect, changeable.<sup>21</sup> He says that what is natural is unchangeable but nevertheless man's nature is changeable so that what is natural to man may sometimes fail. To illustrate this point he gives the following example: "the restitution of a deposit to the depositor is in accordance with natural equality, and if human nature were always right, this would always have to be observed; but since it happens sometimes that man's will is unrighteous there are cases in which a deposit should not be restored, lest a man of unrighteous will make evil use of the thing deposited; as when a madman or an enemy of the common weal demands the return of his weapons."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>"We are used to hearing in the context of the natural law, that man as a substance has an inclination to survival; as an animal he has an instinct towards the procreative union of male and female; and, as rational, he has an urge to communicate with others, to co-operate with them in society and to increase his knowledge and develop his talents. Have we here those elements in human nature which persist through the greatest variations in civilizations and culture and provide the principles that can be applied to the infinite complexity of circumstances in which man finds himself?" Crowe, "Natural Law Theory Today," p. 362.

<sup>21</sup> See M. B. Crowe, "Human Nature—Immutable or Mutable." Crowe warns us of the danger of making "uncritical use of St. Thomas's phrase that human nature is mutable as if it solved everything." (p. 231) Crowe had earlier noted that while "there are certain advantages in being able to say that human nature is "mutable"; and, for a Thomist, decided advantages in being able to quote St. Thomas in support" (pp. 220-221) nevertheless, given the infrequency of the supporting texts and the particular nature of the contexts in which they occur "to exaggerate [the] import [of the phrase 'human nature is mutable'] would be imprudent as well as facile." (p. 231)

<sup>22</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, II IIae, q. 57, a. 2, ad. 1.

Now, although the third order of natural inclination to the good includes the goods of both theoretical and practical reason, there is nonetheless a very important difference between reason in each of its two aspects. The basic principles of theoretical reason and the basic principles of the practical reason are both the same for all and are known by all. The proper conclusions of theoretical reason are the same for all though they are not necessarily known to all. By contrast, the proper conclusions of practical reason are not only not necessarily known by all, but *they are not necessarily the same for all* either. The example given to illustrate this point in the discussion of law in the *Summa Theologiae* is the same example about the maniacal or antisocial depositor which was given to illustrate the changeability of human nature.

This appears to me to be a vitally important point, for it allows for objectivity at the level of principle while at the same time allowing for a certain measure of relativity in regard to particular choices and actions.<sup>23</sup> Many of the fears of those who regard the notion of human nature as imposing a deadening uniformity on human action can be allayed if this distinction between moral principles and particular moral

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<sup>23</sup> “The strongest suit of traditional natural-law theory is not necessarily its capacity to generate a list of precepts, which are then used to generate tables of positive laws. Such lists and tables can be, and indeed have been, done on the basis of something other than explicit natural-law theory. The long tradition of scholastic natural law has recognized that particular rules are ordinarily derived in a rather remote way from basic natural-law precepts, and that moral deliberation is usually governed by a complex network of traditions: civil, ecclesiastical, cultural. It is a mistake to expect natural law theory to constitute an over-arching tables of laws which can be straightforwardly applied to issues ranging from the use of condoms to the allocation of public monies.” Russell Hittinger, “After MacIntyre.” For a more complete discussion see, by the same author, *A Critique of the New Natural Law Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987.)

beliefs is clearly grasped. Stuart Hackett makes the point that those who conflate the level of moral principle with the level of moral belief more or less inevitably come to attach the relativity of moral beliefs to moral principles.<sup>24</sup> But if principles and beliefs are not identical then the relativity of the one does not necessarily attach to the other. Any given set of moral beliefs is, to some extent, an exemplification of moral principles and there can, of course, be more than one such set.<sup>25</sup> Crowe makes a similar point in an ontological mode when he says that “Viewed abstractly and universally human nature is univocally the same in all members of the human species—it is what defines individuals as men. But as concretely and individually existing in each member of the species, human nature is subject to bio-cultural evolution....Human nature, then, may be essentially the same in all places and in all times and, in incidentals, subject to evolution and development. The consequences for morality are most important; for what is ontologically an accident may be the source of essentially differences in the field of morals.”<sup>26</sup>

Take, for example, the first principle of practical reason “good is to be done and sought after, and evil is to be avoided.” This principle is exemplified or instantiated in all human actions, just as the corresponding first principle of theoretical reason is exemplified in all meaningful statements and beliefs. And just as particular truth-claims are not deduced from the principle of non-contradiction but rather have, of

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<sup>24</sup> Stuart Hackett, *Oriental Philosophy* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), “Introduction,” passim.

<sup>25</sup> Crowe notes that while “moral principles may be invariable...their application is conditioned by circumstances—and circumstances do alter cases.” “Natural Law Theory Today,” p. 378.

<sup>26</sup> Crowe, “Natural Law Theory Today,” p. 373.

necessity to exemplify it if they are to be meaningful, so too the first principle of practical reason necessarily informs all human action.

How does a theory of human nature operate in ethics and politics? Can we set out a theory and deduce particular consequence from it as if it were a set of axioms and the consequences were its theorems? The answer must be—assuredly not!<sup>27</sup> To begin

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<sup>27</sup> “When Aquinas speaks of principles in the theoretic order he does so with considerable ambiguity. At times he speaks as if such principles were the premises in a piece of reasoning. But at other times his first principles are such as the principle of contradiction, of excluded middle, etc. Now from such principles it is impossible to derive any argument. The truth is that by first principles he may mean the fundamental axioms in any given field of enquiry. But at other times he means principles immanent to the whole process of reasoning—not premises in an argument, but the structure without which no argument would be coherent—not axioms but rules of thought.” Columba Ryan, “The Traditional Concept of Natural Law,” in *Light on the Natural Law*, ed. Illtud Evans (London: Burns and Oates, 1965), p. 26. Hittinger too notes that “The strongest suit of traditional natural-law theory is *not* necessarily its capacity to generate a list of precepts, which are then used to generate tables of positive laws. Such lists and tables can be, and indeed have been, done on the basis of something other than explicit natural-law theory. The long tradition of scholastic natural law has recognized that particular rules are ordinarily derived in a rather remote way from basic natural-law precepts, and that moral deliberation is usually governed by a complex network of traditions; civil, ecclesiastical, cultural. It is a mistake to expect natural law theory to constitute an over-arching table of laws which can be straightforwardly applied to issues ranging from the use of condoms to the allocation of public monies. One can agree with Pincoffs that the test of a moral theory cannot simply be its facility in resolving an indefinite array of quandaries. For a moral outlook should, at the outset, be able to delimit the range of such issues, and the principle of delimitation is not only the perspective implicit in the individual agent’s character, but also the philosophical view of what the world is like and how it is ordered. Natural law theory is best able to treat the more identifiably *philosophical* problem of whether human reason is related to an order that is not merely of its own making and doing.” Hittinger, “After Macintyre” pp. 460-461; and Crowe notes that “a natural law that legislates confidently for all the details of moral behaviour can no longer be defended; but...there is a concept of natural law that can

with, as already noted, prescind from Revelation, natures of whatever kind can be discovered only by means of an analysis of the characteristic activities and reactivities of the entity whose nature we are attempting to elucidate. This is the order of discovery. So, for example, if you want to know what kind of thing, let us say, copper is, you hit it with a hammer, heat a length and measure it, stretch it and see what happens. The piece of copper behaves in a quite definite way. And if the data we elicit is true not only of our favourite piece of copper but of any piece of copper selected at random then we have gained some insight—partial and limited but real—into its nature: “[T]he modern must be content with the humble search for the uniformities of behaviour that betray the presence of stable ‘natures’. This is the basis of the predictability that characterizes scientific knowledge, whether it be that of bodies to obey gravitational pulls, of magnets to be pole-seeking, of chemicals to combine or react, of plants to grow or regenerate tissue, of animals to propagate their kind....But what of man and man’s nature? Is there something constant here too?...the problem is whether observation of human nature, its structure and tendencies, will enable us to formulate a law of that nature.”<sup>28</sup>

Once a nature has been more or less clearly delineated, once we have some reasonable grasp of the characteristic human needs, desires, and inclinations arranged more or less coherently in an account of human nature, then this knowledge can be used as an organising explanatory principle in relation to a range of data wider than that from which it was originally elicited. If the concept of human nature is not to be sterile then it must be applicable in such a way. Of course a theory of human nature is

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cater for the moral doubts and dilemmas of our or any age....The genuine natural law....is quite sufficiently flexible and nuanced a notion to accommodate the modern difficulties.” “Natural Law Theory Today,” p. 357.

always open to modification in the light of reflective experience, though not every part of the account will be equally revisable, and it may be difficult to imagine what could count as evidence against the central elements of the theory.

In practice, a theory of human nature functions in ethics and politics by articulating the limits within which questions may sensibly be asked and answered, and, in the case of particular naturalistic theories by attempting to pre-empt any possible rival non-naturalistic theories by interpreting their positions as being partial, inadequate, or limiting cases of itself.

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<sup>28</sup> M. B. Crowe, "Natural Law Theory Today," pp. 371-372.