

*Psychology  
and 'Human Nature'*

PETER ASHWORTH

**Psychology Focus**



# Psychology and 'Human Nature'

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Trevor Butt,  
*University of Huddersfield*

'This is an extremely useful text which provides an insight into the debates surrounding human behaviour and the psychological models that inform our understanding.'

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*Psychology and 'Human Nature'* problematises what psychology usually takes for granted—the meaning of the psyche or 'human nature'. Peter Ashworth provides a coherent account of many of the major schools of thought in psychology and its related disciplines, including: sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, psychoanalysis, cognitive psychology, radical behaviourism, existentialism, discursive psychology and postmodernism. For each approach he considers the claims or assumptions being made about the psyche and their position on the associated issues of consciousness, the self, the body, other people and the physical world.

*Psychology and 'Human Nature'* will be essential reading for all students of psychology.

**Peter Ashworth** is Professor of Educational Research and Director of the Learning and Teaching Research Institute, Sheffield Hallam University.

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# Psychology and 'Human Nature'

▪ Peter Ashworth



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## **Series preface**

The Psychology Focus series provides short, up-to-date accounts of key areas in psychology without assuming the reader's prior knowledge in the subject. Psychology is often a favoured subject area for study, since it is relevant to a wide range of disciplines such as Sociology, Education, Nursing and Business Studies. These relatively inexpensive but focused short texts combine sufficient detail for psychology specialists with sufficient clarity for non-specialists.

The series authors are academics experienced in undergraduate teaching as well as research. Each takes a topic within their area of psychological expertise and presents a short review, highlighting important themes and including both theory and research findings. Each aspect of the topic is clearly explained with supporting glossaries to elucidate technical terms.

The series has been conceived within the context of the increasing modularisation which has been developed in higher education over the last

# Series preface

decade and fulfils the consequent need for clear, focused, topic-based course material. Instead of following one course of study, students on a modularisation programme are often able to choose modules from a wide range of disciplines to complement the modules they are required to study for a specific degree. It can no longer be assumed that students studying a particular module will necessarily have the same background knowledge (or lack of it!) in that subject. But they will need to familiarise themselves with a particular topic rapidly since a single module in a single topic may be only 15 weeks long, with assessments arising during that period. They may have to combine eight or more modules in a single year to obtain a degree at the end of their programme of study.

One possible problem with studying a range of separate modules is that the relevance of a particular topic or the relationship between topics may not always be apparent. In the Psychology Focus series, authors have drawn where possible on practical and applied examples to support the points being made so that readers can see the wider relevance of the topic under study. Also, the study of psychology is usually broken up into separate areas, such as social psychology, developmental psychology and cognitive psychology, to take three examples. Whilst the books in the Psychology Focus series will provide excellent coverage of certain key topics within these 'traditional' areas, the authors have not been constrained in their examples and explanations and may draw on material across the whole field of psychology to help explain the topic under study more fully.

Each text in the series provides the reader with a range of important material on a specific topic. They are suitably comprehensive and give a clear account of the important issues involved. The authors analyse and interpret the material as well as present an up-to-date and detailed review of key work. Recent references are provided along with suggested further reading to allow readers to investigate the topic in more depth. It is hoped, therefore, that after following the informative review of a key topic in a Psychology Focus text, readers not only will have a clear understanding of the issues in question but will be intrigued and challenged to investigate the topic further.

# Introduction

## **Introduction: psychology and 'human nature'**

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THOUGH THIS IS NOT AN ABSOLUTELY UNCHALLENGED POSITION, contemporary academic psychology to a large extent views itself as a science. This seems to mean, certainly at undergraduate level, that it is not felt necessary for psychology to examine its most basic assumptions and presuppositions. Does physics, as taught, entail any reflection upon what is included or excluded in the scientific study of the material world? No—and neither is there any need in teaching psychology to raise the issue of what human nature might mean. In this book it is the meanings of ‘human nature’ that I wish to bring out. The scare quotes are to indicate that I see ‘human nature’ as a problem: the notion is not to be taken for granted.

The reader who is involved in the formal study of psychology, either as a specialism or as part of a degree whose centre of gravity lies elsewhere, will be able to use the book to locate the approach of the theories on which they are working within wider debates concerning human nature. Other readers, who are not formal students of the discipline but who may wish to increase the sophistication or range of their own thinking on human nature—the ‘proper study’ of us all according to the poet—will, I sincerely hope, equally find these pages of interest.

In this book, then, I consider several viewpoints on human nature, chosen for their diversity, contemporary impact, and relevance to the broad field of psychology. But it must be stressed that relevance to the field does not mean, necessarily, that a viewpoint lies *within* the field. Several theorists discussed here would firmly reject the label ‘psychologist’. For instance, Sartre said in an interview conducted close to the end of his life, ‘I do not believe in the existence of psychology. I have not done it and I do not believe it exists’ (Schilpp, 1981:28). Nevertheless the grounds for this statement relate to Sartre’s understanding of the nature of human life, so—whatever academic discipline it falls within, if any—it is certainly relevant to ‘psychology’ as far as this volume is concerned.

To reach a perspective on the discipline requires that we pay attention to those who would reject psychology. Among them are authors who, like Sartre, are antagonistic to the notion that there can be any stable meaning to ‘human nature’ at all, and reject psychology, thinking that psychologists are necessarily committed to such ‘essentialism’. (Though some more recent views, such as those of the discursive psychologists represented in [Chapter 6](#), indicate that this is too partial a view of the discipline as a whole.) The aim of all this is to help the reader see each viewpoint—some familiar, some new—in the context of a general problematic: What are the claims or assumptions which are being made about the subject matter, the human being?

The book is structured in a rough-and-ready way in terms of authors’ explicit or implicit assumptions about whether ‘human nature’ should be regarded as ontologically primary or whether it is derivative of some more primordial reality. Ontology is concerned with the question of being. So what I mean by ‘ontologically primary’ is whether human nature is its own special kind of being or whether it is better understood through a more general or basic field of research. Of course, biology and culture are the prime candidates for primacy: many thinkers treat human nature as best studied in the wider context of biological or sociological research. Representatives of both these views appear in the following pages. But it is also of great interest that there are authors who do take neither the sociological path nor that of biological science but insist instead that personal ‘psychological’ life (they might not use the term ‘psychological’ for various reasons) is indeed ontologically primary. And this brings us to the profound question of whether, when we take psychological life to be its own special form of reality, this can still be treated as subject to scientific laws (such as the ones sought by cognitive psychologists) or whether some version of voluntarism, in which the person has individual freedom and responsibility, is necessary.

Of course, not all kinds of scholarly thought about the nature of the individual will be discussed here. Anglo-American philosophical thought is mostly not represented in this book. Nor is theological thinking covered. Religious thought does indeed deal

with human nature but always as a secondary theme to the question of ultimate meaning. For a scholarly account of the treatment of human nature in a wide range of religions, east and west, see Ward (1998). Incidentally, he includes a discussion of what he calls 'evolutionary naturalism' in that book—for he regards the approach of Darwinists (to which I devote [Chapter 1](#)) as providing an interesting variation on certain religious themes regarding human nature.

Theological and certain philosophical approaches are left out, then, and sociology is only here at the 'micro' level, in which the human actor comes into focus. So there has been selection; but not arbitrary selection. In line with the structure I have outlined, the approaches discussed vary in the extent to which *social* or *biological* factors are emphasised as *determining* thought and action, or whether personal *freedom* is taken as characterising human nature, and voluntary decision-making is taken to be a real possibility.

## **Outline of the book**

There is great scholarly merit in the unification of knowledge. It is an aim of science to draw disparate phenomena together under a coherent set of explanatory principles. So the possibility that the whole spectrum of psychological work may be grounded in mechanisms whose nature is fundamentally biological is very attractive, even if it is, at present, only an aspiration of some researchers and theorists. The two approaches dealt with in [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#) are usually seen as rather distinct in the kind of psychology they generate, but they are united in at least this feature: both the *evolutionary perspective* and *psychoanalysis* suggest that human nature is fundamentally biological. They do so by claiming that this is because biology is the ultimate source of human motivation.

In the case of the evolutionary perspective, the ultimate motive is survival, in the sense that it is postulated that the process of evolution has selected psychological characteristics which serve to

increase the likelihood of continuity over the generations. For psychoanalysis, on the other hand, the ultimate motive—equally unbeknown to the individual person—is sexual. In making the claim that there is an ultimate motive, both approaches face challenges of interpretation. How can an account of human nature which is built on such a narrow basis of biological motivation cover such a variety of both cultural and individual differences in actions and apparent motives?

In [Chapter 1](#) I have selected homosexuality as the focus of a discussion of the approach of evolutionary theorists to a specific issue of human nature. Homosexuality is a special problem for the evolutionary perspective because it remains an enigma how a sexual orientation which obviously markedly reduces the individual's reproductive fitness nevertheless remains significant within the human gene-pool. But each subsequent theory also finds homosexuality enigmatic. So in each of the following chapters I have specifically discussed it—and it therefore provides a basis for the comparison of theories.

In [Chapter 3](#) I turn to *cognitive psychology*. For maybe the majority of research psychologists, cognitive psychology is psychology, or at least it is the scientific core of the discipline. Cognition is the process by which we attain knowledge. It includes perception, remembering, thinking, reasoning, imagining and learning. Psychology is understood by cognitive psychologists to be a biological science, and it is expected that, in the long run, the views psychologists progressively develop concerning mental processes will converge with the findings of neurologists and other biological scientists interested in brain function. Indeed, work at this interface, attempting to investigate research questions through a direct study of the brain, is of growing importance.

Yet in [Chapter 4](#) we find in the influential work of B.F. Skinner a critique of cognitive psychology. Indeed, the theories of the whole of the rest of the book can be seen as agreeing in some way with this critique, however they might differ in other ways with Skinner's *behaviourism*. Skinner wants to assert, primarily, that the human being is intrinsically engaged in the world. More than this, there is a sense in which the person is not separable from the world. I am simply the



place where a number of variables interact, and so 'my' behaviour is not *mine* but the direct lawful outcome of those variables.

Now, though this book is not organised along historical lines, a reader may be forgiven a moment of puzzlement. Cognitive psychology largely arose in the context of a critique of behaviourism. Might it not therefore have been more rational to introduce behaviourism first, reversing the order of [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#) ? After all, the two approaches to human nature are not very different in their positions on the two organising dimensions of the book; they both regard psychology ultimately as a biological science and they both adopt a deterministic stance. It does, however, seem to me that historical sequencing, in drawing out some connections necessarily downplays others (but see Richards, 1996, for a positive application of the historical perspective). My chosen ordering allows us to see that there is a surprising closeness between Skinnerian behaviourism and Sartreism.

In some ways Skinner's determinism is the extreme opposite of the *existentialism* of Sartre, which is the focus of [Chapter 5](#). For in Sartre we have the outstanding example of a voluntarist— a position which I feel it is particularly important to represent in these pages precisely because the emphasis on freedom is so contrary to the scientific determinism assumed in psychology generally. Yet both Sartre and Skinner are anti-cognitivists. They deny with equal vehemence the idea of an 'inner life'. If in Skinner all 'choices' are really determined, and if in Sartre we are responsible for the significance we give even to 'determinants', nevertheless both place us firmly in the world. It is here that whatever human nature is must be found—not 'in our heads'.

The focus of Sartre and Skinner on the externality of 'mental' life is continued by the authors brought together in [Chapter 6](#). The *symbolic interactionists*, *discourse analysts* and *discursive psychologists* share a very radical social view of human nature. G.H.Mead, Erving Goffman and the rest share the vision of John Donne that 'no man is an island entire of itself'. The notion that mind and the self make up a firmly distinguishable inner world is illusory, for it is interaction with others within a shared culture conveyed by language and other systems of symbols which provides

our possibilities of thought and identity. If we wish to know human nature, then, the approach must be through knowledge of the *discourses* within which we live and think.

It is not a great leap from this group of authors to those I discuss in the final chapter. *Postmodern* thought—hard to characterise—has, at least as one feature, an emphasis on discourse. In fact, this is carried to the point where we have a direct, deconstructive critique of the claim that there is any such thing as ‘human nature’. This very idea may well be culturally specific so that other epochs or societies have no place within reality for the idea of a ‘human nature’. The implication is, postmodernism asserts, that under such circumstances there is indeed no such thing as human nature. And so it is appropriate to have postmodernism as the final chapter of the book. But I have not allowed it to have quite the last word. In the Conclusion I briefly indicate certain features that I would personally wish to emphasise in a theory of human nature.

### **Criteria of comparison**

It is in the Conclusion also that I mention some factors which I regard as essential to any understanding of human nature whatsoever. This is a strong assertion, and one which could be defended only in a different kind of book to this one (but see Merleau-Ponty, 1962; van den Berg, 1972). But my belief that it is so leads me to choose them as the basis for comparison and debate in looking at the wide range of views tackled in the book. So I have ended each chapter by summarising authors’ positions on the *place in their understanding of human nature* of consciousness, the self, the body, other people, and the physical world.

- *Consciousness*. What place is given in the theory to the fact that human beings are aware? Plainly any author who takes the view that human freedom is real will give a central place to consciousness, whereas theorists who emphasise the determining role of society or biology may either downplay individual awareness or try to show that a particular personal outlook is

the result of societal or biological processes and is not to be regarded as primary.

- *The self.* The importance of identity, selfhood, or the person's awareness of his or her own characteristics is a second key question to be put to each viewpoint. A thinker who adopts a biological stance will give a different weight to the self (possibly a lower one) than will a socially inclined author. This said, many social theorists regard selfhood as merely a product of the individual's place within the multifaceted structure of their society. Indeed, it is often argued that cultures vary in whether the self has much meaning at all in the face of the whole collectivity. A different line of argument is that, in coming to an awareness of self, we begin to have access to some degree of choice of what kind of person we wish to be.
- *The body.* Biological science can be expected to stress the body as the place where various causal factors interact and lead the person to act and think in the way they do. Yet there is a sociology of the body, and theories may very well stress the way in which social and historical circumstances come to dictate the person's view of their own body. Maybe, then, the body is best thought of as a social construction rather than that definite object which biological scientists claim to be describing.
- *Other people.* We will find that, at many points on the spectrum between biological science and social theory, authors try to express the inseparability of the individual and the collectivity. Biologists note that human evolution has always been in the context of an ecology which includes, as a major part, other people. So the individual's developing mental life 'presupposes' other people. Sociologists take the individual to be an intrinsic part of the culture, with the result that the person owes their 'individual psychology' to the influence of other members of the collectivity.
- *The physical world.* Perhaps less obvious than the earlier questions, but equally important, is the issue of how the person's relation to the physical world is theorised. I have mentioned that, for Skinner, the person has no distinct reality and must be viewed as just one element in the web of causes and effects

which constitutes the objective world as a whole. At the other extreme, the 'objective world' is itself a human construction. In other cultures (or simply in other people's mental life, as a result of their biography) the world is a very different place.

In putting these five categories forward as ways in which views of human nature can be clarified I am, of course, seizing the right to provide an author's spin. But no book is spinless! I hope that one effect of the account of the varying meanings of 'human nature' laid out in these pages is to alert the reader to the most insidious spin of all. That is the pretence of recounting 'the facts' without any standpoint, perspective or position.

