

‘Human nature’, science and international political theory

Chris Brown

Department of International Relations, London School of Economics and Political Science,
Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE UK.
E-mail: C.J.Brown@lse.ac.uk

The Post-War rise in importance of the individual in international political theory, as evidenced by the development of the international human rights regime, International Criminal Law and theories of global justice, has, paradoxically, been accompanied by an highly critical approach to the concept of human nature. Criticisms of human nature largely rest on the association of the concept of with social Darwinism, racism, sexism and eugenics, but, understood properly and at the right level of generality, the concept of human nature need not attract such undesirable, pseudo-scientific bedfellows. The modern science of evolutionary psychology is in the process of changing our understanding of the social implications of our genetic inheritance, and social and political theorists ought not to resist this change, and international relations scholars should not leave the field to realist scholars. Premature generalisations based on the findings of evolutionary psychology should certainly be resisted, but so should blanket rejections of the new knowledge. The task for international political theorists is to find a way of integrating the findings of the new human sciences into a humane understanding of the human animal.

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Enough is known, enough has been written, about what divides people: my purpose is to investigate what they have in common. (Zeldin 1999: 16)

Introduction: a contradiction outlined

Humanitarianism, human rights, humanity, human nature — there’s a family resemblance between these notions that is difficult to miss, and yet the discourse of international political theory does its best to do so, and the result is a pattern of thought and action that contains strange contradictions. On the one hand, since 1945 the individual has become active in international relations, as both subject and object, to a degree not seen previously in the so-called Westphalia System.

Thus, the international human rights regime purports to grant very extensive rights to individuals — granted, the state is generally seen in international law as the



delivery system for these rights, in the same way that the state is responsible for upholding International Humanitarian Law, which, before 1945, was the main vehicle for granting status to the individual in international relations, but still the growth and elaboration of the international human rights regime no longer seems to be something that is comprehensible within a state-centred framework. Further, International Criminal Law (ICL) has developed at high speed in the post-1945 period, and especially post-1989. The International Criminal Court, established in 2002 on the basis of the Rome Statute of 1998, and building on the International Criminal Tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, represents a potentially revolutionary development, in principle capable of holding individual national leaders criminally responsible for acts, which previously would have been regarded as covered by sovereign immunity. Perhaps equally revolutionary has been the development of notions of universal jurisdiction, the claim that individuals who are alleged to have committed certain crimes in one jurisdiction can be tried in another.

In addition, moving beyond the formal/legal dimensions of international relations, scholars of international political theory and of globalisation have identified the individual as the focus for their work. Theorists of global justice reject the state-centrism of much conventional Westphalian political theory, exemplified most recently by Rawls (1999) in his *Law of Peoples*, in favour of an emphasis on the individual — people not peoples, as the trope has it. This refocusing is echoed in cosmopolitan theorising on global governance, where it is suggested that state-centric bodies such as the UN should be shadowed by popularly elected chambers, and by globalisation theorists who stress the role of global civil society as a route through which individual opinion can be heard. In the same vein, modern means of communication and the development of global brands of both consumer goods and the politics of protest have elevated some ‘powerful people’ to positions of political influence as individuals in spite of their lack of direct access to the levers of state power.

One could continue to offer examples to make the point, but, in summary, the individual is a part of contemporary international relations, and the study of international relations, to an extent that would have been difficult to understand a century ago, or even 40-plus years ago, when I was an undergraduate in the subject. However, on the other hand, this change has taken place without the employment of a coherent account of what goes to make up an individual, without, that is, a story that can be told about human nature.

Thus, unlike the rights of the individual in a domestic legal system, which are clearly based in positive law, the international human rights regime appears to rest on an account of human universals, and yet is deeply reluctant to admit that this is the case. Mindful of critics of the notion of human rights ranging from Jeremy Bentham to Alasdair McIntyre via Karl Marx, rights advocates commonly describe rights as ‘useful fictions’, dodging the question ‘useful to whom?’ Or they argue that human rights are actually part of positive law created by international treaties, in spite of the



obvious fact that many states sign-up to obligations they have not the slightest intention to honour. What human rights advocates rarely say is that rights rest on human nature — that humans have such a set of rights because that is what human beings are like.

Further, international criminal lawyers commonly simply assume that the notion of criminal responsibility used in Western courts can be translated more or less intact to International Criminal Courts. In fact that notion of criminal responsibility rests on a quite contentious notion of what human beings actually are like — contentious in the West, I should say, not simply in the rest of the world — but, as with rights advocates, this is somewhere where international criminal lawyers would really prefer not to go, because, from their point of view, ending 'impunity' is more important than establishing the foundations of their jurisprudence, and perhaps they recognise that those foundations are distinctly unsafe.

Spelling this out becomes tedious, but, again, theorists of global justice have to make judgements as to what it is that people 'really' want — because quite often and quite plausibly people are assumed to suffer from false consciousness of one kind or another — but are deeply reluctant to argue that what people want is deeply embedded in their nature as human beings, even though, as the early Marx (1992) for one appreciated, this is the only kind of argument that can be used to distinguish false from 'true' consciousness.

Putting these two halves of the argument together, it seems clear (to me at least), first, that the rise in importance of the individual cries out for a coherent account of human nature, but, second, that arguments from human nature appear to have been de-legitimised in contemporary discourse, and, paradoxically, are rarely if ever used by those who have created the characteristic institutions of modern international individualism. This is not to say that there are not many people in the world today who do not have — and express — strong views about the nature of the individual. For example, Islamic thinkers and the more traditional theologians of Christianity have a clear account of who and what human beings are — but, of course, they contradict each other and are both rejected by secular Westerners and by adherents to non-theistic religions. Islam and, in principle though often not in practice, Christianity are universalist systems of thought grounded in clear views of human nature, but the claims they make are not recognised by each other or by third parties.

This seems to me to constitute a serious and interesting problem. Obviously there are many features of this problem, which deserve to be studied at length, far more than can be covered in an essay of this scope: one would need to examine the rise and fall and, perhaps, rise again of classical notions of natural law; to explore the misuse of notions of human nature by social Darwinists and theorists of race; and to give an overview of some of the findings and possibilities of evolutionary psychology and neuroscience (Connolly 2002). What I want to do here is much less ambitious — I want to explore how the notion of human nature became discredited in the first half of the last century, and to suggest that this discrediting rested on a misunderstanding



of what the idea involved, a misunderstanding that is closely related to the level of generality at which the topic is approached. I then want to offer a short defence — it can be no more than that — of the notion that contemporary evolutionary psychology has game-changing potential for our understanding of human nature, even though that term itself may have to be abandoned. Moreover, of course, I want to say that one of the games that is being, and will be, changed is the game of ‘International Relations’ and that our discourse is only dimly aware of this, and for the most part draws the wrong conclusions from it. Given the important role that notions such as human rights, ICL and global justice have both in our discipline and in the world of practice, it is important that the task of grasping the implications of the new thinking is taken on board by international political theorists. However, finally, it is also important to understand that the new scientific account of what it is to be human does not drive out non-scientific understandings of our common nature, and to that end I will give the final word to the modern novelist who, more than anyone else, attempts to cross the boundary between the arts and the sciences.

How human nature became a myth

There are lots of ways of telling this story. One popular narrative goes something like this: people are different; ‘otherness’ — alterity — is a fact of life, but a fact that European, Christian thought has been unable to come to terms with. Europeans naturalised their own form of life, treating their way of being in the world as defining what it is to be human; two strategies emerged for dealing with what appeared to be other forms of life, for example, those of the native ‘Americans’ encountered on the European voyages of discovery (Todorov 1987). From one perspective, that of ‘natural law’ and universal values, differences were denied or regarded as superficial; did they but know it these people were really like us, sharing our nature, our needs and our desires. The other possibility was that they were genuinely different but inferior — there was only one true way of being human, ours, and these people simply did not measure up, weren’t really ‘people’ at all in the full sense of the term. The first of these strategies accorded best with traditional Christian doctrine, and was continued by some strands of enlightenment and post-enlightenment thought (including the aforementioned work of the early Marx), but the second was always present, and came to the fore in 19th-century Europe when combined with Social Darwinism and so-called scientific racism, with horrendous consequences when the implications of this position were played out in the 20th century (Hawkins 2008). The key point here is that both strategies deny difference, in one case by a superficially generous willingness to incorporate, in the other case by a decidedly ungenerous rejection of those who fail to meet the required standard.

Fortunately — this narrative continues — although the 20th century witnessed the worst consequences of this way of thinking about human nature, it also witnessed its



demise. The assault on the idea of human nature came from many directions. Marxists set aside Marx's early thinking about the 'species-being' of humans and developed instead his critique of bourgeois political economists who assumed that the laws of motion of capitalist society were universal — different modes of production didn't simply generate different kinds of society, they generated different kinds of people (Cohen 2001). Sociologists followed Durkheim in rejecting 'reductionist' explanations of social behaviour; only social facts could explain other social facts, and human nature could have no explanatory power for social scientists (Durkheim 1982). Anthropologists — especially those who were the pupils of Boas (1982) — produced evidence that supported the view that features of what had been thought of as human nature, part of the human condition, were actually the product of modern Western industrial societies. Coming of age in Samoa was radically different from — less traumatic than — coming of age in the bourgeois West (Mead 1928); even, so it was said, basic notions of 'colour' and 'time' were not constant between societies (Brown 1991: 9–38).

The message of tolerance that these studies promoted seemed an appropriate response to the horrors produced by the racist intolerance of difference — although the very unwillingness to tolerate intolerance suggested that some universal values were actually present in this work. Still, in the second half of the 20th century the basic story was redrawn in new ways but to much the same effect. Philosophers undermined the correspondence theories of truth upon which notions of human nature had been based; observers, it was said, could no longer lift up a mirror to nature and read off how things were or should be (Rorty 1981). In the Wittgensteinian formulation, 'forms of life' simply have to be accepted as a given, there being no standard against which they could be judged (Winch 1970). As European political control of the non-European world receded, post-colonial theorists have demonstrated the ways in which Western 'universalism' privileges certain kinds of reasoning, certain mental categories, which act to legitimate imperialism and oppression (Williams and Chrisman 1993). Moreover, feminist theorists point to the role of traditional concepts of human nature in providing support for patriarchy, and an account of traditional and oppressive gender roles as natural rather than as social creations (MacKinnon 2007). All told, on this account, it seems the notion of 'human nature' has a lot to answer for; those who use the concept are probably involved in throwing a smoke screen over something that would otherwise be recognised as undesirable.

This critique of human nature from the perspective of a sensitivity to difference still has a great deal of mileage in it, although it is also, as noted above, rather unhelpful if one wishes to promote human rights and a concern for the individual that rests on universal standards. It is also worth noting that the suggestion that the white European males who are the villains of the story instantiated the only — or even the most — xenophobic culture of the past 500 years is obvious nonsense. Still, the case against a rigid account of what human beings are is



compelling — but is it possible to tell a story about human nature that is less rigid, more plastic, less open to manipulation in the interests of the powerful, but still with serious content? I think so, and a good place to start to constructing such a story would be at the very beginning of Western thought on identity and difference.

Herodotus and Darius

Greek thought, with its distinction between Hellene and Barbarian, gets a bad press in the anti-essentialist literature; this is allegedly where the ‘West’ started to get things wrong. Anthony Pagden tells this story well in his wide-ranging *Worlds of War: The 2,500 Year Struggle between East and West*; the linguistic devaluing of foreigners was closely associated with the idea that the inhabitants of Asia were essentially ‘Other’ — effeminate, irrational and incapable of emulating what the Greeks thought of as their own supreme achievement, living in self-governing communities, equal under the law (Pagden 2008). However, he also points out that there is another side to the story: it is interesting that although the classical Greeks distinguished between themselves and barbarians, they also possessed a single word for ‘human being’ — *anthropos* — which covered both categories, unlike many other pre-modern cultures.

A practical demonstration of the same point is given by Herodotus, who travelled around the then-known world while putting together his history of the wars between the Greeks and the Persians. He was fascinated by the differences between the Greeks and their various others, and in approaching these matters he was a perceptive and tolerant (albeit somewhat credulous) observer. In the course of his history, he relates the story of the Persian Great King Cambyses, who mocked the religious beliefs of his Egyptian subjects. This is seen by Herodotus as a sign of insanity; Herodotus thinks that all peoples will believe that their own customs are best and tells of a thought-experiment conducted by one of Cambyses’ successors, Darius:

During his reign, Darius summoned the Hellenes at his court and asked them how much money they would accept for eating the bodies of their dead fathers. They answered that they would not do that for any amount of money. Later, Darius summoned some Indians, called Kallatiai, who do eat their dead parents. In the presence of the Hellenes, with an interpreter to inform them of what was said, he asked the Indians how much money they would accept to burn the bodies of their dead fathers. They responded with an outcry, ordering him to shut his mouth lest he offend the gods. Well then, that is how people think, and so it seems to me that Pindar was right when he said in his poetry that custom is king of all. Book 3: 38 (Herodotus 2008: 224)



And, of course, as Mary Midgely and Steven Lukes remark, Darius the Persian would have known that the correct way to honour the dead is to expose bodies on high towers to be eaten by vultures (Midgely 1991: 78 cited in Lukes 2003: 4 ff).

This is a popular story because it is open to many different interpretations. What I want to suggest is that which interpretation one favours, which moral one wishes to draw, is largely a function of the level of generality with which one approaches the problem. Exposing one's parents to the elements, eating them and burning them are radically different ways of expressing respect, but they *are* actually all ways of expressing respect — the reason why neither the Hellenes nor the Indians will give up their customs is because to do so would be a form of sacrilege, horrifying to the gods and unacceptable to any dutiful offspring. In other words, the same story can be told to illustrate the power of 'difference' or to bring to light a basic similarity, depending on what we hope to get from it.

We can see two kinds of errors illustrated by this example. Cambyses' mistake would have been to impose one particular way of showing respect, while mocking and/or outlawing the others, and he would have done this in the name of nature, regarding the other ways of treating the dead as 'unnatural'. Cyrus (and Herodotus) approach the ways of others more generously and are prepared to regard each of these practices as potentially equally legitimate — but, wrongly, summarise this position as reflecting the view that custom is king, failing to see the underlying similarities between the Hellenes, the Kallataiai and the Persians. The parallels with 20th-century debates on human nature are, I hope, obvious; respect for 'difference' and a generous tolerance produce a more attractive politics than any attempt to impose one particular 'form of life' on all others (and this is so even if the form of life in question is not as obviously undesirable as the racist, Eurocentric and Social Darwinist versions often favoured in the first half of the last century), but such a desirable outcome need not be arrived at the expense of any notion of human nature. At the right level of generality, human nature still does important work.

Still, if the story told by Herodotus is actually to work the way I suggest it should, there are three important steps that need to be taken. First, the basic similarity in attitude towards the dead inadvertently identified by Herodotus by itself proves nothing; there has to be better evidence for such an underlying similarity, and there has to be evidence that there are other features of human conduct that are, apparently, universal. Second, the ontological status of such universals, assuming they exist, needs to be explored. Third, it needs to be shown that all this, at least potentially, has an impact on the problems outlined in the introduction to this essay.

The universal people

Filling out a little the argument presented above, for much of the 20th century the environment ('nurture') was stressed at the expense of nature as the key to



understanding how humans behave and think. Naturalist arguments were associated with racism and eugenics. The findings of cultural anthropologists supported this opposition; influential studies, the most famous of which was *Coming of Age in Samoa* by Mead (1928), portrayed societies that were unworried about adolescent sexual experimenting and other allegedly modern taboos. The nuclear family was likewise seen as culture-specific; institutions such as the Kibbutz were as effective ways of raising children as male–female pairs. Reacting to the horrors of 20th-century warfare, it became a point of principle for many anthropologists to insist that so-called primitive societies were less violent and troubled than industrial societies. In such societies war is largely a symbolic affair; violence had to be seen as learned behaviour and learned particularly in modern capitalist states. This latter position was formalised in the so-called ‘Seville Statement on Violence’ in 1986, later adopted as official doctrine by UNESCO (Seville Statement on Violence 1990).

These positions were held to be ‘scientifically correct’, to use the Seville phraseology; the ‘bad sciences’ of Social Darwinism, eugenics and scientific racism were to be driven out not by a ‘good science’ of human nature, but by the scientific rejection of essentialism. Like Darius, the anthropologists who produced these propositions wanted to show that custom was king, although the current preferred terminology had a more scientific ring to it. Unfortunately, well-meaning liberals are as capable of producing bad science as racists, and this anti-essentialist position has been pretty much demolished over the last quarter-century. Thus, it is now clear that Margaret Mead was the victim of what was essentially a practical joke, her informants having made up tall tales that they did not expect to be believed — coming of age in Samoa was every bit as stressful as it was, and still is, in modern industrial societies (Freeman 1983; 1999). Mead’s work was so central to the consciousness of social anthropologists that the American Anthropological Association actually passed a resolution at its annual congress condemning the work of Dennis Freeman, the anthropologist who revealed that she had been hoaxed, as clear an illustration as one could wish of the way in which anti-essentialism had become so much part of the intellectual furniture that to challenge it was simply unacceptable — but, of course, scientific disagreements cannot be settled by the votes of an academic association. The reversal of opinion on violence in pre-modern societies has been equally dramatic; here the issue has been a question of interpreting rather than challenging the data. The central point has been statistical — warfare in ‘primitive’ societies may only lead to the occasional death, but in small societies one death can have an impact greater than tens of thousands in modern mass societies (Keeley 1996). In fact, the probability of violent death for young men in primitive societies is higher than in any civilised society at any time period, including the 20th century, which experienced the two most destructive wars in human history. Modern industrial societies are actually the least violent of any societies of which we have knowledge. Recently, Pinker (2011)



has summarised the arguments here with great force in his *The Better Angels of our Nature*.

One could go on; contra one popular misconception, the Hopi have much the same notion of time as Western (and every other) society, and the Eskimos don't have lots more ways of describing snow than any other society — but although this sort of anthropological work is valuable in undermining the naïve anti-essentialist position, it doesn't establish a positive account of what human beings are like. Brown (1991) does tentatively provide such an account in his description of the 'universal people' (UP) synthesising the work of other anthropologists (130–41). He begins with features of language and grammar — including the use of metaphor and metonym — goes on to look at features of human psychology that are universal — distinguishing self and others, recognising the self as both subject and object — and then describes universal features of social arrangements — including commonalities in child-rearing, the division of labour, social stratification, play, ritual, notions of justice, a theory of mind, and the presence of a worldview. His full account runs to around 6,000 words, packing in far more detail than can be conveyed in this essay. To a great extent, the features of the UP are discerned in the same way that the commonality behind burial practices is discerned by a reading of Herodotus — to say, for example, that the UP 'practice magic, and their magic is designed to do such things as to sustain and increase life and to win the attention of the opposite sex'¹ (*ibid.*: 139) requires us to drop the notion that 'magic' is something only associated with primitive people, and recognise that our own behaviour often rests on beliefs about the world that can only be described as magical, even though we characteristically dress them up in different clothing.

Brown bases his account of the UP on a synthesis of work by other anthropologists; what is the standing of such a synthesis and what work can it do? One might describe what he has done as establishing by induction a kind of lowest common denominator for cultural arrangements, true by definition but unhelpful for precisely that reason, in the same way that the biological needs of the human body, although obviously important, tell us little about the social arrangements needed to meet them — if this is simply how things are *and had to be* then there is very little else to be said. However, the most interesting fact about the common features of the UP is that they could have been different; the human need for food, water and a breathable environment is a given — a 'human being' who did not need sustenance would not actually be a human being — but the features of the UP are for the most part not true simply by definition. In Buñuel's film *Le Phantôme de la Liberté* (1974) people defecate together, sitting on toilets around a table, but go off to eat in private — the scene is fascinating precisely because, although we (or at least Buñuel) can imagine such a scenario, it is a striking fact that no actual society has ever produced such an arrangement. This seems to be a statement of the obvious, but that is simply because when something is universal it is taken for granted; it takes someone with the imagination of Buñuel to reveal to us that things could have been different, but aren't.



Given that they could have been different, it makes sense to ask why the UP are as they are.

Explaining universals

It may be helpful at this point to clarify a little further what is under consideration, and in particular to make a rather important distinction between the anthropologist's account of the UP and a normative account of universals such as Nussbaum's (2000) account of 'basic human capabilities'. Nussbaum puts together a set of capabilities that are required to live what she regards as a normal human existence, and there are many points of contact with Brown's account of the UP, but, nonetheless, the two positions rest on radically different foundations. Nussbaum is looking for something like a Rawlsian 'overlapping consensus' on the capabilities that allow for the living of a desirable human existence; this is an explicitly normative project oriented towards changing the world to allow everyone the opportunity to exercise their capabilities. By way of contrast, the features of the UP are simply described rather than endorsed by Brown and his sources. Thus, for example, UP life is described as characterised by conflict and in-group/out-group antagonisms; this is not a normative proposition — there is no suggestion that this is desirable feature of the UP, nor does it follow that because UP life has been characterised in this way it will continue to be so.

This latter is an important point; a great deal of the discontent generated by the use of the term human nature stems from the misguided notion that to say something is natural is the same as saying (i) that it is good and (ii) that it is unchangeable. Neither inference follows; the features of the way of life of the UP certainly emerged for a reason (and we may want to use the shorthand term human *nature* to describe the end result of this process) but that in itself does not require us to value them, nor do we need to accept that they are unchangeable.

It is worth stressing this point because of the predictable reaction to the next stage of the argument, which is that it is clear to me that if the UP is not simply a figment of our imagination, if there really are universal features of culture and society, then the most likely explanation for this is that these features are the product of human evolution via natural selection. Past experience suggests that this simple statement will be read, quite wrongly, as an endorsement of these features, an attempt to give them a status that they do not deserve. In the 19th century, when it first became clear that nature 'red in tooth and claw' was not simply a literary conceit, but a graphic description of natural selection, the social Darwinists, led by Herbert Spencer, deemed this to be a desirable feature of human society, and began the process that led to the justifications for racism and imperialism referred to above (Spencer 1992). Conversely, when in the early 1970s, Edward O. Wilson revived the application of Darwinism to what he called 'human sociobiology', he was attacked by those on the



left who saw this as leading to an endorsement of racism, patriarchy and so on (Wilson 1975; Sahlins 1977; Gould 1981; Rose *et al.* 1984). In both cases, the same error was enacted, albeit to different political purposes. Spencer and colleagues adopted Darwinism because they believed it endorsed views about social and political life they already held; the critics of sociobiology opposed this discourse because they believed in undermining the possibility of a progressivist politics. Both groups were mistaken; the results of human evolution neither endorse nor undermine any particular political programme.

To illustrate the point that to describe something as 'natural' is not to endorse it, consider the case of male violence. It does seem to be the case that males, especially young men, have a 'natural' tendency (i.e., a genetic predisposition) towards violence, but it is clearly highly desirable that this tendency be controlled, and there is also plenty of evidence that it can be — the institutions of the UP reflect this desire, and the relatively low levels of violence in modern industrial societies as opposed to their predecessors indicates that control is indeed possible (Archer 1994). The message here is not that, simply because it is natural, male violence is somehow inevitable, but rather that it would be unwise to design human institutions on the basis that such violence is learned behaviour, with the concomitant that, with the right kind of education and social environment, restraints on violent behaviour would be unnecessary. To put the matter differently, it is never going to be possible simply to read off an account of human flourishing from an anthropology. Scientific knowledge of the human animal will not tell us what sort of society we ought to promote, or what kind of rights we ought to assign to individuals, or, indeed, what kind of human capabilities we ought to allow to develop. However, on the other hand, it may eventually provide us with a set of parameters within which a substantive account of human flourishing will have to be constructed, and a set of problems (like male violence) with which this account will have to cope.

Thus, what does 'scientific knowledge of the human animal' actually teach us? Wilson's first attempt at a human sociobiology — in the final chapter of a book that was essentially concerned with social insects — was rather crude, and attracted justified criticism — although the extreme opposition from figures such as Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Leowontin and the Sociobiology Study Group reflected non-scientific agendas (Seegerstrale 2000). Again, although Dawkins (1976) in *The Selfish Gene* explicitly argued against anti-progressivist readings of his work (his own views were, and are, politically radical), the very title of this book, with its association of a human quality, selfishness, with something non-human invited and received criticism. Thirty-plus years on from these pioneering works, sociobiology has been rebranded as 'evolutionary psychology' and is now very firmly grounded in experimental as well as theoretical work (Barkow *et al.* 1992; Dunbar and Barrett 2007) — and even quasi-popularisations such as those by Pinker (2002, 2007, 2011), Dennett (2004) and Matt Ridley are light years away from the crudities of, for example, Morris (1967) and Ardrey (1966) in the 1960s. The arguments that were



used against Wilson and Dawkins in the 1970s are still used today, but with much less plausibility (Bell 2006; Sahlins 2008).

Part of the story of this increased sophistication consists actually of moving away from the notion of human nature, which now would be regarded as a very crude shorthand expression by most evolutionary psychologists (it still has quite a lot of popular resonance, however, which is why I continue to use it, albeit in scare quotes, in the title of this essay). Instead the product of evolution is seen to take the form of multiple mechanisms, which, taken together, and combined with the environment, produce actual human behaviour — use of the term ‘human nature’ implies a constant; newer thinking certainly rests on the idea that some things are constant but at a much more disaggregated level (Dunbar and Barrett 2007).

Using the IT analogies that are more or less unavoidable nowadays, it is agreed by both evolutionary psychologists and their (scientific) critics that the brain can be seen as general-purpose, problem-solving computer, which comes with a basic operating system on board, an operating system that evolved in the ancestral environment through natural selection. The core issue is what programmes are pre-installed by this process. Even the most extreme opponents of evolutionary psychology agree that there are some such programmes — for example, it is impossible to believe that children would be able to learn how to use language as quickly as they do without the capacity to learn a language being already in some sense present in the brain — and the real question is how extensive this programming is. The minimalist position suggests: not very. The capacity to think and to use language may be the product of evolution, but what is thought is the product of culture; the notion that human beings have a particular nature that is the product of evolution and is therefore heritable is, on this account, only acceptable to a very limited degree. This is the position evolutionary psychologists call the ‘Standard Social Science Model’.

The alternative position is that the brain is a general-purpose, problem-solving computer, which comes pre-loaded with a great deal of software that was developed in the ancestral environment. On this account there are a many, potentially thousands of psychological mechanisms that have evolved over millions of years and are present in normal human brains. These mechanisms combine with each other in complex ways, and interact with the environment. This environment does not interact with some kind of ‘blank slate’, but with a slate, that is, metaphorically, covered with writing (Pinker 2002). Because of complexity and interaction with the environment, the crude notion that these mechanisms directly affect behaviour is unsustainable, but the idea that we have certain pre-dispositions hard-wired into us by evolution is more difficult to dispose of. The aim of evolutionary psychology is to identify such mechanisms via experimental and other methods.

A couple of illustrations with considerable implications for the conduct of international relations may help to show what is meant by a mechanism in this context. First, there is good evidence that mentally healthy people tend to exhibit psychological biases that encourage optimism; such biases, ‘positive illusions’, may



well influence decision making in the direction of risk-taking, and Johnson (2004) and his collaborators have explored this phenomenon at some length (Johnson *et al.* 2006). Several points are important here. First, the actual operation of positive illusions is a function of all sorts of individual, cultural and political factors — the bias is always in the background, but actual behaviour will depend on personality types, mental states, decision-making procedures and so on. Second, forewarned is forearmed; far from it being the case that this bias must always be in play, the fact that one knows it exists encourages the development of institutional restraints precisely in order to prevent it from working. Third, evolutionary psychologists are often accused of inventing *post hoc* 'Just So' stories to justify their findings, but this particular mechanism is not associated with such a story; because the mind works in this way there is a *prima facie* case in favour of the supposition that this mechanism has been selected for, but its existence doesn't depend on any particular narrative.

Second, another very thoroughly researched mechanism focuses on the capacity of human beings to understand social exchanges and, in particular, to spot individuals who 'cheat'. As many accounts of altruism stress reciprocity, it seems plausible that the capacity to identify people who do not respect promises they have made would be selected for, and experiments conducted using variants of the Wason Selection Task give evidence that it has been (Cosmides and Tooby 1992). This is a logic problem designed to test how good individuals are at identifying a 'material conditional'. The answer is: not very, when the Task involves the manipulation of abstract symbols — but when exactly the same Task is described in terms of social relations (a classic example involves spotting whether the age rules on drinking alcohol are being observed) people do much better. The hypothesis is that we have no inherited capacity to solve logic problems, but we are extremely good at spotting whether rules are being followed. This is a mechanism that is selected for, but, conversely, there was no advantage in the ancestral environment associated with being able to spot a 'material conditional' in an abstract problem.

As yet, evolutionary scientists are nowhere near able to give anything like a full account of the mechanisms that underlie human behaviour, but the outlines of a picture are beginning to emerge. In *The Blank Slate*, Pinker (2002), who is more willing to generalise than most, summarised the evidence as it then stood in a series of generalisations, which clearly will be refined over time, but, as things stand, are very well supported: human beings, left to their own devices, tend to be selfish and somewhat violent animals. We are biased in favour of our kin and immediate circle of friends, and are potentially ethnocentric, violent and domineering. Cooperative behaviour is kin-based or based on reciprocity. This clearly reinforces the picture painted by Brown of the UP; thus, more extended systems of cooperation rely on a degree of coercion to minimise free-riding, and, contrary to the myth of the peaceful 'garden', beloved of the counter-culture of the 1960s and perhaps today, the existence of authoritative and coercion-based political institutions is central to minimising inter-personal violence.



Implications?

The international relations community has taken on board some of this work, but not in such a way as to address the questions raised in the introduction to this essay. Some of the work of biologists in developing theories of animal behaviour uses game-theoretic methods, and the connections here to studies of cooperative behaviour in international relations are obvious; for example, Axelrod's (1984) classic *The Evolution of Co-operation* draws extensively on neo-Darwinian biology and, in a famous collaborative paper with Robert O. Keohane, applies this thinking to international cooperation (Axelrod and Keohane 1985). More recently the insights of evolutionary psychology have been applied more systematically to conflict and security studies; books by Thayer (2004) and Rosen (2005), and an authoritative collection edited by Sagarin and Taylor (2008), give a sense of where this work is going. On the whole, these authors are careful in the claims they make about the status of their work, and they deserve to be read rather more widely within the security studies community than it seems they are — as with Dominic Johnson's work referred to above, a major and laudable aim of much of this middle-level theorising is to identify, and give a less anecdotal account of, the biases that shape decision making on security issues.

The picture is less encouraging when it comes to the contribution of the new sciences to the core topics of international political theory and in particular to the issue of human nature. The problem here is that this is an area that positively invites over-generalisation and moving beyond the kind of mechanisms that can be identified with a degree of reliability to making grand statements of the sort that are certainly currently premature and may actually never be possible. The kind of summary statement of mechanisms drawn from Pinker and cited above, and the exercise of generalisation that led Brown to create a picture of the UP are, I think, valuable heuristic exercises, but do not yet provide the foundations for an account of 'human nature' that can be related to the current international human rights regime and its associated spin-offs. Still, some valuable general studies do exist. Arnhart's (1998) attempt to combine Darwinian thinking with essentially Aristotelian notions of natural right is ambitious and thought-provoking, and Singer's (1999) concise plea for a 'Darwinian left' is a useful corrective to those who regard this work as essentially conservative if not reactionary; but neither of these two works from the late 1990s has actually generated a research programme. The problem with both these studies is that they are actually rooted in Aristotelianism and utilitarianism, respectively, and the value added from a Darwinian perspective looks rather marginal unless one is already pre-disposed to take this perspective seriously.

More promising, although also rooted in another discourse, this time economics broadly defined, is the work of writers such as Ken Binmore and Herbert Gintis. Binmore (2005, 2009), a mathematician and game theorist, develops a moral theory, which he believes to be culturally and evolutionarily stable — a non-technical



version of the argument is his *Natural Justice* (see also a recent short summary paper available online). He assumes individuals to be essentially self-regarding and continually faced with social dilemmas of the kind summarised by game theorists — prisoner's dilemma, 'battle of the sexes' and so on; the standard game theoretic position (summarised as the 'folk theorem') is that such dilemmas can be solved with high levels of cooperation if accurate information is readily available and the game is played repeatedly. These conditions are rarely achieved in modern societies, but in the evolutionary environment, where small populations are facing the same dilemmas over and over again, and where it is impossible to keep information about outcomes private, such high levels of cooperation can be achieved and, he suggests, are.

The world Binmore describes is essentially egalitarian, and coercive measures to achieve cooperation do not play a major role, but on his account individuals remain essentially self-regarding, even if they are capable of high levels of cooperative behaviour — and, because of this egoism, outside of the evolutionary environment coercive ways of ensuring cooperative behaviour will be necessary. Gintis (2006, 2009), another major developer of evolutionary game theory, while supportive of the kind of reasoning Binmore uses, takes issue with the assumption that evolution has created such self-regarding individuals. Along with Binmore, Gintis assumes that the ancestral environment was essentially egalitarian, lacking the means by which a minority could impose institutions on the majority, but he suggests that this environment will actually produce a situation where the personal fitness of those who have the genetic capacity to internalise norms of 'strong reciprocity' will be enhanced. More accurately — but still oversimplifying — he suggests that it is the capacity to internalise norms that enhances fitness, and strong reciprocity is a by-product of this capacity, but the central point is clear:

[h]uman beings are constituted, by virtue of their evolutionary history, to behave as altruistic co-operators and punishers whose egalitarian predilections stem from a long history of enforced egalitarianism in the hunter-gatherer societies from which modern humanity emerged. (Gintis 2006: 25)

This is a rather more favourable picture of the ancestral environment than that offered by not just Binmore, but also Pinker and colleagues, and empirical evidence from existing hunter-gatherer societies suggests that egalitarianism, although real at some levels, is perhaps more limited in scope than Gintis suggests. Still, the value of his work is considerable, not least as a corrective to the work of those evolutionary economists whose work is essentially designed to show that the norms of capitalism correspond to our 'animal spirits' (Akerlof and Schiller 2009). It is also the case that Gintis' standing as one of the doyens of radical/Marxian political economy in the United States reinforces the point that a materialist account of 'human nature' does not necessarily rest on an extreme environmentalism.



Conclusion: back to Herodotus and the classical Greeks

It seems to me that the kind of work on altruism undertaken by Binmore and Gintis — supported perhaps by research by neuroscientists into ‘mirror neurons’, which provides physical evidence of our capacity to share the grief and joy of others (Slack 2007) — may in the medium run provide us with a much firmer basis for thinking about humanity and humanitarianism than we have at the moment. However, we aren’t there yet, and for the time being we are still obliged to talk about these issues using metaphor and telling stories, albeit metaphors and stories that are consistent with the existing level of scientific knowledge.

Herodotus tells us one such story, and Darwin (1998) tells another, which I think can be read in the same way, in his book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. This book has a strange history. The basic thesis is that facial expressions conveying disgust, pleasure, sadness and so on are the same in all humans, and indeed in all the higher primates, and the book was explicitly written to combat the racist notion that there were higher and lower races, as well as the more traditional Christian belief that there was an unbridgeable gulf between man and ape. In spite of this motivation, the anthropological wisdom of the first half of the 20th century was that this was simply one more attempt to promote universalist ideas at the expense of a healthy attitude to difference, and the empirical basis of Darwin’s thesis was rejected *a priori*. Then Paul Ekman, editor of the 1998 edition of Darwin’s book, actually carried out controlled experiments in New Guinea, Japan and the United States — reported in his Introduction and Afterword — that showed that Darwin was more or less correct; people from wildly different cultures do indeed usually recognise the same emotions in given facial expressions. To my mind, the interesting feature of this work is that, as with Herodotus, common humanity is revealed at one level of generality when it might be missed at another. Different cultural environments produce different objects of disgust, but the idea that some things are disgusting is universal, as is the physiological response to something that is perceived to be disgusting.

The ‘nature’ of human beings is always going to be found in the relationship between those things about us that are genuinely universal, rooted in our genes, and those things about us that shaped by our culture. As time goes by, we will learn more and more about the former, but the relationship between the two, identity and difference, will continue to be crucial. Science is involved, but not only science, and the interplay between identity and difference, between a common humanity and cultural differences, can be as well illustrated by literature as by scientific papers. I will end this essay by allowing a noted boundary crosser, the finest living English novelist (unscientific opinion, firmly held) to drive the point home.

Ian McEwan is fascinated by the new human sciences. The protagonist of one of his best novels, *Saturday* (2005), is a neurosurgeon whose work is described in apparently accurate detail therein, and in his latest, *Solar* (2010), his protagonist, a



physicist, as a result of a chance remark gets drawn into an acrimonious debate about gender and evolutionary psychology, which is described in considerable and accurate detail. In a short, well-informed essay, 'Literature, Science and Human Nature' (2006), he makes more sense of the relationship between nurture and nature than most social or natural scientists. After a thoughtful review of many of the sources discussed above, he ends by looking at a text of an even earlier Greek vintage than Herodotus, Homer's *Odyssey*. He chooses to focus on the deeply moving lines at the end of the story where Penelope first hesitates, confused by his changed appearance, but then recognises that her husband Odysseus has indeed finally returned from his long exile. McEwan comments:

[C]ustoms may change — dead suitors may be lying in the hallway, with no homicide charges pending. But we recognise the human essence of these lines. Within the emotional and the expressive, we remain what we are.

In a coda on the human genome project, he contemplates the 'metaphorical convergence' of literature and science:

That which binds us, our common nature, is what literature has always, knowingly and helplessly, given voice to. And it is this universality which science, now entering another of its exhilarating moments, is set to explore. (McEwan 2006: 58)

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Note

1 The suggestion that the UP are necessarily heterosexual is unfortunate — had Brown been writing 20 years later, I suspect he would have referred to winning the attention of sexual partners.

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About the Author

Chris Brown is Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics. He is the author of numerous articles in international political theory and



of *Practical Judgement in International Political Theory: Selected Essays* (2010), *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice* (2002), *International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches* (1992), and co-editor (with Terry Nardin and N.J. Rengger) of *International Relations in Political Thought: Texts from the Greeks to the First World War* (2002). His textbook *Understanding International Relations* (2009) is now in its fourth and final edition.