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BOOK REVIEW


by Johan M.G. van der Dennen

In some social and political science circles, sociobiology is still associated with “innate killer instincts” and such stuff (if this sounds incredible, see page 12 of Wolpin, 1992. Wolpin was/is Prof. of Political Science at SUNY). It needs some (moral) courage to profess to be a bio-discipline such as biopolitics, even though biopolitics was associated, at least in my mind, with rather inoffensive (and rather dull), very proximate-level theory and research, a kind of traditional ‘floating voter’ investigation, but now with some genetics, endocrinology (hormones), and biochemistry (serotonin and other neurotransmitters) thrown in as extras. The present volume, however, endeavors to address ultimate-level questions, in particular (the nature of) human nature.

After an introduction by the editors Joseph Losco and Albert Somit (who give a very accurate description of how this elusive human nature might look like: “[T]he human organism may be predisposed to confront environmental exigencies with a predictable and patterned array of behavioral strategies”), the volume is opened by Albert Somit and Steven Peterson (“Darwinism, Dominance, and Democracy”). They explore the extent to which democracy can realistically be viewed as compatible with human nature. Throughout human history, the overwhelming majority of political societies has been authoritarian. Democracies remain very much a minority in the contemporary family of nations. Why have authoritarian societies been so pervasive and enduring, and democracies so infrequent and fragile? Somit & Peterson give the ‘politically incorrect’ answer that evolution has produced, in Homo sapiens, a highly social species with an inherent preference for hierarchically structured social and political systems, with a strong tendency toward obedience, dominance and subordination, rather than equality of status and power. Supporting their viewpoint with evidence from a variety of life sciences (primatology, child ethology, small group psychology) and from the human historical record in which democracies seem to enjoy relatively brief life spans, Somit & Peterson conclude that while democracy is not manifestly impossible, it is a rare and endangered species. This conclusion contrasts with other studies (e.g., Vanhanen, 1992), which show that democracy is a feasible, viable, and rather successful form of political society in the contemporary world. The authors do not, however, seize the opportunity to discuss this controversial evidence, nor the growing body of evidence that democracies are relatively peaceful, at least among themselves.

The next chapter (“Human Nature and Aggression: And Where Do We Go from Here?”) addresses human aggression. James Davies contends that aggression is not spontaneous but created by conditions of need (“a response to the frustration of innate desires”). He holds that “Regarding violence as a response makes it possible not only to explain why it occurs – when innate desires are frustrated – but also to explain why it ends – when innate desires are satisfied”. While we may understand how many of these conditions contribute to the arousal of aggressive acts, political scientist have spent far too little time studying ways to correct these conditions. This chapter has a high déjà-vu-content (Davies is communicating the same
message for some 25 years now) and seems strangely out-of-place (and sometimes contradicts the general tenor of the book). I come back to this chapter later on.

The next two chapters address more specialized and venerable themes within political philosophy and illustrate the ways in which the life sciences may provide fresh insights. Richard Hartigan (to whose memory the volume is dedicated), in this posthumously published paper (“Natural Law, Nature, and Biology: A Modern Synthesis”), proposes that the life sciences breathe new life into the tradition of natural law philosophy, of which he gives a broad overview from its Platonic and Aristotelian inception to Edward O. Wilson and Richard Alexander. Biology can provide a blueprint for a naturalistic ethic, one which is both universal and flexible. He asserts, for example, that the Judeo-Christian Decalogue makes sound sense from an evolutionary perspective. The Ten Commandments provide directives that helped insure survival and procreation during our evolutionary history as a species. Particularly noteworthy is Hartigan’s distinction between ‘absolute’ and ‘universal’ moral code:

Though often used interchangeably, they should not be so understood. If the term ‘absolute’ conveys anything, it is the characteristic of immutability; ‘universal’ on the other hand simply conveys the condition of generality, but allows for the possibility of exception. Thus, from a scientific vantage, the core of human morality can be described as universal, as flowing from human nature, without implying some sort of absolute determinism of either a metaphysical or material kind. – With this distinction in mind the seeming contradiction between principles of a universal nature and enormously varied cultural/ customary applications of these principles disappears. The core principles of life, property and lineage protection and enhancement are universal; the secondary tier, the concrete application of specification of these principles, in various human societies at different times will admit of variation. This is a verity as old as the Greeks, accepted by the Medievals and apparent to us today. It is really nothing more than the distinction between primary and secondary principles of the natural law, if one still chooses to use these terms. The only modern innovation that is required is to maintain the perspective of human evolution as the generating source of human morality (p. 100-101).

Joseph Losco (“Liberalism and the Bifurcated Self: A Life Sciences Critique of Liberal Political Psychology”) addresses a fundamental principle informing liberal political psychology and finds it lacking in the light of contemporary life science findings. The distinction between (or the antinomy of) passion and reason in human behavior has been noted by all major Western thinkers ever since Plato recognized the tripartite division of the human soul. Losco finds such a distinction is untenable. Rather, biological findings are mustered to show that reason and passion are interactive and inseparably linked. He presents theories of the emotions by Scott, Gibbard, and Plutchik, and concludes that emotional arousal and display rarely occur in a ‘cognitive vacuum’. Cognitions indeed play a major role in the triggering and expression of emotions. For example, in the emotional experience of fear, a stimulus must be ‘interpreted’ as threatening before the sequence of physiological and motor responses we associate with the subjective feeling of fear can be executed. He goes on to explore the consequences of these findings for the creation of a more accurate political psychology and for the study of politics in general. A little bit annoying in this chapter are the consequent typos ‘thalmus’ for ‘thalamus’ and ‘amagdala’ for ‘amygdala’.

In the Descent of Man (1871) Darwin offered an evolutionary theory of the natural differences between men and women, in which he concluded that regarding ‘mental power’
“man has ultimately become superior to woman”. A few years later, in 1875, Antoinette Brown Blackwell responded with the first feminist criticism of Darwin in her book The Sexes Throughout Nature. She argued that Darwin’s evidence did not support his conclusion. Although males and females tend to differ in their natural propensities, these differences do not justify any male claim to moral or intellectual superiority. Blackwell’s feminist argument rested on a modern biological version of ethical naturalism. Larry Arnhart (“Human Nature – One, Two, or None?: Feminism and Primatology”) argues that feminist primatology supports ethical naturalism rooted in evolutionary biology. Patriarchal exploitation can be condemned as contrary to women’s natural needs and capacities, although prudence is required in recognizing how ecological circumstances limit the range of practicable reform. Some feminists, however, reject naturalistic realism in favor of nihilistic relativism. Arnhart attempts to illustrate how such relativism is disastrous for the feminist position because it deprives the feminist of any ground in nature for criticizing patriarchal claims: “if there are no human universals that define ‘man’ and ‘woman’, but only radically diverse cultural constructions of gender, then ‘man’ and ‘woman’ as categories have no general meaning and feminist theory is impossible”. Arnhart illustrates the power of feminist naturalism by examining the practice of female circumcision.

What follows is a mini-roundtable discussion on a recently proposed and influential biological model for the study of human political behavior. The roundtable is initiated by Roger Masters’ book The Nature of Politics which sketches a blueprint for biopolitical study that stresses the interaction of genes and learning according to a hierarchical pattern. According to Masters, his model demonstrates how individual behavior is nested within the context of physical and social systems involving interaction among all levels and not reducible to explanation at any one level alone: “Human behavior is the product of an integration, within the brain and central nervous system of each individual, of phylogenetically selected information transmitted by the genes, historically selected information systems transmitted by language and cultural symbols, and individually learned information acquired during the life cycle”. The model, briefly reconstructed here by Losco, suggests that, as Aristotle posited, Homo sapiens is the political animal (‘zoon politikon’) ‘par excellence’ and that politics can be defined as a biological phenomenon that partakes of elements which we share with our primate ancestors and certain unique elements like law and customary regulation found in human groups alone. This model, Masters has suggested, can go a long way in helping us understand political phenomena like bureaucracy and nepotism. Heinz Eulau and Susan Zlomke (“Biological Phenomena, Levels of Analysis, and Reductionism: Masters’ Model of Human Behavior as a Case Study”) criticize Masters’ model and find it lacking for the coherent study of politics. They claim that Masters confounds units and properties and conflates levels of analysis employed in his model by slipping between terminology and concepts employed at different levels. They further assert that, in Masters’ attempt to avoid what he appears to take as the negative consequences of reductionism, he fails to demonstrate the utility of a biological model over and against alternative approaches which concentrate on more traditional definitions of politics. This critique is followed by a rejoinder by Masters (“The Paradigm Shift in the Social Science: A Reply to Eulau and Zlomke”), in which he parades all his hobby horses up to quantum mechanics and chaos theory. Apart from the question whether such acrimonious (under the skin) verbal feuds should be fought out in a book of this caliber, this debate between Eulau & Zlomke, on the one hand, and Masters, on the other, is a fine example of communication at cross-purposes. If the former’s chapter is a masterpiece of misunderstanding, the latter’s chapter is a masterpiece of evasion.
Robert Blank (“The Changing Nature of Human Nature”) shows that advances in biological knowledge, especially genetic technology, may make any understanding of human nature short-lived. Biological knowledge has given us not only the means to understand the biological foundations of human action, but also the means to alter it: “If there is a genetic basis to human nature, and through genetic engineering we are able to break the code, there is nothing to stop us from controlling or changing the nature of what it means to be human”. With the anticipated conclusion of the human genome program early in the next century and the development of gene splicing technology, humans may be able to alter human nature in ways considered fantastic only a generation ago. Blank analyzes the implications of these technologies for the whole enterprise of human nature and for the study of politics as it has been traditionally undertaken. He sketches some frightening scenarios if technologies for prenatal diagnosis, genetic screening and genetic engineering would become generally available, of which the anticipation of substantial parental demand to maximize their progeny’s chances, is the least scaring.

Finally, Garry Johnson’s chapter (“The Evolutionary Origins of Government and Politics”) squarely attacks the question: How does a life sciences approach to human nature help us understand the phenomenon of government and politics? Johnson’s response is based on an unconventional definition of government as the hierarchical, organizing principle inherent in all life forms from the eukaryotic cell to the human nation state. Though this open-ended and functionalist definition will likely draw fire, Johnson nevertheless makes the plausible argument that human governments arose as a means to induce cooperation and inhibit conflict among aggregations of nonrelated individuals for whom kinship once served to insure a modicum of social harmony. Politics is defined as “competitive efforts to influence a government”, a complex game involving rampant manipulation, rationalisation, and (self)deception. “Regardless of how the benefits are distributed... it is clear that associations of individual units, from genes to nation-states, are often more effective competitors than solitary individual units”. All instances of such collaboration appear to be built on one or more of three foundations: nepotism, reciprocity (perhaps a better name would be what Peter Corning called ‘selfish cooperation’), and exploitation. Politics thus defined also exists in primates, bee colonies, and, indeed, in all sexually-reproducing social species, and even multicellular organisms and cells themselves. Johnson concludes that (a) government and politics are probably universal human phenomena; and (b) government and politics are not confined to humans, but originated early in the history of life on earth and may be found at every level of life’s hierarchy. His biocentric approach serves to instruct political scientists in the potential utility of paying attention to the organization of the physical universe and to nonhuman animal societies in drawing conclusions about human political arrangements.

This last chapter is a fine and thought-provoking finale of a symphonic work with a few disharmonies and discords. The strangest discordant sound is produced, as noted above, by Davies. His chapter seems out-of-place, and included for the wrong reasons. It has little to do with biopolitics in general and human nature in particular; it has a very narrow proximate focus; the propositions offered at the end are rather trivial; as most American behaviorists he conflates the existence of the agonistic behavioral system (in organisms of at least the phyla Arthropoda and Chordata) with (manifestations of) aggression and (acts of) violence; and his concept of aggression (some variant of outdated frustration-aggression theory applied to groups) is untenable in an ultimate and comparative context. The basic argument in this paper, Davies, contends, “is that violence is not an innate desire but a response to the frustration of innate desires”. Maybe Davies considers infanticide in many primate species and social carnivores, fratricide in many avian species, chimpanzee raiding on other
communities, and human sadistic murder, to be responses to the frustration of innate desires? Somit & Peterson argued that “evolution has given our species an inherent preference for hierarchically structured social and political systems” (p. 22), which, moreover, is “found among Homo sapiens not simply at the small group level but at every level from the family to the state” (p. 24). It is indeed hard to even imagine a human institution that is not hierarchically organized. Yet, Davies (writing in the best/worst behaviorist tradition) flatly denies that there might be some ‘innate’ component in this universal human tendency (p. 48). Davies also seems to think that sometimes somebody has actually argued that acceptance of subordination is “inherently satisfying” (p. 50); his treatment of sociobiology (p. 37) is the usual, half-prejudiced half-ignorant, rubbish; and so on, and so forth. In brief, a very disappointing chapter which was obsolete already 25 years ago, and which the editors should not have allowed to pass. In their introductory chapter, Losco & Somit note that behaviorism brought with it the universal truth that there is no such thing as human nature. Nowadays, the continued denial of the biological basis of many behaviors can be sustained only by committed ideologues, as Fox (1991) formulated it. These considerations make the inclusion of Davies’ chapter almost a mystery. One final piece of milder criticism: with the availability of sophisticated spell checkers in most word processor programs, the many typos could easily have been avoided.

The editors have done an excellent job to encourage and stimulate the necessary study of (the nature of) human nature in the light of evolutionary theory (to paraphrase the famous Dobzhansky adage: “Nothing makes sense in politics, except in the light of evolution”), and the book should be obligatory reading for beginning students of biopolitics as well as other bio-disciplines.

**References:**


