

Theories of Human
Nature
Classical and
Contemporary Readings

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Donald C. Abel

St. Norbert College

THEORIES OF HUMAN NATURE
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For Diane

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Preface

This anthology is designed as a textbook for a philosophy course that explores human nature. Since studying human nature can be an engaging way for students to be introduced to philosophy, the book can also serve as a text for an introductory course in philosophy.

As a philosophy instructor committed to the use of primary texts but long frustrated by the lack of an anthology on human nature containing substantial selections from a wide spectrum of authors, I decided to compile an anthology that would meet my needs and those of like-minded instructors. This gave me the opportunity to include some pedagogical features I have found particularly useful: a concise introduction to each selection, notes explaining any terms and references likely to be unfamiliar to beginning students, questions for reflection and discussion, and suggestions for further reading. Editing this anthology also afforded me the luxury of selecting what I consider to be the best available English translations of the foreign-language works included. I am pleased to say that I received permission to reprint my first-choice translation in every instance.

The fifteen authors in this anthology represent a broad range of thought about human nature, spanning twenty-four centuries, ten countries, and several disciplines. Criteria for their selection included (1) the extent of their insight into human nature, (2) their historical significance, (3) their diversity, and (4) the accessibility of their writings to undergraduates with little or no background in philosophy. Most of the authors (e.g., Plato, René Descartes) are standard figures in Western philosophy; others fall outside this category, either because they are non-Western (namely, Mencius) or because they are associated primarily with some discipline other than philosophy (e.g., Sigmund Freud, Edward O. Wilson). The selection from each author is taken from a single work and is long enough to give students a substantial introduction to the author's ideas and manner of presentation.

The study of human nature can be approached in many ways. My own experience as a teacher indicates that because beginning philosophy students relate most immediately and energetically to questions concerning ethics, in many cases the most fruitful way to introduce them to an author's views on

human nature is to select a work of the author on some broad ethical issue, such as the nature of happiness. Moreover, works on ethics are often more accessible to students than are those that examine human nature more directly. For example, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is more readable than *On the Soul*, and David Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* is more readable than his *Treatise of Human Nature*. Human values and human nature are, of course, closely related; and students will benefit by thinking about how an author's views on ethics flow from or imply a certain theory of human nature. Many of the selections in this anthology, consequently, are taken from works dealing mainly with ethics.

Not all the readings in the anthology have an ethical orientation. For example, Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* presents a metaphysical theory of mind-body dualism, and Freud's *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis* sets forth a psychological theory of the unconscious mind. But each selection, regardless of its specific orientation, makes important claims about some aspect of human nature and contains, either explicitly or implicitly, a general theory of what human nature is.

It would be difficult—and inadvisable, in my opinion—to cover all fifteen authors in this anthology in a single semester or quarter. The diversity of readings in the anthology will enable the instructor to select the readings most suitable to his or her objectives. Since each chapter is designed to be accessible on its own, it is possible to omit chapters or to take them in an order different from the chronological sequence in which they appear.

A few comments on the various pedagogical features of the book may be helpful. The introduction to each chapter describes the author's life, principal works, and general philosophy and gives students a brief summary of the main points in the selection. The notes at the end of each section explain terms and references that may be unfamiliar to first-time readers. Some works, such as Plato's *Republic*, required very few notes; others, such as Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*, required more thorough annotation. I also include some notes written by the editor or translator of the volume from which the selection is taken.

Each selection is followed by five questions. The questions are not designed to check reading comprehension, but to help students reflect critically about the author's views on human nature and begin to formulate their own views. None of the questions has an obviously correct answer; in each case, persuasive arguments can be given for various positions. The questions thus provide students with an opportunity to interpret the text, find textual evidence to support their interpretations, and begin to articulate their own positions on human nature and give reasons for their views. The questions could serve as topics for papers or for classroom discussion or debate.

The final section of each chapter consists of an annotated bibliography of both primary and secondary sources. The primary-source bibliography lists several accessible works (or parts of works) by the author that pertain to

human nature. In most cases, the first entry is the work from which the selection is taken. The secondary-source bibliography for each author lists five works, each chosen for its reliability and its accessibility to undergraduates. When I omitted a standard secondary source, such as W. D. Ross's *Aristotle* or Norman Kemp Smith's *Philosophy of David Hume*, I did so because it seemed too difficult or too detailed for most undergraduates. The annotations for the secondary sources briefly describe the content of the work and indicate works written especially for beginners (e.g., the volumes in Oxford's Past Masters Series) and works appropriate for more advanced students. To give students a clearer idea of what to expect in these suggested readings, I state the length of each primary and secondary work.

I wish to thank all those who have helped me with this book, especially Diane Legomsky and Robert J. Vanden Burgt, two of my colleagues at St. Norbert College, and the following readers for McGraw-Hill: David B. Boersma, Pacific University; Deal W. Hudson, Fordham University; Gerald Matross, Merrimack College; Lawrence P. Schrenk, The Catholic University of America; and Raphael T. Waters, Niagara University. I am greatly indebted to Cynthia Ward, my editor at McGraw-Hill, for her support of this project and for her astute editorial advice, which greatly improved the book in both form and content. I thank Tom Holton of McGraw-Hill for his excellent supervision of the copyediting, design, and production of the book. I am also grateful to the St. Norbert College Office of Faculty Development for two summer grants to work on this anthology and to Robert L. Horn, Dean of St. Norbert College, for financial assistance from the Faculty Publications Fund. Finally, I would like to thank the publishers of the books from which the selections are taken (listed on the following pages) for their kind permission to reproduce copyrighted material.

Donald C. Abel

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General Introduction

There are many wonders, but none more wondrous than human beings.

Sophocles, Antigone

Do human beings have a soul? What is happiness? How do we know if an action is morally right? Do we freely choose our actions, or are they the result of forces beyond our control, such as our genetic makeup, unconscious mind, and environment? Such questions about human nature, difficult as they are, eventually confront every reflective person. Culture and religion usually provide us with our first answers, but as we grow older and gain more experience and knowledge, we may come to question the answers we were given. For example, we may have been taught as children that we have an immortal soul, but as we grow older we might begin to wonder how we can be *sure* we have one or we might want to know just what sort of thing a “soul” is.

The fifteen authors represented in this anthology thought deeply about such questions. Each author approached human nature from his or her own perspective, providing distinctive insights into certain aspects of human nature. Taken together, the readings cover a broad spectrum of views on the soul, happiness, morality, freedom and responsibility, and other important issues regarding human nature. Some of the authors hold that we have a soul, while others argue that the fact that we evolved from animals makes the existence of the soul unlikely. Of those who defend the soul, some maintain that it is immortal and some believe that it ceases to exist when we die. Several authors discuss the nature of happiness and give advice on how to attain it. Some see a close relationship between happiness and morality, arguing that the ultimate purpose of moral rules is to make us happy. Some authors propose other theories of what makes actions moral, while others examine the psychological origin of moral judgments or explore the connections between morality and other topics, such as politics, economics, or evolution. Several of the selections address the question of human freedom and responsibility. Some authors hold that we are utterly free and responsible for our actions; others argue that our actions are partly or even completely

determined by genetic, psychological, or environmental factors. Among other issues of human nature addressed in these readings are the relationship of human beings to God, the nature of a just society, and the sources of human motivation.

A principal goal of this anthology is to acquaint readers with interesting, thoughtful, and historically important views on various issues concerning human nature. The authors come from a variety of cultures, disciplines, and personal backgrounds; and each approaches human nature from his or her unique perspective. Most of the authors, such as Plato and David Hume, are typically classified as philosophers, but others are associated primarily with some other discipline. For example, B. F. Skinner is a psychologist and Edward O. Wilson a biologist. Some thinkers do not fall neatly within the boundaries of a single discipline. Augustine, for example, unites theology with philosophy, while Karl Marx combines economics with political theory. Each reading, however, whatever its particular focus or orientation, contains, either explicitly or implicitly, a general view of what human nature is.

A second goal of this anthology is to stimulate readers to reflect critically on the theories presented here. When reading the texts, it is important that we become actively involved with them, noting what we agree with and what we reject and trying to articulate our reasons. We should try to see if the author's conclusions follow from his or her premises. When some point is unclear to us, it helps to note the passage and come back to it later. If an author does not address directly the question of what human nature is, we should try to determine what view he or she implicitly holds. As we progress through the various selections, it is helpful to note similarities and contrasts among the theories and to imagine how one author would respond to another's claims.

The most effective technique, in my opinion, for critically reading the selections is to ask questions along the way and then carefully reread the text in an attempt to answer these questions. To illustrate the kinds of questions I have in mind, at the end of each selection I list five questions that arose for *me* as I reflected on the author's views. The best questions for a reader to ponder, however, are those that derive from his or her own encounter with the text.

The third and ultimate goal of this anthology is to encourage readers to become philosophers of human nature. The word *philosophy* may conjure up notions of hopelessly abstract disputations, but philosophy is not something reserved for specialists. The word comes from a Greek compound that means, literally, "the love of wisdom." To philosophize about human nature, then, means to seek the truth about who (or what) we are. In this sense, all the authors in this anthology—even those who are not usually classified as philosophers—are, in fact, philosophers of human nature. And in this same sense, every reader who seeks a better understanding of who we are is also a philosopher of human nature. The very processes of reading the texts and

reflecting critically on them (the first two goals) can themselves be philosophical activities if they are undertaken with a view to attaining wisdom about human nature.

My own experience as a student and as a teacher indicates that the best way to make progress in thinking philosophically about human nature (or about any other topic) is to engage in dialogue. Private reflection and critical reading are important first steps, but real gains in understanding often come only when we articulate our thoughts to other people, hear their views, and challenge each other to defend our respective positions—all in an honest effort to find the truth about the question at hand. We may think that we have a very clear notion about something only to find out otherwise when we try to articulate it to someone else. For example, we may speak easily about the soul but then find ourselves at a loss when we try to explain to someone exactly *what* the soul is or *where* it is. Sometimes a belief that we have may seem obviously true until someone challenges us to defend it. We may, for example, think that human beings can be unselfish but find it difficult to respond to the argument that every apparently unselfish action has some self-interested motive, such as feeling good about oneself, avoiding guilt, receiving gratitude, or gaining merit in heaven.

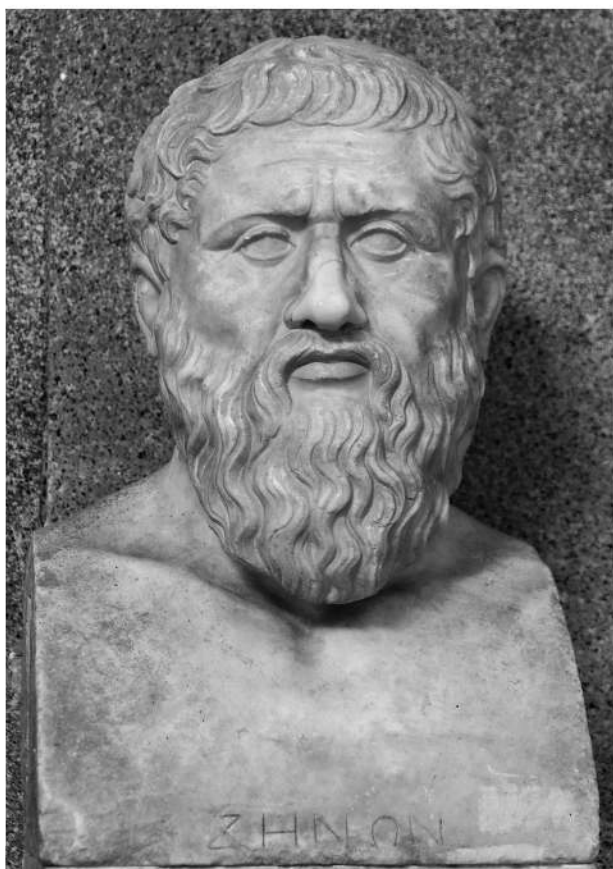
As we ponder the various arguments presented by the authors in this anthology and try to decide which views to accept and which to reject, we may become aware of so many arguments on every side of every question about human nature that we are tempted to give up all hope of finding any answers; we may decide that “it’s all just a matter of opinion.” While it may be true that any claim about human nature is just a matter of opinion, we should be aware that this position is, in itself, an opinion that needs to be examined. And I would guess that few readers would maintain that they know nothing *at all* about human nature. I grant that it is unlikely that anyone will ever come up with the whole truth about human nature (no one has done so yet!), but this does not mean that we cannot know something about human nature or that we have no basis for saying that one theory is better than another. If a particular theory seems to explain and illuminate our personal human experience better than other theories we are familiar with, and if it fits in with other ideas that we hold to be true, we have good reasons for preferring this theory to the others. As our human experience grows, we find ourselves continually revising our views of human nature; philosophy is thus a lifelong enterprise. Although philosophy may be frustrating at times, those who pursue it are likely to find it rewarding and worthwhile. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates went so far as to say that “the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being.”

This book includes certain editorial features designed to help readers understand and critically assess the theories of human nature presented here. I have already mentioned the questions following each selection. In addition,

each chapter has an introduction that describes the author's life and thought and summarizes the main points in the reading. There are also notes explaining terms and references that may be unfamiliar. Some of the notes are my own; others are by the editor or translator of the book from which the selection is taken. The author of each note is indicated by initials placed in brackets at the end of the note.

To help readers who want to learn more about a particular author's ideas, each chapter includes two lists of additional readings. The first list ("Primary Sources") consists of works (or parts of works) by the author. The second list ("Secondary Sources") consists, in each case, of five books (or articles) *about* the author's theory. A wealth of literature exists on all fifteen authors, and I encourage readers to browse the stacks in their library to find additional works that seem interesting and useful.

As the Greek dramatist Sophocles remarked long ago in the line quoted at the beginning of this introduction, human beings are wondrous creatures. This anthology will have served its purpose if it stimulates readers to delve more deeply into the fascinating reality that is human nature. There is much to ponder—and there is much enrichment to be gained from the pondering.



1

Plato

Plato was born in Athens in about 428 B.C.E. of distinguished parents. As a youth he associated with Socrates (about 470–399 B.C.E.), a philosopher who constantly challenged fellow Athenians to think about virtue and to improve their souls. Plato's initial interest was in politics, but he soon became disillusioned. Under a democratic system, Athens entered into a protracted and devastating war with other Greek states. Upon Athens's defeat in 404, an oligarchy was installed (known as the Thirty Tyrants) and it conducted a reign of terror. Democracy was restored the following year, but the new government proved reactionary: Socrates was arrested on false charges of impiety and the corruption of youth and—to Plato's great distress—was convicted and executed. Plato was present at the trial and later wrote an account of Socrates's defense speech, known as the *Apology*.

After Socrates's execution, Plato moved to nearby Megara for a time and then may have traveled to Egypt. Inspired by Socrates's life (and death) and intellectually convinced by his argument that in order to establish a just political order one must first know what "justice" is, Plato devoted himself to philosophy. In 388 he traveled to Italy and to the city of Syracuse in Sicily. He soon returned to Athens, where he founded a school devoted both to philosophical inquiry and to the philosophically-based education of politicians. The school was located on the outskirts of the city near a grove sacred to the hero Academus; hence it came to be called the Academy. Plato had many illustrious students at the Academy, the most famous of whom was Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.), who studied under him for twenty years.

Plato spent most of his life teaching at the Academy and writing philosophical works. Most of these works are written as dialogues between Socrates and one or more interlocutors on some topic concerning morality. The dialogue called the *Laches*, for example, depicts Socrates asking the Athenian generals Laches and Nicias about the nature of courage. Plato made two more trips to Syracuse, in 368 and 361, apparently with the intention of turning Dionysius the Younger into a philosopher-king. (If so, he failed.) Plato died in Athens in 347 at the age of eighty-one.

Plato's *dialogues* (the term by which his surviving works are known) are

classified chronologically into three groups, each with its distinctive features. To what extent the various dialogues reflect the views of the historical Socrates is a matter of debate. In dialogues of Plato's early period, Socrates typically asks his interlocutors to define a specific moral virtue. For example, in the *Euthyphro* he asks Euthyphro to define *piety*. The interlocutors are quick to give their answers; but Socrates, through probing and persistent questioning, shows them that their responses involve them in contradictions. It thus becomes clear that the interlocutors are not as wise as they claim to be. In these early dialogues, Socrates usually does not propose any solutions of his own to the questions he asks and, at the end of the conversations, the questions remain unresolved. In the dialogues of Plato's middle period, by contrast, Socrates presents his own views on the topic under investigation. In the *Republic*, for example, Socrates gives a detailed answer to the question "What is justice?" In the dialogues of Plato's late period, Socrates plays a lesser role; in fact, in Plato's last dialogue, the *Laws*, Socrates is absent altogether.

Plato had wide-ranging philosophical interests, but his main concern, like Socrates's, was ethics: How should one live one's life? Our selection is from the *Republic*, a dialogue that addresses this question. Everyone wants to live well, and in the *Republic*, Socrates argues that living well means living justly. He examines the nature of justice and depicts an ideal society—one that promotes a just, good life for its citizens.

The dialogue is cast as a report by Socrates of a conversation he had the previous day in the house of his friend Cephalus. Joining Socrates and Cephalus in the conversation are Cephalus's son Polemarchus, the young Sophist Thrasymachus, and Glaucon and Adeimantus (Plato's older brothers).

In Book I Socrates asks his companions to define "justice" and proceeds to point out problems with each definition that is offered. Thrasymachus's definition of justice as "the interest of the stronger" raises the question of whether justice or injustice is more profitable to the individual. Thrasymachus argues that injustice is more profitable, but Socrates exposes inconsistencies in Thrasymachus's position. At the end of Book I, however, Socrates expresses dissatisfaction with his refutation of Thrasymachus: Although he was able to reveal contradictions in Thrasymachus's views, Socrates observes that one cannot be sure whether justice or injustice is more profitable unless one first knows what justice is—and justice had not yet been satisfactorily defined.

Our selection begins with Book II. Here Socrates (who narrates the dialogue) explains how Glaucon urged him to provide a more persuasive refutation of Thrasymachus's view that injustice is more profitable than justice. Glaucon wanted Socrates to show that justice is desirable not simply for its results, such as the benefits accruing from a good reputation, but for its own sake. Socrates states that he will try to meet this challenge by showing

what justice is; once this is known, he believes, its intrinsic value will be obvious. In order to understand justice in the soul, Socrates decides first to examine justice in the state. He thus proceeds to construct an imaginary, perfectly just state. In our excerpts from Books III and IV, Socrates argues that as the state has three parts and is just when each part plays its proper role, so the soul has three parts and is just when each of its parts plays its proper role. He then states that justice in the soul, like health in the body, is obviously desirable for its own sake. Our selection ends with an excerpt from Book IX in which Socrates illustrates the intrinsic value of justice by comparing the soul to a composite of a many-headed beast, a lion, and a human being.

THE REPUBLIC

BOOK II

Glaucon . . . went on to ask: Socrates, do you really want to convince us that justice is preferable to injustice, or will you be content if we only seem to be persuaded?

[I responded:] I would really like to persuade you.

Well, so far you haven't succeeded. Consider this question. Is there some kind of good we ought to strive for, not because we expect it to bring about profitable results but simply because we value the good for its own sake? Joy might be an example, or those sorts of harmless pleasures that leave nothing behind except the memory of enjoyment.

These are good pleasures to savor.

And can we agree that there is a second and different kind of good, valuable not only for its own sake but also for the desirable effects it produces? I think of sight, of knowledge, of health.

Of course.

How about a third kind of good? Gymnastic, medicine, the art of making money—all these yield benefits but are tiresome in the doing. Hence we think of them not as goods in themselves but value them only for their effects.

Yes, this is certainly another kind of good. But what is your point?

I want to know in which of these three categories or classes of goods you locate justice.

Justice belongs in the most valuable category. It is the good that the happy man loves both for its own sake and for the effects it produces.