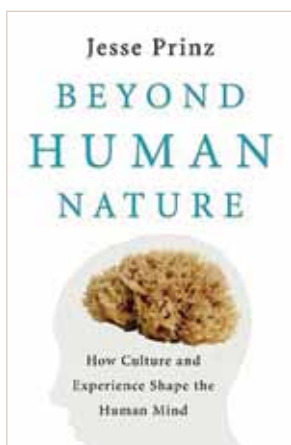


Nature or Nurture?

BEYOND HUMAN NATURE: HOW CULTURE AND EXPERIENCE SHAPE THE HUMAN MIND

by Jesse Prinz

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“Know thyself” was the scant description that Carl Linnaeus provided for the genus *Homo* in his seminal *Systema Naturae*. In the two subsequent centuries, evolutionary biology and cultural anthropology provided parallel explanatory frameworks for how humans know themselves. The former gave new meaning to Hamlet’s appraisal of man as “the

paragon of the animals.” Darwin’s insight threw light on the deep connections between human nature and animal instinct. With anthropology came a record of widespread behavioral diversity in our species. The dazzling cultural differences among human populations caused some to question the sufficiency of merely knowing oneself in understanding human nature. These separate researches in biology and anthropology were grist to the mill of a philosophical debate about the structure of the human mind and the basis of human nature: was the mind endowed with innate, specialized capacities, or does experience furnish the mind? The same discussion echoes through the human sciences today, and Jesse Prinz bravely enters the din with *Beyond Human Nature*.

The central issue at stake is whether the majority of human behavior is a result of largely unalterable, innate, genetically encoded capabilities and dispositions adapted over many thousands of generations, or if evolution has endowed *Homo sapiens* with a few general-purpose capacities which are malleable and fine-tuned by experience. Prinz minces no words in his defense of an empiricist, “nurturist” over

“naturist” perspective, making the case that culture better explains human behavior than universal laws of biologically determined human nature. An element of Prinz’s data-rich argument is that most human behavior is underdetermined by biological explanations: with some exceptions such as color vision, which has a well-understood and tightly constrained biological basis, most human characteristics, like personality, IQ, sexual preference, linguistic ability, and moral sentiments, are flexible and susceptible to cultural input.

Reading evolutionary psychology makes one wonder if there is anything about humans that cannot be deduced from allegedly innate genetic modules. Prinz’s book presents a powerful riposte. A profoundly flexible creature emerges, not endowed with a particular human nature, but capable of many human natures. The theoretical implications may be interesting, but the practical message is that we should be skeptical of claims that certain groups are biologically predisposed to this or that behavior. Experience, education, and culture matter.

The greatest strength of a book with such a synoptic scope is its methodological pluralism: Prinz draws from research in all areas of the social and natural sciences, from neuroscience to ethnology, to supply a rich array of support for his arguments. Though trained as a philosopher, Prinz recognizes that any productive philosophical method engages the sciences and any investigation of “human nature” requires broad understanding. Despite the vast breadth of his coverage, Prinz keeps his prose pulsing and his ideas highly accessible and relevant to the scientific and social discourse.

Beyond Human Nature sprawls over many topics, and those interested in psychology, anthropology, linguistics, genetics, or ethics will find a treasury of fascinating information. Readers attracted to Prinz’s work would be well-served to also explore *The Geography of Thought* (2003) by Richard Nisbett and *Not by Genes Alone* (2005) by Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson. Overall, Prinz presents a deft critique of biological reductionist arguments for human behavior and provides an engaging presentation of research relevant to anyone with an interest in the big picture of the social sciences. ●

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