

Swift, Shaftsbury, & Hutcheson

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Date: Fri, 23 Feb 1996 14:04:49 -0600

From: Rosemary Grant <hr010@mail.connect.more.net>

In the past I've been fascinated with Alfie Kohn's ideas about the better side of human nature. In the same way I favored Aquinas's perspective that man was wounded by the fall, but not totally corrupted. That is until some recent discoveries.

I happened to be re-reading Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* after the recent tv showing. In the introduction Paul Turner writes that Swift had a dim view of human nature which was a popular idea in the 18th century. Turner contrasts this perspective with more optimistic philosophers such as Shaftesbury and Hutcheson who argued for the natural goodness of man.

I've read about Shaftesbury and Hutcheson but don't recall their arguments. Now I'm waffling and beginning to think I was too easily persuaded for believing man is basically good and can just as easily choose his better nature. What are the major pros and cons from Shaftesbury and Hutcheson?

Can you help me out here in trying to resolve this philosophical dilemma? If so, I'm much obliged. I know there is no hard and fast rule on this, but it can make a great deal of difference about the rests of my beliefs.

Respectfully,

Rosemary Bradford Grant

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Date: Mon, 26 Feb 1996 09:09:59 EST5

From: Kenneth D. Pimple <pimple@lanshare.ucs.indiana.edu>

Rosemary Grant wrote:

>

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I have nothing to say about Swift, Shaftesbury, or Hutcheson, but it seems to me that if you want to start to understand human nature -- e.g., the age-old question about whether human beings are "basically good" or "basically evil" -- you'd do well to read Robert Wright's *The Moral Animal*. It discusses these questions (and many others) in the light of evolutionary psychology.

I also feel that theologians and philosophers who write about human nature tend to be overly abstract and not sufficiently empirical. (I will gladly read the long list of exceptions members of this list will no doubt provide.) What would we mean, after all, if we said that human beings are basically good? That they always and everywhere follow the Ten Commandments? The Sermon on the Mount? The Golden Rule? Or just that they tend to take care of their children; they tend to be faithful to their friends; they tend to tell the truth as they know it; etc. When you consider the myriad opportunities to be less-than morally praiseworthy, and the limited return on morally upright behavior, it really is astonishing that human beings are not much worse than they are.

Ken

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Date: Wed, 28 Feb 1996 14:16:44 -0600

From: Rosemary Grant <fr010@mail.connect.more.net>

Kenneth,

Thanks for your response, and I plan to read the book you suggest. Sometimes it's difficult to find answers to such hard philosophical questions, but it still is important to me. I may be foolish to dwell on this, but my dissertation was somewhat connected to the concept of our having the ability to get in touch with our better natures. I'm trying to reconsider my first premise, and that's tough.

What about the people who never quite get a handle on this and get further and further into mucking up their lives? There must be a reason for this, and frankly just saying we all do better than expected doesn't resolve this. Maybe we're not all playing with the same deck of moral and ethical cards.

Respectfully,

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Date: Mon, 4 Mar 1996 09:21:23 EST5

From: Kenneth D. Pimple <pimple@lanshare.ucs.indiana.edu>

Rosemary Grant wrote:

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I hope I didn't make it seem like I thought it was foolish to dwell on such questions; I just think that evolutionary psychology has a very persuasive way of addressing it that no philosopher (that I know of) has come close to.

There are two separate questions, I think: Are human beings, as a species, basically good or basically bad? and, What can an individual human being do to be a good person, or a better person? (The second question can be posed many different ways: Am I, personally, basically good or basically evil? Can I/should I be better than I am? etc.)

I'm not sure that evolutionary psychology has much to say about the latter question(s). I would still guess, though, that there are better sources than the philosophers you mention -- there is a whole field of moral psychology, not to mention all sorts of other kinds of psychology, none of which I have much background in. And of course there's religion, but there, too, I am less inclined to think that theologians are particularly helpful; a specific priest, minister, or rabbi might be, or even a particular layperson with a religious bent.

(All of my skepticism about the value of high philosophy and formal theology no doubt is related to the fact that I am a folklorist.)

If your question at heart is, "What can I do to get in touch with my own better nature?," I don't think, offhand, that I have much of an answer. As I've mentioned before, I am Roman Catholic, and my religious upbringing and faith have provided me with a framework for thinking about both my better and worse aspects, with an incentive to improve myself, and with some ideas about how to go about it.

I would be interested to read what advise other members of this list might have for someone

wrestling with this question.

Ken

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