

Ockham's Razors has certainly whetted my appetite for more.

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ON HUMAN NATURE: BIOLOGY, PSYCHOLOGY, ETHICS, POLITICS, AND RELIGION.

Edited by Michel Tibayrenc and Francisco J. Ayala. Academic Press. Amsterdam (The Netherlands) and Boston (Massachusetts): Elsevier. \$129.95. xxiii + 789 p.; ill.; index. ISBN: 978-0-12-420190-3. 2017.

This is an impressive volume. Its 789 pages consist of 46 chapters, written by specialists in the many disciplines that study human nature. Part I, Biological Basis of Human Diversity, includes chapters on: human evolution and taxic diversity; the history of *Homo sapiens*; human dispersals; human population variability; the evolution of the human brain; the differences between humans and the great apes; disease genetics; natural selection and disease; aging and cancer; human life-history evolution; sexual dimorphism; the biological future of humankind; and more. Part II, Psychology, Behavior and Society, includes chapters on: the origins of agriculture; empathy, morality, and altruism; cognitive ethology and social attention; human sociobiology and group selection; the diversity of human behavior; the psychological concept of normality; the evolution of mental mechanisms; homosexuality and evolution; the origin of language; and culture, brain, and behavior. Part III, Ethics, Politics and Religious Considerations, includes chapters on: the adaptive significance of ethics and aesthetics; the politics of human nature; the race debate; social Darwinism; scientific accounts of religion; evolution and the future of medicine; the impact of medicine on human evolution; science and technology in human societies; and biology, psychology, ethics, and politics.

This is a book for the serious student of human nature. The chapters are sometimes technical, although readily understandable for anyone with a reasonably good, general understanding of human evolution and biology. There is some overlap among the chapters, particularly in the first chapters in Part I on human evolution. And although the list of topics is not exhaustive, there is a wide range of subjects for anyone interested in biological, anthropological, psychological, philosophical, and medical questions about human nature. No volume on human nature, even one of over 700 pages, could be fully comprehensive, but there are two ways in which this book could be improved. First, the chapters would be better understood if broader perspectives could have been included. In their introductory comments, for instance, the editors tell us that a volume written

by Buddhist monks or Amazonian shaman would have been different yet still fascinating. Does this imply that the empirical, scientific approach adopted here is just another way of looking at human nature? If so, what is so significant about the approach here? Moreover, introductions to the various topics might also give readers a sense of what the big issues are, and how the various topics fit together. Second, a methodological question is also raised in Edward O. Wilson's foreword, where he tells us that this is biological reasoning taken into subject traditionally reserved for the humanities. But even though questions of ethics, aesthetics, and value, for instance, may be approached within a biological framework (as I think they should be), biologists do not necessarily have the philosophical expertise to adequately address these issues. More philosophical expertise would be welcome here.

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ETHICS IN THE REAL WORLD: 82 BRIEF ESSAYS ON THINGS THAT MATTER.

By Peter Singer. Princeton (New Jersey): Princeton University Press. \$24.95. xvi + 355 p.; index. ISBN: 978-0-691-17247-7. 2016.

The 82 essays collected here are, for the most part, previously published op-ed articles of two to four pages in length. Their author is one of the great *provocateurs* of contemporary bioethics, and in this volume demonstrates clearly both the benefits and perils of what is a rather unusual format for philosophical writing.

Across an almost comically eclectic range of topics—from the rights of robots and synthetic organisms to the propriety of Soviet-themed restaurants, via civic initiatives to encourage smiling, not to mention more familiar hobby horses such as veganism and effective altruism—Singer is never less than incisive and morally challenging; it is almost wearying to contemplate the sheer number of ways in which an individual feels, reading these essays together, that one really ought to change their life. Taken in smaller doses, however, the effect is both inspiring and enlivening; each essay is an easily digested nugget of acute, inventive reasoning and moral urgency, focused on practical, achievable results and the resistance of lazy, dogmatic thinking.

That aversion to dogma is one of Singer's most appealing traits as a writer. In several pieces here he critically revisits his own previous stances, whether to disavow his blanket opposition to GMOs as a Green Party candidate for the Australian Senate in the 1990s in light of growing evidence for their safety or to acknowledge the way student protestors have forced

him to qualify his admiration for Woodrow Wilson, whose “fourteen points” are several times lauded as a model for international governance, yet whose profound racism cannot simply be explained away as typical of its time. In the book’s most affecting entry Singer eulogizes disability rights activist Harriet McBryde Johnson, born with a muscle-wasting disease, who challenged his views that such conditions must necessarily make one’s life less worth living.

Nevertheless, without at least the opportunity for detailed and extended argument and qualification, any philosophical position must risk flirting with glibness. Or worse. In a more recent *New York Times* editorial piece, not included here, Singer and fellow ethicist Jeff McMahan drew a storm of criticism for querying whether a cognitively disabled person could have been harmed by undergoing a nonconsensual sexual experience “that he is incapable of understanding and that affected his experience only pleurably” (2017. Who is the victim in the Anna Stubblefield case? *New York Times* 3 April. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/03/opinion/who-is-the-victim-in-the-anna-stubblefield-case.html>). In this volume, Singer frequently invokes John Stuart Mill’s “harm principle”; discussing video games in which players may engage in virtual sex with children, he tells us that “(w)hen someone proposes making something a criminal offense, we should always ask: who is harmed?” (p. 143). It is not hard to see how conjoining those views very quickly gets us into trouble, and while careful and detailed caveating could salvage the position, that is just what essays of this brevity will not permit.

So these short essays are not going to supplant the kind of closely argued, careful, and nuanced writing that philosophers—including Singer himself—more usually aim for. But they are a wonderful spur to that sort of reasoning, as well as to more moral living. Any reader will find the book accessible; every reader will find it both thought-provoking and challenging.

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THE INVISIBLE HISTORY OF THE HUMAN RACE: HOW DNA AND HISTORY SHAPE OUR IDENTITIES AND OUR FUTURES.

By *Christine Kenneally*. *New York: Viking (Penguin Publishing Group)*. \$27.95. xi + 355 p.; index. ISBN: 978-0-670-02555-8. 2014.

In this monograph, the author brings together various fields in the sciences and humanities to investigate the complexity of inheritance and heredity, and how those concepts are shaped by public understanding. Employing copious contemporary cases, historic examples, anecdotes, and personal experiences, Kenneally delves into the muddy waters

of how the public conceptualizes genetic history, the role of DNA in human behavior, and health determinism. This work reflects the growing public interest in genetic testing and genealogy and draws from the author’s own experiences investigating her ancestry. The result is a thought-provoking, academic exploration into the broader motivations, thought processes, and philosophical challenges of genealogists.

The book consists of several chapters organized into three sections: ideas about what is passed down, what is passed down, and how what is passed down shapes bodies and minds. From the introduction, Kenneally sets out a challenging agenda as she identifies some of the most difficult questions surrounding ancestry studies, such as: How does mortality limit our perspective on heredity? Why do we care about who we are from? Are we confined by biological path dependence? How can we combine a history of written and oral tradition with modern scientific methods to develop a more accurate picture of our past? How can we ensure that our own expectations about genetics are not skewing our conclusions? The first two sections are largely chronological and focus on the history of genealogical pursuits. The chapters in the first section explore the historic waxing and waning interest in genealogy, motivations for ancestral studies, and the influence of national policies especially regarding eugenics. The second section includes chapters that discuss the loss of ancestral knowledge for a variety of reasons, including political intervention and social stigma, the rise of publicly accessible genealogical information through sources such as Ancestry.com, how scientific researchers have approached these large data sets, the implications of the rapid development of personal genetic screening, and the complexity of using all of this genetic information to delve deep into human history. Finally, the chapters in the third section center on the implications of linking modern genetics and health science to hereditary studies.

Intended for a general audience, the author’s enthusiasm and personal interest in the subject along with numerous examples and historical cases will help captivate readers. Although the work covers a diverse and extensive range of topics, Kenneally creates a clear narrative and successfully clarifies a number of public misconceptions about genetic testing and the interplay of hard sciences, social sciences, and humanities. She makes an excellent case for the importance of interdisciplinary engagement regarding ancestry and heredity studies.

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