The Nature of 'Human Nature' – psychology between Darwin and Derrida

Ashworth, Peter (2000). **Psychology and 'Human Nature'**. Psychology Press Ltd., Taylor & Francis Group. (180 pages).

Reviewed by: *Svend Brinkmann*, stud. psych., University of Aarhus

How would you react if I told you that a book exists that deals with all major psychological theories from Darwin, Freud, and Skinner to Bartlett, Neisser, Kelly, and even Sartre, Mead, Goffman, Foucault, and Derrida? And what if you in addition were informed that the book contains all this in just 180 small pages? You would probably shake your head and smile with a certain indulgence. I know I would before I heard of Peter Ashworth's *Psychology and 'Human Nature'*.

Ashworth's new book is part of the Psychology Focus series and is meant for students taking module courses in psychology. The purpose of the book is to give the students a chance rapidly to familiarise themselves with the topic in order to form a general view. To help the reader, each chapter ends with a summary where the topical theory of the chapter is outlined and discussed concerning its views on consciousness, selfhood, the body, others, and the physical world. This is meant to ensure the cogency of the arguments, and to provide the reader with the tools for comparing theories as diverse as Freudian psychoanalysis and Derrida's deconstruction. In general, I believe that the book achieves what it sets out to do. It is well-written and closely reasoned, but reading it nevertheless leaves one with the feeling that this is the "quick and dirty" version of the theories, and furthermore there are a number of loose ends that could have been avoided.

The book is divided into eight chapters, and each chapter expounds a psychological (or quasi-psychological) theory with special attention given to the theory's views on human nature. The theories treated are Darwinian evolutionary psychology, Freudian psychoanalysis, cognitive psychology ("flowchart"-style), Skinner's behaviourism, Sartre's existentialism, various symbolic and discursive psychologies (Mead, Goffman, Harré, etc.) and finally postmodern thought represented by Foucault and Derrida. The basic assumptions concerning human nature are often left implicit in standard textbooks on psychology, but Ashworth does a good job in making these assumptions explicit. The theories are regarded on a continuum according to

whether human nature is best understood through biology or through culture, or if human nature is best understood as “its own special kind of being” (p. 3).

Several of the chapters are interesting. The chapter on Foucault and Derrida is thought provoking, and especially Ashworth’s presentation of Foucault is well worth reading. Not only do we get an overview of Foucault, but also an account is given of the intellectual development of this great thinker along with cogent critical comments from Ashworth. This relatively thorough presentation of Foucault could have been complemented by more complete investigations in the other chapters. The chapters on cognitive psychology and on Mead and Goffman are rather superficial. Ashworth seems to aim for a complete description of the theories instead of moving more directly to the main theme of the book: human nature. I do not need to hear in details about the articulatory loop or the visuo-spatial sketch pad in order to understand the basic assumptions behind cognitive psychology. Ashworth wants to remain faithful to the theories and that has my sympathies, but in some cases the limited number of pages of the book could have been used in a more relevant way. I would have preferred either a much longer book or more thorough treatments of fewer theoretical perspectives.

Other interesting chapters besides the one on Foucault and Derrida are the ones on Skinner and Sartre. Skinner’s chapter is interesting because it mainly serves as a critical perspective on cognitive psychology. In most standard literature it is the other way round: the cognitive revolution is seen as a major step forward from Skinner’s radical behaviourism. Ashworth gives Skinner the credit he deserves, and several Skinnerian virtues are pointed out: most notably the fact that radical behaviourism is able to deal with human nature in a non-dualist framework, which is philosophically superior to the cognitive emphasis on the inner world. Furthermore Skinner is compared to the phenomenological tradition in its rejection of “the illusion of the double world” (p. 84). This approach to Skinner is both fair to his theory and also very illuminating.

It is refreshing to see a chapter on Sartre’s existentialism in a psychology book. Sartre is presented as anti-psychological (he did not “believe in the existence of psychology” p. 104). But the problem with this chapter lies in the fact that the theory is detached from the other theories in the book. In fact this is the general problem of the book. The theories are “blowin’ in the wind” and too little attention is given to integrating and comparing the theories and chapters. The final chapter serves as a conclusion and we are initially promised that Ashworth’s own approach to a theory of human nature will be presented here, but we are finally left with a conclusion that is way too short, and also very vague. It tries to steer between biological determinism and postmodern anti-subjectivism, but no real arguments are given except for a common sense

insistence on the idea that "the *personal sense of being a self* cannot be assimilated to these structures and processes" [of neither biology nor culture, S.B.], (p. 180, original italics). So Ashworth apparently wants to see human nature as its own special kind of being, and in this sense he comes close to being a modernist psychologist in a traditional vein.

Perhaps the author himself has sensed the impression of detachment of the individual chapters. In any case he has a recurring theme through the chapters, homosexuality, and he tries to provide coherence to the book through asking each of the theories how it would explain the phenomenon of homosexuality. I can see the general idea of doing this, but the result is rather contrived. Ashworth has to *construct* accounts of how cognitive psychology and existentialism would explain homosexuality. Again, with the limited size of the book in mind, these pages could have been used to deepen our understanding of the theories' implicit views on human nature, which was the main theme of the book.

Psychology and 'Human Nature' deserves credit for trying to present wildly different views on human nature in a single, short book. Some very interesting points are presented along the way, especially concerning unorthodox approaches to psychology such as Skinner's, Sartre's, and Foucault's, but these points actually deserve a book of their own. The student who wants a first impression of diverse psychological views on human nature can read the book with profit, but Ashworth's book is simply too short to be a real guide to these thinkers. The good thing about the book is the fact that important theorists that are normally left out in standard psychology books are here included and the idea of explicitly articulating implicit assumptions in psychology on human nature is necessary and exciting.

Ashworth has made a book that covers psychological theory from Darwin to Derrida in just 180 pages. It will not make you nod your head enthusiastically, but will not make you shake your head either!