



Human Natures: Genes, Cultures, and the Human Prospect

Paul R. Ehrlich

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Why do we behave the way we do? Biologist **Paul Ehrlich** suggests that although people share a common genetic code, these genes "do not shout commands at us...at the very most, they whisper suggestions." He argues that human nature is not so much result of genetic coding; rather, it is heavily influenced by cultural conditioning and environmental factors. With personal anecdotes, a well-written narrative, and clear examples, **Human Natures** is a major work of synthesis and scholarship as well as a valuable primer on genetics and evolution that makes complex scientific concepts accessible to lay readers.

Human Natures: Genes, Cultures, and the Human Prospect Details

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From Reader Review Human Natures: Genes, Cultures, and the Human Prospect for online ebook

Steven Williams says

A very servicable book on what “human natures” consist of, and where they came from. Ehrlich believes that humans do not just have one nature, but being highly complex, have multiple natures. His one big point through out the book was that the genetic component to human natures rarely acts without environmental impact. This got me to thinking that even from the beginning DNA interacts within the environment of the cell. Another point he makes is that there just aren't enough of genes to dictate each individual behavior that humans exhibit.

While I cannot agree with everything Ehrlich has to say, it was a very good book. The narative flowed nicely and held my attention throughout. The book itself is a bit dated (2000) for a topic that has probably advanced much since it has been written, but not that much. I feel the book would be good for someone just starting to read about human nature, or someone who has been reading about it for years, like me.

I do want to tell of an interesting thing that happened while reading the book. I happened to be watching “The Brain” on PBS, where the narator talked about how are brains make up reality. That is what we see of the world out there and how we see it are brain induced. This does not negate a real world that is out there, only that how we precieve it through how the brain interprets it, hence no falling into idealism or solipism. Well, the interesting thing was, that shortly after seeing this on the show I read about in the book. I guess Ecclesiastes was right – there is nothing new under the sun. Although, I do believe the author spent to much time in the sun :).

mandagram says

Thus far it delves a lot into man's evolutionary path re: creating our many different cultures and "natures". The author argues that human nature is a flowing, changing, and plural concept rather than the traditional view of human nature being all inclusive or stagnant.

Ok...halfway thru book got a bit boring and repetitive. Have set it down for now, but may return to it later.

Ron says

Ehrlich wrote numerous histrionic books in the 70s that garnered mass sales and proved to be (mostly) untrue. Time--and perhaps an association with the thoughtful Jared Diamond at UCLA--has mellowed him quite a bit, and he has written one of the best overviews of cultural anthropology ever published. He examines all the typical topics--sex, gender, violence, culture--and does so in a very well written and accessible work.

Justin says

Well written and extremely cogent. However, if you've already read Guns, Germs and Steel, The Blind Watchmaker, and anything by Steven Pinker, you will probably not learn anything new beyond the second chapter.

Greg says

Ehrlich comes at you from a lot of places: history, anthropology, biology, economics, psychology, etc. Even if at times it doesn't seem like the most tightly-written book, there's tons of interesting information and stories. If you don't know anything about evolution, it's a great place to start.

Bridgett says

a tedious read at times, but also full of some interesting insights and ideas.

Josh says

This book is brimming with information on evolution - cultural and biological - that your lay scientist cannot afford to miss out on. My only complaint is that, if you've read up on these topics to any significant degree prior to this book, you won't find much new here. In summary, this is great for beginners - not so much for intermediates or higher.

Bob Nichols says

For Ehrlich, there is no biological human nature. Rather, human nature is formed by culture and it is pluralized to reflect our great diversity. Ehrlich gives a nod to our biological being (food, sex, and some genetic-based diseases). He grants the power of the genotype but then states that it is transformed, most meaningfully, by culture. Appropriately, he reacts negatively to extreme biological determinism but he goes to the opposite extreme by dismissing any fundamental role for biology to explain human behavior. In this regard, he mentions in one of his footnotes his alignment with Sartre: We are free (of biology) to make our own choices; we create our own meaning.

Ehrlich conflates biological need with the cultural content that satisfies this need. Biological-given needs are more than food and sex. They are in the main the need for nurture, for protection and security, for group life, for independence, and for some degree of "self-fulfillment." There are also "anti-needs," the threats and harms that we resist. These needs are invariant and make us, substantially, who we are. In many ways, they also make us kindred spirits with life itself. Ehrlich makes the observation that we don't go very long each and every day without thinking about food and sex. That observation can be extended to the other needs as

well. Below the surface of what we do and how we do what we do, we can trace these to some fairly basic, unchanging needs. Why, after all, do we work? Why do we choose the line of work we do? It's these sorts of questions that lead to the deeper, underlying issue of motivation and this explains a lot.

Of course we are free to make our Sartre-like choices, informed by experience and reason, but the question is why we make the choices we do. Daily decisions describe who we are only in part. Underneath this are the deeper motivational components that predispose us to act in the world in certain ways. Ehrlich talks about the role of culture in forming us. That's clear enough, but why does culture have that power? Why do we seek to be a member of the group? Why do we so willingly conform to the group? Why does the group insist on conformity to its mores, and why does it react so strongly to apostasy? Darwin's insight here is pertinent – biology has molded us this way because being a member of the group is essential for our survival.

This is not a nitpicky point. The problem with Ehrlich's perspective is that he's all about the mind and "reason" controlling the unruly body. In fact, for him, our mind and all of its content diversity IS human nature. But how does the mind perform that regulatory function if it is not aware of the underlying dispositions that push us in certain directions to satisfy our need for nurture, for security, for sex, for self-fulfillment, for value within our group, and that have us resist the world with fear and anger. We cannot regulate ourselves by reason if we are not aware of what activates us. We simplistically think we know why we do what we do, but any good therapist can show just how shallow our self-understanding is.

Regarding our biological nature and who we are collectively and individually, just as Darwin opens up "Origins" with his discussion of breeding ("cultivated plants and animals"), if we can breed other life for certain characteristics, temperament or disposition, why hasn't nature done the same for humans? Or, are we an exception to nature? Could it be that beyond a species-level human nature, we have biologically-based, variable (variability is, after all, what natural selection works on) human natures, starting with the poles of selfish behavior on the one hand and other-oriented, behavior on the other, with most of us lying somewhere in between, because both poles work as survival strategies?

As Ehrlich's culturally-created human natures are multiple and diverse, so are, he believes, human values. Despite all of his various humanitarian impulses, Ehrlich is a relativist. That's a problem because he says, again in one of his footnotes, that Hitler's values cannot be condemned, objectively. Hitler and Ehrlich – take your pick. "Thou shall not kill," Ehrlich states, is "culturally evolved." Really? Ehrlich then makes the statement, gratuitously, that in their quest for universal values, "philosophers and sociobiologists alike are restricted to using their value-laden and emotional minds as tools for searching and analysis." Ehrlich repeats the mantra that one cannot derive an "ought" from an "is." Yes, logically, that's correct. But you can turn this into a hypothetical statement and do just fine. If we are free to kill what does that do for social order and, then, what does that do for our own welfare? There is a logic to the science of biology that is fully value-laden and it's only the Ehrlich-types who "forbid" us to go there. In fact, take a page out of Sartre's work and make a choice: Value life, value our freedom in ways compatible with the freedom of others (the golden rule) and put some common sense back into theory.

For those new to this subject area, Ehrlich's book is comprehensive. He covers all of the arguments from A to Z in a 500 plus page book, which he characterizes as his attempt to cover this subject matter "concisely" and with "brevity." He doesn't move without a footnote. For those who have read more extensively in this area, it is a repetitive treatment of what's been said by many before, prompting the question as to why Ehrlich needs to write this book. Well, for one thing, Ehrlich is pushing a point of view. He argues that he's merely presenting the consensus view of the scientific community and that he supplements this with his "interpretation" where there is a dispute. A "consensus" view is misleading. Wilson, Dawkins and the evolutionary psychologists, to start with, are large voices in this longstanding debate regarding the role of

biology in human behavior and they have substantially different perspectives. Ehrlich's book, as well-written as it is, is mostly an interpretation. It's an interpretation as old as Plato that we are free to cast our biology aside and be whoever we want to be. Ehrlich has one vision and Hitler had another. For Ehrlich, scientifically, it doesn't really matter.

John Petersen says

A great book. The author provides an update of fossil record that fills in many of what were considered to be missing links. Then based on the updated family tree and fossil records he describes how the human evolutionary past has influenced our current behavior in such areas as; religion, ethics, the environment, etc.
