Human Nature as Normative Concept: Relevance for Health Care

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Abstract

Appeals to human nature as a normative principle for practical reasoning are often made in medical and health-care ethics. Such moral arguments presuppose an essentialist theory of human nature that posits the existence of an intrinsic human nature or essence that explains the necessary properties and causal powers that distinguish human beings from other animals. With an essentialist theory in hand, moral philosophers who advocate a metaethical theory called ethical naturalism propose that moral principles to guide human action, especially the identification of the virtues, can be discerned from and justified by considerations of human nature. Three areas in medicine and health care where human nature has been proposed as a normative principle to guide moral decision-making include attempts to describe the virtuous patient and health-care provider, debates over the legitimacy of biotechnological enhancements of human capacities, and arguments against the moral acceptability of reproductive cloning and other efforts to radically change human procreation.

Introduction

Appeals to human nature as a normative principle for practical reasoning are often made in medical and health-care ethics. For one influential ethical tradition that traces its roots to Aristotle, human actions, including all medical interventions, are good if they promote, perfect, or are in harmony with the ends that are perfective of human nature and are bad if they diminish, frustrate, or are in discord with those ends. Here, human nature remains a moral benchmark that cannot be altered without undermining the human good. For other traditions, however, ethical judgments are not determined by and should not be dependent upon human nature. For critics of the view that human nature is a normative guide for human action, there may even be scenarios where it is a moral imperative to change, improve, or “reinvent” human nature using medical technology or genetic engineering in the pursuit of some other perfection or ideal.

To clarify the normative role that human nature has played in discussions surrounding health care, this chapter begins with an overview of the two broad categories of theories of human nature that are prevalent in contemporary discourse. Essentialist theories posit the existence of an intrinsic human nature or essence that explains the necessary properties and causal powers that distinguish human beings from other beings. These properties and causal powers would be an objective description of the human being that is valid at all times and places, designating the human individual as belonging to a unique natural kind. In contrast, non-essentialist theories deny that there is an underlying nature that designates human beings as members of a natural kind. Instead, for non-essentialists, human beings share overlapping clusters of properties and powers, none of which all human beings must necessarily possess. Indeed, in the view of one kind of non-essentialism, called anti-essentialism by some, human nature is best described as an ad hoc clustering of properties and powers that is constructed by the particular cultures and societies in which human beings live. As such, it is ever changing and ever new.

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This chapter then moves to a summary investigation of ethical naturalism, a tradition that proposes that the basic principles of morality can be discerned from a rational inquiry of the natural world. Not surprisingly, ethical naturalism presupposes an essentialist account of human nature. According to this metaethical view, human nature can be a normative guide for human action where good acts are those that help human beings to attain their species-specific ends well. An influential strand of this ethical tradition is constituted by contemporary philosophers who have been inspired by Aristotle. This is the account of morality that proposes that virtues, and not moral laws or social policies in themselves, are the proper objects of practical reasoning.

Finally, this chapter closes with a summary discussion of three areas in medicine and health care where human nature can be and has been used as a normative principle to guide moral decision-making. First, philosophers have reflected upon the ends of human nature to describe the virtuous patient and the virtuous health-care provider, to provide practitioners with a moral framework to guide virtuous human activity within the context of the provider-patient relationship. Next, appeals to human nature have been used by critics of proposals to use biotechnology and genetic engineering to permanently enhance human capacities. Finally, references to human nature have also figured prominently in several arguments against the moral legitimacy of reproductive cloning and other efforts to radically alter human procreation.

Theories of Human Nature

What are human beings? Do they have shared properties and causal powers that distinguish them from nonhuman beings? And if they do, what are these properties and causal powers, and how do they relate to our biological and psychological constitution? To answer these and related questions, philosophers, religious thinkers, poets, and scientists throughout history have proposed theories of human nature that try not only to explain human beings but also to contextualize their fears, hopes, and aspirations. Though there appears to be broad agreement on what the term “human” means today, especially if it is understood as indicating membership in a biological species category called Homo sapiens, there is little agreement on what “nature” means. Nonetheless, theories of human nature can be broadly categorized into two kinds, those that are essentialist and those that are non-essentialist in character (Pojman 2006; Kronfeldner et al. 2014).

Essentialist theories of nature posit the existence of an underlying and intrinsic essence or core nature in a particular thing of a natural kind that explains the properties and causal powers it shares with other individuals of the same kind (Ellis 2001; [2002] 2014; Oderberg 2007; Bird and Tobin 2015). For example, an essentialist theory of chemical nature would explain the properties and causal powers of elemental gold, i.e., it is a bright, slightly reddish yellow, dense, soft, malleable, and ductile metal, which is relatively nonreactive, by appealing to gold having 79 protons in its nucleus, a received view called microstructural essentialism (Hendry 2006). Every atom of gold would have this essence and every other elemental atom would not. In the same way, essentialist theories of human nature posit the existence of an underlying human essence that explains the properties and causal powers that are together associated with human beings. Proponents of such an essentialist account include, among others, Greek philosopher and biologist Aristotle (384–322 BC), Christian theologian and Catholic saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596–1650), and contemporary Harvard scientist and sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson. The folk conception that human beings have an intrinsic underlying nature is also intuitively appealing and is widespread, even among children (Keil 1989).

Unlike the commonly held view that chemical natures are linked to their atomic numbers, there is no consensus among essentialists on what necessarily and sufficiently constitutes human nature and the properties and causal powers that emerge from it. For Aristotle and Aquinas, human beings are rational
animals, matter-form unities that have the distinctive powers of thinking and desiring (Pasnau 2002). For Descartes, we are thinking extended things, body-soul composites of two substances that can be conceived clearly and distinctly apart from each other (Skirry 2005). For Wilson, we are members of a species distinguished by a genetic makeup that has been shaped by an evolutionary process that has selected for shared adaptive traits and behaviors (Wilson 2004). Nonetheless, despite the lack of consensus on how to explain them, it is clear that anthropologists have identified human universals that are shared by human beings in different social contexts and historical periods, whether one calls them God-given characteristics or evolved adaptive traits (Brown 1991).

In contrast, non-essentialist theories deny that there is an intrinsic underlying core human nature. Proponents include, among others, English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704), Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776), and the majority of contemporary philosophers working within the modern and postmodern traditions. These theories trace their roots to the nominalism of William of Ockham (c. 1287–1347) who proposed that universals do not exist, only individuals do (Loux 1974). According to the nominalists, universals are social conventions that name similarities shared by things that do not have any underlying shared reality. This claim certainly holds for artifacts. Whether a timepiece is a clock or a watch varies from culture to culture and from age to age. However, non-essentialism extends this observation from artifacts to natural kinds. Each individual thing, whether it is a watch, a gold atom, or a human being, is unique. There are no common natures.

Non-essentialists who deny the reality of biological natures, including human nature, often argue that the sort of typological categorization espoused by essentialists has been made obsolete and untenable by evolutionary theory for at least three reasons (Sober 1980; Okasha 2002). First, they point out that biological species come into and go out of existence as distinct populations of individuals are shaped and reshaped by natural selection. In other words, biological species are dynamic realities that are unlike the static essences that purportedly define a natural kind. Next, they argue that biological species as they are understood today are defined not by their intrinsic traits but by their genealogical relationships. Individuals of a species are similar not because they share a common underlying nature but because they share a common ancestor. Finally, non-essentialists claim that the variability and diversity among individuals that belong to the same species rule out the existence of biological natures. Each organism is different. It is significant for non-essentialists that there is nothing in biology comparable to an atomic number in chemistry that is shared by members of a chemical kind.

Instead, non-essentialists propose that human nature, like all biological natures, can be conceived of as covarying clusters of relational properties, capacities, or causal powers that are typically, but not necessarily, shared by individuals that belong to a population descended from a common ancestor (Boyd 1999; Griffiths 1999, 2011). Indeed, in the view of one kind of non-essentialism, called anti-essentialism by some, human nature is best described as an ad hoc clustering of properties and powers that is constructed by the particular cultures and societies in which human beings live, often to protect the interests of the powerful (Peterson 2001, Chap. 3). This account emerges from a postmodern worldview that contends that all knowledge of reality is fabricated by the human beings who together inhabit and are influenced by their particular social, cultural, and historical contexts (Berger and Luckmann 1966). For these non-essentialists, human nature is whatever a particular community or society proposes it to be.

In response to their critics, essentialists raise three counterarguments (Devitt 2008). First, they note that the discovery of chemical transmutation where one element is changed into another element has not weakened the consensus that chemical kinds exist. In the same way, essentialists argue that the observation that one species can be transformed into another by natural selection does not necessarily rule out biological kinds. Next, they affirm that biological species are defined by their genealogical relationships. However, they also propose that a genealogical definition for a biological species does not rule out a structural definition that seeks to explain why individuals descended from a common ancestor actually
have the similar properties that they do. To illustrate this point, consider three children. One could argue
that they are siblings who belong to the same family because they share the same parents. This would be a
genealogical explanation. However, one could also propose that they are siblings because they share
certain familial traits, say, a broad forehead and a hooked nose. This would be a structural explanation.
Structural explanations explain why all tigers are striped, all jaguars are black, and all kangaroos jump.
They do so because they share common properties and causal powers, i.e., a common nature that
distinguishes them from other individuals of other species. Finally, essentialists point out that individual
atoms of the same chemical element with the same atomic number can vary because they have different
atomic mass numbers. Variability and diversity do not necessarily rule out biological essentialism as long
as one can find an underlying shared reality among the individuals that belong to the same biological kind.
Recent work in systems biology has concluded that individual organisms of a biological species share a
common molecular state space that comprises all the possible molecular states of their gene regulatory
network (Auyang 1998, pp. 101–102). This molecular state space underlies the genotype and phenotype
landscapes that are also uniquely associated with each biological species. A species’ state space would
specify a biological kind in the same way that an atomic number specifies a chemical kind.

The Normative Use of Human Nature in Practical Reasoning

Appeals to human nature as a normative principle in practical reasoning are made by advocates of moral
or ethical naturalism, a metaethical theory that claims that moral principles can be justified by appealing to
the architecture of human nature (Lenman 2014). Not surprisingly, ethical naturalists hold to an essen-
tialist theory of human nature that can be a substantive guide to practical reasoning. To illustrate the basic
contours of ethical naturalism, consider the influential account proposed by Rosalind Hursthouse, a
contemporary moral philosopher working in the Aristotelian tradition, that links ethical naturalism to an
account of the virtues (Hursthouse 1999). Other prominent contemporary philosophers who would hold
similar views include Philippa Foot (2001), Alasdair MacIntyre (1999), and Martha Nussbaum (1995).

Hursthouse begins her ethical analysis by exploring the way that we evaluate plants and animals
(Hursthouse 1999, Chap. 9). She notes that it is not uncommon for us to conclude that an individual plant
is a good or bad specimen of its natural kind by determining if two of its aspects, i.e., its parts and its
operations, are good or bad in light of two ends, i.e., whether they are contributing, in the way
characteristic of a member of its natural kind, first to the survival of the individual and then to the ongoing
survival of the species. A good plant would be an individual with good roots and good leaves that facilitate
its survival and that of its species. A bad plant would be a sickly plant that is unable to survive or produce
progeny.

Moving up the ladder of life, Hursthouse explains that an animal is a good or bad specimen according to
its natural kind not only according to whether it has good parts and good operations but also according to
whether it acts well in a way characteristic of its species. Moreover, in her view, animals have an
additional end beyond individual and species survival, and that is whether they are free from pain and,
where appropriate, are enjoying the pleasure that is characteristic of their natural kind. Thus, a good owl
would be an individual that can see well in the dark so that it can hunt well at night to nourish itself and its
offspring. However, an owl that could hunt well at night but is experiencing pain in any way would not be
a good owl.

Hursthouse then extends her analysis to human beings where the “criteria of goodness in human beings
must be related to what human beings are and/or do as such” (Hursthouse 1999, p. 206). She proposes that
as rational and social animals, human beings have four aspects, namely, their parts, their operations, their
actions, and now their emotions/desires, that have to be evaluated with respect to four ends, namely, their
individual survival, their species survival, their freedom from pain and enjoyment of pleasure, and additionally the good functioning of their social group. These four evaluative aspects and ends emerge from a reasoned interrogation of human nature revealed in the natural history of the human species.

Thus, for the most part, according to Hursthouse, a good human being would be an individual who is healthy, who feels and acts well, and who has good relations with others, including his family, his relatives, his friends, and his colleagues, relations that allow him and the rest of the group to live well. In her view, he would have the good character traits, which she and the Aristotelian tradition call the virtues, that allow him to live well, one of the many forms of life that are in accord with the ends that are distinctive of the human natural kind. To illustrate her point, Hursthouse proposes that human beings are good, and more specifically, they possess the virtue of courage, when they “defend themselves, and their young, and each other, and risk life and limb to defend and preserve worthwhile things in and about their group, thereby fostering their individual survival, the continuance of the species, their own and others’ enjoyment of various good things, and the good functioning of the social group” (Hursthouse 1999, p. 209).

Finally, Hursthouse explains that ethical naturalism, as she and the Aristotelian tradition understand it, provides criteria for a particular character trait being a virtue, i.e., it being conducive to a human being living a good life characteristic of his natural kind, and not criteria for right or wrong action, except indirectly. Therefore, to determine if a particular action were right or wrong, one would have to ask whether this is an action that would be undertaken by a virtuous individual in these particular circumstances, here and now, and not whether or not it is in accordance with some moral principle. Or to put it another way, one would have to ask whether this particular action would promote or undermine the virtue of the agent who is contemplating this particular action here and now. For ethical naturalists, the virtues, and not moral laws or social policies in themselves, are the proper objects of practical reasoning.

The Normative Use of Human Nature in Medicine and Health Care

Human nature has been used as a normative principle to guide moral decision-making in medicine in different contexts. Three will be summarized here to illustrate how appeals to human nature have played a diversity of roles in ethical debates in health care.

First, human nature can be used to describe the virtuous patient and the virtuous health-care provider in a manner analogous to the way that it has been used to paint the portrait of the virtuous human being (Pellegrino and Thomasma 1993; Austriaco 2011, pp. 113–119). These descriptions can then serve as a moral framework to guide virtuous human activity within the context of the provider-patient relationship.

To illustrate this approach, a virtuous patient would be described as an individual who acts well to promote her own well-being, the well-being of her family, and the well-being of her community, in the particular context of one who is sick and in need of health care. For herself, the patient would be called to be disciplined, temperate, and courageous so that she can successfully complete her medical regimen, no matter how difficult and inconvenient it may be for her. For her family and her community, she would be motivated to be charitable, long-suffering, self-forgetful, and cooperative, ordering her relationships with others so that everyone is challenged to seek her healing together in light of the common good. These character traits would help her to make prudent decisions regarding her health care, both medical and moral, which are integral to human flourishing.

Similarly, the virtuous health-care provider would be the individual who acts well to promote the four ends perfective of his nature, this time in the context of providing medical care to those in need. He would make sure that he cares for himself and his own well-being. This involves studying diligently, thinking clearly, and resting appropriately, among other things, so that he is at his professional best when he encounters his patients. But this self-care has to be offset with a genuine concern for the care of the other.
Therefore, he too is called to be charitable, long-suffering, self-forgetful, and cooperative, so that he can work with his patients, their families, and the other members of his health-care team, even when it is inconvenient, to provide patients with the care that they need to heal. In all things, the virtuous health-care provider would be challenged to consider the genuine good of everyone involved, his own included, when he makes the health-care decisions that promote the healing of his patients.

Next, human nature has also been used as a normative principle in the ethical debate, called the debate over enhancement ethics by some, over whether or not medical interventions should be used to permanently enhance human capacities (Buchanan 2009, 2011, Chap. 4; Giubilini and Sanyal 2015; Kaebnick 2011; Peterson 2010; Sharon 2014). Critics of efforts to use biotechnology or genetic engineering for human enhancement appeal to human nature in at least three ways.

First, critics argue that society should not permanently enhance human nature because doing so would alter our common understanding of human excellence and flourishing in ways that would undermine our social practices. For instance, in its moral analysis of proposals to enhance the performance of human beings, whether this is the performance of the vocalist, the student, or the athlete, with biotechnology, the President’s Council on Bioethics highlights the excellence of the striving that we acknowledge when we honor the achievement of superior performance (President’s Council on Bioethics 2003, pp. 101–157). The council then wonders whether the enhancement of the human capacities used in these performances would move us to lose sight “of why excellence is worth seeking at all, and hence what excellence really is, and how we pursue it as human beings, not as artifacts” (President’s Council on Bioethics 2003, p. 156). Thomas Murray would be equally cautious about biotechnological enhancements for athletic prowess. He proposes that enhancing human capacity in sport would radically alter the meaning of sport as a human activity because “what we look for in athletes is a combination of natural talents and the virtuous perfection of these talents” (Murray 2007, p. 513). Permitting athletes to be enhanced with technological manipulation rather than through virtuous effort and practice would transform the competition of sport. It would now be an occasion to honor not athletic achievement but technological innovation.

Second, critics oppose enhancement because they argue that human nature is such a complex reality that enhancing one aspect of it could undermine the excellence of the whole. The President’s Council on Bioethics, for example, is concerned that there is a danger in enhancement technologies “that we will become better in some area of life by diminishing ourselves in others, or that we will achieve superior results only be compromising our humanity” (President’s Council on Bioethics 2003, p. 295). Likewise, Francis Fukuyama argues, “we want to protect the full range of our complex, evolved natures against attempts at self-modification. We do not want to disrupt either the unity or the continuity of human nature” (Fukuyama 2002, p. 172). For critics, even enhancements that seek to eliminate select limitations in our human nature would be problematic because in reality, they would be purging the human condition of opportunities for virtuous behavior and human excellence. Thus, Erik Parens challenges society to consider whether reducing our fragility, which he defines as our being subject to change and to chance, by biotechnological enhancement could in fact diminish our humanity by decreasing our appreciation for beauty, benevolence, and vulnerability (Parens 1995). Similarly, Michael Sandel is concerned that enhancement and genetic engineering could make us lose sight of the giftedness of the human condition, because these technologies represent “a kind of hyperagency, a Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires. The problem is not the drift to mechanism but the drive to mastery. And what the drive to mastery misses and may even destroy is an appreciation of the gifted character of human powers and achievements” (Sandel 2007, pp. 26–27).

Lastly, critics are concerned that biotechnical or genetic enhancement would so alter the nature of an individual such that it would, in the eyes of many of his peers, put him outside of the human species. It would make him “post-human.” The Vatican is worried that genetic enhancements of this kind “would
promote a eugenic mentality and would lead to indirect social stigma with regard to people who lack certain qualities, while privileging qualities that happen to be appreciated by a certain culture or society” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2008, §27). Alternatively, Francis Fukuyama is concerned that this type of intervention would undermine the individual’s dignity by depriving him of the human nature that is the source of his dignity and moral status (Fukuyama 2002, Chaps. 7–9). At a minimum, technological enhancements that are perceived to place individuals outside our species would weaken our common sense of humanity that grounds our conception of human rights as we know it.

Finally, human nature has been invoked as a normative principle in the debates over human reproductive cloning and other means of altering human procreation. To take one prominent example, the President’s Council on Bioethics has argued that cloning-to-produce-children “would represent a challenge to the nature of human procreation and child-rearing” (President’s Council on Bioethics 2002, p. 99). In reproductive cloning, “researchers would be transforming a sexual system into an asexual one, a change that requires major and ‘unnatural’ reprogramming of donor DNA if there is to be any chance of success” (President’s Council on Bioethics 2002, p. 94). In the view of the Council, this “unnatural” form of reproduction would radically alter the meaning of human procreation transforming it from a begetting into a making: “The likely impact of cloning on identity suggests an additional moral and social concern: the transformation of human procreation into human manufacture” (President’s Council 2002, p. 104). The Vatican has made a similar argument, condemning reproductive cloning because “[i]t represents a radical manipulation of the constitutive relationality and complementarity which is at the origin of human procreation in both its biological and strictly personal aspects... The difference should again be pointed out between the conception of life as a gift of love and the view of the human being as an industrial product” (Pontifical Academy for Life 1997, §3).

Objections to the Normative Use of Human Nature in Medicine and Health Care

Proponents of human enhancement and/or reproductive cloning respond to arguments against these medical interventions that appeal to human nature in at least three ways. First, they deny the existence of an intrinsic core human nature that could serve as a benchmark for moral inquiry. This is the objection of the non-essentialists and has already been considered above.

Second, they maintain that it is not clear why human nature must be normative in moral analysis. For example, Allen Buchanan is deeply critical of the Council’s claim that human sexuality is sexual by nature, because he thinks that it does not follow that human procreation between same sex partners using biotechnology to combine their DNA, even though it is not sexual, is “less than human, incompatible with the fundamental dignity of humanity” (Buchanan 2009, p. 146). Thus, in his view, it is not clear why the nature of human sexuality as it is understood today should rule out procreative acts that are post-sexual. Indeed, for Buchanan, there are scenarios where it can be a moral imperative to change, improve, or “reinvent” human nature, including human sexuality, using medical technology or genetic engineering in the pursuit of some other perfection or ideal.

Finally, proponents of enhancement point out that human nature includes evolved adaptations that constrain our good in unfortunate ways. To put it another way, human nature has both good and bad aspects to it. Buchanan lists our limited altruism as one such limitation (Buchanan 2009). Would it not be reasonable, he proposes, to enhance this limitation, making human beings more generous and more sociable? This would change our human nature but in ways that improve rather than diminish it.

To briefly respond to the two final objections, critics of reproductive cloning who claim that this technological intervention would undermine the human dignity of the cloned person are arguing that
manufacturing a human person is inimical to her dignity in the same way that buying and selling a human person, even with her consent, is inimical to her dignity. To affirm that a human being has dignity is to affirm that there is something worthwhile about each and every human being such that certain things ought not to be done to any human being and that certain other things ought to be done for every human being. According to opponents of reproductive cloning, among those certain things that ought not to be done to a human being because of her dignity includes selling, buying, and manufacturing her. Finally, ethical naturalists would counter the final criticism by noting that at least the Neo-Aristotelian account grounds moral inquiry on a reasoned inquiry of the overall architecture of human nature rather than on particular evolved adaptations, hence the four aspects and four ends of human nature proposed by Hursthouse. Within this framework, biotechnological interventions that could help persons to better attain the ends of their human nature by minimizing the limiting effects of certain evolved adaptations would not be altering human nature as such.

**Key Terms**

*Human nature*: The underlying essence or core nature in a human being that explains the properties and causal powers he or she shares with other individuals of the same kind.

*Enhancement ethics*: The subfield of ethics that deals with proposals to enhance human capacities with biotechnology and genetic engineering beyond what would be considered a therapeutic intervention.

*Essentialism*: A philosophical theory that posits the existence of an intrinsic nature in a particular thing of a natural kind that explains the properties and causal powers it shares with other individuals of the same kind.

*Ethical naturalism*: A metaethical theory that claims that moral principles can be justified by appealing to the architecture of human nature.

*Non-essentialism*: A philosophical theory that denies the existence of an intrinsic nature that explains the properties and causal powers of individuals that are thought to belong to a natural kind.

*State space*: The set of all possible molecular configurations that can be occupied by an organism over its developmental lifetime. Since all the individual organisms of a biological species share a common molecular state space, then a state space can be said to ground a biological kind in the same way that the atomic number of an atom grounds a chemical kind.

*Virtue*: Good character traits that enable human beings to act quickly, spontaneously, and happily, so that they may better attain the ends that are perfective of their nature.

**Summary Points**

- Appeals to human nature as a normative principle for practical reasoning are often made in medical and health-care ethics.
- Essentialist theories of human nature posit the existence of an underlying and intrinsic essence or core nature in human beings that explains the properties and causal powers they share with other individuals of the same kind.
- In contrast, non-essentialist theories deny that there is an intrinsic underlying core human nature.
- Non-essentialists who deny the reality of biological natures, including human nature, often argue that the sort of typological categorization espoused by essentialists has been made obsolete and untenable by evolutionary theory.
Instead, non-essentialists propose that human nature, like all biological natures, can be conceived of as covarying clusters of relational properties, capacities, or causal powers that are typically, but not necessarily, shared by individuals that belong to a population descended from a common ancestor.

Appeals to human nature as a normative principle in practical reasoning are made by advocates of moral or ethical naturalism, a metaethical theory that claims that moral principles can be justified by appealing to the architecture of human nature.

As rational and social animals, human beings have four aspects, their parts, their operations, their actions, and now their emotions/desires, that have to be evaluated with respect to four ends, their individual survival, their species survival, their freedom from pain and enjoyment of pleasure, and additionally the good functioning of their social group.

Ethical naturalism provides criteria for a particular character trait being a virtue, i.e., its being conducive to a human being’s living a good live characteristic of his natural kind, and not criteria for right or wrong action, except indirectly.

Human nature can be used to describe the virtuous patient and the virtuous health-care provider in a manner analogous to the way that it has been used as to paint the portrait of the virtuous human being.

Human nature has also been used as a normative principle in the ethical debate, called the debate over enhancement ethics by some, over whether or not medical interventions should be used to permanently enhance human capacities.

Human nature has been invoked as a normative principle in the debates over human reproductive cloning and other means of altering human procreation.

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