**What does it mean to be human?**

**Christian and social scientific understandings of human beings in society**

**Donald Hay, Emeritus Fellow of Jesus College, Oxford, and Emeritus member of Department of Economics, University of Oxford[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Oxford Developing a Christian Mind programme[[2]](#footnote-2): Social Sciences stream**

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[Note. This paper is based on the lecture given as part of the Social Sciences stream over several years. It is intended to provide an overview of its subject, not an exhaustive treatment. So it is light on scholarly references, and reflects a selective approach to the various literatures addressed. A bibliography is attached at the end, to guide readers who want to explore the themes in more detail. The paper has benefitted hugely from the comments of a number of colleagues, particularly Michael Lamb.

The hope is that this written version of the lecture will stimulate others to follow up the themes and provide more substantive treatments of the relevant literatures.]

1. **Introduction**

Across the range of disciplines in the Social Sciences, there is a variety of conceptions of what it is to be a human being. These might be thought to be more or less satisfactory, partly in their use as social constructs within each discipline, and more widely in understanding human beings generally. This is a matter of considerable importance. In explaining and modelling human behaviour in a societal context, an understanding that is defective or too narrow could lead to errors in both the models and the explanations advanced. Moreover, though this is not the main focus of this paper, understandings of human nature are often implicitly normative: that is, they provide a framework within which issues of human flourishing may be addressed, and hence the basis for wider evaluations of social and economic arrangements. The purpose of this paper is to explore the main conceptions of humanity in the social sciences, as currently practised.

The paper is organised into five sections that follow. The first section offers a summary review of theological understandings of human beings in society. This is followed by three sections that address mainstream approaches in the social sciences: evolutionary psychology, rational choice theory, and social theory. Each section outlines the salient features of the approach, before indicating the convergence or divergence between the social scientific approach and theological understandings. A fifth section explores the theme of personhood as proposed by Christian Smith, an account that draws on sociological insights, but suggests a more robust understanding of human beings as agents, rather than just socially constructed actors.

1. **Theological understandings**

**2.1 Creation**

The mainstream Christian tradition understands human nature with reference to the biblical themes of creation and fall. In the opening chapters of Genesis, human beings are described as being ‘formed from the dust of the ground’ (Genesis 2: 7). This indicates the continuity of humanity with the rest of creation: we are part of the natural order, and our biology is shared with other creatures. We are not merely spirits: our bodies matter for our flourishing as human beings.

Human beings are also described (in the first creation narrative) as being made in the image of God: ‘So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them’ (Genesis 1: 27). Being made in the image of God sets the human race apart from the rest of creation. Note, too, that just as God is relational within the triune godhead, so too human beings are relational, not least in the differentiation of the sexes. Humanity is given the responsibility to rule over the created order, a rule exercised through work (and rest): ‘Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1: 26). The nature of this ‘rule’ is indicated in the second creation narrative to be that of care combined with use: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2: 15). There is no biblical justification for exploitation or destruction of the natural order. This requirement to take care is followed by the story of the naming of the animals: “Now the Lord God had formed out of the dust of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them: and whatever the man called each living creature that was its name” (Genesis 2: 19, 20). The point about naming is that to name someone, something, or some place in Hebrew thought is to understand it and to know its essence. The implication is that humanity has the capacity to understand the natural order, which undergirds our activity of enquiring into the nature of things, notably in the practice of science. There is also an implication for our work. Since we are made in the image of God the Creator, then our work will have a creative aspect. This may involve using our understanding of the world to develop new technologies and products as we interact with the natural order. Moreover, if we are made in the likeness of the Creator, our work should seek not just to produce things or services, but also to generate works of beauty pleasing to the eye or to the other senses.

Finally, the narrative of Genesis 3: 1-7 also indicates the human capacity to make choices, especially moral choices. We are creatures with moral understandings that are an important part of our interactions with the environment and with our fellow human beings.

To sum up, human beings are biologically part of the natural order, but made in the image of God, implying capacity for relationships, with responsibility for the natural order, the potential for creativity in work, capacity for understanding our world in science, and capacity for evaluating and making moral choices.

These theological insights contribute to answering the question: What is the purpose of human life? The short answer is that we are persons in relationships, with particular purposes in those relationships. First, we are to love God and to serve him with all our being: ‘Jesus answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” ’; and second, “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Luke 10: 27). The third relationship is with the natural order which we explored in the previous paragraph: our purpose is to care for, use and enjoy the created natural order.

**2.2 Fall**

Theologically this high calling and purpose has been frustrated by the Fall, rooted in our disobedience to God and his purposes for us. This is the dark side of biblical anthropology. The Fall arises out of our created capacity for evaluating and making moral decisions. If we are truly to love God, neighbour and the creation, we need to be autonomous agents with the freedom to make choices about our relationships. The narrative of Genesis 3 explores the exercise of this freedom with the consequence that all three relationships are fractured and broken. In the place of an intimate relation between God and Adam and Eve, there is separation as they seek to hide themselves from the Lord God in the garden (3: 8). This is a continuing theme of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, culminating in the act of defiance against God symbolised by the Tower of Babel: “Come let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves…”(Genesis 11: 4, 5). The implication is that the fallen humanity exercises its freedom to determine its own purposes and destiny apart from God. Second, power and deception enter human relationships, destroying the trust and mutual support that should characterise them. Thus Adam and Eve deceive one another, Cain and Abel fall out with murderous results, and throughout the first few chapters of Genesis, human relationships of all kinds are characterised by the exercise of power rather than the expression of love. ‘Violence’ is identified as one of the reasons for God’s decision to destroy the earth in the Flood (Genesis 6: 11-13). Third, the curse also affects the relationship between Adam and Eve and the natural order: “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life…. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food…” (Genesis 3: 17-19). The contrast is with the abundance of food that characterises the Garden before the Fall. The consequent ambivalence of the natural order *in its use by humankind* – both blessing and curse – is present in the narrative of the Flood, but is given partial healing after the Flood with the covenant promises to Noah.

* 1. **The implications of the Fall for human nature**

The implications of the Fall for human nature are analysed in Pauline theology. In Romans 8, Paul explores the concept of the ‘sinful nature’, which has two dimensions. “Those who live according to the sinful nature have their mind set on what that nature desires…” (8: 5), addresses the inner motivations of human beings. The assertion is that human beings have a predisposition to sin, which effectively enslaves us. That “those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God…” (8: 8) underlines the break down in humanity’s relationship with God. The consequences for human behaviour follow. As indicated in Romans 1, “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God, nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened” (1: 21). The implication is that their minds and motivations are changed, and what follows is bad behaviour: “They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice.” (1: 29). This is not the only place where Paul spells out the implications of the sinful nature: “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like” (Galatians 5: 19, 20). Even allowing for the fact that Paul was writing to churches located in cities with strong pagan cultures, his argument linking behaviour to the mindset of the sinful nature is generalized, though in other cultures the ‘acts of the sinful nature’ may be quite different (and perhaps not as gross as in Galatia in the first century of the Christian era!).

Does that mean we have to assume the worst about humanity’s motivations in all circumstances when modelling human behaviour? Not necessarily. It is important to remember that even fallen humanity is in the image of God. While that image is grievously marred and distorted, is is not completely destroyed. As Jesus is recorded as noting: ‘If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children …’ (Luke 11: 13). The motivation here is presumably love for a child: and as a matter of experience we know that human beings, even in their fallen state, are capable of acts of goodness. Perhaps the concept of common grace, the idea that God sustains human life within the created order despite our sinfulness, enables us to understand this reassuring characteristic of humanity as we experience it in our daily lives.

What then are we to make of Paul’s apparently unequivocal condemnation of human nature? The context is important. Not only is he writing to churches confronting pagan cultures, he is also writing to make clear the importance of ‘salvation’ from the ‘sinful nature’: in Christ we are offered a restored and renewed relationship with God, enabling us to ‘crucify’ the sinful nature (Galatians 5: 24), and to live by the Spirit (Galatians 5: 16-18). Note that the fruit of the Spirit, according to Paul’s listing, is not primarily behaviours, but virtues linked to fundamental motivations: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5: 22-23). These are the dispositions that should characterise all our behaviour, especially our interactions with other human beings and the natural order.

* 1. **Aquinas and Roman Catholic theology**

The previous paragraphs have followed traditional Protestant theological treatments of the ‘doctrine of man’ derived for the most part from the understanding of the biblical theology expounded by Augustine, and restated at the Reformation notably by John Calvin. Roman Catholic theology also finds its roots in the theological writings of the Church Fathers, but its modern form owes much to the formulations of the doctrine by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Aquinas’ account does not contradict the Protestant version, but has some rather different emphases. In particular, Aquinas makes a strong connection between creation and teleology. The purpose of the natural order is derived from the will of the Creator. It is to provide for the flourishing of the human race, which is created in the image of God to bring glory and worship to the Creator. A distinctive characteristic of human beings is the intellect: human rationality sets us apart from the irrational animals and enables us to explore and understand the purposes of our lives, and to order human actions accordingly.

Another key characteristic of this view is the centrality of free will: human beings are moral beings who are responsible for their actions and life commitments. Evil is traced to human sin, but the doctrine of ‘total depravity’ is rejected. It is on this point that Thomist theology differs most significantly in respect of understanding human nature. The contention is that our humanity is still essentially good, and that our creaturely capacities including our reason and our will can enable us to reach out to God. To paraphrase Aquinas: ‘Natural law cannot be cancelled in the human heart.’ Human behaviour is instructed by our understanding of ‘natural law’. Aquinas takes this insight from St Paul, who writes that ‘the requirements of the law are written on their [Gentiles] hearts’ (Romans 2: 14-15). We pursue our natural inclinations which are conducive ‘to our good’ and ‘to the good’. The former include pursuit of self-preservation, procreation and care for offspring. The latter involves dispelling ignorance and weakness of the will (which are seen as a fertile source for motivations and behaviour that are not conducive to the common good), and cooperating with others to achieve outcomes that would not be attainable by individuals acting on their own. These motivations are natural to humankind, and are possessed even by those without faith in the Christian God. Natural law does not change across time and culture, but how it is applied will change according to circumstances. It normally has to be supplemented by human law, which is put in place to strengthen moral impulses and restrain immoral ones among the majority of human beings who lack virtues.

Theological anthropology presents a rich understanding of human motivations and behaviour. The key feature, with respect to the disciplines of the social sciences, is the complexity of human nature. On the one hand humans are created ‘in the image of God’ as persons in relationship, with purposes (*telos*) to love God, neighbour and (to care for) the natural order. Thomist theology is right to argue that we are capable of pursuing those purposes in our social interactions. On the other hand, humanity is also ‘fallen’, with the consequence that our relationships are broken and incomplete. The root of this is human pride (consider for example the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11), which leads to disobedience to the pattern of human life that God made us for in our creation in his image. The social sciences are most concerned with the implications of the fracturing of human relationships, with deception and the exercise of power becoming characteristic of those relationships, driven by the desire to pursue selfish goals regardless of the impact on neighbour (or the natural order). The effect of these two components is that we have two sides to our nature: we are capable of both positive and negative behaviours, and the balance between the two is varied across people and cultures. This hugely complicates the development of suitable models of human behaviour in the social sciences. If this summary of theological anthropology is correct, a one dimensional understanding of human motivations and behaviour (e.g. utility maximisation or rational self-interest) is unlikely to capture the full complexity of what it is to be a human being living in society with others.

* 1. **17th and 18th century philosophical ideas displacing theology, and the birth of social science.**

The philosophical ideas of the Enlightenment are very significant for understanding the development of the social sciences. They displaced the theological understandings of human nature, and replaced them with concepts which enabled the disciplines to emerge with their own understanding of human motivations and behaviour.

Among the important Enlightenment figures for the social sciences was Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). Borrowing ideas from the rise of natural science, he asserted that human beings are best understood as ‘machines’ in motion, with their functioning and behaviour being determined by physical and environmental factors. He favoured an atomistic view of society with each person an individual, and society and culture the outcome of interactions between individuals. The ‘machines’ are selfish, pursuing their self-interest and defending themselves against the threat of depredations by others. In this ‘state of nature’ they are naturally antagonistic, and cooperate with others only if that serves their self-interests. Competition for resources and power is central to human interactions: as Hobbes famously observed, ‘The condition of man … is a condition of war, of everyone against everyone’[[3]](#footnote-3). Their behaviour is best described as ‘psychological egoism’. Human society is a construct, whose purpose is to counter the fear and unpleasantness generated by this ‘state of nature’. Fear persuades individuals to enter into covenants with others to reduce conflict and to gain a degree of peace in everyday living. Seeking ‘peace’ is a fundamental law of nature. In particular, the individuals may contract to give to the civil state powers of enforcement to ensure that the rules are obeyed and violence is countered. Once this contract has been established, it is irreversible, with absolute authority residing in the ‘sovereign’.

Another important figure was John Locke (1632-1704). He was a much more sympathetic figure than Hobbes, with a strong Protestant faith and a commitment to the values of the Royal Society (with its focus on empirical methods of enquiry in the natural sciences). So he rooted the human capacity for reason in our created nature in the image of God. Reason does not have a materialist basis, but is to be understood as a creation gift to human kind. As a theist Locke believed God’s world is ordered and so can be understood. An empiricist, he thought that, apart from revelation, everything has to be learned from experience, from evidence. But he maintained a role for revelation – ‘the candle of the Lord’- as providing the basis on which reason could begin to interpret the evidence that empirical enquiry uncovers[[4]](#footnote-4).

The same created capacity for reason applied in the moral sphere. Locke contended that our created nature implied fixed moral duties which could be uncovered by exploration of evidence and the application of reason. He proposed that moral behaviour is motivated by the pain/ pleasure principle, which gives a basis for law and punishment in this world, and divine judgement and punishment in the world to come. His vision of human society was one where reason uncovers natural law that should govern human society. A particular outcome of his writings was the structure and definitions enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence. In particular his elevation of reason above tradition, law and custom fitted the world view of the American settlers, who sought to escape the tyranny of European authorities with the proclamation: ‘…that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and possessions.’ Locke suggested a doctrine of the common good, based on the insight that we should seek to preserve not only ourselves, but also others as well. Ruthless pursuit of self-interest is contrary to God’s natural law. He also constructed a defence of private property based on the labour needed to produce property – or in the case of land, the work needed to bring it under cultivation (a concept that was particularly apt in the North American context of settlement of new lands). But this right is subject to a proviso which says that, whilst individuals have a right to homestead private property from nature by working on it, they can do so only "...at least where there is enough, and as good, left in common for others". He defended a doctrine of government as safeguarding the good of the people, though only if it ruled on the basis of reason and service to the nation. Natural rights revealed by reason provide a yardstick against which the justice of governments can be judged.

A third key figure was David Hume (1711-1776), who appealed to the experience of our senses rather than reason as the means to acquire knowledge about the world in general and human behaviour in particular. For Hume, a person is simply an accumulation of experiences over time and the distinction between men and animals is of degree only: like the animals, human behaviour follows instinct and preferences reflecting self-preservation. So there is a common human nature across time and geography. Human action is motivated by the passions, not reason or morality. The role of reason is as the servant of the passions, enabling us to achieve what we desire. Because the passions are common to all humans, human behaviour is fundamentally invariant and predictable. The scientific method can be applied, looking for regularities that can be explained by the underlying passions and the best way for those passions to be satisfied. Morality is based not on reason, but on basic traits of human nature that give rise to sentiments or sympathies for other humans. For Hume, ‘sympathy’ is the chief source of moral distinctions, arising from an ability to see things from other peoples’ point of view. But Hume also identifies a strong human tendency to seek short term personal gain due to ‘narrowness of the soul’. Human society is based on division of labour, and competition rather than cooperation, as these are conducive to the interests of everyone. But a framework is needed to minimise the potentially harmful effects of unrestrained human passions. Human nature cannot be changed, only the context within which humans express that nature. So the political authorities rule by consent to rules based on tradition or convention, which seek to harmonise or channel behaviour ruled by the passions.

The significance of these three patterns of thought – the contributions of Hobbes, Locke and Hume – is that they set the intellectual context for the development of social sciences over the next two centuries[[5]](#footnote-5). Echoes of their thinking are very clearly present in the understandings of human nature that remain dominant paradigms in the modern social sciences: evolutionary psychology, rational choice and social theory. Each has taken an approach from these key philosophies, and made that approach central to its understanding of human behaviour and the functioning of societies. It is to these three paradigms that we now turn.

1. **Evolutionary psychology**

**3.1 Human nature as ‘evolved psychological mechanisms’.**

Evolutionary psychology has emerged in the past 30 years as a strong contender for the understanding of human nature and motivations as the basis for social science. It is an approach that has echoes of Hobbes’ conception of humans as ‘machines’, with its deterministic overtones, and of Hume’s contention that we are driven by our innate passions. The assertion is that human nature is the product of our evolutionary past, notably the result of evolutionary processes in the Pleistocene era. It appeals to the standard evolutionary mechanisms. These mechanisms include adaptation and selection for characteristics that solve problems of survival or reproduction. Selection acts like a sieve, favouring those characteristics that are most favourable to survival. Second, evolutionary psychology applies the concept of ‘inclusive fitness’, proposed by W D Hamilton, that evolutionary processes work at the level of the gene (‘the genes eye view’) rather than at the level of the organism. So what matters is not just the individual carrier of a gene, but all close relatives that share the same gene. The implication is that natural selection favours mechanisms for ‘altruism’ when the costs of an altruistic strategy or action are less than the benefits to relatives weighted by the degree to which genes are shared.[[6]](#footnote-6)

So how does this relate to the psychological bases for human behaviour? The proposition is that the source of our behaviour is ‘evolved psychological mechanisms’ that are ‘hard wired’ into bodies (especially brains) as the result of our evolutionary development. These mechanisms are cues to act in particular ways in response to threats to survival or to opportunities to reproduce. These mechanisms may involve ‘altruistic’ behaviour which benefits close relatives even if not the human being himself or herself. The claim is that ‘The primary non-arbitrary way to identify, describe, and understand psychological mechanisms is to articulate their functions – the specific adaptive problems they were designed by selection to solve.’ (D Buss (1999)).

**3.2 An example: kinship and the family**

The example of kinship and family may help to clarify how this approach can explain human behaviour. In the family, the concept of inclusive fitness is easily understood: the extent of shared genetic inheritance is 50% between parents and children, 25% between grandparents and their grandchildren, 25% between uncles, aunts, and their nieces and nephews, and 12.5% between first cousins, with lesser percentages for other relationships. ‘Altruistic’ behaviour by a parent towards a child will be worthwhile, if the costs are less than half the benefits accruing to the child from that behaviour. This analytic framework can be utilised to generate theoretical themes and empirical hypotheses. Thus according to the theory, siblings must resolve a conflict of interest between on the one hand competing for resources from their parents, and on the other hand favouring their siblings ‘altruistically’ because of their shared genetic endowment. Moreover, male relatives should be favoured simply because they have more opportunities for spreading genes via multiple matings compared to female relatives. The degree of cooperation and solidarity among kin will be a function of their degree of relatedness. Humans need to know in detail who are their kin who are to be favoured.

Some evidence relating to these theoretical themes has been assembled[[7]](#footnote-7). Thus (major) acts of helping kin have been found to be greater with a close genetic relative than a more distant one, and to decrease with the age of the relative (presumably because an older relative is less likely to have offspring). Studies of inheritances show that bequests are greater to offspring than to siblings despite equal relatedness; this is probably because offspring tend to be younger than siblings and are therefore more likely to pass on genes to their offspring at the time that they receive the inheritance. The same empirical studies indicate that men typically leave a high proportion of their bequests to their wife thus indirectly benefitting their children. But the same is not true of a wife, which researchers explain by the higher likelihood that the husband will marry again and have more children who are not of course genetically related to the first wife. Other empirical studies have shown that grandmothers give more resources (including both time and money) to grandchildren than do grandfathers. One explanation is that grandmothers have a greater degree of certainty about the genetic relatedness of grandchildren than do grandfathers. A further finding is that women are better than men in identifying kin.

Evolutionary psychology has also tackled the question why humans form families. This is a particular characteristic which is shared by only 3% of animal and avian species. The puzzle arises because belonging to a family imposes costs on offspring: they have to compete for resources within the family, and opportunities for reproduction tend to be delayed. Emlen[[8]](#footnote-8) advanced an explanation based on ecological resource constraints at the critical juncture in human evolution. The scarcity of reproductive opportunities outside the family lowers the expected benefits from leaving the family where the populations are small and geographically spread. Staying in the family gives opportunities for acquiring skills (e.g. in hunting and gathering), which in the long run will enhance survival. Staying also holds out the prospect of sharing or even inheriting the family ‘territory’ where food can be found, and gives the opportunity to take over a reproductive ‘vacancy’ on the death of a parent.

* 1. **What are we to make of evolutionary psychology?**

The evolutionary psychology paradigm seeks to be all embracing in its explanation of human behaviour. Thus E O Wilson’s tract Consilience explains how he believes that the paradigm can give a unified scientific account of human society and even culture. It is scientifically reductionist since in his view everything human can be traced back through biology to underlying chemistry and physics, and understood by appeal to evolutionary processes. The difficulty, which he appears not to recognise in his unified theory of everything human, is that reductionism can easily be self-defeating. Is evolutionary psychology itself a product of evolution? It is hard to see why evolutionary processes should favour the theory since it is difficult to understand what might be the evolutionary benefits of adopting it. The standard argument that knowledge itself improves survival (and possibly reproductive) probabilities makes sense if applied to knowledge about (for example) gathering foods, or even to understanding the threats from the natural environment. But that does not apply to an abstraction like evolutionary theory. And even if an argument could be constructed, there remains an unsettling thought that the paradigm is not necessarily *true* – just beneficial in some way to survival, perhaps a comforting myth!

That does not of course exclude the possibility that the theory is helpful in explaining some particular areas of human behaviour. There is no requirement to ignore the fact that we are creatures, part of the created order, and so biological drives such as hunger and sex are very likely to play a part in understanding and explaining human behaviour. The work of evolutionary psychologists on sexual strategies certainly has contributed to our understanding of human pairing and sexual activities, even if it is important to consider the social context in which these activities take place.

The weakness of evolutionary psychology as a scientific theory is that it is not possible to access the direct evidence that would be needed to test its hypotheses. The theories rely on human experience in the Pleistocene era being ‘hard wired’ into the human brain to generate epigenetic rules that control behaviour. But we can only surmise what life might have been like in that geological era. Moreover the concept of hard wiring seems unlikely to get empirical confirmation: neuroscience is sceptical about the possibility, given the plasticity of the brain. Why might the evolutionary process have led to ‘hard wired’ psychological mechanisms in that period, without any modification since? Moreover, the presumed link between genes, hard wiring and behaviour is far from established. This is not to say that it never could be: just that the links are nowhere near being established in the current state of our knowledge.

Finally, the standard evolutionary psychological explanations tend to be ‘Just So’ stories. That is, they are teleological stories that explain why things evolved in the way that they did. As explained above, we do not, of course, have access to the actual history. So a story may be plausible, but there may be other stories that are even more plausible but have not yet been considered. The example of benefits to close kin outlined above is an apt example of this problem. What explains that acts of helping kin tend to be greater with close kin? It may be psychological mechanisms, but equally it could be that people tend to help most those who are close to them because they know them and love them more than distant relatives. Explanations related to social norms and mores may be more convincing than appeals to some psychological mechanism that cannot be observed. It seems unlikely that an evolutionary psychological mechanism could be the whole explanation of what we observe, even if it might be part of it.

A Christian social scientist might observe that the evolutionary paradigm has another weakness - that it yields a very thin understanding of what it means to be a human being. It rules out, *ex hypothesis,* the idea that human beings have purposes in life other than survival and sexual reproduction. In contrast Christian theology insists that the purposes of human life are to love God and to love our fellow human beings, purposes that cannot be simply reduced to physical survival and reproduction. The paradigm also risks eliminating human responsibility for actions, a key assumption of our prevailing ethical, theological and legal norms. If our behaviour is determined by ‘hard wired’ psychological mechanisms it is difficult to see how we can hold people responsible, morally or legally, for how they behave. Finally, for both the previous reasons, the paradigm has no understanding of sin and evil, or the theological concept of the fallen humanity. It is a moot point whether any reconciliation might be possible between evolutionary psychology and Christian anthropology, but it does not look very likely.

1. **Rational choice theory**

Rational choice theory has been one of the dominant paradigms in social sciences in the last hundred years, especially in economics but spreading into other disciplines such as political science and international relations. Indeed in some social science faculties, it is claimed to be the ‘standard socioeconomic science model’ (SSSM).

**4.1 The Enlightenment conception of a human being**

The building blocks of rational choice theory are reason and preferences. The echoes of Locke and Hume are evident: Locke with his emphasis on humanity as reasoning beings made in God’s image, with behaviour driven by the pain/pleasure principle; and Hume’s emphasis on humans being ruled by our passions with our reason enabling us to achieve what the passions demand. It is easy to see how these philosophical positions can be translated into a rational choice theory. Both assume individual autonomy, and rationality, which enable us to analyse alternatives and make the choices that lead to action and behaviour. The motivation is our preferences, which need not be specified, as in Locke, as avoiding pain and seeking pleasure, but often are.

**4.2 The basic rational choice model**

The basic rational choice model has a simple structure: the agent evaluates the available alternatives with full information. So, for examples, the consumer explores the range of goods that can be bought within his budget, and a person seeking a marriage partner considers the qualities of those that she or he might marry (the constraint being, presumably, the number of others that she or he knows and can evaluate within a reasonable time horizon). The agent then chooses the option (bundle of goods, partner) that maximises utility, or maximises ‘well-being’, or satisfies preferences. This is the equivalent of Hume’s idea of reason serving the passions. Exactly what is maximised or satisfied is usually left undefined, but it is presumed to be unchanging and complete across all states of the world, well ordered and internally consistent (no contradictions). There may be implicit here a Humean notion of a common human nature across time and geography, so there is no need to allow for a very wide variety of preferences. And it could easily be incorporated in an evolutionary psychological approach that assumes that preferences are entirely motivated by survival and the desire to reproduce.

* 1. **Extensions: expected utility and game theory**

As stated above the rational choice model is obviously too simple. In particular it does not take account of uncertainty of outcomes in making choices, or of the fact that many choices are not made in a social vacuum, but can be materially affected by the concurrent choices of others. These concerns are addressed by expected utility theory and game theory.

The basis of the expected utility model is that agents are uncertain about the outcomes of their choices, but are able to attach probabilities to the different states of the world that are likely to determine those outcomes. Choice is then based on maximisation of expected utility, that is, the summation of the values of outcomes multiplied by probabilities of states of the world in which those outcomes will materialise. From whence these probabilities come is not addressed: they are generally described as ‘subjective probabilities’, based on the judgement of the chooser about the future. Presumably, the agent draws on whatever information is available to make his own judgement. It is evident that this represents a considerable step up in sophistication on the part of the agent, and requires much more and better information than the basic model. The model has been widely used in economic analysis to explore gambling, insurance, stock market valuations, and other behaviour in financial markets. It has also been used in criminology to analyse punishment as deterrence, where the expected cost to the potential criminal is identified as the probability of detection of the crime times the costs of the likely sentence. Evidently draconian sentences are unlikely to deter crime if the probability of detection is too low.

The second extension to basic rational choice is game theory. This approach analyses choice in situations where the outcomes depend not only on the agent’s choice, but also on other agents’ choices made contemporaneously. The favourite example is the Prisoners’ Dilemma, but the set-up is quite general. If two agents cooperate in making the decision, then by holding back they can together achieve the best outcome for both. If one agent makes a cooperative decision in the hope of reciprocity from other, but is met by a competitive play, then he is going to lose out substantially, while the agent who did not play cooperatively will gain much more. What are the agents to do? The concept of Nash or non-cooperative equilibria suggests that the best move on the part of both agents is non-cooperative, since non-cooperative gives a better outcome whatever the other agent does, but the overall outcome is the worst for both of them when both play non-cooperatively. The non-cooperative strategy is the ‘dominant strategy’. The question is under what circumstances the agents might be induced to cooperate with better outcomes for them both. Evidently it will help if they can communicate and come to some agreement about what actions they will take: this will have to be binding, otherwise the logic is that they should renege immediately. One way out from this impasse is when the game is repeated over time: if one party reneges, then the other party can punish in the next period by refusing to cooperate. However in principle the repetition has to be infinite: otherwise the best strategy will be to renege in the last period, since there is no further period for punishment to be inflicted. But if that is understood, then it is optimal to renege in the penultimate period, and the cooperative strategy simply unravels backwards.

Game theory analysis is intellectually seductive, and has generated a huge theoretical literature, but a rather thinner empirical literature, in economics and related disciplines. Note that it is implicitly normative – it describes ‘the best thing to do’ given its particular form of rationality. So it functions as more than a theory of human action. The theory functions best where the alternative payoffs to actions are easily measurable in monetary or at least quantitative terms. But many decisions don’t come with values attached to outcomes, unless one believes in cardinal utility. There is another concern which we will address below: in interactive games in an experimental ‘laboratory’ setting, the participants often fail to follow the ‘best thing to do’ even if they fully comprehend what it is. They cooperate much more than they ‘should’.

* 1. **Rational choice: an evaluation**

The rational choice model has been subjected to sustained critique, both of its content and its realism as a description of human behaviour.

The paradigm asserts human autonomy, rationality and the ability to choose, but does not offer any explanation of where these come from. They are simply taken as facts.

Elster’s critique explores the underlying logic of the model, suggesting that it leaves some important issues unaddressed. He identifies the structure of the model: beliefs or cognitions (C) plus desires (D) give rise to behaviour (B), which is presumed to be causal, but there is no access to the ‘mental machinery’ that would enable the causes to be tracked. Moreover, rationality presumably requires (C) to be founded in evidence of some kind, since an impeccably rational decision based on a mistaken understanding of the circumstances surrounding a choice would generate mistakes. But then the question is how much evidence the agent should collect before making the decision. The problem is that collecting information is itself costly (usually), so a prior decision is required – but in the absence of information about the range of evidence to be uncovered, the search process is underdetermined. A simple example illustrates. Suppose that I wish to buy an electrical good like a kettle on the internet. I type in ‘electric kettle’ and find literally hundreds of sources. How many do I explore before making my decision? That question is impossible to address unless I have some prior information about the likely distribution of qualities and prices. Elster also points out that the paradigm assumes that the agent chooses an ‘optimal’ solution without explaining why. Optimization can be difficult, not least if there is more than one optimum.

Elster’s critique raises issues about the role of preferences or desires (D). These are never given content: the presumption is that whatever a person does is rational, reflecting their preferences. The only testable content is consistency: but there is no explanation of how preferences are formed and how they might change over time. So the theory is essentially a decision *rule* not a description of actual decisions and behaviour. The sources of preferences could be social, cultural or even spiritual. Consider for example the comparison between the ‘sinful nature’ and the ‘Spirit led’ nature in Galatians 4. The presumption of the paradigm is that preferences are always self-interested, so exclude relational dimensions. By contrast, Sen notes the idea of commitment: that is, preferences leading to decisions and acts that actually lower utility for the person, such as giving to a neighbour or contributing at work beyond the ‘call of duty’. The prevailing sense of the rational choice paradigm is that decisions are made on a personal cost-benefit calculation as the only ‘rational’ basis. But the Christian understanding of rationality is quite different, with reasons for acting arising from God’s normative intent, including love of neighbour.

* 1. **Beyond rational choice: forms of rationality and giving content to preferences**

Dissatisfaction with standard rational choice theories as the basis for analysing human behaviour has grown in recent years. One strand of literature challenges the standard model of rational choice: the other argues that we should do more to identify actual human preferences.

V L Smith in his Rationality in Economics (2008) follows Hayek in identifying two rather different forms of rationality. The first form, which is central to rational choice theory, is ‘constructivist’. In the constructivist model, the agent is presumed to be involved in an impersonal market exchange, or any other activity, where all that matters is the agent’s self-interest, not the interests of others who might be affected by the agent’s decision. The second form is ‘ecological rationality’, which is described as ‘….emergent order in the form of practices, norms and emerging institutional rules governing action by individuals, that are part of our cultural and biological heritage and are created by social interactions.’ Smith gives as an example the implicit social rules governing the summer grazing by cattle on the Alpine pastures in Switzerland. These rules address a free rider problem that has potential to destroy the meadows by overgrazing. Given that the pastures are not fenced, but open to use by all members of the village to which they belong, the individual incentive would be to buy additional livestock in the spring to be fattened on the pastures. The social rule that prevents that from happening has developed over generations: a farmer is only permitted to graze on the alps the number of cattle that he has sustained over the winter. Similar arrangements are found in other parts of the world where common resources need to be protected from exploitation by individuals. Smith argues that ‘ecological rationality’ is in fact fairly commonplace in human communities, and becomes central to how people actually behave when faced with opportunities to pursue self-interest in a constructivist manner. So participants bring social exchange experiences into experimental games in ‘laboratory’ conditions, and behave cooperatively even though the structure of the game (and usually rewards) suggests that rationally they should not. This ‘paradoxical’ behaviour has been widely reported in behavioural economics. But as Amartya Sen has pointed out, the ‘paradox’ is that we have defined ‘rationality’ in such a narrowly self-interested way. More broadly, Sen argues, rationality involves giving reasons for one’s actions, but those reasons do not have to be entirely or even mainly self-interested.

The second recent development has been a concern to give content to people’s preferences, so that actual choices can be related to what people actually want in life. The most notable example of this is the burgeoning literature on ‘happiness’, exemplified in the work of Richard Layard, Happiness: lessons from a new science (2005). Layard’s starting point is the definition ‘Happiness is feeling good, and misery is feeling bad’. His (unsurprising) conclusion is that income and more ‘stuff’ do not make us happy, at least once a certain level of income and sufficiency has been reached. What make us happy are status, security, and being able to trust others. So reported happiness levels in the advanced economies are correlated with good family relationships, a secure financial situation, work, community and friends, health, personal freedom, and values (in that order). By contrast, unhappiness is correlated closely with the loss of a spouse or partner, unemployment, poor health (including importantly mental health), and loss of freedom. These indicators of happiness and unhappiness are also based on genetic predispositions and upbringing – the classic mixture of nature and nurture.

**4.4 Rational choice: a Christian evaluation**

The rational choice paradigm has had a long innings in the social sciences, and one is tempted to think that it must have got a number of things right to have been such a dominant framework.

It is, for a start, apparently consistent with the theological anthropology that focuses on human responsibility for making choices – the Garden of Eden model, where the man and the woman are given an existential choice and fatefully choose to follow their own desires for autonomy and freedom apart from God. Admittedly the nature of the choice to be made is more significant than the day-to-day choices that are the focus of standard choice theory in economics and politics where the theory holds sway. Rationality is an essential characteristic of humanity in theological thought. So too is the idea that human beings are motivated by passions: we are after all created beings with desires for food, survival, and sex. The issue is whether that is all that we are. Perhaps the concept of fallen human beings gives a dominant role to these basic passions. But not the only role, since theological anthropology also avers that we have the capacity for entering into relationships that can trump a sole focus on the passions when it comes to the choices we make. The other element of a biblical anthropology is that choice has a moral dimension, and we can be held responsible for the decisions we make. This is not necessarily incompatible with choice theory, but it is certainly missing from the Humean notion of choice as rationality seeking to serve the passions, as if the latter were in complete control of our lives.

A Christian understanding of rationality also has a good deal in common with Sen’s observations about rational choice considered above. Rationality means giving reasons for actions, not just maximising well-being or utility. It is not difficult to identify choices which are rational even though they actually diminish one’s well-being or (putative) utility. If significant enough, these choices will often involve life commitments or projects, which give reasons that lie completely outside the narrow calculus of standard choice theory.

Christian anthropology will also find much to commend in the concept of ‘ecological rationality’ expounded by V L Smith. The fact that human beings are inescapably social, being created in the image of the triune God, makes them open to community related motivations that are absent from the pure rational choice models. This goes far beyond a concern for family and close friends, to a more general concern for the other person and the public good. It should not come as any surprise that ‘experimental games’ with people have induced other-relating behaviour that is completely contrary to the standard models.

1. **Social theory**

The third major contemporary approach in the social sciences to understanding human nature and behaviour is social theory. This approach has three points of departure. First, it builds on the simple idea that people don’t just ‘behave’, but commonly give reasons or justifications for their behaviour. So a Christian asked why she goes to church at Easter, along with millions of other believers worldwide, will explain that it is an important celebration because of the resurrection of Jesus. The same applies to much less significant behaviour: so a person might explain that he is going out to buy a paper, or to visit the library, or to have coffee with a friend. All of these activities have a social context: buying a paper is a sign of involvement with the news of the day; visiting the library could indicate a love of reading or just that the person is pursuing a degree course and needs to pick up the course books; and having coffee with a friend could be just a friendly social occasion, but might have a more serious ‘agenda’. These things are so commonplace in daily life that we hardly think about them or note them. This brings us to the second point: reasons are generally culturally specific and related to accepted social norms. In that sense, the behaviour may well be entirely predictable and not worthy of comment; but that does not imply that the reasons for particular actions are not what drives the behaviour. The third point follows: human beings become ‘socialised’, that is they internalise social norms of behaviour which are applied ‘automatically’ or ‘intuitively’.

[The relation of this approach to the thinking of the philosophical ‘worthies’ of the Enlightenment is less apparent. It is closest to the approach of Locke, who, compared to the other two, focused his arguments a bit less on human autonomy and a bit more on the social context in which human beings live and make decisions about their lives. But it is perhaps more important to note the impact of some 19th century thinkers, notably Marx and Comte, as the intellectual forbears of this approach. They too wrote in contradiction of any Christian understanding of humanity and society.]

**5.1 The social construction of reality**

The question is from where do social norms come. The definitive answer was given by Peter Berger and T Luckmann in The Social Construction of Reality (1966), where they advanced a ‘strong version’ of social constructionism (as described by Christian Smith):

‘Reality itself for humans is a human social construction, constituted by human mental categories, discursive practices, definitions of situations, and symbolic exchanges that are sustained as ‘real’ through on-going social interactions that are in turn shaped by particular interests, perspectives, and, usually, imbalances of power – our knowledge about reality is therefore entirely culturally relative, since no human has access to reality ‘as it really is’, …., because we can never escape our epistemological and linguistic limits to verify whether our beliefs about reality correspond with externally objective reality.’

This approach is widely favoured by social scientists, but has been subjected to intensive scrutiny as for example in I Hacking, The Social Construction of What? (1999). The title of the book is no doubt ironic. Hacking reduces social constructionist analyses to the following formula:

‘Social construction of X: (1) X is taken for granted, X appears to be inevitable; but (2) X need not have existed or need not be as it is, X is not determined by the nature of things, it is not inevitable. Add: (3) X is quite bad as it is, and (4) we would be much better if X were eliminated or at least radically transformed.

For example, consider constructivist approaches to gender (the roles of men and women in society). Many constructivists take gender to be socially constructed, not an inevitable result of biology, but highly contingent on social and cultural processes. Moreover, they suggest current understandings of gender are harmful, and should be eliminated or modified.

The key feature of social constructionist understanding of society is that it is *against* any form of essentialism; there is no ‘human nature’, other than what is ‘constructed’ socially.

**5.2 Critiques of social constructionism: philosophical and theological**

Social constructionist methodologies have been widely applied in sociology. Areas of study have included gender, sexuality, family, race, mental illness, science, quarks, and many others. But the foundations of the approach (as applied to particular areas) have attracted some significant critiques. The first is that it remains unclear whether the claim is that *X itself* is socially constructed, or whether it is just that *our ideas about X* are socially constructed. Consider a mental illness like schizophrenia which surely exists quite apart from the socially constructed responses that the illness provokes in the community.

The second critique is epistemological, which is that social constructionism is rationally ‘self-defeating’. In other words, the critique goes, in constructionist thinking, the social constructionist research agenda is itself socially constructed. In another time or place, the intellectual framework might be quite different. So if the strong version is correct, then there is no way to evaluate its claims. We do not know whether its findings are true or not (indeed within the paradigm, that statement is meaningless!).

The third critique (of practice rather than method) is that social constructionism is ‘self-defeating’ on moral grounds. In practice, exponents of social constructivist analysis often express strong moral judgements about the areas they study, but within the paradigm there can be no objective values to apply. An example is the strong condemnation of FGM (female genital mutilation or ‘female circumcision’) by secular Western anthropologists and sociologists: but it is evident that the practice is socially constructed in the predominantly Muslim communities in which it is widespread. We may not understand the social norms involved, but we have no firm basis on which to condemn the practice, if we take the norms to be valid within their social context. There may also be an element of hypocrisy here: for example, the Jewish practice of male circumcision does not generally attract the same condemnation as the Muslim practice of ‘female circumcision’. Finally, it remains unclear what ‘constructs’ the norms or reality. Is it personal agents, or is it impersonal – cultures, social conventions, institutions? And what are the processes by which social constructions arise and change over time?

A theological evaluation of social constructionism might critically note the following characteristics of the paradigm. First, the recognition that human beings are inescapably social is to be welcomed, since theological analysis emphasises that human beings are relational. It is therefore a helpful counter to theories that focus entirely on individuals. But second, the assumption that there is *no* human nature or ‘essence’ contradicts our Christian understanding of human nature as ‘created’. This nature may indeed be socially constructed to take many different forms across different cultures and histories. Social constructionism is correct in that respect: but it does not acknowledge the common features of human life arising from our ‘created’ nature. Third, strong forms of social constructionism may undermine rationality and responsibility in human action. If all our decisions obey the constructed norms of whatever community we find ourselves in, then it is hard to impute either reason or moral responsibility for what we do. Indeed to accept social norms uncritically can lead to behaviours that are utterly abhorrent, as for example the willingness of guards in the Nazi concentration camps to obey orders to slaughter Jewish inmates. This is very different from the natural law approach that posits universal values that must be upheld. Fourth, social construction may be construed in a way that is consistent with the theological understanding of human fallenness. The idea that human beings are effectively enslaved by their fallen nature is consistent with them being at the mercy of the social norms and behaviours that surround them (for good or ill). The Christian affirmation, in contrast to the sociological analysis, is that they do not have to be so enslaved.

1. **Persons: the social theory of Christian Smith**

Christian Smith[[9]](#footnote-9), who is himself an academic sociologist, has developed a ‘weak’ version of social constructionism, which rescues it from some of its more paradoxical features, but still enables the paradigm to frame research. He notes first that all human knowledge is influenced by socio-cultural factors – interests, group structures, language, technology – as well as objective realities. Second he affirms that some dimensions of reality are socially constructed institutional facts. So for example, a ring worn on the fourth finger on the left hand is not only made of gold (or some other precious metal), but more importantly signifies that the person is married. The latter is very evidently a socially constructed institutional fact. But rather than starting from the socially constructed context within which human beings inevitably live their daily lives, Smith’s starting points are the origins and nature of human personhood. His claim is that there *is* a human nature, and that persons are important actors in shaping their lives and the lives of their communities. They are the agents of social construction.

**6.1 The origins and characteristics of personhood**

Smith’s contention is that personhood ‘emerges’ from the underlying capacities of the human being. He presents a list of human capacities that starts with existence capacities (e.g. conscious awareness), and proceeds through experience capacities (e.g. mental representation, assigning causal attributions, memory, interest formation) and creating capacities (e.g. acting as efficient causes of own actions, technology and innovation, language use, anticipation of the future) to the highest order capacities such as abstract reasoning and truth seeking, moral awareness and judgement, aesthetic enjoyment, and love for others. His claim is that the combination and interaction of lower order capacities generates higher level characteristics that are *more than* just the sum of the lower ones. A whole human person cannot be ‘reduced’ to her constituent parts whether physical or mental. Precisely how this emerges is not entirely clear in Smith’s work: the reasoning is ontological rather than developmental. A particular feature of his understanding is that the emergent entity acts back on the lower entities from which it emerged. In this way life experiences change the brain: for example, learning mathematics leaves a distinctive mark on the capacities of the brain. The conclusion of emergence is the human person as a centre of subjective experience with a purpose in living, and real agency in the world (not just a puppet of the physical and social environment).

So what emerges? What is a person according to Smith’s argument? A person is a centre of subjective experience (we have an ‘inside’ that reflects on our lives), durable identity (we know who we are), moral commitment (we accept aims that lie beyond ourselves), and social communication (we are inescapably social). Persons are efficient causes of their own responsible actions and interactions: a person does not just respond to external stimuli, but initiates actions. Importantly, a person sustains the self in relationships with others and with the physical world: persons have life projects and commitments that give meaning to their lives. To these characteristics of persons, Smith adds a final characteristic – ‘brokenness’. This reflects the experience of human beings that relationships do not always work out as we hoped, our lives don’t live up to our own moral standards, our actions have unintended consequences, and we are not always at peace with our own selves. No explanation is given for this by Smith, and it is not evident that it fits with his concept of emergence. It is just an add-on.

In his earlier work, Smith had identified two core human characteristics: that we are ‘moral, believing animals’. We explore these in the next two sections.

**6.2 Human beings are reasoning moral animals**

Smith gives a very particular meaning to his concept that humans are moral. ‘Moral’ is described as consistency with those teleological purposes for living, which make our lives significant. In this framework, the motivation for human action should be (is?) to act out and to sustain moral order in our lives. Even if we don’t fully succeed in so doing, it is still what our lives are all about. The preferences and values that we espouse are derived from larger systems of moral order: higher order value systems are present to evaluate the preferences by which we live on a daily basis. Our preferences are not just what we think we desire. In this framework, actions are motivated by the duty to do what is right, good and just, and not just the means/ ends of personal benefit, as the rational choice paradigm asserts.

It is not just individuals who are oriented by moral considerations. According to Smith, social institutions are also morally oriented in that they have their own purposes. It is, for example, appropriate to ask what universities are for. Three answers to that question have been advanced over the past hundred years or so of the modern university. An older answer is that universities are for the pursuit of truth and the instilling of virtues in the young. More recently, the universities (in the UK at least) have identified their purpose as ‘consolidating knowledge, producing new knowledge, and communicating knowledge’. A third answer has been given by economists and policy makers: a university should concern itself with ‘producing highly skilled workers and developing new technologies to make the economy more productive’. Each of these answers is implicitly teleological or purpose-driven, and takes the university in very different directions in regard to the allocation of resources of time and funds to the activities of teaching and research that characterise the modern secular university.

Similarly, there is an implicit teleology behind the advocacy of markets as the way to achieve social goals. Building on the presumption that human beings are rational, acquisitive, and self-interested, the role of markets is to facilitate production and distribution of goods and services to meet expressed human needs. This is built on a framework of law to ensure that trading is ‘fair’ and contracts freely entered into are fulfilled.

* 1. **Humans are believing animals**

For Smith, the second characteristic of persons in community is that we are all ‘believers’. Our lives and our knowledge are based on basic assumptions or beliefs about the way the world is – our worldviews. We may in practice be totally unaware of these beliefs, but we function as ‘believing actors’. One example of such a belief system is the scientific worldview. To make progress in science, scientists need to believe in causation, the uniformity of nature, and the temporal continuity of experience. There are good reasons to believe in these things on the basis of experience. Another example is the belief system of Christian theology: the existence of a loving creator God, a purpose for human beings and communities, and an objective moral structure for our lives. The point about these worldviews is that they are not open to direct empirical verification, since data are ‘theory-laden’; that is, data have to be collected and analysed within a framework of interpretation of some kind. There is no deeper, more objective, basis for differentiating between belief systems. Smith also notes that belief systems are not universal, and this accounts for cultural diversity. To understand social life, we need to understand the context and function of the beliefs that a society or community holds. The differences can be most easily understood by rehearsing the dominant narratives that hold contrasting communities together.

Narratives play a key role in Smith’s analysis. His claim is that we tell stories and are made by them: and in Chapter 4 of his *Moral, Believing Animals* he illustrates his contention with a number of differing narratives. Two of these are related to dominant narratives that motivate and undergird the work of social scientists in North America.

The primary narrative is that of *Liberal Progress*:

‘Once upon a time the vast majority of human persons suffered in societies and social institutions that were unjust, unhealthy, repressive, and oppressive. These traditional societies were reprehensible because of their deep-rooted inequality, exploitation, and irrational traditionalism – all of which made life very unfair, unpleasant and short. But the noble human aspiration for autonomy, equality, and prosperity struggled mightily against the forces of misery and oppression, and eventually succeeded in establishing modern, liberal, democratic, capitalist, welfare societies. While modern social conditions hold the potential to maximise the individual freedom and pleasure of all, there is much work to be done to dismantle the powerful vestiges of inequality, exploitation, and repression. This struggle for the good society in which individuals are equal and free to pursue their life defined happiness is the one mission truly worth dedicating one’s life to achieving.’

Smith observes that the important tasks of social scientists working within this narrative are clear. They must work ‘to identify privilege, exploitation, prejudice, and unequal opportunity’ to propose societal changes, sometimes backed by public policies, ‘to make society more free, equal, and fulfilling for its individual members.’

But many social scientists also work with a secondary narrative of *Ubiquitous Egoism*:

‘Once upon a time, people believed that human self-centeredness was a moral flaw needing correction through ethical and spiritual discipline toward self-sacrificial love for neighbor and commitment to the common good. Even today, many people believe that. But noble as it sounds, more perceptive and honest thinkers have come to see the cold, hard, simple fact that beneath all apparent expressions of love and altruism, all human motives and concerns are really self-interested. In fact notions such as love and self-sacrifice themselves have been tools of manipulation and advantage in the hands of Machiavellian actors. Idealists persist in affirming moral commitment to the welfare of others, but they are naïve and misguided. Truly honest and courageous people who have intellectually “come of age” are increasingly disabusing themselves of such illusions and learning to be satisfied with the substitute idealism of helping to build the best society possible, given the constraints of ubiquitous rational egoism.’

Smith points out that these two narratives reflect the optimistic and pessimistic themes which Christianity’s theological anthropology united, but the Enlightenment split apart. That is, the contrast between humanity made in the image of God, and the tragedy of fallen humanity, ‘inclined to deep and sustained self-centeredness, pride, alienation, hatred and self-destruction’. Smith explores some other narratives that are significant in shaping our world, though not social sciences as such: the *American experiment narrative, the Militant Islamic Resurgence narrative, the Capitalist Prosperity narrative, the Scientific Enlightenment narrative, the Progressive Socialism narrative,* and a number of others. He notes that these are ‘big narratives’ which provide a context in which lives are lived, with significant outcomes for human behaviour, communities and societies. In the West they have largely displaced the Christian narrative, which Smith describes as follows:

‘A personal, loving, holy God created the heavens and the earth for his own glory, making humans in his very image, and establishing a relationship of care and friendship with humanity. Tragically however, humans in pride have chosen to rebel against and reject God, the source of all life and happiness, thus plunging the world into all manner of evil, death and spiritual blindness. But the love and grace of God is more powerful and determined than the sin of humanity, so through Israel God continued his covenant relationship to redeem the world from its own sin. Rather than allowing creation to reap death and utter destruction as the full and just consequence of sin, God himself became human and freely took upon himself those evil consequences. Through the undeserved crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God conquered death, set aright the broken relationship, and opened a way for the redemption of creation. God now calls all people to respond through his Spirit to this divine love and grace by repenting from sin and walking in a new life of friendship with and obedience to God in the church and the world. Those who persist in their denial of God’s love will finally get exactly what they want, the end of which is death. But those who embrace God will enjoy him and worship him together as his people forever in a new heaven and a new earth.’

[This Christian narrative takes various forms, with multiple versions arising from different theologies, but all are clearly related to the central narrative, despite differences of emphasis and interpretation.]

Enough has been said to underline Smith’s contention that to understand a society and its cultural practices, it is essential to understand the narrative and how it affects human and group behaviour.

* 1. **Evaluation of Christian Smith’s social theory**

It is evident that Smith’s theory is a polar opposite to the stance of evolutionary psychology. Rather than biology controlling the way we live, it is our capacities as moral, personal agents that determine our behaviour and our social interactions. Biology provides the physical frame in which we live, and that generates some constraints on our activities, but it is not all there is to being a human being (unless we allow it to take us over). Smith’s exposition of personhood is closely correlated with a Christian understanding of humanity as agents; we can be ‘moral, believing’ persons even if we make the mistake of believing in the idols of ‘money, sex and power’. Smith’s theory also suggests a research programme for social sciences, looking at the impact of world views (often best understood as narratives) on key social institutions. It would for example be instructive to base a comparative study of the family across various cultures and societies on his approach. The downside is that it is very open-ended: it is unclear what would constitute ‘progress’ for the social sciences within this paradigm. The question remains as to which narrative best reflects the ‘truth’ about humanity, and social sciences operating *within* a narrative have no means evaluating that narrative against another.

1. **Conclusions**

This review of the understanding of human nature within the various paradigms currently most used in social scientific research has identified some very different emphases. The *evolutionary psychology* paradigm is based on an understanding of human beings as complex animals whose patterns of thinking and behaviour were formed in our evolutionary past. The core of the approach is the selection of characteristics that contributed to survival and reproduction, but at the level of the gene rather than the whole human organism. This is linked to the concept of inclusive fitness, where selection favours those genes are shared among close kin, and this concept can be used to explain ‘altruistic’ behaviour, at least in kinship groups. The strength of the paradigm is that it takes our biological make-up seriously, and thus provides insights into behaviour that might otherwise be difficult to understand fully. The *rational choice* paradigm focuses on the human process of choosing between options available, and assumes that the choices are made rationally with a view to ‘optimising’ with respect to the preferences or ‘utility’ of the individual. Reason assists in fulfilling the requirements of the ‘passions’. This paradigm captures our common understanding that we have the capacity, at least to some extent, to direct our individual lives by choosing between options presented to us by our environment – natural, social and economic. The *social construction* paradigm is addressed to the ways in which we think and behave is conditioned by our social context. We are not individual ‘islands’, but rather part of a complex web of social interactions and meanings that constrain us to behave in certain ways. Culture, including social mores, is very important to understanding what it means to be a human being at a particular time and place. There will be underlying patterns of behaviour across cultures, but their significance and moral value is entirely socially constructed.

The response of Christian theology to these three broadly defined paradigms is that all capture aspects of what it is to be a human being, but none is satisfactory on its own. We are indeed creatures with a distinctive biological imprint as attested in the creation narratives; but we are also able to make decisions (choices) about our lives as the accounts of the first few chapters of Genesis affirm; and we are created as social beings, living out our lives in relationships with other human beings, and notably being capable of love. The integrating model for these theological insights is that humanity is made ‘in the image of God’: we are creatures, but with the capacity for making choices, and in relationship with other human beings reflecting the triune God. Our calling is to love God and to serve him, his people and his creation. But we are also fallen: so we fail to love God, we fail in our stewardship of the natural order, and we do not love our neighbour as ourselves.

The theological model is much richer than any one of the social science paradigms on its own. That does not mean that we have to abandon the three paradigms in our research. Each of them does have an important place in the discipline: the very fact that these paradigms have been developed and function effectively analytically indicates that each has a role. But we need to be very careful to recognise that they are at best partial understandings of human behaviour. There is a judgement to be made about what paradigm is best suited to explore particular behaviour. So rational choice theory may indeed be appropriate for the exploration of behaviour in markets, and evolutionary psychology may provide important insights into sexual behaviour and families that enable us to understand these areas of human life better. But we need to avoid the mistake of believing that an explanation based on one paradigm is necessarily exhaustive in a particular area of research, or even that one paradigm is sufficient for all areas of human behaviour. The tendency of economic analysis to extend its reach far beyond economic behaviour is a case in point.

The fallenness of humanity may have an important implication for the ability of the three paradigms to model social and economic behaviour adequately. The effect of the Fall in breaking the relationship with God is that human beings can become disposed to respond to motivations identified by the three paradigms. So the ‘natural man’ of Paul’s theology may well be motivated by sexual gratification and material goods, and may pursue these goals within a rational choice model in which these inform his ‘preferences’. Social construction may explain how members of a society come to hold such goals, accepting them uncritically as social norms. There is considerable truth in the suggestion that social science provides an analysis of the behaviour of fallen human beings.

There is a danger to be recognised here. The paradigms are descriptive not normative. But unfortunately there is a widespread tendency to move beyond description. So, for example, the rational choice model is based on preference satisfaction or utility maximisation. This may be a good description of economic behaviour in a wide range of situations, but economic analysis has often taken the next step of presuming that satisfying preferences or maximising utility is what human life is all about. Equally evolutionary psychology provides an understanding of some aspects of sexual behaviour, but it is quite wrong to assume that marriage and the family has no greater significance than providing an evolved context for reproduction. It is at the point at which the paradigms are tending to become normative that Christian anthropology steps in with the observation that human life is more complex than our models suggest, and that a richer understanding of what it means to be human is needed before we can make normative judgments based on our social science research.

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1. Contact details: Jesus College, Oxford, OX1 3DW; donaldahay@gmail.com [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For information about the programme please see [www.oxfordchristianmind.org](http://www.oxfordchristianmind.org) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Leviathan,* Part I, chapter 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *An Essay concerning Human Understanding,* 1975 edition, ed. P H Nidditch, page 45 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For example, Hume undoubtedly had an important influence on the thinking of Adam Smith [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This gives rise to the simple formula: c<rb, where c are the costs, b are the benefits, and r is the degree of relatedness in genes. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See the survey of evidence in Buss (1999), chapter 8, section 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Emlen S T (1995), ‘An evolutionary theory of the family’, Proceedings of the National Academy of Science, 92(18), 8092-9, (Review article) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In his books Moral, Believing Animals (2003) and What is a person? (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)