

Book Review

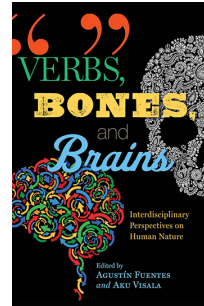
Augustín Fuenates and Aku Visala, ed., .

Verbs, Bones, and Brains:

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Human Nature.

Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. Hardcover,
pp. 271, \$50.00. ISBN 978-0-2681-0114-5.

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This volume is a collection of twenty-one essays, offering a state-of-the-art look at the debates about human nature, presented at the “Conference on Human Nature(s): Moving Us Forward”, held at the University of Notre Dame in April 2014. The goal of the editors is to provide a wide interdisciplinary stance on human nature, reflecting on the notable widening of the debate about human nature in the past few decades; as a result, there are anthropologists, neuroscientists, theologians, philosophers among the contributors. The book is divided into five main papers (chapters) and two or three short responses in each chapter. Many among the twenty-three scholars are trying to propose or defend a “generally” Christian view on human nature.

In chapter one, Jonathan Marks, an anthropologist, argues that the most consistent articulation of human nature in the post-Darwinian world is that we are *biocultural ex-apes*. On one hand, it means that we are descendent of apes *but* with modification. We are not the *same* as our ancestors were, because the essence of being human is *to become*, not just to be. On the other hand, *biocultural* means that we have been coevolving with, and adapting to, technology for millions of years, starting with the first stone tools made about two and a half million years ago. During this time the dominance of biological evolution

changed into *biocultural* evolution, in which the crucial ability is to learn culturally provided niceties. Relationship and historical traditions became far more important than genetic codes as the individual organism transcended biological evolution, and, in a classic sense, the process of survival became *superorganic*. This process peaks today in things like the ability to fight diseases by antibiotics, or correct eyesight. Marks seemingly dines the possibility of a definitive *human nature*. The essence of humans is *becoming*, but not in an Aristotelian sense (i.e., having some kind of *telos*). Marks’ becoming has no goal or purpose. As Philip S. Sloan points it out in his response, it becomes very problematic to define some notion of *good* that is more than adaptation to local conditions and surviving advantages. This instance makes Marks’ view very problematic from a Christian point of view.

In chapter two, Tim Ingold, a social anthropologist, argues that we should think about human nature as a *verb*. He argues that life is an ongoing process of change to be *led*, and to lead life is to *undergo education* in reciprocally constitutive relationships. He recognizes imagination as the generative impulse of life that continually runs ahead of itself. It leads us toward the *not-yet-being*. Thus, human nature is not an absolute category or a guaranteed status, but an ongoing fabrication. Or, as Ingold puts it: it is a “humanifying.” Ingold’s argument can

inform Evangelical theological anthropology in many ways. Most notably, as Richard Sosis points it out in his response, since in Judaism God's name is a verb, humans, as *imagines Dei*, must be *verbs* also. The main shortcoming of Ingold's project from a theological aspect is its attempt to describe human nature while completely ignoring the concept of sin, or its effect on human nature.

In chapter three, two neuropsychologists, Warren Brown and Brad D. Strawn propose what they call a *complex emergent developmental linguistic relational neurophysiologicalism*. Their two preliminary objectives are: (1) to avoid the prevalent inner-outer dualism inherent in many models of human nature, and (2) to bring the manifold dimensions of human nature into the discussion. They also try to carve out a middle ground between philosophical and theological anthropology and neuropsychology, in the field of human neuropsychology "by at least expressing models in ways that allow the inherent complexity and basic functional properties of hypercomplex neural systems like human brains and bodies to be explicitly recognized" (p.124). Their basic assumption is that the brain interacts dynamically with all of the peripheral systems that control and sense the entire body, as well as extra-bodily tools and systems. Human nature emerges via and from this dynamism. Although supportive of many of their notions, I have difficulty in accepting their setting aside the metaphysical nature of human beings. In doing so everything that is beyond matter becomes an emergent property of the physical world. It is a refutation of the biblical notion which describes the material world coming into existence from the non-material.

In chapter four, J. Wentzel van Huyssteen aims to go beyond *genetic* evolution and

consider other causal aspects of human development: the *epigenetic*, the *behavioral*, and the *symbolic*. Evolution, from this perspective, is organism-environment systems interacting and changing over time. Humans are but one element of the evolving *system*. He proposes that *Homo sapiens sapiens* had a *hand in making itself* via *religious imagination* which is natural for humans. It means that we are creatures who are predisposed to religious belief. Yet this *naturalness of religious imagination* is not just a by-product of evolution "but crucial to the process of human evolution and incorporates behavioral processes and a sense of imagination and hope that would... increase the likelihood of innovation and successful responses to evolutionary change" (p. 173). He argues that the most responsible Christian theological way is to move away from esoteric, abstract notions and return to a radically embodied notion of humanness. Although his concepts definitely challenge traditional Christian anthropology, I find his approach the most promising from an Evangelical point of view. Not just because his notion of *imago Dei* is informed by both Old and New Testament texts, but also because he boldly claims that human behavior or human personhood cannot be properly understood without taking account of its fundamentally religious nature.

In chapter five, Grant Ramsey a philosopher, puts forward two concepts of human nature: *normative* and *descriptive*. The first one is religious in origin, and traditionally used as a guide to good behavior. The *descriptive* concept, on the other hand, *only* characterizes what humans do and are disposed to do. After a short critical assessment of both he offers an alternative: the *life history trait cluster account*. In this reckoning, human "nature can be

defined as the pattern of trait clusters within the individual's set of possible life histories" (p.226). He acknowledges the vast diversity in human nature, but trying to sketch a structure behind the diversity, and to provide a framework for better understanding and appreciating this structure. He claims that study human nature is no more than to study patterns of human traits and their causes. He concludes that there is no *essentialist human nature*. But his conclusion is basically an outcome of his method of investigation, and ultimately, his metaphysical naturalism. Or, as Aku Visala amply puts it in his response to Ramsey: "If the only thing you hold in your hand a naturalist hammer, everything concerning human will start to look like a nail" (p. 244).

Verbs, Bones, and Brains is not a theological book *per se*, so it should not be read as such. However, it is a must read for those who are interested in theological anthropology in order to be aware of what other disciplines are saying about human nature in the fast-changing contemporary landscape.

