Ashgate New Critical Thinking in

PHILOSOPHY

Two Orientations Toward Human Nature

RONY GULDMANN

Two Orientations Toward Human Nature

RONY GULDMANN

ASHGATE

Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Gower House
Croft Road
Aldershot
Hampshire GU11 3HR
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
Suite 420
101 Cherry Street
Burlington, VT 05401-4405
USA

Ashgate website: http://www.ashgate.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Guldmann, Rony
Two orientations toward human nature. – (Ashgate new critical thinking in philosophy)
1.Egoism 2.Courage 3.Determinism (Philosophy) 4.Innate ideas (Philosophy) 5.Mind-brain identity theory 6.Good and evil
I.Title
171.9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Guldmann, Rony, 1973-
Two orientations toward human nature / Rony Guldmann.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0-7546-5552-0 (hardcover : alk. paper)
1. Psychology – Philosophy. 2. Human behavior. 3. Egoism. 4. Altruism. I. Title.

BF38.G82 2006
128 – dc22

2006004747

ISBN-13: 978-0-7546-5552-7

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham, Wiltshire.

TWO ORIENTATIONS TOWARD HUMAN NATURE

Our culture entertains a schizophrenic attitude towards human nature. On the one hand, egoism is held to be our most powerful motive, playing a crucial cultural role by explaining the appeal of capitalism and providing a foundation for individualism. By contrast much of the continental intellectual tradition speaks of wholeness and alienation, seeing human nature not as self-interested but as herd-like.

Guldmann argues that this schism reflects two diverging conceptions of human agency, and that the attempt to locate human nature somewhere along a continuum between egoism and altruism presupposes a misleading picture of what it is to be a human being. The second, 'continental' tradition is more illuminating because it recognizes that human beings are necessarily committed to some conception of the ultimately significant.

ASHGATE NEW CRITICAL THINKING IN PHILOSOPHY

The *Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Philosophy* series brings high quality research monograph publishing into focus for authors, the international library market, and student, academic and research readers. Headed by an international editorial advisory board of acclaimed scholars from across the philosophical spectrum, this monograph series presents cutting-edge research from established as well as exciting new authors in the field. Spanning the breadth of philosophy and related disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives *Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Philosophy* takes contemporary philosophical research into new directions and debate.

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without the support of my Dissertation Chair, Karen Hanson, and of the rest my Committee at Indiana University, Paul Eisenberg, Paul Spade, David Pace and William Rasch. Amidst an academic culture that is skeptical of broad theorizing about humanly significant subjects and prefers narrow specialization, they demonstrated a faith in this project which I was indeed fortunate to have come by.

Contents

Introduction

Beyond Nature and Nurture

The Terms of the Debate

Can a theory of human nature be neutral on the perennial question of nature and nurture? It would seem not, especially today, when much of the discussion about human nature is a response to Darwinism, which offers a new context for many classic questions about free will and human beings' inherent egoism or altruism. Steven Pinker identifies three doctrines about human nature which, in the course of the twentieth century, have emerged as sacred cows for many[1] and, for a few intellectual renegades, as the target of their attacks on the ideological status quo. The first and most encompassing of these is the *Blank Slate* – "the idea that the human mind has no inherent structure and can be inscribed at will by society or ourselves."[2] For many, this doctrine represents the hope that our moral sensibilities may be propitiously refashioned by enlightened social policies. The second doctrine, the *Noble Savage*, further encourages this optimism. Here is the view that human beings are innately good-natured and that any evidence to the contrary is the contingent product of defective social institutions or corrupting parenting philosophies (à la Rousseau). Pinker adopts Gilbert Ryle's famous expression to designate the third doctrine, *The Ghost in the Machine* – the position that the soul is an non-material entity which, though residing in a physical body, can potentially exist and function independently of it.

This last doctrine is a favorite of the religious right, which, implicitly or explicitly, relies upon it to justify its opposition to abortion and stem cell research, and which it believes is presupposed by moral responsibility, if not morality itself.[3] The doctrine also underpins belief in the soul's immortality – an important religious tenet for many on the religious right, who insist that life would be meaningless if the mind died with the body.[4] While the political right does not welcome the Blank Slate doctrine when it is adduced to justify unwelcome "social engineering," conservatives tacitly rely upon it in their celebration of the traditional family and their correlative condemnations of feminism. For only to the extent that we are indeed Blank Slates does it become all-important that mothers stay at home to inscribe the proper marks upon their children.

---

1 Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate* (New York, 2002), pp. 1–13.
2 Ibid., p. 2.
3 Ibid., 129–30.
4 Ibid., pp. 129–31.

But it is the left that gets the greatest ideological mileage out of these doctrines. While leftists do not straightforwardly endorse the Ghost in the Machine, they implicitly rely upon some disguised version of it in their defense of the first two doctrines. Only once we assume that the soul is non-material does our genetic inheritance come to seem irrelevant to our intellectual development.[5] This conclusion, in the view of many leftists, is indispensable to upending the legacy of Social Darwinism,[6] with all its sociological blindness and cruel fatalism. And only once biology is deemed immaterial does it become plausible to assign to human nature a kind of moral nobility that is absent among our primate cousins. The Blank Slate and the Noble Savage seem theoretically incompatible, since the former denies the innate characteristics presupposed by the latter. But in practice the Blank Slate plays a defensive role in support of the Noble Savage by being deployed against theories suggesting innate egoism or aggression. And while the secular, scientifically oriented left has little need of a non-material soul, it is willing to transfer the soul's traditional prerogatives to "culture," which it conceives as a free-floating super-organism existing and changing unperturbed by the machinations of biology.

All three doctrines are, directly or otherwise, responses to the nature–nurture question. They loom large in debates about whether the average IQ scores of different groups are the results of biology or upbringing, about the long-term effects of various parenting styles, and many others with which we are by now very familiar. According to Pinker, such questions have become so politicized and moralized – especially by the political left, which presides over most of the venues in which they are raised – that even the most nuanced criticisms of these doctrines is sure to draw denunciation. The left reflexively reads theories attaching importance to biology as tacit endorsements of the economic and political status quo – with Hume's point about the logical incommensurability of "is" and "ought" statements being disregarded as an idle philosophical subtlety, or else as lost entirely amidst a storm of self-righteousness. So inexorable is the moral furor that intellectually accomplished members of the political left are prepared to histrionically caricature the actual content of what are very complex theories in an effort to sustain, justify, and spread their outrage.[7]

Indeed, evolutionary psychology and sociobiology would suggest that much that the left dismisses as mindless prejudice – like belief in inherent gender differences – is not so simple-minded after all and, correlatively, that these ideas' conservative advocates are not as naïve (or malicious) as the left presumes. These fields also represent an affront to the left's celebration of cultural diversity and multiculturalism. In the context of evolutionary psychology, culture is to be understood as the adaptation of groups of complex organisms to challenges *rooted in nature* – a set of rules and practices by which the individuals in these groups maneuver toward their reproductive goals with a minimum of conflict and bloodshed. The colorful

5 Ibid., p. 128.
6 Ibid., pp. 141–58.
7 Ibid., p. 112.

diversity of various rituals, moralities, and religions is a superficial veneer masking the psychological unity of mankind.

But most significantly, these new sciences seem to represent a decisive victory for what Thomas Sowell calls the *constrained vision* of human nature and the world. Whereas the *unconstrained vision* maintains that human beings are infinitely malleable and hence perfectible, the constrained vision posits an unchanging human nature that is forever recalcitrant to social, moral, and political progress. The constrained vision does not deny the possibility of progress, but it does regard whatever progress is possible as a series of prudent trade-offs, by which greater evils are cautiously replaced by lesser ones.[8] Evolutionary psychology, with its emphasis on our ineradicable potential for selfishness, aggression, and self-serving moral bias seems to confirm the constrained vision and the intuitive wisdom of its historical exponents.

This "conflict of visions" can be conceptualized on multiple levels. At its most abstract, it concerns our potential for "perfectibility." It can additionally be understood as a disagreement about the value of reason as against tradition – about our ability to foresee the long-term consequences of well-intentioned social reform. It also concerns whether suffering is intrinsic to the human condition – whether societies can guarantee their citizens happiness or merely the opportunity to pursue it. The opposition may be cashed out in terms of policy prescriptions too. Whereas the politics of the unconstrained vision aim for particular outcomes – such as greater economic or racial equality – the constrained vision seeks to institute "process characteristics" like property rights, free enterprise, and the strict construction of the Constitution[9] – which structure our social interactions without dictating their outcomes.

It seems, however, that the issue of egoism is at the heart of many if not most of these differences. If process characteristics are preferable to specific policy prescriptions, one reason is that politicians and bureaucrats cannot be trusted to pursue these disinterestedly. If human reason is limited in its ability to foretell the consequences of political decisions and cultural change, this is probably because selfish human nature – not amoral inanimate nature – gets in the way. While our limitations as biological organisms are undoubtedly responsible for much of our suffering, the latter is amply augmented by our egocentricity. Finally, when we speak of human perfectibility, we usually mean moral perfectibility – our perfectibility *as altruists*. The conflict of visions described by Sowell is very much about egoism's origins and power. The constrained vision is largely constrained by the recognition of egoism.

8 Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions* (New York, 2002), pp. 17–19.

9 Ibid., p. 30.

Visions and Orientations

But there is another conflict in our culture. It concerns not the degree of egoism in human nature, but the proper role of the *concept* of egoism in *explanations* of human nature. It is a conflict whose conceptual structure is inherently more resistant to articulation than Sowell's conflict of visions. This book is an examination of this conflict.

One side of this divide begins with the fact of egoism, holding it to be a powerful, if not ineluctable motive, the reason for capitalism's appeal and our society's supposedly rampant individualism. This philosophical temper is superficially similar to Sowell's constrained vision. The similarity is superficial because those most uncomfortable with this "tough-minded" starting point actually accept it in its essentials. The unconstrained vision disputes only the premise that egoism is ineradicable. It does not deny the egoism of human beings as they are presently constituted. Nor does it challenge the practice of conceptualizing human motivation in terms of egoism and altruism. Like Adam Smith in his opening line of *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments* – "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others ... "[10] – the unconstrained vision recognizes egoism as the problem to which moral philosophy and social theory are responses. In all these respects, the two visions both express a single *orientation* toward human nature.

The hidden affinity between the two visions becomes salient when we consider that the Continental intellectual tradition makes curiously little use of egoism as a *concept*. Largely dispensing with the egoism–altruism dichotomy, this second orientation toward human nature speaks of wholeness and alienation, authenticity and inauthenticity, self-transparency and self-deception (or self-oblivion). Our default setting is not self-interest, but aversion to reflection on our lives and the structure of our societies, uncritical acceptance of local mores, and a tendency toward social conformity. The second orientation offers a portrait of modern life that is radically at odds with that held by the first. The latter relies on Darwinian metaphors to make sense of the free market – which is conceived as a struggle among social atoms largely indifferent to the public good. Both visions accept such characterizations of the status quo, however much they differ in their moral attitudes toward it. By contrast, the second orientation characterizes pecuniary ambition as a contemptible quest for "bourgeois respectability" or, more contemporarily, as the mark of a hapless "cog in a machine." Where the first orientation observes self-centeredness, the second discerns depersonalization at the hands of mass culture. While individualism is axiomatic to the first orientation, it is, for the second, a rare achievement of exceptional persons, an ideal that has only half-succeeded even in societies that advertise an intense commitment to it. Behaviors described as egoistic by the first orientation are, as seen by the second, the products of social conformity, or evasions from life's existential dilemmas. Egoism is, as it were, epiphenomenal to

10 Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Amherst, NY, 2000), p. 3.

these. The contrast between "out for number one" and Thoreau's remark on the mass of men's "lives of quiet desperation" aptly conveys the magnitude of the chasm. And yet most of us selectively take up both orientations on various occasions, without being disturbed by their *prima facie* incompatibility.

The dispute between the two visions concerns the future – humanity's potential for radical change (or lack of it). But the dispute between the two orientations concerns the character of the present. The first dispute is about the relative influence of human nature (biology) and socialization. But rather than concerning *why* we are as we are, the dispute between orientations surrounds the deceptively modest question of *what* we presently are – not our behaviors' *origin* but their *meaning*. Whereas the first conflict is about natural human *tendencies* – the kinds of behaviors we can reasonably expect of each other – the second is about human agency – the structure of action, the fundamental problems to which action is a response. The dispute between visions is the proper province of anthropologists, psychologists, neuroscientists, and behavioral geneticists. That between orientations belongs to philosophers.

And yet the latter has not received its due. However important it is to discover the origins and frequency of various character traits, such knowledge requires as its background a model of agency against which to conceptualize its human significance. Absent such a background, this knowledge is potentially dangerous. For investigations of origins may, unbeknownst to the investigator, rely on concepts that prejudge the question of agency. Pinker and his intellectual kin invoke evolutionary psychology to oppose what he calls the modern denial of human nature (the blank slate ideology), but they themselves deny human nature in ignoring the question of agency. Having neglected this, they must cast human beings as mere bundles of desires – some of which they insist are more innate than was previously imagined.

But they do not examine *what it is* to be a human agent. One can deny the existence of an immaterial soul without denying the distinctiveness of human agency. In overlooking this distinctiveness, the debates originating from within the first orientation radically circumscribe the terms in which the human nature question can be posed. Could it be that the orthodox approach to human nature, which seeks to locate it somewhere along a continuum between egoism and altruism, is sterile and misleading – and that the most philosophically interesting question lies not *within* the egoism–altruism continuum but *between* it and the continuums (or dichotomies) of the second orientation? Which of these most revealingly conceptualizes human nature? Is their incompatibility illusory? If so, how are we to reconcile the radically diverging portraits of modern life in which they culminate? If not, why do both resonate with us on select occasions? Once these questions are articulated, the conflict of visions may come to seem like a local squabble rather than a global conflagration.

Egoism, Agency, and the Meaning of Life

In this book, I will be arguing that the first, tough-minded, orientation is a flawed framework for conceptualizing human action and motivation. Its central categories and metaphors obscure that our self-understanding as human agents is predicated on a conception of the kinds of conduct, passions, and tempers that qualify as intrinsically significant. This understanding, rather than personal advantage or its renunciation, is the key to human moral psychology. Most thinkers of the second orientation, I will seek to show, recognize this at least implicitly, and are thereby placed in a position to address social and existential problems that cannot even be perceived from within the first orientation.

The first orientation is heir to the Enlightenment and its ambition of disenchanting the world. Here was the hope was that disengaged reason would explode the false religious and heroic ideals that had hitherto inspired our ambitions and structured our judgments, and that we would thereby be freed from the wars and other destructive behaviors engendered by such absolute convictions. Having discarded these idealistic pretensions, we would be in a position to approach the world instrumentally – as a depository of valuable resources – rather than submit to demands emanating from a cosmological hierarchy of the good. Freed from the illusion of the latter, we would become capable of valuing and pursuing desire-satisfaction as such

Disenchantment presupposed the objectification of nature – a process, as described by Charles Taylor, whereby we would come to see things solely in terms of their causal properties, and thereby deprive them of their normative power over us.[11] In this way, disengaged reason would pave the way for social harmony and a kind of individual happiness unmediated by broader ideals. This project runs through Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* and is perhaps best illustrated in his attempt to distinguish property rights from mere taboo. The two are superficially similar in burdening individuals with restrictions which are not entailed by the thing's strictly physical characteristics. In light of this, we might be tempted to regard property rights as mystical entities – much like the pure and the impure, or the sacred and the profane. Hume combats this conclusion by arguing that property rights, unlike mere taboos, produce social utility, and so are not mere superstitions.[12] Once social utility is recognized as the essence of virtue, we will cease burdening ourselves with "useless austerities and rigours, suffering and self-denial."[13]

Taylor describes how this project involved a new conception of desire. Whereas desires were previously understood as involving implicit judgments concerning the intrinsic value of things – as in judgments of the sacred and profane – they would now be conceived in non-cognitive terms, as mere appetites, reactions to stimuli, rather than responses, appropriate or not, to the order of things.[14] On this view,

11 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 160.

12 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Indianapolis, IN, 1983), pp. 30–31.

13 Ibid., p. 79.

14 Cf. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pp. 143–50.

we are not, in experiencing and satisfying our desires, concomitantly committing ourselves to some broader conception of the good. Thus, for Locke desire is mere "unease."[15] For Hobbes, it is a kind of movement.[16] This non-cognitivist conception of desire, it was assumed, would facilitate autonomous self-control. With our desires no longer suggesting their own standard of value, we would become capable of detaching ourselves from them so as to evaluate them in terms of their general utility. Our hopes and aspirations would continue to submit to a causal order, of course; but they would not longer be prisoners of the misguided convictions associated with the old cosmological order.

Only once desire has been conceptualized this way is the tough-minded orientation with its emphasis on egoism and altruism able to play a dominant role in ethical discourse. As MacIntyre observes, ethics became focused on adjudicating between egoism and altruism only once the traditional understanding of virtue lost its centrality to ethical thought.[17] This displacement was the inevitable consequence of disenchantment, which exploded the teleological conceptions of the universe presupposed by this understanding. So long as desire was conceptualized as a response to a meaning-laden situation, an action could be described and judged as was recommended by Aristotle – in terms of how well it acknowledged the situation's demands and the broader conception of the good against which these were intelligible. But with human desire as such conceived on analogy with appetite, such frameworks lose their credibility. Having reduced things' human significance to their potential for inducing pain or pleasure, we can no longer describe our actions as we actually experience them – as responses to the situation's meaning. We must now, in Taylor's words, step "outside the first-person stance and [take] on board some theory, or at least some supposition, about how things work"[18] (for example, by explaining our moral convictions as outgrowths of natural selection). The ethical question is no longer whether we might come to recognize and conform to the good, but whether others' pleasure and pain can and should exercise as much influence on us, elicit the same reactions in us, as do our own. Absent a conception of *the* good, virtue and idealism becomes become more or less synonymous with altruism, just as vice becomes assimilated to egoism – so that virtue, as Hume puts it, demands no more than "just calculation, and a steady preference of the greater happiness."[19]

I hope to show that while disenchantment may have improved our grasp of the natural world, this has come at the cost of obscuring the structure of our self-understanding as human agents. The scientific spirit may give us ample reason to reject Hume's "useless austerities and rigours," but it does little to explain why these appealed to so many for so long – and continue to do so to a significant extent.

---

15 Ibid., p. 169.

16 Thomas Hobbes, *Man and Citizen*, trans. Charles T. Wood, ed. Bernard Gert (Indianapolis, IN, 1991), p. 45.

17 MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN, 1984), pp. 228–9.

18 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pp. 162–3.

19 Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 79.

Taylor remarks that with the decline of teleological conceptions of the universe, the nature of a thing came to be seen as inhering within it, rather than in its relationship to other things, its place in the wider world. Under the influence of this ontology, human subjectivity came to be conceived as an enclosed space – a self-sufficient sphere whose identity is unconnected to its place in a broader scheme of things.[20] This misguided ontology, I will argue, produces an equally misguided moral psychology, which in turn lends superficial plausibility to the socio-cultural diagnoses of the first orientation. The latter presupposes what I term the *digestive model* of agency. This is the picture of human agency presupposed by what Gary Becker calls the "economic approach to human behavior."[21] On the digestive model, action constitutes an attempt to extract abstractions – power, pleasure, pride, or, most broadly, utility – from objects and situations. Like the process whereby we extract calories and vitamins from particular foodstuffs, action within the digestive model extracts goods whose significance for us is detachable from the social practices by which we procure them. We are, on the digestive model, capable of pursuing only what MacIntyre terms *external goods* – satisfactions the experience of which does not presuppose any commitment to a social practice and the conception of the good life underlying it.[22]

In opposition to the digestive model, I will be developing the *heroic model* of agency. My choice of term here is inspired by Ernest Becker, who argued that culture should be understood as a "hero system" through which individuals strive to imbue themselves with a usually ill-acknowledged sense of cosmic significance, and thereby allay the anxiety natural to creatures cognizant that they must die. Becker's work represents the clearest articulation of the second orientation yet written. But lacking the necessary analytic and phenomenological tools, Becker could not directly confront the philosophical presuppositions of the tough-minded outlook, and so had to present the second orientation as a competing vision or intellectual tradition, rather than as a clear philosophical position.

On the heroic model, our self-understanding as agents is predicated on an *understanding of the heroically significant* – a usually (but not always) ill-articulated conception of the kinds of attitudes and actions that are intrinsically worthwhile, the human condition being what it is. This understanding is not a moral attitude but a broader vision lending sense to our moral attitudes. To quote Walter Lippmann:

> At the core of every moral code, there is a picture of human nature, a map of the universe, and a version of history. To human nature (of the sort conceived), in a universe (of the kind imagined), after a history (so understood), the rules of the code apply.[23]

---

20 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 188.

21 Gary Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (Chicago, IL, 1976), pp. 3–14.

22 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 181–203.

23 Qtd Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions*, p. 9.

This understanding is in no way chosen. Heroic agents are encumbered selves – to borrow Michael Sandel's term – in that they are, knowingly or otherwise, "claimed" by ideals apart from which they cannot understand themselves or retain their sense of agency. Much that is too quickly dismissed as mere inclination actually has this kind of normative content, for what superficially appear like raw desires or gut feelings actually implicates us in a conception of the heroically significant. While our belief in a cosmic world order has faded, it has not disappeared. It is against the backdrop of such a conception that we articulate what we experience as our situation's intrinsic significance – a significance which lends intelligibility to our desires, rather than being merely a function of them.

But we need not articulate this conception to be beholden to it, for it structures how we pre-reflectively apprehend the significance of our situation, as well as others' intentions and character traits. Thus, Heidegger emphasizes that *Dasein* is always already "thrown" into an understanding-of-Being. Just as *Dasein* forgets that things are originally ready-to-hand for it in articulating them as present-at-hand, so within the heroic model, we forget that the situation is always already laden with a meaning which structures what appears like autonomous reflection. The modern consciousness is haunted by the tension resulting from its effort to maintain a façade of reflective sobriety atop a pre-reflective thralldom – its background passivity before some ill-understood conception of the heroically significant. In the name of disenchantment, we aspire to self-possession, but self-possession's very status as an ideal suggests that the structure of our agency normally deprives us of it.

The terms "heroic model" and "heroic significance" are also intended to evoke structural features of human agency that were recognized in heroic cultures but are overlooked in our own. Primarily, I want to emphasize the social and ideal nature of what our culture unthinkingly dismisses as egoism. MacIntyre argues that self-assertion in heroic societies was not mere egoism, but the assertion proper to one's social role, and of the socially sanctioned prerogatives attending it.[24] In its original aristocratic interpretation, *phronesis* meant pride in claiming one's due.[25] As moderns, we are insensible to the possibility that so-called egoistic behavior may express *a sense of obligation* toward an individual's role or ideals. Certainly, roles in modern society are less clear, and our ideals are more contentious, than in Homeric Greece. Nevertheless, our self-understanding continues to require conviction in ideals, which continues to be generated out of social interaction undertaken in the context of shared social practices. The modern assimilation of idealism to altruism obscures the importance of ideals to agency as such. And the egoism–altruism dichotomy obscures that the self is constituted by a kind of self-concern which is irreducible to self-interest – a concern with one's *being* rather than with the nature of one's *experience*, with the significance of one's life and actions within the grand scheme of things, rather than with the significance of things for one's well-being. Such self-concern is easily caricatured as mere self-importance or vanity because

24 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 129.

25 Ibid., p. 154.

our culture misconstrues the structure of human agency, ignoring how our self-understanding necessarily reflects a conception of the good endowing people, things, and situations with their significance for us. Egoism is unquestionably a fact of life, a characteristic of much human behavior. But in conceiving of it as a basic motivation, the first orientation propagates a distorted picture of agency. For the egoism that is its starting point is only the byproduct of the rigidity created by an uncritical allegiance to the ideals underpinning our self-understanding – not self-centered utility-maximization.

The heroic model also incorporates heroic culture's greater appreciation for the self's embodied character. The heroic self is what it does – not what it intended to do, was disposed to do, or would have done under different circumstances. As heroic agents understand themselves in terms of their place in the wider world – rather than as self-sufficient inner realms – their actions' unintended consequences must figure into their self-understanding. As heroic agents, we are embodied in another respect, too. Rather than calculating and implementing long-term intentions, we are "moved" by the significance inhering in the particular situations in which we find ourselves. These can carry more or less meaning and, consequently, engage us more or less. The Homeric psyche, according to Taylor, designates the life force within us, not the site of thinking and feeling – as it is conceived today. For the Homeric hero could be carried to the heights of action by a surge of power infused by a god.[26] Such mythology illustrates how the embodied structure of our agency leaves us potentially fragmented, thrown about by the peculiarities of the situations confronting us – unable to execute long-term intentions, let alone pursue our "enlightened self-interest."

Heroic agents are moved not by egoism but by their foundationless presumption in the accuracy of their self-understanding. This primal insistence is human beings' *structural presumptuousness*. Sustaining this presumptuousness requires sustaining the plausibility of a broader worldview and the ideals it entails. Our presumptuousness concerns not only our self-understanding, but also the particular ideals upon which it is predicated – our *heroic presumptions*. Both of these are intelligible only against the backdrop of a narrative, articulated or otherwise, about the place of human beings in some broader context. As this narrative loses its plausibility, so must our self-understanding. While our allegiance to the narrative underpinning our self-understanding cannot be undermined by cold rational argument, it may be refuted by events, which can diminish its intuitive plausibility for us. We are embodied selves because our self-understanding is at stake in whatever the situation in which we find ourselves. Our narrative concerns not only the past, but is as much a view of "where things are headed." It therefore involves us in an understanding of how the situation will develop if we respond to it appropriately – in recognition of the narrative of which it is an expression. We therefore understand the heroically significant not merely as an ethereal ideal but as a source of power, and pre-reflectively ascribe causal powers to things and events by virtue of their place in the narrative underpinning our self-understanding. And so we experience time not merely as a sequence of causes and

26 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 118.