THE NATURE OF HUMAN NATURE BY THE LATE ROB WENTHOLT: A SYNOPSIS

(written by the book's editors, H. Floris Cohen and Maykel Verkuyten)

Plenty of books are on sale which enlighten us about the nature of nature. If you want to learn what the sciences have to tell us about natural phenomena and how these hang together in the grand scheme of things, you need not search for long. But what about the nature of *human* nature? The study of what we, human beings, in our individual and collective behavior and in our mental equipment are like, has for so long been split up so thoroughly over a range of non-communicating disciplinary traditions that we rarely even realize how much their shared subject, which is ourselves, has been lost sight of. Somehow the central topic has fallen out of a relentless process of academic specialization and mutually incompatible theorizing imbued with no less incompatible preconceptions.

To be sure, psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists have a great deal to say about this or that aspect of who and what we ourselves are, and many an insight emerging from each of these disciplines has turned out immensely valuable. And yet no coherent, let alone consistent picture emerges from these distinct efforts. In effect, many scholars have given up the search for such a picture to the point of regarding its attainment as hopelessly chimerical. At the same time, a sense that such a coherent picture is much needed has yielded several serious, although not always very successful, efforts in that direction, such as Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, or Edward O. Wilson's *On Human Nature*, or Roy Baumeister's *Social Psychology and Human Nature*.

The task of presenting a comprehensive picture of who we are and why we behave the way we behave is very large indeed, and the outcome here presented may well look at first sight like the product of a crank — a talented crank perhaps, skilled as a theorist and well at home in the manifold currents that have swept over the social and behavioral sciences for more than a century, yet a crank nonetheless. Was Rob Wentholt, who lived from 1924 to 2010, a crank indeed? We have taken the trouble to edit this book out of a conviction that, instead, he was an original, daring, diversely gifted, and also a both rational and reasonable scholar, whose ultimate objective was not chimerical at all but exciting and, in the end, wholly realistic. Once the reader has made his or her way through the book, he or she is bound to feel enriched by the deep insights it has on offer, not only systematically but also as gems to be encountered on many a page.

What is needed on the part of a prospective reader to enjoy, and benefit from, this book to the extent it deserves?

You should not, in the first place, expect it to follow either of two meanwhile well-trodden paths.

One path often taken nowadays is to reduce any given portion of human behavior to some allegedly identifiable portion of our genetic makeup. Wentholt explains on the very first pages of his book in what respect certain features of evolutionary theory are basic to his entire enterprise, yet by no means in the manner of fashionable, pseudo-Darwinian reductionism. Instead, he sets forth, defends, and extends far beyond its customary terrain a biological-adaptive conception of how human beings respond to the stimuli we receive all the time. He calls it for short the principle of Organic Self-Regulation (OSR), and he argues that it

> underlies mental behaviour in humans. It is how the organism is geared for action. In understanding human behaviour this is the first thing to bear in mind .... There are two structuring conditions ... The processing [of

> information in humans] must be done *personally*, and there is *no pre-set way*.

Nor is Wentholt out to imitate (let alone copy) the methodology of the natural sciences. Again, already in the first sections of his book he explains that the social and behavioral sciences deserve a meta-methodology of their own. He calls it 'process analysis', and after setting forth its main features he applies it throughout the book. His search is for 'patterned complexity' rather than for the explanatory parsimony central in most of these sciences. Process analysis comes as close as can be realized in human science to the coherence ever since Galileo and Newton attained in the natural sciences by other means, yet it is far indeed from copying their inherently simplifying and reductive, mathematical-experimental approach. This is so because from the outset Wentholt takes the well-acknowledged complexity of human makeup and behavior, not as a regrettable circumstance best either ignored or sidestepped, but as the very starting point of analysis:

> Simplifying human motivation is deceptive about the nature of human motivation and prevents adequate theory formation. It means that the growing accumulation of empirical data cannot be properly served. Empirical findings unsupported by adequate theory are as unfit for explanatory generalizations as uncemented sand for building.

Remarkable about Wentholt's mode of analysis, with the many complications of our human makeup deliberately taken as his point of departure, is that it nonetheless does not drown in its own complexity. Rather, it appears capable of yielding one tenable and also humanly recognizable generalization after another. 'Recognizable' indeed: where at times Wentholt's theorizing attains heights of manifold distinction and sophisticated conceptualization, examples and illustrations taken from everyday life enable the reader to anchor the most abstract-looking conclusions in experienced reality.

Even more important than not to mistake Wentholt's book for what it is *not* — either pseudo-genetic reductionism or methodological scientism — is for the reader just to open his or her mind to what the author *does* have to say. As he himself phrases it at the end of his introductory chapter,

> in a sense the novel approach here taken seems almost to amount to a new scientific paradigm. Phrased less pretentiously, it requires at any rate a shift in thinking of considerable dimensions.
>
> Prior to such a shift, even simple, common-sense recommendations like the ones just given may look alien to most human science practitioners. The entire way of thinking just does not fit in with the ordinary, seemingly self-evident ways of doing things as they are done now. Only after the shift has taken place do things begin to look familiar.
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> On the other hand, from those readers who feel taken by the approach advocated and practised in this book, nothing more is required than to open their minds for what it has on offer. So I ask my reader this: Please, try to bracket for a while your upbringing in the social or other human sciences if that is your background, and give the argument a chance to unfold on its own terms — it requires no specialized foreknowledge of any kind. As the book proceeds, you shall readily find that the very idea of open minds takes a place of its own in the rich panorama of human realities depicted in it.

Indeed, those who might find Wentholt's claim of a veritable 'paradigm shift' all-too-pretentious may remind themselves that the book in which a once unknown historian of science named Thomas S. Kuhn (the very author of that much-abused phrase) achieved a paradigm shift in the philosophy of science, was on its first appearance regarded as engaged in a pointless and hard-to-grasp fight against well-known, by then wholly consensual verities. Just as in 1962 many a reader asked in effect 'who does this guy Kuhn think he is?', so may the question 'who does this guy Wentholt think he is?' in due time come to look equally odd.

To answer the question of who Rob Wentholt was all the same, albeit very briefly and in a different vein: he was born in the Netherlands, and spent his youth in the Dutch Indies, in the end as an adolescent in a camp run in its typical fashion by the Japanese occupational army. Upon liberation he left Indonesia for

Australia, then for New Zealand, where (besides serving as a male nurse in what was then called a lunatic asylum) he studied psychology and anthropology. When by the early 1950s he returned to the Netherlands he found employment as a policy adviser at the Ministry of Social Affairs, subsequently to be appointed full professor in social psychology at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam. Never just an academic, in his spare time he composed music, translated poetry, wrote stories, and generally immersed himself in the cultural life. Even so, he regarded himself as a 'denkmens' ('thinking person') in the first place.

Much of the thinking that has gone into the present book, albeit prepared already in his New Zealand days, was done during the later, Rotterdam period. Not only did substantial portions find expression in his teaching, but in the 1970s and 1980s he made various efforts to put vital aspects of his evolving vision on the nature of human nature down on paper. Alas, both the very 'evolving' of his vision and an unfortunate variety of writer's block prevented him time and again from completing what time and again he set out to expound with dedicated enthusiasm. Not until the early years of the 21st century, way after retirement and meanwhile in his eighties, did he manage, all the while his physical health kept deteriorating, to overcome his cursed writer's block and not only started but also with dogged perseverance completed the present book. To be slightly more precise, he died soon upon completion of a thoroughgoing revision of Parts I and II, which contain his general theory of human motivation and his account of six 'universal strivings of consciousness' (meaning, grip, hedonic well-being, belongingness, social esteem, transport) and how these hang together ('inner conflicts'; 'the consciousness management system'; 'an inner peace of mind').

Part III, completed only on the first run, yet still following smoothly upon the revised Parts I and II, takes the book to the author's ultimate objective. To gain an insight into the nature of human nature was, to Rob Wentholt, subservient in the end to making a contribution to the hoped-for solution of pressing human problems. Our great gifts serve us as a dual-edged sword, and whether our own nature is not in the end to destroy us is a question by no means settled yet, so he was convinced. He felt that realistic solutions to our human predicament, to our dilemmas and to how for better or worse we seek to deal with them, require a prior insight into who we really are and what we are up to. Hence the critical subjects successively tackled in Part III — 'quality', 'rationality', 'evil', and 'pro-social prospects'.

So this is a book written not so much by a disinterested bystander as by a deeply engaged and committed fellow-citizen. The apparent paradox is that, for all his concern over human destiny, Wentholt went out of his way to distinguish in scholarly matters between the search for what *is* the case and what we *wish* to be the case (in his own parlance, the principal opposition between 'alethic' and 'deontic', explicated at length in ch. 4). How, for all the human temptations of subjective bias, to attain objectivity in scholarly pursuits was a question of overriding importance to him, which comes to the fore at many places in his book.

Well aware that he would not live to see his *magnum opus* in published form, Rob ensured that in due time others would take over. Who, then, are the 'we' who are now keeping the promise we made to him? One of us, H. Floris Cohen, is professor in comparative history of science at the Faculty of Humanities of Utrecht University, and author of *The Scientific Revolution. A Historiographical Inquiry* (University of Chicago Press, 1994). He became friends with Wentholt in the early 1980s, and later stimulated him to start writing the present book. The other, Maykel Verkuyten, is professor in interdisciplinary social science at the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences of Utrecht University, and author of *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*

(London: Psychology Press, 2005). He studied social psychology and anthropology, and then became an assistant professor at Erasmus University, with Wentholt as his dissertation supervisor.

The task to bring this book to the press, while a great joy in itself, has not been particularly easy. How to ensure enhanced readability of a book with a complicated albeit clear-cut and thoughtfully organized argument, which however the author was not granted sufficient time to set forth with the greatest attainable lucidity? We have conceived of our task as one of streamlining — here and there to explicate apparent gaps in an argument, cut out verbiage, delete or shorten needlessly lengthy sign-posts and cross-references, rename and/or rearrange section headings. Both Rob and the two of us were well aware that it would in all likelihood be up to us to lick the book into its final shape and find a publisher for it. So we selected two portions of the first chapter and went through a preliminary editing process with the author himself, to find out in practice what kind of editorial changes he found acceptable and what not. We have since cleared the nature of all our editorial interventions with his partner, Bart Vlek, with his son-in-law, Peter Vlek, and with his heiress and legal owner of the copyright, his daughter Nicki Wentholt.

Rob fitted the mold of many truly innovative thinkers given to erecting upon a few original, well-argued points of departure an intricate building by following consistently, indeed compulsively, their own train of thought down to hosts of novel answers to questions not or only rarely asked before. He likewise joined such innovators in the inclination to look with a blend of presumption and humility at what in the end they found to have come out of their own efforts. In Wentholt's book, too, we have encountered (and toned down) such expressions as come with the experience — some self-congratulation, some contempt for those who failed to anticipate his own procedures and conclusions, but also a genuinely modest awareness that his can be no more than a hopefully successful step on the pathway toward an at long last theoretically tenable, integrated science of what in human minds produces human behavior. As a deep thinker about fundamental epistemological questions he knew full well that every contribution to science in the end takes its deserved place as one link in a chain of ongoing advance (at certain times and places even of progress). His epistemological views are one of a piece with his biological-adaptive conception of our mental structure, and therefore well capable of enriching current debates in the philosophy of science. They are to be found primarily in chs. 1 (Aims and Approaches), 7 (Grip) and 15 (Rationality).

For all its insights and its comprehensiveness, this book fails in one respect to meet customary standards of scholarship. Wentholt was well abreast of the basics of the behavioral and social scientific literature, yet he decided early on not as a rule to engage in scholarly debate with specific views and approaches encountered therein, at least not to the extent of naming names and citing chapter and verse of pertinent publications. On the one hand, this is of course to be regretted — it would have been instructive to learn what Wentholt might have thought of books like Steven Pinker's *How the Mind Works*. On the other hand, if he had not made the decision he would never have written, let alone completed the book. It was difficult enough for him to keep returning to it, chapter upon chapter, and to engage in the struggle with where his own ongoing thinking was getting him. This he could achieve only if he ensured his not getting sidetracked again and again by a sense of the collectivity of social scientists, both dead and alive, watching over his shoulders all the time. He was well aware of his aptness to rush into detailed, exhaustive, and as a rule well-reasoned polemic — all very fine, perhaps, but hardly conducive to an attempt at long last, near the foreseeable end of his life, to set

forth in all detail required the still unfolding Wentholt conception of the nature of human nature that now lies before us in search of a suitable publisher.

Here, then, is some more information of interest to a prospective publisher.

The book comprises about 238,000 words. We have appended its Table of Contents on the next pages. There are no figures or any other tables, only text. We as editors are responsible for careful proofreading and for the timely preparation of a solid Index.

Thanks to the many years Rob Wentholt spent in Australia and New Zealand, his English was far above the level of the average non-native speaker, yet not of course perfect. Efforts by a first-rate copy editor will be indispensable, and we are prepared to work closely with her or him, just as we have done with our own books in English. Rob did not make a consistent choice between American or British spelling — this, too, will in due time have to emerge from the copy editing process in conformity with the publisher's wishes.

Given that the author is no longer among us, the customary peer reviewing process cannot extend to altering the book's substance— barring the necessary copy editing, *The Nature of Human Nature* has to be accepted or rejected as it stands.

Who, finally, may be envisaged as the book's audience?

Here we like to invoke once again the admittedly pretentious parallel drawn above with Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Published originally as a low-visibility monograph in the incompleted *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, it took over a decade for the book's central concept of 'paradigm' to catch on and then to expand far beyond its intended, and *a fortiori* its original audience. In our view, Wentholt's book has an in many ways similar potential. If it catches on, it may in ten to twenty years from now be regarded as a pioneering work that in the 2010s stood at the origin of rethinking three social sciences — sociology, psychology, and cultural anthropology combined. Not that these disciplines, their numerous subdisciplines included, would stand to lose their empirical basis, far from it. Rather, they would be theoretically restructured from the ground up. But where may this process of fundamental restructuring find its actual starting point?

The question of the book's readership must be answered at more than just one level.

In the widest sense, its subject matter, which is ourselves, hardly fails to appeal to just about all of us, almost obsessed as we as human beings naturally are with seeking an understanding of who we are and what makes us tick. Surely the book's academic style confines it to an audience familiar with academic ways of arguing, but the point is that this audience need not remain confined to those active in the social and behavioral sciences. One of us is a historian rather than a social scientist, and yet, the minute he got in touch with a first expression of Wentholt's aspirations, now some thirty years ago, he found himself hooked for good. There is no reason to assume that he should remain the only academic to find himself thus attracted.

Even so, the book's primary audience is to be sought in quarters not quite so far removed from academic thought about who we are and why we behave the way we behave. One obvious point to start from is some niche in any of the social and behavioral sciences themselves, preferably situated there where a yearning makes itself felt for a truly comprehensive and yet sensible approach to human behavior. Here Parts I and II (general theory of human motivation; inner conflicts; universal strivings of consciousness) cover terrain broadly familiar to social and behavioral scientists, albeit parcelled up in mutually incompatible and mostly

non-communicating ways. Another possible niche to start from might be moral philosophy — in Part III Wentholt treats subject matter (quality, rationality, evil, and pro-social prospects) with an immediate appeal to its practitioners, in particular.

In any case, as happened with Kuhn's *Structure*, members of a younger generation may be expected to overcome both the ingrained judgments and prejudices that often come with age and with the persistence of vested academic interests. Unfettered by such impediments, youngsters may well find that here, then, is a book they semi-consciously longed for when first embarking on their academic careers in hopes of arriving at a deepened insight into who we as human beings are and what makes us tick.

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Rob Wentholt

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