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Book Reviews

Edited Trevor Curnow

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David Wasserman and Robert Wachbroit (eds)
Genetics and Criminal Behavior
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001, pp. xi + 335
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Thanks to such as Abraham Maslow, a concern with the abnormal no longer dominates psychology to the extent it once did. In genetics, however, the overwhelming interest appears still to be with disease and deviance. If there is any research going on into the genetic basis of happiness, rationality or genius, I am not aware of it, and the contributors to this book make no mention of it. Perhaps the problem is that something such as 'happiness' is just too vague to support such research. But if that is so, then it is difficult to see how anyone can believe it is worth spending time and money looking for the genetic basis of crime either. Crime is what society labels as such, no more, no less, and so has no 'natural' basis at all. A standard response to this fact has been to focus on what might be termed dimensions of deviance, and in particular on violence (even though most crime is non-violent, and not all violence is criminal), and the essays in this book reflect that.

The book is divided into two parts. The first assesses the plausibility of genetic accounts of behaviour, with special reference to criminal behaviour and violence, while the second examines the philosophical implications of such accounts, in particular as they bear on free will and moral responsibility. While the twelve contributors are far from unanimous in their outlooks, the dominant tone in the first part is one of scepticism. As Wasserman and Wachbroit point out in their introduction, 'Genes only produce proteins, so any link between certain genes and particular types of behavior will rest on the mechanisms or causal pathways that lead from the genes to the behaviors' (p. 16). However, much of the research carried out is statistical in nature, and so can only reveal correlations at best. And as Kenneth Schaffner pointedly observes, the other principal type of research, based on molecular genetics, has so far failed to produce explanations of the behaviour of worms, let alone of human beings. All that, combined with the problem of coming up with a satisfactory characterisation of criminal behaviour, suggests that the consideration of the philosophical implications of genetic explanations of behaviour is not a high priority task.

The second part of the book therefore has a more hypothetical tone to it. The essays are not without interest, and raise important ethical issues concerning what kinds of influence might mitigate moral responsibility and why, but in concrete terms the sense is that they address problems that are unlikely to arise (although a 'double Y chromosome' defence has apparently been attempted in a criminal court in California). But perhaps it is helpful to carry out such a ground-clearing exercise in order to head off unrealistic moral expectations.

Overall, the book is a good introduction to the state of play in this area of study, and might be useful reading for any philosophical counsellors whose clients are inclined to plead helplessness in the face of their genes!

Trevor Curnow