

WHAT IS MAN? THEORIES OF HUMAN NATURE

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What is man? This is surely one of the most important philosophical questions of all, for so much else depends on one's view of human nature. The meaning and purpose of human life, what man ought to do, and what man can hope to achieve—all these are fundamentally affected by whatever one thinks is the 'real' and 'true' nature of man.

It would be comforting if there existed one distinct viewpoint which could be agreed upon as the definite nature of man. However, there are many conflicting views about what human nature really is. "What is man that Thou art mindful of him... Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour," wrote the author of Psalm 8 in the Old Testament. The Bible implies that man is a being created by a transcendent God who has a definite purpose for man's life.

Many philosophers, on the other hand, insist that man's nature is something separate from a religious determination. Karl Marx, for example, believes that "The real nature of man is the totality of social relations (Ghilson 47)." Marx denied the existence of God and held that each individual is a product of the society in which he lives.

With a slightly different perspective, Jean-Paul Sartre stated that "Man is condemned to be free (Abel 315)." Sartre, like Marx, denied the existence of God, but also denied that we are determined by our society or by anything else. He held that every human individual is completely free to decide for himself what he is, and what he wants to be and do. Sartre's contemporary, Simone de Beauvoir, built on these ideas, asserting that man's freedom carries with it certain implications and responsibilities, being that morality requires respecting the freedom of others.

Different views about human nature naturally lead to different conclusions about man's purpose and morality. If God made man, then it is His purpose that defines what man should be, and we must look to Him for help. If man is a product of society, and if he can find that his life is somehow unsatisfactory, then there can be no real cure until society itself is transformed. If man is fundamentally free and can never escape the necessity for individual choice, then the only realistic attitude is to accept his situation and make his choices with full awareness of what he is doing.

Conflicting beliefs about the nature and purpose of human life are often embodied in different ways of life, in political and economic systems, and in educational theory and practice. For example, Marxist theory so dominated life in many communist countries that citizens could not publicly question it without endangering their jobs or their freedom. In many 'free' or 'democratic' countries one may easily forget that it has only been three centuries or less since Christianity occupied a similar position here. People who publicly dissented from the orthodox version of Christianity could suffer discrimination, persecution, or even death (Schuler 180).

In some countries, Roman Catholicism is still the belief that is taught in all schools, and is accepted by the government as 'limiting legislation' on social matters such as divorce and contraception. Even in a so-called 'secular' society such as contemporary Great Britain, Christianity retains an official place in the educational system, and the Church of England is the established church (Schuler 183).

'Existentialist' views, such as Sartre's, are thus not embodied in institutions, for it would be unfamiliar and extraneous to a theory which emphasizes human freedom to make it an orthodox system to be imposed and taught. However, existentialist theory

naturally suggests that society should allow as much individual freedom as possible, so implications follow for social and educational policy. In other words, the existentialist man down the street does not enjoy any social or educational outlet by which to be educated about or express his personal views. The implication of this statement is that many individuals are affected by the mandatory imposition of social systems which influence their personal beliefs and morality.

In order to gain a better overall understanding of the general conceptions of human nature, one may examine, for example, Christianity and Marxism as two rival theories of human nature. It is important to note that these two theories have not been chosen for discussion randomly. Not only are Christianity and Marxism fundamentally opposed to each other, they have also served to influence every scholar and philosopher of the nineteenth century. Because Christianity and Marxism embody many of the fundamentals and assumptions of other human nature theories, this analysis will not only illuminate those elements and assumptions, but also lay the foundation upon which the discussion of human nature may be expanded in the future. Although both theories are radically different in content, there are remarkable similarities in structure. That is, in the way the parts of each doctrine fit together and give rise to ways of life.

Firstly, both theories make claims about the nature of the universe as a whole. Christianity, of course, is committed to belief in God, a personal being who is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, and who created and controls everything that exists. Marx denied all of this, and condemned religion as “the opium of the people” which distracts them from their social problems (Schuler 407). He held that the universe

exists without anybody behind or beyond it, and it is fundamentally material in nature, with everything determined by scientific laws of matter.

As part of their conception of the universe, both Christianity and Marxism have beliefs about the nature of history. For the Christian, the meaning of history is given by its relation to the eternal. God uses the events of history to work out His purposes, revealing himself above all in the life and death of Jesus. Marx claimed to find a pattern of progress in human history which is entirely internal to it. He described an inevitable development from one economic stage to another, so that just as feudalism had given way to capitalism, capitalism would give way to communism. Thus both views see history as moving in a certain direction, though they differ about the nature of the moving force and the direction.

Secondly, flowing from conflicting claims about the universe, there are different descriptions of the essential nature of the individual human being. According to Christianity, he is made in the image of God. Man's fate depends on his relationship to God, as each man is free to accept or reject God's purpose, and will be judged according to how he exercises this freedom. This judgment goes beyond anything in this life, because somehow each individual person survives his or her physical death. Marxism denies any such survival of death and any such judgment. It must also deny the importance of that individual moral freedom which is crucial to Christianity; according to Marx our moral ideas and attitudes are determined by the kind of society we live in.

Thirdly, there are different diagnoses of what is basically 'wrong with' mankind. Christianity says that the world is not in accordance with God's purposes, and, in effect, that man's relationship to God is disrupted. Man misuses his freedom; he rejects God,

and is thus infected with sin. Marx replaces the notion of sin with that of ‘alienation,’ which conveys a similar idea of some ideal standard which human life does not meet (Abel 229). Marx’s alienation, however, is from oneself, from one’s own true nature, because men have potential that the conditions of capitalist society do not allow them to develop.

The prescriptions for these problems depend on the diagnosis of the basic cause. Therefore, fourthly, Christianity and Marxism offer completely different answers to the ills of human life. The Christian believes that only the power of God Himself can save us from our state of sin. The startling claim is that in the life and death of the particular historical person Jesus, God has acted to redeem the world and restore men’s ruptured relationship with Himself. Each individual needs to accept this divine forgiveness, and can then begin to live a new regenerate life in the Christian church. Human society will not be truly redeemed until individuals are thus transformed. Marxism proclaims the opposite, stating that there can be no real change in individual life until there is a radical change in society. That is, the socio-economic system of capitalism must be replaced by that of communism. This revolutionary change is inevitable, because of the laws of historical development; the role of the individual is to join the revolutionary party and help shorten the birth pangs of the new age.

Implicit in these rival prescriptions are somewhat differing visions of a future in which man is totally regenerated. The Christian vision is of man restored to the state that God intended for him, freely loving and obeying his Maker. The new life begins as soon as the individual accepts God’s salvation and joins the church, the “community of the redeemed (Schuler 523).” The process, however, is not completed in this life, for both

the individual and community will still be imperfect and infected with the sin of the world. The Marxist version is of a future in this world, of a perfect society in which men can become their real selves, no longer alienated by economic conditions, but freely active in co-operation with each other. This society is Marx's perceived goal of history, although it should not be expected immediately after the aforementioned 'imminent revolution,' since a transitional stage will be needed before the higher phase of communist society can come into being.

Presented in this example are two systems of belief which are total and complete in their scope. They address the past, the future, and the best way for man to attain that future. Both Christians and Marxists claim to have the essential truth about the whole of human life; they assert something about the nature of all men, at any time and in any place. These world views claim not only acquiescence but also action; if one really believes in either theory, one must accept that it has implications for one's way of life.

As has already been suggested, there are many various differing views of man. The theories of the ancient Greeks, especially of the great philosophers Plato and Aristotle, still influence us today. More recently, Darwin's theory of evolution and Freud psychoanalytic speculations have permanently changed our understanding of ourselves. Also, modern philosophy, psychology, and sociology continue to offer further theories about human nature. Outside the Western intellectual tradition, there are the ancient Chinese and Indian conceptions of man, among many others. Many of these views are embodied in human societies, institutions, and ways of life, as Christianity and Marxism are. If so, they are not simply theories, but ideologies, and thus they are subject to growth and decay.

One of the primary challengers to any and every theory of human nature is the unchangeable, unavoidable, inevitable advancement and progress of scientific theory, technology, and practice. Just as Christianity and Marxism were great rivals in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, modern scientific and biological theories of human nature have stepped into the intellectual limelight to challenge existing systems of thought.

The general acceptance of Darwinian evolution, along with scientific progress, have opened doors for biological philosophers to cast their theories into the human nature circle. Biologists such as E. O. Wilson insist that humans, like all other beings, have no purpose in life other than to survive and reproduce; “we have no higher calling (Abel 381).” The higher goals posited by religion and ideology are no longer tenable, and “their power to marshal the energy of societies is fading (Abel 382).” Wilson’s suggestion then, is that the goals of life must lie inside man, within his biological nature. This leads man to another dilemma: how to choose which of his varied inherited ethical tendencies he should follow.

Wilson’s vision, then, is a cultural evolution of higher ethical values. He contends that man’s genes hold his culture on a leash. Inevitably, values will be constrained in accordance with their affects on the human gene pool. The brain is, after all, a product of evolution. As Wilson puts it, “Human behavior—like the capacities for emotional response which drive and guide it—is the circuitous technique by which human genetic material has been and will be kept intact. Morality has no other demonstrable function...(Abel 402).”

The findings and theories of biological philosophers such as E. O. Wilson have served to greatly alter the more traditional conceptions of human nature that have existed until the present. However, the truth remains that the 'true' nature of man lies somewhere between the Christian perspective and Wilson's biological determinism. Just as man is a product of his society, so is his nature. Just as man is the sum of his behaviors, so is his nature. Just as man adapts, changes, and evolves, so does his nature.

If Wilson's presumption that man, his brain, and even his genes are the result of thousands of years of evolution, then it is reasonable to state that man's nature, which must be located within the brain somewhere amongst his genes, must evolve as well. In effect, the various theories, institutions, and ideologies that have existed throughout history have played a significant part in the development of man's perceived nature. In order to find a complete explanation, one may piece together the fundamentals and assumptions of a myriad of theories.

First of all, it only makes sense that because Christianity has predominated among the world's religions, it must have played (and is indeed still playing) a substantial role in the evolution of morality. This is further supported by the various theories of human nature that have been offshoots or interpretations of Christianity, with God playing a lesser role in the determination of man's ultimate nature. These religions may be categorized as various forms of worship to a similar deity, although differing religions have differing prescriptions for how to cure spiritual ills.

Next, the aforementioned impact of the theories of Marx, whom influenced both Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, who, in turn, passed that bearing over to society as their respective theories of new morality and psycho-analysis. Also heavily influenced

by Marx were existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, who built on Marx's theory by insisting that man freedom carried certain moral responsibility. The spread of these ideas has allowed men to make choices about their ways of life. In effect, if individuals are able to relate to the theory and make a connection between it and themselves, then the theory is transformed into an ideology, and a perception of an individual's nature.

The most recent addition to the intellectual forum has been the biological perspective, introduced essentially by Charles Darwin but reinforced by biologists such as Wilson. Wilson's theories provide an entirely new direction to guide the discussion of human nature. Wilson insists that the elements of human nature are "the learning rules, emotional reinforcers, and hormonal feedback loops that guide the developments of behavior into certain channels as opposed to others (Abel 403)." The understanding and acceptance that man is purely biological presents new dilemmas. According to Wilson, man will be able to make decisions about choosing his own specific nature through scientific and biological manipulation. Also, because morality has evolved through instinct, it is possible to determine the origins and meanings of human values.

A less well-known scholar who may assert some influence in the understanding of human nature is psychologist Morton Prince. In his analysis of dreams, Prince states that during the dream state, there are actually two process taking place: the conscious 'dream,' and the underlying process that determines the dream. That underlying process, Prince contends, is evidence of a "subconscious intelligence," that exists within man (Ghilsen 236).

Prince's line of reasoning may be combined with the ideas of another biologist, R. W. Gerard, whom, in detailing the biological basis for imagination, points out that an area in the brain which is responsible for sending sensory nerve messages, known as the thalamus, has over 50 individual and distinct 'projection areas' on which sensory messages are analyzed, interpreted, and relayed. The human body, however, which only uses five senses, must only use five of those projection areas for conscious processes (Ghilsen 248). This may indicate, according to Gerard, that the subconscious intelligence to which Prince refers may be the intended recipient of sensory nerve messages from many of the unused projection areas.

If the ideas of Prince and Gerard are indeed biological possibilities, then each individual, presuming the existence of a subconscious intelligence, may contain within themselves elements of which they are not consciously aware. The origins of these elements, in turn, are also unknown. There is a prospect that subconscious mental elements are a variation or evolution of the idea of 'collective memories' introduced by early psychologists. It is indeed then possible that these unknown elements link all men together in a sort of 'collective subconscious.' Perhaps this sense of 'humanity,' for lack of a better term, is the reason for the development and evolution of morality.

In any effect, to develop a complete theory of human nature, one must consider each of the arguments made by each area of influence: the Christians, the Marxists, the existentialists, and the biologists, among many others. Each argument is correct, for man is the summation of each of the elements of the various theories. This is evidenced by the mere existence of the theories themselves. In order for the theories to have developed, the scholar or philosopher would have undergone a period of introspection and self-

analysis to determine his or her emotional rationalization for the argument. In other words, how else could a theory be developed unless a man's feelings perceptions, and beliefs were put into it? Each theory of human nature is correct because of the person behind the theory.

Another consideration that must be made is the influence of various Eastern religions and ideologies on the West. That is, traditional Christians that have been influenced and educated by Eastern philosophy would certainly hold different values than individuals in a southern Baptist community. The moral values which influence society and which parents pass onto their children are the key to determining the future of human nature. These values are the underlying adhesive for society, and as people and values evolve, society evolves as well.

It is important not to think of values or morality as determined. Individuals must remember that they have the autonomy to make moral decisions for themselves. While it is true that our decisions and, in effect, our free will, affects the will of others, this is not necessarily a convincing argument in support of man's alienation from his true self. The fact that man is able to socialize and compromise regarding free will is an excellent indicator of what his true nature may be. As Nietzsche eloquently stated, "Reality is guarded by the doors of perception. If we are able to be set free from our perceptions, then we could see everything as it truly is: infinite (Kaufmann 433)."

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