

May 1985

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Recommended Citation

Waters, Raphael T. (1985) "The Nature of Man: A Philosopher's Viewpoint," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 52 : No. 2 , Article 11.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol52/iss2/11>

The Nature of Man: A Philosopher's Viewpoint

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I. INTRODUCTION

- a) There is a great crisis today concerning what we understand by the nature of man, which is a reply to the question: "What is a man?"

The effects of this crisis are being felt in the discussion of such topics as abortion, euthanasia, death, human rights, the nature of society, justice, freedom, and the notion of the common good.

- b) Ideas are important for they influence our whole lives whether we like it or not. Our idea of man, for instance, determines what will be done with him by his fellow men and also by the society in which he lives. To add to the difficulties we are living in a man-centered culture, for he has become the measure of all things.

- c) In the midst of confusion of definitions of the nature of man, springing from a confusion of philosophical systems, one stands out above the rest. I am referring to that philosophical teaching based on the errors of Immanuel Kant whereby some claim that we cannot know the nature of anything and therefore cannot know the nature of man.

- d) Those who claim that we cannot know what man is, conclude — as we are seeing in the world of medical ethics — by deciding on the nature of man being what they WANT him to be, e.g., a socially-conscious being, or a citizen with meaningful existence, etc. Thus we impose an idea on reality instead of discovering man's true nature. Then as a result of certain fundamental errors, these philosophers and others reduce him to a purely social being, i.e., a being whose whole reason for existence is to be a citizen, to have good social relations, or otherwise he is not to be considered man. Such a teaching has the seeds of Marxism. The state becomes the ultimate reality and each man MUST fit in — or else.

- e) A second notion of what a man is depends on the philosophy

called empiricism, which reduces him to a collection of what can be observed by the senses. We can have no other knowledge of him, according to such teaching, except to know him as a bundle of impressions — impressions made on the senses.

f) A third understanding of the nature of man is to be found in the traditional philosophy developing over the past 25 centuries, seeking its principles and facts faithfully in external reality. I am referring to the philosophy of realism as presented in a most masterly fashion by St. Thomas Aquinas — the prince of all philosophers. It is with the perennial realism of Aristotle, St. Thomas and all the great masters within that tradition that I shall now be dealing.

II. Human Operations

A. Human Rationality

Every science perceives as its special domain the activities of some particular kind of bodily thing in order to determine to what order of beings it belongs. The sciences of man do not differ from this method of proceeding in a scientific investigation.

Man has much in common with other living things for like them, he is capable of *immanent activity*, whereby he can move himself and benefit from his own actions. Like plants, he has the powers of vegetative operations; like brute animals, he has the powers of sensitive life for he can sense, has passions and can do locomotive operations. Yet he fills a unique place among bodily things for his special manner of acting is characterized by *rationality*. Whatever he does as man — the human actions of which he is capable and which are properly human — manifest that central characteristic we commonly call rational life. His highest power of operation — the intellect — can make extraordinary distinctions by *abstracting* one reality from another, such as the color from the flower; can form *judgments* about reality, and can *reason* to obtain new truths.

While the operations of plants and brutes clearly indicate an absence of rational life, man's intellectual activity sets him apart from all other corporeal entities for it specifies his most fundamental difference.

Since the kind of activity of which any being is capable flows from the being as it is the cause of that operation, careful consideration is necessary to discern what operations manifest the nature of that being. For example, a *tree* is capable of the activities of a tree for it can nutrify itself, grow to perfection, and generate offspring through its reproductive powers. Likewise, the activities of a *dog* have a certain peculiarity to that particular beast and they are to be distinguished from the activities it has in common with plant life. *Man's* capacity for rational actions, then, is a sure indicator of the kind of being he is.

Everything man does when executing human acts manifests rationality. He contemplates the order in the universe and puts order into his affairs; he makes distinctions and seeks to understand the causes of things. He is reflective for he can understand his own reasoning, correct it, and is thus able to make progress in his knowledge and all that he does.

B. Some Characteristics of Rationality

a) What is this power peculiar to man — this rational life which distinguishes him from other bodily natures around him? It is a power of the soul — the power of knowing natures of things, grasping being as it is being and not as it is colored, nor possessing qualities of hardness, coldness or other sensible aspects. Above all it is the power of making progressive judgments through the reasoning process whereby man can discover new truths from previously known truths. Through the knowledge of the comparison of two concepts with a third we conclude that the two ideas themselves can be compared.

b) Rationality receives what it knows through the *senses* which cannot understand, cannot reflect and cannot have consciousness of abstract realities. Indeed, our rational life depends on sensitive life and, in fact, implies the operations we know as *sensation*, *passions* and *emotions*, *vegetative life* and even *locomotive life*, or our power to make physical movements. In all of these functions, the intellectual life implies the association of the soul with a physical reality we call the body.

c) The operation of the human intellect manifests above all that the human soul belongs to the order of beings known as *spiritual natures*. This non-materiality is properly termed spirituality and signifies its ability to transcend the material order or the order of bodily things. It does not depend on matter as its subject of operation. In other words there is no organ of the intellect as there is an organ of sight. This can be deduced from its knowledge of immaterial objects such as honesty, truth, justice, and the like. This non-materiality or spirituality is characteristic of every kind of intellect whether human or — on the supposition that there are other beings above the bodily order and below the divine Being — of angelic beings, or the divine Being. The only dependence on the bodily world for the human intellect is an objective dependence for we get our knowledges through the senses and about bodily things.

C. Properties of Rationality

Since the properties of a being are signs of its essence, a study of the nature of man should not fail to consider his properties and how they are founded in his nature. The properties with which we shall

deal are known as metaphysical properties. They are all unique to man and are sure signs of the distinctly human nature he has — well above the highest instinctive capacities of any other animal. They are metaphysical properties, for they are in reality the very same thing as rationality, but viewed from a different perspective or are the very function itself, as applied in a particular field of human endeavor. For instance, when we declare that man is a social animal, we are merely describing the application of his rational life, but in relation to the socially organized group and its members. In a word, without rationality, none of these properties will exist.

The applications of the life of reason are vast in depth and number. Consider for example the following:

- i) Man is a *talking animal* because he is rational.
- ii) Man is a *laughing animal* because he is rational.
- iii) Man is *self-corrective* because he is rational.
- iv) Man is *progressive* because he is self-corrective.
- v) Man is *scientific* because he is rational.
- vi) Man is *social* because he is rational. Some writers would tell us that man is man because he is social. This is topsy-turvy philosophy to say the least. Their expression is somewhat akin to this: Man becomes human when he has meaningful relations with others in society. Aristotle,¹ however, sees clearly enough that man's whole application to the social order is founded upon the fact that he is a rational animal as indeed does also St. Thomas Aquinas.² They likewise saw that man is not wholly social, i.e., is not entirely a social animal so that he would be merely an individual and not a person. If man was entirely social, this would lead us straight to totalitarianism and the total subordination of man to society. No, man is also a whole person in himself, above and beyond his sociality.
- vii) Man is a *political animal* as Aristotle also said.³ He gave as the reason for this the rational nature of man.
- viii) Man is an *economic animal* because he is rational. Karl Marx⁴ saw this to the exclusion of everything else. He saw man as a worker but failed to realize that man works to avoid work — to save effort — through making acts of exchange as Aristotle⁵ and St. Thomas⁶ well showed.
- ix) Man is a *free being* because of his rationality, i.e., he has freedom of the will. The French philosopher Sartre proclaimed this as if it were the very essence of man.⁷
- x) Man is contemplative because he is intellective as Plato learned from Socrates.⁸ Indeed this teaching lies at the basis of most of Platonic philosophy.
- xi) Man is a *technical or artistic animal* because he is rational. One does not need to reflect very deeply to see that modern technology demands the application of reasoning in company with all

of the instruments possible which extend and render more precise the functioning of man's senses and his higher faculties.

Each of these properties, together with others too numerous to mention, signifies the presence of reason and its faculty, the human intellect. Each of them manifests the complexity of human activity with all of its distinctions, orderly disposition of thousands of items with relations so intricate that one can only hope to become familiar with a small part of social and personal affairs.

These proper operations of man all have certain characteristics in common:

- a) They are immanent activities, that is to say, man does the act and benefits from the act. They are not merely transitive acts which are characteristic of non-living things whereby the non-living substance produces an effect in something other than itself. What is characteristic of all living things is that what they do is for their own benefit. They are, in other words, self-perfective, inasmuch as they perfect the living being in some way.
- b) The second characteristic of these properties is their common foundation in human reason. They are, as said above, the application of rationality in one or another order. To *talk* is to apply rationality in social life in order to communicate to others what we understand of reality — our judgments, and our reasonings. To be *scientific* is to use one's highest powers to draw conclusions about the causes of things, while to be *social* is to seek goods we have in common with other members of the group.

While the reasonableness of human activity is remarkably present, impregnating the myriads of matters which occupy man throughout any lifetime, yet another aspect sometimes causes many today to raise serious doubts about the presence of this rational element. One hears about the irrational in man. A defective organ on which the intellect operates, or to put it another way, which presents to the intellect initial knowledge of the external reality, can inhibit the due operation of the reasoning faculty. Faulty mental life and unbalanced emotional states arise on account of the habits built up over a period but sometimes the presence of intellect may be thrown completely into question on account of the failure of some function of the brain, wherein is located the organ of the imagination. A very young child does not have the full use of reason on account of the slow development of the appropriate instrument — the cortex. The intellect can be proved to be a faculty not dependent either for its existence or subjectively for its proper operation on the cerebral cortex. Therefore the non-functioning must never be taken as a sign that its presence is lacking. Hence to say that an *embryo* is not yet human because it does not

manifest its humanity leads us to draw an unwarranted conclusion. In similar fashion, to say that a *comatose* patient does not display evidence of his thinking powers is not sufficient evidence for saying that he does not possess rational power. Likewise, we can hardly claim that a *senile* patient lacks the faculty to judge and think as we do. Furthermore, not using one's reason and acquiescing in violent, emotional outbursts demonstrates a failure to use reason but that is not the same as not having reason. One must always carefully distinguish between a power and the exercise of that power.

At times there are difficulties to be explained but a thousand difficulties can never add up to one absurdity!

III. Human Nature or What a Man Is

a) In this era of confused culture, articles and books have been written about the nature of man, the nature of life and other natures, but I have yet to see one of these works which explains what is meant by a nature. Thus we should at once determine what the philosopher really means by that term "nature." The word comes from the Latin "natus" meaning "born." When we are born, we arrive "naked" or in the "na" so the root "na" means born. Being naked, we come with the barest essentials or standard issue of equipment, not blue bellies!

The term "nature" has this signification then: what something has within itself (not added to itself) that which enables it to have the powers of operation which it does have? It is the being with reference to what it can DO. Note what it can DO! For example, to be a plant or have the nature of a plant signifies to be able to DO what a plant can do. To be a man or to have human nature means to be such a being as to be able to DO what a man can do.

b) But how do we arrive at knowledge of this nature? If each nature is accompanied by a certain mode of operation, then by a careful study of the mode of operation of that being, we can arrive at a knowledge of its nature. This is expressed in the famous principle:

DO follows BE and the mode of doing follows the mode of being.

If something does or acts like silver, it must be silver; if something does like a dog, it must be a dog. If something does like a man, it must be man. Hence we consider those special qualities which we called his properties and which we said characterized man as he is man, since they belong exclusively to him.

Such a procedure is not monopolized by philosophers. Every science operates in accordance with this principle as is evident from the above examples.

c) But the philosopher does not rest there! He discovers by a process of very accurate reasoning from infallible principles and the facts gathered from reality that the *cause* within man which enables him to DO these things of which he is capable, is something of his nature. For what he does be, enables him to do what he does do. The same intrinsic principle which makes him be what he is and distinguishes him from all other things is the same principle which makes him do what he does. His functioning is in terms of his very nature. To act like a man presupposes that he is a man. The shorthand term which is employed by philosophers to describe the intrinsic principle which forms part of man and which causes him to be what he is, is "FORM" and the usual name in the English language given to man's form is "SOUL." This should not be misunderstood, for every living thing, precisely because it is living, has a soul. Each has a different kind of soul, however, while man has a unique soul which enables him to have all those special properties he has. Incidentally, other names for this vital principle in organisms are used because of the penetration of the English language by Greek and Latin, namely *psyche* in the word "psychology" and *anima* as in the word "animal," used in biological sciences. These terms have the meaning of be-souled things.

d) We can go further and prove that not only is this soul a part of man but that it has a capacity for existing even apart from the matter. It has the property of being able to function subjectively and even exist as an incomplete principle and apart from its co-principle which is matter. This property depends on its incomplete nature as a non-material principle; in other words, as a spiritual substance. It is but a small step then to prove from this its immortality which follows from its lack of composition — or its simplicity. This aspect of human nature has been faced from the first attempts to philosophize 25 centuries ago.

In sum, we could say that man consists of two principles: one which is material, and a co-principle which is spiritual and therefore immortal, and which is the ultimate reason within man of all that a man can have as human — all those properties we have named above.

You will note that I said a co-principle, for it can be shown that the two principles of which man is composed, together make him be one complete substance. This is to say that he has one nature consisting of one bodily substance.

e) We would be dishonest at this stage if we did not admit the existence of two other explanations of human nature: mechanism⁹ and extreme vitalism.¹⁰ *Mechanism* claims that man consists of a bundle of chemical and physical activities. In other words, chemico-physical explanations are sufficient to explain all that a man is and does. This is valid as a working principle in experimental sciences but fails completely as a philosophical explanation as can be shown.

Extreme vitalism on the other hand recognizes the need for a greater explanation of life but fails on another count. It teaches that there is a soul, but it is trapped within man and, as René Descartes taught, is joined to him at the pineal gland. In this teaching, trees and dogs are merely machines and man alone is a living thing. But again there is failure to explain the proper activities of the living since no account can be given for the immanent actions of man. Man would consist of two whole substances, as if he were related to his body as a boy is to his bicycle. This is absurd!

f) We are obliged to conclude that man, (although it is difficult to comprehend), has to be made up of two principles, one of which exceeds the capacity of the other and this is the only adequate explanation of human nature. It is somewhat easy to prove this, using the precise methods of philosophical demonstration, but it is difficult to grasp how a spiritual principle can be the form of a bodily substance — how matter and spiritual form are united to comprise one operative being. But then philosophy comes face to face with mysteries like any science — but these are not absurdities. Man, like all corporeal beings, has a nature made up of two principles, but in his case, one occurs uniquely among living organisms, for it is spiritual and is the reason he can live the complex life as an individual and as a member of many complex social groups. This description of human nature is *in accord* with the facts and can also be shown to be the *only* teaching which is in agreement with the facts. This doctrine, coming from as far back as the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, right down to the present day, is known as hylomorphism.¹¹ It signifies simply that the soul causes the body to be an organized unit on account of being a co-principle with it.

f) Man, then, can be defined as a rational animal and this spelled out fully declares man to be a rational, sensitive (having senses), vegetative, body, with the power of expressing himself with sensitive love, and — what is characteristically human —, intellectual love.

This again implies that man has the *power* of reasoning, sensitive knowledge, inclinations of his free will, passions, vegetative activities, and the power of locomotion, for all of these follow as necessary accompaniments of rational life.

g) The soul of man is the ultimate reason why he is what he is and what he does. It is the cause of all of his perfections and special qualities, and hence is the cause of the dynamic surge within man whereby his whole thrust into reality originates, his whole thrust of the power of growth towards the ultimate quantity due to his species and its fullness of being. The soul puts a great urge into man causing him to reproduce as Freud saw when he described that urge called sexuality even though he did not understand the metaphysics of human sexuality. The effect of the human soul right from the start is to drive him toward developing his proper shape, size, activities, etc. all of

which properly belong to him.

h) But the unity of that being — the diverse urges whether of the whole being for its existence, the maintaining of its existence through the powers of nutrition and growth, the reproduction of the species through the power of generation, the appetite for the goods which are pleasing to our nature, the appetite of the will for the complete satisfaction of man, and the appetite of the intellect for truth — all are unified in the one being, man, on account of the unity of matter and form, body and soul. Man's soul is the final principle decreeing that all be for the one existential centre — his whole being.

i) One more thing needs to be said about the matter of which man is composed. Matter according to itself, (as the philosopher understands matter; not as the scientist understands it) when left to itself cannot be. Without form matter is no thing. It is the form which gives it its reality, determines what that thing is to be. It is the form which imposes on living things that they be, that they be living, that they necessarily have organs to be organized. It is the form that determines the proper development of the matter for each thing so that it has the body of a tree, a dog, a kangaroo, or a man.

Hence a certain mode of matter is proper to man, for the form determines that. Furthermore, at conception, the form and matter come into being together and the proper function of the parents through appropriate parts of them, which we know as sperm and ovum, is to prepare suitable matter which demands or has an urge for, human soul. Whenever there is a certain mode of organization present, there is human soul, for this is an apt and demanding matter for that soul. It is in direct proportion to that soul. This organization appropriate to man is to be observed at conception, therefore one cannot reasonably doubt the humanity of the being at that point.

IV. Some Corollaries Which Follow from Our Teaching Concerning the Nature of Man

a) The human soul cannot evolve from matter as seems to be sometimes suggested in evolutionary literature. The power of the soul far exceeds the potentialities of matter both for its being and its operations. Hence, to claim that the greater comes from the lesser is manifestly absurd, but some who suggest that the embryo becomes human do, in some way, propose such an absurdity. One wonders what they mean by human and what kind of evidence they have for their claims. Contemporary biology, and especially embryology, has shown us that there is sufficient microscopic organization within the zygote to testify that human soul is present notwithstanding the errors based upon the macroscopic biology of earlier teachers. The proportion which *has* to exist between matter and soul is sufficient evidence

to teach us that the human soul is present.

b) But it might be objected that those special functions which we claimed above for man are sometimes absent and hence the organism ceases to be human. Sometimes man does not use his faculties but this would hardly be reason enough to deny that he has the power which, under the correct circumstances, would enable him to use them. Damage to the organ, need for rest, comatose states are instances where man does not use his higher operative powers. His rationality may appear to cease to function, but this is not to deny that the human soul still possesses those faculties. Thus we cannot deny the presence of a human soul! No biologist would claim that the resting stage of a zygote, for instance, is sufficient reason for claiming a change of species. The comment that Karen Quinlan is a vegetable merely means that she can perform vegetative functions only. But in the popular mind, this appears to mean that she is no longer human and therefore can be slaughtered. While this is not the place to enter into the moral questions involved, we must be careful at all times to distinguish between human powers themselves and the exercise of those powers. In such cases the human soul with its complete powers of operation is present and thus one is still a man, notwithstanding the lack of the exercise of the powers in those operations which properly belong to each of us.

c) Man is either a rational animal, or he is not. Bill Smith is either human, or he is not. The evidence shows that without any doubt man is, by nature, a rational animal. Such a contemporary view that he becomes human as the result of social relationships, or is not human until birth, or even is not alive until birth, is utter nonsense, at the least, and is in direct conflict with what can be demonstrated in sound philosophy, as has been summarily outlined above.

At the other end of the scale of life, to suggest that an individual ceases to be human because he no longer has a useful existence, or no longer has a meaningful existence, or cannot relate to reality, and that he thereby ought to be released from his human or non-human existence, indicates a failure to take fully into account the nature of humanity as well as the nature of human society, not to mention the whole purpose of human existence.

It is quite evident that, from the moment of his conception, each man acquires the human shape and gradually increasing size proper to his species through the power of growth. But such quantitative aspects are not to be confused with the substance of man. The power of growth is a quality of the soul — something added to the soul — while the soul itself constitutes a part of the substance. The effect of the soul is the life caused in the organism while the object of the power of growth is the quantitative aspects effected.

It would be false to claim that through growth, the organism acquires a new species, as if a non-man became man. The increase in

quantity of the embryo or fetus (biological names for the youngest men) causes no substantial change but on the contrary, the tiniest babe in the womb is as much a man as the most perfectly developed Olympic athlete. They have specific identity. This, in fact, is what is meant by the equality of men. In similar vein, it can be argued that a man asleep is as much a man as one who is wide awake and able to use all his faculties. Hence, to suggest that we ought to destroy someone because he is not using his operative powers or even cannot use them, is to suggest that we destroy a human person. Man is not just a useful thing, disposable for our convenience.

d) An important difference between the various sciences which deal with man should be indicated, for in those disciplines which we call the empirical sciences, with their dependence on observation as the final arbiter of truth, we can obtain knowledge of what is common among men expressing their conclusions in truths which can attain a high degree of probability. Theirs is not the function of specifying the natures of things, but they determine the latter merely in terms of the appearance of those natures. For instance, we commonly accept that water boils at 100 degrees centigrade but we should be cautious enough to realize that some factor might be present — either a minute quantity of an element so far undetected, or some condition whose presence has escaped our attention — which factor, on being removed, will permit water to boil at its true level of "x" degrees. In other words, no observable evidence can show the *necessity* of this predicate "boils at 100 degrees centigrade" being attached to this subject "water."

On the other hand, the philosophical treatment of the nature of man depends on an intelligible method in which the fact of certain modes of movement are considered in the light of utterly certain, rational *principles*. For we must know the nature of man — not the appearances of the nature as is determined in experiment, for instance — in order to know what is *normal*. Hence, an important distinction exists between the *common* and the *normal*. It might be common to deliberately abort a child, for men to steal, for men to practice homosexuality, but nevertheless, none of these constitutes a normal state of man, which conclusion can only be discovered on arriving at an understanding of his nature. Those empirical scientists who claim to arrive at what is normal, are operating outside their field. The confidence of some, confidence which is unwarranted by the method, in their ability to specify what ought to be, manifests a lack of understanding of the true object of their science.

Conclusion

Many of those ideas about man, his manner of existence, his place in society, and his destiny are all contingent upon a true understand-

ing of his nature. Ideas have consequences and we must never forget that, as the famous Aristotle said, a small error in principle leads to a great error in the conclusion. Elaborate a false teaching about what a man is and the consequences are disastrous as we are beginning to see today. The philosopher seeks the ultimate causes of reality and first among the realities which immediately concern his speculation is his own being and its existence. Incorrect answers to his questions about man can lead to disorders in several fields such as education, and psychiatry — as Anna Terruwe, the Dutch psychiatrist, would be quick to inform us.¹² Even such social phenomena as disco dancing might be considered otherwise if the adherents of such sensualism had a better grasp of human nature.

Technology is being viewed these days as the ultimate tribunal of the nature of things and how they should be treated, while that same technology supposedly offers solutions to human problems. According to current thinking, it is considered that if something can be done by technology, then it should be done. Such matters as artificial insemination come readily to mind. From an artistic capability we jump to a moral decision. Children are being indoctrinated in the naive tenets of 19th century optimism in the cult of progress, with the result that we are producing technical barbarians or de-educated monsters. At the same time we are being deceived by such people as journalists, radio announcers, and others of the mass media whom a recent article in a French newspaper referred to as the "new clergy."

The utilitarian outlook imposed on us by the adherents of totalitarian doctrine reduces man to the lowest possible value — he becomes a useful thing, purely an instrument of society, readily disposable if it suits society. But two final points need to be made:

- 1) one man is worth more than the whole universe, for he will continue to exist when the universe is burnt out. Furthermore, even in his present state, quite apart from his immortality, each man has a spiritual substance as one of the two principles of which he is made up. Hence in the hierarchy of bodily things one man is of greater value than all the stars.
- 2) The second and final point is that what I have set down is not a mere fanciful presentation made to fit the order as conceived by men in keeping with traditional Christian principles! No, it is laid upon firm foundations and results from the one thing acceptable to the philosopher — evidence and the evidence alone of the sense and the necessary truth of the principles of human reason.

All these things must be kept in mind when we are deciding the answer to serious moral questions such as abortion, euthanasia, artificial insemination, and test-tube fertilizations.

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