

*Essays in Anthropology: Variations on a Theme by Robert Spaemann*

notes by David Alexander

Chapter 1: "Human Nature"

The question "What is a human being?" in Psalm 8 is posed as the fourth question in Kant's lecture on logic, and he comments that the first three questions can be subsumed under this one: "What can I know?"; "What ought I to do?"; and "What may I hope for?" Although Kant makes this observation, he leaves the question hanging, asserting that all attempts at scientific inquiry about the subject encounter considerable difficulties that are inherent in human nature itself.

It's not always clear what someone who asks "What is a human being?" actually wants to know. Robert Spaemann lists a few leading questions to illustrate the different answers people may be looking for (p. 2).

In the preface to his *Anthropology in Pragmatic Perspective*, Kant also refers to a basic dualism in perspectives that characterize our anthropological perspective - the "physiological" and the "pragmatic." The physiological knowledge of the human being concerns the investigation of what nature makes of the human being. Pragmatic knowledge concerns the investigation of what he, as a free-acting being, makes of himself. The question is how do these two forms of knowledge relate to each other. Can a free-acting being in any way be conceived of as a "natural product," or shall nature instead be thought of as a "substrate of freedom," if we want to have a conception of freedom at all? Descartes identified this dilemma before Kant. He believed it impossible to conceive of the unity of the soul (*res cogitans*) and the body (*res extensa*). The union as he understood it could only be experienced empirically, not through pure intellect. In other words, philosophical anthropology in its true sense is impossible in Descartes's view.

The aftermath of the dualism can be explained according to the dictum: "What man is, only his history tells him." Heidegger's phenomenological approach also ended up like Descartes's, a theory of historicity. His effort remains the dialectical counterpart to various forms of natural reductionism, both interpreting human beings as products of nature programmed for survival, and integrating the whole realm of spirit into this interpretation. The dualism of perspectives in the question "what is man?", hermeneutic on the one hand, scientific on the other, seems to speak of an insurmountable stalemate. Sartre radicalizes the "inner perspective" of *res cogitans*. As Sartre saw it, the gaze of the other fixates me as what I am rather than who I am, turning me into an object. That is why he says hell is other people, because he presupposes that the human gaze is a Cartesian one resulting in a total objectification of that on which it falls. Understandably, Spaemann asks, "Is that really the paradigm of the human gaze?" The gaze under which human beings become human, the gaze of the mother upon the newborn child, is normally a gaze of love. Dawkins conceives of the mother as a machine programmed to propagate copies of the genes which ride in it. Dawkins and Sartre represent the extremes - scientific reductionism which can tolerate any 'transcendental' self-interpretation as long as it claims no 'objectivity,' and a pure phenomenology of solipsistic self-experience which can claim no more truth than scientific reductionism.

We are confronted with a new form of the double truth doctrine. Recently attempts to secure a new epistemic monism have appeared, emanating from scientific circles, seeking to clarify this dualism in

terms of evolutionary theory, and to surmount it in terms of a system-theory (Rupert Riedl, etc.) Despite their intention, the attempts made thus far are in fact actually reductionist. In reality, the new "epistemic monism" sticks to one side of the dualism.

The process of surmounting the dualism will require from both sides not only intellectual effort but also the mobilizing of the full spectrum of human experiences. A deeper reflection on the particular history of thought that began with the concept of "nature" (*physis*) is also called for. To back this assertion, Spaemann notes for example that it is common among Catholic theologians today to put the concept of person against the concept of nature, questioning the moral relevance of the concept of nature. This is one way in which the dualism of modernity surfaces.

The concept of nature was itself not "naturalistic" as pure exteriority according to Aristotle since this was precisely what *physei* was not. Rather, nature denotes that which has in itself the principle of movement. We can know what it means to have in oneself a principle or beginning only because we are selves and we experience ourselves as a beginning, an origin of spontaneity.

A human being cannot understand his humanity as a quality of something other than himself. Spaemann says it was no coincidence that the beginning of modern science was marked by polemics against the concept of nature. The idea that God could create such things as secondary causes and that creation could involve the release of independent beings alongside God retreats from accepted scholarship into the cabalistic and hermetic. Nature becomes understood as a purely immanent realm where objects are just moved. "Nature becomes exteriority without selfhood (*Selbstein*)." Knowing something as "existing by nature" objectifies it and alienates it. This alienation contrasts markedly with the classical understanding of knowing as "understanding in act is identical to the thing understood in act." This oneness with what is known becomes completely implausible where the ideal of cognition is self-contained enlightenment. In the modern understanding of things, the human being can no longer understand himself as "natural being" and "person" at the same time. The only way reconciliation of these two perspectives might proceed is if there is a hermeneutic of nature not conceived merely metaphorically or poetically. The typical experience of the indeterminacy peculiar to humankind, expressed in our concepts of truth, beauty, moral ought, good, and sanctity can only be naturalistically reconstructed to the extent that it is deprived of what is specific about it, namely its unconditional character.

Rousseau tried for the first time to deduce human nature by way of a radical abstraction from all historical and social conditions. What is "natural" no longer shows itself in its teleological end, but rather becomes pure initial availability. Rousseau was following the path of early modern theologians who conceived the concept of a "state of pure nature" by hypothetically abstracting human beings from their actual context of salvation history. Because our reason is historical, radical abstraction from history does away with the definition of the human being as 'rational animal.' The beginning of historical existence comes to be understood as a taking leave of nature. For Rousseau, the beginning of the human being is free in a negative sense, not determined by an instinctive submersion in his surroundings. History and nature become incommensurable. Person and nature also in the Rousseauian perspective of modernity have become incommensurable.

However, Rousseau did not invent this anthropological dualism. It is grounded in the very structure of human self-experience. A distinction of body and soul is already characteristic of the most ancient manifestations of humanity.

Aristotle abolishes the dualism, understanding the soul as the "form of the body," but then he immediately reintroduces it. The principle of intelligibility is in no real sense part of the human soul. Only this *nous* is immortal and eternal.

Aquinas encountered this form of dualism in Averroes. To combat it, Aquinas wrote that if the acting intellect were a separate substance, then "human nature would be a deficient nature," for it would lack "one of the principles that it needs for its naturally appropriate activity of understanding, which requires both the potential and the agent intellects. Hence, complete human nature requires that both of these be intrinsic to man." (p. 14).

The anthropological dualism resurfaces despite Thomas's labors, this time leading to the concept of the "supernatural." He writes that nature did not give man the wherewithal to attain Happiness but it did give him freewill with which he can turn to God, that He may make him happy.

For Aristotle, to isolate a self-sufficient individual "nature" is to abstract from the social nature of human beings. For Thomas, to isolate a "pure nature" is to abstract from our religious nature, a nature leading to friendship with God. A human being is not a surplus from nature, but a creature in which nature transcends itself toward that surplus. Only insofar as he transcends human nature does the human being recover it. Only in human beings does what nature really is intrinsically manifest itself because only in him does nature's purposive structure become free of ambiguity and appear as both free will and free recognition of a foundation and end he did not posit himself.

In the late Middle Ages this "ecstatic" view of nature and humanity is no longer understood and there is a return to the idea of nature's necessary self-sufficiency, which Thomas had emphatically rejected. Thomas's anthropological observations according to which nature transcends itself in humankind are lost. The new understanding of nature that replaces it moves toward the Cartesian/Spinozan definition of substance as what can be grasped without having a concept of something else. It is here that the anthropological fiction of "pure nature" commences its triumphal procession. The human being is again conceived in purely immanent terms.

In the wake of this process, reason becomes a late epiphenomenon of a creature's originally irrational and undetermined life. Spaemann lists some of the further dismantlements of teleology on p. 18 and he prescribes for us all readings of Husserl and Frege's critique of psychologism in logic for use in testing out genetic theories of evolution. Neither Husserl nor Frege ultimately surmount our dualism, however. They had nothing to say about the obvious fact that a thinking creature must first have come into existence before it can entertain truth-assertions.

To see the other as other, and oneself as his "Thou" is to see oneself as an environment for other centers-of-being. This stepping out from being the center of the world is an "eccentric position" that opens up a realm "beyond substance", as Plato put it when he wanted to define the locus of the good. Human nature is defined by what it is not and is characterized by anticipation. It is only possible to conceive of the human being as both open to the Absolute and as a natural being if a structure of anticipation is divined from the general structure of nature. After the Cartesian reduction of nature to mere extension, Leibniz was the first to reassert this structural anticipation in human nature. Leibniz saw that one can only understand movement in nature if one understands it as analogous with our own striving for or anticipation of the future.

To understand nature as in principle self-transcendent is also the condition for understanding nature as a medium for the expression of personality. Such an understanding allows us to grasp "body language" and to understand that a person's dignity can be injured in a physical way. We already find "striving for" in ourselves and others as a pressing onwards for satisfaction.

As a phenomenological anthropological claim, the fact that the human being transcends himself is independent of metaphysical interpretations. The utopian interpretation of human self-transcendence (as we see in Marx and Nietzsche's looking forward to the "superman", etc. ) replaced the theological one in which human self-transcendence implies an indeterminacy, a *via media*, which cannot be accounted for sociologically or cosmologically. The theological outlook will not permit man to be conceived of as a mere means for the production of a future superman, or a future reconciled society. All ages are "equidistant." "The good itself," God as final end, is forever real and does not require humanity for its realization. A human being can only be related to this ultimate end by being its image or representation. The human being as representation of the undetermined is completely independent of any function. The independence of the person hinges on the fact that no one is allowed to decide whether or not another human being bears the fundamental features of personhood. Representation is an ultimate category, beyond self-assertion and beyond making oneself into a means for something in the future, or for others. We cannot model ourselves on an ideal human being and no anthropology can teach us what we ought to be.

When we pay attention to what nature makes out of human beings, we resort to biology and inevitably speak of something less than human. For nature does not "make " a person. If we ask, as we must, what ought a free agent to make of himself, we must speak of indeterminacy and that which is more than human. The unified perspective can only be reached when we consider the whither of humankind and the whence of nature.