

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 cabbalistic 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.

Chapter 2: "Evolution"

Spaemann assumes the truth of the claim that we live in an age of totalized Enlightenment in which scientific results are no longer a matter of ideological battling in the public realm. He asks why this is the case and why it was previously not so.

To be reliably informed of the facts of our circumstances typically enhances our ability to arrive at goals we set for ourselves. However, there are obvious cases where the "noble lie" would seem to be desirable or understandable. There are clearly occasions when the refusal to take a report as read may be a sign of humanity. Spaemann asks whether a friend who doesn't think twice about believing a report severely incriminating a good friend can be a true friend. He notes that those who, for religious reasons, resisted the Copernican worldview did so because in their view nothing less was at stake than the credibility of divine revelation.

What emerged from the challenge of the "reactionaries" was a formula in which they pushed Galileo to concede that his theory dealt purely with a mathematical hypothesis depending on a particular paradigm of thought, which is exactly what, according to the modern understanding of things, scientific theories can only be. This opened the door for a similar critique of the Ptolemaic theory, which was perceived to be more harmonious with the Biblical account.

A wholesale rejection of revelation as a reliable source of knowledge and a theological reinterpretation rendering revelation immune to scientific results developed as a result of the conflict between the Ptolemaic and Copernican worldviews. This theological reinterpretation paved the way for the fully-fledged "banalization" of the Copernican worldview. The laws of science are laws that allow us to dominate nature by reducing it to an indifferent or banal realm.

There are three modern ways of reacting to the banalization of the world. The first is theoretical resistance. Leibniz and A.N. Whitehead explained the indifference of reality as a passive continuum that is structured by mathematical laws of nature as seen from an external perspective. The second possibility is materialism. Materialism tries to explain human beings as merely particularly complex features of the objective world, totally subject to its laws. Not only is the non-human world indifferent but human beings themselves share in this indifference, as Marquis de Sade evinces. The materialist cannot explain his revulsion to Marquis de Sade except as subjective dislike. The third way is Kant's attempt to understand human subjectivity as the condition for our objectification of the world, so that he is subject to the laws of the objective world only if he makes himself an object of theoretical inspection. Kant's solution to the problem of scientism was to make subjectivity immune to the attack of objectifying science.

Kant noted that scientism knows only the interrelations of material conditions and does not comprehend the absolute that is represented in basic moral experience. Scientistic reinterpretation of moral absolutes mars them beyond recognition. This is part of Kant's rejection of theoretical realism in his wider program to claim that what is real is actually consciousness of freedom or subjectivity. Yet when transcendental subjects are reduced to objects of experience, they automatically lose what constitutes them as subjects. They are suborned in the subjective. Reconstitution theoretically of the object constituting subject turns outside of Kant to realist interpretation. When evolutionary theory plays this role, it spells the end of Kant's subjective immunity.

Recent discussion of the evolutionary paradigm has been characterized by the application of Darwinian design to the entire cosmic process, as well as the origin of life, and by an attempt to reconstruct genetically transcendental subjectivity. It is typical for this moment in evolutionary theory that it refuses to bracket out subjectivity as Incommensurable, nor tries to deconstruct subjectivity as an illusion, but attempts to reconstruct it as serving our survival.

Where is the subject who will reduce the *a priori* of knowing to a product of adaptation? And what can be the truth of such a reduction, as it can be itself only a product of adaptation? Evolutionary ethics does not necessarily reject the use of the term "good" in an absolute sense but it does not provide an adequate scientific "translation" of it either. The "good" becomes "good for x, if x wants A." Evolutionary ethics merely offers a functional account, claiming that in order to prevent reflection from constantly suspending or relativizing conscious moral imperatives, the "aura" of the Absolute is tacked onto these imperatives. Yet in saying that the Absolute is useful, evolutionary theory again abolishes the Absolute. The sentence "It is good to sustain human life" now only means, "It is life sustaining to sustain human life."

Evolutionary theory can go a long way in reconstructing the basic contents of human ethics in functional terms, and can even highlight the dysfunctionality of once useful behavioral patterns (one of the main concerns of the latest publications in the field of human ethology). Yet what evolutionary theory cannot do is set out the specific form of human ethics, the form of the Absolute expressed in the

use of the "good" in a non-relative sense. Evolutionism must relativize our admiration for a worthy action, our disapproval of a detestable one. For, on the view of evolutionism, such admiration and disapproval can only indicate that this particular action is functional or dysfunctional in terms of a state in itself indifferent to value, a state the person expressing admiration or disapproval simply happens to want. The chorus of moral appeals with which the books of evolutionary thought are abundantly supplied cannot change the fact that they have first deprived these very appeals of all their force."

The discovery of the Absolute can be reconstructed. For animals the imperatives of instinct are subjectively unconditioned because they cannot reflect at all on the possibility of their being conditioned. Not until we reflect on the conditioned nature of our own passions do we confront the distinction between relative and absolute. The condition of such theoretical reflection is that we cannot understand the Absolute as relatively absolute, absolute only for us. "The experiential dimension of the Absolute can be reconstructed from the conditions of its origin, yet it is by definition a dimension for which the conditions of origin become indifferent the very moment it arises" (p. 37).

There is a deadlock between the scientific approach focusing only on conditions and the value-oriented approach focusing only on the Absolute. If we begin with a purely material world, how can we possibly reconstruct what it means to form an image of anything, let alone a correct image? A living being goes from one state of affairs to another, reacting to circumstances. Why then do human beings need to conceptualize anything at all? How can the origin of negativity be reconstructed at all without begging the question? Negativity appears in three forms: as pain, as difference (that which is other than myself), and as the notion of the Absolute. For the animal that suffers pain, that pain is fundamentally negative, something that ought not to be. To the extent that negativity is essential to how beings behave when they are in pain, pain cannot be defined behaviorally nor neurologically. Naturalistic reductions run aground in dealing with "becoming other qua other." Recognition involves seeing the other as other, as one who is more than what appears to me, while it is equally clear to me that I appear to him too. Recognizing the act of recognition is useful for survival remains extrinsic to the significance of the act of recognition, so the reductionism does not work. The Absolute implies the negation of conditional reality.

Our being an end in ourselves is completely independent from whether or not we see ourselves as a goal of nature and outcome of evolution. Even the highest claim imaginable could not provide a foundation for the idea of human dignity. The human capacity for reflection really entails the ability to distance natural ends and take up a stance towards them, either affirmative or negative. The religious view that each individual human being is a creature of God, explicitly willed as this particular person and not another, does not predetermine how God's will realizes its end.

On p. 43, Spaemann examines Karsten Bresch's argument regarding evolutionary progress. Bresch tries to promote a reverence for a process of development of ever more complex and comprehensive structures. First, the process which brought us into being is assigned retrospectively a positive value. The regularity of the process that is deemed to have brought us into being is now valued as progress *per se*. The positive evaluation that brought us into being is carried over to encompass the tendency toward the construction of ever more complex structures. Paradoxically, the process is now presented as worthy of our reverence to the extent that it leads to macro-structures which lack consciousness themselves and contain persons only as cogs in the system. Where originally the process was valued for leading to consciousness, it is now valued in a way antithetical to consciousness. This just ruins the positive evaluation of evolutionary progress.

Contemporary debates are really all about evolutionism. The term "evolution" detaches evolutionary theory from denoting changes that an organism undergoes from its origin until its end. Now it is employed to describe the emergence of organisms in the first place. Yet no one would say, "My father developed into me." You and your father related as independent individuals. This was necessary to become human, because you can become human only by communication with a Thou with whom you interact. Evolutionism always has to make substantial unities into only another aspect of the same substrate. It always must dissolve the I and Thou, so it leads to the inhuman.

Today people try to subsume beginning and ending under the concept of change. Nothing begins at all anymore because existence is no longer temporally understood. Yet for humans to live is the same thing as to exist. For evolutionism there is no end, only change. Nowhere do we find something that exists discretely. The only thing that exists is the process of becoming.

What brought us to presuppose individual substances was the experience of negativity in a threefold form: as pain, as experience of the other, and as the notion of the Absolute. All three of these Buddhism considers illusory. Spaemann mentions in passing that he thinks Buddhism is the most compatible ideology with the evolutionary worldview, but one which is also superior because evolutionism does not acknowledge, as Buddhism does, the contradiction of positing a succession of states that are, in the end, states of nothing.

Spaemann ends with prescriptive aphorisms: "It is crucial to think subjects as substances" and "Man is a self-subsistent thing."

Chapter 3: "Human Dignity"

There are basically two positions on the basis of human rights, one which attributes them to natural law, and one which sees them as merely the product of legal systems created, altered, and destroyed by human beings. The later position is held by positivists and when they talk about human rights, what they mean is mere "edicts of toleration" which can be easily revoked. A positivist holds that natural law convictions have no legal character in themselves and should not be accorded legal authority lest freedom of thought be violated. A natural law lawyer, on the other hand, would say that positing a right is a demand of natural law itself. Transcendental philosophy provides a version of natural law which, while not establishing an Ought on the basis of an Is, manages, by taking the Ought for an *a priori* fact, to secure the presupposition of every Ought. An analogous version of positivism, the functional sociological theory of right, hold that while human rights are not logical conditions of possibility, they are functional conditions of reality and they are not merely invented at will.

Natural law and positivism seem to differ more over the basis of human rights than on their content. Both sides might agree then on a right to express one's opinion freely. However, the belief that human dignity is inviolable, like the concept of freedom, is transcendental. It does not just describe one specific human right but contains within itself the basis of such things as human rights. The ambiguity in the formulation of the inviolability of human dignity (It cannot be violated, or it may not?) is a sign that it is rooted in a soil below the surface opposition of Ought and Is.

How are human dignity and human rights related? Is there a right to dignity or does dignity form the basis of each right. The idea of human dignity is older than that of human rights. Human dignity is

inviolable to the extent that other people cannot take it from you. Only you can forfeit your own dignity. All that other people can do is to affront your dignity by failing to respect it. What can be taken from the other person, however, is the opportunity for dignified self-presentation. Crucifixion in its essence is the exposing of a person to the gaze of all without any kind of self-presentation. Christian art has again and again highlighted the dignity of the crucified one even in this situation of objective indignity. Thus dignity has something to do with an inner self-possession that is independent of circumstance. Dignity is about mastering one's existence and then displaying that mastery.

In Aristotle's account of *megalopsychia*, or dignity, the magnanimous person has only great, and therefore few, purposes. He has a strong sense of self-worth so that he does not go around seeking everybody's approval. He values honor more than life.

Dignity demands a kind of distance from the natural aspects of one's existence.

The idea that human beings possess a dignity demanding absolute respect arises only with the Stoics and with Christianity. The concept of dignity points to the distinctive way in which a being is not simply an end-in-itself for itself, but an end-in-itself absolutely. The anti-ontological position which would treat human beings as ends in themselves only to themselves undermines arguments against the secret murder of the human being who has no relatives. If the human being is of value only to himself, then when he is murdered, there is no loss of value (except what he had for himself). But if we no longer exist, we no longer can suffer loss. Only two things can change this: either a human being survives his own physical death, or there exists a God who regards the human being as precious, rendering life holy. Dignity signals something sacred. The only argument against murder is a religious one. It is a mistake that persists into our own time to think that you can drop your religious view on reality without losing something else, something you would not so readily do without. (Hence Paul tells Timothy to watch his life *and* doctrine closely).

The argument for a non-functional understanding of dignity has culminated in the ascription of self-value to everything that exists. Where does the distinction lie in the general way in which everything is an end-in-itself and the specific way we use this to denote our inviolable human dignity? Non-human beings cannot take ownership of the web of purposes into which they are drawn by external forces. A human being is one who can stand back and relativize him or herself. He or she can submit his or her own interests and agendas to a wider conversation because he or she can recognize others' interests as being worthy as his or her own for consideration. By thus relativizing his or her own finite "I," the person expands to become an Absolute. The person becomes capable of "love of God carried as far as contempt of self. Human beings possess "dignity" for the sole reason that as moral beings they represent the Absolute.

Dignity is unequally distributed because it consists in the ability to stand back and let be and so the person who takes greater responsibility for other people and things than he does for himself has more dignity. Dignity can be forfeited by failing to meet the moral demands of one's office. The more a person is absorbed with his natural self and his passions and interests, the less distance he commands on himself, and therefore the less dignity he has.

It is impossible to go beneath the minimum threshold of human dignity because it is impossible because freedom for potential moral dispositions and actions cannot be lost. Human dignity is respected by both anticipating the alignment of the good and making free space required for it to

occur.

The Platonic and Aristotelian idea is that that which shows itself in a certain species most of the time is an indication of something essential to that species which always applies to it. Nominalists reject this presupposition and require demonstration of certain characteristics to recognize personhood. Even with nominalists, however, since the origins of the "I" are obscure, it can be argued that we must respect the aptitude for "I," for freedom. Unless we are to say that human rights are rewarded by a majority vote, biological membership in the species *homo sapiens* can be the only criterion which establishes the minimum threshold called human dignity.

What is the result of a belief in human dignity? Human dignity can only be violated by beings that can discern this dignity in the first place, human beings. It is a moral concept. In the context of legal distribution and enforcement, it can only be understood minimally. It serves as the ultimate, basic residuum of selfhood as potential self-determination.

Demanding unconditional respect for human dignity is incompatible with demanding its maximum "positive" promotion. Dignity functions as a constraint upon actions ostensibly serving human wellbeing. Bruno Schuller holds the view that personal dignity is a transcendental principle of morality and as such is incommensurable with all empirical values. Schuller's view ignores the fact that morality, though *a priori*, is materialized only in the empirical existence of concrete human beings. Some courses of action are always irreconcilable with human dignity. The German Federal Court determined that, on the Christian and pan-European view, the active participation in the killing of innocent human beings cannot be justified by any weighing-up of goods. Spaemann lists three other examples which, in his view, cannot be justified by any weighing-up of goods: torture, sexual exhibition for anonymous voyeurs, and the production of human beings in test-tubes.

First, we know a human being possesses a spatial shape and human dignity requires that we respect its integrity. It also possesses a temporal shape, and this is respected, in so far as it represents the Absolute, by ensuring that its beginning and end are not the result of any intentional making on the part of other human beings. The artificial extension of human life, reducing human existence to a function of instruments, also violates human dignity.

Spaemann believes that modern civilization poses a threat to human dignity unlike any that has ever existed before.

The human perspective on what it is to be human is now deemed unscientific. Scientific technical civilization characteristically eliminates physical labor but, in so doing, it deprives many human actions of their inherent meaning and the occasion for an expression of human dignity.

The notion of human dignity in truth finds its theoretical foundation only in metaphysical ontology, a philosophy of the Absolute. Atheism deprives human dignity of its foundation, and with it the possibility within civilization to reflect on the good reasons to protect human life. It is not by chance that both Nietzsche and Marx described dignity as something that still needs to be constructed rather than something that is already respected.