Human Nature

Some preliminary, theological reflections on a current intellectual battlefield

JOHANNES ZACHHUBER

The question of what human nature is appears as one of the major riddles of human history. And while in some ways we now know much more about its qualities than people have known at any time previously, we nevertheless seem not so far removed from those citizens of Thebe that could not answer the riddle of the Sphinx. All announcements that this discovery or that, most lately predominantly in the area of the so-called life sciences, would spell the end of the age-old secret of our own being have proved premature. Indeed, most recently, as if in mockery of some scientists' enthusiasm, the debate has turned into various alleys that could not be more diverse, even contradictory. Thus the metaphor of a battlefield, which I employ in the title to this communication, might be criticised not only for its perhaps overly bellicose overtones, but for a substantial imprecision.

In many ways today's controversy about human nature is not fought on one 'battlefield', it is spread out over various discourses which often seem all but unconnected. The late surge of neo-naturalism, which has come with the ascent of neuroscience and the life sciences in general, coincided with the rise of historical anthropology which, in spite of its name, comes along in many ways as fundamental criticism of all traditional anthropologies including, but not limited to, theological anthropology. While some scientists, who often argue as self-appointed philosophers of science, declare that human nature is all in our genes or in our brain cells, cultural studies inform us that human nature does not exist except as a historical or social

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construction or, better, as a large variety of such construction*s* that have governed human self-understanding and thus practically formed humanity into its multiple and manifold shapes displayed by and through human culture.

As if the irony contained in the coincidence of these two developments were not yet sufficient, the last few years have also seen a string of public debates about issues ranging from abortion to stem cell research to euthanasia. This list could easily be expanded. The fervour of those debates has highlighted, I think, the perseverance of yet another approach to human nature, which we might call the 'ethical' and which is different from both naturalism and postmodern relativism. Its underlying notion of human nature is not relativistic at all, rather strictly normative; this distinguishes it from what one might call the cultural approach. On the other hand, its notion of human nature is not the empirical thing studied and described by scientists, and thus it differs fundamentally from the scientific approach too. Rather, this 'ethical' approach refers to some ideal, by which the human being is measured and to which it is compared so that it can be judged as good or bad, their action as right or wrong.

This has been the briefest possible sketch of the vicissitudes of current debates about human nature, the 'battlefield' to which the title alluded. We are then, as I said initially, far from possessing any ready answer to the ancient riddle of our own existence. Some would even say that the question as such has been ill-conceived; that there is no such thing as human nature, only the various constructions emerging from cultural settings. Yet these same people are likely to lose their cool about human rights issues or about someone's transgression onto their own or someone else's personal dignity. Any such indignation, as could be easily demonstrated, is ultimately

based on a strong view about human nature, regardless of whether or not such people choose to make this explicit.

Within the confines of this paper I shall not be able to provide a much more detailed account of these three strands of current debate about human nature even though I realise that the sketch I have provided of them is so rough as to make it open to severe criticism. I do hope, however, that their outlines have become reasonably clear.

In the following I shall start from this threefold structure and argue that, in spite of all the novelties and discontinuities, which I have no intention of denying in the setting of today's debate, this structure is essentially not new, but reflects some real problems inherent in any attempt to come to terms with human nature. I will, in other words, reconstruct the threefold structure of today's debate as one configuration of a typical setting that is due to the very difficulty of describing and understanding what human nature is. This reconstruction will, first of all, provide me with a critical angle towards the current discourse, for it will open up the possibility, even the likelihood, that its crucial shortcoming is not in any of those strands as such, but in the reductionism inherent in many contributions to them. I will then, in a second step, be able to address, more specifically, the role theology can and ought to play today within our perennial quest for understanding human nature.

2. What then is this typical setting of attempts to understand human nature? I shall argue that it is the result of three answers, or three types of answer, that are invited by the question, 'What is human nature?' Let us examine them in turn.

The first answer, apparently, is that human nature is something. It is some being, some nature (*phusis*) or, to use the traditional Aristotelian language, a substance, a *tode ti*. It is a thing which, in so far as it is precisely this, can, and must, be likened to

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other things and, in principle, be analysed, described and understood in analogy to them. Indeed, this approach needs a conceptual framework which integrates humanity into something more encompassing, of which it is part. It is the approach of science in the widest possible sense of the word; we cannot do without it as long as we find it necessary to be able to tell apart a human being and, say, a scarecrow.

This is a *kind* or a *type* of answer more than an actual answer because it leaves open various ways of conceiving more specifically what this being is. There is, of course, a huge difference between an approach that sees being primarily as God's creation and one that sees being solely as a configuration of elementary particles, and I would be grossly misunderstood were I taken to say that this difference is in any way negligible. Nevertheless, all those answers have something in common. In the phrase human nature they emphasise, one might say, the word 'nature'; for them humanity is primarily nature, *a* nature. What is special about this emphasis may become clearer perhaps once we turn to the second possible answer.

b) To the question of what is human nature this type seems to give an answer directly opposed to the first one. For it assumes that by attending to whatever appears as the human being, one will necessarily go astray. Human nature is not so much what we see when we study or observe or experiment with empirical human beings. Rather, it is what those human beings ought to be. It is what they – or I might say: what we – were if we were what we are meant to be.

This answer, then, is non-empirical and in a limited sense we might even call it 'anti-empirical'. In any case, it defines human nature in a counter-factual way. Even if all (empirical) human beings in a given situation would betray their friends, this would not prevent us from saying that it would be truly human not to betray your friends.

Many or indeed all may fall short of the standard applied; yet this need not mean that the concept as such is false.

The traditional concept introduced to express precisely this non-empirical element into anthropology has been that of the soul as an intelligible principle of man. In an admirable passage in Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates makes it clear why he thinks a naturalistic explanation of human behaviour, as he had encountered it in Anaxagoras, does not work. Such an explanation, he argues, would cite the peculiar quality of muscles, bones and the like as the reason for his being in his current position in an Athenian jail, waiting for his execution. While this account might explain something, it would fail to notice the chief reason which is different:

> for I am inclined to think that these muscles and bones of mine would have gone off to Megara or Boeotia – by the dog of Egypt they would, if they had been guided only by their own idea of what was best, and if I had not chosen as the better and nobler part, instead of playing truant and running away, to undergo any punishment which the State inflicts.

Socrates does not deny that he could be neither here nor there without his muscles or his bones, but argues that there is a confusion of 'condition' and 'cause' where they are taken to explain his actual behaviour: 'to say that I do as I do because of them, and that this is the way in which mind acts, and not from the choice of the best, is a very careless and idle mode of speaking.'

There can be no doubt, then, that the ethical approach is not – nor could it be – entirely detached from the scientific, 'physical' approach. There would be no point in stipulating that a good human being ought to fly or live for 200 years. The difference, on which the ethical approach draws, between what human nature in any case *is* and what, in order to be properly human, it ought to be presupposes some flexibility on the physical level. Only within the space created by this flexibility can this difference operate. And yet, in order for human nature to be understood as *human* nature the

ethical approach is indispensable, for it alone gives orientation within this space left open by the physical potentials of our nature.

Just how these two work together is a problem that seems to defy penetration. It has been the chief cause of Aristotle's protestation against Plato's doctrine of the soul that the interaction between the 'muscles and bones' on the one hand and mind or soul on the other is, precisely, not elucidated in his concept. In his own account, the 'physical' approach takes precedence, but whether this does justice to the fundamental concern of the ethical approach is doubtful and arguably the cause for the continuing fascination of Plato's idealism.

c) If the first two approaches to understanding human nature are antithetical and thus necessarily related, the third one is quite different. It radicalises the emphasis on 'human' within the 'human nature', but this leads to an altogether distinct perspective. The quintessential intuition of this perspective has perhaps never been better expressed than by Karl Marx writing that 'man is *the world of man*'. For Marx himself this boils down, eventually, to the economy and the means of production, which needs not concern us here. What is meant, however, by equating 'man' and 'the world of man'? The world of man is the 'world' brought forth by human creativity – from the most fundamental, language, to social institutions like family, education and the state. Any discourse about human nature is conducted within this world; it would not exist, to the best of our knowledge, were this world not there.

It seems fairly obvious, that a full account of human nature could not be given without elaborating on all those products of humanity, which we encompass in the concept of culture. Yet this is not all: man is *the world of man* – this means that an account of culture would necessarily integrate any other account of human nature, including the

physical and the ethical ones, because they are, as such, part of the totality of what we call culture. This, I take it, is the insight also of the famous four questions listed by Kant in his lectures on metaphysics and on logic, where it is stated that the former three ('What can I know?' 'What ought I to do?' and 'For what may I hope') all refer to the final one: 'What is a human being?' making anthropology the all-inclusive subject matter of philosophy.

This approach, then, has the strongest claim to offer a comprehensive understanding of human nature. For, once we accept its basic premise that 'man is the world of man,' it would seem difficult or impossible to escape from the sweep of its all-embracing conclusions. And yet it is equally clear that the cultural approach is inextricably bound to insights into human nature that have been gained through the former two approaches. It could never even get off the ground without some preliminary physical or ethical knowledge of human nature. It is, therefore, well advised not to present itself in a way that forestalls those approaches; it ought to perfect and not destroy them, if I may put it this way.

3. We can now see perhaps a little more clearly just where we stand in today's debates. It would appear that the three fields on which intellectual controversy about human nature is taking place mirror the three types of approach that I have attempted to sketch in the preceding. This seems to me an important insight given that our culture – including both its advocates and its critics – tends to overemphasise its utter novelty, its discontinuity towards the past, its break with tradition. These features exist, but it is healthy also to realise that we in many ways continue to be heirs of our own past.

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At the same time, looking at today's debates from this particular angle helps reveal some rather striking idiosyncrasies of current approaches. I would point out here two of those.

The first and foremost is the prevalence of empiricist and naturalist principles: this is not only true for the 'physical' approach where one might be least surprised about this feature even though this is by no means self-evident. The same is, perhaps in spite of appearance, also true for large parts of the cultural studies discourse insofar as the latter, as historical anthropology, is rooted in an empirical-sociological method. I could express the same insight by saying that current debates about human nature are characterised by the striking absence of the category of mind. This tendency has not been mitigated, largely, by the 'ethical' approach simply because a substantial part of more recent ethical discourse has refrained from an explicitly anthropological grounding of ethics.

The other observation is a reductionist tendency inherent in many recent contributions. Genetics, neuroscience, cultural studies – each promise *the* ultimate answer to the question 'What is the human being?' My brief sketch of the threefold structure of attempts to answer this question should have suggested that any such reduction is unlikely to be successful. If progress is to be achieved here, it is through integration of those approaches, through a careful consideration of how they might work together rather than an attempt to demonstrate that it can all be reduced to one explanation.

3. Given that the title to this communication promises theological reflections on current debates about human nature I realise that I have tried your patience by offering up to this point an analysis that paid little heed to the peculiar perspective of

theology. And given further the limitations of this paper, it is by now clear also that my announcement to offer 'some preliminary' theological reflections is in no way an understatement. Without a proper analysis of the problem under consideration, however, theological reflections risk bypassing their topic. We must know what the question is, are we to address it properly.

There is something else to be noted. However important it may be for the world to realise that theology has something important to contribute to the understanding of human nature, for the theologian it is at least as important to realise what is at stake within his own discipline. It ought to be uncontroversial that theology stands and falls with its account of human nature. Whatever may be said about theocentric or anthropocentric theologies should not obscure this fact: eventually the Christian message, upon whose reflection theology is chiefly called, concerns human nature; it is meant to reveal something about ourselves which, it is alleged, we could not know from any other source, and this knowledge will have a transforming effect on human lives and, indeed, their destiny.

I cannot and will not expand on these fundamentals which I merely recall. I shall be equally brief sketching what the central content of this message is. Essentially, I take it, Christianity starts from a concept of anthropological difference: human nature as we experience it now is different from what it is meant to be. This difference, however, becomes only apparent in the light of the promise of a radical transformation of what is. This transformation of human nature is called salvation, and Christianity is properly described as a religion of salvation insofar as this notion stands at its very centre. This notion of salvation, however, is not only a promise, it is also already a reality. It is a reality, first of all, in the human person of Jesus Christ,

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the incarnate God, but it also a reality, at least in principle and to some extent, in the actual lives of those following Jesus and thus forming his Church.

The account so far has, of course, left out one crucial aspect, perhaps the decisive one. The anthropological difference that is at the heart of the Christian religion is conceived in terms of a relation to God who is origin and goal, *arche* and *telos*, of human nature. The current state with all its deficiencies is thus understood as a damaged or broken relationship with God, a state of estrangement from God, humanity's ultimate source; salvation, on the other hand, means the mending, the restoration of this relationship. It could, therefore, only be worked by someone who himself embodies the perfect relationship between the human and the divine, the god man.

I am here only rehearsing a story which I assume will be familiar to all of you. It is nevertheless worth recounting it even in such succinctness. For it becomes apparent almost immediately how closely related the resulting idea of human nature is to the strands that I have singled out in non-theological approaches. This is most obvious in the case of what I termed the ethical approach, and it is thus no coincidence that specifically in this area we find early Christian authors in apparent dependence on, and explicit agreement with, the Platonic tradition. Indeed they could, and did, argue that the Christian history of salvation achieved for everyone what the philosophers only announced to the very few.

Yet this is not all. By understanding the difference between the real and the ideal human being in terms of his participation in God or the lack thereof, the Christian account of human nature could also integrate the physical with the ethical approach. Insofar as human nature was understood as a creature of God who was both ultimate source of creation and the principle of all Goodness, the difference between the actual

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and the ideal state of human nature became part of a history reaching from creation to the eschaton, and whose identity was vouchsafed by the unity and the continuity of God, the creator and saviour.

Thirdly, and finally, human nature is not just any creature of God. It had been created in God's *image* and was thus unique within creation. This led, later on, to the idea of the human being as a second God who shares, not least, in his creativity. Thus, as we understand God – partly and defectively – from his works, so we may understand human nature from their works, for better or worse.

Theology can, therefore, contribute to the current discussion

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