



# **MODERN SCIENCE**

## **Threshold & Philosophical Problems**

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## CHAPTER 12

### **A SOUND PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY: A CORRECT THEORY OF HUMAN NATURE**

The twentieth century is, for good reasons, regarded as the age of technology. This is as a result of the explosion of the application of scientific knowledge. Science directly impacted the wide and broad spectrum of society. The presence of technology everywhere and its impact (positive and negative) created the need to evaluate the rationality of technology. The need to evaluate technology throws up another more fundamental need: the need to articulate a sound philosophical anthropology (a correct theory of human nature). Certainly, it is against the canvas of a correct image of man, a correct philosophical anthropology, that the rationality of technology could be perceived.

There are, generally, two thematic approaches to espousing a theory of human nature. There is the “human being” approach and there is the “being human” approach. The “human being” approach is normative. When it defines man as “rational”, for instance, it means that to be qualified as man, man ought to be rational. It does not mean to assert that in fact, man is always actually rational. When this approach defines man, it merely lays down norms about what the nature of man ought to be. The “being human” approach is existential. This approach holds that the nature or essence of man unfolds as he lives. There are no absolute essences of man. There are no norms about the nature of man. Man’s nature unfolds as he encounters reality and responds to them. This implies many theories of human nature. P.C. Okuma understands this perspectivity in the conception of man and so he says: “For the chemist...man is a complex collection of chemicals; for the existentialist, he is a tissue of possibilities; for the economist, he is a producer and a consumer; finally for the evolutionist, he is a mere beast of prey, a late-comer in the evolutionary trend.”<sup>1</sup>

In defining man, the defining pendulum usually swings between two fundamental extreme poles. These are the spiritual conception or the only-a-soul theory; and the material conception or the only-a-body theory of human nature. Thomas Hobbes, following in the tradition of only-a-body theory, states that



“whatever exists is corporeal and the scope of philosophy is limited to the study of bodies in motion.”<sup>2</sup> And Frederick Nietzsche supports: “I am my body wholly and entirely and nothing else, the soul is merely a word for something attached to the body.”<sup>3</sup> This material conception of man derives from the materialist philosophies, atomism, Epicureanism and Marxism. Atomism, for instance, postulates that all realities (man included) are the accidental results of the collision of small bits of indivisible matter called atoms. On the other extreme is the only-a-soul theory of human nature. To this theory belongs Søren Kierkegaard. He insists: “The concept of man is spirit, and no one ought to allow himself to be deceived by the fact that he can also walk on two legs.”<sup>4</sup>

Each of these extreme views of human nature is a severely unfair, imbalanced or distorted conception. None satisfactorily unravels the puzzle, the riddle, the paradox, called man. The debauchery and the degradation of human nature in modern thought derive from such one-dimensional conception of human nature. The following is a shocking instance:

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his belief, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspirations, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins – all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand.<sup>5</sup>

Man, definitely, has a better image and occupies a more enviable place in the general scheme of things than the above materialist thought presents. There is therefore an urgent need to espouse a philosophical anthropology that would place man in a respected pedestal in the general scheme of things. Such a philosophical anthropology should present man as a composite being, a being composed of the material and the moral. J. Mouroux captures this composite nature of man in the following lines: “The composite being of man is neither animal nor angel, but partakes of both; and in him are accumulated all the paradoxes of an essence composed of contrary principles, of a being situated outside place and time, and developing in place and time.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus the cryptic expression the “nature of man” is sentential. It encapsulates a lot of meanings, some of them apparently contradictory. Part of the meaning is that man is material and as such is subject to the physical laws of nature. Man is bound by the physics of space and time. Another part of the meaning is that man is moral. Man has a nature evocative of spiritual emotion, something that transcends space and time, some nature that overreaches the self. Thus man is a radical link between the world of matter and the world of spirit.

Life is of the essence of man. Life is the vital principle of metabolic activities. It is that which groups together plant and animal and man but differentiates them from other things. Every attempt to make intelligible the origin of life, biological, chemical, theological, philosophical, et cetera, demonstrates one hard-to-accept fact, that the origin of life, the source from which life springs, is unfathomable. We can say that life begins at the moment of conception and stops at death. But this has not answered the question of origin. Since the origin of life is shrouded in the cover of unintelligibility. It is beyond our powers to grasp. Life is a mystery, it is sacred. These are ways of registering our respect for something as awesome as life.

From the moment of conception, every life is separate, personal, and unrepeatable. This implicates the uniqueness or individuality of every life. This nature of man has serious implication for the morality of life.

One of the significant essences of man is that he is autonomous. Man wills. He is self-determining. This implies his creativity, freedom and responsibility. Defining man in this connection Nietzsche says, “man invents man”. It is in this regard that man is said to be a bundle of possibilities. The “being human” approach to the definition of man hinges on the autonomy of man. Autonomy, however, demands responsibility. If man is independent and free to act of his own volition, then he must also be responsible for his choice action. Responsibility is a graceful essence of man. It makes a man a real man. Joseph Fletcher puts it this way: “To be men we must be in control, that is the first and last ethical word, for when there is no choice, there is no possibility of ethical action. Whatever we are compelled to do is amoral...”<sup>7</sup>

Freedom and responsibility differentiate human act from the act of man. Human act puts man in a pedestal different and higher than other animals. This is why man is defined as the paragon of animals and the beauty of creation.

Closely connected to the above is man’s ability to search and strive for truth and knowledge. This ability springs from man’s rational or intellectual nature. This is



among man's highest qualities because with it he can understand, plan and re-design the world. Many philosophers underscore this as the quintessential essence of man. John Locke says it is "...that faculty whereby man is supposed to be distinguished from beast, and wherein it is evident he much surpasses them."<sup>8</sup> And Sir W. Hamilton adds: "In the world, there is nothing great but man, in man there is nothing great but the mind."<sup>9</sup> Sophocles had earlier declared, "Many mighty things exist but none is mightier than man." To be added to man's intellective nature is his auto-consciousness. Like other animals he is conscious but above other animals he is auto-conscious. This means he is capable of self-knowledge (or self-reflection) and consequently self-improvement.

This brings us to the issue of the "end" of life or the natural goal which man strives to achieve. The end or the goal which man aims to achieve is humanization – to be more fully human, the challenge to be man and be fully man. Socratic exhortation: "Man know thyself", is given in this regard. To be more fully human implies self-cultivation, self-actualization, self-fulfillment and self-perfection. It implies total enlightenment or wisdom in an optimally developed material condition. Of course the latter is necessarily sequel to self-perfection.

From the above theory of human nature we derive a principle of the morality of human life. Man is an end in itself and not a means to an end. Hence human life at every stage must be respected and treated as such. Man cannot be treated as a mere object of laboratory experimentation or manipulation; else we lose respect for man.

We also deduce that the dignity of the human person is inviolable, not a matter of convention; that is, something that can be granted or taken as one fancies. Human dignity does not even ensue from man's achievements, his contributions to society, his function, physical beauty, age or other extraneous factors. Human dignity stems from the sanctity of human life, from the inalienable essences of man.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>3</sup>F.W. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Trans. Thomas Common, New York:

<sup>4</sup>S. Kierkegaard, *Either-or*, Gena: Gotlesched Schrempt, 1909, P.23

<sup>5</sup>E.A. Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1954. P.23

<sup>6</sup>J. Mouroux, *The Meaning of Man*, New York: Image Books. 1961. P.115

<sup>7</sup>J. Fletcher, "Ethical Aspect of Genetic Control", in *New England Journal of Medicine*, 1971, P. 783.

<sup>8</sup>John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book IV Chapter 17 Section 4. Britain: Colins Fount Paperback, 1964, P.419

<sup>9</sup>W. Harmilton in J. Obi-Okogbue, *Idols of The Human Reason and Fallacies in Logic*, Owerri: Assumpta Press, 1999, P.7



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