What is man?

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Roger Scruton
ON HUMAN NATURE

160pp. Princeton University Press. £17.95 (US $22.95). 978 0 691 16875 3

If you were asked to explain philosophy to an anthropologist from Mars, you could do worse than begin with Kant’s three questions: What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope? These questions define the project of philosophy in the Critique of Pure Reason and they have stood the test of time. It is perhaps more surprising that, in lectures published nineteen years later, Kant subsumes his questions under a fourth. In asking what we can know, what we should do, and what we may hope, he contends, we are asking: What is man? At bottom, all philosophy is anthropology.

This is not a fashionable thought. For most contemporary thinkers, the study of human nature has gone the way of biology, psychology, and linguistics, gathered in from the philosophical nursery into the laboratory of science. Our nature is an empirical subject like the nature of any animal species and it is to be studied in much the same way. Philosophy has no more claim to human nature than it does to the nature of fish.

To a first approximation, the aim of Roger Scruton’s eloquent, uncompromising book is to take us back to Kant. Not afraid to be unfashionable, Scruton wants to repossess our common nature as a subject for philosophy and a basis for ethics. The result is a luminous sketch of what we are, or might be, that will inspire some readers and infuriate others.

Among those likely to be infuriated are scientists who investigate human nature with the tools of evolutionary biology. Scruton cites Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Steven Pinker. Though he paints with a broad brush, he is justifiably impatient with attempts to reduce the human phenomena of art, reason, and morality to genetic adaptations. It doesn’t help to invoke Dawkins’s “meme” (units of cultural selection) since the theory of their survival is a patchwork of conjectures and tautologies that omits what is most essential: our rational engagement with ideas. We are self-conscious rational beings and our rationality does not reduce to the mechanics of genes or memes, or to the science of the human brain.

Reductionism is a live issue in the philosophy of mind and Scruton is not alone in fighting it. Part of what is distinctive of his view is that he treats our irreducible rationality not just as a fact about us but as defining what we are.

“When we talk of creatures like us,” he insists, “we do not necessarily refer to our species membership … it is ‘person’ not ‘human being’ that is the true name of our kind”. A person is a locus of self-consciousness and consciousness of others; “We are the kind of thing that relates to members of its kind through interpersonal attitudes and through the self-predication of its own mental states”. This is our essence, which is not revealed by human biology but by philosophical reflection on self-conscious thought: “your being this person is what (or who) you essentially are. Hence you could not cease to be this person without ceasing to be”.

Once more, Scruton is not alone: he cites Boethius, Aquinas, Locke and Kant. But his view is deceptively radical. If he is right, we are not self-consciously human beings, but rather self-conscious persons. If there are “members of some other species, or of no biological species at all, who exhibit the same complexity and are able to engage with us, to I… they belong with us in the order of things”. What differentiates us from the Martian anthropologist is not our basic nature – it is a person, too – but our organic constitution and environment. The same point holds for persons without bodies. We are, if not ghosts in machines, then angels incarnate. That is why it is impossible in any account of what we are that our nature dies, but by the same token, we did not exist before it came to be. Since there is every reason to doubt that a newborn infant can self-predicate mental states, it follows that you and I were never born. Our mothers gave birth to mere animals, not persons. We came into existence later, where those animals were.

What happened to them? Did they cease to exist, replaced by the persons we are? More plausibly, on a view like Scruton’s, they continue to constitute us. We are the statues to which organic beings, but the questions do not end here. If the animals we sprang from constitute us now, do they have minds of their own? If not, adult human beings are distinguished from other animals by their incapacity for thought! But if the animals that constitute us think, these are two thinkers here, an animal and a person. How should we make sense of self-consciousness when there is more than one candidate for being me?

In short, the idea that we are not essentially human beings, but persons constituted by beings, runs into paradox. But if the animals we sprang from constitute us now, do they have minds of their own? If not, adult human beings are distinguished from other animals by their incapacity for thought! But if the animals that constitute us think, these are two thinkers here, an animal and a person. How should we make sense of self-consciousness when there is more than one candidate for being me?

At the same time, Scruton does not want to undermine ethics or to alienate its principles from our nature. That is why he needs a conception of our nature as persons, not human beings, and a conception of persons that is implicitly ethical: “Personhood emerges when it is possible to relate to an organism in a new way – the way of personal relations … with persons we are in dialogue: we call upon them to justify their conduct and we judge them by the same standards we use for ourselves”. On this foundation, Scruton hopes to build an ethics of reciprocity at odds with the consequentialism of Derek Parfit or Peter Singer. Their calculative approach to the greater good he finds repugnant, tracing the barbarism of Lenin and Mao to the consequentialist arithmetic of ends and means. The stakes could not be higher.

The problem is that, while Scruton’s picture is alluring, it is a fantasy to hope that ethics can be founded on the bare idea of interaction among rational beings, without taking into account our conduct being me? Scruton’s book would influence more of us to wonder what it means.