

Roger Scruton  
ON HUMAN NATURE  
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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, graduating 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 "memes" (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 fundamentally 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, I 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 only a first approximation to say that Scruton takes us back to Kant and the question: What is man? *On Human Nature* is not, in the end, a book about human nature. It is not about what makes us distinctively human, as opposed to Martian, or angelic. It is about the nature we allegedly share with every rational being. By rights, there should be a similar book on Mars, with an equally misleading title, *On Martian Nature*, whose contents are virtually the same.

Something has gone wrong. If we are essentially self-conscious and cease to exist when that capacity dies, then 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 their organic clay. 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, there 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 human beings, runs into paradox. Scruton is aware of the difficulties, though he shrugs them off. He can be forgiven for this in a short book intended for a general audience. But the puzzles are profound. The idea that we are fundamentally human beings is not reductionist prejudice or misguided deference to the cultural authority of science but scientifically educated common sense.

Why is Scruton so attached to his conception of what we are? Even if he is right to believe that rationality is irreducible, it doesn't follow that we are essentially rational. Being self-conscious and conscious of others: these are properties we acquire and will eventually lose. Why think otherwise? The answer is ethical. If virtues and obligations are explained by what we are, rooted in our nature, and they are the same for all rational beings, Martians and angels alike, our nature must be the same as theirs. The alternative is an unseemly dependence of ethics on the human condition. It is, in effect, an ethical relativism, a relativism of species or life-forms. If ethics is explained by what we are and our nature differs from that of the Martian anthropologist, our virtues and obligations differ, too.

Though he did not imagine life on Mars, this is more or less what Aristotle thought. Accord-

ing to his *Nicomachean Ethics*, since "what is healthy or good is different for men and for fishes, but what is white or straight is always the same, anyone would say that what is wise is the same but what is practically wise is different". Theoretical wisdom, knowledge of the timeless truths of logic, mathematics, and physics, may be the same for all rational beings, but practical wisdom is not. The ethics of rational fish would no more align with ours than their medical science. Each turns on the nature of fish, as ours depend on human nature.

Scruton does not address this vision explicitly or give voice to the anxieties it provokes. He conspicuously avoids it. Humanity does not play for him the role it plays for Aristotle. 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 in our eyes, as we must justify our conduct in theirs". On this spare 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. For Kant, Scruton writes, "the motive toward [altruism, forgiveness and the pursuit of virtue] is implicit in the very fact of self-consciousness". But despite a footnote insisting otherwise, this view is not widely shared. Nor is it credible. One way to see this is to picture a species of rational consequentialists, sacrificing one another for the greater good. Star Trek has Mr Spock, for whom the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. If the ethics of reciprocity is contained in the nature of personhood, as Scruton claims, such beings could not be self-conscious or conscious of one another, not without their consciousness conflicting with consequentialism. This reflects a failure of imagination. Science fiction tells of rational beings more wildly unlike us than Spock, beyond pointy ears to differing modes of reproduction and sustenance, sociality and solitude, life and death. They are not impossible and their ethics need not be ours.

It is not just a bloodless fear of relativism that protests against the involvement in ethics of our specifically human nature. It is fear of what an unprejudiced examination of our nature would reveal. A clinical look at what we are in light of biology, social psychology, and the dismal history of humanity might disclose a nature we cannot embrace. What if human beings turn out to be naturally selfish, vengeful, sexist? Would it follow that we ought to be? One recoils from the thought. But then we are left in a difficult place. Scruton's book explores a possible way out. I have been emphasizing its difficulties, though I do not want to downplay its appeal. Others hope to save the objectivity of ethics by divorcing it from our nature altogether.

Both responses are premature. Imagine the grim discovery that we are hard-wired for self-

interest, or revenge, or sexist attitudes. Why isn't the fact that so many of us recoil from this itself some evidence of human nature? That we know in advance that we would not treat such discoveries as guides to life may not be a sign that ethics is independent of what we are but a manifestation of the human nature on which it rests. Our anxiety about the facts of our nature and how they might turn out may partly answer itself.

I don't mean to be sanguine. My point is not that we already know what human nature is. In fact, the opposite: my point is a Socratic one, about the depth of our ignorance. In discussing human nature, we are speculating about a question we don't know how to ask, much less to answer. The bait-and-switch of Scruton's title brings out how little contemporary work there is in philosophical anthropology. Even the most basic issues remain unsettled. When we talk about human nature, do we intend something invariant, an essence we share with the sapiens who travelled out of Africa thousands of years ago? Does it change over time, like the contents of the book our Martian anthropologist would write if it were asked to describe how human beings live today? Does human nature mesh with history in some more subtle way, as it did for Vico or Marx? Kant's fourth question is rarely asked by Anglophone philosophers. I wish the provocation of Roger Scruton's book would influence more of us to wonder what it means.