

Reflections on the Natural and the Supernatural in Man

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According to the Christian view, based on the Biblical accounts of the Creation, humans appear to be the sole beings who, on this earth, are explicitly called to share the divine life. So humans belong to two worlds: with all the Creation they are a part of nature but their destiny (and already their present life) has a definite supernatural character.

The grounding of humankind in nature, that we see at present through a biological evolution, is expressed, as we know, at the very beginning of the Bible. In the second account of the Creation, which is the earlier account, we read: “The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground” (Gen 2:7). This is said only of man. But it is in the first account that man is created with a surprising qualification: he is created in the image and the likeness of God (Gen 1:27).

It is clear that nature cannot raise humans to such a level; it would be a contradiction since we are dealing here with a specifically supernatural level. But this has far-reaching consequences: any definition of man, in order to be complete, must necessarily include a theological element as well as a natural basis. It seems that these requirements are fulfilled in the following attempt: “Humans are the beings that biological evolution has brought to a level which enables them to receive the gift of the spirit in order to respond to the call of God.

The gift of the spirit! We really enter here into the core of the subject we wish to tackle but we have to begin by looking at questions of terminology which at first may seem to be of secondary importance. However, as I shall try to show later on, I think that the debate goes further than a simple question of words: it throws light on the status of man.

In order to characterise this status, a classic statement of Christian theology says that God creates immediately each “spiritual soul” and that man is a unity comprising a body and a soul.

Such ideas are, as expected, to be found again in the new Catechism of the Catholic Church published in Latin at the end of 1992 and translated since into various languages. The paragraphs bearing the numbers 355 to 383 deal in particular with the creation and the status of man.

However, such fundamental questions have, of course, been the subject of much speculation through the centuries. It is thus not astonishing to find, in a historical survey, a variety of interpretation without (and this remark is important) such diversity necessarily entailing divergence or disagreement.

The Catechism refers to one of these non-divergent interpretations. In paragraph 367 we read: “Sometimes, the soul is distinguished from the spirit.” For instance, one may read this prayer of St Paul: “May the God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Th 5:23). And the Catechism adds this comment: “The Church teaches that such a distinction does not introduce a duality within the soul. The ‘spirit’ means that man is called since his creation to a supernatural destiny and that his soul has the capacity to be raised gratuitously to communion with God.”

Thus, the anthropology that one might consider as the official one in the Catholic Church is bipartite: man is a unity with a body and a soul, and this soul, created by God, is spiritual.

Nevertheless, quite a number of theologians throughout history have followed the views of St Paul more directly where this great Apostle sees man as a whole with a spirit, a soul and a body. This is precisely what the Jesuit Father Henri de Lubac (now a Cardinal) reminds us of in a study significantly entitled “*Anthropologie tripartite*” (Tripartite anthropology).¹ Basing his study on numerous examples, beginning with the early Fathers of the Church but followed with others throughout the centuries, the author mentions that this vision “has constantly provided a basis for doctrine and spiritual life in the tradition of the Church.”²

For myself, being not a theologian but a scientist eager to ensure a harmony between my scientific vision of the world and my faith, I feel a duty to indicate the reasons for my sympathy with the tripartite anthropology.

First, it seems to me that it secures in a better way the integrity of the natural aspect of human beings, that part of them which arises from the evolution of the animal world. In the light of this anthropology, the gift of the spirit, which transforms an hominoid into a true human, must be attributed to a complete living being. Now, any animal has not only a body but also a “psyche” which directs its behaviour. In other words, using a terminology which may appear somewhat “archaic” today but which keeps its value, an animal has also a body and a “soul,” this “soul” being understood as a unifying and informative centre. Hence the perspective of bipartite anthropology leads one to fear that this aspect of a natural unifying centre is somewhat blurred, even wiped out, when the soul is explicitly said to mean the spiritual principle in man (see paragraph 363 of the Catechism). Is there any room then left for the “animal” (or natural) soul that the living being called by God should have possessed as well? And if there is no room for this natural soul, the “spiritual principle” immediately created by God seems to have been allocated to a being restricted only to a body. In such a perspective, the integrity of the contribution of nature may be judged to be only partially respected.

Some people may argue that the “spiritual soul” includes the natural soul of the living being but, then, you would be led to distinguish two levels in the soul. In other words, a tripartite perspective would be reintroduced under a bipartite terminology! But such a tripartite vision, with two elements recognized under the same term, seems to me definitely less appropriate than the one directly expressed in the Pauline verse of the first Epistle to the Thessalonians. And in another passage (1 Cor 2:14-15) St Paul distinguishes the man with natural gifts from the man with spiritual gifts. The first, in contrast to the second, “is not able to receive the gifts of the Spirit of God.” Such a language cannot be applied to a being restricted to a body and the distinction can be put in parallel with the one between the (natural) soul and the spirit.

One finds in the work of Father de Lubac a nuance of terminology which may throw some light here.³ The present author considers it as very important. If it is admitted that the body and the soul are both part of man’s constitution, (they are said to be of man), the spirit, on the other hand, is said to be “within man” or “in him,” expressions which correspond to a gift from outside. Thus tripartite anthropology offers, according to our views, a better understanding of the respective contributions of nature and of divine grace.

Of course, the gift of the spirit changes the whole human condition. In another passage of his work, Father de Lubac enumerates its consequences: the spirit is in man the seat of a higher life, ethical, religious, mystical; it is the seat of the Christian life, a life which is not a mere question of feeling but of faith.⁴

For a scientist who tries to picture evolution (if he is open-minded enough to admit extra-scientific contributions), to take the gift of the spirit into account throws light on the sharp contrast to be noted with the emergence of man between the somatic and the psychic “jumps” which characterise this emergence. We learn that man and the chimpanzee have a chromosomic patrimony differing by about only 1%. This refers to the somatic side. But on the psychic side, one really enters into another world! And it is this fundamental change which justifies the placing of man on a different level from the animals in the hierarchy of the main landmarks of evolution.

With the gift of the spirit, humans become personal, relational, free and creative beings and thus responsible beings.

I like to emphasize this last characteristic. This does not mean that I do not appreciate the numerous works pointing to the differences between humans and animals in the fields of language, of tools (notably tools for making other tools), or the recognition of signals, etc. But in my view, human specificity appears to be much more decisive in the emergence of responsibility, which is a fruit of freedom. Nobody would ever attribute responsibility to any other being except man. The intrusion of ethics accompanying the emergence of man (of true man should I say) is something completely new for, in contrast with tools, there is no sketch of ethics in

nature before the appearance of man. Thus, something fundamentally new must have happened, something that the great neurophysiologist J.C. Eccles qualifies as non-material.⁵ And something so new is better foreshadowed if we admit the Christian vision of divine intervention.

Of course, we enter here into a domain which is right outside the scientific sphere. But when the integrity of humans is at stake, science alone cannot describe them completely. As Dr. John Durant rightly said during the ESSSAT [European Society for the Study of Science and Theology] Conference at Enschede in 1988, science cannot explain the advent of a subject, of a responsible personality.⁶ It is quite meaningful, in this respect, that in the second account of the Creation in the book of Genesis, there is in the midst of the garden granted to Adam and Eve the tree “which brings knowledge of good and of evil” while they are forbidden to eat its fruits. This shows that humans are beings bound with ethical rules in a religious context. This is surely one of their most distinctive marks. Nature knows individuality but not personality, it knows the unforeseeable but not freedom.

Humans as relational beings show also new characteristics closely linked with ethics. Relations between similar beings are widespread in nature but no human society may be compared with a bee-hive or an anthill. A Japanese primatologist of Belgian origin, Father Jean Kitahara-Frisch, underlines an interesting difference regarding the behaviour of prehistoric human groups and chimpanzees. The traces left by the first are best interpreted as showing a sharing of the products of the hunt or of the picking of leaves or fruits. But there is no sharing in the groups of primates: a chimpanzee will leave a disabled companion alone, everyone looks out for himself only and any help is unknown. (One must of course consider separately the feeding of offspring which is instinctive).⁷

The sharing of food among prehistoric human groups shows that, from the beginning, the behaviour of man is governed by ethics. The Bible will accentuate this character: let us but refer to the famous chapter 25 of the Gospel according to St Matthew. However, man is free and he may act either way. We may find in the opposite direction another distinction between man and animals: there are fights between animals but only men can reach in their struggles a degree of perversity. This observation brings us back to the first chapters of the book of Genesis, namely to the history of the fall. Humans, being free, may rightly or wrongly make use of the gift of the spirit. There is no sin on earth before the advent of humankind.

The emergence of the human personality and of his destiny are at the heart of the question of the meaning of life. In the perspective which has associated a scientific evolving vision and a theological view of man, God appears to have completed a process of hominisation by a humanisation. And man’s model is Christ: Ecce Homo! We are created in God’s image and our vocation is to look like Him.

References

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- 3) Ibid. p. 1274) Ibid. p. 125
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