

Praxeology

AN ANTHOLOGY

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Conceptual Competence and the Nature of Man

1. In our philosophical tradition, the topic of the nature of man has been discussed for more than two thousand years. The outcome has been a proliferation of views rather than unanimity on central points. The philosophical conceptions of the nature of man are legion, from Plato's and Aristotle's picture of human life as action guided by reflection and experience, reason and emotion forming a harmonious whole, through Christian notions of man as a sinful creature partaking in the salvation plan of the Almighty God, to Hobbes' view of man as an egoistic and rational creature obliged to form coalitions with his fellow egoists in order to safeguard his basic needs, and so on.

Against the background of the manifold of views concerning the nature of man, Sartre's stance in "L'existentialisme est un humanisme" is highly understandable: there is no nature of man which is given once and for all; as far as man is concerned, his existence comes before his essence; man is thrown into the world and free to form his own nature. Man is only what he makes himself into, proclaimed Sartre, and continued to state that man is responsible not only for his own isolated individuality but for all mankind. And so he became the spokesman of a secularized view of the nature of man, in which a Kantian ethics of responsibility played a prominent part.

Sartre's modernized version of Kant deserves sympathy and respect, but the quick leaps to the conclusions stand in need of scrutiny. One way in which philosophers can contribute to clarification of the problems of the nature of man is by reflection on the kinds of arguments which can possibly be adduced for and against various conceptions of man. How can we argue for and against propositions concerning the nature of man? I can think of at least two different ways here.

Many statements concerning human nature which are claimed to be

universally true turn out to have a more local validity than they pretend to have. The starting-point for reflection on human nature has traditionally not included the predicaments of women, to take one example. And if one talks to a person who thinks (like Frederick Taylor, the father of modern production technology) that men and women are lazy by nature and that it therefore is necessary to have both economic incentives and close supervision to safeguard productivity, it may turn out that he is thinking of our kind of society only and that he is uninterested in the kind of arrangements which would perhaps be viable in utterly different circumstances. More or less local statements concerning human nature of this kind have a strong normative element in them; they form part of the perspective in which the world is regarded and are therefore not open to empirical falsification in a simple, straightforward way. But it would be unsafe to conclude from this that statements of this kind have no empirical elements in them. Sometimes statements of this kind are open to revision in the light of experience, though not in an immediate, straightforward way. It may take a long time to undermine a segregationist's view of man with arguments, but it is not *a priori* impossible.

The other kind of statement on the nature of man which I have in mind consists of statements which pretend to be necessarily true. Man is sometimes said to be a rational creature. This can be interpreted as a statement to the effect that man is essentially rational, so that it is impossible to conceive of a creature lacking rationality without at the same time dispensing with the specifically human. It is a peculiarly philosophical task to try to establish statements of this kind with the help of thought experiments, reflection on the necessary conditions of human practices, and critique of alternative views which are untenable for *a priori* reasons.

2. Consider again Sartre stating that man is free and responsible both for himself and for everybody else. In order for Sartre to be able to state this he must be able to reflect on the predicament of human beings. A necessary condition for the possibility of commenting on the nature of man is having the ability to reflect on the nature of man. One of the characteristics of human nature is, indeed, the ability to reflect upon what it is to be human. Self-reflection belongs to the specifically human, and this is a proposition which has more than local validity. It is an *a priori* truth which can only be seen to be true through reflection, for instance in the form of thought experiments to the contrary.

Are there further conditions which must be fulfilled in order for us to be able to reflect upon our own situations? Descartes is one of those who have emphasized that self-reflection belongs to that which is cha-

racteristically human. “Cogito, ergo sum” expresses an insight into the fact that self-reflection is a necessary component in the existence of man. Descartes supposed that an isolated, bodiless consciousness could be able to reflect upon itself and the world. This is a presupposition which seems untenable.

Why is it impossible for a completely isolated mind to reflect upon itself and its world? One of the answers is: because a completely isolated mind cannot have a language. Descartes presupposed that the isolated mind is fully able to think, that is, that it masters a good number of concepts and that it can use the concepts to make statements and perhaps other kinds of utterances as well. But is it possible for a completely isolated mind which has had no contact with other minds, not to speak of bodies, to learn to use concepts at all?

The notion of the isolated mind without body and yet in direct contact with the world presupposes amongst other things that it is possible to have a language which is completely private and both practically and theoretically out of reach for all others. To see why this is impossible one can reflect upon what Wittgenstein says in § 258 of *Philosophical Investigations*:

Let us imagine the following case. I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign ‘E’ and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation. — I will remark first of all that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated. — But still I can give myself a kind of ostensive definition. — How? Can I point to the sensation? Not in the ordinary sense. But I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate on the sensation — and so, as it were, point to it inwardly. — But what is this ceremony for? for that is all it seems to be! A definition surely serves to establish the meaning of a sign. — Well, that is done precisely by the concentration of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connection between the sign and the sensation. — But ‘I impress it on myself’ can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connection *right* in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can’t talk about ‘right’.

In order for the diarist to be able to decide whether E occurs or not he must have some method or technique for deciding whether E occurs or not. He must have a criterion which enables him to distinguish between correct and incorrect uses of the expression ‘E’. The point can be generalized: all normal uses of language presuppose that there are ways of distinguishing between right and wrong uses. We have to have crite-

ria for the correct use of our expressions, and the criteria cannot be absolutely private, for then the possibility of distinguishing between correct and incorrect uses evaporates. (If there is a key to the code, there is no reason why just one individual and no one else should be able to use it.)

If one reflects upon cases like this, one can begin to see why the completely isolated mind could never acquire a language in the first place. All use of language is public, or builds upon the public use of language. All meaningful use of language presupposes methods of correction, which again presupposes an intersubjective space. Linguistic activities are basically public activities in a common social space. When we have learnt a language through acting in social space, we can withdraw to solitude and reflect in private. Descartes assumed that the process can be reversed, but it seems that this cannot possibly be so.

The insight that language is essential for our being conscious, rational beings and the insight that language is essentially a social phenomenon are examples of non-trivial insights into necessary circumstances. They are non-trivial insights against the background of Cartesian ideas about the possibility of isolated minds, which along with Platonic and Christian ideas about the separateness of mind and body have become part and parcel of the common-sense view of the world. The statement that man is a language-using, social and self-reflecting creature is not thrown out by me to help to spread an alternative ideology concerning the nature of man. What I want to remind you of is that there are circumstances which are basic to all ideologies of human nature, necessary conditions for the possibility of human thought and action, which can only be uncovered by reflection. To uncover "transcendental conditions" of this kind I regard as a specifically philosophical contribution towards understanding human nature.

3. There are things which are so close to us that it is difficult to see them, like our languages and bodies. The discovery of the central roles of our language and bodies in human existence belongs to our own century. Descartes started from the assumption that man is a combination of mind and body, the problem being to account for their unity. The traditional ways of tackling the problems of human nature build on the same kind of assumption: psycho-physical parallelism, for instance, or various versions of "materialism" ("Only the body exists really") and "idealism" ("Only the mind exists really"). A more rewarding way of tackling the problems is to scrutinize the starting-point which gives rise to the problems of body and mind: Is it possible to conceive of a bodiless, isolated mind having the properties which are usually ascribed to minds?

The assumption that a pure mind can have access to the world in a direct, speechless fashion lies at the bottom of traditional conceptions of knowledge and man ("rationalism" as well as "empiricism"). The pure mind confronting the world is somehow able to label the things in the world, which as it were structures itself for the observing mind. Even Kant, who emphasized the structuring role of the mind in the production of knowledge, did not discover the fundamental role of language.

To get a perspective on the traditional labeling view of language one can reflect on the conditions which must be fulfilled in order for us to be able to use simple everyday expressions. "Give me an apple!" I said to my daughter when she was eighteen months old, and she gave me an apple. How was it possible that my uttering those words could have this result? In order for my daughter to be able to do what she did she must have acquired a number of abilities. She must have learned what it means to give someone something. She must have learned to distinguish between apples and other things like pears and bananas and toys. She must have learned to grasp things with her hands. She must have learned to see in certain ways, e.g. to organize her surroundings as consisting of a certain thing (an apple) against a certain background. She must have learned the role of certain words in all this. An eighteen months old child has a more or less clear comprehension of all those things. She might have had rather vague notions of what giving is, but she was well under way as far as elementary conceptual competence was concerned.

Conceptual competence is thus a complex consisting of visual, cognitive, linguistic and motor abilities; the list can be added to. And those abilities are acquired at the same time, more or less. It is not the case that the child first learns to see and to hear and to move, and afterwards to use the culturally conventional labels for the things and processes and institutions it has already got to know. To learn a language is to learn ways of handling reality. To master a concept means to be able to do things. Conceptual competence is internally related to action competence. Therefore it remains a mystery how a bodiless Cartesian mind could acquire even simple concepts like 'apple' and 'toy'. For normally the conceptual competence which is required to be able to think about oneself and the world is built up conjointly with the corporeal competence which by definition no Cartesian mind can have.

4. If we learn about reality through language, it would be plausible to expect that different languages lead to different conceptions of reality. In the philosophy of language, the standard example is the different colour terminologies one finds in different natural languages. Where one

language uses one word for “brown”, another language might use say six hundred different words, making it necessary for the language users to observe in different ways. Different colour languages demand different visual competencies from the users. And, in general, different concepts demand different competencies from the concept users, which implies that in some sense the users don’t experience quite the same reality. It is, for instance, impossible to date the discovery of oxygen exactly for the reason that our concept of oxygen has developed gradually. In 1774—75, Joseph Priestley produced something which he referred to as dephlogisticated air, but what he produced was not pure oxygen. At the same time Lavoisier by heating the red oxide of mercury produced something which he called “air itself entire without alteration except that it comes out more pure, more respirable”. But oxygen is not “pure air”. To his death, Lavoisier had a misconceived idea of the nature of the gas which he managed to produce. The observations of Priestley, Lavoisier and Scheele must be considered as so many steps on the way to the conceptual revolution which was completed only with the emergence of the full-fledged concept of oxygen. In order to apprehend the aspect of reality which we refer to as “oxygen” a conceptual competence is required which existed only in a rudimentary form at the end of the eighteenth century.

That there are internal (conceptual) relations between our concepts and the ways in which we act and comprehend reality is (I suggest) a necessary feature of all human practices. Let me end with an illustration from the field of ethics. Our views on what is right and wrong, good and bad, are closely tied to our views of human nature, and that this is so is perhaps more easy to see in others than in ourselves. When I taught philosophy at the University of Khartoum in the early sixties, virtually all the students came from the Northern Sudan, Muslims with Arabic as their mother tongue or school language. The categories they used to grasp human relationships were the traditional Arab ones (as I gradually discovered): honour and dignity, decency and self-respect, courage and generosity (in certain senses of those words), and so on. The view on the nature of man which my Sudanese informants communicated to me was that all human beings are naturally endowed with characteristics which can be referred to as “dignity”, “honour”, “self-respect”, “decency”. Women and children are, however, weak and stand in need of the protection of adult men (the father or guardian, the husband, the oldest son). Women are above all the carriers of virtues like decency and honour. If a woman loses her honour in this sense, this will also affect the honour, in a wider sense, of her family and relatives. The dignity and self-respect of an individual depend upon the family’s honour, for sure, but above all they are vulnerable to “insults”. It there-

fore becomes extremely important to behave in such a way that it becomes perfectly clear that insults are not "accepted". And what this means can only be clarified through examples. It is because women and children don't react with sufficient emphasis when insulted that it is difficult to say that they have dignity, and the same applies to the "slaves", the descendants of the captives taken in the South in the last century, and of course to foreigners.

The concepts of honour and dignity, decency and self-respect play a fundamental role in the Northern Sudanese view of the world, and not only there. These conceptions belong to the cultural heritage of the Arab World, including both Muslims and for instance Egyptian Copts. The concepts of honour and dignity etc. help to structure the world in ways which are not totally unlike the role which Kant ascribed to the categories (causality, unity and manifold, etc.). When Napoleon arrived in Egypt in 1798, he wanted to impress the natives by launching a "montgolfier", a newly invented large balloon filled with hot air. An Arab chronicler described the event in the following way: "The French fabricated a monster which rose up into the sky with the intention of reaching and insulting God. But it rose only to a feeble height, then fell back, ridiculously impotent" (quoted from R. Patai, *The Arab Mind*, p. 270). The French engineers witnessed a process which they could describe in physical and technical terms. The Arab onlookers saw something rather different in terms of their categories of dignity and respect: an impious attempt to affect the dignity of God, which naturally did not succeed and fell back on the dignity of the perpetrators themselves, who suffered a great loss of face.

The examples which I have given in the last few paragraphs illustrate, like the Taylor example in the beginning, views on the nature of man which have no more than local validity. A generalized version of Kuhn's notion of paradigm might be useful at this juncture. In the same way as the doings of chemists are determined by their paradigms, including their views of the territory they are investigating, one could say that the doings of anybody engaged in a practice of a certain kind are conditioned by his paradigm, including his views on the aspect of reality in question. The core of a paradigm in the sense intended here consists of a number of key concepts together with the paradigm cases which fix the meaning of the concepts and a number of views on how to proceed with the activity in question, the nature of the territory one operates upon, etc. Human practices can then be seen to be tied to paradigms by necessity, and this might help us to grasp the status of the first type of statements upon human nature (those which are not unconditionally true *a priori* but have a local validity only): precisely which statements of this kind there are in different paradigms

and practices is a contingent matter, but *that* there are statements of this kind, in some empirical concretization or another, is not a contingent matter but an *a priori* truth.

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