The Nature of Man and his Historical Being

Charles De Koninck
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If man had no nature, he could have no history. Nevertheless, supposing one interpretation of the term "true being," it may well be said that the true being of man is his historical being. In fact, we distinguish in a man what he is by virtue of being a man from what he is in view of what he should be: for one may be truly man without being a good man. If, then, by "true being" we mean what a man is in view of what he should be, we have to admit that this being is a strictly historical one — seeing that it cannot be inferred either from the nature of man or from the nature of this particular man.

By the term "history" we mean here, primarily, narratio. Historical personages, actions or events are, first of all, things that can be "reported" or "narrated." It is true that these things may also reveal more or less rational connexions that exist among them, and that the term "history" also serves to designate the kind of knowledge ordained to the discovery of such connexions. Taken in this sense, History tends towards a certain universality and thus towards the estate of a "science." And, in this sense, only significant facts enter into the realm of History: the kind of facts credited with "historical importance." It is not with this second meaning of "history" that we are now concerned. Rather, taking the term in its more primitive sense, we call "historical" even such things — nay, such above all — as cannot form the object of any rationalization: the things that can at best be "told," "reported," "narrated"; in a word, things obscure, ineffable, incommunicable as to their essential meaning. In this sense, to be sure, the true being of man is an eminently historical one; so much so that our narratio of the events that manifest it cannot attain its inmost core.

For, indeed, it is in his contingent behaviour that a man proves to be, or not to be, what he should be. By contingency we do not mean here simply the fact that his action is free, and might not have taken place; we call it contingent, more specifically, by reason of the circumstances comprising the agent himself. Socrates, Sophroniscus' son, is waiting for the street-car; the children in the street are exploding crackers; he is thirsty (it is the day after the banquet); Xanthippe was in a good temper this morning (owing to a new hat, but Socrates does not know this); the sky is clear; the street-car arrives, crowded; Socrates, only just in time, slips past a motor truck rushing God knows why; and so forth. The circumstances of our action are inexhaustible in wealth and complexity. Those, in particular, of which a given person in a given situation must take account as to act well are, in a sense, inalienably "his," and incapable of any complete rendering or communication. Alighting from the
street-car, Socrates bumps into a woman loaded with parcels: eggs and cabbages are lying scattered about in the street. Ought he not to have watched his step better? — the more so as the lady possessed very visible bulk. But Socrates, at the critical moment, was asking himself why Bergson saw in real movement an object of his “intuition of becoming.” Which, now, were the relevant circumstances for Socrates: the ones he had to think of before all else?

Practical truth, as referred to action in a given situation, is not a matter of knowledge alone. If, in order to act in a reasonable manner, we had to know all the objective circumstances of our action, we should never be able either to move or to refrain from moving; nor even be able either to think or not to think. And accordingly, the truth of human behaviour consists, not in the mind’s conformity to what is, but in its conformity with the rectified appetite.¹ We cannot infer what a man ought to do hic et nunc either from our speculative knowledge of the facts or even from moral science as such, however elaborate. The truth of an action resides in a type of judgment formed according to a mode of inclination, and not merely according to a mode of cognition. That is why this truth is inaccessible both to mere speculative knowledge as such and to mere moral science as such.² Neither a just evaluation of the circumstances of an action nor even one’s certitude as to what one ought to do hic et nunc suffice to constitute prudential truth. Over and above these, it is requisite for the judgment to be true that the agent should love the good as it is proper for him to love it and determine himself to do what he ought.

In this respect, even moral science is of little usefulness for virtue: it cannot provide the proximate and ultimate measure of conduct. Indeed, as St. Thomas says,³ “...prudence implies more than practical science, for practical science only embraces moral judgments of a universal character: for example, that fornication is evil, that theft should be shunned, and other similar judgments. Even where this science is present, it may happen that reason, in regard to a particular act, is prevented from judging rightly; and thus has it been said that practical science is of scant usefulness for virtue: even though he happens to possess this science, man may sin

¹ “...Verum intellectus practici aliter accipitur quam verum intellectus speculativi, ut dicitur in VI Ethic. Nam verum intellectus speculativi accipitur per conformitatem intellectus ad rem. Et quia intellectus non potest infallibiliter conformari rebus in contingentiis, sed solum in necessariis; ideo nullus habitus speculativus contingentium est intellectualis virtus, sed solum est circa necessaria.—Verum autem intellectus practici accipitur per conformitatem ad appetitum rectum. Quae quidem conformitas in necessariis locum non habet, quae voluntate humana non fuit: sed solum in contingentibus quae possunt a nobis fieri, sive sint agibilis interiores, sive facibilis externa. Et ideo circa sola contingentia ponitur virtus intellectus practici: circa facibilium quidem, ets; circa agibilium vero, prudentia.”—St. Thomas, Ia IIae, q.57, a.5, ad 3.—In VI Ethic., lect.2.

² “Contingit enim aliquem iudicare, uno modo per modum inclinationis: sicut qui habet habitud virtutis, recte iudicat de his quae sunt secundum virtutem agenda, inquasum ad illa inclinatur: unde et in X Ethic. dicitur quod virtuosus est mensura et regula actuum humanorum. Aio modo, per modum cognitionis: sicut aliquid instructum in scientia moralis, posset iudicare de actibus virtutis, etiam si virtutem non haberet.”—St. Thomas, Ia, q.1, a.6, ad 3.

³ Quaestio disputata de Virtutibus in communi, a.6, ad 1.—Ia IIae, q.77, a.2; In VII Ethic., lect.3.
against virtue. It is the office of prudence to judge rightly concerning the particular actions as they have to be performed in the present, and any sin but cannot falsify this judgment.” When either speculative or moral science are alleged to be the proximate norm of conduct, they degenerate into a “system.”

The prudential act, then, is inalienable and incommunicable. Ultimately, every man has to judge on his own count. Suppose he is following an advice: very well, even then he must judge it proper for him to follow that advice, and actually conform his conduct to his judgment; otherwise, he would not be performing a human act. Seen from this point of view, every man is alone in the midst of his fellow men. Here is the very centre, the innermost core of our neighbour’s behaviour — which it is strictly beyond our power to judge in any absolute fashion. A man may be plainly criminal, fairly tried, rightly judged and condemned to death. Yet, this judgment can never claim finality, or identity with that of the Supreme Judge. God alone sounds the hearts; God alone plumbs the depths of the mind. The gulf between the Day of the Lord and the Day of man cannot be bridged from this side. Neque meipsum judico — I says the Apostle. Correspondingly, the human narratio of a person’s actions can never transcend the field of appearances, no matter how much or how little foundation these may seem to have in reality. As for the personal or auto-

1 Here now it is required among the dispensers, that a man be found faithful. But to me it is a very small thing to be judged by you, or by man’s day; but neither do I judge my own self. For I am not conscious to myself of anything, yet am I not hereby justified; but he that judgeth me, is the Lord. Therefore judge not before the time; until the particular actions as they have to be performed in the present, and any sin but cannot falsify this judgment.” When either speculative or moral science are alleged to be the proximate norm of conduct, they degenerate into a “system.”

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biographical diary, it is subject to the same limitation, and is so, for the most part, to an even higher degree. The aspect of "inaccessibility" of which we are speaking is not, therefore, a characteristic of the secrets of the heart as such; for anybody who is keeping a thing secret could as well communicate it if he chose to.¹

This is the point we must bear in mind if we are to understand in what sense a man's true being is radically historical — and, in the same time, inaccessible to the Day of man. None except the Maker of history could "narrate" to us the life of Peter. The "sufficient reason" of what happens in this world is not itself of this world; it is not "subjectified" in the things. As seen in the particular things and the actions of which it is composed, the world reveals itself full of irrationality and absurdity. And, from this point of view, the "system" can be described as an attempt (or, worse, a determination) to find the sufficient reason of the world in the world. That is why the "system" is bent on eliminating all objective irrationality as at least irrelevant, and tends to impose itself as a "sufficient reason." How superficial and how perverse, at the same time, such an outlook on the world — together with the type of action it inspires — must be we shall best understand in considering that the absolutely universal causality of God, as well as His properly divine wisdom, appear most strikingly in the intrinsic contingency and the inherent absurdity of the world: for only God is the determinate, per se cause of that, too, which in itself is contingent. No creature can be the per se cause of what is either casual or fortuitous.

Ecclesiastes tells us what the world looks like when viewed in its own light. Under the sun, the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the learned, nor favour to the skilful: but time and chance in all. […] There are just men to whom evils happen, as though they had done the works of the wicked: and there are wicked men who are as secure as though they had done the deeds of the just.² It is Prof. Bummelklotz, of all people, who strikes oil in his back yard while digging for water. And it was Hegel — the way had been prepared by Spinoza and Leibniz — who discovered in the nineteenth century, that the light of the Sixth Day³ is actually under the sun: "What irks and infuriates us is not what is, but the fact that it is not as it should be; once we know that it is as it must be — that is to say, not arbitrary or contingent — , we also

¹ The "secretum cordis" must not be confused with the secret "intentio cordia." “Nihil mihi conscius sum, id est, non habeo aliquis peccati mortalis conscientiam, secundum illud Job xxvii: Neque reprehendit me cor meum in omni vita mea.—Sed non in hoc justificatus sum, id est, non sufficit ad hoc, quod me justum pronuniecem, quis posunt aliquas peccata in me latere, quae ignoror, secundum illud Ps.: Delicia quis intelligit? Et Job xx dictur: Et si simplex fuero, hoc ipsum ignorabil anima mea… Qui autem judicat me Dominus est, id est, ad solum Deum pertinet judicare utrum sim fidelis minister an non; hoc enim pertinet ad intentionem cordis, quam solus Deus ponderare potest, secundum illud Prov. xvi: Spirituum ponderator est Dominus. Et Jer. c. xvii: Prosum est cor hominis et inescrutabile, quis cognosce illud? Ego Dominus probans renes et scrutans corda."—St. Thomas, In 1 ad Cor., loc. cit.—1a 11ae, q.100, a.9, c. It is in this attitude, with its background of humility and Hope, that the Christian sense of humour is ultimately rooted.

² IX, 11; VIII, 4.

recognize that it should be as it is." And Karl Marx is even more concrete in applying the "sufficient reason" — the "system": Socrates believes in immortality and Xanthippe drenches him with a pail of water "because the production relations are lagging behind the forces of production."

The philosophical doctrine that properly concerns the opinions advanced by Existentialism is not the doctrine of being; rather, it is the doctrine of the good. Nor do we mean, by "good," the transcendentable property which is convertible with being; we are referring, more particularly, to the good that divides being. That division has been indicated already at the beginning of this paper. The good man is "good, absolutely" (bonus simpliciter), not by reason of his "absolute being" (esse simpliciter) — this, in fact, is not good except in a certain respect (bonum secundum quid), — but by reason of a superadditive or ultimate perfection, which derives from an accidental being (esse secundum quid), and in itself is separable from his "absolute being."

Briefly, it is by reason of his virtue and proper ordination to his end that a man is a good man. It is only in God that what is being in the absolute sense is also good in the absolute sense; the esse simpliciter which encloses all perfection of being is the proper of God, Whose essence is His being. (It may be well to remember here that there can be found in God no basis for a distinction, even of reason, between His essence and His esse.)

1 "Aliquid potest dici bonum et ex suo esse, et ex sua proprietate, vel habitudine superaddita; sicut dictur aliquid homo bonus et in quantum est justus et castus, vel ordinatus ad beatitudinem. Ratione igitur primae bonitatis ens convertitur cum bono, et e converso; sed ratione secundae bonum dividit ens."—St. Thomas, Quaestiones disputatae de Veritate, q.21, a.2, ad 6.

2 St. Thomas, 1a, q.5, a.1, ad 1.

3 "Sicut ens multiplicatur per substantiale et accidentale, sic bonitas multiplicatur; sed tamen inter utrumque differt. Qua aliquid diecit ens esse absolute propter suum esse substantiale, sed propter esse accidentale non dicitur esse absolute: unde cum generatio sit motus ad esse; cum aliquid accept esse substantiale, dictur generari simpliciter, cum vero accept esse accidentale, dictur generari secundum quid; et similliter est de corruptione, per quam esse amittetur. De bono autem est e converso. Nam secundum substantialem bonitatem diecit aliquid bonus secundum quid, secundum vero accidentalem dictur aliquid bonus simpliciter; unde hominem injustum non dicimus bonum simpliciter, sed secundum quid, in quantum est hominem vero justum dicimus simpliciter bonum. Cujus diversitatis ists ratio est. Nam secundum substantialem bonitatem non obtinet risi secundum quod complevit secundum substantialem et secundum accidentia principia. Quidquid autem creatura perfectionis habet ex essentialibus et accidentalius principiis simul conjunctis, hoc totum Deus habet per unum suum esse simplicem; simplicem enim ejus essentia est ejus sapientia et justitia et fortitudo, et omnium hujusmodi, quae in nobis sunt superaddita. Et ideo ipsa absoluta bonitas in Deo ideam est quod ejus essentia; in nobis autem consideratur secundum ea quae superadduntur esse tae. Et pro tanto bonitas completa vel absoluta in nobis et angetur et minuitur et totaliter superficit, non autem in Deo; quamvis substantialis bonitas in nobis semper maneat."—St. Thomas, De Ver., q.21, a.5, e. — . Esse simpliciter acceptum, secundum quod includit in se omnes perfectionem essendi, praeseminet vitae et omnibus subsequentibus: sic enim ipsum esse praehabet in se omnia subsequetia. Et hoc modo Dionysius loquitur.—Sed si consideretur ipsum esse prout participatur in hac re vel in illa, quae non capiunt totam perfectionem essendi, sed habet esse imperfectum, sicut est esse cuiuslibet creaturen; sic manifestum est quod ipsum esse cum perfectione superaddita est emi-
It follows from the preceding that the substantial or absolute being of the creature is formless, as it were, by comparison with the accidental being which renders it good in the absolute sense. "In God the absolute goodness itself is identical with His essence; in us, however, it is to be considered according to the things which are superimposed on the essence."

If, then, by "existence" were meant that actuality which is due to the things "superimposed on essence" — which determine whether or no a man is "good absolutely" — we should be willing to say that, simply speaking, essence is prior to existence; for it is not merely by reason of his esse simpliciter that man possesses existence thus understood. Again, it is by reason of this "true being" of his, dependent upon an esse secundum quid, that the good man grows into a truer likeness of Him "Who Is." On the other hand, if, by "existence" we mean esse simpliciter, and by "essence" that which a man is in view of what he should be — i.e., that which he becomes, or is, in his actions —, we would say that existence is prior to essence: Socrates can be without being a good man.

Indeed the answer to the question "To be or not to be" gives rise to a far more pertinent query. That we shall inescapably be, is not the final solution. The certainty of life beyond death leaves in our historical being — it is truly a being towards the death in which our lot shall be established once and for all — a supreme concern about the one thing necessary: to be good in the absolute sense. The choice is not, forthwith, between "to be or not to be": it is between goodness absolute and the kind of absolute being which, in itself, may as well as not be superfluous, expendible, and destined for the refuse-heap — de trop, as one writer puts it. For the "absolute being" of a rational creature confirmed in evil is a being de trop, seeing that for him, at any rate, it would be better not to exist. What may be de trop for man is, indeed, his esse simpliciter.
In the final analysis, this problem of existence — of true being, of historical being — is a moral and personal one: its solution lies, not in any science as such but in our conduct.\textsuperscript{1} No amount of speculativew, nor even of practical doctrine, whether natural or supernatural, can make a man to be as he should be. Yet that is what many critics demand as an essential condition of true doctrine. It has been said that the demonstrations of God’s existence and of the immortality of our soul — some have included Faith as well — could hardly be certain unless they irresistibly compel one to pursue the good and to be a saint, as if such knowledge had to be practical truth and thus constitute prudential judgments. Whoever seeks a doctrine that is to be “existential” in this sense is on the road to despair.

\textbf{Charles De Koninck.}

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\textsuperscript{1} "... Homo non dicitur bonus simpliciter ex eo quod est in parte bonus, sed ex eo quod secundum totum est bonus: quod quidem contingit per bonitatem voluntatis. Nam voluntas imperat actibus omnium potentiarum humanarum. Quod provenit ex hoc quod quilibet actus est bonus suas poterteriae; unde solus ille dicitur esse bonus homo simpliciter qui habet bonam voluntatem. Ille autem qui habet bonitatem secundum aliquam potentiam, non prae supersatis bona voluntate, dicitur bonus secundum quod habet bonum visum et auditionem, aut est bene viens et audiens. Et sic paet, quod ex eo quod homo habet scientiam, non dicitur bonus simpliciter, sed bonus secundum intellectum, vel bene intelligens; et similiter est de arte, et de alieius huiusmodi habitibus." — St. Thomas, \textit{Quaest. disp. de Virt. in comm.}, a.7, ad 2.