



The Nature of Man and his Historical Being

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The Nature of Man and his Historical Being

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 so 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 contingentibus, 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 fiunt: sed solum in contingentibus quae possunt a nobis fieri, sive sint agibilia interiora, sive factibilia exteriora. Et ideo circa sola contingentia ponitur virtus intellectus practici: circa factibilia quidem, ars; circa agibilia 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 habitum virtutis, recte iudicat de his quae sunt secundum virtutem agenda, inquantum ad illa inclinatur: unde et in X *Ethic.* dicitur quod virtuosus est mensura et regula actuum humanorum. Alio modo, per modum cognitionis: sicut aliquis instructus in scientia morali, 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 cannot but 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* —¹ 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 Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts; and then shall every man have praise from God.—*I ad Cor.*, iv, 2. "Aut ab humano die, id est, St. Thomas explains in his Commentary on this passage, ab intellectu in hoc tempore judicantibus, quasi dicat: vestrum, vel quorumcumque hominum iudicium parum curo." Of course, this does not mean we may be careless of our neighbour's judgment. Yet, in so far as our own person is concerned, unless we have put too much or all of our faith in the *Day of man*, that judgment will be of slight concern to us. "... De iudicio hominum dupliciter debet curari. Uno modo, quantum ad alios, qui ex eorum bono, vel aedificantur, vel scandalizantur, et sic sancti non pro minimo, sed pro magno habent ab hominibus iudicari, cum Dominus dicat: Videant opera vestra bona, et glorificent Patrem vestrum, qui in coelis est.—Alio modo quantum ad seipsos, et sic non curant multum, quia nec gloriam humanam concupiscunt, secundum illud I. Thess. ii: Neque gloriam ab hominibus quaerentes, neque aliquid a vobis, neque ab aliis. Neque approbrium hominis timent, secundum illud Is. li: Nolite timere opprobrium hominum, et blasphemias eorum ne timeatis. Unde Apostolus signanter dicit: Mihi autem, etc., id est, quantum ad me pertinet, non autem id pro nullo est, sed pro minimo, quia bona temporalia, inter quae bona fama computatur, non sunt nulla bona, sed minima, ut Aug. dicit [in *De Libero arbitrio*]."—*Ibid.* That the "iudicium hominum bene de hominibus opinantium" is the most fragile of goods, St. Thomas shows in the following lines from the *De Regimine principum*: "Nihil enim videtur in rebus humanis fragilius gloria et honore favoris hominum, cum dependeat ex opinionibus hominum, quibus nihil mutabilis in vita hominum, et inde est quod Isaias propheta, xx, huiusmodi gloriam nominat *florem foeni*. Deinde humanae gloriae cupido animi magnitudinem aufert. Qui enim favorem hominum quaerit, necesse est ut in omni eo, quod dicit aut facit, eorum voluntati deserviat, et sic dum placere hominibus studet, fit servus singulorum. Propter quod et idem Tullius in lib. *De officiis*, cavendam dicit gloriae cupidinem. Eripit enim animi libertatem, pro qua magnanimis viris omnis debet esse contentio."—*I.*, c. 7. "Fama non habet stabilitatem: immo falso rumore de facili perditur. Et si stabilis aliquando perseveret, hoc est *per accidens*."—*Ia IIae*, q. 2, a. 3, ad 3. In other words, the man whose conduct is governed by the *Day of man* (i.e., the "free man" of the *City of man*, or free man in the now usual sense) and who could appeal to no more than the *Judgment of history*, is, in reality, the most abject kind of slave, catering as he must to the most whimsical of masters.

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 cordis." "Nihil mihi conscius sum, id est, non habeo alicujus 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 pronunciem, quia possunt aliqua peccata in me latere, quae ignoro, secundum illud Ps.: Delicta quis intelligit? Et Job ix dicitur: Et si simplex fuero, hoc ipsum ignorabit 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: Spiritum ponderator est Dominus. Et Jer. c. xvii: Pravum est cor hominis et inscrutabile, quis cognosceret illud? Ego Dominus probans renes et scrutans corda.*"—ST. THOMAS, *In I ad Cor.*, loc. cit.—*Ia Iae*, 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.

³ *Viditque Deus cuncta quae fecerat: et erant valde bona. Et factum est vespere et mane, dies sextus.—Genesis, I, 31.*

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 transcendental property which is convertible with being; we are referring, more particularly, to the good that divides being.¹ 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."² 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.³ (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 dicitur aliquis 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, *Ia*, q.5, a.1, ad 1.

³ "... Sicut ens multiplicatur per substantiale et accidentale, sic bonitas multiplicatur; sed tamen inter utrumque differt. Quia aliquid dicitur ens esse absolute propter suum esse substantiale, sed propter esse accidentale non dicitur esse absolute: unde cum generatio sit motus ad esse; cum aliquis accipit esse substantiale, dicitur generari simpliciter; cum vero accipit esse accidentale, dicitur generari secundum quid; et similiter est de corruptione, per quam esse amittitur. De bono autem est e converso. Nam secundum substantialem bonitatem dicitur aliquid bonum secundum quid, secundum vero accidentalem dicitur aliquid bonum simpliciter; unde hominem injustum non dicimus bonum simpliciter, sed secundum quid, in quantum est homo; hominem vero justum dicimus simpliciter bonum. Cujus diversitatis ista est ratio. Nam unumquodque dicitur esse ens in quantum absolute consideratur; bonum vero, ut ex dictis, art.1, ad 6 argum., patet, secundum respectum ad alia. In seipso autem aliquid perficitur ut subsistat per essentialia principia; sed ut debito modo se habeat ad omnia quae sunt extra ipsum, non perficitur nisi mediantibus accidentibus superadditis essentiae; quia operationes quibus unum alteri conjungitur, ab essentia mediantibus virtutibus essentiae superadditis progrediuntur; unde absolute bonitatem non obtinet nisi secundum quod completum est secundum substantialem et secundum accidentalia principia. Quidquid autem creatura perfectionis habet ex essentialibus et accidentalibus principiis simul conjunctis, hoc totum Deus habet per unum suum esse simplex; simplex enim ejus essentia est ejus sapientia et justitia et fortitudo, et omnia hujusmodi, quae in nobis sunt essentiae superaddita. Et ideo ipsa absoluta bonitas in Deo idem est quod ejus essentia; in nobis autem consideratur secundum ea quae superadduntur essentiae. Et pro tanto bonitas completa vel absoluta in nobis et augetur et minuitur et totaliter aufertur, non autem in Deo; quamvis substantialis bonitas in nobis semper maneat."—ST. THOMAS, *De Ver.*, q.21, a.5, c.—"... Esse simpliciter acceptum, secundum quod includit in se omnem perfectionem essendi, praeeminet vitae et omnibus subsequentibus: sic enim ipsum esse prae habet in se omnia subsequentia. 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 habent esse imperfectum, sicut est esse cuiuslibet creaturae; 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."¹ 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*,² 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.³ What may be *de trop* for man is, indeed, his *esse simpliciter*.

nentius. Unde et Dionysius ibidem dicit quod viventia sunt meliora existentibus, et intelligentia viventibus."—*Ia IIae*, q.2, a.5, ad 2.—"... Quia finis respondet principio, ex illa ratione probatur quod ultimus finis est primum principium essendi, in quo est omnis essendi perfectio: cuius similitudinem appetunt, secundum suam proportionem, quaedam quidem secundum esse tantum, quaedam secundum esse vivens, quaedam secundum esse vivens et intelligens et beatum."—*Ibid.*, ad 3. For this meaning of "esse"—"principaliter esse et vivere"—see ARISTOTLE, *Ethics*, I, chap.6 (St. THOMAS, lect.10); IX, chap.9 (lect.10-11).

¹ Supra, p.275, n.3.

² There is, of course, a sense in which even the absolute being of a man is an historical one, since natural improbability, further augmented by chance and fortune, renders his very coming-to-be quite unpredictable, and irrational in the same measure. When we view it in the light of created causes alone, the generation of *this* individual in particular is so unlikely as to verge on the impossible. Even within the relatively narrow margin of the proximate possibilities just before conception, his chance is but one out of a quarter-billion. As we recede into the past and look forward, the unlikeliness spirals out into an increasing improbability interwoven with chance and fortune. Hence, if nature intended *this* individual, she would be like the man who takes a bath so that the sun might be eclipsed. (ARISTOTLE, *Phys.*, II, chap.6, 197b25. —"Natura enim intendit generare hominem, non hunc hominem; nisi in quantum homo non potest esse, nisi sit hic homo." St. THOMAS, *Quaestio disputata de Anima*, a.18, c.) *This* individual, to be sure, is a work of nature, at least as to his substantial being. But originally he was no more intended than was the fact that this particular fragment of birdshot should down the duck—in fact considerably less so. Although the generation of Socrates Jr. is ultimately a natural event, his already very tenuous possibility could only materialize owing to a strictly fortuitous event. It was quite by chance that Socrates first met Xanthippe.

³ "... Non esse dupliciter potest considerari. Uno modo secundum se: et sic nullo modo potest esse appetibile, cum non habeat aliquam rationem boni, sed sit

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.¹ No amount of speculative, 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.

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pura boni privatio. Alio modo potest considerari inquantum est ablativum poenalis vel miserae vitae; et sic non esse accipit rationem boni. Carere enim malo est quoddam bonum, ut dicit Philosophus in V *Ethic.*, cap. 1; et per hunc modum melius est damnatis non esse quam miseros esse. Unde Mattn. xxvi, 24, dicitur: *Bonum erat ei, si natus non fuisset homo ille*; et Hier. xx, super illud, *Maledicta dies in qua natus sum etc.* dicit Glossa Hieronymi, ibi: "Melius est non subsistere quam male subsistere." Et secundum hoc damnati possunt praeeligere non esse, secundum deliberativam rationem."—ST. THOMAS, In IV *Sententiarum*, d.50, q.2, a.1, sol.3.—In *Matth.* 26.24.—CORNELIUS A LAPIDE, In *Eccleriaten*, 4.2-3.

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 bonum suae potertiae; unde solus ille dicitur esse bonus homo simpliciter qui habet bonam voluntatem. Ille autem qui habet bonitatem secundum aliquam potentiam, non praesupposita bona voluntate, dicitur bonus secundum quod habet bonum visum et auditum, aut est bene videns et audiens. Et sic patet, 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 aliis hujusmodi habitibus."—ST. THOMAS, *Quaest. disp. de Virt. in comm.*, a.7, ad 2.