



THE QUESTION ABOUT MAN

Mortimer Adler

2 of 2

(3)

The question about man has been asked in a variety of ways. We are all familiar with the ways in which philosophers and theologians have traditionally posed it: *What is man? How shall man's nature be defined? What is the essence of humanity?* And, recently, existentialist thinkers have appeared to strike out in another direction by asking, *Who is man?* In all these forms the question tends to bypass or ignore the contributions of the biological and behavioral sciences to the study of man. No scientist who understood his business would attempt to answer questions couched in such terms, though he would, quite rightly, suspect that much knowledge in his possession and still more within his competence to acquire would have critical relevance to any answer that might be given to questions thus formulated. As thus formulated, the question about man has a philosophical or theological cast that tends to protect it from

the intrusion of scientific evidence and tends to elicit only the kind of answers that theologians have given in the course of explicating the dogmas of religious faith, or that philosophers have discovered by intuition, propounded by reason, or framed within the systematic context of an over-all view of the world.

That is why it seems to me preferable to pose the question in another way and ask how man differs from everything else on earth—from inert bodies, from other living things, especially the higher forms of animal life, and from machines, especially such mechanical contrivances as computers or robots invented to simulate human intelligence in operation. Asked in this way, the question calls for a multitude of comparisons—comparisons of the sort that biological and behavioral scientists have carefully and patiently made. Asked in this way, the question becomes impossible to answer without consulting all the available scientific evidence, the relevance of which cannot be doubted or discounted by evasive tactics on the part of philosophers or theologians. For all that, the question thus formulated, is, as we shall see, not a purely scientific question. Philosophical analysis plays an indispensable part in clarifying the question by indicating the range of the possible answers and also by determining the criteria for interpreting the relevance of particular items of evidence. In addition, it helps us to evaluate the probative force of the scientific data—to see, with regard to this or that piece of evidence, which of the possible answers it tends to support and the extent to which it approximates being decisive in the resolution of the problem.

At the same time, the comparative question about how man differs from everything else on earth underlies the traditional philosophical and theological forms of the question about man that, on the surface at least, appear to be non-comparative. To know man's quiddity, to define human nature or to understand its essence, and even to speculate about man's identity—who he is—presupposes that one knows and understands how man differs from everything else. This presupposition, unfortunately, was often overlooked when the question was traditionally asked by philosophers in its non-comparative form. They often appeared to proceed as if they could, by contemplating or by examining man in isolation from everything else, reach a definitive answer about his nature, essence, or identity. Nevertheless, whether they were aware of it or not, the answers they did give always contained one or another of the possible answers to the question about how man differs, bearing out the point that the latter question is the inescapable underlying one in any approach to the consideration of man.

In *The Conditions of Philosophy*, [2] I tried to show that there are some purely philosophical questions, just as there are some purely scientific questions—the former being questions that philosophers alone are competent to answer, just as the latter are questions that scientists alone are competent to answer, the answers in both cases having the same character as knowledge (i.e., reasonable and criticizable opinion, testable and falsifiable by experience). The comparative question about man is neither a purely philosophical nor a purely scientific question. It is instead what I have called a mixed question, a question that cannot be adequately answered either by scientists alone or by philosophers alone, but only by their collaboration—by combining the findings of scientific investigation with the contributions of philosophical analysis and criticism.

To say that philosophy and science are knowledge in the same sense is to say that both are empirical knowledge: their theories or conclusions are falsifiable by experience. They have the status of testable and corrigible opinions, capable of some relative degree of truth, but never attaining certitude or finality. But while both are empirical by virtue of submitting their theories or conclusions to the test of experience, the experience that philosophy appeals to is the common experience of mankind, experience that is possessed without any effort of investigation, whereas the experience that science appeals to is special experience, experience that can be obtained only by deliberate and methodical investigation. Science, in other words, is investigative knowledge about that which is or happens in the world; philosophy, insofar as it is knowledge of that which is or happens, is non-investigative, precisely because it relies on and appeals to the experience that all men enjoy and share without any effort of investigation on their part. [3]

By virtue of the fact that philosophy, employing common experience, has a method of its own, it also has certain questions of its own—questions that it and it alone is competent to answer, questions that cannot be answered by scientific and historical research because they are questions on which investigation, no matter how ingenious or extensive, is unable to throw light. Similarly, there are questions that can be answered solely by investigation and in the light of the data of special experience that results from investigation. These are purely scientific or historical questions, to the solution of which philosophy can make no direct contribution. But there are certain questions which, while subject to investigative efforts, cannot be adequately solved by investigation alone. These are the questions that I have called “mixed” to indicate that the so-

lution of them depends upon some combination of philosophical knowledge with other forms of empirical knowledge obtained by investigation, whether by scientific inquiry or by historical research. [4]

Though this book will, in my judgment, amply demonstrate that the question about man is a mixed question, it has not always been recognized to be one. On the contrary, it has been treated for almost twenty-five centuries of Western thought as if it were a purely philosophical question. This is partly because the question was traditionally posed in a non-comparative form, and partly because until recently little scientific evidence was available for answering the comparative question about how man differs. Most of the philosophers who proposed answers did so entirely in terms of philosophical theories, hypotheses, or conclusions based on common experience alone. A few philosophers showed some awareness of scientific evidence—evidence obtained by investigation—that had some bearing on the question, but at the time this evidence was either so slight or so indecisive that even they treated the question as if it were a purely philosophical one. It is only in the last hundred years, at the most, that the mixed character of this question has forced itself upon our attention; and it is only in the last hundred years, or even less, that the mounting masses of scientific evidence from a wide variety of research pursuits have come to play a critical role in the consideration of how man differs from everything else on earth. Yet even now there are philosophers who persist in ignoring the scientific evidence, just as there are scientists who fail to recognize its philosophical dimensions and proceed as if their data could solve it without the help of philosophical analysis.

(4)

A philosophical clarification of the mixed question about man will, I hope, be achieved in Chapter 2, where I will try to set forth, exhaustively, the range of possible answers to a more general question; namely, how any object that we can consider differs from any other. The various possible ways in which any two comparable things can be said to differ exhaust the ways in which man can be said to differ from everything else on earth.

Everyone is familiar with the usual alternative answers that we give when we are asked how two things differ: either we say that they differ in degree or we say that they differ in kind. But though the words “degree” and “kind” are frequent and familiar in every-

day speech, they are seldom understood by the persons who use them in ordinary discourse; nor, as we shall see, is the distinction between these two modes of difference adequately grasped by the scientists who use these words. In addition, the alternatives thus far mentioned—difference in degree and difference in kind—by no means exhaust the possible modes of difference. A difference in kind may be only apparent, as compared with one that is real. Since an apparent difference in kind reduces to a difference in degree, we need only consider differences in kind that are real; among these, some are superficial, and some radical. Hence there are three basically distinct modes of differences:

1. difference in degree,
2. superficial difference in kind, and
3. radical difference in kind.

These distinctions will, I hope, become clear in the following chapter, both as they apply to any two comparable things and also as they apply to the comparison of man with anything else. Here I wish only to point out that unless these distinctions are made and understood, the various answers that the philosophers have given to the question about man cannot be seen as constituting the opposed positions in a three-sided controversy; nor, without this philosophical clarification of the modes of difference, can the scientific literature bearing on the question be read critically.

With this philosophical analysis set forth in Chapter 2, clarifying the question of man's difference by reference to a framework of possible answers, I will, in Chapter 3, consider the different types of evidence that bear on the question and the conditions under which a decisive resolution of it may be reached, or at least something closely approximating a decision in favor of one as against the other two modes of difference. And since Chapter 3 will conclude the introductory part of this book, I will try there to prepare the reader for the series of chapters that constitute Part Two, by outlining the course of the argument that lies ahead—the sequence of steps that will bring us to the appraisal we can make at this time of the state of the mixed question about man. Then, in Part Three, we will be concerned with the theoretical and practical differences it makes how the question about the difference of man is answered.

When the conflicting answers to a question do not make a significant difference to us—either a difference to the way we think about things and to what we believe or a difference to the way in which we act and to the practical policies we adopt the question is


academic in the worst sense of that term. William James and the pragmatists were quite right to dismiss such questions as trivial and to call upon philosophers and men generally to concentrate on what James called “vital options”—questions to which the conflicting answers make a significant difference. The question about man, with which this book is concerned, is far from being an academic or trivial question; it is a vital option in James’s sense of that term. How we answer it makes a great difference to us—both to the principles and policies governing our actions and to many of our fundamental beliefs and disbeliefs. We tend to be impatient with extended analyses, elaborate arguments, and thoroughgoing examinations of evidence, unless we can foresee that the effort will be repaid in the form of important practical or theoretical consequences. A brief preview of the consequences to be discussed in Part Three may persuade the reader to be patient with all the steps of thinking through which he must go in order to have a clear and solid foundation for assessing the difference it makes how man differs from other things.

We will find, on the one hand, that it makes a great practical difference whether we say that man differs only in degree from other things or that he differs in kind as well. And, on the other hand, we will find that regarding all of man’s differences in kind as only superficial or regarding at least some of them as radical has serious theoretical consequences—for science, for philosophy, and for religion.

The practical consequences of regarding man as differing only in degree from other animals all turn on the abrogation of the distinction we make between persons and things—a distinction that involves a difference in kind. The dignity of man is the dignity of the human being as a person—a dignity that is not possessed by things. Precisely because we do not attribute to them the dignity of persons, we feel justified in treating things—other animals or machines—as means, as instruments to be used or exploited. The dignity of man as a person underlies the moral imperative that enjoins us never to use other human beings merely as means, but always to respect them as ends to be served. The condemnation of slavery and other forms of human exploitation as unjust is an immediate corollary of this basic normative principle. Hence, it would appear to make a great practical difference whether we can preserve the distinction between men as persons and all else as things, or must abrogate it because men differ from all else only in degree.

What are the opposite theoretical consequences of asserting a superficial or a radical difference in kind between man and other things? We will find, on the one hand, that the view that man differs radically in kind harmonizes with certain fundamental beliefs in all orthodox forms of Judaism and Christianity: for example, the belief that man and man alone is, as a person, made in the image of God; the belief that man and man alone is a special creation of God; the belief that man and man alone has an immortal soul or is destined for personal immortality; the belief that man alone has free will and carries the burden of moral responsibility. But this view of man does not harmonize with the fundamental principle of continuity in nature, to which almost all natural scientists subscribe. More specifically, it challenges the principle of developmental or phylogenetic continuity, which is central to the theory of evolution and which evolutionists think is as applicable to man as it is to other living organisms. In addition, the view that man differs radically in kind, entailing as it does the conception of man as having a non-physical factor in his make-up, is embarrassing, to say the least, to the new theology that rejects the traditional tenets of orthodox Christianity.

We will find, on the other hand, that the view that man differs in kind, but *only superficially*, harmonizes with the principle of continuity in nature. It also harmonizes with the main tenets of materialism and naturalism in philosophy, and gives support to the fundamental disbeliefs of the prevalent secularism. By the same token, it challenges and tends to repudiate the traditional dogmas of orthodox Judaism and Christianity. The philosophers who have held this view have been, for the most part, anti-religious. Far from concealing their antagonism to religion, they have outspokenly espoused the adverse effects of their views of nature and of man upon traditional religious beliefs. In addition, this view, entailing as it does the denial of anything non-physical in the nature of man, raises serious if not insuperable difficulties for the metaphysical theory of the will's freedom, as well as for the philosophical doctrine that freedom of choice is the sine qua non of moral responsibility.

This must suffice as a sketchy preview of the consequences for action and for thought of the answers we give to the question about man. These matters will be more thoroughly treated in Chapters 17 and 18. We shall then have explored all angles of the question about the difference of man and be in a position to examine with thoroughness the difference it makes. 

NOTES


1. From *You Shall Know Them* by Vercors, copyright 1953 by Jean Bruller, with permission of Little, Brown and Co. A paper-back reprint of it has just been published. I heartily recommend Vercors' novel not only for the pleasure of a well-told story, but also for a learned exploration of the criteria involved in differentiating between humans and other animals.

2. The first series of Encyclopaedia Britannica Lectures at the University of Chicago in 1964, published in 1965.

3. *The Conditions of Philosophy*, Chapter 2, esp. pp. 21-38.

4. See *ibid.*, Chapter 2, pp. 38-42; Chapters 6-7; and Chapter 12, esp. p. 216-217. Let me stress the two related aspects of every mixed question. On the one hand, philosophy, as we have seen, is indispensable in the clarification of the question and in laying down the criteria for interpreting and judging the relevance and force of the evidence obtained by investigation. On the other hand, since the mixed question is not beyond the scope of investigation, it can never be adequately answered on the basis of common experience alone. Purely philosophical answers to mixed questions are corrigible by science, just as common sense is corrigible when the latter forms opinions about matters on the basis of common experience alone, in spite of the fact that special experience is obtainable and should be sought.

Not all mixed questions are of the same type. Some arise from an apparent conflict between science and common-sense opinion. These serve to test the truth of competing philosophical theories by challenging them to resolve the conflict without giving up either the truth of common-sense opinion or the truth of science. I dealt in *The Conditions of Philosophy* with a striking example of this type of mixed question, involving a conflict between the common-sense beliefs in the reality of the individual physical objects of common experience and the assertion, by some scientists, of the reality of elementary particles. The mixed question about man is of a different sort. Here the solution of the problem of how man differs requires us to consult all the relevant scientific data and theories and to bring to bear on them the applicable philosophical analysis and arguments. It requires us, in addition, to have recourse to philosophical thought in order to get the question itself properly

framed and understood and in order to lay down criteria for interpreting and judging scientific evidence and philosophical arguments in their relation to each other. But what is most extraordinary about the mixed question concerning man, as will become apparent in the concluding chapters of Part Two, is that we can envisage in the future the possibility of scientific efforts that will have effect either of falsifying a traditional philosophical theory or of confirming its relative truth. 

Chapter 1 from his renowned book *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes*.

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