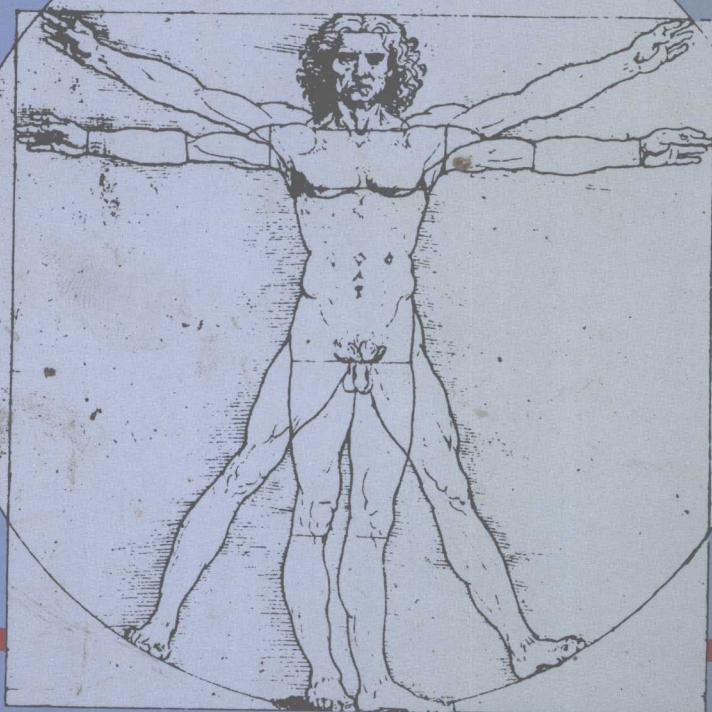


SEVEN THEORIES OF HUMAN NATURE

CHRISTIANITY • FREUD • LORENZ
MARX • SARTRE • SKINNER • PLATO

Leslie Stevenson



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Second Edition

LESLIE STEVENSON

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TO MY PARENTS

Preface

I am gratified that this book has been so widely found useful at the introductory level for which it was designed. Given this success of the basic plan, I found no reason to change it for a new edition, so the text of the central seven chapters remains unaltered except for minor corrections and emendations. No doubt, almost every reader has a favourite suggestion for an eighth theory which should be added, but I found no overwhelmingly obvious candidate, and none that I wanted to drop, so the basic team remains. If it were to be augmented, I could see more reason to add another seven than to stop at one.

In the two opening chapters, I have taken the opportunity to amend some naiveties and infelicities, and in particular I have tried to be a little less superficial about the philosophy of science at the end of Chapter 2. There is, of course, vastly more to be said about each theory, but an introductory textbook is not the place to say it. To lead the reader towards deeper thought, I have taken some care to extend and bring up to date the recommendations for further reading at the end of each chapter. Bibliographies and reading lists are often too long and indiscriminating, it seems to me: I have mentioned only what I believe to be the best of the relevant work in each field, and I give some indication of the scope and level of each work.

The last chapter has been completely replaced. In the original edition I rather betrayed the applied, interdisciplinary character of the book by ending with a brief indication of some of the

main problems recognized by academic philosophy (with a mere nod towards psychology and sociology). Somehow—no doubt because of my own employment—I seemed to be assuming that my readers would proceed to study philosophy in a more specialized way. While I still hope that some will do so, I now recognize that they will very likely be a minority. A greater number may want to ponder the mysteries of human nature at a less abstract level. So in the new final chapter I introduce a wider range of further questions and suggest a personal selection of readings.

Among these urgent questions is that of gender differences, which has been brought to our attention in recent years by the feminist movement. I have made no systematic attempt to 'desex' the language of this book, from the opening sentence 'What is man?' onwards—I hope readers will believe me when I say that I intend the masculine words to cover the whole human species. The issue seems to me to require a deeper response than that, yet it did not seem appropriate to extend the book by entering the debate, even if I were qualified to do so. What I have done is to indicate in the new Chapter 10 how this is one of several vitally important issues arising from this introductory discussion of human nature.

St. Andrews
May 1987

L. S.

Preface to First Edition

This is an introductory book, intended simply as a rapid tour of a fascinating intellectual landscape. If it whets the reader's appetite for more detailed exploration, and helps him to start doing it for himself, then I shall have fulfilled my purpose. I assume no previous knowledge of the topics covered.

Librarians will find it hard to classify this book. Though written by a philosopher, it treats some writers and subjects not counted as philosophical in the academic sense. And though it considers some psychological theories, it could hardly count as a general introduction to psychology. It even strays into questions of biology, sociology, politics, and theology, thus overstepping the conventional faculty boundaries between arts, sciences, social science, and divinity. To use the word which is presently fashionable, it is 'interdisciplinary.' Perhaps it is best described as an extended exercise in what I have called 'applied philosophy' (in *Metaphilosophy* I: 3, July 1970, 258-67), that is, the application of conceptual analysis to questions of belief and ideology which affect what we think we ought to do, individually and socially. Inevitably, questions of pure philosophy are raised and not answered; I hope that some readers will be led into pursuing them further.

My thanks are due to my colleagues Keith Ward, Bob Grieve, and Roger Squires for their critical comments on parts of the manuscript, to my father Patric Stevenson for suggestions about

style, to my students at the University of St. Andrews for their testing of my ideas and exposition, to Ena Robertson and Irene Freeman for efficient typing, and to my wife Pat for everything.

St. Andrews
October 1973

L. S.

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I

Introduction

Introduction

1

Rival Theories

What is man? This is surely one of the most important questions of all. For so much else depends on our view of human nature. The meaning and purpose of human life, what we ought to do, and what we can hope to achieve—all these are fundamentally affected by whatever we think is the ‘real’ or ‘true’ nature of man.

The use of the masculine word ‘man’ here is very convenient for brevity of question and statement, and, as the quotations made in the next paragraph show, it has been very common practice. But straight away many of us will want to protest that what is involved is more than mere linguistic convenience, that some distinctive features and problems of women’s nature have all too often been overlooked by the common assumption that the concept *man* can represent the whole human species. This book does not attempt any systematic discussion of feminist issues: it presents some rival theories of general *human* nature. Some readers may wish to pursue the implications for gender differences, and for this purpose some further reading is recommended at the end of Chapter 10 (note 5).

Even within the most masculine-oriented views of human nature, there are disagreements aplenty, and more than enough for this book to consider. ‘What is man that Thou art mindful of him . . . Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour,’ said the author of Psalm 8 in the Old Testament. The Bible sees man as created

by a transcendent God who has a definite purpose for our life. 'The real nature of man is the totality of social relations,' said Marx (in his theses on Feuerbach in 1845). Marx denied the existence of God and held that each individual is a product of the human society he lives in. 'Man is condemned to be free,' said Sartre, writing in German-occupied France in the early 1940s. Sartre was as much an atheist as Marx, but (in that period of his thought, at least) he differed from Marx in holding that we are not determined by our society or by anything else. He held that every human individual is completely free to decide for himself what he wants to be and do.

Different views about human nature lead naturally to different conclusions about what we ought to do and how we can do it. If God made us, then it is His purpose that defines what we ought to be, and we must look to Him for help. If we are made by our society, and if we find that our life is somehow unsatisfactory, then there can be no real cure until society is transformed. If we are fundamentally free and can never escape the necessity for individual choice, then the only realistic attitude is to accept our situation and make our choices with full awareness of what we are doing.

Rival beliefs about human nature are typically embodied in various individual ways of life, and in different political and economic systems. Marxist theory (in one or another version) so dominates public life in most communist-ruled countries that any questioning of it can have serious consequences for the individual. In the so-called 'free' or 'democratic' nations we can easily forget that a few centuries ago Christian belief occupied a similarly dominant position: heretics and unbelievers were discriminated against, persecuted or burned. Even now, in some countries and in some areas, there is a socially established 'Christian' consensus which one can oppose only at some risk. In the Republic of Ireland, for example, Roman Catholic doctrine is constitutionally accepted as limiting policy on social matters such as abortion, contraception, and divorce. In the United States, there is an informal Christian ethos which affects the sayings (if not the actions) of politicians, despite the official separation of Church and State.

There is thus a tendency for the people and leaders of the superpower nations (U.S. and U.S.S.R.) to see themselves as in a competition that is not merely one of national rivalries, but of ideologies, each of which sees the other as based on a false and pernicious theory of human nature. This book will raise some sceptical and critical questions about both sides of this perilous confrontation.

An 'existentialist' philosophy like Sartre's may at first seem less likely to guide social practice; but one way of justifying modern 'liberal' democracy, with its separation of Church and State and its acknowledgment (as in the American Declaration of Independence) of the right of each individual freely to pursue his own conception of happiness, is by the philosophical view that there *are no* objective values for human living, only subjective individual choices. This assumption would seem to be incompatible with both Christianity and Marxism, but it is highly influential in modern Western society, far beyond its particular manifestation in French existentialist philosophy of the mid-century. It should be noted, however, that someone who believes there *are* objective standards may still support a liberal social system if he thinks it wrong to *enforce* them.

Let us look a bit more closely at Christianity and Marxism as two rival theories of human nature. Although they are radically different in content, there are some remarkable similarities in structure, in the way the parts of each doctrine fit together and give rise to ways of life. Firstly, they each make claims about the nature of the universe as a whole. Christianity is of course committed to belief in God, a personal being who is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, who created and controls everything that exists. Marx denied all this, and condemned religion as 'the opium of the people' which distracts them from their real social problems. He held that the universe exists without anybody behind or beyond it, and is fundamentally material in nature, with everything determined by the scientific laws of matter.

As part of their conception of the universe, both Christianity and Marxism have beliefs about the nature of history. For the Christian, the meaning of history is given by its relation to the

eternal. God uses the events of history to work out His purposes, revealing himself above all in the life and death of Jesus. Marx claimed to find a pattern of progress in human history which is entirely internal to it. He thought that there is an inevitable development from one economic stage to another, so that just as feudalism had given way to capitalism, capitalism would give way to communism. Thus both views see history as moving in a certain direction, though they differ about the nature of the moving force and the direction.

Secondly, following from the conflicting claims about the universe, there are different descriptions of the essential nature of the individual human being. According to Christianity, he is made in the image of God, and his fate depends on his relationship to God. For each man is free to accept or reject God's purpose, and will be judged according to how he exercises this freedom. This judgement goes beyond anything in this life, for somehow each individual person survives the physical death that we know. Marxism denies any such survival of death and any such judgement. It must also deny the importance of that individual moral freedom which is crucial to Christianity, for according to Marx our moral ideas and attitudes are determined by the kind of society we live in.

Thirdly, there are different diagnoses of what is basically wrong with mankind. Christianity says that the world is not in accordance with God's purposes, that man's relationship to God is disrupted. He misuses his freedom, he rejects God, and is thus infected with sin. Marx replaces the notion of sin by that of 'alienation,' which conveys a similar idea of some ideal standard which actual human life does not meet. But Marx's idea is of alienation from oneself, from one's own true nature, since men have potential that the conditions of capitalist society do not allow them to develop.

The prescription for a problem depends on the diagnosis of the basic cause. So, fourthly, Christianity and Marxism offer completely different answers to the ills of human life. The Christian believes that only the power of God Himself can save us from our state of sin. The startling claim is that in the life and death of the particular historical person Jesus, God has

acted to redeem the world and restore men's ruptured relationship with Himself. Each individual needs to accept this divine forgiveness, and can then begin to live a new regenerate life in the Christian church. Human society will not be truly redeemed until individuals are thus transformed. Marxism says the opposite—that there can be no real change in individual life until there is a radical change in society. The socioeconomic system of capitalism must be replaced by that of communism. This revolutionary change is inevitable, because of the laws of historical development; what the individual should do is to join the revolutionary party and help shorten the birth pangs of the new age.

Implicit in these rival prescriptions are somewhat differing visions of a future in which man is totally regenerated. The Christian vision is of man restored to the state that God intends for him, freely loving and obeying his Maker. The new life begins as soon as the individual accepts God's salvation and joins the Church, the community of the redeemed. But the process is only completed beyond this life, for both individual and community will still be imperfect and infected with the sin of the world. The Marxist vision is of a future in this world, of a perfect society in which men can become their real selves, no longer alienated by economic conditions, but freely active in cooperation with each other. Such is the goal of history, although it should not be expected immediately after the revolution, since a transitional stage will be needed before the higher phase of communist society can come into being.

We have here two systems of belief which are total in their scope. Both Christians and Marxists claim to have the essential truth about the whole of human life; they assert something about the nature of all men, at any time and in any place. And these world views claim not only assent but also action; if one really believes in either theory, one must accept that it has implications for one's way of life.

As a last point of comparison, note that for each belief-system there is a human organization which claims the allegiance of believers and asserts a certain authority on both doctrine and practice. For Christianity there is the Church, and

for Marxism the Communist Party. Or to be more accurate, there are now many Christian churches and many Marxist parties, making competing claims to follow the true doctrine of their founder, defining various versions of the belief as orthodox, and following different practical policies. Such sect-formation is typical of both beliefs.

Many people have noted this similarity in structure between Christianity and Marxism, and some have suggested that the latter is as much a religion as the former. There is food for thought here for believers of both kinds, and for the uncommitted person too. Why should such very different accounts of the nature and destiny of man have such similar structures? Perhaps the differences can be reconciled to some extent, for there are those who claim to be Christian Marxists. But in the traditional interpretations of each belief, there are very basic disagreements about the existence of God and the nature of man.

But, as I have already suggested by quoting Sartre, there are many more views of man. The theories of the ancient Greeks, especially of their great philosophers Plato and Aristotle, still influence us today. More recently, Darwin's theory of evolution and Freud's psychoanalytic speculations have permanently changed our understanding of ourselves. Modern biology, psychology, and sociology offer a variety of allegedly scientific theorizing about human nature. Many distinguished scientists, including some to be mentioned in this book, have been ready to offer their own diagnosis of, and prescription for, the human condition, supposedly based on their own particular scientific expertise. Outside the Western tradition, there have been Chinese, Indian, African, and Islamic views of man, some of which are still very much alive. Islam in particular is undergoing a resurgence of popular strength, as the peoples of the Middle East express their rejection of many aspects of Western culture.

Some of these views are embodied in human societies and institutions and ways of life, as Christianity and Marxism are. If so, they are not just theories, but ways of life, subject to change and to growth and decay. A system of belief about the nature of man which is thus held by some group of people as