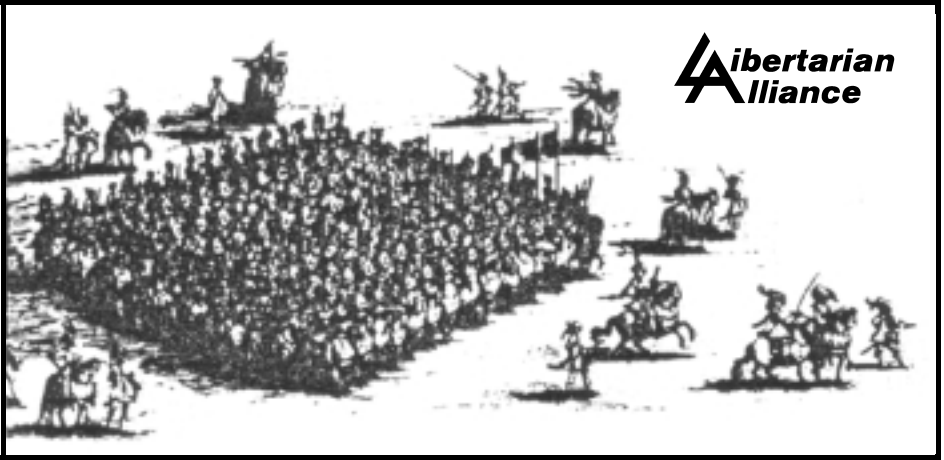


NATURAL ETHICS AND THE ORIGINS OF WAR

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Most contemporary writers and thinkers have passed an overwhelmingly negative verdict on human nature. Not only has modern civilised man upset the previously harmonious order of nature, they claim, but his natural destructive impulses have resulted even in the extermination of millions of his own kind in wars and genocidal concentration camps. Modern literature focuses on the murder-ous instincts which allegedly lie deep in man's unconscious, on the unknown inner 'heart of darkness' which occasionally manifests itself in orgies of violence and destruction. Psychologists declare that man is motivated by destructive and irrational natural drives which must be repressed if he is to function successfully in society. Thus A. A. Brill writes that "it is not repression, but the *failure* of it, which produces the (neurotic) symptom. People constantly misinterpret Freud as having said that one gets sick because of repression, and, *ergo*, they deduce that the best way to remain healthy is never to repress. Now only a complete fool could believe or say such a thing ... and certainly Freud and his school never advocated such nonsense.¹ Similarly, psychologist-philosopher Arthur Koestler devotes his work *The Ghost in the Machine* to the thesis that "man's native equipment ... contains some built-in error or deficiency which predisposes him towards self-destruction"; given the advanced nuclear and biological weapons of the "post-Hiroshima era", this "paranoid streak" in human nature will result in disaster unless (as Koestler hopes) it is artificially corrected by applying the discoveries of modern biology.² Sociologists proclaim that differences in values and attitudes among individuals and among cultures make conflict and violence unavoidable. Contemporary economists assume that the interests of individuals are necessarily in conflict with one another and seek to discover how individual self-interest can best be sacrificed to "the public good". Philosophers of ethics declare that man's "aggressive nature" must be tamed — that if peace and social harmony are ever to be achieved, man must be made submissive and "unselfish" by religious teachings, or by the coercive machinery of the state, by behaviouristic conditioning or by tranquilisers.

A CRITIQUE OF THE DOCTRINE OF EVIL HUMAN NATURE

Some reflection, however, reveals several fundamental contradictions in this view of man. Man is condemned because he imposes death and suffering upon his fellows, war and violent aggression. Yet why is it that these destructive actions are thus regarded as reprehensible? Clearly, they are censured precisely because they involve the sacrifice of human life and welfare. Implicit in this very condemnation of man, in other words, is the contradictory belief that human life is a value, that man is not a monster but a creature worthy of life and happiness. Furthermore, in order to restore the natural order which he has violated, man (it is proclaimed) must accept the anomalous penalty of sacrificing his own *nature*, of relinquishing his mind and its unique achievements — science, technology, industry, philosophy. While pleading for a "return to nature", most reformers have had in mind a concept of "nature" from which the intruder man is excluded — or in which he is reduced to a primitive, subhuman existence, having abandoned civilisation and intellect to become meek, altruistic, and self-sacrificing. In view of these inconsistencies, it would be wise to re-examine the standards by which man's choices and actions are evaluated and to determine whether or not there exists an irreconcilable conflict between ethical principles and the requirements of human nature.

NATURAL ENDS

Most modern philosophers have assumed that an action or a purpose can only be evaluated by a standard derived from some higher purpose. Consequently, they conclude, there exists no standard by which any particular ultimate purpose or end can be judged more "objective" than any other, and ultimate ends must therefore be arbitrary. Certainly, it cannot be denied that an entity or a process can potentially serve any of various purposes or functions; yet the subjectivist view overlooks the fact that a particular function is sometimes implicit in the very existence and nature of a thing. Thus for example, a house may function more or less well as a factory or as a warehouse; yet, if the house is to be evaluated *as a house*, one must consider it in the context of its natural function — the purpose of which explains the very existence of the house, and which is essential to understanding its nature and attributes — namely, satisfaction of the need of human habitation.

In general, if there exists some need or requirement which explains or determines the existence of an entity or process, then the entity or process is functioning well if and only if it is fulfilling that need or satisfying that requirement.³ The concept of a *need* or *requirement* in nature, it should be noted, presupposes the existence of living entities. Inorganic matter is by nature indestructible; its existence is unconditional. A living organ-

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ism, however, is an integrated unity which can be destroyed even while its material components continue to exist. An organism's life — whether on the level of mere physical survival or on the highest level possible to the organism — is contingent upon the fulfillment of certain conditions or metaphysical needs. The goal which accounts for the processes of valuation and action in every organism — and hence the standard for objective evaluation of these processes — is satisfaction of the organism's life-needs. Thus, a tree, a fish, or an organ of the human body is functioning properly to the degree that it is successful in satisfying the biological requirements of the organism. For every organism, the good is that which furthers its life; the evil that which harms or destroys it. Metaphysically, in short, life is an end in itself.⁴

FREE WILL

This principle is no less applicable to man but with one significant difference. The actions of a non-human organism are uniquely determined (caused) by its nature. Normally, such an organism is biologically "programmed" to execute those activities which are necessary to the sustenance of life and health. (Clearly, those rare individuals of a species which are not automatically programmed to perform the essential life-supportive functions cannot long survive and hence must remain the exceptions of nature, not the rule.) The nonhuman organism *must* pursue its life-functions in the manner necessitated by its nature. A human being, however, has the power either to sustain and improve his life or to destroy himself through inaction or improper action. To pursue that which is good for him or that which is harmful is for man a matter of *choice*⁵ — and therefore it is an ethical issue. For each individual man, the highest *moral* goal is the furtherance of his own life. (Since happiness is that stage of successful life in which one is free of internal life-debilitating conflicts,⁶ moral actions are also those which promote one's own happiness.)

FREE WILL AND NATURAL LAW

While man is free to act against his nature (i.e., in his own destruction), he is not exempt from natural law. He cannot escape the consequences of his actions which follow from the principles of his nature and the nature of reality. Like every other living organism, he must fulfill the needs of his nature if he is to *live* on the highest possible plane.

More specifically, since man's ability to maintain and ameliorate his life is ultimately dependent upon the efficacious functioning of his mind, he has a fundamental need to maintain the highest possible level of conceptual awareness of reality. Man is perpetually confronted with the alternatives — to focus his mind or to evade the effort of thought. But if he chooses not to think, if he evades the responsibility of producing the values necessary to his life, he can enjoy at best only a meager and fleeting existence, inappropriate to the needs of a rational being. Productive human activity, dependent upon the successful exercise of the human mind, is possible only under conditions of freedom. It follows that man cannot live successfully as a parasite, by aggression against others or by the wholesale destruction of his natural environment.

THE OBJECTIVE MORAL ORDER

Hence, to assert that value-judgements cannot be objective is implicitly to maintain that man is a being without a definite nature or objective needs. Nevertheless, this view is widely accepted today. Believing themselves incapable of discovering any objective natural law through the use of their own minds, men today surrender their lives in unquestioning obedience to the commands of higher authorities — particularly to the arbitrary laws, decrees, and orders of the state. Thus, in a recent

Harvard survey, two-thirds of American citizens declared that they would shoot every inhabitant of a Vietnamese village — including old men, women, and children — if ordered to do so by a commanding officer. Such large-scale atrocities are possible only to the extent that the doctrine of ethical subjectivism — which asserts that there exists no objective moral order, that life and death are equally acceptable standards for moral judgment — is accepted and practiced by men.

NATURAL LAW, FORCE AND WAR

If war and other forms of interpersonal aggression are ever to be eliminated, man must come to be regarded, not as a sacrificial animal, but as an end in himself. Man's rational self-interest requires that he respect the rights of others, in order that he may enjoy the benefits of a voluntary society. In such a society, human diversity would no longer be viewed as a source of conflict; on the contrary, differences in values and skills would create opportunities for the division of labour, for social co-operation to mutual advantage, and for a general improvement in human welfare.⁷ In a society based on freedom and suited to the needs of man's nature, there would be no initiation of force (coercion) between men, whether in the form of wars between entire populations or in domestic violence initiated by government against its own citizens. Force could legitimately be wielded only in defence of human life and rightful property, and government would necessarily be restricted to the sole function of preserving the rights of individuals.

WAR IS NOT INEVITABLE

War is not an inevitable product of human nature, but rather a consequence of the belief that ethical judgements must be based on whim rather than on the objective requirements of man's nature. An effective strategy for peace must not depend upon institutions (such as national or international political authorities) designed to subdue man's nature, to make him submissive and selfless for "the good of humanity": for such coercive institutions already contain the germ of war. Statism is obviously responsible for such devices as conscription and trade and immigration barriers which contribute indirectly to war; more fundamentally, however, powerful aggressive governments rest upon the same coercive principle as does war — and the twentieth century bears witness to the consequences. Exponents of peace must employ philosophical means if they are to realise their goal. Specifically, they must uphold the ideal of rational egoism as an alternative to prevailing anti-life ideologies which view man as the slave of "the good of society" and the state.

NOTES

1. A. A. Brill, *Lectures on Psychoanalytic Psychiatry*, Vintage Books, New York, 1955, pp. 42-43, quoted in Nathaniel Branden, *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*, Bantam Books, New York, 1971, p. 87.
2. Arthur Koestler, *The Ghost in the Machine*, Macmillan, New York, 1969, pp. xi and 327 ff.
3. See Eric Mack, "How to Derive Ethical Egoism", *The Personalist*, Autumn, 1971, pp. 735 ff, for a statement, elaboration, and discussion of possible objections to this principle.
4. Cf. Ayn Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics" in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, New American Library, New York, 1964.
5. On the contradiction in the determinist view of man, and on the relation of the law of causality to this issue, see Branden, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-63.
6. It is of course, possible to repress awareness of unresolved conflicts — and even of the pain one suffers as a consequence. Such pain, while not consciously recognised, nevertheless continues to be *felt*. Thus, authentic happiness cannot be attained while such conflicts persist. Cf. Branden, *ibid.*, especially pp. 144-153.
7. In economics, the law of association shows that social cooperation and trade are mutually advantageous to the degree that there exists a variety of skills, resources and values. Undoubtedly, peaceful human society owes its origin to such considerations of rational self-interest rather than to belief in the altruistic ethic or in a mythical "social good".