

## Chapter two

### *Some definitions of man*

Whom do I mean when I ask about man? I mean myself as well as other selves. The subject I ask about is exceedingly close to me. I not only perceive it; I am it as well as representing it. To know others I must know myself, just as understanding others is a necessary prerequisite for understanding myself.

The maxim "Know thyself" which was inscribed at the gate of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi referred to self-knowledge in relation to the gods: "Know that you are human and nothing more"—a warning against presumption (*hybris*), and a call to the Apollonic virtue of temperance (*sophrosyne*).<sup>\*</sup> It was Socrates who isolated the nature of man as a problem in itself, regardless of his relation to the gods, and employed the maxim "Know thyself" in the sense of self-examination.<sup>§</sup> Man must interrogate his own nature; through self-knowledge men

\* See *Charmides* 164; Martin Nilsson, *Greek Piety* (Oxford, 1948), pp. 47f; also A. Altmann, "The Delphic Maxim in Medieval Islam and Judaism," in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. A. Altmann (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), pp. 183ff.

§ *Phaedrus* 230. It is also ascribed to Thales: Diogenes Laertius *Thales*, section 40.

meet with countless blessings, and through ignorance of themselves with many evils.\*

Regarded by Plato as the very essence of knowledge, "Know thyself" was later characterized as a brief saying, and yet a task so great that Zeus himself alone could master it.<sup>§</sup> There is no issue about which so many contradictory statements have been made, no issue so important, no issue so obscure. Psychology, biology, sociology have sought to explore the nature of man. And yet man remains an enigma.

This failure, standing in such marked contrast to the advancement of our knowledge about other matters, is itself a major problem. Why is man elusive in spite of his being the most self-expressive entity known to us?

The right knowledge of man is a prerequisite for the right understanding of man's knowledge about the world. All decisions, cognitive, moral, aesthetic, are determined by the conception of our own selves.

Protagoras maintained: "Man is the measure of all things."<sup>¶</sup> This naturalist principle has been shattered more than ever in our own age by the question: What is the measure of man? Postmodern man is more deeply perplexed about the nature of man than were his ancestors.

In efforts to comprehend the nature of man, numerous definitions have been suggested which have enhanced our realistic understanding and illumined many aspects of man's nature

\* Xenophon *Memorabilia* IV, 2, 24.

§ According to Menander, "the saying 'Know thyself' is not well said. It were more practical to say, 'Know other folks.'" See Menander, *The Principal Fragments*, ed. Frances G. Allinson (New York, 1930), p. 361 (Thrasyleon).

¶ Diogenes Laertius *Protagoras*, book 9, section 51.

and condition. And yet they fall short of helping us in our situation today when ultimate problems have become our immediate problems.

What is man? A worm crawling on a pebble, the earth; a speck of life floating aimlessly through the immeasurable vastness of the universe.

"In the final analysis, man's 'soul' is no more than his heat-producing metabolism and warm blood, lung respiration and breath, his inordinately large brain and questing mind, the creativity of his hands, his memory, dreams, and volition, his familial social organization, conscience, and culture."\*

We know that man is more similar to an ape than an ape is to a toad. It may be that "man has not only developed from the realm of animals; he was, is, and shall always remain an animal." But is this the whole truth about man?

Indeed, man is a thing of space, biologically a type of mammal, and the definitions cited above expose aspects of the facticity of his being. However, when pretending to express what is decisive or central about man, these definitions seem to depict an effigy rather than an image of man. We are ready to accept as adequate the definition of a dog as a carnivorous domesticated mammal and of a fish as of the class of vertebrate animals living exclusively in water. But are we ready to accept the definition of a human being as an individual of the highest type of mammal existing or known to have existed?

*What do we seek to know?*

These definitions betray a deep inclination to conceive man as a being made in the image of the animal. There undoubtedly is a conscious desire in man to be animal, "natural" in

\* Weston La Barre, *The Human Animal* (Chicago, 1954), p. 295.

the experience of carnality, or even to identify himself as animal in destiny and essence. It is, however, questionable whether this desire may serve as a key in solving the riddle of human being. Is it to be regarded as evidence of man's being an animal at heart or as a desire to experience what he is not?

Since Aristotle it has been the generally accepted procedure to define man as a unit in the animal kingdom. Man was defined by Aristotle as "by nature a civilized animal," and "an animal capable of acquiring knowledge," as an animal that walks on two feet, as a political animal, as the only animal that has the power of choice, as the most imitative animal.\* Scholastic philosophy accepted the definition of man as an *animal rationale*, and Benjamin Franklin defined him as *Homo faber*, a tool-making animal.

This tendency—so widespread in anthropological reflection—to comprehend man in comparison with the animal, from the perspective of what we know about the animal, is bound to yield answers which are unrelated to our question. To be sure, anatomy and physiology display innumerable points of resemblance between man and animal. Yet, for all the similarity in composition and functions, the contrasts are even more remarkable. In asking the question about man our problem is not the undeniable fact of his animality but the enigma of what he does, because and in spite of, with and apart from, his animality. The question about man is not provoked by what we have in common with the animal kingdom, nor is it a function derived from what is animal in man.

\* *Topica* 128<sup>b</sup> 17, 132<sup>a</sup> 8; *Topica* 130<sup>b</sup> 8, 132<sup>a</sup> 20, 133<sup>a</sup> 21, 134<sup>a</sup> 15, 140<sup>a</sup> 36; *Topica* 133<sup>b</sup> 8, 136<sup>b</sup> 20, 140<sup>b</sup> 33; *Politika* 1253<sup>a</sup> 1; *Ethica Eudemia* 1226<sup>b</sup> 22; *Poetica* 1448<sup>b</sup> 8.

In establishing a definition of man I am defining myself. Its first test must be its acceptability to myself. Do I recognize myself in any of these definitions? Am I ready to identify myself as an animal with a particular adjective?

In order to understand the validity of an answer, it is necessary, as said above, to comprehend the precise and full meaning of the problem, the situation of stress and strain in which it comes to pass, and the necessity of coming to grips with it. Otherwise, we are likely to accept answers that are irrelevant to the questions.

Man in search of self-understanding is not motivated by a desire to classify himself zoologically or to find his place within the animal kingdom. His search, his being puzzled at himself is above all an act of disassociation and disengagement from sheer being, animal or otherwise. The search for self-understanding is a search for authenticity of essence, a search for genuineness not to be found in anonymity, commonness, and unremitting connaturality. Thus any doctrine that describes man as an animal with a distinguishing attribute tends to obscure the problem which we seek to understand. Man is a peculiar being trying to understand his uniqueness. What he seeks to understand is not his animality but his humanity. He is not in search of his origin, he is in search of his destiny. The way man has come to be what he is illumines neither his immediate situation nor his ultimate destination. The gulf between the human and the nonhuman can be grasped only in human terms. Even the derivation of the human from the nonhuman is a human problem. Thus, pointing to the origin of man throws us back to the question: What do we mean by man, whose origin we try to explore?

The hippopotamus may well regard man, with his physical

weakness, emotional unpredictability, and mental confusion, as a freak, as an unhappy and perverse sort of animal. However, in asking about the status of man we obviously take the perspective and standards of man. What do these standards disclose about the inner being of man?

Is it not possible that, in following the example of Aristotle and contemplating man in terms of the animal species, we have been looking at man from the wrong perspective? The sense in which the term "animal" is used in defining the whole man is far from being clear and exact. Do we really know the inner life of the animals? Is it possible for us to sense pure animality, unmixed with humanity? Is the animality of a human being the same as the animality of an animal? Would it be valid to define an ape as a human being without the faculty of reason and the skill of making tools?

It is reported that after Plato had defined man to be a two-legged animal without feathers, Diogenes plucked a cock and brought it into the Academy. The zoomorphic conception of man enables us to assign his place in the physical universe, yet it fails to account for the infinite dissimilarity between man and the highest animal below him. Zoomorphic conceptions of man are as proper as anthropomorphic conceptions of God. In addition to its descriptive inadequacy, the suggestive and evocative meaning of the word "animal" in the term "thinking animal" distorts as much as it clarifies.

Every generation has a definition of man it deserves. But it seems to me that we of this generation have fared worse than we deserve. Accepting a definition is man's way of identifying himself, holding up a mirror in which to scan his own face. It is characteristic of the inner situation of contemporary man that the plausible way to identify himself is to see himself in

the image of a machine. "The human machine" is today a more acceptable description of man than the human animal. Man is simply "a machine into which we put what we call food and produce what we call thought." A human being is "an ingenious assembly of portable plumbing." The definition itself goes back to the eighteenth century.\* Never before, however, has it been so widely accepted as plausible. An animal stands before us as a mystery; a machine is an invention.

We must not take lightly man's pronouncements about himself. They surely reveal as well as affect his basic attitudes. Is it not right to say that we often treat man as if he were made in the likeness of a machine rather than in the likeness of God?

A definition of man in the Eleventh Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is surely bound to inspire reverence for the greatness of man. It says: "Man is a seeker after the greatest degree of comfort for the least necessary expenditure of energy." Do we still recognize man here?

In pre-Nazi Germany the following statement of man was frequently quoted: "The human body contains a sufficient amount of fat to make seven cakes of soap, enough iron to make a medium-sized nail, a sufficient amount of phosphorus to equip two thousand match-heads, enough sulphur to rid one's self of one's fleas." Perhaps there was a connection between this statement and what the Nazis actually did in the extermination camps: make soap of human flesh.

\* The first explicit statement *Man a Machine* goes back to *L'Homme machine*, the title of the famous work by La Mettrie (1709-51), in which human psychical activities are explained as mechanical functions of the brain. Descartes had denied the possibility of conceiving man as a machine (*Discourse on Method*, part V).

As descriptions of one of many aspects of the nature of man, these definitions may indeed be correct. But when pretending to express his essential meaning, they contribute to the gradual liquidation of man's self-understanding. And the liquidation of the self-understanding of man may lead to the self-extinction of man.

An important characteristic of our problem is that we do not even know how to phrase the question; we are bewildered and perplexed over what to ask about. What precisely do we wish to know in asking the question about man? Socrates articulates his desire to know himself as the desire to know man's disposition: "Am I a monster more complicated and more furious than the serpent Typhon, or a creature of a gentler and simpler sort, to whom Nature has given a divine and quiet lot?"\*

However, what we seek to know about man is not only his disposition, the facts of life, but also his meaning and vocation, the goals of life. Beholding him piecemeal, we may come upon his kinship to animality. Seen as a whole, however, the situation of human being is one in which facts and goals, disposition and thirst for meaning are intertwined.

### *The eclipse of humanity*

A new skepticism has emerged. In the past, philosophy has been motivated by a variety of ultimate questions. Can I be sure of what I know? Can I be sure of the reality of the external world? Today it is the humanity of man that is no longer self-evident, and the issue we face is: How can a human being achieve certainty of his humanity?

\* *Phaedrus* 230.

In the Middle Ages thinkers were trying to discover proofs for the existence of God. Today we seem to look for proof for the existence of man.

The term "human" has become ambiguous. It has the connotation of weakness. ("He is only human." "Adam was but human." "To err is human." "All that I care to know is that a man is a human being—that is enough for me; he can't be any worse.") Yet the term is also used in the sense of magnanimity ("To step aside is human") as well as charity, particularly when spelled *humane*, which connotes feelings and inclination proper to man, having tenderness, compassion, and a disposition to treat other human beings and the lower animals with kindness. We speak of humane as opposed to severe or strict justice.

The ambiguity of *Homo sapiens* is an old triviality. Both praise and derision have been heaped profusely upon him. To some, he is "heaven's masterpiece"; to others, "Nature's sole mistake." Yet a note of compassion vibrates in the older discourses about him. Today we are fiercely articulate in deprecation and disdain. He who would write a book in the praise of man would be regarded as a half-wit or a liar. Man is being excessively denounced and condemned by artists, philosophers, and theologians. This is a typical view:

Since [Tennessee] Williams frankly declares himself to be an evangelist, we may inquire what is the gospel, the good news, which he has to offer. Man is a beast. The only difference between man and the other beasts is that man is a beast that knows he will die. The only honest man is the unabashed egotist. This honest man pours contempt upon the mendacity, the lies, the hypocrisy of others who will not acknowledge their egotism. The one irreducible value is life, which you must cling to as you can and use for the pursuit of pleasure and of power. The specific ends of life

are sex and money. The great passions are lust and rapacity. So the human comedy is an outrageous medley of lechery, alcoholism, homosexuality, blasphemy, greed, brutality, hatred, obscenity. It is not a tragedy because it has not the dignity of a tragedy. The man who plays his role in it has on himself the marks of a total depravity. And as for the ultimate and irreducible value, life, that in the end is also a lie.\*

Man has very few friends in the world, certainly very few in the contemporary literature about him. The Lord in heaven may prove to be his last friend on earth. Is it not possible that the tantrum we witness is due to our being trapped by overwhelming self-disdain, by a superior sense of inferiority?

The tragedy of this creeping self-disparagement is in its cultivation of the doubt whether man is worthy of being saved. Massive defamation of man may spell the doom of all of us. Moral annihilation leads to physical extermination. If man is contemptible, why be upset about the extinction of the human species? The eclipse of humanity, the inability to sense our spiritual relevance, to sense our being involved in the moral task is itself a dreadful punishment.

#### *What is being human?*

Man is our chief problem. His physical and mental reality is beyond dispute; his meaning, his spiritual relevance is a question that cries for an answer. Is it not right to suggest that the agony of the contemporary man is the agony of a spiritually stunted man? The image of man is larger than the frame into which he was contracted; we have underestimated

\* Robert E. Fitch, "Secular Images of Man in Contemporary Literature," *Religious Education*, LIII, 87; also in *What Is the Nature of Man?* (Philadelphia, 1959), p. 60.

the nature of man. Even the form in which we ask the question about man is biased by our own conception of man as a thing. We ask: *What is man?* Yet the true question should be: *Who is man?*\* As a thing man is explicable; as a person he is both a mystery and a surprise. As a thing he is finite; as a person he is inexhaustible.

The popular definitions cited above offer an answer to the question "What is man?" in terms of his facticity, as a thing of space. The question "Who is man?" is a question of worth, a question of position and status within the order of beings.‡

The self-certainty of the soul was valued by Augustine as the surest of all experiences. Now what is the soul certain of? It is certain that it thinks, that it functions. Yet the problem is not whether I function, or whether I am, but who I am.

And the first answer to the question: Who is man? is that he is a being who asks questions concerning himself. It is in asking such questions that man discovers that he is a person, and it is the kind of questions he asks that reveals his condition.

Our question is not only: What is the nature of the human species? but also: What is the situation of the human individ-

\* "What is man?" means what sort of thing is he? "Who" is a pronoun asking for the identification of a person or persons. The biblical question: "What is man, that Thou art mindful of him..." (Psalm 8:4), "What is man, that Thou dost make so much of him..." (Job 7:17) really means what is the worth of man...?

‡ The question "Who is man?" (phrased in the category of substance) is by no means the only possible question in a reflection about man. In an old rabbinic text three other questions are suggested: "Whence did you come?" "Whither are you going?" "Before whom are you destined to give account?" And yet these questions presuppose the knowledge of an answer to the question: "Who is man?"

ual? What is human about a human being? Specifically, our theme is not only: What is a *human being*? but also: What is *being human*?

Man is not only a special kind of being. His being human depends upon certain relations without which he ceases to be human. The decision to give priority to the question what is human about a human being is based upon the assumption that the category of human is not simply derived from the category of being. The attribute "human" in the term "human being" is not an accidental quality, added to the essence of his being. It is the essence. Human being demands being human. An analysis of the human situation discloses a number of essential modes of being human, a few of which I should like to refer to in the next chapter.

It is indeed conceivable that man may continue to be without being human. Human being and being human are both exposed to danger, the latter even more than the former. "Being human" must always be rescued from chaos or extinction.

One of the most frightening prospects we must face is that this earth may be populated by a race of beings which though belonging to the race of *Homo sapiens* according to biology will be devoid of the qualities by which man is spiritually distinguished from the rest of organic creatures. To be human we must know what being human means, how to acquire, how to preserve it.

Just as death is the liquidation of being, dehumanization is the liquidation of being human. What qualifies a being to be called a human being?

No one definition can fathom the depth of human being, the intricate ways and byways in whom it is disclosed. Yet to claim that the question is unanswerable, and the problem in-

soluble, would be to surrender to the hope of attaining any knowledge concerning significant issues, since the question about man is a radical question and the significance of all other questions we ask depends upon the answer we are ready to offer to this one.

Self-understanding seeks to comprehend my existence. What do I supremely care for? What do I dream of, aspire to? Facing myself as I am here and now I discover gold as well as dross. What I come upon as I delve within myself is twilight, confusion, contentment as well as not knowing what is ultimately worth striving for. The mind unguided is groping in the dark, the mind guided is the product of superimpositions.

Is it possible to achieve knowledge of the self? Rationalism operates with the assumption that whatever *is* can also be *known*. It fails to distinguish between the world as given *in* my mind, wrapped up in concepts and categories, and the world as given *to* my mind as sheer being; between the self as given *in* my explanations of certain behavioral forms and the self as given *to* my mind. What is the self? What in me remains identical throughout the changes and transformations to which I am subject, the forms of behavior, actions and reactions?

The minimum of self-awareness comes to expression in the words: I am. But who is I? And what does it mean to be?

The I is an epistemological pretext, a pseudonym for what we do not know. "I am" is a marvel, a source of astonishment. One can never recover from the surprise of just being here and now.

It seems that the depth and mystery of a human being is something that no analysis can grasp. The knowledge of man we get from science, for all its usefulness, strikes us as an over-

simplification; its definitions prove barren when applied to actual human beings.

Ultimate self-penetration is neither possible nor desirable. What we may aim at is a degree of self-understanding which would enable us to project our living rather than let our living be a projection of crowd, a fashion or a whim. Our task must include the effort to discern and to disclose the authentic as well as the unauthentic prepossessions, the honest as well as dishonest manifestations of the inner life.

The exclamation of the Psalmist, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made!" (139:14) expresses man's sense of wonder at the mystery of his own existence. There is a depth of personal existence that cannot be fully illumined, that eludes our generalizations. Yet the necessity to understand man is rough and demanding.

To explain means to make plain. Yet the roots of existence are never plain, never flat; existence is anchored in *depth*. One cannot study the life of a tree by *excavating its roots*.

What follows is an attempt to describe some modes of being human which every reader as a human being will recognize and accept as essential. They represent a requiredness rather than a fabrication of the mind; not postulates of morality but fundamentals of human existence. Failure in nurturing the essential sensibilities results in the decay of the humanity of the individual man.

These features or sensibilities are no disparate trifles, random impressions, arbitrarily registered, but rather necessary components which constitute the essence of being human. They are not reflecting actual behavior but rather the wisdom of a necessary self-awareness, a scope of interrelated features within which man must be understood in his being human

as distinguished from being animal, from being beastly. They are not simply given in man's consciousness, nor are they properties derived from his biological nature. His sheer being does not guarantee them. However, they may be claimed of him, expected of him. They emerge as manifestly true when a person begins to ponder the latent substance of his self-understanding.

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## *Chapter three*

### *Preciousness*

What do I see when I see a man? I see him first as one other specimen of the human species, then as a specific, particular individual who can be named or identified; but then he stands before me as the only entity in nature with which sanctity is associated. All other sacred objects in space are made holy by man. Human life is the only type of being we consider intrinsically sacred, the only type of being we regard as supremely valuable. The particular individual may not be dear to me—in fact I may even dislike him. But he is dear to someone else, to his mother, for example, although that too is not the reason for his eminence. For even if nobody cares for him, he still is a human being.

Our way of seeing a person is different from our way of seeing a thing. A thing we perceive, a person we meet. To meet means not only to come upon, to come within the perception of, but also to come into the presence of, or association with, a person. To meet means not only to confront but also to agree, to join, to concur.

How do I think when I think of a human being? To think of a thing is to think what I know; to think of a human being