

THE NATURE OF MAN

BY JOHN EDMOND HEARN

WHAT do we know about the nature of man? Very little, and mainly because man can not know himself. "We are unknown, we knowers, ourselves to ourselves," says Nietzsche, and he compares us to one who, "sunken in the seas of his own soul, in whose ear the clock has just thundered with all its force its twelve strokes of noon, suddenly wakes up, and asks himself, 'What has in point of fact just struck?' So do we at times rub afterward, as it were, our puzzled ears, and ask in complete astonishment and complete embarrassment, 'Through what have we in point of fact just lived?' further, 'Who are we in point of fact?' and count, *after they have struck*, all the twelve throbbing beats of the clock of our experience, of our life, of our being—ah!—and count wrong."

But where direct knowledge is denied us, we may make the best of indirect. No one ever saw a vitamin, but we do not deny the existence of the accessory food substance on that account. And really we know a great deal about them without knowing them. It is possible even, by appropriate manipulation, to secure vitamins in a fair state of purity; how far it is impossible to say, because there is no standard of comparison. Apart from a few of their physiological properties, our knowledge of them is largely negative. We may examine a mass of material and may find that it does not contain certain chemical elements although it contains vitamins. Then we conclude that vitamins do not contain the certain elements. But when we find that the mass does contain a certain element, we can not conclude that vitamins do contain it, for it may be present as an impurity, in the matter surrounding the vitamin but not in the vitamin.

It is not possible to apply chemical manipulation to man. We can not secure him in even a fair state of purity. And when certain things are alleged about man, it may be that they are true not of

man himself, not of pure man, but of impurities which cling to him.

But if it is impossible to develop a technique for purifying the creature, we may at any rate question some of the allegations about him and try to decide whether they apply really to him himself.

"To the eye of vulgar Logic," says Carlyle, "what is man? An omnivorous Biped that wears breeches."

Is he omnivorous? The best diet for an animal of any species is that to which he is naturally adapted. His natural diet is that to which he was earliest accustomed, provided he has not passed through any evolutionary changes which make such a diet unsuitable at the present time.

Ovid, in describing the Golden Age of the Greeks, says that men fed on fruit, without meat.

As to man's ancestors, Elliot of Oxford, in his recent work on "Prehistoric Man," declares that "there was not, so far as we are aware, any carnivorous creature in the Eocene period."

Genus homo belongs to the order of Primates, which includes men, monkeys, and lemurs, and his natural or primitive diet is the same as that of his order—fruits, nuts, tender shoots and bulbs, which were found in the primitive home, the forest. It was after leaving the forest, according to United States Forester Graves, that man began to prey upon the animals of the plains.

Is man a biped? No; there is no room for doubt that primitive man walked on all fours, and many anatomists believe that he changed prematurely from the horizontal to the vertical position. Dr. J. K. Thompson says that the upright position causes the gravitation of the blood and waste products in the circulation to the abdomen and the lower limbs, this congestion bringing on disorders of various kinds. Most people, he thinks, would benefit by walking quadruped-fashion part of the time and by exercising in the horizontal position.

We need not discuss the bifurcated garments that most men wear, except to remark that Carlyle's definition rules out some men and most women, and we had thought that he used the term man in the generic sense.

But Carlyle, as you will remember, does not stop with his materialistic definition but gives a metaphysical one also: "To the eye of pure reason what is he? A Soul, a Spirit, and divine Apparition."

This is not very enlightening. It is the identification of something we little know with something we know not at all.

It is a curious fact that men are offended at the correct definition of man. Man is an animal, but he sometimes hates to acknowledge it. "Every member and organ of his body has its counterpart or analog in the bodies of other animals," says W. H. Thompson. "The brain of the chimpanzee, as far as structure goes, presents us with not only every lobe but with every convolution of the human brain."

Korzybski, the author of "The Manhood of Humanity," seems to think that men are not animals. He divides life into three parts: plants, the chemistry-binders; animals, the space-binders; men, the time-binders. No one doubts that men have some qualities that lower animals lack, but to make a separate classification of men because they can fuse, in their minds, the past, present, and future into an eternal present tense seems hardly necessary, especially as it is not known whether an intelligent dog can perform that feat.

Doctor Crile's exceedingly useful description of man as an adaptive mechanism, as a sensitive being immersed in a hostile environment, applies not exclusively to man.

Paul Lafargue has shown that man can not be distinguished from other animals by the ability to entertain abstract ideas. The idea of number is the abstract idea par excellence, and a pigeon, if robbed of the second egg she lays, will lay a third, and a fourth and fifth if the eggs are taken as fast as she lays them. She will sit upon two eggs, not more nor less. She shares with man the abstract idea of number.

Of all the definitions of man, perhaps the Nietzschean characterization of him as the animal that can promise is the best: whence it may be said to follow that the ignoblest member of the species is the man who repudiates or forgets his promises.

The bare possession of the social sense does not distinguish man from the other animals. Even earthworms are social. And there are men who are not much more social than earthworms. On the higher levels, sociability becomes an esthetic affair; but even there the difference is in degree rather than in kind—a quantitative, not a qualitative, difference.

It is generally conceded that the possession of intelligence roughly divides mankind from the beasts, although a two-year-old dog is more intelligent than a two-year-old child. Recent experiments with scopolamin have shown that the intellect may be put to sleep without interfering with the speech center. A subject in this so-called twilight sleep may talk, but, when the drug works to suit the operator, the subject can not tell a lie. The reason for this is that the

intellect is necessary for deception. If man is the only intelligent creature, then he is the only liar. But even insects can play dead to deceive their enemies.

It is a peculiarly human idiosyncrasy that one man while listening to a recital of the woes of another has his attention focused on his own troubles and his friend's woes are seen dimly at the outer range of his vision. This has been observed so often of humans, and never of non-humans, that the probability is that it is a trait at least predominantly human.

Man is narrow-minded, but for all we know not more so than other animals. Among the various ways in which this narrow-mindedness is manifested is in the inability of a man to appreciate the worth of another man's work and interests. I was speaking to a friend about a fundamental problem in philosophy and of William James's contribution toward its solution. After listening quietly for a moment, my friend, smiling engagingly, said: "Which is about as important as the distinction between tweedledum and tweedledee."

Man is a religious animal. It is probable that pigs neither pray nor swear. Swearing is the expression, hardly of religion, but at any rate of religiosity.

Reverence for something greater than himself is a universal property of man. He may blaspheme God, he may despise intellect, but there is always something greater than himself which he reverences. Sometimes this shows in his complaints. He may complain that there is no justice in the world. Thereby he shows his deep reverence for justice. Perhaps he is right. Perhaps there is no justice in the world—in his world, which is made up of a grasping landlord, a penny-saving employer, and himself.

Schopenhauer admonished his students, when they met with any disagreeable trait in human nature, merely to make a note of it. It may not be true that all knowledge is useful: one's attitude toward knowledge is the important thing. The student of insects finds interest in every insect trait. The student of man should find interest in every human trait.

These traits, pleasant and unpleasant, may be divided into those of instinct and those of intelligence. But instinct is a sort of intelligence, and perhaps the differentiation should be between the traits which are under the control of the subconscious mind and those controlled by the conscious mind.

An act which has been repeated so often as to become a matter of unconscious habit may at first have been harmless to any one

and yet later it may become offensive. A man who smokes in the presence of those who dislike tobacco smoke (if such people still exist) may not realize that he is doing anything reprehensible; but he should get into communication with his conscious mind.

The observer of the traits of men will soon see that many men live a sort of automatic life, made up mostly of habit. It is the exceptional man who orders his own life, changing his habits at will, knowing that even a fairly good habit may become bad by losing connection with conscious intelligence.

It is presumably in the interest of the unexceptional that reformers of the present day are endeavoring to make self-control superfluous. It is conceivable that paternalism may go so far as to endanger the supremacy of man over the lower animals rather than to exalt the monofanatics to the position of missing link between man and superman. For "end on" evolution has been discredited. There is, according to modern ideas, to quote Dr. F. Wood Jones of the University of London, "no march of progress to perfection along a single line." It seems logical to presume, with Professor Dendy, that the successor of man will arise from "some unspecialized offshoot of the human race," rather than from a group of highly specialized reformers who constitute the very pinnacle of perfected humanity.

Aside from the question of man's successor, the improvement of the race will probably depend rather on the leading of the people to an appreciation of the inexorability of the natural laws applicable to all animal life, including our own, than on legislation.

Man's origin, from the point of view of biology, was lowly; but his destiny may be greater than we of the present dream. His origin, from the non-physical point of view, many people think was not lowly. They regard him as an emanation from the Most High (but evil itself is an emanation from God if the Plotinian doctrine is carried to its logical end), and think that his destiny can not be less great than his origin; that his progress is determined by his own aspiration, volition, and imagination; that he must visualize himself as a god in order to achieve his ineffable destiny.

Whatever the destiny of the human race, it will not have existed in vain if from it arises a greater than itself. And that greater one may be able to pass judgment on the nature of man.