Philosophical Theories of Human Nature

Francis Sparshott
University of Toronto

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Francis Sparshott
University of Toronto
"What is man, that thou art mindful of him? Or the son of man, that thou visitest him?" The questions of the psalmist sound like good questions, though the language is unfashionably sexist and they rather take the existence of a mindful deity for granted. But are they really good questions? How does one set about answering the question "What is humanity?" Can we say in general terms which answers are good ones, and what is good about them? Is there some one answer that, if we could hit on it, would stand as the one best possible answer for all time? And, if there isn't, why isn't there? If there is one set of questions that dominates everything philosophers do, this might be that set. But philosophers don't actually talk about it much. It is, however, what I am going to write about here, though rather inconclusively as you will find.

One caveat I must enter at once. My title is misleading. The word "nature" sounds as if I were committed from the beginning to the belief that humanity has some timeless essence, corresponding to a fixed place in a natural order. But I make no such commitment. I am concerned with the possibility of true and adequate answers to the question "What is humanity?" whatever the form they may take. The concept of nature holds no sway over what follows. I put it in my title only to have an excuse for disavowing it at the start.

A year or two ago I heard two eminent philosophers, whom I shall call the God and the Giant, talking about the prospects of what they called "cognitive science." This turned out to mean the project of building a computer that would replicate human thought processes. One of the philosophers, the Giant, said that what cognitive science could do was to work out machine equivalents for particular types of intelligent human action, and that by summing these equivalents one could approach ever closer to a complete replication of human behaviour. This perfectly practicable project, he said, was by no means invalidated by the fact that one might never succeed in completing the replicating machine and could certainly never know that one had done so. It seemed to me, as I listened, that the Giant was entirely right about this.

The God disagreed. He said that cognitive science could never make any contribution to the understanding of human behaviour, because no characterization properly applicable to human behaviour is properly applicable to anything else. The reason for this, he said, is that human action is what it is only because of the context of concern within which we do everything we do. Humans always care; machines
never do. You can play chess against a computer program, but the computer can't play against you because it can't play, can't win or lose; the computer program is something you use to help you play chess against yourself. And it seemed to me, as I listened, that the God was entirely right, just as the Giant had been. But how could both be right, when each was convinced that the other was entirely wrong? It was as if there were two incompatible claims about what is essentially involved in being a human being, one sticking to observable behaviour and working up from particular actions and the other working down from the general notion of committed intelligent agency. It seemed to me that these might be two aspects of our notion of humanity, each necessary even if not jointly sufficient. But, if that is so, why were the God and the Giant so fiercely at odds? I found it very puzzling.

The God said something else, that I didn't think was right. He said that the committed concern and care of a human being could be embodied only in organic matter, in flesh and bone and such stuff — and not, presumably, in wires and chips. But he didn't say why that had to be true. He said that if you found between your best friend's shoulderblades a trapdoor with a mess of gears and circuitry inside where the liver and lights should be, your best friend wouldn't be your friend any more. I agree that it wouldn't happen and won't happen and couldn't happen, but if it did happen it could happen and would probably keep happening, and why not? I am glad to say that I don't actually know that any of my friends have real meat inside — I have never looked, and I have never asked them. What would I think if one of them proved to be metallic after all? Would my friend stop being my friend? Perhaps I would decide that my friend was a person, and a very nice person, even if not exactly a human person — but surely not exactly inhuman either. In any case, the God is clever and famous, so here we have a third possible view of what is essential to humanity to be an intelligent manifestation of ensouled embodiment in a biological order.

Anyway, here were at least two views about what humanity essentially is, both of which a conscientious philosopher should take into account. How many such views are there, and how do we identify them? Then I recalled that, many years ago, my department set up a course in "theories of man" or some such, and told me to teach it, so I had to figure out what to teach. What did I do? I don't remember, but I expect we read a little Plato, a little Aristotle, a little Descartes, a little LockeBerkeleyHume, a little Nietzsche, a little Heidegger or Sartre, stuff like that. It was quite easy, in practice, once one realized that the prior question was, "What texts are available in paperback?" It was not so easy to say what such a course should ideally contain and how it should be organized. Absolutely everything anyone is and does is equally an aspect of humanity, so how could there possibly be a
theory of it all? The mind boggles.

Faced by such boggling of the mind, some philosophers say that one must be dealing with a pseudo-question. Real questions, they say, have real answers, because they arise from real uncertainties in specific contexts. Whatever has no straightforward answer cannot be a real question. But all sorts of answers have been given to the question "What is humanity?" The problem is how the answers are to be evaluated. I have never understood exactly what a pseudo-question is, but I don't see how calling something a pseudo-question solves anything. It is an inadequate excuse for not thinking about complex and ill-formulated issues. We still have to decide what the issues are and what to do about them.

Philosophically, the question "What is a human being?" seems to arise as soon as one embarks on that respectable philosophical discipline, ethics or moral philosophy. Questions of the form "What shall I do?" and "How shall I live my life?" are completely general in scope, in the sense that all my values and concerns are in principle brought to bear on every decision I make, and all the values and concerns current in a community are brought to bear on every issue of policy it faces, in the sense that the limited frameworks and contexts within which each decision is made hold their validity only on the assumption that there is no other framework and context that should preempt them. In practice, of course, we don't always call everything into question, and the Socratic claim that only an examined life is truly human is one we need not grant, but the principle holds. That means that ethical reflection drives us to inquire into what kinds of constraints and determinants govern and should govern our actions and plans overall. Since the ancient Greeks, the rationale of living has not often been pursued at this level, where one inquires into the relation between goodness, justice, convenience, advantage, pleasure, righteousness, beauty, sweetness, "human flourishing" and so forth, and even the Greeks never examined the question in a really critical spirit. But it seems to me that the question "How should I live?" takes that sort of form, and is in a shadowy sort of way coterminous with the question "What am I?" And the question "What am I?" looks as if it might be the subjective and existential form of the question "What is a human being?", though it would be rash to affirm that it actually is the same.

Meanwhile, on the purely practical level, there was this course in the university calendar, and the course had to be taught. By me.

The course, as I have described it, was merely anecdotal. I presented and discussed views that happened to have become standard, over the course of years, to the point where the documents were easily available and came easily to a mind that had been submitted to a conventional academic education. Now, that may really be the best way to do things: what has become a traditional consensus suffices to
define the standpoint of modern civilization, and to have done any-
thing more systematic would have been merely to rely on one subject-
tive interpretation of that consensus among others. We may, of
course, wonder how the consensus was reached, and what it was a
consensus about. To say that these are the leading available alternative
views does not explain what it is they lead in, or whether they are
truly alternatives to each other; and availability is not always a virtue.
But there may after all be no answer to such questions: the content of
a curriculum, like other administrative institutions, is a concrete uni-
versal that may resist analysis. All the same, we can't be sure before-
hand that there is nothing more to be said.

One possible interpretation of the sort of course I taught is that it
consisted, in effect, of attempted solutions to the mind-body prob-
lem. But does that mean that I, and the philosophers on whom I
depended, had surreptitiously stipulated that the human being is
essentially that being in relation to which, and for whom, the mind-
body problem arises? If so, how was that stipulation validated? It
seems only too likely, when we think about it, that philosophers have
agreed among themselves on making that stipulation, because, as phi-
losophers, minds are what interest them and bodies are what they
have to have. If so, my casual reliance on book catalogues may have
been sinister rather than benign. What is in paperback is popular
prejudice.

If philosophers put the question about humanity in a special way, it
is because that is the way in which the question becomes salient for
them. If we are going to escape that sort of bias, then, we will have to
pose the following general question: in what sorts of context is it the
question "What is a human being?" that becomes salient, as opposed
to questions about sexes, trades, ages, natures, or cross-categorizations
that only some humans share with some beings that are not human? If
the question becomes salient only in some special contexts, one may
be quite wrong even to raise the question in other contexts; if, on the
other hand, it is a question that can in principle always be raised, it
might still call for different answers in different contexts in which it
does become salient.

What sorts of answers to the question "What is a human being?"
become salient when? I would expect answers to become salient, irre-
spective of immediate practical occasions and concerns, on two condi-
tions. The first condition is that there should exist preemptive sys-
tems of explanation within which our civilization provides and
structures answers to such questions. The second condition is that
some answers to the question should prove inexpugnable. The first
condition is fulfilled by whatever the currently accepted system of
basic science may be; the second condition is fulfilled in the way Des-
cartes made famous, by considering the most basic acceptable answers
that could be given by human beings when they reflect on their own
humanity and ask themselves "What am I?" I will say something of each of these in turn.

The preemptive systems of explanation in our civilization are those of accepted or mainstream science. The whole point of these scientific systems is that they are preemptive: they are built up critically to eliminate error and illusion, and hence to resist disbelief. The scope of science, most people agree, is limited; but these limitations do not undermine its authority.

Science, in fact, provides not one preemptive system, but three. The first is that of physics (which I am taking here to include chemistry). The precise content and scope of contemporary physics is not what matters here: what matters is its status as our basic science, to which, if to any, all other natural sciences must be reduced. Physics is the science of nature just insofar as it is natural. Well, a human being is, whatever else it is, a natural object; human beings are among the sorts of entity that physical science applies to, a special but not-too-special case of that of which the laws of physics hold. Physics can and must reach an answer to the question "What is a human being?" by systematically differentiating humans from other natural entities, and whatever answer it reaches will have an unshakable privilege. The physics and chemistry of humans are essential to humanity if humanity is a reality in the natural world.

It is important to realize, however, that the very fact that physics as here understood is the general science of nature as a whole and in general makes it unlikely that it will shed light on any specific questions about humanity as such. What we can truthfully say in its terms will be important and will have its privileged place, but it will probably not be what we want to know. It might have been incumbent on our physics to tell us what we most want to know about humanity if it had been the only preemptive system of explanation our civilization had at its disposal. But there are at least two others, and that lets physics off the hook.

The second preemptive system is that of biology and zoology. The concept of physics as basic science is a bit cloudy, but humans are quite clearly and directly beings of the kind that biology is about. In fact, it is plausible to claim that biology was originally generated by extrapolation and extension from an inquiry into human nature as a kind of nature: you can see this happening already in Aristotle, who really invented the idea of biology. Man is a kind of animal, but the concept of an animal is itself arrived at by generating and refining analogies between humans and other entities; humanity is at the conceptual centre here, whereas among the entities with which physics deals humanity has no privilege. It follows, oddly enough, that the proviso that humanity must figure within these explanatory systems as a case that, though special, is not too special, is less evidently stringent for biology than for physics. A human must be plausibly a physical
object, or the claim of physics to be the one basic science cannot be allowed; but a human need not be a plausible biological object. Since biology is or might be an expansion of the study of humanity, not necessarily making any claims to foundational status among the sciences, biology could be based on extrapolating from what is admittedly only a part of human reality. Human beings could be other things as well, without biology having to be concerned at all.

The recent development of sociobiology suggests that uneasy status of biology in this regard. It is possible to equate biology as far as possible with genetics, in that it is at the molecular level that biology comes closest to being a specialist department of physics. Sociobiology in its application to human behavior can then be seen as a speculation on the extent to which human experience can be explained in terms of survival value. Those who work in this field may then be puzzled when their work is felt to be threatening. Why should it be? Nothing they do need claim to displace other means of access we have to our lives. The preemptive claims of our main systems of explanation need not amount to usurpations.

The third preemptive system of explanation is very different from the other two. It is the sum of the human sciences. In this system, the assertion or denial that humanity has some exceptional status among the realities of the world is simply irrelevant. Humanity now becomes coextensive with economics, plus sociology, plus anthropology of course, plus human psychology. The simple sum of reliable answers to specific questions in the context of accepted scientific methodology, however that may (for the time being) be conceived and however its domains may be organized, provided that the questions are clearly and straightforwardly about humans and not about other sorts of entity, furnishes the acceptable straight answer to the question "What is humanity?" The philosophy of human nature would be the critique of such science from the point of view of its summability, adequacy, completeness, consistency, depth and so on. And the philosophy of human nature overall would be the same sort of critique of all three of the putatively preemptive systems of explanation.

In sum, then, the answers to the question "What is humanity?" that are provided by these three systems of scientific explanation, together with the corresponding philosophical critiques, are an essential part of any account of what humanity is that can be taken seriously. But they are not the whole of it, because, as I said before, there are inexpugnable answers to the question "What is humanity?" that arise quite independently of any general explanatory systems, and cannot be presumed a priori to be equivalent to what those systems require or even to be reconcilable with them.

The second set of permanently salient answers to the question "What is humanity?", the ones I call "inexpugnable," are the answers that no context of inquiry can invalidate. And the reason no context
can invalidate the particular answers I have in mind is that they are involved in the very act of asking and answering the question. The basic idea is that of Descartes: whatever I am, I cannot deny that I am a being that can wonder what it is; I cannot deny my own denial, I am at least a thinking being. No systematic framework of explanation is appealed to here, only the minimum that is built into the act of asking and answering. Our present enterprise, however, differs from that of Descartes in at least one important way. We are not trying to combat metaphysical scepticism; we are asking about ourselves as human beings, as a kind of entity that is admitted to be real in a real world. We may then discover not, as Descartes did, a single inexpugnable answer, but as many as our self-comprehension requires. At least nine are familiar to philosophers. I will say what these are and explain them as succinctly as I can.

1. First, what must I be to be able to ask and answer this question or any other? Jean-Paul Sartre gave a twofold answer: I must be, first, a bare consciousness, a nothingness, able to distance itself from and to call into question any concrete self-identification whatever; I must also be, second, a real being, a self-conscious entity with enough identity and continuity to ask and answer questions, a being-for-itself.

2. Second, what must I be to be able to formulate this question or any other? I must have a language with a definite structure and use. So I must be a symbol-user, a language-user; more generally, I must be a culture-haver and an information-processor. This second answer comes from Aristotle.

3. Third, what must I be actually to set about asking and trying to answer this question? Any being that conducts inquiries is a being that forms plans and seeks to execute them, an autonomous agent. This third answer sounds rather like Immanuel Kant.

4. Fourth, what must I be to want to ask the question? As in the quotation with which I began this talk, questions like “What am I?” and “What is man?” come close to being cries of despair. A being that calls its own being in question is a being with no security; Descartes’ answer, “I am a thinking substance,” is the coldest of comfort unless we can collapse almost at once into the arms of an almighty God. A being that can seriously ask such a question is, as Albert Camus said, an “absurd” being, one that cannot fit anywhere into any system of categories even if it is itself the author of those categories. Camus’ answer is one not much favoured by philosophers, who conclude that Camus was better at football than at philosophy; but it is an important member of our set of inexpugnable answers, for all that.

5. The fifth member of the set is unfinished business from the
first member, the one derived from Sartre. What must I be to
be able to ask the question in just the way that I do ask it? I
must be not just a rational animal, but the very kind of
animal I was born as and grew up to be, not just a speaker of
language but a speaker of the very language I learned to speak
at home. To be human I must be a particular biological entity
and a particular social entity, with a sharply individuated
body and mind.

6. Once a person gets used to those first five of our inexpugna-
able answers, they are quite simple and obvious. What we
come to next is more recondite. Our sixth answer comes
from combining the fifth one, about our biological and social
situatedness, with the first one about nothingness or the
fourth one about absurdity. What am I or who am I, we now
ask, that I should thus call the world and my own self into
question, knowing all the time that it is a real world in which
I really live? The answer must be that I am the fragile sus-
tainer of the world; I am what Heidegger called \textit{Dasein}, the
place where being is revealed, the questioning that makes all
answers possible. That is fancy stuff; the basic form of the
answer here would simply echo the precise form of our ques-
tion in the way we asked it. That is: I am the being for whom
the world is real, but only because I call its reality into
question.

7. Our seventh answer may be no more than a different version
of the sixth one, but we can reach it directly by recalling what
the "God" urged in the philosophical battle between the God
and the Giant that I mentioned several pages back. I am ask-
ing about humanity because I care about myself and my
world. To be human is to be concerned, to be responsible, to
be interested; our lives are essentially a structure of care, and
to cease to care is to fall out of humanity.

8. The eighth answer is reached by cutting out the melodrama
from the seventh. The world really does not depend on us,
when I die the world will go on as it did before I was born.
To ask, not just one of the forms of question about oneself
and one's humanity that I have formulated, but all of them, I
must be living in a caringly and responsibly embedded way
within a world whose complexities the complications of my
self-questioning reflect. That is the world of Hegel's philo-
sophy, in which human individuality is reached by a long dia-
lectical process of ever deepening relationships; it is also the
world of the great religions, in which, as Martin Buber said,
"the world is established, as we ourselves" — but just how it
is established it is not so easy to say.

9. Whoever says Hegel must say Kierkegaard, even if one mut-
ters it under one's breath, and may even be moved to say Nietzsche as well. We have allowed the question "What is humanity?" to become the question "Who am I?" — because after all, as we said when introducing our fourth answer, we want to ask the question only because it concerns us. As a human being, I represent that kind of being that sets itself up as an individual against the world to which it belongs but whose insidious possessiveness it repudiates. Not merely an autonomous agent, as our third answer made out, but a being that fundamentally asserts itself and the system of its own concerns, in fear and trembling or in defiance.

That gives us nine inexpugnable answers, and I think that's enough for today. Why should humanity have more lives than a cat? In any case, as we went on from one of our answers to another, the path became ever more tangled. It may be time to ask ourselves whether there really is a path at all. As we suspected on a previous occasion, in connection with the mind/body problem, what seemed to give our answers authority may have been a bias built into the questions.

When Descartes in his quest for indubitability asked what must be involved in the very act of questioning, his procedure was legitimate because asking questions really was what he was talking about. But I have been carrying on as if we somehow knew that asking and answering questions was not only essential to humanity, but as it were constitutive of humanity. But is it? We can see the problem as soon as we ask whether it is not equally true that humanity is essentially a sexual being. To be a mammal, to be any sort of well organized animal, is to have a sex, and this sexuality affects deeply how we structure our lives. And if Freud is right, human lives are more pervasively sexual than the lives of any other animals. But is this sexuality something that is essential to our humanity, or is it just an important but inessential aspect of it? I do not know. More important, if I thought I did know, it would not be because of anything I have said so far. The presupposition that humans are first and foremost questioning beings, a presupposition I did not even know I was making, gave me a false sense of security. Suddenly I feel helpless.

Why? you may ask. Wasn't Descartes right? Does not our status as questioning beings have an inexpugnability that nothing else can possibly have? Well, yes and no. Some feminists suggest that the primacy of questioning, with its insinuation of the primacy of the mind over the body, of the individual over the group, and of the explicit over the implicit, is simply an expression of typically male sensibility, and would have won no credence if enough women had been allowed into the philosophical enclave soon enough. That is what makes the question of the essential sexuality of human nature one that we cannot systematically postpone to the sorts of inexpugnable consideration we enumerated. As a male, trained in a male philosophy, I am in no posi-
tion to pontificate (besides, since only males can be pontiffs, pontificating would have no effect).

Actually, things are worse than that. Because I took uncritically the standpoint of some human being asking "Who or what am I?", I lazily took it for granted that the answer to that question would automatically answer the question "What is a human being?" But of course that is not true. What it automatically answers, if anything, is more likely to be some such question as "What is a person?" Most of my preferred answers might have been given by any self-questioning life-form, whether it was a human being or not — remember what the God said on the necessity that persons should be made of meat. Perhaps this whole discourse depends on our being ready to admit that as philosophical inquirers, which is what all of us are while we are reading philosophy and thinking about what we read, we are first and foremost human beings. And why should we admit that, and what are we letting ourselves in for if we do?

Like someone who, while nonchalantly doing up a zipper, suddenly notices that the part which the tag should have closed still gapes as widely as the part it has yet to travel, we find ourselves in a predicament to which there is no immediate solution. But we can't do anything about that now, so let us proceed. Before our doubts crippled us, we were trying to draw up a list of answers to the question "What is humanity?" that no one could deny were good answers. Perhaps we know less than we thought we did about what should be on that list, but we can still say something about how an answer could be eligible for it. Each answer must be inexpugnable, such that a denial of its relevance and truthfulness would be silly. The answers, if it is to be a proper list, must be mutually irreducible, so that none could be omitted; and they must resist mutual subordination, so that none could be directly inferred from any other. That gives us something to go on.

And I would now add that each acceptable answer must claim pre-emptive salience, must be such that in some important context it would be the first thing that came to mind and would be such that one could rest content with it.

Pre-emptive salience may be conferred by a system of overall explanation such as the sciences provide, or by inexpugnability in a context of inquiry. It can also be conferred by inherent poignancy in terms of some pervasive preoccupation of the dominant culture. Such poignancy belongs to traditional contrasts of soul and body, of spirit and flesh, of freedom and law, the compelling force of which seems to come from something other and deeper than any arguments used to explicate and vindicate them. But something else also seems to confer pre-emptive salience: not sciences, but myths, world pictures or world narratives within which humanity must be assigned a place. Perhaps a well-supported answer to the question "What is humanity?" is most often one that fits into such a picture or story, a persuasive scenario.
can think of half a dozen types of such scenario. They overlap with our scientific systems and our inexpugnable answers, as we would expect, but they don’t coincide with either. Space is too short for details; here are some thumbnail sketches to give you an idea of the sort of thing I have in mind.

1. The first scenario starts with a “big bang” and proceeds via the formation of galaxies, of stars, of planets, of big molecules, of cells, of multicellular organisms, to the development of planning and questioning life forms in an ecosystem, which is where we are now, and onward who knows where if anywhere. In this scenario, humanity may figure as a particular manifestation in the history of the “selfish gene” or something like that.

2. The second scenario envisions a single terrestrial ecosystem, “spaceship earth” in Buckminster Fuller’s old phrase, in which human cities coexist with termites and coral colonies as more or less stable systems, but in which conscious deliberation and reflection introduce a uniquely complicating factor into the closed loop of ecological feedback. That complication is what we know as humanity.

3. In the third scenario, some demiurge establishes a special community or species, humanity or the tribe, together with its own folkways and laws with which it ought to comply but doesn’t always. Humanity is defined by a special vital relation to the demiurge, such as that expressed by St. Augustine in the sentence *Fecisti nos ad te, et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te*—“Thou hast made us for thyself, and our heart is restless until it rest in thee.” In the most familiar version of this scenario, as Augustine’s words remind us, a human being is first and foremost a spiritual being.

4. The fourth scenario starts with an infant born blind and dumb that grows to find itself a member of a family, an intimate intercourse group, through which it grows up to realize its membership in successively larger and larger circles of interrelaters and language sharers, remaining sustained in a huge and intricate web of relationships that are the meaning of its life. In this scenario, the story of a lifetime is the only story that matters, and humanity is the maximal scope of the circles into which birth affords entry.

5. The fifth is parallel to the fourth as the third was parallel to the first. In this scenario, the unknowing infant acquires consciousness, becomes conscious of itself as an entity, then of itself as an individual person, then of itself as a free, autonomous agent, able to enter spontaneously into contractual relationships with other free individuals. Humanity in this scenario is the maximal market in which all are strangers.
6. In the sixth scenario we start with ourselves as reflective adults and analyse the structure of our freedom and understanding. The scenario is the corresponding synthesis. In the mythical time of absolute origins the individual is a pure subject for whom there are objects. It finds itself thrown into a world to which it somehow belongs without losing its thrownness. All the other scenarios are good stories and you have to believe them, but you can’t be contained in them because they are just part of your belief. The universe is a system and you are obviously part of the system, so you identify yourself with the world, but the identification is something you do as an isolated subjectivity. In this scenario, humanity is defined by the duty and capacity of exploring this predicament.

There you have six popular scenarios. They don’t contradict each other, unless you make it part of each story that it is the only true story that can be told. What makes such a scenario, such a picture or such a story, persuasive or convincing? Presumably, in the first instance, it would be conformity to an accepted narrative or representational mode; and one could hardly spell out what makes such a mode acceptable, since whatever really did not conform to it would not be a bad or unconvincing representation so much as something that did not really say or show anything at all. But that is only in the first instance. There must be more to it than that: not all conceivable narrative and pictorial modes are viable in all societies, I expect, and some stories and pictures that do comply with the approved modes will prove less acceptable than others. Actually, when I look at my six examples, I notice that in each of them a picture of a world, or of a part of a world, has been built up either by a sort of evolutionary development from a supposed original simplicity, or by imagining myself zeroing in from a global view. These are familiar patterns indeed. I used them quite unselfconsciously. But, even if the fact that they come naturally gives them a kind of privilege, I know of no justification for that privilege. In fact, I have no system of justification at all in this area. I know of no rules; so far as I am aware, the selection and construction of such scripts and panoramas are as arbitrary and ad hoc as the answers to the more naive-looking questions I was asking at the beginning: “Which philosopher has a good theory about humanity?” and “What kind of practical preoccupation points to an inescapable and fundamental aspect of our being?”

When I am feeling low, the way all these leads keep fizzling out persuades that, after all these words, I really don’t know at all what shape a good general answer to the question “What is humanity?” should have, what kind and degree of consistency among putative or partial answers should be looked for, and above all whether the task of compiling such an answer, or even the task of saying what conditions such
an answer should comply with, is in principle completable. And I cer-
tainly don’t know what place the question should have in general phi-
losophy, whether the philosophy of human nature should replace
ethics and metaphysics, for example, or be dissolved into them, or
stand in some inviting posture alongside them. It would be nice to
think that it was only a pseudo-question after all.

That’s how I feel on my bad days. But I do have my good days, and
then I feel like saying that, after all, the bathwater of discourse I have
been emptying out here was not entirely free from babies.

We have, in fact, furnished ourselves with a serviceable sketch of
what a general philosophical answer to the question "What is human-
ity?" could be like. It might be the completion, the adequate formu-
lation, the interrelation, and the justification of the list of lists I have
built my discourse around: preemptive systems of explanation, inex-
pugnable answers, and scenarios. If so, it would also be the comple-
tion and interrelation of the lists themselves. Alternatively, it would
be a justified explanation of exactly why those tasks cannot be per-
fomed. In either case, people attempting the answer might conceive
themselves as doing so either within a specific context of inquiry of
which the validity was either independently established or called in
question, or for the present age, or for all time. The fact that we do
not ourselves have any prospect of performing any of these tasks, and
that I for one have no intention of trying, does not affect the fact that
we have a far from empty framework within which the problem can
be considered.

The first time I presented these thoughts to an audience, however, I
was confronted with a number of challenges. Most of these, as usually
happens on these occasions, were protests by hobbyhorse riders who
complained that I had not confined myself to the only real truth of
the matter, which happened to be the sole aspect of the issue they had
thought about. But two of the challenges are worth a mention, claim-
ing to offer approaches that differed from mine and ruled it out of
court. They could be right, and you might agree, so I had better say
what they were.

One challenger said that my approach was ahistorical, whereas in
reality humanity is nothing but the history of humanity. In a way
that’s quite right, I think: to say what humanity is, you say what
humans have done and do. But the question then arises what you put
in your history, and why you put it in, and the principles of your his-
toriography are then what serves as your answer to the question what
humanity is. I won’t pursue that debated topic any further here,
beyond saying that it is not clear what difference it would make if we
took our starting point from history, but since it isn’t clear we must
leave the matter open. However, there are two specific versions of the
equation of humanity with its history that I would single out. First, if
we follow some contemporary biologists and say that animal species
are not really natural kinds, because of the way the gene pool changes, but are individuals, then you could certainly say that humanity is such a genetically constituted individual and is defined by its life-story. But we dealt with that. It is taken care of by the preemptive status of biology and is incorporated in the scenario that starts with the big bang. Second, people who want to equate humanity with its history are often talking about the Hegelian view of history (including its Marxist variants) in which everything human is excluded as unhistorical except what contributes to some desired consummation in a presumably perfect moment of past or future. About that sort of thing I have nothing to say except that such a scenario requires justification like any other; and the justification had better be good, because what is excluded as unhistorical and hence beneath consideration is usually rather a lot.

If, however, we equate humanity with its history but think of history as chronicle rather than narrative, we may arrive at a quite different way of answering the question "What is humanity?" That is what I had in mind when I said that "To say what humanity is, you have to say what humans have done and do." We can say, as Democritus is said to have said, "Humanity is — what we all know." We simply point to all the people there are and say "Look!" It turns out, though, that there are rather too many to point at. So we choose examples: ideals that show what we are to aspire to, monsters that show what we must dread.

Democritus was a philosopher in good standing, but the rest of the philosophical community have qualms. How do we decide how to choose our ideals and monsters, they say, and how shall we distinguish what in them is to be avoided and dreaded? Pointing is useless unless we know what is being pointed at, showing us an example is impossible unless we can see what it is an example of. And that is quite true. But it is also true that a human being is someone who lives a life, and a life is a whole life, and cannot be reduced to episodes and aspects. If philosophical answers to the question "What is humanity?" are given in words, they will all be fundamentally misleading unless they are counterpoised by the weight of experience. Humanity is what we all know, and is all of what we know, and whatever philosophers have to tell us should end by reminding us of that.

So much for the challenge of history. The second challenge to my approach told me I had started by dealing with the wrong question: the existential form of the question "What is humanity?" should have been put in the form, not "What am I?" but "Who am I?" And I am certainly ready to agree that, when we are examining as I said we must the relation between the questions "What is humanity?" and "What am I?" this further question must be included too. Probably all three questions change their meanings from context, but not necessarily in simple or uniform ways.
Just because a question so impersonal as "What is a human being?" seems to belong to the domain of preemptive explanatory schemes, any attempt to answer it raises poignantly the question "What, then, am I? Is that all I am?" And because the question "What am I?" calls immediately for an answer that is self-evidently inexpugnable, any answer to it provokes the more reflective supplementary question, "Is this, that I evidently am, really what a human being essentially is?"

But it seems to me that the question "Who am I?" stands rather on its own. We notice, for one thing, that one cannot sensibly ask "Who is a human being?" or "Who is man?", much less "Who is humanity?". More importantly, perhaps, "Who am I?" seems to be a quite different sort of question from the others. If I ask who I am I imply that I know I am someone, a person: I am asking only which among all real or possible persons is me. One can hardly imagine anyone asking the question except in amnesia. The question can only arise, of course, in languages that make this distinction between who and what; but perhaps all languages do, and, if they don't, perhaps they should.

Curiously enough, the personal-sounding question "Who am I?" may be reifying in a tendentious way that neither "What is a human being?" nor "What am I?" is. Asking who I am asks what person I am, and a person is surely a substance, distinguished from other persons in the way that a substance is distinguished from other substances. But the pronoun "What" can be used of entities in any category. And if the being I am is the living that I do, perhaps I should not think of myself, in the first instance, as a substance at all.

Even if I have beaten off those challengers, they may rearm and return to the assault; and I do not know what fresh challenges might be issued — have perhaps been issued out of my hearing, and the issue decided in their favor. The misgivings of my bad days are exacerbiated by the sense of approaches neglected, roads not taken, thoughts unheard of. But I would remind you that what we are left with is, after all, not nothing. We have three schemes of explanation, nine inexpugnable answers, and six scenarios to refine, combine, criticize, and add to. It is hard to believe, whatever our misgivings, that we are right back where we started.

So the question "What is a human being?" does not leave us speechless. But there really need be no one way of answering it. In its traditional form, "What is man?", it usually expressed some anxiety about the status of those who asked it: for the Greeks, it was the status of humanity vis-a-vis divinity; for the post-Darwinians, the human place among other animals; today, the difference between humanity and machinery. If that is so, then perhaps "human" is primarily a contrastive term, and its precise significance in any context would depend on what it was being contrasted with. The unity of the concept through all these contrasts would be what we would have to trace; but the importance of the contrast would in each case be different.
But that, too, is something a philosopher would have to discuss. I really do not see how a philosopher can turn away from these questions. We will go on wondering what humanity is, unless we are to give up philosophy altogether.