

Nature, Sex, and Person in Thomistic Thought

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Certain Catholic feminists of philosophical bent have criticized a strand of Catholic thought as positing in effect two natures of human beings. Sr. Mary Aquin O'Neill, for example, says the Catholic view of complementarity between the sexes has invented a male nature and a female nature.¹ Mary J. Buckley repeats this charge.² Both accuse the tradition of arriving at this error by "extrapolating meanings from the male and female bodies" and thus mistakenly attributing culturally-based gender differentiations to human nature itself. Sr. O'Neill seems to prefer an androgynous view of human capability and a biological view of what is "natural" to us. Mary Buckley demands that all talk of "constant" or "fixed" human nature be replaced by a "transformative model," as she calls it, in which the core of humanity is sheer freedom. The aim of this paper is to show that the Thomistic account of human nature does not commit the mistake the feminist philosophers allege and avoids both of the disastrous (and conflicting) reductionisms into which they fall. Man *qua* man is one nature, for St. Thomas, not two; yet this one nature is neither pure biology nor pure freedom.

1. The starting point of traditional thought is easily understood. It is that 'human nature' means 'what we are or have insofar as we are human.' It means that whereby we are human. So the traditional concept of human nature (as of any other nature) combines two assumptions: an assumption of commonality (since the nature is what we *all* have or are) and an assumption of necessity (since it is what we *must* have or be, in order to be human at all).

2. Commonality and necessity can be combined in two different ways, *de re* and *de dicto*, to yield two concepts of human nature, both quite traditional. The one concept defines our 'nature' as what all actual humans are born with, inescapably; this concept requires only *de re* modalities in its formal expression. The other concept defines our 'nature' as our essence (the traits which any possible human would have) viewed as a principle of operations in actual humans; this concept, which is that of Aquinas (ST 1, q. 60, a. 1), is taken from Aristotle, and it requires *de dicto* modalities in its formal expression.³

3. For Aquinas, this essence is not the soul (for the soul is only a part of a human).⁴ Hence man's essence is not pure freedom or pure spirit or anything of the kind; it includes

¹ Mary Aquin O'Neill, R.S.M., "Toward a Renewed Anthropology," *Theological Studies* 36 (1975), 725-736. Her principal targets are Gertrude von le Fort and Karl Stern.

² Mary J. Buckley, "The Rising of the Woman is the Rising of the Race," *CTSA Report*, 1978.

³ A full argument showing that an Aristotelian essence-claim reaches to "all possible" members of a kind, and that in order to come over into contemporary logic such a claim needs to be formulated with *de dicto* modalities is developed in a work on Aristotle's "apodeictic" syllogisms: W. H. Marshner, *Demonstrative Syllogisms, Aristotle's Logic of Explanation* (forthcoming).

⁴ *Quaestiones disputatae de anima*, ed. James H. Robb (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 1968).

biological components, because any possible human would have a body. But man's essence abstracts from this or that particular body (or particular sort of body).⁵ Thus, St. Thomas's doctrine of human nature is certainly a doctrine of *one* nature. It is one by abstraction. It abstracts the common core of what-it-is-to-be-human from all possible variations and differences, whether they be biological differences (such as sex or race), historical differences, cultural differences, or even the supernatural differences between our integral, fallen, and resurrected states.

Paragraphs 1- 3 have presented only the easy part of the Thomistic doctrine, however. The difficult parts, more likely to be abused, concern Aquinas's route back to the concrete.

The Nature *a parte rei*

4. Each individual has human nature in a concretized "condition" (see *ST I*, q. 119, a. 1). In order to move from Aquinas's concept of human nature (as just presented in para. 3) to a Thomistic description of what a given human person *has* insofar as he or she "has human nature," one must follow Aquinas's remarks in *De ente et essentia* on universals and abstractions done with prescinding. For the definition of human nature as our essence presents human nature as a formal universal. The mode of being of a formal universal is being-in-the-mind, where it is entertained as a result of cognitional operations abstracting it from individuating conditions. Because the abstraction formed is one done with prescinding, it is not the concept of a class of individuals (the humans) but the concept of a part of those individuals (the part whereby they are members of this class-"humanness"). When this precisely abstracted content is no longer thought of as a formal universal but as having its other mode of being (being-in-the-real), it is a principle *quo* of operations in existing human individuals. Aquinas says that this principle is an internally complex affair, involving both a role for the body and a role for the soul. Yet it remains only a part of those individuals. It is something they have, rather than something they are. Socrates, for example, being a human person (who is thereby a human "total"), has many principles *quo* in his make-up, including that whereby he is male and that whereby he is snub-nosed, in addition to the one whereby he is human.

5. Now if Aquinas had thought like Scotus, he would have thought that each of these principles *quo was* "formally distinct" in Socrates from each of the others. He might even have thought that Socrates could be cobbled together by starting with a nature *quo*, adding a sex-*quo*, tacking on a great many *quibus* of details, and topping them all off with a touch of this-ness. But Aquinas didn't think like that. He didn't use the "formal distinction." He recognized only real distinctions and distinctions of reason. In the latter case, the "things" distinguished are *idem in re* and differ only in *ratio*.⁶ Hence, in the case of nature and sex, a Thomist either holds that, in a

⁵ *De ente et essentia (On Being and Essence)*, trans. Armand A. Maurer, C.S.B. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 1949), esp. sections 1-3.

⁶ Here the word '*ratio*' means a scientific definition or, by extension, what it takes to meet the definition. To illustrate how two terms can refer to one and the same thing in the real and yet differ in definition (and so highlight different aspects of the one thing), one may as well begin with the case of concrete wholes. The renates and the

given individual, the nature-quo and the sex-quo are *idem in re*, or else holds that, in a given individual, they are really distinct. Which is it?

6. The Thomistic tests for real distinctness are several and subtle, but the most obvious test is real separability. Since that whereby one is human and that whereby one is male are actually separated in one who is female, it follows that the two are really separable and hence really distinct. That whereby I am a human being is really distinct from the principle whereby I am a male, and that whereby you are a human being is really distinct from the principle whereby you are a female, if that is what you are.

7. It thereupon follows that the endowment with which a given individual is born an endowment which includes a race, a sex, and innumerable genetic specifics an endowment which is often called one's concrete or individuated human nature is a batch of principles really distinct from each other.⁷ Thus the Thomistic account posits human nature as common ground, neither androus nor gynous nor androgynous: a really distinct principle in each human whereby he or she has the biology which any human being must have, as distinct from the biology a male or female must have. Thomism posits this common ground but does not rest content with it. For Thomism also considers the person.

The Person

8. When "individuated nature" is considered in relation to the human person, it matters whether the description, 'the human person,' is taken formally or materially.

9. If 'human person' is taken formally, the term is being used in an unusual way, so as to mean human personhood, which is that whereby one is a person. This much-debated *quo* (whereby) one is a person is *subsistentia*, which some Thomists have thought was *esse* itself in substances with our nature, and some have thought was not *esse* but a "mode" completing our nature and rendering it incommunicable. So taken, then, the person is really distinct from the individuated nature on the ground that existence is really distinct from it, or on the ground that this completive mode is really distinct from it. Either way, the ground is verified by the test of

chordates are just exactly the same set of animals, but "a renate" differs in *ratio* from "a chordate" in that what it takes to have kidneys is different from what it takes to have a backbone. Thus between renates and chordates there is only a distinction of reason; they are *idem in re sed different ratione*. The same account applies when one moves to the case of principles *a parte rei*, the components of concrete wholes. That whereby an animal has kidneys and that whereby it filters its blood are *idem in re* but differ in *ratio*; after all, the medieval physicians who could recognize a kidney but didn't know its function had the one *ratio* but lacked the other.

⁷ This batch of principles is what is "natural to an individual" in *ST 12, q. 50. a. 1*. This Thomistic opinion is more intelligible today than it used to be, since we can now see (a) the invariant information that makes a human and (b) the information that makes a sex specification [along with (c) the variable information that makes a racial type and (d) the variable informations that make for purely individual traits] as distinct stretches of code on the overall genetic "message."

real separability: individuated human nature and that whereby one is a human person were actually separated in Christ.⁸

10. If, on the other hand, 'human person' is taken materially, then the term is being used in the normal way, so as to mean the human "total" or *compositum*, which is not a "whereby" or *quo* of any kind, but a concrete human being, *a quod*. So taken, the person is identically the "whole" which includes each and every *quo* in the individuated nature as a part.⁹ It follows that whatever is included in individuated human nature is included in the human person,¹⁰ and this is where things get interesting for feminist philosophers.

11. Let's make a syllogism. If [major] whatever is included in individuated human nature is included in the human person, and [minor] that whereby one has one's sex is included in individuated human nature, then [conclusion] that whereby one has one's sex is included in the human person. The form of the syllogism is valid (it is a version of Darn), and its premises are both true according to Aquinas. Therefore its conclusion is true according to Aquinas (assuming he was consistent). From this syllogism, it follows immediately that the sex of a person is not "external" to that person; for what is included in a thing is not external to it.

12. But 'included' and 'not external' mean one thing, and 'intrinsic' means another. We must now turn to the difficult question of intrinsicity. In correct Thomistic usage, 'intrinsic to A' means 'gets mentioned in the *ratio* of A', that is, 'in the scientific definition of A', and such a definition is supposed to pick out what belongs to the essence of A. By this test, is sex intrinsic to human nature? Is my own sex intrinsic to me? These are different questions, because the one is about *a quo*, and the other is about *a quod*.

13. Let us ask first about the *quo* of 'human nature' in the proper sense which is not a batch of principles but a single (albeit complex) principle which is precisely abstracted in the concept of human nature. In *esse reali*, it is a component of the person whereby that person is human. Aristotle says that this nature is a human being's essence "viewed in relation to operations." Concerning essence, he says in the *Posterior Analytics I, 4*, that it belongs to the

⁸ Aquinas held with Chalcedon that there is no human person in Christ, yet he held (a) that the human nature of Christ is fully individuated (being this flesh and these bones and this soul) and (b) that a person is an individual substance of a rational nature (ST I, q. 29, a. 1). Therefore, if Aquinas was consistent, he did not hold that an individual substance of a rational nature = a fully individuated case of a rational nature. For he concedes that Christ was or had the latter with respect to humanity, while denying that Christ was or had the former with respect to humanity. In modern logical terms, this amounts to saying that individuated cases of our nature are not values of bound variables. Only persons are values of bound variables. When 'there is some x such that x is Christ' is true, the value of the bound variable 'x' is a Divine Person, whereas, when 'there is some y such that y is William Faulkner' is true, the value of the bound variable 'y' is a human person. In neither case is the value of the variable simply *a{2aec} humanitas*. One reason for this has emerged above. "Individuated human nature" is not of itself an individual but a batch of principles really distinct from one another.

⁹ It follows that this universal is true: 'for all x: if x is a human person, then x has individuated human nature.' But its converse is false; Christ falsifies it.

¹⁰ Of course, no Thomist would hold the converse. For if whatever is included in the human person were included in individuated human nature, and Christ had such a human nature, then whatever is included in the human person would be included in Christ. Christ would then have had a human *esse* and a human *subsistentia* claims utterly incompatible with the Thomistic metaphysics of the Incarnation. That metaphysics demands, in short, the following corollary: Some things included in the human person are not included in human nature, however individuated.

essence of numbers that they be odd or even. *So an essence can include a disjunctive trait.* Since numbers have no operations, their essence is not thought of as their "nature," but the example is still instructive. For it presumeably belongs to the essence of an animal kind that its instances be male or female. Any possible human would be male or female. Therefore man's essence includes this disjunctive trait, and the same essence actuated by *esse* as someone's human nature (the *quo* whereby some person is human) will include what it takes to have this disjunctive trait *but will fail to include what it takes to have either of its disjuncts.* For as was said above (point 6), in any given individual, that whereby one is human is really distinct from that whereby one is male (if one is male) or from that whereby one is female (if one is female). What is really distinct from a nature does not belong to it, obviously, and (here is the rule for terms *quo*) whatever does not belong to a nature is "extrinsic" to it and, if "joined to it," is contingent to it (*accidentalis*). Therefore what is intrinsic to human nature is just *a place for the quo of sex.* That *quo* itself is both extrinsic to human nature and accidental to it in any given person. Hence, once again, the Thomistic doctrine is that there is one human nature, not two.

14. But it does not follow that the *quo* of sex is extrinsic to me as an individual person. If the particular number four were defined, its evenness would be mentioned. If seven were defined, its oddness would be mentioned. And if an individual person were defined, says Aquinas, "this flesh" and "these bones" would be mentioned (ST 1, q. 3, a. 3; *De ente et essentia*, c. 2, para. 4). Well, "this flesh" is male in my case; female, in hers.¹¹

15. Moreover, neither my flesh or hers can survive a physical change in which she or I acquires the opposite sex. Aristotle did not know this; he speculated that every female started out as a male (or as an embryo that aimed at being a male), but that a funny thing happened to it early in gestation. We know better: sex is established at fertilization. No fertilizatum or embryo, nor any fetus or child, nor any adult, survives a physical change in which that genetically given sex is lost or changed. Hence the sex of the person is *a non-accidental trait of the person*-an "intrinsic" or "essential" trait of who she is or who he is.

16. At the same time, the sex of the person is an *inseparable accident of human nature as found in that person.* For since the person's sex can neither be lost nor changed without the person's perishing, and since the person's perishing entails the ceasing-to-exist of human nature as found in her (or him), it follows that the *quo* whereby this person is human cannot have its real mode of being apart from conjunction to the *quo* whereby this person is female (or male). Thus Thomism, when freed from a pre-modern biology, does full justice to our personal experience, whereby we experience ourselves as "through-and-through" male or female.

Person and Personality

¹¹ Similarly, this flesh is white in my case; black, perhaps, in yours. Note with maximum care therefore that, when Aristotle and Aquinas say that being-white is an accident of Socrates, they are talking about what we would call the phenotypical trait of being white - the trait which can be lost through disease, through ingesting certain drugs, or even, I suppose, through a deep and all-over sunburn. They are not talking about the genotypical racial trait of Caucasians, about which they knew nothing. The racial trait is not an accident of Socrates, since it is part of the flesh that would define him (he could not have survived a change from which he emerged as a Negro).

17. Moreover, this intrinsicity of sex to the human person (materially taken) is not just biological but also psychological and cultural. All of the points made above have to do with what I call the hardware person, the body-soul composite. Aquinas also lays some groundwork for what I call the software person. As the agent of certain operations (such as reflexive acts of cognition and volition), the hardware person forms a self-image, retains self-memories, chooses freely between competing avenues of self-determination, etc. The "self" as imaged, remembered, and self-determined is what I call the software person. It is the self which I "put into" my deeds when I "put myself into" them and is therefore the self which I "make of myself" in making my choices and doing my deeds.¹² In Thomistic terms, what is this software self? It is at least one's *verbum* or *species expressa sui ipsius*, the developing self-concept which each person forms. This, then, is the space which Thomism creates for Mary Buckley's "transformative model." But in Thomism this space will not be a contentless freedom. Self-concept formation will spring from the real content of human nature as that content gives rise to the concrete operations of a human person. Self-concept formation will absorb the pre-given content of sex but will *create* the self-understanding which is gender.¹³

18. We come at last to the point at issue between feminists and complementarists. No one disputes that the female body (sex) is complementary to the male. Few dispute that this somatic difference extends to include some psycho-somatic or psychological differences. The question is whether there is also a proper female personality-type and self-understanding which is complementary to a proper male personality-type and self-understanding. Gertrude von le Fort and other writers articulate a female self-understanding (celebratory of receptive/intuitive/nurturing aspects alleged to be complementary to male traits) which they proclaim to be "the natural one" for women to have; the feminists dislike that self-understanding, deny its naturalness, assign it an origin in patriarchal culture, and assign that culture an origin in the remote history of men's injustice. Historical speculation and the feminist critique of "patriarchal" culture are beyond the scope of this discussion. The question to be addressed, rather, is quite limited: according to Thomistic thought, would any definite self-understanding be "natural" to women?

¹² I remain the same hardware person throughout my life, and all the choices I make are just *accidents* of this one, underlying person. But I become a certain software person, and my choices (especially the deep ones, like converting to Christ, embracing this profession, choosing to live as a husband to this woman and a father to this family) are *essential determinants* of this "person" which I have made of myself. In Calvin's ghastly theology, I will go to Heaven or Hell for being the hardware person I am. In Catholic orthodoxy, I will go to Heaven or Hell for being the software person I have made of myself (with or against the help of God's grace).

¹³ Note by the way that, in Thomism, neither hardware nor self-concept can exhaust the person. There is a crucial text in the *Prima Secundae*, q. 72, a. 4 ad 2. It says that when two things are such that the one includes the other and yet the two are distinguished, the distinction is understood to be made not insofar as the one is contained in the other but insofar as the one exceeds the other. Cf. *Prima Pars*, q. 44, a. 3 ad 2. Therefore, while it will not be meaningful Thomism to distinguish the person from his (or her) nature-and-sex insofar as he (or she) includes both, it is meaningful Thomism to say that the human person is "more" than just a case of the nature plus a sex determinant somehow understood.

19. The question admits of two senses. In the first sense, `natural' is taken properly, and the question is whether a definite self-understanding is essential to women. Setting aside very trivial points (such as that all women would naturally know that they are women), the answer is a clear no. For what belongs to human nature as individuated in females belongs *of necessity* to every woman. Hence the existence of even one woman who does not have the preferred sort of self-understanding proves that that selfunderstanding is not natural to women just as the existence of even one black swan proves that whiteness is not essential to swans. The existence of an active, ambitious, aggressive woman proves that women are not "by essence" otherwise. (So much for the charge that Thomists construct two natures out of *gender* generalities.)

20. In the second sense, `natural' is taken broadly, and the question is whether a definite self-understanding *tends to arise* in women because of the way their human nature is individuated. In other words, the question is whether a certain self-image fulfills a natural tendency of women. As Aquinas learned from the *Prior Analytics* of Aristotle, a natural tendency is not necessarily fulfilled; it can fail to be fulfilled in some cases; but it will be fulfilled "for the most part." In this sense, the question has no philosophical answer. It can only have an empirical answer. The Catholic writers would (one suspects) have a strong case, if they stopped introspecting and did some serious cross-cultural research. Feminists would be hard put (one suspects) to show that their own preferred image of women has ever had enough adherents anywhere (at any time) to prevent a counter-image from prevailing "for the most part."