

## BIOETHICS AND THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN NATURE

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### **The notion in retreat**

The concept of human nature is associated with the so-called classical outlook at man. Undergoing changes of his secondary traits – it was traditionally thought – every human being possesses an invariable core which is a guarantee of his/her human identity. Nevertheless, in the course of developing philosophical thought such an understanding of human nature has been seriously challenged; some thinkers started doubting the existence of human nature. Since the moment when Ch. Darwin's theory of evolution was launched, the notion of human nature has been severely contested and even directly rejected. According to this critical approach, there is no such reality as a permanently unchangeable human essence.<sup>1</sup> Human species is experiencing a continuous shift as a result of being in constant interaction with the environment. Moreover, a set of features which seems to be a typical for all humans nowadays represents only a very distinct and particular moment of evolutionary history. It is said that these features are a kind of by-product of random evolutionary processes and forces. It is thus because in Darwin's account of evolution there is no space for teleology guiding occurring development.

<sup>1</sup> D. C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meaning of Life*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1995, 35-39.

From this prospective, it seems pointless to talk plausibly about human nature: what we are dealing with is only a set of the species-typical human characteristics and behaviour that emerged about 100,000 years ago (the era of evolutionary adaptation).<sup>2</sup>

The rejection of the notion is argued by many contemporary bioethicists who adhere to this Darwinian approach. One of them is, for instance, H. T. Engelhardt. In his view, the main reason for excluding the understanding of human nature as a plausible structure comes from the fact that it is derived from a theological thinking. The theological perception of human nature is strictly connected with the universal God's project concerning the existing world. As Engelhardt puts it, "After all once one acknowledges that human nature is created by God, even if created through evolution, the basic design of human nature can be recognized as having a fundamental status through divine endorsement".<sup>3</sup> This very premise consequently grants a moral status to human nature. "Human nature – as Engelhardt goes on – as given to us by God or produced for us by evolution has been a secure starting-point not only for arguing what could and should be done, but also for arguing what could not or should not be done".<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, human nature as in its physicalistic understanding as in the theological perspective is shown as something which "has until now been regarded as placing constraints on human freedom".<sup>5</sup>

Evaluating such an account, Engelhardt expresses his disapproval. The traditional approach to human nature seems to be inadequate. The post-modern world is so mentally divided and diversified that putting forward such a concept as an overriding notion is obsolete. He points out that "the post-Darwinian, post-Christian worldview removes human nature from the moral centre of things. Human nature becomes the outcome of biological and chemical forces, happenstance and chance, so that its particular characteristics no longer have a claim as moral constraints on human technological powers. [...] A transcendent purpose or grounding for

<sup>2</sup> F. Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future. Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, Profile Book, London 2003, 152.

<sup>3</sup> H. T. Engelhardt, *Germ-Line Genetic Engineering and Moral Diversity: Moral Controversies in a Post-Christian World*, in: *Ethical Issues in Biotechnology*, R. Sherlock, J. D. Morrey (eds.), Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham 2002, 508.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 507.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

an overriding value [of human nature – G.H.] is not available, because the secular is immanent”.<sup>6</sup>

Such a position is widely shared not only by bioethicists and philosophers but also by geneticists. At present, they consider themselves as having a privileged, epistemological access to the human organism because of the participation in the process of decipherment and mapping of human DNA. Therefore, L. M. Silver’s conviction that “unfettered evolution is never predetermined [towards some goals], and not necessarily associated with progress – it is simply a response to unpredictable environmental changes”<sup>7</sup> does not cause any surprise. It is just a straightforward expression of the faith in a lack of any stable structure of the existing world and the faith in the all-powerful role of blind evolutionary forces. Everything is constituted by such factors and, consequently, everything will be prey to them.

Following this approach, a pretty strong suggestion emerges that if at all we take up the concept of human nature, it will have no special status in itself and it will have not too much in common with morals or values. The world of nature seems to be value-free, or even ‘disenchanted’, and – within this view – it is difficult to prove that it is organised according to natural harmonies.<sup>8</sup> The grasp of the ethical and axiological order of the world – if such a factor exists – seems incapable of being grasped.

The outlined thinking as a whole gives away pretty clearly a well-known philosophical position, namely monistic materialism.<sup>9</sup> Within this approach everything, in one way or another, is reduced to empirical data and

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 508. A similar stance is held by D. L. Hull. He sets forth his view saying, “I do not see why the existence of human universals is all that important. Perhaps all and only people have opposable thumbs, use tools, live in true societies, or what have you. I think that such attributions are either false or vacuous, but even if they were true and significant, the distribution of these particular characters is largely a matter of evolutionary happenstance”. See: D. L. Hull, *On Human Nature*, in: *The Philosophy of Biology*, D. L. Hull, M. Ruse (eds.), Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, 385.

<sup>7</sup> L. M. Silver, *Remaking Eden: Cloning and Beyond in a Brave New World*, Avon, New York 1998, 256.

<sup>8</sup> C. Deane-Drummond, *Biology and Theology Today*, SCM Press, London 2001, 27.

<sup>9</sup> J. Dupré points out that the modern philosophy, especially philosophy of science, is under strong influence of monistic materialism. He puts it in this way, “Current philosophy is dominated not by the Cartesian thesis itself, but by one of the traditional reaction to it, monistic materialism”. See: J. Dupré, *Human Nature and the Limits of Science*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2001, 5.

a range of processes which flows from it. Every single human trait, traditionally considered as an expression of the higher function of the human psyche or mind, is in fact a kind of epiphenomenon of the empirical reality. Evolutionary progress devoid of any goals and blind evolutionary forces stems from the material domain, whatever understood.<sup>10</sup> This tendency can be easily perceived yet in the very concept of evolution coined by Darwin. What he rejected was I. Kant's dualistic distinction between the 'phenomenal' domain of casual nature and the 'noumenal' realm of human freedom. Darwin simply treated nature as the comprehensive whole of which humans are only a part.<sup>11</sup>

### **Back to human nature**

Treating human being only from such a prospective reveals a kind of inadequacy of the deployed method. People do perceive themselves as something more. That process of perception marked by the question about me-as-something-more cannot be easily played down as some of the positivistic thinkers tend to claim. As the history of philosophy sets out, many materialistic conceptions have been breaking up in the realm of anthropology where human freedom and vital, existential questions come into play.

The first problem which materialistic position finds as far as the notion of human nature is concerned is to explain why humans ask continuously about their nature meaning something stable, enduring in all human generations. In other words, why do we persistently keep enquiring about a kind of essence in our being? And secondly, if the concept of human nature is denied, what are the consequences of it in the realm of biotechnology, for instance?

Such an intellectual restlessness can be even noticed within the very group of debunkers of the idea of human essence or human nature. They

<sup>10</sup> Modern philosophers distance themselves from traditional understanding of material reality calling themselves 'physicalists'. They want to detach their conceptions from the specific understanding of the material world. See: *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> L. Arnhart, *Thomistic Natural Law as Darwinian Natural Right*, in: *Natural Law and Modern Moral Philosophy*, E. F. Paul, F. D. Miler, J. Paul (eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, 16.

are very concerned with the idea of universal human equality.<sup>12</sup> This position can be explained in two ways. On the one hand, the above-mentioned conviction seems to be a common feature of contemporary mentality. Very few people, at least in the Western World, express their serious doubts concerning universal equality enshrined, for example, by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On the other hand, confessing the commitment to universal human equality suggests a reference to something more. The only basis on which anyone can make an argument in favour of equal rights for people who are different from us (because of race, colour of skin or even moral status) is just pointing out that they are the same people sharing a basic common characteristic, namely human nature.<sup>13</sup>

Another problem which stems from getting rid of the common human nature is a danger in the realm of biotechnology. The fundamental worry is associated with the lack of frontier of biotechnological enterprises. Then what is technically viable seems to be morally permissible. And, of course, it causes a lot of justifiable anxiety. Even the debunkers of the notion acknowledge that such a way of thinking can lead to a real disaster. F. Fukuyama commenting Silvers' stance notices that Silver "is horrified at the possibility that it [genetic engineering] could be used to create a class of genetically superior people. He paints a scenario – as Fukuyama continues – in which a class called the GenRich steadily improve the cognitive abilities of their children to the point that they break off from the rest of human race to form a separate species".<sup>14</sup> Since there is no stable, well-defined human essence-nature, or rather because such a concept is a subject of all kinds of genetic manipulations, there is no possibility of preventing such a looming future. Sooner or later we, humans, may fall prey to not properly, ethically controlled scientific and technological progress.

In addition to the mentioned reasons, calling on the necessity to revive the concept of human nature, Fukuyama takes into account one more argument, namely an argument of moral order. His quest concerns the fundamental source of moral order. Can it be found in the world religions or rather each society is a real lawgiver for itself? It is an old question and in

<sup>12</sup> F. Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future. Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, o.c., 153.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

fact many philosophers and law theorists are in dispute over that important issue. Fukuyama's answer points neither to religion nor to society. In his view, moral order, usually addressed by these tendencies, exists independently. As he puts it, "that moral order did not completely break down in the West in the wake of the destruction of consensus over traditional religious values [...], because moral order comes from within human nature itself and is not something that has to be imposed on human nature by culture".<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, analysis aimed at spelling out what it is human nature and what understanding it takes on seems to be rational and even desirable. Following the direction indicated by Fukuyama, such an analysis should be conducted neither in the field of religion nor the field of the reflection on the structure of society. It ought to be carried out in the field of philosophy using rational methods and tools.

To order what has been said, it can be pointed out that the concept of human nature does seem to play a vital role in the bioethical investigations. Not only does it capture the human intuition concerning the existence of a stable structure of his/her being but – what is more important – it is needed as a criterion for any kind of biotechnology exploitation of the human body. In other words, not only does the concept of human nature formulate the deeper comprehension of human existence but it points to the process of anthropological and ethical discernment revealing the foundation of human equality. Then, how can the notion be addressed?

### *Towards possible understandings of human nature*

Embarking on a formulation of the concrete understanding of human nature, two approaches can be distinguished. They operate on different levels of human existence. To put it in other words, they present a human being in different facets: biological and axiological. It is like perceiving the same man from two different points of view. These presentations have been already suggested, in one way or another, in the discussion itself. As far as the mentality of above-mentioned scientists and thinkers is concerned, there is a strong and widespread tendency to treat man either as a

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 156. See also: F. Fukuyama, *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstruction of Social Order*, Free Press, New York 1999, part II.

subject to a scientific investigation (underlining priority of her/his biological, empirical dimension) or as a subject of rights (suggesting her/his higher, privileged, marked by a special value, position in the world). Therefore, such twofold perception of a human being seems to be reasonable and justifiable, at least preliminarily.

The chosen method does not mean that a human cannot be understood as a wholly integrated being. It means, however, that every human being is a multi-dimensional existence.<sup>16</sup> And that is why humans once appear as one of the species inhabiting the planet Earth. Then what really matters are common biological traits which people share with animals. Another time, man can be depicted as a value. Here, what really stands out is her/his preciousness.

### *Biological Human Nature*

The first proposal concerns the biological dimension of human existence. It is absolutely obvious that being man means possessing a biological body. Can we, however, notice a clear-cut regularity in the processes which take place in the realm of human anatomy, which would be a sign of a possible human nature? As it has been mentioned, the adherents of the theory of evolution would tend to stress the indeterminateness of the evolutionary processes and driving forces. According to Silver's opinion that indeterminateness concerns as the inner aspect of developing human biology (there is no such a thing as an internal goal) as the outer facet of it (its relation to unpredictable environmental changes). Therefore, from such a radical perspective of the theory the issue of human nature as a stable structure (however evolving) must be rejected out of hand.

<sup>16</sup> This multidimensionality points to the further possible interpretational schemes we can draw up in reference to a human being. For instance, we can argue that man is a huge system elaborating and transmitting information; or we can perceive man as an entity whose main activity is interpreting its existence, as philosophical hermeneutics points out. In fact, we can produce several more such anthropological descriptions. Of course, they never exhaust fully who man really is. At least, we will never be entirely satisfied with such single pictures of man. They only reveal that our human knowledge about ourselves is highly aspectual. This remark, however, does not deny the fact that biological and axiological facets are dominant ones revealing strikingly their special significance, as far as we try to formulate the concept of human nature.

Nevertheless, the theory of evolution can be perceived differently as well. There are some proposals pointing to the possibility of showing a kind of regularity in the realm of human nature.

First of all, there are a couple of schools of thought dealing with evolutionary biology. Some of them emphasize the role of chance and blind forces, and others underline the role of physical laws and necessity in the evolving nature. As it is held, none of them can be overestimated and prioritised.<sup>17</sup> It means that pointing to the sheer indeterminateness of the process of evolution could be rather a sectarian position.

Secondly, a famous theoretician of the process of evolution Th. Dobzhansky once pointed out that we should be careful not to overlook the inner differences occurring within evolution. In his view, it is pretty easy to confuse the different levels of the process: cosmic, biological, and human. Even though they are interconnected, they should be considered on the precisely distinguished levels. As far as the evolution on the human level is concerned, Dobzhansky decisively asserts that ‘biological evolution transcended itself when it gave rise to man’.<sup>18</sup> Appearance of man initiated a new quality of evolving nature. As Dobzhansky continues, “The *humanum* is born”; and this does “not mean that a new force or energy has arrived from nowhere; it does mean that a new form of unity has come into existence. At all events, no component of the *humanum* can any longer be denied to animals, although the human constellation of these components certainly can”.<sup>19</sup> This assertion conveys a strong suggestion concerning the possibility of the existence of human nature. In fact, it can be even a well founded starting point in capturing the notion of a human nature as a very plausible structure distinguishing man from other live beings.

Thirdly, a philosophical investigation on the process of evolution does cast doubt on this concept when it utterly rejects any notion of goal. As O. Blanchette says, “any understanding of an evolution of the species must begin from the end, which is, of course, where the theory of evolution begins anyway as a theory”.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, if we begin our assessment

<sup>17</sup> E. Mayr, *What Evolution Is*, Basic Book, New York 2001, 119-121. 228-230.

<sup>18</sup> Th. Dobzhansky, *The Biology of Ultimate Concern*, World Publishing, New York 1971, 45.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>20</sup> O. Blanchetta, *Philosophy of Being. A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics*, The Catholic

from the end, we are dealing with the results of that process. In other words, “without standing at the end we could not have such a discernment and without the discernment of some finality in the process we could not think of the movement as a development or an evolution”.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, claiming that human nature can be perceived as a biological structure evolving towards a kind of goal seems to be at least rational.

To put it bluntly, the existing differences between humans such as gender, intelligence, the secondary traits (colour, hair type, appearance, height, diversified fingerprints, etc.), or unique DNA, still allow to claim that there is human nature and it is not a construct of a social convention. All these individualizing particularities must have indeed an underlying unity, and this is just human nature.<sup>22</sup>

### *Human Nature as a Value*

In the second approach, human nature can be considered as a value. Looking at this approach methodologically, it must be said that it stems not merely from the common sense attitude, as it has been assumed preliminarily. Deploying the method of phenomenological axiology, in human perception everything can come out as a *sui generis* value; or everything can convey itself in terms of preciousness or importance which it encompasses but at the same time transgresses empirically understood content (data). As phenomenologists point out, we can even draw up a kind of hierarchy among these important qualities. In such a prospective, the highest value is indeed a human being.

This value is usually spelt out in terms of human dignity. It can be pointed out that such a perception of human nature is strongly suggested by the previously mentioned Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In Article 1, we can read, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood”. Man as a whole, including his/her nature, appears as a special value-dignity. Here, there is no

University of America Press, Washington D.C. 2003, 390.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 391.

<sup>22</sup> P. Vardy, *Being Human. Fulfilling Genetic and Spiritual Potential*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London 2003, 32.

reference to any empirical traits as subject to biological investigations. Human nature is given as a sort of experience (given primordially, intuitively); or it comes out as a kind of axiological importance conveying by itself its preciousness. Therefore, the notion of dignity is usually accepted before any rational and scientific explanations. As J. Seifert pointed out, “this value called ‘dignity’ is an ultimate and irreducible phenomenon which cannot be defined properly speaking but can only be unfolded and brought to evidence”.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, perceiving human nature from the perspective of its preciousness, or its dignity, bears a need of its demonstration as well. In order to carry it out, the definition of human nature launched by K. Wojtyła can be deployed. Arguing from the thomistic-phenomenological position, the ethicist pointed to nature which should be understood as “a proper to the person as a person (and not as substance) essence or constitution of her strictly personal subjective-ness (having relational, axiological provenance)”.<sup>24</sup>

This definition points to a typically personal sphere of human existence. What is really stressed is a strictly personal subjective-ness clearly distinguishing even one person from another. It, of course, does not mean that between person and person there is an unbridgeable gulf. It, however, does mean that on the level of personal existence a general and unifying criterion is important but cannot play decisive role. Every person, as far as its axiological morphology is concerned, is a unique, unrepeatable value even if it participates in the general class of persons characterized by the preciousness-dignity factor.

When we treat a person as a general value, the quest for the meaning of human nature leads directly to the question about what is a *sine qua non* of being a person-value. Within the continental philosophical tradition we find a well established ground to deal with this task. For instance, so Kant as Wojtyła pointed to the fact that a person or personal nature is an end in itself. It should always be treated as a goal of human action never only as a means. This being-always-end-and-not-only-means constitutes the real

<sup>23</sup> J. Seifert, *What Is Life? The Originality, Irreducibility, and Value of Life*, Rodopi, Amsterdam-Atlanta 1997, 98.

<sup>24</sup> K. Wojtyła, *Miłość i odpowiedzialność*, Wydawnictwo Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 1986, 29. (English transl., *Love and Responsibility*, H. T. Willetts (trans.), Collins, London 1981).

core of human personal nature. It stems from the very essence of a value as such.

Secondly, as it has been mentioned above, Wojtyła's definition, in comparison with a general understanding of human nature-value, points to a more specific comprehension of this category. Nature understood as a constitution of a man's strictly personal subjective-ness has a very unrepeatable and unique profile. In other words, every human personal nature, being a value (which can be generally described, analysed, and exposed), is a very unique me-ness too. These two aspects (human nature-general value and human nature-unique quality) are strictly associated and co-related with each other. The latter is a further stage of the human-personal-nature-value which is expressing itself here and now. The unrepeatable-ness, however, is not dissociated from the main stem of the value but it is a kind of specification of it.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> The outlined description of human nature understood as a value can be easily confused with other distinction which is usually deployed by personalists. They point to nature-personhood and nature-personality. The first one treats human nature as an unchangeable foundation of a person. Such a comprehended nature is not bestowed on a person by people or society; it is innate; it decides about basic human identity and equality, and there is no way to lose it. The second one has a different character. It is something which is being gained in the lifetime. Usually, it is connected with the development of a set of psychological traits, or in other words, with the process of psychological and mental maturation. Therefore, we can say that the last notion of human nature plays decisively secondary role. Psychological traits are changeable, and we can gain them, improve them, and even lose them. Nature-personality is under constant influences of the educational environment (to a certain extent) or personal decisions; whereas nature-personhood is independent, and it cannot be possessed partly, or to a certain degree. It is constant meaning that there is no way to be a person less or more. If something has nature-personhood it has it fully and permanently, and that is why this notion of human nature has a primary importance. Furthermore, it expresses and unfolds itself, in one way or another, in nature-personality. But in our case, we can argue reasonably that even so, the understanding of nature-personhood is not only a kind of general quality which takes different shapes (within nature-personality) in interaction with the environment. Then, the factor causing a difference in nature-personality would be only on the side of external circumstances. And this is not the case. Putting aside the role of the external circumstances, we can plausibly talk about a unique profile of nature-personhood which reveals, expresses, and unfolds itself slightly differently in each case. This is a real source of the personal diversification and unrepeatable-ness.

*Between biology and axiology of human nature*

Having distinguished two different understandings of human nature, we can embark on a couple of vital analyses concerning the consequences stemming from that. Initially, we can point to different manners in which these aspects appear. First of all, human biological nature, in one way or another, is evident since the beginning of a human being. In many respects, it is similar to other mammals as many genetists claim; however, what really distinguishes it from animal nature is its unique DNA.<sup>26</sup> Analogically, from a different prospective, the same can be said about nature understood as a value. It has been present since the beginning of man, or since the moment of conception (an initiation of existence). Nonetheless, it appears gradually unfolding itself in the course of the process of human development.

Furthermore, we can notice that in bioethics there is a tendency to separate these perceptions of human nature or even ignore one of them. The most common tendency is to highlight an importance of biologically understood nature, whereas another perception is treated as only theoretical or non-realistic construct. This tendency is typical for all naturalistic approaches. They automatically identify human nature with its empirical data. According to this position, there should be a possibility to reduce somehow all other properties of human nature to biological functions and make them into a subject of the process of scientific verification. For a strict positivistic thinker, the axiological viewpoint is a theoretically dim position. Given these premises, it is clear that everything tends to be treated within the above-mentioned current of monistic materialism. Within it, it does not make any sense to address the notion of human na-

<sup>26</sup> Of course, the discussion of the uniqueness of human DNA is very advanced. Some researchers-bioethicists claim that we humans share with chimps about 98.4% of the genes. See: P. Singer, *Rethinking Life and Death*, The Text Publishing Co., Melbourne, 1994, 177. Others point to 95% of the common genes. See: R.J. Britten, *Divergence between Samples of Chimpanzee and Human DNA Sequences Is 5% Counting Indels*, Proceeding of the Natural Academy of Science, October 15, 2002, 99.21: 13633-13635. Nevertheless, R. Mirkes concludes saying that "Even if human species were different from some hominoid species by a single mutation of a single gene, it is also necessary to acknowledge the momentous effect of this 'slight genetic difference', that is, the emergence of a human brain that is very different structurally from that of nonhuman primate". See: R. Mirkes, *The Wrongs of Animal Rights*, "The National Catholic Bioethical Quarterly" Volume 3, Number 2(2003), 295-296.

ture outside the realm of physical reality, whatever understood. This position tends, consequently, to reduce everything to a kind of (empirical) oneness.

The tendency to separate and emphasize the role of one approach to human nature, at the expense of other, concerns the axiological perception as well. Then, what really mattered would be looking at man from the point of view of his/her preciousness, importance, or dignity not paying much attention to diverse perspective. Nevertheless, the problem appearing here is how to spell out properly the notion of human dignity itself. There is, however, a strong tendency in the contemporary philosophy to identify dignity with freedom.<sup>27</sup> On this account, human nature can be understood as a sheer freedom which is not essentially influenced by any other factors. Hence, in the radical perception of dignity as freedom, human nature tends to be made into a spiritual entity creating itself by itself.

Addressing the topic of a possible separation between the biological and axiological approach to human nature, we can also investigate the opposite possibility. Not playing down the importance of the biological dimension of human nature, the personalistic thought tends to emphasize the leading role of the axiological outlook. It can deliver a relatively coherent view on how these two aspects can be harmonized.

Putting at the centre of analyses the axiological notion of human nature does not mean that we disparage what the biological perception conveys. This attempt aims, rather, to demonstrate that, in one way or another, a human being is indeed a special value in any dimension. In the realm of human biology, human body cannot be considered only as material foundation for personal life-to-be; or, as something which is merely intended to support biologically (passively) the higher quality, namely human personal life.<sup>28</sup> It can be argued, very plausibly, that the human body as such actively participates in any form of personal life, being a transmitter of strictly personal utterances.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> S. Belardinelli, *Nature in a Cosmological, Biological, Anthropological and Ecological Sense*, in: *The Nature and Dignity of the Human Person as the Foundation of the Right to Live*, J. De Dios Vial Correa, E. Sgreccia (eds.), Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2003, 75.

<sup>28</sup> As R. Sokolowski puts it, „the self is scattered through the lived body and is active in all its parts, not stationed behind it. It is identifiable in its unconscious and even its bodily life”. See: R. Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, 127.

<sup>29</sup> J. Haldane, *Bioethics and the Philosophy of the Human Body*, in: *Issues for a Catholic Bioethic*,

It would not be physically possible to express the innermost personal ideas without a human body and a human language (which itself would be, then, impossible without human embodiment). Moreover, human body and language colour very uniquely any personal utterance. It happens thus when a subject-man is about to utter a symbolic message. The mental idea of it has usually a general character. A proper specification of the idea is carried out when a body and its expressional possibilities come into play. In other words, the idea itself takes its shape as in the mind and as on the level of bodily expressions. This twofold process seems to mark a natural course of uttering any personal ideas. The body is, then, not only an instrumental tool conveying ready-made notions; actually, it is a something more.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, the very personal profile of human being seems to be seriously interwoven with human biological life. Thanks to that, we can point to a body saying that “it is physical subjectivity – mine, me, my-self”; or that “I experience it [my body] as my word-in-flesh, intrinsic to my own life-narrative”.<sup>31</sup> Hence, we can say straightforwardly that human body is indeed a value in itself due to participation in a human subjectivity. From the personalistic prospective, it can be even recognized as an indispensable factor of being human-value.

Nonetheless, none of the notions sketched above (taken singularly) can be overestimated or accepted as a decisive one. From the personalistic position, it would be even mistaken to elaborate the concept of human nature drawing on the unique and unified constellation of empirical and axiological qualities (within the latter proposal). They play an important role, as proved above, but they cannot deliver a fully satisfactory answer to the question of what human nature is in itself. The problem is that we should seek the solution of the human nature dilemma on the more advanced level delivering a set of unifying criteria for all the possible aspects of the human multidimensionality. Surely, such a level is the level of ontological investigation. Hence, as the biological understanding as the axiological one remains the justifiable facets of human nature which,

L. Gormally (ed.), *The Linacre Centre*, London 1999, 88.

<sup>30</sup> This remark does not deny the fact that the human mind has a priority role in conceiving any mental-spiritual idea.

<sup>31</sup> J. F. Kavanaugh, *Who Count as Persons? Human Identity and the Ethics of Killing*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, D. C., 36.

however, do need be completed and founded on the ontological framework.<sup>32</sup>

### *Ontology of human nature*

Search for the meaning of human nature leads us beyond a set of empirical and axiological analyses. Ontologically understood human nature stems from the purely rational approach to the issue. Of course, it does not mean that so formulated the concept is completely detached from any reference to the empirical data. It, however, does mean that a human being can be comprehended on the more advanced level of philosophical investigation where what really matters is founding a very core of man; or putting another way, the ontological investigation of human nature points to such a fundamental aspect of human-ness which radically distinguishes man from anything else, showing these essential differences.

The ontological outlook at human nature has its source in Boethius' famous definition of the person, "an individual substance of a rational nature". It sets out a quite classical perception of a human being, deeply rooted in the Western culture. Nevertheless, further understandings and interpretations of the key-words of this definition (nature, substance) seems to be troublesome and should be addressed. J. F. Kavanaugh takes this task up saying: "Although the word *nature* is troubling to some thinkers, it actually can be quite simple and serviceable. We can use it to refer to the fact that there are different kinds of individuals in the world, differentiated according to the kinds of activity they and only they are capable of exercising. Nature, in this sense, is simply the answer to the question, What kind of reality are you? – answered from the point of view of the

<sup>32</sup> To spell it out, this methodological proposal, however, does not tend to deprive a human being of any 'material' richness. Instead, it is to point to 'something which is irreducible in man'. Ontological investigation is necessary but that does not mean that it is all what really matters as far as a human being is concerned. Boethius definition, which is about to be deployed and which will play a vital role in this kind of analyses, determines so called 'metaphysical terrain' which is a starting point for the further interpretations of man's life. See: K. Wojtyła, *Podmiotowość i "to, co nieredukowalne" w człowieku (Subjectiveness and 'what is irreducible' in man)*, in: K. Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn oraz inne studia antropologiczne*, T. Styczen, W. Chudy, J. W. Galkowski, A. Rodzinski, A. Szostek (eds.), Wydawnictwo Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 1994, 440.

kinds of capacities-to-act that I share with other individuals of my class and seem not to share with others".<sup>33</sup>

Analysing Boethius' definition, such basic features can be highlighted: being an individual, autonomous entity and being a rational one. These endowments of human nature result in the ability to be free (freedom), in the ability to make generalisations, to be conscious, self-conscious, to perform abstract thinking, create projects, and in the ability to grasp the deeper meaning of things.

This understanding of human nature emphasizes a functionalistic facet of the ontological nature. But it strongly implicates the presence of a very foundation of all these typically human manifestations-capacities. It can be described by the notion of substance.<sup>34</sup> A person's substance-ness points to its real existence. As E. Sgreccia puts it, „a person is a real entity, a special existence who exemplifies a general gender and an abstract core in an individual man. One's being points to the existence of a person *in se* and *per se*, through its proper act of being".<sup>35</sup> Therefore, this act of being seems to be a very core of human nature.

Existence of human nature understood as a substance is permanent. It endures even despite the possible lack of the above-mentioned rational and autonomous activities. In other words, active rational and autonomous acts are a kind of manifestation of rational nature which flow from it but they do not exhaust it whatsoever.<sup>36</sup> Human nature understood as a core of man exists independently (even if it can be separated and demonstrated only theoretically). Actually, it is a unique act of existence itself which is a final guarantee of a very human identity.

<sup>33</sup> J. F. Kavanaugh, *Who Count as Persons? Human Identity and the Ethics of Killing*, o.c., 65.

<sup>34</sup> Describing man as a substance is often interpreted negatively by philosophers. It seems to be very distant from a common sense perception an average human being has about her/himself. Thomistic-personalistic thinkers seem to be aware of it (M. A. Krapiec points to man as someone who does fulfil her/himself in their personal acts). Nevertheless, the notion can be pretty serviceable as far as we try to bring out an essential truth about a human existence. Therefore, Krapiec's proposal is to maintain that important term but treat it analogously. See: M. A. Krapiec, *Ja-człowiek*, Wydawnictwo Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 1991, 128 (English trans., *I-Man: An Outline of Philosophical Anthropology*, M. Lescoe (trans.), Mariel Publication, New Britain 1983).

<sup>35</sup> E. Sgreccia, *La persona umana*, in: *Bioetica*, C. Romano, G. Grassani (eds.), UTET, Torino 1995, 191.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. See also: L. Palazzani, *Genetic Engineering and Human Nature*, in: *Man-Made Man. Ethical and Legal Issues in Genetics*, P. Doherty, A. Sutton (eds.), Open Air, Dublin 1997, 52.

The ontologically understood nature reveals man as a real entity. It does not mean that a human being, in her/his fundamental constitution, is equal to any material object. It, however, does mean that a human in him/herself is a coherent, structured being, and no extrinsic principle is needed in order to explain its existence whatsoever. In other words, man is not an appendage to anything else: it exists in itself and by itself thanks to a proper act of existence. Sgreccia sets forth this essential conclusion saying, “in each man sense of the universe is contained and all the value of the humanness: a human person is a unity, the whole and not a part of the whole”.<sup>37</sup>

### *Towards final conclusions*

To sum up, we can comprehend human nature at least in two different manners. Human nature can appear as the relatively stable biological structure or as the intuitively seizable value. It can be plausibly stated that all of these understandings can deliver a kind of answer to the question about the core of our human existence. Furthermore, remaining only on the axiological level, we can point to human nature’s pivotal role in the realm of enquiry on a source of morality (moral order). Consequently, it can allow us to formulate a moral criterion for any biotechnology undertakings. Should man be comprehended as a special importance or preciousness, she/he cannot be subjected to the instrumental biotechnology exploitation.

Nevertheless, such a twofold grasp of human nature does reveal that we can also point to other semi-general pictures framing the idea of this category. We can list at least several of them. In this way every next proposal seems to be but a mere aspect of what we search for not delivering a satisfactory solution to the problem. To put it more generally, humans inevitably appear as multi-dimensional beings, and, in one way or another, we have to accept it.

Therefore, we are led to enquire into a reality which underlies all possible aspectual understandings of human nature. Of course, it can be found

<sup>37</sup> E. Sgreccia, M. L. Di Pietro, *La persona e il modello personalista*, in: *Bioetica. Manuale per i diplomati universitari della sanità*, E. Sgreccia, A. G. Spagnolo, M. L. Di Pietro (eds.), Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1999, 149.

in the realm of the ontology of a human being. Here, we should point to a unique act of existence as a very core of human nature. What is, then, given primordially is existence itself of a human being and not its material content; or 'that it is' and not 'what it is like'. It seems that such a discovery of the act of existence must really precede any further act of thematic descriptions of human nature, which indeed are many depending on an approach we deploy.

If, however, the solution of the dilemma of human nature is determined: 'existence before essence' (which is a consequence of the above analyses), then it is clear that looking, at a first stage of enquiry, for a particular set of biological or whatever qualities as constitutive ones is wrong. Putting it another way, if there is an act of existence as a very foundation of human nature, none of the constellation of any kinds of qualitative essences can prove that such-and-such a thing is a human being, and otherwise. It must be asserted in the very first act saying, 'that is man'; whereas what he/she is like, it is a matter of a further thematic clarification.

In this light, it is understood the personalistic thesis that 'active rational and autonomous acts are a kind of manifestation of rational nature which flow from it but they do not exhaust it'. Rational nature as existing subject is an absolutely primary factor who does emanate secondarily all other human thematic acts.<sup>38</sup> To put it another way, the existence of a human being (existing subject) does not depend basically on a summation of any qualitative essences (thematic acts). Indeed, it is given before them as their foundation. Therefore, the essentialist tendency, so strongly operating within naturalistic bioethics, seems to be rather mistaken. Looking for new sophisticated biological-neurological features in order to prove, or otherwise (that a given thing is a human being) can hardly deliver a satisfactory conclusion. The scientific understanding of the biological, or whatever, traits is far from a definite and final stage; in fact, these factors are still subjects of scientific research and specification. Hence, the tendency mentioned above unavoidably results in a process of a constant search for new and more specific material qualities, and that makes the notion of human nature rather a blurred idea. Only by putting the act of existence at the core of analyses can we pave the sure way to the sound and viable concept of human nature.

<sup>38</sup> M. A. Krapiec, *Ja-człowiek*, o.c., 129.