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Chapter 1: Human Nature and the Christian

Marc Clauson

Human Nature and the Christian

Theologians and philosophers have debated the question of what humans are like for thousands of years. Whether Christian or not, the questions are the same: Do we as humans have a fixed or changing basic nature? If so, what is it like? What makes us human? What happened (or did not happen) to human nature at the Fall? And how do the answers to these questions influence the way we think about politics, economics, psychology, sociology, theology, philosophy, and even science? This chapter seeks to answer these questions from an explicitly biblical standpoint, taking the Scriptures as the fundamental set of presuppositions on which to build any and all arguments.

We will classify and articulate the various views on human nature into four categories, each having its historical antecedent, but only one consistent with Scripture. These four traditions are (1) Augustinian-Protestant Reformed, (2) Semi-Pelagian-Arminian, (3) the philosophical view of John Locke, and (4) the Psychological-Nihilist.

We believe that of the above views of human nature, the closest to the biblical view is the Augustinian-Protestant Reformed approach (No. 1). As such, we will now examine the biblical view of man, based explicitly on Scripture itself. This is where we must ultimately look for the truest idea of human nature.

The Biblical View of Human Nature

The first statement from God about man's nature is the crucial one: Genesis 1:26–31 tells us that God made man and woman “in the image of God.” The phrase means first that in some sense humans were created to be like God — though not in His power or omniscience. Most theologians have said that the ways in which humans are like God (but not God) include our capacity for a right relationship with God, ability to reason, creativity, sociability, dominion over creation, and freedom or choice. Some of these are implied in the Genesis text (dominion in Gen. 1:26, sociability in 1:27).

The Fall, however, changed all that in profound ways. Everyone knows the Genesis 3 account of the sin of Adam and Eve, their expulsion from the Garden, and the fundamental alteration in their nature. What changed

and how did it change? First, Adam and Eve sinned in act when they ate the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:6). We are told that “their eyes were opened” — a change had occurred inwardly. Second, they covered their nakedness because now they “knew” good and evil experientially. In fact, we are told that they would know good and evil in this way. It is also telling that they both evaded responsibility for their act, an indication that the results of their disobedience effected a real change in them internally (Gen. 3:10, 12–13). Sin now was part of who they were. They were not merely externally punished. How did it affect them and all their progeny down to us?

We are told that before grace has been given, we are “darkened in our understanding,” (Eph. 4:18). “The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving” (2 Cor. 4:4); Paul acted “ignorantly in unbelief” before his conversion (1 Tim. 1:13). Here we see the noetic effects of sin, the effects on the mind, which is not able, apart from illumination, to understand the true nature of reality or knowledge. The will is also affected. Our desires became evil (Gen. 3; 1 Pet. 4:3; 2 Pet. 2:10, 18), our intentions became directed toward evil (Gen. 6:5; 8:21). Human choice is disabled when it comes to choosing actions or words that please God. To summarize, after the Fall, the image of God is “defaced,” though not obliterated. The effects of that marring are profound, not just for the spiritual life of each individual, but also for every institution individuals “touch” during their lives — family, church, political and economic institutions. As one writer put it, “The Fall, in bringing corruption into the world, made necessary [the] institutions which should correct and control the sinfulness of human nature.”¹

The Augustinian-Reformation View

According to Augustine, man after the Fall, though still in God’s image, was “not able not to sin.” Augustine was the most influential theologian in the West until the Middle Ages. The Reformers, however, later revived his anthropology. For instance, Martin Luther and John Calvin both taught that man was originally created in the image of God, but that the image had been severely damaged by sin. Calvin, for example, citing Romans 3, wrote that Paul is “indicting the unvarying corruption of our nature” and that “so depraved is his nature that he can be moved or impelled only to evil.”² This leaves little doubt. Sin permeates every aspect of the human life to some degree or another. Again the implications are profound.

¹ A. J. Carlyle, *A History of Medieval Political Theory in the West*, 6 vols. William Blackwood, 1950, vol. I, 120.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), edited by John T. McNeil, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. Westminster Press, 1960, II.iii.2 and II.iii.5.

This idea would be carried forward in later Reformed tradition, for example in the *Canons of the Synod of Dort* (1618) and the famous *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) and its Baptist variations. The Puritans of England and America certainly agreed with the Reformers on the nature of sinful man; it is held by most evangelical churches today. To reiterate, for Augustine and this line of doctrine, man is made in God's image, but the Fall has so affected all of man, spiritual capacities as well as natural, that he is unable to will or to reason as he ought.

Unbiblical Views of Human Nature

The Voluntarist or Free Will Position

Though we call this the Free Will view, it goes beyond just the will. This idea of human nature asserts essentially that the Fall did not have the catastrophic effects on man in the manner that Scripture teaches, and in the theological formula articulated by Augustine and the Calvinists. The origin of this view began in Late Antiquity with the British monk Pelagius, who taught that there was no sin nature and that the will therefore was completely free. The ability to reason is only distorted when it comes into contact with bad influences. Pelagius was condemned as a heretic, but his influence lingered in a modified form.

The church condemned Pelagius but did not fully affirm Augustine's views. As a result, the teaching on human nature was able to steer a middle course that came to be known as Semi-Pelagianism. This view largely was accepted in the church until the Reformation. Thomas Aquinas represents the detailed expression of it. Man was not so devastated by Adam's sin that he lost all autonomy of will; man and God cooperate as partners in the process of salvation. Though man was harmed by the Fall in his relationship with God, human nature remains naturally capable of thinking and willing correctly. Given that a portion of our will and reason remain nearly unaffected by the Fall, man's nature is only partly fallen, yet humans still need grace for righteousness before God. Aquinas continued and elaborated this view, and his theology eventually became the official version of the Roman Catholic Church.

One might say that this view is a Roman Catholic teaching and not relevant to Protestants. However, a variation of it arose among later 17th- and 18th-century followers of the Dutch Protestant theologian Jacobus Arminius, who taught that the Fall profoundly affected man as a whole; every human was born a sinner in need of grace to do any good. Arminius argued that when Adam and Eve sinned, the "Holy Spirit

departed,” the conscience was “depraved,” they suffered a “privation of the image of God,” and they lost their “original righteousness,” which amounted to original sin. Arminius adds, “But in his lapsed and sinful state man is not capable, of and by himself, either to think, to will, or to do that which is really good. . . .” Arminius looks much like a Calvinist with regard to his view of fallen human nature, though he differs when he adds that grace from God is resistible and that the will and intellect retain some natural capability.³

Arminius certainly did not go as far as Aquinas, but he did begin a tradition among Protestants that views man’s nature as only partially disabled by the Fall. Unfortunately, this view translates into a greater problem: that humans can be autonomous in their reason and will, and that as a result, we don’t have to worry too much if we allow the foundations for our knowledge and practice to ignore the Bible. This is precisely what happened, as the followers of Arminius deviated even further than he himself did. It would not be too much to say that Arminianism, in its more radical form at least, aided the shift to modern philosophical thinking about human nature and natural (or unaided) moral ability. If Arminianism is the theological backdrop for free will, then modern philosophy is its rational conclusion.

The Philosophical View of Human Nature

Beginning in the 17th century, with hints even earlier, a philosophical view of human nature developed that primarily exalted reason as autonomous. Not all philosophers agreed on just what this looked like, but all agreed that the rational and moral ability of human beings were in fact not affected by the Fall, at least not in any significant way. Moreover, the very idea of a “sin nature” begins to disappear as a philosophical explanation for any limitations in man. Instead, humans are defined by an essence that is either some sort of “blank slate” or is morally good. René Descartes provides a glimpse of this new view around 1637 when he used unaided reason first to derive his own existence, then that of other humans, followed by the existence of the natural world, and finally the existence of God Himself. Obviously that gives a lot to the creature’s ability to reason on his own authority! But for autonomous reasoning to have such great intellectual capacity, humans simply could not have been born in a morally distorted condition.

³ *The Writings of James Arminius*, translated by James Nichols, 3 vols. Baker Book House reprint, 1977, Vol. 1, 252, 253-254; vol. 2, 77-79.

John Locke represents a crucial transitional figure here. While acknowledging the existence of sin, Locke nonetheless thought of the individual as a “blank slate,” or rather, as he actually wrote, “a white paper” or “empty cabinet.” For him, the knowledge of sin is not innate, nor is the mind preprogrammed with “innate Principles.”⁴ Rather, men come to know what is sinful in the same manner that they attain knowledge: through experience of the natural world. Not completely secular, Locke argued that God’s divine law is still the measure of right and wrong, yet according to him, this law is capable of being known through the correct use of reason alone — apart from Scripture — because its content is revealed “in nature” and the natural man is rationally able to apprehend and assent to it. Thus, he rejects the traditional Augustinian and Calvinist idea about human nature — especially moral depravity.

Locke’s “blank slate” psychology has continued to play a crucial role in the “nature versus nurture” debate in the social sciences. He must be seen as teaching both a measure of *nature* (the moral condition we are born into) as well as a measure of *nurture* (upbringing and social environment), with nurture taking the lead for him. Yet even this represents a major departure from orthodox Christianity. Even though the Church has always understood that humans are shaped in various ways by their environment, this “nurture” was normally in terms of bad influences operating on an already sinful nature. Humans were then not fundamentally better with nurture, except perhaps externally. They could not be made better internally, for only God’s grace could achieve that transformation — a fact Locke neglected. In doing so, he represents yet another subtle but important shift in our understanding about human nature. The lines of philosophical thought from this point on would only further undermine the Christian view.

The 18th and 19th centuries saw yet further deviations from the Augustinian view of human nature. Marquis de Condorcet, like many of his Enlightenment colleagues, advocated a very optimistic view of human nature, even more so than Locke. He wrote a work titled *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* in 1795, in which he attempts to show how humans have continually progressed over time, resulting in a genuine advancement of the human person, particularly the mind. It is clear Condorcet has broken with the Christian tradition,

⁴ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1700), 2 vols, edited by Peter H. Nidditch. Clarendon, 1979, Vol. 1, 55, 79.

as he makes no mention of any biblical origin of humans, their initial God-given nature or their fall into sin; rather, man can sanctify himself through reason and science. Condorcet writes,

no bounds have been fixed to the improvement of the human faculties; that the perfectibility of man is absolutely indefinite; that the progress of this perfectibility, henceforth above the control of every power that would impede it, has no other limit than the duration of the globe upon which nature has placed us.⁵

Humans have only been restrained from progress in the past because of ignorance, a lack of reason, and servility to corrupt traditional authorities (church and state). Obviously man is not fallen and, thus, there are no obstacles within human nature itself to unlimited progress. For instance, a contemporary of Condorcet, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, held that man in his original state of nature was inherently good (“noble savage”) and that it was only society that came later, which corrupted him. Many Enlightenment rationalists, in opposition to the teaching of Scripture, held to this very optimistic view of human nature.

A Christian might think that philosophers could not deviate much farther from the biblical view. Unfortunately, the worst was yet to come — and is still with us — in theology and science. In the 19th century, the intellectual world rejected the very truth of the Bible, except as a record of primitive and superstitious religion, while simultaneously embracing evolution. Neither academic trend was totally unexpected, as they had been foreshadowed earlier. But the culminating effect was devastating.

When Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of the Species* in 1859, the theological world was at least partly ready to accept it. According to the theory of evolution, humans were at best a more highly evolved animal, having descended through long ages from much simpler animal forms. An inescapable implication of Darwin’s work (as well as his later works) was that since humans did not come by a direct, fiat creation of God, the Genesis narrative was false and the theology of sin had to be replaced by some other explanation for human nature. For both secular evolutionists and certain Christian intellectuals enamored by Darwin’s theory, humans are “getting better,” for no other reason than that natural selection and adaptation were “weeding” out the bad traits and passing on the good.

⁵ Marquis de Condorcet, *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind*. J. Johnson, 1795, Introduction.

This view in particular has become popular among economists and political thinkers in the field of sociobiology.

The Psychological-Nihilist View

The Existentialist view of human nature (which I have called Nihilist) is currently diffused into various academic disciplines. Existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre believed that humans had no nature at all. As Sartre would put it, “existence comes before essence.”⁶ One develops an “essence” (or nature) by acting in the world, by using one’s freedom. In one sense this view resembles Locke’s blank slate, but Locke allowed for some pre-existing “structure” of the mind that cooperated in shaping the human being. This structure was “built in” by God. But Sartre was an atheist. Therefore, the human came into the world with essentially nothing and thus “makes” himself into what he will become. Man is not pre-determined but, rather, self-determined.

The Psychological view, on the other hand, derives its understanding of human nature from observation and experimentation. Seeking scientific respectability, psychologists tended to move toward more naturalistic explanations for human behavior.⁷ But they still were faced with the problem of how to explain external behavior with a satisfactory internal view of human nature. Locke’s “white paper” theory was popular, as was a purely physical-material explanation. The problem has not really disappeared. At present, the dominant view of human nature among psychologists is some variation of the blank slate, though some have argued that humans have no nature. In addition, psychologists have been attracted to the theory of evolution, which teaches that human behavior and the “mind,” have changed over a long period of time for the better.

It is not always clear how psychologists have reconciled these different views within the profession. But it is certain that none except Christian psychologists still accept the traditional Christian understanding of human nature — yet it is a crucial issue in the discipline. Explaining why human beings do what they do cannot be done simply by observing stimuli and resultant behavior, as the Behaviorists did in connection with B. F. Skinner’s views. It may be the dominant view that “Human behavior is a product both of our innate human nature and of our individual

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, translated by P. Mairet. Methuen, 1948.

⁷ Leslie Stevenson and David L. Haberman, *Ten Theories of Human Nature*, Third edition. Oxford University, 1998, 189.

experience and environment.”⁸ No one would deny that experience and environment play a role, but sin also must be accounted for in order to diagnose problems accurately. The foundational assumption must be that humans are created in the image of God, but that the Fall produced a sin nature that has profoundly affected the internal and external lives of all humans.

Adding these various intellectual traditions together, a largely optimistic view of human nature dominates today’s intellectual culture, and it even has infiltrated the Christian church to an extent. According to the new order, man is not fallen; he may not be perfect, but he is perfectible. The term “sin” has been banished, as has “sin nature,” even of the Arminian kind. One doesn’t have to look very far to find any or all of these various shades of the “new man” being taught; they permeate our intellectual, legal, and cultural institutions. And yet, sin is the major aspect of human nature involved in the questions surrounding most areas of thought and practice; it is the elephant in the room.

On the other hand, we should be cautious not to elevate sin such that it destroys the image of God in us. It is in His image, and by and with the work of God’s grace, that any human is able to make the best use of his divine image by laboring to make the world a better place consistent with the known (revealed) will of God. We do not yet live in the final eschatological Kingdom and so utopia is a foreclosed option. But we can glorify God to the greatest extent in this life by taking into full account the reality of both the divine image and our sin nature as we consider how to engage our culture for God. We can think about all aspects of life and thought with these considerations in mind, and we can then engage in purposive action that is realistically just and promotes flourishing. And we can design institutions that also account for our sin nature and that will constrain potential or real bad actions while enabling the conditions for productive and free activity.

Applications of the Christian View of Human Nature

When we study human nature from a Christian perspective, it is not for the purpose of mere curiosity. The results of scriptural foundations have very crucial applications to virtually every area of life and thought, from personal ethics and the family to politics, economics, and beyond. The way we think about human nature influences how we consider all these

⁸ Alan S. Miller and Satoshi Kanazawa, “Ten Politically Incorrect Truths About Human Nature,” *Psychology Today*, July 1, 2007.

areas and how we give counsel about how various aspects of human action (politics, economics, etc.) ought to be organized. In this section we will examine some selected areas of application to suggest the range of life and thought to which a biblical view applies.

Economics and Human Nature

The biblical view of human nature and the Fall ought to have a special role in the realm of economics. Economics is the discipline that concerns human action in markets and the role of state intervention in those markets, as well as the legitimate (or illegitimate) role of government in providing public goods and services. By virtue of being created in the image of God, we saw that humans possess creativity, the capacity to reason (including the ability to calculate means and ends), and are innately social creatures. In addition, humans were given dominion over the earth to make it a better place for the glory of God. The implications for possession, production, and exchange are evident. Humans are not only mandated to have dominion, but are given the creative capability to “make things” and to use reason to solve production problems in order to make better and cheaper goods or provide better and cheaper services. Because humans are social, they will be driven both to cooperate and to exchange some things for others. The result is that those who make one thing better tend to specialize on that (and do it better and more efficiently) and sell that to others who make what they want better and more cheaply. Both parties benefit, and wealth is created. Expand this process among many and there is a market that is able to coordinate many simultaneous transactions that enhance life and produce human flourishing. Ideally, of course, this is all done for God’s glory and His Kingdom.

Contrast this with the economic system of Karl Marx. Marx was indeed a child of the Enlightenment, and his influence in politics and economics cannot be overstated. Marx believed that human nature was malleable; however, humans were changed not by some inward action, but outwardly, by economic systems, by the organization of material production. According to Marx, the ideology of capitalism contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Owing to its natural tendency toward increased competition, the capitalist system would inevitably produce “alienation,” or frustration and discontent, among the proletariat (factory workers). Why? Because he predicted that such ruthless competition in the market place (desire for profit) would increase unemployment (because businesses would go under) and lower wages.

Eventually this worker dissatisfaction would produce a revolution, leading to a socialist state. But as individuals now operated under a new economic system — noncapitalist, yet communal and cooperative — their hidden cooperative nature would emerge and the state would “wither away.” Utopia would be achieved!

Unlike Marx, we consider true human nature, to help markets function as much as possible as they should. The goal is to create the incentives for proper behavior in market settings that are as free as possible — not to inhibit markets unduly. Admittedly, if humans remained in a pre-Fall state, markets would work perfectly. But sin has entered and humans are predisposed to behavior that sometimes disrupts the efficient and just working of markets. Jealousy, envy, and greed make humans susceptible to behavior that interferes with others’ desire for freedom and pursuit of economic well-being. Even without those motives and their resulting actions, the mind is also distorted by sin, causing individuals to think falsely about their own habits, motives, and about the effects of their conduct. Therefore, a set of fundamental rules is necessary to constrain certain behavior and to provide positive incentives for other kinds of behavior.

Rules then actually make for more prosperity and flourishing. Rules include laws against theft, fraud, and duress. They may also ensure that one is able to keep what he earns, with the exception of legitimate taxation. With these basic rules in place humans are free to be productive without fear that their creativity and productivity will be ruined when someone appropriates their “creation.” The market is able to produce tremendous flourishing, but it is made up of individuals who are subject to selfish and sinful behavior. Therefore, while maintaining the greatest possible freedom for market institutions, we must at the same time establish rules to prevent sinful behavior and to enhance human flourishing as a result of those markets.

But we also want to be careful not to confuse selfishness with self-interest or to assert that humans are selfish all the time. The Bible does correctly label all humans as sinful, even in a state of belief. Selfishness is, of course, sin. But self-interest can be legitimate, as it drives humans to provide for themselves and their families. Otherwise they might simply fall into sheer laziness or a kind of profligate altruism and, ultimately, into poverty. Adam Smith made such a useful distinction, and we do well to maintain it, while at the same time we do not condone selfishness. In addition,

humans can be properly altruistic as Christians in whom the Holy Spirit is working to bring about compassion.

However, it is also the case that compassion cannot be coerced, as Adam Smith also stated and as Scripture makes clear. The Bible exhorts and encourages Christians to love, but such genuine love is created in us, for as the inner man is changed by God, the heart is “softened.” Neither the state nor any economic system (contra Marx) can affect inward compassion. We may be tempted to argue that since believers are called to care for those in need, and since individuals and churches don’t have sufficient resources, we can simply push this off to the state. But three problems arise. First, as already noted, the state cannot actually convey compassion. Second, the state can only coerce action. Third, to accomplish the goal of aiding the less fortunate, the state must coercively take from some and redistribute to others, since the state does not itself create wealth. Is that then consistent with biblical standards? In other words, is that a just solution?

Another problem that arises as a result of the Fall is that humans lack perfect knowledge of the present and certainly of the future. Christian theology recognized this problem, but in the 20th century it had been largely forgotten in the wake of optimism regarding the capacity of central planning to arrange and guide an economic system. Friedrich Hayek reminded us of the problem once again when he wrote on “The Use of Knowledge in Society” in 1945. Though Hayek was not a Christian, he agreed with the Christian view that knowledge is limited in scope and time due to the Fall, even though Christian theology would also allow that the problem can be lessened and partially overcome by the Scriptures and the work of the Holy Spirit. If local knowledge is really all we can have accurate access to, then planning an economy from the top down is counterproductive, even harmful. Markets should largely be left alone to bring about the best results without having to know everything necessary for a given decision.

These problems take us back into the realm of government, especially its relationship to private action. Crucial questions arise: How much government? Is there a limit to state intervention? If so, on what grounds? Is there and should there be a limit to such intervention in market processes? Given the potential for sinful behavior among all, and given that a particular institutional setting does not “magically” transform individuals from private sector egoists into public sector altruists, we

must think about how to organize government itself so that we minimize the ability of individual decision-makers to do mischief. Even beyond that, what ought to be the scope and power of government entrusted to decision-makers? The existence of sin makes a difference in how the Christian answers these questions. Checks, balances, and limits seem to be preferable to unlimited scope of power and unlimited individual authority.

Given human nature as including the image of God, we would favor the institutional arrangement that best promotes the elements of creativity, calculation of means and ends through reason, and freedom to pursue ends within the limits of law. We would also favor the institutional arrangement that best harnesses any selfishness for good ends, over ones that actually tend to incentivize negative behavior. Markets fulfill these conditions. They are not perfect institutions; no human institution is perfect, since it is made up of imperfect individuals.

So in the end, we may say that self-government is the ideal type, with allowances to be made for the necessity of governmental action to constrain theft, fraud, duress, etc. It is precisely because of the corrupt nature we possess that the best form is to leave maximum freedom within the boundaries of appropriate law. The state through its “ministers” does not know what the needs, desires, and problems of each individual are, and cannot ever attain such knowledge, either in sufficient quantity or quality. Individuals generally know this best, and only need to know as much as necessary for each transaction or act of production, given that only individuals are capable of attaining local knowledge. The real question is which type of institution, given our natures, moves us closer to the ideal, even if the ideal is unattainable this side of Paradise?

Human Nature and Law

Law of course is closely related to politics and economics. Put simply, law is the authoritative and enforceable command of some legally constituted body. Law then is a set of rules. But for laws to be consistent with reality and also with special revelation, a proper view of human nature is essential. For a long period, especially after the Roman Emperor Constantine’s accommodation of Christianity (ca. 4th c. A.D.), law codes of the West reflected Christian foundations, including the ideas about human nature in Scripture.⁹ It was not assumed that humans were either inherently good or that what they did was environmentally determined so

⁹ Harold Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*. Harvard University, 1985.

that they were not responsible agents. Rather all humans are responsible agents, but all sinful (hence, the reason why we act irresponsibly). It was for that very reason that the Mosaic legal code in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy established the particular legal precepts. In fact in two texts, Genesis 9:6 and Romans 13, we see implied that government exists in part to make laws and to punish wrongdoing when those laws are broken. This in turn implies that human nature will inevitably be sinful — or the law would not be necessary. The study and thinking about law must therefore take account of human nature or fail to achieve any ultimate good.

In addition, it is worth stressing that, unlike some modern thinkers, Christians do not believe that law perfects humans or moves them toward perfection, as if an “environmental change” can effect a change in the internal disposition of human beings. While it is true that humans are also made in the image of God, and retain some vestige of that image, the sin problem is too great to overcome without grace. But law cannot provide grace, an internal working of the Holy Spirit producing a “habit” of living that is based on a changed nature. Law in the end can at best only restrain external acts. It can also point forward to grace, but by itself it has no power to make an inward change.

This also means that law cannot and ought not to attempt to address internal motives, as it has recently begun to attempt (so-called “hate crimes” for example). These must be left for the working of God in the individual as the Word of God is proclaimed and the church is involved. True internal change is impossible through law.

Finally, the ultimate purpose of law is justice.¹⁰ This concept means that one receives under law what he or she is due. If an offense has been perpetrated, then punishment of some kind results. Law must be administered impartially and universally for justice to apply at all. Otherwise justice cannot ensue. The temptation is to allow mercy to encroach too far on justice, and this error is partially rooted in a faulty view of human nature (and of course a faulty view of God). Humans are considered to be inherently good or perfectible, and so it is thought that mercy is necessary to promote that process of perfection. But if the state gives only mercy, then not only has no punishment been meted, but the other party has not received a just outcome and God’s standards have been violated.

¹⁰ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*. Princeton University, 2010.

Moreover one of God's very attributes is justice, and that is understood in Scripture as His perfectly correct response to any and all actions commensurate with the nature of that action. It is what we are due based on God's standards. We then take our cues about the content of justice from the God revealed in the Scriptures, not from man-made ideas. Since humans will attempt to evade God's standards, and since God is holy, He must also be just in not overlooking man's rebellious nature. In the realm of personal salvation, God can justly show mercy because of Jesus Christ's work of atonement. But in the realm of public and private law, justice must be administered according to God's standard. That realm is the realm of external behavior and comprehends both believers and unbelievers here on earth during its existence.

But law is also concerned with procedure, and procedure is also related to human nature. Since humans are not perfect or perfectible, it is necessary that when law intervenes, that is, when individuals are charged by the state, the state itself, consisting also of human judges and juries, must be constrained by arrangements that preserve the God-given rights of those charged. These rights are procedural because they do not guarantee a certain outcome, but they do maximize the chances that the outcome has been arrived at fairly and justly. Otherwise the possibility for arbitrary actions by the state would be enormously increased and at some point would become rampant.

In addition, when we speak of law we should also mention the concept of the rule of law, by which laws are known, relatively clear and especially applied to all, including those who make the laws. The rule is *Lex, Rex*, "law is king" — not "the king is law." Because of the universal sinfulness of human nature, we can no more trust the officers of the state to act perfectly than we could trust ordinary citizens to behave perfectly. Though we would welcome both, we can count on neither, so a rule of law is absolutely essential.

Conclusion

Humans have a definable nature that has been created by God, first in Adam and Eve, and that was then distorted, though not destroyed, by the Fall. The image of God in all humans involves several innate (but, of course, marred) characteristics that make us in some way "like God." God has made humans to be essentially rational, creative, sociable, free, and potentially capable of having a relationship with Him. These elements are important as we consider how humans can best serve God in their

vocation and as stewards of His creation, understood broadly. This consideration in turn involves the type of institutional context best suited for human flourishing in God's world.

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