

Theology for a scientific age (2)

“What is man that thou art mindful of him?”

Introduction

In ancient times the Psalmist asked, “What is man?” Today the question is very important. The definition of a “human person” is at the heart of controversies over abortion and stem-cell research, while the basic notion of “humanity” is involved in debates over women’s rights, homosexuality, and marriage.

By the way, answers to the question are sometimes called “anthropology.”

Here, too, science matters.

- Darwin’s account of natural selection combines with genetics to promote an understanding of human beings as animals related to and descended from other animals, and also as evolving forms whose present state is the product of random events and not having a fixed or permanent nature.
- The digital computer, a product of contemporary science and technology, has shown it possible for a machine to simulate thinking and surpasses in speed and accuracy many mental activities.

These developments question long-held convictions about human nature, and they show how urgent the Psalmist’s question has become for Christians.

1. “What is man?” Today the answer is...

Early Christians had to deal with pagans and gnostics who understood human beings to be essentially *spiritual*.

And so it matters that Christians have long confessed...

Today the Church’s challenge comes from the other direction. Especially since Darwin, it has become common to understand simply as a machine, that is, as purely physical, material beings like any other. Human beings are animals descended with modification through a natural selection of advantageous random variations, and, given enough time, other animals will descend from human beings. Human beings are unique but not special or set apart in a biological sense.

And what about our minds and souls? The advent of the digital computer makes it possible to think that even thought, emotion, and language are mechanical.

So it is increasingly common to think as computer scientist Rodney Brooks does:

The body is a machine, with perhaps billions of billions of parts, parts that are well ordered in the way they operate and interact. We are machines, as are our spouses, our children, and our dogs.

Needless to say, many people bristle at the use of the word “machine.” They will accept some descriptions of themselves as collections of components that are governed by rules of interaction, and with no component beyond what is understood with mathematics, physics, and chemistry. But that to me is the essence of what a machine is... (*Flesh and Machine*, 173–174).

2. How have Christians responded?

The short answer is: “In many and various ways.”

But we can see that many Christians are of two minds (no pun intended).

- On the one hand, most insist that they “have” minds and/or souls. Indeed, many will act as if they were *essentially* minds or souls. (This comes out when speaking about life after death.) In this regard, modern science is challenging.

- On the other hand, many also act as if their mental and spiritual states were produced by their bodies. We see this in that they have attitudes about alcohol, drugs, head injuries, and Alzheimer’s disease. In this regard, they have a lot of respect for medicine, which itself depends heavily on modern science.

3. What does this mean for Christian theology?

We should acknowledge that modern science is only one factor that makes anthropology an important topic. But it is indeed a factor. How should a Christian account of human creatures proceed?

- First, human beings are *creatures*.

- Second, human beings are creatures of a certain sort: *animals*.

The Genesis 1 account of creation shows that human beings are a kind of animal. As philosopher Mary Midgley said: “We are not just rather like animals; we *are* animals... not a brand of machine or a type of disembodied spirit.” Midgley was not denying differences between human beings and other animals, but she wanted to stress that all such differences “distinguish man *among* animals,” and not “man from the animals” (xiii, xiv).

- Third, what of human uniqueness? It lies in being made in the *image of God*. But what is that? For our purposes, image of God should be understood as a “function” than a “feature” (like rationality or language). Human creatures were made to *image* God to creation.
- Fourth, this view accords with a proper understanding of sin as unrighteousness. Adam and Eve were not content to image God; they wanted to be just like God.
“Sin” for the Lutheran Confessions is “original sin,” that is, the innate sinful condition. This condition might be explained as *the tendency to always want things to go your way, not God’s way*.

- Fifth, this implies a certain understanding of how God saves sinners.
“[Isaiah] calls it an alien work of God to terrify, because the proper work of God is to make alive and to console.... For these are the two chief works of God in human beings, to terrify and to justify the terrified or make them alive. The entire Scripture is divided into these two works” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, XII.51, 53).
This understanding of salvation is consistent with what we have said about God, Christ, and creation.

References

Brooks, Rodney. *Flesh and Machines: How Robots Will Change Us*. New York, Pantheon Books, 2002.

Midgley, Mary. *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978.