

What Are We? Answering the Riddle of Mankind

In recent days I've been involved in a conversation about which aspects of modern life have the most impact on shaping the culture in which we live. Is it business or education? Is it politics or the media? How about medial issues or the health industry? Or perhaps the network of associations which form the fabric of our society? Or religion? Or sports?

The discussion has been good, and helpful, and, I think, constructive. I've been minded, however, to approach the whole issue from a philosophical perspective by suggesting new categories which impact culture much more powerfully, such as virtue (and its absence), and love (and its absence). I have then pointed out that these two categories are really synonymous, i.e. that love and virtue are really the same thing. In short and in sum, love (and its absence) is the defining impact on any culture, not just ours.

The point is that culture is not merely a mechanism influenced by realpolitik. It's not merely a machine in which various powers are at work: business, education, politics, religion, the media, etc. It is, therefore, wrong, or at least inadequate, to discuss culture in mechanistic terms. Culture is, first and foremost, human and it cannot be understood until we understand what it means to be human.

Any discussion of human culture or human society must begin, therefore, with a discussion of the human. Until we know who or what we are, we cannot understand who or what we are in our relationship with others.

We need to begin with deciding whether we are *who* or *what*. Are we *persons* or are we merely *beasts*? Do we possess a genuine freedom, enabling us to make ethical choices, or are we

ultimately enslaved by instinct, unable to make any choices that contradict what our base instincts demand? Do we have a soul, an *anima*, which animates our desires, or are we merely a bundle of molecules doing what we're programmed to do (even though we don't believe in the existence of a programmer)?

These are not merely *academic* questions, in the bad sense that they are only of interest to academics. These are *essential* questions, in the sense of *essence*, from the Latin *esse*, i.e. "to be". Can we be human beings without being human, and can we be fully human unless we understand what it means for a human to be *being*?

To return to our earlier question, who or what on earth or in heaven are we?

Are we *homo viator*, i.e. man on a journey or man on a quest, whose purpose in life is to achieve the goal of becoming more fully human, more fully who he is meant to be? Or are we simply clever apes who merely follow our instincts in order to gratify our material needs, no different in *essence* from ants or slugs?

Are we *anthropos*, i.e. he who looks up, staring at the stars and the heavens and wondering what they mean? Or are we merely like the beasts of the field, mere monkeys who have lost their tails and learned some useful tricks? Do we gaze wonderingly or do we merely graze instinctively?

It is asking and answering questions such as these which will determine the sort of culture and society in which we live.