

THE CRADLE OF CIVILIZATION:

Defending (Human) Nature and Protecting Its Fragile (Social) Ecology

Proposed paper by Gil Bailie

My poor scapegoat,
I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.
Seamus Heaney

In keeping with our conference theme, this paper is concerned with protecting nature – in this case, human nature – from cultural trends increasingly contemptuous of the concept of human nature, trends which are currently altering the social ecology in ways almost certain to prove catastrophic for our children and grandchildren. If the category *nature* has any content at all, it is only because it is a delimited category. If there is such a thing as nature, it is because there is such a thing as the unnatural. If the distinction between the natural and the unnatural is obliterated, it is impossible to define, much less to defend, nature.

To be sure, for creatures endowed with freedom, and with what Paul Ricoeur calls an unstable ontological constitution, the category nature must be given wide latitude, for it is the nature of human nature to be ordained to its own transcendence. Self-sacrifice and martyrdom are as unnatural as self-mutilation and suicide, but only the latter are contrary to human nature. However elusive the term human nature may become when applied to what is noblest and most selfless, its usefulness in inhibiting the descent into what is morally degrading and culturally ignominious remains, and we flout it at our peril.

As for methodology, the paper will bring three forms of thought into conversation, forms of thought which its author regards as the most trustworthy, each being both tenaciously realistic and – because of that tenacity – resistant to the currents of intellectual and moral fashion which otherwise cloud the examination of fundamental human questions. The three sources of lucidity that will be brought into dialogue are: Girardian anthropology, biblical exegesis (albeit of a rather old-fashion variety) and Roman Catholic moral theology. By acknowledging at the outset my intention to interweave these epistemological and moral resources I may at least avoid being thought surreptitious, aware as I am that other, even less charitable thoughts, may arise.

Both biologically and spiritually, humanity depends on the depth and mystery of two indispensable relationships: the nuptial relationship between a man and a woman and the maternal relationship between a mother and her child. If any human relationships deserve to be

called “the cradle of civilization,” it is surely these. While both of these relationships are rooted in mammalian nature and subserved by instinct, both regularly become occasions for the noblest and most ennobling acts of non-instinctual self-sacrifice. In pondering the transition from pre-human to human existence, it is, I will argue, precisely evidence of such non-instinctual acts of self-sacrifice which provide the single most reliable indicator that hominization has occurred – that the threshold between the animal and the human realm has been crossed, that nature has at last been touched by a gust of grace.

(To these two relationships should be added the relationship between father and child, especially in light of the tragedy of fatherlessness in contemporary society. This paper will not address that issue directly. So intricately interwoven is the moral fabric of cultural life, however, that male irresponsibility toward women and children is encouraged and exacerbated by the deterioration of the two relationships this paper does address. With the cultural acceptance of abortion, for instance, and as it comes to function as just another contraceptive procedure, male irresponsibility is more easily rationalized. Since the courts have decided that a father has no legal right to interfere with the mother’s decision to abort the child – in other words, that the life or death of his child is “none of his business” – the law has encouraged the father to regard his child as none of his business, whether the child is aborted or brought to term. Since, in either case, it is “her decision” (her “choice”), when it is convenient, the father may simply accede to his irrelevance and ignore his responsibilities. Thus the betrayal of one of culture’s two essential relationships becomes the occasion for the betrayal of the other.)

Nothing of value in culture can endure if these two relationships are weakened, cheapened, relativized or betrayed. A culture which cannot privilege these relationships, accord them special protections, and insist on a greater degree of personal responsibility with regard to them, is socially reckless, morally adrift, and spiritually exhausted. This paper is an attempt to understand these two relationships both anthropologically and spiritually, and to call attention to the deeply troubling ways in which they are being betrayed in contemporary Western culture.

– SYNOPSIS –

Part 1: “Male and female he made them.” (Genesis 1:27)

A nuptial account of pre-cultural hominization: “This, at last, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23).

Part 2: “All who hate me love death.” (Proverbs 8:36)

A non-Gnostic and post-feminist reading of the biblical theme of Feminine Wisdom, a mimetic, maternal, and Marian interpretation, but one consistent with the more familiar pneumatological interpretation when the latter is understood in Girardian terms.

Part 3: “Grace perfects nature according to the manner of the nature.”

A Reflection on this bedrock of Thomistic anthropology and some thoughts on its implications, especially in light of the anthropological suggestions made in the previous two parts of the paper.