

8. Humans: Are We Angels or Beasts?

We have moved logically from God and then to angels. Now we turn our attention to the oddest creatures of all: humans. A human is less than an angel and greater than a beast. The human has an immaterial soul that can think and abstract forms, which are known to the angels. Our soul is immortal and will live forever—just as angels and demons will live on forever.

Yet, humans also have hair, eyes, teeth, and stomachs like a cow, dog, or a mouse. We eat food and defecate just like all the other animals. If we do not wash, we stink. Things can go terribly wrong with our bodies. Our bodies can be broken. Our skin can be slashed. Our organs can be infected by disease. We die just like the frog and the ant. In this regard, we are not like angels at all. We are rather like the beasts.

So the human person straddles both the spiritual world and the physical world. In his soul, he resembles an angel. In his body, he resembles a beast. He is stretched out between heaven and earth. If we consider the great hierarchy of being with God at the top, followed by angels, then humans come next by virtue of their intellect. The ancient philosophers denoted humans as "rational animals." We are physical animals but distinct in that we are rational intellects.

Do Animals Have Souls? We say that other animals think, and this is somewhat true. Nevertheless, animals (dolphins, gorillas, elephants, dogs, etc) do not engage in abstract intellection. They may be able to identify a triangle sign, but they cannot abstract the idea of triangle like a human can. For this reason, only humans are rational.

Humans can make long complicated arguments based on abstract ideas. We can use abstract ideas (for example, triangles) and employ them to make strong bridges and buildings. Because we have intellects, humans are able to advance over time. Anyone who tells you that dolphins or gorillas are just as rational as humans probably does not understand what the word "rational" means. Dolphins and gorillas have emotions to be sure, but they cannot engage in abstraction.

A human can solve a long geometric problem because he is able to abstract the concepts and put them back together. This complicated procedure cannot be performed by any other animal. The reason for this is only humans have intellectual souls.

The Hierarchy of Your Soul: What is a soul? The Greeks used the word psyche for soul, and the Romans called it the anima. Aristotle also referred to the "soul" as the life-principle of any living thing. For him, plants have "nutritive souls," animals have "sensitive souls," and humans have "rational souls."

Plants	Nutritive soul	Life principle that enables an organism to nourish itself and reproduce.
Animals	Sensitive soul	Life principle that enables an organism to sense and move around.
Humans	Rational soul	Life principle that enables an organism to think, contemplate, and live in society.

Now the soul of the human is hierarchical. The highest power in the soul is the intellect. Next there is the will. Below the will are the passions. The passions fall into two categories: the concupiscible appetite and the irascible appetite. These passions relate to the human body. Angels also have an intellect and will, but they do not have the passions. To understand passions, think in terms of appetites, emotions, or bodily instincts.

The concupiscible passions relate to personal survival (desires for food, drink, and sleep) and the survival of the human species (desire for sexual intercourse). The irascible passions also relate to personal survival when it comes to situations that require "fight or flight." These passions involve anger and fear. If you suddenly come across a wolf, you must either fight it or run away. So then, the hierarchy of the human soul looks like this:

Intellect
Will
Passions

The Human Soul as a Horse-Drawn Chariot: Plato gave us a good image for this arrangement. He compared the soul to a horse-drawn chariot. The man in the chariot is the intellect. The chariot is pulled by two winged horses - one horse is the concupiscible appetite and the other horse is the irascible appetite. The will is the reins in the hand of the charioteer. If the charioteer uses the reins correctly, he can steer the horses to wherever he desires. If he lets go of the reins (lets go of his will), then the horses will go crazy and drag his chariot all over the place.

Our intellect, like a trained charioteer, is supposed to govern our passions through the reign of the will. If we let go of our will, we lose control and our passions take over. We become obsessed with sex, food, money, power, anger, revenge, or fear.

The horses run wild and chariot gets dragged behind. However, if the intellect holds a firm grip on the reins of the will and controls and tames the horses of passion, he can win races and travel to all lands. He becomes the master of his destiny.

Thomas Aquinas has a similar idea with regard to the human soul. Since we are animal-like, we experience the passions for pleasure (food and sex) and also the passions of fear and anger. Unlike animals, we can say "no" to our passions, since we possess rational souls. A dog might start mating with a strange dog, but humans can temper their libidos - even completely if they desire. Incidentally, Thomas Aquinas and other medievals pointed to the vocation of celibacy as ultimate proof that man can conquer his passions perfectly. Similarly, a mother bear may kill a hiker who comes between her and her cub. Yet, a human mother is able to abstract and reason as to whether killing someone is the appropriate act with regard to an unsuspecting hiker.

Why You Keep Eating Ice Cream: As you sit down with a spoon and a frozen pint of ice cream, you take a few bites. Soon you are half way through the pint and you think to yourself, "This is ridiculous. I need to stop eating this." Yet there is this sense of resistance within you. You know that you do not need that many empty calories, but you keep digging into that pint of Cherry Garcia with its creamy texture, delicious cherries, and fudge flakes.

The same thing happens with chips and salsa at a Mexican restaurant. You're hungry so you start with a few chips. Then you order your presidente enchilada dinner. Then you keep eating chips and salsa. Soon you think, "Man, I'm getting full. I should stop eating chips so that I can eat my meal." But you keep eating chips. Why?

Finally, your enchilada dinner arrives. The server says, "Be careful, the plate is hot. Don't touch it." And what do you do? You touch the plate and burn your finger. Why are you engaging in illogical behavior? The answer is your passions are out of control.

Getting to Know Your 11 Passions: Thomas explains there are eleven passions of the human soul - six passions in the concupiscible appetite and five passions in the irascible appetite. The concupiscible passions regard the absolute good. The irascible passions regard the restricted good - that which is difficult. Thus, the concupiscible precedes the irascible. To put it another way, if the concupiscible and the irascible were in a truck, the concupiscible would drive and the irascible

would ride shotgun. Now the passions exist in pairs as contraries or opposites.

Concupiscible passions with opposites: love and hatred desire and aversion joy and sadness

Irascible passions with opposites: hope and despair fear and daring anger, which has no opposite passion

Now how do the concupiscible passions operate? The movements of the human appetite are forces of attraction. The concupiscible passions relate to a good or evil considered absolutely.

Any time you feel the desire to eat a pint of Cherry Garcia ice cream, commit adultery, avoid confessing your sins, or hate your boss, your concupiscible passions are stirring. If you want to fight someone at a bar or give the bird to someone who cut you off, then you are experiencing your irascible passions. The passions are not evil in themselves, though. Let's take a look at how they operate correctly.

How the Passions Should Work: So when a good presents itself, there is love but when evil presents itself, there is hatred. This forms our first pair: love and hatred. Next, if the good is not yet able to be possessed, the appetite moves to the attainment of that good. This is the passion of desire. If it is evil, then the passion is its contrary, aversion. This forms our second pair: desire and aversion. Last of all, when the good is finally attained, the appetite rests and this is called joy. The contrary is sadness. Consequently the last concupiscible pair is joy and sadness.

Next, we examine the five irascible passions, which regard that which is difficult or arduous. With regard to a good not attained we have hope. The contrary is despair. This forms the first pair. Next, when evil is approaching we experience either fear of the evil or the contrary passion of daring. This forms the second irascible pair: fear and daring. We would expect one last "passion pair" to conform to the pattern, but here Thomas Aquinas breaks the outline and lists anger as the fifth and last irascible passion without an opposite. Why?

The last set of irascible passions is with respect of a good obtained. Now when a good is obtained, there is no irascible passion because there is nothing arduous in being at rest. However, when the opposite in the case, that is, when an evil is already present, this does give rise to the passion of anger. So this is why anger is not paired with an opposite.

Are Passions Good or Bad? The ancient Stoics believed the passions were evil. They observed the human person is a rational creature and whenever things go wrong in the moral life, the passions are involved. So the Stoics looked to the passions as the evil within the human soul. Good living, taught the Stoics, consisted in denying the passions. Evil living consisted in giving the passion free reign.

Those who followed Aristotle taught the passions could be good when subjected to right reasons. Thomas Aquinas disagrees with the Stoics and agrees with the Aristotelians because Thomas understands a "moral act" as entailing the intellect and the will. Accordingly, the passions considered by themselves are not good or evil. However, if the passions are considered as subject to the intellect and will, they can be judged and morally good or evil.

Think about the passions with regard to children. According to Thomas Aquinas, children are ruled by their passions until they attain to the age of reason. At the age of reason, the child's intellect and will are developed enough to function. Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas say that this occurs in the human soul around seven years of age.

Children and Passions: Children desire and have aversions to all manner of irrational things. They have desire for a special blanket. Without the blanket, they are fearful. They are fearful of things for no reason. They are often irrationally daring - children at play do not consider they can get hurt or die. Adults, who are fully rational, guide and correct the children. Moreover, we do not think it is "morally wrong" for a child to have a desire for candy and an aversion to broccoli. A small boy may have a desire to play with a burning candle. Since the little boy does not yet have a developed intellect and will, he does not think: "Fire can be very painful and destructive. If I play carelessly with this burning candle, I might burn myself or burn down this house. This will endanger people and so it is a morally evil act. I won't do it." No, the child is drawn by its brilliance and will play with fire unless a rational adult prohibits him. The passions are at play within little humans whether or not the intellect and will are developed.

People are easily confused about the passions. Here's why. Today, everyone assumes "being passionate" is always a good thing; however, it can also be very bad. The passions can be good if they are submitted to reason, and God designed them to be that way. Yet when the passions overcome the intellect and will, bad things happen.

Boxing with Your Passions: Take boxing as an example. Boxing is a physical sport that requires intellectual discipline in a number of ways. First, the mind needs to pace the body and decide where and exactly when to punch the opponent. The intellect must observe timing, fatigue, patterns, and openings. The intellect communicates actions through the will. Sometimes, the passion of anger appears in a boxer. He is right to be passionate as he boxes. If, however, the intellect of the boxer becomes clouded with anger, his intellect will lose control. He may also acquire too much aversion to pain. He might begin to make foolish punches and open himself up to loss. We call this "losing your cool" and it simply refers to the moment in which the passion of anger overcomes the human intellect.

Playing Golf with Your Passions: Playing golf is another example. The professional golfer measures distance, judges the wind patterns, inspects the turf, and calculates the lie of the green. His mind is constantly engaged so his will can properly execute each swing and putt. Now imagine the professional golfer is being stalked by an obsessed fan. The fan writes him and says he is going to shoot him on the eighteenth green during the next televised tournament. The professional golfer doesn't take it seriously, but as he plays, he begins to worry about getting to the eighteenth hole. He becomes fearful. His fear begins to overtake his intellect and will. He starts to slice the ball and miss easy putts. The passion of fear takes over. In this case, his fear is understandable. However, the passions do not always accurately conform to reality.

Someone can be passionate about food in a good way. However, if someone's desire for food becomes irrational - that is - he begins to eat more than his body needs, bad things happen. Gluttony. Heartburn. Lack of sleep. Weight gain. Obesity. Most people who eat too much know eating so many calories is not healthy, yet their passions overrun their intellects whenever the dessert cart rolls up to the table.

In order to resist that dessert cart, one has to begin patterns of behavior. The ethical theory of Thomas Aquinas is based on these patterns of behavior. Good patterns are called virtues. Bad patterns are called vice. Thomas Aquinas, then, proposes for us an ethics of virtue.