

HUMAN NATURE AND THE FALL

Appendix 1, Revised, from *Redemption By Jesus*
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The Nature Of Things

Things have natures. We have absorbed this fact from conversation, even if we have never studied the topic. We understand that even rocks have natures, in the sense that they have physical properties that distinguish them from other things and other kinds of rocks. Most often, though, when we hear the mention of something's nature, the comment refers to a living thing and to something deeper than — *though not unrelated to* — its physical properties. The nature of a living thing, we have learned, is somehow connected to its typical behavior. For this reason, we have a particular interest in human nature. However, in order to discuss *human nature* we must define what we mean by the phrase.

The Nature Of Human Beings

What Do We Mean By Human Nature?

To what do we refer when we speak of *human nature*? In everyday speech, and even in theological writings, we use *human nature* to refer to a variety of vague notions. However, when we speak with philosophical precision, *human nature* refers to **the whole complex of species-specific potentialities¹ with which a human being is born.²** We speak of potentialities, because human nature does not consist of the actualization of

¹ As opposed to the potentialities of a horse or a housefly. Cf. Adler, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*, ch. 8, part 3.

² Deriving from Latin, *natura*, “nature,” and in turn from *natus*, “born.”

those potentialities. For example, all human beings have the potentiality of grammatical speech, but if a member of our species is born with defective vocal chords, we do not reject him as non-human. We see him as having a human nature, like the rest of our race; we see him as fully human, only handicapped. Likewise, a human fetus in its mother's womb has a human nature, even though only a fraction of its human potentialities have already been actualized (including the potentialities of an effective circulatory system and a responsive nervous system). Furthermore, if we hold to the biblical teaching of creation (contra Darwinian evolution), we can infer that the God-given natures of living creatures are immutable, and that therefore, when we speak of *human nature*, we refer to something that is not susceptible to change — at least under normal circumstances.

We can further clarify our definition of *human nature* by distinguishing between *nature* and *character*.³ ***Character is a person's psychological and moral disposition, and unlike nature, character is mutable.*** In other words, two dogs, obviously with the same canine *nature*, may have very different *characters*, one friendly and gentle, the other mean and aggressive. The friendly dog can have his character changed by mistreatment, and the mean dog can likewise be gentled by love and patience; these changes would not alter the fundamental canine nature of both. Similarly, the Bible recognizes individuals as having differing characters, and calls for change in the characters of those who are manifestly foolish or sinful. Significantly, Scripture calls for radical change in the lives of sinners *without hinting that they should become something other than human, or that they should recover a lost humanity*.⁴

Human Nature And Our Propensity For Sin

With these definitions and distinctions in hand, we can proceed with our investigation into *human nature*. We are not interested, though, in merely human speculations on the subject. As Christians, we're interested in what the Bible has to say about human nature. Furthermore, while we're interested in the general idea of human nature, we are particularly interested in whether or not human nature is *sinful*. We know that human nature as created by God was good (Gen 1.31), but the universal sinfulness of human

³ We sometimes use *personality* as a near synonym for *character*.

⁴ The Bible does not speak as we do when we decry the "inhumanity" of individuals or groups, though it does speak of certain behaviors as unnatural, that is, "against nature" (Rom 1.26).

beings (except for Jesus) suggest that human nature, or something having to do with it, has changed. This troubling thought begs the following questions:

1. Since only the Creator designs and integrates natures into living creatures, did God, after the fall, give man a different nature?
2. If God did *not* install a different nature in man, was man's nature, after the fall, somehow altered by sin or by the devil and changed into a sinful nature?⁵
3. If human nature was neither changed by God, nor corrupted by some other power, how can we account for man retaining his good nature (given at creation) while at the same time being bent toward sin?

Before we can respond biblically to these questions, we must briefly survey the biblical terms relevant to our topic.

The Relevant Biblical Terms

The Bible is our supreme source for understanding human nature. Nevertheless, tracing the Bible's teaching on this subject is challenging for reasons including: (1) the lack of any doctrinal passage that explicitly defines *human nature* and identifies its qualities; (2) the polyvalence of words (that is, the use of the same word to mean different things), and (3) the occasional lack of distinction between *nature* and *character*. Therefore, with regard to Bible words that might refer to "nature," we must interpret them (as with all biblical terms) by their usage in the specific context in which they appear.

γένος

We recognize our English word *genus* in this Greek term, which translates the OT Hebrew word *kind* (קָנִי). In the OT, we could translate this word as *species*, and in the food laws it is used taxonomically, without reference to *nature* as such. It has a similar usage in Matthew 13.47 that refers to "fish of every kind." The NT also uses this term to speak of family descent. Related to this nuance it can refer to *ethnicity* or to a nation of people (γένος is unhappily translated *race* in Mark 7.26, Acts 7.19 and 1Peter 2.9 by the NAU). With reference to a demon in Mark 9.29, it seems to refer to *character*, in differentiating one *kind* of evil spirit from another.

⁵ Setting aside Darwinian theory, and assuming that God created man as *Homo sapiens* from the beginning, did man after the fall somehow become *Homo peccator*, something other than human?

εἰκών

This word, familiar to us as the English word *icon*, means *image* or *likeness*, and by extension can refer to *an idol* (Dan 3.1; Rev 13.15). The term εἰκών takes us back to Genesis 1.26-27 and is used strategically in Luke 20.24-25, Romans 8.29 and other New Testament passages to teach about man being created — and in Christ *recreated* — in the image or likeness of God. For our present topic, we recognize that *image* is something distinct from *nature*, though it can refer to aspects of both nature and character. When we speak of two acquaintances, and say that one is the *image* (or the “spitting image”) of the other, we do not mean that they share the same *nature* (in a technical sense), because that is obvious. Instead, we mean that the two look and/or act very much alike.

On the other hand, Colossians 1.15 tells us that the Son of God is “the image of the invisible God,” and in this case it was *not* always obvious that the incarnate Son and the invisible God shared the same essential nature. Yet, the fact that they do is indicated by the following verses, Colossians 1.16-17. Therefore, we might think that Paul here used “image” to mean *nature*. However, the point the apostle made with the word *image* in this passage is that in Jesus Christ we can *see* the divine character and at least some aspects of the divine nature. As the NLT puts it, “Christ is the **visible** image of the **invisible** God.”⁶

We must be clear: the word *image* does not express the idea of *the whole essential nature*. After all, images on coins at best consist only of a likeness of a person’s head, and convey almost nothing of the person’s character or nature. Similarly, when God created man *in His own image*, He did not duplicate the whole of His *divine nature* in man. Nevertheless, the fact that God created man in His own image, distinctively from all the other living creatures, implies that God created man with *some* potentialities that also exist in the deity. In other words, God gave man some capacity for experiencing His communicable attributes such as rationality, relationality, and creativity, along with a sense of morality and justice, and an administrative aptitude. These potentialities do represent components of human nature.

⁶ Emphasis added.

θεότης, θειότης, And θεῖον

These terms refer to the state, nature or character of deity. Thus, the LXX uses *théōn*, the adjective, in reference to the *divine* law, *divine* will, *divine* providence, etc. In Colossians 2.9, Paul used the noun, *theótēs*, to speak of “the fullness of *Deity*,”⁷ and in this instance it can be understood as “God’s nature” (CSB and NIV). Likewise, in Romans 1.20, the noun can refer to the “divine nature” (NAU and others), or the “Godhead” (KJV), or “deity” (RSV). Once more, in Acts 17.29, Paul used the noun to affirm that the “Divine Nature” (NAU), or the “divine being” (ESV), or the “deity” (NRSV), does not consist of “gold or silver or stone” like the idol images formed by people.

καρδία

We recognize this Greek term as underlying our English *cardiac*, and in Scripture it can refer to the physical organ, *the heart* (as in the LXX of 1Sa 25.37). However, normally in the Bible *heart* refers to a person’s center of consciousness, the seat of the thoughts, will and emotions. We can often translate *καρδία* with the English word *mind* if we think of mind as involving not only thoughts and emotions, but also motives, desires and conscience. The human *καρδία* or *heart*, in its common biblical sense, can be “hardened” or “softened,” worsened or improved. Evil thoughts and actions emerge *from it*, such that God called apostate Israel to acquire a new *καρδία* (in Heb כִּלְיָהוּ, Eze 18.31; 36.26). However, ideas and fears can also be put *into it*, and it is with the *καρδία* that a person believes the gospel (Rom 10.9-10).

μορφή And σχῆμα

These terms refer to the form or appearance of something (see Job 4.16 and Isa 44.13 in the LXX; see 1Co 7.31 and Phil 2.7 in the NT). They may hint at underlying character or nature, but strictly speaking, they refer to *form*, whether physical or metaphysical. The NIV 1984 committee was hasty in translating *μορφή* with *very nature* in Philippians 2.6. They could not translate the same term consistently in the next verse, and had to add a footnote: “or *in the form of*.” While we agree that the pre-incarnate Christ Jesus *did exist* in “the very nature of God,” the NIV risked implying that after His incarnation Christ

⁷ So the NASB95 and other versions.

Jesus *did not exist* in the very nature of God.⁸ Our standard versions do better by consistently translating this term as *form* in both Philippians 2.6 and 2.7. The preincarnate Son existed in the *invisible form* of God, and in His incarnation took upon Himself the *visible form* of human likeness.

μορφώω And σύμμορφος

The verb *μορφώω*, cognate of the preceding noun *μορφή*, expresses the idea of *forming* something. In our Bible this word only appears in Gal 4.19, where Paul speaks of Christ “being formed” in the Galatian believers. Since aspects of Christ’s divine nature, like omnipotence and omniscience, cannot be infused into finite creatures, Paul’s apparent meaning in this passage is that he labored to see the moral-spiritual *character* of Jesus formed in the believers. This is consistent with Paul’s teaching that God is conforming us to the image (*εἰκῶν*) of His son, that is, to the *character* of Jesus. The verb itself, though, like the related adjective *σύμμορφος*, has nothing to do with the idea of *essential nature* nor even with *character*. The words only refer to something being *formed* or *conformed*.

ὁμοιοπαθής

In this compound Greek term, we see the basis for our words having to do with homeopathy. In its two biblical occurrences (Act 14.15; Jam 5.17), it is well translated in the KJV (1900) with the phrase, “like passions.” Newer translations, however, including the NKJV, tend to translate with *like nature* or *a nature like ours*. This latter translation seems warranted in Acts 14.15, which recounts how the apostles insisted to a crowd of idolators that they, Barnabas and Paul, were “merely human beings” (NLT) and not gods. However, it seems superfluous in James 5.17 to say, “Elijah was a man with *a nature like ours*.” Instead, emphasizing his like aptitude for fear and uncertainty seems more meaningful. In 4Maccabees 12.13, the term is used to speak of men of like *feelings*, and in Wisdom 7.3 to speak of “the *kindred earth*” upon which all little children stumble and fall. It seems best to retain the KJV rendering of this term in its biblical instances, and since it speaks only of having like passions, it does not advance our understanding of the Bible’s view of human nature.

⁸ The NLT takes a similar risk.

σάρξ And σαρκικός

This word, together with its Hebrew counterparts, has a vast semantic field in Scripture. In its strict literal sense, it denotes the soft tissues of animals and humans, that is, *flesh*. By extension, however, it can refer to the *physical body*, *humanity*, or to *all living creatures*. It can also refer to the physical, weak, and limited aspects of human personality. The apostle Paul used *sarx* extensively to refer to **the driving or guiding principle (of the mind or person) that is in opposition to the spirit**. In this usage *sarx* relates entirely to earthly and physical impulses, and so as a driving force it cannot help but be selfish in its orientation, at least if left to itself. According to Paul, there is *nothing good* in the *sarx* as a driving force for the human personality (Romans 7.18). Let us be clear, though: for Paul, *sarx* did not denote *human nature* but the driving force *behind human nature* in its current state.

σπέρμα

Familiar to us in our English word *sperm*, this word in Scripture always speaks of *seed*, whether of plant or animal, and by extension often means *child* or *descendant*. For our present topic, this word only concerns us as it appears in 1John 3.9:

No one who is born of God practices sin, because His **seed** abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.⁹

Since the verse affirms that it is *God's* seed that is within the born-again believer, we know that we are not speaking of seed in its fundamental and literal sense. The RSV translates with, "God's nature abides in him," and the NIV Reader's Version of 1998 says, "God's very nature remains in them." Likewise, the TEV (*The Good News Translation*) says, "God's very nature is in them." Since the word in question never means *nature* elsewhere in Scripture, this interpretation is questionable. It's more likely that John meant that God's prophetic Seed, that is, Jesus Christ in the person of His Holy Spirit (Joh 6.46; 14.17; 15.4-5; 1Jo 2.27; 3.24; 4.12-13,15-16) remains in the person. If *sperma* in 1John 3.9 refers to Christ, then we *can* say that "God's very nature" is in the believer but only in the sense that God Himself is abiding and working in the believer. We certainly cannot interpret this verse as implying divination of the believer or the infusion of any of God's

⁹ Emphasis added.

incommunicable attributes into the nature of the believer. The word *sperma* does not mean *nature* and cannot convey the theological idea of *infusing divine nature* into believers.

ὑπόστασις

Behind our English word, *hypostasis*, this noun has meanings as diverse as *a project* and *a ground for hope*. Relating to our present topic, however, we find it in Hebrews 1.3 referring to God's *essential nature* as truly appearing in Jesus Christ.¹⁰

φύσις, φυσικός And φυσικῶς

The noun φύσις and its cognate adjective and adverb are important for this investigation but they are quite polyvalent. They can express the diverse ideas of:

- *Species* (Jam 3.7)
- *Native*, i.e., *natural according to species* (Rom 11.19-24)
- *Instinct* (Rom 2.14; 2Pe 2.12; Jude 1.10)
- *Cultural norm* (1Co 11.14)
- *Ethnic character* or *cultural-moral character* (Gal 2.15; Eph 2.3; sadly φύσις in Eph 2.3 is translated *nature* in all our standard versions¹¹)
- *Divine character* (2Pe 1.4)
- *Essential nature* (Gal 4.8; in this instance Paul uses φύσις to deny that pagan idols have the essential nature of deity)
- *Natural* (in contrast to *perverted*, Rom 1.26-27)

We see that these terms may relate to our interest in *essential nature* but they must be carefully interpreted according to context.

¹⁰ Cf. Psa 8.8.48(47) in the LXX.

¹¹ I would translate Eph 2.3 as follows: "Among whom we ourselves all formerly conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, continually doing the desires of the flesh and of *our own* reasonings, and we were by character *deserving* of wrath, even like the rest." This verse employs the familiar idiom, *son of* or *children of*, used to express character or merited destiny. It's an idiom Paul used repeatedly in Ephesians. The "children of wrath" of Eph 2.3 are roughly equivalent to the "sons of disobedience" in Eph 2.2 who are also deserving of wrath according to Eph 5.6 (cf. Col 3.6). All of these verses in their contexts are about outwardly manifest — and sometimes demonically motivated — *evil character* rather than about essential nature.

Ψυχικός

Sharing the same root as our English *psychological* and *psychic* terms, this word has to do with the life force or soul (Greek, ψυχή). The apostle Paul used it to contrast the purely *natural* with the *spiritual*, whether speaking of mind or body (1Co 2.14; 15.44,46), and James used it to contrast heavenly wisdom with the *natural* and *demonic* wisdom of selfish people (Jam 3.14-17). Jude (1.19) used this word to speak of wicked people and their *worldly-mindedness* (NASB) or *sensuality* (KJV) or habit of following their *natural instincts* (NLT, NIV). This word, then, can refer to any aspect of humanity considered as earthly apart from the influence of the divine Spirit. In this capacity, it speaks of the human condition (of body and mind) apart from God, and its usage tells us implicitly that human nature apart from God is in deep trouble, but it does not refer explicitly to *human nature* as such.

What Do We Learn From These Terms?

From a perusal of these biblical terms at least loosely connected with the idea of a living entity's *nature*, we find that:

1. Scripture rarely speaks of something's *nature* in the modern sense of species-specific *essential nature*. However, it does so a few times using the terms ὑπόστασις, φύσις, and θεότης or θειότης but only with regard to *divine nature*. Regarding *human nature*, Scripture says very little directly, but implies something vitally important by affirming that man is created in the image (εἰκὼν) of God.
2. The biblical authors were much more interested in *character*, touching upon it with the terms εἰκὼν, γένος, μορφή with its cognates, and φύσις. As stated above, the Bible recognizes individuals as having differing characters, and calls for change in the characters of those who are manifestly foolish and sinful.
3. The prophets and apostles were also vitally interested in the *heart* (i.e., the person's center of consciousness). They were also highly concerned with the driving principles that direct the heart, which in turn directs a person's character. The two great driving forces in this regard are the σάρξ on the one hand, and the *Spirit* (possibly equivalent to "God's seed," 1John 3.9) on the other.

The biblical evidence, then, indicates that it is man's *character* that has been corrupted since the fall, rather than his *essential nature*. In saying this, we do not deny that phenomenologically, that is, from the perspective of our own observations of humanity, the corruption of man's *character* is tantamount to the corruption of his *nature*. We also recognize from the biblical evidence that man's *character* has been universally and thoroughly corrupted ultimately because of some disabling "disconnect" of the Spirit's governing influence over human *nature*.

Nevertheless, the biblical distinction between the crippling of man's *nature* and the corruption of his *character* has important implications. The first of these is that **human nature still bears the divine image**, as implied in Genesis 9.6,¹² and as pointedly affirmed by Jesus in His "render unto Caesar" saying (Luk 20.24-25). Thus, human nature retains the qualities of the divine image mentioned above:

- rationality,
- volition,
- relationality,
- creativity,
- sense of morality and justice,
- administrative aptitude.

The moral sense expresses itself in the conscience and an instinctive impulse to keep God's laws (Romans 2.14). The moral sense working with rationality and relationality contributes to humanity's inescapable religious impulse and need to worship, such that Paul can affirm that human nature is still capable of knowing and perceiving enough about God so as to be without excuse for failing to honor and give thanks to Him (Romans 1.19-21).

Second, so far as we can tell from Scripture, **human nature has remained stable, and thus intrinsically good in its design and intended purpose**. It's external governance has changed, but this does not warrant characterizing human nature as a "sinful nature."

¹² The perfect verb, *has made*, in Genesis 9.6 expresses a settled reality (NIV84, NIV, NIV), as opposed to simply a past event.

Answering The First Two Questions

These implicit truths answer the first two of our opening questions:

1. **Did God, after the fall, give man a different nature?** No. Since there is no explicit biblical evidence that man received a different nature after the fall, and implicit scriptural evidence to the contrary (including the fact that man retains the divine image), along with positive evidence that the sin problem is more about man's *character* than about his *nature*, we can set aside the problematic idea of God replacing man's original *nature*.
2. **Was human nature changed into a sinful nature?** No. The biblical evidence that the sin problem is in man's *character* rather than in his *nature*, implies that human nature itself was not altered by anyone or anything.¹³

At the same time, it is clear that since the fall, and apart from redemption, human nature is severely crippled in actualizing its *good* potentialities. Human beings constantly violate their consciences and fail to keep God's laws. There is only One Who actualizes *all* of His good potentialities (Mat 19.17), and He is not a fallen person. In contrast to that One, everything that fallen human beings "think or imagine is bent toward evil from childhood" (Gen 8.21, NLT). So, we must still answer the third of our opening questions:

3. If human nature was neither changed by God, nor corrupted by some other power, how can we account for man retaining a good nature (given at creation) while at the same time being bent toward sin?

The Enslavement of Human Nature

Scripture describes the problem in terms of enslavement, and relates the spiritual bondage to being held captive or prisoner, and being oppressed. Jesus explicitly identified the problem of enslavement in John 8.34:

Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.

¹³ Contra Augustine who wrote that by the first two people "so great a sin was committed that by it the human nature was altered for the worse, and was transmitted also to their posterity, liable to sin and subject to death." A little further on, he creatively attempted to explain why "other sins do not alter human nature" (*The City of God*, Book 14, chapters 1 and 12).

Notice that in this saying, Jesus did not specify some *part* of the sinning person as enslaved, but implied that the whole person, including his nature, was in bondage. If, however, man's sinful *character* is attributable to the enslavement of the whole person (including their nature), we must ask, "to whom?" or "to what?" are fallen people enslaved?¹⁴

Enslavement To Sin Itself?

The wording of John 8.34 implies that the sinner is enslaved to sin itself. Genesis 4.5-7 seems to point in the same direction: "... sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you but you must rule over it."¹⁵ The apostle Paul also spoke of enslavement to, and mastery by, sin (Rom 6.6-7,12-14,16-22). However, though Scripture has occasionally personified sin, as though it were a living entity, we find no indication that sin exists independently of people and evil spirits, nor do we find any suggestion that human accountability will be lessened on the basis that sin "made me do it." Sin is either an abstract idea without any discrete existence, or it is the state or act of a personal being. Phenomenologically, we have all *felt* enslaved by our sins, but there must be something concrete behind the sinful drives and impulses that compel us.

Enslavement To Satan?

Jesus pointed to the devil as the one whose desires sinners are compelled to pursue (Joh 8.44). The idea that human nature is enslaved to Satan makes sense in light of our first parents having turned from allegiance to the Creator, and thereby having given their allegiance to the Serpent. This reality of human enslavement to the devil is mentioned by Paul (2Ti 2.26), and is implicit in passages like 1John 3.8, "the one who practices sin is of the devil," and 1John 5.19, "...the whole world lies under the power of the evil one."¹⁶ It is also consistent with passages that speak of Satan as the ruler or god of this world (Joh

¹⁴ In the phrase "slave of sin," the genitive, *of sin* is probably a genitive of relationship, expressing only that the sinner is a slave in relationship to sin. However, it could be interpreted as a genitive of product, *a slave producing sin*, or a genitive of producer, *a slave made so by sin*. The point is that "slave of sin" does not tell us definitely who the slave's master is.

¹⁵ Notice, "you must rule over it"; you must act consistent with your God-given nature to rule.

¹⁶ NRSV.

12.31; 14.30; 2Co 4.4) and as the one “working in the sons of disobedience” (Eph 2.2), and as the one from whose dominion people must turn (Acts 26.18; cf. Col 1.13).

Still, we suspect that for Satan to enslave us and rule over our actions, he must have some handle by which to manipulate us. Scripture gives no hint that we will escape accountability because “the devil made us do it.” Instead, it points us to that driving principle that the apostle Paul referred to as “the flesh” (*sarx*, mentioned above).

Enslavement To The Flesh

The term *flesh* (σάρξ), when used in reference to humanity in its fundamental and general sense, only points to the physicality or frailness of human persons (e.g., in Mat 26.41; Luk 24.39). However, even the general usage of the term hints at a distinction between *flesh* and *spirit* (Joh 3.6), and at the problem that occurs when *flesh* rules the inner person (Joh 8.15; Rom 6.19). Paul, addressed the distinction and the problem directly, describing unbelievers as in *a state* of fleshliness (literally, “in the flesh”) which involves sinful passions aroused in connection with bodily organs (Rom 7.5). If we crystalize what Paul means by this usage of *flesh* (σάρξ), it appears that the *flesh* in this sense is the whole complex of human drives and hungers *ungoverned by God’s spirit* (Gal 5.16). The drives and hungers are not intrinsically evil, but good; they were integrated into human nature to enable human thriving in the physical environment of this world. However, these good drives and hungers, unleashed and ungoverned by the Spirit, have no limiting switch, or one that is highly unreliable. For example, everyone who has tried to lose weight knows that the human digestive system has a built-in limiting system that tells us when enough food has been consumed and the mouth should stop eating, but we also know that the limiting switch in our mind is defective. We find that it requires us to bring all manner of psychological and even pharmaceutical devices to bear in the attempt to keep food consumption under some semblance of control. If our hunger for food and for other diverse pleasures (including our hunger for human intimacy), are not somehow brought under control, they corrupt the whole human character (Gal 5.17, 19-21; Eph 2.3; 2Pe 2.10). Fallen persons, without the Spirit of God, can indeed be characterized as enslaved by the “flesh” (2Pe 2.18-19).

Answering The Final Question

So, we can now answer the third of our opening questions:

3. How can human nature be good when humanity is bent toward sin?

Since the fall, human beings are bent toward sin because human nature has been enslaved by Satan and a fleshly mind, both hostile toward God (Rom 8.7; cf. Luk 8.12; Act 13.9-10; Eph 6.11-12; 1Th 2.18; 2Ti 2.26; Rev 12.9). Satan takes advantage of the drives and impulses that are built into human nature but left ungoverned by the Spirit. Though enslaved to all kinds of selfish and devilish impulses that pervert the mind and will, human nature remains intrinsically good in its divine design and purpose, and the image of God remains stamped upon it. This amalgam of a good nature and anti-God masters, explains why, on the one hand, all people sin and fall short of God's glory (Rom 3.23), but, on the other hand, human nobility still occasionally shines through, even if feeble and tarnished. Enslaved human nature produces Hitlers and humanitarians, and all manner of sinners in between. Nevertheless, for all those whose nature is in bondage, even their good works are tainted by selfish motives and cannot expiate their sins before a holy God. Human nature is good; it's the enslavement of that nature that explains humanity's bent toward sin and the universal corruption of human character.¹⁷

Implications And Applications

Jesus Shared Our Nature

Affirming the abiding goodness of *human nature*, in spite of the utter corruption of *human character*, allows us to affirm the true humanity of Jesus without casting doubt upon His sinlessness. We must realize that positing a "sinful human nature" leads to a Christological problem. We can exhibit that problem with two syllogisms (based on the presupposition of sinful human nature):

¹⁷ Stephen Charnock described the tension of fallen man's ability-inability in terms of faculties lacking moral goodness and a lute with untuned strings: "In Adam, by creation we were possessed of [certain faculties]. In Adam, by his corruption, ... we have not lost the physical but the moral nature of these faculties; not the faculties themselves, but the moral goodness of them." And, "Sin hath untuned the strings, but did not unstring the soul; the faculties were still left, but in such a disorder, that the wit and will of man can no more tune them, than the strings of an untuned lute can dispose themselves for harmony without a musician's hand." Charnock, *Works*, Volume 3, Page 172.

Human nature is sinful.

Jesus had a human nature.

Therefore, Jesus had a sinful nature.

Or:

Jesus did not have a sinful nature.

Human nature is sinful.

Therefore, Jesus did not have a human nature.

The problem is summarized well by Adam Harwood, whom I quote here at length:

The problem with affirming that people inherit a sinful *nature* is that if human nature is essentially and inherently sinful, then Jesus (who was truly human and divine) would have been a person whose human nature was sinful. However, Scripture is clear there was no sin in him. Not only did Jesus not sin, but he also was not sinful in any way. If one affirms that human nature is essentially and inherently sinful *and* one denies that Jesus’s human nature was sinful, then one would be affirming that Jesus’s human nature was not truly human — a conclusion which would fail tests for orthodoxy that have been in place since the early ecumenical councils. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice for human sin because he was both truly divine and truly human. **The property of being sinful is common to fallen humanity but not essential to authentic human nature. Though it might be proper to refer to my human nature as corrupted and twisted, this is different than arguing for the existence of a thing called an inherited sinful nature.**¹⁸

Jesus, as God the Son and simultaneously a true son of Adam, not only serves as the perfect Redeemer for fallen humanity, but also as the perfect example of a person whose human nature is directed fully and unceasingly by the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ shows us what true humanity is, what God intended a human being to look like in nature and character.

How To Describe Humanity’s Sinful State

Since all Christians agree that human nature was created good, and since Scripture does not warrant the idea that human nature (as distinct from human character) has ever been sinful, we should not use the phrase “sinful nature” nor “evil nature” with reference to human persons. To do so raises unnecessary theological questions and causes

¹⁸ Adam Harwood, “A Critique of Total Depravity,” emphasis added.

unnecessary confusion. Nor should we incautiously speak of “the corruption of our [whole] nature,” without clarifying our meaning.¹⁹

When we wish to refer to the sinful state and actions of humanity, we should speak of the corruption of human *character* rather than the corruption of human nature. If we refer specifically to the woeful, post-fall state of human *nature*, we can biblically speak of it as *captive or enslaved*, or *in bondage to sin*. This terminology of enslavement will direct the mind to the importance of Biblical redemption in its aspect of buying back the freedom of a person in servitude.

Subscribing to the abiding goodness of human nature does not jeopardize the doctrine of total depravity. That doctrine does not affirm that man is totally sinful or “as sinful as he can possibly be,” but only that *the totality* of man’s faculties, including his will and his reason are corrupted by sinfulness. We see, therefore, that at least with regard to its central idea, the doctrine of total depravity does not require the presupposition that human nature has become sinful *in itself*. Though human nature after the fall remained intrinsically good in its design and intended purpose, its state of bondage and the consequent depravity of human character still leaves man incapable of saving himself.

Human Bondage Calls For Redemption In The Present

Our understanding of the human condition inevitably shapes our approach to evangelizing the spiritually lost. A biblical understanding of the state of fallen man’s nature and character encourages us to emphasize people’s need for right-now, this-life redemption, not just their need to know they’ll go to heaven when they die, or for justification at the final judgment. Consider two metaphorical scenarios:

SCENARIO 1: An unregenerate man is being chauffeured in his Cadillac limo by two mild-mannered drivers who take turns driving and opening the doors. They are driving the man to the Pleasure Palace where all manner of carnal delights are available. While the man sits comfortably in the back seat, his cell phone rings, and he answers. It’s his Christian friend John. John says, “I know you’re busy but I’d like to bless you. In the next five minutes

¹⁹ *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, in its brief entry on *sarx* provides us with an example of scholarly use of the phrase “human nature” in an incautious manner (as is often the case when scholars expound a traditional view regarding which they expect no disagreement). The entry says that *sarx* is used “in Paul’s writings, for sinful human nature as it exists apart from relationship with God.” What is troubling are the citations offered, namely, Gal 5.17,19 and Eph 2.3, which neither define *flesh* nor mention *nature*.

I can do one of two things for you. **Either I can hack your car's electronics and kill the ignition system so that your drivers can't take you to bad places, or I can share with you how to receive forgiveness for your sins so you'll go to heaven when you die.**" Which will the man choose?

SCENARIO 2: An unregenerate man is locked in the trunk of his Cadillac limo that is careening down the road at 120 mph. Two insane creatures are in the front seat of the car wrestling for control of the steering wheel and gas pedal. The man in the trunk is being thrown about as the car zig-zags, hits bumps and sometimes goes airborne. The man gets a phone call, and answers his cell. It's his Christian friend John. John says, "I know you're busy but I'd like to bless you. In the next five minutes I can do one of two things for you. **Either I can hack your car's electronics and kill the ignition system so that your car will coast to a stop and your drivers can't keep endangering your life, or I can share with you how to receive forgiveness for your sins so you'll go to heaven when you die.**" Which will the man choose?

Thankfully, the redemption that God has provided through Jesus Christ does not limit the salvation seeker to only one kind of kind of rescue, either for this life or the next. The gospel, properly understood, offers redemption in this life as well as the forgiveness that opens the door to blessedness in the next life. The problem occurs when we preach an empty shell of "the gospel" that implies to the audience that people can receive assurance of the forgiveness of their sins without having to repent and replace the drivers at the steering wheel of their lives. It also occurs when we preach therapeutic moralism in a way that implies that neither human nature nor human character are unfixable if we only apply ourselves to the problem with enough will.

We must preach and teach the biblical assessment of both human nature and human character. We must do so with clarity, and thoroughness. We must stop referring to "sinful human nature," lest people assume we are describing a problem with no solution. Instead, we should preach about human nature enslaved, and do so in such a way as to help people understand the immediate relevance of the Good News about how they can be set free by the Son (Joh 8.36). In our preaching we should make full use of the Bible's passages about God and Christ as Ones who *in the present* deliver the oppressed and set the prisoner free (Psa 68.6; 72.12-14; 102.19-20; 103.6; 146.6-8; Isa 42.6-7; **61.1; Luk 4.18**; 13.12-16; **Act 10.38**; 12.6-9; 16.25-26 ff.).²⁰ The fact that many of these passages had specific application for ethnic Israel or had reference to external

²⁰ Cf. the responsibility of God's people to imitate Him in this regard, Isaiah 58.6.

circumstances rather than to spiritual enslavement, does not diminish what they reveal about our Redeemer's inclination to deliver those in bondage of whatever kind, and those oppressed by whichever tyrant.

Fallen People Need A New Birth And A New Lord

Human beings, after the fall, do not need a *new* nature, but they most certainly need a *redeemed* nature. That is, they need to have their nature bought back and liberated from its bondage to sin, the devil and the flesh. Thus, though the corruption of fallen humanity centers in their character rather than in their nature, the fact that the problem of fallenness relates so directly to *nature*, explains why Scripture articulates the solution in terms of birth and creation, the very phenomena at which *nature* is normally embedded. The release of human nature from its bondage is accomplished by way of a new birth of the Spirit (Joh 1.12-13; 3.5-6; Tit 3.5) that is equivalent to a new creation of the inner self (2Co 5.17; Gal 6.15; Eph 4.24; Col 3.10) and is tantamount to a personal resurrection (Rom 6.4-11).

Integral to the liberation of human nature from its old masters is the installation of a new Lord at the "steering wheel." There is no redemption of the human person that leaves human nature autonomous. There are only two possibilities: man's nature is ruled by the devil and its own misdirected desires, or it is ruled by Jesus Christ through the agency of the Holy Spirit. No one can presume to have escaped their fallen state, the enslavement of their nature and the corruption of their character, apart from the direct and abiding involvement of Christ Himself working within them by His Spirit (Eze 36.26; Joh 14.23; Col 1.27). Thankfully, with the new birth of the Spirit (Joh 3.5-6), comes the gift of faith that receives Jesus Christ as Lord. Now, with the Spirit of Jesus at the steering wheel of human nature, the rebuilding of the character begins.

God Values Human Beings

God's willingness to sacrifice His own Son should leave no doubt regarding the value that He places upon human beings (Joh 3.16-17). Why does God so love the world of humanity? If there is a reason, then one aspect of it is that human beings are made in His own image and still retain a nature that is good in its design and purpose. Not that these things constitute human merit. What is valuable in fallen man consists only of what God

Himself put in man. Fallen man is like a dirt clod in which someone hid a gold coin. The clod is passive and can claim no credit for the gold within, but God sees the gold reflecting His own image.²¹ God values the clod for the gold inside. So much so that he will hold accountable the man or beast that murders a human being, precisely because “in the image of God He made man” (Gen 9.5-6).



If we subscribe to the abiding goodness of human nature, we can and should preach the spiritual deadness of the human dirt clod (apart from Christ) while at the same time proclaiming the innate value of fallen humans. Never has the Christian message regarding the inherent value of *all* human beings been more needed than today. Though racism and prejudice have existed since deep antiquity, the threat to communities and nations from those ready to view other ethnicities as sub-human remains unabated. Though abortion, infanticide and the sexual enslavement of children have existed since at least Greco-Roman times, never has the world exterminated the unborn, nor trafficked children in the systematic way that it does today. Also, as a new phenomenon in Western society, we are beginning to see the deadly consequences of educating several generations in a Darwinian worldview that implicitly tells our children that they are biological accidents, with no objective meaning or purpose, and ultimately no meaningful value. Think of the adolescents who are cutting themselves “just to feel something,” and the teenage felons

²¹ Were there no gold; if human nature were indeed intrinsically sinful and corrupt, would God still deem mankind worth saving? If there is an answer to this question, we cannot discover it in this short study.

committing adrenaline-rush crimes, justifying their actions by telling themselves that nothing really matters anyway, but secretly wishing for significance and just to be noticed by somebody. Think of the white-collar embezzlers and swindlers who are intelligent enough to realize that from a Darwinian point of view, there is no objective right or wrong, nor any objective reason to care about what happens to the poor fools they're defrauding. Preaching the biblical message of the innate value of all human life will not solve all these problems, but it can help stanch the life-draining wound within our circle of influence. And it cannot help but complement our proclamation of the gospel: "Jesus died for our sins, not because we are morally worthy, but because we are innately so valuable to Him that He seeks our redemption!"

We Can Appeal To Human Nature

Aspects Of God's Image Still Discernable In Human Nature

The fact that human nature remains intact after the fall, to the extent that we can still perceive aspects of the divine image even in the unregenerate, provides us with an additional rationale for calling fallen people to faith and repentance. We can remind unbelievers of the evidence of their original nature, stamped with the image of God. We can press their responsibility of rendering "to God the things that are God's" (Luk 20.25). We can preach the reasonableness of desiring a redemption that will allow one's character to become that for which human nature was designed.

The evidences of the divine image remaining in fallen man include the following:

1. Rationality.
2. Volition with respect to abstract options (animals make instinctual choices about immediate realities).
3. Relationality.
4. Creativity.
5. Administrative aptitude.
6. Conscience, morality, justice, instinctive keeping of the law (Rom 2.14), the recognition of certain human crimes, abuses and perversions as *unnatural*.
7. The impulse to restore and beautify.

Contrary to the Darwinian doctrine that man is essentially no different from other animals, we can affirm human uniqueness and humanity's unique call to know and love the Creator.

Culpability For Living Contrary To Our God-given Nature

We can also affirm the inexcusable culpability of living contrary to our God-given nature. We do not have to confuse people by affirming that God will hold us accountable for sinning, even though our doing so is consistent with our "sinful nature." Notice the logical tension that Brauch feels on this point:

We are sinners by nature ... [and just] as Scripture affirms the total depravity and helplessness of human beings, it also affirms that God holds humans morally accountable for their sinful choices that are consistent with that nature. ... God will hold individuals accountable for their acts in this life — despite their sinful nature²²

No, on the contrary, God will hold individuals accountable for their acts in this life that were *in violation of* their good nature, stamped with the image of God. We can sound this warning confidently.

The Oughtness Of Living Consistently With Our Nature

We can also confidently echo the unbeliever's own conscience. All people have a sense of what they ought and ought not do. We can and should use this fact in our evangelism. We should not let the depravity of human character blind us to ready receptors to God's truth that are embedded in every person's nature. The Greeks whom the apostle Paul addressed on Mars Hill gave no credence to the Hebrew Scriptures, but Paul did not hesitate to call them to repent **on the basis of what they knew intuitively about God and about their obligation to seek Him** (Act 17.24-30). The noble aspects still discernible in human nature are enough to underscore that all people *ought* to be and do better, and not continue to yield to their fleshly instincts. It is *this tension* — between the oughtness of being better and the impossibility of being better by human strength and will — that the gospel so wonderfully addresses for those still held captive (Joh 8.36).

Christian Character Must Differ From Fallen Character

If we appropriately exhort unbelievers that they are obligated to live in a manner consistent with their God given nature, how much more should we press this truth upon

²² Brauch, p. 30-31.

our fellow believers. Here in the United States, many have observed that divorce and moral problems are as common among church people as they are among non-church attenders. Friends have shared with me about how they have been financially defrauded by “Christian” businessmen. The common excuse of unbelievers for avoiding church attendance is that “the churches are full of hypocrites.” This current reality is diametrically opposed to what the church’s testimony to the world should be, as the New Testament epistles and the Revelation’s letters to the seven churches make painfully clear.

The reasons for the current spiritual crisis in the American church are complex, but perhaps one small part of the problem has to do with the tendency in some congregations to unguardedly emphasize Christians’ continuing status as “sinners,” albeit “saved by grace.” Is this the New Testament’s emphasis? Does the Bible depict believers as **sinners** who labor to do what is right, or as **saints** who sometimes stumble? “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves,” wrote the apostle John (1Jo 1.8), but we are no longer sinners in the same sense that we were prior to our regeneration. The apostles describe the believers’ sinfulness in the past tense. We “were slaves of sin” but “became obedient from the heart” (Rom 6.17). “Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, ...” (1Co 6.11). We “were once darkness, but now ... light in the Lord” (Eph 5.8). We were “dead in [our] wrongdoings” but now “made alive” (Col 2.13). “You were continually straying, but now you have returned” (1Pe 2.25).

It appears that the distinction we have observed between immutable nature and mutable character should caution us as to how we speak about ourselves as Christians. In a true sense, we are no longer sinners but righteous (Rom 5.19), if our faith and new birth are authentic. This reality makes sense of the many biblical passages that contrast the sinners with the righteous and godly. Yes, there is a sense in which we remain sinners by virtue of the fact that we still sin; Paul spoke of himself as the chief of sinners in the present tense (1Ti 1.15). We must be clear in our preaching, though, and not speak of believers as still being sinners in the same sense that they were before coming to faith in Christ. We do not want to abet the trending belief that the Christian life need not differ from the non-Christian life of our surrounding culture.

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