CHAPTER 4

Postlapsarian Man

The Nature of Man

Medieval and Renaissance interpretations of the nature and role of man were profoundly shaped by what the Book of Genesis tells about Adam and Eve’s defiance of God and their subsequent expulsion form the garden of Eden. The notion of sinful and wretched postlapsarian man, tainted by original sin and powerless with regard to his own salvation, was based on Augustine’s interpretation of Adam’s rebellion, the fall, and the necessity of divine grace. This pessimistic interpretation of human nature became popular by the late fifteenth century and appeared in the writings of reformers and erudites such as Luther, Calvin, Sarpi, Pierre Charron (1541–1603), Abbé of Saint-Cyran (1581–1643), Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638) and Blaise Pascal (1623–1662). Indeed, it has been argued that this sort of ‘Augustinian moment’ endured in European centres of learning for over three centuries, until the time of the French Revolution.1 Of the many sixteenth-century writers who were influenced by the Augustinian concept of man it was in particular the French thinker Pierre Charron whose idea of the nature of man came close to that of Sarpi. Although the philosophies of Charron and Sarpi were deeply naturalistic, they also adhered to the Augustinian concept of man’s depravity and at least Sarpi explicitly adopted Augustine’s theory of grace.2 At the same time, Sarpi’s understanding of the nature of man was to a large extent Epicurean, as we will see.

Similarities between Charron and Sarpi are evident in their reflections upon the differences between man and animals. Sarpi concluded that while an animal knows only natural and useful things, man was often led astray by his superfluous knowledge. Sarpi believed that excessive knowledge was harmful, observing in 1609 that “one does not only learn truths, but also, and in a greater number, falsehoods, and one falsehood damages more than a hundred truths benefit”.3 This is one of many passages, in which Sarpi (paradoxically, by this point a famous erudite) expressed his distrust in human reason. In his view

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1 For Charron and Saint-Cyran, see Popkin 1979, pp. 113–115; Kogel 1972, p. 67; For Jansen and his followers, see Doyle 2000, p. 6 and passim.
2 According to Maia Neto 1995, p. 26, Charron’s point of view was naturalistic, not Augustinian.
3 Sarpi, Arte, p. 593: “non solo s’imparano verità, ma falsità in maggior numero e più nuoce una falsità, che non giovano cento verità”.
man struggled with the flow of information both because of the weakness of his senses (which he considered inferior to those of many animals) and because of his reasoning capacity (which he considered superior to that of animals, but still hopelessly weak in front of many problems). Sarpi believed that while animals relied on quick and instinctive reactions, man often became paralyzed by the slow and unnecessarily convoluted process of reasoning. Much later, but in a similar vein, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) argued that a reflective state of mind was unnatural and a “meditating man” little more than a “depraved animal”. Sarpi believed that man was debilitated not only by his own reason, but also by defects in his physical constitution, which was weaker than that of animals. “Not the body that is kept well with medicines”, he wrote, “but the one that does not need them, is the better one”. He then concluded that “man more than any of the animals needs medicines”, which only proved that “he especially is imperfect”.

In my view, Sarpi’s belief in man’s physical and moral imperfection was conducive to the emergence of absolutistic principles in his political thought. It was, in fact, quite typical of those sixteenth-century political thinkers who—like Sarpi—insisted on the key importance of obedience to base their political theory on an Augustinian reading of the nature of man. These thinkers included Justus Lipsius and Pierre Charron, but also, to a certain extent, religious figures such as Martin Luther and John Calvin.

Renaissance writers often resorted to the method of comparing men with animals in their attempts to define the nature of man. They argued that man’s physical weakness, his lack of fur, scales, horns and so on, was compensated for by the invincible abilities of reason. God himself had taken the form of man and this was considered an undisputable proof of man’s superiority over animals. It was also argued that God had created man in his image and that the body of man was perfect and suitable to be the measure of all things. The fifteenth-century philosopher and scientist Nicholas of Cusa even claimed that man’s capability to create an autonomous mental world was similar to God’s ability to create the real world. While the mortal body of man connected him to the temporal world of animals, his immortal soul united him with divine eternity. Man was at once mortal and immortal, a fact that, according to the Neoplatonistic tradition, rendered him the vinculum mundi, the link between material and cognitive worlds. Drawing on Aristotle’s theory of the soul’s three dimensions, the

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4 Rousseau, Oeuvres complètes, Vol. I, p. 87: “j’ose presque assurer que l’état de réflexion est un état contre nature, et que l’homme qui médite est un animal dépravé”.

5 Sarpi, Pensieri, no. 404, p. 307: “Non è migliore il corpo, che sano conservasi colle medicine, ma quello che di loro bisogno non ha: onde perché l’uomo più di tutti animali abbisogna di medicine, sopra tutti egli è imperfetto”.