

Are People Basically Good?

Crucial Questions

R. C. SPROUL

Are People Basically Good?

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Contents

One	The Supreme Paradox	1
Two	The Image of God	11
Three	The Duality of Man.	21
Four	The Reality of Our Sin	31
Five	The Depth of Our Sin	39
Six	The Extent of Our Sin.	47

Chapter One

The Supreme Paradox

When I was in high school, my biology teacher told me that my value as a person was \$24.37. He was adding up the value of all the minerals in the body—zinc, copper, potassium, etc. Today, thanks to inflation, that total would be around \$160. That’s still a paltry sum. But it is one way to take the measure of a man.

Other attempts to define man have tried to understand him as simply one variety of primate. Desmond Morris once had a best-seller titled *The Naked Ape*, in which he said there

Are People Basically Good?

are some eighty-nine kinds of primates—chimpanzees, orangutans, gorillas, baboons, monkeys—but there's one that is distinguished from the rest. It is distinguished not so much by its intelligence but by the fact that it's naked. Man is distinct by the fact that he has to manufacture artificial clothes to cover his nakedness. Evidently, man is the only one of these eighty-some varieties of primate that has a problem with nakedness—and therefore he has a problem with guilt. Man is the only creature in all of creation that has artificial garments, and the Scriptures tell us that this is not to keep us warm but to cover our shame.

Blaise Pascal, the French philosopher said, “Man is the supreme paradox of all creation.” Man is the creature possessing the highest grandeur in all of the created universe; at the same time, he is the creature that endures the most abject misery of all creatures in the universe. Pascal said man's grandeur is located in his unique ability to contemplate his own existence. Man alone can think of the future and speculate upon or imagine a better life than he currently enjoys or could ever bring to pass, and this is the source of his misery.

As humans contemplate their existence, they always come around to this basic question: What is man? This

question has far-reaching implications, and the answer one gives has a profound impact on how one lives. One theologian has said that how human beings understand their own existence determines how they think, how they behave, and the type of culture that they produce; thus, the culture that we live in is a product of our understanding of what it means to be human. In this book, we will explore what Scripture says about the nature of man, including such related topics as the image of God and the reality of sin.

In our day, most attempts to understand what it means to be human do not begin with Scripture but rather proceed from a worldly perspective. The most common definition for a human being—or for what it means to be human—is the scientific name *Homo sapiens*, meaning “wise man.” This term, in distinguishing man from all other creatures in the animal kingdom, does so in terms of intelligence or wisdom. In almost every era of Western civilization, philosophers and theologians have zeroed in on man’s thinking capacity as the unique element of his identity.

In the early centuries of Greek philosophical inquiry, the overarching concern was in the dimension called *metaphysics*, meaning that which is above or beyond the physical world. Thales, Parmenides, Anaximander, Anaxagoras,

Are People Basically Good?

and others before Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, were asking big questions, such as, what is the ultimate substance from which everything comes in the universe? What is the essence of things? What stands above and beyond the physical? These philosophers couldn't agree on what the ultimate reality is. Plato said it is the transcendent world of forms or ideas; Aristotle said it is the essence embedded within the physical form. Ultimately, thinkers questioned the fact that different philosophers, each acute in their thinking, came to radically different conclusions about issues of metaphysics.

Thus, the next great emphasis in philosophy was in the discipline called epistemology, which is the theory of knowing. It undergirds all science. It is the study of the question, "How do we know what we know?" The focus is on how we learn, how we can know anything, whether we know principally through the activity of the mind or through observation, and related questions.

The twentieth century marked a dramatic shift in the whole history of theoretical thought. The dominant concern in philosophy in the twentieth century was in the area of anthropology, or the study of man. Now, the key question is, what does it mean to be a human being? People are

The Supreme Paradox

concerned about self-esteem, identity, and understanding who we are as creatures. The focal points in Western civilization include issues such as abortion, euthanasia, human relationships, peace, gender, sexuality, and labor/management difficulties. How we address issues in these areas will depend ultimately upon how we define man.

Philosophers have wrestled with this question before. Plato was perplexed by the task of giving a precise definition to man. In the science of taxonomy, to distinguish a bird from a fish or a fish from an antelope, for example, one looks at what is different among them and also at what is similar. For instance, birds and planes both fly through the air. Birds have wings, and planes have wings. But there are differences too. Planes don't have feathers, and birds have to flap their wings to fly. So when we classify, we recognize the similarities and the differences. Plato was challenged in trying to pinpoint the distinctive features that would separate or distinguish a human being from all other forms of life. Finally, he figured it out: he called man a "featherless biped." One of his students got a plucked chicken, wrote a sign across its chest saying, "Plato's man," and put it on the wall at the Academy—and Plato had to start all over again.

Are People Basically Good?

Karl Marx described man as *Homo faber*: man the fabricator, or maker. Marx sought to understand the uniqueness of man not in his chemistry or anatomy but in his work habits. Man's whole life revolves around work, and much of the history of civilization, especially the history of warfare, has to do with a conflict over economic forces and the yield of human labor. Humanity's greatest alienation is the alienation from the fruit of labor, which is unnatural, Marx said. So Marx's theory of economics was rooted in the fact that he saw man as a toolmaker. When anthropologists and paleontologists look back into history and try to draw the line between other kinds of primates and human beings, the presence of tools among the fossils becomes very important because man—*Homo faber*—is the one who fashioned tools and used them to increase production.

Homo volens is another way in which man has been described, particularly in the latter part of the nineteenth century in a school called "voluntarism." This view claims that what makes man unique is his capacity to make choices. Friedrich Nietzsche took this idea farther, saying that the real man, the authentic man—the *Übermensch*,

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Why do people lie, cheat, and steal?

Surveys routinely show that a majority of men and women believe that people are basically good. In fact, the Bible reveals that mankind was indeed created good. And yet, we all know people who have hurt us or others. And we have likewise done what is wrong. So what changed? Why do people lie, cheat, and steal?

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul explains how we became morally corrupt and just how deep our corruption is. We don't merely make mistakes; we sin against a holy God. But although this is bad news, it's not the end of the story.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

Dr. R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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