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Adam's Gift: Man in the Order of Creation

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Our aim in this essay is to understand the nature of our relationship to non-rational animals. These include the untamed and the domesticated, those we hunt and those we raise for food, those we watch from a distance and those we curl up with at night. Our question is concerned with our responsibility for these our fellow creatures—and what rights, if any, we have over them. Though we will make our way to a more theoretical account, our starting place is a recent archaeological discovery—insights from an event that took place 45,000 years ago.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported this spring that, in January of this year, Russian scientists published a remarkable paper in the journal *Science*. The paper documents their discovery of the remains of an ancient woolly mammoth—a young bull in his prime—in the Siberian Arctic. Their investigation revealed that the creature's injuries, both those that caused his death and those inflicted afterwards, could only have been at the hands of men.

Now for the scientists, what is remarkable about this discovery is the fact that it provides rare documentation of the presence of humans in the Arctic at least 10 millennia earlier than previously thought. But of greater interest to us is what it demonstrates about the men who brought the giant creature down.

The evidence reveals that there was more than one hunter, a group of men who banded together to take down an animal perhaps ten times their size. They used tools—spears and knives—very likely fashioned from the bones of other animals they had hunted and killed previously. Their thrusts were targeted, meaning they already knew the vulnerabilities of their prey. They had to have moved with speed, dexterity, and strength, for the quarry was itself clearly on the move. They butchered the animal, leaving nothing useful behind to go to waste. And we know that they must have journeyed with the herds of woolly mammoths as the huge beasts migrated north in search of food. The men were hungry—and so were their families. Though members of the animal kingdom themselves, they were fighting for survival in an unforgiving environment. What they lacked in brute force, they made up for in superior intelligence and clever hands. As the *WSJ* writer put it: "... this too is our legacy: a band of men subduing a huge threatening beast to feed their families. Brilliant, skillful and bold."

Now to modern ears, the assumption that it had to be a group of men who attacked the mammoth sounds patently sexist. No doubt someone is protesting: hey, but what about the women? Surely they hunted too. And surely they did. But only a foolish ideologue would insist on women's "rights" and equal opportunity at such a moment. The men were responsible. They were stronger, they were equipped, and they were courageous. They were fulfilling their duty. They were intent on insuring the subsistence of their families. Surely, we can be confident that, when the men returned with enough

food for the tribe, the women looked up from the hearth in relief and gratitude. It is a moment frozen in time that gives us a peephole through which to observe the essential role that men have played in the survival of the species, an aspect of the story to which we will return. But first, it reveals the nature of our relationship to the animals.

Consider the following perhaps startling and arguably self-evident claim. It has been referred to as “the human fact.”^[i] It is illuminated in the first instance by the fundamental recognition that man *qua* man—*homo*—is the only creature in the animal kingdom that is manifestly *not* naturally suited to his environment.^[ii] Though like all the animals, he must eat in order to live, *homo* has had to discover and invent the means by which to ensure the accessibility of adequate nourishment. He does not have a highly developed sense of smell that would help him to find food or sense immediately that the food he has spotted will likely make him sick or could even lead to his death. He does not have claws that would permit him to kill his prey easily with his bare hands. He does not have a prominent snout equipped with fangs that would allow him to attack and devour his prey that way. In order to accommodate his own limited capacity for mastication and the requirements of his digestive system, he needs to cook the meat, grind and bake the wheat, boil the corn. Though he must survive the same vicissitudes of weather and climate, unlike the other animals, he does not have fur that might protect him from the elements. Unable to see in the dark, his biological rhythms and his search for food and shelter are governed by the rising of the sun.

These are just the facts. St. Thomas Aquinas himself refers to them in his argument that the human soul is fittingly united to the human body. How could it be right, says the objector, that that most perfect of souls, the human soul, should be united to so imperfect a body? After all, the bodies of other animals are naturally provided with covering instead of clothes, with hoofs instead of shoes, with claws, with teeth, with horns. But the human body is deprived of such protections. This means we must conclude that the soul is not properly united with the human body, does it not?

On the contrary, says Aquinas, man’s protection is found through the operation of his reason and the work of his hands, both of which make it possible for him to create for himself instruments of an infinite variety, for any number of purposes. Man’s protection is of his own making. And this is so because of what is unique to him: he has the power of reason, the capacity to fashion the tools he needs, and the freedom to exercise both of these powers in the service of his own good.^[iii]

It is thus the very embodiment of man *qua* man (not *qua* male) that called for the discovery of fire and the fashioning of tools. It is precisely his particular status as creature, unique to him among all the animals, that required him to learn to hunt and eventually to raise his fellow—though lower—creatures for their superior strength and their meat, to construct shelters, make clothing, and plant, harvest and store food in anticipation of the time when there would be none. He has no choice but to speculate about what might be needed, to think ahead, to plan, to anticipate.

It is within this context that man’s relationship to the animals must be comprehended. First, it is manifestly clear that the principle that legitimates our use of the goods of creation—animals in particular—is grounded in the recognition that without them, human flourishing would not be possible. It is the primordial fact that has driven man’s use of the earth and, as we well know, the excesses that have tended to characterize it. In his relentless push for a continual improvement in his standard of

living, man arrives at the flash point of contemporary disputes concerning our relationship to the animal kingdom, an equally important truth that must be acknowledged simultaneously with the first. But here we must go further back in time, to the beginning.

Though primordial, the account of the mammoth hunters with which we began is not the whole story for it illuminates but one aspect of our relationship to animals. This accidental discovery is but a silhouette hidden within an even more ancient tale: the timeless story of the creation of the world. And it points to the genius of man—an unambiguous example of Adam’s gift, revealed to us in the book of Genesis—and the meaning of the fall from grace.

Let me explain.

It is now fairly common knowledge that Pope St. John Paul II points to the two creation accounts found in Genesis 1 and 2 as the starting place for his understanding of the relationship of man and woman. And by now, most have heard of his convictions concerning the existence of a feminine “genius,” something he describes as the natural orientation toward persons, characteristic of all women. The late Holy Father’s work in this regard is a gift to the world, its wide dissemination one of the many fruits of his papacy. It is no accident that he has been referred to as the “feminist Pope.”^[iv]

But perhaps out of a recognition of the need for an unequivocal affirmation of women and their place in life and culture, arguably quite timely at this point in history, John Paul left out of his account any mention of the existence of a masculine “genius.” Though—oddly—mostly overlooked, this is clearly a lacuna in the tradition that begs to be filled. And I believe we can discern its contours by returning to those same passages in Genesis. More to the point here, a brief sketch of what might constitute the genius of man—of *vir*, that is, the male of the species—provides direct insight into our questions in this essay. For the creation account found especially in Genesis 2 illuminates the nature of his relationship to the created order. ^[v] A closer look will shed light on the deeper significance of the prehistoric achievement of the men in our ancient tale.

Let’s consider first the notable fact that the man is (apparently) in the Garden alone with God for some period before the appearance of woman.^[vi] Here I would point us toward an important truth: it certainly can be said that, aside from his special relationship with the Creator, man’s first contact with reality is of a horizon that otherwise contains only lower creatures, what we might call “things.”^[vii] It is this very fact that leads God to conclude that the man is alone, and ultimately leads to the building of woman.^[viii]

But the heart of the matter is found at Genesis 2:15–23. Here we learn that the man’s place is in the midst of the created order and, further, that his task is to care for it. He is put in the Garden to till it *and to keep it*. Though it is not insignificant that, in Genesis 1, both woman and man are instructed to “fill the earth and subdue it” and to have dominion over the earth, in this second, more concretely personal account, only *vir* is given a specific task. And his task is to work, to care for the things found in God’s creation. This becomes more evident when we consider that, as God searches for a partner for the man, He brings to him all the animals, indeed all the things of creation, to see what *he will name them*. And, one by one, the man gives each a name, that is, *he takes dominion over them*.

Now, in order to name things well and, in so doing, have true dominion over them, man would have to gain some kind of direct knowledge of them; he would have had to have acquired a certain familiarity and sophistication with things. Indeed, Aquinas himself goes so far as to state that man had to have been given a distinct preternatural gift to make the task given to him by his Creator possible.^[ix] It is here that we come to the core of what I propose is man's genius: as the narrative unfolds in Genesis 2, *vir* learns that he excels at discovering what things are, how they are to be distinguished from one another, and what they are for. In fact, it could be said to provide a point of departure in Scripture for the well-documented evidence, affirmed by both science and human experience, that men seem more naturally oriented toward things than toward persons.^[x] *This is his gift.*

From this analysis, we are justified in proposing at the very least that man's capacity to name things, to determine what can and cannot be said of something—accompanied by the ability to arrive at a systematic way of making judgments about it—constitutes the special gift that men bring to the tasks of human living.^[xi] When considered along with the fact that the man's mission is to work in the Garden, to care for God's creation, we are able to draw a further conclusion: that the genius of man is found in his capacity to know and to use the goods of the earth in the service of authentic human flourishing, an orientation that must include the recognition that the goods of the earth have more than mere utility. They also possess their own inherent integrity and beauty.

Thus, it is equally important to point out that the first man's capacity to know and use things does not mean that he is *only* oriented toward things. In truth, his first contact with reality includes the Lord God. He is, in the first instance, aware that, of all the animals, he is singularly "alone" before God, and he is truly marked by that relationship forever after. It is within this context that he encounters the woman. Until the woman is brought to him, both to name and to love as he can love no other, he has no "other" like himself. He knows immediately that the woman is *not* a thing; she is a person. Without hesitation he declares that she is "flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bones." And, while he can and does name her, he knows he cannot have dominion over her in the same way he has over the animals. She represents for him his highest good, the greatest gift God has given him and, as a consequence, the value of all the rest of creation is suddenly reordered. From and through his encounter with the woman, the Lord God reveals to him the nature of the reciprocal relationship of the gift of self. And he must realize as well that his own gift—that of caring for and using the goods of creation—is a gift to be exercised in service to her authentic good.

The significance of this gift is highlighted in dramatic ways when we consider where we began. The pinhole provided by our prehistoric tale confirms the fact that humanity now lives in an alien environment; the story of the fall and our exile from the Garden reveals how it occurred. No longer "at home," Adam's genius will now be called on forever after in his struggle with creation. Only burdensome toil and the "sweat of his brow" will disclose to him the intelligence hidden in the order of things. And in the darkness of his intellect, he will forget to pause before the intrinsic integrity and beauty in created things, mistaking them for mere raw material provided solely for his exploitation and use. Nonetheless, at the same time, also unmistakably illuminated is the significance of Adam's gift—for without it, the human race would not have lived to tell the tale. Properly understood, the particular genius of man has proven throughout history to be an essential gift in sustaining families and creating social order—indeed, it has been the key to the very building up of civilizations.^[xii] We might even say that, without it, we would still be living in caves, afraid to come out.^[xiii] The proper response to men's achievements is not ridicule, not disdain or resentment, but gratitude.

The human person's unique status within the hierarchy of the created order does not free us from seeing the unity, truth and goodness in all the rest of creation. In fact, on the contrary, our very nature as the only creature endowed with reason, makes us *responsible* for seeing it. We must constantly recall that the goods of creation, like persons, have ontological status also. They are created by God, held in existence by God, endowed with a *telos* that orders them toward a final end according to God's design. They are an *a priori reality*, that has been *given*, a priceless inheritance that we did not create and that is meant for every generation until the end of the world. They are not, therefore, in the first instance, our property, belonging to us in an absolute sense. The proper attitude toward such a gift, therefore, is not greed or exploitation (which is ultimately a self-destructive strategy). On the contrary, what is called for is a profoundly deferential receptivity—a recognition that the gifts of creation must be accepted with both gratitude and respect^[xiv] and a willing acknowledgement of the fact that our task is to care for them. Thus, though the constant moral context of all human action is the fact that the highest value is and always will be the authentic good of human persons—the only creatures created for their own sake—man's orientation is also an orientation towards the whole of creation. In fact, it is this orientation that makes him most properly their steward. We are called to be stewards of the earth—to till it *and* to keep it. We misinterpreted the command to take dominion over the goods of the earth—we thought it meant “control” when what it really means is that we are to serve as its curators. We have both a right to it and a responsibility for it. For the human person does not live in an environment; we live in a created order, a schema that reflects a natural hierarchy and *homo* is at the meeting place of the material and spiritual realms, responsible *for* what is below him, *to* what is above him.

Working together quite literally for centuries, men *and* women have fashioned for themselves an artificial niche that finds expression in the form of homes, cities, whole nations, and culture itself.^[xv] In fact, everything we refer to as culture was and is the achievement of human reason. Driven in part by the fact that the human person is the only creature who is capable of genuine love and who contemplates his own death, we operate in a world of meaning, of hope and of faith. Culture is ultimately the result of our own search for meaning; it will reflect our conclusions in that regard. But it originates in the fact that man *qua* man must participate in the achievement of his final end, through, among other things, the fashioning of his environment. It is this power that is to guide his desires and the work of his hands. And it is the male of the species who has been on the front lines of that occupation.

We all owe both the men who have come before us and those who populate our lives in the present moment a debt of gratitude, even if we must also remember that all of us—man and woman alike—are forever under the sway of the effects of original sin. It is the logic of sin that confuses us, that “needs to be broken [so that] a way forward can be found that is capable of banishing it from the hearts of sinful humanity.”^[xvi] But as our faith reveals, self-knowledge is an important weapon in our constant battle with the forces that seek to defeat us. To understand the masculine genius in this way is to equip man with the knowledge he needs to strengthen his own struggle with the effects of original sin, which now can be seen in a new light. For our relationship to the goods of creation, and in particular to the animals, is complex. It calls for discernment of the good they represent, itself a multi-valent notion; it can be useful—but it can also be beautiful.^[xvii] Animals can be useful to man. But they are also creatures with their own inherent goodness and beauty. If our task is not only to till the Garden, but also to “keep it,” it is the fullness of this truth that must be kept in mind.

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[i] M.A. Krapiec, O.P., *I-Man* (New Britain: Mariel Publications, 1983), 29-37.

[ii] For a more comprehensive development of this theme, please refer to my article "Metaphysical Realism as the Foundation of Environmental Stewardship and Economic Development," *Nova et Vetera*, Vol. 10:1 (February, 2012), 233-52.

[iii] Aquinas, *ST* 1.76.1.

[iv] There are many resources that document the "feminism" of Pope John Paul II. For one particular example, please refer to Mary Ann Glendon's fine essay: "The Pope's New Feminism," *Crisis* 15, no. 3 (March 1997): 28-31.

[v] In fact, I have shown that this passage actually provides a point of departure for an immediate grasp of *both* the masculine and feminine genius. A fuller account of these claims is beyond my purposes here, but let us at least acknowledge a truth that provides the scaffolding of any discussion of what differentiates the sexes. Though I can only assert this now, this truth is not only accessible to human reason; it is revealed in Genesis 1. And that is that man and woman are manifestly equal. They are both equally human, both in possession of intellect, will, and freedom, both agents in the process of their own becoming. For a fuller account, please see my paper "The Nature of Woman in Relation to Man: Genesis 1 and 2 Through the Lens of the Metaphysical Anthropology of Aquinas," *Logos: a Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, Vol. 18:1 (Winter, 2015).

[vi] Here I need to highlight the fact that I have a somewhat different interpretation of this passage than that of John Paul II in the *Theology of the Body*. There he argues that the reference to man at 2:7 is a reference to man in the abstract or collective sense. But my reading of the text and its use of *ha-adam* to refer "man" in that passage is that it is a reference to a "human being" in this case a man. In the Hebrew, *adam* without the definitive article *ha*, is man in the collective sense; this term is used only in Genesis 1. But when the definitive article is used, it is a reference to a "human being," and, according to the narrative that follows, in this case, one who is male. And indeed, the narrative goes on to reveal that it is from the man's rib that the woman is created. It seems clear from the passage that the reference is to the male *at the level of the species*. However, it is essential to affirm as well that John Paul is absolutely correct to point out that it is only with the creation of *ishah* (the concretely existing woman we have come to refer to as Eve) that *ish* (the concretely existing man we have come to refer to as Adam) appears. There is no *ish* without *ishah*. See John Paul II, *A Theology of the Body*, ed. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 158. Some Scripture scholars argue that Genesis 2 must be interpreted in light of Genesis 1 where *ha-adam* is used at one point. But I am looking at Genesis 2 both in light of the clear meaning of the narrative and Genesis 3 where it is clear that man and woman receive different consequences for their fall from grace, an indication that their particular charism, something unique to each of them, will now be a source of pain and confusion.

[vii] At this point in the narrative, Gen 2:8-10, *ha-adam* is placed in the Garden and the Lord God makes "to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food," including the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

[viii] In contrast, it can be said that woman's first contact of reality is of a horizon that contained man. While Adam's first experience is of loneliness for another like him, Eve's first experience is of a world of persons. For from the moment of her creation, Eve's horizon contains persons and she is governed by that contact ever after. I argue that this, rather than, as John Paul argues, motherhood *per se*, provides the first point of departure for grasping the genius of woman.

[ix] St. Thomas Aquinas does argue that Adam received an additional preternatural gift, infused knowledge, in order to be able to name all the animals brought before him (*Summa Theologiae* I, Q. 94, a. 3). And though it is from an entirely different tradition, I find it so interesting to consider that one of Lao-Tze's more famous aphorisms is: "The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names."

[x] See especially *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 18.

[xi] Anthony Esolen, [An Interview with Zenit](#). Though Professor Esolen admits he doesn't exactly have a theory, his thinking is very helpful. He adds: "Without this literal 'discernment,' I mean the clear separation of what may be predicated of a thing and what may not, with systematic means for judging the matter, there can be nothing so intricate as law, the government of a city, higher learning, a church—not to mention philosophy and theology."

[xii] Even a well-known mainstream feminist seems to agree with this point. See Camille Paglia, "It's a man's world and it always will be," *Time Magazine*, December 16, 2013: "if it weren't for men, we would still be living in grass huts."

[xiii] There is an interesting connection to be made and explored between this aspect of the genius of man and Angelo Cardinal Scola's argument that the father introduces the child to the "law of exchange (work) as the law of growth in life." See Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 242.

[xiv] Christopher Franks, *He Became Poor: The Poverty of Christ and Aquinas's Economic Teachings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), Chapter 1. Though Aristotle would not have had a notion of creation *per se*, Professor Franks points to Aristotle's awe of the unexplained pre-existence of the world and his acknowledgement of the fundamental "deferent dependence" human beings have on it. Franks argues that Aquinas's own economic teaching is grounded in this deferential receptivity and our "ontological poverty" before it.

[xv] Krapiec, 31.

[xvi] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Letter to the Bishops on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World," 8.

[xvii] Aquinas tells us that from the higher and more universal point of view, the good has three aspects: the good as virtuous, the good as useful, and the good as pleasurable. Everything is good in so far as it is desirable and it is the term or end toward which the appetite moves. But this end can present itself in three ways. It can be an end that is absolute in that it is desired for its own sake, as, for example, the Beatific Vision, or the natural desire to live. This is the good in its virtuous aspect. Or, it can be relative to some other end, that is, a means to an end, like food which is taken in order to sustain life. This is the good as useful. Finally, it can be an end in which the appetite comes to rest in the thing desired. This is the good as pleasant. Cf. Aquinas, *ST*. I.5.6.

