

ESSAYS

MAN AND THE VILLAGE

CRANK CALLS FROM THE STATE OF PERPLEXITY

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This essay is, like others in this issue of *Dominicana*, about masculinity, or what I'll be terming "man-ness." Since the approach of the argument will be somewhat tortuous, I figure I should just lay some cards on the table. All frills of qualification aside for the moment, I mean to defend both of the following claims:

1. A man is such by nature, and not by nurture.
2. A man is such by nurture, and not by nature.

To that end, the essay raises and attempts to deal with the complex relation of nature to nurture. It wonders how someone can both *be* a man and still need to *become* a man. The essay asks how men are made in and by certain kinds of relationships—and not by others. It criticizes certain assumptions underlying dominant sociological divisions by age or generation as well as the characterizations yielded by those divisions. The essay gestures toward a different sort of "reconditioning" of men than that currently in the works

as a result of the horrific events which have led to, among other things, the #MeToo movement.

Note that for many in our uber-sensitive, morally indignant, and post-truth culture, reflection on a thorny social, political, or moral issue that acknowledges its complexity without denying its intelligibility can only come across as an intrusion, an irruption of maladroit chatter or classless malice, at best an irritation, at worst a threat of criminal proportions. A violation of the safe space has occurred, a transgression of the boundaries of acceptable discourse. The right response to such moral obtuseness or outright malice? Invective, outrage, *fortissimo*. Consider, too, that for someone who is genuinely perplexed by trends and events in contemporary American culture, it only adds to the confusion when honest questions and reasoned proposals are greeted like the crass incivilities of a crank caller.

Case in point: suppose you were to ask at your next cocktail party, work retreat, or Caribbean cruise, “What does it mean to be a man?” As a crank caller, you would of course be upbraided for your tasteless, even offensive, question. This is hardly the moment, when men are finally called out for oppression, manipulation, and sexual crimes. You seem to be attempting to justify, rehabilitate, or excuse these sins that cry out to heaven. As you struggle to connect the dots, the problem is spelled out: the heinous sexual crimes are uniquely *male* crimes, and it’s the very *maleness* and all that it signifies which is the problem. Toxic masculinity has suddenly become a redundant phrase. So a discussion of what it means to be a man can seem like a smokescreen for what’s really going on: a sneaky redefinition of “true” man-ness, which (conveniently) diminishes the “maleness” of the crimes and thereby shifts the blame *away* from the historical bulwarks of male privilege, patriarchy, power, and so on.

According to this reasoning, this is simply not the time for such questions. I suggest that this line of argument be vigorously opposed. To ask about the meaning of man-ness is not to sidestep the crimes of men, or to downplay the sufferings of women at their

hands. This is the time to ask what it means to be a man, so that we can understand with clarity and conviction the *nature* of the wrongs that these particular men have committed. Only if we know what it means to be a man can we adequately understand the ongoing crisis of man-ness. Further: only then could we have the intellectual wherewithal to do more than just recondition, but truly to reform society, to recall and defend the true dignity of women and men. We have before us a wider reading list. We need to read the painful history of men's wrongs; we also need to re-open the book of nature, and to read each in light of the other.

But here, in this contemporary view, we hit a snag. Nature is precisely the problem. It seems clear to many that the concept has not merely been unmasked as a human construct rather than an objective feature of the things we experience; it is now positively a threat, since it serves as a platform of justification for classical paradigms of masculinity. So long as people believe in the fixity of (particularly human) nature, we will continue to be subject to nature's unyielding, vengeful action across history. Where we used to speak of "mastering" nature, we seek something more radical. In vigorous opposition to the old view of nature's stability across time and culture, the shift is made toward a more fluid notion of, for example, gender and identity.

Consider the case of male desire, the ostensible prime mover of much of the public and private evil committed by men. Masculinity is seen by its critics as an irrepressible source of violence, with the violence originating in desire, which then puts in motion various physical, psychological, financial, and institutional forces in order to acquire and possess the desired object. Hence the threat. To have a strong notion of nature is at the same time to excuse, enable, and empower the abuses perpetrated by men and arising from their nature. From this deconstructive perspective, moral and sociopolitical categories and structures have been put in place to further the flights of male desire.

This is, in a way, a radical restatement of a Christian reading of desire, made by Augustine in the early 5th century. Male desire

is equated or reduced to *libido dominandi*, the lust to dominate, which Augustine viewed as one of the foremost symptoms of the Fall as well as a powerful force in structuring social arrangements. Yet the desire for rule is itself unruly, and its abuses provoke a fundamental distrust of desire, which seems inseparable from its historical incarnations in male oppression and crime.

To dissolve the problem of desire thus seems to demand, on this logic, a negation of nature, and, consequently, of the notion of man-ness. Positively, it appears incumbent upon us to locate and work from a more basic (and abstract) place of “human-ness.” For now, note that this human-ness is necessarily devoid of formal clarity or directionality. It devolves upon individuals to *constitute* themselves as the particular sort of human they are. The way to be a good man is by being a good human (however this is understood). The universal is the way to the particular. This is a modern, ideologically motivated variation on the old Platonic theme of the Forms: we are guided to the truth about the world and ourselves not by concrete realities we experience, but by abstract, supra-experiential, inaccessible principles.

It’s this sort of abstraction that can become the worst sort of ideological weapon. Even as history is invoked and particular examples cited, the interpretive lens is a concept, unmoored from concrete reality. On the other hand, if we get back to particularities, to what “makes” a man in actual fact, then we might get a sharper picture of what man-ness is and can be. This will involve a discussion of nature, understood not as a legitimating principle for male wrongdoing, but as the proper category within which the meaning of “male” and “wrongdoing” could become clear.

THE MAKING OF A MAN: NATURE AND NURTURE

As the first move in the return to particularity, to who and what makes a man, we need to stress that what’s in view here is the *truth* and *imperfection* of nature: we’re pursuing its intelligibility but

not presupposing that we'll find nature perfect in every instance. Too often these are pitted against each other.

So, the making of a man. There's a principle inscribed in nature that can guide us forward: like causes like. That's why cats produce cats, and not pineapples, and apples come from apple trees, not giraffes.

If we ask, *who* makes a man, our answer is: a man and a woman. By becoming one flesh, they produce a child. If we ask *what* makes a man, our answer is: common human nature. At once the explanation and the cause, nature also signals the pattern and goal of its development as a thing of a certain kind, that is, human.

This moves us toward the question of nurture. But we have to get more particular here. For instance, note what happens to the role of the father when the baby proves to be a boy rather than a girl. His role is different if he has a son on his hands rather than a daughter. Why? Because of the likeness they share, which is more particular than the likeness of child to parents. The likeness of human nature is configured a certain way: he is a boy, which is another way of saying he is *like* his father more than he is *like* his mother, and in a way that crucially encompasses his being, his biology, his spiritual and moral existence. Father and son participate in man-ness—that is determined. What's not determined or fixed is how well one develops *as* a man.

Already, by being born out of a relationship (of father and mother), and not spontaneously generating, a child's nature is intertwined with its nurture, its formation as the thing it is, within a nexus of relationships. This goes beyond the father and mother, because human sociality gets highly complex and, ultimately, many other people are involved in the nurture business. Yet, while nurture begins with the parents before extending outward in concentric circles to the rest of society, the primordial *locus* of nurture is never left behind, precisely because it's the intersection of nature (transmission of life, like producing like) and nurture.

So if this nature demands nurture, what exactly is nurture? First off, it's a kind of art. Art imitates nature, according to

Aristotle. Nurturing a child is a kind of imitation of the natural patterns, docile to what's already there and what is in turn called for. It doesn't get a blank slate, nor does it change the thing into something else entirely.

Nurture is also then a kind of providence, a caring for, with foresight and responsibility. Providence, like art, doesn't corrupt, but preserves nature, according to St. Thomas. It keeps nature going, gives what is needed to survive and flourish.

According to homespun wisdom of some culture or other, and enshrined in American minds by Hillary Rodham Clinton, "it takes a village to raise a child." How, exactly? And what, if any, connection does the village's nurturing have with what I've said about nature?

To begin with the obvious, the village's role is to support, protect, educate, and supply what the parents themselves do not or cannot. The village's role in nurturing isn't chaotic, however. There's an order to it, which is why firemen are not expected to feed the baby, football coaches don't take him to church, teachers aren't expected to buy him clothes. Various sectors of society are involved in nurturing, that is, forming the child to be a good instance of the sort of thing he is: the fireman keeps him alive, the football coach forms him into a hardy, skillful athlete, the teacher develops his mind to recognize and love the truth.

Positively, then, different parts of the village play a coordinated role, and this always takes into account the *age* of the child. By age, I mean two things. First, the personal chronological age (Buddy is 11 years old); second, the particular age in which Buddy was born and is being brought up (Buddy was born in 2007—and thus qualifies as an iGen rather than a Millennial). This distinction helps to identify why and how an 11 year old in 2018 is different from an 11 year old in 2000. Both types of age serve to shape the particular way parents and the wider "village" adapt their nurturing.

SOCIOLOGICAL DIVISIONS

Nurture requires some sort of order for it to imitate successfully and preserve (or promote) nature. One such ordering structure, highly prevalent today, is based on a classification derived from sociological analytics and focuses on age, in both the senses just mentioned. People are studied according to which generation they fall into based on their birthdate. This involves an artificial segmentation into neatly labeled groups: Baby Boomer, Gen X, Millennial, iGen, etc. Additionally, their chronological age serves to focus study on phenomena of, say, pre-adolescents, or young adults, or those in their “middle adulthood.” Taken together, these two factors yield a comprehensive picture of human life from cradle to grave, with stratified divisions allowing an analytical clarity about patterns, traits, and behaviors typical of each subgroup.

As such, it’s a fairly straightforward classification schema, that serves certain descriptive and analytical purposes. My contention, however, is that we’ve unwarily taken these criteria and divisions not just as an interpretive model describing features of different ages, but as essentially normative. Its descriptive purpose has been surpassed by its utility in identifying necessary and sufficient characteristics of each age, which characteristics, in turn, serve to ground a new set of “empirical” evaluative standards.

One implication of this is the pressure it puts on nurturing to adapt more radically to the newly-discovered specificities of each age. This adaptation is implemented through discouraging or eradicating negative behaviors, and/or promoting and endorsing positive ones. Along the way, certain behaviors traditionally held to be negative are rehabilitated as positive, and vice versa. Either way, the impetus is toward reconditioning society according to—what?

What sociology does *not* claim to do is to establish ultimate ends or goals for human life. To this extent it remains true to the limits of the discipline. Yet it does rely on certain assumptions that do in fact move in the direction of ultimate interpretations, a meta-narrative about the meaning of human life. As such,

sociological divisions play an instrumental role in the culture's program of reconditioning, as it attempts to forget or move past nature. Consider the following assumptions:

1. Sociological analyses based on age division rely on an atomic conception of the individual, who is irreducibly prior to his relationships and can be considered without reference to his life as a whole.
2. There is a stable, discrete identity discoverable in each age, even abstracted from the larger whole and the ultimate meaning of life.
3. There are disparate and age-specific interests and needs, which translate into intelligible goals and goods for each age. Moreover, these narrow and short-term needs and goals are analyzable without any need for an account of nature.
4. What divides is greater (i.e., of more significance and moral weight) than what unites. This brings into view the issue of self-determination, and the question whether freedom can and at times should divide us on account of differing canons of rationality.

These assumptions are not obviously false, but nor are they obviously true. I find them to be deeply problematic. To bring the problems into focus, we need to look at some concrete examples.

1. Everyday practical questions arise where we need criteria external to mere sociological data. When should kids get phones? Whether or not all people *should* get married (and Catholics clearly have a position on this), is there a *reason* to think that people should get married by a certain age? Or is there an age where we would culturally *expect* someone to have a job, or a house? Shifting ground, what is the role of retirees in contemporary society? Is their disappearance from the workforce simultaneous with their departure to the sunlit margins of cultural life?

2. The phenomenon of increasing generational indifference and unfamiliarity could lead one to suspect that there's an underlying contempt breeding the unfamiliarity, an acquired repugnance to people whose difference in age entails that the particular goods and interests show little overlap and, at times, even instigate real conflicts.
3. The tensions and misunderstandings between generations suggest that the sociological division has deepened and ramified, as reflected in conflicts between Millennials and Boomers whose divergent work ethics alone indicate substantive disagreements about moral and political issues from justice, happiness, and autonomy to appropriate work attire.
4. The last point is simple, but only apparent as an absence. How many richly intergenerational groups does the average American adult belong to (leaving aside work or philanthropic activities)? How is this different from the cultural situation a century ago?

BACK TO NATURE!

OR, HOW NURTURE IS (AND MUST BE) NATURAL

The above illustrates the effects of decoupling nurture from nature. I want to propose that a better way to think about the work of the village in the making of a man is by way of the notion of *participation*. As a philosophical concept, it begins from a basic definition. To participate is to share in something that you don't possess fully. So I am, at this moment, participating in various things, from seatedness to humanness, from rationality to baldness. That is to say, I have this or that property, but it doesn't exhaust the category. There are plenty of other bald people in the world, and as it happens, I'm currently seated near one of them. But participation also has the implication that you get to be the thing you are by sharing in it more and more fully, though never exhaustively. I'm a Seattle Mariners fan—I participate in that perfection. But I can

become a better fan, a more passionate supporter. Relate this to our question of nature and nurture. One *is* a man by nature; but the full depth of the natural as well as the moral meaning of this term comes about through *nurture*—in coordination with your freedom of choice (by nature one *is* free, while nurture presumes you're free and works to promote the flourishing of your freedom in accord with the meaning inscribed in nature).

The problem with generational divisions, when overextended and taken as normative in character, is that they tightly circumscribe the goods you can participate in: a small, age-specific set of goods. At the same time, they shrink your notion of the full scope of your good, and how it is mutually implicated in the goods of other folks—even those twice your age.

Nurture, both proximate and remote, aims to promote participation, your deeper share in the good defining the sort of thing you are. Participation, moreover, takes its specific shape in a person's life according to a certain order: *what* and not just *when* you are. How does this work? You participate through imitation, what the ancient Greeks called *mimesis*. That's the entry point, the basic form of human learning and development. So, for example, I can learn to sing (in principle), but I can't learn to fly. Because my nature is capable of some sorts of participation and not others, I can share in the quality of tunefulness but not aerial self-movement. And thus my way into such participation is through imitation, when I actively seek a real likeness to the model singer.

As noted above, nurture is a sort of imitation of nature. Nurture isn't just something done *to* someone without their involvement. The freedom of the one nurtured is engaged by actively imitating the nature they see on display. In other words, the notions of participation and imitation open up a sociological horizon and order that is at once wider and deeper than that of "pure" sociology.

FATHERS AND SONS: REMARKS ON A PARADIGM

But it's not enough to have useful philosophical concepts, so long as they're not tested against reality itself. For that, we need to locate a paradigm already given in nature. The paradigm that seems the most fundamental for men and which enables dynamics of participation and imitation is that of fathers and sons (leaving aside the interesting question of how brotherhood fits into this picture). I want to draw attention to a couple reasons for this.

First, there's a basic law of nature reflected in our development: we grow toward perfection to the extent that we imitate our cause. When I was a kid, and wanted to be a good shortstop, I watched like a hawk when the great shortstops of the '90s came on TV: Jeter, Garciaparra, Rodriguez, Vizquel. They were making me a better shortstop by their modeling of certain techniques. Or take an even simpler example: you want to make a piece of paper blue (to participate in blueness). You make it imitate a blue thing, and so become blue itself: you take a blue pen, or blue paint, or dye.

With respect to fathers and sons, this pattern of *perfection via imitation* gets back to the heart of the mystery of how your or my life came to be in the first place. I owe both my life and my man-ness to my father, whom I imitate more than my mother precisely because my father and I both participate in man-ness. Sound strange?

Here's another strange notion. If a father says, "be like me," we might think him arrogant, or self-deceived. Yet St. Paul, inspired by the Spirit, tells the Corinthians twice to imitate him. How can this even be said? Because a father (biological or spiritual) is not himself the ultimate source of what he hands on. In other words, he is and remains forever an imitator, sharing in—but not exhausting—a given perfection. Yet at the same time, he *is* genuinely a principle, so he has a responsibility, a gift to share, in humility, but unapologetically.

Viewing the relationship of fathers to sons in terms of participation and imitation reveals that this relationship is a two-way street. In other words, the goodness of father and son is mutual. A father's goodness is shown precisely insofar as he raises his son well, and as his son, freely cooperating with his father's goodness, becomes a good son. And a son is good to the extent that he will be a good father. Furthermore, even as a father, a man remains—forever—a son. This is far from trivial. Fatherhood grows out of the soil of sonship, and a man lives as a father without losing his sonship. This is not to say that *only* those sons raised by good fathers can themselves grow up to be good fathers (which is untrue), but it does underscore the real heroism of such an achievement.

Because the relationship between fathers and sons is mutual or reciprocal in this way, it provides a suggestive paradigm for understanding what it means to be a man, or, conversely, how a man can be misunderstood.

In order to imitate anything, we need to know what it *looks like*. It needs to be seen. Moreover, the good always reveals itself—unless we hide it, or so revise or distort its definition that people forget what it looks like. All that to say: if one is never exposed to the whole range or gamut of man-ness, as it's realized concretely over the course of a lifetime, one will have a correspondingly impoverished concept of, and ability to live as, a man. To be a good son, you need to know a good father. You need to know what it looks like to be a man in his prime, shouldering responsibility, but also to be a man facing old age, sickness, and death. You need to see joy and hardship, defeat and victory in the life of a man. You need to see, incarnate before you, how the virtues of a man, his particular way of being loyal, courageous, generous, and true, are inflected according to his age.

This is, of course, an alternative to the division and segregation of age-specific groups. Recall that in the sociological model, precisely because it implies a radical gap between ages (in both the senses discussed above), there would be little sense in

giving boys and young men a knowledge and example of *how a man is*, how man-ness is gained or lost over time, how he must *win* the victory each day, how he both is and must become a man until his last breath.

This paradigm of fathers and sons has to be extended and expanded to be of any use: extended across time, and expanded outward to include other fathers and sons, and always playing out according to the pattern and metaphysical rhythm of participation and imitation. This again signals the need to be concrete, not abstract. A man's way of being human is precisely as a *man*. He becomes better as a *human* to the extent he becomes better as a *man*. To attempt to avoid this pattern can only end in confusion and disaster. If it's true that it's only by being a good man that Buddy is a good human, and not the other way around, then we can't get by only with generic discussions of human-ness. Beyond mere talk about man-ness, we need a rich panoply of examples of good and bad men, of young, old, and middle-aged men, to know what that concept means. We need boys to spend time with actual men. We need men of all ages to spend time together—*not* because of work or do-gooding, but on some deeper, because more basic, ground. This requires that men rediscover the common ground where it lies fallow and till it, that they seek to recover interests and pastimes that used to draw men together, where bonds were formed and virtues were developed. If this seems to veer toward nostalgia, so be it. A society threatened by amnesia can't afford to turn up its nose at nostalgia, inasmuch as nostalgia is a form of cultural memory that is capable of both a recognition of a loss of a good, and a hope of its recovery.

My point is not to locate a paradigm immune from sin and its effects; that's impossible. Male sin is precisely and irreducibly *male* sin. But this is no longer a redundant phrase, since we can understand the sin as being also and irreducibly a failure of man-ness. There is a burden to bear, if we take the concept of nature seriously. It must inform our nurturing. It must reveal its

own imperfections. But if we're going to carry a burden, let's make it a worthwhile one.

This leads to a final, though interrogative, point. One might ask, "How does all this relate to the cultural program of 'reconditioning' male desire? Are there grounds to develop an alternate form of such 'reconditioning,' one which takes its bearings from nature, and models its nurturing according to the patterns of participation and imitation? What can be *done*?" A proposal of this sort cannot—must not—be seen or appropriated as simply a rival ideological possibility, which, for all its pretensions to rationality, is still just a counter-strike, one more tired exercise of the flagging will to power. To the contrary, any practical efforts should reflect the core of this thesis: the notion of man-ness rooted in nature and made more visible through nurture is *not* itself a conceptual instrument of male domination. Participation—nature's existential center—is fundamentally anti-domination. It is not exhaustive or exclusive, nor can it be proprietary or domineering. Likewise, imitation requires humility, restraint. These notions have to underlie our concept of man-ness. Lastly, the paradigm of fathers and sons doesn't presume that it's naturally, necessarily, and in all ways perfect, but it does presume that the truth of nature can become visible and its perfection desirable, even if such a goal calls, ultimately, for a nurture that is above nature.

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