

## МОРАЛЬ, ПОЛИТИКА, ОБЩЕСТВО

*Michael H. Mitias*

### GENESIS OF HUMAN VALUES

**Michael H. Mitias**, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy. Millsaps College. 1701 North Str., Jackson, MS, 39210, USA; e-mail: hmitias@gmail.com

The thesis I elucidate and defend in this paper is that human values come into being as an existential response to the peremptory desires, or basic human urges, that constitute the essential structure of human nature, or the human essence, and that human nature exists as a potentiality in the formal organization of the human body. Implicit in this thesis is that an adequate understanding of the phenomenon of value should be based on a reasonable examination not only of its instantiation in aesthetic, moral, or cultural objects or activities but also on the dynamics of its genesis. We cannot comprehend a phenomenon in the fullness of its being adequately unless we comprehend it in terms of its structure, assumptions, effects, and the conditions under which it comes into being. The paper consists of two parts. In the first part, I discuss the concept of potentiality with particular emphasis on what it means for human nature to exist as a potentiality in the formal organization of the human body. In the second part, I argue that human nature is essentially a power. Its basic structure consists of peremptory desires: intellect, affection, and volition. Their living unity comprises the essential structure of human nature. The objects at which these desires aim are human values: aesthetic, religious, cognitive, moral, cultural, and individual values. They emerge as potentialities in the human body, as schemas in human experiences, and as meaning in human life.

**Keywords:** value, human nature, potentiality, emergence, experience, human meaning

**For citation:** Mitias, M.H. “Genesis of human values”, *Filosofskii zhurnal / Philosophy Journal*, 2025, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 163–177. (In Russian)

### Introduction

In their endeavor to inquire into the nature of human values, axiologists begin by reflecting on a sphere of value that figures prominently in human experience, such as religious, moral, intellectual, social, economic, political, or aesthetic experience. Ethicists theorize on the nature of moral values, aestheticians on the nature of beauty or aesthetic values, theologians on the nature of religious values, political philosophers on the nature of human well-being and the conditions of social progress, and economists on the nature of economic values. An analysis of value in one of these areas of human life frequently amounts to a theory or conception of value, as if the theory is comprehensive and exhaustive in its function as a principle of explanation. However, one wonders whether

a reasonably constructed theory of morals or any other sphere of human values, taken singly, can, in principle, provide an adequate explanation or analysis of what it means for something to be a human value. For example, the ethicist restricts her inquiry to questions such as what makes a law, situation, institution, person, or act moral. What does "moral" signify? What is the basis of moral principles? How can we establish the validity of a moral judgment? We encounter a similar approach in the other areas of value and value experience. Although a comprehensive theory of the nature of one value may be meaningful, enlightening, satisfactory, and logically compelling, it would not, I submit, be adequate if it does not provide an adequate understanding of the nature of value in the fullness of its being as a human phenomenon. Regardless of whether they are taken singly or collectively, instantiations of a concept, or schema, of a value, the way it is disclosed in concrete human experience cannot by itself reveal the nature of the depth of the inexhaustive possibilities of realizations implicit in the concept or schema, or the value primarily because any one of them is general and therefore a potentiality for limitless realization. The inexhaustibility of a value as a schema reflects the inexhaustibility of the possibility of types of value and valuation inherent in the human essence as a potentiality.

An adequate comprehension of the phenomenon of value should be based on a reasonable grasp of not only its instantiation in the various domains of value experience or in the way it reveals itself in them but also on its genesis, that is, on its source and stuff that makes up its essential structure as a phenomenon. Value experience, as I shall momentarily discuss, is an integral element of human experience not only because the activities that make up the structure of human life, in general, are inherently conscious and purposeful but also because the concept of purpose implies deliberation, selection, evaluation, and a sense of value. Value is the basis of purpose. No matter its kind, purpose as well as the process of its realization are embodied in the stream of human experience individually and collectively. A reasonable account of this two-fold process is a necessary condition for an adequate understanding of the phenomenon of value.

Moreover, achieving this understanding without a serious grasp of the roots from which value comes into being is extremely difficult and, I think, impossible. The point that merits special attention is that we cannot comprehend any phenomenon adequately unless we comprehend it in terms of its origin, assumptions, and the activity of its realization in concrete experience. It derives its being from this origin, after all! Ontologically speaking, the essential nature of a cause, or some of its basic aspects, is, to a large extent, immanent in its effects. Do we not acquire a significant measure of understanding the nature of the sun by a scientific examination of the light it emits? Do we not derive ample knowledge of a dead culture by an examination of its cultural achievements in the domain of art, religion, technology, science, and cultural achievements? It would, I think, be plausible to argue that a reasonable knowledge of the origin of value as a phenomenon is a necessary condition for the possibility of an adequate account of its nature.

Furthermore, in all its concrete dimensions, humanity is a value reality: the human as such comes into being in the medium of realized value. This is the primary reason why the central types of human experience exemplify the thrust – aim and drive – of the values that underlie all the types of experiences people undergo in the course of their theoretical and practical lives. Again, can we speak of types of value if they do not share the same essence or nature or if

they do not arise from the same source? Religious, moral, political, aesthetic, and cultural values are generically different from each other, and yet they are identical by the fact that they are types of value. What is the basis of this identity? In what sense are they modes of value experience? How does value arise in human experience as a living reality in the course of value experience? There is no reason to argue the way Plato did that natural and artifactual objects derive their identity from a particular universal, although most, if not all, philosophers ever since the Enlightenment abandoned this mode of explanation simply because Plato's view of universals is epistemologically and metaphysically untenable<sup>1</sup>. We can say that his view stands on its head; accordingly, it would be appropriate to let it stand on its feet and palpably argue that various values arise from a primordial source of value, that they derive their identity as values from this source, and that their concrete realizations in experience are instantiations of these values. This argument warrants reflection on the phenomenon of value in the fullness of its being, that is, from the standpoint of its origin, structure, and effects.

The thesis I will clarify and defend in this paper is that values come into being as an existential response to peremptory desires inherent in the human essence. They are not only ingredients of human experience but also their foundation. These desires are the reason for being of the values. Delete them from the sphere of human living, and you delete humanity as a real phenomenon. Implicit in this proposition is the idea that human nature is a reality in the sense that it exists as a potentiality in the formal organization of the human body and comes to life as realized value in experience. How? In my attempt to defend this proposition, I shall first advance a concept of the human essence as the ultimate source of everything human in our lives. In this context, I shall discuss the concept of potentiality with particular emphasis on what it means for human nature to exist as a potentiality. Second, I shall argue that the human essence is essentially a power, an impulse for being according to its nature. Its structure consists of five basic peremptory desires, which can be viewed as capacities, drives, or urges. Their living unity constitutes the structure of human nature. These desires are entirely telic in character. The objects at which they aim are values. Third, human beings live in two realms: the first is natural, and the second is human. The first is the realm of nature, and the second is the realm of realized human values. These values exist in the world as human achievements.

## A Concept of Human Nature

An inquiry into the nature of human values should, I submit, proceed from an adequate conception of human nature and, more concretely, from the *phenomenon* whose presence in a reality makes it a human reality. Philosophers have been in the habit of asking questions such as, what makes an act, an object, or a situation moral, religious, aesthetic, or political? In raising these and similar types of questions, they seek an understanding of the phenomenon that makes the reality moral, religious, aesthetic, or political. Although these qualities do not exist as ready-made objects of perception for our sensibility or intellect, the way trees or rocks, or the way sensual qualities exist; nevertheless, they are as real as

---

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 100c–101c.

the reality of the objects to which they belong<sup>2</sup>. For example, we seek an understanding of the type of quality that makes an object aesthetic because aesthetic qualities such as grandeur, tragedy, or magnificence are possible objects of experience and because we deem them desirable and important or significant. Similarly, philosophers ask with irresistible curiosity or concern, what makes an organism a human being? This question calls for urgent consideration not only because people are self-conscious beings and possess a sense of curiosity and a desire to know but also because self-understanding is indispensable for meeting their needs, desires, and dreams. Any type of discourse about the quality, aspect, or reality that makes people human beings, that is, the human dimension of their being, is a discourse about the dimension that distinguishes human beings from the rest of the animal species.

Broadly, the nature of an object is the source of its identity. It is the basis of classifying it as a *kind* of object. To know the nature of an object is to know the nature of the reality that gives it its identity. We may refer to it as “essence” primarily because it consists of essential, constitutive, and generative powers or elements. Accordingly, it is the basis of its definition. Cognizing the identity of an object is, in effect, cognizing the essential structure of its essence, and to cognize its essence is to apprehend the constitutive features and elements that make up the unity of its essence or, put differently, to apprehend the unity of its differentiae. The essence of an object shines through this unity. For example, a manikin is not a human being, although it appears to be one. But if by a magical or supernatural act, it is endowed with the essential features that constitute the human essence, which necessarily shines through its appearance, we can interact with it as a human being. Again, whether it is a particular rock, lion, or tree, we know its identity by an apprehension of its differentiae, or essence.

However, the essence of an object is not merely its appearance or the way it is apprehended in ordinary or mental or sensual perception, or simply its differentiae, for the appearance is a necessary condition for its existence as well as its perception but includes the appearance; on the contrary, the appearance is an integral part of the essence of the object as an integrity. We do not, and cannot, experience the differentiae apart from all the elements that make up the appearance. This is why it is appropriate to say that the essence *shines in and through* its appearance. This claim is based on the fundamental assumption that the essence of objects is not always given in the fullness of their being in ordinary mental or sensual perception. Let me illustrate this point with an example. We can say that matter is the essence of physical objects, but then, what is matter? We may begin with the given or perceptible features of the object, for instance, a rock, that is perceivable by the five senses. Can we say that the material essence of the rock is these features? No. The types of physical objects that make up the scheme of nature are both limitless in number and different in kind. The elements and features of water are different from the features of rocks. Again, the objects that make up the class of rocks and those that make up the class of water are variable. However, although physical objects exist and have different types of identities, they share one essence by virtue of which they are categorized as “physical objects.” As the history of science from the times of Democritus to the present shows, as a reality, matter is an unusually complex structure

<sup>2</sup> See Mitias, M. “What Makes an Experience Aesthetic?”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1982, Vol. 42, No. 2, pp. 157–169.

composed of a diversity of elements. It took scientists 3000 years of painstaking research to discover most of the elements that constitute the structure of matter. The history of physical theory is a history of a growing and developing knowledge of this structure. To a large extent, most of these elements are not directly given to ordinary mental and sensual perception, that is, as parts of the given appearance of the physical object. Yet, they are constitutive of their appearance, for they appear to the scientist under certain perceptual conditions. These elements are not restricted to what scientists discover by means of their instruments and mathematical computations or the way people perceive or identify them in ordinary experience. This is why it is plausible to say that the essence of an object shines in and through its appearance.

The point that deserves special mention in view of the analysis of these two examples is that the essence of an object is the basis of our cognition of its identity. Any talk about it is tantamount to talking about its nature. This is why I feel justified in using “essence” and “nature” interchangeably. This approach to the concept of essence, which is Aristotelian in character, obviates the need to take into consideration the various views of “essence” and “nature” that dominated philosophical speculation from the days of Plato and Aristotle to the second half of the last century. Its field of reflection is the natural and artifactual objects people create and interact with during their theoretical and practical lives.

However, unlike natural and artifactual objects, human nature does not exist in the world as a kind of given object that exists as an individual identity the way a tree, a car, or an artwork does. In our search for it, we do not encounter it anywhere, either in the sphere of the mind or in the scheme of nature. Nevertheless, it is as real as the reality of the tree, the car, or the artwork not only because it is the source and foundation of the realm of humanity in the amazing richness of its concretizations but also because it is omnipresent in this realm and the source of the identity of every object in it. It is at once embodied in and shines through these objects. Its presence in them is what endows them with a human character. However, if human nature is real, and it is, it should be treated as a *nature*, therefore as a type of reality, although it is not given as a ready made reality; but if it is a nature, we should be able to reflect on it the way we reflect on any other type of reality, examine its structure, and articulate a conception of it. Once more, if it is a reality but does not exist directly to our faculty of reflection, where are we to look for it or identify it? In what sense is it an object of reflection?

Broadly, we examine the nature of the human essence the way we examine the nature of any type of *embodied reality*. For example, the beauty of an artwork is embodied in the formal organization of the artwork. The beauty of the work comes to life in the process of the aesthetic experience. The beauty shines through the dynamic interrelatedness of the elements that make up the aesthetic structure of the work, and the beauty we experience is always the beauty of a particular artwork. However, when we turn our attention to the human essence, we discover that it is embodied in three basic types of reality, each one of which is a class of various objects: first, the individual human being as a cognitive subject; second, the multitude that comprise the human beings in the past and present, and third, the history of human civilization, viz., the works or achievements of human beings in the past six millennia. Although these achievements are different in particulars and types, they are human achievements by virtue of the fact that they embody one and the same essence. This essence shines through their structural form as their distinctive quality.

First, I know what it means for a reality to be human by an examination of my inner, or subjective, self. My body, every experience I undergo, and every action I perform or artifact I create embodies the flare of the human essence that pulsates in every element of the work I accomplish, produce, or create. Beginning with oneself in our attempt to explore the nature of the human essence is not only natural but also reasonably reliable because the structure of my being is given directly to my inquiring mind. But no matter its resourcefulness, we cannot, in this kind of inquiry, be contended with the knowledge derived from self-examination because the individual self is just one reality in which the human essence is embodied. As we shall presently see, this essence is an inexhaustible possibility for realization in different forms and ways. Do we not encounter it in every element of the realm of humanity? Does the human individual not reveal her humanity in limitless forms and ways? Does the creative act of the human individual recognize any limit of envisionment or imagination?

The second type of reality we should consider as a source of our knowledge of the human essence is the plentitude of human beings in their various domains of experience everywhere in the world with a special focus on what they do and how they think, feel, desire, and make decisions primarily because the human essence reveals itself in their subjective world and objectively in their actions and achievements. Every human being is a center of human presence. She is a drop of human life. This drop is a human world. It is private, subjective, and confidential, but as a living world, she reveals herself in her various actions and achievements. Do we not constantly interact and observe other human beings in the sphere of the family, society, workplace, school, religious places of worship, and every institution of the state? Do we not discern the depth and versatility of their humanity in their actions and attainments? How can we achieve this discernment if the humanity we comprehend is not the same humanity we comprehend in the privacy of our souls?

But, third, the fundamental insight implied in the preceding remark, and which functions as an assumption, applies with greater lucidity in our attempt to acquire an adequate understanding of the human essence, when we move our attention to the actions and achievements that make up the essential structure of human civilization. In this realm, we do not observe or interact with human beings individually or collectively, but with their deeds and achievements. What are these deeds and achievements? From one vantage point, we can say that this world is a macroscopic extension of what people do, seek, and achieve, but with one exception. The world of human civilization is an amazing mosaic of universal and significant human achievements, those that matter to human beings in the course of realizing their life projects everywhere in the world. Generally, those achievements reflect the peremptory desires that constitute the human essence. They reflect what human beings can do and create. If we examine these achievements, we discover that they are works of science, philosophy, art, religion, technology, and social organization. We can plausibly assert that the nature of the world of human civilization is the world of the human being writ large mainly because the humanity revealed in them is the humanity of the human individual. We can intuit the dynamics of the human essence, which throbs in the bosom of the human individual, in the story of human civilization. Do we not acquire a depth of self-understanding the more we explore the nature of human achievements in the various fields of human experience? Is the history of these achievements not a mirror in which we see a magnification of our individual

selves? What is the aim of education but the growth of self-understanding? Do we not assume in pursuing this aim that this type of understanding is a necessary condition for achieving our happiness or well-being?

A critic who has been following the thread of my discussion would now intervene: "Can the humanity that is revealed in the cognitive subject, other human beings, and the history of civilization disclose the nature of the human essence in the fullness of its being? How can we say that this essence reveals itself in these three types of reality if we do not assume (1) that the human essence is a subject that presides over the creation of this world and (2) that every human being is a microcosmic subject that presides over its actions, creations, and management of its life? If the human as such is real, it must exist as a reality, and if it manifests itself similarly everywhere in the world, it must be universal – what is the ontological status of the human essence? In what sense is the human individual a human subject if we say that it inheres as a potentiality in the formal organization of the human body, which is a natural reality?"

This line of reasoning, as well as the questions it implies, is reasonable. The countless ways in which humanity is revealed in human achievements cannot suddenly surge into being *ex nihilo*. On the contrary, they are inherently telic, i.e., purposeful, which necessarily implies a power or an agent that consciously, knowingly, and pointedly creates them and underlies their existence. This inference is, first, logically warranted by the fact that every mode of human being and every type of its manifestation is essentially artifactual. The concept of artifact implies the concept of an artificer. Humanity is not a natural reality, although nature is its home; it is a created reality. Accordingly, it is appropriate to inquire into the nature of the agent or subject that creates it. Second, the human realm does not, and cannot, exist apart of human beings. If, perchance, they cease to exist, the human world ceases to exist. We not only experience this world as a created reality, but we also experience ourselves as its source. We may argue, as I have been doing, that the human being is its source; still, it is critically important to explore the nature of this source because, as the present analysis shows, the human subject as a creative power is not given to the world as a ready made reality but as a potentiality. When I encounter a human, I do not perceive or discern a cognitive or human subject. All I perceive or discern is a lump of flesh organized in a certain way and moves about in a strange way. What is the nature of the power that makes it move about the way it does?

Although the human essence does not exist concretely as a natural or metaphysical reality anywhere in the universe, as I indicated a moment ago, nevertheless, it exists as a drop of potentiality in the formal organization of the human body; and as a concrete potentiality, in the sense that it is an identity, it exists as a creative, formative, and productive power, that is, as a subject that administers the process of its realization purposefully and volitionally. I characterized it, albeit metaphorically, as a "drop" not only to avoid referring to it as an object, since it is essentially a power but to accentuate the fact that it is also a burst of life and as such, a thrust for being – for continual growth and development in the process of realizing itself as an individual human reality. We may, moreover, characterize it as an "*elan vitale*", a kind of source or *arche* that is formless yet capable of giving rise to a multitude of forms in a variety of ways. These ways of characterizing it are consistent with the being and logic of power as a natural human phenomenon. Is it an accident that philosophers from the days of Plato and Aristotle to the present viewed it as spirit, soul, reason, self, or some

kind of reality that is not physical in nature? This is why it is justifiable to refer to it as a flare, flame, burst, drop, or even as a sun.

Now, what do we mean when we say that the human essence exists concretely as a power inherent in the formal organization of the human body? How does it come into being as a cognitive subject, one that thinks, feels, desires, wills, and acts? Does it exist in some organ or some corner of the body as a lump of flesh? No. No matter its kind, as a power, potentiality does not exist as an independent object. It inheres in the body as an organic whole. It emerges as an identity from the way the human body is organized, unlike the way the body of any other animal organism is organized. It is reasonable to say that it inheres in the dynamics that enable the body to function as a kind of reality the way the aesthetic object, or the human world, of an artwork emerges from the dynamic interrelatedness of the representational elements that constitute its substance as an artwork in the process of the aesthetic experience. The way of organization or relatedness of the various parts of the human body is the womb from which the human essence emerges as a distinctive reality. The event of emergence occurs the moment the human being opens her eyes to the world in the morning and passes into deep sleep the moment it closes them in the evening. This occurrence marks the emergence of consciousness. The human being functions as a cognitive subject and acts from the humanity that constitutes the powers that inhere in her being as a potentiality. The body that was dormant when it was asleep functions according to the will of the cognitive subject the moment it becomes conscious of itself. Our knowledge of it, which is based on self-examination, is very limited. Which cognitive subject can we trust? Although the dynamics of its emergence are shared by all human beings, its details are still the subject of scientific and philosophical study.

The emergence of consciousness is, in fact, the emergence of the human subject that can act according to laws inherent in its being. What emerges is a flare of power. This power does not exist in the body as a physical constituent but in and through the body and functions, not according to the laws that govern the activities of the body as a natural object but as an instrument of the human essence that is immanent in it. This is why we can say that the emergence of the cognitive subject spiritualizes, or humanizes, the human body which it inhabits. The body is transformed into an objectification of the will of the human subject. As a human essence, the subject exists in its objectified mode of being, and the body exists as a human reality. When I stand before a human being as a human subject with the intention of having a conversation with her, do I stand before a mere lump of flesh, or before a human subject? Do I see her merely as a body but primarily as a human reality? On the other hand, do I act as a lump of flesh, or as a human subject? On the contrary, do I not feel that her humanity shines through every part of her body and every bodily gesture she makes? Even when men and women sometimes see each other as sexual objects, do they not engage in this kind of seeing as human realities? Would any one of them treat the other as a manikin or as a biotically engineered being?

"It seems to me," my critic would at this point of my discussion interject, "that although succinct, your account of the emergence of consciousness is consistent with the recent findings of neuroscience. But these findings are, as far as I know, infant because they do not explain the emergence of the human subject as a cognitive subject and especially as a unique type of reality. I tend to think that the human phenomenon is irreducible to a physical phenomenon, which is



the domain of physical science,. But the human as such transcends, in its existence and nature, the method of the empirical scientist. How can you explain, if you can, the emergence of human reality from the human body, which is essentially a material object? The emergence of self-consciousness seems to be a necessary condition for the existence of the human subject, but is it a sufficient condition? How can we explain the leap, or transition, from the material to the human? This question is a request for an explanation of the nature of the human essence that inheres as a potentiality in the formal organization of the human body, which is material in nature, giving rise to an essence that is not material.” My immediate response to this question is yes. Let me explain and defend this answer.

I shall first point out that the bifurcation of reality into two distinct types, physical and human, according to which neither one is reducible to the other, or there cannot be continuity between them, has been unduly exaggerated and, I think, mistaken. This distinction is philosophically and probably scientifically useful as a basis of explanation, for it enables us to classify the types of objects that make up the human and natural worlds, but it is not consistent with human experience on the ground of living reality where the human and material not only intersect existentially but are continuous with each other. Does the human dimension of the human being not shine in and through the human body? As Schopenhauer argued in detail, in *The World as Will and Representation*, the body is an objectification of the human will. How can that which is natural be transformed into a reality that is not only an image but also the actual reality of the human will? Is this type of transformation not an essential aspect of human experience? Let me illustrate the significance of this foundational intuition with an example<sup>3</sup>.

Let us ask, what makes an artifact art? Most aestheticians would readily say that the presence of aesthetic qualities in the work is what makes it art; it comes to life as a non-physical quality in the aesthetic experience. But what is the nature of these qualities? How do they exist in the artwork which is given to our sensibility merely as a physical object? Can we experience them by anyone or a combination of the five senses? No. Again, how do they exist in the artifact?<sup>4</sup> Broadly, we can plausibly ascertain that they come to life as non-physical qualities in the aesthetic experience, that is, when we perceive the work *aesthetically*. First, aesthetic quality is a human quality; it does not exist in the artwork as a sensual element or as a constituent of its physical dimension, and yet, it exists in it, but how? I submit that it exists in it as a potentiality inherent in the dynamic interrelatedness of the elements that make up the work as a representation. Can it come to life in the aesthetic experience if this type of potential does not inhere in the formal organization of the representation or if it cannot be realized in the aesthetic experience under certain conditions of aesthetic perception? Moreover, we experience it as a quality of the artwork, not merely as a subjective feeling. How does it move from the physical object into my experience as a human quality? Again, in what sense or mode does it exist in the physical representation? As I have just indicated, a plausible answer to this question is that it exists not directly in the representation but as potentiality inherent in its formal organization. Artistic form is what artists create – pure form. The form of an object is

<sup>3</sup> Schopenhauer, A. *The World as Will and Representation*. New York, 1966, p. 245 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Mitias, M. *Creativity and Aesthetic Theory*. London, 2022, pp. 69–90.

the language the object speaks – expresses or communicates. The essence of this type of creation consists of translating the artist's vision, emotion, feeling, or experience during the creative process into a non-ordinary language: form. The form is given in the representation, but its mode of organization is not. The capacity of a human emotion, idea, mood, or state of mind to be embodied in a certain formal organization, which is sensible, is, it seems to me, a clear case in which the intersection between the physical and human becomes a continuity in the aesthetic experience: the physical and human are fused and transcended into a unique category or type of reality, viz., experience, and more concretely human experience. When I listen to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony aesthetically and move into the depth of the world of joy that unfolds in my experience, can I be aware of, sense, intuit, or in any way perceive, anything in my physical environment, including my body, and can I be aware of any psychological or intellectual states of mind, or anything that is not an integral part of the unfolding of the world of the music? Am I not one with the music when I am having this type of experience? Is this moment not a flare of experience, of life, of being that transcends the physical and psychological? If you ask me to describe my experience, can I describe it? No, not literally. All I can do is smile and ask you to listen to the symphony aesthetically. How can I describe it if my experience is neither mental nor sensual? But one in which the physical is humanized and the human materialized?<sup>5</sup>

### A Concept of Potentiality

However, my critic would remind me that the real question is whether the human essence, which is irreducible to physical terms, can emerge from a physical reality such as the human body. My immediate response is, why not? I have discussed a few examples in which the human emerges from the material. Now I would like to direct my critic's attention to the scheme of nature, which exists to our sensibility as an amazing web of species and sub-species. If we take into consideration the recent findings of biological science, we can characterize this scheme as a process of creative advance, in the sense that it is an evolutionary process. Biological species emerge from existing biological species under certain natural conditions. These conditions are creative in character. The newly emerging species always exists as a potentiality in the species from which it emerges. Can a species such as lions emerge from a species such as water or apple trees? The potentiality of any species or object inheres in the formal organization of the members of existing species or objects. Regardless of whether it is natural or human, the form of an object is a dynamic organization of elements. These elements are held together by virtue of the dynamic nature of the relations that constitute the structure of the object. Dynamism is a necessary condition for the possibility of any kind of creation and any kind of change. This aspect is inherent in the structure of reality and indispensable for the possibility of change. If, for some reason, it vanishes from the universe, material reality collapses. I would not be amiss if I said that it is not only the impetus but also the moving force of any type of change, evolution, development, or creation<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> See: Ibid., pp. 91–123.

<sup>6</sup> Cf.: Whitehead, A.N. *Process and Reality*. New York, 1929, pp. 21–26, 86, ff.

The kind of reality that emerges in the human or natural realm depends on the kind of potentiality that inheres in the object which gives rise to it. A certain species of apple trees is a potential for a variety of apple species. The new species emerges from an existing species of apples; it cannot emerge from a species of rocks or lions. It is critically important at this point of my discussion to spotlight the phenomenon of potentiality. What type of reality is this phenomenon? What do we mean when we speak of potentiality? The word “potentiality” is derived from the Latin *potens*, preposition of *posse*, “to be able”, which derives from *potis*, “able”. A potent object is powerful, and potentiality signifies power. Broadly, “potentiality” connotes “the state or quality of being potential; possibility of becoming, developing” (WNWCD). It does not exist as a perceptual mental or physical reality but as a latent – hidden or invisible – quality. Implied in this characterization is that potentiality does not exist in an object or individual reality but is always a quality inherent in an object. For example, we do not stumble on it in our observation of any natural environment. However, it does not inhere in the object as perceptible quality, which one can perceive by one or more senses, but in the *dynamic interrelatedness* of the elements that make up the essential structure of the object. It derives its identity from the nature of the object and the way it is organized or formed.

From the standpoint of biological science, the human species as we know it in its present stage of development has emerged from a less-developed human species, which, in turn, emerged from a less-developed species. There was a point of evolution at which the human species, which may be characterized as primitive compared to its present form, emerged from an undeveloped human species. Every new kind of species emerges, under appropriate material conditions, from an earlier or less developed or structurally different species. The impetus of development inherent in the dynamic interrelatedness of the essential structure of the previous species is the type of potentiality latent in this very structure. We may palpably theorize that the evolution of human nature as it now exists in the scheme of nature emerged from the potentiality that inhered in the same species. Although the human nature that prevails in the human species at present is, in principle, the same as the one that prevailed in the human species millennia ago, nevertheless, it is far more developed than it had ever been. I think it will continue to grow in complexity and creativity with the gradual growth and development of the human and natural conditions of life.

### **Structure of Human Nature: Emergence of Values**

The purpose of the preceding excursion into the concept of evolution, which is familiar to students of science, philosophy, theology, and ordinary people, is only to underscore the reasonableness of the claim that the human species can, in principle, emerge from a non-human species, thanks to the dynamical nature of reality. Now, we can ask in the spirit of my critic’s query, how does the essence which exists as a potentiality in the formal organization of the human body come into being as a living reality when it becomes conscious of itself and the world around it? Let me at once state that, as a flash, impulse, or burst of power, a potentiality is a possibility for a multitude, and in some cases as an infinite, number of realizations in various forms and ways. For example, a rock that sits on the side of a mountain has the potential for realization as

a building block, statue, monument, or weapon. This feature is an essential property of the concept, or universal, of any type of reality, to which I have already alluded in the context of my elaboration of the concept of human essence. We may view it as a source that gives rise to different types of objects or formations. In itself, it is pure and formless, but it is capable of being a condition for the possibility of a plentitude of formations. As a universal, it expresses a necessary condition for the creation of novel objects. The presence of these elements in an object is the basis of its inclusion in a class. For example, the different types of apples we see in the marketplace are apples because they possess the essential elements of the general or universal concept or phenomenon of "apple". As we see, the universal provides the basic structure that constitutes the identity of an object: to know an object is to know all the features it reveals in experience.

Now, when I say that the human essence emerges from the formal organization of the human body, I mean that its essential structure is a potentiality for the emergence of certain essential elements or functions, which are, in turn, potentials for the emergence of elements or powers that constitute the human essence. The possibility of this two-fold emergence in the evolution of the human species, which was not simple or straightforward, did not happen in one eruption, surge, or sudden appearance but gradually under certain material conditions. The essence that emerges from the way the human body functions and develops in accordance with the logic, powers, and demands of the human body; its domain action and creation is the body. It cannot transcend its physical and potential capacities. The identity of the human essence is an emanation from these capacities.

The time is now ripe to ask more directly, what are the elements that constitute the structure of the human essence as a potentiality inherent in the body? How do these elements come to life as concrete, active, and constitutive components of the living human individual? I raise these questions because the human essence exists as a power inherent in the formal organization of the body. However, it does not exist as a simple, or pure but, as I indicated earlier, as a possibility for realization in various modes of being. What are these modes? Let me first point out that the constitutive components of the structure of the human essence are emergent from the human essence as a potentiality; they express the fundamental impulse of the human body, viz., the impulse to life. Its presence in this kind of body in contrast to the rest of the animal family, transforms the biological impulse to life to a human impulse to life. Human beings do not merely aim to live as lumps of flesh but as *human lumps of flesh*. The body is transmuted into a means, or materiel, indeed into an extension of the human being as a human reality. A comprehensive examination of the three manifestations of the human essence, namely, the cognitive subject, the human other, and the history of civilization, will show that the constitutive elements of the human essence are five primary capacities, powers, or urges: thinking or intellect, feeling or affection, volition or choice as the basis of being or living.

These urges are thrusts – a cry for realization or being. We may characterize them as *peremptory desires* because they are insistent and cannot be resisted without the possibility of either failure, loss, or penalty, mainly because they are emanations from the potentiality that gives rise to the human essence. As urges, they are telic in character. They are types of appetite. The word "appetite" comes from the Latin *appetitus*, "eager desire for," that is, a desire to satisfy an urge or craving. Although they are distinguishable, they exist as the unity of the human

essence. They are interdependent. They imply each other. They derive their unity from the human essence as a potentiality.

Desire implies lack – need or want – and lack implies a craving for satisfaction. One desires something she does not have, and what she desires inheres in the essential nature of the desire as a craving. Essential or primary desires are needs; they are necessary for survival. One cannot feel satisfied or satiated until she fulfills her desires or, in some way, silences them. For example, the desire for food or drink is necessary for survival, the desire for social existence is necessary for the satisfaction of one's social nature or impulse, and the desire for knowledge, beauty, and love is necessary for human growth and development. We can choose to fulfill our desires in various ways and measures, but we cannot choose to ignore, neglect, or marginalize them.

Now what do the peremptory desires that make us the structure of human essence aim at? What do they want? It is, I think, appropriate to propose that the objects at which peremptory desires constitute the human essence, which inheres in the human body as a potentiality and aims *at values*. The crystallization of these values as principles of action marks the emergence of human nature as a type of reality that emanates from the formal organization of the human body. Intellect aims at knowledge or truth; affection aims at goodness, religiosity, and beauty; and volition aims at freedom and being. If we reflect on the driving forces of our lives theoretically and practically, we discover that they aim at these values and their derivatives. For example, the value of truth embraces values such as wisdom, sound judgment, open-mindedness, or integrity; goodness embraces values such as justice, friendship, honesty, or courage; beauty embraces values such as grandeur, tragedy, or loftiness; religiosity embraces values such as mercy, piety, humility, or faith; and freedom embraces values such as individuality, success, prosperity, or progress. If we turn our attention to the various domains of human inquiry, we discover that they comprise philosophy, science, religion, technology, and art. Philosophy aims at understanding the nature of the meaning of existence in general and human existence in particular; science aims at understanding the nature of matter, life, and consciousness; art aims to explore the nature of human and natural existence; and technology aims to translate the truth of the scientist, philosopher, and the artist into means of promoting the well-being of people in the various spheres of their lives. Any discourse about any dimension of human life is at the bottom, a discourse about these peremptory desires and the values they aim at.

## The Idea of Value

We can plausibly argue that human values emerge as existential responses to the peremptory desire that constitute the human essence because they are indispensable for human being and flourishing. They do not exist as finally definable aims because the spiritual and material conditions of life are variable and constantly changing. Human beings invariably strive to understand them and try to appropriate them for their growth and development. This is why the concept of value is treated as a general, universal, or schema. This way of viewing it is consistent, and in fact expresses, the meaning of potentiality as a possibility for inexhaustible realization in different forms and ways. Is there one way of loving a human being? Yet, all acts of love share the essential elements of the concept

of love as a schema: the desire for union, being-with, sharing, affection, or self-completion.

The word “value” comes from the French *valu*, preposition of *valooir*, “to be strong, be worth, and from the Latin *valere*, which derives from *wal*, “be strong”. I emphasize this twofold root of “value” to spotlight two of its connotations, importance and power. Value is not merely an aspect of an object but also a power, the kind of power that expresses the essential demand of the human essence and plays a creative, formative role in human experience. A valuable object does not only embody a certain value but also a power that inclines the human individual to seek or desire it. How can one aim at an object if it is not important and desirable? What is desire but an urge or a drive? Again, how can it perform this function if it is not capable of satiating the impulse to human growth and development? When I stand before an aesthetically beautiful artwork, do I not feel the power and significance of this beauty the moment I begin my aesthetic penetration of its artistic depth? When the human warmth of my friend enfolds me in a moment of loneliness or dejection, do I not feel the power and significance of his or her love for me? When I contemplate the amazing order of nature, do I not feel the power and significance of the being that shines through this order? By the same token, do I not feel the power and significance of these values?

The source of the feeling of self-fulfillment and elation or the feeling of forlornness and anxiety or absence originates from the fact that value is a potential meaning. *Realized value is realized meaning*. We feel satisfied when the value we seek is realized and frustrated when it is not. The experience and attainment of meaning are, as I have just indicated, the *raison d'être* of the being of the human as such, regardless of its kind or mode of being. They exist as responses to the peremptory desires that constitute the structure of the human essence because the process of their realization is the medium in and through which human meaning is attained. Having reflected deeply on the meaning of existence in general and the meaning of human existence in particular, Aristotle declared in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the highest end or good of human life is happiness<sup>7</sup>. However, we may ask ordinary people and philosophers, as he did, “What is the nature of happiness?” Well, what is happiness but the unity of the meaningful experiences human beings undergo during their theoretical and practical lives?

## Abbreviations

WNWCD – *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, ed. by M. Agnes, D.B. Guralnik, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Cleveland, OH: Webster's New World, 2001.

## References

- Hamilton, E. & Cairns, H. (eds.) *Plato, The Collected Works of Plato*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1961.
- Mitias, M. “What Makes an Experience Aesthetic”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1982, Vol. 42, No. 2, pp. 157–169.
- Mitias, M. *Creativity and Aesthetic Theory*. London: Cambridge Scholars Publ., 2022.
- Ross, D. (tr.) *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics*. New York: Regnery Publ., 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *EN*, 1095a–1102b7.

Schopenhauer, A. *The World as Will and Representation*, transl. from the German by E.F.J. Payne. New York: Dover Publications, 1966.

Whitehead, A.N. *Process and Reality*. New York: Macmillan, 1929.

## Генезис человеческих ценностей

**Майкл Х. Митиас**

Почетный профессор философии. Милсапс Колледж (Миссури, США). Millsaps College, Department of Philosophy. 1701 North Street, Jackson, MS 39210, USA; e-mail: hmitias@gmail.com

Тезис, который я разъясняю и отстаиваю в этой статье, состоит в том, что человеческие ценности возникают как экзистенциальный ответ на императивные стремления, или основные человеческие побуждения, составляющие базовую структуру человеческой природы, или человеческой сущности, которая заложена как потенциальность в конституции человеческого тела. Этот тезис подразумевает, что адекватное понимание феномена ценности должно основываться на разумном изучении не только его воплощения в эстетических, моральных или культурных объектах или видах деятельности, но и динамики его возникновения. Мы не можем адекватно постичь феномен во всей полноте его бытия, если не понимаем его с точки зрения его структуры, предпосылок, воздействий и условий, при которых он возникает. Статья состоит из двух частей. В первой части я обсуждаю концепцию потенциальности, уделяя особое внимание тому, что для человеческой сущности означает существовать как потенциальность в конституции человеческого тела. Во второй части я утверждаю, что человеческая природа – это, по сути, сила. Ее основная структура состоит из императивных стремлений: интеллекта, привязанности и воления. Их живое единство составляет сущностную структуру человеческой натуры. Объектами, на которые направлены эти стремления, являются человеческие ценности: эстетические, религиозные, познавательные, моральные, культурные и индивидуальные. Они проявляются как потенциальность в человеческом теле, как план действий в человеческом опыте и как смысл – в человеческой жизни.

**Ключевые слова:** ценность, человеческая природа, потенциальность, возникновение, опыт, человеческий смысл

**Для цитирования:** Mitias M.H. *Genesis of human values* // Философский журнал / Philosophy Journal. 2025. Т. 18. № 2. С. 163–177.