"For man, when perfected, is the best of animals; but, when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all"
- Aristotle

Aristotle's quote deals essentially with the question of human nature. It touches upon that timeless issue that has divided philosophers for centuries upon centuries; is mankind essentially good, by virtue of its intrinsic being, or do we have a natural inclination towards vice? Are we born virtuous, or must we depend upon the societal structures we have created? Aristotle subscribes to the latter view in his quote, maintaining that humanity's saving grace is the civilization and institutions it has developed – its "law and justice". Without such society, left solely to his own devices, he believes man is the "worst [animal] of all".

As mentioned, this is a topic that has been thoroughly debated throughout the ages, and there have been many who have both agreed and disagreed with Aristotle. Different viewpoints have varied according to which period and philosophical ideology the question has been discussed in light of – depending on if we're talking about the Middle Ages or The Enlightenment, in religious terms or humanistic ones. Therefore it can be fruitful to first take a brief historical overview in order to gain a broader perspective on the issue.

Starting in Aristotle's time, antiquity, it's hard to discern the same sort of dogmatic consensus on the issue that we will see became more apparent later on. However, it was still a widely held belief both in ancient Greece and Rome that man lived a virtuous life only if he dedicated himself to the society of which he was a part of. In Athens, for example, it was expected that every free citizen with the right to vote did so, and that he was present at all political gatherings. Every inhabitant was given a dedicated (and most often hereditary) role in society – being, say, either a farmer, soldier or politician – and he was expected to fulfill this role to the best of his ability in order to secure the stability of the city state. Thus we can picture society as a finely tuned machine in which each interlocking piece is a societal class fulfilling their duty, making it run smoothly as a whole. This is illustrated for instance in Plato's political philosophy, in which there is a finely balanced equilibrium between the farmers, soldiers and leaders, and the well-being of society depends upon every citizen carrying out his respective duty. Plato was no fan of the Greek democracy, but the same fundamental pattern is still evident here; a citizen has no real importance as an individual, instead it is only through fulfilling his societal responsibility that he becomes a worthy human being. Such a belief seems to lessen the natural virtue of man, rather placing in the society and institutions which he creates – as summarized in Aristotle's quote.

If we then generally speaking can say that man was defined in political terms in Antiquity, we can say that he in the Middle Ages was defined religiously. As the Church grew both in size and influence, it became the dominating aspect of every side of life. Man's ultimate loyalty now shifted from the society he was a part of to God and the Pope, and Christian doctrine, describing man as essentially sinful, became the dominating ideological belief. Mankind had failed God and was in debt to Him; the "fall of man" had lead to his corruption and we were now born as sinners. Laymen were taught that it was only through embracing Jesus Christ that they could redeem themselves and make up their debt. Such a belief is harsh in its condemnation of human nature, and seems to render man devoid of all intrinsic worth – a belief that is also apparent in this period's artistic output, where religious themes were the only

subjects deemed worthy to express. A complicating factor here, however, is that that Christian theology also maintains that man was created in God's image. Shouldn't this then instill in man a sliver of his goodness?

This is a thought that gained a wider following during the Renaissance and following Enlightenment where the pattern we have seen thus far – man deemed worthy only in the context of some bigger cause – is somewhat complicated. The Renaissance was the period where humanism was born, where one looked back to Antiquity's focus on life's more worldly and human aspects. In contrast to antiquity, however, a blossoming belief now became that mankind was worth studying in light of itself and no longer solely by virtue of his societal role. Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci celebrated the aesthetic beauty of the human form, while Erasmus of Rotterdam promoted mankind's virtues. Later on, during the Enlightenment, Rousseau longed for the "noble savage" who was "uncorrupted" by what he believed to be modern society's oppressive influence on mankind. This isn't to say that the philosophical attitude had changed completely – let us not forget Thomas Hobbe's famous and damning quote on life in a pre-civilized stage (which I won't quote myself in fear of inaccuracy) – but the point is that what had once been a one-sided belief in the immorality of man now became diversified and complicated.

Now concluding our short time travel, through the course of the 19th and 20th century towards contemporary time, the picture changed yet again with the birth of existentialism. While Kierkegaard still concluded that God was the ultimate answer to man's anxiety, by the time of Sartre the individual was dominating the centre of philosophical enquiry. Now, however, it's important to note that the normative condemnation or celebration of man started to recede. While earlier philosophers had injected into the discussion of the nature of humanity value-laden terms and beliefs, either religious or political ones, one now started to conclude that man simply *is*. As Sartre said, man is "doomed to freedom" and it is only through the choices he makes and action he takes that he can affirm himself as a human being. It is man who has the ultimate responsibility for his own life, and he is neither essentially good nor evil, but rather full of infinite possibilities. This train of thought was developed even further with post-modernism's radical individualism, where Lyotard's "small stories" put the final nail in the coffin for an overreaching, all-encompassing theory as to what human nature really is.

We have thus taken a brief and simplified look through the ages to see how man has been regarded in different times. What was the point of this? Merely to list different philosophers and philosophies? No, the point is to illustrate the relativism and subjectivism of such a topic. For it's my (and many other's) view that each historical period's dominating philosophical belief is dependent upon the material circumstances it finds itself in. In the volatile and unstable situation of the Greek city states, for instance, utmost loyalty towards one's native state was required. In the sharp rivalry between warring factions the survival of a city state depended on its citizens carrying out their responsibilities towards it, and thus man was only worthy through his societal dedication. Likewise in the Middle Ages, amongst a often oppressed population, using God as a justification for the state of things helped secure the king's and nobility's power at the same time as religion provided consolation and meaning for what must have been a grueling and dreary existence for the general public. In the 20th century two world wars, the Holocaust and the realization of mankind's ability to annihilate itself created a social vacuum in which old values and norms lost their meaning. It showed reality in a fragmented and disjointed way, inspiring a disillusioned population to search for a new vocabulary and new forms of

expression. Thus Picasso's cubism was born, Schoenberg's atonality in music, Joyce's stream of consciousness and philosophy's gradual dismissal of normative stances. Such a pattern shows the constant and mutual relationship between historical reality and ideological belief, and it makes it difficult to unequivocally conclude anything on the subject of human nature. We will always regard the matter through our own historical lenses, informing our view with the reality we see around us – a reality that is constantly shifting and changing.

What then on a personal level? For me today, looking at the state of the world, it seems that the question of man's inherent goodness or evilness is becoming redundant. We can look at all the wars marking contemporary times, we can witness global warming, over-consumption and the increasing gap between the world's wealthy and poor and conclude that man is fundamentally egotistical and immoral. Or we can look at the incessant efforts to negotiate peace in those very same wars, the growing fight to combat global warming and international commitment to stimulate emerging economies and conclude that - despite being able to screw things up once in a while - man is intrinsically good. Being a product of my own time, it seems to me then, as mentioned, that the nature of humanity is a socially, politically and historically conditioned question where arriving at a final consensus is an unrealistic hope. In addition, even if we hypothetically were to find an "answer", what would this mean pragmatically? Would it help us solve the problems the world is facing? Concluding for example that we are "evil" – would that, for a lack of a better word, do any good? Or would it simply create a feeling of complacency, a sense of "what's the point anyway"? I believe it would, in the same way as concluding that we are fundamentally "good" could allow us to dismiss the evil that actually exists in the world, allowing us to give up the struggle to better our existence. The uncertainty we face in discussing this question doesn't afford us these luxuries, the tension it creates forces us instead to take responsibility for our actions and to always question our beliefs and motivations.

Nevertheless, such relativism does not mean that *respect* for humanity – whatever it is - is not required. We can acknowledge both man's virtues and vices and conclude that this is simply who we are; imperfect beings certainly, but still entitled to a meaningful existence. This is a humanistic view that has been anchored in many of today's modern democracies – from the French Revolution all the way to the U.N and its declaration of human rights – the very same institutions Aristotle instead believed man derived meaning from. I differ from him here in maintaining that it is *we* who give these *institutions* meaning; human "civilization" is an organized and systemized expression of what is on the purest level natural human behavior. The wish for stability and safety, freedom and liberty, meaning and purpose; all these things are basic human sentiments which are facilitated through the organization of states and nations - Aristotle's "law and justice" - and I believe they retain meaning only through carrying out this function. For what about nations which do not fulfill this responsibility? Iran, for instance, or North Korea? Can we say that these states merely through their legal status are what make man the "best of animals"? Or do they rather suppress that very creativity and uniqueness which allowed Aristotle to claim that position for humanity? I'm a subscriber of the latter view, believing that it is our human values that are instilled in the bodies we allow to govern us - not the other way around - and, in the vein of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, that these bodies are only just insofar as they promote these principles.

It is also worth noting that in the globalized world we find ourselves in, arbitrary state borders start to loose their meaning. We can now find belonging and

purpose not only in the nation we are a citizen of, but also in the international undercurrents of shared passions and interests that constantly flow through the Internet, TV and radio. Instead of meeting in the Senate to discuss the Empire's matters, each and every one of us can log in to an electronic forum and discuss, for example, philosophy with people of all different of nationalities. At the same time official state institutions are undermined as people from all over the world join together through these new modes of communication; we all remember last summer in Iran, where Twitter became the whole world's window into a country at the brink of revolution, or in China where dissident bloggers are a constant pest to the censorship and authorities. On such a note I would like to conclude affirming my belief that we are no longer given a purpose merely through our own country's needs and priorities but also through that trans-national faith in the value of humanistic pursuits - which are neither fundamentally virtuous nor sinful but rather of a reflection of man's conflicted and multifaceted nature. Thus, in an alteration of Aristotle's quote, I would say man is perfected simply when he is allowed to be man.