
Homo Curans

Dulcia sunt ficata avium sed cura gubernat.

Sweet are the livers of birds, but concern reigns.

Inscription from the Mithraeum beneath
the Church of Santa Prisca, Rome

AMONG THE HUNDREDS OF FABLES collected and revised by the Roman grammarian Hyginus (d. AD 17), one has proved to be particularly relevant among later poets and philosophers. The brief tale relates how Cura—a personification of “care,” “concern,” “anxiety,” or “trouble”—formed the first human being. Although many of the narrative’s details may be found in other mythic anthropogonies from a variety of cultures and traditions, Hyginus’s account is the only extant version that ascribes the creative role to an allegory of Care. When crossing a shallow river, Cura spotted the bank’s muddy clay, gathered it up, and molded it into a figure. She then asked Jupiter, who was presently passing by, to breathe spirit into her freshly crafted work. The god readily obliged, yet became angry when Cura expressed her desire to name the animated figure after herself. Jupiter felt instead that the honor should be his. The debate escalated when Tellus, Earth herself, emerged on the scene and insisted that the new creation bear her name. To resolve the issue, the three antagonists summoned Saturn, who immediately pronounced judgment:

Jupiter, since you have given the spirit, take the soul after death; Tellus, since she provided the body, should receive the body. And since Cura first molded him, let Cura possess him as long as he is alive; but since there is a dispute over the name, let him be called *homo*, since he appears to have been made from *humus*. (*Fabulae* 220)

Thus the fable that began with creation ends with the designation of a name, with the determination of a species. The first phase concerns being, the second involves language. With this combination of ontology and semantics or nature and convention, we obtain not only an etiological explanation for one question (Why is the word for “human being” *homo* in Latin?) but also a philosophical anthropology that folds one question (What is mankind?) into another (What is mankind called?).

Although distinct, these two areas of concern are related insofar as both revolve around the issue of gift. “Human being” (*homo*) is portrayed first and foremost as a recipient, as a creature endowed with multiple donations from the gods: a form, a body, a spirit, and a name. These provisions are not freely given but rather impose a series of obligations or debts. Divine expenditure in the past requires human compensation in the future; and in this myth the human is not lacking in benefactors to whom his very existence is bound by inevitable, fateful duty, if not guilt. For the most part, the terms of exchange established by Saturn are sufficiently clear: man will ultimately owe his body to Earth and his spirit to Jupiter of the sky. Death would appear to occasion the final reckoning and settle all accounts. Yet, unlike the first gift of creation, the second gift—the gift of a name—sparks a heated philological controversy among the gods, a dispute that is not as simple to reconcile. What obligation does a name incur? To whom or to what must man satisfy this debt? Can a designation, once ascribed, be returned to its source? And is the source itself—in this particular case, the source of concern—even nameable?

In terms of structure, the story of corporeal fabrication and subsequent animation is somehow deemed insufficient. The myth of mankind’s physical and spiritual origin presents a whole that contains a lack, one that requires a further step, a narrative supplement that closes off but also opens up the story. Once body and spirit have been coupled, a single name must be found, one that would presumably secure the identity of the newly composed creature. Through name, the physiospiritual dichotomy that inheres in the galvanized corpus can be further reinforced as a recognized entity. Upon forming her creature, Cura does not fail to take care of this task. It is, indeed, unthinkable that Care would ever be so careless.

Yet, the gift of the name ultimately imposed by Saturn, by a law from without, gives the creature over to exteriority, to the improper outside that frames and also contaminates every proper name. The inner being, constituted by a split—the split between body and spirit—will henceforth be assigned fresh dichotomies, unforeseeable divisions. For the name, which is always a name for others, draws mankind into history, into circulation. Once the creation story overflows into a story of nomination, humanity flows into an inscrutable, properly improper future. At the behest of Saturn, or perhaps Time itself, the vivified clay will be possessed by Cura—its being will be informed by Concern or Anxiety or Worry—but its name will be *homo*. In other words, its being will fail to coincide with its name. It may be that to live with Care is to suffer this non-coincidence wrought by the ongoing succession of time, which renders all identity, all selfsameness over time, worrisome.

Cura’s primary task is to unify. With muddied hands, she brings together the dual aspects, spirituality and materiality, that define the human condition. The conglomeration of Tellurian gravity and Jovian levity is indebted to the artistic and persuasive endeavors of divine maternal solicitude. Concerned

worry or even careful vigilance would seem to result from the attempt to keep together what would otherwise be separate. Still, human existence is traversed by a fragile caesura. If it is argued that all anxiety (*cura*) is ultimately an anticipation of death, this emotion could be specified as the fear that the corporeal and spiritual components of life will one day be torn asunder. For death is here defined as being either an inanimate body or an incorporeal spirit, as the state of being either a corpse or a god. Cura's competence—the capacity of care—to maintain heterogeneous qualities is a way to stave off both versions of human lifelessness.

Cura's creature is not named after Tellus or after Jupiter, presumably because Tellurian or Jovian existence would be no existence at all. Indeed, it would be a nonexistence, when the cadaver is absorbed back into the earth and the spirit goes on to reside in the invisible heavens. Hyginus proposes instead that human life—mortal life, one that lives in time and in time will pass away—falls directly under the governance of Care. This time-bound life of mankind, subject to contingency and impermanence, is a life with Cura, *cum cura*, fraught with disquiet, apprehension, and concern. Only in the perfect repose of death will humanity be without the anxiety that haunts its place in the midst of historical flux. It is only after death—*posthumously*—or at the end of history when humanity will be removed from Cura, apart from Care, *se-cura*. That is to say, at least according to this myth, it is only when man is no longer alive that he will achieve *security*.

Although the word does not appear in Hyginus's text, *securitas* is nevertheless implicit, insofar as it denotes a state of being removed from care. The word is transparent enough, featuring three distinct components: the prefix *sē-* (apart, aside, away from); the noun *cura* (care, concern, attention, worry); and the suffix *-tas* (denoting a condition or state of being). *Securitas*, therefore, denotes a condition of being separated from care, a state wherein concerns and worries have been put off to the side. Man will be literally secure when he is removed from Cura's governance, when his unified being is split apart, back into its discrete elements. As the story suggests, *securitas* describes either the cadaveric or the discarnate repose that is achieved post-mortem. With death, the constitutive conjunction of body and soul disintegrates. At this point, the gifts that constitute life are paid back to their donors. The delicate seam that carefully holds life together is always but a reminder of debts to be settled.

Cura represents this presentiment. She appears as an allegory of concern for mankind's future, for the destination that may be specifically understood as a future of loss, ostensibly the loss of the object for which Care cares. "As long as he lives," man lives with concern, predicated by mortality and finitude. To be entirely secure or carefree would require the negation of time itself, for it is in time that threats emerge, giving rise to fresh concerns. As Saturn's pronouncement suggests, man's removal from care—his security—is purchased with devitalization. All the same, the extreme cases that this myth posits need not be

understood in so stark a manner. Although *perfect* security—either the Tellurian security of perpetual peace or the Jovian security of eternal immortality—is mortally inaccessible, some measure of security is nonetheless possible in this life, if only by the fact that mankind is composed of earthly matter and heavenly spirit: gifts that grant a modicum of security, albeit provisional.

Hyginus's tale thus poses a series of crucial questions. Is the history of mankind's desire for security nothing other than the history of an ambition to evade time and its contingencies? Is the dream of being secure ultimately an expression of some death drive or nirvana principle, a wish to rejoin the silence of the tomb or the redemptive bliss of paradise? Must the will to security always imply a striving toward these modes of timelessness, a desire for refuge in the protected quarters of the grave or the impregnable fortress of the Emyrean, where, beyond the reach of time and its effects, one is at last safe from all harm, immune from every danger? Is the longing for security in fact a denial of our humanity, our *humility*? Or is it not rather informed by the recognition that any attainment of security in this life is necessarily limited, ephemeral, subject to change? If security promises to make us carefree, how can we avoid becoming careless? How could any measure of security be possible without vigilance, anticipation, and concern, without making calculations or weighing risks? How can one ever be without care without care?