

INTELLECT: MIND OVER MATTER

Mortimer Adler

CHAPTER ELEVEN:
ABOUT HOW THE PLURALITY OF CULTURES
SPRINGS FROM THE UNITY OF MIND

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There is another attack on the thesis that the human mind is the same in all human beings. This time the quarter from which the attack comes is mainly twentieth century cultural anthropology. It is aided and abetted by twentieth-century existentialism in philosophy. A leading French existentialist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, sums it up by saying that “it is the nature of man not to have a nature.” It follows, of course, that if there is no specific nature, which all human beings share in common, then it cannot be asserted that they all have a human mind that is the same for all of them.

At first sight, two things are strange about this denial of human nature. First, what is alleged to be true of man is not ascribed to any other species of animal life. Each has a specific nature commonly possessed by all members of the species and having all the species specific properties entering into the definition of the species. Why is the human species uniquely different from all other animal species by virtue of its not having a specific nature.)

Second, neither the existentialists nor the cultural anthropologists can deny the well-known facts of anatomy and physiology. There can be no doubt that, anatomically, members of the human species have a large number of species-specific characteristics: one nose, two eyes, the same number of bones and teeth, the same structure of brain and central nervous system, the same number of chromosomes in their cells, the same genetic code, and so on. The same thing is true physiologically. These common anatomical and physiological properties are so clearly defined that no one could mistake a human corpse, freshly deceased, for that of any other species of animal.

These things being so, how shall we understand the denial that there is specific human nature? The answer lies in the facts to which the cultural anthropologists call attention: the extraordinary variety of behavioral patterns to be found in all the tribes and other societies that constitute human associations, and in all the ethnic, racial, and national groupings that differentiate one set of human beings from another.

Not only do all these subsets of the human population differ in their customs, their manners, their practices, their observances and rituals, their institutions, their tastes in food and dress, their sexual proclivities, 'their taboos or inhibitions, their family organizations, their arts and crafts, their forms of play and amusement, and their means of military aggression; but they also differ in their beliefs and prejudices, in their style of thinking and in the logic of their thinking, the manner in which they rear their young and educate them, their medical practices in the treatment of diseases, their religious dogmas, and their philosophical assumptions.

The existentialist philosophers go one step further. With regard to all behavioral matters, if not in anatomy and physiology, each human being is free to project and create his or her own individual nature. Individual human existence comes first, not the human essence or nature. Given existence initially, each individual forges his or her own nature on the anvil of his or her freedom.

That is what existentialists mean when they say that each human being is not born endowed with a specific nature, comprised of definite behavioral tendencies or propensities, instinctual drives or needs. All are free from birth to make of themselves what they can and what they will.

If the cultural anthropologists attribute a different cast of mind or a different mentality to each of the major and minor subsets of the human population, the existentialists appear to go even further. They endow each individual with the freedom to shape the character of his or her own mentality.

The response to these sweeping negations of one human mind that is the same in all human beings must begin by conceding that all the behavioral patterns that differentiate one subset of Individuals from another, or even one individual from another, are of mental origin.

Since there are no instinctively determined patterns of human behavior, as there are in social insects and other lower animals; since

all human behavior is learned behavior, which is not the case in other animals—it follows that the way human beings have learned to use their minds determines how they behave. Their different styles of behavior reflect acquired differences in mentality—in the ways their minds have been shaped by experience and by nurture.

It would appear to be the case that this initial concession gives away the whole case. Why, then, are the cultural anthropologists and the existentialists wrong in their denial of a specific human nature and a common human mind shared by all persons regardless of the subset of the human population to which they belong and regardless of their idiosyncratic individuality?

The answer is that they have failed to distinguish between potentiality and actuality, between innate powers and acquired habits, and between habitual dispositions to act in a certain way and the particular actions that individuals, having the same innate powers and the same acquired habits, diversely perform. These incredible failures in their understanding of human behavior, due to their ignorance of analytical insights so fundamental in ancient and medieval psychology, underlie their erroneous denial of a specific human nature and a common human mind.

What I have just said also accounts for their failure to understand the one point that they correctly make: namely, that the human species uniquely differs from all other species of animal life in not having the same kind of specific nature that all these other species have.

The specific natures of all other animal species are not only determinate in the anatomical and physiological properties common to all members of each species, but they are also determinate with respect to the actual patterns of behavior with which members of each species are innately endowed.

While the human species is like other animal species with respect to specific anatomical and physiological features, it differs from all others strikingly in the field of behavior. With respect to behavior, what is an actual innate endowment in the case of all other animal species is, in the case of the human species, only an innate endowment of potentialities.

All human beings have the same set of potentialities for behavior because the specific constitution of the human mind consists of the same set of passive and active powers—to be acted upon and to act in a variety of ways. All human beings have the same natural de-

sires or needs, the same sensitive powers and powers of memory and imagination, and the same intellectual powers. These powers are the natural endowments that, along with common anatomical and physiological properties, constitute the specific nature of man.

The specific nature of the human species differs from the specific natures of other animal species by virtue of having behavioral potentialities or powers instead of behavioral actualities (i.e., actual patterns of behavior) among the set of attributes or innate properties that define the specific nature of the human species.

The innate nature of the human mind, consisting of these potentialities or powers, is the same wherever there are human beings—under all cultural conditions at all times and places. But that one and same human mind is nurtured differently under different cultural conditions. What the cultural anthropologists are describing when they report diverse patterns of human behavior in different subsets of the human population are all nurtural differences. These nurtural differences exist as acquired behavioral habits or dispositions. Underlying diverse habits are the same natural powers or potentialities.

Nurtural differences should never be interpreted either as natural differences or as a basis for denying the existence of a common nature. All the forms of racism and sexism with which we are acquainted have been prejudices bred by the error of attributing to nature what are only the products of nurture.


By correcting this error, Rousseau corrected one of Aristotle's most serious mistakes, the mistake of thinking that some men are by nature slaves. Those who are nurtured as slaves will appear to have slavish natures. Similarly, females nurtured as inferior human beings will appear to have natures inferior to males. It is this substitution of nurture for nature that causes the error made by cultural anthropologists and philosophical existentialists in the twentieth century.*

*For another discussion of this error, see *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (1985), chapter 8.

One more thing should be said on this subject. All the differences in the many, diverse conventional languages that manifest themselves in the ways that human beings express themselves are nurtural not natural differences. Such nurtural differences are superficial as compared with the underlying sameness of the human mind's natural powers. So, too, all culturally conditioned differ-

ences in human behavior are superficial nurtural differences as compared with the underlying sameness of specific human nature.

Here then is the correction of the mistakes made by cultural anthropologists in the twentieth century and by contemporary existentialists. To it must be added the correction, in the preceding chapters, of the mistakes made by contemporary philosophers of language and by the many forms of modern and contemporary idealisms.

There are still other matters concerning which ancient and medieval psychology give a much better account of the human mind than can be found in modern and contemporary psychology. That is mainly true with respect to man's intellectual mind, much less so with respect to the human senses, memory, and imagination. Hence, we turn now to the consideration of the powers of the human intellect. 

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