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GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

Mortimer J. Adler

PART X

Questions About Man and His World

99. THE IMMUTABILITY OF HUMAN NATURE

Dear Dr. Adler,

Realists or cynics often respond to plans to establish world peace or social justice with the remark, "You can't change human nature." What are the views of various schools of thought on whether human nature can be changed or not? If human nature is unchangeable, does that mean that social progress is impossible?

M.P.R.

Dear M. P. R.,

Western thought gives three main answers to the question about the constancy or immutability of human nature.

The first is the traditional view that men are essentially the same generation after generation. According to this view, the set of physical and mental characteristics which constitute the specific nature of man have not changed and will not vary as long as man is man and not another kind of creature. The reason human behavior always runs true to form is that it is determined by unchanging properties of human nature—the same mental faculties, the same emotional makeup. The individual may modify his inherited equipment in the course of his lifetime, but each individual starts out with the same basic equipment.

The second view follows from the evolutionary hypothesis which has dominated Western thought since the nineteenth century. According to this view, human nature has undergone an evolutionary development during the last eighty thousand years. The genetic constitution of man has been altered, and this has resulted in perceptible changes in man's body and probably also in his mind. Some exponents of this view believe that certain of these changes have taken place in the relatively short period of recorded human history and are still going on.

The third view is the historical or sociological view that what man is varies with the culture and society in which he lives. Some protagonists of this view believe that man's nature is formed by his social environment, and that man, in different epochs, is "the product of his times." Others believe that he can fashion his society and himself according to his will—"man makes himself." Contemporary existentialist philosophy, with its emphasis on man's power to create himself, has an obvious affinity with this school of thought.

Such views usually proclaim that man has no antecedent or independent nature, fixed for all time. Man has only a history and a constantly changing existence. This, by the way, is the central thesis in the Marxist theory of man.

There is a certain confusion about the saying, "You can't change human nature." It may simply express the traditional view that man, like any other species, has a nature that remains essentially the same as long as the species itself endures. Or it may express the conservative, pessimistic view that certain social evils, such as war, slavery, and poverty, are irremediable. Those who are hopeless about reforming these things blame their despair on human nature. The late John Dewey argued against such inferences in his *Human Nature and Conduct*. He held that social evils can be eliminated by giving a new pattern to basic human impulses, and by turning human activity into new directions.

On this point I tend to agree with John Dewey. I do not believe that age-old social evils such as war spring from something inherent in human nature. On the other hand, I agree with those who say that all the progress man can make comes from improving his institutions, not from perfecting his nature. It is society, not man, that is perfectible within certain limits. These limits are set by the unalterable limitations of man's nature.

For example, to say that man is by nature social means that man will always need to live in society. To say, furthermore, as Alexander Hamilton did, that men are not angels, is to say that human societies will always need government. In other words, man is by nature unfit for anarchy, and this will always be so, as long as man lives on earth. He can no more dispense with government than he can subsist without food or fly without mechanical means to carry him.

100. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEN AND ANIMALS

Dear Dr. Adler,

Is there any basic difference between men and animals, or is man an animal like all the others? Some people say that man is the only creature that can think and learn. But I don't regard this as a real distinction, since biologists and psychologists have demonstrated that animals can construct things and solve problems. I have known some very intelligent dogs and some very thoughtless hu-

man beings. What is the essential difference between man and the animals?

A.M.P.

Dear A. M. P.,

Until comparatively recent times, few philosophers doubted that man was essentially different from all other animals. In the great tradition of Western thought, from Plato right down to the nineteenth century, it was almost universally held that man and man alone is a rational animal. This philosophical view of man's distinctive nature accords with the Biblical view that man and man alone is created in the image of God—a person, not a thing.

Since the time of Darwin, the opposite view has come to prevail, not only among scientists but among the educated classes generally. The Darwinian theory of man's origin, as you know, is that man and the anthropoid apes have descended from a common ancestral form; and along with this view of man's evolutionary origin goes the view that man and the higher mammals differ only in degree. Thus, for example, instead of regarding man alone as rational, the evolutionists find the same kind of intelligence in man and other animals. Man simply has more of it.

You say in your letter that you think the traditional arguments for man's distinctive nature are weak, because animals as well as men can reason, because animals as well as men can make things, etc. Let me answer your question by defending the traditional point of view about man as a very special creature.

The strongest evidence that men have certain powers which no other animals possess in any degree whatsoever consists in the things which men can do but which other animals cannot do at all. One such indication is man's power of making things.

I know that bees make hives, birds make nests, and beavers make dams. But such productions are entirely instinctive on their part. A given species of bird makes its nests in the same way generation after generation. This shows that the nest is a product of instinct not of art, which involves reason and free will. In making houses, bridges, or any other of their artifacts, men invent and select. They are truly artists, as animals are not.

In addition, only men build machines which are themselves productive. Other animals may use rough tools, but no other animal

makes a die press which stamps out an indefinite number of a product when the raw materials are fed into it. This is another indication of man's special power as a maker of things.

You say that other animals can reason. In my opinion it is more correct to say that other animals can solve problems when they are confronted by the biological urgency of finding a way of getting what they need. All so-called "thinking" by animals is on this level. But no animal ever sits down to think, the way a philosopher or a mathematician does when he has no biologically urgent need to do so.

The fact that human thinking is discursive and involves language is another indication that it is quite different from animal problem-solving. Animals, of course, do make sounds and communicate their emotions or impulses to one another. But no animal communicates thought; no animal ever utters a sentence which asserts something to be true or false. Only a rational animal can do that.

I could go on and give you many other items of evidence that man has certain powers which no other animal possesses in the least degree. But I shall content myself with one more fact.

Man is the only animal with an historical development. Other animals may change in their biological constitution over the course of hundreds of thousands of generations; but such changes result entirely from changes in the germ plasm, which is the only thing that is transmitted from one generation to another. Men transmit ideas and institutions, a whole tradition of culture, from one generation to another, and it is this which accounts for the history of the human race.

In my opinion the empirical evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of the view that men are essentially different in kind from the brutes. Like the brutes, they, too, are animals. But unlike them, men are rational. This, of course, if true, would require us to reject Darwin's theory of man's evolutionary origin. But theories after all must be made to fit the facts, not facts theories.

101. THE PURPOSE OF LIFE

Dear Dr. Adler,

It seems to me that the most important question of all is the purpose of life. What are we doing here on earth? What is our des-

tiny? How do various thinkers approach this most urgent and baffling of all questions?

C. L. V.

Dear C. L. V.,

Let us begin by asking the purpose of the question about the purpose of life. What do men have in mind when they ask this question? Asking it is a peculiarly human phenomenon. Other creatures just exist and go on unquestioningly to pursue their natural ends—to be a tree or a bird or a stone. It is man's peculiar misery or glory that he perennially poses the question of the purpose of his own existence.

What, then, are men who ask this question trying to discover? Are they asking about the destiny appointed by God for man to achieve through his earthly existence? Does man have an ultimate goal beyond the sphere of his temporal experience? And if so, what must he do to attain it? The Christian doctrine of the Kingdom of God as man's ultimate destiny is one of the answers to the question.

Or are men asking whether human life can be made significant on earth by achieving all the perfections of which it is capable? In the philosophy of Aristotle, each kind of creature tends toward the perfection of its own nature. Thus, for man, the goal—the purpose—of life is to achieve the virtues that constitute happiness.

As against these theological and philosophical ideas of human destiny, our question may arise from a conviction of the purposelessness of the physical universe as a whole. We look out on the world around us and see nothing but a whirl of atoms in a meaningless void. Whether we see the physical world as chaotic and “chancy” or as an orderly cosmos, human life may still seem meaningless and valueless. The pattern of material events is no answer to the questing human heart and mind. All of science remains silent when man asks, “What am I doing here? Where did I come from? Where am I going? What is the purpose of my life?”

Many modern thinkers, faced with these urgent and disturbing questions, reject the traditional theological and philosophical views of the purpose and meaning of human life. They assert that men can and must set their own goals, and find meaning in the creation and transformation of their own nature. In their view, a man who is truly human must live for some transcendent goal that he sets him-

self. If he does not do this, he must be engulfed in overwhelming despair at the meaninglessness of life.

I think we will all agree that the question is urgent and that it demands an answer and a life which is in accord with the answer. On the other hand, to answer the question requires us to take a comprehensive view of God, the universe, and man. An understanding of man and his nature is necessary, but it is not enough for a solution to the problem of the meaning of human existence. We must also understand the place of man in the universe and in relation to all the beings that there are. And we must see him in relation to the ultimate power that governs the universe and all that is in it. Man is not alone in the universe, and we cannot understand him apart from the rest of things.

This sounds like a long-term program and it is—as long as life itself. It requires the study of theology and metaphysics, as well as of psychology and ethics. It requires the experience and wisdom which can be acquired only after much living and much effort.

This is what is so disturbing about the question. It is urgent, it calls for an immediate answer, and yet it demands the patient and careful reflection of a lifetime. But “that’s life,” as the popular saying has it. It has never been easy to be a human being.

102. THE ELEMENT OF CHANCE IN HUMAN LIFE

Dear Dr. Adler,

Men who have achieved prominence often admit that luck or chance has had a lot to do with their success. And we all know that there is bad luck as well as good luck. Chance encounters often determine lifetime friendships and marriages. The course of history may be changed by chance events. The chance downing of a photo-reconnaissance plane may break up a “summit” conference prepared over many years. What do the great thinkers have to say about the role of chance or luck in human affairs?

S. T.

Dear S. T.,

The great thinkers of the past disagree a lot about what chance is and even whether there is such a thing. But one thing they do agree

about: we can't be sure of our luck, nor can we control it. The "chancy" is what's uncertain and unpredictable.

The ancients contrast what happens by chance with what happens naturally, necessarily, more or less regularly, or as the result of conscious human purpose. Men, since they are by nature mortal, necessarily die. If the sun shines on a pool of water, it normally evaporates. These things do not happen by chance; they happen because of the very natures of the things involved. Nor is my going to the store a matter of chance if I go there for a deliberate purpose. But if I happen to meet a friend there by the sheer *coincidence* that our paths cross at a given time and place, that meeting, according to Aristotle, is something which happened *by chance*.

The ancients also call chance in human affairs "fortune," which has the same root as the word "fortuitous." They consider such things as wealth, fame, honor, and power to be goods of fortune. Having or not having them is largely a matter of chance, not of deliberate choice as in the case of such goods as knowledge and virtue. Aristotle, however, thinks that the goods of fortune are important for human happiness. The Stoics, on the other hand, consider it noble to be indifferent toward things beyond our control.

Many thinkers deny that there really is any such thing as chance. What we call chance, they say, is merely an expression of our ignorance of the causes of events. When we don't know why a thing happens, we ascribe it to chance. Spinoza maintains that nothing happens by chance, that all things are determined to be as they are. Most Christian theologians, with their notion of a divine providence that affects even the fall of a sparrow, agree with Augustine that "nothing happens at random in the world." Everything, even what appears to be a matter of chance, has been willed by God.

William James, who shudders at the idea of Spinoza's completely determined universe, holds that there are certain ultimate choices in human life that we cannot decide on rational grounds alone. Where such choices are about matters that concern us vitally, he feels that we must decide one way or the other and take the risk of being wrong. The alternative, of course, is to wait until all the returns are in, when a rationally certain judgment would be possible. But, says James, on such questions all the evidence never does come in; indeed, it does not come in at all unless you take a chance.

Economists, those practitioners of the “dismal” science, are rather sober-sided about such things and take a gloomy view of betting. John Maynard Keynes in his *Treatise on Probability* concludes that it is rational and ethical to avoid great risks and to be guided by calculated probability. He advises us not to gamble, at cards or the Stock Exchange, unless we can afford to lose a lot of money.

Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* is even more pessimistic about taking chances. He points out, in regard to lotteries, that the percentage is *always* in favor of the house.

The world neither ever saw, nor ever will see, a perfectly fair lottery; or one in which the whole gain compensated the whole loss; because the undertaker could make nothing by it. . . . There is not a more certain proposition in mathematics than that the more tickets you adventure upon, the more likely you are to be a loser. Adventure upon all the tickets in the lottery, and you lose for certain.

Adam Smith does not say, “You can’t win.” One ticket, or a piece of it, on the winning horse in the Irish Sweepstakes may bring in a considerable sum. But the more you try to make your luck certain, the more likely you are to suffer net loss. I wonder how much all the tickets in the Irish Sweepstakes would cost.

WELCOME NEW MEMBER

David Barnhart

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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