

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

---

Mar '15

*Philosophy is Everybody's Business*

Nº 811



---

## THE UNIQUENESS OF MAN

**Mortimer Adler**

*In *The Descent of Man* Darwin says, "The difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, is certainly one of degree and not of kind."*

**I**n this concluding discussion on Man I want to sum up and assess not only the evidence on both sides of the question but also the importance of the issue itself.

Last time I began by reporting to you the experimental evidence in regard to animal intelligence, especially the perceptual insight of the chimpanzee. And to demonstrate some of the experiments that Köhler did with chimpanzees, I showed you how a chimpanzee made a crude tool to fetch bananas by fitting together two bamboo sticks to make a longer one. And as a matter of fact, I fumbled doing this last time and someone who saw the show told me during the week that I had fumbled and didn't do it as well as the chimpanzee. Well, it's hard to be an intelligent chimpanzee. And though I practiced, I didn't quite succeed.

Then I went on to present the evidence to support the conception of man as distinct in kind from other animals on the ground that man and man alone is rational. I presented this evidence under three main heads. Let me remind you of what those were: first, that only humans make artistically; second, that only humans think discursively; and third, that only humans associate politically.

### **ONLY HUMANS HAVE A HISTORY**

In connection with this third main heading there are two further points I would like to make now which I did not have time to make last week. The first of these is that only human life has an historical development. Let me explain that. In the case of all other animals, all that they pass on from generation to generation is a biological inheritance, a physical inheritance contained in the germ plasma. But humans, in addition to inheriting biologically from their ancestors, inherit culturally. There is cultural transmission, the transmission from generation to generation of ideas and institutions.

Mrs. Postel of Mill Valley raised this very question when she said, "Is not a difference in kind indicated by the fact that man is able to leave to his posterity a recorded collection of knowledge which his thinking and experimentation in all forms of human endeavor have produced?"

Yes, Mrs. Postel, that is precisely the point. Without such an inheritance of ideas and institutions, no history would be possible. And that is why only man has such an inheritance, because man and man alone is an historical animal.

This leads me to my second additional point which is that only humans either merely subsist or live well. In the case of all other animals, they are more or less successful in the struggle for existence. They are more or less successful in a matter of degree in satisfying their biological needs. But only man can lead two different kinds of life. In fact, only man on earth has lived two different kinds of life, prehistoric man leading a life on the level of a beast or brute, historic man leading a civilized life.

And the reason why man even now can lead two different kinds of life is the fact that nature is compounded of two different principals: animality and rationality. This I think answers the question raised by Mr. John Marlow of San Francisco, this fact that man has capacity for two modes of life. For if prehistoric man, Mr. Marlow, was really man and yet did not do some of the things that civilized man now does, then prehistoric man must nevertheless have had

the potentiality for doing it, just as the young baby does today. The development or maturation of potentiality is not evolution.

### **MAN ALONE IS RATIONAL**

Now what does all this prove? All the evidence I gave you last time and the evidence I added today, what does all this evidence prove? I think it shows that man and man alone is rational.

**Lloyd Luckman:** Now it seems to me really, Dr. Adler, that you've been conducting a one-sided argument. As between man and animal, you've allowed man to speak for himself, and once more to be the judge in his own case. No one asked the animals what they think about this. And this reminded me of Bertrand Russell's comment on a very famous quotation from John Stuart Mill in his Utilitarianism. May I read it?

**Mortimer Adler:** Please do.

**Lloyd Luckman:** John Stuart Mill wrote, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied. It is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool or the pig are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question." Now Bertrand Russell's comment on this was, "No one has asked the pig how he feels about it." So, you see, I say no one has asked the animals what they think about the difference between themselves and human beings.

**Mortimer Adler:** Well, Lloyd, that point, it seems to me, cuts both ways. Mr. Bickle of Burlingame this very week sent us a clipping from Time Magazine which reports that the bower birds of Australia decorate their nests. Now you recall I said last week and repeated just a moment ago that only man is a fine artist, making things sheerly for enjoyment and not for use. But according to this clipping from Time Magazine, the investigator of the bower birds says that, I quote, "Sometimes you can see the bower birds indulge in purely decorative art, solely for recreation and entertainment of friends," end quote. Well, all I can say is that I wish we could ask the bower birds why they make such a fuss about their nests. And I would be willing to bet that if we could ask the bower birds, the answer they gave us would be on my side of the issue, not on the side of those who think that the bower birds are fine artists.

Now it seems to me, Lloyd, that the argument does not depend on our asking questions of men and animals. It depends entirely on our observing behavior, our behavior and their behavior. It is what the behavior tells us men do and animals don't do, not what men

say they do and animals don't talk about. Nevertheless this objection of Mr. Luckman's raises for all of us, I think, a very important point of logic.

Negative evidence is always inconclusive. We can never be sure that the negative evidence is not the result simply of our failures in observation. On the positive side, we can infer man's powers from what we observe men doing. But on the negative side, we cannot be certain simply from the fact that we don't observe animals doing certain things that they lack the powers that men have.

Now notice, I said we cannot be certain. But certitude is not to be expected in the course of scientific reasoning. We must be satisfied only with probability. And it is in terms of probability, the opposed probabilities, that I am now going to try to sum up the weight of the evidence on the two sides of this great and important issue.

First, in regard to man's body, here let me say that the evidence seems to me to be overwhelmingly in favor of believing or holding that man's body differs only in degree from the bodies of other animals. This, supported by further evidence from embryology or by the discovery of fossil remains, I think, tends to render highly probable Darwin's hypothesis about the evolutionary origin of the human body. But on the side of the human mind I think the evidence is equally overwhelming, showing the equally great probability that man's mind differs in kind from animal intelligence.

The intelligence of animals is a sensitive intelligence, an intelligence active in perception, memory, and imagination. Humans have that kind of intelligence too, although as a matter of fact they often have less of it than some non-human animals do. Animals often have greater perceptual acuity than humans, or longer memory. But though animals sometimes have a higher degree of perceptual intelligence, or sensory intelligence, they don't have the kind of intelligence that man and man alone has, the kind of intelligence that I think is abstract or rational intelligence.

**Lloyd Luckman:** I just wanted to ask you two questions about what you've been saying, Dr. Adler. First of all, you said in regard to man's body that the fact that it is differing only in degree supported the hypothesis of evolutionary origin, Darwin's hypothesis. Now if man's mind differs in kind, what does that imply about the origin of the human mind? That is my first question. And my second question would then be, How can human nature, which is only one thing, not two, have more than one kind of origin, differing origins?

**Mortimer Adler:** Let me answer your two questions in the order in which you gave them. First, if there is nothing in nature like the human mind, nothing at all like it in degree, then it seems to me that the human mind could not have evolved from natural things by natural causes. Its origin would require supernatural causes, divine creation.

And I see no difficulty whatsoever in the hypothesis that God introduced a new principle into the world at a certain stage of its development, thus transforming what already existed into a new kind of things. Thus, for example, taking an animal body and by introducing into it the principle of a rationality or a rational soul, at that moment creating man. This is also what might have happened at an early stage of development of the earth when God breathed life into inorganic matter.

In the very last chapter of *The Origin of Species*. Darwin says, “I see no reason why the views given in this volume should shock the religious feelings of anyone.” And he leaves open the question whether vegetable and animal organisms develop from one or from distinct primordial forms created by God. And then in his very last paragraph, in fact, his last sentence, he says, I quote, “There is grandeur in this view of life with its several powers having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one. And that from so simple a beginning, endless forms most beautiful and wonderful have been and are being evolved.”

Now I say that if God, according to Darwin, could have created living organisms as distinct in kind from inorganic matter, so God could also have created the human mind, man’s rational soul if you will, as distinct in kind from all forms of sensitive life as it exists in other animals.

I turn now to the importance of this issue, its importance considered theoretically, that is, the importance of it as it affects your thinking. And I should like to begin by asking you a direct question. Is your own mind on this issue open or closed? Is this issue itself an opened or closed issue for your mind? Now I know from much experience that most educated men and women regard this issue as closed.

#### **CLOSED MINDS ON MAN’S NATURE AND ORIGIN**

I remember giving a lecture on this subject at the University of Chicago before a large audience of students and faculty in the division of the biological sciences. And I was shocked when I discov-

ered at the end of the lecture that most of those advanced students and scientists in the field of biology and evolution had never before heard anyone in their lifetime argue the facts against Darwin's theory of man's origin and nature.

And only in the last few weeks people who have been watching and taking part in this series of discussions and watching these programs have said to me that they had never heard anyone before, as they went to school and carried on discussion, never heard anyone before offer evidence on man's nature or origin against Darwin. This seems to me a very sad state of affairs. This one-sidedness, this closed-mindedness, is an unwarranted dogmatism that is, in my judgment, dangerous to the spirit of free inquiry and, according to the late Alfred North Whitehead, absolutely contrary to the true spirit of science itself.

Whitehead tells us how he overcame such dogmatism in his own life when early in his life, at the very turn of the century, he was shocked by the fact that Newton was being proved wrong by modern physics. For centuries Newton's laws of motion had been supposed to be the last word on the structure of the physical universe. And then in this century, modern physics changed all that. And this awakened Whitehead from his own dogmatic slumber. He says, "Nothing is more curious than the self-satisfied dogmatism with which mankind at each period of its history cherishes the delusion of the finality of its existing beliefs. Skeptics and believers are all alike." And then he adds, "At this moment scientists and skeptics are the leading dogmatists. Such dogmatism," he goes on, "is the death of philosophic adventure. The argument on any basic issue is never closed." This certainly applies, does it not?, to the issue about man's nature and origin. Like Newton, Darwin too can be wrong.

Now I don't hope to convince you, I do not expect I can convince you in this short series of discussions that Darwin is wrong. But I would like to persuade you that the issue itself is far from being closed, that there is evidence on both sides, that there is reason to weigh the evidence on both sides. Why, I keep asking myself and I'm asking you too, are there so many closed minds on this subject? I think partly the reason is that science is taught dogmatically in our schools. But I think there is another reason in part and that is the fact that evolution is one of the things which has emancipated man from religion, from the belief that God created man in His own image with a special dignity and a special destiny, including divine rewards and punishments. Let me repeat that: including divine rewards and punishments.

**Lloyd Luckman:** Now, Dr. Adler, on that point is this merely a theoretical matter or does it also have a practical aspect? In fact, isn't it more practical than theoretical, this issue that you are just raising? Because doesn't it concern human actions and emotions as much as, if not more than, it concerns thought?

**Mortimer Adler:** It seems to me that the belief or disbelief that God created man with a special dignity and a special destiny that accords therewith has profound practical consequences for the conduct of life, consequences which many persons wish to avoid. But it also has profound consequences of another sort that many persons wish to embrace. And this brings me to the consideration of the issue in practical terms which in some sense is my chief interest today.

### **DARWINISM IS INCOMPATIBLE WITH HUMAN DIGNITY**

Let me begin this consideration of the issue in practical terms by asking you to face one fact with me. Central to the whole moral, political, legal or juridical, and religious structure of Western civilization is the distinction which you all know and you all use every day, the distinction between person and thing. You have no doubt about this. You never call a shoe a person. You never call even a beloved domesticated animal, a house pet, a cat or a dog a person. You know the difference between persons and things. And this distinction you recognize is not one of degree, but one of kind. You don't say that something is a little more or less of a person, a little more or less of a thing. There is a sharp line that divides persons from things. Now this distinction between person and thing is identical with the distinction between man as a rational animal, distinct in kind, not degree, from all other animals as brutes.

Notice the basic or the fundamental properties which follow from man's possession of personality, from the fact that man is a person, not a thing. If man were not a person, he would not have special dignity or special status, social or political status in the world. Things do not have this dignity. Things do not have this status. Moreover all the rights and liberties we demand for human beings, their natural and legal rights, their natural and legal liberties, these belong to human beings as persons. They do not belong to things. Only persons have moral responsibility. We do not hold things morally responsible. And personality is the essence of human equality and of man's superiority to other animals.

Let me spend a moment more on this last point. When the Declaration of Independence says all men are equal, what that means in its

deepest understanding is that all human beings equally or alike have the quality, the character, of being persons. Their equality is the equality of persons and all the rights and privileges and liberties that go with being a person. Not only is human equality to be understood in the fact that all men are persons. But the superiority of men over animals is also in terms of humans being persons and animals being things.

Justice requires us to treat equals equally and unequals unequally. And when the unequals are regarded as unequal in kind because one is a superior kind and the other is an inferior kind, justice requires us to treat that kind of inequality different from the inequality which is merely an inequality in degree. Now I say that if man is not superior in kind to other animals, then the rules of justice in terms of which we treat men one way and animals another way would all be wrong. We would have to revise all our standards in the treatment of humans and animals.

Now we regard humans as superior in kind and that justifies us in regarding humans as ends, to be treated as ends whereas brute animals or other things to be treated as means, can be used. Because all humans are equal in kind with one another, because all are persons and as persons equal in kind, one human being must treat another human being as an end.

But suppose that humans were superior to other animals only in degree, that humans were higher animals and other animals were lower animals. Then if humans being higher animals and other animals being lower justifies humans in treating other animals as means, then by the same principle of justice if there are superior races of humans, they would be justified by that difference in degree in treating inferior races as things, exploiting them, enslaving them, even killing them. In fact, if man differs from man only in degree and man from animal only in degree, then by the principles of justice we have no defense against Hitler's doctrine of superior and inferior races and the justification he would give for the superior to enslave, exploit, and kill the inferior.


Finally I come to my last point of practical significance, the validity of the three great religions of the West: Judaism, Mohammedanism, and Christianity in both its Catholic and its Protestant forms. The validity of these three great religions depends on the truth of the proposition that man is created by God in His own image with a special dignity and a special destiny. If this proposition is not true, then in honesty and frankness and clarity of mind we ought to repudiate Judaism, Mohammedanism, and Christianity as idle



myths, as deeply and essentially false.

I'm not asking you to accept my view that the basic tenets of Western moral, political, legal, and religious beliefs are true and that Darwin's view of man's origin and nature is false. But I am saying to you that you must decide, decide you must, between these two views. Both cannot be true. You cannot have it both ways. You cannot keep your religious, your political, your moral beliefs and also with another part of your mind hold Darwin's view of man's origin and nature to be true.

Let me be sure that I've got this point clear. Our actions, I think, should be consistent with our beliefs. A letter from Mrs. McLord raised three points that I would like to consider finally. She said, "Why do you think it is important to take sides on the issue about man's origin and nature? And how does taking sides influence one's behavior? And why isn't it enough," she says, "merely to be informed about the opposite views of the question?"

I think I have answered these questions, but to be sure let me repeat these two basic points. I think one's actions should be consistent with one's beliefs. We are all guilty of hypocrisy if we believe that Darwin is right and that at the same time go on acting as if he were wrong, enjoying the privileges of human dignity, even demanding those privileges but at the same time denying the very facts on which that dignity and its privileges are based. 

*[We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.](#)*

---



---

## THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

### CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.