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Philosophy is Everybody's Business

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If moral philosophy is to have a sound factual basis, it is to be found in the facts about human nature and nowhere else. Nothing else but the sameness of human nature at all times and places, from the beginning of Homo sapiens, can provide the basis for a set of moral values that should be universally accepted.

—Mortimer Adler



THE NATURE OF MAN

The Nature of Man was an appropriate title for the first formal lecture given at the opening of the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. That lecture was given by Mortimer J. Adler on July 1, 1950. Now, in my interview, forty-five years later (1995) he sums up his views on aspects of Human Nature, Nurture, and Culture.

(Part 2 of 2)

PART III

ON HUMAN NURTURE

Weismann: Now that we have a better understanding of the difference of man from other animals and the difference it makes, I would like to begin this segment of our discussion with your assessment of the role that nurture plays in human life?

Adler: All the knowledge we acquire, all the understanding we develop, everything we learn, is a product of nurture. At birth, we have none of these. All the habits we form, all the tastes we cultivate, all the patterns of behavior we accumulate, are products of nurture. We are born only with potentialities or powers that are habituated by the things we do in the course of growing up. Many, if not all, of these habits of behavior are acquired under the influence of the homes and families, the tribes or societies in which we are brought up. Some, of course, are the results of individual chosen behavior.

Weismann: In the first part of this interview you called to our attention some profound mistakes relative to a correct understanding about human nature. What is your view on some of the errors that are prevalent about human nurture?

Adler: First, I would say that what nurture adds to nature in the development of human beings should be so clear to all of us that we do not make the serious mistake that results from the failure to distinguish what human nature is from all of its nurtural overlays. That serious mistake has been made again and again during the last 4,000 years. We find it still being made in the twentieth century by those sociologists and existentialists who deny the existence of human nature itself because of the pluralism they find in differently nurtured groups of human beings.

Weismann: What is the most serious consequence of this mistake?

Adler: The answer in short is that it consists in regarding human inequalities that result from nurtural influences as if they were the manifestation of unequal natural endowments.

But, to be sure this is clear, let me reiterate the difference between human nature and that of all other animal species. In the case of other animal species, the specific nature common to all members of the species is constituted mainly by quite determined characteristics or attributes. In the case of the human species, it is constituted by determinable characteristics or attributes. An innate potentiality is precisely that—something determinable, not wholly determinate, and determinable in a wide variety of ways.

Weismann: Does this mean that to a great extent man is a self-made creature?

Adler: Yes. Given the range of potentialities at birth, he makes himself what he becomes by how he freely chooses to develop those potentialities by the habits he forms. That is how differentiated subgroups of human beings came into existence. Once in existence, they subsequently affected the way in which those born into these subgroups came to develop the acquired characteristics that differentiate one subgroup from another. These acquired characteristics, especially the behavioral ones, are the results of acculturation; or, even more generally, results of the way in which those born into this or that subgroup are nurtured differently.

No other animal is a self-made creature in the sense I just indicated. On the contrary, other animals have determined natures, natures genetically determined in such a way that they do not admit of a wide variety of different developments as they mature.

Weismann: But isn't there also a genetic factor in the determination of human nature?

Adler: Yes, but because the genetic determination consists behaviorally in an innate endowment of potentialities that are determinable in different ways, human beings differ remarkably from one another as they mature. However they originated in the first place, most of those differences are due to differences in acculturation, to natural differences. To confuse nature with nurture is a philosophical mistake of the first order. That philosophical mistake underlies the denial of human nature.

Weismann: What are the most common and serious everyday consequences of not correcting this mistake?

Adler: I would say the most important of all is overcoming the persistent prejudices—the racist, sexist, elitist, even ethnic prejudices—that one portion or subgroup of mankind is distinctly inferior by nature to another. The inferiority may exist, but it is not an inferiority due to nature, but to nurture.

For example, for most of the centuries of recorded history, the female half of the population was nurtured reared and treated—as inferior to the male half, that nurturing made them apparently inferior when they matured. To have correctly attributed that apparent inferiority to their nurturing would have instantly indicated how it could be eliminated. But when it was incorrectly attributed to their nature at birth, it is accepted as irremediable.

What I have just said about the sexist prejudice concerning inequality of men and women applies to all the racist and ethnic prejudices about human inequality that still exist among mankind.

Weismann: Are you saying that all these apparent inequalities that we witness in our everyday lives are nurtural in origin?

Adler: Yes, none is a natural inequality between one human subgroup and another. Let me give you another example, In the centuries prior to this one, the elitist view taken by the propertied class about the inferiority of the working class was similarly grounded in grave deficiencies in the nurturing of workers who went to work at an early age without schooling and who often toiled fourteen hours a day and seven days a week.

Weismann: Is this at least in part what Thomas Jefferson meant when he said “all men are created equal”?

Adler: Yes, Jefferson was right in declaring that all human beings are created (or, if you will, are by nature) equal. They are also, in terms of their individual differences, unequal in the varying degrees to which they possess the species-specific potentialities common to all. When inequalities between human subgroups that are entirely due to nurture are taken for natural inequalities, that mistake must be overcome and eradicated for the sake of social justice.

The correction of the mistake that confuses nature with nurture leads to certain conclusions that many individuals may find disconcerting. All the cultural and nurtural differences that separate one human subgroup from another are superficial as compared with the underlying common human nature that unites the members of mankind.

Weismann: Why would anyone find this disconcerting?

Adler: Because although our samenesses are more important than our differences, we have an inveterate tendency to stress the differences that divide us rather than the samenesses that unite us. For example, we seem to find it difficult to believe that the human mind is the same everywhere because we fail to realize that all the differences, however striking, between the mind of Western man and the mind of human beings nurtured in the various Eastern cultures are, in the last analysis, superficial—entirely the result of different nurturing.

Weismann: Should a world, cultural community ever come into existence, do you think it will retain cultural pluralism or diversity with respect to matters that are accidental in human life—such things as cuisine, dress, manners, customs, and the like?

Adler: Yes, these are the things that vary from one human subgroup to another, accordingly, as these subgroups differ in the way they nurture their members. When that happens, we will have at last overcome the natural illusion that there is a Western mind and an Eastern mind, a European mind and an African mind, or a civilized mind and a primitive mind. There is only a human mind and it is one and the same in all human beings.

PART IV

CULTURAL UNITY and CULTURAL PLURALISM

Weismann: So far, we have learned that the unity of mankind and the human mind underlies all the differences that are caused by differences in nurture and by their consequences—differences among diverse human creatures. That being the case, should not an ultimate desideratum of human life on earth be the formation of a single cultural community to which all human beings belong—a single, global cultural community?

Adler: My answer to your question is twofold: First, because world government is necessary not only for world peace, but also—and now more urgently—to preserve the planet as a viable place for human life. In 1943, I wrote a book that argued for world government as indispensable to permanent world peace, and predicted that it would occur in about 500 years. In the years subsequent to 1945, after the destruction of Hiroshima by the first atomic bomb, I changed my prediction of world government to 200 years because of the then threatening nuclear holocaust that would make life unlivable on a large portion of this planet. Now as we near the end of the century and the threat of a nuclear holocaust has dwindled almost to disappearance, another and more serious threat has loomed up—the prospect of climatic and environmental changes that, when they become irreversible, will make the planet unlivable for human beings.

It is clear that without worldwide enforced control of all human activities that pollute the environment, its degeneration will continue to the point where lethal disabling environmental conditions are irreversible. To enforce such worldwide control of human ac-

tivities world government is necessary. The United Nations will not suffice. Nor will the global commons.

This leads to the second reason: World government is impossible without world community; but the existence of world community requires a certain degree of cultural unity—unity of civilization.

Weismann: These things being so, I can foresee many major aspects of the problem to be solved, e.g., what is the kind and the degree of cultural unity that is required for world community as a basis for world government? How much cultural diversity or pluralism should persist? How much is appropriate and tolerable? What is the basis for determining the matters with regard to which it is reasonable to expect worldwide cultural unity as well as the basis for determining the matters with regard to which cultural diversity or pluralism should be tolerated because it is not incompatible with the unity of mankind and of the human mind? I must assume that to solve problems of this magnitude on a global scale you must be ready to divulge a key to the solution.

Adler: You are quite correct, and you may be surprised to learn that the key to the solution of the problem as stated is to be found in a fundamental difference between matters that belong to the sphere of truth and matters that belong to the sphere of taste, together with the moral obligations imposed upon us by our commitment to the pursuit of truth with regard to all matters that properly fall in the sphere of truth. And, of course, we must also take account of a principle that should regulate our pursuit of truth—the principle that the sphere of truth is itself unified, that it is not divisible into a plurality of separate and incompatible domains.

Weismann: Would you offer some examples to illustrate the difference between matters of truth and matters of taste?

Adler: Let us start with clear cases at the extreme ends of the spectrum. At one extreme, clearly belonging to the sphere of truth, is mathematics, and associated with it the exact sciences, especially the experimental sciences. Placing these disciplines in the sphere of truth does not mean that there is perfect agreement among all the practitioners in those fields. But it does mean that when they disagree, we expect them to be able to resolve their disagreements by rational processes. An irresolvable disagreement about any matter that properly falls in the sphere of truth would constitute an intellectual scandal, but we also think that it is their obligation not to

rest in their efforts to resolve such disagreements until they finally succeed in doing so.

At the opposite extreme, clearly belonging to the sphere of taste, are such matters as cuisine, social manners, styles in dress or dance, and so on. Here we do not expect that men should be able to resolve their differences in taste. We do not expect them to achieve uniformity. On the contrary, we would regard as monstrous any attempt to impose conformity upon all with regard to any one culinary program or set of social manners or style of dress. Here the adoption of one style rather than another is an act of free choice, not an act of the intellect necessitated by objective considerations.

Weismann: Between these extremes, where there is no doubt that we are dealing with matters of truth on the one hand and with matters of taste on the other, where do philosophy and religion fall?

Adler: The prevalent view today, in academic circles at least, tends to place philosophy and religion on the side of taste rather than the side of truth. I hold the opposite view—that philosophy belongs to the sphere of truth, not of taste.

Tabling for the moment the very difficult problem of locating the position of religion on one or the other side of the dividing line, I will turn to the bearing of the points so far considered on the problem of cultural unity and cultural pluralism. Two things should be immediately obvious. We have already achieved a high degree of transcultural agreement in mathematics and the exact and experimental sciences and we should expect it to continue and approach completeness. There is no question about cultural unity with respect to the principles of technology that are now also transcultural—adopted worldwide.

Weismann: Is there one whole of truth no matter how many diverse parts there are, and no matter how diverse the methods by which the truth of the parts is attained?

Adler: Yes, the irrefragable unity of the sphere of truth is merely an extension, but nonetheless a very important extension of the principle of contradiction: that two propositions—or sets of opinions or beliefs—cannot both be true if they contradict one another. Truth in these different parts may be attained by quite different methods: investigative and experimental, noninvestigative and nonexperimental, intuitive, mystical, or even by the acknowledgment of divine revelation. The principle of the unity of truth entails

the consequence that the several parts of the one whole of the truth to be attained must coherently fit together.

Weismann: If there cannot be irreconcilable contradictions between one segment of the whole truth and another, are you saying that what is regarded as true in philosophy and religion must not conflict with what is regarded as true in science?

Adler: Yes, but since it is only in the spheres of mathematics and experimental science that doctrinal agreement has been achieved in large measure, the truths agreed upon in those areas at a given time test the claims to truth that are made in philosophy. In other words, a particular philosophical view must be rejected as false if, at a given time, it comes into conflict with the scientific truths agreed upon at that time.

Weismann: Then would the same mandate that has been operative within the Western tradition be operative when we go beyond and consider the philosophies of the Far East?

Adler: Yes, the truths of mathematics and science that are agreed upon at a given time have been employed as the test for accepting or rejecting Western religious beliefs or philosophical views, so, in exactly the same way, they should be employed as the test for accepting or rejecting Far Eastern religious beliefs or philosophical views.


Weismann: Does the fact that the fruits of technology are now universally put to use confirming global doctrinal agreement about the best approximations to truth that we have made so far in mathematics and experimental science, mean that you are saying that that agreement involves an agreement about rules of logic and of discourse enabling men to pursue the truth cooperatively and to resolve their disagreements?

Adler: Yes. The logic of science and of mathematics is, like science and mathematics, global, not Western.

Weismann: Though the method of philosophy may not be the same, is the basic framework of its logic the same?

Adler: Yes. A contradiction is a contradiction whether it occurs in philosophy, in mathematics, or in science. Unchecked equivocation in the use of words generates fallacious arguments, whether in philosophy or in mathematics or science.

Weismann: What about the difficult problem of religion?

Adler: The problem of religion is much more difficult than that of philosophy. If religion claims to involve knowledge, then we must face a further question. Is it distinguishable from philosophy as a branch of natural knowledge, or does it regard itself as quite distinct from philosophy and all other branches of natural knowledge because its beliefs are articles of faith, not conclusions supported by empirical evidence and rational arguments? This problem is so difficult that it requires a separate discourse on the plurality of religions and the unity of truth that we will have to cover in the future. 

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