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WHY DID IT TAKE SO LONG?

**Mortimer J. Adler
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The answer, in a nutshell, lies in long persistent denial or misunderstanding of the truth that all human beings are by nature equal.

That all are equal by virtue of having whatever properties belong to all members of the species.

That all are equal in the sense, and only in the sense, that none is more or less human than another.

That all equally have the dignity of being persons rather than things.

That all are equally endowed with the same human rights that derive from their having the same inherent human needs.

This truth in no way conflicts with another plain and indisputable truth, one that is generally acknowledged and mistakenly thought to be grounds for denying or rejecting the truth about human equality.

It is, and always has been, generally recognized that individuals differ from one another in a wide variety of ways that render them unequal in all the respects in which one has a certain native endowment or a certain acquired attainment to a greater or lesser degree.

Though all have the same species-specific properties that make them all equally human beings, they differ individually from one another in the degree to which they possess these properties.

All the acknowledged facts of individual difference, and the individual inequalities that flow from them, do not require us to deny the sameness of the specific human nature to be found in all members of the species, or the one human equality that follows from that fact.

Nevertheless, over the past twenty--five centuries, the almost universally prevalent recognition of individual differences and individual inequalities resulted in the almost universally persistent neglect of the no less obvious fact that all these differing individuals are members of the same species and, therefore, have the same specific nature.

When that no less obvious fact was ignored, for whatever reason, the almost universal acceptance of the truth about individual inequalities was accompanied by the almost universal denial of the truth about the equality of all human beings by virtue of their common humanity.

What reasons might explain this astonishing, persistent mistake?

The most profound and penetrating answer to this question was given by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 18th century when he explained the mistake Aristotle had made in the 4th century B.C. about the division of mankind into those who were by nature born to be free men and those who were intended by nature for slavery or subjection.

I have paraphrased Aristotle's view by speaking of those by nature intended for subjection as well as those by nature intended to be slaves.

I have done so to include the female half of the population. Aristotle regarded them as naturally inferior to the male half.

Consequently, he looked upon them as having no rightful claim to be self-governing citizens.

Without that status, they must be left in subjection to despotic rule by the ruling class—the freeborn males whom he thought were qualified for citizenship.

The rest, male or female, were either those born into slavery or those bought or captured as slaves. All these, in Aristotle's view, were rightfully enslaved if, as a matter of fact, they were by nature intended for that status in society.

Being tyrannically ruled by their masters did them no injury or injustice any more than the benevolent despotism to which freeborn women were subjected did them injury or injustice.

Rousseau's penetrating rectification of Aristotle's profound error concerning slavery consisted in pointing out that what Aristotle attributed to nature should have been attributed to nurture instead.

Those born into slavery and reared as slaves took on the appearance of slavishness. Their apparent slavishness, due solely to the way in which they were nurtured and treated, concealed from view the underlying reality of their natural equality as human beings.

The apparent superiority of those nurtured and treated in one way and the apparent inferiority of those nurtured and treated in a radically different way accounts for the error to which all are prone who think that mankind is really divided into natural superiors and inferiors. In consequence, they attribute rights to one subgroup and deny them to another.

They were, according to Rousseau, so deceived by the appearance that they ignored or overlooked the fact that subgroups of mankind consisted of individuals, all of whom belong to the same species and who are, therefore, entitled to be called human beings. Even further, they were prevented from thinking that, if human rights exist, they must be rights possessed by all human beings.

The division of mankind into subgroups should not be limited to the division between freeborn and slaves. Everything that I have said about mistaking apparent inferiority (due entirely to nurture) for real inferiority (due solely to nature) applies in exactly the same way to the division of mankind by gender, as well as to racial and ethnic divisions of mankind into superior and inferior subgroups.

Chattel slavery was abolished in most of the civilized world long before male superiority was first challenged. It never occurred to Rousseau that his brilliant insight about nurture and nature applied to female inferiority.

In spite of all the efforts of the women's liberation movement, male chauvinism still persists at present in the most, enlightened countries, and goes unchallenged in the rest of the world. The same holds true of racism in all its protean forms.

This being the case, we should not be astounded, or find it unintelligible, that the idea of democracy has been so long in coming to birth.

The archetypical Aristotelian mistake, made by many of the most eminent political theorists, has persisted in all quarters of the globe throughout all centuries down to the present. It still persists today, though it has at last been challenged and rejected by the more enlightened.

This explains why democracy, properly conceived, is so new an idea. It also explains why, in so many quarters, so many still refuse to acknowledge that the idea of democracy is inseparable from the political ideal of a form of government that is alone perfectly just.

One further step must be taken to make what has been said applicable to still one other subgroup that was thought unfit for citizenship and so remained disfranchised until the last hundred years or a little more.

I am referring to the subgroup that Aristotle called artisans, who later came to be denominated the working or laboring class, and still later as proletariat.

To the extent that his subgroup included females as well as males, and to the extent that it included immigrant aliens regarded, on ethnic or racial grounds, as natural inferiors, it comprises an overwhelming mass of any population.

Quite apart from the mistake of regarding the female or immigrant members of the working class as natural inferiors, why were the rest who belonged to this class thought unfit for citizenship? The first step in answering that question consists remembering the disabling conditions under which they worked and the deprivations that they suffered until the 20th century.

It was not until quite recently that laborers toiled less than twelve or even fourteen hours a day. They frequently worked seven days a week.

It was not until recently that children were legally prohibited from toil until they were 14 or 16 years of age. Many became laborers at much tenderer ages.

It was not until recently that free schooling at the state's expense gave members of the working class some education and, with it, some preparation for citizenship.

When Jefferson in 1817 advocated three years of public schooling for those in society who were destined for labor, not for leisure and learning, it was rejected by the legislature of Virginia. It was thought to be too radical—and pointless.

At the beginning of this century, most children of working class families were to school for six years, or at the most eight. The advance to twelve years of compulsory schooling came slowly after that.

Totally deprived of schooling or not given enough schooling to prepare them for citizenship, and lacking enough free time to engage actively in political life, the members of the working class, young and old, female and male, immigrants and native-born, appeared to be unfit for citizenship.

However, we must carry the explanation one step further by returning to the difference between nurture and nature, and the consequent difference between the appearances and the realities.

Those who, from Aristotle right down to modern times, argued for the exclusion from citizenship of artisans, laborers, the proletariat, dismissed them as inferiors in their natural endowments, not as inferiors because of their nurture and the disabling conditions of life that society imposed on them.

Only when it began to be understood that theirs was a nurtural, not a natural, inferiority, did social and economic reformers fight for the amelioration or elimination of the disabling conditions and for crippling deprivations that disqualified the working class for participation in political life.

Only then did the masses in the population of any country that enjoyed constitutional government become members of the ruling class. Only then did they form the preponderant majority of any self-governing people.



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Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher Emeritus

Elaine Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Phone: 312-943-1076

Mobile: 312-280-1011

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

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