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—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 this interview, forty-five years later (1995) he sums up his views on aspects of Human Nature, Nurture, Culture, and their relation to Natural Justice and Natural Rights. (in seven parts)

PART I

ON HUMAN NATURE

Weismann: I would like to begin this discussion by asking you to comment on an extraordinary error that has arisen in this century inhering in the repudiation of human nature made by social scientists and existentialist philosophy.

Adler: This egregious mistake consists in denying that man has a specific nature comparable to the specific natures to be found in the zoological taxonomy in the classification of animals according to their generic and specific natures. As the social scientists put it, the differences among human groups racial, ethnic, or cultural are primary; there is no common human nature in which they all share. As the existentialists put it, man has an existence, but no essence: the essence of each human being is of his or her own making. The French existentialist Merleau-Ponty sums up this error by saying, "It is the nature of man not to have a nature."

Weismann: Before you explicate the full character of this mistake, what is its most serious consequence?

Adler: 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. Nothing else will correct the mistaken notion that we should readily accept a pluralism of moral values as we pass from one human group to another or within the same human group. If the basis in human nature for a universal ethic is denied, the only other alternative lies in the extreme rationalism of Immanuel Kant, which proceeds without any consideration of the facts of human life and with no concern for the variety of cases to which moral prescriptions must be applied in a manner that is flexible rather than rigorous and dogmatic.

Now to the explanation of the mistaken denial of human nature, which while conceding that all human beings have certain common anatomical and physiological traits number of bones, number of teeth, blood type, number of chromosomes, the period of parturition, and so on—denies their psychological sameness—the sameness of the human mind and its behavioral tendencies.

Consider other animal species. If you were to investigate any one of them as carefully as possible, you would find that the members of the same species, living in their natural habitats, manifest a remarkable degree of similarity in behavior. You might find differences in size, weight, shape, or coloration among the individuals you examined. You might find behavioral deviations here and there from what would have become evident as the normal behavior of that species. But, by and large, you would be impressed by the similitudes that reigned in the populations you examined.

The dominant likeness of all members of the species would lead you to dismiss as relatively insignificant the differences you found, most of which can be explained as the result of slightly different environmental conditions. That dominant likeness would constitute the nature of the species in question.

Now let's consider the human species. Its members inhabit all the regions of the globe, under the most widely divergent environmental conditions. Let us suppose you were

to visit all the human populations wherever they existed. Let us suppose the visit not be a casual one, but one in which you lived for a time with each of these populations and studied them closely. You would come away with the very opposite impression from the one you took away from your investigation of the populations from the other animal species. You were there impressed by the overwhelming similitude that reigned among its members. Here, however, you would find that the behavioral differences were dominant rather than the similarities.

Weismann: But as human beings we are also animals; therefore, don't we share many of the same traits?

Adler: Of course human beings, like other animals, must eat, drink, and sleep. We all have certain biological traits in common and there can be no doubt we share the nature of other animals. But when you come to their distinctive behavioral traits, how different one human population will be from another. They will not only differ in the languages they speak, you will have some difficulty in making an accurate count of the vast number of different languages you will have found. They will differ in their dress, in their adornments, in their cuisines, in their customs and manners, in the organization of their families, in the institutions of their societies, in their beliefs, in their standards of conduct, in the turn of their minds, in almost everything that enters into the ways of life they lead. These differences will be so multitudinous and variegated that you might, unless cautioned against doing so, tend to be persuaded that they were not all members of the same species.

Weismann: This view seems preposterous to a person of common sense, how did it come about?

Adler: Consider, the behavioral differences between one human race and another, between one racial variety and another, between one ethnic group and another, between one nation and another, these differences would seem to be dominant. It is this that might lead you to conclude that there

is no human nature in the sense in which a certain constant nature can be attributed to other species of animals. Even if you did not reach that conclusion yourself, you might understand how that conclusion is plausible.

Furthermore, unlike most other species of animals, the members of the human species appear to have formed subgroups that differentiated themselves, one from another. Each subgroup has a distinctive character. The differences that separate one subgroup from another are so numerous and so profound that they defy you to say what remains, if anything, that might be regarded as a human nature common to all.

Weismann: What then is the basis for the denial of human nature?

Adler: The denial of human nature rests ultimately on the striking contrast between the dominant behavioral similitude that prevails among the other animal species and the dominant behavioral differentiation that prevails among the subgroups of the human species.

Looked at one way, the denial of human nature is correct. The members of the human species do not have a specific or common nature in the same sense that the members of other animal species do. This, by the way, is one of the most remarkable differences between man and other animals, one that tends to corroborate the conclusion that man differs from other animals in kind, not in degree. But to concede that the members of the human species do not have a specific or common nature in the same sense that the members of other animal species do is not to admit that they have no specific nature whatsoever.

Weismann: How then would you state what alternative is left open for a resolution of this issue?

Adler: The answer can be simply stated: The members of the human species all have the same nature in a quite different

sense.

Weismann: In what sense then is there a human nature, a specific nature that is common to all human beings?

Adler: It can be given in a single word: "potentialities." Human nature is constituted by all the potentialities that are species-specific properties common to all members of the human species. It is the essence of a potentiality to be capable of a wide variety of different actualizations.

Weismann: Would you give us an example of a common human potentiality that is not shared by other animals?

Adler: Consider for a moment, the human potentiality for syntactical speech that is actualized in thousands of different human languages. Having that potentiality, a human infant placed at birth in one or another human subgroup, each with its own language, would learn to speak that language. The differences among all human languages are superficial as compared with the potential for learning and speaking any language that is present in all human infants at birth.

Weismann: Does what you just said about one human potentiality apply to all the other common potentialities of human beings?

Adler: Yes, each underlies all the differences that arise among human subgroups as a result of the many different ways in which the same potentiality can be actualized. To recognize this is tantamount to acknowledging the superficiality of the differences that separate one human subgroup from another, as compared with the samenesses that unite all human beings as members of the same species and as having the same specific nature.

In other species of animals, the samenesses that constitute their common nature are not potentialities but rather quite determinate characteristics, behavioral as well as anatomical and physiological. This accounts for the impression from

studying these other species—the impression of a dominant similitude among its members.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Colleagues,

From Thursday 12 July to Sunday 15 July, the Gilson Society, American Maritain Association, and the Maritain Gallery will co-sponsor the second annual international Maritain/Gilson Summer Institute at the Grailville Conference Center, set over 300 acres of rolling farmland in Loveland, Ohio. The conference theme is:

“Wonderful and Beautiful, a Discussion of James Taylor's Poetic Knowledge: The Recovery of Education”

Anyone interested in presenting a paper, participating in a panel, or in presenting a slide show related to the general conference theme should contact Conference Chair Carrie Rehak for more details at: crehak@bigvalley.net

Best wishes,

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To Mortimer Adler and staff

God bless you all for your work. I want to especially thank Mortimer Adler for his life's work. All my life I've been searching for someone with some common sense the guts to verbalize it and stand up for it.

Mr. Adler, you are truly a God-send. I was raised in a non-Christian home but attended a Chinese Evangelical church for most of my life but I knew a lot of things I was hearing were not correct judgments of propositions of truth. God bless you for setting things straight. Even in your two intellectual biographies, I could sense the opposition and stir that you created in your travels through academia. I am 26 years old and I consider you the clearest thinker I have ever come across and by your standards of clarity in thought, I consider you therefore the best thinker also.

Thank you also for sharing your conversion experience in your eighth decade of life.

I came upon your name through the works of Richard Maybury. God bless you for having the faith and courage to stand for truth! Now with the global communications revolution, the line between truth and untruth will grow increasingly clear because minds all over the world will have the chance to decide for themselves even if they are greater than 6 decades apart in life experiences. Thank you so much, Mr. Adler and all your colleagues.

You are one of my heroes! God bless you.

Sincerely,

Jason Chang, Vancouver

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WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Edilberto M. Bautista, MD
George M. Elsener, Esq.
Douglas L. Ross

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As always, we welcome your comments.

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