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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 II

ON HUMAN NATURE

Weismann: How do you account for the opposite impression of dominant differences among human sub-groups?

Adler: The explanation of it lies in the fact that, as far as behavioral characteristics are concerned, the common nature that all the subgroups share consists entirely of species-specific potentialities. These are actualized by these subgroups in all the different ways that we find when we make a global study of mankind.

Weismann: What, then, is the precise mistake made by the cultural anthropologists, the sociologists, and the other behavioral scientists when they deny the existence of human nature?

Adler: It is in their failure to understand that the specific nature in the case of the human species is radically different from the specific nature in the case of other animal species.

Weismann: Having established the sameness of the human species which consists in its common human potentialities, psychological and behavioral, in addition to its common anatomical and physiological traits, what are some of the main differences in kind between the human species and other animal species?

Adler: I have dealt with this subject in great detail in a book I wrote in 1967, *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes*, and in another book in 1990, *Intellect: Mind Over Matter*. So, here I will only state the most important and obvious ones:

Intellect is a unique human possession. Only human beings have intellects. Other animals may have sensitive minds and perceptual intelligence, but they do not have intellects. No one is given to saying that dogs and cats, horses, pigs, dolphins, and chimpanzees lead intellectual lives; nor do we say of nonhuman animals that they are anti-intellectual, as some human beings certainly are. Other animals have intelligence in varying degrees, but they do not have intellectual powers in the least degree.

Free will or free choice, which consists in always being able to choose otherwise, no matter how one chooses, is an intellectual property, lacked by nonintellectual animals. Some of their behavior may be learned and thus acquired rather than innate and instinctive, however it is determined by instinct or by learning, it is determined rather than voluntary and freely willed.

A person is a living being with intellect and free will. That is both the jurisprudential and the theological definition of a person. Everything else, animate or inanimate, totally lacking intellect and free will, is not a person but a thing.

Only persons have natural and unalienable rights. These we call human rights. There is no comparable animal rights.

Weismann: What are some of the ordinary behavioral differences exclusive to human beings?

Adler: Other animals live entirely in the present. Only human individuals are time-binders, connecting the present with the remembered past and with the imaginable future. Only man is a historical animal with a historical tradition and a historical development. Human life changes from one

generation to another with the transmission of cultural novelties and with accretion of accumulated cultural changes and institutional innovations. Nothing like these innovations and changes can be found in any other species.

Only man makes machines, for the purpose of making products that cannot be produced in any other way. The kind of thought that is involved in designing and building a machine betokens the presence of an intellect in a way that the use of hand tools does not.

Only man makes works of art that we regard as fine rather than useful because they are made for the pleasure or enjoyment they afford. The songs made by a given species of bird remain the same for all members of that species generation after generation. In contrast, in the making of drawings or paintings, from the sketches drawn on the walls of Cro-Magnon caves down to the present day, the extraordinary variety in human works of art shows that human artistry is not instinctive, and therefore not the same for all members of the species from one generation to the other.

Weismann: It seems to me that all the differences in kind so far mentioned cannot be explained except by reference to man's exclusive possession of an intellect with its power of conceptual thought and its power of free choice. But suppose I am not yet persuaded, what other distinctive, unique human performances can you elucidate?

Adler: Only human beings use their minds to become artists, scientists, historians, philosophers, priests, teachers, lawyers, physicians, engineers, accountants, inventors, bankers, statesmen.

Only among human beings is there a distinction between those who behave ethically and those who are knaves, scoundrels, villains, criminals.

Only among human beings is there any distinction between those who have mental health and those who suffer

mental disease or have mental disabilities of one sort or another.

Only in the sphere of human life are there such institutions as schools, libraries, hospitals, churches, temples, factories, theaters, museums, prisons, cemeteries, and so on.

I hope you are now persuaded that human and non-humans differ in kind, not merely in degree.

Weismann: One still may ask, what of it? What does it all really mean? How is this crucial to our understanding of our lives and our world?

Adler: I have already answered your questions in part by calling your attention to the meaning of human personality—that only humans are persons, not things, and have the dignity and worth that belongs only to persons, the rights that belong only to persons, and the moral obligations that belong only to persons.

There is, in addition, one further consequence that I have not yet mentioned. The Declaration of Independence asserts that all human beings are, by nature, equal, and they are equally endowed with the same natural or unalienable rights. All of us know, as a matter of fact, that any two individuals that we may compare with one another will be unequal in a large variety of respects. This leads to how we understand the equality that all humans possess all, with no exception whatsoever and to how we understand their myriad individual inequalities?

Weismann: Before you go on, tell me the basic definition or meaning of the terms equality and inequality?

Adler: Most persons, I have found, do not know the answer to this question, yet it is both short and simple. Two things are equal in a given respect, if in that respect, one is neither more nor less than the other. Two things are unequal in a given respect if in that respect, one is more and the other less than the other.

Weismann: Am I correct in understanding that you are saying there is only one respect in which all human beings, all without any exception, are equal?

Adler: Precisely, one human being is neither more nor less human than another. They all have the same species-specific common properties—the innate potentialities that constitute their human nature.

Weismann: But individual human beings do differ from one another in the degree to which they possess these common human properties, and with respect to such differences, can they be both equal and unequal?

Adler: Yes. These individual differences in degree may be due either to their different innate endowments or to their different individual attainments. Thus understood, there is no incompatibility between the statement that all human beings are equal in only one respect and the statement that they are also unequal in many other respects.

Weismann: Before we go on to the next topic, I have two further questions that relate to humans beings as social animals, how do they differ from some other animal species that have natural associations, and to what consequence?

Adler: You are quite correct in pointing out that humans and some other nonhuman animals are gregarious and are naturally impelled to associate with one another. But while man is not the only social animal, humans are the only political animals. Because they have intellects and free will, they voluntarily constitute the societies in which they live—their domestic, tribal, and political associations. All animal societies or groupings are instinctively determined, and thus they are all purely natural societies, differing from species to species but everywhere the same in the same species. Only human societies are both natural and conventional, natural by natural need, not by instinctive determination. Motivated by natural need, they are conventionally instituted by reason and

free will; and so, within the same species, they differ at different times and places.

As to the consequence, let me say that, quite apart from the doctrines that prevail among mankind, the ultimate resolution of the question about how man differs from other things will make a difference—to the future course of human affairs; for the image we hold of man cannot fail to affect the attitudes that influence our behavior in the world of action, and the beliefs that determine our commitments in the world of thought.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Max,

I thought you would be interested in what happened recently at the University of San Francisco's St. Ignatius Institute (their Great Books program). The director and assistant director were fired Jan 19. For more news see their website: <http://www.friendsofSII.com>

Sincerely,

James Chevedden, S.J.
Sacred Heart Jesuit Center, Los Gatos, CA

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WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Edward Dodson
Tom Lucia
Edward White

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As always, we welcome your comments.

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