

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Mar '01

Center for the Study of The Great Ideas

122

. . . 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.

—Mortimer J. 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 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 nurtural 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.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Most Respected Sir,

I am V. M. R. Vincent, from Bombay in India. A few days ago I received the magazine **Classical Homeschooling**. This particular magazine provided me the unique opportunity of knowing the fabulous work that you are doing in the field of education. Right from the time I gained my wisdom, I have been acutely concerned with the state of education in my country and elsewhere in the world. I am hugely impressed by the vision of Dr. Mortimer J. Adler.

As to me, I should like to state that I am an intellectual thinker with broad spectrum of knowledge gained through years of assiduous study. My interests encompass all fields of human endeavor and knowledge. I am always craving for novelty of human creativity and freedom from orthodox

thinking. I cannot resist the intellectual temptation of being part and parcel of your esteemed organization.

With great regards to Dr. Mortimer J. Adler and Mr. Max Weismann. May God bless these great souls and peace be always with them.

Thanking you, Sir.

Yours faithfully,

Victor

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Theophilus Lindzter - Teacher, Stockholm, Sweden

**Dr. Greg Maillet - English Professor Campion College
University of Regina, SK, Canada**

As always, we welcome your comments.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE is published
by the Center for the Study of The Great Ideas
Founded by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann
1151 N. State Street - Suite 272
Chicago, IL 60610
312-943-1076
E-mail: TGIdeas@speedsite.com
Homepage: TheGreatIdeas.org
A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) organization.
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.