

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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. . . man alone of all animals does not come into the world endowed with preformed instinctive patterns of behavior. His innate endowment does not program his behavior, except for a relatively small number of reflexes. All of his programmed behavior consists in the self-programming that is habit formation, and all habits arise from voluntary acts.

—Mortimer J. Adler



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# STATE AND SOCIETY (in four parts)

*by Mortimer Adler*

## PART II

### MAN, THE ONLY POLITICALLY SOCIAL ANIMAL

We learn from biological science that some animals lead solitary lives and that other animals live and act in groups that are more or less organized. The latter are called gregarious or social animals. Their individual survival and the survival of the species to which they belong depend upon their living with one another, instead of in isolation, and upon their acting, to some degree at least, in concert with one another.

There can be no question that the members of the human species are gregarious or social animals. They, too, cannot survive, nor can the species, unless they associate with one another in groups, the smallest of which is the human family, without whose care and protection human offspring would perish.

But is man gregarious in the same way that all other species of gregarious animals are? Or does the human race differ from other species of social animals by reason of the fact that its gregariousness gives rise to states as well as to other forms of societies? If so, then man is a politically social animal.

I have long persisted in the view that man is radically different from all other animals, different in kind, not merely in degree. This means that human beings have the ability to do what other animals cannot do at all. If what humans did, other animals also did to one extent or another, then the difference would be only a difference in degree. If other animals were simply less political

than human beings, that would be so. But if other animals are totally nonpolitical, then the difference is one of kind, and man is the only social animal that is also political.

I have written a book on this subject, entitled *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes*. Since its publication in 1967, I have written many articles to confirm and reinforce the arguments it presents, countering the claims of students of animal behavior who think they have found new evidence to show that human beings only differ in degree from the higher mammals—the chimpanzees, the bottle-nosed dolphins, and other species, to which behavioral scientists incorrectly attribute syntactical speech and conceptual thought.

There is no need here to repeat arguments to the effect that only human beings have the power of conceptual thought and engage in speech that is syntactical. Only such speech is an expression of conceptual thought. What looks like speech on the part of other animals is nothing but a form of communication by signals that refer only to perceptual objects, not to objects that have never been perceived or are totally imperceptible.

The only point I wish to make here is that man is the only politically social animal because (1) only man has an intellect as well as perceptual intelligence; (2) only man has the intellectual powers of understanding, judgment, and reasoning; (3) only man has free will and the power of free choice; and (4) only human beings, through syntactical speech, communicate their thoughts to one another—their judgments and their arguments.

Not all human behavior is voluntary. Some human reactions issue from the reflexes with which human beings are endowed at birth. But all the rest, which do not consist in conditioned reflexes, are not only voluntary, but also a matter of free choice.

To say this is to say that man alone of all animals does not come into the world endowed with preformed instinctive patterns of behavior. His innate endowment does not program his behavior, except for a relatively small number of reflexes. All of his programmed behavior consists in the self-programming that is habit formation, and all habits arise from voluntary acts.

To say that human beings have no instincts, in the strict sense of that term, is not to say that all members of the species do not have, inherent in their specific (and therefore common) human nature, certain instinctual impulses or natural drives. Human gregariousness is a case in point. Human beings are instinctually driven or impelled by their natures to associate with one another. But an instinctual drive or natural impulse, such as this, is not the same as an instinct.

An instinct is an elaborate pattern of behavior that carries out an instinctual drive and reaches the goal at which the instinctual drive aims.

If man were instinctively social as well as endowed by his gregarious nature with an instinctual impulse or need to associate with his fellows, then all human beings, being members of the same species, would always form associations of exactly the same kind. No aspect of their association would be voluntarily determined, nor would it differ from one group of individuals to another.

On this score, the evidence is irrefutably clear. Human associations differ in an incredibly wide variety of ways, from time to time, from place to place, and from one human group to another. This simply could not be the case if all human association were determined by an instinct present in all members of the human species.

It follows from this that human associations are

voluntarily formed, not instinctively determined. Otherwise they would not differ as we pass from one human group to another, or from one time and place to another, since the members of all human groups are members of the same species and would have the same species-specific social instincts.

The behavior of the social insects—bees, ants, termites, and others—lies at the opposite extreme of the spectrum. The hive built and organized by the species of bee, the mound built and socially structured by one species of ant, the colonies formed by one species of termite, are always and everywhere the same. They will remain so as long as the species survives. That sameness bespeaks the sameness of the species-specific instinct, which all members of the species possess by native endowment—all without a single exception.

In between the two extremes of the social insects at one end and the human species at the other, the different species of nonpolitical gregarious animals each have their own instinctively determined patterns of social behavior. These will be the same for all members of the same species. They will differ from one species to another. In addition, there will be some admixture of social behavior that manifests the operation of the perceptual intelligence, which all vertebrates possess and the higher mammals possess in a high degree. One need only observe the difference in dams constructed at different sites by different groups of beavers, all of the same species, to see that this is so.

At the outset of this discussion, I said that man is the only politically social animal because only man has an intellect, reasons, makes free choices, and communicates his thoughts and judgments by making sentences using words that are not just signals.

In the immediately preceding paragraphs, the argument took a different turn. We saw that the manifold diversity in forms of human association

indicates that man's social behavior cannot be instinctively determined. It must be voluntary and influenced by reason.

When the argument moves in that direction, it applies to all types of human association—to the family and the tribe as well as to the state. Here we are saying that we can infer man's unique status as a rational animal with free choice from all the evidence we have about the highly various ways in which human beings organize their families, tribes, and states.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Dr. Adler,

My name is Tony Daprai and this is my second year studying philosophy at North Dakota State University. I am also studying at Cardinal Muench Seminary to be a Catholic Priest. I bought your book, *The Great Ideas*, and have read most of *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* and sections of a few other of your books. In my opinion your books are easier to understand than most philosophy writers, although I still find them difficult to understand.

I'm 36 years old and this is the first time I've tried to think conceptually because I was never exposed to it in public high school or in my undergrad degree at the University of Michigan. From studying Aristotle last year I learned over the years I have developed the cardinal virtue of fortitude without even realizing it. There is much to know and much to do to live a "good" life. I remember from reading one of your books that you decided to spend your entire life pursuing knowledge, and I would like to do the same.

Learning philosophy is the hardest thing I've ever done, but at the same time its the most rewarding. I

plan on reading as much material of yours as I can, and develop myself into a man of knowledge. Thanks for spending your lifetime seeking knowledge and sharing it with us.

Sincerely,

Tony Daprai

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**WELCOME NEW MEMBERS**

**John J. Burack**

**Sandy [Sasha] Cornett, British Columbia**

**Rusty Wilson**

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**We welcome your comments and questions.**

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