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On Being Human, 1950.



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"ON BEING HUMAN"

December 24, 1950

"On Being Human" is a very interesting and stimulating book which appeared recently written by Professor Ashley Montagu, an eminent anthropologist. In this most stimulating little volume Professor Montagu challenges the whole doctrine of the survival of the fittest, or survival by combat upon which so much of the thinking of the world about evolution, organic evolution and social evolution, in the last 100 years has been based. Professor Montagu maintains that the driving force in the evolution of the human and animal societies has been cooperation rather than competition, and he marshals the most recent scientific data to prove his thesis, a thesis which knocks the props from under so many conventional notions and philosophies about individual and social behavior which have been popularly held in the last few generations.

Professor Earnest Hooton of Harvard, in introducing this volume, recounts a story "about a meeting of the National Academy of Sciences at which a famous biometrician was presenting a highly statistical paper. He read page after page of formulae and equations to a somnolent and mostly uncomprehending audience. At the conclusion of the paper, a grubby little man in a back seat arose and enquired: 'In the first equation you read, was the sign of the second element in the first part plus or minus?' In some confusion the speaker, after turning back the pages of his manuscript, replied: 'Minus.' 'Then,' said the grubby little man, 'the whole damn thing is wrong.'"

If Professor Montagu's facts and conclusions are correct, then the whole structure of thought and speculation concerning the nature of life and of human nature, which the last few generations since Malthus and Darwin have erected, is built on foundations of sand, and a thorough-going revision of our basic social, political, economic and educational concepts is clearly in order. And here, as in so many other of the newer and the more profound insights of modern science, one finds substantiation and vindication of the mighty spiritual intuitions of Judaism and of the great religions of mankind generally.



In the latter part of the 19th century and in the early part of the 20th century, the view was generally held that "life is struggle, competition, that the strongest survive and the weakest go to the wall", just as in the jungle, nature is red in tooth and claw, to use a phrase of Tennyson. Struggle is the law of nature.

Toward the close of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th, Thomas Malthus in his "Essay on Population", which made a profound impression on all subsequent thought in England and on the continent, maintained that human life consisted of a constant struggle for existence, and that "poverty and distress are unavoidable in human society since population increases in geometric ratio while the means of subsistence"- food - increase only in arithmetic ratio and that, therefore, war and famine and disease act as a sort of check on population.

Charles Darwin, who was greatly influenced by Malthus, in his famous work, "Origin of Species", which appeared in 1859, gave a biologic basis for this doctrine of Malthus that life is a struggle for existence. He found that to be true of all organic life.

As many more of each species (wrote Darwin) are born than can possibly survive; and as, consequently, there is a frequently recurring struggle for existence, it follows that any being, if it vary however slightly in any manner profitable to itself, under the complex and sometimes varying conditions of life, will have a better chance of surviving, and thus be naturally selected. From the strong principle of inheritance, any selected variety will tend to propagate its new and modified form.

Thus, the idea of "survival of the fittest" and "natural selection" were given scientific validation by Darwin and became, so to speak, legal tender in the current thought of the 19th and the early 20th century. And following that, social philosophers like Herbert Spencer, Thomas Huxley, accepting this view of the struggle for survival as the basis for their philosophies, built of their systems of thought about human social behavior which had, at the heart of them, the idea of struggle and competition and the defeat of the weak by the strong, and life was one battlefield. This idea, especially when taken out of its context, this idea of Darwin, Huxley and Spencer, gave a biologic justification for competition between men of the same community,



for competition and conflict and war between nations. This idea, survival of the fittest, justified the exploitation of ones's neighbors, one's competitors, and of inferior people by superior people. It served as a rationalization for the exploitation of labor and of children and women in industry during the Industrial Revolution, which began just about the time as Malthus and Darwin began their scientific work. The idea gained currency that there would always be the weak in nature and the strong and that the strong had the right to eliminate or to exploit the weak, and competition, ruthless and thorough-going, is the natural law of economic life, just as starvation is a law of nature.

✓ Now, Professor Montagu maintains that this view of life is completely false. He maintains that "activities which may collectively be called the struggle for existence do characterize the behavior of most animals, but that such activities are not all that characterizes their behavior. Cooperative behavior is at least as prominent a form of interaction between animals as competition." "There is," he says, "an unconscious force throughout the realm of living nature, a sort of unconscious mutualism, cooperativeness, which serves to produce greater survival values for every form of life than would otherwise be the case. . . . There is a principle of cooperation at work in nature. There is not only a struggle for life, but also a struggle for the life of others." In the last fifty years much study has been given to this subject, and today he maintains that the principle of cooperation is in a fair way to becoming established as the most important factor in the survival of animal groups and of individuals.

Professor Montagu marshals the accumulated evidence which science is now ready to make available, which is not our purpose here this morning to present. Suffice it to indicate here his main arguments, and his main arguments are that "the fundamentally social nature of all living things has its origin in the relationship between



parent and offspring." That's where the social sense, the social contact, the social pattern of all living things, animal and human, originates. The universal fact of reproduction, the original of one cell from another up through the scale of all living organisms - that is the foundation of the social relationship which characterizes all life.

In other words (writes Professor Montagu) the source of the social appetite of all living creatures is traceable to the way in which the living organism originates. All cells originate from other cells; it is impossible for them to originate in any other way.... And this process is always one of dependency and interdependency between parent and offspring. Dependency and interdependency are the indispensable conditions of life - and these are the conditions which all living organisms strive to maintain. All living organisms strive to be dependent and interdependent, because that is the living state - dependency and interdependency. Because the tissues of every organism remember their dependency and interdependency.

Each cell of the organism is dependent for its proper functioning upon the interaction with it of every other cell of the organism. Which is to say that every organism functions as a whole, and not as a mass of discrete, independent cellular elements. The organism is itself a dependent and interdependent whole.

No living organism is biologically solitary in its origin and few are solitary in their lives. Most organism, from the lowest to the highest, normally are to a certain extent engaged in some sort of social life. In this sense there is reason to believe that, with few exception, the solitary animal is, in any species, an abnormal creature.

And he quotes Professor Wheeler, who says, "Most animals and plants live in associations, herds, colonies or societies and even the so-called 'solitary' species are obligatory, more or less cooperative members of groups or associations of individuals of different species."

Professor Montagu proceeds to cite numerous examples to demonstrate the existence of what he calls "the social appetite" throughout the kingdom of living forms. Whether we are dealing with fungi or bacteria or higher plants and animals, the drive to form social aggregates is the same everywhere.



Why is that the case in nature? Because there are definite biological advantages to such social aggregates against "solitary life". It gives them greater protection, security and greater survival potential. He demonstrates that the animal living in association with others "will increase in size and in the speed of its physiological reactions, will tend to recover more quickly from wounds and survive more often" than the isolated animal. So that "natural selection" operates not as was imagined heretofore on the basis of nature "red in tooth and claw", not on the basis of the ruthless struggle on the part of each individual for survival, but on the optimum capacity of each individual and each group for cooperation. And that applies also and more so to man.

We begin to understand (writes Professor Montagu) that evolution itself is a process which favors cooperating rather than disoperating groups and "fitness" is a function of the group as a whole rather than of separate individuals. The fitness of the individual is largely derived from his membership in a group. The more cooperative the group, the greater is the fitness for survival which extends to all its members.

If we would seek for one word which describes society better than any other, that word is cooperation. The important point to grasp is that, contrary to the beliefs of the struggle-for-survival school of thought, man does not have to create a cooperative mood for himself to erect over the tufa of his savage strivings to be otherwise. Not at all. The impulses toward cooperative behavior are already present in him at birth, and all they require is cultivation. There is not a shred of evidence that man is born with "hostile" or "evil" impulses which must be watched and disciplined. Discipline of basic impulses is, indeed, necessary, but it is the discipline of love, not of frustration, which they require.

It was said long ago by Seneca that man is a social animal. Professor Montagu wants to demonstrate that all animals are social animals. But the full implications of the saying that man is a social animal have never been drawn. We talk about the individual and about society as though they were two separate and distinct and not related facts. In reality the individual has no meaning except as he is identified with a social group. The individual does not fulfill himself unless he fulfills himself in the light of the group and finds the meaning of his life in his relations with other persons and their thoughts and activities. It is society which gives meaning



and direction to the life of the individual. Personality is always a function of relations with others. As a wise rabbi long ago declared,

"Never try to separate yourself from society," because one destroys himself and whatever is in him, his distinctiveness, his individuality, his uniqueness. He destroys it all by abstracting himself from the only milieu in which he can work, in which the qualities of his being can express themselves; namely, the social group.

So the author proceeds to develop this thought:

Man is related to himself only in so far as he is related to others. To love is to relate oneself to others. The infant is born with drives whose urgency is directed toward relating himself to others and to have others relate themselves to him. Life is social and man is born to be social, that is, cooperative, an interdependent part of a whole, a working, interacting part of a community. ✓

And he quotes Professor Alfred Adler, the eminent psychologist, psychoanalyst, who declared: ✓

The individual's proper development can only progress if he lives and strives as a part of the whole. The shallow objections of individualistic systems have no meaning as against this view. I could go still further and show how all our functions are calculated to bind the single individual to the community, and not to destroy the fellowship of man with man.... All our bodily and mental functions are rightly, normally, and healthily developed insofar as they are imbued with sufficient social feeling and are fitted for cooperation. ✓

When we speak of virtue, we mean that a person plays his part; when we speak of vice, we mean that he interferes with cooperation. I can, moreover, point out that all that constitutes a failure is so because it obstructs social feeling, whether children, neurotics, criminals, or suicides are in question. In every case it can be seen that a contribution is lacking. No isolated persons are to be found in the whole history of humanity. The evolution of humanity was only possible because mankind was a community. ✓

And so, the basis of life is cooperation and cooperation is just another word for love. The author points out that this idea of cooperation is not some kind of a far-off, distant ideal for which we should strive, but it is part of life from the very beginning. Unfortunately, it has not been adequately cultivated by mankind. It is to be found among the most primitive human groups - the Australian aborigines, the Eskimos and other groups where men live in unity and peace and harmony, where war is ✓



unknown, and the lives of children are the happiest because they are free of frustration. Cooperation is found among children, born with children. The view that the child is born egocentric, evil, in sin, is widely held, and it is nothing more than a projection upon the child of our own conditioning and egocentricity and evil and sin. Such a view is not supported by the facts. The facts, on the contrary, show that the child is born an actively cooperating organism. Charlotte Buhler has pointed out that "cooperative behavior among children is more basic than competitive response, finding that the latter type of response in her group of observed children did not make its appearance till about the third year. All observers have found that hostile responses in the child tend to increase as it grows older." He was born with definite cooperative inclinations.

Now, why is it that we have failed to develop the social competence of ours, asks the author. He attributes it to two factors; first, to the privation of love, which is suffered by the infant during its first six years of life; and secondly, to our ruthless, competitive economic organization and system, which gives our young people as they grow up a false conception of the nature of human life; that is to say, they come to think that human life is a problem of economics, rather than a problem of human relationships. And so, he sums up his thought in the following words:

It is a discovery of the greatest possible significance for mankind that the ethical conception of love, independently arrived at by almost all existing peoples, is no mere creation of man but is grounded in the biological structure of man as a functioning organism. The implications of this discovery are of the very greatest importance, for it means that man's organic potentialities are so organized as to demand but one kind of satisfaction alone, a satisfaction which ministers to man's need for love, which registers love, which is given in terms of love - a satisfaction which is defined by the one word, security. That is what the human being seeks all his life, and society, culture, and man's institutions, however inefficient some of them may be, all exist to secure that one fundamental satisfaction. The emotional need for love is as definite and compelling as the need for food. The basic needs of man must be satisfied in order that he may function on the organic level. But in order that he may function satisfactorily on the social plane, the most fundamental of the basic social needs must be satisfied in an emotionally adequate manner for personal security or equilibrium.



It has been shown that when the needs of the developing social organism are inadequately satisfied, that is, where there have been too many frustrations - thwartings of expected satisfactions - where there has been a privation of love, the organism becomes disordered, anxious, tense, fearful, and hostile. This, in fact, is more or less the state into which most human beings in the Western world today have fallen.

And he concludes:

Cooperative behavior clearly has great survival value. When social behavior is not cooperative, it is diseased. The dominant principle which informs all behavior that is biologically healthy is love. Without love there can be no healthy social behavior, cooperation, or security. To love thy neighbor as thyself is not simply good text material for Sunday morning sermons but perfectly sound biology.

Men who do not love one another are sick - sick not from any disease arising within themselves but from a disease which has been enculturated within them by the false values of their societies. Belief in false values which condition the development of the person, in competition instead of cooperation, in narrow selfish interests instead of altruism, in atomism instead of universalism, in the value of money instead of the value of man, represents man turning upon all that is innately good in him.

Man's sense of mutuality and cooperativeness may be suppressed, but so long as man continues to exist, it cannot be destroyed, for these are traits which are part of his protoplasm. His combativeness and competitiveness arise primarily from the frustration of his need to cooperate. These are important facts to bear in mind at a time when all the surface evidence seems to point in a contrary direction. The word of the moment may be "fission" - whether with respect to physics or human affairs - but "fusion" comes much closer to reflecting man's natural behavior patterns.

Well, that's a tremendously challenging little book, this of Professor Montagu.

I wish I had the time to go into his solution more deeply for the problem of our age.

He sees it largely as a problem in social engineering, a problem of re-educating our children properly, as to what is the nature of society and why it must be modified and how it can be changed. Training in human relations and humanity and goodness, principally on children. He devotes a good deal of space as to how the profit motive of our civilization is devastating human life. Society is not built on economics, he maintains. Man is not an economic commodity. This conception of man as an economic commodity has made possible the exploitation of man by his fellowman. It has produced all of the evils of life, most of the evils of life. It has brought the menace of in-



security into the lives of men.

Well, all of this, of course, points directly to those tremendous prophetic religious insights of Judaism which were given to mankind 3,000 years ago or more; how to be human. And that's the whole business of Judaism. It sought to teach men how to be human. The great seers and prophets of Israel did not work in any scientific laboratory and did not base their conclusions upon what was discovered after investigation and statistics, etc., but they had tremendous spiritual insight, and because of these they were able to give mankind a program for a way of life which science 3,000 years later is validating and establishing scientifically and biologically sound.

Love thy neighbor as thyself. That is, according to our rabbis, that is the whole of Judaism. The rest is commentary. And a man should not say, the rabbis said, love only the scholars, love only the pupils and not the ignorant man, but love everyone. Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart. Love the stranger. God created mankind to be one family. How good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity. Why, those themes ring like clear bells through every passage in our great religious literature. Man is not born to fight his fellowmen. The ideal way of life is to live in peace, to beat your swords into ploughshares and your knives into pruning hooks. The way to live is not to strive for aggrandizement and the economic domination of your fellowmen, but to live for justice. Justice, justice shalt thou pursue. It has been told of man what is good and what the Lord requireth of thee - to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with Thy God. To be human, to be human. That is why Judaism laid so much emphasis not only upon charity and compassion - if thy brother wax poor - the poor man is your brother. You live with him in one family. It's one society - the rich and poor, the strong and weak, the wise and simple - one society, one family, one world. Our sages taught us not only that charity is one of the great obligatory mandates of human life, but it is co-equal with all the other mitzvahs, but they went far beyond Tzedoka. They



spoke of                      of having an attitude of good will and helpfulness toward  
your neighbor in every relationship, and they said that the difference between  
is this: Charity is only for the poor;                      is for the rich and the poor  
alike. We should have an attitude of good will and helpfulness to everyone. Charity  
- that's <sup>for</sup> the living;                      is for the living and the dead, for everyone.

                    they said, is with money.                      is with money, with sub-  
stance, with effort                      . It's a kind of cooperativeness that our religion  
has advocated for mankind. And as for peace, they said, a man must not only be a  
peace-loving man, but he must go out in pursuit of peace. Every other mitzvah, they  
said, you perform when it comes to your hand to perform it; if it doesn't, you are  
under no obligation. Peace                      seek peace and pursue it. Well,  
peace - that is cooperativeness, that is love, that is the very thing that Professor  
Montagu talks about in his book. It is the key to a stable and secure and happy so-  
ciety. Peace means love, for peaceful men are those who love their fellowmen.

There is a little                      the principle of love and cooperation - accredited,  
validated, approved of by the latest of scientific investigation. Mankind for a  
long time has sought to get along without these basic principles. While he thought  
that these principles are a very beautiful idea, good to speak about, good to refer  
to on holidays, when Christmas comes around and when great Jewish holidays come around,  
good to pay lip service to, but somehow not related to the business of life. The real  
business of life - that struggle, that competition, that survival of the fittest. You  
want to get along in the world. You learn early in life how to trample upon the face  
of your opponent - master him, rise to the top - that's real life for practical people.  
Science  
~~Since~~ has proven that that's real life for mad people, for people built upon suicide  
and the destruction of the human race! It is unnatural, unbiologic, it represents  
frustration, it represents disease to the mind and soul - and these principles of love  
and cooperation represent sanity and biologic health and survival value for the indi-  
vidual and for society, and perhaps through seas of blood and much suffering, mankind



collectively and many individually will some day come to the foot of Mt. Sinai again where these great ideals and principles and programs of human life - how to be human - were first proclaimed to mankind. Amen.

