

HUMAN
NATURE
AND
CONDUCT

DEWEY



HUMAN NATURE AND CONDUCT

An Introduction to Social Psychology

BY JOHN DEWEY

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

JOHN DEWEY



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FOREWORD TO THE MODERN LIBRARY EDITION

In the eighteenth century, the word *Morals* was used in English literature with a meaning of broad sweep. It included all the subjects of distinctively humane import, all of the social disciplines as far as they are intimately connected with the life of man and as they bear upon the interests of humanity. The pages that follow are intended as a contribution, from one point of view, to *Morals* thus conceived. The particular point of view taken is that of the structure and workings of human nature, of psychology when that term is used also in its wider sense.

Were it not for one consideration, the volume might be said to be an essay in continuing the tradition of David Hume. But it happens that in the usual interpretation of Hume, he is treated simply as a writer who carried philosophical skepticism to its limit. There is sufficient ground in Hume for this way of looking at his work. But it is one-sided. No one can read the introductory remarks with which he prefaced his two chief philosophical writings without realizing that he had also a constructive aim. To a considerable extent local and temporal controversies incident to the period in which he wrote led to an excessive emphasis on the skeptical import of his conclusions. He was so anxious

to oppose certain views current and influential in his own day that his original positive aim got obscured and overlaid as he proceeded. In a period in which these other views were themselves dim and unimportant his thought might well have taken a happier turn.

His constructive idea is that a knowledge of human nature provides a map or chart of all humane and social subjects, and that with this chart in our possession we can find our way intelligently about through all the complexities of the phenomena of economics, politics, religious beliefs, etc. Indeed, he went further, and held that human nature gives also the key to the sciences of the physical world, since when all is said and done they are also the products of the workings of the human mind. It is likely that in enthusiasm for a new idea, Hume carried it too far. But there is to my mind an inexpugnable element of truth in his teachings. Human nature is at least a contributing factor to the *form* which even natural science takes, although it may not give the key to its *content* in the degree which Hume supposed.

But in the social subjects, he was on safer ground. Here at least we are in the presence of facts in which human nature is truly central and where a knowledge of human nature is necessary to enable us to thread our way through the tangled scene. If Hume erred in his use of his key, it was because he failed to note the reaction of social institutions and conditions upon the ways in which human nature expresses itself. He saw the part played by the structure and opera-

tions of our common nature in shaping social life. He failed to see with equal clearness the reflex influence of the latter upon the shape which a plastic human nature takes because of its social environment. He emphasized habit and custom, but he failed to see that custom is essentially a fact of associated living whose force is dominant in forming the habits of individuals.

To point out this relative failure is only to say that he thought and wrote before the rise of ^[ænthropologia] anthropology and allied sciences. There was in his day little intimation of the pervasive and powerful influence of what anthropologists call culture in shaping the concrete manifestations of every human nature subject to its influence. It was a great achievement to insist upon the uniform workings of a common human structure amid the diversity of social conditions and institutions. What the growth of knowledge since his time enables us to add is that this diversity operates to create different attitudes and dispositions in the play of ultimately identical human factors.

It is not easy to keep a balance between the two sides of the scene. There always tend to be two schools, one emphasizing original and native human nature; the other depending upon the influence of the social environment. Even in anthropology, there are those who carry back social phenomena to processes of diffusion, those who whenever they find common beliefs and institutions in different parts of the world assume some earlier contact and intercourse in which borrowing took place. Then there are those who prefer to dwell

upon the identity of human nature at all times and places and to carry back the interpretation of cultural phenomena to this inherent unity of human nature. When this volume was first produced, there was a tendency, especially among psychologists, to insist upon native human nature untouched by social influences and to explain social phenomena by reference to traits of original nature called "instincts." Since that date (1922), the pendulum has undoubtedly swung in the opposite direction. The importance of culture as a formative medium is more generally recognized. Perhaps the tendency to-day in many quarters is to overlook the basic identity of human nature amid its different manifestations.

At all events, difficulty persists in securing and maintaining an equilibrium with reference to intrinsic human nature on one side and social customs and institutions on the other. There are doubtless many shortcomings in the pages which follow, but they are to be interpreted in the light of an endeavor to keep the two forces in balance. There is, I hope, due emphasis upon the power of cultural habitude and trend in diversifying the forms assumed by human nature. But there is also an attempt to make clear that there are always intrinsic forces of a common human nature at work; forces which are sometimes stifled by the encompassing social medium but which also in the long course of history are always striving to liberate themselves and to make over social institutions so that the latter may form a freer, more transparent and more con-

genial medium for their operation. "Morals" in its broad sense is a function of the interaction of these two forces.

JOHN DEWEY.

New York City,
Dec., 1929.

PREFACE

In the spring of 1918 I was invited by Leland Stanford Junior University to give a series of three lectures upon the West Memorial Foundation. One of the topics included within the scope of the Foundation is Human Conduct and Destiny. This volume is the result, as, according to the terms of the Foundation, the lectures are to be published. The lectures as given have, however, been rewritten and considerably expanded. An Introduction and Conclusion have been added. The lectures should have been published within two years from delivery. Absence from the country rendered strict compliance difficult; and I am indebted to the authorities of the University for their indulgence in allowing an extension of time, as well as for so many courtesies received during the time when the lectures were given.

Perhaps the sub-title requires a word of explanation. The book does not purport to be a treatment of social psychology. But it seriously sets forth a belief that an understanding of habit and of different types of habit is the key to social psychology, while the operation of impulse and intelligence gives the key to individualized mental activity. But they are secondary to habit so that mind can be understood in the concrete only as a system of beliefs, desires and purposes which are formed in the interaction of biological aptitudes with a social environment.

J. D.

February, 1921.

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INTRODUCTION

"Give a dog a bad name and hang him." Human nature has been the dog of professional moralists, and consequences accord with the proverb. Man's nature has been regarded with suspicion, with fear, with sour looks, sometimes with enthusiasm for its possibilities but only when these were placed in contrast with its actualities. It has appeared to be so evilly disposed that the business of morality was to prune and curb it; it would be thought better of if it could be replaced by something else. It has been supposed that morality would be quite superfluous were it not for the inherent weakness, bordering on depravity, of human nature. Some writers with a more genial conception have attributed the current blackening to theologians who have thought to honor the divine by disparaging the human. Theologians have doubtless taken a gloomier view of man than have pagans and secularists. But this explanation doesn't take us far. For after all these theologians are themselves human, and they would have been without influence if the human audience had not somehow responded to them.

Morality is largely concerned with controlling human nature. When we are attempting to control anything we are acutely aware of what resists us. So moralists were led, perhaps, to think of human nature as evil

because of its reluctance to yield to control, its rebelliousness under the yoke. But this explanation only raises another question. Why did morality set up rules so foreign to human nature? The ends it insisted upon, the regulations it imposed, were after all outgrowths of human nature. Why then was human nature so averse to them? Moreover rules can be obeyed and ideals realized only as they appeal to something in human nature and awaken in it an active response. Moral principles that exalt themselves by degrading human nature are in effect committing suicide. Or else they involve human nature in unending civil war, and treat it as a hopeless mess of contradictory forces.

We are forced therefore to consider the nature and origin of that control of human nature with which morals has been occupied. And the fact which is forced upon us when we raise this question is the existence of classes. Control has been vested in an oligarchy. Indifference to regulation has grown in the gap which separates the ruled from the rulers. Parents, priests, chiefs, social censors have supplied aims, aims which were foreign to those upon whom they were imposed, to the young, laymen, ordinary folk; a few have given and administered rule, and the mass have in a passable fashion and with reluctance obeyed. Everybody knows that good children are those who make as little trouble as possible for their elders, and since most of them cause a good deal of annoyance they must be naughty by nature. Generally speaking, good people have been those who did what they were told to do, and lack of

eager compliance is a sign of something wrong in their nature.

But no matter how much men in authority have turned moral rules into an agency of class supremacy, any theory which attributes the origin of rule to deliberate design is false. To take advantage of conditions after they have come into existence is one thing; to create them for the sake of an advantage to accrue is quite another thing. We must go back of the bare fact of social division into superior and inferior. To say that accident produced social conditions is to perceive they were not produced by intelligence. Lack of understanding of human nature is the primary cause of disregard for it. Lack of insight always ends in despising or else unreasoned admiration. When men had no scientific knowledge of physical nature they either passively submitted to it or sought to control it magically. What cannot be understood cannot be managed intelligently. It has to be forced into subjection from without. The opaqueness of human nature to reason is equivalent to a belief in its intrinsic irregularity. Hence a decline in the authority of social oligarchy was accompanied by a rise of scientific interest in human nature. This means that the make-up and working of human forces afford a basis for moral ideas and ideals. Our science of human nature in comparison with physical sciences is rudimentary, and morals which are concerned with the health, efficiency and happiness of a development of human nature are correspondingly elementary. These pages are a dis-

cession of some phases of the ethical change involved in positive respect for human nature when the latter is associated with scientific knowledge. We may anticipate the general nature of this change through considering the evils which have resulted from severing morals from the actualities of human physiology and psychology. There is a pathology of goodness as well as of evil; that is, of that sort of goodness which is nurtured by this separation. The badness of good people, for the most part recorded only in fiction, is the revenge taken by human nature for the injuries heaped upon it in the name of morality. In the first place, morals cut off from positive roots in man's nature is bound to be mainly negative. Practical emphasis falls upon avoidance, escape of evil, upon not doing things, observing prohibitions. Negative morals assume as many forms as there are types of temperament subject to it. Its commonest form is the protective coloration of a neutral respectability, an insipidity of character. For one man who thanks God that he is not as other men there are a thousand to offer thanks that they are as other men, sufficiently as others are to escape attention. Absence of social blame is the usual mark of goodness for it shows that evil has been avoided. Blame is most readily averted by being so much like everybody else that one passes unnoticed. Conventional morality is a drab morality, in which the only fatal thing is to be conspicuous. If there be flavor left in it, then some natural traits have somehow escaped being subdued. To be so good as to attract notice is

to be priggish, too good for this world. The same psychology that brands the convicted criminal as forever a social outcast makes it the part of a gentleman not to obtrude virtues noticeably upon others.

The Puritan is never popular, not even in a society of Puritans. In case of a pinch, the mass prefer to be good fellows rather than to be good men. Polite vice is preferable to eccentricity and ceases to be vice. Morals that professedly neglect human nature end by emphasizing those qualities of human nature that are most commonplace and average; they exaggerate the herd instinct to conformity. Professional guardians of morality who have been exacting with respect to themselves have accepted avoidance of conspicuous evil as enough for the masses. One of the most instructive things in all human history is the system of concessions, tolerances, mitigations and reprieves which the Catholic Church with its official supernatural morality has devised for the multitude. Elevation of the spirit above everything natural is tempered by organized leniency for the frailties of flesh. To uphold an aloof realm of strictly ideal realities is admitted to be possible only for a few. Protestantism, except in its most zealous forms, has accomplished the same result by a sharp separation between religion and morality in which a higher justification by faith disposes at one stroke of daily lapses into the gregarious morals of average conduct.

There are always ruder forceful natures who cannot tame themselves to the required level of colorless