

Conception of human nature

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So much of what I will present in the following chapters is based on my view of human nature that I should make a few comments on the subject. Ideas of the kind I express here run the danger of being dismissed as utopian. But, then, the instinctive rejection of noble aspirations in the name of realism has become habitual with approaches to social issues that have failed both to uplift the human race and to acknowledge their impotence. The prevailing—presumably realistic—views of human nature are confusing and self-contradictory. On the one hand, we dream of and labour for a world of peace and prosperity; on the other, what passes for scientific theory depicts us as slaves to self-interest, incapable of rising to the heights of nobility we must achieve in order to meet our challenges. We work, then, for objectives that lie forever beyond our selfish means. It is such contradictions that have led to the paralysis of will that today pervades all strata of society.

To liberate ourselves from this paralyzing contradiction, we must first ask if the history of the human race, with all its follies, substantiates any such theories as original sin, the innocent being corrupted by civilization, the human who is only one step away from being a god, or the animal who is driven by an insatiable collection of needs. When the operations of love, of the will to conquer the ego, of transcendence and of beauty are examined—along with the cruelty that has afflicted humanity in its arduous evolutionary path—the picture that emerges is of a human being with a dual nature, and a set of complementary forces that shape and reshape that nature.

We cannot deny that we have inherited from millions of years of animal evolution attributes that belong to those origins. In the animal, such characteristics are neither good nor bad; they are merely traits required for individual and collective survival. But they do not constitute a realistic base upon which human society can be constructed. There is ample historical and experiential evidence that we also possess a higher nature, a spiritual one that has gradually made it possible for us to understand and satisfy material needs within appropriate limits, while rising above the exigencies of animal existence. None of the usual attitudes towards our physical nature—rejection, guilt, passive acceptance, or loving fixation—is conducive to transcendence. The challenge is to overcome the limitations urged on us by the demands of survival, to learn to control the appetites of the animal, and to develop the qualities of the higher nature that struggles for expression. This is a personal task to be tackled by every individual, and at the same time, an imperative in the collective evolution of the human race.

The primary force propelling this, now conscious, evolutionary process is knowledge, a knowledge that is created and constantly re-created on the basis of a sound understanding of one's self, of those promptings that lead to abasement and of those that lead to dignity and honour. The two repositories of this knowledge are religion and science. With their aid we discover in ourselves the powers of nobility, freedom and oneness, and learn to apply these powers to the building of an ever-advancing civilization.