

DEMOCRATIZING HUMAN NATURE

BY C. W. REESE

THE age-old faith that human nature can and should be changed is being justified by scientific fact. The expectation of the religions of the world is being fulfilled. While the great religions of the world have spoken ill of original human nature, they have never doubted its possibilities. With the exception of Brahmanism, no great religion has excluded any one from the highest religious attainment. Religion has not been wholly successful in remaking human nature, but its achievements have been such that no doubts have been able successfully to assail its faith. Recent positive achievements have verified the age-long faith in the possibilities of human nature; and one positive achievement overthrows all negative experience. It is now evident that human nature not only can be changed but is being changed constantly. The process of organizing and correlating impulses, of changing human nature, is going on with startling rapidity.

While most living things constantly fit their environment to themselves, man can reshape himself also—and is now reshaping himself on a gigantic scale. Lower forms of life see only the need for change in their outside facts; man sees the need for change in himself also. Other forms of life have some part in their growth and development; but man seems to be the only living thing that consciously examines himself with serious intent to change his nature in accord with an end in view.

I

Original human nature is a bundle of unorganized impulses. We know no man in the unaffected natural state. There are no solitary human infants. With the first social exchange the original self is overlaid; and this early experience becomes the basis of perfectly

normal dispositions later. Hence our idea of original human nature must be the result of abstraction. We have to postulate units. And "an instinct is such an hypothetical unit." Instincts may be thought of as the channels down which the current of life runs, but the channels are not fixed and permanent but are being changed constantly.

The higher range of instincts tends toward the intellectual mastery of problems; but this is a rather late development. Human nature has become what it is by a gradual process of organization around the will to responsible living.

II

The democratization of human nature consists in the gradual organization of instincts or impulses or original tendencies in harmony with the growing conception of individual and social worth, i. e., in harmony with community of interest.

As the human race progresses its conception of individual worth grows apace. The sacredness of the individual becomes an established premise. The violation of personality becomes the gravest crime. No man may be sacrificed on the altar of another's ambition. The individual in and of himself is sacred and his personality must be regarded as inviolable.

Society, too, becomes a sacred thing. That indefinable something that we call society,—that system of psychical relations, that net-work of interdependence, that human brotherhood,—has come to be regarded with reverence and devotion. The rights of the whole have come to be regarded as inviolable as the rights of the individual.

So we must organize our fear, our hunger, our pugnacity, and our love around the will to responsible living, i. e., the will to selfhood in harmony with the selfhood of our fellowmen and the interdependence of all. This is not reversal but development of primitive tendencies on impulses. Such is the process of civilization. The instincts as well as the individuals and species worthy of survival are the federalists and not the anarchists.

III

The principal agent in the remaking of a human being is his own will. By coercion a man may be made to do this or that but such is not to change his wants, and unless his wants are changed, his

instincts reached, he is not a remade man. And in final analysis a man's own will must determine what he wants to be or do.

Coercion long continued may change human nature, but if so it is because a degree of consent has been developed. Unless coercion, even with a child, is so managed as to develop the consent and approval of the will, it is ethically worthless.

While there is continuous interplay between a man's will and the reaction of society, and while every man is what he is in part because of what somebody else is, or has been; yet within very wide margins a man may become largely what he wills to be. That is to say, a man may consciously remake himself and society may deliberately assist in the remaking. In this lies the hope of democracy.

Human nature is the most plastic part of the living world. Within very large margins human beings may not only do what they will but also *become what they will*.

In man, of all animals, heredity counts for least and conscious building for most. Man's infancy is longest, "his instincts least fixed, his brain most unfinished at birth, his powers of habit-making and habit-changing most marked, his susceptibility to social impressions keenest."¹ That is to say, man of all animals is the most unfinished at birth.

There are few national or racial or Utopian demands so contrary to nature that they could not be put into operation. The question, then, becomes *not what is possible but what is desirable*. Once we know what we want to make of human nature, that we can make it.

IV

The original unorganized impulses or tendencies are very general in their nature. For instance, the impulse to flee from danger: Some years ago a cry that sounded like "fire" was heard from the balcony of a theater in the south. The impulse to flee was immediately operative, and many people leaped from the building and landed on the pavement below or piled on top of each other and became heaps of dead. The impulse to flee from danger was not correlated with the higher impulse to think of an end and how to reach it. That is, the general impulse to flee from danger should be particularized and correlated and so become the specific impulse to reach the means of escape. The intellect, that is the idea of an end—in this case safely to reach the ground by means of the fire

¹ Hocking.

escape—must particularize the general impulse to flee.

Consider the food-getting impulse. The impulse to eat may lead to sudden death from the eating of poisonous matter, or which is more usual, to indigestion from eating too much. The impulse to eat must be organized in line with the responsible policy of eating wholesome food and not too much of that, in order to an end, viz., health and long life.

The impulse to sociability, the gregarious instinct, must be particularized to the point of desiring to be with people of worth and to make people worthy of association. The general impulse to be with a crowd must be particularized to the point of desiring to be with a worthy crowd. And so on through the range of impulses.

Original human nature is neither depraved nor divine: it is simply unorganized and undirected. Its remaking, its regeneration if you prefer, consists in organization and direction toward worthy ends. And this is the work of intelligence and will.

V

To this task of democratizing human nature the church must set itself with apostolic fervor. Now that we know how to change human nature, what the change means, and why human nature should be changed, we should increase our efforts and so multiply results.

The achievements of religion in the remaking of human nature have not been what they should. And the reason for this is twofold: Neglect of basic inside facts, and misapprehension of the relation between inside and outside facts.

The function of the will in the remaking process has not been sufficiently recognized, nor has the will been developed adequately. Religion has called on men unconditionally to surrender the will to outside and supernatural forces. "Breaking the stubborn will" is evangelical language. Worldly powers have coerced the will of subjects; and parents have broken the will of children. The will is the central agent in remaking and should be neither broken nor surrendered to God or man. Let the will be developed, let it be directed into safe channels, but never broken or surrendered. If the church would once turn its attention toward developing the will and directing it into safe channels, it could render a most useful service to

humanity. The church must be the champion of the inviolable rights of the human will.

The importance of outside facts in the development of the will and in the remaking of human nature has not been understood by the church. Arctic zones and torrid regions tend to stultify human nature. But worse is the stultifying effect of an evil social environment. The temperate zones tend to development. Likewise the zones of temperate living—of neither too much nor too little—are socially healthful. A democratic environment and a democratic nature are interactive and mutually necessary.

We may become what we will to be. The door to the future swings wide open. The eternal urge moves within us. The laws of nature sustain us. Swords shall yet be beaten into ploughshares. Ours shall be the social order that follows tireless toil and noble purpose. But to attain this goal we must reaffirm our faith in the possibilities of human nature, and dedicate ourselves to the task of organizing human nature on the basis of world-wide community of interest.