

Chapter 40

Differences in Civilizations

TO DISCOVER the law of human progress, we must first determine the essential nature of the differences between civilizations. Such great disparities cannot be explained by innate differences in the individuals who compose these communities. True, there are natural differences and hereditary transmission of particular traits. But these are nothing compared to social influences.'

What is more ingrained than language? Nothing persists longer, nor shows nationality quicker. It is our medium of thought. Yet we are not born with a predisposition to any language. Although our ancestors have spoken one language for generations, children hearing a different tongue from birth will learn that just as easily.

Manners and customs of nation or class are also matters of education and habit, not hereditary transmission. White infants captured and raised by Indians demonstrate this: They become thorough Indians. That the reverse is not as true of Indians brought up by whites is due to the fact that they are never treated precisely the same as white children.

I once heard a highly intelligent Negro gentleman, Bishop Hillery, remark: "Our children, when they are young, are fully as bright as white children, and learn as readily. But as soon as they get old enough to appreciate

their status—to realize that they are looked upon as belonging to an inferior race, and can never hope to be anything more than cooks, waiters, or something of that sort—they lose their ambition and cease to keep up.”

Conditions and surroundings profoundly modify human character. Paupers will raise paupers, even if the children are not their own. Frequent contact with criminals may make criminals out of the children of virtuous parents. Those who learn to rely on charity inevitably lose the self-respect and independence necessary for self-reliance when the struggle is hard. Thus it is well known that charity often increases the demand for more charity.

In any large community, diverse classes and groups show the same kind of differences as we see between different civilizations: differences in knowledge, belief, customs, tastes, and speech. But these differences are certainly not innate. No baby is born a Methodist or Catholic, nor with a particular dialect or accent. These differences are derived from association in these groups.

This body of traditions, beliefs, customs, laws, habits and associations arises in every community and surrounds every individual. This, not hereditary transmission, makes the English different from the French, the American from the Chinese, and the civilized from the primitive. Heredity may develop or alter qualities—but much more so the physical than the mental characteristics.

Even in our wildest state, human life is infinitely more complex than animal life, for we are affected by an infinitely greater number of influences. Amid these, the relative influence of heredity diminishes. The physical differences between races are hardly greater than between black and white horses. If this is true of our physical structure,

it must be reflected even more in our mental constitution. All our physical parts we bring with us into the world, but the mind develops afterward. We cannot tell whether the mind of a newborn infant is to be English or Chinese, or even the mind of a civilized person or the mind of a savage. That depends entirely on the social environment in which it is placed.

Suppose infants of highly civilized parents were taken to an uninhabited country and somehow kept alive until adulthood. They would be the most helpless savages imaginable. They would need to discover fire, to invent the simplest tools, and to construct a language. Just as children learn to walk, they would have to stumble their way to the simplest knowledge the lowest culture now possesses.

No doubt, they could do all these things in time. These possibilities are latent in the human mind, as the power of walking is latent in the human frame. But I do not believe they would do them better or worse, or quicker or slower, than children of barbarians under the same conditions. What could mankind attain if each generation were separated from the next by an interval of time, like seventeen-year locusts? Only one such interval would see the decline of mankind—not simply to savagery, but to a condition compared with which savagery, as we know it, would seem civilized. Conversely, if savage infants were placed in civilized homes, can we suppose that they would show any difference growing up? (We must assume in this experiment that they would be raised the same as other children.) The great lesson thus learned is that “human nature is human nature all the world over.”

There is a people, found in all parts of the world, who illustrate which traits are transmitted by heredity and which

are transmitted by association. The Jews have maintained the purity of their blood more scrupulously, and for a far longer time, than any European race. Yet the only characteristic that can be attributed to this is physical appearance. (And this is far less than conventionally supposed, as anyone who takes the trouble can see.) Although they have constantly married among themselves, the Jews have everywhere been modified by their surroundings. English, Russian, Polish, German, and Oriental Jews differ from each other, in many respects, as much as do the other people of those countries.

Yet they have much in common and have preserved their character no matter where they are. The reason is clear. The Hebrew religion has always preserved the distinctiveness of the Hebrew race. Certainly religion is not transmitted by heredity, but by association.

The Chinese have a very set character. Yet in California they easily adopt American methods of working, trading, and using machinery. They have no lack of flexibility or natural capacity. That they do not change in other respects is due to the Chinese environment that still persists and surrounds them. Coming from China, they plan to return. While here, they live in a little China of their own, as the English in India maintain a little England. We naturally seek to associate with those who share our peculiarities. Thus language, religion and custom tend to persist anywhere individuals are not absolutely isolated.

Modern civilization stands far above those who have preceded us, and far above our less advanced contemporaries. But not because we are any taller. We stand atop a pyramid. The centuries have built a structure to support us.

Let me repeat: I do not mean that all people possess the

same mental capacity, any more than I mean they are physically alike. I do not deny the influence of heredity in transmitting mental characteristics in the same way, and possibly to the same degree, as physical attributes. But the differences between communities in different places and at different times—what we call differences in civilizations—are not differences that reside in individuals, but differences that belong to their societies. That is, they result from the conditions individuals are exposed to in society.

Each society, small or great, weaves itself a web of knowledge, beliefs, customs, language, tastes, institutions, and laws. (More precisely, we should say webs. For each community is made up of smaller societies, which overlap and intertwine each other.) Into this, the individual is received at birth and continues till death. This is the matrix in which mind unfolds, and from which it takes its stamp. This is how customs, religions, prejudices, tastes, and languages develop and are perpetuated. This is how skill is transmitted and knowledge is stored. The discoveries of one time are made the common stock and stepping stone of the next.

Though this is often an obstacle to progress, it is also what makes progress possible. It enables a schoolboy in our time to learn more about the universe in a few hours than the ancient astronomers knew after a lifetime. It places an ordinary scientist today far above the level reached by the giant mind of Aristotle. This is to a civilization what memory is to an individual. Our wonderful arts, our far-reaching science, our marvelous inventions—they have come about through this.

Human progress goes on as the advances of one generation become the common property of the next—and the starting point for new ones.