

Must We Change "Human Nature"?

THOSE WHO MAINTAIN that the social structure is awry because it reflects the inherent badness of human nature suspend their argument in mid-air because of their failure to define this "human nature."

Until a satisfactory definition—inclusive and exclusive—is supplied, we cannot even attempt a solution of our social problems. Unless, indeed, we revert to the ancient therapy of burning devils out of human nature at the stake. That failed because of the incidental destruction of the body which seems to be an essential condition of human nature and its devils.

Whether human nature is identified with soul or ego, it seems to be—as far as we have been able to ascertain—a personal experience which defies description. Metaphysicians deny the accuracy of psychological explanations, while theologians posit a "likeness of God" theory which impales us on whatever concept of God suits our fancy.

There are some who, failing to define human nature, assert that it can be improved by hereditary selectiveness. The social order can be improved only if the breed can be improved, and that can be done by the mating of human beings who measure up to certain standards of behavior and intelligence. That is, the solution of our social problems must wait on the improvement of the stock through the transmission of acquired characteristics—which, in turn, is a moot, if not exploded, biological notion.

The eugenists were on the receiving end of some very telling blows at the annual convention last month of the National Society for the Study of Education. They heard, for instance, of children

born of unwed feeble-minded parents, who after adoption by highly intelligent families exhibited a high intelligence quotient. They were informed by the University of Iowa's Child Welfare Research Station that when children were transferred from a bleak orphanage to good homes their I. Q.'s invariably improved. Other testimony revealed that identical twins reared in separate homes had different I. Q.'s, and that Southern Negroes who moved to Harlem, where better schooling is available, raised their intelligence quotients.

The eugenists contended that technical errors invalidated much of this evidence. And so, the environmentalists and the hereditarians locked horns and, as usual, the battle ended in a stalemate. "Intelligence," said the final speaker, "at least as measured by the I. Q., is not a constant and is a resultant both of hereditary and environmental factors."

Which leaves us where we were. And convinces us that in our search for a better social order it is futile to wait upon universal improvement in human nature (which is even more significant than human intelligence, because intelligent people are not necessarily human in their behavior).

We don't know what human nature is, and, until we do, all talk about improving it is vacuous speculation. But we do know that environment decidedly determines the reactions of human beings, and that a better economy results in more socially desirable reactions. Since environment is an experimentally knowable thing, we should, as sensible people, apply ourselves to the study of the forces which determine its character. And maybe what we call human nature will take care of itself.