

HOW TO READ AND UNDERSTAND HUMAN NATURE



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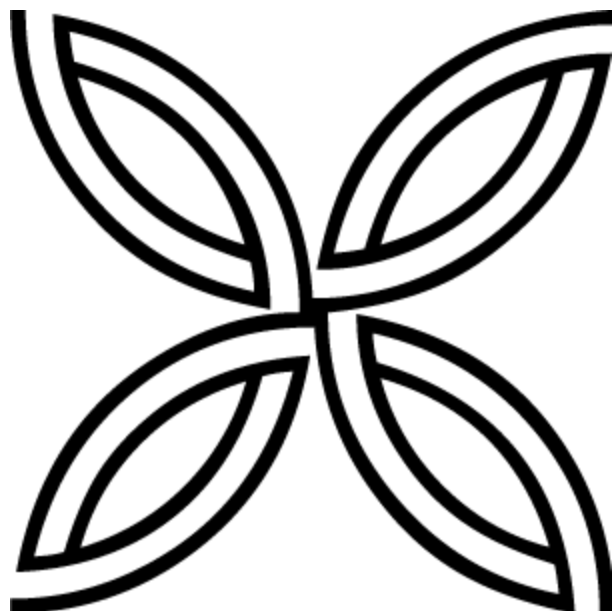
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How to Read and Understand Human Nature

William Walker Atkinson



CHAPTER I INNER STATE AND OUTER FORM

"Human Nature" is a term most frequently used and yet but little understood. The average person knows in a general way what he and others mean when this term is employed, but very few are able to give an off-hand definition of the term or to state what in their opinion constitutes the real essence of the thought expressed by the familiar phrase. We are of the opinion that the first step in the process of correct understanding of any subject is that of acquaintance with its principal terms, and, so, we shall begin our consideration of the subject of Human Nature by an examination of the term used to express the idea itself.

"Human," of course, means "of or pertaining to man or mankind." Therefore, Human Nature means the nature of man or mankind. "Nature," in this usage, means: "The natural disposition of mind of any person; temper; personal character; individual constitution; the peculiar mental characteristics and attributes which serve to distinguish one person from another."

Thus we see that the essence of the nature of men, or of a particular human being, is the mind, the mental qualities, characteristics, properties and attributes. Human Nature is then a phase of psychology and subject to the laws, principles and methods of study, examination and consideration of that particular branch of science.

But while the general subject of psychology includes the consideration of the inner workings of the mind, the processes of thought, the nature of feeling, and the operation of the will, the special subject of Human Nature is concerned only with the question of character, disposition, temperament, personal attributes, etc., of the individuals making up the race of man. Psychology is general—Human Nature is particular. Psychology is more or less abstract—Human Nature is concrete. Psychology deals with laws, causes and principles—Human Nature deals with effects, manifestations, and expressions.

Human Nature expresses itself in two general phases, i.e., (1) the phase of Inner States; and (2) the phase of Outer Forms. These two phases, however, are not separate or opposed to each other, but are complementary aspects of the same thing. There is always an action and reaction between the Inner State and the Outer Form—between the Inner Feeling and the Outer Expression. If we know the particular Inner State we may infer the appropriate Outer Form; and if we know the Outer Form we may infer the Inner State.

That the Inner State affects the Outer Form is a fact generally acknowledged by men, for it is in strict accordance with the general experience of the race. We know that certain mental states will result in imparting to the countenance certain lines and expressions appropriate thereto; certain peculiarities of carriage and manner, voice and demeanor. The facial characteristics, manner, walk, voice and gestures of the miser will be recognized as entirely different from that of the generous person; those of the coward differ materially from those of the brave man; those of the vain are distinguished from those of the

modest. We know that certain mental attitudes will produce the corresponding physical expressions of a smile, a frown, an open hand, a clenched fist, an erect spine or bowed shoulders, respectively. We also know that certain feelings will cause the eye to sparkle or grow dim, the voice to become resonant and positive or to become husky and weak; according to the nature of the feelings.

Prof. Wm. James says: "What kind of emotion of fear would be left if the feeling neither of trembling lips nor of weakened limbs, neither of goose-flesh nor of visceral stirrings, were present, it is quite impossible for me to think. Can one fancy the state of rage and picture no ebullition in the chest, no flushing of the face, no dilation of the nostrils, no clenching of the teeth, no impulse to vigorous action, but in their stead limp muscles, calm breathing, and a placid face?"

Prof. Halleck says: "All the emotions have well-defined muscular expression. Darwin has written an excellent work entitled, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, to which students must refer for a detailed account of such expression. A very few examples must suffice here. In all the exhilarating emotions, the eyebrows, the eyelids, the nostrils, and the angles of the mouth are raised. In the depressing passions it is the reverse. This general statement conveys so much truth, that a careful observer can read a large part of the history of a human being written in the face. For this reason many phrenologists have wisely turned physiognomists. Grief is expressed by raising the inner ends of the eyebrows, drawing down the corners of the mouth, and transversely wrinkling the middle part of the forehead. In Terra del Fuego, a party of natives conveyed to Darwin the idea that

a certain man was low-spirited, by pulling down their cheeks in order to make their faces long. Joy is expressed by drawing backward and upward the corners of the mouth. The upper lip rises and draws the cheeks upward, forming wrinkles under the eyes. The elevation of the upper lip and the nostrils expresses contempt. A skillful observer can frequently tell if one person admires another. In this case the eyebrows are raised, disclosing a brightening eye and a relaxed expression; sometimes a gentle smile plays about the mouth. Blushing is merely the physical expression of certain emotions. We notice the expression of emotion more in the countenance, because the effects are there more plainly visible; but the muscles of the entire body, the vital organs, and the viscera, are also vehicles of expression."

These things need but a mention in order to be recognized and admitted. This is the action of the Inner upon the Outer. There is, however, a reaction of the Outer upon the Inner, which while equally true is not so generally recognized nor admitted, and we think it well to briefly call your attention to the same, for the reason that this correspondence between the Inner and the Outer—this reaction as well as the action—must be appreciated in order that the entire meaning and content of the subject of Human Nature may be fully grasped.

That the reaction of the Outer Form upon the Inner State may be understood, we ask you to consider the following opinions of well-known and accepted authorities of the New Psychology, regarding the established fact that a physical expression related to a mental state, will, if voluntarily induced, tend to in turn induce the mental state appropriate to it. We have used these quotations in other

books of this series, but will insert them here in this place because they have a direct bearing upon the particular subject before us, and because they furnish direct and unquestioned authority for the statements just made by us. We ask you to consider them carefully, for they express a most important truth.

Prof. Halleck says: "By inducing an expression we can often cause its allied emotion.... Actors have frequently testified to the fact that emotion will arise if they go through the appropriate muscular movements. In talking to a character on the stage, if they clench the fist and frown, they often find themselves becoming really angry; if they start with counterfeit laughter, they find themselves growing cheerful. A German professor says that he cannot walk with a schoolgirl's mincing step and air without feeling frivolous."

Prof. Wm. James says: "Whistling to keep up courage is no mere figure of speech. On the other hand, sit all day in a moping posture, sigh, and reply to everything with a dismal voice, and your melancholy lingers. If we wish to conquer undesirable emotional tendencies in ourselves, we must assiduously, and in the first instance coldbloodedly, go through the outward movements of those contrary dispositions which we wish to cultivate. Smooth the brow, brighten the eye, contract the dorsal rather than the ventral aspect of the frame, and speak in a major key, pass the genial compliment, and your heart must indeed be frigid if it does not gradually thaw."

Dr. Wood Hutchinson, says: "To what extent muscular contractions condition emotions, as Prof. James has

suggested, may be easily tested by a quaint and simple little experiment upon a group of the smallest voluntary muscles of the body, those that move the eyeball. Choose some time when you are sitting quietly in your room, free from all disturbing influences. Then stand up, and assuming an easy position, cast the eyes upward and hold them in that position for thirty seconds. Instantly and involuntarily you will be conscious of a tendency toward reverential, devotional, contemplative ideas and thoughts. Then turn the eyes sideways, glancing directly to the right or to the left, through half-closed lids. Within thirty seconds images of suspicion, of uneasiness, or of dislike will rise unbidden to the mind. Turn the eyes on one side and slightly downward, and suggestions of jealousy or coquetry will be apt to spring unbidden. Direct your gaze downward toward the floor, and you are likely to go off into a fit of reverie or abstraction."

Prof. Maudsley says: "The specific muscular action is not merely an exponent of passion, but truly an essential part of it. If we try while the features are fixed in the expression of one passion to call up in the mind a different one, we shall find it impossible to do so."

We state the fact of the reaction of the Outer upon the Inner, with its supporting quotations from the authorities, not for the purpose of instructing our readers in the art of training the emotions by means of the physical, for while this subject is highly important, it forms no part of the particular subject under our present consideration—but that the student may realize the close relationship existing between the Inner State and the Outer Form. These two elements or phases, in their constant action and reaction, manifest the phenomena of Human Nature, and a

knowledge of each, and both give to us the key which will open for us the door of the understanding of Human Nature.

Let us now call your attention to an illustration which embodies both principles—that of the Inner and the Outer—and the action and reaction between them, as given by that master of subtle ratiocination, Edgar Allan Poe. Poe in his story "The Purloined Letter" tells of a boy at school who attained great proficiency in the game of "even or odd" in which one player strives to guess whether the marbles held in the hand of his opponent are odd or even. The boy's plan was to gauge the intelligence of his opponent regarding the matter of making changes, and as Poe says: "this lay in mere observation and admeasurement of the astuteness of his opponents." Poe describes the process as follows: "For example, an arrant simpleton is his opponent, and, holding up his closed hand, asks, 'are they even or odd?' Our schoolboy replies, 'odd,' and loses; but upon the second trial he wins, for he then says to himself, 'the simpleton had them even upon the first trial, and his amount of cunning is just sufficient to make him have them odd upon the second; I will therefore guess odd;'—he guesses and wins. Now, with a simpleton a degree above the first, he would have reasoned thus: 'This fellow finds that in the first instance I guessed odd, and, in the second, he will propose to himself upon the first impulse, a simple variation from even to odd, as did the first simpleton; but then a second thought will suggest that this is too simple a variation, and finally he will decide upon putting it even as before. I will therefore guess even;' he guesses even and wins."

Poe continues by stating that this "is merely an identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his

opponent. Upon inquiring of the boy by what means he effected the thorough identification in which his success consisted, I received answer as follows: 'When I wish to find out how wise, or how stupid, or how good, or how wicked is any one, or what are his thoughts at the moment, I fashion the expression of my face, as accurately as possible in accordance with the expression of his, and then wait to see what thoughts or sentiments arise in my mind or heart, as if to match or correspond with the expression.' This response of the school boy lies at the bottom of all the spurious profundity which has been attributed to Rochefoucauld, to La Bougive, to Machiavelli, and to Campanella."

In this consideration of Human Nature we shall have much to say about the Outer Form. But we must ask the reader to always remember that the Outer Form is always the expression and manifestation of the Inner State, be that Inner State latent and dormant within the depths of the subconscious mentality, or else active and dynamic in conscious expression. Just as Prof. James so strongly insists, we cannot imagine an inner feeling or emotion without its corresponding outward physical expression, so is it impossible to imagine the outward expressions generally associated with a particular feeling or emotion without its corresponding inner state. Whether or not one of these, the outer or inner, is the cause of the other—and if so, which one is the cause and which the effect—need not concern us here. In fact, it would seem more reasonable to accept the theory that they are correlated and appear simultaneously. Many careful thinkers have held that action and reaction are practically the same thing—merely the opposite phases of the same fact. If this be so, then indeed when we are studying the Outer Form of Human Nature we are studying psychology just as much as when we are

studying the Inner States. Prof. Wm. James in his works upon psychology insists upon the relevancy of the consideration of the outward expressions of the inner feeling and emotion, as we have seen. The same authority speaks even more emphatically upon this phase of the subject, as follows:

"The feeling, in the coarser emotions, results from the bodily expression.... My theory is that the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion.... Particular perceptions certainly do produce widespread bodily effects by a sort of immediate physical influence, antecedent to the arousal of an emotion or emotional idea.... Every one of the bodily changes, whatsoever it may be, is felt, acutely or obscurely, the moment it occurs.... If we fancy some strong emotion, and then try to abstract from our consciousness of it all the feelings of its bodily symptoms, we have nothing left behind.... A disembodied human emotion is a sheer nonentity. I do not say that it is a contradiction in the nature of things, or that pure spirits are necessarily condemned to cold intellectual lives; but I say that for us emotion disassociated from all bodily feeling is inconceivable. The more closely I scrutinize my states, the more persuaded I become that whatever 'coarse' affections and passions I have are in very truth constituted by, and made up of, those bodily changes which we ordinarily call their expression or consequence.... But our emotions must always be inwardly what they are, whatever may be the physiological[Pg 23] ground of their apparition. If they are deep, pure, worthy, spiritual facts on any conceivable theory of their physiological source, they remain no less deep, pure, spiritual, and worthy of regard on this present sensational theory."

Kay says: "Does the mind or spirit of man, whatever it may be, in its actings in and through the body, leave a material impression or trace in its structure of every conscious action it performs, which remains permanently fixed, and forms a material record of all that it has done in the body, to which it can afterward refer as to a book and recall to mind, making it again, as it were, present to it?... We find nature everywhere around us recording its movements and marking the changes it has undergone in material forms,— in the crust of the earth, the composition of the rocks, the structure of the trees, the conformation of our bodies, and those spirits of ours, so closely connected with our material bodies, that so far as we know, they can think no thought, perform no action, without their presence and co-operation, may have been so joined in order to preserve a material and lasting record of all that they think and do."

Marsh says: "Every human movement, every organic act, every volition, passion, or emotion, every intellectual process, is accompanied with atomic disturbance." Picton says: "The soul never does one single action by itself apart from some excitement of bodily tissue." Emerson says: "The rolling rock leaves its scratches on the mountain; the river its channel in the soil; the animal its bones in the stratum; the fern and leaf their modest epitaph in the coal. The falling drop makes its sculpture in the sand or stone.... The ground is all memoranda and signatures, and every object covered over with hints which speak to the intelligent. In nature this self-registration is incessant." Morell says: "The mind depends for the manifestation of all its activities upon a material organism." Bain says: "The organ of the mind is not the brain by itself; it is the brain, nerve, muscles, organs of sense, viscera.... It is uncertain how far even