

The Real Debate is over Human Nature

In *Federalist #51*, the 'Father of the Constitution', James Madison, argued:

The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.

At the core of Madison's argument is the belief that human nature is fundamentally flawed. In Christian terms, it is called "original sin". We are born, not as blank slates free of evil, but rather with the tendencies for both good and evil.

Such thinking fundamentally shaped the design of our government with checks and balances, limits on government power, limits on individual power, and so on. No man could be trusted with great power because of his innate tendency to do evil. The thinking was that as there was no way to eliminate the evil in man, the best solution or opportunity for creating a just society was to put systems or laws in place to check man's ability to act on the dark side of his nature.

Today, in the West we have largely given ourselves over to competing worldviews, influenced by Rousseau, German

Romanticism, Darwinism, Marxism, and others. For some, man is born good (or at least neutral) and it is society or systems that ultimately corrupt him and cause evil. The thinking within this worldview is that if we get the systems right, then we will largely be able to eliminate evil from society. For others, they look at man as a purely material being. Evil doesn't really exist as that is a spiritual concept, but oppression and strife do. Again, here it ultimately comes down to the belief that by creating a system in which man's material needs are met equally, we will largely do away with oppression and strife. Another line of thought acknowledges strife and oppression, an imperfection within man, but sees that as merely a stage of human evolution. If we can only speed up our evolution through education and science – even transhumanism – we will move beyond strife and suffering.

There are still other variations on human nature, many rooted in other religious or philosophical beliefs, such as Buddhism. Whether most of us realize it or not, our beliefs about the character or nature of man fundamentally shape our political and cultural beliefs.

Richard Weaver, author of *Ideas have Consequences*, [wrote](#) about this topic deeply. As he argued, if men like Madison and others in the Western Tradition are right about the inherent evil or “original sin” in all men, then any political, cultural, or systemic solutions that fail to take that into account will fail.

Original sin is a parabolical expression of the immemorial tendency of man to do the wrong thing when he knows the right thing. The fact of this tendency everyone should be able to testify to, not only from his observation but also from his personal history. And it is the rock upon which nine tenths of the socialist formula for universal happiness splits. The socialists propose to offer man peace and plenty; and they seem not to realize that he may reject both for crime and aggrandizement. He has done SO before in both the individual

and the national units. It would be more realistic for the reformers to start with the old assumption that the heart of man is desperately wicked and that he needs external help in the form of grace. At least, we cannot build on the quicksand that he is by nature good, for he is not. Whether he has inherited his sin from Adam is perhaps a question for another level of discussion; the plain situation is that he has inherited it, and that it will sink any scheme which is founded on a complacent faith in man's desire always to do the good thing. Nothing can be done if the will is wrong, and the correction of the will is precisely the task which modern radicalism fails to recognize. It is only realistic to point out that the concept of original sin, if not anti-democratic, is at least a severe restraint upon democracy. Democracy finds it difficult ever to say that man is wrong if he does things in large majorities. Yet even politically this notion has to be rejected; and that is why constitutions and organic laws are created in nearly all representative governments, and are indeed regarded as the prime unifiers of such governments...

As you look at the world around, perhaps the starting point for determining man's nature is the question that Weaver raised: "Even if they know what is right, do all men always want to do it?"

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