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Life is a Confluence of Nature and Nurture

When a human child is first introduced to the environment in which it was conceived, it is almost instantly associated with innocence and purity by its parents and deliverers. Yet, as the child grows, these impressions fade away, and the child must develop an entirely different image for itself as it transitions from childhood, to adolescence, and finally, into adulthood. At this point, the young adult must effectively draw from lessons learned from its parents and assume full advantage of its familiar environment. Thus, the lessons children learn from a young age in areas such as religion, culture, vocation, and psychological development, prove to be extremely fundamental in raising a morally upright adult who abides by society's laws and expectations, thereby enriching their inherently virtuous qualities. At the same time, consistently reinforcing these lessons as children grow has the potential of ensuring a long-lasting retention of moral values as a young adult begins to lead an independent lifestyle. These ideas represent just a few of the basic reasons why life is a confluence, or combination of nature and nurture, as advanced by prominent thinkers in world history such as Plato, Hsün Tzu, Francis Galton, Mencius, and Sigmund Freud. In the contemporary age, this fascinating concept of the convergence of nature and nurture has also stimulated a wealth of thought-provoking examination, especially by writers such as Karen Armstrong and Judith Rich Harris.

In just about every civilization in history, religious leaders and governments have formed different ideas of religious principles, and by institutionalizing them throughout their society's

culture, they instilled significant meaning in the lives of faithful adherents. As a child is born into either a religious or atheistic family, the parents are primarily responsible for teaching their child to understand certain religious beliefs aligned with their traditional values or customs. Thus, any society or individual must be instructed in the ways of faith, and in order to continue to embrace religious traditions as society advances and a child grows, those who initially instill these beliefs must reinforce them in the form of frequent communal gathering, such as Roman Catholic mass. According to comparative religion author Karen Armstrong, in her essay *Homo Religiosus*, she juxtaposes religion and culture as she postulates, “Religion is hard work. Its insights are not self-evident and have to be cultivated in the same way as an appreciation of art, music, or poetry must be developed” (pg. 6). This statement demonstrates how the conception of religion was naturally present in human nature, but to be understood and appreciated, humans must diligently practice living a lifestyle motivated by faith and charitable acts. To conclude the essay, Armstrong argues the importance of language and open interpretation in religion, asserting, “So religious discourse should not attempt to impart clear information about the divine but should lead to an appreciation of the limits of language and understanding” (pg. 18). While religious leaders could pontificate a subset of laws for all adherents of a particular faith to follow, some standards may not represent certain groups of individuals, which is why it is important for adherents to create meaning from religious texts and teachings by relating them to their personal lives and cultures.

Subsequently, as religion was rigidly ingrained and incorporated in cultural beliefs and customs, identifying where cultural independence derives from nature, was advanced by ancient philosophers such as Mencius and Hsün Tzu. In section 23 of the *Hsün Tzu*, a collection of Hsün Tzu’s writings dating to 300 CE, translated as *Man’s Nature is Evil*, Hsün Tzu articulates, “Phenomena such as the eye’s fondness for beautiful forms, the ear’s fondness for beautiful

sounds, the mouth's fondness for delicious flavors, the mind's fondness for profit, or the body's fondness for pleasure and ease—these are all products of the emotional nature of man. They are instinctive and spontaneous; man does not have to do anything to produce them” (pg. 103). Each of these sensory appeals, including visual, auditory, gustatory, intellectual, and tactile all refer to the material necessities for human culture to thrive. As such, world civilizations with the most sophisticated architecture, music, food, education, and art were always envied by those who led nomadic lifestyles that resulted in conflict and wars. According to Jeffrey A. Simpson and Lane Beckes, psychology professors at the University of Minnesota, in their 2008 publication to the journal *Biology and Philosophy*, titled “Reflections on the nature (and nurture) of cultures,” in order for Pleistocene societies to cooperate with each other and coexist, “humans must have acquired advanced language and cognitive skills so that symbolically marked groups could be defined, identified, and eventually work cooperatively together” (pg. 261). Since the Pleistocene Epoch existed prior to the emergence of complex tribal systems, it is important to observe how linguistic patterns and intellectual abilities were innately present in the survival of early human beings, thereby justifying the nature argument. Tens of thousands of years later in the present day, modern human beings have developed the most advanced and complex communication systems, which have fostered the development of the most innovative minds in history, thereby justifying the nurture argument. Without the presence of nature and nurture, humankind would most likely never have achieved the level of technological advancement in communication or intelligence epitomized in today's modern societies.

In order for a human society to function and advance itself, its inhabitants each assume different professional roles, or vocations, to serve their community or practice specialized trades. According to Donald E. Super, a writer from Columbia University, in his 1953 publication for

The American Psychologist, captioned “A Theory of Vocational Development,” he identifies a number of elements that constitute a generalization of how individuals choose their occupation and achieve success with research from his colleagues, as he states, “People have been found to prefer, enter, remain in, like, and succeed most consistently in occupations for which they have appropriate patterns of traits” (pg. 187). Indeed, several professionals pursue particular vocations because they are talented or, to an extent, naturally gifted with the necessary abilities to perform. However, Super also contends enthusiasm and persistence are crucial in maintaining one’s self-satisfaction and competence, as he argues, “Although there is ample evidence that ability is to some extent inherited, and that personality too has its roots in inherited neural and endocrine make-up, there is also good evidence that manifested aptitudes and functioning personality are the result of the interaction of the organism and the environment” (pg. 188). In this statement, one could interpret the “organism” and the “environment” as a professional and his/her position in an organization. Meanwhile, the “interaction” taking place would represent one’s attitude toward his/her occupation, which is enhanced by diligently striving to improve one’s ability in handling complex tasks more effectively to greater serve clientele, for example. Thus, a truly self-satisfied and upwardly mobile professional in a hierarchical organization is the result of natural capabilities and unwavering propensities to achieve an elevated vocational status.

Furthermore, one of the most important aspects of the debate between nature and nurture is how heredity and environment impact a child’s psychological development from a young age. As stated by Judith Rich Harris, who quotes Sigmund Freud, considered to be the “true father of the nurture assumption,” in her essay for The New York Times, titled “The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do,” parents have the power over how their children will turn out to be later on in life. According to Freudian theory, Harris contends, “It was Freud who

constructed, pretty much out of whole cloth, an elaborate scenario in which all the psychological ills of adults could be traced back to things that happened to them when they were quite young and in which their parents were heavily implicated...two parents of opposite sexes cause untold anguish in the young child, simply by being there” (pg. 4). It is apparent that those who serve as role models, whether in the household or in the community, are primarily responsible for setting an example for children and the uneducated, just to name a few. For this same reason, in *Plato’s Apology to Socrates*, Plato argues that while poets were revered in ancient Greek society, they were not always morally driven or logically accurate in the poetry they recite, as he comments, “Concerning the poets, I soon recognized that they do not make what they make by wisdom, but by some sort of nature...for they too say many noble things, but they know nothing of what they speak...I perceived that they supposed, on account of their poetry, that they were the wisest of human beings also in the other things, in which they were not” (pg. 5). Essentially, Plato realizes what many adults who may have struggled during their childhood with parents who did not teach them correctly also come to terms with later in life. While nobody can choose which family or community they are born into, which justifies the nature argument, one’s upbringing can have either positive or detrimental effects on future generations. By making a conscious judgment to not emulate one’s dark past or express eloquent rhetoric based on obsolete, traditional values, a parent or poet, in Plato’s case, ultimately nurtures the actions and beliefs of their subordinates.

In conclusion, life is not merely a progression of one’s hereditary characteristics, but also a consistent set of consequences for the actions and decisions one makes throughout the various life stages. As observed above, religion was established to inculcate meaning and inspire open discussion among its adherents, culture as a multifaceted materialization of human necessities and desires, vocation as a specialized application of natural talent and aspirations, and last but

not least, heredity and environment as the primary catalysts of psychological development. For human societies to advance, the disposition of people must change and adapt to the requirements of the world. If the growth of the individual were motivated solely by natural selection, then the destiny of all human beings would be predestined and choices wouldn't be made independently. Conversely, if life were governed by nurture, then all humankind could be precisely conditioned to achieve a common purpose and neither disease nor cultural upbringing would affect one's path toward an ultimate goal. Finally, people not only evolve by their hereditary characteristics, but by the specific environment they have become conditioned to; that is, people become who they are through learning from the environment they live in as well as the traits they are born with.

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