The popular television series “The Twilight Zone” of the 1960s was exciting and sometimes eerie. As an audience we seemed to know that a surprise—scary, wondrous, or both—awaited us at the end if we patiently followed the story. One episode that has stayed with me concerned a journey by American astronauts who landed on a distant planet. They befriended the inhabitants (who looked very human) and were pleased to find themselves in a luxurious home, much like one they might have had on earth. However, they eventually became aware that they could not leave the home, that they had become prisoners. Then a wall opened up and revealed a large pane of glass with spectators peering in. The astronauts were on display under the label “Homo Sapiens from the Planet Earth.”

Since then, I have been bothered by a question that probably few people asked after seeing that episode: What would those creatures from earth that we call human beings have to do in the cage for those outside to understand what human beings are really like? Phrasing the question differently: What is the human being? What makes us “human” and not something else? In what ways are we like all other living creatures? What do we have in common with other animals? How are we different? Of course, these questions have probably teased the thinking person from the very beginning of human existence. Look around. We see worms, dogs, cats, bees, ants, and maybe fish. Are we unique? All species of animals are unique. But how are we unique? What is our essence as a species? What would the astronauts in the cage have to do to reveal the essence of the species they represent?

We might begin by recognizing that we share many qualities with other animals. Human beings are mammals, which means we are warm-blooded, we give birth to live young, the female nurses the young, and we have hair covering parts of our body. We are also primates; therefore, we are mammals who are part of an order within nature that is characterized by increasing manual dexterity, intelligence, and the probability of some social organization.

Philosophers have made various claims about what our outstanding characteristic, our key quality, is. They have pointed to our ability to make and use tools, to love, to know right from wrong, to feel, to think, or to use language. Religious leaders emphasize that we have a soul and a conscience. They may also stress that we are created in God’s image (thus, we are closest to God) or that we are selfish and sinful (thus, we are similar to other animals). The more cynical critic maintains that we are the only animal that makes war on its own kind (even though other animals are clearly aggressive toward members of their own species).

Psychologists may focus on the fact that humans are instinctive, that they are driven by their nonconscious personality, that they are conditioned like many other animals, or that, unlike other animals, they act in the world according to the ideas and perceptions they learn. Most will maintain that human beings develop traits early in life out of an interplay of heredity and environment.

Sociologists, too, have much to say about the nature of the human being. They maintain that our unique qualities are that we are

1. *social*, in that our lives are linked to others and to society in many complex ways;
2. *cultural*, in that what we become is not a result of instinct but of the ideas, values, and rules developed in our society.

Without these two core qualities, we would not be what we are. Put us in a zoo, take away either quality, and visitors to the zoo would see something very different. To understand human beings as a species,
therefore, it is important to understand how these two core qualities enter into our lives. It is also important to recognize the complex interrelationship between the social and the cultural: Our culture arises from our social life, and the continuation of our social life depends on our culture.

**HUMAN BEINGS ARE SOCIAL BEINGS**

What does it mean to be “social”? On the simplest level it means that humans need others for their very survival. Infants need adults for their physical survival: for food, shelter, and protection. A great deal of evidence suggests that infants also need adults for emotional support, affection, and love. Normal growth—even life itself—seems to depend on this support. Studies of infants brought up in nurseries with very little interaction with adults show us that these babies suffer physical, intellectual, and emotional harm and that this harm is lasting (Spitz, 1945). Of course, the horrible discovery in 1990 of infants brought up in Romanian government nurseries attests to the same problems: Neglecting the basic emotional needs of children brings severe retardation of growth and often death.

Adults also need other people. We depend on others for our physical survival (to grow and transport our food, to provide shelter and clothing, to provide protection from enemies, and almost all the things we take for granted). As adults we also depend on others for love, support, meaning, and happiness. Human survival, therefore, is a social affair: Almost all of our needs—physical and emotional—are met through interaction with others.

**Learning How to Survive**

To be social also means that much of what we become depends on socialization. Socialization is the process by which the various representatives of society—parents, teachers, political leaders, religious leaders, the news media—teach people the ways of society and, in so doing, form their basic qualities. Through socialization people learn the ways of society and internalize those ways—that is, make them their own.

Back to survival, for a moment: Others are important not only for fulfilling our needs, but also for teaching us how to survive. We know how to do very little instinctively (suck, defecate, breathe, sweat, cry, see, hear, and other simple reflexes). But we are not born knowing how to deal with our environment. As newcomers we do not know how to get along in our world. We do not know how to deal with other people, weather, food sources, shelter, and so on. We do not know how to survive through instinct, necessitating our social nature. We do not have to learn that we need to eat, but we do learn how to get food (to grow it, hunt it, fish it, or buy it). In most societies (though not all) we must also learn how to build a shelter, use weapons, make clothing, and handle other people, to name only a few of the things that matter. In fact, we must learn thousands of things if we are to survive in the society we live in, from learning the ABCs to learning how to discourage others from robbing us to learning how best to dress and talk so we can be popular. In short, human beings live in a world where socialization is necessary for survival.

**Individual Qualities**

Besides showing us how to survive, socialization is also necessary for creating our individual qualities. Our talents, tastes, interests, values, personality traits, ideas, and morals are not qualities we have at birth but qualities we develop through socialization in the context of the family, the school, our peers, the community, and even the media.

We become what we do because of a complex mixture of heredity and socialization. We may have certain biological predispositions, but how others act toward us, what they teach us, and the opportunities they provide for us are all important for what we become. As we interact with others, we choose the directions we will take in life: crime or legitimate business, school or on-the-job training, the single life or the married life, life on the farm or life in the city. Some of us may have all kinds of talent, but whether we direct it toward making money through selling illegal drugs or helping people solve their problems through psychoanalysis depends on our interactions and resulting socialization.

The treatment of women in our society highlights this point. Actually, if we are going to be more accurate, this description is most applicable to white women born in America. In colonial days women were socialized to become the property of men. It was socialization not only by parents, neighbors, religion, and friends that accomplished this, but also by limited opportunities for women in the larger society, and this prohibition told women what they must become to be useful in society. Eventually, the
relationship between white women and men was altered as women were increasingly socialized to take care of the household in return for male economic support. In the twentieth century and especially after World War II, this relationship moved toward a more equal one. As economic opportunities opened up, white women joined the paid labor force in real numbers. Their success in the political, educational, and economic worlds altered the expectations in society for women, and it increasingly altered the female role. After the war, our view of the differences between women and men continued to blur. By the 1990s, an acceptance of the idea that women can do almost anything traditionally reserved for men had clearly evolved, even though opportunities remained limited. Such an idea influences the socialization of children; that socialization affects choices made in life. I never dreamed 25 years ago that women would ever compete in horse racing, bodybuilding, or fast-pitch softball. I never imagined that women would be successfully competing with men in the armed services, on police forces, and in business. My imagination was limited by my own socialization, which carefully distinguished what men could do from what women could do. Opportunity and socialization have influenced each other, and the result is a society less differentiated and stratified on the basis of gender. Although barriers will continue to exist in society for a long time, we are clearly living within a real-life experiment that offers clear support for the idea that socialization is very powerful for what people become!

It is important to see that socialization is very complex. It involves not only learning things but also modeling one’s behavior on that of individuals whom one respects, being socialized by perceived opportunities “for people like us,” and being influenced by one’s successes and failures. When we see socialization this way, we can better understand the harmful effects of discrimination, segregation, and persecution. To be put down by others directly has an impact; to see others like oneself in a deprived existence has an effect on the value one places on oneself as well as the expectations that one develops for oneself. Of course, some individuals overcome such conditions, but these exceptions do not disprove the power of socialization. Indeed, they help clarify the importance of socialization as we try to identify the conditions that encourage individuals to be different from those around them. Socialization helps explain why poverty is so powerful a force on what children choose to do with their adult lives.

We can also turn this explanation around. The opportunities that wealthy and privileged people have in society socialize their children to seek directions closed to most other people in society: prestigious high schools and colleges, providing professional training that helps ensure high placement in society and a life of affluence. Robert Coles (1977) describes the final result of socialization in the wealthy class to be “entitlement”: The children of the affluent learn that they are entitled to certain things in their lives that other children cannot take for granted and often do not even know exist. “The child has much, but wants and expects more, all assumed to be his or hers by right—at once a psychological and material inheritance that the world will provide” (p. 55). In what their parents give and teach, affluent children learn what they have a right to expect from life, what is their due because of who they are.

Socialization may not determine all that we are, but its influence cannot be easily denied. Much of what each of us has become can be traced to our interaction with others, and thus, our individual qualities are in this sense really social ones. The sociologist emphasizes how socialization influences our choices, abilities, interests, values, ideas, and perspective—in short, the directions we take in our lives. And, socialization is not something that happens to us in childhood alone; instead, it continues throughout our lives. At every stage we are being taught or shown by others how we should act, what we should think, and who we are. Early socialization may be the most important, but later socialization may reinforce these early directions or lead us in new ones. Socialization forms the individual actor and is the third way we are social beings: by our very nature.

Basic Human Qualities

We have looked at three ways in which we are social: Our survival depends on others, we learn how to survive through what is taught to us by others, and we develop our individual qualities largely through socialization by others. A fourth quality of the human being attests to the importance of our social life: our very humanity.

At what point does the human being become human? Religious leaders differ: Some argue that it is at the point of conception, while others say that it occurs when the fetus can survive on its own or at birth or after one year of survival. Indeed, in some religious perspectives children are
The more we understand human beings, the more centrally important becomes their use of symbols. A symbol is something that stands for something else and that we use in place of that something else for purposes of communication. Although we communicate through the use of nonintentional body language, unconscious facial expressions, and so on, symbols have the additional quality of being understood by the user. Symbolic communication is meaningful: It represents something to the one who communicates as well as to the one receiving the communication.

Words are the best example of symbols. They stand for whatever we decide they do. We use words intentionally to communicate something to others, and we use words to think with. Besides words, however, we also decide that certain acts are symbolic (shaking hands, kissing, raising a hand). And humans also designate certain objects to be symbolic: flags, rings, crosses, and hairstyles, for example. Such objects are not meaningful in themselves, but they are designated to be.

Where do such representations come from? It is true that many other animals communicate with one another: wagging tails, making gestures, giving off smells, and growling, for example. The vast majority of these behaviors, however, are instinctive. They are not learned, and they are universal to the species. They are performed by the organism automatically and usually do not appear to have any meaning to the user.... The closer we get to the human being in the animal kingdom, however, the more the forms of communication take on a different quality: The acts represent something else only because it is agreed on in social interaction. In other words, the tools of communication are socially based. Because the meanings of symbols are socially based, what something represents is pointed out—intentionally taught—to the organism....

This ability to create and use symbols that are understood by the user is part of our social essence. And this ability is so important to us that it undoubtedly qualifies as a central human quality alongside our social essence. Consider what we do with symbols: We use them to communicate ideas, feelings, intentions, identities; to teach others what we know; to communicate to others and to cooperate with others in organization; and to learn roles, ideas, values, rules, and morals. We can hand down to future generations what we have learned, and they are able to build on what others have taught; symbols make the accumulation of knowledge possible. We use symbols to think with: to contemplate the future, apply the past, figure out solutions to problems, consider how our acts might be moral or immoral, generalize (about anything, such as all living things, all animals, or all human beings), and make subtle distinctions between smart and not-so-smart candidates for office. Our whole lives are saturated with the use of symbols. And, far from being
created by nature for us, symbols are created by human beings in social interaction. It is through social interaction that our representations are developed, communicated, and understood by us.

**Selfhood** In a similar way, humans develop self-awareness only through interaction with others, and self-awareness, too, qualifies as a central human quality. Humans develop a realization that they exist as objects in the environment.… This self-realization should not be taken for granted. It arises through the acts of others. We see ourselves through the eyes, words, and actions of others; it is clearly through socialization that we come to see ourselves as objects in the environment. Selfhood develops in stages, and each stage depends on a social context. Through interaction with significant others, we first come to be aware of the self, and we see it through the eyes of one other person at a time. (Children may see themselves through the eyes of their mother, then their father, then their nursery school teacher, then Mister Rogers—all in the same day.) Over time, our significant others merge into a whole, into “them,” “society,” “other people,” or what George Herbert Mead calls a “generalized other,” and we begin to use the generalized other to see and direct ourselves. We then see ourselves in relation to a group or society, in relation to many people simultaneously. We thus guide our own acts in line with an organized whole: our family, our elementary school, the United States, all people in our church, or all humanity. We see and understand a relationship between our acts and these other organized wholes.

Selfhood makes possible many human qualities—from the ability to assess our place in a situation or in the universe to the ability to judge our own behavior or general worth in life to the ability to control our own actions through directing ourselves in situations.

Specifically, we are able to do three things because we have a self. First, we can see and understand the effects of our own actions, and we are able to see and understand the effects of the acts of others on us. We are thus able to plan strategy, alter our directions, and interpret situations as we act. For example, in choosing a major, students can examine themselves: their abilities, interests, values, and past achievements. They can evaluate their experiences, future chances, and possible occupational opportunities. They will probably try to imagine what they would look like in a certain occupation and whether the work would be enjoyable.

Second, selfhood also brings us the ability to judge ourselves: to like or dislike who we are or what we do, to feel proud or mortified. We develop a self-concept, an identity and self-love or self-hate.

Third, self also means self-control, our ability to direct our own actions. We can hold back; we can let go at will; we can go one direction, and upon evaluation, decide to tell ourselves to go quite another. We are not simply subject to our environment—we are able to alter our own acts as we make decisions, and we are able to do something other than what we have been taught to do.

The more we investigate the meaning and importance of having a self, the more obvious it can be recognized as one of our central qualities. And it is a socially developed quality: Without our dependence on social interaction, selfhood would certainly not exist.

**Mind** George Herbert Mead made sociologists aware that the ability to think is intimately related to selfhood and symbol use. Mead called this ability mind. Humans, like all other animals, are born with a brain, but the mind—the ability to think about our environment—is a socially created quality. Symbols are agreed-on representations that we use for communication. When we use them to communicate to our self, we call this thinking; and all this communication that we call thinking, Mead called mind. Humans do not simply respond to their environment; they point things out to themselves, manipulate the environment in their heads, imagine things that do not even exist in the physical world, consider options, rehearse their actions, and consider how others will act.… This ability, so central to what humans are, is made possible through symbols and self, which (as we saw above) are possible only through social interaction.

To be social, therefore, means that humans need others to survive and socialization to learn to survive. Socialization also creates our individual qualities. And social interaction is important for developing our essence: It creates our central qualities of symbol use, self-hood, and mind.

**A Life of Interaction Within Society**

Humans are social in a fifth sense, however. For whatever reason, we live our entire lives interacting and embedded in society. Observe our species. We are not simply around others all the time, we are doing things with
others. Anyone watching human beings objectively should be amazed at how much their lives are affected by one another. We are constantly social actors: We impress others, communicate to others, escape others, con others, try to influence others, watch others entertain, display affection to others, play music or create art for others, and so on. Almost everything we do has an element of the social—it takes other people into account. As a result, we also end up interacting with others, and therefore, what we do affects what the others do. Action is built up back and forth as we do things together: cooperate, discuss, argue, teach, engage in conflict, play, make love, play tennis, or rear children. We are constantly involved in social action and social interaction, and this again is evidence of how important our social life is to what we are.

But we are also embedded in social organization. Our whole lives exist within groups, formal organizations, communities, and society. We live an organized existence, not an existence apart from others. Almost everyone spends his or her life in a world of social rules (morals, laws, customs) and social patterns (established systems of inequality, types of families, schools, and religious worship, for example), a world that directs much of what he or she does. As we try to understand what human beings are objectively, we inevitably see animals who are born into a society they did not create, who are very likely to live their entire existence there, and who will find life filled with belonging to a host of groups, formal organizations, and one or a few communities. To observe humans in an environment that does not include a larger social organization is not to observe them as they actually live their lives. We are not solitary beings, but social ones: We exist within a social organization.

To emphasize the idea that human beings are social by their very nature is to see something very profound about what we are. Take away our social life and there is nothing left that we might call human. Our very survival depends on society; much of what we are both as individuals and as a species depends on socialization, and almost everything we do is based on and includes a strong element of social action, social interaction, and social organization.

**Human Beings Are Cultural Beings**

To say that human beings are cultural is to maintain that we are characterized by several other qualities not described above. Many animals are social, but what makes some animals cultural? The answer to this question entails determining what the foundation of a society is. Most social animals live together out of instinct. Nature commands that they cooperate, and it directs exactly how that cooperation should take place. Worker bees, queen bees, and other bees do not understand what they are doing, nor do they figure out how to play their various roles. Instead, they are born with instincts that control their behavior, making cooperation possible.

Some animals learn how to act in society, but much of that learning is imitative. They watch and do what others do. In this way they learn their place in the organization. In still other animal societies, adults actually teach the young what to do. This teaching is instinctive; that is, nature commands the organism how the young are to be trained. Now, it is difficult to determine how close to culture some animals come, but it is clear that human beings are cultural, and their social organization is founded on culture, not on instinct, simple imitation, or species-based teaching.

As cultural beings, humans act in society as they do because they share a view of their environment. This shared view is sometimes called culture. Culture is a set of ideas, values, and norms (procedures, customs, laws, morals) that people use as a guide to understanding and self-control. It is how we are able to know how to act around one another in a cooperative manner. Humans discuss their world, learn about their world, and teach what they learn. Knowledge is not lost with the individual organism but is passed down to others. There is a heritage that each individual within society learns and uses. People are not simply trained; with culture they are able to understand what they and others are doing and are supposed to do. Because of this cultural quality, societies differ considerably from one another. Each has a somewhat unique approach to living. Culture distinguishes organizations of people.

On the one hand, culture means that we see the world according to our social life; on the other hand, it means that we give meaning to our world. We do not merely respond to a world that acts as a stimulus on us. Instead, we understand it through the meanings that we learn in interaction. As our culture changes, so does our understanding of the world and our action in it.

Even our internal world is cultural, not simply physical. Our physical internal state may change as something happens to us (as someone points a gun at us or surprises us or tells us he or she loves
What Does It Mean to Be Human?: Human Nature, Society, and Culture

The Importance of It All

What difference does it really make that we are social and cultural beings? To be social and cultural means, first of all, that we are not set at birth but can become many different things and can go in many different directions. Because we are social and cultural, we are capable of becoming a saint or sinner, a warrior or business executive, a farmer or nurse. One can become only what one knows, and that depends on what one learns. Although biology may have something to do with differentiating us from one another, making it possible for some of us to excel in various spheres rather than others, our flexibility is still great, and thus society, culture, and socialization play an important role in what we all become.

Societies based on culture rather than instinct, imitation, or universal-species teaching, will vary greatly in what they emphasize, and thus, what they socialize their populations to become. We can become a peaceful people or a people who worship militarism. As a people we can come to believe that the most important goal in life is to make money, or we can believe that the good life is one of unselfish giving. We can emphasize past, present, or future; people or things; competition or cooperation; this life or an afterlife; rock music or opera. Nature does not command what a society becomes, just as it does not command what an individual becomes. Social interaction and culture do, and thus we have evolved a wide diversity of societies. This also means that as new circumstances and problems arise, people can reach new understandings and change their ways. It means that, in contrast to other primates, humans are able to evaluate their ways and improve their cooperative endeavors. How a society comes to define reality changes and this, in turn, changes the direction of society. Agricultural societies become industrial societies, peaceful societies turn their attention to war or architecture; tastes in food and music, technology, and employment possibilities change over time.

To be social and cultural also means that to a great extent each of us is controlled by other people. We are located within a set of social forces that shape and control what we do, what we are, and what we think. The culture that we learn becomes a part of our very being and comes to influence every aspect of our lives. Unlike other animals, it is not nature that commands us. Nor, unlike what most of us may think, is it free choice that characterizes many of our decisions. We are social and cultural beings, and it is impossible to escape the many complex influences that fact has on us.

Our relationship with our environment also changes because we are social and cultural. It is not a fixed response to a stimulus that characterizes what we do. Instead, socialization into a society...
with culture means that we begin to understand our environment; we now have the tools of ideas, values, morals, goals from which to approach life. We can do more with our surroundings than simply respond to them. We can shape it to fit our goals, we can better determine what we should do in relation to it, we can guide our actions by a set of rules or values that we understand. By not simply responding to the environment, we are able to shape it to some extent. Through the use of symbols, self, and mind—all arising from a society that socializes us into its culture—we are able to figure out our world and develop ideas uniquely our own. In short, it is because we are both social and cultural that we are able to think about our world and control what we do in it. Humans are not passive fixed responders, but active thinking actors.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Look around you. Look in your classroom, on the campus mall, in your dorm, home, or apartment. Look at television, on the street, in the department store. Watch football games, symphony concerts, and serious drama. What is it that you see? What is the real essence of that being you see that we call human? The sociological answer is that you see:

1. A being who is social in nature, who survives through a dependence on others, who learns how to survive from others, who develops both human qualities and individual qualities through socialization, and who lives life embedded in society.

2. A being who is cultural in nature, who interprets the world according to what he or she learns in society, and, therefore, a being whose nature is not fixed by biology but who is tremendously diverse.

It may eventually be found that alcoholism, homosexuality, intelligence, athletic skill, and so on have biological bases. It would be a mistake, however, to isolate and claim that it is only biology that matters. All of our qualities as individuals are encouraged or discouraged by society and its culture. Our rules, our ways of viewing others and ourselves, our rewards and punishments, and the expectations we have for ourselves and others are all social. In fact, it is critical to recognize that although biology may matter in explaining individual differences, it matters far less in explaining differences between groups of people. Groups of people differ primarily because of social and cultural differences.

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