

REITH LECTURES 1948: Authority and the Individual

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Lecture 3: The Role of Individuality

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In this lecture I propose to consider the importance, both for good and evil, of impulses and desires that belong to some members of a community but not to all. In a very primitive community such impulses and desires play very little part. Hunting and war are activities in which one man may be more successful than another, but in which all share a common purpose. So long as a man's spontaneous activities are such as all the tribe approves of and shares in, his initiative is very little curbed by others within the tribe, and even his most spontaneous actions conform to the recognised pattern of behaviour.

Need for the Exceptional Man

But as men grow more civilised there comes to be an increasing difference between one man's activities and another's, and a community needs, if it is to prosper, a certain number of individuals who do not wholly conform to the general type. Practically all progress, artistic, moral, and intellectual, has depended upon such individuals, who have been a decisive factor in the transition from barbarism to civilisation. If a community is to make progress it needs exceptional individuals whose activities, though useful, are not of a sort that ought to be general. There is always a tendency in a highly organised society for the activities of such individuals to be unduly hampered, but on the other hand, if the community exercises no control the same kind of individual initiative which may produce a valuable innovator may also produce a criminal. The problem, like all those with which we are concerned, is one of balance; too little liberty brings stagnation and too much brings chaos.

There are many ways in which an individual may differ from most of the other members of his herd. He may be exceptionally anarchic or criminal; he may have rare artistic talent; he may have what comes in time to be recognised as a new wisdom in matters of religion and morals, and he may have exceptional intellectual powers. It would seem that from a very early period in human history there must have been some differentiation of function. The pictures in the caves in the Pyrenees which were made by palaeolithic men have a very high degree of artistic merit, and one can hardly suppose that all the men of that time were capable of such admirable work. It seems far more probable that those who were found to have artistic talent were sometimes allowed to stay at home making pictures while the rest of the tribe hunted. The chief and the priest must have begun from a very early time to be chosen for real or supposed peculiar excellences: medicine men could work magic, and the tribal spirit was in some sense incarnate in the chief. But from the earliest time there has been a tendency for every activity of this kind to become institutionalised. The chieftain became hereditary, the medicine men became a separate caste, and recognised bards became the prototypes of our poets laureate. It has always been difficult for communities to recognise what is necessary for individuals who are going to make the

kind of exceptional contribution that I have in mind: elements of wildness, of separateness from the herd, of domination by rare impulses of which the utility was not always obvious to everybody.

In this lecture I wish to consider both in history and in the present day the relation of the exceptional man to the community and the conditions that make it easy for his unusual merits to be socially fruitful. I shall consider this problem first in art, then in religion and morals, and, finally, in science. The artist in our day does not play nearly so vital a part in public life as he has done in many former ages. There is a tendency in our days to despise a court poet, and to think that a poet should be a solitary being proclaiming something that Philistines do not wish to hear. Historically the matter was far otherwise; Homer, Virgil and Shakespeare were court poets, they sang the glories of their tribe and its noble traditions. Of Shakespeare, I must confess, this is only partially true, but it certainly applies to his historical plays. Welsh bards kept alive the glories of King Arthur, and these glories came to be celebrated by English and French writers; King Henry II encouraged them for imperialistic reasons. The glories of the Parthenon and of the medieval cathedrals were intimately bound up with public objects. Music, though it could play its part in courtship, existed primarily to promote courage in battle—a purpose to which, according to Plato, it ought to be confined by law. But of these ancient glories of the artist little remains in the modern world except the piper to a Highland regiment. We still honour the artist but we isolate him; we think of art as something separate, not as an integral part of the life of the community. The architect alone, because his art serves a utilitarian purpose, retains something of the ancient status of the artist.

The decay of art in our time is not only due to the fact that the social function of the artist is not as important as in former days; it is due also to the fact that spontaneous delight is no longer felt as something which it is important to be able to enjoy. Among comparatively unsophisticated populations folk dances and popular music still flourish, and something of the poet exists in very many men. But as men grow more industrialised and regimented, the kind of delight that is common in children becomes impossible to adults because they are always thinking of the next thing and cannot let themselves be absorbed in the moment. This habit of thinking of the 'next thing' is more fatal to any kind of aesthetic excellence than any other habit of mind that can be imagined, and if art, in any important sense, is to survive it will not be by the foundation of solemn academies, but by recapturing the capacity for wholehearted joys and sorrows which prudence and foresight have all but destroyed.

The men conventionally recognised as the greatest of mankind have been innovators in religion and morals. In spite of the reverence given to them by subsequent ages, most of them during their lifetime were in a greater or less degree in conflict with their own communities. Moral progress has consisted, in the main, of protest against cruel customs, and of attempts to enlarge the bounds of human sympathy. Human sacrifice among the Greeks died out at the beginning of the fully historical epoch. The stoics taught that there should be sympathy not only for free Greeks, but for barbarians and slaves, and, indeed, for all mankind. Buddhism and Christianity spread a similar doctrine far and wide. Religion, which had originally been part of the apparatus of tribal cohesion, promoting conflict without just as much as co-operation within, took on a more universal character and endeavoured to transcend the narrow limits which primitive morality had set. It is no wonder if the religious innovators

were execrated in their own day, for they sought to rob men of the joy of battle and the fierce delights of revenge. Primitive ferocity, which had seemed a virtue, was now said to be a sin, and a deep duality was introduced between morality and the life of impulse - or rather between the morality taught by those in whom the impulse of humanity was strong, and the traditional morality that was preferred by those who had no sympathies outside their own herd.

Our Debt to the Religious and Moral Innovator

Religious and moral innovators have had a profound effect upon human life; not always, it must be confessed, the effect that they intended, but nevertheless on the whole profoundly beneficial. It is true that in the present century we have seen in important parts of the world a loss of moral values which we had thought fairly secure, but we may hope that this retrogression will not last. We owe it to the moral innovators who first attempted to make morality a universal and not merely a tribal matter, that there has come to be a disapproval of slavery, a feeling of duty towards prisoners of war, a limitation of the powers of husbands and fathers, and a recognition, however imperfect, that subject races ought not to be merely exploited for the benefit of their conquerors. All these moral gains, it must be admitted, have been jeopardised by a recrudescence of ancient ferocity, but I do not think that in the end the moral advance which they have represented will be lost to mankind.

The prophets and sages who inaugurated this moral advance, although for the most part they were not honoured in their own day, were, nevertheless, not prevented from doing their work. In a modern totalitarian state matters are worse than they were in the time of Socrates, or in the time of the Gospels. In a totalitarian state an innovator whose ideas are disliked by the government is not merely put to death, which is a matter to which a brave man may remain indifferent, but is totally prevented from causing his doctrine to be known. Innovations in such a community can come only from the government, and the government now, as in the past, is not likely to approve of anything contrary to its own immediate interests. In a totalitarian state such events as the rise of Buddhism or Christianity are scarcely possible, and not even by the greatest heroism can a moral reformer acquire any influence whatever. This is a new fact in human history, brought about by the much increased control over individuals which the modern technique of government has made possible. It is a very grave fact, and one which shows how fatal a totalitarian regime must be to every kind of moral progress.

In our own day an individual of exceptional powers can hardly hope to have so great a career or so great a social influence as in former times if he devotes himself to art or to religious and moral reform. There are, however, still four careers which are open to him; he may become a great political leader like Lenin; he may acquire vast industrial power like Rockefeller; he may transform the world by scientific discoveries, as is being done by the atomic physicists; or, finally, if he has not the necessary capacities for any of these careers, or if opportunity is lacking, his energy in default of other outlet may drive him into a life of crime. Criminals, in the legal sense, seldom have any influence upon the course of history, and therefore a man of overweening ambition will choose some other career if it is open to him.

Rise of the Scientists

The rise of men of science to great eminence in the state is a modern phenomenon. Scientists, like other innovators, had to fight for recognition; some were banished; some were burnt; some were kept in dungeons; others merely had their books burnt. But gradually it came to be realised that they could put power into the hands of the state. The French revolutionaries, after mistakenly guillotining Lavoisier, employed his surviving colleagues in the manufacture of explosives. In modern war the scientists are recognised by all civilised governments as the most useful citizens, provided they can be tamed and induced to place their services at the disposal of a single government rather than of mankind.

Both for good and evil almost everything that distinguishes our age from its predecessors is due to science. In daily life we have electric light, and the radio, and the cinema. In industry we employ machinery and power which we owe to science. Because of the increased productivity of labour we are able to devote a far greater proportion of our energies to wars and preparations for wars than was formerly possible, and we are able to keep the young in school very much longer than we formerly could. Owing to science we are able to disseminate information and misinformation through the press and the radio to practically everybody. Owing to science we can make it enormously more difficult than it used to be for people to escape from a government which dislikes them. The whole of our daily life and our social organisation is what it is because of science. The whole of this vast development of science is supported nowadays by the state, but science grew up originally in opposition to the state, and where, as in Russia, the state has reverted to an earlier pattern, the old opposition would again appear if the state were not omnipotent to a degree undreamt of by the tyrants of former ages.

The position of science in the past was by no means surprising. Men of science affirmed things that were contrary to what everybody had believed; they upset preconceived ideas and were thought to be destitute of reverence. Anaxagoras taught that the sun was a red-hot stone and that the moon was made of earth. For this impiety he was banished from Athens, for was it not well known that the sun was a god and the moon a goddess? It was only the power over natural forces conferred by science that led bit by bit to a toleration of scientists, and even this was a very slow process, because their powers were at first attributed to magic.

It would not be surprising if, in the present day, a powerful anti-scientific movement were to arise as a result of the dangers to human life presented by the atom bomb and liable to be intensified by bacteriological warfare. But whatever people may feel about these horrors, they dare not turn against the men of science so long as war is at all probable, because if one side were equipped with scientists and the other not, the scientific side would almost certainly win. Science, in so far as it consists of knowledge, must be regarded as having value, but in so far as it consists of technique the question whether it is to be praised or blamed depends upon the use that is made of the technique. In itself it is neutral, neither good nor bad, and any ultimate views that we may have about what gives value to this or that must come from some other source than science.

The Magician and the Genie

The men of science, in spite of their profound influence upon modern life, are in some ways less powerful than the politicians. Politicians in our day are far more influential than they were at any former period in human history. Their relation to the men of science is like that of a magician in the Arabian Nights to a genie who obeys his orders. The genie does astounding things which the magician, without his help, could not do, but he does them only because he is told to do them, not because of any impulses in himself. So it is with the atomic scientists in our day; some government captures them in their homes or on the high seas, and they are set to work, according to the luck of their capture, to slave for the one side or the other. The politician, when he is successful, is subject to no such coercion. The most astounding career of our times was that of Lenin. After his brother had been put to death by the Tsarist Government he spent years in poverty and exile and then rose within a few months to the command of one of the greatest of states. And this command was not like that of Xerxes or Caesar, merely the power to enjoy luxury and adulation, which but for him some other man would have been enjoying. It was the power to mould a vast country according to a pattern conceived in his own mind, to alter the life of every worker, every peasant, and every middle-class person; to introduce a totally new kind of organisation, and to become throughout the world a symbol of a new order, admired by some, execrated by many, but ignored by none. No megalomaniac's dream could have been more terrific. Napoleon had asserted that you can do everything with bayonets except sit upon them; Lenin disproved the exception.

The great men who stand out in history have been partly benefactors of mankind and partly quite the reverse. Some, like the great religious and moral innovators, have done what lay in their power to make men less cruel towards each other, and less, limited in their sympathies; some, like the men of science, have given us a knowledge and understanding of natural processes which, however it may be misused, must be regarded as in itself a splendid thing. Some, like the great poets and composers and painters, have put into the world beauties and splendours which, in moments of discouragement, do much to make the spectacle of human destiny endurable. But others, equally able, equally effective in their way, have done quite the opposite. I cannot think of anything that mankind has gained by the existence of Jenghis Khan. I do not know what good came of Robespierre, and, for my part, I see no reason to be grateful to Lenin. But all these men, good and bad alike, had a quality which I should not wish to see disappear from the world—a quality of energy and personal initiative, of independence of mind, and of imaginative vision. A man who possesses these qualities is capable of doing much good, or of doing great harm, and if mankind is not to sink into dullness such exceptional men must find scope, though one could wish that the scope they find should be for the benefit of mankind.

Power through Large Organisation

There may be less difference than is sometimes thought between the temperament of a great criminal and a great statesman. It may be that Captain Kidd and Alexander the Great, if a magician had interchanged them at birth, would have each fulfilled the career which, in fact, was fulfilled by the other. The same thing may be said of some artists; the memoirs of Benvenuto Cellini did not give a picture of a man with that respect for law which every right-minded citizen ought to have. In the modern world, and still more so far as can be guessed in the world of the near future, important

achievement is almost impossible to an individual if he cannot dominate some vast organisation. If he can make himself head of a state like Lenin, or monopolist of a great industry like Rockefeller, or a controller of credit like the elder Pierpont Morgan, he can produce enormous effects in the world. And so he can if, being a man of science, he persuades some government that his work may be useful in war. But the man who works without the help of an organisation, like a Hebrew prophet, a poet, or a solitary philosopher such as Spinoza, can no longer hope for the kind of importance which such men had in former days. This change applies to the scientist as well as to other men. The scientists of the past did their work very largely as individuals, but the scientist of our day needs enormously expensive equipment and a laboratory with many assistants. All this he can obtain through the favour of the government, or, in America, of very rich men. He is thus no longer an independent worker, but essentially part and parcel of some large organisation. This change is very unfortunate, for the things which a great man could do in solitude were apt to be more beneficial than those which he could only do with the help of the powers that be. A man who wishes to influence human affairs finds it difficult to be successful, except as a slave or a tyrant: as a politician he may make himself the head of a state, or as a scientist he may sell his labour to the government, but in that case he must serve its purpose and not his own.

Individual Initiative Reduced to a Minimum

And this applies not only to men of rare and exceptional greatness, but to a wide range of talent. In the ages in which there were great poets, there were also large numbers of little poets, and when there were great painters there were large numbers of little painters. The great German composers arose in a milieu where music was valued, and where numbers of lesser men found opportunities. In those days poetry, painting and music were a vital part of the daily life of ordinary men, as only sport is now. The great prophets were men who stood Out- from a host of minor prophets. The inferiority of our age in such respects is - an inevitable result of the fact that society is centralised and organised to such a degree that individual initiative is reduced to a minimum. Where art has flourished in the past it has flourished as a rule amongst rival small communities, such as the Greek City States, the little Principalities of the Italian Renaissance, and the petty Courts of German eighteenth-century rulers. Each of these rulers had to have his musician, and once in a way he was Johann Sebastian Bach, but even if he was not he was still free to do his best.

There is something about local rivalry that is essential in such matters. It played its part even in the building of the cathedrals, because each bishop wished to have a finer cathedral than the neighbouring bishop. It would be a good thing if cities could develop an artistic pride leading them to mutual rivalry, and if each had its own school of music and painting, not without a vigorous contempt for the school of the next city. But such local -patriotisms do not readily flourish in a world of empires and free mobility. A Manchester man does not readily feel towards a man from Sheffield as an Athenian felt towards a Corinthian, or a Florentine towards a Venetian. But in spite of the difficulties, I think that this problem of giving importance to localities will have to be tackled if human life is not to become increasingly drab and monotonous.

The savage, in spite of his membership of a small community, lived a life in which his initiative was not too much hampered by the community. The things that he wanted to

do, usually hunting and war, were also the things that his neighbours wanted to do, and if he felt an inclination to become a medicine man he only had to ingratiate himself with some individual already eminent in that profession, and so, in due course, to succeed to his powers of magic. If he was a man of exceptional talent, he might invent some improvement in weapons, or a new skill in hunting. These would not put him into any opposition to the community, but, on the contrary, would be welcomed. The modern man lives a very different life. If he sings in the street he will be thought to be drunk, and if he dances a policeman will reprove him for impeding the traffic. His working day, unless he is exceptionally fortunate, is occupied in a completely monotonous manner in producing something which is valued, not like the shield of Achilles, as a beautiful piece of work, but mainly for its utility. He cannot, like Milton's shepherd, 'tell his tale under the hawthorn in the dale', because there is often no dale anywhere near where he lives, or, if there is, it is full of tins. And always, in our highly regularised way of life, he is obsessed by thoughts of the morrow. Of all the precepts in the Gospels the one that Christians have most neglected is the commandment to take no thought for the morrow. If a man is prudent, thought for the morrow will lead him to save; if he is imprudent, it will make him apprehensive of being unable to pay his debts. In either case the moment loses its savour. Everything is organised, nothing is spontaneous.

The Nazis organised 'Strength through Joy', but joy prescribed by the government is likely to be not very joyful. In those who might otherwise have worthy ambitions, the effect of centralisation is to bring them into competition with too large a number of rivals, and into subjection to an unduly uniform standard of taste. If you wish to be a painter you will not be content to pit yourself against the men with similar desires in your own town; you will go to some school of painting in a metropolis where you will probably conclude that you are mediocre, and having come to this conclusion you may be so discouraged that you are tempted to throw away your paint-brushes and take to money-making or to drink, for a certain degree of self-confidence is essential to achievement. In Renaissance Italy you might have hoped to be the best painter in Siena, and this position would have been quite sufficiently honourable. But you would not now be content to acquire all your training in one small town. We know too much and feel too little. At least we feel too little of those creative emotions from which a good life springs. In regard to what is important we are passive; where we are active it is over trivialities.

If life is to be saved from boredom relieved only by disaster, means must be found of restoring individual initiative, not only in things that are trivial, but in the things that really matter. I do not mean that we should destroy those parts of modern organisation upon which the very existence of large populations depends, but I do mean that the organisation should be much more flexible, more relieved by local autonomy, and less oppressive to the human spirit through its impersonal vastness, than it has become through its unbearably rapid growth and centralisation, with which our ways of thought and feeling have been unable to keep pace.