

REITH LECTURES 1948: Authority and the Individual

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Lecture 4: Conflict of Technique and Human Nature

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Man differs from other animals in many ways. One of these is that he is willing to engage in activities that are unpleasant in themselves, because they are means to ends that he desires. Animals do things that, from the point of view of the biologist, seem to be labour for a purpose: birds build nests, and beavers build dams. But they do these things from instinct, because they have an impulse to do them, and not because they perceive that they are useful. They do not practise self-control or prudence or foresight or restraint of impulses by the will. Human beings do all these things. When they do more of them than human nature can endure, they suffer a psychological penalty. Part of this penalty is unavoidable in a civilised way of life, but much of it is unnecessary, and could be remedied by a different type of social organisation.

From Necessity to Pleasure

Early man had little of this conflict between means and impulses. Hunting, combat, and propagation were necessary for survival and for evolutionary progress, but that was not his reason for engaging in these activities: he engaged in them because they gave him pleasure. Hunting became, in time, an amusement of the idle rich; it had lost its biological usefulness, but remained enjoyable. Combat, of the simple sort directly inspired by impulse, is now only permitted to schoolboys, but quarrelsomeness remains, and finds its most important outlet in war.

Early man, however, was not wholly without activities that he felt to be useful rather than intrinsically attractive. At a very early stage in human evolution the making of stone implements began, and so inaugurated the long development that led up to our present elaborate economic system. But in the early stone age it is possible that the pleasure of artistic creation and of prospective increase of power diffused itself over the laborious stages of the work. When the journey from means to end is not too long, the means themselves are enjoyed if the end is ardently desired. A boy will toil up hill with a toboggan for the sake of the few brief moments of bliss during the descent; no one has to urge him to be industrious, and however he may puff and pant he is still happy. But if instead of the immediate reward you promised him an old-age pension at seventy, his energy would very quickly flag.

Much longer efforts than those of the boy with the toboggan can be inspired by a creative impulse, and still remain spontaneous. A man may spend years of hardship, danger and poverty in attempts to climb Everest or reach the South Pole or make a scientific discovery, and live all the while as much in harmony with his own impulses as the boy with the toboggan, provided he ardently desires the end and puts his pride into overcoming obstacles. As the Red Indian said, 'There's glory in it'.

The introduction of slavery began the divorce between the purpose of the work and

the purposes of the worker. The pyramids were built for the glory of the Pharaohs; the slaves who did the work had no share in the glory, and worked only from fear of the overseer's lash. Agriculture, when carried on by slaves or serfs, equally brought no direct satisfaction to those who did the work; their satisfaction was only that of being alive and (with luck) free from physical pain.

In modern times before the industrial revolution, the diminution of serfdom and the growth of handicrafts increased the number of workers who were their own masters, and who could therefore enjoy some pride in what they produced. It was this state of affairs that gave rise to the type of democracy advocated by Jefferson and the French Revolution, which assumed a vast number of more or less independent producers, as opposed to the huge economic organisations that modern technique has created. Consider a large factory, say one that makes motor-cars. The purpose of the organisation is to make cars, but the purpose of the workers is to earn wages. Subjectively, there is no common purpose. The uniting purpose exists only in owners and managers, and may be completely absent in most of those who do the work. Some may be proud of the excellence of the cars produced, but most, through their unions, are mainly concerned with wages and hours of work.

To a considerable extent, this evil is inseparable from mechanisation combined with large size. Owing to mechanisation, no man makes a large part of a car, but only one small share of some one part; a great deal of work requires little skill, and is completely monotonous. Owing to the large size of the organisation the group who collectively make a car have no unity and no sense of solidarity as between management and employees. There is solidarity among the wage-earners, and there may be solidarity in the management. But the solidarity of the wage-earners has no relation to the product; it is concerned to increase wages and diminish hours of work. The management may have a pride in the product, but when an industry is thoroughly commercialised there is a tendency to think only of profit, which may often be secured more easily by advertisement than by improved workmanship.

Two things have led to a diminished pride in workmanship. The earlier was the invention of currency; the later was mass production. Currency led to the valuation of an article by its price, which is not something intrinsic, but an abstraction shared with other commodities. Things not made to be exchanged may be valued for what they are, not for what they will buy. Cottage gardens in country villages are often lovely, and may have cost much labour, but are not intended to bring any monetary reward. Peasant costumes, which now hardly exist except for the delectation of tourists, were made by their wearers' families, and had no price. The temples of the Acropolis and the medieval cathedrals were not built with any pecuniary motive, and were not capable of being exchanged. Very gradually, a money economy has replaced an economy in which things were produced for the use of the producer, and this change has caused commodities to be viewed as useful rather than delightful.

Remote Results

Mass production has carried this process to new lengths. Suppose you are a manufacturer of buttons: however excellent your buttons may be, you do not want more than a few for your own use. All the rest you wish to exchange for food and shelter, a motor-car and your children's education, and so on. These various things

share nothing with the buttons except money value. And it is not even the money value of the buttons that is important to you; what is important is profit, i.e. the excess of their selling value above the cost of production, which may be increased by diminishing their intrinsic excellence. Indeed a loss of intrinsic excellence usually results when mass production is substituted for more primitive methods.

There are two consequences of modern organisation, in addition to those already mentioned, that tend to diminish the producer's interest in the product. One is the remoteness of the gain to be expected from the work; the other is the divorce between the managements and the worker. As for the remoteness of the gain: suppose you are engaged at the present time in some subordinate part of the manufacture of some commodity for export—let us say again a motor-car. You are told, with much emphasis, that the export drive is necessary in order that we may be able to buy food. The extra food that is bought as a result of your labour does not come to you personally, but is divided among the 40,000,000 or more who inhabit Britain. If you are absent from work one day, there is no visible harm to the national economy. It is only by an intellectual effort that you can make yourself aware of the harm that you do by not working, and only by a moral effort that you can make yourself do more work than is necessary in order to keep your job. The whole thing is completely different when the need is obvious and pleasing, for instance in a shipwreck. In a shipwreck the crew obey orders without the need of reasoning with themselves, because they have a common purpose which is not remote, and the means to its realisation are not difficult to understand. But if the captain were obliged, like the government, to explain the principles of currency in order to prove his commands wise, the ship would sink before his lecture was finished.

Divorce between the management and the worker has two aspects. One of which is the familiar conflict of capital and labour, while the other is a more general trouble afflicting all large organisations. I do not propose to say anything about the conflict of labour and capital, but the remoteness of government, whether in a political or an economic organisation, whether under capitalism or under socialism, is a somewhat less trite theme, and deserves to be considered. However society may be organised, there is inevitably a large area of conflict between the general interest and the interest of this or that section. A rise in the price of coal may be advantageous to the coal industry and facilitate an increase in miners' wages, but is disadvantageous to everybody else. When prices and wages are fixed by the government, every decision must disappoint somebody. The considerations which should weigh with the government are so general, and so apparently removed from the everyday life of the workers, that it is very difficult to make them appear cogent. A concentrated advantage is always more readily appreciated than a diffused disadvantage. It is for this sort of reason that governments find it difficult to resist inflation, and that, when they do, they are apt to become unpopular. A government which acts genuinely in the interests of the general public runs a risk of being thought by each section to be perversely ignoring the interests of that section. This is a difficulty which, in a democracy, tends to be increased by every increase in the degree of governmental control.

Private Feelings and Public Interest

Moreover, it would be unduly optimistic to expect that governments, even if democratic, will always do what is best in the public interest. I have spoken before of

some evils connected with bureaucracy: I wish now to consider those involved in the relation of the official to the public. In a highly organised community those who exercise governmental functions, from Ministers down to the most junior employees in local offices, have their own private interests, which by no means coincide with those of the community. Of these, love of power and dislike of work are the chief. A civil servant who says 'no' to a project satisfies at once his pleasure in exercising authority and his disinclination for effort. And so he comes to seem, and to a certain extent to be, the enemy of those whom he is supposed to serve.

Take, as an illustration, the measures necessary for dealing with a shortage of food. If you possess an allotment, the difficulty of obtaining food may lead you to work hard if you are allowed to use your produce to supplement your rations. But most people must buy all their food unless they are engaged in agriculture. Under laissez-faire, prices would soar and all except the rich would be seriously undernourished. But although this is true, few of us are adequately grateful for the services of the ladies in food offices, and still fewer of them can preserve through fatigue and worry a wholly benevolent attitude to the public. To the public, the ladies appear, however unjustly, as ignorant despots; to the ladies, the public appear as tiresome, fussy, and stupid, perpetually losing things or changing their addresses. It is not easy to see how, out of such a situation, a genuine harmony between government and the governed can be produced.

The ways which have hitherto been discovered of producing a partial harmony between private feelings and public interest have been open to objections of various kinds. The easiest and most obvious harmoniser is war. In a difficult war, when national self-preservation is in jeopardy, it is easy to induce everybody to work with a will, and if the government is thought competent its orders are readily obeyed. The situation is like that in a shipwreck. But no one would advocate shipwrecks as a means of promoting naval discipline, and we cannot advocate wars on the ground that they cause national unity. No doubt something of the same effect can be produced by the fear of war, but if fear of war is active for a long enough time it is pretty sure to result in actual war. And in any case fear of war is not a good thing, however unavoidable it may sometimes be.

Competition, where it exists, is an immensely powerful incentive. It has been generally decried by socialists as one of the evil things in a capitalist society, but the Soviet Government has restored it to a very important place in the organisation of industry. Stakhanovite methods, in which certain workers are rewarded for exceptional proficiency, while others are punished for shortcomings, are a revival of piece-work systems against which trade unions have vigorously and successfully campaigned. I have no doubt that these systems have in Russia the merits formerly claimed by capitalists, and the demerits emphasised by trade unions. As a solution of the psychological problem they are certainly inadequate. But although competition, in many forms, is gravely objectionable, it has, I think, an essential part to play in the promotion of necessary effort, and in some spheres affords a comparatively harmless outlet for the kind of impulses that might otherwise lead to war. But if competition is not to become ruthless and harmful, the penalty for failure must not be disaster, as in war, or starvation, as in unregulated economic competition, but only loss of glory. Football would not be a desirable sport if the defeated teams were put to death or left to starve.

In Britain, in recent years, a gallant attempt has been made to appeal to the sense of duty. Austerity is, for the present, unavoidable, and increase of production is the only way out. This is undeniable, and an appeal of this sort is no, doubt necessary during a time of crisis. But sense of duty, valuable and indispensable as it may sometimes be, is not a permanent solution, and is not likely to be successful over a long period. It involves a sense of strain, and a constant resistance so natural impulses, which, if continued, must be exhausting and productive of a diminution of natural energy. If it is urged, not on the basis of some simple traditional ethic, such as the Ten Commandments, but on complicated economic and political grounds, weariness will lead to scepticism as to the arguments involved, and many people will either become simply indifferent or adopt some probably untrue theory suggesting that there is a short cut to prosperity. Men can be stimulated by hope or driven by fear, but the hope and the fear must be vivid and immediate if they are to be effective without producing weariness.

It is partly for this reason that hysterical propaganda, or at least propaganda intended to cause hysteria, has such widespread influence in the modern world. People are aware, in a general way, that their daily lives are affected by things that happen in distant parts of the world, but they have not the knowledge to understand how this happens, except in the case of a small number of experts. Why is there no rice? Why are bananas so rare? Why have hens apparently ceased to lay eggs? If you lay the blame on India, or red tape, or the capitalist system, or socialism, you conjure up in people's minds a mythical personified devil whom it is easy to hate. In every misfortune it is a natural impulse to look for an enemy upon whom to lay the blame; savages attribute all illness to hostile magic. Whenever the causes of our troubles are too difficult to be understood, we tend to fall back upon this primitive kind of explanation. A newspaper which offers us a villain to hate is much more appealing than one which goes into all the intricacies of dollar shortages. When the Germans suffered after the First World War, many of them were easily persuaded that the Jews were to blame.

The Destructive Appeal to Hatred

The appeal to hatred of a supposed enemy as the explanation of whatever is painful in our lives is usually destructive and disastrous; it stimulates primitive instinctive energy, but in ways the effects of which are catastrophic. There are various ways of diminishing the potency of appeals to hatred. The best way, where it is possible, is to cure the evils which cause us to look out for an enemy. Where this cannot be achieved, it may sometimes be possible to disseminate widely a true understanding of the causes that are producing our misfortunes. But this is difficult so long as there are powerful forces in politics and in the press which flourish by the encouragement of hysteria. I do not think that misfortune, by itself, produces the kind of hysterical hatred that led, for example, to the rise of the Nazis. There has to be a sense of frustration as well as misfortune. A Swiss Family Robinson, finding plenty to do on their island, will not waste time on hatred. But in a more complex situation the activities that are in face necessary may be far less capable of making an immediate appeal to individuals. In the present difficult state of British national economy, we know collectively what is needed: increased production, diminished consumption, and stimulation of exports. But these are large general matters, not very visibly related to the welfare of particular men and women. If the activities that are needed on such

apparently remote grounds are to be carried out vigorously and cheerfully, ways must be devised of creating some more immediate reason for doing what the national economy requires. This, I think, demands controlled devolution, and opportunities for desirable more or less independent action by individuals or by groups that are not very large.

Democracy, as it exists in large modern states, does not give adequate scope for political initiative except to a tiny minority. We are accustomed to pointing out that what the Greeks called 'democracy' fell short through the exclusion of women and slaves, but we do not always realise that in some important respects it was more democratic than anything that is possible when the governmental area is extensive. Every citizen could vote on every issue; he did not have to delegate his power to a representative. He could elect executive officers, including generals, and could get them condemned if they displeased a majority. The number of citizens was small enough for each man to feel that he counted, and that he could have a significant influence by discussion with his acquaintance. I am not suggesting that this system was good on the whole; it had, in fact, very grave disadvantages. But in the one respect of allowing for individual initiative it was very greatly superior to anything that exists in the modern world.

Consider, for purposes of illustration, the relation of an ordinary taxpayer to an admiral. The taxpayers collectively are the admiral's employers. Their agents in Parliament vote his pay, and choose the government which sanctions the authority which appoints the admiral. But if the individual taxpayer were to attempt to assume towards the admiral the attitude of authority which is customary from employer to employee, he would soon be put in his place. The admiral is a great man, accustomed to exercising authority; the ordinary taxpayer is not. In a lesser degree the same sort of thing is true throughout the public services. Even if you only wish to register a letter at a post office, the official is in a position of momentary power; he can at least decide when to notice that you desire attention. If you want anything more complicated, he can, if he happens to be in a bad humour, cause you considerable annoyance; he can send you to another man, who may send you back to the first man; and yet both are reckoned 'servants' of the public. The ordinary voter, so far from finding himself the source of all the power of army, navy, police, and civil service, feels himself their humble subject, whose duty is, as the Chinese used to say, to 'tremble and obey'. So long as democratic control is remote and rare, while public administration is centralised and authority is delegated from the centre to the circumference, this sense of individual impotence before the powers that be is difficult to avoid. And yet it must be avoided if democracy is to be a reality in feeling and not merely in governmental machinery.

Most of the evils that we have been concerned with in this lecture are no new thing. Ever since the dawn of civilisation most people in civilised communities have led lives full of misery; glory, adventure, initiative were for the privileged few, while for the multitude there was a life of severe toil with occasional harsh cruelty. But the western nations first, and gradually the whole world, have awakened to a new ideal. We are no longer content that the few should enjoy all the good things while the many are wretched. The evils of early industrialism caused a thrill of horror which they would not have caused in Roman times. Slavery was abolished because it was felt that

no human being should be regarded merely as an instrument to the prosperity of another. We no longer attempt, at least in theory, to defend the exploitation of coloured races by white conquerors. Socialism was inspired by the wish to diminish the gap between rich and poor. In all directions, there has been a revolt against injustice and inequality, and an unwillingness to build a brilliant superstructure on a foundation of suffering and degradation.

This new belief is now so generally taken for granted that it is not sufficiently realised how revolutionary it is in the long history of mankind. In this perspective the last 160 years appear as a continuous revolution inspired by this idea. Like all new beliefs that are influential, it is uncomfortable, and demands difficult adjustments. There is a danger—as there has been with other gospels—lest means should be mistaken for ends, with the result that ends are forgotten. There is a risk that, in the pursuit of equality, good things which there is difficulty in distributing evenly may not be admitted to be good. Some of the unjust societies of the past gave to a minority opportunities which, if we are not careful, the new society that we seek to build may give to no one. When I speak of the evils of the present day, I do so, not to suggest that they are greater than those of the past, but only to make sure that what was good in the past should be carried over into the future, as far as possible unharmed by the transition. But if this is to be achieved, some things must be remembered which are apt to be forgotten in blueprints of Utopia.

Among the things which are in danger of being unnecessarily sacrificed to democratic equality perhaps the most important is self-respect. By self-respect I mean the good half of pride—what is called ‘proper pride’. The bad half is a sense of superiority. Self-respect will keep a man from being abject when he is in the power of enemies, and will enable him to feel that he may be in the right when the world is against him. If a man has not this quality, he will feel that majority opinion, or governmental opinion is to be treated as infallible, and such a way of feeling, if it is general, makes both moral and intellectual progress impossible.

The old load of poverty and suffering and cruelty, from which mankind has suffered since history began, is no longer necessary to the existence of civilisation; it can be removed by the help of modern science and modern technique, provided these are used in a humane spirit and with an understanding of the springs of happiness and life. Without such understanding, we may inadvertently create a new prison just, perhaps, since none will be outside it, but dreary and joyless and spiritually dead. How such a disaster is to be averted, I shall consider in my last two lectures.