

REITH LECTURES 1948: Authority and the Individual

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Lecture 5: Control and Initiative: Their Respective Spheres

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A healthy and progressive society requires both central control and individual and group initiative: without control there is anarchy, and without initiative there is stagnation. I want in this lecture to arrive at some general principles as to what matters should be controlled and what should be left to private or semi-private initiative. Some of the qualities that we should wish to find in a community are in their essence static, while others are by their very nature dynamic. Speaking very roughly, we may expect the static qualities to be suitable for governmental control, while the dynamic qualities should be promoted by the initiative of individuals or groups. But if such initiative is to be possible, and if it is to be fruitful rather than destructive, it will need to be fostered by appropriate institutions, and the safeguarding of such institutions will have to be one of the functions of government. It is obvious that in a state of anarchy there could not be universities or scientific research or publication of books, or even such simple things as seaside holidays. In our complex world there cannot be fruitful initiative without government, but unfortunately there can be government without initiative.

Three Primary Aims of Government

The primary aims of government, I suggest, should be three: security, justice and conservation. These are things of the utmost importance to human happiness, and they are things which only government can bring about. At the same time, no one of them is absolute; each may, in some circumstances, have to be sacrificed in some degree for the sake of a greater degree of some other good. I shall say something about each in turn.

Security, in the sense of protection of life and property, has always been recognised as one of the primary purposes of the state. Many states, however, while safeguarding law-abiding citizens against other citizens, have not thought it necessary to protect them against the state. Wherever there is arrest by administrative order, and punishment without due process of law, private people have no security, however firmly the state may be established. And even insistence on due process of law is insufficient, unless the judges are independent of the executive. This order of ideas was to the fore in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, under the slogan 'liberty of the subject' or 'rights of man'. But the 'liberty' and the 'rights' that were sought could only be secured by the state, and then only if the state was of the kind that is called 'liberal'. It is only in the west that this liberty and these rights have been secured.

To us in the present day, a more interesting kind of security is security against attacks by hostile states. This is more interesting because it has not been secured, and because it becomes more important year by year as methods of warfare develop. This kind of

security will only become possible when there is a single world government with a monopoly of all the major weapons of war. I shall not enlarge upon this subject, since it is somewhat remote from my theme. I will only say, with all possible emphasis, that unless and until mankind has achieved the security of a single government for the world, everything else of value, of no matter what kind is precarious, and may at any moment be destroyed by war.

Economic security has been one of the most important aims of modern British legislation. Insurance against unemployment, sickness, and destitution in old age, has removed from the lives of wage-earners a great deal of painful uncertainty as to their future. Medical security has been promoted by measures which have greatly increased the average length of life and diminished the amount of illness. Altogether, life in western countries, apart from war, is very much less dangerous than it was in the eighteenth century, and this change is mainly due to various kinds of governmental control.

Security, though undoubtedly a good thing, may be sought excessively and become a fetish. A secure life is not necessarily a happy life; it may be rendered dismal by boredom and monotony. Many people, especially while they are young, welcome a spice of dangerous adventure, and may even find relief in war as an escape from humdrum safety. Security by itself is negative aim inspired by fear; a satisfactory life must have a positive aim inspired by hope. This sort of adventurous hope involves risk and therefore fear. But fear deliberately chosen is not such an evil thing as fear forced upon a man by outward circumstances. We cannot therefore be content with security alone, or imagine that it can bring the millennium.

And now as to justice. Justice, especially economic justice, has become, in quite recent times, a governmental purpose. Justice has come to be interpreted as equality, except where exceptional merit is thought to deserve an exceptional but still moderate reward. Political justice, i.e. democracy, has been aimed at since the American and French revolutions, but economic justice is a newer aim, and requires a much greater amount of governmental control. It is held by socialists—rightly in my opinion—to involve state ownership of key industries and a considerable regulation of foreign trade. Opponents of socialism may argue that economic justice can be too dearly bought, but no one can deny that, if it is to be achieved, a very large amount of state control over industry and finance is essential. There are, however, limits to economic justice which are, at least tacitly, acknowledged by even the most ardent of its western advocates. An attempt to bring about economic equality between western nations and south-east Asia, except by very gradual methods, would drag the more prosperous nations down to the level of the less prosperous, without any appreciable advantage to the latter.

Justice, like security, but to an even greater degree, is a principle which is subject to limitations. There is justice where all are equally poor as well as where all are equally rich, but it would seem fruitless to make the rich poorer if this was not going to make the poor richer. The case against justice is even stronger if, in the pursuit of equality, it is going to make even the poor poorer than before. And this might well happen if a general lowering of education and a diminution of fruitful research were involved. If there had not been economic injustice in Egypt and Babylon, the art of writing would never have been invented. There is however no necessity, with modern methods of

production, to perpetuate economic injustice in industrially developed nations in order to promote progress in the arts of civilisation. There is only a danger to be borne in mind, not, as in the past, a technical impossibility.

Preserving the World's Natural Resources

I come now to my third head: conservation. Conservation, like security and justice, demands action by the state. I mean by 'conservation' not only the preservation of ancient monuments and beauty spots, the upkeep of roads and public utilities, and so on. These things are done at present, except in time of war. What I have chiefly in mind is the preservation of the world's natural resources. This is a matter of enormous importance, to which very little attention has been paid. During the past hundred and fifty years mankind has used up the raw materials of industry and the soil upon which agriculture depends, and this wasteful expenditure of natural capital has proceeded with ever-increasing velocity. In relation to industry, the most striking example is oil. The amount of accessible oil in the world is unknown, but is certainly not unlimited; already the need for it has reached the point at which there is a risk of its contributing to bringing about a third world war. When oil is no longer available in large quantities, a great deal will have to be changed in our way of life. If we try to substitute atomic energy, that will only result in exhaustion of the available supplies of uranium and thorium. Industry as it exists at present depends essentially upon the expenditure of natural capital, and cannot long continue in its present prodigal fashion.

Even more serious, according to some authorities, is the situation in regard to agriculture, as set forth with great vividness in Mr. Vogt's *Road to Survival*. Except in a few favoured areas (of which Western Europe is one), the prevailing methods of cultivating the soil rapidly exhaust its fertility. The growth of the dust bowl in America is the best known example of a destructive process which is going on in most parts of the world. As, meantime, the population increases, a disastrous food shortage is inevitable within the next fifty years unless drastic steps are taken. The necessary measures are known to students of agriculture, but only governments can take them, and then only if they are willing and able to face unpopularity. This is a problem which has received far too little attention. It must be faced by anyone who hopes for a stable world without internecine wars—wars which, if they are to ease the food shortage, must be far more destructive than those we have already endured, for during both the world wars the population of the world increased. This question of a reform in agriculture is perhaps the most important that the governments of the near future will have to face, except the prevention of war.

I have spoken of security, justice, and conservation as the most essential of governmental functions, because these are things that only governments can bring about. I have not meant to suggest that governments should have no other functions. But in the main their functions in other spheres should be to encourage non-governmental initiative, and to create opportunities for its exercise in beneficent ways. There are anarchic and criminal forms of initiative which cannot be tolerated in a civilised society. There are other forms of initiative, such as that of the well-established inventor, which everybody recognises to be useful. But there is a large intermediate class of innovators of whose activities it cannot be known in advance whether the effects will be good or bad. It is particularly in relation to this class that it

is necessary to urge the desirability of freedom to experiment, for this uncertain class includes all that has been best in the history of human achievement.

‘Desirable Diversity’

Uniformity, which is a natural result of state control, is desirable in some things and undesirable in others. In Florence, in the days before Mussolini, there was one rule of the roads in the town and the opposite rule in the surrounding country. This kind of diversity was inconvenient, but there were many matters in which fascism suppressed a desirable kind of diversity. In matters of opinion it is a good thing if there is vigorous discussion between different schools of thought. In the mental world there is everything to be said in favour of a struggle for existence, leading, with luck, to a survival of the fittest. But if there is to be mental competition, there must be ways of limiting the means to be employed. The decision should not be by war, or by assassination, or by imprisonment of those holding certain opinions, or by preventing those holding unpopular views from earning a living. Where private enterprise prevails, or where there are many small states, as in renaissance Italy and eighteenth-century Germany, these conditions are to some extent fulfilled by rivalry between different possible patrons. But when, as has tended to happen throughout Europe, states become large and private fortunes small, traditional methods of securing intellectual diversity fail. The only method that remains available is for the state to hold the ring and establish some sort of Queensberry rules by which the contest is to be conducted.

Artists and writers are nowadays almost the only people who may with luck exercise a powerful and important initiative as individuals, and not in connection with some group. While I lived in California, there were two men who set to work to inform the world as to the condition of migrant labour in that state. One, who was a novelist, dealt with the theme in a novel; the other, who was a teacher in a state university, dealt with it in a careful piece of academic research. The novelist made a fortune; the teacher was dismissed from his post, and suffered an imminent risk of destitution. But the initiative of the writer, though as yet it survives, is threatened in various ways. If book-production is in the hands of the state as it is in Russia, the state can decide what shall be published, and, unless it delegates its power to some completely non-partisan authority, there is a likelihood that no books will appear except such as are pleasing to leading politicians. The same thing applies, of course, to newspapers. In this sphere, uniformity would be a disaster, but would be a very probable result of unrestricted state socialism.

Men of science, as I pointed out in my third lecture, could formerly work in isolation, as writers still can; Cavendish and Faraday and Mendel depended hardly at all upon institutions and Darwin only in so far as the government enabled him to share the voyage of the Beagle. But this isolation is a thing of the past. Most research requires expensive apparatus; some kinds require the financing of expeditions to difficult regions. Without facilities provided by a government or a university, few men can achieve much in modern science. The conditions which determine who is to have access to such facilities are therefore of great importance. If only those are eligible who are considered orthodox in current controversies, scientific progress will soon cease, and will give way to a scholastic reign of authority such as stifled science throughout the Middle Ages.

In politics, the association of personal initiative with a group is obvious and essential. Usually two groups are involved: the party and the electorate. If you wish to carry some reform, you must first persuade your party to adopt the reform, and then persuade the electorate to adopt your party. You may, of course, be able to operate directly upon the government, but this is seldom possible in a matter that rouses much public interest. When it is not possible, the initiative required involves so much energy and time, and is so likely to end in failure, that most people prefer to acquiesce in the status quo, except to the extent of voting, once in live years, for some candidate who promises reform.

In a highly organised world, personal initiative connected with a group must be confined to a few unless the group is small. If you are a member of a small committee you may reasonably hope to influence its decisions. In national politics, where you are one of some 20,000,000 voters, your influence is infinitesimal unless you are exceptional or occupy an exceptional position. You have, it is true, a twenty-millionth share in the government of others, but only a twenty-millionth share in the government of yourself. You are therefore much more conscious of being governed than of governing. The government becomes in your thoughts a remote and largely malevolent 'they', not a set of men whom you, in concert with others who share your opinions, have chosen to carry out your wishes. Your individual feeling about politics, in these circumstances, is not that intended to be brought about by democracy, but much more nearly what it would be under a dictatorship.

The sense of bold adventure, and of capacity to bring about results that are felt to be important, can only be restored if power can be delegated to small groups in which the individual is not overwhelmed by mere numbers. A considerable degree of central control is indispensable, if only for the reasons that we considered at the beginning of this lecture. But to the utmost extent compatible with this requisite, there should be devolution of the powers of the state to various kinds of bodies—geographical, industrial, cultural, according to their functions. The powers of these bodies should be sufficient to make them interesting, and to cause energetic men to find satisfaction in influencing them. They would need, if they were to fulfil their purpose, a considerable measure of financial autonomy. Nothing is so damping and deadening to initiative as to have a carefully thought out scheme vetoed by a central authority which knows almost nothing about it and has no sympathy with its objects. Yet this is what constantly happens in Britain under our system of Treasury control. Something more elastic and less rigid is needed if the best brains are not to be paralysed. And it must be an essential feature of any wholesome system that as much as possible of the power should be in the hands of men who are interested in the work that is to be done.

From World Government to Parish Council

The problem of delimiting the powers of various bodies will be one presenting many difficulties. The general principle should be to leave to smaller bodies all functions which do not prevent the larger bodies from fulfilling their purpose. Confining ourselves, for the moment, to geographical bodies, there should be a hierarchy from the world government to parish, councils. The function of the world government is to prevent war, and it should have only such powers as are necessary to this end. This involves a monopoly of armed force, a power to sanction and revise treaties, and the right to give decisions in disputes between states. But the world government should

not interfere with the internal affairs of member states, except in so far as is necessary to ensure the observance of treaties. In like manner the national government should leave as much as possible to county councils, and they in turn to borough and parish councils. A short-run loss of efficiency may be expected in some respects, but if the functions of subordinate bodies are made sufficiently important, able men will find satisfaction in belonging to them.

Whether an organisation is geographical or cultural or ideological, it will always have two sorts of relations, those to its own members, and those to the outside world. The relations of a body to its own members should, as a rule, be left to the free decisions of the members, so long as there is no infringement of the law. But relations to the outside world, if they cannot be settled by friendly negotiation, must be regulated by a neutral authority. To this principle there should be no exception until we come to the world as a whole, which, so far, has no external political relations. If a Wellsian war of the worlds were possible, we should need an inter-planetary authority.

Differences between nations, so long as they do not lead to hostility, are by no means to be deplored. Living for a time in a foreign country makes us aware of merits in which our own country is deficient, and this is true whichever country our own may be. The same thing holds of differences between different regions within one country, and of the differing types produced by different professions. Uniformity of character and uniformity of culture are to be regretted. Biological evolution has depended upon inborn differences between individuals or tribes, and cultural evolution depends upon acquired differences. When these disappear, there is no longer any material for selection. In the modern world, there is a real danger of too great similarity between one region and another in cultural respects. One of the best ways of minimising this evil is an increase in the autonomy of different groups.

The general principle which, if I am right, should govern the respective spheres of authority and initiative, may be stated broadly in terms of the different kinds of impulses that make up human nature. On the one hand, we have impulses to hold what we possess, and (too often) to acquire what others possess. On the other hand, we have creative impulses, impulses to put something into the world which is not taken away from anybody else. These may take humble forms, such as cottage gardens, or may represent the summit of human achievement, as in Shakespeare and Newton. Broadly speaking, the regularising of possessive impulses and their control by the law belong to the essential functions of government, while the creative impulses, though governments may encourage them, should derive their main influence from individual or group autonomy.

Material goods are more a matter of possession than goods that are mental. A man who eats a piece of food prevents everyone else from eating it, but a man who writes or enjoys a poem does not prevent another man from writing or enjoying one just as good or better. That is why, in regard to material goods, justice is important, but in regard to mental goods the thing that is needed is opportunity and an environment that makes hope of achievement seem rational. It is not great material rewards that stimulate men capable of creative work; few poets or men of science have made fortunes or wished to do so. Socrates was put to death by authority, but he remained completely placid in his last moments because he had done his work. If he had been loaded with honours but prevented from doing his work, he would have felt that he

had suffered a far severer penalty. In a state where authority controls everything, including the means of publicity, a man of marked originality is likely to suffer this worse fate: whether or not he is subjected to legal penalties, he is unable to make his ideas known. When this happens in a community, it cannot any longer contribute anything of value to the collective life of mankind.

The control of greedy or predatory impulses is imperatively necessary, and therefore states, and even a world state, are needed for survival. But we cannot be content merely to be alive rather than dead; we wish to live happily, vigorously, creatively. For this the state can provide a part of the necessary conditions, but only if it does not, in the pursuit of security, stifle the largely unregulated impulses which give life its savour and its value. The individual life still has its due place, and must not be subjected too completely to the control of vast organisations. To guard against this danger is very necessary in the world that modern technique has created.