

REITH LECTURES 1948: Authority and the Individual

Bertrand Russell

Lecture 6: Individual and Social Ethics

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In this last lecture I wish to relate social and political doctrines to the individual ethics by which a man should guide his personal life, and after the evils we have recognised and the dangers that we have acknowledged, to hold out nevertheless, as resulting from our survey, certain high hopes for the not too distant future of mankind, which I, for my part, believe to be justified on a sober estimate of possibilities.

Individual ethics is especially relevant in considering cultural matters where diversity is a condition of progress. Bodies that have a certain independence of the state, such as universities and learned societies, have great value in this respect. It is deplorable to see, as in present-day Russia, men of science compelled to subscribe to obscurantist nonsense at the behest of scientifically ignorant politicians who are able and willing to enforce their ridiculous decisions by the use of economic and police power. Such pitiful spectacles can only be prevented by limiting the activities of politicians to the sphere in which they may be supposed competent. They should not presume to decide what is good music, or good biology, or good philosophy. I should not wish such matters to be decided in this country by the personal taste of any Prime Minister, past, present, or future, even if, by good luck, his taste were impeccable.

Freedom and Personal Morality

But liberty is not merely a cultural matter. No man is wholly free, and no man is wholly a slave. To the extent to which a man has freedom, he needs a personal morality to guide his conduct. There are some who would say that a man need only obey the accepted moral code of his community. But I do not think any student of anthropology could be content with this answer. Such practices as cannibalism, human sacrifice, and head-hunting have died out as a result of moral protests against conventional moral opinion. If a man seriously desires to live the best life that is open to him, he must learn to be critical of the tribal customs and tribal beliefs that are generally accepted among his neighbours.

Ethics, however, is not concerned solely with duty to my neighbour, however rightly such duty may be conceived. The performance of public duty is not the whole of what makes a good life; there is also the pursuit of private excellence. For man, though partly social, is not wholly so. He has thoughts and feelings and impulses which may be wise or foolish, noble or base, filled with love or inspired by hate. And for the better of these thoughts and feelings and impulses, if his life is to be tolerable, there must be scope. For although a few men can be happy in solitude, still fewer can be happy in a community which allows no freedom of individual action.

Individual excellence, although a great part of it consists in right behaviour towards other people, has also another aspect. If you neglect your duties for the sake of trivial

amusement, you will have pangs of conscience; but if you are tempted away for a time by great music or a fine sunset, you will return with no sense of shame and no feeling that you have been wasting your time. It is dangerous to allow politics and social duty to dominate too completely our conception of what constitutes individual excellence. What I am trying to convey, although it is not dependent upon any theological belief, is in close harmony with Christian ethics. Socrates and the Apostles laid it down that we ought to obey God rather than man, and the Gospels enjoin love of God as emphatically as love of our neighbours. All great religious leaders, and also all great artists and intellectual discoverers, have shown a sense of moral compulsion to fulfil their creative impulses, and a sense of moral exaltation when they have done so. This emotion is the basis of what the Gospels call duty to God, and is (I repeat) separable from theological belief. Duty to my neighbour, at any rate as my neighbour conceives it, may not be the whole of my duty. If I have a profound conscientious conviction that I ought to act in a way that is condemned by governmental authority, I ought to follow my conviction. And, conversely, society ought to allow me freedom to follow my convictions except when there are very powerful reasons for restraining me. But it is not only acts inspired by a sense of duty that should be free from excessive social pressure. An artist or a scientific discoverer may be doing what is of most social utility, but he cannot do his proper work from a sense of duty alone. He must have a spontaneous impulse to paint or to discover, for, if not, his painting will be worthless and his discoveries unimportant.

The sphere of individual action is not to be regarded as ethically inferior to that of social duty. On the contrary, some of the best of human activities are, at least in feeling, personal rather than social. As I have said before, prophets, mystics, poets, scientific discoverers, are men whose lives are dominated by a vision; they are essentially solitary men. When their dominant impulse is strong, they feel that they cannot obey authority if it runs counter to what they profoundly believe to be good. Although, on this account, they are often persecuted in their own day, they are apt to be, of all men, those to whom posterity pays the highest honour. It is such men who put into the world the things that we most value, not only in religion, in art, and in science, but also in our way of feeling towards our neighbour, for improvements in the sense of social obligation, as in everything else, have been largely due to solitary men whose thoughts and emotions were not subject to the dominion of the herd. If human life is not to become dusty and uninteresting, it is important to realise that there are things that have a value which is quite independent of utility. What is useful is useful because it is a means to something else, and the something else, if it is not in turn merely a means, must be valued for its own sake, for otherwise the usefulness is illusory. To strike the right balance between ends and means is both difficult and important. If you are concerned to emphasise means, you may point out that the difference between a civilised man and a savage, between an adult and a child, between a man and an animal consists largely in a difference as to the weight attached to ends and means in conduct. A civilised man insures his life, a savage does not; an adult brushes his teeth to prevent decay, a child does not except under compulsion; men labour in the fields to provide food for the winter, animals do not. Forethought, which involves doing unpleasant things now for the sake of pleasant things in the future, is one of the most essential marks of mental development. Since forethought is difficult and requires control of impulse, moralists stress its necessity, and lay more stress on the virtue of present sacrifice than on the pleasantness of the subsequent reward. You must do right because it is right, and not because it is the way to get to

heaven. You must save because all sensible people do, and not because you may ultimately secure an income that will enable you to enjoy life. And so on.

Consciousness of Ends

But the man who wishes to emphasise ends rather than means may advance contrary arguments with equal truth. It is pathetic to see an elderly rich business man, who from work and worry in youth has become dyspeptic, so that he can eat only dry toast and drink only water while his careless guests feast; the joys of wealth, which he had anticipated throughout long laborious years, elude him, and his only pleasure is the use of financial power to compel his sons to submit in their turn to a similar futile drudgery. Misers, whose absorption in means is pathological, are generally recognised to be unwise, but minor forms of the same malady are apt to receive undue commendation. Without some consciousness of ends, life becomes dismal and colourless; ultimately the need for excitement too often finds a worse outlet than it would otherwise have done, in war or cruelty or intrigue or some other destructive activity.

Men who boast of being what is called 'practical' are for the most part exclusively pre-occupied with means. But theirs is only one half of wisdom. When we take account of the other half, which is concerned with ends, the economic process, and the whole of human life, takes on an entirely new aspect. We ask no longer: what have the producers produced, and what has consumption enabled the consumers in their turn to produce? We ask instead: what has there been in the lives of consumers and producers to make them glad to be alive? What have they felt or known or done that could justify their creation? Have they experienced the glory of new knowledge? Have they known love and friendship? Have they rejoiced in sunshine and the spring and the smell of flowers? Have they felt the joy of life that simple communities express in dance and song?

Once in Los Angeles I was taken to see the Mexican colony— idle vagabonds, I was told, but to me they seemed to be enjoying snore of what makes life a boon and not a curse than fell to the lot of my anxious hard-working hosts. When I tried to explain this feeling, however, I was met with a blank and total lack of comprehension.

People do not always remember that politics, economics, and social organisation generally, belong in the realm of means, not of ends. Our political and social thinking is prone to what may be called the administrator's fallacy', by which I mean the habit of looking upon a society as a systematic whole, of a sort that is thought good if it is pleasant to contemplate as a model of order, a planned organism with parts neatly dovetailed into each other. But a society does not, or at least should not, exist to satisfy an external survey, but to bring a good life to the individuals who compose it. It is in the individuals, not in the whole, that ultimate value is to be sought. A good society is a means to a good life for those who compose it, not something having a separate kind of excellence on its own account.

The Individual and the Community

When it is said that a nation is an organism, an analogy is being used which may be dangerous if its limitations are not recognised. Men and the higher animals are

organisms in a strict sense: whatever good or evil befalls a man befalls him as a single person, not this or that part of him. If I have toothache or a pain in my toe, it is I that have the pain, and it would not exist if no nerves connected the part concerned with my brain. But when a farmer in Herefordshire is caught in a blizzard, it is not the government in London that feels cold. That is why the individual man is the bearer of good and evil, and not, on the one hand, any separate part of a man, or on the other hand, any collection of men. To believe that there can be good or evil in a collection of human beings, over and above the good or evil in the various individuals, is an error; moreover it is an error which leads straight to totalitarianism, and is therefore dangerous.

There are some among philosophers and statesmen who think that the state can have an excellence of its own, and not merely as a means to the welfare of the citizens. I cannot see any reason to agree with this view. 'The state' is an abstraction; it does not feel pleasure or pain, it has no hopes or fears, and what we think of as its purposes are really the purposes of individuals who direct it. When we think concretely, not abstractly, we find, in place of 'the state', certain people who have more power than falls to the share of most men. And so glorification of 'the state' turns out to be, in fact, glorification of a governing minority. No democrat can tolerate such a fundamentally unjust theory.

There is another ethical theory, which to my mind is also inadequate; it is that which might be called the 'biological' theory, though I should not wish to assert that it is held by most biologists. This view is derived from a contemplation of evolution. The struggle for existence is supposed to have led gradually to more and more complex organisms, culminating (so far) in man. In this view, survival is the supreme end, or rather, survival of one's own species. Whatever increases the human population of the globe, if this theory is right, is to count as 'good', and whatever, diminishes the population is to count as 'bad'. I cannot see any justification for such a mechanical and arithmetical outlook. It would be easy to find a single acre containing more ants than there are human beings in the whole world, but we do not on that account acknowledge the superior excellence of ants. And what humane person would prefer a large population living in poverty and squalor to a smaller population living happily with a sufficiency of comfort?

It is true, of course, that survival is the necessary condition for everything else, but it is only a condition of what has value, and may have no value on its own account. Survival, in the world that modern science and technique have produced, demands a great deal of government. But what is to give value to survival must come mainly from sources that lie outside government. The reconciling of these two opposite requisites has been our problem in these discussions.

And now, gathering up the threads of our discussions, and remembering all the dangers of our time, I wish to reiterate certain conclusions, and, more particularly, to set forth the hopes which I believe we have rational grounds for entertaining. Between those who care most for social cohesion and those who primarily value individual initiative there has been an age-long battle ever since the time of the Greeks. In every such perennial controversy there is sure to be truth on both sides; there is not likely to be a clear-cut solution, but at best one involving various adjustments and compromises. Throughout history, as I suggested earlier in this series, there has been a

fluctuation between periods of excessive anarchy and periods of too strict governmental control. In our day, except (as yet) in the matter of world government, there has been too much tendency towards authority, and too little care for the preservation of initiative. Men in control of vast organisations have tended to be too abstract in their outlook, to forget what actual human beings are like, and to try to fit men to systems rather than systems to men. The lack of spontaneity from which our highly organised societies tend to suffer is connected with excessive control over large areas by remote authorities.

One of the advantages to be gained from decentralisation is that it provides new opportunities for hopefulness and for individual activities that embody hopes. If our political thoughts are all concerned with vast problems and dangers of world catastrophe, it is easy to become despairing. Fear of war, fear of revolution, fear of reaction, may obsess you according to your temperament and your party bias. Unless you are one of a very small number of powerful individuals, you are likely to feel that you cannot do much about these great issues. But in relation to smaller problems—those of your town, or your trade union, or the local branch of your political party, for example—you can hope to have a successful influence. This will engender a hopeful spirit, and a hopeful spirit is what is most needed if a way is to be found of dealing successfully with the larger problems. War and shortages and financial stringency have caused almost universal fatigue, and have made hopefulness seem shallow and insincere. Success, even if, at first, it is on a small scale, is the best cure for this mood of pessimistic weariness. And success, for most people, means breaking up our problems, and being free to concentrate on those that are not too desperately large.

The world has become the victim of dogmatic political creeds, of which, in our day, the most powerful are capitalism and communism. I do not believe that either, in a dogmatic and unmitigated form, offers a cure for preventable evils. Capitalism gives opportunity of initiative to a few; communism could (though it does not in fact) provide a servile kind of security for all. But if people can rid themselves of the influence of unduly simple theories and the strife that they engender, it will be possible, by a wise use of scientific technique, to provide both opportunity for all and security for all. Unfortunately our political theories are less intelligent than our science, and we have not yet learnt how to make use of our knowledge and our skill in the ways that will do most to make life happy and even glorious. It is not only the experience and the fear of war that oppresses mankind, though this is perhaps the greatest of all the evils of our time. We are oppressed also by the great impersonal forces that govern our daily life, making us still slaves of circumstance though no longer slaves in law. This need not be the case. It has come about through the worship of false gods. Energetic men have worshipped power rather than simple happiness and friendliness; men of less energy have acquiesced, or have been deceived by a wrong diagnosis of the sources of sorrow.

‘Justice is Not Enough’

Ever since mankind invented slavery, the powerful have believed that their happiness could be achieved by means that involved inflicting misery on others. Gradually, with the growth of democracy, and with the quite modern application of Christian ethics to politics and economics, a better ideal than that of the slave-holders has begun to prevail, and the claims of justice are now acknowledged as they never were at any

former time. But in seeking justice by means of elaborate systems we have been in danger of forgetting that justice alone is not enough. Daily joys, times of liberation from care, adventure, and opportunity for creative activities, are at least as important as justice in bringing about a life that men can feel to be worth living. Monotony may be more deadening than an alternation of delight and agony. The men who think out administrative reforms and schemes of social amelioration are for the most part earnest men who are no longer young. Too often they have forgotten that to most people not only spontaneity but some kind of personal pride is necessary for happiness. The pride of a great conqueror is not one that a well-regulated world can allow, but the pride of the artist, of the discoverer, of the man who has turned a wilderness into a garden or has brought happiness where, but for him, there would have been misery—such pride is good, and our social system should make it possible, not only for the few, but for very many.

The instincts that long ago prompted the hinting and fighting activities of our savage ancestors demand an outlet; if they can find no other, they will turn to hatred and thwarted malice. But there are outlets for these very instincts that are not evil. For fighting it is possible to substitute emulation; for hunting, the joy of adventure and discovery and creation. We must not ignore these instincts, and we need not regret them: they are the source, not only of what is bad, but of what is best in human achievement. When security has been achieved, the most important task for those who seek human welfare will be to find for these ancient and powerful instincts neither merely restraints nor the outlets that make for destruction, but as many as possible of the outlets that give joy and pride and splendour to human life.

Throughout the ages of human development men have been subject to miseries of two kinds those imposed by external nature, and those that human beings misguidedly inflicted upon each other. At first, by far the worst evils were those that were due to the environment. Man was a rare species, whose survival was precarious. Without the agility of the monkey, without any coating of fur, he had difficulty in escaping from wild beasts, and in most parts of the world could not endure the winter's cold. He had only two biological advantages—the upright posture freed his hands, and intelligence enabled him to transmit experience. Gradually these two advantages gave him supremacy. The numbers of the human species increased beyond those of any other large mammals. But nature could still assert her power by means of flood and famine and pestilence, and by exacting from the great majority of mankind incessant toil in the securing of daily bread. In our own day our bondage to external nature is fast diminishing, as a result of the growth of scientific intelligence. Famines and pestilences still occur, but we know better, year by year, what should be done to prevent them. Hard work is still necessary, but only because we are unwise: given peace and co-operation, we could subsist on a very moderate amount of toil. With existing techniques, we can, whenever we choose to exercise wisdom, be free of many ancient forms of bondage to external nature.

But the evils that men inflict upon each other have not diminished in the same degree. There are still wars, oppressions, and hideous cruelties, and greedy men still snatch wealth from those who are less skilful or less ruthless than themselves. Love of power still leads to vast tyrannies or to mere obstruction when its grosser forms are impossible. And fear—deep, scarcely-conscious fear—is still the dominant motive in very many lives. All this is unnecessary; there is nothing in human nature that makes

these evils inevitable. I wish to repeat, with all possible emphasis, that I disagree completely with those who infer from our combative impulses that human nature demands war and other destructive forms of conflict. I firmly believe the very opposite of this. I maintain that combative impulses have an essential part to play, and that their harmful forms can be enormously lessened. Greed of possession will grow less when there is no fear of destitution. Love of power can be satisfied in many ways that involve no injury to others: by the power over nature that results from discovery and invention, by the production of admired books or works of art, and by successful persuasion. Energy and the wish to be effective are beneficent if they can find the right outlet, and harmful if not—like steam, which can either drive the train or burst the boiler.

Our emancipation from bondage to external nature has made possible a greater degree of human well-being than has ever hitherto existed. But if this possibility is to be realised, there must be freedom of initiative in all ways not positively harmful, and encouragement of those forms of initiative that enrich the life of Man. We shall not create a good world by trying to make men tame and timid, but by encouraging them to be bold and adventurous and fearless, except in inflicting injuries upon their fellow-men. In the world in which we find ourselves, the possibilities of good are almost limitless, and the possibilities of evil no less so. Our present predicament is due more than anything else to the fact that we have learnt to understand and control to a terrifying extent the forces of nature outside us, but not those that are embodied in ourselves. Self-control has always been a watchword of the moralist, but in the past it has been a control without understanding. In these lectures I have sought for a wider understanding of human needs than is assumed by most politicians and economists, for it is only through such an understanding that we can find our way to the realisation of those hopes which, though as yet they are largely frustrated by our folly, our skill has placed within our reach.