

REITH LECTURES 1948: Authority and the Individual

Bertrand Russell

Lecture 1: Social Cohesion and Human Nature

TRANSMISSION: 24 December 1948 - Home Service

The fundamental problem I propose to consider in these lectures is this: how can we combine that degree of individual initiative which is necessary for progress with the degree of social cohesion that is necessary for survival? I shall begin with the impulses in human nature that make social co-operation possible. I shall examine first the forms that these impulses took in very primitive communities, and then the adaptations that were brought about by the gradually changing social organisations of advancing civilisation. I shall next consider the extent and intensity of social cohesion in various times and places, leading up to the communities of the present day and the possibilities of further development in the not very distant future. After this- discussion of social cohesion I shall take up the other side of the life of man in communities, namely individual initiative, showing the part that it has played in various phases of human evolution, the part that it plays at the present day, and the future possibilities of too much or too little initiative in individuals and groups. I shall then go on to one of the basic problems of our times, namely the conflict which modern technique has introduced between organisation and human nature, or, to put the matter in another way, the divorce of the economic motive from the impulses of creation and possession. Having stated this problem, I shall examine what can be done towards its solution, and finally I shall consider as a matter of ethics the whole relation of individual thought and effort and imagination to the authority of the community.

In all social animals, including man, co-operation and the unity of a group have some foundation in instinct. This is most complete in ants and bees, which apparently are never tempted to anti-social actions and never deviate from devotion to the nest or the hive. Up to a point we may admire this unswerving devotion to public duty, but it has its drawbacks; ants and bees do not produce great works of art, or make scientific discoveries, or found religions teaching that all ants are sisters. Their social life, in fact, is mechanical, precise and static. We are willing that human life shall have an element of turbulence if thereby we can escape such evolutionary stagnation.

Early man was a weak and rare species whose survival at first was precarious. At some period his ancestors came down from the trees and lost the advantage of prehensile toes, but gained the advantage of arms and hands. By these changes they acquired the advantage of no longer having to live in forests, but on the other hand the open spaces into which they spread provided a less abundant nourishment than they had enjoyed in the tropical jungles of Africa. Sir Arthur Keith estimates that primitive man required two square miles of territory per individual to supply him with food, and some other authorities place the amount of territory required even higher. Judging by the anthropoid apes, and by the most primitive communities that have survived into modern times, early man must have lived in small groups not very much larger than families-groups which, at a guess, we may put at, say, between fifty and a hundred

individuals. Within each group there seems to have been a considerable amount of co-operation, but towards all other groups of the same species there was hostility whenever contact occurred. So long as man remained rare, contact with other groups could be occasional, and, at most times, not very important. Each group had its own territory, and conflict would only occur at the frontiers. In those early times marriage appears to have been confined to the group, so that there must have been a very great deal of inbreeding, and varieties, however originating, would tend to be perpetuated. If a group increased in numbers to the point where its existing territory was insufficient, it would be likely 'to come into conflict with some neighbouring group, and in such conflict any biological advantage which one inbreeding group had acquired over the other might be expected to give it the victory, and therefore to perpetuate its beneficial variation. All this has been very convincingly set forth by Sir Arthur Keith. It is obvious that our early and barely human ancestors cannot have been acting on a thought-out and deliberate policy, but must have been prompted by an instinctive mechanism-the dual mechanism of friendship within the tribe and hostility to all others. As the primitive tribe was so small each individual would know intimately each other individual, so that friendly feeling would be co-extensive with acquaintanceship.

The Family-Most Compelling of Human Groups

The strongest and most instinctively compelling of social groups was, and still is, the family. The family is necessitated among human beings by the great length of infancy, and by the fact that the mother of young infants is seriously handicapped in the work of food gathering. It was this circumstance that with human beings, as with most species of birds, made the father an essential member of the family group. This must have led to a division of labour in which the men hunted while the women stayed at home. The transition from the family to the small tribe was presumably biologically connected with the fact that hunting could be more efficient if it was co-operative, and from a very early time the cohesion of the tribe must have been increased and developed by conflicts with other tribes.

The remains that have been discovered of early men and half-men are now sufficiently numerous to give a fairly clear picture of the stages in evolution from the most advanced anthropoid apes to the most primitive human beings. The earliest indubitably human remains that have been discovered so far are estimated to belong to a period about one million years ago, but for several million years before that time there seem to have been anthropoids that lived on the ground and not in trees. The most distinctive feature by which the evolutionary status of these early ancestors is fixed is the size of the brain, which increased fairly rapidly until it reached about its present capacity, but has now been virtually stationary for hundreds of thousands of years. During these hundreds of thousands of years man has improved in knowledge, in acquired skill, and in social organisation, but not, so far as can be judged, in congenital intellectual capacity. That purely biological advance, so far as it can be estimated from bones, was completed a long time ago. It is to be supposed accordingly that our congenital mental equipment, as opposed to what we learn, is not so very different from that of paleolithic man. We have still, it would seem, the instincts which led men, before their behaviour had become deliberate, to live in small tribes with a sharp antithesis of internal friendship and external hostility. The changes that have come since those early times have had to depend for their driving force

partly upon this primitive basis of instinct, and partly upon a sometimes barely conscious sense of collective self-interest. One of the things that cause stress and strain in human social life is that it is possible, up to a point, to become aware of rational grounds for a behaviour not prompted by natural instinct. But when such behaviour strains natural instinct too severely nature takes her revenge by producing either listlessness or destructiveness, either of which may cause a structure imposed by reason to break down.

Social cohesion, which started with loyalty to a group reinforced by the fear of enemies, grew by processes partly natural and partly deliberate until it reached the vast conglomerations that we now know as nations. To these processes various forces contributed. At a very early stage loyalty to a group must have been reinforced by loyalty to a leader. In a large tribe the chief or king may be known to everybody even when private individuals are often strangers to each other. In this way, personal as opposed to tribal loyalty makes possible an increase in the size of the group without doing violence to instinct. At a certain stage a further development took place. Wars, which originally were wars of extermination, gradually became-at least in part-wars of conquest; the vanquished, instead of being put to death, were made slaves and compelled to labour for their conquerors. When this happened there came to be two sorts of people within a community, namely the original members who alone were free, and were the repositories of the tribal spirit, and the subjects who obeyed from fear, not from instinctive loyalty. Nineveh and Babylon ruled over vast territories, not because their subjects had any instinctive sense of social cohesion with the dominant city, but solely because of the terror inspired by its prowess in war. From those early days down to modern times war has been the chief engine in enlarging the size of communities, and fear has increasingly replaced tribal solidarity as a source of social cohesion. This change was not confined to large communities; it occurred, for example, in Sparta, where the free citizens were a small minority, while the Helots were unmercifully suppressed. Sparta was praised throughout antiquity for its admirable social cohesion, but it was a cohesion which never attempted to embrace the whole population, except in so far as terror compelled outward loyalty.

At a certain stage in the development of civilisation, a new kind of loyalty began to be developed: a loyalty based not on territorial affinity or similarity of race, but on identity of creed. So far as the west is concerned this seems to have originated with the Orphic communities, which admitted slaves on equal terms. Apart from them religion in antiquity was so closely associated with government, that groups of co-religionists were broadly identical with the groups that had grown up on the old biological basis. But identity of creed has gradually become a stronger and stronger force. Its military strength was first displayed by Islam in the conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries. It supplied the moving force in the crusades and in the wars of religion. In the sixteenth century theological loyalties very often outweighed those of nationality: English Catholics sided with Spain, French Huguenots with England. In our own day two widespread creeds embrace the loyalty of a very large part of mankind. One of these, the creed of communism, has the advantage of intense fanaticism and embodiment in a sacred book. The other, less definite, is nevertheless potent - it may be called 'the American way of life'. America, formed by immigration from many different countries, has no biological unity, but it has a unity quite as strong as that of European nations. As Abraham Lincoln said, it is 'dedicated to a proposition'. Immigrants into America, or at any rate their children, for the most part

find the American way of life preferable to that of the Old World, and believe firmly that it would be for the good of mankind if this way of life became universal. Both in America and in Russia unity of creed and national unity have coalesced, and have thereby acquired a new strength, but these rival creeds have an attraction which transcends their national boundaries.

Changing Division of Friends' and Foes

Modern loyalty to the vast groups of our time, in so far as it is strong and subjectively satisfying, makes use still of the old psychological mechanism evolved in the days of small tribes. Congenital human nature, as opposed to what is made of it by schools and religions, by propaganda and economic organisations, has not changed much since the time when men first began to have brains of the size to which we are accustomed. Instinctively we divide mankind into friends and foes '-friends towards whom we have the morality of co-operation; foes towards whom we have that of competition. But this division is constantly changing; at one moment a man hates his business competitor, at another, when both are threatened by socialism or by an external enemy, he suddenly begins to view him as a brother. Always when we pass beyond the limits of the family it is the external enemy which supplies the cohesive force. In times of safety we can afford to hate our neighbour, but in times of danger - we must love him. We do not, at most times, love those whom we find sitting next to us in an omnibus, but during the blitz we did.

It is this that makes the difficulty of devising means of world-wide unity. A world state, if it were firmly established, would have no enemies to fear and would therefore be in danger of breaking down through lack of cohesive force. Two great religions - Buddhism and Christianity - have sought to extend the co-operative feeling that is spontaneous towards fellow tribesmen to the whole human race. They have preached the brotherhood of man, showing by the use of the word 'brotherhood' that they are attempting to extend beyond its natural bounds an emotional attitude which, in its origin, is biological. If we are all children of God, then we are all one family. But in practice those who in theory adopted this creed have always felt that those who did not adopt it were not children of God but children of Satan, and the old mechanism of hatred of those outside the tribe has returned, giving added vigour to the creed, but in a direction which diverted it from its original purpose. Religion, morality, economic self-interest, the mere pursuit of biological survival, all supply to our intelligence unanswerable arguments in favour of world-wide co-operation, but the old instincts that have come down to us from our tribal ancestors rise up in indignation, feeling that life would lose its savour if there were no one to hate, and that anyone who could love such a scoundrel as so-and-so would be a worm, that struggle is the law of life, and that in a world where we all loved one another there would be nothing to live for. If the unification of mankind is ever to be realised, it will be necessary to find ways of circumventing our largely unconscious primitive ferocity, partly by establishing a reign of law, and partly by finding innocent outlets for our competitive instincts.

This is not an easy problem, and it is one which cannot be solved by morality alone. Psycho-analysis, though no doubt it has its exaggerations, and even perhaps absurdities, has taught us a great deal that is true and valuable. It is an old saying that, even if you expel nature with a pitchfork, it will still come back. But psycho-analysis has supplied the commentary to this text. We now know that a life which goes against

natural impulse beyond a point is one which is likely to involve effects of strain that may be quite as bad as indulgence in forbidden impulses would have been. People who live a life which is unnatural beyond a point are likely to be filled with envy, malice and all uncharitableness. They may develop strains of cruelty, or, on the other hand, they may so completely lose all joy of life that they have no longer any capacity for effort.

‘Victims of Virtue’

This latter result has been observed among savages brought suddenly in contact with modern civilisation. Anthropologists have described how Papuan head-hunters, deprived by white authority of their habitual sport, lose all zest, and are no longer able to be interested in anything. I do not wish to infer that they should have been allowed to go on hunting heads, but I do mean that it would have been worth while if psychologists had taken some trouble to find some innocent substitute activity.

Civilised man everywhere is, to some degree, in the position of the Papuan victims of virtue. We have all kinds of shocking impulses and also creative impulses which society forbids us to indulge, and the alternatives that it supplies in the shape of football matches and all-in wrestling are hardly adequate. Anyone who hopes that in time it may be possible to abolish war should give serious thought to the problem of satisfying harmlessly the instincts that we inherit from long generations of savages. For my part I find a sufficient outlet in detective stories where I alternatively identify myself with the murderer and the huntsman-detective, but I know there are those to whom this vicarious outlet is too mild, and for them something stronger should be provided.

I do not think that ordinary human beings can be happy without competition, for competition has been, ever since the origin of man, the spur to most serious activities. We should not, therefore, attempt to abolish competition, but only to see to it that it takes forms which are not too injurious. Primitive competition was a conflict as to which should murder the other man and his wife and children; modern competition in the shape of war still takes this form. But in sport, in literary and artistic rivalry, and in constitutional politics it takes forms which do very little harm and yet offer a fairly adequate outlet for our combative instincts. What is wrong in this respect is not that such forms of competition are bad, but that they form too small a part of the lives of ordinary men and women.

Apart from war, modern civilisation has aimed increasingly at security, but I am not at all sure that the elimination of all danger makes for happiness. I should like at this point to quote a passage from Sir Arthur Keith’s *New Theory of Human Evolution*:

Those who have visited the peoples living under a reign of ‘wild justice’ bring back accounts of happiness among natives living under -such conditions. Freya Stark, for example, reported thus of South Arabia: ‘When I came to travel in that part of the country where security is non-existent, I found a people, though full of lament over their life of perpetual blackmail and robbery, yet just as cheerful and as full of the ordinary joy of living as anywhere on earth’. Dr. H. K. Fry had a similar experience among the aborigines of Australia. ‘A native in his wild state’, he reports, ‘lives in constant danger; hostile spirits are about him constantly. Yet he is light-

hearted and cheerful ... indulgent to his children and kind to his aged parents'. My third illustration is taken from the Crow Indians of America, who have been living under the eye of Dr. R. Lowie for many years. They are now living in the security of a reserve. 'Ask a Crow', reports Dr. Lowie, 'whether he would have security as now, or danger as of old, and his answer is - "danger as of old ... there was glory in it"'. I am assuming that the wild conditions of life I have been describing were those amid which mankind lived through the whole of the primal period of its evolution. it was amid such conditions that man's nature and character was fashioned, one of the conditions being the practice of blood-revenge.

Such effects of human psychology account for some things which, for me at least, were surprising when in 1914 I first became aware of them. Many people are happier during a war than they are in peace time, provided the direct suffering entailed by the fighting does not fall too heavily upon them personally. A quiet life may well be a boring life. The unadventurous existence of a well-behaved citizen, engaged in earning a moderate living in a humble capacity, leaves completely unsatisfied all that part of his nature which, if he had lived 400,000 years ago, would have found ample scope in the search for food, in cutting off the heads of enemies, and in escaping the attentions of tigers. When war comes the bank clerk may escape and become a commando, and then at last he feels that he is living as nature intended him to live. But, unfortunately, science has put into our hands such enormously powerful means of satisfying our destructive instincts, that to allow them free play no longer serves any evolutionary purpose, as it did while men were divided into petty tribes. The problem of making peace with our anarchic impulses is one which has been too little studied, but one which becomes more and more imperative as scientific technique advances. From the purely biological point of view it is unfortunate that the destructive side of technique has advanced so very much more rapidly than the creative side. In one moment a man may kill 500,000 people, but he cannot have children any quicker than in the days of our savage ancestors. If a man could have 500,000 children as quickly as by an atomic bomb he can destroy 500,000 enemies we might, at the cost of enormous suffering, leave the biological problem to the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. But in the modern world the old mechanism of evolution can no longer be relied upon.

Security Plus Adventure?

The problem of the social reformer, therefore, is not merely to seek means of 'security, for if these means when found provide no deep satisfaction the security will be thrown away for the glory of adventure. The problem is rather to combine that degree of security which is essential to the species, with forms of adventure and danger and contest which are compatible with the civilised way of life. And in attempting to solve this problem we must remember always that, although our manner of life and our institutions and our knowledge have undergone profound changes, our instincts both for good and evil remain very much what they were when our ancestors' brains first grew to their present size. I do not think the reconciliation of primitive impulses with the civilised way of life is impossible, but I do not think it can be achieved by exclusive emphasis upon either side. A life without adventure is likely to be unsatisfying, but a life in which adventure is allowed to take whatever form it will is sure to be short.

I think perhaps the essence of the matter was given by the Red Indian whom I quoted a moment ago, who regretted the old life because 'there was glory in it'. Every energetic person wants something that can count as 'glory'. There are those who get it-film stars, famous athletes, military commanders, and even some few politicians-but they are a small minority, and the rest are left to day-dreams: day-dreams of the cinema, day-dreams of wild west adventure stories, purely private day-dreams of imaginary power. I am not one of those who think daydreams wholly evil; they are an essential part of the life of imagination. But when throughout a long life there is no means of relating them to reality they easily become unwholesome and even dangerous to sanity. Perhaps it may still be possible, even in our mechanical world, to find some real outlet for the impulses which are now confined to the realm of phantasy. In the interests of stability it is much to be hoped that this may be possible, for, if it is not, destructive philosophies will from time to time sweep away the best of human achievements. If this is to be prevented, the savage in each one of us must find some outlet not incompatible with civilised life and the happiness of his equally savage neighbour.