Human Society in Ethics and Politics

Bertrand Russell

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HUMAN SOCIETY IN ETHICS AND POLITICS

by BERTRAND RUSSELL

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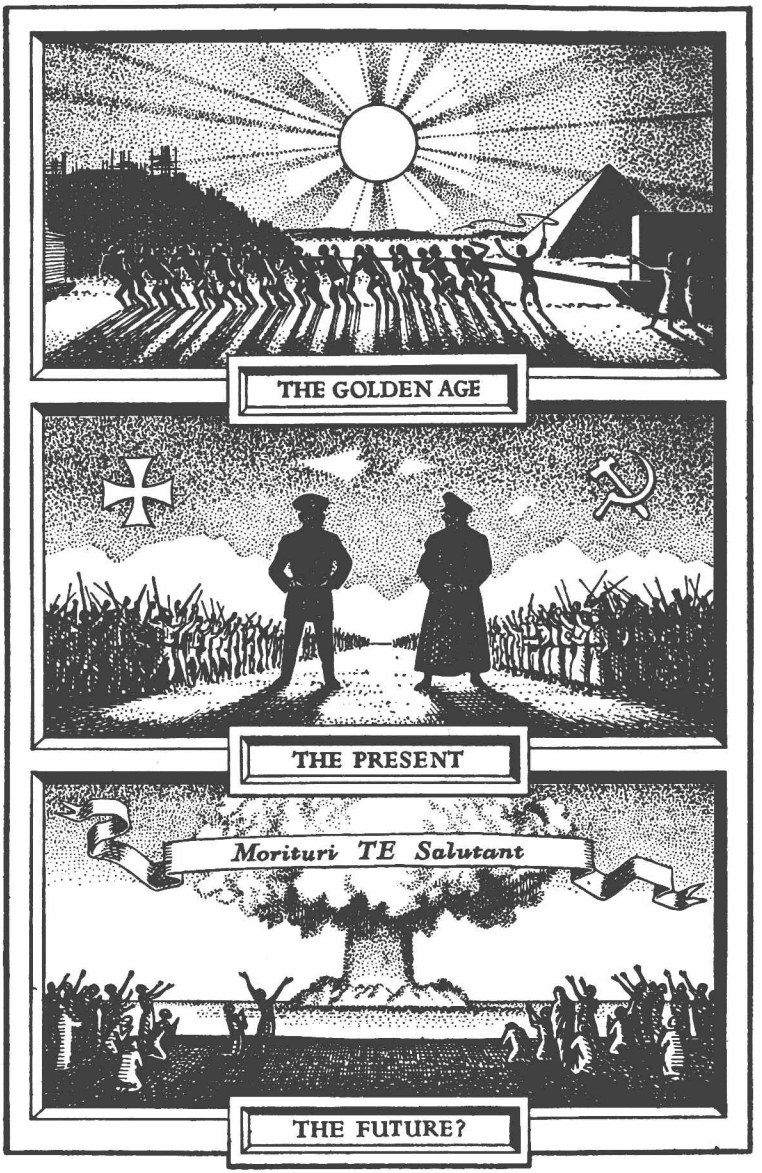

THE USES OF INTELLIGENCE

Drawing by Charles Stewart

PREFACE

THE first nine chapters of this book were written in 1945–6, the rest in 1953, except Chapter II of Part II, which was the lecture I gave in Stockholm on the occasion of receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature. I had originally intended to include the discussion of ethics in my book on "Human Knowledge," but I decided not to do so because I was uncertain as to the sense in which ethics can be regarded as "knowledge".

This book has two purposes: first, to set forth an undogmatic ethic; and second, to apply this ethic to various current political problems. There is nothing startlingly original in the ethic developed in the first Part of this book, and I am not sure that I should have thought it worth while to set it forth, except for the fact that, when I make ethical judgments on political questions, I am constantly told by critics that I have no right to do so, since I do not believe in the objectivity of ethical judgments. I do not think this criticism valid, but to show that it is not valid requires certain developments which cannot be altogether brief.

The second Part of this book does not attempt to be a complete theory of politics. I have dealt with the various parts of the theory of politics in previous books, and in this book I deal only with those parts that, in addition to being closely related to ethics, are of urgent practical importance in the present day. I have hoped that, by setting our actual problems in a large impersonal framework, I may cause them to be viewed with less heat, less fanaticism, and a smaller amount of worry and fret than is easily possible when they are viewed only in a contemporary context.

I hope also that this book, which is concerned throughout with human passions and their effect upon human destiny, may help to dispel a misunderstanding not only of what I have written, but of everything written by those with whom I am

in broad agreement. Critics are in the habit of making a certain accusation against me which seems to imply that they approach my writings with a preconception so strong that they are unable to notice what, in fact, I say. I am told over and over again that I over-estimate the part of reason in human affairs. This may mean that I think either that people are, or that they ought to be, more rational than my critics believe them to be. But I think there is a prior error on the part of my critics, which is that they, not I, irrationally over-estimate the part which reason is capable of playing, and this comes I think from the fact that they are in complete confusion as to what the word "reason" means.

"Reason" has a perfectly clear and precise meaning. It signifies the choice of the right means to an end that you wish to achieve. It has nothing whatever to do with the choice of ends. But opponents of reason do not realize this, and think that advocates of rationality want reason to dictate ends as well as means. They have no excuse for this view in the writings of rationalists. There is a famous sentence: "Reason is and ought only to be, the slave of the passions." This sentence does not come from the works of Rousseau or Dostoevsky or Sartre. It comes from David Hume. It expresses a view to which I, like every man who attempts to be reasonable, fully subscribe. When I am told, as I frequently am, that I "almost entirely discount the part played by the emotions in human affairs", I wonder what motive-force the critic supposes me to regard as dominant. Desires, emotions, passions (you can choose whichever word you will), are the only possible causes of action. Reason is not a cause of action but only a regulator. If I wish to travel by plane to New York, reason tells me that it is better to take a plane which is going to New York than one which is going to Constantinople. I suppose that those who think me unduly rational, consider that I ought to become so agitated at the airport as to jump into the first plane that I see, and when it lands me in Constantinople I ought to curse

the people among whom I find myself for being Turks and not Americans. This would be a fine, full-blooded way of behaving, and would, I suppose, meet with the commendation of my critics.

One critic takes me to task because I say that only evil passions prevent the realization of a better world, and goes on triumphantly to ask, "are all human emotions necessarily evil?" In the very book that leads my critic to this objection, I say that what the world needs is Christian love, or compassion. This, surely, is an emotion, and, in saying that this is what the world needs, I am not suggesting reason as a driving force. I can only suppose that this emotion, because it is neither cruel nor destructive, is not attractive to the apostles of unreason.

Why, then, is there this violent passion which causes people, when they read me, to be unable to notice even the plainest statement, and to go on comfortably thinking that I say the exact opposite of what I do say? There are several motives which may lead people to hate reason. You may have incompatible desires and not wish to realize that they are incompatible. You may wish to spend more than your income and yet remain solvent. And this may cause you to hate your friends when they point out the cold facts of arithmetic. You may, if you are an old-fashioned schoolmaster, wish to consider yourself full of universal benevolence, and at the same time derive great pleasure from caning boys. In order to reconcile these two desires you have to persuade yourself that caning has a reformatory influence. If a psychiatrist tells you that it has no such influence on some peculiarly irritating class of young sinners, you will fly into a rage and accuse him of being coldly intellectual. There is a splendid example of this pattern in the furious diatribe of the great Dr. Arnold of Rugby against those who thought ill of flogging.

There is another, more sinister, motive for liking irrationality. If men are sufficiently irrational, you may be able to induce them to serve your interests under the impression that

they are serving their own. This case is very common in politics. Most political leaders acquire their position by causing large numbers of people to believe that these leaders are actuated by altruistic desires. It is well understood that such a belief is more readily accepted under the influence of excitement. Brass bands, mob oratory, lynching, and war, are stages in the development of the excitement. I suppose the advocates of unreason think that there is a better chance of profitably deceiving the populace if they keep it in a state of effervescence. Perhaps it is my dislike of this sort of process which leads people to say that I am unduly rational.

But I would put to these men a dilemma: since reason consists in a just adaptation of means to ends, it can only be opposed by those who think it a good thing that people should choose means which cannot realize their professed ends. This implies either that they should be deceived as to how to realize their professed ends, or that their real ends should not be those that they profess. The first is the case of a populace misled by an eloquent *fuehrer*. The second is that of the schoolmaster who enjoys torturing boys, but wishes to go on thinking himself a benevolent humanitarian. I cannot feel that either of these grounds for opposing reason is morally respectable.

There is another ground upon which some people oppose what they imagine to be reason. They think that strong emotions are desirable, and that no one who feels a strong emotion will be reasonable about it. They seem to think that any person who feels strongly must lose his head and behave in a silly manner which they applaud because it shows him to be passionate. They do not, however, think in this way when self-deception would have consequences that they would dislike. No one, for example, holds that a general ought to hate the enemy so passionately as to become hysterical and incapable of rational planning. It is not, in fact, the case that strong passions prevent a just estimate of means. There are people, like the Comte de Monte Cristo, who have burning passions

leading them straight to the right choice of means. Do not tell me that that worthy man's aims were irrational. There is no such thing as an irrational aim except in the sense of one that is impossible of realization. Nor are cold calculators always conventionally wicked. Lincoln calculated coldly in the American Civil War and was roundly abused by the Abolitionists who, as apostles of passion, wished him to adopt measures that looked vigorous but would not have led to emancipation.

I suppose the essence of the matter is this: that I do not think it a good thing to be in that state of insane excitement in which people do things that have consequences directly opposite to what they intend, as, for example, when they get themselves killed in running across a street because they could not stop to notice the traffic. Those who praise such behaviour must either wish to practise successful hypocrisy or be the victims of some self-deception which they cannot bear to surrender. I am not ashamed of thinking ill of both these states of mind, and if it is for thinking ill of them that I am accused of excessive rationality, I plead guilty. But if it is supposed that I dislike strong emotion, or that I think anything except emotion can be a cause of action, then I most emphatically deny the charge. The world that I should wish to see is one where emotions are strong but not destructive, and where, because they are acknowledged, they lead to no deception either of oneself or of others. Such a world would include love and friendship and the pursuit of art and knowledge. I cannot hope to satisfy those who want something more tigerish.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

THE life of man may be viewed in many different ways. He may be viewed as one species of mammal and considered in a purely biological light. From this point of view his success has been overwhelming. He can live in all climates and in every part of the world where there is water. His numbers have increased and are increasing still faster. He owes his success to certain things which distinguish him from other animals: speech, fire, agriculture, writing, tools, and large-scale co-operation.

It is in the matter of co-operation that he fails of complete success. Man, like other animals, is filled with impulses and passions which, on the whole, ministered to survival while man was emerging. But his intelligence has shown him that passions are often self-defeating, and that his desires could be more satisfied, and his happiness more complete, if certain of his passions were given less scope and others more. Man has not viewed himself at most times and in most places as a species competing with other species. He has been interested, not in man, but in men; and men have been sharply divided into friends and enemies. At times this division has been useful to those who emerged victorious: for example, in the conflict between white men and red Indians. But as intelligence and invention increase the complexity of social organisation, there is a continual growth in the benefits of co-operation, and a continual diminution of the benefits of competition. Ethics and moral codes are necessary to man because of the conflict between intelligence and impulse. Given intelligence only, or impulse only, there would be no place for ethics.

Men are passionate, headstrong, and rather mad. By their madness they inflict upon themselves, and upon others, disasters which may be of immense magnitude. But, although the life of impulse is dangerous, it must be preserved if human existence