

SOCIAL IDEALS AND HUMAN NATURE.

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IT will not do for philosophers and seers to gallop away from the position assumed by the average body of human beings in a community. If the plain men and women, the majority of a given society, are left far behind on the road to the Ideal, what happens is that the Ideal remains a paper scheme, a pleasant dream, while the plain, matter-of-fact people who live and work and play in the world as it is know not of the Ideal, or, if they hear of it from authors and preachers whom they can understand, treat it as something so remote and Utopian as to have no bearing whatever on actual conduct.

Sociologists and moralists are beginning to appreciate this sobering truth. They are beginning to reckon seriously with the plain man, to put him into their equations, to test their doctrines and proposals by asking whether they fit his mind and character. Ours is a Pragmatic and Behaviorist age, though many of us are not ready to accept either Pragmatism or Behaviorism as the last word of science and philosophy. The desire of the philosopher to "reconstruct" his whole system in order to establish close contacts with, and claims upon, the plain man is at times pathetic. But if philosophy is to be of use and service it must be vital and significant to the plain man—that is, the plain man who stops to think about philosophical issues and seeks to grasp them.

It is in this commendable spirit that philosophers and sociologists are now attacking the problem of Social Reform and endeavoring to vindicate it against the charge of Utopianism or repugnance to essential human nature. And it is in the same spirit that efforts are being made to prove that reforms deemed by many "radical" and revolutionary are, in point of fact, entirely consonant with average human nature and the practical reason.

We shall briefly discuss here two books that are symptomatic of the tendency just alluded to and interesting on other accounts as well. One is Professor John Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct*, and the other Professor Arthur J. Todd's *Theories of Social Progress*.

Professor Dewey is a philosopher and one of the most distinguished living exponents of Pragmatism. He is known as an advanced liberal. Professor Todd is a sociologist and a social worker with a decided leaning, philosophically speaking, toward Bergsonian and post-Bergsonian anti-intellectualism.

Let us see how much aid and encouragement each of these thinkers affords the advanced progressive schools of reform, on the one hand, and the deeply-perplexed plain man on the other—the man who is naturally conservative, who knows that the present social order is full of defects yet hesitates to condemn it and embrace a nebulous and revolutionary paper alternative for it.

Professor Dewey has no faith in social nostrums or panaceas. He is practical in his idealism, for like a true Pragmatist he has little use for an ideal that is divorced from reality and that seems to offer one a Sunday consolation, sentimental and sterile in character, for the troubles and disappointments of the rest of the week. For Professor Dewey there are no "ideals" to be realized, no one knows how, in the dim and distant future, but problems of the present to be discussed and solved in the present, so far as possible. He is an opportunist in the true and right sense of the term—one who believes in making the best use of immediate opportunities in the light of reason. He does not believe that any institution can be successfully defended against attacks by asserting that it is rooted in human nature, or that a proposal involving radical changes in institutions is disposed of by affirming that it conflicts with human nature. It is natural for men to act, says Professor Dewey, but it is not natural for them to act in a given, fixed way. War, for example, is not necessarily inevitable because men are restless, combative and covetous. They have fought and still fight for certain causes that seem to many of us irrational or that, if rational, can now best be served by conference, conciliation and arbitration. But it does not follow that men must continue to fight instead of settling disputes by submitting them to impartial tribunals. Men no longer fight duels, but they are as combative and suspicious as ever. They fight in a different way—that is all. There are substitutes for war, and their use does not spell violence to human nature.

Another bold example given by Professor Dewey concerns private property and what is called capitalism. There are thinkers who dismiss Socialism, Communism and like radical schemes by saying that they are severally incompatible with human nature. Men, it is claimed, desire to own things, and will not work, invent and plan if they are deprived of the incentive to toil and hard thinking found in private property and in the possession of economic power. But, objects Professor Dewey, is not our conception of ownership and possession too narrow, too inelastic? Would not human nature be gratified as much as it now is, or as it ever has been, by a different industrial system, provided it offered ample scope for leadership, for distinction, for "possessive use" of wealth? If productive work is so uninteresting and unpleasant, says Professor Dewey, that men must be bribed or artificially induced to engage in it, then the conclusion is that the conditions under which work is now carried on irritate and frustrate natural human tendencies, and our question then is this—Under what arrangements and relations can work be made as agreeable as, say, scientific research, exploration, painting, writing books, composing music?

The question concerning the alterability of human nature, Professor Dewey holds, is almost invariably irrelevant. As a matter of fact, even in animals instincts are less fixed and infallible than an outgrown psychology has assumed, while the human being "differs from the lower animals precisely in the fact that his native activities lack the complex, ready-made organization of the animals' original abilities." Inertia, stability and permanence belong not to human nature as such, but acquired habits and customs, to modes of thought and feeling. It is very difficult to bring about radical social changes, because legal, political and economic institutions are shaped by objective conditions, by environmental factors, and by habits of thought formed under the influence of those forces and agents. A revolution may wipe out legal codes and institutions, but it does not seriously affect ways of belief and mental habits. "When general and enduring moral changes do accompany an external revolution, it is because appropriate habits of thought have previously been insensibly matured."

In fine, it is idle and unphilosophical to urge, or oppose, a reform on the ground that it harmonizes or conflicts with human nature. We do not know what "human nature" is. We cannot arbitrarily assign limits to it. We cannot say, "This is impossible" or "This is imperative" by reason of the given and constant factor,

human nature. A thing seemingly impossible may be made possible by creating new habits of thought, by changing ideas, by re-adjusting superficial relations. Slavery was at one time considered natural and ineradicable. Slavery has been abolished, but servility, docility, dependence have not been abolished. Those who defended slavery on biological and psychological grounds gave that term too narrow a definition. They overlooked the elasticity of human nature, the possibility of domination and government of men in ways less gross and coarse than slavery.

Our arguments, then, pro or con a reform in any direction should be addressed, as common sense always has addressed them, to two things—Reason and Conscience. Every human problem is at bottom a scientific problem. We note a maladjustment, a source of friction and waste and pain, a situation that disturbs and offends many of us. Several remedies are proposed, some of them moderate and some radical. How is a choice to be made? In the case of an individual patient the advice of the best physician, or a group of eminent physicians, is usually followed. Where the patient is the body social and political, “the doctors disagree,” and there is no way of determining which of the groups offering diverse remedies is the wisest and most authoritative. What, then, do we do? Why, we continue the discussion, we seek to convert one another, we write books and articles, we construct planks for party platforms and consult the voters. We gradually attract adherents to our respective programmes. Finally, some school or party, or some combination of school and parties, carries the day and secures the opportunity of applying its remedy. This remedy meantime has been modified by criticism and perhaps by limited experiments. Reason, conscience, fear, sympathy and other factors have contributed to the result. The rejected alternatives proved to be repugnant to habits of thought, to certain feelings and ideas, to “the spirit of the age.” The formula “contrary to human nature” would not cover the case.

Hence, the men and women who desiderate an important reform, while justified in ignoring sweeping and empty assertions of opponents who claim an intimate knowledge of human nature, are by no means justified in assuming that there are few difficulties in the way of radical social alteration. On this latter point Professor Dewey is clear, emphatic and wise. To quote:

“The force of lag in human life is enormous . . .

“Political and legal institutions may be altered, even abolished; but the bulk of popular thought which has been shaped to their pat-

tern persists. This is why glowing predictions of the immediate coming of a social millennium terminate so uniformly in disappointment. . . . Habits of thought outlive modifications in habits of overt action. The former are vital; the latter, without the sustaining life of the former, are muscular tricks. Consequently, as a rule, the moral effects of even great revolutions, after a few years of outwardly conspicuous alterations, do not show themselves till after the lapse of time. A new generation must come upon the scene whose habits of mind have been formed under the new conditions.

The Lenins, the Troztkys, the Bela Kuns, the Haywoods and other worshippers of Force in reform; the intolerant fanatics who believe themselves to be infallible and entitled to impose their ideas upon "ignorant, backward majorities" and "perverse, doctrinaire minorities" alike might ponder Professor Dewey's words with profit. Bolshevik methods are condemned by the entire human record—including the record of all great upheavals and revolutions. Bolshevism reckoned without the mental habits and the material conditions which militate against its success—even a partial and slight success. The same remark may be made respecting that strange Italian essay in revolutionary communities, the famous "lock-in" of the metallurgical workers. Though the government remained passive, the adventure failed dismally—the workmen were not prepared to take over any industry, operate it efficiently, sell the product and pay themselves living wages.

Now, these two illustrations from current experience re-enforce Professor Dewey's argument. Communism may or may not be repugnant to that uncertain quantity of uncertain quality, human nature, but it incontestably proved to be repugnant to the mental habits and the complex of conditions of contemporary Russian and Italian life. For scientific as well as for practical purposes, this conclusion is all sufficient.

Let us now turn to Professor Todd's work and inquire into the bearing of its review of theories of social progress on the radical reform movements of the day.

Human nature, Professor Todd holds, is "infinitely diverse and infinitely malleable, infinitely sensitive to change." We are a bundle of potential selves. The real human self is social; it is built up of social experiences; social life furnishes not only the mold but the very materials that are poured into the self for the casting of a social self. We are all part and parcel of one another. We can modify our dominant self by efforts of the will, and social educa-

tion, including discipline and fear or dislike of censure, may and do give us the will to modify ourselves. But what is the aim, what the intended effect, of social education? The answer is, to civilize and socialize the individual. More definitely still "social education aims to create social solidarity by means of a social type marked by service rather than exploitation." Harmony, peace and co-operation are, and have for centuries been deemed possible and desirable. When we speak of progress we mean advance toward harmony, peace and co-operation. We are dissatisfied with present conditions, and we are certain that this discontent is "divine"—or rather rational and creditable. We seek improvements and feel that they are within our reach, provided a sufficient number of a given society desiderate and long for them.

We say that we have a social ideal, but what we mean is that we have a difficulty, or a set of difficulties—a problem to solve, in short. The first question is, Is the problem soluble or insoluble? If insoluble, the discussion ends. If soluble, then the next question is, How?

If we believe in social progress; if we believe, not that some force not in or of ourselves makes for progress, but that we ourselves, because of our intelligence, our adaptability, our power of self-control and of control over the environment, are able to remove the difficulties we are troubled by in industry, politics, social relations, etc., and establish a far more satisfactory state of things in those realms; if we believe that the individual and the body social can reconcile their differences and live in greater harmony, each serving the other and each helping the other in freedom and peace to make life better worth living, then we are philosophical optimists and practical meliorists, and it is both our duty and privilege to work for progress.

If there be any value in a general statement of the end of human progress, which is doubtful, Professor Todd offers the following formula: "Reconciling freedom of individual will with evolution of society, the identification of man individualized and man socialized."

Is there any evidence that man and society have been moving toward this goal? Certainly, answers Professor Todd. The march has not been steady, and at times it seems to have been arrested altogether, or even to have taken a backward direction. But on the whole, if we take definite standards and measures of value and apply them to human history, we cannot fail to conclude that man

and society have not unsuccessfully adjusted many serious differences and removed many obstacles in the way of individual expansion and social efficiency and co-operation.

Human nature has made past progress possible and has conditioned it and even imposed it. The same human nature will impose, insure and condition further progress. Crime, poverty, cruelty, injustice, oppression are severally symptoms of discord and maladjustment. Man is not yet adapted to the social state; the state has not learned to respect and to make the best use of the individual and his faculties. Harmony will not be achieved in a century, perhaps not in a millennium. But it will be achieved gradually, if at all, and many of us—a constantly increasing number, happily—are making “the goal of human progress” our individual goal. That is, many of us are earnestly grappling with the questions which divide modern civilized society, cause waste and trouble, breed animosity and hatred and lead to international and internecine warfare in various forms. We have as yet little agreement respecting the remedies to be applied, the preventives to be adopted, but deep study, thinking and discussion will sooner or later evolve a substantial consensus of opinion in the premises.

Why are we interested in the questions that are connected with the “goal of human progress?” Do we expect personal benefits from the efforts we are making? Are we selfish or unselfish in making those efforts?

The answers to these queries are important, for they are bound to throw light on the general and abstract question of human progress. But too often the answers given are superficial, dogmatic, narrow. Men are not governed by simple or single motives. They do not know where self-interest ends and altruism begins. They are not certain altruism is free from a touch of self-interest. All that we can know and need to know is that all sorts and conditions of men are co-operating, for various reasons, or without any definite conscious reason, in the search for the solution of the complex of social problems we identify with human progress. Some men are selfish, or think they are. Others are disinterested, or think they are. Some are curious and intellectually interested in those problems, while others reveal an emotional interest in them. Some are in love with their own ideas on the subject and persistently press them on the community. Others maintain an open mind as to particular ideas, but are willing and anxious that the search and discussion shall continue till solutions are found.

We are what we are. We have made progress because of our qualities, and in spite of *some* of our qualities. We shall continue to make progress, and with the same qualities and propensities. "Human nature," to repeat, does not obstruct progress, but, on the contrary, invites and demands it, but what in a given case is in line with progress and what not, is a question intelligence and reflection alone can answer. It is, first and last, a scientific question, and facts, experiments, more facts and more experiments will eventually enable society to settle it. It will not be settled by "the superior few," by benevolent and tyrannical majorities. The plain man will have to be reckoned with and consulted; he will have to be—not perhaps fully converted by elaborate arguments and demonstrations, but certainly favorably impressed, interested and rendered tolerant and open-minded in regard to the proposed reforms. The function of the advanced minority is to lead, not to drive. The plain man has boycotted reform as he has boycotted philosophy. Neither seemed meant for him. Both *are* meant for him—if they are meant for life; if they are to be of service to humanity. "Democracies," said James Bryce, "are what their leaders make them." This is true, for no society can dispense with initiative, foresight and vision, or with the leadership of those who possess these rare gifts, and no society ever does dispense with them for any considerable period. But the leaders in modern society, if they aspire to enduring influence, must beware of intellectual arrogance or tactless claims to superiority and privilege. They can only mold and make society by winning its sympathy, affection and confidence. They can make it, especially, by enlisting the younger elements and giving them new ideas and new mental habits. Philosophers and reformers are first of all educators and should act as competent educators do. Coercion, fanaticism, supercilious airs, contempt for the students have never made an educator or school successful. Education, not force, is the means to social progress, as it is the means to the popularization and dissemination of sound philosophical ideas.