

A Philosopher on Individualism

WE are publishing in this "Review" an extract from "The Human Situation" by Macneile Dixon. Macneile Dixon, in his lifetime, was regarded as among the greatest of British philosophers, and his book, "The Human Situation," is thought by many of the best-qualified critics to be one of the outstanding intellectual achievements of the century.

The extract republished here is worth careful reading, not alone for the masterly conceptions of the author and their relevance to present-day political tendencies, but also for the rare pleasure to be obtained from the richness, beauty and force of the prose.

In the pressure to find expedients to meet the political and economic issues of the moment, we tend, perhaps, to overlook the importance of fundamental beliefs and principles. Yet at the root of all political policies worthy of the name must lie a philosophy of life. At times it is necessary to withdraw from the every-day hurly-burly to think afresh our basic philosophies, and thus to establish the standards by which to test the solutions we propose for the problems that beset us.

THE doctrine of the perfectibility of the world is old. It is not, however, Christian doctrine, rather, as Schopenhauer perceived, it is radically irreligious. Men cannot get along without religion. If one is abandoned another is adopted. And all our humanitarianism, all our philanthropy and welfare work are efforts to fill the great spiritual void left by the decay of faith, drab substitutes for the older creed. The spirit of man craves a friendly God, and you give him economics. He asks for immortality, and you say, 'Be content, here is beer and bacon.'

Since there is nothing beyond the present to be hoped for, let us make the only lives men will ever know less pitifully wretched. As the tide of religion has receded, the tide of this creed, the only alternative, it seems, has correspondingly risen. Miracles, once the province of the Church, will now be performed by the State, which will provide a heaven on earth, here and now. I am not to be understood as decrying humanity, kindness, philanthropy. These are no new things. They were not discovered yester-

day. It is the gospel that is new. These things have always existed, and will continue to exist. There was plenty of kindness in the world, before it was set above the Olympian gods, above truth, and freedom and justice, before emotionalism was placed upon the throne of Zeus and took the wheel of the universe. In the new Garden of Eden, when we enter it, there will be good roads and water supply, unlimited picture houses, unstinted soft drinks, excellent sanitation, and humane slaughtering, the best of schools and wireless installations for everyone, free concerts and lectures for all. There will be no far horizons and invincible hopes. We shall cease to think of birth and death, of the infinite, of God, and the sublime secrets of the universe.

I AM not much in love with these six-penny Utopias. Men have other thoughts than these—thoughts that wander through eternity, and projects unattainable in time. How childish to think that the world's griefs are all of economic origin. Our world planners

have great designs for the filling of empty stomachs. Let them ponder the more intricate problem—the filling of empty hearts.

The troubles of the world have by the brilliant diagnosticians, like Robespierre or Marx, been assigned to a great variety of causes. Landor thought the best initial step towards the amelioration of its sufferings would be 'to strang'e the last king with the entrails of the last priest', or vice-versa. The giant or dragon to be slain is differently pictured in different generations. In one age monarchs are declared the public enemy, in another the aristocrats, in another the bourgeois class, or the capitalists, the bankers or the Jews. The millennium is not yet, however, in sight.

And under whose leadership are we to advance towards it? There is never any lack of seedy reformers, 'the Projectors and Schematists', for whom Swift had such contempt, who suppose themselves entrusted with a divine mission for the betterment of the human lot, 'sky-blue idealists', as Carlyle called them, kind hearts and muddy understandings, 'potato' philosophers, who see their way to provide beef and beer, or preferably beef without beer, for everyone from East to West; the grass-green enthusiasts, who in their mind's eye see men over all the earth sitting for ever at their cottage doors, festooned with ivy and honeysuckle; who are persuaded that if wars should cease, gambling be put down and love-making rendered respectable, if men in their more energetic moments were given a ball to play with, a harmless woolly ball, God would be better pleased.

The oyster-women locked their fish up
And trudged away to cry 'no Bishop.'

Even morals become a nightmare when we reflect upon its self-appointed representatives. What sort of world would it be in which Wesleyanism or Anglicanism ruled the scene? in which throughout its breadth and length not a soul ever kicked

over the social traces, in which there were no idlers, or spendthrifts, or jesters or Sir Fopling Flutterers? Does anyone in his senses really wish for an undiluted respectability throughout eternity? A perfectly ordered world is not, though it may be to yours, to everyone's mind. Some would prefer a disorderly as vastly more interesting, and a risky life as better worth living and infinitely more attractive. Must we look forward to wholly conventional lives, all alike, on the model of a colony of ants, in standardised buildings, with hot water provided, lifts and electric light, where all men think the same thoughts and pursue similar ends? If this be what is promised us, then indeed the life of all our blood

Is touched corruptibly, and the pure
brain,
Which some suppose the soul's frail
dwelling-house,
Doth by the idle comments that it makes
Foretell the ending of mortality.

SCIENCE has worked wonders in our time, and may be confidently expected to work still greater wonders. The Utopian architects, as might have been anticipated, have turned to her genius for assistance and encouragement. If science be permitted to take matters in hand no bounds can be set, Professor Haldane assures us, to human progress. Diseases will, of course, be banished. Men, he predicts, 'will be able to think like Newton, to write like Racine, to paint like the Van Eycks, to compose like Bach. They will be as incapable of hatred as St. Francis.' Man's life will probably be measured by thousands of years, 'and every moment of his life will be lived with the passion of a lover or discoverer.' One can see it will all be very wonderful. Professor Haldane is a man of science, the grand manner of the prophets sits well upon him, and I have no kind of claim to challenge his forecast of what science can perform. It may be that the Professor Haldanes of the future will be able to manufacture

any kind of men to order, cynics or saints, chess-players or engineers, poets epic or lyrical, or any brand of humorist, philosopher, Adonis, or Admirable Crichton to suit the requirements of society.

And what more could you want? Well, shall we say, for one thing, justice, a small matter which this programme does not include? Would you in possession of this heaven upon earth be content to forget the past sufferings of human kind? Would a happy lot for men and women to be some day born obliterate or compensate for all that the previous generations have endured? Do not these humanitarian schemes overlook, with a singular inhumanity, the millions who have perished without even a glimpse of the glories to come? They are of no account. Yet what have the new-comers done to deserve the felicity denied their predecessors, and will they be of any greater account when their day, too, has come?

Oh dreadful thought, if all our sires
and we
Are but foundations of a race to be,—
Stones which one thrusts in earth, and
builds thereon
A white delight, a Parian Parthenon,
And thither, long thereafter, youth and
maid
Seek with glad brows the alabaster
shade,
Not caring that those mighty columns
rest
Each on the ruin of a human breast,—
That to the shrine the victor's chariot
rolls
Across the anguish of ten thousand
souls!

THE thoughts of our well-meaning reformers appear to be directed to one end only, the cessation of strife, and the consequent cessation of effort, for which there will no longer be any need. But how false it is to suppose that human beings desire unending ease, unthreatened safety, that their summum bonum is cushioned comfort, a folding of the hands to sleep. That way madness lies. What then is left to occupy their interest and attention? They desire rather difficulties,

such is their nature, difficulties to elicit their powers, to keep them alert and wakeful. They wish to be alive. In the absence of resistance to desires, desires decay, and an intolerable, an appalling tedium invades the soul.

Whose lives do we read with interest and admiration? The lives of men lapped in comfort from the cradle to the grave? Or of those who in the face of odds have accomplished their ends, good or bad? When the soul of man rises to its full stature, with what disdain does it regard the sweetmeats and the confectionery. In their anxiety for human welfare, in their collectivist schemes, the sentimentalists have overlooked the individual man. They submerge him in the sea of their universal benevolence. But who desires to live in the pauperdom of their charity? Every man desires to be his own architect, and the creator of his own design, the sentimentalist himself among the rest. And the last and greatest insult you can offer to the human race is to regard it as a herd of cattle to be driven to your selected pasture. You deprive the individual of his last rag of self-respect, the most precious of his possessions, himself. If you treat him as a thing, an inanimate object, which can be pushed hither and thither, if you treat him as one of a drove of oxen, you take away his birth-right, and for his loss nothing can compensate him, not all the soothing syrups and honeys of the world.

To its eternal honour Christianity has stood steadfastly for the sanctity of the individual. To imprison the human spirit is the unpardonable sin, the attempt to make men automata, to force them into the same mould. No means will ever be found to induce human beings finally to surrender themselves, either body or soul, to a dictated felicity, to satisfactions chosen for them, whatever vulgar Caesars rule the world. And upon this rock all forms of regimentation, of standardised existence will eventually shipwreck.

EVERY type of compulsion is hateful, always has been, and always will be hateful, as long as men are men. Was this freedom about which the poets have raved since the world began, for which men have died in millions, worth the bones of a single soldier? Have you ever asked yourself why men have fought for liberty? Not for amusement. Freedom they must have, whether they know or not what to do with it, freedom to choose cause or party, order or disorder, the good or the bad, to steer each his own vessel to the port of his desire. Take away his choice, and you make of him, for all your benevolent intentions, a chattel or a slave. There is a rebel in every man; men will revolt and demand again their freedom. As Dostoievsky expressed it, when everything is smooth and ordered and perfect, 'in the midst of this universal reason there will appear all of a sudden and unexpectedly some common-faced, or rather cynical and sneering gentleman, who with his arms akimbo will say to us, "Now then, you fellows, what about smashing all this reason to bits, sending their logarithms to the devil, and living according to our own silly will?"' And he will have followers in their thousands. Men desire the strangest and,

in their neighbours' eyes, the most incomprehensible, the most irrational, the most preposterous things.

The astonishing thing about the human being is not so much his intellect and bodily structure, profoundly mysterious as they are. The astonishing and least comprehensible thing about him is his range of vision; his gaze into the infinite distance; his lonely passion for ideas and ideals, far removed from his material surroundings and animal activities, and in no way suggested by them, yet for which, such is his affection, he is willing to endure toils and privations, to sacrifice pleasures, to disdain griefs and frustrations, for which, rating them in value above his own life, he will stand till he dies, the profound conviction he entertains that if nothing be worth dying for nothing is worth living for.

The inner truth is that every man is himself a creator, by birth and nature, an artist, an architect and fashioner of worlds. If this be madness—and if the universe be the machine some think it, a very ecstasy of madness it most manifestly is—none the less it is the lunacy in which consists the romance of life, in which lies our chief glory and our only hope.

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