

Bertrand Russell

Political Ideals

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IN dark days, men need a clear faith and a well-grounded hope; and as the outcome of these, the calm courage which takes no account of hardships by the way. The times through which we are passing have afforded to many of us a confirmation of our faith. We see that the things we had thought evil are really evil, and we know more definitely than we ever did before the directions in which men must move if a better world is to arise on the ruins of the one which is now hurling itself into destruction. We see that men's political dealings with one an-

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other are based on wholly wrong ideals, and can only be saved by quite different ideals from continuing to be a source of suffering, devastation, and sin.

Political ideals must be based upon ideals for the individual life. The aim of politics should be to make the lives of individuals as good as possible. There is nothing for the politician to consider outside or above the various men, women, and children who compose the world. The problem of politics is to adjust the relations of human beings in such a way that each severally may have as much of good in his existence as possible. And this problem requires that we should first consider what it is that we think good in the individual life.

To begin with, we do not want all men to be alike. We do not want to lay down a pattern or type to which men of all sorts are to be made by some means or

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another to approximate. This is the ideal of the impatient administrator. A bad teacher will aim at imposing his opinion, and turning out a set of pupils all of whom will give the same definite answer on a doubtful point. Mr. Bernard Shaw is said to hold that *Troilus and Cressida* is the best of Shakespeare's plays. Although I disagree with this opinion, I should welcome it in a pupil as a sign of individuality; but most teachers would not tolerate such a heterodox view. Not only teachers, but all commonplace persons in authority, desire in their subordinates that kind of uniformity which makes their actions easily predictable and never inconvenient. The result is that they crush initiative and individuality when they can, and when they cannot, they quarrel with it.

It is not one ideal for all men, but a separate ideal for each separate man,

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that has to be realized if possible. Every man has it in his being to develop into something good or bad: there is a best possible for him, and a worst possible. His circumstances will determine whether his capacities for good are developed or crushed, and whether his bad impulses are strengthened or gradually diverted into better channels.

But although we cannot set up in any detail an ideal of character which is to be universally applicable—although we cannot say, for instance, that all men ought to be industrious, or self-sacrificing, or fond of music—there are some broad principles which can be used to guide our estimates as to what is possible or desirable.

We may distinguish two sorts of goods, and two corresponding sorts of impulses. There are goods in regard to which individual possession is possible,

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and there are goods in which all can share alike. The food and clothing of one man is not the food and clothing of another; if the supply is insufficient, what one man has is obtained at the expense of some other man. This applies to material goods generally, and therefore to the greater part of the present economic life of the world. On the other hand, mental and spiritual goods do not belong to one man to the exclusion of another. If one man knows a science, that does not prevent others from knowing it; on the contrary, it helps them to acquire the knowledge. If one man is a great artist or poet, that does not prevent others from painting pictures or writing poems, but helps to create the atmosphere in which such things are possible. If one man is full of good-will toward others, that does not mean that there is less good-will to be shared

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among the rest; the more good-will one man has, the more he is likely to create among others. In such matters there is no *possession*, because there is not a definite amount to be shared; any increase anywhere tends to produce an increase everywhere.

There are two kinds of impulses, corresponding to the two kinds of goods. There are *possessive* impulses, which aim at acquiring or retaining private goods that cannot be shared; these center in the impulse of property. And there are *creative* or constructive impulses, which aim at bringing into the world or making available for use the kind of goods in which there is no privacy and no possession.

↪ The best life is the one in which the creative impulses play the largest part and the possessive impulses the smallest. This is no new discovery. The Gospel

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says: "Take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?" The thought we give to these things is taken away from matters of more importance. And what is worse, the habit of mind engendered by thinking of these things is a bad one; it leads to competition, envy, domination, cruelty, and almost all the moral evils that infest the world. In particular, it leads to the predatory use of force. Material possessions can be taken by force and enjoyed by the robber. Spiritual possessions cannot be taken in this way. You may kill an artist or a thinker, but you cannot acquire his art or his thought. You may put a man to death because he loves his fellowmen, but you will not by so doing acquire the love which made his happiness. Force is impotent in such matters; it is only as regards material goods that it is

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effective. For this reason the men who believe in force are the men whose thoughts and desires are preoccupied with material goods.

The possessive impulses, when they are strong, infect activities which ought to be purely creative. A man who has made some valuable discovery may be filled with jealousy of a rival discoverer. If one man has found a cure for cancer and another has found a cure for consumption, one of them may be delighted if the other man's discovery turns out a mistake, instead of regretting the suffering of patients which would otherwise have been avoided. In such cases, instead of desiring knowledge for its own sake, or for the sake of its usefulness, a man is desiring it as a means to reputation. Every creative impulse is shadowed by a possessive impulse; even the aspirant to saintliness may be jealous

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of the more successful saint. Most affection is accompanied by some tinge of jealousy, which is a possessive impulse intruding into the creative region. Worst of all, in this direction, is the sheer envy of those who have missed everything worth having in life, and who are instinctively bent on preventing others from enjoying what they have not had. There is often much of this in the attitude of the old toward the young.

There is in human beings, as in plants and animals, a certain natural impulse of growth, and this is just as true of mental as of physical development. Physical development is helped by air and nourishment and exercise, and may be hindered by the sort of treatment which made Chinese women's feet small. In just the same way mental development may be helped or hindered by out-

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side influences. The outside influences that help are those that merely provide encouragement or mental food or opportunities for exercising mental faculties. The influences that hinder are those that interfere with growth by applying any kind of force, whether discipline or authority or fear or the tyranny of public opinion or the necessity of engaging in some totally incongenial occupation. Worst of all influences are those that thwart or twist a man's fundamental impulse, which is what shows itself as conscience in the moral sphere; such influences are likely to do a man an inward danger from which he will never recover.

Those who realize the harm that can be done to others by any use of force against them, and the worthlessness of the goods that can be acquired by force, will be very full of respect for the liberty of others; they will not try to bind them

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or fetter them; they will be slow to judge and swift to sympathize; they will treat every human being with a kind of tenderness, because the principle of good in him is at once fragile and infinitely precious. They will not condemn those who are unlike themselves; they will know and feel that individuality brings differences and uniformity means death. They will wish each human being to be as much a living thing and as little a mechanical product as it is possible to be; they will cherish in each one just those things which the harsh usage of a ruthless world would destroy. In one word, all their dealings with others will be inspired by a deep impulse of *reverence*.

What we shall desire for individuals is now clear: strong creative impulses, overpowering and absorbing the instinct of possession; reverence for others; respect for the fundamental creative im-

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pulse in ourselves. A certain kind of self-respect or native pride is necessary to a good life; a man must not have a sense of utter inward defeat if he is to remain whole, but must feel the courage and the hope and the will to live by the best that is in him, whatever outward or inward obstacles it may encounter. So far as it lies in a man's own power, his life will realize its best possibilities if it has three things: creative rather than possessive impulses, reverence for others, and respect for the fundamental impulse in himself.

- + Political and social institutions are to be judged by the good or harm that they do to individuals. Do they encourage creativeness rather than possessiveness? Do they embody or promote a spirit of reverence between human beings? Do they preserve self-respect?

In all these ways the institutions un-

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der which we live are very far indeed from what they ought to be.

Institutions, and especially economic systems, have a profound influence in molding the characters of men and women. They may encourage adventure and hope, or timidity and the pursuit of safety. They may open men's minds to great possibilities, or close them against everything but the risk of obscure misfortune. They may make a man's happiness depend upon what he adds to the general possessions of the world, or upon what he can secure for himself of the private goods in which others cannot share. Modern capitalism forces the wrong decision of these alternatives upon all who are not heroic or exceptionally fortunate.

Men's impulses are molded, partly by their native disposition, partly by opportunity and environment, especially early environment. Direct preaching

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can do very little to change impulses, though it can lead people to restrain the direct expression of them, often with the result that the impulses go underground and come to the surface again in some contorted form. When we have discovered what kinds of impulse we desire, we must not rest content with preaching, or with trying to produce the outward manifestation without the inner spring; we must try rather to alter institutions in the way that will, of itself, modify the life of impulse in the desired direction.

✧ At present our institutions rest upon two things: property and power. Both of these are very unjustly distributed; both, in the actual world, are of great importance to the happiness of the individual. Both are possessive goods; yet without them many of the goods in which all might share are hard to acquire as things are now.

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Without property, as things are, a man has no freedom, and no security for the necessities of a tolerable life; without power, he has no opportunity for initiative. If men are to have free play for their creative impulses, they must be liberated from sordid cares by a certain measure of security, and they must have a sufficient share of power to be able to exercise initiative as regards the course and conditions of their lives. x

Few men can succeed in being creative rather than possessive in a world which is wholly built on competition, where the great majority would fall into utter destitution if they became careless as to the acquisition of material goods, where honor and power and respect are given to wealth rather than to wisdom, where the law embodies and consecrates the injustice of those who have toward those who have not. In such an environment

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even those whom nature has endowed with great creative gifts become infected with the poison of competition. Men combine in groups to attain more strength in the scramble for material goods, and loyalty to the group spreads a halo of quasi-idealism round the central impulse of greed. Trade-unions and the Labor party are no more exempt from this vice than other parties and other sections of society; though they are largely inspired by the hope of a radically better world. They are too often led astray by the immediate object of securing for themselves a large share of material goods. That this desire is in accordance with justice, it is impossible to deny; but something larger and more constructive is needed as a political ideal, if the victors of to-morrow are not to become the oppressors of the day after. The inspiration and outcome of a

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reforming movement ought to be freedom and a generous spirit, not niggling restrictions and regulations.

The present economic system concentrates initiative in the hands of a small number of very rich men. Those who are not capitalists have, almost always, very little choice as to their activities when once they have selected a trade or profession; they are not part of the power that moves the mechanism, but only a passive portion of the machinery. Despite political democracy, there is still an extraordinary degree of difference in the power of self-direction belonging to a capitalist and to a man who has to earn his living. Economic affairs touch men's lives, at most times, much more intimately than political questions. At present the man who has no capital usually has to sell himself to some large organization, such as a rail-

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way company, for example. He has no voice in its management, and no liberty in politics except what his trade-union can secure for him. If he happens to desire a form of liberty which is not thought important by his trade-union, he is powerless; he must submit or starve.

Exactly the same thing happens to professional men. Probably a majority of journalists are engaged in writing for newspapers whose politics they disagree with; only a man of wealth can own a large newspaper, and only an accident can enable the point of view or the interests of those who are not wealthy to find expression in a newspaper. A large part of the best brains of the country are in the civil service, where the condition of their employment is silence about the evils which cannot be concealed from them. A Nonconformist minister loses his livelihood if his views displease his

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congregation; a member of Parliament loses his seat if he is not sufficiently supple or sufficiently stupid to follow or share all the turns and twists of public opinion. In every walk of life, independence of mind is punished by failure, more and more as economic organizations grow larger and more rigid. Is it surprising that men become increasingly docile, increasingly ready to submit to dictation and to forego the right of thinking for themselves? Yet along such lines civilization can only sink into a Byzantine immobility.

Fear of destitution is not a motive out of which a free creative life can grow, yet it is the chief motive which inspires the daily work of most wage-earners. The hope of possessing more wealth and power than any man ought to have, which is the corresponding motive of the rich, is quite as bad in its effects; it compels

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men to close their minds against justice, and to prevent themselves from thinking honestly on social questions, while in the depths of their hearts they uneasily feel that their pleasures are bought by the miseries of others. The injustices of destitution and wealth alike ought to be rendered impossible. Then a great fear would be removed from the lives of the many, and hope would have to take on a better form in the lives of the few.

** But security and liberty are only the negative conditions for good political institutions. When they have been won, we need also the positive condition: encouragement of creative energy. Security alone might produce a smug and stationary society; it demands creativeness as its counterpart, in order to keep alive the adventure and interest of life, and the movement toward perpetually new

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and better things. There can be no final goal for human institutions; the best are those that most encourage progress toward others still better. Without effort and change, human life cannot remain good. It is not a finished Utopia that we ought to desire, but a world where imagination and hope are alive and active.

It is a sad evidence of the weariness mankind has suffered from excessive toil that his heavens have usually been places where nothing ever happened or changed. Fatigue produces the illusion that only rest is needed for happiness; but when men have rested for a time, boredom drives them to renewed activity. For this reason, a happy life must be one in which there is activity. If it is also to be a useful life, the activity ought to be as far as possible creative, not merely predatory or de-

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fensive. But creative activity requires imagination and originality, which are apt to be subversive of the *status quo*. At present, those who have power dread a disturbance of the *status quo*, lest their unjust privileges should be taken away. In combination with the instinct for conventionality,¹ which man shares with the other gregarious animals, those who profit by the existing order have established a system which punishes originality and starves imagination from the moment of first going to school down to the time of death and burial. "The whole spirit in which education is conducted needs to be changed, in order that children may be encouraged to think and feel for themselves, not to acquiesce passively in the thoughts and feelings of others. It is not rewards after the event that will produce initiative, but a certain

¹ In England this is called "a sense of humor."

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mental atmosphere. There have been times when such an atmosphere existed: the great days of Greece, and Elizabethan England, may serve as examples. But in our own day the tyranny of vast machine-like organizations, governed from above by men who know and care little for the lives of those whom they control, is killing individuality and freedom of mind, and forcing men more and more to conform to a uniform pattern.

 | Vast organizations are an inevitable element in modern life, and it is useless to aim at their abolition, as has been done by some reformers, for instance, William Morris. It is true that they make the preservation of individuality more difficult, but what is needed is a way of combining them with the greatest possible scope for individual initiative.

One very important step toward this

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end would be to render democratic the government of every organization. At present, our legislative institutions are more or less democratic, except for the important fact that women are excluded. But our administration is still purely bureaucratic, and our economic organizations are monarchical or oligarchic. Every limited liability company is run by a small number of self-appointed or coöpted directors. There can be no real freedom or democracy until the men who do the work in a business also control its management.

Another measure which would do much to increase liberty would be an increase of self-government for subordinate groups, whether geographical or economic or defined by some common belief, like religious sects. A modern state is so vast and its machinery is so little understood that even when a man has

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a vote he does not feel himself any effective part of the force which determines its policy. Except in matters where he can act in conjunction with an exceptionally powerful group, he feels himself almost impotent, and the government remains a remote impersonal circumstance, which must be simply endured, like the weather. By a share in the control of smaller bodies, a man might regain some of that sense of personal opportunity and responsibility which belonged to the citizen of a city-state in ancient Greece or mediæval Italy.

When any group of men has a strong corporate consciousness—such as belongs, for example, to a nation or a trade or a religious body—liberty demands that it should be free to decide for itself all matters which are of great importance to the outside world. This is the

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basis of the universal claim for national independence. But nations are by no means the only groups which ought to have self-government for their internal concerns. And nations, like other groups, ought not to have complete liberty of action in matters which are of equal concern to foreign nations. Liberty demands self-government, but not the right to interfere with others. The greatest degree of liberty is not secured by anarchy. The reconciliation of liberty with government is a difficult problem, but it is one which any political theory must face.

The essence of government is the use of force in accordance with law to secure certain ends which the holders of power consider desirable. The coercion of an individual or a group by force is always in itself more or less harmful. But if there were no government, the result

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would not be an absence of force in men's relations to each other; it would merely be the exercise of force by those who had strong predatory instincts, necessitating either slavery or a perpetual readiness to repel force with force on the part of those whose instincts were less violent. This is the state of affairs at present in international relations, owing to the fact that no international government exists. The results of anarchy between states should suffice to persuade us that anarchism has no solution to offer for the evils of the world.

There is probably one purpose, and only one, for which the use of force by a government is beneficent, and that is to diminish the total amount of force used in the world. It is clear, for example, that the legal prohibition of murder diminishes the total amount of violence in the world. And no one would maintain

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that parents should have unlimited freedom to ill-treat their children. So long as some men wish to do violence to others, there cannot be complete liberty, for either the wish to do violence must be restrained, or the victims must be left to suffer. For this reason, although individuals and societies should have the utmost freedom as regards their own affairs, they ought not to have complete freedom as regards their dealings with others. To give freedom to the strong to oppress the weak is not the way to secure the greatest possible amount of freedom in the world. This is the basis of the socialist revolt against the kind of freedom which used to be advocated by *laissez-faire* economists.

Democracy is a device—the best so far invented—for diminishing as much as possible the interference of governments with liberty. If a nation is divided into

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two sections which cannot both have their way, democracy theoretically insures that the majority shall have their way. But democracy is not at all an adequate device unless it is accompanied by a very great amount of devolution. Love of uniformity, or the mere pleasure of interfering, or dislike of differing tastes and temperaments, may often lead a majority to control a minority in matters which do not really concern the majority. We should none of us like to have the internal affairs of Great Britain settled by a parliament of the world, if ever such a body came into existence. Nevertheless, there are matters which such a body could settle much better than any existing instrument of government.

The theory of the legitimate use of force in human affairs, where a government exists, seems clear. Force should

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only be used against those who attempt to use force against others, or against those who will not respect the law in cases where a common decision is necessary and a minority are opposed to the action of the majority. These seem legitimate occasions for the use of force; and they should be legitimate occasions in international affairs, if an international government existed. The problem of the legitimate occasions for the use of force in the absence of a government is a different one, with which we are not at present concerned.

Although a government must have the power to use force, and may on occasion use it legitimately, the aim of the reformers to have such institutions as will diminish the need for actual coercion will be found to have this effect. Most of us abstain, for instance, from theft, not because it is illegal, but be-

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cause we feel no desire to steal. The more men learn to live creatively rather than possessively, the less their wishes will lead them to thwart others or to attempt violent interference with their liberty. Most of the conflicts of interests, which lead individuals or organizations into disputes, are purely imaginary, and would be seen to be so if men aimed more at the goods in which all can share, and less at those private possessions that are the source of strife. In proportion as men live creatively, they cease to wish to interfere with others by force. Very many matters in which, at present, common action is thought indispensable, might well be left to individual decision. It used to be thought absolutely necessary that all the inhabitants of a country should have the same religion, but we now know that there is no such necessity. In like manner it will be found, as men

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grow more tolerant in their instincts, that many uniformities now insisted upon are useless and even harmful.

* Good political institutions would weaken the impulse toward force and domination in two ways: first, by increasing the opportunities for the creative impulses, and by shaping education so as to strengthen these impulses; secondly, by diminishing the outlets for the possessive instincts. The diffusion of power, both in the political and the economic sphere, instead of its concentration in the hands of officials and captains of industry, would greatly diminish the opportunities for acquiring the habit of command, out of which the desire for exercising tyranny is apt to spring. Autonomy, both for districts and for organizations, would leave fewer occasions when governments were called upon to make decisions as to other people's con-

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cerns. And the abolition of capitalism and the wage system would remove the chief incentive to fear and greed, those correlative passions by which all free life is choked and gagged.

Few men seem to realize how many of the evils from which we suffer are wholly unnecessary, and that they could be abolished by a united effort within a few years. If a majority in every civilized country so desired, we could, within twenty years, abolish all abject poverty, quite half the illness in the world, the whole economic slavery which binds down nine tenths of our population; we could fill the world with beauty and joy, and secure the reign of universal peace. It is only because men are apathetic that this is not achieved, only because imagination is sluggish, and what always has been is regarded as what always must be. With good-will, generosity, intelligence, these things could be brought about.