WAR AND HUMAN NATURE

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IN our world to-day there is universal talk of peace, and yet every great nation prepares for war. Belted dictators, strutting before their uniformed supporters, must protest from time to time their pacific interests and intentions. No Minister of Defence pleading for increase of armament must neglect an announcement to all the world that he is thinking entirely in terms of national protection. Have we not all solemnly renounced war "as an instrument of national policy"?

There is no reason to believe that the desire for peace is other than deep and sincere. Every man who presumes to be morally intelligent shrinks from the prospect of a modern world-conflict, and realizes that it would be a catastrophe for civilization of inconceivable dimensions. Nevertheless there is much talk of "the next war". We do more than talk; we prepare for it. No cry of the unemployed man is so bitter, no appeal for social reconstruction is so persuasive, no demand for balancing national budgets is so urgent that, separately or collectively, they can withstand the call for more battleships, airplanes, tanks and artillery. We all want peace, and yet we are getting ready for war in feverish haste. The student of morals is familiar with this antagonism between desire and achievement. In his *Epistle to the Romans*, St. Paul has given it a classical exposition. "For the good that I would, I do not: and the evil which I would not, that I do". The cleft is deep in the heart of human nature; this factor in the causes of war and the inability to realize peace may warrant some closer examination.

Bishop Butler, in his Introduction to *The Analogy*, which still remains the distinctive work on moral theology in the English language, makes a proposal:

> Let us, then, instead of the idle and not very innocent employment of forming imaginary models of a world, and schemes governing it, turn our thoughts to what we experience to be the conduct of Nature with respect to intelligent creatures: which may be resolved into general laws or rules of administration, in the same way as many of the Laws of Nature respecting inanimate matter may be collected from experiments.

The honest bishop anticipated the method and programme of modern experimental psychology. To-day, the laboratory takes

the place of the pulpit, and instead of preaching fifteen sermons as "a preface to morals", we study a hundred and fifteen "reactions" in human behaviour. But the aim is identical, and however we may estimate some of the methods employed, the objective is sound enough. "The proper study of mankind is man".

There has been a widespread research into the causes of war. History, economics, sociology, and not least, theology have all combined to convince us of its futility and folly. Sir Norman Angell has employed a devastating logic to prove that war can benefit nobody, and that it brings ruin equally upon the aggressor and the attacked. There are enough people of mature years left in the world who do not need to proceed beyond the orbit of their own memory and experience for confirmation of these contentions. And yet an irrational factor enters into all our calculations, like an irreducible surd in a mathematical equation. It emerges like a *tertium quid*, illogical, untameable, defeating all our show of reason and mocking our finest moral sentiments. In the end, we are all driven to recognize the existence of this element. Generally, it makes its appearance accompanied by a shrug of the shoulder, in the cynic a symbol of his contempt for moral progress, in the reformer an expression of his defeat by the realities of life. This element is Human Nature. So far from being an irrational factor, appearing on the scene like a demonic visitor to wreck our schemes of international reconstruction, it is the one constant agent always operative, never absent. War is always conceived, declared, carried through and ended by human beings. It is one particular form of human behaviour. The realist who protests that we must always "allow for human nature" is absolutely right in his submissions.

Psychology is more than a modern vogue. It is as much a point of view as a body of doctrine: like the practice of medicine, it is as much an art as a science. As an attitude towards life, it combines the scientific with the philosophical outlook. Out of the welter of opinion and counter-opinion in which the study has floundered, certain well-defined principles are beginning to emerge. We are recognizing in a new way how much we act under the guidance of our emotions; that there are certain great fundamental activities in life which we inherit as part of human nature, and which never cease to make a demand for satisfaction and self-expression. Emotion is often at war with reason, and the suggestive stimulations of social environment are among the most powerful factors in collective human action. Let us endeavour to apply some of these new insights to the "problem of war".

Is man by nature a fighting animal? The question needs hardly to be asked. Our best laboratory is any given group of boys, where "the satisfaction of a gentleman" may still be required without the formality of dispatching seconds or the choosing of weapons. Has nature not provided fists, which, when tightly clenched, display hard knuckles? Civilization only refines the fighting instinct into more subtle forms. The love of battle lingers on, and what psychology calls pugnacity with its associated emotion of anger is among the most cogent of all stimulants to concentrated activity.

Again, in preparation for war we are dealing with another very powerful instinct, that of self-preservation. By some this is held to be the most elemental of all our activities. With it is associated the emotion of fear, which has the effect of concentrating all the efforts of life to one central focus of intense energy. Every other activity is inhibited to the point of sacrifice and loss. It is obvious that in the modern world, whether rational or irrational, fear is the emotional agent that accounts for the great armament-programmes of the nations.

One other factor we must notice. Psychology analyses the nature of these instinctive and emotional energies in the case of individuals. As yet, the effect of the social medium upon their action has not been studied very accurately. We know how potently the influence of emotion operates in the crowd. Fear becomes panic, and pugnacity becomes violence. It is the mob that lynches the suspected criminal, or that tramples the helpless underfoot in making a frenzied escape from a burning theatre. A group is not simply an aggregation of individuals: it comes to have a group mind, deeply emotional rather than rational in its decisions. The practice of war provides an excellent illustration of the transmuting capacity of social emotion. Admittedly reason is abandoned, and not infrequently the habitual moral judgments of individual life are completely set aside. A "cold-blooded" approach to such actions as bayoneting with sharpened steel, asphyxiating with poison gas, tearing human beings asunder with sickening violence by explosives or hurling incendiary projectiles upon helpless women and children is impossible. In war these actions become opportunities for the exercise of great technical skill, and may be regarded as instances of sublime personal heroism. The revolutionary transformation in values is emotional rather than ethical in nature.

The capable propagandist, such as the successful advertiser, has a good working knowledge of similar psychological principles.

He knows the insinuating art of suggestion, and how to frame a many-sided appeal to human nature through its emotion. It may well be asked whether the lofty idealism of the movement for peace has not relied too much upon a somewhat sentimental faith in the rational character of human nature. We may come to the conclusion, after much study, that the real war-makers are certain groups of financiers, capitalists, or diplomatists, hungry for power and possession, and without conscience in their pursuit, until we cry with Carlyle "Simpleton! Their governors had fallen-out: and, instead of shooting one another, had the cunning to make these poor blockheads shoot." But it is these same "poor blockheads" who must be induced to seek for peace instead of war. Can psychology help us in reaching this desirable end?

Scientific psychology has nothing to do with motives: it simply reveals the springs of action with which motives engage themselves. We cannot get rid of human nature. The modern psycho-analyst confirms the wisdom of Horace: *Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret.* Man will remain a fighting and self-protecting creature. But is there any reason why we should not use these native instincts of life to promote the ends of peace?

The psycho-analyst approaches the problem of the "divided self" from a point of view different from that of the moralist. The thwarted self-expression of life produces an interior conflict which gives rise to unhealthy complexes. They are the mental cancers, which drain away our energies and produce a condition which William James, following John Bunyan, called "the sick soul". "I was sick in my inward man," cried John in *Grace Abounding.* Such complexes often find release in irrational conduct through "fixations", when the emotional life is directed towards some object or person. Is this not exactly the mental condition of such nations as Germany, Austria, France, Japan and, indeed, of us all? Does it not account for the hysteria or morbid brooding that flashes out into wild and insane action? It is not too much to say that it would be impossible for any nation to make war without first having induced this mental attitude.

Psychology can reveal, but it cannot cure. Diagnosis may be made through an analytic process, but we have to realise that there is no mental short-cut to moral achievement. But the office of the psychologist is two-fold, and in each case his method has a therapeutic value. *First,* analysis is in itself a step towards a cure. The unhappy mind must come face to face with the realities of its morbid fears, and recognize their distinctive character. *Second,* he can direct the moral energies of the patient to use these

same emotional capacities for worthy and health-giving ends. It is a sound principle of therapeutics that we can use nature to heal nature.

We live in a very unhappy world. The spirit of altruism has spread abroad, and there is a widely disseminated sentiment of genuine goodwill. We are disgusted with war, and most responsible people are stirred by a new vision of what the wise direction of our immense resources in scientific knowledge and productive capacity might mean for large sections of the human race. Many of us are irritated to the point of desperation at the diversion both of wealth and interest towards what we feel is an insane and barbaric method of attempting to establish justice among the nations. We need to engage our moral ideals with wise and constructive methods of realization.

With the evidence at our disposal to-day, there should not be much difficulty in persuading the public mind that war is itself a deadly enemy of self-preservation. The "war potential", of which our modern military experts write, is the entire moral and material resources of a nation. With the advent of the airplane and long-range artillery, vicarious warfare, carried on by a particular group of the population, who are enlisted in the fighting forces, is no longer possible. "I wants to make your flesh creep", said the Fat Boy in *Pickwick Papers*, and he was a sound psychologist. If we can make people really afraid of war, the terror will be wholesome. The powerful emotional activities which are directed to armed preparations must be diverted into preparation for peace. But human nature also wants to fight. Let it fight war.

Miss Vera Britain in her *Testament of Youth* gives us one of the most moving accounts of life sensitively lived during the war generation. Speaking of the power of war to rouse the soul, she says:

> It is, I think, this glamour, this magic, this incomparable keying up of the spirit in a time of mortal conflict which constitutes the pacifist's real problem, a problem still incompletely imagined, and still quite unsolved... The glamour may be the mere delirium of fear, which as soon as war is over dies out and shows itself for the will o' wisp that it is. But, while it lasts, no emotion known to man seems as yet to have quite the compelling power of this enlarged vitality.

Our peace propaganda has hitherto confined itself to the delivery of speeches, the preaching of sermons, the writing of books and the ingrown discussions of study-circles. Has the time not come to think of raising the fiery cross, of enlisting recruits, of forming

battalions, of marching and counter-marching—in other words, unashamedly and for a great moral end, of awakening mass emotions to defeat the present enemy of mankind, which is war?

Our pacific idealism is too pacific. Man is a fighting animal. When he is roused, he will not only give battle with the ferocity of an inherited instinctive nature, but he will dedicate his intelligence and creative ability to destroy what stands in his way. Every reformer has been a fighter, blinded by his concentrated purpose to the very possibility of defeat. He is the transmuted warrior, braced in body and mind for mortal combat. Alongside the patient labours of the Disarmament Conferences and the elaborate diplomatic machinery of the League of Nations, we need the leadership of some fiery spirit, who will preach a crusade appealing to our deep-set emotions. This will be the real "war to end war".