BARNETT HOUSE PAPERS
No. 9

NATURAL INSTINCT
THE BASIS OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

BY
LORD HUGH CECIL

SIDNEY BALL LECTURE
NOVEMBER 25, 1925

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NOTE

THIS Lecture is a rough sketch of a large subject. It needs an indulgent and industrious reader who will follow out and improve what is here loosely indicated.

H. C.

NATURAL INSTINCT THE BASIS OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

WE are met this evening at a time when it is natural and proper to ask questions about fundamental matters. At no time are such questions out of place, but they are peculiarly necessary at a time like the present, because we are now feeling the sense of the termination of a period of movement and the commencement of a new period governed we do not know by what force, and moving towards we do not know what goal. Lord Bryce, in his great book on *Modern Democracies*, makes a striking observation, especially as coming from a man of his experience and reading, to this effect:

> Those whose recollections carry them back over the last seventy years will be disposed to think that no other period of equal length in the world's annals—not even the years between 1453 and 1521, nor those between 1776 and 1848—has seen so many profoundly significant changes in human life and thought.

This period of movement is what we loosely call the nineteenth century, though of course it does not exactly correspond with the years of the nineteenth century. It is a period marked, as Lord Bryce pointed out, by great progress in natural science, and the effect of that progress upon political and social matters has completely changed both the political and the social outlook. And in some respects, at any rate, the movement seems to have come, I will not say to an end, because that would indicate there was some collapse in it, but to completion. No one expects much more from democratic institutions, for example, than has already been achieved. There is not, as there was one hundred years ago, a vast deal of expectation of something coming out of democracy, or of the movement towards democracy of great significance and importance. What has happened has been significant and important. But we look for no more.

This impression of completion is to some extent also felt of that group of opinions which we call liberal. It is not a mere coincidence, a mere accident, that the Liberal political party has found itself so much depleted in numbers; it is partly at any rate due to a general sense, not of reaction against Liberalism, but that Liberalism has done its part. It is a volume we have read and put on the shelf. Such impressions are, of course, often exaggerated, they may even be quite unfounded, but that there is such an impression abroad no one, I think, will dispute. And this sense that there is not much more to expect out of democracy or out of Liberalism has led to a sort of reaction to scepticism. There is no desire to go back on the path we have trod, but there is a want of hope, a sense of deadness, a sense that all is vanity, and that nothing is to be anticipated by way of regeneration or marked improvement. There is a deadness of hope. This, I think, is the great contrast between the present time and the period which in some respects, economically for example, closely resembles the present time—the time, a hundred years ago, after the Napoleonic Wars. There was then a period of great distress and economic trouble. Many of the economic phenomena which are perplexing to us and painfully familiar were also perplexing and familiar to men of that time. But they encountered their trials in a spirit rather different. For one thing they were by no means democratic as we are. The aristocratic government was still in power. But they had, to an extent they themselves did not appreciate, a large measure of liberal anticipation, liberal hope, far larger than is left to us. They expected a great deal, and they felt enthusiasm for many things. I recollect that some one—Jeremy Bentham I think—built in his garden a model of a prison he thought ought to be erected, on a special plan of supervision, so great was his enthusiasm for the idea and his desire constantly to scrutinize and improve it. Most people do not feel about ideas in that way now; only a few feel that sort of enthusiasm for any particular specific of social or political progress. Accordingly, great power has passed to minorities who are keen—temporary power very often—but there has been an inclination to let the few people who are in earnest, who are hopeful, who have beliefs, do what

they like. This has been the reason of the very remarkable progress which has attended the movement in favour of the equalization of civil and political rights between men and women. I doubt whether the great majority of men were more convinced in 1918 than they were in 1913 of the expediency of women's suffrage and the other changes following on it, but they had become indifferent. It appeared that some people cared about the change, and they did not care much to resist it. There was a spirit of acquiescence; and what was very possibly the opinion of a minority had great weight. And abroad, of course, we see first the Socialists in Italy rising and dominating, although plainly not a majority; and then violent reaction against them and their overthrow by the Fascist party, and the domination of the Fascist party, who believe strongly in their conception of life, and therefore are submitted to by the masses of the Italian people, no doubt largely in gratitude for the deliverance from the other minority, but partly from mere acquiescence.

All this is leading many people in this country to look round for some more stable foundation for our social and political teaching. We need to study again the fundamentals and to question them in such a fashion that we may have an answer to political innovations, that we may recover the world of political and social reform out of the deadness of scepticism, and at the same time deliver it from the danger of being dominated by this or that active and convinced but unwise minority. There is scarcely anything more dangerous than that the mass of people should lie inert and helpless, and that an active minority should seize the reins of public opinion and drive for a short time the machine of the State and of social life in what direction it may choose. We desire some firm principle. Where shall we look for it? There is hunger for what our ancestors would perhaps have called divine right, though we don't use the phrase now. Divine right is out of fashion because it is generally understood to refer to the claim of monarchy to be a divine institution, and the further claim that monarchy must be by hereditary succession. These things are no longer accepted, and accordingly the whole conception of divine right, at any rate the name of it, has fallen into

disrespect. But people are looking round for something which really is government by divine right, or social reorganization by divine right. This is what is at the bottom of that important movement which we know as C. O. P. E. C., and other like movements of Christian social reform. They seek to base all social reform and reorganization upon a religious basis, to test it according to a religious standard, and so to give themselves a firmness of standpoint and a strength of imperative direction which cannot be derived from any other source than religion. It would not, I think, be erroneous to describe the whole of that movement as a desire to reconstruct society on the basis of divine right, so that all the institutions should be felt to be God-given institutions. It would be quite foreign to the purpose of this lecture to scrutinize in detail all the proposals for reorganization on a Christian and religious basis, but this general observation is safe, and will not be rejected by many people, that there is immense difficulty in applying the teaching of revealed religion directly to the problems of social and political reorganization. The revelation of Christianity was certainly not given either with the purpose of direct application to social and political problems nor in a form allowing such application, and accordingly, at every turn, so far from getting a safe and firm foundation, the reformer finds himself bogged in an intricate controversy where opinions differ strongly and each side supports his position by a weight of argument not easily displaced. In short, you do not succeed in getting the firm foundation you want by an appeal to revealed religion. Nevertheless, apart from revealed religion, there is an element of divine right in life which may be appealed to and wherein one may find that fundamental character which I suppose to be desired;—I mean human personality itself. Human personality is, on the theistic, much more on the Christian, hypothesis, a divine work. It belongs not merely to time but to eternity. It is, moreover, a moral unit. We speak of right or wrong in relation to personality, and in relation to nothing else. If there were no personality there would be no meaning in what we call right and wrong. And personality is prior to social institutions because of the fundamental character of its moral status, as being the true unit of the moral system,

and because all institutions must in the end be traced to the choice of human persons. It has, I say, priority on both these grounds, which makes it a natural basis if you are seeking for what is fundamental, unchangeable, firm. Personality is prior to social institutions in causation. People who are anxious to depreciate what is called the individualist theory of politics emphasize that, according to the researches of anthropologists, individualism, or the claim of individual rights and functions, comes very late in human history. They point out that human history probably began in some disorganized herd animated by the instincts of a herd, that the herd then became a tribe and then a state, and that only within a modern period of history are the rights of the individual consciously asserted against the State. But all this historical and anthropological research does not prove anything to the purpose. Supposing all this to be true, personality at one time liked to express itself in terms of a herd, at another time as a tribe, and then as a State, and it was only comparatively recently that personality began to dwell on its own character and to emphasize and exalt what we now call the rights of the individual. But personality was always the cause, the true source of all social institutions, and however rudimentary the instincts of the herd or the tribe, or the choice which lay behind the power and authority of the State, it was because human persons so liked to have it that these things existed. Personality is therefore, in the order of causation as well as in the order of moral dignity, the most fundamental thing with which we have to deal in social organization, and there is accordingly a presumption in favour of the instincts of personality being the foundation of the social fabric. The natural instincts of human personality have behind them a clear claim to respect. They have a right, we may say, to find expression in social institutions, and the social institution which does express instinct, whether it be political machinery or the underlying civic status, has a right to be respected. In this room and before this audience I need not say a right is not necessarily an absolute right; but though it is not necessary to say it to an instructed audience, the confusion is constantly made between right and absolute right. Many people will tell you, for example,

that if you acknowledge a right of rebellion, you cannot reject the claim of any rebels or righteously punish them. Often we are told: 'You must not pick and choose if you once admit the right of rebellion.' Similarly a right to property is thought to imply the absolute claim of the owner of property without any restriction whatever. But in truth a human right is not absolute; it means a claim which must be admitted until the contrary be shown. The notion of right implies indeed that a man may do what others disapprove. There is no right left if you reduce it to such a point that a man has only the right to do what others approve and sanction. On such a condition a person has no right; he is merely carrying out the behests of other people. The notion of right implies the possibility of doing wrong, but if it implies this, it does not necessarily imply an unlimited claim to do wrong. A point may be reached where restraint is justified. Other authorities may interfere, other rights may be in conflict with the right claimed, and there must be somewhere a power of bringing every right into judgement and deciding how far its claim in any particular instance is to be sanctioned.

And it is here that we have the function of the moral law respecting all rights, and—especially for the purposes of my present lecture—in respect to the rights which arise out of natural instinct. The moral law may sanction some of these instincts directly, it may control others, and restrain and limit them; it may co-ordinate them and determine the conflicts, actual or possible, between them; but I want to emphasize, as the main theme of what I am trying to put before you, that the instinct has in itself, and before appeal is made to the moral law, a claim to be accepted. It is the utterance of personality; and because it is the utterance of personality it ought to be listened to unless a good reason can be given for rejecting it. The moral law, therefore, in controlling and restraining and co-ordinating, is not the source, as I suggest, of social right or social organizations or institutions. This source is to be found in the expression of natural human instinct. First of all, of course, the instinct to live. Of all the purposes of social organization, the first and greatest purpose is human life; it is to enable people to live. And if we ask, as we very seldom do, 'Why should people live?',

the first answer that can be given is, 'Because they wish to live, their instincts are in favour of living: it is natural for them to live, and therefore they ought to live. It is for others to show that they ought not to live.' In respect to life, this would be generally accepted, and so too about the next great natural instinct—the instinct of sex as expressed in marriage.[1] There again it will be generally recognized that it would be enough to say a man wishes to be married, and is therefore entitled to be, and the institution of marriage requires no further justification than the claim to do what is innocent and what accords with the normal instincts of personality. But when we come to the institution of property, we find that people are not quite so willing to recognize the same authority in the instincts of acquisition and possession on which property rests as they are in respect to the instincts which underlie life and the instincts which underlie marriage. Indeed many people would perhaps deny that property did rest on the instincts of acquisition and possession. That there are such instincts is indisputable. A very obvious phenomenon is seen in childhood. A baby of two years will say with tedious iteration, 'It is mine'; and at every turn we see people exerting themselves, sometimes rightly, sometimes wrongly, in order that they may acquire. People have also great pleasure not only in acquiring but in possessing. They collect, add to their personal property and possessions for the purpose of possessing, because it gives pleasure to them and satisfies something inside them. It is instinctive. I conceive, quite apart from any other justification for property, just as about life and marriage, there is simply in that instinct a rightful claim to own property. A man is entitled to acquire and possess because he likes to do so, and because it is the normal human instinct. And they are wrong who say there must be some element of service to justify property, or some kindred moral justification. Who would hear of such an argument in respect to life or marriage? I have read in a book of importance, a serious work, that no one ought to have more than £5,000 a year because no human service could be rated at a greater value. The works of

[1] I have left out of sight the claim of marriage as part of the divine law of chastity and considered it only as a human right.

Shakespeare, named as the highest of human services, would not justify a larger income than that, in the writer's opinion. I pass over what seems to me the surprising fallacy of supposing that human service can really be measured in money; but, apart from that difficulty, I deny altogether that people are only entitled to the property that they have if they serve for it. How would it do if you applied the same condition to life, if you said to a person, 'You are about sixty; how do you justify your continuance in life? Do your services justify it? Shakespeare might be a centenarian—he was a great man, but what about you? Sixty years is enough for you at the very outside.' Or if you said to a married man: 'You have had many years married happiness; can you justify any more on the ground of your service? Twenty years married life seems fully sufficient on the basis of the service you have rendered to the community.' He would answer, 'I am entitled to live a hundred years if I never did a hand's turn in my life. I am entitled to be married, and to live with my wife and family as long as I can, though my whole life may be useless to the community in which I live.' Life and marriage are primary rights, because they are the satisfaction of natural instincts. And the right of property is of the same kind. You have a right to acquire and possess because it is human nature, and because it expresses normally and wholesomely human personality.

There are other instincts which have great political and social importance—it would be rash to try and make an exhaustive list of them. But one group must be mentioned—the instincts for the corporate life expressed in the State itself, and in that rather different society, the nation. The State and nation partly rest on instinct, though not on instinct alone. Assuredly the authority of the State does not rest on instinct alone. Indeed the moral law corroborates instinct and sustains all these fundamental institutions. That venerable category of moral injunctions which we know as the Ten Commandments includes the prohibition of murder, adultery, and theft. These great rules of the moral law give sanction to life, marriage, and property. And similarly one can quote the support of Revelation for the authority of the State. Moreover all these institutions may be

supported not only by the moral law but by considerations of utility. Nevertheless, I think it will be found that the State does rest upon instinct to a much greater extent than is often supposed. I think so, partly because of our experience in time of war. Perhaps in war-time it is rather the care for the existence of the nation than of the State that is the great motive power. It is nationalism or the instinct of nationality that is at work. But from one instinct or the other, or the two interwoven—for they are obviously closely allied—much of what is done in time of war must seek for its explanation and justification. I am sure the sense that every one ought to give up their lives and property, and make every sacrifice and exertion to preserve the nation and the State in time of war, is an instinct. All these moral claims really find their true power in human instinct. It was not because the people saw the State as an authority supported by the moral law or by considerations of utility or because they were convinced that the British Empire ought to continue in the greatest interest of the greatest number;—it was not from these motives that people submitted to vexatious violations of law and custom under the Defence of the Realm Act or to the greater sacrifices of life and property which were made. These acts and endurances sprang from instinct: it was instinct that induced them. But though it is not always appreciated, we must not allow to the instinct for the State and the nation, any more than to the instinct of acquisition or to the instinct of sex, an absolutely free hand. Instinct assuredly serves us well in war-time: we could not do without it. It may be quite true that the powers that be are ordained of God; it may be quite true that the future of human progress, the happiness of human beings, largely depends on the maintenance of separate states and nations; but these considerations would be taxed beyond their proper capacity if we laid upon them all or anything like all that is done and must be done in the name of the State and nation in time of war. Accordingly we must fall back on instinct, and if in falling back on that instinct we do not constantly check it by appeal to a moral standard, we may just as easily, in obedience to the instinct which supports the State and the nation, sink into moral degradation, as if we were moved by

the instincts of sex or acquisition. Vice is just as ready to spring from the indulgence of one set of instincts as from the other. This truth is very little appreciated and needs to be constantly emphasized. It is the peculiar evil of international war that it expresses the unbridled satisfaction of the human instinct for nationality. I see in many publications at the present time complaint and criticism because of the limitation of the action of the League of Nations, which excludes it from all domestic troubles and from conflicts between civilized and uncivilized men. But it seems to be overlooked that the League has been set a special task of peculiar difficulty—to fend off the conflicts between civilized nationalities, exercising all the powers and resources of civilization, and under the excited influence of a very powerful instinct. And both the difficulty and danger come from the very peculiar combination between the resources of complete civilization and the passions, barbaric or primitive, which spring straight from human instinct—it is that combination which makes international war so difficult to restrain and so destructive when it happens. To meet this evil a special machinery has been set up. But to turn that machinery to other sorts of purposes would be to make it a kind of panacea and to ask of it more than should be expected of any human institution. The League is not a remedy for all violence or all war; but for the wars that spring from the ungoverned instinct of nationality.

It is clear that with the realization that human instinct is the source of social institutions of the State and the nation, of property and marriage, and of the protection of life, must come the sense of the need for restraint and moral guidance for such instincts. But I do not know that it would be possible within the compass of the present lecture to make an attempt, even by a sketch, to determine how far the authority of the moral law ought to restrain the instincts which lie behind human institutions. Some things I will venture to say. We should apply the same principles to all instincts and the rights that arise from them. For example, we should generally say that the State was not justified in killing a person (except one deserving punishment) for any purpose of social expediency. It would not be thought

right to take an innocent person and subject him to a surgical experiment, even a painless one, if it ended in death—still less a painful one—for any profit or advantage to the community. That would be an invasion of personal right which could not be justified and it would excite violent opposition. In the extreme necessity of war, indeed, we send men against their will to be killed; but actual killing we only inflict on criminals. Property we take more easily. But we ought to feel that here, too, a violation of human instinct may be intolerable. The instinct to live or the instincts of marriage and the family may seem more sacred, but they do not differ essentially from the instincts to acquire or possess. All these things are of one kind; they all belong to one category, and there is a degree of interference by the community which cannot be justified. But where, it may be said, are you to draw the line? Supposing it to be true that all human instincts have a certain sanctity and that to violate them can only be justified by a sufficient consideration, what is that sufficient consideration? I suppose the first one that would be suggested would be that the violation was for the violated person's own good. This, I apprehend, is what justifies the interference with personal rights that takes place in war. It is felt that it is for the supreme good of every one, and that this supreme good justifies great claims on private right. But who is to decide what is for the good of each person or class of person? There must be an element of consent. You cannot determine what degree of interference with human instinct and the rights springing from it is justified, except by asking what invasion of their rights would be generally acceptable to wise men. That is the true explanation of the ancient rule—no taxation without representation. By representation the consent of the class taxed is given. It is true that in modern times, when society has become very much more complicated, all the classes taxed do not consent, and unhappily there have been cases in which classes have certainly been taxed against their will; nevertheless, I believe it to be a principle of justice that there should be an element of consent such as is expressed when a class through representation consents to its own taxation. If, on the contrary, there is resistance, and opposition, and protest, then I think there is ground

for imputing a violation of justice and that there is an oppressive interference with the instincts of possession and acquisition. At the least it should be remembered that no one would ever dream of the State interfering with the instinct of life, or the instinct to be married, on slight grounds; and that the like respect should be paid to the instinct of possession.

The power of human instinct, and the truth that it is the real basis of human institutions, is very well illustrated by another instinct I have not yet mentioned, but which has great social and political importance—the instinct of deference to some one exalted in station. We are being reminded very remarkably to-day[1] of how general and how powerful is the instinct to look up to superiors merely because they are superior, and the real importance and influence of that instinct. That by itself shows that we cannot explain our social institutions on the ground of pure utility, any more than we can explain them according to the now discredited theory of contract. We certainly cannot maintain that persons in exalted station are to be respected and looked up to either because it is useful or because of any bargain or contract that it should be done. That it is done as a matter of instinct cannot be disputed. It is quite true that the Royal Family in this country are eminently gifted with good qualities, and their labours, their sense of public spirit, their plain devotion to the performance of the duties of their position, no doubt powerfully impress public opinion; but it is also obvious that these qualities, admirable as they are, are shared by a great many other families who do not excite the enthusiasm of which the Royal Family is the centre. It is the exalted station that sets off the civic virtues of the Royal Family; and it is the human instinct of deferring to and looking up to an exalted person which is the motive power at work Nothing could be more unsatisfactory than to set this aside without explanation, and to leave what really plays a great part in English social and political life as a sort of intellectual derelict. We must fit it in with our general theory of social and political institutions; and we can fit it in, if we realize that human instinct is the basis of social and political institutions. Certainly respect for a superior

[1] The lecture was delivered shortly after the death of Queen Alexandra.

is a human instinct that finds expression in respect to the Royal Family, and has power behind it because it is a human instinct. And it is wholesome because it is natural. Burke, asking why he should feel for the sufferings and humiliations of the King and Queen of France, answers, 'For this plain reason because it is *natural* I should'. Natural feelings have a claim to be heard. It is right to listen to them. It is right because there is a presumption on the side of personality as being divine, and as being the unit of the moral system of the universe.

To sum up: my theory is that we should recognize natural instinct as being the source of the power which underlies all social and political institutions. We should recognize that human instincts are entitled to be respected, unless a good reason can be shown why they should not. They have a presumption on their side. We should recognize that only the moral law ought to overrule human instinct; and unless we can directly claim some precept of the moral law in favour of interference with human instinct, we cannot justify that interference. Moreover, we must recognize that whenever human instincts may be in conflict, it is only to the moral law that appeal can be made as to a tribunal judging between them and co-ordinating their claims. This is the theory in which we may find that stability for which we are seeking. I am quite certain we shall not find it in the theory of national utility or of the greatest happiness of the greatest number, or in any of the theories which underlay the Liberal movement of the nineteenth century, nor again in the confessedly obsolete theories about social contract. But in the secret recesses of human personality we find the fountain arising which flows and makes the great stream of the life of the community,—here and nowhere else. Human nature is primitive, it is perennial, it is eternal, and from the instincts of human nature society grows and flourishes.

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