

Beliefs and Actions, Aldous Leonard Huxley

Beliefs and Actions

To the collectors of human specimens (a class to which I myself belong; for psychological varieties are the only things I have ever thought it worth while to collect) I recommend the two volumes of M. Jean Martet on the late Georges Clémenceau. One may not entirely approve of Clémenceau as a politician: one may even detest some of the principles and the methods of his statecraft. But in spite of this disapproval and hatred it is impossible not to admire the old tiger, it is impossible to withhold the homage due to a most extraordinary man. For after all there is nothing more admirable than Power—not the organized power of established society, which is generally detestable, but the native power of the individual, the daemonic energy of life. With this native inborn power, this living energy, Georges Clémenceau was richly endowed.

A great man differs from common men by being, as it were, possessed by more than human spirits. These spirits may be good or evil; it is a matter almost of indifference. The important thing is that they should be more than human. It is the supernaturalness that makes the greatness and that we are forced to admire—even in the cases where the supernaturalness is morally evil and destructive. That Clémenceau was 'possessed' one cannot doubt. His devils may have worked in ways we disapprove of, to achieve ends which are not our ends, but they were genuine supernatural devils and, as such, worthy of all our admiration.

So much by way of somewhat irrelevant introduction to my theme. For my theme is not Georges Clémenceau. It is a theme of general psychological and historical interest which the ghost of Clémenceau happened to suggest to me and of which the Tiger's career is a good illustration. For, reading M. Martet's book the other day I came upon the words recorded by him in the course of a conversation with the old statesman about the revolutionary socialists. 'These people,' said Clémenceau, 'do a lot of squealing so long as you allow them to squeal. But when you say "Shut up!" they shut up . . . They are mostly half-wits, and, what's more, they're hardly more courageous than the bourgeois—which is saying a good deal, my word! The thing that gives people courage is ideas. But these revolutionaries of yours have about as many ideas as my boots. Envy and resentment—that's all they've got. That sort of thing doesn't take you very far. I saw them during the War; I talked with them, I tried to find something in them; it's pitiable. I never had the smallest difficulty with these creatures.'

'The thing that gives people courage is ideas.' The phrase might be expanded. For it is not only courage that comes from ideas; it is determination; it is the power to act, the power to go on acting coherently. For though it is true that most ideas are the rationalizations of feelings, that does not mean that feelings are more important in the world of action than ideas. Feeling provides the original supply of energy, but this supply of energy soon fails if the feelings are not rationalized. For the rationalization justifies the feelings and serves at the same time both as a substitute for feelings and as a stimulant for them when they are dormant. You cannot go on feeling violently all the time—the human organism does not allow of it. But an idea persists; once you have persuaded yourself of its truth, an idea justifies the continuance in cold blood of actions which emotion could only have dictated in the heat of the moment. Indeed it does more than justify actions and feelings; it imposes them.

If you accept an idea as true, then it becomes your duty to act on it even in cold blood as a matter not of momentary feeling, but of enduring principle. It is even your duty to revive the emotion which was originally at the root of the idea—or rather the new and nobler emotion which, thanks to the idea, has taken the place of the root feeling from which the idea started. Thus, to take an obvious example, envy—whether of the lucky in money or of the lucky in love—is constantly being rationalized in terms of political, economic, and ethical theory. For all those who cannot compete with him the successful amorist is a monster of immorality. The envied rich man is either wicked personally or vicariously wicked as the representative of an evil system. And having persuaded themselves of the iniquity of those they envy, the envious are not only justified in their now laudable hostility to the envied; they are also no longer envious. The idea has transformed their odious little personal feeling into a righteous indignation, a nobly disinterested love of virtue and abhorrence of wickedness. 'Ce qui donne du courage, ce sont les idées.'

A question inevitably arises. What are the principal courage-giving, emotion-transforming, and action-inspiring ideas of the present epoch? They are certainly not the same as they were. Many of the great ideas which our ancestors accepted with little or no question are now only lukewarmly believed in or even rejected outright. Thus, the Christian, the specifically Catholic and Protestant ideas, once of such enormous significance and the source of so much creative and destructive action, have now lost a great deal of their potency. There are comparatively few men and women in the contemporary West who unquestionably rationalize their feelings in terms of the Christian philosophy and the Christian ethic, few who find in the old Christian ideas a source of courage and determination, a motive for prolonged and effective action.

These religious ideas are not the only ones to have lost their force. There has been a decline in the effectiveness of certain political ideas, once immensely important. All the once inspiring ideas of nineteenth century Liberalism are now without much power to move. It is only among the politically naïve and inexperienced populations of the East that we find them exerting anything like their ancient influence. The most powerful political idea at the present time is the idea of nationalism. It is the justifier and transformer of a whole host of emotions, the persisting motive of important individual and collective actions. Nationalism was the idea that gave old Clémenceau his ruthless and indomitable energy. 'Ce qui donne du courage, ce sont les idées.' He knew it by personal experience.

The idea of progress is another of the great contemporary ideas. A vast amount of personal ambition, of rapacity, of lust for power is sanctified and at the same time made actively effective by this idea. It is in the idea of progress, coupled very often with the humanitarian idea of universal welfare and social service, that the modern business man finds excuses for his activities. Why does he work so hard? Why does he fight so ruthlessly against his rivals? To obtain power and make himself rich, the cynical realist would answer. Not at all, the business man indignantly replies, I am working and fighting for progress, for prosperity, for society.

There are signs, I believe, that this belief in progress and the ideas of humanitarianism is on the wane. The youngest generation seems to be less anxious than was its predecessor to justify its money-making and power-seeking in terms of these ideas. It affirms quite frankly that it works

in order that it may be able to amuse itself in the intervals of leisure. The result of this rejection (it is still, of course, only a very partial rejection) of the inspiring ideas of an earlier generation is that the enthusiasm for work has perceptibly declined and that the amount of energy put into the money-making and power-seeking activities is less than it was. For it may be laid down as a general rule that any decline in the intensity of belief leads to a decline in effective activity.

And here, we find ourselves confronted with two more questions. Is scepticism on the increase? and if so, what sort of new inspiring and justificatory ideas are men likely to accept in lieu of the old ideas in which they no longer believe? My impression is that we must answer yes to the first question. There is, I believe, a general increase in scepticism with regard to most of the hitherto accepted ideas, particularly in the sphere of ethics. There is a growing tendency to rely on momentary emotions as guides to conduct rather than on the fixed ideas in terms of which these emotions have hitherto been rationalized. The result is a general decline in the quality and quantity of activity among the sceptical.

In its extreme forms, however, scepticism is, for most human beings, intolerable. They must believe in something; they must have some sort of justificatory ideas. The contemporary circumstances (under which heading we must include recent political events, recent scientific discoveries, recent philosophical speculation) have forced on us a more or less complete scepticism with regard to most of the religious, ethical, and political ideas in terms of which our fathers could rationalize their feelings. For most of these ideas postulated the existence of certain transcendental entities. But it is precisely about these transcendental entities that modern circumstances compel us to feel sceptical. We find it difficult at the moment to believe in anything but untranscendental realities. (It is quite likely, of course, that this difficulty is only temporary and that a change of circumstances may reimpose belief in transcendental ideas. For the moment, however, we are sceptical about everything except the immediate.) In our daily lives the most important immediate realities are changing desires, emotions, moods. Some people accept these as they come and live from hand to mouth.

But the 'realism' they profess is not only slightly sordid and ignoble; it is also sterile. It leaves them without courage, as Clémenceau would say, without the motive and the power to pursue a course of effective action. Many therefore seek for new justifying 'ideas' as a support and framework for their lives. These ideas, as we have seen, must not be in any way transcendental. The characteristically modern rationalization of feelings, desires, and moods is a rationalization in terms of the untranscendental—in terms, that is to say, of known psychology, not of postulated Gods, Virtues, Justices, and the like. The modern emphasis is on personality. We justify our feelings and moods by an appeal to the 'right to happiness,' the 'right to self-expression.' (This famous 'right to self-expression,' unthinkable in days when men firmly believed that they had duties to God, has done enormous mischief in the sphere of education.) In other words, we claim to do what we like, not because doing what we like is in harmony with some supposed absolute good, but because it is good in itself.

A poor justification and one which is hardly sufficient to make men courageous and active. And yet modern circumstances are such that it is only in terms of this sort of 'idea' that we can hope successfully to rationalize our emotional and impulsive behaviour. My own feeling is that these untranscendental rationalizations can be improved. It is possible,

as Blake said, to see infinity in a grain of sand and eternity in a flower. Only in terms of such an idea, it seems to me, can the modern man satisfactorily 'rationalize' (though the idea is mystically irrational) his feelings and impulses. Whether such rationalizations are as good, pragmatically speaking, as the old rationalizations in terms of transcendental entities, I do not know. On the whole, I rather doubt it. But they are the best, it seems to me, that the modern circumstances will allow us to make.

The end