

## The Political Animal

( 1 )

**S**INCE political philosophy should be controlled by the conception of happiness or the good life as the ultimate end to be served by the good society, the truths about human nature that constitute the factual basis for the ethics of happiness also provide, in part at least, the factual basis for the politics of the good society. In addition, they help us to understand the meaning and truth of the proposition that man is by nature a political animal.

I have elsewhere stated four propositions about the nature of man upon the factual truth or probability of which the normative truth of the ethics of happiness rests. [1] Briefly summarized, they are as follows:

- (1) That man, like any other animal, has a certain limited number of natural needs, and that the natural needs which are specifically human differ from those of other animals as man differs specifically from them; to wit, by virtue of his having the related powers of propositional speech and conceptual thought, powers totally lacking in other animals.
- (2) That man, because he has the power of conceptual thought, is the only animal whose consciousness embraces an extensive past and a far-reaching future, without which he could neither make plans for the conduct

of his whole life nor extrapolate from the historic past of society projections concerning its future.

- (3) That man does not have any genetically pre-formed patterns of species-specific behavior—no definite instincts of the sort to be found in the insects and other lower animals. While man does have instinctual drives or needs, each man, when he is in control of himself, determines how he responds to or satisfies them.
- (4) That man, having the power of conceptual thought, also has freedom of choice—a freedom that enables him to choose this or that course of action without being determined to do so by his past experience, the habits he has formed, or the character he has developed up to that moment. He has, in short, the power of self-determination, the power of creating or forming himself and his life according to his own decisions.

The truth or probability of these propositions is, of course, relative to the present state of the empirical evidence. The scientific evidence now available and the evidence of common experience overwhelmingly favor the first three propositions. None has been falsified by critical negative instances. While the fourth proposition about freedom of choice is still subject to philosophical dispute, there is as yet no decisive evidence to the contrary, and there is good reason to believe that its truth will be progressively confirmed by future empirical evidence. [2] In any case, what must be said about freedom of choice in relation to a normative ethics must be said with equal force about it in relation to a normative politics.

A categorical ought is practically void unless the individual it obligates is free to obey it. Unless the individual has freedom of choice, he is not morally responsible for his acts; he cannot be held responsible for making or failing to make a good life for himself. Similarly, there is no point in saying what institutions men ought to devise and support in order to improve society and work toward the goal of the best society that is possible,

unless they have freedom of choice with respect to the political decisions they make and the political programs they support or oppose.

If all the institutional changes that have taken place in the past and that will take place in the future were inexorably determined or necessitated, then programs of political reform or revolution would be nothing but wishful predictions, for they could not then meaningfully declare what ought or ought not to be done for the improvement of society. Without freedom of choice on the part of individual men as social agents, the effort to create the best society is as meaningless as the effort to make a good life for one's self. Unless men have freedom of choice, they have no genuine moral problems, either ethical or political.

( 2 )

What further consequences do these basic psychological pre-suppositions of the ethics of happiness have for the politics of the good society? There are three to which I would like to call attention.

*First*, our consideration of the good society is based on a set of values that is relative only to human nature, not to the *mores* or value-system of a particular historic society or culture. [3] The sociologists and cultural anthropologists tell us that we cannot transcend what they call the "ethnocentric predicament." Any judgment we make about a society or culture other than our own will assume the soundness or validity of the *mores* or value-system of our own society or culture. This would, of course, be true *if all* value-systems were relative and had validity—or acceptance—only for the society in which they were inherent. But the value-system involved in the scale of real goods that constitute the means to a good human life are relative *only* to human nature and not to the particular circumstances of any historic society or culture. It provides, therefore, a standard for

judging one society or set of social institutions as better than another, a standard by which we can measure the degree to which any society approximates the ideal of the best society that is possible. Transcending the *mores* and diverse value-systems of particular societies, it is a universally applicable standard precisely because it is based on what is universally present in all societies—human beings, always and everywhere the same in their specific nature.

*Second*, the proposition about man that denies the existence of human instincts (i.e., denies genetically determined patterns of species-specific behavior) excludes aggression as an instinct to be reckoned with in political thought or in any other thinking we do about man's social life. Though the ethics of happiness and the politics of the good society would become questionable if a human *instinct* of aggression were a fact, their truth, especially that of politics, involves the acknowledgment of aggressive *tendencies* present in varying degrees in human beings. Let me explain.

If aggression were an instinct in the sense that it constituted a natural human need, then all men—all without exception, not just some—would naturally desire to dominate other men or to inflict injury upon them. If that were the case, then the pursuit of happiness would be competitive, not cooperative. If domination over other men or injuring them were a real good, because it satisfied a natural desire, and as such were a component part of an individual's happiness, then the success of some individuals in making good lives for themselves would necessarily deprive others of real goods that they needed and so defeat their pursuit of happiness. [4]

Furthermore, if real goods make natural rights, and if the best society is one that secures to every individual all of his natural rights, the existence of a natural need to dominate or inflict injury would make it impossible for any society to secure for everyone all his natural rights. On the one hand, to make laws that prohibit one man from injuring or dominating another would act to deprive all men of one of their natural rights. On the

other hand, to permit some men to injure or dominate others in order to secure to them one of their natural rights would result in depriving others of their rights to freedom and to security of life and limb. Hence if aggression were an instinct which created a natural need that had to be satisfied in order to give men possession of something that is really good for them, then the ideal of the best society as one which promotes the pursuit of happiness by all its members would become, in the very nature of the case, impossible to realize. It would be a utopian rather than a practicable ideal.

However, to deny the presence in human beings of any tendency whatsoever to dominate or to inflict injury on their fellow-men would also have serious consequences for political philosophy.

If men were totally devoid of aggressive tendencies, if they were in all things pacific and always motivated by impulses of benevolent love toward all their fellow-men, the maintenance of civil peace, the preservation of individual freedom from coercion and intimidation, and security of life and limb would not need the operation of such institutions as the criminal law and the police force; nor would the sanctions of constitutional government be needed to protect men from being dominated by one individual or group of individuals whose appetite for power makes them seek despotic domination over all the rest.

One of the fundamental principles of politics, to which we will devote considerable attention in Chapter 6, is the proposition that society cannot exist without government and without the exercise of coercive force by government. The truth of this proposition is crucial to the issue between the political philosopher and the philosophical anarchist. But the truth of this proposition rests—in part at least—on the fact that aggressive tendencies are present in some, if not all, members of society, varying in degree from individual to individual.

How can we resolve the apparent contradiction that confronts us, made by the denial, on the one hand, that aggression is a human instinct that creates a natural need which must be satisfied for the sake of the good life; and by the affirmation,

on the other hand, that aggressive tendencies are present in the members of society to an extent which necessitates the exercise of coercive force by government in order to maintain civil peace and to protect the natural rights of all? I propose the following answer.

Whatever properties or tendencies are present in all men without exception are species-specific, and by this criterion they are instinctive or natural. Any property or tendency that is found in some men, but not in others, whether the number in whom it is found is small or large, cannot be species-specific. It is a product of nurture or at most an endowment of individual nature, but in no case an endowment of specific nature. The scientists who deny the existence of an instinct of aggression in man offer as critical evidence in support of their view the absence of aggression in a certain number of men in any society and its absence from a substantially large number of men or even all in certain societies. [5] The very same evidence supports the proposition that aggressive tendencies on the part of some individuals are largely a product of nurture, though perhaps with some basis in innate temperamental disposition. It is unlike the instinctive sexual drive which, being present in all members of the human species, is inherent in man's specific nature.

The apparent contradiction is thus resolved, but the resolution leaves us with other difficulties that must be faced. If aggressive tendencies are largely a product of nurture, then it would seem as if, in principle at least, they are eliminable from human life, since a reformation of the conditions that cultivate aggression is a conceivable possibility. The critical question here is whether the institutions of society, as we have known them so far in the course of history, are solely responsible for fomenting aggressive tendencies in a certain number of human beings; or whether, in contradistinction, aggression develops in the cauldron of the emotional conflicts that are inexpugnable from family life. If the former, then institutional reforms might conceivably result in the elimination of aggression. But if, in a certain number of cases, aggression is nurtured by the irremediable tensions and conflicts of family life, then unless the family

is itself a dispensable institution, no alteration in our other institutions would result in the complete elimination of aggression.

*Third*, underlying the four propositions about human nature that are presupposed by the ethics of happiness is the even more important proposition that there is a specific human nature—that man *is* a species of animal and that, like any other species of organism, he has a specific nature which, in regard to its species-specific properties, is the same in all members of the species. [6]

The affirmation of the sameness of the specific nature in which all human beings participate as individual members of the species has many consequences for ethics and one consequence of particular importance for politics. In ethics, it supports the proposition that all men have the same natural needs; that real goods, corresponding to natural needs, are the same for all; and that all men have the same natural rights, based on the real goods that satisfy their natural needs. In politics, it supports the proposition that all men are equal as men, equal in their humanity, in their dignity as persons, and in their natural rights.

I will postpone until Chapter 11 the consideration of the political consequences that flow from affirming or denying the proposition that all men are equal as men. [7] We shall see that a sound resolution of the basic issues about equality of treatment, equality of status, and equality of opportunity involves not only an understanding of the human equality that is rooted in man's specific nature, but also an understanding of its relation to all the personal inequalities among men that are rooted in their individual differences, whether differences in natural endowment or differences in personal attainments and possessions. But I cannot leave the matter here without one further comment.

The judgment that all men should be treated equally in certain fundamental respects, and similar normative judgments concerning equality of status and equality of opportunity, would not be tenable if it were not factually as well as normatively true that all men are by nature equal. I mention this point

because it is so insistently denied by many today who, on the one hand, uphold the prescription of equal treatment, or call for an equality of conditions, and, on the other, deny that it has or need have any basis in the fact of man's specific human nature. [8]

( 3 )

Are there any other psychological presuppositions of sufficient importance to deserve explicit statement? I think there is at least one more, which has special significance for political philosophy. It is the fact that man is by nature a political animal. To understand what is meant by that statement, it is necessary to understand the difference between saying that man is a social animal and saying that man is a political animal; and also to understand what is involved in saying that man is by nature both social and political.

Animals other than men are social or gregarious; only man is political in addition to being social or gregarious. In contradistinction to solitary or non-gregarious animals, gregarious animals, such as the social insects and many vertebrate species, exhibit in diverse ways and varying degrees patterns of organized social life. To say that these animals are by nature social or gregarious is to say that their natures are such that they need to associate with other members of the species for the exigencies of their organic life and for the perpetuation of the species. How is this need satisfied? In each case, by a particular pattern of association, a particular mode of social organization, that is distinctively characteristic of a particular animal species or population. The fact that a particular pattern of association or mode of social organization is uniformly and universally exhibited by the members of a particular animal species or population warrants the inference that it is a species-specific property of that animal population or, in other words, that it is instinctively determined.

This is tantamount to saying, *negatively*, that the members of a particular animal species do *not* determine for themselves



the precise way in which they will associate to satisfy their need for social life, a need that is inherent in all animals that are, by nature, gregarious. Not only is their need for social life something that is genetically determined by the inheritable nature of a given animal group or population. It is also the case that genetic determination produces the manner or mode of their association (as, for example, the organization of the beehive or ant-mound, the wolf pack or walrus herd); and it is in this sense that a particular form of animal association is instinctive—a consequence of the inheritable nature of a particular animal population, not a choice made by the members of that population at a given time and place.

While man is by nature social or gregarious in the sense of being so constituted that he needs to associate with his fellow-men for the exigencies of organic life and for the perpetuation of the species, he is not instinctively social in the further sense that the way in which men associate is genetically determined. There is no one pattern of human association or one mode of social organization uniformly and universally found wherever men live together, either in families or in larger communities, as there would be if the manner of human association and mode of social organization were instinctive, i.e., were a genetically determined, inheritable, and species-specific property of the human race. The variety of forms manifested by human association is the incontrovertible factual basis for the denial that the diverse forms of human association are instinctively determined.

If they are not instinctively determined, how are they to be explained or accounted for? There is only one tenable answer to this question: *by human institution and by choice*. Naturally needing to associate with their fellow-men in families or in larger communities, men determine for themselves how they will associate and how they will organize the communities in which they live. They invent or devise the institutions and arrangements of social life, institutions and arrangements which, taken together, produce this or that particular form of human association; and when they are able to envisage alternative forms of association, they are also able to choose one mode of social organization rather than another.

We can now understand the sense in which man, in addition to being a social or gregarious organism, is also uniquely a political animal. In this characterization of man, the negative meaning of "political" consists in denying that human social organization is genetically determined, i.e., instinctive. To say that man is *politically social* is to say that he is *not instinctively social* in the manner of his association. The positive meaning of "political" consists in affirming that the diverse forms of human association are *instituted* by men and subject to *choice* on their part. The invention of social institutions and the adoption of one set of institutions rather than another by choice are the marks of a political animal. [9]

That, among social or gregarious organisms, man and man alone is a political animal in the sense just indicated is to be accounted for by the basic properties that distinguish man from all other living organisms; namely, his unique possession of the powers of propositional speech and of conceptual thought, together with the freedom of choice that is a consequence of his intellectual powers. Without the power of conceptual thought, man could not invent or devise social institutions before their existence becomes an enacted reality; nor could he choose among the diverse institutions that he is able to conceive and project in advance of their adoption. Without the power of propositional speech, man could not engage with his fellow-men in the public consideration of social arrangements. The development of human communities, in their myriad forms, involves speech about social institutions in the same way that the development and improvement of tools by the human species is conditioned by speech about technological devices and inventions.

Hence when we say that man is by nature social, we mean that, like other gregarious animals, he needs to associate with his fellow-men for his own good; and when we say that he is by nature political, we mean that, unlike other gregarious animals, he is, by virtue of powers that are uniquely human, able to devise and adopt one or another set of social institutions to produce the various forms of social organization in which he lives. Wherever we find a natural need, we also find a natural capacity, and conversely. Thus gregarious animals not only need

to associate, but also have the capacity for doing so, not present in non-gregarious animals. Man's natural ability to devise and adopt social institutions must bespeak a natural need on his part.

What is the need that corresponds to man's political capacity? It is the need to participate, by speech, thought, choice, and action, in public affairs. Stated another way, man's political capacity carries with it a need to act politically—to exercise a voice or have a say about the organization of the community in which he lives. The full significance of this will not become apparent until, in later chapters, we come to understand that political liberty and equality are requirements of a good society because they are indispensable components of the good human life that a good society must seek to promote. Because man is by nature political, he has natural needs that make political liberty and equality the real human goods they are.