

Dreams and Facts

Bertrand Russell (1919)

I

The influence of our wishes upon our beliefs is a matter of common knowledge and observation, yet the nature of this influence is very generally misconceived. It is customary to suppose that the bulk of our beliefs are derived from some rational ground, and that desire is only an occasional disturbing force. The exact opposite of this would be nearer the truth: the great mass of beliefs by which we are supported in our daily life is merely the bodying forth of desire, corrected here and there, at isolated points, by the rude shock of fact. Man is essentially a dreamer, wakened sometimes for a moment by some peculiarly obtrusive element in the outer world, but lapsing again quickly into the happy somnolence of imagination. Freud has shown how largely our dreams at night are the pictured fulfilment of our wishes; he has, with an equal measure of truth, said the same of day-dreams; and he might have included the day-dreams which we call beliefs.

There are three ways by which this non-rational origin of our convictions can be demonstrated: there is the way of psycho-analysis, which, starting from an understanding of the insane and the hysterical, gradually makes it plain how little, in essence, these victims of malady differ from ordinary healthy people; then there is the way of the sceptical philosopher, showing how feeble is the rational evidence for even our most cherished beliefs; and finally there is the way of common observation of men. It is only the last of these three that I propose to consider.

The lowest savages, as they have become known through the labours of anthropologists, are not found groping in conscious ignorance amid phenomena that they are aware of not understanding. On the contrary, they have innumerable beliefs, so firmly held as to control all their more important actions. They believe that by eating the flesh of an animal or a warrior it is possible to acquire the virtues possessed by the victim when alive. Many of them believe that to pronounce the name of their chief is such sacrilege as to bring instant death; they even go so far as to alter all words

in which his name occurs as one of the syllables; for example, if we had a king named John, we should speak of a jonquil as (say) a Georgequil, and of a dungeon as a dun-george. When they advance to agriculture, and weather becomes important for the food supply, they believe that magical incantations or the kindling of small fires will cause rain to come or the sun to burn brightly. They believe that when a man is slain his blood, or ghost, pursues the slayer to obtain vengeance, but can be misled by a simple disguise such as painting the face red or putting on mourning.¹ The first half of this belief has obviously originated from those who feared murder, the second from those who had committed it.

Nor are irrational beliefs confined to savages. A great majority of the human race have religious opinions different from our own, and therefore groundless. People interested in politics, with the exception of politicians, have passionate convictions upon innumerable questions which must appear incapable of rational decision to any unprejudiced person. Voluntary workers in a contested election always believe that their side will win, no matter what reason there may be for expecting defeat. There can be no doubt that, in the autumn of 1914, the immense majority of the German nation felt absolutely certain of victory for Germany. In this case fact has intruded and dispelled the dream. But if, by some means, all non-German historians could be prevented from writing during the next hundred years, the dream would reinstate itself: the early triumphs would be remembered, while the ultimate disaster would be forgotten.

Politeness is the practice of respecting that part of a man's beliefs which is specially concerned with his own merits or those of his group. Every man, wherever he goes, is encompassed by a cloud of comforting convictions, which move with him like flies on a summer day. Some of these convictions are personal to himself: they tell him of his virtues and excellencies, the affection of his friends and the respect of his acquaintances, the rosy prospects of his career, and his unflagging energy in spite of delicate health. Next come convictions of the superior excellence of his family: how his father had that unbending rectitude which is now so rare, and brought up his

¹ See the chapter on "The Mark of Cain" in Frazer's *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*.

children with a strictness beyond what is to be found among modern parents; how his sons are carrying all before them in school games, and his daughter is not the sort of girl to make an imprudent marriage. Then there are beliefs about his class, which, according to his station, is the best socially, or the most intelligent, or the most deserving morally, of the classes in the community—though all are agreed that the first of these merits is more desirable than the second, and the second than the third. Concerning his nation, also, almost every man cherishes comfortable delusions. "Foreign nations, I am sorry to say, do as they do do." So said Mr. Podsnap, giving expression, in these words, to one of the deepest sentiments of the human heart. Finally we come to the theories that exalt mankind in general, either absolutely or in comparison with the "brute creation." Men have souls, though animals have not; Man is the "rational animal"; any peculiarly cruel or unnatural action is called "brutal" or "bestial" (although such actions are in fact distinctively human);² God made Man in His own image, and the welfare of Man is the ultimate purpose of the universe.

We have thus a hierarchy of comforting beliefs: those private to the individual, those which he shares with his family, those common to his class or his nation, and finally those that are equally delightful to all mankind. If we desire good relations with a man, we must respect these beliefs; we do not, therefore, speak of a man to his face as we should behind his back. The difference increases as his remoteness from ourselves grows greater. In speaking to a brother, we have no need of conscious politeness as regards his parents. The need of politeness is at its maximum in speaking with foreigners, and is so irksome as to be paralysing to those who are only accustomed to compatriots. I remember once suggesting to an untravelled American that possibly there were a few small points in which the British Constitution compared favourably with that of the United States. He instantly fell into a towering passion; having never heard such an opinion before, he could not imagine that anyone seriously entertained it. We had both failed in politeness, and the result was disaster.

But the results of failure in politeness, however bad from the point of view of

2 Compare Mark Twain's *Mysterious Stranger*.

a social occasion, are admirable from the point of view of dispelling myths. There are two ways in which our natural beliefs are corrected: one the contact with fact, as when we mistake a poisonous fungus for a mushroom and suffer pain in consequence; the other, when our beliefs conflict, not directly with objective fact, but with the opposite beliefs of other men. One man thinks it lawful to eat pork, but not beef; another, beef but not pork. The usual result of this difference of opinion has been bloodshed; but gradually there is beginning to be a rationalist opinion that perhaps neither is really sinful. Modesty, the correlative of politeness, consists in pretending not to think better of ourselves and our belongings than of the man we are speaking to and his belongings. It is only in China that this art is thoroughly understood. I am told that, if you ask a Chinese mandarin after the health of his wife and children, he will reply: "That contemptible slut and her verminous brood are, as your Magnificence deigns to be informed, in the enjoyment of rude health."³ But such elaboration demands a dignified and leisurely existence; it is impossible in the swift but important contacts of business or politics. Step by step, relations with other human beings dispel the myths of all but the most successful. Personal conceit is dispelled by brothers, family conceit by schoolfellows, class conceit by politics, national conceit by defeat in war or commerce. But human conceit remains, and in this region, so far as the effect of social intercourse is concerned, the myth-making faculty has free play. Against this form of delusion, a partial corrective is found in Science; but the corrective can never be more than partial, for without some credulity Science itself would crumble and collapse.

³ This was written before I came to know China. It would not be true of the China that I saw.

II

Men's personal and group dreams may be ludicrous, but their collective human dreams, to us who cannot pass outside the circle of humanity, are pathetic. The universe as astronomy reveals it is very vast. How much there may be beyond what our telescopes show, we cannot tell; but what we can know is of unimaginable immensity. In the visible world, the Milky Way is a tiny fragment; within this fragment, the solar system is an infinitesimal speck, and of this speck our planet is a microscopic dot. On this dot, tiny lumps of impure carbon and water, of complicated structure, with somewhat unusual physical and chemical properties, crawl about for a few years, until they are dissolved again into the elements of which they are compounded. They divide their time between labour designed to postpone the moment of dissolution for themselves and frantic struggles to hasten it for others of their kind. Natural convulsions periodically destroy some thousands or millions of them, and disease prematurely sweeps away many more. These events are considered to be misfortunes; but when men succeed in inflicting similar destruction by their own efforts, they rejoice, and give thanks to God. In the life of the solar system, the period during which the existence of man will have been physically possible is a minute portion of the whole; but there is some reason to hope that even before this period is ended man will have set a term to his own existence by his efforts at mutual annihilation. Such is man's life viewed from the outside.

But such a view of life, we are told, is intolerable, and would destroy the instinctive energy by which men persist. The way of escape that they have found is through religion and philosophy. However alien and indifferent the outer world may seem, we are assured by our comforters that there is harmony beneath the apparent conflict. All the long development from the original nebula is supposed to lead up to man as the culmination of the process. Hamlet is a very well-known play, yet few readers would have any recollection of the part of the "First Sailor," which consists of the four words: "God bless you, sir." But suppose a society of men whose sole business in life was to act this part; suppose them isolated from contact with the Hamlets, Horatios, and even Guildensterns: would they not invent systems of literary

criticism according to which the four words of the "First Sailor" were the kernel of the whole drama? Would they not punish with ignominy or exile any one of their number who should suggest that other parts were possibly of equal importance? And the life of mankind takes up a much smaller proportion of the universe than the "first sailor's" speech does of Hamlet, but we cannot listen behind the scenes to the rest of the play, and we know very little of its characters or plot.

When we think of mankind, we think primarily of ourself as its representative; we therefore think well of mankind, and consider its preservation important. Mr. Jones, the Nonconformist grocer, is sure that he deserves eternal life, and that a universe which refused it to him would be intolerably bad. But when he thinks of Mr. Robinson, his Anglican competitor, who mixes sand with his sugar and is lax about Sunday, he feels that the universe might well carry charity too far. To complete his happiness, there is need of hell-fire for Mr. Robinson; in this way, the cosmic importance of man is preserved, but the vital distinction between friends and enemies is not obliterated by a weak universal benevolence. Mr. Robinson holds the same view with the parts inverted, and general happiness results.

In the days before Copernicus there was no need of philosophic subtlety to maintain the anthropocentric view of the world. The heavens visibly revolved about earth, and on the earth man had dominion over the beasts of the field. But when the earth lost its central position, man, too, was deposed from his eminence, and it became necessary to invent a metaphysic to correct the "crudities" of science. This task was achieved by those who are called "idealists," who maintain that the world of matter is unreal appearance, while the reality is Mind or Spirit—transcending the mind or spirit of the philosopher as he transcends common men. So far from there being no place like home, these thinkers assure us that every place is like home. In all our best, that is, in all those tasks which we share with the philosopher in question, we are at one with the universe. Hegel assures us that the universe resembles the Prussian State of his day; his English followers consider it more analogous to a bi-cameral plutocratic democracy. The reasons offered for these are carefully camouflaged so as to conceal even from their authors

the connection with human wishes: they are derived, nominally, from such dry sources as logic and the analysis of propositions. But the influence of wishes is shown by the fallacies committed, which all tend in one direction. When a man adds up an account, he is much more likely to make a mistake in his favour than to his detriment; and when a man reasons, he is more apt to incur fallacies which favour his wishes than such as thwart them. And so it comes that, in the study of nominally abstract thinkers, it is their mistakes that give the key to their personality.

Many may contend that, even if the systems men have invented are untrue, they are harmless and comforting, and should be left undisturbed. But they are in fact not harmless, and the comfort they bring is dearly bought by the preventable misery which they lead men to tolerate. The evils of life spring partly from natural causes, partly from men's hostility to each other. In former times, competition and war were necessary for the securing of food, which could only be obtained by the victors. Now, owing to the mastery of natural forces which science has begun to give, there would be more comfort and happiness for all if all devoted themselves to the conquest of Nature rather than of each other. The representation of Nature as a friend, and sometimes as even an ally in our struggles with other men, obscures the true position of man in the world, and diverts his energies from the pursuit of scientific power, which is the only fight that can bring long-continued well-being to the human race.

Apart from all utilitarian arguments, the search for a happiness based upon untrue beliefs is neither very noble nor very glorious. There is a stark joy in the unflinching perception of our true place in the world, and a more vivid drama than any that is possible to those who hide behind the enclosing walls of myth. There are "perilous seas" in the world of thought, which can only be sailed by those who are willing to face their own physical powerlessness. And above all, there is liberation from the tyranny of Fear, which blots out the light of day and keeps men grovelling and cruel. No man is liberated from fear who dare not see his place in the world as it is; no man can achieve the greatness of which he is capable until he has allowed himself to see his own littleness.