

IDEALISM IN
INTERNATIONAL
POLITICS

A

Rectorial Address, Delivered on November 3rd, 1923,

by

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Idealism may be defined, as well as in another way, by calling it the spirit which impels an individual or group of individuals to a loftier standard of conduct than that which ordinarily prevails around him or them. This definition does not, of course, impinge upon the philosophical concept of idealism that in external conceptions the objects immediately known are ideas; that, in other words, all reality is in its nature psychical. With such abstractions (though they are of great interest) we are not practically at this moment concerned.

Idealism in the international field is the spirit which would carry into the relations of States the kind of ethical progress generally indicated above.

Now it is evident that every sane and normal citizen must desire improvement in the standards of purity and morality. Nor is it less evident that every reasonable statesman must desire that the relationship between States shall be increasingly regulated in accordance with the highest attainable standards of conscientious conduct. Conflict, therefore, is very unlikely to arise so long as attention is confined to the larger generalizations which the term suggests. The subject, however, of this observation is naturally neither an attempt to examine nor appraise the value either in national or international affairs of a loftier standpoint, or of a more austere ethical outlook. Such abstract discussion would be one-sided; nor would it lend itself to any fruitful disputation.

It is when attention is directed to the sharply contrasted views of those who are distinguished in political matters as "Idealists" or "Realists" that the subject-matter of the present examination becomes apparent. The use of these discordant terms makes it plain that the word "Idealism" is employed in current phraseology to indicate a point of view in relation to life which may be challenged without either absurdity or cynicism. No one, for instance, imagines that the school of political thought which is conveniently described as Realistic would impeach the conception or definition of Idealism with which this address began. The term, therefore, is used in a narrower

or more specialized sense, which must be somewhat more carefully analysed. In current language, an idealist in this sense is one who places before himself in private or public affairs as attainable a goal which other citizens, perhaps equally moral, do not believe to be so attainable. Provided that the idealist be a sound judge of moral valuations nothing but good can proceed from his admonitions. If he wrenches in his individual exertions even a tiny fragment from the area of a grosser world he will not perish without the glory of achievement. It has, of course, naturally happened that the greatest of idealists have been teachers or preachers. And of all such, Jesus Christ was evidently the most pre-eminent. But it would be unreasonable to suppose that when He admonished him who was assaulted to turn the other cheek to the smiter, or him who was rich to sell all his possessions, and give them to the poor, He was laying down standards of conduct which He either expected or desired to see generally adopted. He was, on the contrary, diffusing through the medium of metaphor a sweet and beautiful moral atmosphere for the purification of imperfect manhood. Were an autocrat to issue a ukase within his own dominions ordering all rich men to divest themselves of their possessions in favour of the poor, he would be, assuming morality of purpose, an idealist in the narrower sense, but he would also be an idealist in that more aggressive and dangerous connotation with which we are principally concerned. An analysis of the subject derives some guidance from the use of the term in private as opposed to public policy. For such an examination makes it plain how small has been the conquest of idealist thought, even over the comparatively easy domain of individual conduct. The school of Idealism is the very antithesis of the school of self-interest. And yet nothing is more apparent than that politically, economically, and philosophically the motive of self-interest not only is, but must be, and ought to be, the mainspring of human conduct. Bentham long since pointed out in his *Theory of Legislation** how inconvenient and even mischievous the conse-

* *Hildreth's translation (p. 2):—Nature has placed man under the empire of pleasure and of pain. We owe to them all our ideas; we refer to them all our judgments, and all the determinations of our life. He who pretends to withdraw himself from this subjection knows not what he says. His only object is to seek pleasure and to shun pain, even at the very instant that he rejects the greatest pleasures or embraces pains the most acute. These eternal and irresistible sentiments ought to be the great study of the moralist and the legislator. The principle of utility subjects everything to these two motives.*

Utility is an abstract term. It expresses the property or tendency of a thing to prevent some evil or to procure some good. Evil is pain, or the cause of pain. Good is pleasure, or the cause of pleasure. That

quences would be if every individual were to regulate his conduct, not in relation to his own interests, which he is likely to understand, but in relation to the interests of others, in relation to which he is very likely to be imperfectly informed. Economically, the matter is not less plain. Mankind subsists precariously upon this globe on the terms of constant and contributory toil. The experience of thousands, perhaps of hundreds of thousands, of years has shown that the desire of self-advancement is the only adequate incentive for that standard of labour and achievement which each individual must be encouraged in the common scheme to afford. The only legitimate sphere, therefore, of the idealist within the field of private morality is to elevate, if he can, the standards by reference to which conduct is, in the existing

which is conformable to the utility, or the interest of an individual, is what tends to augment the total sum of his happiness. That which is conformable to the utility, or the interest of a community, is what tends to augment the total sum of the happiness of the individuals that compose it.

A principle is a first idea, which is made the beginning or basis of a system of reasonings. To illustrate it by a sensible image, it is a fixed point to which the first link of a chain, is attached. Such a principle must be clearly evident—to illustrate and explain it must secure its acknowledgment. Such are the axioms of mathematics: they are not proved directly, it is enough to show that they cannot be rejected without falling into absurdity.

The logic of utility consists in setting out, in all the operations of the judgment, from the calculations or comparison of pains and pleasures, and in not allowing the interference of any other idea.

I am a partisan of the principle of utility when I measure my approbation or disapprobation of a public or private act by its tendency to produce pleasure or pain: when I employ the words just, unjust, moral, immoral, good, bad, simply as collective terms, including the ideas of certain pains or pleasures: it being always understood that I use the words pain and pleasure in their ordinary signification, without inventing any arbitrary definition for the sake of excluding certain pleasures or denying the existence of certain pains. In this matter we want no refinement, no metaphysics. It is not necessary to consult Plato nor Aristotle. Pain and pleasure are what everybody feels to be such—the peasant and the prince, the unlearned as well as the philosopher.

He adopts the principle of utility, esteems virtue to be a good only on account of the pleasures which result from it: he regards vice as an evil only because of the pains which it produces. Moral good is good only by its tendency to produce physical good. Moral evil is evil only by its tendency to produce physical evil; but when I say physical, I mean the pains and pleasures of the soul as well as the pains and pleasures of sense. I have in view man, such as he is, in his actual constitution.

If the partisan of the principle of utility finds in the common list of virtues an action from which there results more pain than pleasure, he does not hesitate to regard that pretended virtue as a vice; he will not suffer himself to be imposed upon by the general error; he will not lightly believe in the policy of employing false virtues to maintain the truth.

If he finds in the common list of offences some indifferent action, some innocent pleasure, he will not hesitate to transport this pretended offence into the class of lawful actions; he will pity the pretended criminals and will reserve his indignation for their persecutors.

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scheme of things, adjusted, without attempting to impair motives which are fundamental in human nature, and vital to social economy.

If we turn to the relationship of States we shall find it necessary to draw similar distinctions even more clearly; for many causes combine in this field to contract the area with which altruism is likely to win adherence. The man who cries "My country, right or wrong," may or may not be a patriot; but he is certainly not an idealist. The latter in this connection must again be conceived of not merely as one who desires to see the substitution in international practice of Law for War: the complete purification of international morality; and perhaps—

The Parliament of Man, the Federation of the World.

For in this vague sentiment of benevolence many admirable citizens of many countries would concur. But the Idealist in the sense which concerns us is he who believes that these things are in fact attainable; that we ought to take steps and make exertions and take great risks in order to attain them. And he would indeed, in most cases, actually shape the policy of his country, and even compromise its interests, because he believes in the prospects which he indicates, and in the sanctity and infallibility of international compacts. Twenty-four years ago a Tsar of Russia issued to the world a very sonorous and idealist message. It announced the hope that war might be for ever ended. It made specific proposals in that sense. And thus there came into existence a Hague Conference, with the history of which most of us are familiar. It would be foolish to deny that this Conference did some useful work in its secondary tasks—namely, the consideration of international disputes, and the alleviation of avoidable cruelty in the prosecution of war, which is itself in its very essence cruel. But it has achieved absolutely nothing in the direction of its major and more imposing purpose. In a book upon the subject of international law which I wrote immediately after the appearance of the Tsar's communication, I made the following observation:—

No sensible person with the slightest knowledge of history will believe that human nature has so profoundly altered as to afford the most remote prospect that this dream will ever be realized.

This conclusion was much assailed at the time by our sentimentalists. But a few years later that same Russia was hurling men in millions in the attempt to destroy Japan. And continuously thereafter the junto of evil and ambitious men, of whom the Kaiser was alike the mouthpiece and the figure-

head, was projecting the stupendous tragedy which has almost, in its reactions, destroyed the civilization of Europe. Untaught by previous experience; undeterred by the shattering refutation of their beliefs which the Great War brought with it, the Idealists immediately had the originality to exploit its outbreak for their own controversial purposes. It was indeed unfortunate, they admitted, that the war should have occurred at all, and especially war so savagely conducted and flung over so enormous an area of the world's surface. But, after all, it had its bright side. For it was to be a war to end war. This time, at least, when once the ploughshare, according to the correct tradition, had ousted the weapons of war, there was to be no further declension into primeval savagery. And so we were to have a League of Nations consisting in time of all the nations, great and small, in the world; equipped with military and naval force, and therefore able to make good its decisions against a recalcitrant member.

While I thought and think that there was and still is a modest area within which the League of Nations may make useful contribution to the harmony of the world, the larger claims made on its behalf have always seemed to me to be frankly fantastic. Its framers forgot human nature as absurdly as they neglected history. What in the history of the world has ever happened which afforded foothold for expectations so megalomaniac? Divide the history of the world into two broad epochs, with the birth of Jesus Christ as the dividing line. An examination in terms, however general, of these two periods equips a scientific observer with some material for the formation of true decision. Of the earlier period first.

I do not pause to deal here with the countless minor struggles which everywhere marked the infancy of the world. I mention, only to note it, the evidence collected by Darwin and his followers showing at work in every department of life the survival of the fittest. But I must bestow a moment upon the lessons to be derived from the Old Testament. According to Holy Writ, the Chosen People were set in motion in order that they might violently possess themselves of a land flowing with milk and honey. They are "utterly to destroy their enemies." And thereafter we find them over a long period of time, protracted, no doubt, by their own peccadilloes, engaged in violent and bloody strife with various antagonists. It may, of course, be said, in view of their desperate struggles with the Philistines, that the latter were very wicked men. Unfortunately, however, there always have existed in the world wicked men. Perhaps, therefore, it is necessary to import the qualification that

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all wars are to cease, except against very wicked men. But even here a difficulty presents itself. For every war that I know of has recurrently presented the same phenomenon that each protagonist believed, or pretended to believe, in the moral vileness of the other. In 1914, for instance, the French affirmed the Germans to be wicked aggressors, whereas the German people as a whole loudly proclaimed the criminal initiative of Russia. It must, therefore, I think, be admitted that the history of the Chosen People, and indeed the Old Testament, taken as a whole, afford little ground for optimism in this regard. A similar, but more extended, observation falls to be made about all the great Eastern Empires of the ancient world. Indeed, in this connection sombre images throng the mind. Egyptians, Medes, Persians, Assyrians—all these achieved Empire at the point of the sword. Of how many dead Empires does the silent and immobile East contain the record? In what graves repose the millions of their unprotesting slain?

A happier and more humane experience might have been looked for from that exquisite intellectual efflorescence which we associate with the greatest of Greek States. Yet, historically, their records tell of almost continuous strife. So bitterly indeed, and amid such jealousies, did they wage war with one another that they could not combine even against the fierce Macedonian, and so one more rare and beautiful civilization perished utterly from the earth.

To Greece succeeded Rome, teaching the entire world through the whole of its stern, dominating, and Imperial sway, that might was right, and that a sharp sword in the hand of a disciplined soldier was the most persuasive argument in world diplomacy.

And there came, too, in correction, the message of Jesus Christ, tender in its simplicity, superhuman in its humanity. The creed of Him who was crucified was to spread with incredible swiftness over a large part of the world's surface. Mighty powers and great princes have rendered homage to the message of mercy and peace which came from those Divine and persuasive lips. And yet, while we take note of the spread of the Christian religion, we must none the less ask what has been its reaction upon international conduct? What was its influence over the recent world convulsion? What was its spiritual and intellectual contribution to the poignant problem:—Why did an omnipotent Deity suddenly doom so many innocent victims to bestial destruction? Did the greatest priest in the world, enthroned in his Roman Palace, ever pronounce a clear and intelligible conclusion upon the moral responsibility for the

outbreak of war, or upon the methods by which that war was conducted? Was he influenced by the fact that his flock diverged beneath different standards? If so, he ceased to be the divinely appointed mouthpiece of the higher morality, and declined to a place, such as it was, among the politicians.

After a digression, apparently rather than actually irrelevant, we may resume a hurried historical summary.

After Rome, the Barbarians; after the Barbarians, countless decades of anarchical chaos. And then throughout the centuries a long succession of almost uninterrupted wars—wars dynastic; wars territorial; wars on points of honour; and wars of naked aggression. England and France; England and Spain; England and Holland; England and France again; France and Germany; and thereafter the violent emergence of the Hohenzollern dynasty, more cynically based on blood and iron, more determined *debellare superbos*, than any Power since mighty Rome.

Are we really to learn nothing from all that has happened over this immense period of time? Does any warrant exist for the belief that human nature has altered its whole character? And, if so, what is the warrant? And when did that alteration take place? And, more particularly, what evidence of this great Reformation do we find in what has happened in Europe since the Armistice? There have been wars and rumours of wars. I do not myself know of a moment in the last four years in which there has appeared to be less prospect of permanent peace in Europe than at the present moment. Nor is it an answer to say, as some do, that the infirmities of the Treaty of Versailles were responsible for the unrest and the violence which distract Europe to-day. If there were infirmities in that Treaty, these again were infirmities in human nature which cannot be corrected. For the statesmen who put their names to that Treaty—to the territorial re-adjustments of that Treaty—were themselves the mouthpieces of imperious and conquering democracies, and the views under discussion here are largely founded upon the expectation that the human nature of democracies will not undergo much modification. And if it does not they will obtain statesmen malleable to their purposes.

Summing up this branch of the matter, we are bound to conclude that from the very dawn of the world man has been a combative animal. To begin with, he fought violently for his own elemental needs; later, perhaps in tribal or communal quarrel; later still, with the growth of greater communities, upon a larger and more sophisticated scale. And it is to be specially noted that there have nevertheless almost always existed men

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who sincerely, but very foolishly, believed, firstly, that no war would arise in their own day ; and, secondly (when that war did arise), that for some reason or other it would be the last. At this point the idealist degenerates into the pacifist ; and it is at this point consequently that he becomes a danger to the community of which he is a citizen. Athens, in her decline, had no lack of such advisers ; and, unhappily for the City of the Violet Crown, she preferred their sloppy folly to the ardent eloquence of Demosthenes. In the days of Napoleon (who had a very just contempt for these "idealogues") Charles Fox harnessed his eloquence to the chariot of sentimentalism. But he switched rather abruptly as soon as he became Prime Minister. And in our own day we have been afforded convincing evidence of the real peril to national security which arises when idealists grow too strong in the conduct of public affairs. Perhaps this happened in 1906. Every sensible person now realizes that even in that year the German scheme was being nebulously conceived ; and its deadly menace increased with every year which passed. I myself in a book called *Unionist Policy*, published in 1910, devoted a long article, of which I shall presume to say that it was closely and clearly reasoned, to demonstrating the soundness of Lord Roberts's warnings. But the immense increase in the German Army, the construction of strategic railways upon the Belgian boundary, the creation of a mighty fleet, left our idealists unconvinced.

And accordingly, every year the annual meeting of a great federation, with pathetic faith and sincerity, passed resolutions in favour of reducing our military and naval expenditure ; and a member of Parliament, in private life an admirable citizen and a sagacious chemist, Sir John Brunner, produced the immortal saying that he would rather trust to the doctrines of international law than to the protection of the British Fleet. Even the robust patriotism of my friend, Mr. Winston Churchill, succumbed for a fugitive moment to the miasma, though the lapse in his case was to be nobly retrieved by the demoniac energy elicited by actual contact with the Admiralty. It was, indeed, in these years that Idealism became rampant with those in power. Notorious and almost vital facts were everywhere ignored. German editors were entertained by English editors in London, and dilated with fluent eloquence upon the pacific intentions of the Fatherland. English editors in their turn visited Berlin to enjoy, in that martial capital, the same agreeable re-assurances. And all the time the armies grew. All the time a mighty instrument was being fashioned in the German fleet. All the time Heligoland frowned more impregably upon the North

Sea. All the time those great military railways, unneeded for peaceful traffic, were debouching upon the defenceless Belgian frontier. In the welter of sentimentality, amid which Great Britain might easily have mouldered into ruin, my valued colleague, Lord Haldane, presented a figure alike interesting, individual, and arresting. In speech fluent and even infinite he yielded to no living idealist in the easy coinage of sentimental phraseology. Here, indeed, he was a match for those who distributed the chloroform of Berlin. Do we not remember, for instance, that Germany was his spiritual home? But he none the less prepared himself, and the Empire, to talk when the time came with his spiritual friends in language not in the least spiritual. He devised the Territorial Army, which was capable of becoming the easy nucleus of national conscription, and which unquestionably ought to have been used for that purpose at the outbreak of war. He created the Imperial General Staff. He founded the Officers' Training Corps.

And two other names require special and honourable mention in an age of incredible self-deceit. Lord Roberts devoted the evening of an illustrious life to warnings of marvellous prescience which passed almost unheeded. General Baden Powell used the laurels which he had gained at Mafeking to inspire and sustain the noblest and most promising movement which has taken place in our lifetime. The foundation of the Boy Scouts established for this gifted and imaginative soldier a monument more lasting than bronze.

It has been thought worth while to retrace the events of these fateful years with some particularity in order to show that Idealism in national affairs is not merely impracticable, but that it may easily degenerate into a deadly source of national peril.

Still, a further illustration may be drawn from recent events. The signing of the Armistice immediately released all the sentimentalists. Not only was the Great War ended, but there was never to be another. The League of Nations was to be equipped with functions and resources which would in effect en throne it in super-sovereignty over the contributory nations. But herein the statesman who, of all others, should most completely have understood the American people demonstrated that in fact he understood them least of all. That people is the most generous people in the world in the field of international charity. The United States have lavished countless millions of dollars upon the starving population of Russia. They were first in the field with bountiful relief to stricken Japan. But they draw—and rightly draw—a sharp and logical distinction between Idealism in their capacity as private citizens for private charities and

Idealism in their corporate or national character. And accordingly they exercised their undoubted right in repudiating at the first opportunity an idealist conception which they believed to be at once impracticable, strange to their traditions, and incompatible with their national interests.

A broader consideration must now in its turn be examined. We are told that the object aimed at is the abolition of war. Everybody recognizes that war is both cruel and hateful. But is it even conceivable that it can ever be abolished? Is the ownership of the world to be stereotyped by perpetual tenure in the hands of those who possess its different territories to-day? If it is, very strange and undesirable consequences will one day follow. For nations wax and wane, so that a Power competent in one age to govern an empire, perhaps remote, in the general interest of the world, will in another abuse a dominion for which it no longer possesses the necessary degree of vigour. The history of Spain supplies a familiar illustration.

Her chivalry was second to none in Europe. Her high standard of gallant conduct was disfigured only by the cruelties of the Inquisition. Her stately galleons brought a quiver of apprehension even to the stout bosom of Queen Elizabeth, and were never discredited until the rout of her superb Armada. And in exuberant colonial enterprise she was the mistress and pioneer of Europe. In the last-named enterprise, indeed, she flung her civilization and her language into the remote parts of the world, deriving incredible titles from successive Papal Bulls. And coincidentally, or almost so, with her immense maritime enterprise, she flung the martial Moor in rout from Spain. But her decline was as rapid as her ascension. She proved no adequate custodian for her oversea possessions. Had a League of Nations existed when she began to lose them, would it have sustained Spain or the insurgents of Spain, or, in another case, the despoilers of Spain?

And the general extrusion of savage races from regions, for instance, the American continent and certain of the South Sea Islands, to which they had some considerable legal right, shows that, rightly or wrongly, nations of stronger fibre, confronted by indigenous weaklings, have always asserted the right of forcible expropriation. No one (to make the argument short) who has studied the history of the world has ever defended the view that the supreme interest of evolutionary humanity can support a definite delimitation for all time of the surface of the world.

But if such a final distribution is impracticable, and even undesirable, by what agency are modifications to be made? Volun-

tary cessions of territory have not been frequent in the past ; and there seems little reason to suppose that they will become more fashionable in the future. For many thousands of years the emergence of new and martial nations has been gradually marked by violent re-adjustments of national boundaries. It may, of course, be the case that human nature has so completely altered that some new method is discoverable. I confess, however, that none has up to the present occurred to my own mind.

It may, perhaps, be charged against those who sincerely hold the views which I have attempted to make plain, that we carry in our veins the virus which coloured the sombre and unmoral genius of Nietzsche, and which found popular expression in the mosquito propaganda of Von Bernhardi. But such a charge, if made, would be patently unjust. We neither hold nor have we preached these doctrines. We diagnose certain diseases. We did not create them. A distinction must surely be drawn between him who calls attention to the risk of conflagration and that other who puts his torch to inflammable material.

The purpose and moral of these general observations may be summarized in a few concluding observations. For as long a time as the records of history have been preserved, human societies have passed through a ceaseless process of evolution and adjustment. This process has been sometimes pacific, but more often it has resulted from warlike disturbance. The strength of different nations, measured in terms of arms, varies from century to century. The world continues to offer glittering prizes to those who have stout hearts and sharp swords ; it is therefore extremely improbable that the experience of future ages will differ in any material respect from that which has happened since the twilight of the human race. It is for us, therefore, who in our history have proved ourselves a martial, rather than a military, people to abstain, as has been our habit, from provocation ; but to maintain in our own hand the adequate means for our own protection, and, so equipped, to march with heads erect and bright eyes along the road of our Imperial destiny.