



## **Bertrand Russell: Columns for the Hearst Newspapers**

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## • “How to Become a Man of Genius”

If there are among my readers any young men or women who aspire to become leaders of thought in their generation, I hope they will avoid certain errors into which I fell in youth for want of good advice. When I wished to form an opinion upon a subject, I used to study it, weigh the arguments on different sides, and attempt to reach a balanced conclusion. I have since discovered that this is not the way to do things. A man of genius knows it all without the need of study; his opinions are pontifical and depend for their persuasiveness upon literary style rather than argument. It is necessary to be one-sided, since this facilitates the vehemence that is considered a proof of strength. It is essential to appeal to prejudices and passions of which men have begun to feel ashamed and to do this in the name of some new ineffable ethic. It is well to decry the slow and pettifogging minds which require evidence in order to reach conclusions. Above all, whatever is most ancient should be dished up as the very latest thing.

There is no novelty in this recipe for genius; it was practised by Carlyle in the time of our grandfathers, and by Nietzsche in the time of our fathers, and it has been practised in our own time by D. H. Lawrence. Lawrence is considered by his disciples to have enunciated all sorts of new wisdom about the relations of men and women; in actual fact he has gone back to advocating the domination of the male which one associates with the cave dwellers. Woman exists, in his philosophy, only as something soft and fat to rest the hero when he returns from his labours. Civilised societies have been learning to see something more than this in women; Lawrence will have nothing of civilisation. He scours the world for what is ancient and dark and loves the traces of Aztec cruelty in Mexico. Young men, who had been learning to behave, naturally read him with delight and go round practising cave-man stuff so far as the usages of polite society will permit.

One of the most important elements of success in becoming a man of genius is to learn the art of denunciation. You must always denounce in such a way that your reader thinks that it is the other fellow who is being denounced and not himself; in that case he will be impressed by your noble scorn, whereas if he thinks that it is himself that you are denouncing, he will consider that you are guilty of ill-bred peevishness. Carlyle remarked: “The population of England is twenty millions, mostly fools.” Everybody who read this considered himself one of the exceptions, and therefore enjoyed the remark. You must not denounce well-defined classes, such as persons with more than a certain income, inhabitants of a certain area, or believers in some definite creed; for if you do this, some readers will know that your invective is directed against them. You must denounce persons whose emotions are atrophied, persons to whom only plodding study can reveal the truth, for we all know that these are other people, and we shall therefore view with sympathy your powerful diagnosis of the evils of the age.

Ignore fact and reason, live entirely in the world of your own fantastic and myth-producing passions; do this whole-heartedly and with conviction, and you will become one of the prophets of your age.

*28 December 1932*

## • “Of Co-Operation”

In these days, under the influence of democracy, the virtue of co-operation has taken the place formerly held by obedience. The old-fashioned schoolmaster would say of a boy that he was disobedient; the modern schoolmistress says of an infant that he is non-co-operative. It means the same thing: the child, in either case, fails to do what the teacher wishes, but in the first case the teacher acts as the government and in the second as the representative of the People, i.e. of the other children. The result of the new language, as of the old, is to encourage docility, suggestibility, herd-instinct and conventionality, thereby necessarily discouraging originality, initiative and unusual intelligence. Adults who achieve anything of value have seldom been “co-operative” children. As a rule, they have liked solitude: they have tried to slink into a corner with a book and been happiest when they could escape the notice of their barbarian contemporaries. Almost all men who have been distinguished as artists, writers or men of science have in boyhood been objects of derision and contempt to their schoolfellows; and only too often the teachers have sided with the herd, because it annoyed them that a boy should be odd.

It ought to be part of the training of all teachers to be taught to recognise the marks of unusual intelligence in children and to restrain the irritation caused in themselves by anything so unusual. Until this is done, a large proportion of the best talent in America will be persecuted out of existence before the age of fifteen. Co-operativeness, as an ideal, is defective: it is right to live with reference to the community and not for oneself alone, but living for the community does not mean doing what it does. Suppose you are in a theatre which catches fire, and there is a stampede: the person who has learnt no higher morality than what is called “co-operation” will join in the stampede since he will possess no inner force that would enable him to stand up against the herd. The psychology of a nation embarking on a war is at all points identical.

I do not wish, however, to push the doctrine of individual initiative too far. Godwin, who became Shelley's father-in-law because Shelley so much admired him, asserted that “everything that is usually understood by the term ‘co-operation’ is in some degree an evil.” He admits that, at present, “to pull down a tree, to cut a canal, to navigate a vessel requires the labour of many”, but he looks forward to the time when machinery is so perfected that one man unaided will be able to do any of these things. He thinks also that hereafter there will be no orchestra. “Shall we have concerts of music?” he says. “The miserable state of mechanism of the majority of the performers is so conspicuous as to be even at this day a topic of mortification and ridicule. Will it not be practicable hereafter for one man to perform the whole?” He goes on to suggest that the solitary performer will insist on playing his own productions and refuse to be the slave of composers dead and gone.

All this is, of course, ridiculous, and for my part I find it salutary to see my own opinions thus caricatured. I remain none the less convinced that our age, partly as a result of democratic sentiment, and partly because of the complexity of machine production, is in

danger of carrying the doctrine of co-operativeness to lengths which will be fatal to individual excellence, not only in its more anarchic forms, but also in forms which are essential to social progress. Perhaps, therefore, even a man like Godwin may have something to teach those who believe that social conformity is the beginning and end of virtue.

*18 May 1932*

*It may be noted that Russell himself was educated by tutors at home until he went to Cambridge, and so is unlikely to be expressing personal animus against his own teachers and school-fellows, of which he had none.*

## • “On Astrologers”

There is always something pathetic about a great and ancient tradition which has fallen on evil days. The astrologer, as one pictures him in the past, is an aged sage with a long white beard, speaking in a slow and trance-like manner, and felt by his auditors and himself to be possessed of mystical lore. In his most glorious days, he controlled the destiny of nations: among the Chaldeans, he stood to the King in the same relation as the Governor of the Bank of England now stands to the Prime Minister. In ancient Rome he was revered, except by a few rationalistic Emperors, who banished from the City all “mathematicians”, as they were called. The Arabs consulted them on all important occasions; the wisest men of the Renaissance believed in them, and Kepler, the great astronomer, had to become an astrologer in order to win respect and a livelihood.

Astrologers still exist; it has been my good fortune to know several. But how different they are from the magnificent beings of former times! They are, so far as I have come across them, hard-working and highly meritorious business men or women, with an aged mother or an invalid husband to support. They follow by rule of thumb the ancient formulae about the House of Life and planets in the ascendant and the rest of it, but their language is sadly modernised, and their horoscopes, instead of being inscribed cabalistically upon parchment, are neatly typed upon the best quarto typing paper. In this, they commit an error of judgement which makes it difficult to have faith in their power of deciphering the future in the stars.

Do they believe themselves in the sciences that they profess? This is a difficult question. Everything marvellous is believed by some people, and it is not improbable that professional astrologers are of this type. And even if they are aware that their own performances are largely guesswork and inferences from information obtained otherwise, they probably think that there are superior practitioners who never resort to these inferior methods. There was once a worthy man who made a vast fortune by professing to have discovered how to make gold out of sea water. He decamped to South America before it was too late and prepared to live happily ever after. Unfortunately another man professed to have made the same discovery; our friend believed in him, invested all his money in the new process, and lost every penny. This incident shows that people are often less dishonest than they might be thought to be, and probably professional astrologers are in the main honourably convinced of the truth of their doctrines.

That this should be possible is creditable to them but very discreditable to our educational system. In schools and universities information of all sorts is ladled out, but no one is taught to reason, or to consider what is evidence for what. To any person with even the vaguest idea of the nature of scientific evidence, such beliefs as those of astrologers are of course impossible. But so are most of the beliefs upon which governments are based, such as the peculiar merit of persons living in a certain area, or of persons whose income exceeds a certain sum. It would not do to teach people to reason correctly, since the result

would be to undermine these beliefs. If these beliefs were to fade, mankind might escape disaster, but politicians could not. At all costs, therefore, we must be kept stupid.

*28 September 1932*

## • “On Modern Uncertainty”

There have been four sorts of ages in the world's history. There have been ages when everybody thought they knew everything, ages when nobody thought they knew anything, ages when clever people thought they knew much and stupid people thought they knew little, and ages when stupid people thought they knew much and clever people thought they knew little. The first sort of age is one of stability, the second of slow decay, the third of progress, the fourth of disaster. All primitive ages belong to the first sort: no one has any doubt as to the tribal religion, the wisdom of ancient customs, or the magic by which good crops are to be secured; consequently everyone is happy in the absence of some tangible reason, such as starvation, for being unhappy.

The second sort of age is exemplified by the ancient world before the rise of Christianity but after decadence had begun. In the Roman Empire, tribal religions lost their exclusiveness and force: in proportion as people came to think that there might be truth in religions of others, they also came to think that their might be falsehood in their own. Eastern necromancy was half believed, half disbelieved; the German barbarians were supposed to possess virtues that the more civilised portions of mankind had lost. Consequently everybody doubted everything, and doubt paralysed effort.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, exactly the opposite happened. Science and scientific technique were a novelty, and gave immense self-confidence to those who understood them. Their triumphs were obvious and astonishing. Repeatedly, when the Chinese Emperor had decided to persecute the Jesuits, they would turn out to be right about the date of an expected eclipse when the imperial astronomers were wrong, and the Emperor would decide that such clever men, after all, deserved his favours. In England, those who introduced scientific methods in agriculture obtained visibly larger crops than those who adhered to old-time methods, while in manufactures team and machinery put the conservatives to flight. There came, therefore, to be a general belief in educated intelligence. Those who did not possess it allowed themselves to be guided by those who did, and an era of rapid progress resulted.

In our age, the exact opposite is the case. Men of science like Eddington are doubtful whether science really knows anything. Economists perceive that the accepted methods of doing the world's business are making everybody poor. Statesmen cannot find any way of securing international co-operation or preventing war. Philosophers have no guidance to offer mankind. The only people left with positive opinions are those who are too stupid to know when their opinions are absurd. Consequently the world is ruled by fools, and the intelligent count for nothing in the councils of the nations.

This state of affairs, if it continues, must plunge the world more and more deeply into misfortune. The scepticism of the intelligent is the cause of their impotence, and is itself the effect of their laziness: if there is nothing worth doing, that gives an excuse for sitting still. But when disaster is impending, no excuse for sitting still can be valid. The

intelligent will have to shed their scepticism, or share responsibility for the evils which all deplore. And they will have to abandon academic grumblings and peevish pedantries, for nothing that they any say will be of any use unless they learn to speak a language that the democracy can appreciate.

*20 July 1932*



## • “On Sales Resistance”

Throughout recent years, a vast amount of money and time and brains has been employed in overcoming sales resistance, i.e. in inducing unoffending persons to waste their money in purchasing objects which they had no desire to possess. It is characteristic of our age that this sort of thing is considered meritorious: lectures are given on salesmanship, and those who possess the art are highly rewarded. Yet, if a moment's consideration is given to the matter, it is clear that the activity is a noxious one which does more harm than good. Some hard-working professional man, for example, who has been saving up with a view to giving his family a pleasant summer holiday, is beset in a weak moment by a highly trained bandit who wants to sell him a grand piano. He points out that that he has no room large enough to house it, but the bandit shows that, by knocking down a bit of wall, the tail of the piano can be made to project from the living room into the best bedroom. Paterfamilias says that he and his wife do not play the piano and his oldest daughter has only just begun to learn scales. “The very reason why you should buy my piano” says the bandit. “On ordinary pianos scales may be tiresome, but on mine they have all the depth of the most exquisite melody.” The harassed householder mentions that he has an engagement and cannot stay any longer. The bandit threatens to come again next day; so, in despair, the victim gives way and his children have to forgo their seaside holiday, while his wife's complaints are a sauce to every meal throughout the summer.

In return for all this misery, the salesman has a mere commission and the man whose piano is being sold obtains whatever percentage of the price presents his profits. Yet, both are thought to have deserved well of their country since their enterprise is supposed to be good for business.

All this topsy-turvydom is due to the fact that everything economic is looked upon from the standpoint of the producer rather than of the consumer. In former times, it was thought that bread is baked in order to be eaten; nowadays we think that it is eaten in order to be baked. When we spend money, we are expected to do so not with a view to our enjoyment of what we purchase but to enrich those who have manufactured it. Since the greatest of virtues is business skill and since skill is shown in making people buy what they don't want rather than what they do, the man who is most respected is the one who has caused the most pain to purchasers. All this is connected with a quite elementary mistake, namely, failure to realise that what a man spends in one direction he has to save in another so that bullying is not likely to increase his total expenditure. But partly also it is connected with the notion that a man's working hours are the only important part of his life and that what he does with the rest of his time is unimportant unless it affects other men's working hours. A few clergymen, it is true, speak of the American home and the joys of family life, but that is regarded merely as *their* professional talk, against which a very considerable sales resistance has grown up. And so everything is done for the sake of something else. We make money not in order to enjoy what it provides but in order that in spending it we may enable others to make money which they will spend in enabling yet others to make money which.... But the end of this is bedlam.

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