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Author: Murray, George Gilbert Aimé (1866-1957)

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FAITH, WAR, AND POLICY

III

HERD INSTINCT AND THE WAR ^[1]

(February, 1915)

At the Natural History Museum, South Kensington, close to the entrance, you can buy for the sum of fourpence a most fascinating little book on "The Fossil Remains of Man." It is official and, I presume, authoritative. And it tells how, in very remote times, before there was any South Kensington Museum, or any England, or, I believe, in the strict sense, any Europe, there lived in swampy forests in various parts of the world, troops of little lemur-like tree-dwellers. They were, I suppose, rather like small monkeys, but much prettier. They had nice fur, good prehensile tails, and effective teeth. Then there fell upon them, or some of them, a momentous change, a hypertrophy or overdevelopment of one part of the body. This kind of special increase, the author tells us, seldom stops till it becomes excessive. With the lemurs it was the brain which began to grow. It grew and grew, both in size and in complexity. The rest of the body suffered in consequence. The fur became mangy and disappeared. The prehensile tails wasted away. The teeth ceased to be useful as weapons. And in the end, ladies and gentlemen, after incalculable ages, here we are!

Now these lemurs had certain instincts and habits of life. Let us define our terms. By an instinct I mean, following the exposition of Dr. McDougall, an innate psycho-physical disposition to notice objects of a certain class, to feel about them in certain ways and to act correspondingly. They would notice an enemy, hate him, and spit at him; notice an object that was good to eat, desire it, and eat it. They made love, they protected their young, they defended their group against other groups. And primitive man inherited, with modifications, their instincts, and we have similarly inherited his. Some of them were generally desirable, and are consequently admitted and encouraged; others were generally undesirable, and have been habitually denied and suppressed in our conscious life, only to break out in dreams, in fits of insanity or passion, or more subtly in self-deception. But, suppressed or unsuppressed, man's instincts form the normal motive force in his life, though the direction of that force may from time to time be controlled by conscious reason.

From this point of view I wish to consider what has happened to us in England since August 4, 1914. For that something has happened is quite clear. There is an inward change, which some people praise and some blame. There is a greater seriousness in life, less complaining, less obvious selfishness, and more hardihood. There is a universal power of self-sacrifice whose existence we never suspected before: on every side young men are ready to go and face death for their country, and parents are ready to let them go. There is more brotherhood and more real democracy; and at the same time, a quality of which we stood in much need, far more discipline and obedience.

This makes a very strong case on the good side. Yet, on the other, you will find generally that reformers and idealists are disheartened. Friends of peace, of women's causes, of legal reform, of the mitigation of cruelty to animals, are all reduced to something like impotence. One hears the statement that "there is no Christianity left." The very increase of power and devotion which has occurred is directed, so some say, to the service of evil. The same process has taken place in Germany, and has there apparently reached a higher degree of intensity. To leave aside its more insane manifestations, a Danish friend sends me the following quotation from a German religious poet, much admired in evangelical circles: "We have become the nation of wrath.... We accomplish the almighty will of God, and will vengefully wreak the demands of His righteousness on the godless, filled with sacred fury.... We are bound together like a scourge of punishment whose name is War. We flame like lightning. Our wounds blossom like rose-gardens at the gate of heaven. Thanks be to Thee, God Almighty! Thy wrathful awakening does away with our sins. As the iron in Thy hand we smite all our enemies on the cheekbone." Another poet, a clergyman, prays that the Germans may not fall into the temptation of carrying out the judgements of God's wrath with too great mildness. Now the state of mind which these poems reveal—and I dare say they could be paralleled or nearly paralleled in England—is compatible with great self-sacrifice and heroism, but it is certainly not what one would call wholesome.

In order to understand this change as a whole, it is necessary to analyze it; and I would venture to suggest that, in the main, it consists simply in an immense stimulation of the herd or group instincts, though, of course, other instincts are also involved. For the present, let us neither praise nor blame, but simply analyze. At the end we may have some conclusion to draw.

Man is by nature a gregarious animal and is swayed by herd instincts, as a gregarious animal must be; but of course they are greatly modified. Outside mankind we find these instincts in various grades of development. They show strongest in ants and bees, with their communal life of utter self-sacrifice, utter ruthlessness. I see that Professor Julian Huxley, in his book on "The Individual in the Animal Kingdom," doubts whether among ants the single ant or the whole ant-heap is really the individual. I remember a traveller in northern Australia narrating how he once saw a procession of white ants making towards his camp, and to head them off sprinkled across their line of advance a train of bluestone, or sulphate of copper. And instead of turning aside, each ant as he came up threw himself on the horribly corrosive stuff and devoured it till he fell dead; and presently the main army marched on over a line consisting no longer of bluestone, but of dead ants.

The instinct is less overpowering in cattle, horses, wolves, etc. Certain wild cattle in South Africa are taken by Galton as types of it. In ordinary herd life they show no interest in one another, much less any mutual affection. But if one is taken out of the herd and put by himself he pines, and when he is taken back to the herd he shoves and nozzles to the very centre of it. Wolves, again, will fight for their pack, but not from mutual affection. If the pack is not threatened, they will readily fight and kill one another. A dog in domesticated conditions is especially interesting. He has been taken away from his pack, but he retains his fundamental habits. He barks to call his mates on every emergency, even if barking frightens his prey away. He sniffs at everything when he is out walking, because he has wanted so long to find his way home to the lost pack. His real pack is now artificial, grouped round his master. It will take in his master's friends and house-companions, including quite possibly various animals such as cats and rabbits. Meantime he rejects the strange man and cheerfully kills the strange cat or rabbit. His delightful friendliness and sympathy are of course due to his herd habits. A cat has no herd. She has always "walked alone."

Now man satisfies his herd instinct by many groups, mainly artificial. Like the dog, he may take in other animals. In ordinary life the group of which he is most conscious is his social class, especially if it is threatened in any way. Clergymen, landowners, teachers, coal-miners tend, as the phrase is, to hang together. They have the same material interests and the same habits of life. Again, there may be local groups, counties or villages, or groups dependent on ideas and beliefs, a church, a party in politics, a clique in art. But of all groups, far the strongest when it is once roused is the nation, and it is the nation that is roused now.

Normally men of science form a group, so do theologians. But now they feel no longer as men of science or theologians, they feel as Englishmen or Germans. I see that the Archbishop of Munich has expressed a doubt whether "any appreciable number of Belgian priests" have been "irregularly killed" by German soldiers. There is an absence of class feeling about this remark which few clergymen could attain in peace time. I see that even the German Jesuits are sharply differing from the rest of the Jesuits, an order famous throughout history for its extreme cohesion and discipline. The only bodies that have at all asserted themselves against the main current of feeling in the various nations have been a few isolated Intellectuals and some small groups of International Socialists. It was easier for these last, since with them Internationalism was not only a principle, but a habit, and, besides, they were accustomed in ordinary life to be against their own government and to differ from their neighbours.

In the main, what has happened is very simple. In all wild herds we find that the strength of this instinct depends upon the need for it. As soon as the herd is in danger, the herd instinct flames up in passion to defend it. The members of the herd first gather together, and then fight or fly. This is what has happened to us. Our herd is in danger, and our natural herd instinct is aflame. Let us notice certain different ways in which it operates.

First, the herd unites. Wolves who are quarrelling cease when menaced by a common enemy. Cattle and horses draw together. We in England find ourselves a band of brothers; and the same of course occurs in Germany. Indeed, it probably occurs even more strongly there, since all herd emotions there tend to be passionately expressed and officially encouraged. Those who are ordinarily separate have drawn together. Canada, Australia, India, even Crown colonies like Fiji, seem to be feeling a common emotion. A year or so ago one might see in the advertisements of employment in Canadian newspapers the words, "No English need apply." You would not find them now. Even the United States have drawn close to us. Of course in part this is due to the goodness of our cause, to sympathy with the wrongs of Belgium,

and the like. Most neutrals are somewhat on our side. But herd instinct is clearly present; or why do the German-Americans side with the Germans?

Even those who are ordinarily at strife have drawn together. Before the war our whole people seemed at strife with itself, how far from natural causes and how far from definite intrigue on the part of Germany history will doubtless show. We had the Militant Suffragists, we had an utterly extraordinary number of strikes and a great deal of rebellion against trade-union leaders, we had trouble in India, terrific threats in Ireland. And on the whole, now these various enemies have "made it up." Of course it was much harder for them than for those who were merely separated by distance. There were serious obstacles in the way; habits of anger, habits of suspicion; often the mere routine of party attack which comes natural to small groups in strong opposition to a government. As a journalist said to me: "I mostly keep the truce all right; but sometimes, when one is tired and has nothing particular to say, one drops into abusing McKenna."

The chief problem that arises in this general drawing together is the problem of fidelity to the lesser herd. Sometimes there is no clash between the lesser and the greater. A man's emotion towards his family, his associates, his native district, causes as a rule no clash. On the contrary, it is usually kindled and strengthened by some sort of analogy or some emotional infection. The emotions of loyalty, of love to one's neighbours and surroundings, are all stirred; and the family emotions in particular, being themselves very ancient and deep-rooted in our instinctive nature, have grown stronger together with those of the herd.

But often there is a clash. For instance, an individual who has recently been in Germany and made close friends there will, out of loyalty to this friendship, rebel against the current anti-German passion, and so become "pro-German." I mean by "pro-German," not one who wishes the Germans to win,—I know of none such,—but one who habitually interprets doubtful questions in a way sympathetic to Germany. Again, there are a few people who, on one ground or another, disapproved of the declaration of war. They are attacked and maligned: their friends naturally stand by them. The whole group hits back angrily and becomes, in the same sense, pro-German. Then there are people who are influenced by a peculiar form of pugnacity which is often miscalled "love of justice." It is really a habit of irritation at excess which finds vent not in justice, but in counter-excess. "So-and-so is overpraised; for Heaven's sake, let us bring him down a peg! Every fool I meet is emotionalized about the German treatment of Belgium; can we not somehow—somehow—show that no harm was done, or that Belgium deserved it, or at least that it was all the fault of the Russians?" People of these types and others form, some generous and some perverse, both here and in Germany, a protesting small herd in reaction against the great herd. Thus the herd draws together, though lesser and protesting herds within it may do the same.

Secondly, in time of danger the individual subordinates himself to the herd. He ceases to make claims upon it, he desires passionately to serve it. He is miserable and unsatisfied if there is no public work found for him. Discipline consequently becomes easy and automatic. I know of one case where a number of recruits in a certain new regiment were drawn from a local trade union of pugnacious traditions. One of them was punished for something or other. The rest instinctively proposed to strike, but even as they proposed it found themselves in the grip of a stronger instinct. They hesitated for an instant and then obeyed orders. Again, I seem to have noticed that there is in most people an active desire to be ordered about. We like a drill-sergeant to speak to us severely, much as you speak to a dog which has not yet been naughty but looks as if he meant to be. In ordinary life, when a man has to obey and submit, he feels small. The action is accompanied by what Mr. McDougall calls "negative self-feeling." But now, it seems, we actually have a sense of pride when we are ordered about. It makes us feel that we are really serving.

We may notice here a curious side-movement, a counter-action to the main stream making for union. Such counter-actions are, of course, always to be expected and need cause no surprise. Why is it that, among these great steady forces of union and mutual trust, we have sudden flashes of the very opposite, especially of wild suspicions of the herd-leaders? I do not mean mere spy-mania. That is simple enough, a morbid excess of a perfectly natural feeling directed against the common enemy. You desire passionately to capture a real German spy; and, since you cannot find one, you make up a bogus one and capture him. I mean a similar mania, though much weaker and rarer, directed against the herd itself: the semi-insane suspicions of Prince Louis of Battenberg, of Lord Haldane, and of persons even more exalted. Partly, these impulses are the remains of old quarrels in feeble minds. But partly they have a real biological origin. For

while, in ordinary dangers, the safety of the future race depends on the individuals serving and trusting their herd, there are moments when the only chance of safety lies in their deserting and rejecting it. If once the herd is really conquered and in the power of the enemy, then the cry must be "*Sauve qui peut*," and the panic which is generally disastrous is now a protection. Thus these small cases of panic, though practically unimportant, are psychologically interesting and have their proper evolutionist explanation.

So far we have found, first, that the herd draws together, and next, that the individual subordinates himself to the herd. Thirdly, it seems clear that this closer herd union has an effect upon the emotions, and a two-fold effect. As all readers of psychology know, herd union intensifies all the emotions which are felt in common. The effect is so strong and so striking that some writers have treated it as a kind of mystery and described it in language that is almost mythological. But there does not seem to be anything inexplicable in the matter. Emotion is infectious. Each member of a herd which is in the grasp of some emotion is himself in a "suggestible" state and is also exerting "suggestion" upon his neighbours. They are all directly stimulating his emotion and he theirs. And doubtless we should also remember that, herd emotion being itself a very old and deep-rooted animal affection, its stimulation has probably a sympathetic effect on all kinds of similar disturbances, such as fear and anger and animal desires of various sorts.

Furthermore, herd union often gives the suppressed subconscious forces their chance of satisfaction. Hence come the atrocities committed by crowds. Some dormant desire, existing in your nature but normally suppressed, is suddenly encouraged by suggestion. You see a look in your neighbour's face, and he in yours; and in a flash you both know what that look means. You dare to own a feeling which, in your normal condition, you would have strangled unborn. Suppressed instinct calls to instinct across the gulf of personality, and the infamous thing is half done. For the herd, besides tempting you, also offers you a road of impunity. You can repudiate responsibility afterwards. It is never exactly you that really did the thing. It is the crowd that did it, and the crowd has now ceased to exist. M. Lenôtre, in his studies of the French Revolution, has commented on the somewhat ghastly fact that in moments of herd excitement people on the verge of lunacy, people touched by persecution mania, by suspicion mania, by actual homicidal mania, are apt to become leaders and inspire confidence. The same phenomenon has been noticed in certain revolutionary movements in Russia.

In England, fortunately, there has been so far almost no field for this kind of dangerous herd excitement. There has been of course some ferocity in speech, a comparatively harmless safety-valve for bad feelings, and in some persons a preferable alternative to apoplexy; but no violent actions and, I think, among decent people, extraordinarily little vindictiveness.

But herd union does not intensify all emotions. It intensifies those which are felt in common, but it actually deadens and shuts down those which are only felt by the individual. The herd is, as a matter of fact, habitually callous towards the sufferings of its individual members, and it infects each member with its own callousness. To take a trifling instance, a friend writes to me thus: "I discovered one day on a march that my boot was hurting me; after an hour or so it became obvious that my foot was bleeding. In ordinary times I should have made a fuss and insisted on sympathy, and certainly not gone on walking for several miles. But as it was, moving in a steady mass of people who were uninterested in my boots, and I in theirs, I marched on without making any remark or even feeling much."

The ramifications of this herd callousness are very curious and intricate. It acts even with fear, that most contagious of emotions. The herd deadens the fears of the individual so long as they do not become real herd fears. Untrained troops will advance in close masses. It needs good troops to advance individually in open order. The close masses are much more dangerous and the open order less so, but in the close mass the herd is all round you, buttressing you and warming you, and it deadens your private fear. It may also be that there is here some hereditary instinct at work, derived from a time when the act of huddling together was a real protection, as it is with sheep and cattle attacked by wolves.

If this herd callousness acts with fear, it acts of course far more with scruples or pities. The first scruple or ruth or criticism of the herd must rise in the breast of some individual. If, by good luck, at the same moment it occurs to some dozen other men, it has a chance of asserting itself. Otherwise there is only the single unit standing up, in his infinite weakness, against the great herd. The scruple is silenced and dies.

Of course, in actual warfare this callousness is immensely increased by the nature of the work which the combatants are doing, and the immense change in their habitual standard of expectation. You cannot always be pitying people, or you would never get on with your business. A friend of mine, a clever and kindly man, told me how he and his men, after a long spell in the trenches, utterly tired and chilled and dropping with sleep, had at last got into their billets—a sort of warm cellar where they could just squeeze in. They heard the scream of shrapnel sweeping the street outside, and some

soldiers of another regiment and nationality ran up to the door begging for admittance and shelter. With one voice, so my friend said, he and his men growled at them and slammed the door in their faces. It was their own cellar, and these people were intruders. And they shut them out into the shrapnel much as, in ordinary circumstances, they would perhaps have felt justified in shutting them out into the rain. The strangest development of all is perhaps the disregard of the herd for its wounded, and the readiness of the wounded themselves to be so disregarded. Of course there are abundant cases of the opposite sort, where individuals show the utmost regard for the wounded, risk their lives for them, and count no labour too hard for their sake. But I have certainly met with well-authenticated stories, notably of incidents in the German and Japanese and Turkish armies, which seem to take one back to some rather primitive instincts. The true animal herd hates its wounded and kills them; cattle, wolves, porpoises, every herd of gregarious animals does the same. Of course it hates them. They not only tend to hamper its movements, but they present vividly to its eyes and senses the very thing that it most loathes—its own blood and pain. And one finds also curious instances where the wounded man himself is so absorbed in the general herd emotion that he insists, even angrily, on being left alone.

Thus, under the influence of herd union, common emotions are intensified, individual emotions deadened.

Now thought, unlike emotion, is markedly individual and personal. It is not infectious. It is communicated by articulate language. The herd growls, cries, sobs, sometimes laughs; but it finds speech very difficult. Again, thought is critical, and the herd wants unanimity, not criticism. Consequently herd union deadens thought.

True, the herd leader must think and plan, and the herd will obey him. In an organized army, where discipline and organization powerfully counteract many of the normal herd characteristics, thought sits enthroned and directs the whole mass. But it is a special kind of thought, under central control and devoted simply to attaining the purposes of the herd. Other thought is inhibited.

For instance, if the herd is angry, it is quite simply angry with another herd. This state of mind is normal among savages and primitive men. Some one belonging to a tribe over the river has speared one of our cows, therefore we catch some other person belonging to a different tribe over the river and club him on the head. Herd justice is satisfied. It only sees things in herds. "The Germans" did so-and-so; therefore punish "the Germans": "the English" did so-and-so; therefore punish "the English." Whenever a herd is offended by some action, it is made happy by punishing as dramatically as possible several people who did not do it. Collective anger, collective punishment, is always opposed to justice, because justice applies only to individuals. And again, the more angry a herd is, the less evidence it needs that there is due cause for its anger. Accuse a man of some irregularity in his accounts, and the herd will expect to have the charge duly proved. But accuse him of having drenched little girls in paraffin and set fire to them, and the herd will very likely tear him—or some one else—to pieces at once without further evidence.

By this process of killing out thought the herd sinks all its members in itself and assimilates them to an average. And this average is in some ways above but in most considerably below that of the average man in normal life. For it is that of the average man not thinking but merely feeling. Only the leader has the function of thinking; hence his enormous and uncanny power.

Lastly, let us consider the effect of this herd union on religion. At first sight the answer would seem simple. Religion is a network of primitive collective emotions, and any stimulus which works upon such emotions is likely, by force of sympathy, to rouse religious emotion at the same time. At any rate some of the causes which have recently roused herd emotion in Europe are just the causes on which religious emotion is often said to be based. Man has been made to feel the presence of terrific forces over which he has no control. He has been taught, crudely and violently, his dependence on the unknown. On this line of reasoning, the religious life of the world should be greatly intensified. Yet there are serious considerations leading to the opposite conclusion. A world so mad and evil, however terrific, can hardly seem like the mirror in which to see God. I remember a dreadful incident in one of the consular reports of the Armenian massacres of 1895. At that time the universal dread and horror throughout Armenia sent most people praying day and night in the churches. But the report tells of one woman who sat by the road and refused to pray. "Do you not see what has happened?" she said. "God has gone mad. It is no use to pray to Him." I have myself talked on different days to two soldiers who gave vivid accounts of the hideous proceedings of the war in Flanders and of their own feelings of terror. Their accounts agreed, but the conclusions they drew were different. One man ended by saying with a sort of gasp: "It

made you believe in God, I can tell you." The other, a more thoughtful man, said: "It made you doubt the existence of God." I think that the effect of this year of history will be to discourage the higher kind of religion and immensely strengthen the lower.

Let me try to analyze this conclusion more closely, and see what we mean in this context by "higher" and "lower." I hope that most of my hearers will agree with me, or at least not disagree violently, in assuming that the attributes which a man ascribes to his God are conditioned by his own mind, its limitations and its direction. I could, if necessary, quote at least one Father of the Church in support of such a view. Thus the God whom a man worships is in some form a projection of his own personality. The respective Gods of a seventeenth-century Puritan, a Quaker, an Arab, a South-Sea Islander, will all differ as their worshippers differ, and the human qualities attributed to each will be projections of the emotions of the worshipper. Thus, the lower, and often the more passionate, religion will be directed towards a God who is a projection of the worshipper's own terrors and angers and desires and selfishness. The higher religion weaves its conception of God more out of its duties and its aspirations. To one of those soldiers whom I mentioned above God was evidently a Being of pure terror, fitly mirrored by the action of a host of high-explosive shells. To many people in great oppression, again, God is almost an incarnation of their desire for revenge: let those who doubt it read the history of persecution. To others, an incarnation of Self. Some of you will have seen Mr. Dyson's finely tragic cartoon entitled "Alone with his God." It represents the Kaiser kneeling, a devout and fully armed figure, before another Kaiser exactly the same in dress and feature, but gigantic, august, enthroned amid the incense of ruined towns and burning churches, blindly staring and inexpressibly sad. It is a picture to ponder on.

All these emotions, the self-worship, the hate, the revenge, the terror, will be stimulated, and so will the kind of religion that depends on them. The higher religion, of which it is less easy to speak, which expresses itself in the love of righteousness, in the sense of one's own imperfection, in the aspiration after a better life and a world with more love in it...that sort of religion, I fear, will chiefly come in reaction. It cannot be the main flood. There is too much reflection in it, too much inhibition. The main flood of herd emotion will sweep over it for the time being, but it will not die. There is a strange life in the things of the spirit.

I suggested at the beginning of this very rough and sketchy analysis that perhaps at the end we might be able to pass some definite moral judgement on the change which has taken place in us, and say whether it is a good or a bad change. But I fear that the suggestion has not been realized. Herd instinct in itself is neither good nor bad. It is simply part of the stuff of life, an immense store of vitality out of which both good and evil, extreme good and extreme evil, can spring.

Thus it is impossible to say without qualification that we ought to rejoice in this stimulation of our herd instincts or that we ought rigorously to master and reject it. Neither alternative is sufficient. We must do this and not leave the other undone. We must accept gladly the quickened pulse, the new strength and courage, the sense of brotherhood, the spirit of discipline and self-sacrifice. All these things make life a finer thing. It is nothing against a particular emotion that mankind shares it with the ape and the tiger. Gorillas are famous for their family life, and tigresses are, up to their lights, exemplary mothers. As regards herd feeling in particular, we should realize that even in its most unthinking forms it generally makes a man kinder and more trustworthy towards his immediate neighbours and daily associates; the evil side of it comes into play much more rarely, since it is directed against the far-off alien herd which is seldom met or seen.

And lastly, we should remember one piece of certain knowledge which is both immensely important and very difficult to apply: that thwarted instincts act like poison in human nature, and a normal and temperate satisfaction of instinct is what keeps it sweet and sane. At the present time, for instance, the people whose minds have turned sour and vicious are almost always those who can neither fight nor serve. The fighters and doctors and nurses and public servants—as a rule their herd desire is satisfied, and they do their work with fervour and without bitterness.

Yet, after all, we are thinking beings. If we acknowledge our instincts, we need not worship them. Thinking itself is both an instinct and a form of public service, and it is our business to watch ourselves. We must see that this fresh force which we feel within us is not wrongly directed, and that the higher and gentler elements of life are not swamped by this new strong wine. Millions of men throughout Europe are, without stint or question, offering all that is in them to the service of their countries and the command of their leaders. We must see, so far as lies in our power, that we do not abuse that heroic blindness. And, among us who remain at home, we must see as far as possible that the normal texture of

life is not lowered or coarsened.

There has been current in England of recent years a reaction against reason, an avowed worship of instinct and tradition and even prejudice. The doctrines of this reaction are in themselves fascinating, and they have been preached by fascinating writers. The way of instinct and old habit is so full of ease, so facile and strong and untroubled. Look at the faces of men who are wrapped up in some natural and instinctive purpose. Look at a dog chasing his prey, a lover pursuing his beloved, a band of vigorous men advancing to battle, a crowd of friends drinking and laughing. That shows us, say the writers aforesaid, what life can be and what it ought to be. "Let us not think and question," they say. "Let us be healthy and direct, and not fret against the main current of instinctive feeling and tradition."

In matters of art such a habit of mind may be valuable; in matters of truth or of conduct, it is, I believe, as disastrous as it is alluring. True, the way of instinct is pleasant. I happened once to be waiting at a railway station on a summer afternoon. There were several railway men about, rather wearily engaged on work of one sort or another, when suddenly something happened which made them look alert and cheerful and put a kindly smile on their faces. One of them had seen some small animal—I think a rat—and a little crowd of them ran blithely and pelted it to death. One would have seen the same kindly and happy smile, the same healthy vigour, in the people who amid other circumstances let loose their hunting instincts on runaway slaves or heretics or Jews. And the man among them who should feel a qualm, who should check himself and try to think whether such hunting was really a pleasant and praiseworthy action, would, I have little doubt, have looked guilty and uneasy and tongue-tied. His face would have condemned him. "Why should he trouble himself with thinking and criticizing?" people may say. "Why not enjoy himself with his mates? Thought is just as likely to lead you wrong as feeling is."

The answer of mankind to such pleadings should be firm and clear. Human reason is very far from infallible, but the only remedy for bad thinking is to think better. The question was really settled for us thousands and thousands of years ago, by those little lemurs in the marshy forests. They took not the path of ease, but the path of hard brain-work, and we their children must go on with it. That is the way of life and the bettering of life, to think and labour and build up; not to glide with the current. We of the human race have our work in the scheme of things; and to do our work we must use all our powers, especially our greatest powers, those of thinking and judging. And even if we deliberately set our faces in the other direction, if we yield to the stream of instinct and let scruples and doubts and inhibitions be swept away, we shall not really find life easier. At least not for long. For the powers to which we yield will only demand more and more.

There is one character in Shakespeare, who is often taken as a type—a very unflattering type, I admit—of the follower of the mere instincts; who feels the release, the joy, the sense of revelation which they bring, and thinks that they will lead him to glory. And I suspect that some modern adorers of instinct as against reason will in the end awake to disillusion like that of Caliban:—

What a thrice-double ass
Was I, to take this drunkard for a God,
And worship this dull fool!

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Lecture at Bedford College.

