

THE SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

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Prologue

This book tells of
The past, discusses the present and looks to the future of
A Social Conscience
Founded on only two fundamental principles of life:
The Instinct to Care
The Necessity to Share

Introduction

LIFE IS A manifestation that has appeared as a mystery to the thinking man from time immemorial. So abundant and varied are its forms that, until recent times, man has had the wisdom to accept its unfathomable nature and bow to a mystical Creator having universal sovereign power and knowledge. It remains unfathomable and is an irresistible attraction to thinkers. The scientific age has increased considerably the means available to thinkers to advance knowledge over a wide variety of fronts. As new discoveries are made, some part of the mystery is unravelled. The discovery of the structure of DNA, in particular, with all the possibilities that it has shown for extending and improving physical life, is proof of the intelligence of the human mind. But the discovery of DNA also revealed the wonder and the magic that is the order and harmony that sustains life. The human mind inches forward towards an ultimate goal of understanding the origin of life. But, paradoxically, discovery seems only to deepen mystery, which tauntingly recedes from the grasp of understanding as knowledge advances.

An acceptable basis for understanding life is today a matter of personal choice. Relics still exist of prehistoric man's conception of life in the miraculous survival of the Australian aboriginal. Separated by infinite time from other people, they have retained to this day a perception of a pictorial heaven, as seen by the naked eye and interpreted as an imagined 'other' world peopled by mystical beings assuming the shapes of constellations of stars. Physical life is a dream: reality lies in the starry heaven above, the ultimate destination on awakening. Ancient Egyptians, like the Greeks, believed that life on Earth was a preparation for the life to come. They were mystical people and considered that throughout life on Earth, mystical knowledge of the Divine World was potentially available to anyone who wanted it. The preparation for life after death was a crucial aspect of their burial ceremonies. The Christian belief in resurrection also seeks to give life continuity after death. Those troubled by the lack of objective evidence of life after death reject that possibility. The meaning of life and death,

as physical experiences, has been the subject of religious interpretation for as long as man has looked up to the skies for locating heaven.

As formal religions have gradually lost their influence in many Western industrial nations, they have been replaced by other beliefs, all seeking to explain or interpret life and being. The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre¹ developed the notion of existentialism that explains life as reality in existence. Humanism is a set of beliefs about life that has gained wide adherence. It explains life in terms of physical being and beliefs: there are no supernatural beings; the material universe is the only thing that exists, and science provides the only reliable knowledge of this universe; there is no afterlife and no reincarnation. Humanism rallies atheists and agnostics in placing at the centre of its beliefs a commitment to moral values that are derived from human experience and thought.

The Ancient World still has useful ideas and guidelines to offer in the difficult and perplexing world in which we find ourselves. Plato is particularly relevant to the argument developed in this book. According to Plato² the world has two aspects, the visible, or that which is perceived by the senses and the non-visible or intelligible, which consists of universal, eternal forms or ideas perceived only by the mind. Human experiences of so-called reality are only of visible appearances, and from them can be derived only opinions and beliefs. Genuine reality exists in such Platonic forms as goodness, truth, beauty and justice, which exist in the mind.

This book discusses the 'humane condition'³ based on moral values. The concept provides us with a meaningful reality within which we can situate ourselves and understand our purpose. The ideal forms defined by Plato are treated here as absolute values. To those holding religious beliefs, Life, Truth and Love may be understood as absolutes and as symbolic expressions of a Supreme Being, or God.

Life includes all manifestations of existence, in whatever form, and is paramount. From whatever viewpoint it is considered, the absence of life is nothingness. In a scientific sense, life includes man, animals, trees, plants and all things visible to the naked eye as well as the minute particles of matter that are its most elementary forms.

Truth is a moral value particularly relevant to the activities of

1 Sartre, J-P., *Existentialism and Humanism*, London: Methuen, 1948.

2 See *The Dialogues of Plato*, Jowett, B. (trans.), New York: Random House, 20th edn, 1937.

3 The term 'humane condition' is an adaptation of the term 'the human condition' used to emphasise the paramount importance of moral values.

the mind that is itself engaged in its eternal search. Truth, expressed in such derivatives as honesty, sincerity, good faith and trust, validates and guarantees the continuity of human relationships and of society itself.

Love is to the heart what Truth is to the mind. Love is a moral value that relates the human experience to all other humans, species and things. It expresses itself in a goodness that binds people together. To many, Love is the greatest of the *desiderata*, and felt as the greatest human need. Love as a moral value is here defined as a sympathetic awareness of others, their qualities and of the life of all things. It is sensitive to the external and internal beauty of all manifestations of life itself. It is the main motivation in the creation of harmonious relationships and of happiness, which is one of man's most constant searches.

To those who are existentialists or humanists, Life, Truth and Love may be accepted as moral values that are central to the human condition. They are all three *sui generis*, that is, they are unique and do not depend on other conditions

The argument for a caring society finds its justification in moral values. It relies on two simple propositions. The first proposition is that caring is not only an instinct present in nature, but is a moral value in itself. It is an expression of Love, and it is through caring that genuine reality comes into the experience of Life. It takes very little for the caring instinct to manifest itself. It is a vehicle for the expression of moral values. It is the central argument of this text that public policy based on explicit moral values makes possible a fuller realisation of the caring instinct.

The second proposition follows from the first: given that caring is an instinct, sharing becomes a necessity. We live our lives as individuals but share them with those with whom the joys and trials of life are experienced. It is in the manner in which life is shared with others that it becomes a meaningful reality. In that sense, sharing is a moral value as well as an existential imperative. Caring may be seen as a self-satisfying experience, and as such it does not conflict with the sense of self biologically instilled through the survival instinct.⁴ Sharing, on the other hand, may conflict with the sense of self and hence be constrained. However, a caring society cannot exist unless the idea of sharing is generally accepted. Why we should willingly accept that view is part of the central argument of this text.

4 Dawkins, R., *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press, 1976.

It will be shown that both caring and sharing exist naturally in the notion of the family as the fundamental unit of social structure. The idea that society is an extension of the family provides the springboard from which to discuss the ways in which a caring society may be empowered.

These points are discussed in the Part I, *The Humane Condition*, the term 'humane' expressing the moral values implicit in caring and sharing. It must be emphasised that the ideas discussed do not constitute an argument in favour of any specific religious belief, or indeed any other set of beliefs such as humanism, or any political credo such as socialism. It seeks to employ moral values as a basis for examining problems of society and evaluating policies aimed at improving the humane condition. One of the most important aspects of this debate concerns the Social Conscience and its role in providing value judgements of social and economic behaviour. Moral values have sovereign authority in all matters of judgement affecting society; they provide the essential jurisprudence for established law and accepted custom. The principal postulate on which this text relies is that the Social Conscience, as expressed in public opinion and in generally accepted beliefs, is and should be the sovereign authority, since it is founded on moral values. Support for this idea is derived from Durkheim who argued that moral laws, defined as social facts, imposed upon individuals a moral obligation to obey rules. Durkheim considered that society is something beyond us and something within us, and that when society is strongly integrated the moral laws (or social facts) hold individuals under its control.⁵ The Social Conscience is thus the ultimate law.

The existing social structure reflects the influence of a market economy that has shaped society to the needs of industrial and financial capitalism. Caring and sharing are eroded in such a society. There is, in the collective memory, an experience of social misery, deprivation and brutality associated with the transformation of an agrarian economy into a capitalist economy. Marked by this experience, European nations have retained a strong commitment to the idea of a social economy, manifested in government policies addressed to social programmes. The notion of welfare is

⁵ Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) is considered one of the founders of modern sociology. He introduced the concept of functionalism, which argues that the basis of an orderly society is the existence of a central value system that imposes common values on all its members. See Lukes, S., *Emile Durkheim, His Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study*.

entrenched in the political debate. In Great Britain, it led to the creation of the Welfare State, for which social objectives were political priorities. Most European countries adopted and still maintain extensive social programmes. Government policies, that are now orientated towards reducing commitments when budgeting expenditure, are tending to consider selective privatisation of some welfare activity. Part II, Empowering a Caring Society, examines how caring and sharing could be implemented in social policies, even within the constraining context of a market economy. The role of education is considered as an important means of bringing about a caring society. The market economy, based on the shareholder value criterion has social consequences that run counter to this aspiration. The role of government and of government policy is another aspect of this debate.

One of the major social problems of our times is the conflict between freedom and authority. Much of recent history reflects man's struggle to be free from oppressive authority. The French Revolution was a culminating point: Liberty, Equality and Fraternity were proclaimed as the moral values on which the new society was to be founded. This was the rallying cry for social change everywhere in Europe. To this day, these three moral values are at the heart of what the French call *l'esprit républicain* (the republican spirit). That man should be free from oppression is universally conceded, but the need for order within society is also accepted as necessary to good government. Overfed by unthinking populism, freedom has degenerated to some extent into permissiveness, and the expression of authority in a demand for discipline or call to order seems to attract instant opposition. The tension between freedom and authority is an important aspect of the social debate and it is discussed in Part III.

Social change is a continuous process that is inspired by a number of reciprocal factors: the world of ideas, science, and changing technological, material and political circumstances. Are we in control of our destiny or at the mercy of forces beyond our control? Certainly, as the world gets smaller with the globalisation of the market economy, there is a risk that welfare policies will have lower priority than profit-making. The concentration of economic and hence military power in the hands of one nation, that dictates its law to the rest of the world and takes as bounty a wholly disproportionate percentage of all its natural resources for its own excessive consumption, may be seen as an alarming portent of a new form of oppression. The absorption of nations, with their own

culture and history, into larger federations or unions governed by remote and bureaucratic authorities adds to concerns about the future of their newly gained freedom and, in some cases, their nationhood. From Communist empire to European Union, some Eastern European nations, such as Poland, worry about how these changes will impact on values for which they have fought, damaging their freedom of expression and sense of identity. Finally, the threat that climate change implies for the survival of life on Earth has created a general sense of foreboding and helplessness. The significance of these trends for caring and sharing in this wider context is discussed in Part IV.

It is hoped that the thoughts expressed in this book will interest the general reader, and that he will find in them a direct link with the keynote ideas that have fascinated so many illustrious thinkers in the past, from Plato, Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas to Locke, Hume, Rousseau, Kant, Marx and Durkheim *et al.* The book is also addressed to members of religious congregations and those concerned with moral values.

Education is vital to empowering a caring society. There is now recognition of the need to restate the importance of ethics and morality in the teaching curriculum. Education for citizenship has been adopted as an important orientation of education in schools. It is hoped that this book will provide useful material for discussion. Many professional bodies, such as the British Medical Association, the Law Society and the Institute of Chartered Accountants are concerned with the moral values implicit in governance and transparency. This book may also be useful as a supplement to courses set by professional bodies which have introduced ethics into the curriculum.