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G.B.S. on the Nature of Man

Allen T. Conn
Western Michigan University

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The mind of George Bernard Shaw is a vibrant, calculating instrument which he uses to penetrate into the Mind of Man. Yet even this instrument of almost infinite perception, having pierced the hard shell of man’s behavior, cannot find an easy solution to the miseries of society. But the force of his declamations—and the logic behind them—are enough to make men sit up and take stock of the situation, to make a new appraisal of man’s role in the mechanics of running this world.

Shaw’s plays provide a running commentary on the fallibilities of civilized societies; he points out the errors of our ways in such devastating fashion that we cannot help but cower with fright. But because his plays are commercial products, and because a point of criticism is sometimes softened by humor, his plays are filled with spice and wit. Though Shaw constantly censures man’s plans for living, his stand isn’t made with an air of superiority from a seat of omniscience nor is it done with sarcasm. He simply takes us in hand as a wise adult would an erring child and gives us a verbal spanking where it hurts most—in our seat of learning. For it is in education, claims Shaw, that we not only fail to learn that which we seek but where we become trained to unconsciously set up obstacles blocking the attainment of our goals. As if this were not frustrating enough, he then shows that even our goals are unworthy. By education is meant not only that which is assimilated in institutions of learning but what man should rightly be expected to learn in the course of a life and from the experiences of others. It covers everything from economics to religion to politics to fraternization.

The underlying force responsible for the cloud of chaos which has enveloped civilization is the status man has erroneously given government. We begin on the right foot by admitting that an enlightened government is necessary to guide our energies in the proper direction and to provide for the security of the nation. We say, in theory, that our governors should be wise men, educated in the business of governing. What happens then? After formulating the idea of an educated and responsible government, we decide that, after all, the individual should know best what he wants, what is necessary for him and the rest of society, and how best to go about getting it. So we decree that every man shall have an equal voice in determining what kind of government there will be. We create The Ballot. This device enables every man—farmer, carpenter, school teacher, laborer, ignoramus and all other levels of illiterates—to choose the men who will guide the destinies of huge nations. In other words, man has such a low opinion
of himself that he chooses someone else to govern in his stead. Selfishly, however, we still claim that we govern ourselves. But what really happens is that the majority of the people, with little or no knowledge of political science or economics, chooses men who reflect the majority philosophy and intellect. We distrust or discredit anyone who swerves from the established pattern. Perhaps it is more clearly stated by Shaw in Everybody's Political What's What, where he says that “... Our pseudo-democratic tradition of government by committees and their majorities brings up sharply against the fact that majority rule is unnatural because capable rulers are always a minority.”

What confounds and irritates Shaw is man's incessant maunderings about the freedom he enjoys in religion, politics, speech and the pursuit of happiness. Without lowering himself to vulgar and useless argumentation, G. B. S. would nod his head in assent and with a curl of the lip agree with is thus: “No, we are not slaves. We are free to do whatever government and public opinion wants us to do.” And what about this pursuit of happiness? In Man and Superman Shaw says that “the ordinary man’s main business is to get the means to keep up the habits and position of a gentleman and the ordinary woman’s business is to get married... You can count on their doing nothing, whether noble or base, that conflicts with these ends.” To Shaw's obvious disgust, man is too shortsighted to see a problem through to the end. We have desires. We seek a goal. But in our attempts to set up machinery which will allow us to attain the goal, we fail miserably. We lack the intelligence to understand the situation, first of all; and because we do not understand it, the machinery really has no use. We end up in a futile state of confusion with the machinery still running and man unable to turn it off.

Shaw's efforts appear directed toward rectifying this situation. Above all, he tries to make men think, to rationalize. His philosophy comes from the mouth of Don Juan in Man and Superman:

In the heaven, I seek no other joy. But there is the work of helping Life in its struggle upward. Think of how it wastes and scatters itself, how it raises up obstacles to itself and destroys itself in its ignorance and blindness. It needs a brain, this irresistible force, lest in its ignorance it should resist itself. But what a piece of work is man! says the poet. Yes; but what a blunderer! Here is the highest miracle of organization yet attained by life, the most intensely alive thing that exists, the most conscious of all organisms: and yet, how wretched are his brains! Stupidity made sordid and cruel by the realities learnt from toil and poverty: Imagination resolved to starve sooner than face these realities, piling up illusions to hide them, and calling itself cleverness, genius! And each accusing the other of its own defect: Stupidity accusing Imagination of folly, and Imagination accusing Stupidity of ignorance: whereas, alas!
Stupidity has all the knowledge, and Imagination all the intelligence.

Man never does what he claims he wants to do; he is never what he thinks he is. We say that government must be efficient. To be efficient it must have trained and intelligent personnel who are not encumbered by the greedy whims of millions of individuals. But then we make an about face and decide that, in order to squeeze a little more from government than we originally intended, we should somehow make our wishes felt. With the power to remove from office any official who does not bow to our wishes, we blast all semblance of efficiency to pieces. We claim that our capitalist economy makes it possible for any individual to raise his station in life through dint of sheer hard work, the use of practical intelligence, and the grasping of opportunity. Yet, in reality, it is the owners of the means of production and the land owners who regulate the economy, who provide the products for consumption and who influence the paths our lives are to follow. No amount of education, preparation or labor can fulfill our aspirations if it is not done in accord with these groups. The only possible way for all men to become equal is for the state to acquire all property, to redistribute it according to need, and to employ all workers.

We say that religion gives us an answer to Life, that it provides a moral code, a code of conduct, by which we can model our behavior. But, in reality, we make no practical use whatever of religion. Its dogmatic assertions, its miracles and its contradictory statements make it impossible for the average man to believe. And they make its tenets impossible to apply in everyday life. But Shaw does feel that religion is necessary, that society cannot be held together without it. As in politics, science, education, and all other phases of our culture, public opinion has a lot to do with how we practice our religious traditions. Not many people, Shaw thinks, actually believe that splashing water on a baby's head will remove any sins it might have accumulated in the course of its short life. Yet we go through the performance because it is the accepted procedure. Just so with most religious traditions. Because we bow to anything that smacks of religious order, dictators, politicians, economists, educators—anyone who wants something—can use it as a threat to hang over our heads to make us submit to their wishes.

Behind all this confusion in politics, religion and the mechanics of everyday life is the greed to be found in all men. As Shaw says, there is nothing in man's industrial machinery but greed. Greed may seem to be a strong word, unacceptable to many, yet in the final analysis that is what it amounts to. It governs our social behavior: we behave in the accepted manner not particularly because we want to, but because it enhances our reputation and helps to accomplish desired ends. We elect governmental representatives not because we believe they will further the cause of all society but because the representative, dependent upon our support for his political survival, accedes to our singular demands. We claim that capitalism is the only
feasible economic system not because it furthers the equality of all men, but only because it increases our chances of rising in the social strata. Man’s abilities are misdirected, says Shaw. Instead of striving for instruments of peace, we concentrate all our efforts and money into the production of potent weapons of death.

Again quoting from *Man and Superman*: “The sympathies of the world are all with misery, with poverty, with starvation of the body and heart. I call on it to sympathize with joy, with love, with happiness, with beauty.” These are the words of the devil who, after all, speaks from a point of authority. And why should our sympathies lie in the first direction? Why should we not look to joy, happiness, love and beauty? Are not these the things which make life worth living?

THE ETERNAL QUADRILATERAL

U. Harold Males

I hadn’t wanted to come. I had made up my mind that this was one weekend that I wasn’t going to spend in an alcoholic stupor. These drunken weekend parties were getting to be a habit.

I was settled down with a good book when the phone rang. Immediately I regretted not having taken the receiver off the hook.

“Hello darling. What are you doing?” Marge Outerbridge. It was impossible not to recognize that squeaky voice.

“Reading.”

“What?”

“A book.”

“Oh, you’re so clever, darling. What’s the title?”

“War and Peace.”

“My God. Are you going highbrow on me?”

“What did you call up for, Marge?” As if I didn’t know.

“We’re having a little party.” My guess was right.

“How little is little?”

“Just a few friends, darling. Get dressed and come on over. What the hell you wanna waste your time reading for?”

“Forget it Marge. I feel like staying sober this weekend. It’ll be a novelty.”

“Don’t try to high-hat me you crum,” she screeched. “You lush it up as much as any of us. Now, get the hell out here or I’ll see to it that you never get another contract.”

“Since you put it that way, I’ll be right out.”

“That’s better. Be seeing you darling.”

That’s the trouble with earning an honest living; people who don’t have to earn one can foul you up with hardly any effort at all.

I designed and built expensive sailing craft in a small boat yard.