

IDEAS THAT HAVE HELPED MANKIND

Bertrand Russell

*BERTRAND ARTHUR WILLIAM RUSSELL (1872- 1970), a British philosopher, historian, mathematician, advocate for social reform, pacifist and a prominent rationalist of the twentieth century, was a prolific writer. He was also a commentator on a large variety of topics. His comments on sex, marriage, politics, religion, science, psychology, philosophy, socialism, education, Christ, Marx, Buddha and a host of other topics are pithy and full of candour. In 1950, Russell was awarded Nobel Prize in literature 'in recognition of his varied and significant writings in which he champions humanitarian ideals and freedom of thought.' As one of the world's best-known intellectuals, Russell's voice carried great moral authority. He was original and provocative in his attitude and clear and forceful in his style. His writings emphasise reason, intelligence, human happiness, peace and liberty. His major works include *A History of Western Philosophy*, *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits*, *Authority and the Individual*, *Has Man a Fact and fiction*, *My philosophical Development*, *Conquest of Happiness*, *Marriage and Morals*, *Roads to Freedom*, *In Praise of Idleness*, *Why I am not a Christian*.*



A. Work in small groups and discuss the following:

1. Your idea of a happy future life.
2. Man and development.
3. Some of the valuable ideas which have inspired you.

IDEAS THAT HAVE HELPED MANKIND

1. Before we can discuss this subject we must form some **conception** as to the kind of effect that we consider a help to mankind. Are mankind helped when they become more numerous? Or when they become less like animals? Or when they become happier?

Or when they learn to enjoy a greater **diversity** of experiences? Or when they come to know more? Or when they become more friendly to one another? I think all these things come into our conception of what helps mankind, and I will say a **preliminary** word about them.

2. The most **indubitable** respect in which ideas have helped mankind is numbers. There must have been a time when **homo sapiens** was a very rare species, subsisting precariously in jungles and caves, terrified of wild beasts, having difficulty in securing nourishment. At this period the biological advantage of his greater intelligence, which was cumulative because it could be handed on from generation to generation, had scarcely begun to outweigh the disadvantages of his long infancy, his lessened agility as compared with monkeys, and his lack of **hirsute** protection against cold. In those days, the number of men must certainly have been very small. The main use to which, throughout the ages, men have put their technical skill has been to increase the total population. I do not mean that this was the intention, but that it was, in fact, the effect. If this is something to rejoice in, then we have occasion to rejoice.
3. We have also become, in certain respects, progressively less like animals. I can think in particular of two respects: first, that acquired, as opposed to **congenital**, skills play a continually increasing part in human life, and, secondly, that assuming more and more dominates impulse. In these respects we have certainly become progressively less like animals.
4. As to happiness, I am not sure. Birds, it is true, die of hunger in large numbers during the winter, if they are not birds of passage. But during the summer they do not foresee this **catastrophe**, or remember how nearly it befell them in the previous winter. With human beings the matter is otherwise. I doubt whether the percentage of birds that will have died of hunger during the present winter (1946-47) is as great as the percentage of human beings that will have died from this cause in India and central Europe during the same period. But every human death by starvation is preceded by a long period of anxiety, and surrounded by the corresponding anxiety of neighbours. We suffer not only the evils that actually befall us, but all those that our intelligence tells us we have reason to fear. The **curbing** of impulses to which we are led by forethought averts physical disaster at the cost of worry and general lack of joy. I do not think that the learned men of my acquaintance, even when they enjoy a secure income, are as happy as the mice that eat the crumbs from their tables while the **erudite** gentlemen snooze. In this respect, therefore, I am not convinced that there has been any progress at all.
5. As to diversity of enjoyments, however, the matter is otherwise. I remember reading an account of some lions who were taken to a movie showing the successful

depredations of lions in a wild state, but none of them got any pleasure from the spectacle. Not only music, and poetry, and science, but football, and baseball, and alcohol, afford no pleasure to animals. Our **intelligence** has, therefore, certainly enabled us to get a much greater variety of enjoyment than is open to animals, but we have purchased this advantage at the expense of a much greater liability to boredom.

6. But I shall be told that it is neither numbers nor **multiplicity** of pleasures that make the glory of man. It is his intellectual and moral qualities. It is obvious that we know more than animals do, and it is common to consider this one of our advantages. Whether it is, in fact, an advantage, may be doubted. But at any rate it is something that distinguishes us from the **brutes**.

B.1. Read the following sentences and write T for true and F for false statements:

- i. Ideas help mankind.
- ii. Survival was never a problem for homo sapiens.
- iii. Long infancy was a biological advantage to mankind.
- iv. Man's earliest technical skill was devoted to increasing their population.
- v. Congenital skills play a more important role than the acquired skills.
- vi. Unlike birds, human beings can foresee a catastrophe.
- vii. Forethought can avert physical danger.
- viii. The intelligent qualities account for the glory of man.
- ix. In a secure future there are neither worries nor lack of joy.

7. Has civilization taught us to be more friendly towards one another? The answer is easy. Robins (the English, not the American species) peck an elderly robin to death, whereas men (the English, not the American species) give an elderly man an old-age pension. Within the herd we are more friendly to each other than are many species of animals, but in our attitude towards those outside the herd, in spite of all that has been done by moralists and religious teachers, our emotions are as ferocious as those of any animal, and our intelligence enables us to give them a scope which is denied to even the most savage beast. It may be hoped, though not very confidently, that the more **humane** attitude will in time come to prevail, but so far the omens are not very **propitious**.
8. All these different elements must be borne in mind in considering what ideas have done most to help mankind. The ideas with which we shall be concerned may be broadly divided into two kinds: those that contribute to knowledge and technique, and

those that are concerned with morals and politics. I will treat first those that have to do with knowledge and technique.

9. The most important and difficult steps were taken before the dawn of history. At what stage language began is not known, but we may be pretty certain that it began very gradually. Without it it would have been very difficult to hand on from generation to generation the inventions and discoveries that were gradually made.
10. Another great step, which may have come either before or after the beginning of language, was the utilization of fire. I suppose that at first fire was chiefly used to keep away wild beasts while our ancestors slept, but the warmth must have been found agreeable. Presumably on some occasion a child got scolded for throwing the meat into the fire, but when it was taken out it was found to be much better, and so the long history of cookery began.
11. The taming of domestic animals, especially the cow and the sheep, must have made life much pleasanter and more secure. Some **anthropologists** have an attractive theory that the utility of domestic animals was not foreseen, but the people attempted to tame whatever animal their religion taught them to worship. The tribes that worshipped lions and crocodiles died out, while those to whom the cow or the sheep was a sacred animal prospered. I like this theory, and in the entire absence of evidence, for or against it, I feel a liberty to play with it.
12. Even more important than the domestication of animals was the invention of agriculture, which, however, introduced blood-thirsty practices into religion that lasted for many centuries. Fertility rites tended to involve human sacrifice and cannibalism. **Moloch** would not help the corn to grow unless he was allowed to feast on the blood of children. A similar opinion was adopted by the **Evangelicals** of Manchester in the early days of industrialism, when they kept six-year-old children working twelve to fourteen hours a day, in conditions that caused most of them to die. It has now been discovered that grain will grow, and cotton goods can be manufactured, without being watered by the blood of infants. In the case of grain, the discovery took thousands of years; in the case of the cotton goods hardly a century. So perhaps there is some evidence of progress in the world.
13. The last of the great prehistoric inventions was the art of writing, which was indeed a **prerequisite** of history. Writing, like speech, developed gradually, and in the form of pictures designed to convey a message it was probably as old as speech, but from picture to syllable writing and **thence** to the alphabet was a very slow evolution. In China the last step was never taken.

B.2.1. Read the following sentences and write T for true and F for false statements:

- i. Utilization of fire was a milestone in human progress.
- ii. Fire was used only for cooking.
- iii. Domestication of animals had nothing to do with religion.
- iv. Our earliest form of writing was pictorial.
- v. Invention of agriculture was less important than domestication of animals.
- vi. In course of time we have progressed.

B.2. 2. Answer the following questions briefly :

- 1) Has civilization taught us to be more friendly towards one another?
- 2) What is our attitude towards those 'outside our herd'?
- 3) What are the two broad categories of ideas that have helped mankind?
- 4) Did language play a role in human development?
- 5) How many languages do you know apart from your mother tongue?
Has it helped you in any way?

GLOSSARY AND NOTES

conception (n): idea, notion

diversity (n): variety, multiplicity

preliminary (adj): introductory, initial

indubitable (adj): which cannot be doubted

homo-sapiens (n): a Latin term for the human race

hirsute (adj): covered with hair, furry

congenital (adj): from birth

catastrophe (n): sudden great disaster

curbing (n): restriction

erudite (adj): intellectual, cultured

depredation (n): destruction

multiplicity (n): a large number or a great variety of things

brutes (n): animals especially large and fierce

humane (adj): compassionate, kind

propitious (adj): favourable, auspicious

anthropologists (n): expert in anthropology

Moloch (n): an ancient Hebrew deity to whom children were offered as sacrifices

Evangelicals (adj): a sect of orthodox Christian Protestants
prerequisite (n): a thing required as a condition for something
thence (adv): from there

C. 1. Long Answer Questions

1. Discuss the ideas that have helped mankind.
2. How are human beings different from animals? Explain.
3. How has the civilization helped us? Discuss.
4. Is it important for us to be civilized? Give examples of the civilized behaviour that you practise in your everyday life.

C. 2. GROUP DISCUSSION

Discuss the following in **groups** or **pairs**:

1. Role of good manners in everyday life.
2. Ideas pave the way for development.

C. 3. COMPOSITION

1. Write a letter to your friend in Delhi about the culture of Bihar.
2. Write a paragraph in about 100 words on the 'significance of original thinking'.

D. WORD STUDY

D.1. Dictionary Use

Ex. 1. Correct the spelling of the following words.

numerus

preliminary

continually

vareity

teknique

acquaintence

Ex. 2. Look up a dictionary and write two meanings of each of the following words – the one in which it is used in the lesson and the other which is more common:

herd

catastrophe

numbers

brutes

biological

skill

century

passage

erudite

D.2. Word-formation

Read the following sentences carefully:

Given below is a list of words from the lesson. Write their antonyms by adding prefixes like 'in-', 'un-', 'dis-', 'im-'

advantage

certain

definite

friendly

moral

agreeable

sure

foreseen

pleasure

D.3. Word-meaning

Ex. 1. Match the words given in **Column A** with their meanings in **Column B**

Column A

hirsute
catastrophe
erudite
snooze
humane
propitious
cannibalism

Column B

nod off
auspicious
cultured
barbarism
sudden great disaster
compassionate
covered with hair, furry

D. 4. Phrases

Ex.1. Read the lesson carefully and find out the sentences in which the following phrases have been used. Use these phrases in sentences of your own:

at any rate have to do with hand on last for tend to

E. GRAMMAR

Ex.1. Read the following sentences, taken from the lesson, carefully:

- I will say a preliminary word **about** them.*
- Birds die **of** hunger **in** large numbers **during** the winter.*

You see that the word 'about' in the first sentence is used before a pronoun 'them'. Similarly, 'of', 'in' and 'during' in the second sentence are used before a noun 'hunger', a noun phrase 'large number' and a noun 'winter' respectively. Such a word or group of words used before a noun or pronoun to show relation in terms of place, position, time or method is known as reposition.

Fill in the blanks with correct prepositions:

- Please read line 5 page 10.
- Birds die hunger the winter.
- Mamta prefers coffee tea.
- Manatma Gandhi was born Porbandar Gujarat.
- Chhabhi swam..... the river.
- We have become certain respects less like animals.

F. ACTIVITY

Ex. 1. Visit a library or a museum or request your history teacher and gather information about the following:

- Palaeolithic or Old Stone Age
- Chaleolithic or Copper Age
- Neoithic or New Stone Age