# MORAL ORIGINS AND THE NUB OF ETHICS

BY BRUCE W. BROTHERSTON

## I

IT has often appeared to the present writer that the moral philosophers have dealt too cavalierly with the materials of early human life. Of course none are so well aware as they that the difference between tribal or national standards is a relative matter. They would not, as less well-informed men might, think of basing upon this difference the charge that another people lacked moral consciousness. Yet the suspicion may be justified that the extreme difference between our own ways and the ways of uncivilized men is largely the basis of the doctrine that moral consciousness is absent or merely "in germ" among them. This error, if it exists, is hidden in a well-conceived method. The method presents the nub of ethics as it appears "to the enlightened moral consciousness", and takes this as a criterion in the study of moral origins. The presence or absence of moral consciousness or the degree of its force is measured by the presence or absence or the degree of force in early life of this nub of ethics.[1]

It is notorious that the views of moralists differ widely. But as to this nub of ethics there is general agreement. As psychologists and sociologists, moral philosophers may have different ways of accounting for volition and responsibility. But all agree that voluntariness is what gives conduct its ethical quality. And volition is of course individual volition . Hence courses of action for which individuals are responsible are the subject-matter of ethics. But even the casual reader of the customs and beliefs of early men re-

[1]Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of Moral Ideas*, Vol. I, p. 202; Chaps VIII-X, esp. p. 524 f. Hobhouse, *Morals in Evolution*, Vol II, pp. 135 f, 137, note. McDougal, *Society Psychology*, p. 238 f.

members that any notion of individual responsibility played a very small part among them and he is prepared to hear that moral consciousness is absent or vaguely 'in germ".

But if he be one who has yielded to the fascination of strange customs and has read farther, he will remember cases of passionate loyalty among savage peoples; of the Greek Menoikeus immolating himself to save his city;[2] of Oedipus wishing to be exiled to remove the "uncleanness" from Thebes; or of an Indian brave who accepts a forlorn hope to save a contingent of his tribe. One reads the Libation Bearers of Aeschylus and finds himself at once in the atmosphere of Central Africa or Polynesia and at the same time in an intense life of moral praise and blame. One wonders whether Aeschylus, immersed as he was in the Chthonic religion of Greek peasants, as nearly primitive as is Central Africa today, has read all this intense moral feeling into the tradition, and has not truly interpreted for us—no doubt omitting many external things that were confused in it—the inwardness of early life. Greek tradition descends from the period of barbarism. Yet the dramatic power of Euripides is achieved while presenting these traditions just as they are, bringing out their human relations in full force of passionate good and evil, passionate praise and blame.

When one is told by the moralists that custom, which is the ethics of early man, was wholly external; as though it were obeyed without any force of inward approval, merely from superstitious and wholly unfounded fear, one feels that something has been overlooked; that there is something at fault in the usual method of studying moral origins. But on the contrary, it may be the case that the Greek dramatists are true interpreters of the traditions of their early ancestors. Doubtless they made analyses of human situations not made by their fathers, as they were not made by the masses of their contemporaries. But their powerful handling of the materials of tradition merely served to bring out the force present in those traditions and in the experience of their creators.

The thesis of this paper is that the materials of early human life have been in this regard wholly misread, because a too radical individualism has mislead moral philosophers as to the nub of ethics. It will begin with a study of primitive man's world-view in which it will attempt to make appear the genuine moral consciousness in-

[2] Cox, *The Mythology of the Aryan Nations,* p. 415. Euripides, *The Phoenician Virgins,* 990 ff.

volved in social or group responsibility: to show why the notion of individual responsibility did not at first enter; and to suggest the part it later played. Next by tracing the development of the concept of moral evil in Greek thought, we will make clear the inextricable relation of individual responsibility to social or group responsibility. Finally by a very brief outline of the development of the concept of the good in Hebrew experience, traced from the primitive world-view to the teachings of Jesus, we will make appear how the religious motive, really the motive of social responsibility, maintained itself as the ground of ethics, carrying individual responsibility with it as an implication, at first obscure and at last fully clear. Hence we will maintain that individual responsibility is not the nub of ethics; that while it is inevitably involved in social responsibilty, it can never be clearly and distinctly separated from it. But even while, as in the primitive world-view, it lies within it in a wholly confused way, group responsibility manifests still a genuine and full-powered moral consciousness.

Since Codrington presented the Melanesian conception of *mana* in 1891, there has issued among scholars a tendency to believe in the existence of a preanimistic world-view. The following interpretation of this primitive *Weltanschauung* is offered as that which best synthesises the entire field of facts. It is usually supposed that what seemed most real to early man was the distinct and solid particular thing—human body or natural object. This body or object, through experience of dreams or visions, had come to be "doubled" by an anima or soul. But this view is a preconception on the part of modern students rather than a result of the study of the facts. Such a study shows rather that the thing most real to early man is something he cannot see. It is a reality inward to the world in general as a man's psychical nature is inward to his body. Indeed it is universal in primitive man's little world. But however universal, this reality has not been conceived by the abstracting intelligence. It is the immediate issue of his own psychical organization and it has the vivid and persistent reality of spontaneous impulse. It would never occur to early man to doubt its presence in the ritual observances of his people, the awful power of natural storms, or the dread passion of social upheavals. We have here perhaps a fact of foundational significance in the study of human nature. The common sense view of reality has not always been the common sense view of later ages when social atomism has prevailed. It did not

always fasten upon the unit of sense perception. It has always been ingenuous enough, but man's first sense of reality followed the lines of inner rather than of outer perception; and it issued in the conception of a vital, psychic, dynamic reality felt with varying potency through the flow of his life. It found its "substance" not in solidity, nor in individual distinctness, but in so tenuous a matter that it could flow through all solidities like ions. It is the solidary, inward reality of kin, clan, tribe, and natural environment, holding all things together in the real world of his experience. The labored conception of a unity, presupposed in human experience, which issued in modern philosophy to correct the subjectivity of Berkeleyan idealism, was native, though in absolute naivete, in the world-view of primitive man.[3]

But this immediate reference of man's experience to the universal did not take the arrangement and management of his world out of man's hand. Man's ability to affect his own world and life was conceived to lie in his ability to operate this power through the discovery of systems of interconnections which it followed and a manipulation of these. This brings us at once into the realm of religious and "magic" ritual. It was customary thirty years ago to explain magic as primitive science. Apparently the "power" that operated in magic was taken to be the force of causal relationship or of logical implication. This force was thought to have been felt in a wholly vague way by the primitive mind and to have been confused therefore with the more obvious psychological associations of similarity and continuity. But it becomes evident upon study of the sources that man's power to adapt himself to physical forces and physical things by observation of their causes and implications played no dominant part. It was not that early man was deficient in this power. Its prosaic progress was retarded, and greatly retarded, as was also his sense of individual responsibility, not by logical or moral incapacity, but by his systematic and persistent attempts to operate this more profound and elemental force. This force was primitive man's reality sense. It was the total force of his psychical organization, the impulsive objectification of his own nature. It was still without analysis and hence it was conceived as being both matter and force unbounded. It flashed in with concentrated power upon

[3]For another view, see Hopkins, *History of Religion*, p 18. But Hopkins takes the view-point that the savage thinks "concretely". He has not sufficiently felt the force of the shape-shifting nature of the savage world, whose constant realities are general solidarities.

any avenue of relationship that might more or less strikingly present itself to a wholly inexperienced intelligence. It presents strong evidence, as against the usual theory of the instincts, of an innate organization of man's total psychical equipment, which shows itself, amidst the confusion of objective events, in a want, of all wants the most specifically human, and one just as persistent and definite as hunger or sex,—the prophetic restlessness, the ethical penchant for social integration, the philosophical desire for universal integration, for unity, the religious want for God. This deepest force in primitive human life was "the Presence" in earliest religious apprehension. It was nearer than breathing and closer than hands or feet. It itself was immediately known. Its consequences alone were occult. It was a wind blowing where it listed. It focussed like storm forced at different times and places, and common men could not tell whence it came or whither it went. So was every one born of this spirit and every place where it focussed its power. But such a man became potent with esoteric knowledge and power to bless or ban. Similar were sacred spots where it was concentrated and localized. It was thus that the later animism and theism were derived from this earlier religion. The plenitude of this theoplasm, concentrated in sacred places, constitutes the vague aniconic deities of pre-theistic times, and that in persons, the semi-divine heroes. It is likely through an interplay of these two that personal gods are conceived.

Hence it is not the case that magic was an early science. It was not the case that the loose associational connections were confused with the more binding relations whose tracing constitutes science. The world-view of early man is not to be apprehended by any such comparison with the modern mind. It is to be apprehended only in the apprehension of their sense of a ubiquitous reality, holding all in unity, ready to strike across any relation however insignificant. Indeed for primitive man to discover any relation whatever,—to have any connection in thought or things become a distinct matter of interest, was to discover a natural avenue of this potency, this real identity under difference. Any sort of similarity, any sort of contiguity is sufficient to become an evidence of reality,—of identity in difference,—lines upon which potent operations of the unseen reality may run. Thus while this is ubiquitous, universal, it is present in all sorts of changing qualities and degrees,—a changing pattern of utmost intricacy, as it follows the lines of these connections

which intrench upon each other because vaguely observed and carried beyond their proper scope.

Now the significant matter in primitive man's world-view is just this continuity of the real. At every turn of the data one is struck with early man's feeling of solidarity. There is evidence on every side of a sense of real connections binding apparently distinct things and events. The contagion of "uncleanness" and of sacredness, closely connected, the inner bond of kinship acquired by birth or by partaking of the blood of the kin, or even of common food, these connections,—these undercurrents of reality all referring to the same underlying theoplasm, dominate the life of early man. They are the inner power for which custom merely fixes the lines of operation. Jevons pointed out long ago that the contagion of taboo is not conceived through an error but is an *a priori* principle.[4] Equally so is the bond of kinship and the force of curses and blessings. They are all forms of the same thing. They are the sanctions of custom and the source of its authority and they give it its *a priori* aspect.

This obsession of solidarity, which found real connections in every chance relation, militated against any proper conception of the relations of individuals and particulars. It is exceedingly important to notice this obverse side of early man's world-view. The world of particulars is a world of lesser reality capable of all kinds of metamorphoses. Its changes proceed upon connections inwardly felt. Hence all sorts of real relationships and all sorts of merging are possible. A man and a crow may perfectly well be of the same kin, and the rain and the hail may perfectly well be in the same class as the crow and the man.[5] Particular things and persons may shape-shift indefinitely—from old woman to beautiful maiden, or to serpent, or to werewolf. The identity of such forms is an inward matter discovered on traditional lines. The individual is merged in his kin and in his environment. There is a continuity in which each individual and each particular has significance according as he or it is the locus of a greater or lesser concentration of the continuous reality of the universe. Always submerging the individual and the particular and constituting all that is real in any person or thing is a superrealm from which the tribal custom gets its whole force and the lines of whose operation it marks. It is a cosmic power. To call it a transhuman reality were to make a distinction between humanity

[4] Introduction to the *History of Religion*, p. 88.

[5] See Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, p. 141 ff.

and the world which early man never made. It is a hyperrealm, including all particulars and constituting a cosmic unity solidary with the central current of human impulse and emotion. A fluidity of perception following lines of a continuity not conceived intellectually but arrived at upon the basis of impulse and emotion characterized the world-view of early man. The universal is the real. The particular is appearance.

We are now in a position to understand primitive man's conception of good and evil. They had one source together in the same reality and the same cosmic power. The difference between them belongs to the realm of relations among individual and particular persons and things. The theoplasm focusses in advantageous and in disadvantageous combinations of particular things. It may follow lines of beneficence to the kin, or it may break out in disaster. But this real Presence is one. It is beyond good and evil, which lie in the connections it finds to take, connections which man himself may determine. *Sacer* means both sacred and polluted, and $\alpha\gamma$ is the root from which derive both ἄγος pollution and ἁγνός holy. The same power operates for blessing or for cursing, for good or for evil according to outer forms that may be manipulated by enemy or friend.

From the beginning men believed that if the group strictly followed the customs, particularly observing the rites and offsetting the magic of enemies, reality would operate in all beneficence. If not, any evil might fall. The lines men open or leave open toward good or toward evil are the lines the hidden force takes. It lies with men—with all men in following the customs—but especially with the directors of the ritual, to open good or evil ways for sacred power. Because the Tao of man in China does not implicitly imitate the Tao of heaven, the forces of the universe operate for evil to mankind. The Rita in India is at once the ritual and the order of nature and it is some breach in the former that brings disturbance in the latter. In Greek life the Real Presense has early been divided up into a pantheon of distinctly personal gods and thus particularity and evil with it had been carried back into the realm of the real. The early thinkers were baffled by this escapeless fusion of good and evil among the gods. The philosophers repudiated the gods altogther, excluded impulse and emotion in which the gods had their origin, and made the quest for reality a noetic pursuit. The dramatists were unwilling to go so far. It remained a baffling

problem to them. It was perhaps with this problem that the Bacchae of Euripides was intended to deal. It presents the real presence of deity as, on the one hand, poetic inspiration and noble social passion and, on the other, as mad intoxication and the frenzy of social chaos. Both issue from deity, but according to the current of man's life. Upon the action of Pentheus, the locus of social authority, depends which shall prevail. Repeatedly he is adjured,—by the priest, Teriesius, by Cadman, and finally by the God, himself: "All may yet be well". Euripides seems here to reflect the idea that good and evil issue from one reality which takes different direction and quality according to the trend men give the social relations they control. If so he has returned with clear concepts to what is essentially the attitude of the earliest human traditions.

The first traceable human situation had its passion for good and against evil, its criterion for judging them and its methods for escaping the one and achieving the other. In total confusion of particular and individual relations a normal moral consciousness was working. As we have suggested, it was very force of moral consciousness which prevented an earlier analysis of relations between particulars in both the moral and the natural realms.

Let us see what was the extent of this confusion in the moral sphere. In that "uncleanness" which arises out of sinster focussings, sinister courses of the common reality all the different aspects of evil are present without distinction. We can separate its several elements. First, natural evils which fall upon men out of unforseen operations of natural laws. Second, evils which men enact but without intent, which if intended would be genuine moral evil such as the "sin" of Oedipus. Third, there are evils which the immediate agent could not avoid but which common sense persists in calling moral evil--deeds wrought under passion that came upon the agent out of larger circles of evil in which he was involved. Fourth, the moral evil of the Aristotelian—what the individual could have avoided. These distinct matters are mingled together in utmost confusion. Guilt and punishment, accident and design, sin and misfortune lie undistinguished in a common ground of evil, to which primitive man referred the whole force of his moral consciousness. Profound moral loathing attached to any of its focussings,—to the inner thought or to the outer object or act alike. Indians performing their purificatory rites, must refrain from thoughts of strife. The inner thought is "unclean" in precisely the same way as the outer

deed. There is no lack of inwardness, but a failure to distinguish inward and outward. Again the individual's voluntary misdeed is "unclean" just as the passionate or accidental evil in which he is involved. There is no absence nor weakness of moral consciousness; but rather the solidarity of the whole field of evil as of good is so powerfully felt that moral feelings rightly attached only to certain aspects of evil are indistinguishably attached to all.

With this in mind it is not difficult to understand why scholars have thought that among early men there has been no conception of moral evil at all, or one only "implicit" or "in germ", and that custom which prescribes the individual's conduct was a matter of merely external rules sanctioned by superstitious fears. It is because the individual plays so slight a part in the world-view of early men, whereas modern ethical thought is centered in the individual. The enlightened moral consciousness lays all emphasis upon the immediate *agent* and thereby does him vast injustice. The savage mind was intent only on discovering the *locus* upon which a generalized moral evil had centered its baneful force. This is the point: it is the locus of a superparticular evil they are intent upon, rather than the agent of a particular deed. The agent is passed over except in case he is also the locus. Upon that locus the guilt, the sin, has fallen with its fluid power that can flow on any connection infecting a whole city and causing flood and earthquake and war. It can even pass its contagion by the relations of time, making days unclean. It is this which renders resentment at real agents strangely slight in savage life. Resentment of a violent color fastens rather on particular loci of evil. A man to whom an accident occurs may be loathed, or a stone, or a beast. It is not the agent but the locus of moral evil that is important to early man.

Here is the key to the understanding of primitive ethics. Early man was concerned with the control of evil conceived as a social and indeed as a cosmic unity and is not concerned with the individual as such. The social and cosmic falling of evil prevent him from perceiving the true relation of the individual to evil. The control of evil is a restoration of balance in the hyperrealm, making negative sacredness to flow again in positive channels. The sinister focus must be localized. The centre of danger must be dealt with. Whether the locus of the loathed evil be another or oneself it must be removed. It is significant that the agent of evil first reprobated *as agent* is the magician who for private ends can disturb the balance

of the hyperrealm and centre its forces for ill on man or group. He is the first agent of moral evil. Every other sinner is merely a locus. And the man of social praise is the man who can manipulate the theoplasm for social good. The early priest is usually also chief. A strong moral life is seen here in progress but in utmost confusion of its elements.

To be sure the feeling of the significance of agency enters very early under the motive of justice to the individual, while yet the all-important control of superindividual evil in society is kept secure. Agency often seems to be taken as a sign that the individual thing or person is truly the locus of a superindividual evil and of how profound an evil. In English law, for instance, a cart or other object was "deodand", given to God, if it fell on a man when it was said "*movere ad mortem*", but not if the man fell upon it.[6] The Hebrew law established cities of refuge for the accidental slayer. It is not that he is not a locus of the evil, nor that he ceases to be if he reach his refuge. He must remain there, an exile until the death of the high priest, when a new regime renders him no longer danger-central. A sense of justice to the individual is here in process of excluding adventitious elements from the primitive view of the social control of evil. And this process is not by any means complete. Men who are very largely mere loci of vast social evils and only slightly agents, having been born into involvement in these evils, are sacrificed to justice, still conceived by the "legal mind" as an occult force to be balanced or deity to be appeased. Yet today the proved agent of a crime, especially if he be a minor, is recognized to be the locus of superindividual evil, as well as the agent of particular deeds, and is sentenced to social training rather than to a balancing retribution.

In a second part of this paper, the inextricable relation of individual responsibility to social or group responsibility will be clearly illustrated by tracing the development of the concept of moral evil in Greek thought. Then by tracing, in Hebrew history, the development of the opposite conception—that of the good—it will be made to appear how, from the primitive world-view to Jesus' conception of the Kingdom of God, the religious motive—really the motive of social responsibility—maintained itself as the ground of ethics, carrying individual responsibility with it as an implication, at first obscurely, at last quite clearly.

[6]Westermarck, *Op. Cit.*, Vol. I, p. 264.