

## MORAL VALIDITY IN A VULGARIAN AGE

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WHENEVER we find the public temper of a people giving way to pleasure and extravagance, we can safely say that they are growing fickle, worldly and selfish. The common term expressing their delinquency is materialism, while the serpent in their garden always seems to be the strange and compelling fascination which folly exercises over them. They are appallingly easy to corrupt, excite to wrath, or render proud in case of private gain. And as the foremost feature in the modern world's decadent lack of character is just such a delinquency, it is timely here to ascertain a few of its causes and concomitants, its remedy and possible elimination.

First of all, there are the broad distinctions of fallacy and fact regarding spiritual law. And tracing these as they range down through the subtle processes of emotion and intellect, we arrive at the threshold of private character and intelligence. It is well to note that in every community there are units of both normal and defective faculty; we find everywhere the expression of intelligence and ravauderie, as well as various shades of dual complexion. With this primary simplification of the situation we can readily begin to see why some people are more susceptible to the subtle fascinations of folly than are others.

A secondary inquiry might be based upon other than psychological aspects of the question: for example, its moral, political, economic and literary phases of application. Under this departure we would look for analyses of virtue and vice, social and legal relations, industrial and distributive exchange, public and private expressions of opinion. Though it cannot always be said that any one of these phases has an exclusive manner of analysis, yet the inquiry as a whole, like the philosophical and psychological estimates of its principles, is unique and synthetic. Moral validity means that a certain definite decision has been rendered upon the problem of good and evil, and that this decision is made in recognition of the authori-

tative superiority of virtue over vice, of public service over private gain, and of wisdom over folly.

There is a certain threshold of conscious or purposive intelligence in everyone, the altitude of which often indicates the degree of his spiritual power. The higher degrees of marking the various grades of nobility from holy exaltation to normal commonsense, and the lower degrees marking the various grades of vulgarity from simple mediocrity down to the lowest forms of violence and vicious delinquency. This spiritual threshold is capable of both exaltation and depression, and the functions there taking place are hence subject to both acceleration and repression. The manner of such raising or lowering of one's spiritual threshold, constituting the cause, is never as obvious as the resultant conduct which constitutes the effect (and in turn a secondary cause) of all our actions.

In his "Science Maxims," Goethe says that "we more readily confess to errors, mistakes and shortcomings in our conduct than in our thought. And the reason of it is that the conscience is humble and even takes a certain pleasure in being ashamed. But the intellect is proud, and if forced to recant is driven to despair and violence."

Many things of present delight to our finite natures are still culpable elements in the folly of the age. Too large a majority of people take umbrage from the world's activities and, although looking upon the grand spectacle of cosmic life, yet read into it a sense of rancor and distress. No amount of grandeur in the pageant of life, no wealth of happy design and pleasant color in the magic screen of experience, can redeem the broken pledge of mental wrecks, souls lost in the dismal grotto of perdition, or hearts whose loves are being wrenched askew by futile toil and pain.

What we feel and what we think are seldom the actual patterns of reality. They may be ever so joyous, bright and attractive, and yet be absolutely estranged from truth and moral promise by some fallacy of our individual mood or makeup. Just because a certain impulse, motive, feeling, thought or wish is *insistent* in its demands for satisfaction or its claims of utility, intuitive sanction or conceptual content, is no sufficient reason why a person should call it code for interpreting the structure and functional relations of the Cosmos. Very likely on examination or through mere process of time such an item, or even a whole systematic series of such items, will prove to be one-sided, detrimental and hence ultimately fallacious in either thought, feeling or conduct.

Therefore, I always like to think of practically all our passional or affective moods as but so many varying degrees of moral default.

They are often as not rebel agitators in the spiritual fields of man's heritable estate, and if we let them, they would certainly soon depose our intellectual peerage from the house of lordly rule and usurp the rightful throne of common sense. To succumb to the fascinations of any personal passion less than that for *free truth* and uniform moral principles is unphilosophical and contradictory of the rational economy of life; it is a base deliverance of the keys of soul and treacherously opens the gates of an otherwise courageous resistance. Hence it is that what we suffer we bring upon ourselves, not by living external or ephemeral lives, but by falsely valuing and cherishing what is not within the sphere of our self-control. Not only is it unphilosophical to think in terms of the pathetic fallacy, but to conduct oneself under its specious sanction is likewise in poor promise of righteousness and justice for all one's fellows. To envy others, get angry, lust after, feel proud, be idle, lazy, deceitful or extravagant is a far more dangerous exercise than most of us seem to ever consider, much less fully understand and avoid.

However, I still am mindful of certain tokens of our nobler affections and sympathies which are not only permissible in our philosophies; but are both worthy of our most loyal cultivation and quite practicable in our daily life. Among these are the commonly acknowledged virtues and patterns of impersonal judgment, but they must have an actual footing and following in our life, our thought and conduct. No one should be cold and crude of heart just to save one's intellectual prestige. No one should except to improve his spiritual condition by swearing allegiance to any sort of fallacy, be it pathetic, prudential, political, economic or otherwise. It is always an indication of character as well as of wisdom to know by personal experience and aspiration the love of goodly things, pity for the weak, aid for the needy, and amiable comradeship with those of kindred nature. With these invariable credentials of a noble inner life anyone can live happily, be loved by loyal friends, and at the final reckoning recall not one decrepid day of wickedness or woe.

Much as we have presumed ourselves to be Twentieth Century perfect, yet we are, I am certain, still groping about in our spiritual cavern undecided in our quandary over the paradox of *vision*. Do we see Truth with our physical senses and their celestial eye-piece, the mind; or with some strange intuition of the heart? Here is a question that has persisted from the time of the first Veda singers, and forms the crux of the venerable controversy between empiricism and rationalism, materialism and intuitive idealism. In his masterly poem on Paracelsus, Browning answers this question by saying that:

“There is an inmost center in us all  
Where Truth abides in fulness, and to know  
Rather consists in opening out a way  
Whence the imprisoned splendor may escape,  
Than in effecting entrance for a light  
Supposed to be without.”

This, even after almost ninety years, remains one of the best summary conceptions of the situation which I have drawn attention to. The intellectual power of man goes sounding on its dim and perilous way because it is a slow-coach affair in comparison with the psychic or intuitive capacity. Quite recently experiments and observations during and after certain cardiac operations by French army surgeons have been joined together with the physiological argument to prove that the heart and not the brain is the seat of our emotional and affective life. It is found to respond to attractive or repulsive ‘ideas’ (i. e., motives or action-patterns suggested as though arising from affection or sensory volition, passionate impulses and neurotic tropisms) because its functions are largely sympathetic or what I have elsewhere called replical; meaning that the heart is a non-consciously intelligent organ which, at least when free of compulsory external restraints, acts in conformity not in opposition to the laws and stimuli of Nature. And it is this sympathy or replicability of functional process which has been anagogized into the conception of spiritual or intuitive vision. One of its major functions is that of animating and exalting the moral sense or what has been called conscience. A man’s affections and aversions are far more basic elements of his character, his very being, than any thought or judgment his intellect may produce.

Conversely, only the most hardy philosopher would attempt to argue that we love or hate or brave or fear anything with the mind alone. His contention would be disproven summarily by the very first case of affection or disaster which intimately concerned his personal affairs. Something like this was in Epictetus’ mind when he said that “the contest is unequal between a beautiful young girl and a beginner in philosophy.” And it will continue to be an unequal contest so long as the latter is fascinated by the varying phases of his pathetic fallacy.

Herein then, we are all very much alike, insofar as we have hearts and minds which are separately normal and alert enough to bring us the prestige of congeniality, but which are not yet sufficiently trained to competently coöperate in the spiritual and philosophical

conduct of our lives. Anyone who is all mind and no heart is a tyrant at home and abroad who wields the club of intellectual goods over the heads of his less one-sided companions. He will take refuge in ineffable absolutes and dictate philosophy to others. He is hence as much an imperfect man as one who is all heart and no mind, all emotion and no meditative calm in which to bring a balance among his turbulent moments of hysteria. He would perhaps make a model feminist and look as pathetic as a forsaken picture-bride, but little philosophy would mark his words.

It would seem then that the best and most harmonious proportion between the functions of thought and feeling would be that in which the mind or intellectual power was given over to deliberations on the wisdom, inventive genius, economic and industrial regulation, arts and crafts of a melioristic world-order, while the heart or spiritual power was dedicated to a meekened mood of helpfulness, compassion, virtue, sincerity and an honest generosity with which to save humanity from its growing despond of ethical irresponsibility and consequent pejorism. It would be at least a practical situation for a series of experiments to prove just what we are made of, just which side of Heaven we would be on if there should ever come a decision in what Bertrand Russell calls the eternal conflict between mysticism and logic.

Whether we are esthetes and are thrilled with a personal observation of Giotto's stately campanile at Florence with its intricate tracery windows and artistically corbelled cornice, or whether we are philosophical architects and demand that the structure of reality be symmetrical, interdependent and uniformly coördinate in its parts, the function we perform or rather experience remains the same. It is an exercise, not of any particular mental discrimination, although this is one of the elements in the process, but of the heart's general affection for what is beautiful, noble, durable, useful and somewhat akin to our own creative genius. We are then living according to Nature; for we are not trying to foist an artificial rationale into the system that is as old as the very planet itself. And anyway, there is a kind of wisdom in *feeling* truth that can never be attained through a thousand years of intellectual study. It is, or at least seems to be, more vital, more simple and direct, more significant to our life and destiny than merely thinking about what is true and real in this wonderful Universe.

We must always take care, however, that our sentiments and emotional thrills do not overbalance our intellectual restraints, the rational and moderative judgment which awaits further evidence

supporting or disqualifying the first delightful aperçus of intuitive vision. We who are naturally sober-minded will always feel it our bounden duty to remonstrate with those who read anthropomorphic signs among the constellations and abjure the petty minds of fools from too many personal and pathetic fascinations. It is with just such a moderative soberness of mind that I have looked upon both pragmatism and rationalism, empiricism and absolutism, both the spontaneity of personality and the determinism of circumstance, and I find in the essential facts of life no hard absolutes of intellectual dictation, no affective proofs of religious truth stronger than the emotion of those who cherish its belief, and no non-human sense of the *necessity* of utile or practical values that can match the utter selfishness of our demands upon reality and truth.

In short, I have just about come to a philosophy which conceives the world to be, not a tight block-system of intellectual contents and necessities, but an open sphere of cultural aims, ornamental delicacies, constructive purposes, active and reactive affections, crude and refined tastes, and a myriad wills to power often coöperating and often conflicting with the moral ideal of humanity's creative function. To pick out one particular aim, whether intellectual, emotional, affective, volitional, repoussant, or even syncretic of all these, and label it *der einzeiger* is perhaps the utmost folly of presumption, for in this pluralistic life of Feeling and Willing we cannot be too sure of what we Think. Nor can we place all confidence in what our wills and affections claim are true and good by merely making the opposite or irrelevant schemes intolerable. People have a multifarious life from which to draw innumerable variations of experience and argument for individual creeds, and it is foolish to demand or expect others to think or feel like we do.