

CONVENTIONAL VIRTUE'S DEVIIOUS PATH.

BY T. SWANN HARDING.

IT is small wonder that many minds fail to find evidence of reason in the workings of the world and its biped parasites when the veil of conventional virtue is permitted so completely to obscure positive right and true morality. As James Branch Cabell has remarked in *Beyond Life*, we are prone to be conventional before all else, even in the matter of amusement, which should, above all, be free from the bored appearance of going through the motions because it is the correct thing to do. And yet how much less artificial and how much more healthy our lives would be did we but boldly stand forth and call that ingeniously shaped soil-overturning instrument a spade now and then.

Theodore Dreiser is not the only novelist (see H. G. W. *et al.*) whose ruminations have led him to question the plan and purpose of the universe; nor is he the only person who, swamped in the slough of antagonistic philosophies, has had recourse to that popular refuge of minds bewildered or unenergetic—Pyrrhonism. In the *Nation* of Aug. 30, 1919, Mr. Dreiser has tabulated his interrogations with engaging frankness and complete detail and has thus added another chapter to the creed of "All is at variance, therefore believe nothing," an attitude of intellectual laziness further exemplified in the works of Joseph Conrad and permeating that pleasing *Book of Prefaces* which H. L. Mencken has given us.

Not that such an attitude of mind is to be condemned altogether. It is indeed a just and reasonable half-way house in the evolution of a working philosophy of life; and every mind needs such a philosophy, whether personally evolved or accepted machine-made. The tendency of just a certain amount of study and reflection is to make the student question the existence of any such thing as the absolute good or moral, in the sense of Aristotle's doctrine

of means, and to eschew speculation forever in disgust—as half threatened even so incorrigible a scholar as one David Hume.

Moreover, so meticulously systematic a philosopher as Royce remarked (in his *Religious Aspects of Philosophy*), “We choose some fashion of life in the morning, and we reject it before night. Our devotional moments demand that all life shall be devotional; our merry moments that all life shall be merry; our heroic moments that all life shall be lived in defiance of some chosen enemy.” But he recovered from this depression to formulate his philosophy of loyalty which is his solution of the problem of life.

It must be remembered, first, that such things as religion, philosophy and morality are inherently individual matters. Says Emerson, “Religion has failed; yes, the religion of another man has failed to save me. But it saved him.” And, while the dedication of life to great ends is supremely necessary a diversity of thought and method is inevitable; and it is perhaps this diversity which makes Mr. Dreiser’s millionaires and meat merchants seem so utterly at variance in their ideas of right and morality.

Then again, if we peruse the *Protagoras* we find Socrates opining that the pleasant is the good and that “nobody does anything under the idea or conviction that some other thing would be better and is also attainable,” and that “to prefer evil to good is not in human nature.” From whence the conclusion is that people are after all doing what to them seems best and most moral; that morality is more subjective than objective; that judgment cannot be made out of hand by another poor human who finds it forever impossible to weigh justly all submerged motives and adumbrant ideals; and that the education and diversion of impulse and instinct are wiser than repression and hypocrisy.

While the attitude that might be summed up in the single word “Chance” (of Joseph Conrad) is a convenient and a necessary one it should by no means be final. The writer was once told by a Presbyterian minister that his Unitarianism was a plausible half-way house to greater enlightenment; and it was—but to a broader and more vigorous philosophy of life rather than to orthodoxy! Yet the mind incapable of proceeding further than to recognize that “Chaos is in Cosmos, all’s wrong with the world!” had better revert to conventional morality and traditional theology as safeguards of conduct and leave further cogitation to the more robust.

Whatever else may or may not be true, we are practically all agreed that we have been placed here to perfect ourselves as much as possible mentally, morally and physically; to help our neighbor

evolve into something better and to use the best means at hand for the accomplishment of these purposes. It is surprising but none the less true that the most depraved, the most absorbed in trivialities, and the most stupid have within them some force which feebly attempts to dictate the right; some impulse that propels them almost irresistibly toward some service to intangibles—whether that intangible be religion, philosophy, morality or more simply duty to friend or relative or organization.

The more nearly we approximate our ideal in practice the more certainly that ideal is lifted beyond practice, thus to become a perpetual goad to further attainment. For that ideal is pursued oftentimes in error. Yet error does not always spell disaster; it may indicate growth, as Emerson testifies in "Considerations by the Way" when he says, "'*Croyez moi, l'erreur aussi a son mérite.*'" said Voltaire. . . . In short there is no man who is not at some time indebted to his vices." The matter is also pleasingly discussed by Samuel Butler in *The Way of All Flesh*, Chapter 19, one of the many interpolated essays. Here the gist of the matter is that "there is no useful virtue which has not some alloy of vice, and hardly any vice, if any, which carries not with it a little dash of virtue."

The problem is studied more scientifically by Mary Whiton Calkins (in *The Good Man and the Good*) when she says:

" . . . every virtue keeps, as it were, a balance between corresponding vices. For a vice is simply the overindulgence of any instinctive tendency, the absence of any moral control of a given impulse. The material of our vices is, in other words, precisely that of our virtues—our instinctive feelings, impulses, reactions—but these are uncontrolled by moral habits of willing. So, the greedy or untruthful man gives full play to instinctive acquisitiveness or secretiveness; he throws the reins over the neck of every impulse and disposition, whereas the virtuous man does not humor any instinctive tendency to the top of its bent. Every virtue is thus, in Aristotle's words, a 'mean' between two opposing views, in Holt's term,¹ a 'resolution' of diverse instinctive impulses."

In this same book Miss Calkins has very clearly and accurately analyzed the difference between the moral, the immoral and the unmoral act. She has demonstrated that the young man who enlists may be a moral hero: he may be an instinctive or non-moral hero; and, if acting in opposition to some more fundamental loyalty of family tie or conscience, he may be positively immoral. Her essential conclusion is that "a man is good or bad, moral or immoral,

¹ Cf. Edwin B. Holt, *The Freudian Wish*.

according as he wills or refuses to will what is to him, and not to any one else, the good."

It follows in consequence that many men acting in diverse ways and animated by widely differing ideals must yet be accredited equally good and equally moral. With this thought in mind much of our confusion at beholding the comings and goings of men and their apparent lack of virtue disappears, and we may begin to see order emerging from chaos and to believe in the possibility of a universe of law. Indeed Thoreau of Walden has told us in "The Pond in Winter" that "our notions of law and harmony are commonly confined to those instances which we detect; but the harmony which results from a far greater number of seemingly conflicting, but really concurring, laws, which we have not detected, is still more wonderful."

It is with these facts in mind that we should consider things moral and religious as reflecting conventional virtue. And as we are venturing into the sacred precincts of traditional theology it may be well to remember Voltaire's saying,² that "we must never be apprehensive that any philosophical opinion will ever prejudice the religion of a country"—because such opinions never sink deeply enough to penetrate the credulous mass. The *Hibbert Journal* normally and regularly discusses theology of a type that would profoundly move simple laymen to inordinate wrath, and no one who should be kept ignorant of the fact that religion is now tempered with reason, is the wiser.

It has been said that religion and morality are essentially matters which most concern the individual. And, indeed, Christianity as taught by Jesus was intensely individualistic as far as matters of interpretation were concerned; it was in fact a revolt against conformity; it preached devotion to cause but diversity of method. That this individualism eventually centered around the purely selfish matter of the salvation of the individual's soul is to the shame of organized Christianity, but detracts nothing from the lofty idealism of Jesus.

In the matter of religion we have now come to the point where sects innumerable have arisen in order that people may be successfully organized into group-units composed of those who profess to believe similarly about matters the absolute truth of which it is humanly impossible to ascertain. Durant Drake, in his *Problems of Religion*, has pointed out that we should recognize the difference between the assured conclusions of science and those personal "over-

² *English Letters*, XIII, on "Locke."

beliefs" which, however passionately we espouse them, cannot be used as the basis for a universal religion. And no matter how many and fantastic the sects formed, it will always be impossible to get absolute agreement on matters purely of opinion where even two are gathered together.

Nevertheless, it is quite possible to have sufficient agreement among a very great many as to what is best and expedient and to accomplish much good. Trinitarians and Unitarians may cherish their pet beliefs as fervently as they wish without prejudicing the benefit of their philanthropic enterprises carried on in common. For we are very widely agreed that poverty and social distress should be alleviated; that education should be more accessible and more free; that higher ideals should be inculcated; that the trivial and the ephemeral should be neglected for the character-building and the permanent; that there is within each of us something less gross than the flesh, which revolts at shallow materialism and assures us that there is a "force which makes for righteousness" with which we should cooperate for the betterment of ourselves and of our neighbor. Upon some such basis as this a universal religion could be evolved.

Religion is after all but one conventionally organized path to virtue. Personal morality offers another. And here it is also apparent that while the conventional is not always wrong the unconventional is often eternally right. While one might well question the purity of motive on the part of that government which legitimized twenty thousand war babies partially in order not to be lacking in human material for future warfare, one must admit that in some instances the child born of love out of wedlock is more properly born than is the accidental and undesired offspring of parents legally wed. Without necessarily going to the lengths advocated by Freud and his school, it must be admitted that in the matter of sex, the very civilization whose matrimonial requirements defer wedlock till later and later in life does not provide rationally and sanely for the sex life of those upon whom it imposes celibacy. There is no tendency here to advocate either free love or polygamy; but monogamy will not come into its own until civilization is re-organized to be more perfectly adapted thereto. In the meantime, they who cast the first stone should be sure beyond all peradventure that they are without sin in the matter of helping to bring about conditions which make sexual irregularity inevitable.

Perhaps in no matter of morals is our position so artificial as in those relating to sex. Here we have a powerful basic instinct

tremendously repressed by the superficial requirements of civilization in order to present the external appearance of virtue, so much so that one cannot avow the Freudian school altogether in error when it traces all neurosis to this prolific source. The wonder indeed is that we have sublimation so often and perversion so comparatively seldom! For, smirk and sidestep as we may, here is a real fact that we should face; a fact so real that a philosopher as bland, as mild and as gentlemanly as Emerson remarked, in "Culture," that "the preservation of the species was a point of such necessity that nature has secured it at all hazards by immensely overloading the passion, at the risk of perpetual crime and disorder." And crime and disorder there will be until we face sex seriously, sanely and above all clean-mindedly.

Surely there is no race whose attitude toward sex exceeds in imbecility that of the Anglo-Saxon; no nation whose attitude exceeds in stupidity that of the United States; and no section of the land of the Puritans whose attitude exceeds in its not-as-that-publican-there sanctimoniousness the Middle West. For Huneker observed truly that Puritanism had migrated bag and baggage from staid New England to the Middle West.

There comes to mind a suggestive and idiotic set of rules recently promulgated by the moral censors of a complacently self-satisfied Middle Western city for safeguarding the moral tone of the community theatrically, and herding the human cattle into the narrow path of rectitude. In their paternal solicitude for the feeble-minded, average, citizen these rules bear comparison with those less openly promulgated which decreed what it was right and what it was naughty for adult Americans to know during the late war. For herein were theatrical producers warned, e. g., that young ladies of the chorus must swathe their lower limbs in vulgar and ill-fitting pink tights, lest the unsophisticated spectators perchance discover that female nether extremities are veneered with cuticle—a fact so recondite that it has never before even been suspected!

Consider, if you will, the inherent lecherousness of the mind which can focus upon such purely minor details and evoke therefrom wickedness. Consider the absurdity of having such a mind to safeguard the morals of people who are well balanced enough morally to take care of themselves in such trivial matters.³

It is beyond doubt that our attitude is utterly artificial and

³ H. L. Mencken has sufficiently covered the matter of Puritanism in a clever and pointed essay in his searching *Book of Prefaces*, so that further discussion seems unnecessary.

that what we aim at is not true morality at all. Our aim is to give in appearance and legislation an outward evidence of virtue while we inwardly and privately indulge in things we cannot tolerate in others. We are in the clutches of certain unhealthy-minded individuals who rush merrily about suppressing violently that which is much less wrong than things they privately condone. The rules of an apartment hotel insure public decency by prohibiting any man from entertaining any lady in his room, but engagingly permit any lady to entertain any man in her room! It is obvious that the result is not moral probity but rather the mere superficial and shallow semblance of decency.

And while asinine (to use no more forceful adjective) censors gad about seeking purely unmoral acts that they may transform into the, to them, immoral; while learned legislators pass euphonic laws against this and that—illicit drinking and prostitution and worse sins go on apace, matrimony becomes a mockery and careless living the rule. It is all very well to laugh at Samuel Butler's ridiculous Erewhonians who tried to legislate disease out of existence and yet found that it would occur every now and then, as indeed it must occur until sanitary precautions are taken and the masses are educated up to the point of spontaneous cooperation for the attainment of health; but we are quite as ridiculous as the naive inhabitants of Erewhon when we try to legislate or repress immorality out of existence. For until we learn the process of reform from within-out and forget the process of pseudo-reform from without-in, immorality will remain.

While no girl of real moral stamina and lacking the germ of sexual perversion ever yields to the combination of low wages and high prices, however much she may condone herself by using the popular formula as a cloak for weakness, we do need a reorganization of society to lessen the strain on those of impaired strength. While no man in his right mind would be moved by a stage representation of nudity, measures must be taken to doctor the perverted minds of the moral censor and of the more honest depraved who candidly admit their condition. We need, in short, the attitude toward immorality depicted in Erewhon where moral weakness is looked upon as an illness and kindly measures are taken to restore the patient to his virtuous health.

When we think of immoral we should endeavor to get away from the conventional meaning of the term. Perhaps a better idea is given by Mowry Saben (in *The Spirit of Life*) where the essence of immorality is regarded as the taking of a part for the whole.

The Spanish audience which dispassionately viewed a nude dancer as a purely esthetic spectacle, as depicted in Havelock Ellis' book, was moral because it saw the body as a whole. And none are more immoral than the blind bigots who fasten upon a half truth, declare it to be a whole truth and hence unalterable, and denounce as dangerous heretics all who hold a differing opinion. The Comstocks who have sought out parts to proclaim them immoral and have refused to see the beauty, the symmetry and the perfection of the whole are most immoral of all. It is the Comstocks who see nothing but nudity in art and fail altogether to appreciate a masterpiece in proper spirit. It is the Comstocks who invent the salacious in musical comedy while a more fundamental immorality is our demand that amusement be ever more extravagant and costly until our finer senses are satiated and glutted beyond the point of appreciation.

The immorality of money only exists when it is no longer seen as a medium of exchange but becomes an all-important thing in itself. Our very food and clothes may become immoral when the end and aim of life becomes animal gratification. We cannot imagine Plato or Socrates or Jesus living to eat and to wear fine clothes; we can well understand that they were clothed and fed in order to live decently.

We curse high prices, yet we habitually demand too much even of what we choose conventionally to dub necessities. Far less of these than we think are absolutely necessary to our mental, moral and spiritual welfare and to focus inordinate attention upon these things is moral perversion. Of course, the path of the single iconoclast set against society would be rock-strewn; but it is a fact that persons in moderate circumstances have more clothes and more jewelry and more "conveniences" than they need; they expect too boundless an extravagance in amusement. If our incomes were cut, our myriad "necessities" shaved down to real necessities, our hours of work shortened to the very few sufficient to provide us with these—would we not live more wholesomely, more happily, more morally? Think too of the back-breaking, blood-sweating labor we are compelled to do in order to achieve an artificial standard of living in a certain social stratum while actual necessity would require but sufficient work to be a real pleasure.

We speak of Christian morals. What do we mean? One can really improve little upon Epicurus, Juvenal, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Plato, Lao-Tse, Aristotle and other "pagans" except by fulfilling their precepts more nearly than has been done before. We speak of French immorality; but may not the actual fact be that

the French are more nearly moral than we in that much we see as immoral is, to them, unimmoral and a part of a greater whole? Real immorality steps in where we become obsessed with fractional views of things, and see, like paranoiacs, all things distorted through the sadly imperfect medium of some preponderant delusion.

However rabid we may be for prohibition, we must face the fact that a moderate use of wines and beer certainly does no harm in a large number of instances. However Puritanical we may be in the matter of blue laws, we must admit that mental and physical recreation on the only possible day is not altogether detrimental to office-cooped humanity. However particular we are on the question of taking human life, we must see that euthanasia is absolutely moral and humane in certain cases. Virtue is not and never can be a thing of fixed and iron-clad rules; it consists in reasoned adjustment to environment and in following out the highest ideals within us. Let us not put a dead weight on progress by compelling thoughtful minds to be bound by rule.

If any human faculty was given to be used fearlessly, boldly and to our best advantage that faculty was reason; and we should be seriously enough interested in matters of virtue to evolve our own philosophy of living. This does not imply moral and religious anarchy; for any individual painstaking enough to evolve a practical philosophy of life after conscientious heart-searching, deep study and profound meditation, realizes the personal character of such matters, respects the beliefs of his fellows and lives so as to cooperate with all efforts toward ideals and right, however divergent his beliefs on matters of opinion from those of his fellows. And he will find himself perhaps capable—more capable than ever indeed—of being a valuable member of society. Rules, in so far as they concern the practical solving of problems, are rules of necessity; rules in so far as they stultify intellect by requiring conformity to propositions of a speculative character or to inane customs and precedents are useless and dangerous.

It is surprising indeed to reflect how nearly ideas of "what is to be done" coincide among men who have attained these ideas by the most diverse cogitations. In essential matters of living and of world-betterment there is little indeed to choose between Socrates, Christ and Lao-Tse; between Huxley, Emerson and Haeckel; between Ingersoll, Comte and an orthodox divine. William James touched upon this matter when he said in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, "He believes in no God, and he worships him," said a colleague of mine of a student who was manifesting a fine atheistic

ardor. And the more fervent opponents of Christian doctrine have often shown a temper which, psychologically considered, is indistinguishable from religious zeal."

True enough, there are those who devote time, talent and intellect to matters other than religion and morality; those who do not care to go to the bother of evolving a philosophy of life, and those who are incapable of intelligently doing so did the idea occur to them. Among many of these is the field of conventional morality and traditional theology; and for such they are very necessary rules of conduct and adequate measures of virtue. Furthermore, convention and conformity are necessary in other cases until the mind reaches a maturity sufficient to permit it to attack problems independently and to attain reasoned conclusions; while others need convention as a perpetual safeguard since their time is so taken up that they do not care to reason on matters of virtue and morality.

For these reasons the most heterodox should look kindly upon traditional theology and conventional morality; and should hesitate to deny those who desire some machine-made creed or code as a guide and anchor. A supercilious attitude on the part of the non-conformer is not only bad grace but is positively evil. Reform must come gradually, and we must beware lest we disrupt established institutions and set circumscribed minds at sea to their destruction; we must see that we have something better to give for that we desire to take away.

Those among us who have evolved beyond the point where a moral code or a religious creed fashioned by another human will suit our needs unaltered, certainly have the right to study under great pioneer minds and to seek true morality and real virtue. Such was the candid effort for which Nietzsche was stigmatized. In *Beyond Good and Evil* he was perplexed to find some way that the highly intellectual physical invalid might have some ruling power for good over the heedless and brainless mass. Creeds and codes which stabilize the lives of sincere believers deserve respect for what they have done; but they deserve renovation for the good of their adherents.

It is well also to remember the felicitous epigram of Joubert, "C'est la force et le droit qui règlent toutes choses dans le monde; la force en attendant le droit." And while we await the easy yoke of right it is necessary to invoke the less congenial rule of force to hold in leash those who lack moral control of impulse. But force in moderation, and then only until right is ready. Iron-clad rule inhibits growth.

G. Lowes Dickinson has very aptly expressed the essence of real religion, and real religion embodies true virtue and morality, in the following words: "The bottom of his belief is that the impulse in him to love and to create is the divine impulse; that that is the core and meaning of the world. And whatever he may believe or may not believe about a world beyond, that spirit working in this world is the spring of his religion. That is why Christians and atheists may, and often do, have the same religion. For the essential thing is the common spirit, not the theology." Ruskin further amplified this thought when he reminded us that we are in any case bound to do our best while on this earth; for if there be no life beyond we must at all hazards make the very most we can of this interval of light between two eternities of darkness. With the poet of Sanskrit we must

"Look to this day!
For it is life, the very life of life!"

MISCELLANEOUS.

"THE MYSTERY OF EVIL."

To the Editor of The Open Court:

I was much interested in Paul R. Heyl's excellent review of "The Mystery of Evil" (*The Open Court*, Jan., Feb., Mar., 1920), and let us hope, his solution, in a distant future, may come to pass.

Assuming certain interpretations of evolution, there seems possible a mathematical solution of the problem of good and evil, and the late Paul Carus suggested it at various times in his writings.

For instance, he makes comparison with the old and new ideas of "heat" and "cold." We now know them as different degrees of one kind of motion. We name all degrees above an assumed point as "heat," and all below as "cold." The surveyor assumes an average level as zero, and calls distance above that, "plus," and distance below, "minus," though all is one vertical space.

Assuming the "enjoyments" and "sufferings" of life to be all made of "feelings," we arrive at a similar solution. All feeling above a certain standard is "happiness," and all below, "suffering."

A certain philosopher has devoted a chapter to "wave-motion" in life and evolution. A flag, in a steady wind, waves. A branch of a tree waves in the stream. The great electric current about the earth gives waves of variation to the magnetic needle. We have waves of health and energy. "All things are good and bad by comparison." We call the upward sweeps of the waves of