

MYSTICISM AND ETHICS

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LET us take counsel from the joyous humanity, loyal and wholesome and unceremonious, of Edward Everett Hale, especially as revealed in the *Life and Letters* recently edited by his son. Therein we find liberal Christianity untainted by the usual hypocrisy and meanness of those who make lofty claims but live miserably selfish and ignorant lives; we find innumerable kindly tokens of a generous and heroic disposition which took no umbrage and offered no spirit or petty spite or vengefulness. There was a spiritual reality about him which sheered away all artifice and formalism; it was, above all things I believe, the secret of his great and inspiring success as pastor of the Church of the Unity at Worcester, Mass., where he laid the foundations for his life work—"the establishment of a social security and worth in the New Civilization," a movement now well under way in Foxboro, Mass. Doctor Hale was a Unitarian positivist rather than an obscurantist or transcendentalist and tried, as he often said was his ambition, "to nobly and effectively transform machinery into life." If anything he was a little precocious and ahead of his time. He could have made a rather more effective delivery of philosophical opinion if he had been less given to the fine discriminations of social injustice, economic fallacy and warnings against the material advance of ruthless worldling power. Especially could he have greatly supplemented his metaphysical outlook if he had accepted the historical foundations of John Fiske's scientific training. At least the latter's Cosmic Philosophy had just the balancing strictures on romanticism and unquestioning faith which were perhaps the chief vulnerable points in Hale's conception of life. Like the early essays on Buckle's historicism and on the evolution of languages which are veritable storehouses of the ideas subsequently developed in his cosmological system, Fiske's philosophy was certainly less irreligious and more consistently expository of liberal evo-

lutionary ideas than Spencer's Synthetic Philosophy. The religious side of Fiske's work, as in his Cosmic Theism, etc., is the best, the most inspiring and heuristic of future meliorism in the world's code of duty, love, faith and morality. To be scientific in mind and yet religious and devout at heart—this simplicity and directness stands out especially strong in his Letters and shows him to have been a *reconciler* of the New School along with Drummond, Emerson, Channing, Huxley and William James.

Another side to the contrast between mysticism and ethics is that no honest devotee of the beautifully good and true will countenance either that thoroughgoing theriasm of man which Philodemus of Gadara taught, nor that sceptic dualism of Laodicean morality which the Marquis de Sade would use for specious apology. Just such a similar argument gives support to that subtle rebuttal "for spiritual security" which Emerson, the last of the pre-scientific philosophers, offered against Carlyle's pessimism. It shared no small favors it seems with Kierkegaard's aesthetic view of historic traditions, human life and destiny, and on the lonely sick-bed of modern morality prescribed that inevitable *Enten-Eller* (Either-Or) of Christianity which Pontus Wilner suavely assures us anticipated our own doubts and posted Vernon Lee's famous detour around Doctor Relling's vital lies and nothing-but in Ibsen's "Wild Duck."

The great dilemma of Christianity is not between joy and sorrow, but between truth and falsehood, virtue and vulgarity, noble sacrifice and selfish interest. Any penny-passionate fool can be devoted to the personal equation whose satisfaction or infringement makes for joy or sorrow, being pleased or angered always in foreview of selfish interest. But it takes a truly profound strength of character, a mystically exalted spiritual exuberance, to be capable of the actual motives behind all honest Christian practice. The choice is therefore not one between the narrow limits of a dual affective susceptibility, but one between the ultimate poles of all possible human conduct between love and rhyomism, between mercy and brutality, between benevolence and exploitation. It is an inexorable choice, one not to be ignored or taken in perfunctory acceptance, for we are active members to the mischief of mercenary motive or else we are equally active protagonists of the beautifully good and true; there is no passive middle ground on which to lounge in lazy indifference to moral conquest over the world, whether we take it as being human or non-human.

Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote how far we differ in our lives and thoughts and teachings from the original doctrine and action-patterns of Christ, that we try to set up certain codes of rules, certain theories and systems of philosophy, rather than a devout ruling spirit of truth and courage, that reverent attitude toward life and God and the Universe which has power to nourish our souls and which has promise of ultimate redemption and emancipation. By both we are reminded that the only way "to learn aright from any teacher is by devotion and appreciation of example; we must, first of all, think ourselves into sympathy with his position and, in the technical phrase, recreate the character in ourselves." On this instruction we can always build an ethic whose principles counsel good conduct, generous friendships, heroic public services and devout worship of unworldly Deity. Thus mysticism has a practical value only when it is honestly practiced as a *life*, as the whole program and destiny of one's spirit, and not merely as an intellectual speculation or shrewd policy of vulgar hypocrisy.

The current criticism of the mystic's program as being impractical and not suitable to the requirements of the modern world is a mere slush-fund of specious argument; it aims to hold our petty purposes down to folly and extravagance, it would corrupt our minds with worldliness and war so that a few murky-minded knaves can tyrannize and exploit all their fellows. Broadly speaking, I agree with Evelyn Underhill who explains mysticism as being "the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit toward complete harmony with the transcendental order, whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood. This tendency in great mystics gradually captures the whole field of consciousness; it dominates their life and in the experience called *mystic union*, attains its end. . . . It is the deliberate and active return to the divine fount of things, it aims to teach men to transcend the sense world and to live on high levels the spiritual life." Accordingly the mystic heeds the inner call of spiritual duty, rather than the external beckoning and empty promise of reward offered by the materiality of things. He seeks the truth and beauty of reality, not the sordid spoils of a sophist rhyomism. He tries to realize his highest aims, his noblest impulses, his brightest visions of the empyrean world. This duty which he holds so bounden and inescapable is that toward himself, his fellows and his God; it is inexorable in its demands and immediate in its rewards. The truth and beauty of reality are the garments of Nature taken out of their seasonal discretion and ren-

dered into eternal types of wisdom and inspiration. The bright visions of the overworld seduce his slow response to a flame once more and light his path to Horeb, Olympus or Helicon; they treasure no regret or half reluctant farewell, they beckon no disaster or defeat.

The mystic holds vast heritage from the past and in a measure is the curator of man's fast-failing power to administer his traditional estate. His intellectual goods are never sold at premium to the vulgar press, but his spiritual insights are given ever freely in hospitable welcome to resurgent souls who make their purchases only with the heavenly coin of love and faith, honesty and courage, innocence and inward joy.

No one, however dull or mischievous, but feels an occasional urgency to make some spiritual response to things divine, take glimpses of the mystic vision or heed the call to amplify and improve the wider life of man. No one, however mercenary or stupid with the wreck and rancorous rewards of worldly life, but comes sooner or later to feel the need of higher prospects than his petty plans can offer, to see the brighter visions of a more far-reaching horizon than usually obtains in his cloudy clamorous world.

What an empty thing this poor existence of ours would be if no one relayed the torch of thought and trust and friendliness along, if no one sought courageous emprise on new paths or tried to coax the vulgarian up a peg or two, out of his murky cellar, out into a nobler world where he could find it worth his while to realize and practice the good. A fine specimen of manhood is never realized however, except through taking life seriously, through having a genuine earnestness and a dauntless energy for every task, being ever ready and willing to make personal sacrifice, and with such heroism trusting in the ultimate destiny of all the worthy aims of true nobility. Emotion must be guided and controlled, the functions of fancy must be sifted for the good of both head and heart, not for sake of selfish pleasure or the exotic fanfare of jazz, not for the lewd luxury and lucre-lust of hedonism, and certainly not for the problematic thrill of strange doctrines. Not any of these, but the sturdy company of harmonious concord, the strength and endurance of chastened continence, the easy balance of naturalness and naive philosophy, all taken together in the mystic counsel of human life make up the only valid ethic of a just and reverent conduct. The vulgarian, like the worldling Fortunatus of old, seeks only some easy road to wealth which will serve rather than suppress his will-to-foolly, his

pride, greed, extravagance and selfish stratagems. The mystic on the other hand, like Isis, grown weary and footsore on the sun-baked Egyptian desert still searching for the mangled and scattered remains of Osiris, goes eternally on seeking the meagre remnants of truth and beauty, wisdom and virtue, which are still extant in the modern world.

The mystic knows that these things persist apart from man's memory and affection for them, that they are not adjectival but substantive existences, not mere figments of associated fancy or ideal conceptions of some Utopian Erewhon, but actual qualities and achievements of proven potency in the only *real world* of human character and spirit. The mystic understands that there is continuity of all that is good and true, that it has no fragile link to cause disjunction or failure in time of trial; he knows full well the subtle art of playing melodies on life's Aeolian Harp, the master touch which deftly carries the overtones as part of the general harmony. Like Coleridge says of truth in his beautiful figure, the mystic understanding has exalted hold on the universal nature of things, whence "it persists like a gentle spring on watercourse, warm from contact with the genial earth, which turns obstacles into its own ever-solvent form and character, and as it makes its way increases its stream. And should it be arrested in its course by a chilling season, it suffers delay not loss, and awaits only a Spring sun or a change in the wind to awaken again and roll merrily onwards."

Perhaps the one most glorious phase of mystic exaltation arises from the knowledge of the soul's true nature, origin, limitations and destiny. It is seen to be truly enough "the light behind the bodily veil," as Swedenborgians and theosophists say. But it is more: it is the unquenchable beacon of hope and faith and courage and love; it is the signal fire which lends code to the silent communion of saints and sages the world over. It knows that the soul is not mechanical but metaphysical, that it is man's real self trying, with what sorry success at times, to express itself clumsily but yet sometimes intelligibly through the muffling laminated garment-folds of physical sense and succor. It is the mystic's exalted consciousness of soul which proves to him that it is not a physical refinement of empirical function, but a spiritual expression of cosmic intelligence; that it functions as a radial center from which all visions and virtues perennially emanate. It is orthodox mystic doctrine that life would indeed be truculent and unbearable were we to make no distinction between the moral soul and the mechanical body. True enough, it

may turn out that what we call the body may simply be an organic system embracing certain processes of life which can be made habitual, mechanical, and through which we are enabled to become ethical beings exercising moral relations with our fellows. But it is no credential of dignity or duty without further process of spirit, the function of soul being to give just this ethical ability, just this capacity for moral fellowship in the world. And the mystic goes even farther. He holds that it is still probable also that the dissolution of the bodily system of mechanical habits, as at death, might mean the acquiring of some other perhaps better suited system which would not be so useful for communicating with people on this planet, but which might be quite efficiently the means for communicating with intelligent beings elsewhere in the Universe, so that life might go on developing and creatively aiming higher and higher even after the present body had been long ago left behind. Our ethics should always keep in mind that rude fact of our perennial spiritual awakening that morality is still very much a personal worldly conflict of selfish ideas and desires. Our ethics would therefore do well to always remember the mystic's viewpoint as being primarily a spiritual attitude toward life and the Universe.

Mystics like Jacob Boström believe that we can be real factors in the evolutionary process of the world by taking a decisive and active part in the great life of the Universe, in the rational meliorism which drives ever on through the directive wisdom of the concretely personal ideas we have of and share with God whose Divine Spirit does not exist in time or space but in the structure of spiritual reality, in the functions of spiritual truth. Such a mystic meliorism is rational and drives us ever forward and upward because it is grounded in the Aristotelian *katharsis* of pure constructive activity; it is positive and good, not negative and treacherous. Boström was in touch with the pulse of Nature and the great Divine Heart which gives her warmth, fertility and supernal beauty. He had no sham psychologism of religion such as makes up the "Belief in God and Immortality" by Professor Leuba, who ultimately shows little more than the difference of attitude with which different men approach and view the problems of literature and life. Some, as scientists, take up literal, sensory, detailed and "verified" concepts as being the fundamental constituents of morality and religion; they take everything apart as if it were a machine or a political speech, and wonder why there is so little actually intelligent content and utility in it. Others, such as professional saints and religionists, look to

whatever is emotional and obscure, metaphorical and hermeneutic, so as to draw therefrom a refined disproof of the former's abulient or static intellectualism. The true mystic then finds himself between two equally mistaken and opposing factions; neither of them is sufficiently accurate in what they have experienced, and neither of them is much concerned to rule out artifice and bring an honest intellectual temper to bear on the situation. It falls to the lot of the mystic to see clearly into what is true and what is false, to understand fully the causes and conditions of their fallacies, and to try to share his own enlightenment with them. Mysticism then is the highest ethical principle, it involves power of soul, spiritual response to the largest environment, it is a cosmic consciousness covering the whole universe of Nature, God, Mind and Love.