

## ETHICS—WITH OR WITHOUT RELIGION

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MANY books and articles have been written by modernists who hold that the way to vindicate or reinvigorate Religion is to prove that, after all, it only inculcates the virtues of love, charity, mercy, sympathy, and that, therefore, religion is merely another name for morality.

In animadverting upon this species of apologetic literature, a British critic said recently with impatience, "Commonplace morality is *not* religion."

No, of course not. Commonplace morality is manifestly based on expediency and utility.<sup>1</sup> A totally irreligious society—using the phrase in a conventional or traditional sense—would need, and enforce, a commonplace morality not different in any respect from that of Christian or Mohammedan or Buddhist societies.

But the question arises: Is the *hi her* morality religion, or, in other words, is the higher morality possible without a religious basis and sanction? By the "higher morality" we mean, as does everybody, certain manifestations of Altruism, such as positive beneficence and self-sacrifice.

It is not to be denied that even certain Agnostics fall into the error of claiming that religion is neither more nor less than ordinary, commonplace morality. They quote James' words, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world". Or they quote Jesus' "The Kingdom of God is within you", and his ethical commandments and sayings. What these interpreters overlook is the emphasis on religion in their quotations. The first of all the commandments, according to Jesus, is, "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart." Neither Jesus nor his disciples dreamed of the possibility of divorcing ethics and morality from religion. The fatherhood of God was to them the primary and fundamental doctrine, and without love and worship of God, love or charity for man was to them inconceivable. And certainly between *their* religion and *their* ethics there was no possibility of antagonism, whatever may be the case with corrupt, obsolescent, dogma-ridden and superstitious religious systems.

If we take the position that morals and religion are indissolubly united, no difficulty presents itself, and the highest forms of altruism stand justified and explained. *If* all men are brothers, and this brotherhood is based on the fatherhood of God, an omnipotent and omniscient power; and *if* love, service and sacrifice on earth are rewarded by eternal bliss hereafter, or by the supreme satisfaction of knowing that in losing one's life, one finds it enhanced a thousand fold, then, indeed, no injunction of religion can be considered to be alien to the potentialities and possibilities of human nature.

But what of the Agnostic? Having divorced morals from religion; having affirmed that the phrase "fatherhood of God" is without meaning to him, the Agnostic is compelled to supply new sanctions for morality in all its essential aspects. It is, of course, hardly necessary to say that there is no such thing as Agnosticism (though there is relativity) in regard to morals. Societies cannot live or grow without moral codes adjusted to their realized needs. It is almost inconceivable that society should permit or tolerate murder, arson, theft, forgery, rape, libel, malicious mischief, etc. Criminal codes are primarily moral codes. Even traffic codes are moral codes, and moral codes, as a rule, are rational. The freedom of any individual in any civilized state *must* be bounded by the equal freedom of all other individuals.

In making such affirmations as these we are assuming, of course, that adequate moral codes are possible without religious sanctions. What are they?

The Agnostic or skeptic will point, first of all, to utilitarian considerations. He will argue, and rightly, that no rational person will defend murder, burglary, theft, etc., and, further, that if a society were formed *de novo*, on a desert island, by Agnostics, there would be virtual unanimity in favor of substantially the same moral code as settled societies follow and enforce. No supernatural or mystical elements are required to justify the familiar prohibitions of the criminal code. Expediency and Hedonism supply all the motives and sanctions that are necessary.

Two questions, however, arise at this juncture. First, what of the so-called *absolute* duties, moral and legal—that is, duties the performance of which yields no reciprocal benefit? Why, for example, should we refrain from inflicting cruelty upon animals—creatures not members of our body politic? Or, again, why should we treat criminals and outcasts of normal intelligence—and there

are such, *pace* certain extreme schools of psychiatry—with humanity and mercy? Why should we abolish capital punishment, reform our prisons, extend parole and probation laws to more and more offenders?

The answer of the Hedonist to these queries is likely to be this: In sparing animals, or in progressively humanizing our treatment of criminals, we are really sparing and pleasing *ourselves*. The more civilized we are, the more painful it is to us to contemplate pain suffered by others, even when the pain is deserved. Our higher nature dictates forbearance, mercy and forgiveness. Hedonism, accordingly covers absolute duties and mitigation of merited penalties. The second question is more difficult. It is this: How can *self-sacrifice* be justified on utilitarian or Hedonistic principles? Why should anyone give up his life for the sake of an idea or a cause? By what right does the secular or Agnostic state send men to their death contrary to their own will and their own conception of self-interest?

Herbert Spencer grappled with these difficulties. We know what his solution was. He believed in the transmission by physical or biological inheritance of certain acquired characters, as well as in the operation in societies of the factor of natural selection. He was convinced—though on what we now see was rather inadequate evidence—that man has long been gradually adjusting himself, and being adjusted by unconscious evolution, to the completely social life. He believed that there has been, and that there will continue to be, evolution in human sentiments and emotions. He believed that the apparent, and for a time real, opposition between Egoism and Altruism was slowly disappearing, and that ultimately “due egoism” will be achieved by giving pleasure and service to others. Because of the postulated social and moral evolution, according to Spencer—“What now is occasional and feeble even in men of the highest nature may be expected to become habitual and strong, and what now characterizes the exceptionally high may be expected eventually to characterize all. For that which the best human nature is capable of, is within the reach of human nature at large.”

Now, the best human nature is capable of self-sacrifice and of deliberate unselfish assumption of the gravest risks. Indeed, in the best natures self-sacrifice is spontaneous, not the result of cold calculations and balancing of advantages and disadvantages. Therefore, on the theory of indefinite perfectibility and upward develop-

ment, even the average human being will in time achieve the capacity of self-sacrifice. To be sure, Spencer pauses to observe, in a harmonious and full-grown society the occasions for anything like serious self-sacrifice will be infrequent, since extensive demands on the superior, the benevolent and the altruistic members of society presuppose much misery, in justice and unhappiness, and these conditions argue greivous lack of adaptation to a truly social state. Still, he contends, the rare occasions for sacrifice will produce keen competition for the privilege, as the satisfaction of the impulse to sacrifice will be very highly prized.

This reasoning, however, involves some question-begging. Why *does* moral or social evolution tend to produce capacity for self-sacrifice. Because, the answer must be, it is impossible for societies or nations to survive and flourish without that asset. In the struggle for existence the societies whose members lacked that impulse and capacity, the theory is, would decline and perish, while the more fortunate societies, whose members were ready to make all manner of sacrifices for the general good, not excepting the sacrifice of life, would grow strong and possess the earth.

But has there ever been such competition among tribes and states? Has any society permitted men to refuse to make sacrifices for the general good? No nation or state is willing, or ever was willing, to live by voluntary taxation, for example, or to relinquish war-time conscription. No state has ever recognized what Spencer, in his radical days, called "the right of the individual to secede", to refuse to pay taxes or serve in the army or navy, or in the militia, when called upon to do so. We are assured by some sociologists that the state would be stronger if it did respect the scruples of non-resistants and pacifists and exempted them from services they conscientiously disapproved of. We are told that the free state would be so dear and sacred to free men that they would rush chivalrously to its defense whenever it was threatened by less noble or enlightened states. There is some truth in this, but exactly how much? No one can know.

What is certain is this—that the duty of the individual to serve the state at any risk or cost to himself is, and has been for ages, inculcated by the churches, the statesmen, the moralists, the educators, the politicians and the publicists of all schools, as well as by the artists. The pressure of the social atmosphere is all but ir-

resistible. Men *feel* that they have practically no choice. The compulsion of the law is supplemented by that of public opinion.

Only in recent years has the doctrine been promulgated by social radicals that the state must *deserve* service and sacrifice, and that the immoral or despotic state, or the wasteful and inefficient state, has no real claim on the individual citizen. This doctrine of the moral basis of the state is, however, purely academic. In practice every state appeals to force as the last resort, and is almost universally upheld in that course. Men instinctively bow to the state and admit its right to rule and to require of them any sacrifice it may deem necessary. Individuals may question and assail the state's policies; they may regard the sacrifices demanded of them in war time, or in times of internal stress and danger, as unfair and vain. They may charge the state with blunders and crimes, and attribute these to the egotism, vanity, ignorance or malice of men clothed with brief authority. (But who can doubt that "My country right or wrong" is the perfectly spontaneous doctrine of most men, of nearly all men, in fact?)

Can reason, logic, expediency, utility account for this attitude, or must the explanation for it be sought in mystical and super-rational or non-rational elements?

Let us see how a great philosopher, Spinoza, dealt with the issues we have raised, and especially with the sanctions of ethics and the relation between the individual citizen and the state. Of course, Spinoza was a profoundly religious thinker and not a Hedonist or utilitarian. Yet how does he fashion or justify his system of Ethics? Does he invoke mystical sanctions? Does he treat the supremacy of the state and of law as corollaries of the Fatherhood of God and of the divine governance of the human world? By no means.

Spinoza, in the fourth section of his Ethics, proceeds almost as the Greek philosophers did or as the English radical utilitarians did. He knows that conceptions of right and wrong, good and bad, in conduct are the foundations of morality. He begins, therefore, with definitions of good and bad, and his definitions are very modern and Hedonistic.

"Good," he says, "is that which we certainly know to be useful to us," and "bad that which we certainly know will prevent us from partaking of any good." By "us", we must assume, Spinoza means those of us who are normal mentally and emotionally, and whose

firm and mature, or certain, judgments commend themselves to the great majority of reasonable and well-balanced human beings.

Again: "The knowledge of good and evil is nothing else than the emotion of pleasure or pain, in so far as we are conscious of it."

"Since," continues Spinoza, "man endeavors to persist in his being and to avoid pain and experience pleasure, what does reason tell him as to the means of realizing the maximum of possible happiness?" His answer is elaborate, but we may condense it as follows:

Reason postulates that each man should love himself and seek what is truly useful to him; that each should desire whatever leads to a state of perfection. The basis of virtue is in action in accordance with the laws of one's nature, or the endeavor to preserve what is one's own. Since, however, we cannot be happy without possessing many desired things that are without us, virtue and happiness cannot be achieved in isolation and in narrow self-indulgence.

Now, there is nothing more useful to man than man. Nothing, therefore, can be desired by men more excellent for their self-preservation than that all with all should so agree that they compose the minds of all into one mind, and all seek at the same time what is useful to them all as a body. Under the guidance of reason then, men would desire nothing for themselves which they do not also desire for the rest of mankind, and therefore they would be just, faithful and honorable. Even hatred and injustice should be repaid with love and charity, for minds are conquered not by arms, but by love and magnanimity. And, although men are too often governed by evil passions rather than by reason, they cannot fail to recognize that they derive more advantages than disadvantages from society, and therefore it is right and wise to bear injuries with equanimity and to promote only the institutions, customs and ways which tend to produce social harmony and social peace.

It will be seen that Spinoza finds no need for mystical, non-rational, supernatural elements in his ethical system. Utilitarian considerations answer every purpose of the social contract. But so far, it should be noted, *there is no mention of any real self-sacrifice*. Spinoza speaks of bearing certain injuries with equanimity, because the advantages conferred by organized society outweigh any ordinary disadvantages—for example, errors of justice, or weakness and negligence in administration, or failure to protect a particular group against sporadic mob violence—and because an individual would lose infinitely more than he could gain by seceding from society,

assuming that he had that alternative. But what of giving one's life for the good of society and at its command? Spinoza avoids this question, perhaps because in his day it hardly presented itself. Yet some of his remarks furnish a clue to his logical answer thereto. He goes on to argue that men, because of their passions, appetites and short-sightedness, can only be made to refrain from inflicting evil by threats of greater evil. Society or the state does this; it prohibits certain courses of conduct and punishes them; it enforces obedience to law by threats, not by appeals to reason. The citizen, then, must feel that such obedience is necessary. In fact, "sin becomes nothing else than disobedience, and is punishable by right of the state alone," says Spinoza.

It may be inferred from this reasoning that it is the duty of the citizen to obey an order of the state *even when it means risking or losing his life*. Without obedience, Spinoza says, the state is insecure and weak. It is, for the State, therefore, to determine when, or whether, perils facing it are of a character and degree to demand self-sacrifice of its members.

Thus it may be contended that, in advocating obedience to the law and the state, and therefore to those who at any given time authoritatively speak for the State, Spinoza did contemplate sacrifice as one of the obligations assumed by the tacit social contract, or by membership in organized society.

Spinoza, however, overlooks the fact that obedience to authority is not *always* a sin, but, on the contrary, may be a virtue. There may be a conflict between one's own sense of right, one's own reason and conscience, and the command of authority. History is replete with such instances. From Socrates down to the Abolitionists and the conscientious objectors, men of rectitude, courage and conviction have maintained that morality may be superior to law and in advance of it. They have accepted the consequences of disobedience, but neither they nor their thoughtful fellow-citizens have regarded them as sinners or criminals. Here is a seeming paradox, but the truth is that self-sacrificing devotion to truth, to duty as one conceives it, to an ideal, in short, is nobler and more courageous than self-sacrifice, at the command of authority, for the common good as interpreted by that authority. We may be sure that Spinoza, if he were writing today, would draw a distinction between organic society and the political state, and another distinction between self-sacrifice for the welfare of society *as one conceives it* and self-sac-

rifice at the command of officers and functionaries who happen to wield power for a time. In other words, obedience to one's own still, small voice, to one's own sense of right, is often a higher virtue than obedience to the state.

But obedience, self-subordination, sacrifice, altruism in the highest form, are indispensable to society and to human progress. The philosophic utilitarian concedes this in theory as fully as the evolutionist of mystical proclivities.

It must be admitted that the mystic and theologian are entitled to argue that the Agnostic Hedonist is interpreting history to suit his preconceived theory, and that it is impossible to *prove* that altruism in its highest forms or degrees would have evolved in a society totally untouched by mysticism and religion. On the other hand, it is equally open to the Agnostic and Hedonist to assert that, at bottom, not faith in any supernatural factors, nor fear of divine wrath, not yearning for divine love, not religion, in a word, but human needs and conditions, human emotions and sentiments born of struggle and competition, satisfactorily account for altruism and sacrifice. One may doubt whether this controversy will ever be terminated by agreement.

What the Agnostic and the philosophic Hedonist will never concede, however, is the claim that without a religious sanction or explanation social and individual morality are of necessity reduced to the lowest and simplest forms. It is sufficient to refer to Spinoza's line of argument for a refutation of that contention. And to say, as some did of the English Utilitarians, that they were finer than their creeds, was merely to indulge in shallow, cheap sneers and patent fallacies. Men of all creeds, and no creeds, have been fine and noble. Men build creeds, in the first place, although good and fine creeds play a part in making and improving men. In the making and re-making of creeds reason plays the controlling part, though it gives full weight to sentiments and emotions. It is an egregious error to treat reason and calculation as synonymous terms. It is a graver mistake to belittle reason.

In a recent book, Prof. Maurice Hutton, of Toronto University, discusses the relative importance of reason and conscious Hedonism, on the one hand, and religious mysticism or intuition, on the other. To quote a few typical sentences:

"If a man must be governed by understanding, it will be by the understanding of the lower things of life, for the highest things

pass understanding; of peace (true peace), of righteousness, of wisdom a man has a suspicion, a vision, a gleam, a divination, as Plato says, but not yet comprehension: 'through a glass darkly' he sees, if at all. And therefore the demand that life be based upon logic, reason and comprehension inevitably sinks into a basing of life on that common sense 'which is intolerable without metaphysics', on that horse sense which is only one degree, I apprehend, removed from jackass sense, and on materialism."

Prof. Hutton asserts that in the great and important actions men are governed, not by reason, but by the indwelling sense of duty, and that, *pace* the Greek thinkers, knowledge is not and cannot beget virtue. The virtuous man does his duty because of a categorical and intuitive imperative, not because he discerns any personal advantage to himself in performance of duty.

These assertions contain a small element of truth, but only a small element. Psychologists and scientific ethicists do not admit that reason supplies no warrant or sanction for acts of justice, of beneficence, of altruism. There is joy and personal satisfaction in service; there is, as Spencer contended, pleasure in sharing pleasure. There is self-realization and self-expression in what may appear unselfish service. And even when real sacrifice is demanded, reason—not "horse sense," to be sure, but reflective reason—has no difficulty in accounting for the readiness to make such sacrifice and for the spontaneous impulse to sacrifice.

To affirm that reason cannot justify great actions, nobility of conduct, and that the attempt to follow it leads one straight to crude egotism and crass materialism, is to deny, by implication, that civilization enriches the individual and makes him freer, better and worthier than he could possibly be in a "state of nature", with its risks, perils and sufferings.

Our conclusion is two-fold. In the first place, service, altruism, sacrifice are *facts*, not mere possibilities. Being facts, reason and science must account for them. In the second place, the theory of social evolution *docs* furnish a satisfactory explanation of those facts. Social evolution, obviously, might and should produce justice, beneficence and altruism, even if mysticism had never dominated the minds of men. And the evolutionary theory of social morality is strengthened by the abstract argument from utility properly understood, as Spinoza, for example, understood it.

We do not know what the religion of the future will be. We

know that science is modifying religion and purging it of childish superstitions and of verbal, meaningless terms. But we know also that science *fortifies social morality instead of undermining it*; that science urges sobriety, temperance, tolerance, humility, industry, co-operation, solidarity, sympathy, respect for personality, release and development of human faculties.

And these are of the essence of social morality. They can dispense with the prop of mysticism and dogma, as can science.