

MORAL ORIGINS AND THE NUB OF ETHICS

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II.

WHEN we turn from the part individual responsibility has played in ethical theory and consider it in and of itself, it at once appears of so simple a nature that its absence from the world-view of early men becomes in itself a problem. How does it happen that they had not even a rough conception of individual accountability and that they failed to distinguish between designed and accidental acts? Westermarck points out that lower animals quite naturally retaliate on the agent of an ill turn, and he gives copious illustration.⁷ It must have been the force of some potent conception that prevented the issue of this simple notion among early men. "It needs little reflection and a very moderate amount of self-knowledge", says Hobhouse,⁸ "to distinguish between design and accident and a very moderate amount of reasoning power to apply the same to other men. But the nascent reflection of savage men was strangled at birth by the prevailing theory of witch-craft and possession". Well, at least, by some attitude or conception of more profound force than the sense of individual agency.

This fact will be made to stand out in relief by a glance at the issue of the notion of individual responsibility in relation to the concept of moral evil among the Greeks. It had different issues in philosophy and in drama, so that a comparison is illuminating. With the former it became in Aristotle the basic principle of ethics—the *sine qua non*. It excluded from the field of ethics whatever was incompatible with itself. In the latter it plays a subordinate

⁷*Origin and Development of Moral Ideas*, Vol. I, p. 36 f.

⁸*Morals in Evolution*, Vol. I, p. 93.

and baffling part. There is a force, deeper and of wider scope, called from of old *fate*, incompatible with individual responsibility, which nevertheless cannot be excluded from one field with it.

Surely it was no great achievement for such a mind as Aristotle to bring to complete clearness the notion of individual responsibility. What lies in it, abstractly considered, is not hard to get at. But in making this analysis, Aristotle was resisting a powerful force in Greek tradition. Plato had gone part way. Positing individual responsibility as the ground necessitating ethics, he had attributed the power of choice to the individual. But he continued to hold with Socrates that a man who did evil was not free. He was held in bonds. Here is the inward coercion which Aristotle found limiting the will. He excluded it from ethics because it came from beyond the individual's volition: what the individual agent could not avoid did not belong to the field of ethics.⁹ But Plato will not so easily exclude it. Instead he attempts to rationalize it.¹⁰ That "blindness of passion", which the Greeks among all other peoples attributed to the gods, was not easily to be excluded from the realm of ethics. It had one undivided basis in reality with human volition. The weight of this realm of psychical coercion, of "non-volitional conation", which is the life-centre of religion in primitive times and in all times, held strongly against a clear realization of individual responsibility among all early men. It is powerfully evident in all Greek ethical thinking.

The ethical thought of both the philosophers and dramatists of Greece is passionate and strained. In all the history of human thinking there is perhaps no equal instance of baffled eagerness. In the gnostic thinkers the Greek intelligence was tearing itself away from religious tradition. A sensitive moral consciousness attempted to repudiate gods that were evil as well as good and to find a clear basis for reality. But they could achieve no immediate insight upon which they could proceed without emotion. The simple notion of individual responsibility did not issue to clarify their thinking. Profound feeling is reflected in the fragments of early philosophy like the passion Euripides manifests in his treatment of deity. It is due to the baffled sense that both evil and good have their basis of reality beyond the volition and also the insight of the individual.

⁹*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, Chap. V, 2, 4.

¹⁰Windelband, *History of Philosophy*, tr. Jas. H. Tufts, p. 191 f.

In the primitive world-view which was their starting-point they found individuals and peoples submerged in a cosmic evil, an "uncleanness" of shed blood and of passionate strife which issued from the unseen world of gods and fates. The individual was merged escapelessly in fated courses. Guilt might fall upon a man by accident and infect a city. It might centre upon a stick or a falling stone, and these must be solemnly tried and if found guilty, carried beyond the borders. Philosophers and dramatists as well as common men found a reality in these traditional attitudes not easily to be shaken off. Why is it that this does not appear to the foremost minds of classical Greece to be a silly superstition of savages? It fixed itself upon courts of law down even to modern times. The fact gives evidence that this early attitude of thought has some ground in reality. Pericles and Protagoras debated through a whole day as to whether, in a certain accident, a man or a spear was the bearer of the guilt of bloodshed.¹¹ Plato's *Laws* provide for the trial of animals and inanimate things and for their death or banishment if found guilty.¹² It became difficult to believe that the main conceptions of early men arose from no real basis in human nature but were superstitions, entirely adventitious, which prevented the arrival of human intelligence at the simple notion of individual responsibility.

Early Greek science remained farther afield in the traditional world-view than did the dramatists, who indeed were of a later day. The early scientists interpreted polarity in nature—the "strife of opposites"—as cases of evil—of the "uncleanness" of tradition. They treated it, without figure, as a vendetta in nature, quite as the Dionysian ritual treated the opposition between the gods of the old and of the new year. A fragment from Anaxamander says, "All things suffer retribution for their injustice to each other according to the ordinance of time". Heraclitus views this strife of opposites as the basis of the natural world. Quite in the spirit of earliest human thought, moral evil is made a force of universal scope, a cosmic principle. Only, reduced thus to a universal scientific law, its moral aspect becomes thin, and disappears. The predominant notion of tradition, namely, the superindividual, super-particular aspect of evil, was dominant also in the minds of these

¹¹Gomperz, *Greek Thinkers*, Vol. I, p. 446.

¹²873 f. See Westermarck, *Op. Cit.*, Vol. I, Chap. X, for a full account of the force of this idea down to modern times.

thinkers. But in reducing a moral attitude to a scientific principle, they moved off the basis of tradition into the "Enlightenment". Socrates took another course. He clearly separated the natural and ethical realms. But, true to the spirit of the "Enlightenment", he conceived the good as a noetic form which the individual could grasp and so achieve. He thus paved the way by which Aristotle escaped from Greek tradition and reduced ethics to the realm of individual volition. The social atomism in Aristotle's definition of moral good and evil as precisely what the individual has power to do or to avoid was a logical issue of the Greek Enlightenment.

But the dramatists present a separate development of ethical ideas in which they do not move off the basis of tradition into the abstract. They are concerned with the problem of "fate"—the problem, that is, of the imposition of evil upon the individual. They stand squarely with primitive traditions in general in attaching a moral opprobrium—an intense sense of guilt—to the individual, even under his superimposed evil. However the aspects of evil which occupy the centre of the stage in Greek drama are always such acts as common sense in our own day would call moral evil. To be sure all traditions, such as the uncleanness of non-moral breaches of taboo, are reflected in the plays but they never claim the centre of interest. Sophocles, it is true, presents Oedipus, who has fallen by an accident into patricide and incest, as *πῦρ ἀναγνός*, wholly polluted and full of guilt. But Sophocles stands nearest to tradition. He is interested in painting nobility of character in the face of traditional "sin". Aeschylus and Euripides however have entirely humanized the content of tradition and correctly delimited the field of ethics. The Center of their stage is always occupied by moral evils in which individuals are involved, not accidentally but by their own volition. But the evils are fated evils, larger than themselves. In the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, the "fury of the house of Atridae" involves Clytemnestra in the slaying of Agamemnon. In the sequel it involves Orestes in the mother murder. The volition of each is escapelessly drawn into a concatenation of evils forming a compact social unity in which every link is a necessity though at the same time it involves the volition of an individual. Euripides presents similar situations, only with broad political meanings suggested. The present writer has pointed out in another place¹³ that the view of moral evil here presented is the same view

¹³*International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 55, No. 1, Oct. 1924.

which, with or without attempted explanation, has been held by Hebrew and Christian tradition, by many great minds in widely different religious and secular circles,—Hebrew prophets, Greek dramatists, modern satirists, poets, and novelists, by one philosopher, Immanuel Kant, and by occidental common sense entire. This view differs from primitive man's conception only in that natural evil and accident are excluded. The essential characteristic of the primitive attitude is maintained—the superindividual quality of moral evil. The concept, as social atomism will view it at least, continues to carry a contradiction at its heart. It is larger than any individual and involves all individuals somewhere and sometime in its stream. It is escapeless, yet every man is responsible for his deeds. Just as the inwardness of moral good—the Word of the Lord in the hearts of all the people—is conceived by Jeremiah as the spirit of a new and lasting Israel, a religious and social force focussed inwardly in each individual, so also the motive of evil, taken up and willed by the individual is yet involved in a social setting of evil which renders it inevitable. In this view of moral evil which has persisted through all ages of history, what is essential to the view of primitive man is unchangeably maintained. The individual is still the locus of moral evil focussing from beyond him. Only now the line separating the moral from the physical universe is clearly drawn and the locus of moral evil is identified with the moral agent. The notion of individual responsibility has emerged at the heart of a larger conception which long blocked its egress and with which it appears to be wholly incompatible. But it is maintained even in contradiction by a vigorous though baffled reaction to things as they are.

What prevented this simple notion from issuing in the thought of early men, though it is plainly evident in the behavior of lower animals, may be clearly outlined. It is clear that there can be no responsibility at all unless it gets its locus in the individual. But philosophers have never been able to draw a distinct line except in the abstract between the accountability of the individual and the force arising out of the social milieu and impelling the individual. Left in the abstract, Aristotle's analysis is clear and clearly defines individual responsibility. The responsibility of the agent is limited by ignorance of the matter, by physical compulsion and by psychical coercion.¹⁴ But when he comes to cases, Aristotle is well aware that

¹⁴*Op. Cit.*, Book III, Chap. I, esp. 10 and 11.

no distinct line marks off the agent's responsibility. No distinct line can be drawn between what was due to his own volition and what was due to psychical coercion out of his social milieu. It becomes evident that these two form an intrinsic unity not to be divided except by violence. The immediate agent must then be conceived as the locus of a responsibility that is wider than his own volition. It finds other secondary loci in less immediate agents. Their combined responsibility is manifest as merged into an essential unity. It extends to the limits of the immediate agent's social milieu. It unites in an intrinsic whole incalculably many individual responsibilities. What can be imputed to the immediate agent can only be roughly assessed for purposes of judicial usage of him.

Since this is so it becomes clear that individual responsibility, taken as such and by itself, is not the test of ethical situations. What is fundamental to ethics is a conception of responsibility which is other than but inclusive of individual responsibility. This fact taken at its full value would have wide bearing upon ethical theory. Among other things it would vitiate the usual method of investigating moral origins and development. Might it not be that the full quality and passion of an ethical situation might attach to the sense of group responsibility, while yet the part of the immediate agent among the other parts of this intrinsic whole was felt only in the vaguest way?

It may be stated with some degree of confidence then, that the process of moral advance has not been one of adding moral elements to a primitively non-moral world-view. It has been that, rather, of eliminating non-moral elements through an analysis brought by experience to the content of religion. This fact may be best illustrated by a brief outline of this process of moral advance as it actually occurred in Hebrew history. Here, by a remarkable social experience, incompatible and adventitious elements were eliminated and an adequate conception of the *summum bonum* was achieved.

The *ruah elohim* is the primitive theoplasm, the source of all power, both of good and of evil.¹⁵ With certain tribes it was centred in Jahweh. Moses who is the founder of Jahwism, experienced a profound social passion for his people enslaved in Egypt. He attributed this social passion to Jahweh. He conceived himself as

¹⁵Kautsch, *Hasting's Bible Dictionary*, Vol. V, p. 667a. Gershenson, *The Key to Faith*, tr. Herman Frank, p. 124 f.

the vicegerent of God not as a conqueror but as the liberator of a slave people. He considered social justice to be the outstanding characteristic of his god, Jahweh. The *ruah Jahweh* became the source, no longer of both good and evil, but of good alone. There gradually developed in the prophetic succession a clear insight into the incompatibility of magic practices with the social justice that characterized Jahweh. When the nation relied upon ritual rather than upon righteousness, ritual also was denounced by the prophets. The end in view was a society based in righteousness—the people of Jahweh. Jeremiah finally saw that the national responsibility could not be mediated through kings and priests. That method was proved a failure by the events leading up to the exile. He conceived of the social responsibility and the authority of Jahweh as being localized in the inward nature of the individual people themselves. The law of God was written in the hearts of the people. Moreover the conception of the supreme good, thus made inward, is also made humanity-wide. In the Deutero-Isaiah, all the nations of the world are to be brought into a harmonious society. The *ruah elohim*, the primitive theoplasm, has been cleansed of adventitious elements and has become at once inward and universal through the discovery by Moses of its profoundly social nature.

That this social nature was, from the earliest times, powerfully if vaguely felt to lie in the primitive theoplasm or *mana* is strongly suggested in several primitive notions. The human being as such, and especially the human being in need, has a special power over the religious dread of early races. Though warriors rightly slaughtered their tribal foes; though any "outlandish" person was often, as such, a fit object for hate and slaughter; yet the shed blood, even of an enemy, was an uncleanness that required in some cases months of cleansing ritual. Again, the greatest sin of early times was the neglect of the guest. The stranger, as though merely by virtue of his humanity, had a powerful claim upon primitive men. That this claim had its sanction in superstition, and that when it was fulfilled, the host might follow and rob his former guest, does not lessen but rather deepens the significance of the fact; since thus forces are presented which would have submerged hospitality, if it had had its basis in mere accident and not in human nature itself. Besides these facts there is the superior potency of the curses of the poor and needy. The fundamentally social nature of the original

theoplasm of primitive conception is thus strongly suggested; and, in the conception of the Kingdom of God issuing from Hebrew tradition, it may be said that the primitive world-view had only attained clearness and eliminated extraneous matters in the course of its development from pre-Mosaic religion to the religion of Jesus.

We affirm then with some confidence that the group consciousness of early man was a genuine moral consciousness and his sense of group responsibility had genuine moral force. The truly enlightened moral consciousness will not find the concept of individual responsibility to be the nub of ethics. The ground of ethics lies rather in a passion that reprobates moral evil and delights in moral good without any immediate reference to individuals. It affirms, for instance, that the Great War ought not to have been and therefore somehow might have been avoided by mankind, without placing passionate measures of responsibility on individuals and special groups. As we have said, roughly to assess individual responsibility in things past, has its judicial use. But responsibility finds its complete meaning only in its forward looking aspect, where some large social purpose renders each individual a locus of a common responsibility, each locus differing from others according to the differing powers and opportunities of individuals. Individual responsibility is an organic element in social responsibility.

We can merely suggest in conclusion what can be developed only in another place—that this view of the imposition of good and evil upon the individual and, at the same time, his personal involvement in the one and responsibility for the other can be explained only by taking at its face value the saying of Aristotle that man is a political, i. e., a social animal, by following it to its logical conclusion and making it the working hypothesis of both psychology and ethics. The hypothesis that sociality is in its essence an acquired matter will not fit the case, if the common sense view of moral evil, supported by the weight of great but non-metaphysical minds is not to be explained away; and especially if it bear the relation we have suggested to the primitive tradition. We are compelled to conceive of man, not, indeed, as “having a social instinct”, but rather, we suggest, as having all the original impulses of his nature centered about a gregarious drive in an innate system whose connections may be weaker or stronger in different individuals and weakened or strengthened by education in different social circles. Those

who find real force in the present tendency to view all innate drives, at least all human innate drives, as general without anything specific in their object-quest, may be reminded that a gregarious drive will have the general nature of the species in question. Only, any member of this species to which the organism itself belongs serves to awaken the gregarious drive into operation, or any species cry, or other sign, whose mechanism will be innately connected with the neural basis of the drive.

That the instincts are, from the dawn of human existence, an innate system, calling for an integrated humanity for its final satisfaction, suggests that reason may be conceived, not as an "instrument of the instincts", but as itself knit into this open system of drives as its object-finding or perceptual end, perceiving not only objects but also objective relations, which are taken up as they are perceived to parallel relations subjectively realized in the innate system of impulses and emotions.