

PROBLEMS OF THE NEW MORALITY

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

IS there such a thing as a new, modern morality? If there is, what are its sanctions, and what its scientific or philosophic foundation? Is it possible to dispense with all morals, as hosts of men and women are dispensing with all religion, or with what they *call* religion? Has there been a revolt against moral standards and principles, and, if so, what are the insurgents fighting for an inscribing on their own banners?

These and other new-old questions are discussed ably and lucidly by Walter Lippmann, a disciple of William James and Graham Wallas, in a new book entitled *A Preface to Morals*. Mr. Lippmann is a social radical, or at least an advanced or "leftist" liberal, and his views are symptomatic and significant. He arrives at no startling conclusions, it is true; but the younger generation respect him and will condescend to read and digest his ideas. To the conservatives he may be recommended as a thoughtful interpreter of ethical and sociological modernism. He puts things, moreover, in a fresh, original way even if the substance and matter of his observations possess very little originality. His book should be pondered and welcomed as a notable contribution to the social sciences.

According to Mr. Lippmann, the present generation is distinguished not by "its rebellion against the religion and moral code of its parents, but *by its disillusion with its own rebellion.*" The rebels are not happy or triumphant; they are completely emancipated, but they do not know how to use and what to do with their freedom. They profess contempt for authority, but they feel that the ousted authority has left a void that must be filled somehow. In Mr. Lippmann's words: "It is impossible to reconstruct an enduring orthodoxy, and impossible to live well without the satisfactions

which an orthodoxy would provide." Hence the unrest, the discontent, the secret quest for a new morality. Even the loudest of the rebels talk of the good life, recognizing the necessity of certain virtues and qualities in human conduct and human relations, but what is the good life? It is not necessary to exhort the young to be good, but it is necessary to show them what the good is and just why it is deemed good. They are profoundly skeptical, but not perverse, not unwilling to learn and to accept proof when offered what they regard as proof.

And Mr Lippmann essays to sketch or forecast the new morality, the morality that may become orthodox and serve as a dependable guide to life and conduct. He is not entirely successful in this hazardous attempt indeed, he seems at times quite arbitrary and to generalize on the slender basis of his own tentative sentiments and opinions. But, even when plainly subjective, he stimulates thought and challenges attention.

Mr. Lippmann has no patience with the shallow neo-Hedonists. He does not believe in the gospel of yielding to natural impulses and desires. He is a rationalist, not a mystic, of course, and he does not agree with those who think we are born to be miserable, or that there is some virtue in unhappiness. He is a combination of Stoic humanist and Puritan. He says, for example:

"To be able, as Confucius indicates, to follow what the heart desires without coming into collision with the stubborn facts of life is the privilege of the utterly innocent and the utterly wise. It is the privilege of the infant and the sage who stand at the two poles of experience; of the infant, because the world ministers to his heart a desire, and of the sage because he has learned what to desire."

The crux of the human problem is expressed in the last several words. We cannot, and we know we cannot, indulge our appetites and follow our instincts—for that way anarchy and madness lie. We must get understanding and acquire wisdom; we must consider others as well as ourselves; we must discipline and reconstruct ourselves to achieve the power to sublimate and harness our instincts and desires. We must become masters of our natures and learn to desire the right and good ingredients of life. And what *are* those ingredients? According to Mr. Lippmann, science and freedom of experimentation have not revised in any substantial way the cardinal precepts of the old morality or the old wisdom. To quote the author again:

“What the sages have prophesied as high religion, what psychologists delineate as matured personality, and the disinterestedness which the Great Society requires for its practical fulfillment, are all of a piece and are the basic elements of the modern morality.”

The saying that all educated and cultivated men have the same religion, may not be strictly true. But Mr. Lippmann contends that all enlightened and earnest men tacitly accept the same morality, a morality based on need and genuine expediency, on reason and the fitness of things. Not, perhaps, fitness in a cosmic sense; we are less dogmatic or confident than were past generations about harmony with nature or with God; but we are incurably pragmatic, and we find that the new-old morality, when sincerely and intelligently applied, makes for the sort of values and satisfactions which we desire when we are most mature and worthy of our best selves.

Mr. Lippmann is more optimistic than most of his present or former colleagues in liberal journalism and politico-social reform. He finds much encouragement in current tendencies—in the increasing moralization of business, for example, in the rising standards of advertising, in the socialization of public utilities, in the acceptance by corporations of the principles of service in lieu of that of profit. Some of his notions seem naive and crude. But he is emphatically right in holding that the new-old morality will be judged mainly by its fruits. The spirit of inquiry and criticism can never be imprisoned again. It has been liberated for all time, and the effects of that liberation must be accepted and as far as possible be converted into goodness and beauty.

Mr. Lippmann is more instructive and helpful as an interpreter of negative phenomena than he is of the manifestations of the new, pragmatic morality. He seems to evade certain profound issues, or not to be aware of their existence. He virtually ignores the element of mysticism. He refuses to face the fact that essentially human life is tragic, unless science is radically and utterly wrong. To many Bertrand Russell's ideas of the good life, of the worship of the free man, of the future of the family and of the state, if not also of industry and economic relations generally, will seem more enlightened and better-grounded than those of Mr. Lippmann. Even so, the latter's book is to be heartily recommended for its admirable qualities.

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