

PARADOX IN MORALS

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“Moralität ohne Sinn für Paradoxie ist gemein.”—

Friedrich Schlegel.

I

IF we are content to define morality as the norm of conduct approved in a given age, we may safely say that paradoxes of ethical theory arise but seldom, since morality is essentially a conservative thing. When such paradoxes do occur, they are usually of a striking, even sensational sort, and occasion prolonged and heated discussions. Ethical practice, necessarily something of a compromise, is always being insensibly modified, but men hesitate to scrutinize the foundations of morality.

But some fundamental questions at once suggest themselves. In what does the essence of morality really consist? Is it, as the derivation of the word indicates, custom? If so, what are we to say about the hero and the martyr? What are we to think of quixotism, of “lost causes, and forsaken beliefs, and unpopular names, and impossible loyalties”? Or, again, may it not be that the intelligent man has always to some extent fashioned his own moral code?

A contemporary American thinker of intellectual distinction has written: “Etymology to the contrary, I shall locate the essence of morality precisely in its contrast to custom.” It was in some such spirit as this that Friedrich Schlegel once coined the aphorism which stands at the head of this article: “Morality without a sense for paradox is tinctured with vulgarity.”

Let us turn for confirmation to the beginnings of Christianity. The spiritual atmosphere of the new religion is saturated with the notions of life in death, gain in loss, victory in defeat, freedom in bondage, wisdom in ignorance, strength made perfect in weakness, things of naught confounding the things that are. The dominant note is manifestly one of pronounced paradox. Here is, it would seem, a complete reversal of the values of the contemporary Gentile world, and even a radical recasting of the values cherished by the Pharisees and Sadducees. Poverty, suffering, humility, ignorance, and obloquy become virtues, the lowly are exalted and the high brought down.

Nevertheless, primitive Christianity does not stand in absolute ethical isolation. Apart from anticipations in Isaiah and other Old Testament prophets and from the possible influence of contemporaneous sects like the Essenes, there is an interesting parallel in the Graeco-Roman world. The so-called paradoxes of Stoicism, which are to be found in the writings of Cicero and Seneca, of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, bear no slight resemblance to those of the Gospel, especially in the uncompromising nature of the demands that are made. Like certain sayings in the Sermon on the Mount, they seem to flout ordinary experience. Virtue, the Stoics tell us, must be possessed entirely or not at all, and being eternal, once possessed can never be lost. The wise man of Seneca is alone free, happy, beautiful, alone possesses absolute wealth, alone is true priest and king. There is such a marked similarity between certain utterances of Seneca and those of St. Paul, that Lightfoot has suggested that St. Paul may have picked the paradoxes up from Greek professors of Stoicism in Tarsus. Cicero in a minor work has listed six of the Stoic "Paradoxa," as he calls them. Probably only one of these would seem indefensible to us: "That all sins are equal among themselves and all good deeds equal among themselves." There is, says Cicero, only one virtue—obedience to reason—and that is unshakable and eternal. Any dereliction of it is a vice, and we must judge of evil acts not by their results but by the vice they presuppose.

The paradoxical sayings of Epictetus are, for the most part, variants of the general Stoic paradox. Thus, Socrates was not in prison, because he chose to be there, and a man's prison is a place that he is in against his will. "The multitude say 'Only the free man may be educated,' but the philosophers say 'Only the educated are free.'" "May it never be my lot to have for friend a wise fool: nothing is more difficult to handle." Some one objects that the philosophers talk paradoxes. "But," replies Epictetus, "are there no paradoxes in the other arts? Nay, what is more paradoxical than to lance a man's eye that he may see? If one told this to a person unskilled in the physician's art, would he not laugh at him who said it? Is it surprising then that in philosophy also many truths seem paradoxical to those who are unskilled? . . . What a fine thing it is to be able to say to myself that I am now putting into action what other men only boast of in the lecture room and thereby win a name for paradox!"

II

For fifteen hundred years after the Gospel paradox was put forward, there was no attempt at a new ethical evaluation in the lands which had embraced Christianity. The moral precepts of Jesus, though perhaps never put into complete practice except by a rare St. Francis of Assisi, at least received official homage and must have modified incalculably the conduct of men.

The Renaissance brought a revival of paganism in men's lives, but only one man, Machiavelli, ventured to construct a new ethic based on pagan self-assertion in place of Christian self-sacrifice, and even he wrote for princes and not for ordinary humanity. About the same time, to be sure, Leonardo da Vinci was jotting down in his notebook—but solely for his own behoof—some arresting observations which plainly indicate his sense of the relativity of virtue and vice:

Lust is the cause of generation.

Appetite is the stay of life.

Fear or timidity is the prolongation of life.

Deceit is the preservation of the instrument.

Machiavelli wished to divorce politics from ethics. He uses constantly the word *virtù* in the older pagan sense of manly courage or self-reliant ability. He calls many things good in statecraft which Christianity would denounce as evil. "A wise prince," he says, "cannot nor ought not keep his faith given when the observance thereof turns to disadvantage and the occasions that make him promise are past." He lauds in his model prince the temper which does not shrink from "honorable frauds" and "glorious villanies." Sometimes he is half apologetic, as when he says: "Cruelties may be termed well-used (*if it be lawful to say well of evil*) that are put in practice only once for security's sake, not insisting therein afterwards." So far as I am aware, there is only one passage that seems to hint a complete ethical revaluation: "If the Christian religion calls for strength in us, it is for strength to suffer rather than to do. *This seems to have rendered the world weak.*"

A book which enjoyed a brisk notoriety in its day was Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, published originally in 1714 and issued in an excellent critical edition by a young American scholar in 1925. It is a rather short poem in doggerel, reinforced by prose essays. The theme, as the subtitle itself indicates, is that "Private Vices" are "Public Benefits."

To enjoy the world's conveniences,
 Be famed in war, yet live in ease,
 Without great vices, is a vain
 Utopia seated in the brain.

The bee-hive thrives as long as the private vices are practiced:

Millions, endeavoring to supply
 Each other's Lust and Vanity.

Thus every part was full of Vice,
 Yet the whole mass a Paradise.

But the hypocrites exclaim about their country's morals and pray the gods for honesty. Jove unexpectedly grants the prayer, and behold! through the loss of individual vices, the hive at the same time loses its greatness:

As Pride and Luxury decrease,
 So by degrees they leave the Seas:

All Arts and Crafts neglected lie;
 Content, the Bane of Industry,
 Makes 'em admire their homely Store
 And neither seek nor covet more.

Mandeville observes in one of his prose sections: "What we call evil in this world, moral as well as natural, is the grand principle that makes us social creatures, the solid basis, the light and support of all trades without exception. . . . The moment evil ceases, society must be spoiled if not totally destroyed." It is, therefore, as if he said: "If it be a vice by which the good of the world is achieved, by all means let us be vicious, for viciousness of this kind is not wickedness but virtue."

As a whimsical, professedly paradoxical work, Mandeville's "Fable" is not always to be taken with literal seriousness. None the less, it did create a furore in England and was vigorously combatted by such men as Berkeley, Law, Hutcheson, and various others; and Mandeville himself became a sort of Lord High Bogyman, much as Hobbes had been a little earlier and as John Wilkes and Thomas Paine were to become later. His paradox is produced, as Sir Leslie Stephen points out, by admitting with the divines that the pursuit of wealth is radically wrong and by arguing with the economists that it is essential to civilization. Of course the paradox loses much of its point as soon as it is admitted that in morals circumstances alter cases. And this was precisely the view that was being urged by Utilitarianism which had its begin-

nings about the same time. But from the standpoint of moral rigorism, Utilitarianism itself is, in the last analysis, immoral.

III

The great paradox of Rousseau, that civilization is inherently and incurably corrupt, that the arts and sciences have simply led to the moral debasement of men, that the only salvation is to return to the life of nature and of primitive simplicity—this paradox, I say, is *mutatis mutandis* a revival of the Gospel paradox. Once more, it is blessed are the poor, the meek, the simple-minded. Whether the idea came to Rousseau, as he himself claimed, in a flash of inspiration, or whether he deliberately adopted it as a paradox at the suggestion of Diderot, makes no difference for our purpose. The point is that he did come to hold the idea with stubborn and passionate conviction. But the necessary changes that I have alluded to between Jesus and Rousseau are important. Rousseau had no vision of a Kingdom of God on earth; he contemplated a continuing society. He did not advocate sexual asceticism. He emphasized, more than Jesus, the instincts, the expansive emotions, and the principle of freedom. What has been called the eleutheromania, the craze for freedom, of his followers, led them in many cases far from the Christian ethic. But not all those who are commonly included under the Rousseauistic formula were fanatics of liberty. Wordsworth and Coleridge, after their brief radical fling, grew tired of "unchartered freedom," and, feeling "the weight of chance desires," "the weight of too much liberty," came to perceive that

The sensual and the dark rebel in vain,
Slaves by their own compulsion.

It is in Blake that Rousseau's expansiveness is reincarnated—Blake who said "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." Many of Blake's paradoxes have seemed cryptic and esoteric, but recent scholarship has shed much light on them and on Blake's mental processes in general. Blake, like Böhme and some other mystics, did not hesitate to synthesize all kinds of contradictions, and, to add to the confusion he frequently, like Nietzsche, inverted terminology. In his philosophy, Poetry or Imagination is the propulsive force of the mind, of which the Reason has not yet been able to render an exact account. This Poetic Imagination has created all great thought, which Reason has only curbed and restricted. Reason has set up an arbitrary code of moral values which it calls Good

and Evil. But the great mind instinctively rejects such standards. It sees that what is called Good is only the accepted conventions of life, whereas Evil is the vital energy which must burst these conventions and remould life. "All the greatest men, including Jesus and Milton, have been evil in this meaning of the word. These men act according to their own impulses, ignoring all established laws of morality; for all such generalized laws are oppression, since each man is an individual. They follow every instinct to the most complete form of self-expression, lest they breed reptiles of the brain." As Blake said to Crabb Robinson: "What are called vices in the natural world are the highest sublimities in the spiritual world." This is his famous *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" (some of them immensely stimulating paradoxes) are to be interpreted in this way. Since Evil means Energy, Hell, the home of Evil, is the source of Energy. And so he can say:

"If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise."

"Prisons are built with stones of Law, brothels with bricks of Religion."

"The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction."

"He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence."

"Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires."

"No virtue can exist without breaking the Ten Commandments. Jesus was all virtue and acted from impulse, not from rules."

Walt Whitman in his poem *Starting from Paumanok* is fairly close to Blake:

"I make the poem of evil also—I commemorate that also:
I myself am just as much evil as good, and my nation is—
And I say there is in fact no evil."

Browning also is not far from the same standpoint in his lines:

"And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost
Is the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin,
Though the end in sight were a vice, I say."

Thoreau wrote in his *Journal*: "We cannot well do without our sins; they are the highway of our virtues." Herman Melville asks in his novel *Pierre*: "Who does not feel more warmly to the Lord of Evil himself than toward a petty shopkeeper who daily practices all the discreet and serviceable virtues?"

The philosophers, indeed, have consistently maintained that the true meaning of good is to be found in the overcoming of evil. Kant said that the virtues which did not contend against perverted will were, if not *splendida vitia*, *glänzende Laster*, at least *glänzende Armseligkeiten*. And for Hegel virtue is the triumph over vice. Holiness is the consciousness of sin with the consciousness of victory over sin. "Die Tugend is der vollendete Kampf."

IV

During the last fifty years as the supernatural sanctions of morality have faded in men's minds, there has been a sharp renewal of the ethical paradox. I can select only three strains which I regard as the most significant: the attack on "idealism" begun by Ibsen and continued by men like Samuel Butler and Bernard Shaw, the new sex morality of Havelock Ellis, and the teaching of Nietzsche.

There is something very disconcerting at first in Ibsen's assault upon that cherished word "ideal." But his drift soon becomes clear. "Don't use that foreign word, Ideals," says one of his characters, "We have the good old native word, lies." If by the "ideal" is meant the vision of what one thinks ought to be, then, indeed, Ibsen had no quarrel either with the word or the thing, but was, on the contrary, an undiluted idealist himself. But a so-called "ideal" is too often a mask for concealing an unpleasant truth, a mist of beautiful words which we draw about a thing until we can no longer see it clearly. These sham ideals are the dregs of an exhausted morality. Against them Ibsen waged incessant warfare, believing that society was sick unto death so long as it remained under their spell. Among these false ideals he reckoned the innocence of girlhood (for which read ignorance or possibly hypocrisy), the notion of the womanly woman, the notion that woman should be full of self-sacrifice and self-surrender, romantic love between the sexes (which Shaw calls "lust dressed up in its Sunday clothes"), the profession that love is always ardent, as if it never burned low, that family life is necessarily beautiful and that the members of a family are naturally bound together by ties of affection. To these Bernard Shaw would add such pseudo-ideals as the beatific contentment of poverty, the glory of war, etc. Ibsen and Shaw have tried to set up honest, vital truths in the place of these masks which only cover what is false or hollow.

Here are a few typical paradoxical sayings of Ibsen, due allowance being made for the possibility that some of the speeches may have been intended dramatically:

"When a truth is hoary with years, it is in a fair way to become a lie."

"A normally constituted truth will live, say, at the very outside, twenty years. . . . But such truths are always shockingly emaciated."

"Wisdom in extremes is folly;

Cowardice in flower is cruelty;

Truth, when exaggerated, is but wisdom backwards."

"One day it will be clearly seen that the greatest victory lies in defeat."

"The strongest man in the world is the man who stands alone."

For Shaw, as for Ibsen, the true ideal is the free development of personality. Anything which thwarts that is evil, though it bear a sounding name and be hallowed by age and religious sanction. His paradoxical epigrams are, like the man himself, flaring and audacious. But though intended to be shocking, most of them seem to me to be neither subtle nor very searching, but rather to merit the description which someone has given of them as statements of the obvious in terms of the scandalous. Many of them are jibes at the cant phrases of Christian moralizing. Thus:

"The only golden rule is that there are no golden rules."

"Do not love your neighbor as yourself. If you are on good terms with yourself, it is an impertinence; if on bad, an injury."

"Do not do unto others as you would that they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same."

"Never resist temptation; prove all things; hold fast that which is good."

"Every step in progress means a duty repudiated and a Scripture torn up."

"The love of virtue always begins with a hatred of morality."

Some of Samuel Butler's ethical paradoxes follow:

"It is as immoral to be too good as to be too anything else."

"If you really wish to understand virtue you must be subvicious."

"How often do we not see children ruined through the virtues, real or supposed, of their parents. Truly, He visiteth

the virtues of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation."

"It is all very well for mischievous writers to maintain that we cannot serve God and Mammon. Granted that it is not easy, but nothing that is worth doing ever is easy. Easy or difficult, possible or impossible, not only has the thing got to be done, but it is exactly in doing it that the whole duty of man consists."

We may take Havelock Ellis as a fitting representative of the new sex-ethics. After what Edward Carpenter called the "impure hush" of Victorianism (Bernard Shaw referred to it as "indecent's conspiracy of silence"), this franker and more truly civilized attitude toward sex must have seemed doubly paradoxical. If Jesus entirely repudiated sex, as I believe to have been the case, then his doctrine is balanced by the equally drastic counter-paradox of Ellis who has taught that sex is vital and essential, wholesome and beautiful, even in many of its alleged aberrations; that nothing which happens in sex-love between man and woman is to be called common or unclean. This, I take it, is substantially the point of view of the rising generation in Europe and America.

In point of fact, the history of Christianity in its relations to sex is sadly in need of a candid investigation. The teachings of Jesus are explicit enough, no matter how hierarchy, theologians, and scholars have sought to evade or soften the issue, and the statements of St. Paul abound in the same sense: all sexuality is sin. Priestly celibacy and monastic vows of chastity are the direct and logical outcome of this primitive Christian attitude. The author of "The Imitation of Christ" wrote: "Be not familiar with any woman; but commend all good women in general to God." Tolstoy, who perhaps more than any other modern tried to repeat and reinforce the spiritual paradoxes of Jesus, said: "He who regards woman—above all his wife—with sensuality, already commits adultery with her." And he comments on certain passages in the Gospels: "The Christian ideal is not marriage; marriage from a Christian point of view, is an element not of progress but of downfall; love, with all that precedes and follows it, is an obstacle to the true human ideal." He adds that the ideal, by its very definition, is incapable of complete realization; it is an appeal to the heroic energies of the soul. Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata* is the legitimate descendant of such texts as Matthew V, 28, and XIX, 11 and 12.

Christendom in all its divisions has departed startlingly from these teachings. How little of the primitive Christian attitude did Luther apprehend, when, in the profane exuberance of his recoil from asceticism, he called the monks and nuns who had renounced their vows "blessed robbers," and remarked that "True chastity is in lust, and the more unclean the lust, the more beautiful the chastity!" Clemens Brentano, a Roman Catholic, who showed the typical vacillation and self-indulgence of the German romanticists, said: "It sounds paradoxical, but it is nevertheless true, that he who is born to voluptuousness and does not practice it, leads a truly sinful life. Nothing is less chaste than a passionate girl who remains virtuous. And should a voluptuous sinner repent of her passions, she would forthwith lose her innocence." Even the more cautious Coleridge once suggested that a treatise might be written in praise of the moral elevation of Gargantua and Pantagruel. It "would make the church stare and the conventicle groan, and yet would be truth and nothing but truth."

Nietzsche's ethical paradoxes are not only iconoclastic, as befits his "transvaluation of all values," they are also phrased with a strident insistency that has dinned them into people's consciousness and made them, so to speak, international property. Such winged words as "beyond good and evil," "the blond beast," "master-morality and slave-morality" served their turn valiantly for him in his campaign to destroy those twin-evils, Christianity and democracy, as a prelude to the establishment of the new culture which was to be based on the primitive instincts. Nietzsche is one of the world's greatest paradoxers. It is interesting to observe how characterizations of him are almost inevitably cast in a paradoxical form. Georg Brandes called him an "aristocratic radical"; others have called him the "murderer of God," a "God-intoxicated blasphemer," and an "Epicurean Stoic," "the Pascal of Paganism," a "mystic of rationalism." Nietzsche called himself an "Immoralist der Tugend," investing the word "Tugend" with the masculine meaning of Machiavelli's "virtù." He proclaimed the ego holy and selfishness blessed. Gut (good) is not opposed to Böse (evil) but to Schlecht (despicable). "Man," he said, "must become better and more evil." But Christianity, that slave-insurrection in morals, had substituted for the old pagan virtues of strength and efficiency the ethics of the oppressed, the suffering, the played-out, the unnerved. Therefore, Christianity and its modern

concomitants, democracy and socialism, are *schlecht*; they are the refuge of the failures in life. To revert to the old values—master morality and the aristocracy of excellence—to inculcate the will to power, to preach tragic optimism as the mood of strong men, was Nietzsche's mission. All his most revolutionary ethical paradoxes take their appropriate place in this setting:

"Ye shall love peace as a means to new wars. And the short peace better than the long."

"Ye say, a good cause will hallow every war? I say unto you! It is the good war which halloweth every cause."

"Ye have heard how it was said of old 'Blessed are the peace-makers, for they shall be called the children of God.' But I say unto you, 'Blessed are the war-makers, for they shall be called the children of Wotan who is greater than Jehovah.'"

"Not peace of mind, but more power; not peace at all, but war; not virtue, but efficiency. The weak and the ill-conditioned shall go to the wall, and we shall help them to do it. What is more harmful than any vice? Active sympathy with all these misbegotten and weak."

"I call Christianity the one immortal blemish of mankind."

Any consideration of latter-day morality would be incomplete without a reference to one of the most striking symptoms of the modern attitude—the loss of the sense of sin—though the matter perhaps concerns theology and mysticism more than it does ethics. The much quoted lines of Edward Fitzgerald's version of the "Rubaiyat" express the change in trenchant paradox:

"Oh Thou who Man of baser Earth didst make,
And e'en with Paradise devise the Snake,
For all the Sin with which the Face of Man is blackened,
Man's Forgiveness give—and take."

Swinburne proclaimed that statement to be the summit of human philosophy, and an American novelist of the present generation has declared that it epitomizes admirably the mature conviction of the modern age.