

## SANCTIONS AND ETHICAL RELATIVITY

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

TO THE average lay reader at all interested in philosophical and moral questions, it must seem totally unnecessary to argue in favor of ethical relativity. Is it not a truism that morals, like manners—and indeed morals have been called “superior manners”—are shaped and determined by time, place, and circumstance? Have not anthropologists, travelers, historians, and others furnished superabundant proof of ethical relativity?

We know that polygamy is moral and legal in certain parts of the world. So is polyandry. We know that killing is not always and everywhere a crime, and that lying is by many tribes deemed a virtue. Even among the best elements of the most advanced nations lying is considered a venial offence, provided it is dictated by pure and disinterested motives.

In fact, one can hardly name a single act which is everywhere treated and which always *has* been treated as immoral and anti-social.

These facts prove the relativity of ethical concepts. But, as already stated, no one denies the relativity of ethics in *this* sense of the phrase. However, there is another sense in which the same phrase is understood by many modern thinkers, a sense not likely to command universal acceptance among scientific and philosophical thinkers.

The distinguished Prof. Edward Westermarck has written an important and arresting book on Ethical Relativity in which highly controversial views are expounded. The eminent sociologist and anthropologist is an uncompromising upholder of the theory of relativity in ethics in the deeper, psychological sense of the phrase.

The central conclusion he seeks to establish in his work is this—that “moral judgments are ultimately based on emotions, the moral concepts being the generalization of emotional tendencies.” This proposition is divisible into two affirmations—namely, that moral judgments are subjective, not objective, and, further, that the source of these judgments is not the intellect, but the emotional nature of homo sapiens.

Prof. Westermarck contends that, contrary to Kant and other great thinkers, no moral principle that is truly self-evident can be

named. This means that logic and ratiocination have nothing to do with moral principles. We feel first and reason afterward. That which pleases us we subsequently approve; that which offends or hurts us we resent and then condemn in more or less precisely formulated doctrines.

With these propositions for his premises, Prof. Westermarck has little difficulty in puncturing and disposing of the old theological notions of ethics as well as of the modern or contemporaneous assumptions. He rejects absolutism, as do the Hedonists and Utilitarians, but, unlike these, he finds it impossible to find a solid foundation for ethics either in the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number or in that of the greatest good or happiness for the normal individual.

We cannot know what is good for the greatest number, or even what, in the long run, is good for ourselves as individuals. Ignorance, of course, is a very poor basis for moral injunctions.

It follows, according to Westermarck, that emotions, and emotions only, are convertible into moral judgments and ethical principles. Not *all* emotions, of course, but some. Which?

Prof. Westermarck answers: First, the feeling of "self," and secondly the sensations and feelings of pleasure and of pain. When we feel pain, we also feel an immediate, instinctive resentment against the author of that pain. Pain caused by a natural force or agent also arouses resentment, as is seen in children and very primitive savages, who will kick a stone or a chair they accidentally run up against. Intelligent persons do not kick inanimate subjects, except when exceedingly angry and furious—that is, when they revert to childhood. But we certainly resent the insults and other injuries of fellow-humans, and not infrequently kick and strike them. Now the same natural emotion will account for codes and laws and agencies directed against those who inflict pain upon us. The criminal code is one of the embodied and crystallized modes of resentment and retaliation caused by pain.

Murder, theft, arson, forgery, libel, slander, and like offences cause us pain, and we prohibit and punish them. The feeling of resentment is primary; the ideas and intellectual processes reflected in criminal codes and moral injunctions are secondary. No one, says Dr. Westermarck, will question the utility of the codes and injunctions, once we recognize their origin and the sanctions back of them.

The sensation or feeling of pleasure gives rise to gratitude, approval, friendly appreciation, or, in the author's words, "retributive kindness." These feelings or sentiments, again, generate ideas and principles. We commend those acts or courses of action which tend to render us individually and collectively contented, happy, secure. The commendations find eventual embodiment in appropriate doctrines and formulae.

Thus far it is impossible to disagree with Dr. Westermarck. But is he justified in claiming startling originality for his views? Is he not, after all, a philosophical utilitarian?

The emotions he regards as the sanctions of moral codes are biologically useful, as he points out. The concepts based on these emotions are also useful. Is it not clear, then, that *utility* is the basis of ethics and the sanction of moral laws and commands? Not always, of course, individual utility, but certainly always *social utility*.

The objection to the utility theory—namely, that we cannot know what is really good for us—applies to the Westermarck view as well. Pleasure and pain are not propositions, but sensations, and, as we have seen, very useful sensations, but our ideas and concepts of morality, based on those sensations are useful only if, and in so far as, they are correct. Manifestly, there is no absolute guaranty of the correctness and truth of the generalizations that spring from feelings. Do we know that capital punishment is useful, deterrent, and preventive? We do not. Yet capital punishment is a result of the pain-pleasure motive stressed by Dr. Westermarck. Our laws and regulations against business fraud and stock gambling are notoriously insufficient; yet there is no uncertainty as to the pain caused by the tricks and manipulations of the dishonest and greedy stock traders and the faithless directors of corporations risking their money in the securities market.

The truth, of course, is simply this: We *think* we know and we act upon such limited knowledge as we possess. Our moral and criminal codes are largely the results of collective experience interpreted by the leaders, lawmakers, and philosophers of the period. The function of the lawmaker is not to anticipate demand, but to meet it. As the psychologists say, a law is significant and effective only if it embodies a social convention, an ascertained and felt need. Even unpopular and disregarded laws—and we have too many such—represent the insistent and persistent demands of strong and mili-

tant groups aided, at least passively, by larger groups.

In short, moral ideas are the ideas of the dominant elements in the given body politic. Authority makes law, said Hobbes. But the authority that makes law has behind it the sanction of the tribe, the community, the environment.

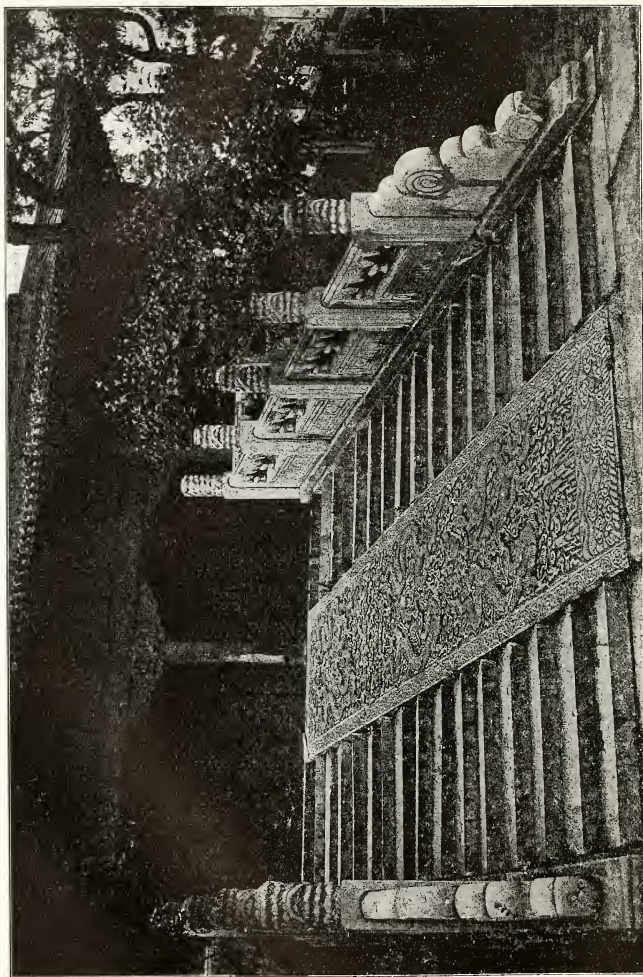
Thus, to repeat, utility is the only real basis of moral ideas, but the individual is not permitted to decide for himself what will and what will not conduce to the success and prosperity of the community of which he is a member. The decision rests with the authoritative spokesmen of the community, be they medicine-men, priests, moralists, men of science, or captains of industry and finance.

Can we conclude, then, that ethical ideas are subjective? By no means. Pain and pleasure are indeed subjective, but the ideas derived from the sensations of pain and pleasure are at once subjective and objective. Whatever lends itself to generalization, abstraction, synthesis, is objective. Science is certainly objective, for the laws of logic and thought are the same for all normal human beings capable of reasoning, criticism, verification, and correction. Ethical science is no exception to the rule.

The point may be raised that even among the most advanced peoples there are wide divergencies of opinion in respect of moral ideas or propositions. Is communism moral? Is it proper to limit or abolish economic freedom? Is currency inflation moral? Is any form or degree of censorship moral? What of the claims and demands of the radical eugenists? Has society the right to sterilize the unfit—and incidentally to define fitness and unfitness? What of birth control, easy divorce, and a hundred other contemporary questions? The wisest of us disagree with regard to them. But what does that prove? Simply, that the social and moral sciences are not exact, and that the evidence available admits of several interpretations. Passion, self-interest, bias, obscure judgment, and in the nature of things human no appeal to experiment and verification is possible. And yet, most of our laws command all but universal assent: they would be nullified with remarkable ease but for that sanction—assent. Dr. Albert Shaw has contended, indeed, that in the United States all important legislation has been the result of virtually unanimous demand and consent.

Certainly, that is the ideal, the goal society is struggling to reach. Tyranny, whether reactionary or revolutionary, whether communist

or fascist, is a passing phase. We must return to liberty, tolerance, respect for personality, spiritual and moral and aesthetic individualism. But civilized individuals like and wish to work together, to play together, to exchange ideas, to share joys and sorrows. More and more, under free institutions, will human beings recognize that abundant life and progress depend upon universal acceptance of certain fundamental principles and conditions. This recognition will be based at once on feeling and on reason. Ethics thus may become more and more scientific. "The fear of moral anarchy among the theological or metaphysical absolutists is utterly groundless. Even in the arts there is no real or lasting anarchy. The utmost freedom in letters, music, and painting leads to agreement and orderly judgment. Schools, movements, experiments come and go, but the giants and classics are not affected in the least by these ephemeral and superficial agitations. Beauty reigns autocratically, although it is relative up to a certain point. Utility ultimately dictates and enjoins ethical ideas and concepts, and it is the business of scientific thought to justify these ideas and concepts if or when they are challenged. Life is dynamic, and social conditions change. But no intelligent person will contend that it is possible for any community or society to dispense with ethical standards and ideas, or that all ethical ideals have equal validity. Civilization has its roots in certain tacit understandings and compacts. To the individual, it has its price. To the body politic and social, we may repeat, the price of civilization is self-restraint. Majorities and governments are not infallible interpreters of social utility and social expediency.



TEMPLE OF CONFUCIUS AT PEIPING