

cyclical changes habitual in the given society, and the irreversible changes coming from outside; the degree to, and the means by, which a sense of identity is maintained in the changing society; the increase, persistence, or possible diminution of social participation by individuals and groups during the process of change; changes in goods, techniques, exchanges, and aspirations; changes in man's use of space and awareness of time; all these need to be taken into the assessment. Professor Wilson is not, of course, unaware of this, and notes the surviving vitality of ritual, either indigenous or based on indigenous sources, among southern Africans.¹ Perhaps if she had made rather more specific comparisons between the Nyakyusa, and, say, two of the Cape Nguni peoples (to be selected for contrasting degrees of Christian influence) general features of African social change might have appeared more clearly; but, even so, as Professor Wilson explicitly recognizes, southern Africa has been peculiarly unhappy in the way that oppression has not merely engaged in here-and-now injustice, but has destroyed the seeds of future growth.

These few criticisms are not meant to deny that, even at the level of general, but scholarly, exposition, this is an excellent book, and deserves to be read by anyone interested in what the African personality has to teach us. Yet the deepest interest of this book lies in the unintended revelation of the author's personality; for in her has been realized that which she attributes to the world process, a growth in awareness of persons that does not destroy the remembrance of roots.

Glaucou's Question

by Hugo Meynell

'What is the use of being a good man—I do not mean what is the use to others, but to oneself? Would not the ideal state, from one's own point of view, be to have the power to injure others for one's own benefit to any extent at all, without being injured in turn oneself? Suppose, like the man in the fairy story, I were able to make myself invisible at will. If I had this power, and abstained, out of conscientious scruples, from all the indulgence in robbery and seduction for which my talent gave me the opportunity, would I not be mad? All our moral education seems to be based on the principle that the *consequences* to an agent of his being morally bad

¹*Op. cit.* pp. 72-3, 128. Professor Wilson's understanding of the relation between religion and society is so perceptive that her view that Nuer monotheism 'is only intelligible in terms of Nuer history' (*op. cit.*, p. 6) by positing an influence from Nubian Christianity seems surprising. Even if we accept this (and there is no evidence for it), it would still have to be explained how it fitted Nuer society and culture.

are unfortunate to himself; but few seem to assure us that to be bad is in itself to be unfortunate—and when they do so, their assurances carry little conviction. And if it is only a matter of consequences, the ideal aim in life, for a man of enlightened self-interest, would seem to be to find some means of enjoying the immediate fruits of being wicked while avoiding the unfortunate consequences. It may be objected that this would be difficult; but then most worthwhile achievements are difficult. Is there any indication that the good man is somehow, just by virtue of being good, more fortunate than the bad? We would dearly like to believe this, but cannot find any adequate reason for doing so. It is no use saying that men and gods will ensure that the good man is rewarded and the bad man punished; since men can always be put off by flattery and bribery, if not by deception; and the gods by sacrifices. Let us take a stark and extreme case: the contrast between a bad man, with all possible worldly goods, honoured among men as though he were good; and a good man, regarded as bad and, in consequence, poor and persecuted, hated, mocked, and finally enduring an agonizing death by being impaled. Who is going to say that the good man in this case is more fortunate than the bad?’

Such, in effect, is the question posed to Socrates by Glaucon and Adeimantus in the second book of the *Republic*. Subsequent moral philosophy consists, to a quite surprising extent, of attempts to evade the question or to pretend that it is somehow unreal. It has been rightly said that Socrates in the *Republic* completely fails to prove his case, that the good are more fortunate than the bad, the just than the unjust.¹ But Plato (or Socrates) must take the credit for something that seems extremely rare in the history of philosophy; that is, raising the question so directly and forcibly. There is an interesting oscillation in Plato’s work, typified in the *Gorgias* as well as the *Republic*, between two kinds of answer to the question. Both works conclude with eschatological myths, with accounts of the fate of souls after death which are such as to clinch the issue of the greater happiness of the just than of the unjust. Of course Plato’s Socrates is not committed to the details of these stories; what concerns him is that something like them should be true; and the essence of the ‘something like’ would appear to be the unequivocal vindication of the just as against the unjust. It appears to me that the argument of Socrates in the *Gorgias* on this topic may not unfairly be summed up as follows. ‘Any decent man will find that good behaviour suits him better than bad; and if you are not a decent man, but someone depraved like Callicles, there are always Rhadamanthus and the rest in the next life to make you wish you had behaved better in this one.’² However, as Hume’s Epicurean remarks, if a

¹David Sachs, *A Fallacy in Plato’s Republic* (*Plato’s Republic. Interpretation and Criticism*, ed. A. Sesonke).

²Cf. *Gorgias*, 522-7.

morally good way of life is really beneficial to him who lives it here below, there is no need to appeal to any life hereafter in which the moral balance will be righted¹. The weight that Plato's Socrates places on his eschatological tales suggests that he had lost his case so far as the present life is concerned, and that he knew he had lost it.

'“Virtue always triumphs in the end”, observed the mysterious beggar.’² That this view is expressed, directly or indirectly, in so many fairy tales, is surely a witness at once to the moral and social significance of the view, and the tenacity of the human mind in upholding it. Of course, the question whether or not the doctrine is *true* is quite another matter.

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is perhaps the world's greatest essay in moral philosophy. But its conception of the moral ideal for man has frequently and not implausibly been held to be inadequate; Aristotelian virtue suits a man very well for social and political life, one feels, just because Aristotelian virtue is very different from heroic virtue, the virtue displayed by the just and persecuted man of Glaucon's example. Glaucon's just man was willing to abjure friendship and wealth for the sake of being good; Aristotle knows that one needs friends and goods in order to be happy, and hence does not envisage the kind of virtue which is apt to lose a man wealth and friends.³ It is also worth noting that Aristotelian virtue seems to presuppose a particular kind of social and political context, that is, one either in which there is not much conflict between those actions and dispositions which really tend to promote social justice, and those which gain their agents friends and material benefits; or in which people fail to advert to that class of actions which tend to the former end while being incompatible with the latter. A man who lives in a society which shares high ideals of benevolence will be likely to tend to find happiness by being, or at least seeming to be, fairly benevolent. But where gross social evils exist, which are greatly to the *prima facie* benefit of one class of a society at the expense of another, the man who has it in mind to right them will, particularly if he is a member of the favoured classes, have to decide whether he would rather be virtuous or happy. A man could gain favour with the Athenian public by financing a trireme or the production of a play by Sophocles; he would not have done so by working towards the fundamental amelioration of the condition of women—who Aristotle says are of less value than men—or of slaves, who he says have no intrinsic value at all.⁴

Of course, moral philosophers have often been preoccupied with the relation between the individual's pursuit of his own happiness and his cultivation of the general happiness; but their attempts to

¹*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, XI.

²*Cinderella*, as re-told by Beni Montresor.

³*Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 8.

⁴VIII, II.

show that these in the long run coincide have not been very plausible. Butler was surely correct in arguing that what he called 'cool self-love' will issue in a great deal more respect for the desires and feelings of other persons than will selfishness of a thoughtless and impulsive kind;¹ but the fact that the maxim of subtle and long-sighted egoism will usually issue in actions very different from those of the crude and unreflective egoist does not entail, as Butler seems to assume, that it will be effectively identical with altruism. The reflective egoist, like the altruist, may be inclined to resist immediate impulses of aggression or greed; but unlike the altruist, he will suppress such immediately gratifying impulses towards kindness and consideration for others as are inconsistent with his long-term interests. I think that a great deal of the argument of J. S. Mill's moral philosophy is vitiated by the same oversight. That exclusive and persistent self-regard which is long-sighted is very different from that which is short-sighted does not entail that it has the same practical consequences as love of humanity. The conviction that one's own interest and that of others do not ultimately conflict is, according to Mill, 'the ultimate sanction of the greatest happiness morality'.² But there is a dangerous possibility of equivocation here; the fact that my self-interest is coincident in effect with that of *some* others does not begin to show that it is coincident with that of *all* others. To benefit those who are near to us in affection and interest is more or less necessary, to be sure, in order to benefit ourselves. But it is important to distinguish between those others whose interests more or less coincide with our own, and those others whose interests may be widely different or even contrary. That our own class interest 'really' coincides with the interests of all other classes at least needs to be argued. Furthermore, a man who would rather be happy than just had better not be too scrupulous where the pet enmities and prejudices of his own group are concerned. The man who cares for happiness more than justice is likely to get good marks from his social group for one attitude to colour prejudice while he is a university student; but he will get them for quite the opposite attitude, perhaps, when he is a householder on a housing estate into which a West Indian or Pakistani family has just moved.

The observation that group or class prejudice tends to widen the gap between action in the individual's own interests and that for the general happiness is at the basis of one of the most epoch-making of all the answers to Glaucon's question. According to Karl Marx, it is in society *as at present constituted*, in which the interests of one class are blatantly in conflict with those of another, that the interest of each does not coincide with the interest of all. The solution is to create a classless society in which this inter-group conflict of interest will never arise, and hence in which the interest of each really will

¹Joseph Butler, *Sermons*, *passim*.

²*Utilitarianism*, ch. 3 (Everyman Edition, p. 31).

be the interest of all. Now it is difficult to disagree with Marx that many social structures make far wider than it might be the gap between action in one's own interest and action in the interest of humanity; but what I do not think he has even begun to show is that in any conceivable human society, however well organized, conflict between individual interests, between those of individuals and society as a whole, and between groups within society, would not arise. That some class structures exacerbate these conflicts of interest does not imply that there is any prospect of their wholly disappearing when the social system is radically altered. However, it does seem to me that Marx is right in suggesting that the social structures of a well-organized society tend to reconcile rather than emphasize such conflicts of interest as will inevitably arise.

The second and third of Kant's three 'postulates of practical reason' express with extraordinary clarity what has to be assumed in order that the maxim of individual long-term interest and the maxim of universal interest may reasonably be deemed to issue in identical courses of action. Kant has refuted, as he sees it, all attempts either to prove or to disprove by theoretical reason the immortality of the soul or the existence of God. Kant's *summum bonum*, or highest good, is that happiness should ultimately be matched with desert; since this certainly is not so and cannot be so in the present life, the good and rational man makes his postulates of practical reason, to the effect that an after-life exists for the human soul in which desert may meet with happiness, and that an omnipotent and just Deity exists to ensure that it will do so.¹ Kant is remarkable, it seems to me, in avoiding the three usual sentimental evasions of the issue: that virtue is always *really* rewarded by happiness in the present life; that virtue fails to be matched with happiness only because of the remediable iniquities of the present social order; and that the reality of an after-life for men and of the restoring therein of the balance between happiness and desert are obvious to anyone who cares to reflect on the subject.

It will be convenient, for my subsequent argument, to label the doctrine that happiness is in the long run apportioned to desert, either in this life or some other, as the Great Assumption. Of what I called the three usual sentimental evasions of the issue, I have already briefly considered the second, in discussing the view of Marx; I shall come later on to discussion of the third. It remains now briefly to consider the first—that the great assumption is true even when this life only is considered. I have heard it suggested, for example, that children who die young and painfully have always had moments of intense happiness which counterbalance what would appear to be the inequity between their own fate and that of those among us who

¹It is fair to say that Kant's attitude has a certain ambiguity; sometimes he seems to be saying that we ought to believe these things, sometimes rather that we ought to conduct our lives as though they were so.

are more fortunate. Of this suggestion, I want to say that no non-analytic proposition is more certainly false. I imagine, moreover, that it is rather easier to maintain when others are being clubbed or starved to death, or enduring the spectacle of these things happening to those they love, than when they are happening to oneself. I am certain that the Jewish children who went to their deaths at the hands of the Nazis singing *Shema Ysroel* confidently expected that death was not the end for them; though I am quite aware of the more sophisticated view of the matter, that they were exercising a 'picture preference', or something of the kind, in relation to their present circumstances.

II

It is by now commonplace to say of the great religions of mankind that they hold no belief in common. But one thing they do have in common. They all seem to proclaim the truth of the great assumption, and the existence of some state of affairs such that it is possible. The just man is happy in that he will in the long run be the better off for his justness; since this is most emphatically not the case when the present life only is taken into account, death cannot be absolutely the end for every man. The process of development of this conviction seems particularly clear in the Old Testament. It is said that up to well after the time of the exile in Babylon, the pious Jew only believed in a drab and shadowy after-life, to which virtue or vice in the present life made no manner of difference. At the time of the exile itself, many of the people were complaining that God was unjustly punishing them for the faults of their fathers; and so the prophet Ezekiel boldly stated that God punished each individual for his own iniquity, and rewarded him for his righteousness.¹ The Book of Job, when taken as a whole, seems to dramatize a struggle between two conflicting convictions: on the one hand, that the world is simply not run in the kind of way Ezekiel had claimed, and that on the contrary the righteous suffer and the wicked flourish; and on the other hand, that in spite of everything God somehow deals justly with men. Short of giving up either the doctrine of the just dealings of God, or the plain evidence of universal human experience, there was really only one way out of the dilemma; and so it is no wonder that, in the period before Christ, the Jews either themselves developed or took over from other sources a more hopeful and morally relevant doctrine of the after-life, that of the resurrection of the just in a reconstituted future world. (In the time of Christ, the conservative theological party, the Sadducees, regarded this as an unwarranted innovation.) This doctrine, whose original source seems to have been Zoroastrianism, was taken over by Christianity and Islam. Another way of rendering the great assumption plausible

¹Cf. the discussion of the proverb, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth have been set on edge', in Ch. 18 of the Book of Ezekiel.

is that taken by the great Eastern religions of Hinduism and Buddhism; according to their doctrine of reincarnation, one ascends or descends the great chain of being, or is finally released from it, according to one's merit in each life. Though the detail of this doctrine is of course quite different from the eschatological doctrines of Christianity and Islam, the moral effect is much the same; though the bully and the sensualist may get away with their conduct here and now, ultimately they will not be able to do so.¹

I do not know how often and how seriously it has been suggested that the virtual universality of religion within human societies is due to the fact that societies, in order to survive, need to foster the illusion that to be good, to act on behalf of others, is consistent with being happy. On this view, societies in which the illusion of their fundamental compatibility, as asserted by the religions, could not prevail, died out just because not enough people could be induced to exert themselves sufficiently on behalf of their fellows. One who held the theory might be inclined to apply the moral to contemporary Western society. This account corresponds very well, of course, to Marx's assertion that religion is the opium of the people, but does not issue in his comforting qualification that the opium will no longer serve any useful purpose when the classless society has arrived. It was Matthew Arnold (I think) who wrote, just a century ago, that it was clear to any man with eyes in his head both that mankind could not do without religion, and that he could not do with it *in its present form*. On the theory which I have suggested, it is only the qualification which is wrong; the dilemma is absolutely that we cannot do with any religion, because it is intellectually incredible, and that we cannot do without it, because it is socially irreplaceable short of some more palpable intellectual absurdity—like the first or the second of the sentimental evasions which I described above.

I admit that there are persons in every society who have a passionate interest in justice, but are without hope for themselves in pursuing it. But I think there is more than enough evidence to say that, at least so far as the present life is concerned, there is insufficient motive for acquiring such an interest if one does not happen to be naturally so constituted as to have it—and that most of us are not. Of course, the impulse to *talk* enthusiastically about justice, provided such talk does not affect our interests adversely, and enables us to

¹This article has been deliberately written from premisses which are not theological; but a theological footnote is certainly in place, as was kindly pointed out to me by the Editor. It is, of course, of the very greatest importance that the point of the doctrine of the Risen Life is not *primarily* the adjustment of the balance in this one. Nor is it the case that the redeemed deserve the incomparable happiness of heaven; any virtue they may have, as well as their joy, is from God. To quote the Editor, 'Christianity doesn't provide more sophisticated reasons for not being a sinner, it forgives the sinner—thereby liberating him to act otherwise'. But only on a superficial analysis would these facts seem actually inconsistent with the main point of the article; that short of Christian eschatology, or something similar to it in the relevant respects, the oppressors and the deceivers are often greatly the better off for their practice of oppression and deception.

curry favour with our group, is quite common; but this is rather a different thing. Most of us, again, are quite inclined to commend, though rather less inclined to imitate, those who resist prescriptions on the part of their rulers which they and we regard as unjust. But there must be few indeed of these who, unless one assumes the truth of some religious eschatology, can be better off or happier in the long run for such resistance. The conscience of a scrupulous man is liable to distress him if he fails to protest against the injustice which is perpetrated around him; but it is absurd to assert that it is liable to distress him more than exile or imprisonment or torture at the hands of the political authorities.

It is even difficult to assert with any confidence that a seasoned oppressor, whether in the private atmosphere of the family or within the political context, would be better off if he ceased to oppress. Oppression is too commonly an aid to self-deception, and the acknowledgement of oneself as one is always more or less unendurable. One would gather from Krushchev's *Memoirs* that Stalin could not bear to contemplate the possibility that his own policies had led to that prodigious famine in the Ukraine, with its frightful tale of suffering and death. It was always easy for him to blame his informants for false information, or to pillory subordinates for incompetence. Except on the great assumption, it is difficult to see what inducement there was for him to consider seriously whether the blame might not lie with himself. If there is an after-life, it is at least possible that oppression and self-deception will not pay their perpetrators in the long run. Short of an after-life, it seems that nothing is more certain than that they often do so, indeed usually do so to a greater or lesser extent.

That there is a certain kind of belief in the after-life which works towards the increase rather than the diminution of self-deception and oppression—that Marx is right where some kinds of religion are concerned—I do not deny. A man who believes that it will ultimately be the worse for the unjust, and that he himself is unjust, has at least three remedies for the anguish of his situation. He may strive or pray to become more just; or he may tell himself that he is really just anyway; he may convince himself that it will not ultimately be the worse for the unjust. (I have mentioned some disreputable ways of being religious; the most disreputable reason for being irreligious is perhaps a judicious compound of the second and third of these possibilities.) Very few men—perhaps one in a million—can take the second way out without more or less gross self-deception. The first way out is arduous; the third only too convenient. And yet, if its constituent belief is true, and generally believed to be true, there follows the socially dangerous, and perhaps ultimately fatal, consequence, that no man who is not altruistic has an adequate motive for becoming so. Somewhere in his writings, George Orwell suggests that the effect of a general cessation of belief in an after-

life is liable in the long run to have far-ranging moral and social effects. I have tried to argue both that this is so, and why it is so. I have *not* tried to argue that this is a valid reason for believing in an after-life.

I am afraid that I have been able to tell neither party in the dispute between the religious and the secularist outlook what it wants to know. But that the conclusion of an argument is inconvenient does not imply that the argument is invalid. Against the secularist, it has been argued that societies can hardly endure for very long without at least fairly widespread belief in the truth of the great assumption; and against at least one possible religious attitude, it has been insisted that the fact that men and societies have need of it, if indeed they do, does not begin to show that it is true. In fact, reasons have been suggested why it would be likely to be widely held whether there were solid grounds for it or not. Of course, if some *other* reason could be provided for believing in the truth of the great assumption—for instance, if it could be proved or shown to be probable that an omnipotent and just God existed, or that the human soul was immortal—matters would be different. But, in the present philosophical climate at least, few appear convinced by such arguments as have traditionally been adduced to establish the one proposition or the other.

Kant's views on this matter have already been briefly alluded to, and I wish in conclusion to state another view allied to his—that people *ought to wish that* the great assumption were true, and hence either that one of the great religions, or some system of ideas with similar eschatological implications, were true. This follows directly from the proposition, which I think few would trouble to negate, that one ought to wish for universal justice. To say that one ought to wish that the great assumption were true, of course, is quite different from saying that one ought to believe it against all the evidence, or even, as Kant appears to have done, that one ought to believe it given that theoretical considerations tell neither for nor against it. But it does entail that people have some obligation to take seriously, rather than dismissing with contempt as harmful or dishonest, evidence or argument adduced to bear either way on the great assumption. At least it is immoral to be indifferent to the issue of such a momentous question; though apparently such indifference is now common enough.

To summarize the argument:

(1) No social or political system has yet been constructed in which there is sufficient motive for those not naturally altruistic to become so. That crass, short-sighted egoism, such as pays no regard to the needs and feelings of others, brings inevitable nemesis to its perpetrator, is not to the point.