

PERSONAL YET UNIVERSAL ETHICS

APART from size, tortoises all look very much the same; mostly shell, and an unvarying, somewhat expressionless countenance—when it emerges. However, a recent correspondence in *The Times* has drawn attention to the range of individuality possessed by these creatures. Mr. and Mrs. Shelley are now famous characters, and the tortoise who nibbles the tennis shoes of visitors; then there is one who thrives on a diet of ground bones, another who has his shell brightened with furniture polish. Some are surly, but many recognize with pleasure their masters and mistresses. Once you know them, almost all betray different characteristics. Antony and Cleopatra in the garden at Blackfriars have quite distinct ways of their own, but watching them this morning it struck me that they have very much in common, after all; that were they just entirely different substances we should never distinguish them from the pansies they have savaged; that, in short, the idea of a tortoise covers them almost as completely as their shell does.

Unconsciously and lazily, I was thinking my way across the ground of the disputes on the nature of universals which occupied the early middle ages; but I was led to reflect that the problem is still very much to the point. If Gerbert and Roscelin thought of it in terms of logical forms, and I was considering it in regard to the realness of tortoiseness, a present and urgent interest applies to the matter of human conduct. Are there real *kinds* of human action? Can fixed standards be applied to what we do, so that some actions must be condemned in themselves, irrespective of their motive or attendant circumstances? Are there universal moral principles, categoric in themselves, more than conventions, more than useful to the community, intrinsic necessities of personal life? Or must every case and situation be apprized on its own individual merits? Is the abstraction we call contraception, or murder, or theft, a *real kind* of thing, and wrong in itself? Or

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must we approach every case biographically and sympathetically and consider it as unique?

According to traditional Catholic moral science the morality of a given action is determined by three real principles: its immediate end, its motive, its circumstances. Circumstances we can here disregard; motive clearly modifies the rightness or wrongness of an action. But there is a common difficulty concerning the first determinant. It is not always easy to see that the immediate term or end of a human action unvaryingly governs its moral nature; that, for instance, it is essentially the same kind of action to kill a child out of cruelty and to give an overdose of morphia to a man dying in agony. Are there really fixed rules covering human action at least as completely as a shell covers a tortoise?

There is a profound English instinct to deny this. Fixed laws may be accepted for the surface of life, for the patterning of social intercourse, for the proper working of civil government, for the traffic-control of one's own private movements. But many people with a developed sense of a situation separate the codes they adopt from the secret heart of their thoughts, and are tempted to think: yes, marriage should be generally indissoluble, but there are exceptions: or, fornication is wrong, but sometimes a deeper and more romantic reality may override the law.

Fundamentally the question is whether we are to be governed by the reason, which sees types, establishes connections and alone makes ordered social life a possibility; or whether we are to be led by a set of cultivated and human instincts, which are committed to the moment, and find in every moment a novel situation. The reason must often feel remote from the moment: it more easily works in the judgments we pass on other people's lives than in the judgments we pass on our own, certainly those in the present tense. Reasoning in the past tense is not so difficult. Ultimately the problem is not one of ethics, but of the theory of knowledge: whether rational principles are an arbitrary framework to give some sort of shape to a sequence of experiences, or whether they are the real ribbing of the world.

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So far as metaphysics is concerned, many will hold that the problem can be left to the lecture-room. But it is different where human happiness is at stake, which is the proper consideration of moral philosophy. Here the existence or otherwise of clear and unchanging principles is a question at once urgent and important. It is doubtful whether people are 'worse' now than they were at any other period, indeed it is arguable that the disappearance of a merely conventional morality **has** released a more delicate and discerning moral sense. But what we do suffer from is an agnosticism in moral matters; the notion that all actions should be firmly and decisively governed by **firm** intellectual principles is, in the opinion of many, continually **growing** weaker and weaker.

In this connection, the recent appearance of a notable collection of lectures is reassuring. Seven well-known lecturers in the University of Oxford have co-operated to discuss leading problems of conduct in the modern world under the general title of *Personal Ethics*.¹ There was no **pre-**vious consultation between the lecturers as to the method of treatment to be adopted, nor yet as to the results to be arrived at. Each **has** followed **his** own bent, and no one of them is responsible either for the arguments or for the conclusions of any of the others. But, as the editor points out, it will not escape the reader's attention that the method of approach is very much the same in each lecture, and that identical principles tend to reappear in slightly varied form throughout the book. Most impressive of all is the general agreement that the problems of practical ethics demand a treatment at once more respectful and less cavalier than is meted out by those who say: 'It is only the motive that matters'; or: 'It is impossible to genera-

¹ Edited with an Introduction by K. E. Kirk. *Edrrcotion*, by B. H. Streeter. *Marriage*, by K. E. Kirk. *Patriotism*, by J. P. K. Maud. *Social Inequalities*, by C. R. Morris. *Earning and Spending*, by R. L. Hall. *Gambling*, by R. C. Mortimer. *Ethics and Religion*, by J. S. Bezzant. (Oxford: at the Clarendon press. Humphrey Milford ; 5/6.)

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lize, everything depends on the circumstances of the particular case.' The world of serious thought, as Professor Kirk remarks, is once more asking for an objective treatment of the problem of duty, and the lectures he edits, in their consideration of 'duties' and 'obligations' apart from the personal motives and circumstances that may surround them, show a return to the Thomist conception that human acts have a moral nature in themselves.

This sense of unchangeable essences in human action is tempered by an appreciation that an exact understanding of the circumstances is also necessary before duties can be determined. The reader accustomed to the more assured tone of Catholic moralists may mistake the absence of dogmatism and the tentative manner of the lecturers for a lack of intellectual conviction. But they approach their subjects professedly in a spirit of inquiry, and as far as possible without dogmatic presuppositions. And because of this, a Thomist, without agreeing with every detail, must be pleased to recognize that they adopt two main principles of his moral dialectic: the simultaneous admission that human actions are both personal and universal, and that while all are unique and different, they yet share in certain specific natures and so are governed by fixed and objective standards. We are back in the garden. Antony and Cleopatra are different, but both of them are really tortoises.

Both principles are necessary. The sense of the individual without the sense of law reduces moral science to a collection of improvised, if shrewd, moral judgments, opportune rather than true. The sense of law unqualified by the prudential appreciation of a real situation can produce the denunciatory moralist, who echoes and applies to the whole of life the injunction given to the governess: 'Go and see what the children are doing, and tell them they mustn't.'

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