III

THE SEARCH FOR THE MORAL STANDARD

O UR survey of the early stages of modern ethical thought has disclosed two essential points. First, the secular reaction against theological authoritarianism imposed on modern ethics a critical, scientific-philosophical character. But, second, this very fact served to accentuate the importance of a critically vindicated standard of moral value. If you rely ultimately on divine revelation, and conceive of virtue and vice as righteousness and sin, obedience and disobedience to God’s will, both the source and content and the sanction of your morality are defined for you. Your problem as a moralist, then, becomes one of exposition and exhortation. To be sure, even here you may refer moral distinctions to the necessarily perfect choice of Divine Reason, or else you may regard them as beyond justification, depending upon the infinitely spontaneous and unsearchable fiat of God’s will. But in either case, we would be told, Divine Reason or else Divine Will has expressed itself: morality consists in directing our reason and our will to accord with the Divine.

If now, however, we assume deliberately the secular standpoint, then instead of our confidently formulating moral principles in terms of religious dogma, both morality and religion present themselves to the undogmatic mind as problems requiring solution in terms of a view of the world sufficiently comprehensive to admit of their reasonable inclusion and sufficiently well established to command con-
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viction on its merits rather than on mere faith and dictation.

Let us put this more bluntly and in somewhat greater detail for the sake of greater clearness. The theologian may tell me that virtue, moral perfection, is in obedience to the law of God, which he is ready to recite with confidence. May I not, however, check the ready recital by asking him to cite his reasons for being so certain that his alleged record of God's law is really authentic and deserving of preference over rival versions?

This is a real perplexity: here is a world's fair of religious wares, a whole encyclopedia of moral codes, each claiming Divine authority: which one are we to accept, and why? An Arabian poet of ironical wit tells us that one day he heard the dogs in the market-place sneering in their canine way at the superstition of the cats. The cats, it seems, believed that, in order to get juicy bones for a week, it was necessary to miau Thursday morning before sunrise; whereas, the dogs said, everyone who had any enlightenment at all might know that juicy bones are assured by barking Friday evening after sunset. In India the Mohammedans are amused by the Hindoo's superstitious refusal to eat beef; but of course, they say, eating pork is entirely wrong. Here is a poor man in a not unusual marital perplexity, yet ready to do God's will, could he but know it. Whom is he to consult and obey? The Roman Catholic priest, who would frown at the least suggestion of divorce and remarriage, or his Protestant more accommodating colleague, or else Mohammedan or old style Mormon divines, who would grant him easy divorce or even allow him a plurality of wives? These various professed ministers of God all claim to have it straight from headquarters: whom are we poor mortals to trust, and on what grounds?

This perplexity is not merely intellectual. Whether I do
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or do not believe that the world was created in six days and that man was created after the plants and the animals, as stated in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, or that the plants and animals were created after man, as stated in the second chapter, may not after all concern my everyday conduct, any more than whether or not I believe in the story of the Deluge or of Jonah and his whale. But your life and mine are apt to get us into devilish tight places where we need all the backing we can find to keep us from doing this or that. If I am to be asked to stake my life on a certain principle of action, because God orders it so, then I want more than someone's say-so in support of the order: I want to know the credentials of God's professed legate. It is strange that millions of men are more circumspect in testing the validity of a check for ten dollars than in examining the warrant of alleged divine checks on their entire conduct and life.

But let us imagine, for the time being—and that by a most liberal extension of credit—that a theologian can indeed supply satisfactory credentials, that his own decalogue and no other has the Divine imprimatur, signed and countersigned by God. Would he even then be justified in expecting to count on my loyal and wholehearted, that is to say on my moral devotion to his divinely authorized moral principles? I may be convinced of the authenticity of the order, but what my attitude towards it is to be, will be determined, among other things, by my estimate of the one who issues the order. Whether I conclude that I must or that I had better obey God's commandments would depend on my judgment as to the range of God's power. But whether I conclude that I ought to do as God commands me, would depend upon my moral approval of God. Before God's commandments can get my moral approval, support and devotion, I
must be assured that God is good and his principles worthy of my allegiance. But how am I to be thus assured, if goodness itself is defined in terms of God's commandment to me? What can I, then, possibly mean when I say that God is good and that his laws are deserving of my confidence and loyalty? Thus we clearly see that, far from our being able to establish morals on a theological foundation, the very conception of God, before it can be available either for morality or for religion, demands a basis in the moral consciousness of man.

So we are brought back to real fundamentals. Before we can speak of God or of good we require a view of the world, of nature and of human nature, that can take in these ideas. For all we know, they may be mere superstitions, though, even if they were, the capacity of man to entertain them would call for explanation. It is not enough to command or to advocate certain ideas of morality. It is all-important to consider what grounds, if any, a moral interpretation of human life has in our view of the objective reality of things.

This consideration leads to another: Here is a man engaged in moral activity, or at any rate morally perplexed and engrossed in inquiry. What does this activity or perplexity or inquiry imply regarding his character? What sort of being does his moral activity show him to be, and how must we think of a world that includes such beings? As the modern mind proceeds along these lines of thought it is confronted with these two problems and thus in a sense experiences a twofold enrichment. On the one hand, its study of nature and of human nature leads to a more detailed knowledge and a more critical understanding of conduct and of moral activity, and the science of ethics thus gains in substance what it perhaps loses in sanctity. But, on the other hand, this very bringing of morality down to
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earth, from the supernatural to the natural level, as it gives us the setting of the moral life, imposes on the modern mind the demand to integrate these facts with the other facts of so-called physical nature in a thoroughly philosophical view of reality. If you say that ethics is to be a science and that man in his moral activity is to be studied as objectively as astronomer or physiologist study their respective fields, then, while on the one hand doing justice to what is distinctive and characteristic in moral experience, we must on the other hand, consider how such experience can be related with the rest of experience and behavior of things in a consistent integral account of the world in which we live. What is the sort of philosophy that can make sense of the moral activity of men and women? If justice and veracity are nothing occult or supernatural, but quite as natural as breathing or gravitation, then what is the science and philosophy of nature that can comprehend not only gravitation and breathing but also justice and veracity?

In the light of this preliminary discussion it becomes clear why Hobbes’ philosophy stirred such a tempest, and why the manifold reactions to it served to articulate ethical fundamentals in modern thought. Hobbes had undertaken to build a cosmos solely out of matter-in-motion. Though he spoke of God, and quite scripturally, he did not require God to explain or direct anything whatever in his universe. Furthermore, all rational principles intellectual and moral were superfluous for him. The native character and behavior of man was mechanically determined. To Hobbes human experience presented no distinctive characteristics or factors which we should take into account in our conclusions regarding the nature of things. The outburst of resentment of an outraged man is like the sizzle of an overheated pan in which water is suddenly poured. The easy formation of
habits in youth and the equally easy return to former ways is like the pliability and resilience of young green branches. The insatiate egoism of man is like a greedy flood or fire which only a strong barrier or counteracting power or else exhaustion of fuel can terminate. It is because human nature involves nothing but matter-in-motion that Hobbes sees it as inherently self-seeking, insatiate and anarchic. There is no meaning in nature to such terms as right and wrong, justice or duty or any other moral principle. Before you can have principles or laws of conduct, you must have the sanction of authority, and to have authority and its sanctions, a social order is required with an absolute ruler at its head. So Hobbes tied his ethics to his social philosophy. Moral laws have their origin and their sanction in the will of Leviathan, and the obligation to observe them was imposed on man, for the sake of greater personal security, by his self-subordination to the social compact.

These characteristics of the Hobbist philosophy appeared fatal to genuine morality, and yet they were advanced as philosophical deductions from the new science which was winning its laurels and increasingly directing the course of thought in the seventeenth century. Hobbes' critics not only endeavored to repulse him all along the line but also to cut him off from his scientific base of supplies. Thus the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth maintained that while atomism warrants such a particular development as physical science has given it, it does not necessitate nor allow Hobbes' metaphysical and ethical conclusions. The material system which we are investigating, and our perception of it, involve the inherent reality of rational ideas. Against Hobbes' view of the primacy of mechanical reactions in human life and of moral standards as artificial and depending on autocratic legislation, Cudworth upholds the principle of eternal and
immutable morality. “Mind and intellect, art and law, ethics and morality are first in order of nature, ... more real and substantial things, than the modifications of mere senseless matter, such as hard and soft, thick and thin, hot and cold, and the like are.”

The merits of this sort of ethics are the merits of rationalistic conviction; its defects are those of a too rigid formalism. Cudworth seems content to exalt the eternal and immutable character of moral principles, whatever these principles may be. But what these principles really are: their analysis in detail, their relation to each other, the character of morality which they serve to reveal, and furthermore the peculiar nature of moral activity and moral judgment as distinguished from intellectual or aesthetic, the nature and the ground of moral obligation and conscience, the non-rational factors in moral experience, pleasure and pain and consequences generally, the clashing of will with itself and with other wills:—of all this that would give ethics content and body, Cudworth’s formal shell contains not a hint. The modern mind set out with the assurance that the world of matter and motion operates according to universally valid laws, but not satisfied with this mere assurance, undertook to vindicate it in detail by discovering and formulating these laws: this precisely was the achievement of modern physical science. Modern thought required also, and still requires, a similar achievement in the realm of moral values. This Cudworth’s formalism did not supply, and for all his disparagement of the insufficiency of other methods, his own did not commend itself sufficiently to eighteenth century British minds that were already being induced by Locke and his followers to renounce the vain quest of aeternae veritates and to hope for piecemeal wisdom from daily experience, with a fairer chance of more moderate success.
The ethical problem in modern thought, just as the problem of knowledge, issues in two concurrent inquiries: one of origin, the other of criterion. In the first place, then, what is the source of moral judgments? If I judge an act as cruel or dishonorable and condemn it as evil, how do I come to make this judgment? A variety of answers to this question contest the field of ethical theory. One group of moralists, the hedonists, point to immediate experience of consequences: my approval or disapproval is due to the pleasure or displeasure which the performance of an act produces. Or else: I approve what I desire and disapprove what I shun. The rationalistic moralist observes reason, in its critical survey, control or censure the passions, judging approvingly of acts in terms of their reasonableness: reasonableness itself being variously defined. A third group believes that the moral judgment of approval or disapproval is not due to the experience of pleasure-pain, nor to the dictation of desires, nor to the conclusions of reason: moral judgment is due to the direct perception of good or evil by our intuitive moral sense. This is the view of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson. Our moral sense is our capacity directly to perceive and to enjoy the perception of a good act, just as we perceive or enjoy a gorgeous sunset or the sweet smell of a rose.

This problem of the origin of moral judgments is closely connected with the problem of the moral standard, but should not be confused with it. It is the latter problem which especially concerns us here: not so much how a certain moral judgment is evoked, but how it is justified. An adequate statement of this demanded justification of moral judgment would, of course, give us a definition of the good, of moral value.

A doctrine of the moral standard emerges and is vigor-
ously advocated in the opposition to the Hobbist portrayal of man as by nature a greedy egoist and of the natural state of man as a war of everyone against everyone else. Against these "unjust reproaches of mankind," disclosing a mind sharp-sighted to see the evil in men, but blind to the good that is in them, Hobbes' critics maintain that there is even in animals a gregarious instinct, and in man a native social character, an over-individual regard for the common good, a sense of justice. This establishment of man's sociability becomes a main problem of ethics: admitting that our life is blessed by a variety of good things, does one's pursuit of them normally involve one's selfish disregard of the similar pursuit of them by others? Are men rivals by nature, or are they not rather active partners in the moral enterprise?

An emphatic answer to this question, in opposition to Hobbes, was given by Lord Shaftesbury and by his follower Francis Hutcheson. Benevolence, they say, is as natural an emotion as self-love. "If eating and drinking are natural, herding is so too. If any appetite or sense be natural, the sense of fellowship is the same." The self-regarding and other-regarding emotions do not conflict. The same irregularity of appetite which makes a man harm others makes him also harm himself, and the same regularity of affection which makes him good to others makes him also good to himself. Virtue and interest may thus be found to agree. Emotions are injurious to others only when they are immoderate: when moderate and duly tempered no emotion is harmful to myself or to others. Vice is the result of emotional intemperance; "over-great tenderness destroys the effect of love, and excessive pity renders us incapable of giving succor. Hence the excess of motherly love is held to be a vicious fondness; over-great pity, effeminacy and
weakness; over-great concern for self-preservation, meanness and cowardice; too little, rashness; and none at all, or that which is contrary (viz., a passion leading to self-destruction), a mad and desperate depravity." Our affections are socially benevolent, or private and selfish, or else unnatural, hurtful to both ourselves and others. Human conduct is vicious or evil when our benevolent emotions are too weak, or the selfish emotions too strong, or the unnatural emotions present at all.

This, then, is virtue and goodness: to strike a fair balance between the care for self and the care for others. And since man is essentially a social being, this balance, to be right, must incline toward benevolence. The good of all is the standard which determines the proper measure of self-regard which morality can tolerate. As soon as an emotion begins to interfere with the welfare of others, the desire for it should be checked, for it leads to vice.

Shaftesbury had sought to point out the proper harmony of benevolence and self-love; his follower Hutcheson emphasizes benevolence as alone constituting an act virtuous. A virtuous act need not be opposed to our interest, but it may not be motivated by any selfish regard: the motive must be wholly benevolent. This benevolence is what alone we respect morally both in ourselves and in others. The least suggestion of a selfish motive is sufficient to make us withdraw our approval of an act, while a man's disinterested devotion to the welfare of others commands our admiration. Suppose we reap the same advantage from two men, one of whom serves us from delight in our happiness and love toward us; the other, from views of self-interest or by constraint: both are in this case equally beneficial or advantageous to us, and yet we shall have quite different sentiments toward them. We admire the brave, honorable,
generous man, even though he lived a thousand years ago,—nay, more, our moral sense is so disinterested that it may approve what is actually to our material disadvantage. The Dutch revolted against their Spanish tyrants and established a free government which made Holland prosperous and a commercial rival of England. England’s trade suffered as a result. Yet, Hutcheson declares, what Englishman would admire the Spanish tyrant, or not approve the brave Dutch fighters for liberty? Thus, we see, there is something disinterested in our moral approval. Nothing so arouses our admiration as an unusual manifestation of generous regard for the good of others, active benevolence.

This emphasis on man’s native social consciousness and benevolence was appropriate criticism of Hobbes’ conception of human character in terms of insatiate and unprincipled selfish desire. But as a statement of the basis of moral value, this ethics of benevolence is inadequate. The earlier critics of Hobbes, especially Richard Cumberland, had undertaken to point out man’s normal regard for the interests of others, his active concern for the common good. Our real interests do not clash, and men are not by nature rivals and enemies, but rather partners. This view Shaftesbury and Hutcheson accentuate and develop into a doctrine of the moral standard by underscoring benevolence in the motive as the test of moral value. In support of this conviction, as we have seen, an appeal is made to our alleged intuitive moral sense and also to the evidence of experience.

But, clearly, the main point at issue has not been met by this theory. The advocate of benevolence maintains that individual and social interests do not clash: that is to say that my moral gain cannot be secured through your moral loss, but on the contrary is conditioned by my active concern for your moral gain. This affirmation, that moral activity
is socialized and coöperative, does not answer the question, what constitutes a moral gain as distinguished from a moral loss, that is, what constitutes good or evil whether yours or mine. Wherein consists that *good* interest of others, benevolent concern for which in you and in me marks the virtuous man? Is the moral value of a life measured in terms of attained happiness, or of enhanced perfection of our rational faculties, or in the balanced development and fruition of all our capacities, complete health and realization of our personality?

We cannot successfully evade the difficulty implied in these questions by reaffirming that, however we may define human interests in detail, moral value is always to be measured in terms of the extent to which benevolence outweighs selfishness in our motives. Though men may differ in their moral theories they are apt to agree in admiring certain particular acts of moral excellence. Would these admit of being described as essentially unselfish? At the height of human excellence, in consummate love, humane generosity, heroic intelligence, the issue between egoism and altruism does not arise at all. As I have stated elsewhere, "the devotion of man to woman, of man to man, of man to men, of man to God is seen to involve utter surrender and oblivion of self, but also enhancement in self-expression and self-affirmation," while at the other end of the moral scale, the lives of a libertine, a miser, a cruel brute or tyrant, a traitor are lives socially noxious but also self-negating and self-destructive. "Moral downfall does not proceed from altruism to selfishness but involves a degradation in the values which are pursued by the agent. . . . So the rise to moral perfection may be viewed as an advance from a conflict to a community of interests, not through the abstract denial of the self, but through its enrichment and exaltation.
A more concrete view of the moral self enables us to recognize that the issue between egoism and altruism, apparently insoluble at lower levels of conduct, is at the highest levels meaningless, and all along the line artificial as far as a genuine understanding of the moral situation is concerned, or an estimate of the value of life.\textsuperscript{1}

So we come again to our problem: How is gain in the moral life to be measured, whether in myself or in others?

The modern reaction against the Aristotelianism of the Church and against unworldliness served to revive interest in Epicurean hedonism. The atomistic basis of this gospel of pleasure gave it a somewhat scientific flavor, to modern taste; its anti-ascetic bias commended it to the worldly. But it was by no means only atomists and voluptuaries who undertook to measure the moral value of life in terms of attainable happiness. Even the critics of Hobbes did not all reject his description of man as spurred to action by desires seeking satisfaction. Hobbes' critics might protest that man is not an insatiate and ruthless egoist, that he is normally benevolent, but still the worth of an act, whether selfish or benevolent, was apt to be defined in terms of happiness, and even benevolence itself was rated above selfishness for the reason that it yielded more happiness all around.

Hedonism enjoys the advantage of appearing to be a simple and straightforward statement of moral value. Everyone, we say, understands what is meant by happiness; everyone knows whether an act yields pleasure or pain. So it has been maintained, an act which yields a balance of pleasure over pain is good, and the better the greater the balance of pleasure which it yields; an act yielding more pain than pleasure is evil, and the worse the greater its

\textsuperscript{1} \textit{The Nature of Evil} (New York, Macmillan, 1931), pp. 383, 386 f.
resultant pain; an act that is indifferent as to pleasure or
pain is also morally indifferent and neither good nor evil.
This act will increase the happiness in the world: I should
do it. That act will diminish the happiness in the world:
I should not do it. That other act will make no difference
one way or the other: it is morally indifferent whether I
do it or avoid it. It seems perfectly simple.

The simplicity is only on the surface. We ask first:
whose happiness? To be sure, the advocate of benevolence
will answer at once in terms of altruism, and the develop-
ment of hedonistic theory has shown a decided tendency to-
wards the formula, the greatest happiness of the greatest
number. But really, why as a believer in hedonism should
I promote the happiness of others? The reasons cited may
be two: because promoting the happiness of others is a
sure source of happiness to myself, or because I should, in
a spirit of disinterested hedonism, seek to attain the maxi-
mum of happiness, be that happiness my own or of others.
But I may answer that happiness, pleasure, is very subjec-
tive in character; I may be certain of it when I experience
it myself, but the pleasures of others are after all only hear-
say pleasures to me. Not being assured of them directly,
why should I prefer them to my own certain satisfactions?

Furthermore, how can I know what is sure to promote
the happiness of another? Let us imagine that I have a
neighbor who owns a radio with a volcanic loud speaker.
He is a hedonist: the radio must give him great pleasure
since he plays it at all hours of the day or night. But it is
because he is a benevolent hedonist that he has invested in
that double-duty loud speaker. The happiness which he
undoubtedly enjoys he wishes to share with the whole block,
and especially with me who have no radio. Indeed he shows
a certain self-denial and consents to be deafened himself
by the blaring noise in order that I in my house and also the folks down the street may all enjoy his radio. All this is greatly to his credit, and so I do not have the heart to tell him the truth, namely that I do not like the music he picks out with his dial, nor the incredible hours of night when he enjoys to distribute it, that in fact I am annoyed beyond decent words by his cacophonic generosity, and that only neighborly reluctance keeps me from telling him personally what I am now confidentially imparting to you all. In endeavoring to add to my happiness, my neighbor is in fact only pestering me: far better for me if he would enjoy his nocturnal jazz by himself.

My example illustrates a double hedonistic embarrassment. If I should find pleasure myself in promoting the happiness of others, or if I should even in pure generosity try to add to their pleasure, I may fail in my endeavor, since my likes and dislikes may differ from theirs, and what I enjoy they may detest. This embarrassment suggests the other and more fundamental difficulty. I find pleasure and satisfactions in certain experiences; so do you. The fact that the same experience may please me and displease you only indicates that our desires and the characters that express themselves in the desires are different. As each one of us gets what he desires, he is pleased. But the hedonist now tells us that our life is good or evil depending upon the increase of pleasure which it yields, that we ought to promote the increase of happiness. Who is to be the judge as to what will give me happiness? Clearly I myself: else we get into confusion, as we have seen: my neighbor may say: he ought to enjoy this music which I am providing for him, and, by George, he shall enjoy it! In this hedonistic sentiment my neighbor may be right, but I am inclined to doubt it. But if each man is to decide about his own pleasure,
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would it then mean more than this, that I am right in desiring the pleasure which I do desire: that I ought to do as I please? But wouldn't this be an amazing conception of the moral standard? Or shall we say that a man's better judgment is to decide: not in the heat of desire but in a cool hour? Yet would the judgment of the cool hour alter the fact that in the ardent hour keen pleasure was actually enjoyed? And why should the judgment of the cool hour be preferred on the basis of pleasure? Are the pleasures of the cool hour keener or greater? They are apt to be mostly regrets: perhaps deserved, but scarcely enjoyable. Turgenev once was asked to give the formula for perfect blessedness. He answered unhesitatingly: "Indolence without remorse."

From a variety of angles we are facing the same essential defect in the doctrine that attainable pleasure determines the moral value of life. A standard of value must admit of a critical use, but how can you on the basis of pleasure criticize pleasure? You cannot even measure it quantitatively, but that may be only a technical defect. Achieve the quantitative mastery of it, hedonistic metrics, your basic perplexity would still remain: how can you, as a hedonist, pronounce one pleasure as different in kind from another, as higher, nobler, worthier than another? Hedonism may perfect its analysis of the mechanics of desire and of our various preferences: but how can it express and justify the judgment that this pleasure is desirable and indeed preferable to this other pleasure, that of two pleasures one is noble and the other unworthy? And can it be said that one has learned even the alphabet of morality if one cannot express the significance of such judgments of moral value? If in our arrogant decency, for instance, we pity the drunkard, he may retort with pity. "You dried up Puritans,"
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he may tell us, "have you ever been drunk? You have not? Then what do you know about it?" Now, in all seriousness, how is one to judge in a case like this; if our standard be merely that of actual experienced pleasure? So Browning muses for us:

How mad and bad and sad it was,
But then, how it was sweet!

So this is the quandary of consistent hedonism. Pleasures cannot be evaluated and graded and some pleasures rightly considered as preferable to others, if pleasure is to be our basic standard of moral value. If we put all pleasures on a par, and are content simply to measure amounts of pleasure, we deprive ourselves of the very basis of judging, for the intensity of a desire may make the pleasure of the moment outweigh every other consideration, and we also run counter to the sane judgment of mankind which has always held noble pain above low and dishonorable pleasure. If, however, we recognize grades of pleasure, some higher than others, we require a standard other than pleasure by which pleasures may be graded, and then pure hedonism is disclosed as inadequate.

A man's character is shown in what satisfies and pleases him. Dissatisfaction with a certain sort of life may be the first mark of spiritual uplift in a man and the one redeeming light in his moral darkness. It was not ill but rather on the way to being well with the prodigal son when his swinish life became disgusting and painful to him. So the real question in morals cannot be this: Are men happy or unhappy? but rather this: Is it well that men are thus and thus happy or unhappy? Pleasure or pain, satisfaction or dissatisfaction of some sort enter into every moral situation. Even so we may say that a man enjoys reading the kind of book that he likes. But if we are to judge of taste, in the one case as in the other, we have
to consider what makes certain enjoyments and satisfactions
worthier than others. Until we realize that we cannot evade
this question we have not even crossed the threshold of
really ethical thinking.

The alternative to which we are proceeding in this
analysis of modern ethical theory is thus bound to be some
variety of perfectionism. The moral value of an act de-
pends upon this, whether it contributes to the perfection of
human nature. We need not be misled by the objection that
this is a mere tautology: namely, an act is good if it makes
us better. It means considerably more than that. The per-
fection of anything is its characteristic fruition: that it
comes to be more fully what it really and distinctively is.
Moral value here shows analogies to logical value. The
truth of a theory depends on this, whether it takes adequate
account of all relevant evidence, and whether it can be the
principle of relevance in the field of experience with which
it deals, rendering that field more intelligible and opening
new significant vistas of thought and problems to the mind.
So with a valid moral theory: the true moral evaluation of
an act must be one that judges it in terms of what is
relevantly and characteristically human. The good act is the
act of a man who is not acting under misapprehension but
knows what he is about. So Aristotle's fundamental defini-
tion of the good holds true: The good in any field of ex-
erience is that which adequately performs its characteristic
function. And for all its theological bias, thirteenth century
Aristotelianism perceived this truth. Man's moral problem
is this: "What ought I to do and to be, considering what
I am." The moral life thus regarded would be the appro-
priate life, the life characteristically and abundantly
human. Morality involves self-evaluation based on self-
understanding and proceeding to discipline, expression and
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enhancement of personality, the culture and enrichment of character.

How the moral standard and the moral ideal, the direction and objective of human life are conceived, if one adopts this general point of view, depends on one's account and estimate of human nature. A variety of proposed alternatives is before us. Giordano Bruno, as we have seen, recognized reason as the divine faculty in man, and the pursuit of truth and enlightenment as man's preëminent concern. But in this his chief business man undertakes more than he can quite fulfil, and so Bruno's ethics ends on a tragic note.

A less tragic, but also less heroic view of man's nature, his range and scope, is that of Descartes. To know how much things can contribute to our contentment, we should know their causes: what can and what cannot bring them about. This knowledge of what is feasible facilitates the moral enterprise of what should be undertaken. Virtue consists in the perfection of our nature, and true happiness in our consciousness of such attainment: both are conditioned by proper self-knowledge which guides the direction of our endeavor. Our well-being thus depends upon the reasonableness of our desires. If we desire what is inappropriate to us and what exceeds our power and capacities to attain, our energies are misapplied and we reap vexation and discontent. Reasonableness of desire thus depends on our right estimate of ourselves, of our proper rôle and scope. This true self-esteem, a noble consciousness of our genuine worth yet nowise conceited or arrogant, a humble sense likewise of our manifold infirmities and limitations yet not abject or basely cast down, Descartes regards as the supreme excellence of the soul, and calls it Generosity.

This insistence on the appropriateness of virtue to characteristic nature and ability frees morals from abstract
rigidity and is in line with Descartes' scientific analysis of man's emotional life. But there are ethical pitfalls in our way here. To one man five talents were entrusted, to another, two, and to another, one: to each according to his ability; and as was the ability, so presumably was the expectation. In the sight of the Omniscient this is no doubt wisdom. But while reason counsels us to count our talents lest we exceed our resources, and experience teaches us a sanely conservative estimate of our gains, there is grave moral hazard in modesty about our ideals. Is not a certain heroic overreaching of ability an essential element of moral endeavor and a condition of genuine moral satisfaction?

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?

This ethical doctrine we may call rationalistic naturalism, and the classical development of it is to be found in the philosophy of Spinoza. Spinoza's system of thought is one which should be examined either carefully or not at all. I can mention here only some of its main ideas which concern our present enquiry. Man finds himself the battleground of passions which confuse his mind and usurp his attention and his will. Yet each passion is and depends on our view of the situation in which we find ourselves. Man, a slave to error, may yet live an enlightened life if only with his reason he sees himself and his life as they really are, in their relation to the nature of things and in their cosmic setting. This rational knowledge and self-understanding frees us from naïve illusions. It shows us that good and evil are only human, relative to ourselves and our little lives: it teaches us rational self-mastery. We learn our place, but are exalted in our recognition of the infinite perfect system in which we do have our place. We gain that rational self-identification with the cosmic order which Spinoza calls the intellectual
love of God and which for him is the ideal goal of man's life.

Spinoza's philosophy exalts the Universe but regards man and his moral values as only finite aspects of a reality which transcends and absorbs them. But if we thus regard moral values as merely human, how is man's serious devotion to virtue, as distinguished from his sentimental attachment, to be sustained? Perfection of our rationality, as it enables us to see things in their cosmic setting, would show us our own life of moral endeavor as only something to be analyzed and understood, and thus with a cosmic sense of humor we may come to see things as they really are, each in its own place in the universal system, see them as God sees them, beyond good and evil, Eternal Actuality. But if ultimate reality is morally neutral, if good and evil, justice and injustice, are not good or evil, justice or injustice for God, if they lack ultimate status, then ethics, strictly speaking, is a solemn misapprehension. Nature and human nature would then admit of description and analysis, not of real evaluation. Spinoza's ethics is one of the noble systems of morality, but how is its nobility to be supported by his metaphysics?

Thus we see early modern ethics pursuing different paths. Does it again and again reach an impasse? No, but in a variety of ways its own inconclusiveness and perplexities guide it to a more adequate conception of the moral situation. The defects of ethical theories may in the main be reduced to two: first, the tendency to select some one aspect of the moral experience and proclaim it as the prime or sole essential of virtue. Second, the failure to distinguish between the demands of moral evaluation and those of mere description and analysis. The first defect is that of oversimplification and consequent narrowness. The second
defect is that of insufficiency and really irrelevance. Let us make both of these somewhat more explicit.

Is is a fact that moral experience and culture involve the progressive socializing of the individual, and that moral categories are social categories: but this, as we have seen, does not warrant us in saying simply that virtue is social feeling or benevolence. Likewise happiness or contentment of some sort is a genuine element in the life which we judge to have positive worth: but this element is insufficient to serve as a standard; it is in terms of the moral standard that we judge and grade various sorts of happiness or pleasure, and not the moral value of conduct in terms of the pleasure that it yields. Again, to mention another example, the conformity to the demands of a moral sense or conscience or personal conviction is characteristic of moral acts that have dignity and deserve respect. No matter how beneficial the results of an act, we say, unless it springs from a person's convictions, it is only a useful act, for which the agent deserves no moral approbation. But, even though an act performed against one's conscience would lack moral value, we cannot say offhand that virtuous acts are conscientious acts. For conscience is also only one element, and it may be misguided and judged defective when the other factors are duly taken into consideration. Furthermore, while the sense of duty or obligation is an important part of many moral experiences, mere adherence to law does not constitute an act virtuous, for some of the finest examples of moral excellence, we shall all agree, are characterized rather by wholehearted spontaneity of love or generosity, involving no sense of obligation whatever. Thus repeatedly we see how various ethical theories rightly recognize the importance of certain elements of the moral experience, but err in regarding these elements as by themselves sufficient to pro-
vide a standard of moral value. The disclosure of narrowness, in the criticism of many ethical theories serves to emphasize the complexity of the moral nature of man, and this is a great advance in our self-understanding.

But, as has been stated, some of these theories and others which we have considered suffer from another defect: that of confusing the description of an act with the evaluation of it. Hobbes and other materialists may describe man as reacting thus and thus to various kinds of pressure, contact, and collision. It makes no difference how complicated the mechanism may be, if it is nothing but a mechanism, it may admit of a description but is nowise subject to evaluation. Materialistic ethics is thus pure irrelevance. But, less obviously yet none the less truly, all merely factual ethics is also irrelevant and spurious. Even the Aristotelian functional definition of the good requires a warning qualification, lest it mislead us as to the essence of moral value. The excellence of everything is indeed in its being preeminently itself: but in the case of man this excellence, this good is distinctively human, moral good in that it expresses the presence in man of what is more than merely factual.

In human personality nature reveals its hierarchical character. There is higher and lower in the universe, and the moral consciousness of man is preeminently a recognition of this gradational character of reality; moral conviction is man's self-identification with the upward trend in nature, and moral devotion the wholehearted direction of the will in the upward line of our conviction. A really scientific ethics is one which, in studying moral experience and moral judgment, perceives all the factors of human nature that enter in it: the act which we call morally good is one that satisfies in appropriate measure all the demands of the particular problem which the will is called upon to meet.
This is precisely what we may call adequate functioning, and in this sense scientific ethics is thoroughly naturalistic, and for the satisfactory treatment of its task must be in constant touch with all the biological and humanistic sciences. But just because it is thus in the true sense naturalistic, it is bound to perceive that a distinctively moral judgment is not a mere judgment about things, but a judgment of and on things, an evaluation and a verdict implying approval or condemnation because conceiving of human nature as ennobled or degraded by the act which it judges.

The recognition of this moral-hierarchical view is the recognition of an ultimate category, as ultimate as intelligence, as life. It is not of the world apart, any more than life or consciousness are, but we should see it for what it is and not try irrelevantly to reduce it to something else, to what is merely factual. Factually viewed, all things are on a par: carbons and chromosomes and consciousness. But evaluation, the moral view of things, consists just in the hierarchical recognition that some things ought to be rather than others, that they are preferable to others, higher, nobler. Man's moral recognition of himself as a member of this hierarchy is a twofold recognition: in the first place, a recognition that his membership in the hierarchy engages all his faculties and energies, involving in active relation all the factors of his self and his environment, mind and body, feeling and intellect, natural and cultural setting, yielding self-expression and self-understanding. All that is true in hedonistic or in rationalistic ethics finds its place in this recognition. But man also recognizes the worthy though unrealized nature that reveals itself in the moral challenge: what ought to be and only through moral achievement can be. This idea is at the basis of the sense of moral obligation, duty, conscience, moral creativeness in conduct and char-
acter: the heroic, self-enhancing, self-transcending element in all distinctively moral experience. Only as a man perceives that he is somehow more than a mechanism living or conscious, only as he thus sees himself as a member of a world of values, loyal to unrealized ideals that challenge his achievement and in such achievement finding his own ever fuller fruition, only thus is he morally conscious and morally active in the full sense of the term. But in a measure this characteristically moral nature is disclosed in each one of us, and all approval or disapproval, all sense of honor, compunction, scruple, fair play, shame or aspiration, duty, piety are evidences of it.

Moral experience, thus conceived, engages all the energies of man, but engages them in such a way as to integrate his personality, to reveal ever more clearly and more maturely man's perception of his own character, what is within his reach but also what is worth his reach and his grasp: his range of capacities but also the grading of them, his thorough self-understanding: the recognition of what in him is in the line of his fruition, realization, enhancement of distinctive character, and what in him is backwash and atavism, discordant and unregenerate: the recognition of himself and of his life as the concourse and interplay of ennobling and downpulling tendencies, an urge and a tug, the gleam of the ideal and the lure of the degenerate. Here are we all, moving not on a level plane but on a slope, an upward but also a downward slope, and every thought and every act of ours is either uplifting or degrading us, and through us uplifting or degrading the world in and of which we are.

The moral problem is thus not a specialized problem dealing with one fragment or corner of life: it is rather a synthesis of all the problems of specialized values which confront men and women. It relies on the self-criticism and
perfection of intellectual activity and its logical truth-values. It demands the ever more rational and just revision of economic and social processes and systems, to emphasize respect for human dignity, to safeguard the human factor and diminish the human hazard. It champions a moral socializing of our nature, spiritual growth through living with others. It counsels an ever saner attitude of man to the larger nature which he is exploiting, that it may as it were vicariously be ennobled through his human imprint on it and not degrade and brutalize and mechanize him; a saner attitude also towards his own bodily nature, not scorning it in misguided asceticism, not yet ignoring that if he is to keep his body fit, it is to be fit for something, a fit means to human achievement and expression. Furthermore it cherishes the whole field of aesthetic appreciation, and seeks that intelligence in taste which distinguishes culture from vulgarity: the enrichment or the cheapening and corruption of the soul by the experiences that evoke in it aesthetic delight. And highest and deepest of all, it finds its consummation in the utter self-yielding of the spirit of man in worshipful devotion to what he regards as Supreme Perfection and calls his God, a most ennobling and yet most hazardous devotion, for it confirms the soul in its ultimate direction, and being the polestar of the voyage of life determines its course and its destiny. All this and more the moral outlook on life embraces: in all judging life as a process of progressive understanding, mastery, individual and social expression and ennobling of character, or as disintegration, degradation and defeat of capacities. Morality thus thrives on the mellowing of intelligence of man in all the fields in which he is realizing his values, and always it voices the imperious demand of the larger life and character of man against upstart caprice or discordant passion. In each case it would keep clear the
rational sense of man's total enterprise: what man is really about in this world: "what he ought to do and to be, considering what he is." But virtue and moral excellence are perhaps most distinctively manifest in what I may venture to call self-exacting heroism: the active spirit that thrives on achievement, that perceives a problem not as a task, nor even as a challenge, but as a promise, and a duty as an opportunity. Logic, aesthetics, social philosophy, philosophy of religion are all tracing their curves of the rise of man up the scale of values: truth, beauty, social order, saintliness. All these moral philosophy would see as various paths to the goal which is its goal, a moving aim of ever-perfectible personality, the culture and enrichment of character.

In these three discourses I have tried to survey some of the typical features of the beginnings of modern ethics, to note the blank walls which confronted some of the modern doctrines and also to follow the promising leads of others. At the close of this last hour I have followed some of these leads further, and ventured to suggest in outline a more satisfactory ethical theory. It utilizes as it seems to me, the results of the more significant moral philosophy of the past, and it is in the true sense of the term scientific: that is, seeking knowledge of the thing which is to be known and not of some other thing: scientific just because it does not distort moral experience in order to make it fit in the conceptual moulds of factual science, but on the contrary perceives what is distinctive and characteristic in moral experience, and then undertakes to make sense of it by adequate interpretation.

Radoslav Andrea Tsanoff.