

## II

### MORALITY AND EVERDAY LIFE<sup>1</sup>

**W**HAT has morality to do with our ordinary workaday life? This question has been asked at frequent stages in the history of the race and answered in ways which have not materially differed. Some sadly confess that it has very little to do with daily life; that the good die young, that the survivors are bent upon realizing their selfish ends and none too scrupulous in the use of means for achieving them. For others morality is a beautiful illusion in which one can bathe one's soul at odd intervals and attain aesthetic enjoyment, an ideal to be contemplated, particularly on Sundays when the business of life is halted and the shops are closed, and by persons, not full-grown, like women, children, preachers, college professors, and other spectators and non-combatants who are in the world but really not of it. The business of civilization cannot be carried on according to the rules of morality: the moral law is impracticable; men with red blood in their veins cannot be bothered by mottoes in children's copy-books.

Still others, unwilling to regard morality as a mere harmless diversion, openly and boldly declare that morality is a positive hindrance to real living, an unnatural limitation, and conscience a pathological state which must eventually end in deterioration and death. This is a teaching which has been publicly preached by theorists who

<sup>1</sup>Address delivered by Frank Thilly, Professor of Philosophy in Cornell University, at the seventh commencement convocation of the Rice Institute, held Monday morning, June 12, 1922, at 9 o'clock.

never dreamed of practising it, and privately practised by men of affairs who never gave the subject of ethics a serious thought. In its crassest form it recommends the trampling underfoot of all those moral restrictions which go against nature and the satisfaction of the natural impulses; for nature, it is said, is wiser than man-made rules, and instinct a safer guide than conscience. Plato puts such a doctrine into the mouths of some of the young iconoclasts of his day: "Nature herself intimates," so Callicles declaims in the *Gorgias*, "that it is just for the better to have more than the worse, the more powerful than the weaker; and in many ways she shows among men as well as among animals and indeed among whole cities and races, that justice consists in the superior ruling over and having more than the inferior." And in our own age a similar view of life has been made popular by Nietzsche who repudiates the traditional altruistic morality because it negates healthy egoism, the fundamental principle of existence, the desire for power, and hinders the production of strong men or a higher species of over-men. This Jewish-Christian pity morality, he holds, is the morality of slaves and weaklings, it is the cry of the failures and the played-out, the programme of the defeated, the rabble's plea for life; whereas the aristocratic ideal is to preserve and develop great individuals, personalities of a higher order who have duties only to their equals, not to their inferiors.

Stated in these bald forms, moral radicalism is not likely to gain a large following among the well-balanced portion of mankind, as a consciously accepted theory of life. But the thought behind it not infrequently possesses the so-called practical man of affairs and is tacitly acted upon in moments of stress and strain by persons who are eager to

believe with Walpole that no country was ever saved by its good men. The moral rules appear to them woefully out of date, as hindering the realization of what is really worth while; they stand in the way of what we want, at least in the way of what "men who do things" want,—and when they do, they may be quietly set aside. This is the principle followed by those who obey a somewhat popular maxim that whatever one wants, one must simply go after and get. My purpose is to sell goods, to earn dividends for stockholders, to continue myself or my party in power, to win my client's case at court, or to increase the circulation of my paper: whatever means will achieve this goal are legitimate and to be employed, all squeamishness and academic moonshine to the contrary notwithstanding.

It does not require much wisdom to see the shallowness of such anarchistic theories and attitudes as have been described. If morality has nothing to do with our everyday life, if it is even a hindrance, we ought to accept the fact frankly and play the game accordingly. If morality is a prejudice, an illusion, or a harmful tradition, let us get rid of it; let us all free ourselves from the dead weight of an ancient superstition; let us follow the overmen of finance, business, politics, and crime; let us play fast and loose with the rules; and let us teach our children to pay no attention to them except it be to break them. Let us eliminate all those elements in our system of education which encourage conscientiousness, considerateness, unselfishness, and fair dealing, and which are said to cripple the individual in his pursuit of success; let us return to the *bellum omnium contra omnes* and the blond beast.

Of course, all this is nonsense. Indeed, immorality is nonsense and morality commonsense. The fact is, life

## Morality and Everyday Life 15

as we demand it is impossible without it. The advocacy of the strong arm morality and the justification of its practice show the necessity of subjecting our ethical ideas to the test of reason and making clear the meaning of the moral world. It is when the old order changeth and the customary rules are broken and cast aside as outworn that the study of ethics becomes an urgent social necessity. It became such a necessity in the age of Socrates and it is such a necessity to-day. And here the nihilistic thinkers are doing us a distinct service in formulating into theory the ideas and practices of the men whose sole and commanding purpose is, after all, getting on in the world. It is well that we should know the driving principle of these men, the manner of life demanded by it, and what would be the consequences for society. Publicity is just as helpful in morals as it is in business and politics.

To ask what morality has to do with everyday life is to ask what justice and fair play, honesty and honour, chivalry and mercy have to do with it. We understand very well what they have to do with it when we see these things outraged as they were outraged in the war. If it is wrong for a people to violate the fundamental principles of right in the terrible business of war, when its very existence is at stake, why should it be right to flout them in the days of peace, simply to increase one's bank-account? The kind of life that real human beings desire to live, and believe, deep down in their hearts, to be worth living, is impossible without the ethical element. To live means more than satisfying our physical needs, and it means more than acquiring the means for satisfying these needs. We desire the life of men among men, to acquit ourselves as men. And this we cannot do without subjecting ourselves to the moral law which the wisdom and

## 16            Morality and Everyday Life

experience of countless generations of men have found worth while.

Morality *is* a hindrance to the realization of wants, that is true; it prevents us from satisfying every chance impulse that may happen to spring up in us; it prevents us from asserting ourselves at the expense of others; it is a hindrance to our riding rough-shod over our fellows. That is one of its purposes; in that sense every rule is a limitation and in so far a hindrance. No group can hold together unless its members practise self-restraint. There is honour even among thieves. No good is achieved without sacrifice. Whoever desires life in the true sense of the term must accept the sacrifice and will accept the sacrifice as the realization of his better self. He that loseth his life will find it. In this sense the moral law is not a fetter, but a means of setting us free.

What confuses and discourages many a young man entering the world to-day is the presence in society of successful men whose professional and business practices fall short of the ordinary ethical standards which the family, the school, and the church have sought to inculcate,—with every outward mark of faith in their truth and practicability. And then he hears the praises sung of persons who appear to regard morality as an elastic contrivance which it is permissible to stretch to realize particular selfish ends; and he comes to the conclusion that success can be had only at the expense of the virtues which had been so earnestly impressed upon him in the surroundings of his childhood: now he sees that they are a beautiful dream for the age of innocence, not realities intended for the hard workaday life! Further reflection may remind him, however, that there are different conceptions of success and that the success of the trickster is not a proof of

the futility of virtue. It remains true that honesty, truthfulness, justice, and good will are the essential conditions of a sound life and a sound social order, and that the wages of sin is death. Let the young man decide at the outset how he is going to play the game; whether he is going to play fair as a man among men; whether he is going to be true and loyal to the group or whether he is going to play false. He can live the life of treachery and deceit, and he may live it for a long time, longer in an honest community than in a dishonest one. Judas could have continued his wretched existence for many years after his act of betrayal; he might have invested his thirty pieces of silver with advantage to himself and perhaps have become a leading citizen. The question a man has to answer early in his career is what *manner* of man he wishes to be. Is he willing to be a traitor in the ranks or even at the head; is he willing to cheat and deceive when it helps him to make money or gain power, appealing all the while to the honour, fairness, trustfulness, and generosity of his comrades,—for he can win in no other way—to enable him to work his miserable scheme of life? Let the young man decide what type of success he would achieve if he could: the success of the men who go down with the ship or the success of the men who return with the women and children in the boats.

I have attempted to elucidate the obvious in showing that the kind of life a civilized human being wants is rooted in morality. It is true that such a life calls for sacrifice. All conduct that looks to the perfection of personality, whether in one's self or in others, implies sacrifice of some sort and in some sense. Fundamentally, however, in its spirit, self-denial means nothing but the highest realization of one's self, of one's truer, better self,

## 18            Morality and Everyday Life

in so far, that is, as it means devotion to a good cause. The money-grubber who slaves to be a millionaire, the parent who denies himself for his family, the reformer who fights for his ideas, the politician who intrigues to keep his power, all of them make sacrifices, all of them give up some parts of themselves. The question is, what is it they are sacrificing and what are they sacrificing for? The spirit that quickens the ethical being is the desire to realize the good in him, the best in him, his *better* self, the spirit of service, the will to realize a higher, finer type of humanity, in himself and in others. Such an attitude is neither impossible nor unknown. Leaders have never been wanting, from the days of the Hebrew prophets down to our own time, who have been moved by this spirit themselves and have striven to kindle it in the hearts of others. And the hunger and thirst after righteousness has worked wonders and will continue to work wonders: it has made a Socrates out of the savage; it has made modern society out of the primitive hordes, and it will go on creating a better society for better men.

It is this spirit of noble discontent with what is and the yearning for something that ought to be that has been at work in our own country and is still alive in it to-day; and it will not disappear from the hearts of mankind. Practical men sometimes sneer at it; like Josiah Bounderby in Dickens' *Hard Times* they see turtle soup, venison, and gold spoon in all this; they speak of its vagueness, its intangibility, its impracticability; but before they know it, it gets itself embodied in practical social forms which the succeeding generation glorifies as blessings of civilization. "Man does not live by bread alone," said R. L. Stevenson, "he lives by catchwords." How vague, abstract, and unmeaning the phrases of the eighteenth century sounded to

## Morality and Everyday Life 19

those who were satisfied with themselves and their age: liberty, equality, fraternity, the rights of man, freedom of contract, equal rights, pursuit of happiness: what Utopian dreams and idle philosophical speculations! They *are* abstract and vague but not unmeaning. Our own American constitution is one of the outcomes of this vague dreaming, a document based upon ethical ideals of a very general character, the practical influence of which has been tremendous. Some of our prosperous citizens, who are now viewing with alarm or contempt the advocacy of "abstract" proposals for the betterment of mankind, ought to remember that they themselves are the greatest beneficiaries of just such "abstract" proposals put forth on behalf of their less fortunate forefathers, by "dreamers" who believed that moral ideas were practicable. Ethical principles and ideals are always more or less empty formulas that gather meaning with the increasing experience of a people. Nothing can be more vague and general than the plea for social justice which has been heard in many lands for many years: we do not know in detail what social justice is, but we want it and wanting it we shall find out what it is, provided always we have the intelligence and good will to seek it. What counts for most in ethical progress is the conscientious will to do the right, for the truly good will not rest content to blunder on in ignorance to realize the good, and it will make no compacts with the Prince of Darkness to achieve its ends!

There is much to lose heart over in our present day American life; much worshipping of false ideals, much distortion of the moral perspective, much false valuation of things. There has always been much of this: the stale, flat, and unprofitable side of man is hard to bear and hard to overcome. But all the egoism and materialism and



commercialism of the age and of all the ages have not been able to silence the voice of conscience: a strong, healthy, militant idealism has ever been at work, and the quickening and diffusion of this spirit is a hopeful sign. The numerous scandalous performances in political and industrial life which were laid bare a number of years ago cannot be cited against this optimistic hope. For "these exposures are not so much indications of America sick," as a writer justly says, "as of America getting well. The corruption we hear so much about is not new. The new thing is the desire to uproot and destroy it."<sup>1</sup>

There is scarcely a field of human endeavor which this ethical spirit is not seeking to transform: everywhere the demand is heard that the good give way to the better. It is well to remember, however, that this spirit is not a disembodied impersonal entity, a *Zeitgeist* mysteriously recasting our institutions for us; it is the living, thinking, fighting men and women of our time who are doing the work. Whether they will succeed or not, whether what they achieve will endure, will depend upon the support that is given them by the rest of us, and particularly upon the attitude of the younger generation. We are too apt to forget that the blessings of civilization are not bestowed upon mankind from without—Prometheus had to steal the fire of the gods from Heaven—they have been wrested from an unwilling nature, material and human, and have been paid for in blood and tears. And they cannot be preserved without human effort: "Nur der verdient die Freiheit und das Leben, der täglich sie erobern muss." What we have inherited from our fathers, Goethe also warns us, we must achieve in order to possess.

Before an audience like the present, the question is not

<sup>1</sup> Alger, "The Old Law and the New Order."

out of place: what can and should university men and women contribute to the solution of the problems which confront our people to-day? The aim of a university is to fit men for their place in the world, to prepare them for their callings and to help them to understand, enjoy, and act upon the physical and social environment into which they are born, that is, to civilize them. The purpose is not merely to equip a man for getting on in life, but to humanize him, to enable him to get his bearing in civilization, and to help him form the right conception of life and the right attitude toward life, to develop in him an understanding and appreciation of the highest moral, æsthetic, political, social, and religious values of the race. To be civilized means to be educated, means to see things in their right relations, means to sacrifice particular interests to universal interests, the little things for the big things, means to be an ethical personality. Above everything else, an educated man must have character, that is, a completely fashioned will: he must give his life a purpose, organize his desires, have an ideal. He must be a man upon whom one can count, who has principles and shapes his conduct according to them. He must know what he wants. But that is not all that is to be said: the self-seeking politician, the unscrupulous machine boss, knows what he wants, organizes his impulses, gives his life a purpose, and is a consistent character in his way. Indeed it is this aspect of the self-seeker, this wonderful self-control, this cool and determined subordination of everything to his one dominating purpose: power for himself or whatever else it may be, that brings him success where the vacillating reformer in whom the struggle between selfish and social motives has not yet come to an end, so often fails. A thoroughly educated personality is an ethical personality, one that can

find no satisfaction in a narrow, selfish life—in realizing a particular personal goal whether this be material comfort or the salvation of his own soul: he seeks his satisfaction in a larger human life; what he conceives as the true good he desires also for others.

Now that is the type of being which all the consciously civilizing agencies of society should have in mind: their function is to give to society the most efficient servants needed for its preservation and perfection. Such institutions are not established either by the state or by private benefactors in order to make selfish individuals more skilful in their selfishness and to equip them with the most developed instruments for preying upon their less fortunate fellows. We are not interested in turning loose upon the community a band of unscrupulous labor-leaders or business men, crooked politicians, thimble-rigging lawyers, money-making physicians, and characterless journalists. A school that has trained its members merely for getting on in life has missed its purpose. It ought to be clear that a professional education that leaves the individual ignorant of his responsibility to society is a woeful failure. A professional man cannot be a self-seeker: he violates the spirit of his profession when he is. Indeed he cannot be truly efficient even in his calling unless his work is disinterested. The teacher, the preacher, the physician, the lawyer, the journalist, the politician, the engineer, have to forget themselves and their private ends in serving their clients if they would be true to the professional ideal; not their own good is the end, but the good of those whom they have bound themselves to serve; or better still, their own true good is bound up with and realized in the good of others: the dominant purpose of their lives is to spend it in the service of others. The fee is a minor incident in the rela-

tion: the main thing is the work. It was an ancient Greek physician who said that only a man who loved mankind could love his profession in the true sense. Something of this spirit finds expression in the vow of Hippocrates, a noble pledge from which every profession can catch the meaning of professional honour.

It is the unselfish element, this disinterested interest that makes the practice of a profession honourable and sets it off from pursuits in which personal gain is the predominant motive. Wherever individuals violate the professional spirit and pervert it to mercenary ends of whatever kind, the profession falls into disrepute among the people: a profession that becomes a trade is not held in high esteem. Such a judgment seems harsh and unfair to business, indicating as it does a conception of business activity as of something of a lower order. The ancient Greeks had a contempt for trade and everything connected with it, and in Plato's *Republic* artisans and tradesmen form the lowest class, the function of which is the satisfaction of animal wants, and the characteristic quality of which is said to be cupidity. This view is unfair to business except where business sets up as the sole and highest good the mere making of money, which it is by no means bound to do. The worth of the activities upon which antiquity frowned as beneath the dignity of a gentleman depends upon their usefulness to society, upon the part they play in the satisfaction, not of any need you please, but of legitimate human needs, of needs which have justifiable place in human existence. Business, too, can be carried on in the true ethical spirit, with the consciousness on the part of those engaged in it that their work contributes to the welfare of mankind. The fact is, a business man is not merely a business man but a human being, a member of

society, who cannot keep his business methods and his morals in watertight compartments.

The university man can and ought to be of service to his people and civilization in helping to raise the moral tone of professional and industrial life and to create a healthy public opinion. In a democracy like ours the need of trained and disinterested leaders is particularly urgent; and it is becoming more urgent with the increase of governmental activities, municipal, state, and national, and with the prospect of added burdens of citizenship in the way of the initiative, referendum, recall, or whatever sound and unsound methods may be chosen to realize our political ideals. But it is not only in the development of higher standards of morality that the intelligent man can be active: he can and ought to aid in the practical solution of the educational, economic, philanthropic, political, artistic, and religious problems which are confronting us to-day. One would naturally expect men of college training to take an active interest in the education of our people. What is needed is an interest that does not confine itself to joining a comfortable club and the glorification of the athletic achievements of one's Alma Mater, but is broad and intelligent enough to include the important functions of education in general. It is of course impossible for any individual to contribute directly to the improvement of all the phases of our social life; his vocation will always have to form the centre from which to work for the general welfare: charity is not the only virtue which begins at home. He will have plenty of opportunity, if he has the good will, to render aid beyond the practice of his profession or the management of his business by virtue of his professional or business knowledge. There is one thing, however, which neither the business man nor the

professional man can shirk, and that is his duty as a citizen. We all know this, but we show no greater zeal in acting upon the knowledge than members of the community who have not enjoyed our privileges. What we need is not only an intelligent and honest body of citizens, but an honest and intelligent body of citizens with a civic consciousness strong enough to impel them to make a few sacrifices for the public good. The nation, the state, and the city have a right to expect that the more favored members of society will help to enlarge this group not only by joining it themselves, but by educating others to useful citizenship. James Bryce mentions among the hindrances to good citizenship indolence, personal self-interest, and partisanship. It ought to be possible for the educated members of our society to purge themselves of these vices and to give an example to the rest of the community of energetic, unselfish, intelligent, and broadminded devotion to the common good. Another hindrance to good citizenship is moral cowardice, which is often bound up with selfishness. It takes courage to fight any moral battle and to serve a cause; courage to face abuse and ridicule and misunderstanding; courage to be whipped and to go on with the fight; courage, in other words, to make sacrifices. The man who is looking for a soft berth and a large fee will not make them. What we need is idealists who are brave enough to put their faith into practice, who will strive to weave their ethical ideas into human institutions, who will pour their morality into everyday life. Such men we have always had, and such men we must have to-day. Is it too much to expect that the universities of America will furnish a fair share of them?

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