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## What Is the Moral Crisis of Our Time?

EVERY age has its own challenge to morality, and the character of this challenge may well come to serve as a significant indication of the spirit of the times. What is the character of the challenge to morality that our age offers? Everyone seems to agree that we find ourselves in a moral crisis of an aggravated kind. But what is the nature of this crisis? What shall we make of it? What is its meaning and portent? And how deep is it, how far does it go? These are some of the questions I should like to raise and discuss.

I.

THE moral crisis of our time cannot, it seems to me, be identified merely with the widespread violation of accepted moral standards, for which our time is held to be notorious. There has never been any lack of that at any time; and comparisons often prove quite misleading. No—the moral crisis of our time goes deeper, and is much more difficult to define and account for. Briefly, I should say that the moral crisis of our time consists primarily not in the widespread violation of accepted moral standards—again I ask, when has any age been free of that?—but in the repudiation of those very moral standards themselves. And this,

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indeed, is our time's challenge to morality; not so much the all-too-frequent breakdown of a moral code, but the fact that today there seems to be no moral code to break down.

Sexual "irregularity" among young people has always been common enough, though it was only in recent years that a combination of sociological factors has extended it as a possibility to young women of the middle classes. There is, no doubt, a marked increase in premarital sexual activity to be found among the younger generation, especially among the younger generation on the college campuses; but however disturbing this may be, it is not the real moral problem involved. The real moral problem, the real challenge to morality, is provided not by the girl who goes along, but by the girl who shrugs her shoulders and says: "Well, so what? What's so bad about sleeping around? It's natural, and it's lots of fun, too."

Cheating may or may not be more widespread on the college campuses of this country today; it is certainly not new. The student who cheats and knows that he is doing wrong is a moral problem, of course; but much more profound is the challenge to morality flung out by the student who cheats and says: "What's so bad about cheating? It gets you ahead, doesn't it?"

Fraud or near-fraud in the mass media of communication is something we have learned to expect and protect ourselves against. But what can we do with the attitude that shrugged off the deceptions practiced with official connivance over TV some years ago by a young professor of honored name, with an indifferent, "Well, so what if it was all

fixed in advance? It was a good show, wasn't it?"

I could multiply illustrations to the same effect from every sphere of contemporary life; but the point, I think, has been made. It is my belief that the really serious threat to morality in our time consists not in the multiplying violations of an accepted moral code, but in the fact that the very notion of morality or moral code seems to be itself losing its meaning for increasing numbers of men and women in our society. It is here that we find a breakdown of morality in a radical sense, in a sense almost without precedent in our western history. To violate moral standards while at the same time acknowledging their authority is one thing; to lose all sense of the moral claim, to repudiate all moral authority and every moral standard as such, is something far more serious. It is this loss of the moral sense, I would suggest to you, that constitutes the real challenge to morality in our time.

## II.

IT is difficult to discover the sources of this kind of moral anarchy that is coming to pervade our culture; it is difficult even to distinguish between cause and effect. But one thing we may notice: in every one of the typical cases I have mentioned, there appears to be not merely a repudiation of morality as such, but a repudiation of morality in favor of a way of life governed by a self-indulgent quest for pleasure and fun. Everything is justified by the "kicks" you get out of it. "Have fun" has become our parting injunction, replacing the long-obsolete "God be with you." In fact, if our time has retained from times past some sense of binding obligation in the conduct of life, it is just this obligation to "have fun." If we have a morality at all, it is a "fun-morality": to "have a good time" is, with many of our modern-minded people, as stern an obligation as serving God was to an old-time Calvinist. Not to be interested in having a "good time" condemns you as a neurotic with a "puritan conscience"—and what could be worse in the eyes of the moderns? Don't think that this pursuit of "fun," of a "good time," is an

easy matter. It often demands a single-minded pursuit of status, adjustment, and sociability so strenuous as to shame many an ascetic saint. Children are shown no mercy; whatever their own gifts or predilections, they are dragooned very early into the "have fun" and "be a good fellow" competition of their elders. In fact, teenagers have become the favorite vehicles of status display for their parents: they are lavishly provided with money and other facilities for having a "good time," and they are earnestly enjoined not to falter in this pursuit. It has become not uncommon for parents to supply their minor children with hard liquor and contraceptive devices when they go out to parties and other "fun" gatherings. In this kind of euphoric culture—where "feeling good" and "being sociable" are the pressing requirements—morality and moral codes in the older sense are obviously irrelevant.

Our emerging euphoric culture is closely connected with the affluence of our "affluent society." Until very recently, our country, and the rest of the Western world very largely, operated as dynamic, production-minded societies driven on by need and scarcity. An ethic of duty, character, hard work, and achievement dominated the culture—that celebrated "Protestant ethic" that is in such bad repute today. Within the past generation, however, a profound change has been taking place in this country and in the more Americanized parts of Western Europe: the older "inner-directed" culture (to use David Riesman's terminology) is being rapidly replaced by a new "other-directed" culture under an economy of plenty, preoccupied with consumption, leisure, and enjoyment. Our current "fun"-morality is obviously an expression of this emerging "other-directed" culture. Affluence brings with it moral problems more perplexing than those that poverty breeds.

The "fun"-morality of our time is also closely connected with the new stress on sociability and adjustment so characteristic of our society, for nothing can so spoil "having a good time" as a taste for solitude and a dislike of being adjusted. But the sociability and adjustment so prized by our euphoric society are of a very curious kind. It is a

"non-involved sociability," and an adjustment that swallows up both the so-called conformist and the so-called non-conformist—the junior executive in his "gray flannel suit" and the beatnik in his leather jacket. It is with this kind of "non-involved" sociability" that we are particularly concerned at this point.

I am sure you all remember those horrifying stories coming from New York and other big cities, of women being attacked, raped, and sometimes throttled to death, while dozens of people looked on, none of them feeling sufficiently "involved" to phone the police from the security of their apartments. These were all respectable middle-class folk, friend-

making a speech. The more humanitarianism in the abstract, apparently, the less humanity in the concrete . . . This kind of "non-involved sociability" is as much part of our euphoric mass culture as the "fun" we are always enjoined to be having. The euphoric way of life requires sociability, but it views with embarrassment and distaste any kind of serious personal involvement; that would spoil everything.

### III.

**B**UT the moral crisis of our time has even deeper roots than these comparatively recent developments I have been describing. The moral crisis of our time, let me remind



A marijuana party

ly and sociable, all sharing the "liberal" outlook for which New York is so celebrated. One of the cases reported in the press is particularly interesting. A young woman was being attacked at the foot of the stairs in the hallway of a building in the Bronx. A number of men came out at the first landing to see what was going on. They saw, and they returned to their own business—which was, believe it or not, passing resolutions on world peace and racial justice! You see, they were the executive committee of one of the best known "liberal" organizations in the city. They were all deeply interested in the welfare of their fellow-men—in the abstract, at a distance, by way of passing a resolution or

you, consists not so much in the violation of standards generally accepted as in the attrition, to the point of irrelevance, of these very standards themselves. Violation of moral standards there has always been aplenty in every age, but until modern times the standards themselves were not questioned; or, more accurately, it was never questioned that there were such standards: this was taken for granted by the very ones who violated them, who, therefore, even in their violation, paid tribute to their authority. In the modern world, for the first time, at least on a mass scale, the very possibility of such standards has been thrown into question, and with it all essential distinctions



between right and wrong. Today's culture comes very close to becoming a non-moral, normless culture.

What has been happening? Something that runs deep in our history and gives our culture its characteristically "modernistic" tone. It is the transformation of the very concept of truth, upon which the whole spiritual structure of a society may be said to depend. Until the dawn of modernity, truth was conceived of as something anchored in objective and transcendental reality, and the whole of man's intellectual and moral life was built upon this foundation. In very early times, truth had been seen as embodied in ancestral tradition and ancestral wisdom, the "wisdom of the fathers." But when this was challenged, as it was by the sophists during the breakdown of the older Greek culture, it was reestablished on an even firmer foundation by the philosophers. Such, I imagine, was the essential task that Plato set for himself, and with Plato, all of subsequent Greek philosophy of whatever school. The philosophers sought to ground the truth, in its objectivity and transcendence, on the rational nature of things. The Hebrew prophets sought the truth in the revealed word of God. But despite the difference between the two approaches, basic and irreconcilable as they are at some points, Greek philosopher and Hebrew prophet were at one at least on this, that the truth by which man lived was something ultimately

independent of him, beyond and above him, expressing itself in norms and standards to which he must conform if he was to live a truly human life.

It was precisely this conviction about truth that was the first to be challenged with the emergence of modernity. It was challenged on one level by the rise of relativism. What sense did it make to speak of truth in the old way when truth was so relative, so obviously man-made and culture-made, varying (as Pascal had put it) with the degree of latitude, or (in the later vocabulary) with the psychological conditioning and cultural pattern? This kind of relativism was full of contradictions, to be sure, and flew in the face of the best evidence, but it appealed to the modern mind, which was rapidly losing all sense of transcendence. Relativism, of a kind more radical and pervasive than the Greeks had ever dreamed of, soon came to dominate the advanced thought of the West, and increasingly also the convictions and the feelings of the common man. In this kind of cultural climate, the dissolution of moral standards, in the sense in which Greek philosophy and Hebraic religion had understood them, was only a matter of time.

But if relativism began the process, it was the triumph of technology that carried it to its disastrous completion. We are not yet in a position to grasp fully what the accelerated and unfettered expansion of technology has done to human life in the past three hundred

years. But we can at least begin to assess its major impact upon the consciousness of the West, and that is the *exaltation of power over truth as the object of man's intellectual and moral quest*. From the earliest times, the object of the knowledge-seeking enterprise had been *truth*—the truth of reason for the philosopher, the truth of revelation for the man of biblical faith—but truth as something to apprehend *intellectually* and live by *morally*. Now, however, some time in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, perhaps, a new conviction arose, constituting a radical subversion of the older view. The whole tradition of the West—that “knowledge is *truth*”—was overturned, and replaced by the new, militantly proclaimed creed, “Knowledge is *power!*”—first, power of man over nature; then power of man over man. This shift from truth to power marks the full scope of the revolution effected by the technological spirit at the very dawn of modernity.

The evacuation of moral standards soon came to aggravate the effects of technology. Nearly a hundred years ago, Jacob Burckhardt, the great historian who so well discerned the ominous outlines of the twentieth century, pointed out with great penetration:

*When men lose their sense of established standards, they inevitably fall victim to the urge for pleasure or power.*

This “urge for pleasure or power” defines as nothing else can the pseudo-ethic of our time.

The technological spirit exalting power, and the ideological relativism that destroys the authority of all moral norms, have cooperated to undermine the older foundations of morality, in fact, the very meaning of morality itself. Human problems are increasingly seen as technological problems, to be dealt with by adjustment and manipulation; the test is always how it satisfies desires or enlarges power, not conformity to a truth beyond man's control. In fact, the belief seems to have emerged that there is nothing beyond man's desires, nothing beyond man's power. His “values” are his to make or unmake, the only criterion being satisfaction

and power. Pleasure and power have taken over, and the bitch-goddess Success, which William James so scornfully denounced, has come into her own. This is the moral crisis of our time in all its amplitude.

#### IV.

SOME twenty years ago, in a happier day, Bertrand Russell raised a question that we are still far from being able to answer:

*There are certain old conceptions [he said] which represent man's belief in the limits of human power: of these, the two chief are God and truth . . . Such conceptions tend to melt away; even if not specifically negated, they lose importance and are retained only superficially . . . What then?*

Traditionally, through centuries and millennia, the limits upon pleasure and power had been set by the “higher law,” a law beyond all human manipulation and control. And this “higher law” was understood to emanate from that which was ultimate in the universe, God for the Hebrews, Reason for the Greeks. The entire spiritual structure of



Bertrand Russell

the Western world was built upon these convictions. With these convictions so rapidly losing their appeal to the modern mind, nothing has been left but the indulgence of pleasure, the anarchy of power, and the chaos of "self-created values." The moral crisis of our time is, at bottom, a metaphysical and religious crisis.

It is hardly surprising, though it is painfully ironical, that man's success in his frantic search for pleasure and power has brought with it the gravest threat to his humanity. Without grounding his being in something beyond, man cannot preserve his humanness. At the very moment when Algernon Charles Swinburne, echoing the new modernity, was singing "Glory to Man in the highest, the Maker and Master of All," forces were coming to a head that were to drive Western man, through unimaginable disasters, to a point where his very survival would come into question. But even more than physical survival, it is the survival of man in his humanness that is becoming problematic.

I wish I had a more cheerful report to present to you. I wish I could offer a word of reassurance, and tell you that the moral crisis of our time is merely a surface phenomenon, an interim thing, transitional between the old and the new. I wish I could report that I have discovered, as some observers claim to have done, the fundamentals of a "new" morality already emerging out of the shattered ruins of the old. I wish I could announce these things; but I can't, since I am simply not able to see things that way. The contextualism and situationalism so eagerly espoused by exponents of the "new morality" have their point, of course, but allow them to be carried away by their own logic, and you end up in either moral platitudes or moral anarchy. They do not offer a way out.

Situationalism, especially, seems to offer a strong appeal to the philosophical and theological champions of the "new morality," and therefore deserves closer attention. Its fundamental insight, shared by the contextualists in a weaker form, is that one must make his moral decisions not in the abstract, or in obedience to some eternal code of law

forced upon him from the outside. I must respond *here and now*, not then and there; in *this* my situation, not in terms of some other—and if my response is to be genuine and authentic, it must be made with true inwardness, as *my* response, not in imitation of someone else's. The one "rule" of situational ethics would appear to be: "Respond from *within* your situation, and respond authentically, with the wholeness of being." After all, has not Saint Augustine counseled us: "Love [God], and do what you will"?

But while this situationalist principle, rooted in a profound existentialist insight, is, in itself, quite valid, it is hardly enough to rescue the man who acts on it from moral chaos and ethical arbitrariness. For there is not the slightest hint in the situationalist principle as to content, positive or negative. The worst abominations of a Hitler or a Stalin may meet the demand of authenticity as well as the finest act of heroism or charity. Sartre himself tells the story of the young man in Paris under the Nazi occupation who came to consult him about a dilemma in which he found himself. The young man, it appears, did not know what to do—to join the Nazis in collaboration, and thus gain a



Jean-Paul Sartre

secure position for himself and his family; or to go into the underground Resistance, and thus bring himself and his family into the direst peril. And what did Sartre, who was himself at the time in the Resistance, say to him? By his own account, Sartre told the young man that the important thing was not which of the two ways he chose; the important thing was that he choose his way with inwardness and authenticity. A philosophy that can say this, but cannot and will not say anything more, may be able to create something new, but not a new *morality!*

Or take another case. The barbarous vandals, many of them teenagers, who invaded the magnificent Spanish Stairs in Rome some time ago, and gleefully fouled up the world-famous work of art in a nihilistic protest against beauty and culture, may well have been acting out of their inner authenticity as much as the anonymous builders who, four centuries ago, created that magnificent structure. In fact, that's exactly what they claimed. Yet is there anyone bold enough to maintain that the two courses—creating and defiling—are morally on the same level if only one acts in either case with true inwardness?

No, authenticity may be a primary quality of a moral response, but it cannot be all there is to it. Unless *some* principle, some standard, *transcending* the particular context or situation, is somehow operative in the context or situation, nothing but moral chaos and capriciousness can result. No human ethic is possible that is not itself grounded in a higher law and a higher reality beyond human manipulation or control. In the

depths of our tradition, we find this higher reality to be, for the Hebrews, God, for the Greeks, Reason; and the higher law derived therefrom, the divine or the natural law. But, as Russell notes, in our time these foundation-conceptions "tend to melt away," and we are left with no grounding or anchorage. A contextual or situational ethic will not save us; rather, in accentuated form, it points to that which we are to be saved *from*.

For it is the humanity of man that is at stake. The humanity of man—our wisdom and our suffering ought to have taught us—is ultimately grounded in that which is *above* and *beyond* man, or the pride and power of man. To realize this profound truth is to realize the full depth and measure of the moral crisis of our time. How to revalidate the moral life in a culture in which the very idea of a moral law binding on man because it is grounded in what is beyond man, has been eroded almost to nullity: this, rather than any particular problem of personal or social morality, no matter how acute or how urgent, seems to me to be the moral dilemma of our time and culture—a dilemma in which we are caught, and from which we, as yet, see no way of escape. Real standards come in and through tradition. "Only he who has the tradition has the standards," the old Greek poet Theognis was wont to say. We have lost, we are losing, the tradition—the tradition of the higher law and the higher reality—and are therefore also losing our standards. Is it ever really possible simply to regain what has once been lost? We do not know. That is our problem, our plight, and our task.

With this issue of *The Intercollegiate Review*, Robert Ritchie, the editor, departs to become an associate editor in the college division of D. Van Nostrand Company, in Princeton, New Jersey.

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