

Youth and a New Morality

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WHATEVER FAULTS we may find with the moral way and the moral wisdom that have long been operative in the Occident, we must admit two points about them. First, it took them a long time to reach their present position, and they got there by endless hard knocks, having originated, as all moral ways and moral wisdoms do, from the general demand of nature to be, and of men, as a part of nature, to be, and, as Augustine so simply said, fully to be. Man's being is good in Aristotle's sense of the good as the desirable, and the fullness of his being would be the ideal and best thing of all. Secondly, that Western way and presumed wisdom, like any way and presumed wisdom, have always to be reexamined and to face criticism from within and without, and today it must especially criticize and be criticized when there is worry and flurry about the new morality and, more important, when because of world conditions our way and its possible wisdom must learn from and with the Oriental way and moral wis-

dom, and, helped by God and man, must become one with them.

I would underline the *demand of nature*. Men are not free to have or simply not to have a moral path of some sort and again to have or not to have beneath it some kind of wisdom rock. Any tribe anywhere and at any time will work out a moral pattern and have at the bottom of this what Aquinas calls a *ratio operis*, a set of guidelines, a basic directive principle; when people square their conduct with this, they consider their acts and habits to be justified, and they assume that this principle is, like the Lord's judgments, justified in itself. They want and need solid rock. Did not the jurist, John Austin, say that all systems of even the civil law "are bottomed in the common nature of man"? In every age, it is necessary to presume or to prove that, in regard to morals, man's nature is the rock which he naturally seeks. St. Paul tells his Christians to accept no other foundation than Christ, and like it as we will, we cannot effectively run away from nature as the

basis of moral theory and practice. Hitler's way was evil not because of "the situation," the time and place, the schools or the economy, or because of "consensus" and what people thought and did, but because it was destructive of man and not bottomed on the common old raggedy nature of man.

Any high or low tribe, people or nation has to have a moral system, some acts and habits taken as good, some as evil. How do we know this? Tribes, peoples, nations always do have and live by a pattern or system of morals. They are universally found to have patterns. That is why anthropologists who are the most competent to speak, say that to have an ethical system of some kind or other is the given case and may properly be called a "cultural universal": every culture has an ethical system and within this general pattern fall many significant items, e.g., to have some kind of understanding about marriage and family morals is a phenomenon discovered in every tribe, so that to have an understanding in this matter is an "ethical universal" within the wider cultural and ethical universal. Various universals such as that mentioned regarding marriage, and there are many of them, are so recurrent that the anthropologist, the late Clyde Kluckhohn of Harvard, said in a famous article that the common ethical universals seem to correspond to "inevitably." He thought this word committed him to less than if he had declared for a "categorical imperative." Perhaps, but I am not so sure.

In setting out to pattern a new morality youths or older people would have a task on their hands. They would have to recreate centuries of how men have thought and lived, and in saying this we do not prejudice the question of whether they should or should not seek a new morality. They would have to take account of many compound factors—of the Grecian natural elements, for instance, the Jewish and Chris-

tian elements and of various secular elements, and also of ethical universals, cultural universals and panhuman universals (for example, every person needs human associates) and the possible answering of all these universals to inevitabilities, and I for one would want youths and elders intent on a new morality to learn what I presume could be learned from Chinese morality summed up in the one word *Tao* and from Indian morality summed up in the word *Rta*. This would be quite a chore, as people used to say. But it is really wished on us now, though not primarily by young rebels or old reactionaries, but by the condition of man and of our own society, and by the necessity, arising from science and technology, for East and West to understand each other and begin to learn how all people can live together.

It is possible that even avant garde youths and their teachers are scarcely conscious of how big the undertaking would be. But it is a hopeful sign when youths become aware that they are asked to live within patterned structures of the moral life, within patterns already set by tradition, by parents and church and state law and the heavy burden of going with the mores. Usually, youths are too immature and healthily youngish simply to ask, "Why?" Their reaction, at least in many cases, is likely to be, "We won't do it!" That is what is now meant by "protest," in one of its commonest forms. However, their becoming aware of patterns is remarkably in their favor, since not all youths and adults achieve this level; it is a good thing to become conscious of social uneasiness and to bring it out into the open. Think how enslaved slaves are until, no matter with what human or divine help, they can begin to hope for freedom. Think how long laboring men, women and children were underlings in tow to their "betters" until at last they refused—really not long ago—to be nobodies,

and how the black peoples and postcolonials now refuse an underprivileged and despised condition, and how women must fight against discrimination. No more of that for us!

For better or for worse, in a minority of its college people youth is refusing a non-entity status and swearing that it will have something to say even about sacred preserves, about the right and wrong of its own conduct, notably in its sexual life, about the incidence of freedom and constraint, and certainly about curricula and the provender of education. We emphasize "for better or for worse," because it might be that Woodrow Wilson and George F. Kenan, in spite of their mustiness and solemnity, would be better policy-makers for education than the rebels at Columbia and Berkeley. Whether youths will be likely to come up with a better world is a detail that few of them have considered with care, and at times they fail to notice obvious realities falling within their own manners and morals. For example, they are in effect told by professors and the media to whom they should pay a big stipend to entertain them and whom to secure as lecturers, and the styles of college girls' dresses are dictated to them from remote, authoritarian and impersonal sources. College students applaud some notorious quacks, and I have seen no line of pickets stopping lecturers who at best were freaks, and no dead weight of girls' bodies denying access to the mod people's offices, not even in Paris. All the same, even if youths are sometimes barking up wrong and highly selective trees, it is good that they are barking. For it must be confessed that old men even more than boys are often passive and thereby lack perspective and miss half of what is going on around them.

Youth is not the only youthful participant in the moral order and in the general social order. Man himself is a novice, a sort

of maverick and greenhorn among living things—see how sure and deft the red ant is—and at least relatively, Americans are mavericks and greenhorns among the nations; the Chinese and Indians and Jews and Greeks and Arabs all achieved great things and learned about human living ages before our nation was born. When youth or a youthful nation rates age down on this or that question, as no doubt it now and then should, it would be a part of its own moral wisdom to know that it could be in danger of suffering from immaturity.

Moral ways, some of which we may suppose are only in part justified, grow up under pressures and sufferings, fears, many errors and sins, by way of heroic deeds and lives and creative visions so that at last something good and defensible as well as viable comes to be. Then bits of this good keep changing, something brought in, something deleted, and only a careful study of the long-time effects could confidently say whether the moral condition and its alleged justifications are truly better now than those in vogue at earlier stages. Who can prove that today's openness is better than Puritan prudery? There is snobbery and better-than-thouism in every generation. A half century ago, the American essayist, Agnes Repplier, was unhappy about what she called "the repeal of reticence." Who can prove that today's much greater repeal is undeniably a good thing?

Possibly some youths and some of their grandfathers do not know that as any tribe or nation, any youth or age group moves out of one set of approved values and institutions, including a patterned way of life, it automatically moves into another. It inches this way or that, perhaps only by a tiny fraction, but it has to be somewhere: it cannot be nowhere at all. It cannot be outside patterns, outside the world of good and evil and of making choices which involve the familiar claim that X is good and

Y evil. Moses said that the people had chosen to walk in God's ways. We cannot examine whether his words truly expressed what the people chose or did. But we know that, like any people, they made choices, took steps this way and that and soon had a beaten path. This was then their *de facto* way, and naturally it was more or less changing and more or less changeless. That is what people do, beat a path, make a good or bad or mediocre way. They would do that, the words of Moses apart.

There is no use supposing that Americans or moderns or youths form a worldwide exception and are not path-creating and path-beating. It is sure to be the case that some of us will abominate certain features of the old paths. Or we will not like how the paths are expressed in what Bonhoeffer called the rusty swords of outworn codes with their "do's" and "don'ts." Stunned by credibility gaps in politics or religion, we surmise and possibly in effect know that some who profess the paths as good and the best way to good are hypocritical and merely say and do not do. Nevertheless the main point here is that going out of one set of mores means plumping into another. And perhaps by this time in our history, all collegians and some other youths and some older folks know that every tribe or people, even the most sophisticated, lives mainly by the mores, and that the mores do not always square with good morals.

People do what they are expected to do. They do what people do, and though they censor and are censored, they fall in line. Adults do that—they go along. And so does youth, the individual quickly and unconsciously doing what the peer group says to do; in our time the media tell young and old what to think and do, and grandmothers accept the authoritarian replies of question and answer programs more rapidly than youths do. Hegemony through the dic-

tatorship of the mores is a mark of all cultures. That the moral and social world should thus obey is (we would argue) a good thing. And for two reasons: in the moral as well as in the physical world a boy or a man cannot at every step be thinking of how to lift his foot and how to put it down, and we are optimistic enough to suppose that a way worked out over some generations, a way that has helped people to survive and develop, is almost certain to be, by and large, a good way. What really would be the best way of all is a basic question we do not have occasion to examine here. As we have already said, if a person or group begins to take notice, to size things up, to criticize and reevaluate values and norms of values, we may stand by for a moment and assume that the action is a sign of life and that it could be a move toward civilized maturity.

As people reject rusty swords, the given codes or parts of them, it could be that they are unconsciously reasserting some old favorites. This is because the forms or norms of the moral life are limited, and every one of them and perhaps every possible combination has been tried many times. In addition to the mores, the hedonistic norm—what gives pleasure is good—has often been followed; the individualistic norm also has been common, and is evidently followed by many women obtaining abortions, although abortion promoters claim to go for slum clearance, quality people, and women's liberation. The individualistic norm, rejecting laws and the legalistic, sets the individual up as a law, asserts that the individual is to follow his conscience and not be bossed by any persons, institutions or imposed codes. In the controversy over artificial birth control, some have said to let every couple follow its own conscience, a difficult thing to do in the case, since the mores and the media were having a good deal to say *pro* and *con*; some said the cou-

ple should get a doctor's advice, no doubt by way of invoking science as an authoritarian norm: whatever is scientifically possible is good to do. A man does follow his own conscience, of course, although this is always shaped up for him by all kinds of odds and ends of worthy and unworthy forces, and a journalist was only a fraction greener than his associates when he wrote this three-word headline: BISHOPS ENDORSE CONSCIENCE. He did not know that he should have added that this is something that has always been done by bishops and everyone else from the beginning of the world. Another type of norm is the expediency or Machiavellian rule, frankly stated by Machiavelli in *The Prince*, that what helps me or my group to the end sought is therefore good, a rule correctly translated as the end justifies the means; this norm, allied to the individualistic, is the rule followed by a boy or a man who tells a lie to get out of the difficulty; it has been followed by Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini and all totalitarianism and is honored in practice by political parties and by many more or less morally good individual politicians and businessmen. On occasion we can refuse the king's edicts as Antigone did and appeal with her to some higher law and perhaps see this, as she did, as the expression of a divine law. We can go with biblical commands, with the Ten Commandments or with Christ's command to love God and man. Or, as people often unconsciously do, we can combine several types of norms, e.g., natural and Biblical and individualistic. But there is a limit, sooner or later we will run out of space—that's about all the norms there are.

An expedient appealed to for a while by youths and a few somewhat shallow adults was to say that there are no norms, codes or laws; a professor in a school for social thought said in Deweyan fashion that there are no standing principles, but that faced

by a decision to be made, a person creates an *ad hoc* principle. The ideal of some youths and some adults was to seek shelter under the umbrella of a lawless conscience or again of commitment to one's own identity; a letter in the *New York Times* a few years ago said that women have the right to any sex life they please because a woman has to seek her identity. Love also got a high rating. Charged with nefarious evil-doing, Charles Manson said he had merely told girls that in love there can be no evil. "Love and the situation" were asked by persons in respectable positions to do duty for what had formerly been regarded as a need for norms. In his lively and charming *Honest to God*, Bishop Robinson said that love would find the way to good, that it would point out the direction for right action and would "home" intuitively on the right object. An obvious objection is that sometimes a man is ready to die out of love for his neighbor's wife and the good bishop seems not to have heard of the axiom that love is blind.

Meantime, youths and adults may find some comfort in the fact that men of distinction have been caught in moments of immaturity in regard to moral norms. Hobbes, a man of charm in many ways, said that once upon a time man lived in what Hobbes called a state of nature; no action was either good or bad, there was no merit or demerit, no justice or injustice until, everything going badly, the king took over and pronounced what was good and what was evil, what was right or wrong, meritorious and what had no merit—the very decisions so peremptorily made by dictators. Descartes, perhaps the keenest mind of his century, was set back when, soldiering in a foreign country, he discovered that there were other ways and mores than the French ways and mores so familiar to him. Locke, a wise and admirably humble man, though not widely traveled, was innocent

enough to say, in his voluminous treatise on human understanding, that American Indians did not possess the first principles of right and wrong—in his opinion, it was as if only Europeans, white and Christians, the wise men *par excellence*, could be blessed with basic moral wisdom. And Chateaubriand, trained as the darling disciple of Rousseau, got his sentimental wings clipped when, soon after 1800 he went upstate in New York to see the Indians who, on his master's word, he had supposed to dwell in a paradise without codes or laws. He soon found out a thing or two. The people not only had laws, but the visitor, running from tree to tree and embracing oak and elm, learned that he had to obey rusty and outworn codes, sometimes an extremely and distasteful thing to do.

If wise men like Hobbes, Descartes and Locke could be narrow, uninformed and immature—not half critical and circumspect enough—on big moral issues, it is possible that those possessed of no great wisdom could be unaware of how difficult it is to do a good job of evaluating the mores. It might even be more difficult to isolate the basic moral issues. Some maturity is needed to see that the fundamental problems are few, such as “what is the end for man?” It is even difficult to be sure whether, in a particular case, we are judging, deciding and acting on a general principle rather than on personal taste and our own values, and again to decide on which type of norm we are deciding, whether an esthetic norm, an ethical one, a theological one, or perhaps on grounds dictated by political, religious or personal preference. That is to say, to find out what a moral theory embodies and is all about—this is a considerable assignment and presupposes maturity. It is hard to do depth thinking in regard to something so much our very selves as is our own daily moral way, and in regard to our presuppositions on morals.

Some of the factors in this area are difficult enough for professionals; for example, moral sentences, moral absolutes, moral relativities. Yet most people find out how to live in terms of what constitutes the moral life.

When Aristotle wrote his treatise on the mean (Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*), he was mature, and “nothing too much, nothing too little” was far from new to him. But it was not merely the mature Aristotle who spoke; Grecian civilization mature on this problem of human living spoke through Aristotle, a civilization which had well seasoned working ideas on the mean in many fields. In *La Morale d'Aristote* René A. Gauthier said that for centuries the idea of the “just mean” was at home among the Greeks.

For a long time familiar to Greek poetry, the idea of the just mean had by Aristotle's age invaded all the areas of life and thought. We find it in effect everywhere in the fifth century before Christ: in the young Ionian physicists, in Prodicus who introduced it into rhetoric, in the Pythagoreans who introduced it into mathematics, above all in the medical doctors, and it was from medicine that it passed, by way of Democritus, into moral philosophy. When in his turn Aristotle appeals to the “just mean,” he is only conforming to custom.¹

On the mean and generally on morals, Aristotle would not have been much of anybody if he had not been far more than Aristotle. He was Greek, no upstart. We may say of him what Renan said of Turgenev: Before he was born he had lived for thousands of years; generations of ancestors lost in the sleep of centuries, came to life through his life and utterance.

¹René A. Gauthier, *La Morale d'Aristote* (Paris, 1958), p. 64.