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Three Independent Factors in Morals

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There is a fact which from all the evidence is an integral part of moral action which has not received the attention it deserves in moral theory: that is the element of uncertainty and of conflict in any situation which can properly be called moral. The conventional attitude sees in that situation only a conflict of good and of evil; in such a conflict, it is asserted, there should not be any uncertainty. The moral agent knows good as good and evil as evil and chooses one or the other according to the knowledge he has of it. I will not stop to discuss whether this traditional view can be sustained in certain cases; it is enough to say that it is not right in a great number of cases. The more conscientious the agent is and the more care he expends on the moral quality of his acts, the more he is aware of the complexity of this problem of discovering what is good; he hesitates among ends, all of which are good in some measure, among duties which obligate him for some reason. Only after the event, and then by chance, does one of the alternatives seem simply good morally or bad morally. And if we take the case of a person commonly considered immoral, we know that he does not take the trouble of justifying his acts, even the criminal ones; he makes no effort, to use the psychoanalysts' term, to "rationalize" them.

As I just proposed, this problematical character of moral situations, this preliminary uncertainty in considering the moral quality of an act to be performed, is not recognized by current moral theory. The reason for that is, it seems to me, quite simple. Whatever may be the differences which separate moral theories, all postulate one single principle as an explanation of moral life. Under such conditions, it is not possible to have either uncertainty or conflict: *morally* speaking, the conflict is only specious and apparent. Conflict is, in effect, between good and evil, justice and injustice, duty and caprice, virtue and vice, and is not an inherent part of the good, the obligatory, the virtuous. Intellectually and morally, distinctions are given in advance; from such a point of view, conflict is in the nature of things, a hesitation about choice, an anguish of the will divided between good and evil, between appetite and a categorical imperative, between the disposition to virtue or the penchant for vice.

That is the necessary logical conclusion if moral action has only one source, if it ranges only within a single category. Obviously in this case the only force which can oppose the moral is the immoral.

In the time I have at my disposal I will not attempt to prove that this idea of the nature of conflict is an abstract and arbitrary simplification, so much so that it runs counter to every empirical observation of fact. I can only express, briefly and in passing, the idea that moral progress and the sharpening of character depend on the ability to make delicate distinctions, to perceive aspects of good and of evil not previously noticed, to take into account the fact that doubt and the need for choice impinge at every turn. Moral decline is on a par with the loss of that ability to make delicate distinctions, with the blunting and hardening of the capacity of discrimination. Posing this point without undertaking to prove it, I shall content myself with presenting the hypothesis that there are at least three independent variables in moral action. Each of these variables has a sound basis, but because each has a different origin and mode of operation, they can be at cross purposes and exercise divergent forces in the formation of judgment. From this point of view, uncertainty and conflict are inherent in morals; it is characteristic of any situation properly called moral that one is ignorant of the end and of good consequences, of the right and just approach, of the direction of virtuous conduct, and that one must search for them. The essence of the moral situation is an internal and intrinsic conflict; the necessity for judgment and for choice comes from the fact that one has to manage forces with no common denominator.

By way of introduction, let us see what is involved. We know that there are two opposing systems of moral theory: the morality of ends and the morality of laws. The dominating, the only, and monistic principle of the first, is that of ends which, in the final analysis, can be reduced to one single end, supreme and universal good. The nature of this end, this good, has been discussed frequently. Some say that it is happiness (*eudaemonia*), others pleasure, still others, self-realization. But, in every respect, the idea of Good, in the sense of satisfaction and of achievement, is central. The concept of right, to the extent it is distinguished from good, is derivative and dependent; it is the means or the manner of attaining the good. To say that an act is consonant with right, legitimate or obligatory, is to say that its accomplishment leads to the possession of the good; otherwise, it is senseless. In the morality of laws, this concept is reversed. At the heart of this morality is the idea of law which prescribes what is legitimate or obligatory. Natural goods are the satisfaction of desires and the accomplishment of purposes; but natural goods have nothing in common except in name, with moral Good. Moral good becomes that which is in agreement with juridical imperative, while the opposite is not true.

Now I would like to suggest that good and right have different origins, they flow from independent springs, so that neither of the two can derive from the other, so that desire and duty have equally legitimate bases and the force they exercise in different directions is what makes moral decision a real problem, what gives ethical judgment and moral tact their vitality. I want to stress that there is no uniform, previous moral presumption either in one direction or in the other, no constant principle making the balance turn on the side of good or of law; but that morality consists rather in the capacity to judge the respective claims of desire and of duty from the moment they affirm themselves in concrete experience, with an eye to discovering a practical middle footing between one and the other—a middle footing which leans as much to one side as to the other without following any rule which may be posed in advance.

So much for preliminary considerations; the essential problem I propose to discuss is the source and the origin in concrete experience of what I have called independent variables. What reasons are there for accepting the existence of these three factors?

First, no one can deny that impulses, appetites, and desires are constant traits in human action and have a large part in determining the direction conduct will take. When impulse or appetite operate without foresight, one does not compare or judge values. The strongest inclination carries one along and

effort follows its direction. But when one foresees the consequences which may result from the fulfillment of desire, the situation changes. Impulses which one cannot measure as impulses become measurable when their results are considered; one can visualize their external consequences and thus compare them as one might two objects. These acts of judgment, of comparison, of reckoning, repeat themselves and develop in proportion to the increase in capacity for foresight and reflection. Judgments applied to such a situation can be thoroughly examined, corrected, made more exact by judgments carried over from other situations; the results of previous estimates and actions are available as working materials.

In the course of time two moral concepts have been formed. One of these is that of Reason as a function which moderates and directs impulses by considering the consequences they entail. The "Reason" thus conceived is nothing but the ordinary faculty of foresight and of comparison; but that faculty has been elevated to a higher order of dignity and named eulogistically by virtue of what it accomplishes, or the order and system it introduces into the succession of acts which constitute conduct.

The other concept we see emerging from moral experience is that of *ends* forming a united and coherent system and merging into one generalized and comprehensive end. As soon as foresight is used to summon objective consequences, the idea of an end is self-apparent; consequences are the natural limit, the object, the end of the action envisaged. But it is significant that from the moment particular acts of judgment become organized into the general moral function called reason, a classification of ends is established; estimates found correct about one are applied in thought to others. Our first ancestors were preoccupied quite early with goals such as health, wealth, courage in battle, success with the other sex. A second level was reached when men more reflective than their fellows ventured to treat those different generalized ends as elements of an organized plan of life, ranking them in a hierarchy of values, going from the least comprehensive to the most comprehensive, and thus conceived the idea of a single end, or in other words, of a good to which all reasonable acts led.

When that process was accomplished, one form of moral theory had been established. To take a broad view of the history of thought, it might be said that it was Greek thinkers who gave articulate expression to this particular phase of experience, and left as their permanent contribution to the theory of morals the conception of ends as the completion, the perfection, and hence the good, of human life; the conception of an hierarchical organization of ends and the intimate relationship between this organization and Reason. Moreover the reigning philosophy of Greece viewed the universe as a cosmos in which all natural processes tended to fulfil themselves in rational or ideal forms, so that this view of human conduct was but an extension of the idea entertained about the universe in which we live. Law was conceived of simply as an expression of reason, not of will or command, being in fact but the order of changes involved in the realization of an end.

That our inheritance from Greek moral theory states one phase of actual human experience of conduct I do not doubt. It is quite another matter, however, to say that it covers conduct in its inclusive scope. It was possible—or so it seems to me—for the Greek philosophers to include social claims and obligations under the category of ends related to reason because of the strictly indigenous character of the Greek city-state; because of the vitally intimate connection between the affairs of this state and the interests of the citizen and because in Athens—upon whose experience the philosophers drew—legislation became a function of discussion and conference, so that, in ideal at least, legislation was the manifestation of deliberate intelligence. The Greek political community was small enough so that it was possible to think of its decisions as being when they were properly made as the expressions of the reasonable mind of the community—as made that is in view of ends that commended themselves to thought, while laws that expressed the fiat of will were arbitrary and tyrannical, and those which were the fruit of passion were perverse and confused.

Probably only in such a social medium

however could law and obligation be identified, without the exercise of mere dialectical skill, with a rational adaptation of means to ends. Moreover the failure of the Greeks to achieve success in practical political administration, their irreparable factiousness and instability, was calculated to bring discredit upon the notion that insight into ends and calculation of means afford a sound and safe basis for social relationships. At all events, we find that among the Romans, the instinct for social order, stable government and stable administration led in the end to quite another conception of reason and law. Reason became a kind of cosmic force that held things together, compelling them to fit into one another and to work together, and law was the manifestation of this compelling force for order. Offices, duties, relationships not of means to ends but of mutual adaptation, reciprocal suitableness and harmony, became the centre of moral theory.

Now this theory also corresponds to a fact in normal experience. Men who live together inevitably make demands on one another. Each one attempts, however unconsciously by the very fact of living and acting, to bend others to his purposes, to make use of others as cooperative means in his own scheme of life. There is no normal person who does not insist practically on some sort of conduct on the part of others. Parents, rulers, are in a better position than are others to exact actions in accord with their demands, to secure obedience and conformity, but even young children in the degree of their power make claims, issue demands, set up certain expectations of their own as standards in the behavior of others. From the standpoint of the one making the demand on others, the demand is normal for it is merely a part of the process of executing his own purpose. From the standpoint of the one upon whom the demand is made, it will seem arbitrary except as it happens to fall in with some interest of his own. But he too has demands to make upon others and there finally develops a certain set or system of demands, more or less reciprocal according to social conditions, which are generally accepted—that is, responded to without overt revolt. From the standpoint of those whose claims are recognized, these demands are rights; from the standpoint of those undergoing them they are duties. The whole established system as far as it is acknowledged without obvious protest constitutes the principle of authority, Jus, Recht, Droit, which is current—that is to say that which is socially authorized in the putting forth and responding to the demands of others.

Now it seems to me almost self-evident that in its roots and natural mode of manifestation this exercise of demands over the behavior of others is an independent variable with respect to the whole principle of rational teleological ends and goods. It is fact that a particular person makes claims upon others in behalf of some satisfaction which he desires. But this fact does not constitute the claim as right; it gives it no moral authority; in and of itself, it expresses power rather than right. To be right, it must be an acknowledged claim, having not the mere power of the claimant behind it, but the emotional and intellectual assent of the community. Now of course it may be retorted that the good is still the dominant principle, the right being a means to it, only now it is not the end of an individual which is sought but the welfare of the community as such. The retort conceals the fact that "good" and "end" have now taken on a new and inherently different meaning; the terms no longer signify that which will satisfy an individual, but that which he recognizes to be important and valid from the standpoint of some social group to which he belongs. What is right thus comes to the individual as a demand, a requirement, to which he should submit. In as far as he acknowledges the claim to possess authority, and not to express mere external force to which it is convenient to submit, it is "good" in the sense of being right—that is a mere truism. But it is not *a* good as are the things to which desires naturally tend; in fact, at first it presents itself as cutting across and thwarting a natural desire—otherwise it is not felt to be a claim which should be acknowledged. In time, the thing in question may through habituation become an object of desire; but when this happens, it loses its quality of being right and authoritative and becomes simply a good.

The whole point for which I am contending is simply this: There is an intrinsic difference, in both origin and mode of operation,

between objects which present themselves as satisfactory to desire and hence good, and objects which come to one as making demands upon his conduct which should be recognized. Neither can be reduced to the other.

Empirically, there is a third independent variable in morals. Individuals praise and blame the conduct of others; they approve and disapprove; encourage and condemn; reward and punish. Such responses occur *after* the other person has acted, or in anticipation of a certain mode of conduct on his part. Westermarck has claimed that sympathetic resentment is the primary root of morals all over the world. While I doubt, for reasons already indicated, its being the only root, there can be no doubt that such resentment, together with a corresponding approbation, are spontaneous and influential empirical phenomena of conduct. Acts and dispositions generally approved form the original virtues; those condemned the original vices.

Praise and blame are spontaneous manifestations of human nature when confronted with the acts of others. They are especially marked when the act in question involves such danger for the one performing it as to be heroic or else goes so contrary to the customs of the community as to be infamous. But praise and blame are so spontaneous, so natural, and as we say "instinctive" that they do not depend either upon considerations of objects that will when attained satisfy desire nor upon making certain demands upon others. They lack the rational, the calculated character, of ends, and the immediate social pressure characteristic of the right. They operate as reflex imputations of virtue and vice—with accompanying rewards and penalties—as *sanctions* of right, and as an individual comes to prize the approving attitude of others as considerations to be taken into account in deliberating upon the end in some especial case. But as categories, as principles, the virtuous differs radically from the good and the right. Goods, I repeat, have to do with deliberation upon desires and purposes; the right and obligatory with demands that are socially authorized and backed; virtues with widespread approbation.

No one can follow the general development of English moral theory without seeing that it is as much influenced by the existence of approvals and disapprovals as Greek theory was the existence of generalized purposes and Latin by the exercise of social authority. Many of the peculiarities of English theory become explicable only when it is seen that this problem is really uppermost even when the writer seems to be discussing some other question. Consider for example the role played by the idea of sympathy; the tendency to regard benevolence as the source of all good and obligation—because it is that which is approved (as sympathy is the organ of approval); and the illogical combination in British utilitarianism of pleasure as the end or good, and the tendency to seek for general happiness as the thing to be approved. The prominent part in English moral theory by such conceptions points doubtless to great susceptibility in English society to the reactions of private individuals to one's conduct as distinct from the tendency to rationalize conduct through consideration of purposes, and from that of attaching great importance to the public system of acknowledged demands that form law.

In calling these three elements independent variables, I do not mean to assert that they are not intertwined in all actual moral situations. Rather is the contrary the case. Moral problems exist because we have to adapt to one another as best we can certain elements coming from each source. If each principle were separate and supreme, I do not see how moral difficulties and uncertainties could arise. The good would be sharply opposed to the evil; the right to the wrong; the virtuous to the vicious. That is, we should sharply discriminate what satisfies desire from what frustrates it—we might make a mistake of judgment in given cases, but that would not affect the distinction of categories. So we should distinguish that which is demanded and permissible, licit, from that which is forbidden, illicit; that which is approved and promoted from that which is frowned upon and penalized.

Actually however, the various lines of distinction cut across one another. What is good from the standpoint of desire is wrong from the standpoint of social demands; what is bad from the first standpoint may be heartily approved by public opinion. Each conflict is genuine and

acute, and some way has to be found for reconciling the opposing factors or again that which is officially and legally forbidden is nevertheless socially allowed or even encouraged. Witness the prohibition of alcoholic beverages in my own country; or, on a wider scale, the difficulties which confront children because of the disparity between what is publicly commanded and what is privately permitted to pass, or is even in practice praised as giving evidence of shrewdness or as evincing a praiseworthy ambition. Thus the scheme of rational goods and of official publicly acknowledged duties in Anglo-Saxon countries stands in marked contrast to the whole scheme of virtues enforced by the economic structure of society—a fact which explains to some extent our reputation for hypocrisy.

In view of the part played by actual conflict of forces in moral situations and the genuine uncertainty which results as to what should be done, I am inclined to think that one cause for the inefficacy of moral philosophies has been that in their zeal for a unitary view they have oversimplified the moral life. The outcome is a gap between the tangled realities of practice and the abstract forms of theory. A moral philosophy which should frankly recognize the impossibility of reducing all the elements in moral situations to a single commensurable principle, which should recognize that each human being has to make the best adjustment he can among forces which are genuinely disparate, would throw light upon actual predicaments of conduct and help individuals in making a juster estimate of the force of each competing factor. All that would be lost would be the idea that theoretically there is in advance a single theoretically correct solution for every difficulty with which each and every individual is confronted. Personally I think the surrender of this idea would be a gain instead of a loss. In taking attention away from rigid rules and standards it would lead men to attend more fully to the concrete elements entering into the situations in which they have to act.

NOTES

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