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MONTHLY LETTER

Devoted to Spiritual and Philosophical Problems -- by Manly P. Hall

Dear Friend:

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In last month's letter we attempted to show how philosophy, as logic, established the reasonableness or unreasonableness of mental premises through a definite procedure. This month we shall attempt to show how philosophy, as ETHICS, examines the moral value of thought and action.

Ethics is generally defined as the science of morality; but this definition, like so many others in the field of abstract learning, must not be taken too literally. In practice ethics is the science of attempting to understand morality. The whole subject of morality is susceptible of division into two major aspects. The first of these parts seeks to answer the question: what is morality? The second seeks the answer to the question: what ought morality to be?

The question: what is morality? is generally answered by a survey of the moral codes and statutes of various civilizations, past and present. This survey reveals the social outworking of the moral impulse in man... As we have no way of examining the moral impulse, except by a consideration of its consequences, we judge morality by morals, even as we judge the quality of minds by the thoughts which emanate from them... A rather comprehensive review of morality is therefore not difficult to secure, as long as we are satisfied to estimate causes entirely by their effects.

The question of what morality ought to be is, unfortunately, far more abstract and difficult to answer. We all know what we do, but we are not all so certain of what we should do. Morality is

a code of relationships. It is that part of philosophy which estimates the importance of one person's actions upon another person. There has always been a wide interval between theory and practice in human relationships. Although civilization is generally regarded as a moral empire, its codes have not produced individual or collective security. Therefore, the true ends of morality have not been achieved. An example of the abstract issue of morality is patriotism. Most nations regard patriotism as a moral virtue, yet patriotism as now interpreted is often anti-social and destructive. Thus we see that the question of what is patriotism, if examined in the light of accepted tradition, might be answered with the words "fanatical nationalism." If, on the other hand, we ask the question: what ought patriotism to be? we should have to answer it in some more noble strain, possibly with the definition "love of man." In the words of Thomas Paine, "The world is my country."

Of course it is necessary, in approaching the problem of ethics, to establish some standard of action. This standard becomes the accepted measure of morality. Unfortunately there are fundamental differences of opinion as to what constitutes moral standards. These opinions may be classified under four general headings:

1st: Theologians maintain that the will of God is the standard of morality; that the Scriptural books of the world, because they are accepted as containing the revealed Word of God, are the absolute textbooks of morality.

2nd: The rationalists maintain that pure reason is the ultimate criterion of morality; that philosophy, by extending all moral values to their abstract ultimates of perfection, reveals the code of action that all men should strive for.

3rd: The hedonists take the ground that comfort, pleasure and utility should be the dominating factors in morality; that, individually and collectively, we should perform those actions which are most pleasant and least arduous and cause the least social confusion. Many of the adherents to this system view the more conservative codes of moralism as merely religious inhibitions.

4th: The biologists assume that morality is perfect adjustment to natural law and social environment. To this school naturalness is the chief of the virtues; and a person who lives a standard perfectly consistent with what he is, in terms of species and type, may be regarded as a moral animal. The biologists, however, do assume that natural law to some measure involves community responsibility. The biological definition of morality is, therefore, perfect biological adaptation to environment and circumstance.

In addition to these four rather well defined interpretations of ethics, there is a fifth abstract approach to the subject. By this approach morality is made a synonym of perfection. Perfectionism is defined as the ethics of self-realization. This interpretation defines morality as a purely personal issue. Right and wrong are regarded as individual problems, and morality consists of each individual living his own code according to his own light; at the same time presuming the existence of a natural impulse in man which is leading him to a rational and constructive philosophy of life.

One of the great problems peculiarly within the province of ethics is the origin of the so-called moral urge. Is there something within man impelling him to right action, or is morality merely the outgrowth of primitive social relationship? In other words, is there an absolute standard of right and wrong in the universe, or is there merely a relative standard arising from action? Again, does the moral urge derive its authority from what is commonly termed universal law? Is this universal law the conscious Will of the Creative Agent, or is it mere-

ly the mechanistic procedure of universal agency? Is there a universal consciousness of morality, or is morality only an accident of human consciousness arising out of human chemistry?

The intuitionists assume that the human mind becomes aware, through a mystical extension of consciousness, of a vast universal morality by which man should regulate his life. The materialists, on the other hand, contend that there is no moral certainty in existence and that all action is finally motivated by impulses toward survival. Another definition of morality, therefore, is the code of survival. Experience, over vast periods of time, has justified certain attitudes towards action and demonstrated the necessity of certain relationships. These actions and relationships constitute the so-called moral evidences in life. Ethics is the science of these actions and relationships, and the purpose of philosophy is to understand and apply them.

All human beings naturally desire to be happy and all justifiable moral codes must, in some measure, acknowledge the desirability of this end. Ethics divides happiness into two forms. The first it terms egotistic, and the second universalistic. Egotistic happiness, as a code of ethics, seeks the comfort, security and pleasure of the individual, and under its law each man places his own well-being as the first consideration of life. Universalistic happiness, as a code of ethics, identifies the happiness of the individual with collective happiness.

Nearly all of the great philosophers, mystics and prophets, of the world have been dominated by the universalistic theory of happiness. To the wise man the happiness of each depends upon the happiness of all. From a moral standpoint, unselfishness is regarded as a more refined emotion than selfishness; therefore universalistic ethics is regarded as superior and more enlightened than egotistic ethics. The materialist, however, will immediately ask: by what rule do we posit unselfishness as superior to selfishness? This immediately plunges the mind into the deepest parts of the moral issue.

If we accept ethics as a philosophy of conduct, we must then define right conduct. According to philosophical morality, right conduct is that system of action that most completely meets human need and leads towards the realization of the most noble

human aspiration. It would follow, as Immanuel Kant has observed, that ethics leads to that ultimate condition in which individuals live together in a condition of ends, rather than in a state of means. All action is a means towards an end. When right action accomplishes the end, then we pass from the state of effort to the state of reward. Happiness is defined as that condition of consciousness which man enjoys when he has fulfilled the requisite actions to produce happiness. The old masters of ethical philosophy postulated the Golden Age as that time which was to come, when all morality as means had accomplished morality as ends; and men dwelt together in a social order arising out of moral discipline and the permanent establishment of moral values.

To students of metaphysical philosophy the issues of ethics must be developed along lines of metaphysical inference. At the same time, the physical inferences cannot be ignored; they should be regarded as Plato regarded them, as suspended from spiritual causes. The initiated Pagans regarded ethics as one of the seven major attributes of divinity. God was not only spirit and body, but also soul, and the term soul inferred the whole sphere of moral virtues. Socrates declared God to be good, thus positing morality as an inevitable correlative of divinity.

The word "good" is a very abstract term and is impossible of exact definition. It is almost certain to be involved in opinion when defined. Therefore, like truth, it is divided into an absolute and a relative aspect. The absolute aspect is ignored as impossible of understanding, and its relative aspect is defined in terms of existing standards, inferring honesty, virtue, obligation, etc. We live in an age of exploitation, in which might exercises its temporal advantage over right, and the issues of morality are confused by the despotism of advantage. The will of the strong becomes the passing standard of right and wrong. Conquerors make laws for the conquered, and the uninformed ascribe to these laws a universal aspect which they do not merit. In time, errors long perpetuated become custom. Men no longer examine them, but accept unquestioning old edicts and ancient fallacies.

It is inconceivable, as Francis Bacon has observed, that this great universal plan should be without

a soul. We are constantly confronted with irrefutable evidence of a directing Intellect. If there is consciousness in man, there is consciousness in the universe of which man is but so small a part. If there is morality in man, there is but one source from which he can have derived it, and that is from the Sovereign Morality of the world.

Plato was unquestionably one of the noblest men who has ever lived upon this earth. The theology of Plato is one of the most exalted religious systems ever established in the world. There is no better way to approach the philosophy of Ethics than through a series of definitions Platonically set forth. You will remember from our previous letter that the logic of Plato descended from generals to particulars, from universal concepts to specific applications. The Platonic philosophy is developed from these fundamental premises:

1: That Universal Cause, which men have named God, is Divine Life, to which the qualities of consciousness, intelligence and virtue are intrinsic.

2: God is good; that is, Divinity, by virtue of its own existence and its own nature, is by necessity the standard of absolute perfection, to which all other things must conform if they are to be god-like.

3: It therefore follows that, all who participate of God as Energy or Mind must also participate of God as Virtue, as these qualities are indivisible and essentially one.

4: In the process of growth, or evolution, forms partake of Divinity first as energy or consciousness; second as intelligence or mind; and third as virtue or morality. It follows that virtue is one of the last of human achievements, for creatures possessing life and intelligence do not necessarily possess virtue. Virtue, while latent in all natures, is said to be possessed when it is objectified in action. Thus we may say that a being possesses, or does not possess, virtue in the sense that it either manifests, or does not manifest, virtue in individual action.

5: Life energizes, intellect organizes, virtue civilizes. Thus all of the constructive relationships, by which isolated creatures are finally brought into a cooperative community existence, arise from man's realization of Divinity as virtue.

6: Virtue is demonstrated on several planes of na-

ture, but it must never be confused with various human emotions. Love, friendship, mercy, obligation, responsibility, generosity, etc. are terms often confused with virtue. It should be remembered that virtue is a principle. We may call it, for practical purposes, the principle of right relationships. Any constructive emotion may or may not be virtuous according to its intrinsic merit, for virtue is a principle and not an action. Generosity, for example, is not a virtue in itself, but it becomes a virtue when directed by wisdom and integrity. Impractical generosity can in no way be regarded as a virtue.

7: Thus, it appears that action partakes of virtue, to the degree that it is consistent with that universal fitness which is the very foundation of the world.

8: Platonically considered, virtue is more than morality, for morality is limited to creatures possessing a moral nature, whereas virtue exists as a principle beyond the sphere of moral values. Ethics, consequently, goes beyond morality and includes that aspect of the Divine purpose which is suggested by the term "fitness."

9: We must now define fitness. As we examine the universal plan, as it is manifest in the universe spread out before us, we must be particularly impressed by the rightness and orderliness everywhere manifest. To use a homely simile, there seems to be a place for everything and everything is in its place. The parts work together; the diversity is enclosed within an all-sufficient unity; cooperation is everywhere present. Contemplating the mystery of Divine order, we cannot fail to be impressed with a certain sense of substantial fitness. Everything is where it ought to be, doing what it ought to do. This must be the pattern of all human re-

lationships. Thus ethics is man where he ought to be, doing what he ought to do, synchronizing personal purpose with universal purpose.

10: Immanuel Kant gives a lofty definition of ethics in his famous categorical imperative. He realized that each man must so act that, if that man's action became a universal law, it would be just and sufficient. The true student of ethics bows to the inevitable spiritual realities of life. He realizes that obedience to universal law is the beginning of individual fitness.

Morality is generally involved in the problem of good and evil, and numerous man-made codes of right and wrong are confused with ethics. All right and wrong must be measured by the law of universal fitness and not by man-made codes. When an individual, through ignorance, violates some principle of universal fitness, he suffers. When a community violates universal principle of community relationships, that community falls into evil, even though its man-made laws are not transgressed. Man is happy and his world is at peace when he lives in harmony with universal purpose. It is universal purpose which reveals natural ethics. To the philosopher fitness not only infers rightness but the "fitting in" quality. We are virtuous when we "fit in" to, the law of life. We are moral when we live in perfect attunement with the plan of which we are a part. This plan is not only a physical plan but a mental and spiritual plan. When our spiritual life is consistent with the spiritual purpose of being, when our mental life is in harmony with the laws of mind, and when our physical life is consistent with the laws of nature, we may then regard ourselves as ethical creatures, possessing virtue and morality.

Yours sincerely,

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