

BLACKFRIARS

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MORALS AND MODERNITY

Perhaps it is as well that the flood tide of moralised philosophy has passed, even though it has left unsatisfying positivism in its ebb. Two or three decades ago when all philosophers concerned themselves with ethics, a rootless ethic based not on the nature of things but on the nature of duty—the categoric imperative—we were in danger of forgetting that the systematisation of human activity is the most intricate of sciences in our zeal to make it the only science. But in truth moral theory is the most intricate and difficult of knowledge because it has the makings of a hybrid, speculation about practice, theory about concrete action. The danger in moral theorising, particularly when it becomes disengaged from doctrinal certitude, is that it can become merely a positive description of how man works, practical without any principles of human action. If I do not consider what the nature of man is, whether he has an immortal soul and to what end he is ultimately called, I can only describe his reactions under certain stimuli which I have observed. And that is not philosophy or theology. It is not 'morals.'

Now moral, human action is in many ways an uncertain and obtuse object of study because it is a practical matter, concrete and

individual, concerned with a whole situation. So the science of morals is rather like a searchlight, grounded at one fixed point, ranging across the half-circle of sky, picking out clouds and aeroplanes, in contact with the present concrete things of human life, but always pointing heavenwards. There are always the two fixtures, human nature from which this action proceeds and the end, which is heaven, towards which it should be directed. These poles of the axis, for the beam of light in this sense is an axis, make the science of human action a stable and certain science fixed firmly within the orbit of philosophy and theology. But the intervening clouds and other objects that cross the path of the beam as it passes across the years vary in opaqueness and introduce an element of uncertainty which necessarily follows from concrete, historical actions. The laws of human action remain the same, streaming out of man's mind and will: the end to which it is all tending is eternally and changelessly the one Good; but the applications of those laws to the present means of attaining that end vary from day to day.

Hence the science of ethics or morality is less certain, more complex and harder to pigeon-hole than that of dogma or metaphysics. Certainly dogma is always alive through the Spirit in the minds of men, developing and spreading out its tentacles into a network of complicated human thought, but it all proceeds so immediately from the Word and is so simple and unified in him that the elaboration is comparatively clear-cut. But moral teaching in a real sense changes from age to age—i.e., in these concrete applications.

In no age perhaps has the beam of the ethical searchlight picked out so many new cloud formations which it is attempting eagerly to pierce as in our own century. The Modern Age has provided a new set of problems and new apparatus to deal with them, and moral theologians on the whole have found it hard to accommodate themselves and to bring their principles to bear on the 'situations' that occur from day to day; they are often concerned with the past problems of an already obsolete age. But by insisting on this changeable element in morality it would be easy to attack the stability and eternity of Christian morals; so we must give some examples.

The most evident example of how the progress in physical knowledge and mechanical invention calls for some modification in moral teaching lies in the prosecution of modern warfare. The present Holy Father, Pius XII, has often indicated that even in a just war all the methods and instruments used are not necessarily fair. The moral theologian can lay down the general and eternal rules of a just war in the familiar way, but if his science is to be practical and directive of real human actions he must consider whether it be

possible, now that tanks and aeroplanes have given place to spears and arrows, for the general principles to be put into practice. If the conduct of modern warfare is often immoral owing to these new inventions—the bombing of cities and the wholesale destruction of populations are cases in point—the specialist must consider these new problems and give men an unbiased judgment with all the present circumstances considered. He should surely weigh in the balance even such questions as whether a modern government can be expected to follow a moral ruling regarding these ‘improvements’ in warfare. This has never really been attempted on any thorough scale. War at best is always a troublesome cloud in the way of the moral searchlight.

Then again the inventions of wireless and the films raise new issues which have yet to be faced squarely by moral theory. Advertising and propaganda have proved bitter enemies to the common good of mankind and therefore must be to a large extent immoral. But if approached from a casuistic or legalistic standpoint it can usually be proved that truth (rather than the truth) has been told. No one has fully discussed the morality of playing on the emotions of men in the mass with truths in such a way that the activities of mind and will are virtually suppressed. In particular the film asks for treatment. ‘Morality’ will lay down the eternal principles about viewing anything likely to stir up sexual passion, and will apply these principles to ‘moral’ or ‘immoral’ films. But whether the whole film industry as it is to-day tends of itself to de-humanise the people and is therefore far more deeply immoral than any bedroom scene, no moral theology seems seriously to have considered.

Or again, the great advance in medical science with its tendency to push its frontiers forward into psychic fields, not resting content with physic, touches the moralist very closely indeed. Circumstances have forced him to discuss the question of birth prevention and birth control though he cannot be said to have come to any final conclusion about natural control through periodic continence. But in matters of psychiatry the moral theologian has seldom ventured from the fastnesses of his principles. Certainly the good confessor has in practice always been a sound psychologist in his application of moral principles, for he has always dealt with the *whole* situation of a penitent. But the means he has used implicitly in his sound common sense have now become explicit and are being removed from the confessional to the consulting room. Experimental psychology demands attention from a moral theology that is going to be a directive in the modern world. And other psychic realities which are often caught in the confusions of spiritualism are only

less urgently requiring the light of the principles of human action to shine on them.

Finally, although so much study has been given by Catholics to the new problems arising from what we can label the 'Industrial Revolution,' it could be argued that application of principles has followed an old plan that should be set aside to allow the principles to be applied without the mediation of past methods. Private property, the title to labour, the rights to the fruits of labour, the relation of individual to community, these social planks would construct a stronger platform if the whole new situation were discussed as a whole by the moralist. The question is no longer whether this or that employer is within his rights in employing a man for so many hours or for so much money, but rather whether the average man can live a moral, or even an immoral, life when his whole being is organised to prevent him from making a deliberate human act. The decline in the birth rate, the flight from the land, the ceaseless demand for money and leisure, the bitter separatism of almost every group of men both large and small, these lapses from the *recta ratio agibilium* indicate a *general* state of immorality for which no one single individual is responsible, but in which all in some way share, as, in an opposite sense, with 'general justice.' Just as we have been obliged to make some kind of reassessment of principle in the matter of Sunday observance and that of Holidays of Obligations, which none but the leisured can fully observe, so there should be a reassessment of a far more fundamental nature of the whole morality of modern man's actions so that directive might be given to society in general as well as to individual units within society.

M. Maritain has often insisted that experimental sciences which collect information, such as economics or even sociology, are not autonomous sciences, but must be 'held in continuity with a constitutive part of moral philosophy and are integrated into it as related sciences' (*Science and Wisdom*, English trans., p. 171). If they are not so integrated it can hardly be the fault of the factual scientist who gives himself wholly to his particular field of observation. It is rather that the moral philosopher and theologian have of necessity held to old forms and have not always kept up with the hasty advance of these practical investigations. Ethnology, economics, psychology, and such like, must be captured by the moralist and brought into his orbit; and even the mechanical inventions that become the instruments or masters of the human individual require his fatherly eye to see that they do not lead to immorality.

All this means that the moralist must live more in the present; first of all the present of his eternal principles, all recapitulated in Christ who is the same yesterday, to-day and forever; secondly, in the present of the contingent, twentieth century. Dorothy Sayers' work goes further in this direction than that of many an official moral theologian. Dante made the whole life of the Christian so much part of his present that it became identified with Beatrice herself. We need then to-day a great theologian who will be able to make the searchlight of his principles pierce all the modern discoveries in so far as they touch the human person, and shining through them in this way throw the outline of their pattern upon the eternal goal beyond. Such may be considered to be the moral of this number of **BLACKFRIARS**.

THE EDITOR.