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MORAL PROGRESS

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*Being the Frazer Lecture delivered within
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by

MORRIS GINSBERG, M.A., D.Lit.

MARTIN WHITE PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF LONDON.



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THE idea of progress which dominated all thought in the latter part of the nineteenth century began to be seriously questioned in the beginning of this century, and in the interval between the world-wars there was a widespread impression that it was about to be relegated to the realm of exploded myths.¹ Professor Bury in an exhaustive historical study, published in 1920, still regarded it as occupying a commanding position, but predicted that it might in the end fall a victim to its own denial of finality and argued that its value as a doctrine was 'only relative, corresponding to a not very advanced stage of civilisation ; just as Providence, in its day, was an idea of relative value, corresponding to a stage somewhat less advanced.'² Anthropologists, who had become sceptical of the value of evolutionary ideas in sociology, were even more critical of the notion of progressive evolution. 'Neither morphologically nor dynamically', says Professor Lowie, 'can social life be said to have progressed from a stage of savagery to a stage of enlightenment.'³ The notion of a unitary mankind moving towards a common goal was particularly challenged by German writers, notably Spengler.⁴ From another angle, Pareto,

¹ 'The myth of progress' by M. D. Eder in *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, Vol. xii, Pt. 1, 1932.

² J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 1920, p. 352.

³ R. H., Lowie, *Primitive Society*, 1921, p. 427.

⁴ O. Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, 1919.

while admitting an onward movement in economic production and in the arts and the sciences, argued that reason had so far proved impotent in dealing with problems of social and political organisation, and the humanitarian movement in particular was dismissed by him with bitter derision.¹ Among the humanitarians themselves the gnawing doubt insinuated itself whether the movement for which they stood was not merely a temporary product of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and whether the main tendency of the modern mind was not moving in the opposite direction towards a supermoral or amoral age, indifferent to the claims of reason and humanity.² These doubts were intensified by the failures and disillusiones of the post-war period and by the rise of Fascism and Nazism which pride themselves on the rejection of the ideas essential to the notion of progress, rational self-determination and a universal ethic binding on all mankind.

There are signs that the tide of sceptical criticism is now receding. Several factors have contributed to this reversal of views. To begin with, those who have been influenced by Marxist theories could not really abandon the notion of development. Although Marxist writers speak with contempt of bourgeois evolutionary sociology, they themselves teach that history is a dynamic process of change following immanent laws. The changes, no doubt, proceed by a series of revolutions, but these follow a regular rhythm and reflect the way in which man-

¹ V. Pareto, *The Mind and Society*, 4 Vols., 1935.

² L. T. Hobhouse, *Morals in Evolution*, 1915, p. 612.

kind adapts itself to the outer environment. Marx-ists further share the optimistic attitude of the early believers in progress and look forward confidently to an age when the 'true realm of freedom will blossom out of the realm of necessity in the fully developed Communist Society of the future'.¹

Another factor working in the same direction is the recent revival or restatement of what may be called the generalised theory of evolution. According to this view the antithesis drawn by T. H. Huxley² between cosmic evolution and ethical evolution is to be rejected. Social evolution, of which the ethical is a part, is to be regarded rather as the last in a series of ascending levels of integration and differentiation. This theory takes many forms. It may be fitted into the framework of the philosophical theory of emergent evolution as by Lloyd Morgan.³ It may be combined with Marxist views as by Needham.⁴ It may be treated more strictly from the biological angle as by J. S. Huxley.⁵ But in all cases the essential point is that social evolution, including the evolution of morals is no longer regarded as outside nature but as falling within it. At a certain stage in the evolutionary order further evolution takes place, not as hitherto through selection of new variants, but through the formation of

¹ K. Marx, *Kapital*, iii, p. 355.

² T. H. Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics*, The Romanes Lecture, 1893.

³ C. Lloyd Morgan, *Emergent Evolution*, 1923.

⁴ J. Needham, *Time the Refreshing River*, 1943.

⁵ J. S. Huxley, *Evolutionary Ethics*, The Romanes Lecture, 1943.

societies, and these develop a method of transmission by means of tradition which in the main replaces the method of genetic transmission through the mechanism of heredity. On this view mutual aid, the sense of justice, moral and legal codes replace at least in part the bare struggle for existence as agents in the process of evolution. In this way the notion of progress which had hitherto been regarded as extra-scientific is brought back to the field of science and scientific warrant is claimed for ethics.

Finally reference must be made to a change of mood, partly reflected in these scientific theories, but even more noticeable in popular thought, the result of a reaction against the mood of cynicism and disillusion characteristic of the period between the two wars. There is a widespread feeling that the troubles of our time are due in the main to a failure of moral wisdom to keep pace with the advance in technical science. Even in the period of disillusion the critics of moral ideals protested too much. Their very criticisms betrayed an underlying faith in the value and power of ideals. Even the Nazi glorification of the irrational is by no means whole-hearted. It bears all the marks of a hidden fear of the power of reason and is an unconscious tribute to that power. In any case the period of 'debunking' seems to be over and there is evidence of a longing for a revival of faith and for a justification of the hope that mankind can in a measure shape its future in accordance with moral values. Those who have attacked the problem from a religious point of view may perhaps be sceptical of the all-sufficiency of human effort. But

even they stress what they call the dynamic view of human history and the importance of human efforts being directed by a restored faith in ultimate values.

In these circumstances, it has seemed to me important to review the problem of progress afresh in the hope of obtaining a clearer definition of the issues involved. A few words must be said first on matters of terminology. The term evolution, in its application to social change, it is generally agreed, should be used in an ethically neutral sense. Those who have followed the analogy of organic evolution understand by social evolution a process by which out of a few relatively simple social structures a great variety of increasingly complex forms has arisen.¹ Others, using the older and wider notion of development have been concerned rather to work out an interpretation of human history as a gradual unfolding of human potentialities. Hobhouse, in a very elaborate study² has suggested criteria for estimating the extent of social development, thus conceived. These criteria are not ethical in character but are such as might be used by a biologist when he distinguishes between higher and lower forms of life. They are scale or size of social organisation, efficiency or the power of using natural forces as means to human ends, freedom or the release of spontaneous energy in all the component members of the group and mutuality or cooperation between the members of the group and between groups. All-round

¹ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *On Social Structure*, Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Vol. lxx, 1940.

² L. T. Hobhouse, *Social Development*, 1924.

development would have to satisfy all these criteria. In fact, as Hobhouse shows, development in one direction has often conflicted with or defeated development in other directions, though taking the whole history of humanity there may have been a net gain.

The notion of progress, of course, arose independently of modern theories of evolution and from the outset had an ethical connotation. It involved, I think, the following elements. First, it meant a belief in the power of the human reason to shape the course of social change. The progress of mankind was not conceived to be an automatic process but rested on deliberate or consciously directed human effort. Second, it involved a belief in the unity of mankind, accompanied by the belief that the potentialities of man can only be fully attained by world-wide cooperation. Third, there was the belief in universalist ethics; the belief that is that there are universal moral principles binding upon and applicable to all men irrespective of racial or national grouping. Fourth, there was an assumption that there is nothing in human nature so intractable that it permits of no adjustment, nothing in the process of development which necessarily involves self-defeat.

It is easy to see that, in the above use of the terms, social evolution or development is not necessarily progressive. Increasing efficiency, for example, may be attained at the loss of freedom. Increase in the scale of organisation may be obtained by methods which hinder further unification or in other ways contradict the principles of universalist ethics. Pro-

gress, is in short that kind of social evolution which moves in the direction of human solidarity, guided by rational principles considered as common to and binding all mankind.

All progress, as distinguished from evolution or development, is in a sense moral progress, in other words, it is a movement towards a better state of affairs. We can, however, also speak of moral progress as meaning progress in morality. This seems to consist in the clarification of moral ideas, the removal of inconsistencies between moral rules, a clearer understanding of human needs and purposes, the enlargement of the area within which moral principles are applied and increasing approximation of behaviour to the demands of the moral code. It may also involve the discovery of fresh moral principles and the emergence of new rights and duties with changing circumstances. Like all social development, moral progress does not necessarily involve changes in the genetic make-up of man. It consists rather in the building up of a tradition which makes it possible for each generation to re-acquire, perhaps more easily, what has been achieved by former generations and, in turn, to prepare the ground for coming generations. Moral progress need not, of course, be continuous, nor proceed at a uniform rate and it does not involve denial of retrogression. Those who deny the reality of moral progress would probably maintain that moral ideals are constant, that the fundamental moral patterns remain the same, despite variations in form. The observable variations in content they would add, do not originate from moral sources, but

arise from changes in human needs or the methods of satisfying them, which are brought about by changes in technology and perhaps by changes in social structure, and such changes are not necessarily for the better. More moderate opponents would perhaps say that the case for moral progress is unproven and that if a distinctively moral development has occurred, it cannot be disentangled from the general changes which human culture has undergone.

We may approach this problem by glancing briefly at what may be learnt from comparative ethics of the extent of variance and stability in moral codes. It may safely be said that comparative ethics knows of no pre-moral stage, that is of any societies where there are no rules, upheld by the general judgment of the people, distinguishing between what may or may not be done. If there has been a development of morals, it has been a development within the field of morality and not a development of morals out of something else. When we look at the codes in detail we find that all known societies insist on some degree of internal peace and order and tend to give public approval to whatever acts contribute to the satisfaction of social needs and the preservation of the continuity of the group, and similarly to disapprove of whatever acts disturb social relations and social peace. Contrary to widespread views on this matter we find, amidst noteworthy divergencies, striking similarities between different codes, and it would be perfectly possible to classify the morals of the most primitive peoples by the aid of categories

which have universal significance. For purposes of brief comparison we may take the classification of duties suggested by Sir David Ross in a recent work.¹ Analogues to the duties he enumerates can be found almost universally in the civilised and uncivilised world alike.

The duties discussed by Sir David Ross come under the headings of fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence and non-injury and self-improvement. The duties of fidelity, that is broadly of keeping promises and telling the truth are, as Westermarck has shown, widely recognised in primitive societies, though there are considerable variations in the intensity with which their violation is condemned and the usual limitation of the duties towards the members of one's own group. In the ancient civilisations respect for truth is inculcated in all the codes. The Egyptians barely distinguished truth from right. The Babylonian Incantation Tablets condemn dishonesty not only in deed but in intention. 'Has he been honest with his mouth while false in heart? With his mouth was he full of yea and in his heart full of nay?'² Truthfulness and sincerity are first principles in Confucian ethics and in Zoroastrianism. According to the Talmud four shall not enter heaven, the scoffer, the liar, the hypocrite and the slanderer. 'He who punished the generations of the Flood and the Tower of Babel will also punish him who does not keep his word. Let

¹ W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, 1930.

² A. Jeremias, Art. *Ethics and Morality* (Babylonian), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 5, p. 446.

your yea and nay be both righteous. Do not speak with your mouth what you do not mean in your heart'.¹

The second class of duties of providing compensation for a wrongful act are universally recognised, though there are, of course, great variations in the interpretation of what is due to the injured party and in the way in which reparation proper is interwoven with punishment. The duties of gratitude for services rendered or benefits bestowed are also widely acknowledged. 'To requite a benefit, to be grateful to him who bestows it is probably everywhere, at least in certain circumstances, regarded as a duty.'² The fourth class of duties namely those concerned with distributive and corrective justice are most seriously affected by the emergence of class gradations within the group, and by the limitation of all duties to members of the group which characterises the early moral codes. To give each man his due, *suum cuique tribuere*, is a formula for which wide assent may be claimed, but there are great differences in defining what is *suum*. In a society where caste exists it is just to treat a pariah as a pariah; in feudal societies to give a man his due meant to give him what belongs to his status. In the middle of the nineteenth century it was not considered unjust that women and children should work sixteen hours a day in the factories for 'suitable' wages. We have here an instance of the great divergence in the actual

¹ C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, p. 398.

² E. Westermarck, *Origin and Development of Moral Ideas*, Vol. ii, p. 155.

content of moral rules that may be hidden under a general formula.

The duties of beneficence and non-injury are universally recognised. They are partly covered by the duties towards the kindred, and since in early society the bonds of kinship extend further than they do in the higher civilisations, the range of the persons affected by familial duties is correspondingly extended. These are strengthened by duties of mutual aid among group members, as is abundantly shown by Westermarck's survey. All the higher religions inculcate charity as a duty. The duties of non-injury, *neminem laedere*, concern the life, bodily integrity, freedom, honour and property of others. Here again there are noteworthy similarities between different codes, amid considerable variation in answering the question who is to be included in *neminem* and what constitutes an injury. The duties to develop our faculties belong of course mainly to higher levels of moral evolution, but even these are anticipated in primitive morality in the notion of self-respect and proper pride in one's own gifts and capacities.

The great similarities that are found in what may be called the elementary duties do not preclude great variations. These may fairly easily be traced to a number of sources, among the more important of which seem to be the following. There are to begin with changes in social relations or other circumstances which give a different character to what at first appear to be the same acts and therefore bring them within the scope of different rules. Money-

lending, for example, had a different character from that which it has in an industrial age, at a time when there was little or no scope for the employment of money in ordinary business and when surplus incomes could be conceived as lying idle. In these circumstances it was not unreasonable to expect that a neighbour's temporary need should be met by lending without interest, full security for recovery being assured. In other cases changes in social circumstances may affect the way in which different conflicting duties are balanced against each other. Thus, for example, in circumstances of nomadic life, the duty of helping the weak or the old may have to be pitted against the duty of preserving the group, and the latter duty may be thought to over-ride the former in stringency. Again the relative importance of particular duties may shift with a change in circumstances. The duty of charity ceases to loom large in an age when social and economic organisation has reached the point when the abolition of poverty by organised effort has become possible. The giving of charity to individuals may then even come to be deprecated as likely to divert attention from the need of a radical reconstruction of the system of property. So again self-redress is condemned in societies which possess a system of public justice, but is regarded as normal in societies where there is no regular machinery for obtaining redress.

A second source of variation is found in the growth of knowledge regarding the nature of acts and the consequences likely to be produced by them. Many of the outstanding differences in moral attitudes are

traceable to such changes in the knowledge of the real properties of acts. Here belong especially changes in religious and magical ideas. Thus, for example, the varying attitude to suicide has been influenced by the notion that it is a man's duty to submit to the will of God, by the belief that life is a penance which must not be shirked, by the belief that loyalty to one's superiors involved the duty of following them to the next world, by the belief that to act in defiance of God's will in the moment of death is the more serious because the individual deprives himself of the opportunity of repentance. The severe condemnation of homosexual practices in Christian countries is, according to Westermarck, to be traced to the abhorrence felt for these acts by the ancient Hebrews on account of their association with idolatrous cults. A most striking example of the influence of religious beliefs on moral attitudes is to be found in the history of religious persecution. The moral judgment approving the persecution of heretics rested on the dogma of the guilt of error and the infectiousness of this guilt. Granted that those who entertain certain beliefs are not only guilty of a heinous crime but by infection are liable to cause the eternal damnation of others, there appeared to be no moral difficulty in concluding that the heretic should be put to death.¹ In this and analogous cases dogmatic theology may inculcate beliefs which then become the basis of moral judgments that otherwise would not be made, and that tend to disappear with loss of faith in the dogma.

¹ W. E. H. Lecky, *History of European Morals*, Vol. i, p. 98.

A third source of variation closely connected with the second is to be found in the influence exercised on individuals by the people whom they regard as possessed of authority. The belief in an infallible authority, in particular, may induce men to approve of acts which otherwise they would regard with horror. That unbaptised infants were liable to endless and unmitigated torture in expiation of an ancestral crime was a doctrine accepted by men who in other ways were not lacking in moral feeling. As Lecky has shown those who accepted this doctrine did so because they believed it was taught by an infallible authority and that to stifle their moral feelings was a matter of duty and a commendable exercise of humility. In such cases there occurs a kind of dissociation or departmentalisation of moral attitudes which makes it possible for a person in certain contexts to give his approval to acts which in others he would condemn as monstrous. It is arguable that in so far as the cruelties now perpetrated in totalitarian countries are widely approved, the approval may rest on this kind of isolation or dissociation and that there too it is made possible by reverence for an infallible authority.

A fourth factor is to be found in the variations of the range of sympathy. Sympathy, in the sense in which it is ethically important, involves the power of imaginative identification with others, the power of entering in imagination into the situation of others, and to react to their feelings as though they were one's own. It is thus the basis of the attitude which makes us ready to do unto another as we would be

done by. The strength of sympathy seems to depend on the strength of our social feelings, on the power of imagination and the absence of counter-acting emotions. Perhaps the most important variable is imagination upon which depends our power to realise vividly the consequences of our actions on others. The failure to recognise that people belonging to another group, social class, race or nation, are men like ourselves makes possible a discriminatory morality, while the extension of the range of imaginative identification facilitates the universalisation of morals or the extension of the area within which common principles are applied.

The variations so far considered are compatible with the assumption that the fundamental moral rules are constant. We have now to consider whether any lines of advance can be discerned. The best established trend is the extension of the range of persons to whom moral judgments are held to apply. As T. H. Green has pointed out, it is not so much the sense of our duty to a neighbour that has varied as the answer to the question who is my neighbour.¹ In primitive morality moral obligations are confined to members of the group and the group may be very small. As the group widens and contacts are established between groups the range of rights and duties extends, though in practice there always remains a distinction between the inner morality and the outer. The fact that morality is still largely group morality is seen in the survival of race discrimination, in the persistence of war and the precariousness of

¹ T. H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, p. 220.

the rules supposed to control behaviour during war.

As far as moral teaching is concerned, the change from the attitude of primitive peoples to that which is found in all the higher religions is enormous. In *Leviticus* we are told 'the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt'. 'Love all men,' say the Rabbis.¹ 'Against the sage who calls the golden rule the most comprehensive precept of the Thora another quotes as still greater the opening verse of the fifth chapter of Genesis: this is the book of the origins of man which declares all men to have been created in the divine image and therefore to be equally entitled to human love.'² 'It is worse to steal from a non-Jew than to steal from an Israelite, because of the profanation of the Name.'³ Benevolence to all man is inculcated by the Chinese teachers. Buddhism enjoins universal love. The love of enemies is taught by Christianity. Analogous teaching is found in other religions. 'Let us live happily, not hating those who hate us.' 'Hatred does not cease by hatred but by love alone' is Buddhist teaching. 'The virtue that deserves to be celebrated, the moral rule to be followed is to conquer one's anger and even in enmity to remember that your enemy is a man, *meminisse hominis*'

¹ *Aboth*, i, 12.

² *Siphra to Leviticus*, xix, 18.

³ Montefiore and Loewe, *A Rabbinical Anthology*, p. 398.

(Quintilian).¹ Seneca urges us to return good for evil and tells us that the weapon which we should use against the wicked is obstinate kindness, *pertinax bonitas*.² The Rabbis teach us that he who is not merciful and kind cannot be of the true seed of Israel, and that he who is reviled and does not revile, returning good for evil, is like the sun when he sets forth in his might.³

Universalism always has its limits in practice and in operative belief. '*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*', was once Christian doctrine. The unity of mankind often means the unity of Christian mankind, and, indeed, each nation tends to regard itself as embodying the highest values of humanity. Nevertheless there is a persistent trend towards universalism; it cannot be denied that there has occurred an extension of the range of persons to whom common principles come to be applied with an increasing measure of impartiality.⁴

Westermarck has argued that this extension has been due to emotional factors, that is, to an extension of sympathy rather than to a refinement of moral insight. But this separation of feeling from thought

¹ *Quintiliani declamationes*, ix, 17.

² *De beneficiis*, vii, 31.

³ Sabbath, 88, B. Cf. Montefiore and Loewe, *Rabbinical Anthology*, 615.

⁴ Cf. B. Russell, *Power*, p. 260: 'The principle of universal sympathy conquered first one province, then another. . . . I do not think that the return to a tribal or aristocratic ethic can be of long duration; the whole history of man since the time of Buddha points in the opposite direction.'

seems unreal. Some feelings are only possible at a given level of rational development, and possibly some thoughts and beliefs only emerge under particular emotional conditions. A certain intensity of social feeling and a certain measure of imaginative identification may be requisite before it becomes possible to grasp the essential relations between men. The insight required is compounded of feeling and thought.

The influence of religion on universalism has been much discussed. Christian writers often maintain that it is a distinctive contribution of Christianity to ethics that it links the love of man essentially with the love of God.¹ The connection exists, I think, in Judaism. But, in any case, universalism may have very different philosophical grounds. For the Brahman it is based on the view that all share in the eternal consciousness; in Buddhism it is connected with the idea that all are linked in the chain of Karma. In Stoic theory all men share in Nature which is the rational principle of the world. Modern humanitarianism tends to see in the spiritual relations between men the nearest approximation to the divine. In this respect it resembles, as Professor Gilbert Murray points out the Stoic view: *Deus est mortali iuvare mortalem*; God is the helping of man by man.² The difficulty in all cases is to estimate the influence of these philosophical ideas on actual behaviour.

¹ Cf. C. C. J. Webb, *The Contribution of Christianity to Ethics*, p. 16, and Westermarck, *Christianity and Morals*, p. 78.

² Gilbert Murray, *Stoic, Christian and Humanist*, p. 185, quoting Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, ii, 7, 18.

The energy with which they are attacked from time to time indicates, however, that they are not without power.

A second trend clearly discernible in the history of morality is the internalisation and individualisation of the conscience. There gradually emerges the notion that goodness is something which the mind can apprehend as self-sustained and independent of external sanctions. Among the simpler peoples, as described by anthropologists, the sanctions behind customary rules are relatively external and prudential. They consist in the pressure of group-opinion, the fear of the vengeance of spirits or gods and especially of the misfortunes which, in accordance with prevailing magical ideas, are believed to follow a breach automatically.¹ In later stages the appeal to external and prudential considerations is variously intermingled with appeals based on the inherent ethical qualities of action. 'Excellent is right and endureth' says Pta-Hotep, but adds immediately, 'Never has wickedness brought its venture safe to port, wrongdoing stealeth away riches'.² The development can be clearly traced in the history of Hebrew morals. In *Deuteronomy* emphasis is continually laid on rewards and punishments. This is much less clearly marked in the Priestly Code and in many of the Psalms, while in Rabbinical writings it is made perfectly clear that the essence of observance lies in

¹ L. T. Hobhouse, *Morals in Evolution*, Pt. II, Ch. 2.

² A. H. Gardiner, Art. *Ethics and Morality (Egyptian)*, Enc. of Religion and Ethics, Vol. 5, p. 476.

itself and not in external reward.¹ The trend is, of course, continued in Christian teaching. In Greek thought the notion that the ultimate sanction of moral rules is internal appears clearly in the fifth century B.C. 'Even when alone', says Democritus, 'a man ought not to say anything or do anything base. He should be ashamed before himself. He should no more do evil when no one will learn about it, than when everybody will do so; it is best to reverence oneself.'² Confucius said: 'The good man rests content with goodness; he that is merely wise pursues goodness in the belief that it pays to do so.'³

The internalisation of the conscience is accompanied by its individualisation. This can be seen, in the first place, in the growth of the notion of individual responsibility in criminal law. In primitive societies responsibility is collective and punishment vicarious. In later stages responsibility becomes more and more individual. This change is no doubt partly the result of the lessening of the ties of the kindred with the emergence of a centralised territorial power. The state has to curb the power of the organisations based on kinship, and, in doing so tends to deal increasingly with the individual directly rather than with the group of which he is a member.⁴ From the moral point of view the process of indi-

¹ Montefiore, C. G., *The Hibbert Lectures*, 1892, p. 534, and Schechter, *Jewish Quarterly Review*, iii, p. 49.

² Diels, H., *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Vol. ii, p. 78.

³ *Analects*, Bk. 14, IV, 2.

⁴ Cf. P. Fauconnet, *La Responsabilité*, Ch. VIII.

vidualisation can be followed best in the increasing stress which is laid on inward motives as distinct from outward conformity. In this, religion, by teaching that God knows the heart of man, played an important part. Already the Babylonian gods require 'perfection of the heart'. In the Psalms the demand is increasingly made for a 'clean heart, a pure heart'. The Rabbis stress the 'duties of the heart' and they distinguish clearly between moral obligation and legal obligation.¹ The supremacy of righteousness as a motive is the keynote of early Christianity. In all these cases religion encourages the development of the notion that morality is inward and individual. Yet parallel developments can be traced in ethical systems which are not directly based on religion. Confucian ethics, for example, insists that in all moral relations the essential thing is sincerity. Outward conformity is not enough: 'Your good careful people of the village are the thieves of virtue.'²

A third trend in the history of morals is the growing rationalisation of the moral judgment. This is to be seen in the gradual elimination of magical elements, in the distinction which comes to be drawn between ritual rules and distinctively moral rules, in the persistent criticisms to which customary morality and the institutions embodying it are subjected and the attempts which are made at their deliberate reconstruction in the light of principles that can be rationally defended. We may in this

¹ M. Gaster, *Art. Conscience (Jewish)*, E.R.E., Vol. 4.

² *Doctrine of the Mean*, xxv, p. 15.

connection distinguish three phases in the relations between reflective morality and practice or conduct. In the first, morality is dominantly customary and there is little or no reflection on the grounds of action, though if challenged traditional explanations will be forthcoming. In the second, there is growing reflection by story tellers, poets and moralists and later by philosophers who seek to disentangle the rules of action and the ideals of conduct by the method of critical analysis. In the third phase dialectical analysis begins to be combined with empirical study of the conditions and consequences of action and the study of ideals is brought into connection with the study of the conditions under which they can be brought to fruition. It is characteristic of the first phase that morals appear as a mass of particular rules defining what is expected in different situations and to which the individual submits without knowing whether there is any principle behind them. Functionally the particular rules may well be interrelated but the principles of interconnection are not known or defined. It is clear that this phase persists to a considerable extent even in advanced societies. In the second phase reflection on morals takes many forms. The earliest ethical documents are apparently collections compiled by high Egyptian officials for the guidance of their sons or other young men in training for office. It is interesting to note that these are purely secular documents, independent of religion, designed in a practical spirit for use in daily life. It is also striking that they were in no sense tribal or national, but conceived as we should say in

the spirit of men of the world. The moralists of this sort did not hesitate to translate or imitate the work of writers belonging to other peoples than their own. Thus the 'words of the wise' in *Proverbs* (22, 17-23, 11) follow closely, it is said, the moral treatise of Amenemope recently discovered, and two of the collections in the same book are attributed to Arab princes.¹ Moralists of this type hardly ever rise above the conventional and merely crystallise in mild platitudes the practical wisdom of their day, though here and there we find them protesting against the law's delays and the magistrates' neglect. Of a different type are the prophets who penetrate to the essentials of human relations and discover truths which the analytic thought of later generations is to explore and perhaps re-discover. Finally in this stage there are the philosophers who seek to clarify ethical concepts by dialectical analysis and to reduce them to system. Perhaps the main contribution of this complex phase is the gradual differentiation of ethical norms from other norms such as the religious and legal, with the result that the problem of what constitutes the distinctively ethical element in social experience emerges more clearly. In the third phase it comes to be realised that it is desirable to bring the study of ethics into closer relation with the social sciences. By this I do not mean that in ethics itself empirical theories become more dominant. That is not on the whole the case. But it is true that there is increasing recognition of the importance of viewing ethical ideals in relation to the conditions under

¹ Cf. A. Lods, *La Religion d'Israel*, p. 202.

which they can be realised. In a changing and highly complex society the moral problems that arise require for their solution very often not so much fresh moral insight as a scientific analysis of the situation which might render possible the application of known principles. We may, for example, agree that the moral basis of the family as an institution is to be found in the fact that it provides conditions for an enduring love-relationship, in which sex and affection are intimately fused, that it satisfies the deeply rooted parental impulses, and that it secures for the children the love and affection essential to their healthy development. But these or similar values will not in themselves help us to decide on the merits of particular systems of divorce law, or the laws governing the inheritance of property. Similarly the problem of justice between nations or social classes is often intractable not so much on account of the obscurity of the moral principles involved, but rather because of the difficulty of calculating in advance the consequences of the different lines of policy that are possible, especially the remote consequences. In any event, even if a divergence of moral principles be involved, the rational solution of a social conflict requires in addition to moral insight and the will to act on it an exact knowledge of the objective conditions of adjustment, and thus a combination of ethics with physical and social science. There are, I think, signs that the need for this combination is being increasingly realised and that we are thus entering on what I have called the third phase in the relations between ethical theory and practice.

The tendencies to moral development which I have briefly indicated are not independent. The growing rationalisation of the moral judgment is connected both with the individualisation and internalisation of conscience and with the growth of a spirit of impartiality and the extension of sympathy. The development in all these directions, though persistent on the whole and occurring in many different cultures, is halting and subject to arrest and even retrogression. Yet it cannot be denied that it has occurred and that at any rate the possibilities of further development along these lines have been revealed in the course of history.¹

The clearest evidence of moral progress, it seems to me, is to be found in the gradual moralisation of religion. The distinction sometimes drawn between nature-religions and ethical-religions is perhaps not warranted, since there appear to be moral elements in all religions. But it seems clear that both the conception of the divine and that of an after-life are gradually transformed by growing moral insight and that in the later phases there is even a tendency to identify the spiritual with the ethical. The demand is then made that religious beliefs must satisfy ethical tests. 'Values', as Höffding says, 'must be discerned and produced in the world of experience before they can be conceived or assumed to exist in a higher world.'² The influence of moral ideas on religion is further seen in the fact that the sacred scriptures are con-

¹ Cf. L. Lévy-Bruhl, *La morale et la science des mœurs*, for another view of the stages of moral development.

² H. Höffding, *The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 323.

tinually re-interpreted so as to harmonise with changes in moral convictions. Thus for example when the moral opinion of mankind came to condemn slavery the upholders of religious tradition found it possible to show that this institution had in fact been denounced in the sacred literature. Similar remarks apply to the changes which have occurred in quite recent times in Christian countries in the matter of kindness to animals. The idea of progress itself illustrates the same point. That idea was quite foreign to mediaeval Christianity and has occasionally been formally denounced by Catholic authorities.¹ The modern emphasis on a dynamic view of history has led to a re-interpretation of the Christian conception of the historical process, and we find that Christian writers are anxious to show not merely that the theory of progress is compatible with Christianity but that it requires Christian principles as a necessary basis.²

An interesting light upon the problem of moral progress might reasonably be expected from a study of the relations between law and morals. But this field seems still largely neglected by students of comparative law. Many instances have been cited of apparently direct influence of moral theory on law. Thus Roman Law is said at certain stages to have been influenced by the teachings of the Stoic philosophers. In England the rise of the Court of Chancery and the development of equity are said to have been affected by the ethical ideas of the casuist

¹ J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, p. 323.

² C. Dawson, *Progress and Religion*.

literature of the sixteenth century. It is further claimed that the idea of the law of nature has been an important factor in the development of law in continental Europe of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹ Of Bentham, Maine has said that 'he did not know of a single law reform effected since his day which cannot be traced to his influence'.² The difficulty in all these or similar instances is to show that there is a causal connection between changes in law and changes in moral outlook. The sceptic can always argue that both series of changes are the joint product of changes of quite another kind in the social and economic structure. Thus, for example, it is argued that the change of attitude to the claims of the working classes, reflected both in changes of moral outlook and in law, is the joint result of the transformation which has occurred in the economic structure and in the balance of power between the social classes and that it is therefore not due primarily to moral factors. There is, so far as I can see, no sure method for isolating the various factors here involved and assigning due weight to each. It seems to be true that no series of social phenomena ethical, juridical or economic, develops independently. But if they are not independent variables, they are not on that account without importance in the causal chain. If each series varies with variations in some other series, it also acts upon it. In this sense it is perfectly possible that moral changes exercise significant influence in initiating

¹ Roscoe Pound, *Law and Morals*, pp. 32-33.

² H. S. Maine, *Early History of Institutions*, p. 397.

social changes or in quickening or retarding movements otherwise initiated.

The moral progress I have so far discussed is essentially a progress in ethical conceptions acting through tradition. It consists in the clarification of ideals, in obtaining a firmer grasp of the conditions of their realisation and in the widening of human sympathies through an extension of the power of imaginative identification. There is no reason to believe that any improvement has been effected in the human breed, or that the hereditary basis of character has undergone a change for the better or the worse. It is sometimes argued that it is useless to improve the forms of social organisation unless the emotional constitution of mankind can also be changed.¹ But if by change is here meant a change in the hereditary constitution, the argument is far from carrying conviction. It seems to be widely agreed among biological sociologists that social development in general has not been brought about by changes in genetic structure, and there appears to be no reason why this conclusion should not apply also to moral development. The establishment of regular machinery for the public administration of justice has gradually eliminated the practice of individual retaliation and private wars, and in the case of civil disputes, has accustomed men to habits of peaceful adjustments. It will surely not be denied that this has been morally of importance, even though there is no reason to believe that a genetic change has been produced in the self-assertive impulses.

¹ C. D. Broad, *The Mind and its Place in Nature*, p. 665.

The really important question, it seems to me, is how far an improvement or refinement of moral conceptions can be expected to result in an improvement in social institutions and in actual conduct, and similarly how far deterioration in institutions and conduct reflects deterioration in morality. Considering the improvement in ethical conceptions which has occurred in the course of history ought we not to expect greater improvement in human institutions and conduct than we find? Do the complexities of modern life require fresh moral principles for their solution, or are the problems in essence non-moral?

We may take the present war as an example. Both sides claim that right or justice is on their side and each accuses the other of moral decadence. Moral conceptions must be very cloudy for this state of affairs to be possible. It is sometimes argued that the Nazi or Fascist philosophy involves a repudiation of morality. This would certainly be denied by the representatives of that philosophy who continually speak in the name of justice and even argue that they alone have bridged the gulf which according to them everywhere else divides law and morals. The view that the difference between the Nazis and their opponents is that the former stress the value of the community while the latter stand for the values of individual personality also fails to find confirmation. What the Nazis maintain is rather, so they say, that the individual can only find his fullest development in devoting himself to the service of the community. What does appear to be distinctive of Nazi ethical theory is the denial of universalism and the insistence

that fundamental values are, so to say, tied to the *Volk* or ethnic group. But even this is not at all clear, since if taken seriously, such a theory could afford no basis for appealing as they frequently do to the sense of justice of other groups who by hypothesis have different moral standards. One is led to wonder whether the ethical theory is to be taken seriously at all and whether it is not in fact so plastic that it can be adapted at will as circumstances require.

It would seem on closer investigation of German mentality that in this as in other contexts we must not generalise about the German people as a whole but must distinguish various groups in it. There are first the leaders and their immediate followers. These seem to be for the most part in a state of moral nihilism, merely using various ethical theories to cloak their lust for power. There are, secondly, the loyal followers who have not repudiated their ordinary moral principles, but who have been reduced by circumstances to a state of moral bewilderment and confusion, from which they can only escape by following the lead of those whom they trust. There are, thirdly, the indoctrinated who believe that Germany is not only the most powerful of all nations but also the most civilised and cultured and that the values which it embodies are of so high an order that all else fades in comparison. Consequently there is no action, however cruel, that cannot be justified if it is shown to be necessary in order to establish the supremacy of Germany. It will be seen that two questions are here involved, factual and

ethical. The ethical question is whether the values for which Germany stands are so superior to all other values as to justify acts which otherwise would be condemned; the factual question is whether these acts are really necessary to secure the values in question. To both questions the Nazis have given an answer which must be repudiated with horror by every impartial observer.

The case of the Nazis brings to light problems of very wide import. The amorality of the leaders can perhaps be regarded as both cause and effect of social deterioration. The group of loyal followers show a moral bewilderment which is not unintelligible, though not on that account to be condoned, in the circumstances. They have been stupefied and rendered helpless by disaster and disillusion. The third group does not lack moral fibre; on the contrary, what they suffer from is a moral fanaticism so profound that under its influence ordinary moral standards cease to count. In different forms parallel cases of moral bewilderment on the one hand and fanaticism on the other can easily be given from other countries. It is extremely important to understand the nature of these phenomena.

There is no reason, it seems to me, for believing that the men of this age are suffering from a weakening of moral fibre. The experience of the first world war and of this shows that men are no less responsive to ideals or less tenacious of purpose than were men of former ages. Nor do I think that the mass of men are infected with the doctrine of relativity of morals preached by some of the learned.

This is not true of the morally bewildered, who show rather a pathetic longing for an assured faith, nor of the fanatics who, if sincere are the most absolute of absolutists. There are involved in the situation genuine moral difficulties and ambiguities and it is these to which the state of the public mind must be in large measure attributed.

The first difficulty to which I shall refer is not due to a weakening of moral sentiment but rather to a growing desire to apply moral principles to the solution of economic and political problems by a larger number of people and on a scale hitherto unparalleled. There is an increasing demand that economic and political institutions shall conform to the principles of justice. Doubt begins when the attempt is made to discover the best methods for carrying them into effect. The believer in capitalism and the believer in a socialised economy may attach equal value to the free development of personality, but each is convinced that the policy of the other leads to slavery. If the matter is pursued further it is realised that the problem involves a balancing or grading of different kinds of freedom and a reliable estimate of the effects of the policy to be pursued on each kind of freedom. Neither ethics nor social science can here give certain guidance and owing to the interweaving of ends and means, facts and values, doubt regarding the one infects our faith in the other. The bewilderment which results is a sign not of moral decay but rather of moral ferment.

Another source of bewilderment is, I think, to be

traced to the growing realisation of the discrepancy between public and private morals. In former times the ordinary man probably did not think that relations between states came within the scope of morals at all, and, in any case, he did not feel any personal responsibility in the matter. Now, I believe, people feel to an increasing extent that states are bound by the same moral principles as are individuals. This is so far in the line of moral progress. But confusion arises when the ordinary man realises that on behalf of their state men are expected to do acts which in the sphere of private relations they would regard as monstrous. The demand is made intelligible to him when he is told that the security of the state is an end of such supreme importance that ordinary moral rules must give way. But he must soon realise that the same type of difficulty might well arise within the state. Is the revolutionary, for example, justified in resorting to violence and brutality in order to gain an end he deems of supreme value? Here too there is involved a balancing of values or an estimation of the stringency of duties requiring a degree of moral wisdom and a knowledge of fact which, to put it mildly, are not readily available. Furthermore, the increasing resort to violence by people who, while professing contempt for morals at the same time not only tacitly assume but proclaim that justice is on their side, cannot but add to the confusion.

A third cause of the moral uneasiness is of longer standing. This is connected with the fact that

European morals are compounded of elements which have never been brought into harmony. The ethics of non-resistance and the subdual of self-assertion have never been thoroughly assimilated by the Christian peoples and have not been brought into effective synthesis with the ethics of self-realisation. The result is a real lack of clarity in dealing with problems connected with the rightful use of force, and the reconciliation of freedom with order; and the erection of a fundamentally false, but superficially plausible, antithesis between the good of the individual and the good of the community. I do not suggest that these are problems which do not permit of a solution, in terms of a combination of Greek and Christian ethics, but I do suggest that they have so far not been thus solved, and this failure may well be one of the deeper causes of the moral malaise of our times.

It will be seen that in order to remove the factors making for bewilderment that I have described, not only moral insight is required but also greater knowledge of social facts. Collectivists and individualists may differ from one another up to a point in the conception they form of the relative importance of the values involved. But they differ far more profoundly on matters which are at bottom questions of fact and these have a way of confusing the ethical issues. They have different views of the motives of action and of the possibility of changing their direction by changes in institutions; they differ in the estimate they form of the probable effects of applying the principles of distributive justice on the

total available for distribution, and so forth. These are questions of sociology and economics and not primarily of ethical theory. Similarly the problems connected with the rightful use of force involve factual issues. It is necessary to know how far force *is required* in order to attain given ends and how far force *can* attain the ends in question without distorting their nature or bringing about conflicts with other ends of equal or greater value. These again are questions of sociology and economics. It thus seems that it is only in what I have called the third phase of the relations between ethical reflection and conduct, that namely in which ethical theory is combined with a factual study of human needs and motives and of the consequences of action, that further advance in the solutions of these problems may reasonably be expected.

The points I have tried to make may perhaps be thus briefly summarised. First, in matters concerning elementary human relations there is a certain relative constancy in moral rules; elementary moral duties are widely recognised. Secondly, in respect of these elementary duties the variations observed are traceable to a number of factors. These include differences in circumstances which affect the application made of the rules, growth of knowledge of the nature of acts and of the human agent, including the varying influence of religious and magical beliefs, the fact that a great deal of morality is accepted on authority, the limitations of sympathy connected with the emergence of classes inside the community and with rivalries between

communities.¹ Thirdly, a study of the variations reveals certain trends of development. This development is not continuous and does not proceed at a uniform rate. It follows divergent lines and is subjected to cross-currents due to culture contacts. The trends show on the whole an increasing rationalisation of moral rules, a growing internalisation and individualisation of the moral conscience and a tendency towards universalism. Fourthly, the development occurs not through alteration of genetic type but through changes in tradition. These changes are at first unreflective, but later are stimulated by reflective thought and the insight of moral teachers and, finally, attempts begin to be made to combine reflection on morals with the study of social facts, though efforts of this kind are still crude and immature. Fifthly, the development consists in the main in a clarification of ethical concepts. How far it is reflected in changes in institutions and actual behaviour is a very difficult problem. The influence of moral insight on religious development seems to be unmistakable; that it has acted on law is not so clear but probable.

Social development is not the same as moral development, and, in the main, the influence exerted by social and economic changes on morals is perhaps greater than the converse influence of changes in moral outlook on the forms of social life. In this connection it is important to avoid the error of

¹ For further discussion of the sources of variation in moral judgments see Westermarck, *Ethical Relativity* and Sidgwick, *The Ethics of Green, Spencer and Martineau*.

ascribing social decay to moral deterioration, while at the same time denying to the moral factor the power of influencing society for good. In either direction the power of morality may not be very great, but it is not insignificant.

These conclusions may be criticised on various grounds. It may be argued in the first place, that they presuppose a rational standard which can be used as the basis of comparison. This must be granted and I have assumed that such a standard is attainable. It is to be noted, however, that ethical relativists do not necessarily deny the reality of moral progress. This is certainly not true of the type of relativism defended by Westermarck. His wide survey leads him to conclusions resembling in part those drawn above, and he maintains that morality has on the whole become more enlightened and reflective and that there has occurred an extension of the range of sympathy, shown in the growth of impartiality and the partial breaking down of the barriers of group morality. Whether the relativity of morals in the form worked out by Westermarck or in other forms is really consistent with the notion of progress is a question which I will not here pursue. But I think it could be shown that all forms of ethical relativity so far attempted unconsciously appeal to standards which go beyond the standards actually accepted in the working codes of existing societies.

A more serious criticism is that based on the recurrence of periods of barbarism and violence of which history is full and of which we have such

terrible examples in our own times. May it not be, it will be suggested that the moral factor is essentially constant, but liable to grave lesions produced by social factors from which it recovers itself from time to time thus creating the illusion of moral progress? In particular, it is argued that the humanitarian period might well have been a temporary episode, restoring a balance previously upset by the industrial revolution and the Napoleonic wars, and is not to be taken as an indication of the line of future development.

This objection must be given considerable weight. But on the other side various arguments may be suggested. First, the constancy of the moral factor is really illusory. The demand for freedom, for example, may be very ancient, but the content of the notion of freedom has been greatly enriched in the course of time and it will not be denied that we now know more both of its possibilities and its limitations, or that valuable experiments have been made on an increasing scale towards its attainment. There are also certain ideals which have only come to be stressed in modern times. Of special interest because of their direct connection with the emergence of the idea of progress is the growing recognition of a duty to posterity and to mankind as a whole. But even of greater importance are the ideals connected with the seeking of truth. The intrinsic value of truth was, of course, clearly recognised by the Greeks. But the virtues of truth-seeking, the cultivation of detachment, disinterestedness, the readiness to abide by the evidence, in Huxley's phrase, 'veracity in thought and action and

the resolute facing of the world as it is ' have only entered fully into the moral conscience with the growth of modern science. These are virtues much more difficult to practise in the sphere of social investigation than in other branches of inquiry and much will depend on further progress in this direction. Secondly, the increase in the scale and complexity of social organisation has altered the nature of the problems which have to be faced, and for this allowance has to be made when we are reminded of our failure to solve them. Thirdly, in the midst of the bewilderment of our times there is evidence of moral ferment. There is, in particular a growing demand that political and social policy should conform to standards of justice and a recognition that even the most fundamental institutions may be challenged in the name of justice. I think, further, that in democratic countries at least the ordinary man is coming to feel that the action taken by the state in his behalf in relation to other states concerns him deeply and that he shares in the responsibility. This is implicit in the discussion by cynics and moralists alike of what is called power politics. This movement is, no doubt, not fully articulate, but so far as it goes it is in line with the tendencies towards universalism emphasised above. It may well gain increased strength as people realise the consequences of a reign of violence and the loss of all sense of human dignity, truth and justice with which our age is threatened.

A third line of criticism comes from certain religious philosophers. They stress the inherent

sinfulness of human nature which sets limits to what man can do by his own efforts. Growth, they would say, no doubt there is, but on each level there are new dangers, and 'history is not its own redeemer'.¹ In particular men are apt to forget their finitude and, in their arrogance, they claim for their partial views the authority of the absolute. This tendency to self-deception together with the will to power will always wreck the hopes of the utopians and shatter the belief in man's perfectibility. From another angle, the Freudian psychologists make a similar point by stressing the aggressive elements in human nature which, they say, can never be eradicated or successfully controlled by changes in social institutions.

These criticisms would be more relevant if directed against the earlier defenders of the theory of progress who, perhaps, saw human nature in too rosy a light. But even Spencer who tended to regard progress as ultimately assured, was well aware of the possibility of retrogression and re-barbarisation and of the fact that every partial development is often a hindrance to further development. Hobhouse, who, I suppose, has given the most systematic account of social development, certainly never thought of progress as automatic and has given much attention to the forces standing in its way.² The problem of the future, it should be remembered cannot be decided by a study of past trends alone. What such a study reveals is not that there certainly has been progress, but that certain

¹ R. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.

² L. T. Hobhouse, *Social Development*, Chs. 12, 14.

possibilities are open to mankind, and if it does not justify optimism, neither does it warrant pessimism. Further progress depends upon whether we can formulate a coherent and comprehensive conception of a good common to mankind, whether we can acquire sufficient knowledge of the conditions which are necessary for its realisation, and whether we can, in the light of such knowledge, generate a common or cooperative will with sufficient energy to bring these conditions into being. The evidence of history and present conditions shows that progress in morality is halting and irregular and lags behind advance in other directions. The lag is due apparently to some extent to lack of clarity in ethical conceptions, but more so to our ignorance of the psychology of character formation and of the ways in which social institutions might be changed so as to bring them into closer conformity with ethical ideals. From this point of view it is clear that there ought to be much closer cooperation between the social sciences and social philosophy than there is at present. The finitude of man, the limitations of his intellectual powers and the fierceness of his passions are obvious enough to warn us, as the theologians think we need to be warned, that man is no god. Short of idolatry, however, we are entitled, despite the cruelties and barbarities which abound in this world, to put some trust in human intelligence and will, and to feel justified in the hope that the energies which are now expended in mutual destruction may come to be used in the service of ends in which reasonable men can find fulfilment.

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