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Ethical Reflections

Arthur Schopenhauer

Translated by T. Bailey Saunders, M. A.

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The philosophers of the ancient world united in a single conception a great many things that had no connection with one another. Of this every dialogue of Plato's furnishes abundant examples. The greatest and worst confusion of this kind is that between ethics and politics. The State and the Kingdom of God, or the Moral Law, are so entirely different in their character that the former is a parody of the latter, a bitter mockery at the absence of it. Compared with the Moral Law the State is a crutch instead of a limb, an automaton instead of a man.

The principle of honour stands in close connection with human freedom. It is, as it were, an abuse of that freedom. Instead of using his freedom to fulfil the moral law, a man employs his power of voluntarily undergoing any feeling of pain, of overcoming any momentary impression, in order that he may assert his self-will, whatever be the object to which he directs it. As he thereby shows that, unlike the lower animals, he has thoughts which go beyond the welfare of his body and whatever makes for that welfare, it has come about that the principle of honour is often confused with virtue. They are regarded as if they were twins. But wrongly; for although the principle of honour is something which distinguishes man from the lower animals, it is not, in itself, anything that raises him above them. Taken as an end and aim, it is as dark a delusion as any other aim that springs from self. Used as a means, or casually, it may be productive of good; but even that is good which is vain and frivolous. It is the misuse of freedom, the employment of it as a weapon for overcoming the world of feeling, that makes man so infinitely more terrible than the lower animals; for they do only what momentary instinct bids them; while man acts by ideas, and his ideas may entail universal ruin before they are satisfied.

There is another circumstance which helps to promote the notion that honour and virtue are connected. A man who can do what he wants to do shows that he can also do it if what he wants to do is a virtuous act. But that those of our actions which we are ourselves obliged to regard with contempt are also regarded with contempt by other people serves more than anything that I have here mentioned to establish the connection. Thus it often happens that a man who is not afraid of the one kind of contempt is unwilling to undergo the other. But when we are called upon to choose between our own approval and the world's censure, as may occur in complicated and mistaken circumstances, what becomes of the principle of honour then?

Two characteristic examples of the principle of honour are to be found in Shakespeare's Henry VI., Part II., Act IV., Sc. 1. A pirate is anxious to murder his captive instead of accepting, like others, a ransom for him; because in taking his captive he lost an eye, and his own honour and that of his forefathers would in his opinion be stained, if he were to allow his revenge to be bought off as though he were a mere trader. The prisoner, on the other hand, who is the Duke of Suffolk, prefers to have his head grace a pole than to uncover it to such a low fellow as a pirate, by approaching him to ask for mercy.

Just as civic honour — in other words, the opinion that we deserve to be trusted — is the palladium of those whose endeavour it is to make their way in the world on the path of honourable business, so knightly honour — in other words, the opinion that we are men to be feared — is the palladium of those who aim at going through life on the path of violence; and so it was that knightly honour arose among the robber-knights and other knights of the Middle Ages.

A theoretical philosopher is one who can supply in the shape of ideas for the reason, a copy of the presentations of experience; just as what the painter sees he can reproduce on canvas; the sculptor, in marble; the poet, in pictures for the imagination, though they are pictures which he supplies only in sowing the ideas from which they sprang.

A so-called practical philosopher, on the other hand, is one who, contrarily, deduces his action from ideas. The theoretical philosopher transforms life into ideas. The practical philosopher transforms ideas into life; he acts, therefore, in a thoroughly reasonable manner; he is consistent, regular, deliberate; he is never hasty or passionate; he never allows himself to be influenced by the impression of the moment.

And indeed, when we find ourselves among those full presentations of experience, or real objects, to which the body belongs — since the body is only an objectified will, the shape which the will assumes in the material world — it is difficult to let our bodies be guided, not by those presentations, but by a mere image of them, by cold, colourless ideas, which are related to experience as the shadow of Orcus to life; and yet this is the only way in which we can avoid doing things of which we may have to repent.

The theoretical philosopher enriches the domain of reason by adding to it; the practical philosopher draws upon it, and makes it serve him.

According to Kant the truth of experience is only a hypothetical truth. If the suppositions which underlie all the intimations of experience — subject, object, time, space and causality — were removed, none of those intimations would contain a word of truth. In other words, experience is only a phenomenon; it is not knowledge of the thing-in-itself.

If we find something in our own conduct at which we are secretly pleased, although we cannot reconcile it with experience, seeing that if we were to follow the guidance of experience we should have to do precisely the opposite, we must not allow this to put us out; otherwise we should be ascribing an authority to experience which it does not deserve, for all that it teaches rests upon a mere supposition. This is the general tendency of the Kantian Ethics.

Innocence is in its very nature stupid. It is stupid because the aim of life (I use the expression only figuratively, and I could just as well speak of the essence of life, or of the world) is to gain a knowledge of our own bad will, so that our will may become an object for us, and that we may undergo an inward conversion. Our body is itself our will objectified; it is one of the first and foremost of objects, and the deeds that we accomplish for the sake of the body show us the evil inherent in our will. In the state of innocence, where there is no evil because there is no experience, man is, as it were, only an apparatus for living, and the object for which the apparatus exists is not yet disclosed. An empty form of life like this, a stage untenanted, is in itself, like the so-called real world, null and void; and as it can attain a meaning only by action, by error, by knowledge, by the

convulsions of the will, it wears a character of insipid stupidity. A golden age of innocence, a fools' paradise, is a notion that is stupid and unmeaning, and for that very reason in no way worthy of any respect. The first criminal and murderer, Cain, who acquired a knowledge of guilt, and through guilt acquired a knowledge of virtue by repentance, and so came to understand the meaning of life, is a tragical figure more significant, and almost more respectable, than all the innocent fools in the world put together.

If I had to write about modesty I should say: I know the esteemed public for which I have the honour to write far too well to dare to give utterance to my opinion about this virtue. Personally I am quite content to be modest and to apply myself to this virtue with the utmost possible circumspection. But one thing I shall never admit — that I have ever required modesty of any man, and any statement to that effect I repel as a slander.

The paltry character of most men compels the few who have any merit or genius to behave as though they did not know their own value, and consequently did not know other people's want of value; for it is only on this condition that the mob acquiesces in tolerating merit. A virtue has been made out of this necessity, and it is called modesty. It is a piece of hypocrisy, to be excused only because other people are so paltry that they must be treated with indulgence.

Human misery may affect us in two ways, and we may be in one of two opposite moods in regard to it.

In one of them, this misery is immediately present to us. We feel it in our own person, in our own will which, imbued with violent desires, is everywhere broken, and this is the process which constitutes suffering. The result is that the will increases in violence, as is shown in all cases of passion and emotion; and this increasing violence comes to a stop only when the will turns and gives way to complete resignation, in other words, is redeemed. The man who is entirely dominated by this mood will regard any prosperity which he may see in others with envy, and any suffering with no sympathy.

In the opposite mood human misery is present to us only as a fact of knowledge, that is to say, indirectly. We are mainly engaged in looking at the sufferings of others, and our attention is withdrawn from our own. It is in their person that we become aware of human misery; we are filled with sympathy; and the result of this mood is general benevolence, philanthropy. All envy vanishes, and instead of feeling it, we are rejoiced when we see one of our tormented fellow-creatures experience any pleasure or relief.

After the same fashion we may be in one of two opposite moods in regard to human baseness and depravity. In the one we perceive this baseness indirectly, in others. Out of this mood arise indignation, hatred, and contempt of mankind. In the other we perceive it directly, in ourselves. Out of it there arises humiliation, nay, contrition.

In order to judge the moral value of a man, it is very important to observe which of these four moods predominate in him. They go in pairs, one out of each division. In very excellent characters the second mood of each division will predominate.

The categorical imperative, or absolute command, is a contradiction. Every command is conditional. What is unconditional and necessary is a must, such as is presented by the laws of nature.

It is quite true that the moral law is entirely conditional. There is a world and a view of life in which it has neither validity nor significance. That world is, properly speaking, the real world in which, as individuals, we live; for every regard paid to morality is a denial of that world and of our individual life in it. It is a view of the world, however, which does not go beyond the principle of sufficient reason; and the opposite view proceeds by the intuition of Ideas.

If a man is under the influence of two opposite but very strong motives, A and B, and I am greatly concerned that he should choose A, but still more that he should never be untrue to his choice, and by changing his mind betray me, or the like, it will not do for me to say anything that might hinder the motive B from having its full effect upon him, and only emphasise A; for then I should never be able to reckon on his decision. What I have to do is, rather, to put both motives before him at the same time, in as vivid and clear a way as possible, so that they may work upon him with their whole force. The choice that he then makes is the decision of his inmost nature, and stands firm to all eternity. In saying I will do this, he has said I must do this. I have got at his will, and I can rely upon its working as steadily as one of the forces of nature. It is as certain as fire kindles and water wets that he will act according to the motive which has proved to be stronger for him. Insight and knowledge may be attained and lost again; they may be changed, or improved, or destroyed; but will cannot be changed. That is why I apprehend, I perceive, I see, is subject to alteration and uncertainty; I will, pronounced on a right apprehension of motive, is as firm as nature itself. The difficulty, however, lies in getting at a right apprehension. A man's apprehension of motive may change, or be corrected or perverted; and on the other hand, his circumstances may undergo an alteration.

A man should exercise an almost boundless toleration and placability, because if he is capricious enough to refuse to forgive a single individual for the meanness or evil that lies at his door, it is doing the rest of the world a quite unmerited honour.

But at the same time the man who is every one's friend is no one's friend. It is quite obvious what sort of friendship it is which we hold out to the human race, and to which it is open to almost every man to return, no matter what he may have done.

With the ancients friendship was one of the chief elements in morality. But friendship is only limitation and partiality; it is the restriction to one individual of what is the due of all mankind, namely, the recognition that a man's own nature and that of mankind are identical. At most it is a compromise between this recognition and selfishness.

A lie always has its origin in the desire to extend the dominion of one's own will over other individuals, and to deny their will in order the better to affirm one's own. Consequently a lie is in its very nature the product of injustice, malevolence and villainy. That is why truth, sincerity, candour and rectitude are at once recognised and valued as praiseworthy and noble qualities; because we presume that the man who exhibits them entertains no sentiments of injustice or malice, and therefore stands in no need of concealing such sentiments. He who is open cherishes nothing that is bad.

There is a certain kind of courage which springs from the same source as good-nature. What I mean is that the good-natured man is almost as clearly conscious that he exists in other individuals as in himself. I have often shown how this feeling gives rise to good-

nature. It also gives rise to courage, for the simple reason that the man who possesses this feeling cares less for his own individual existence, as he lives almost as much in the general existence of all creatures. Accordingly he is little concerned for his own life and its belongings. This is by no means the sole source of courage for it is a phenomenon due to various causes. But it is the noblest kind of courage, as is shown by the fact that in its origin it is associated with great gentleness and patience. Men of this kind are usually irresistible to women.

All general rules and precepts fail, because they proceed from the false assumption that men are constituted wholly, or almost wholly, alike; an assumption which the philosophy of Helvetius expressly makes. Whereas the truth is that the original difference between individuals in intellect and morality is immeasurable.

The question as to whether morality is something real is the question whether a well-grounded counter-principle to egoism actually exists.

As egoism restricts concern for welfare to a single individual, viz., the man's own self, the counter-principle would have to extend it to all other individuals.

It is only because the will is above and beyond time that the stings of conscience are ineradicable, and do not, like other pains, gradually wear away. No! an evil deed weighs on the conscience years afterwards as heavily as if it had been freshly committed.

Character is innate, and conduct is merely its manifestation; the occasion for great misdeeds comes seldom; strong counter-motives keep us back; our disposition is revealed to ourselves by our desires, thoughts, emotions, when it remains unknown to others. Reflecting on all this, we might suppose it possible for a man to possess, in some sort, an innate evil conscience, without ever having done anything very bad.

Don't do to others what you wouldn't like done to yourself. This is, perhaps, one of those arguments that prove, or rather ask, too much. For a prisoner might address it to a judge.

Stupid people are generally malicious, for the very same reason as the ugly and the deformed.

Similarly, genius and sanctity are akin. However simple-minded a saint may be, he will nevertheless have a dash of genius in him; and however many errors of temperament, or of actual character, a genius may possess, he will still exhibit a certain nobility of disposition by which he shows his kinship with the saint.

The great difference between Law without and Law within, between the State and the Kingdom of God, is very clear. It is the State's business to see that every one should have justice done to him; it regards men as passive beings, and therefore takes no account of anything but their actions. The Moral Law, on the other hand, is concerned that every one should do justice; it regards men as active, and looks to the will rather than the deed. To prove that this is the true distinction let the reader consider what would happen if he were to say, conversely, that it is the State's business that every one should do justice, and the business of the Moral Law that every one should have justice done to him. The absurdity is obvious.

As an example of the distinction, let me take the case of a debtor and a creditor disputing about a debt which the former denies. A lawyer and a moralist are present, and show a

lively interest in the matter. Both desire that the dispute should end in the same way, although what they want is by no means the same. The lawyer says, I want this man to get back what belongs to him; and the moralist, I want that man to do his duty.

It is with the will alone that morality is concerned. Whether external force hinders or fails to hinder the will from working does not in the least matter. For morality the external world is real only in so far as it is able or unable to lead and influence the will. As soon as the will is determined, that is, as soon as a resolve is taken, the external world and its events are of no further moment and practical do not exist. For if the events of the world had any such reality — that is to say, if they possessed a significance in themselves, or any other than that derived from the will which is affected by them — what a grievance it would be that all these events lie in the realm of chance and error! It is, however, just this which proves that the important thing is not what happens, but what is willed. Accordingly, let the incidents of life be left to the play of chance and error, to demonstrate to man that he is as chaff before the wind.

The State concerns itself only with the incidents — with what happens; nothing else has any reality for it. I may dwell upon thoughts of murder and poison as much as I please: the State does not forbid me, so long as the axe and rope control my will, and prevent it from becoming action.

Ethics asks: What are the duties towards others which justice imposes upon us? in other words, What must I render? The Law of Nature asks: What need I not submit to from others? that is, What must I suffer? The question is put, not that I may do no injustice, but that I may not do more than every man must do if he is to safeguard his existence, and than every man will approve being done, in order that he may be treated in the same way himself; and, further, that I may not do more than society will permit me to do. The same answer will serve for both questions, just as the same straight line can be drawn from either of two opposite directions, namely, by opposing forces; or, again, as the angle can give the sine, or the sine the angle.

It has been said that the historian is an inverted prophet. In the same way it may be said that a teacher of law is an inverted moralist (viz., a teacher of the duties of justice), or that politics are inverted ethics, if we exclude the thought that ethics also teaches the duty of benevolence, magnanimity, love, and so on. The State is the Gordian knot that is cut instead of being untied; it is Columbus' egg which is made to stand by being broken instead of balanced, as though the business in question were to make it stand rather than to balance it. In this respect the State is like the man who thinks that he can produce fine weather by making the barometer go up.

The pseudo-philosophers of our age tell us that it is the object of the State to promote the moral aims of mankind. This is not true; it is rather the contrary which is true. The aim for which mankind exists — the expression is parabolic — is not that a man should act in such and such a manner; for all opera operata, things that have actually been done, are in themselves matters of indifference. No! the aim is that the Will, of which every man is a complete specimen — nay, is the very Will itself — should turn whither it needs to turn; that the man himself (the union of Thought and Will) should perceive what this will is, and what horrors it contains; that he should show the reflection of himself in his own deeds, in the abomination of them. The State, which is wholly concerned with the general

welfare, checks the manifestation of the bad will, but in no wise checks the will itself; the attempt would be impossible. It is because the State checks the manifestation of his will that a man very seldom sees the whole abomination of his nature in the mirror of his deeds. Or does the reader actually suppose there are no people in the world as bad as Robespierre, Napoleon, or other murderers? Does he fail to see that there are many who would act like them if only they could?

Many a criminal dies more quietly on the scaffold than many a non-criminal in the arms of his family. The one has perceived what his will is and has discarded it. The other has not been able to discard it, because he has never been able to perceive what it is. The aim of the State is to produce a fool's paradise, and this is in direct conflict with the true aim of life, namely, to attain a knowledge of what the will, in its horrible nature, really is.

Napoleon was not really worse than many, not to say most, men. He was possessed of the very ordinary egoism that seeks its welfare at the expense of others. What distinguished him was merely the greater power he had of satisfying his will, and greater intelligence, reason and courage; added to which, chance gave him a favourable scope for his operations. By means of all this he did for his egoism what a thousand other men would like to do for theirs, but cannot. Every feeble lad who by little acts of villainy gains a small advantage for himself by putting others to some disadvantage, although it may be equally small, is just as bad as Napoleon.

Those who fancy that retribution comes after death would demand that Napoleon should by unutterable torments pay the penalty for all the numberless calamities that he caused. But he is no more culpable than all those who possess the same will, unaccompanied by the same power.

The circumstance that in his case this extraordinary power was added allowed him to reveal the whole wickedness of the human will; and the sufferings of his age, as the necessary obverse of the medal, reveal the misery which is inextricably bound up with this bad will. It is the general manipulation of this will that constitutes the world. But it is precisely that it should be understood how inextricably the will to live is bound up with, and is really one and the same as, this unspeakable misery, that is the world's aim and purpose; and it is an aim and purpose which the appearance of Napoleon did much to assist. Not to be an unmeaning fools' paradise but a tragedy, in which the will to live understands itself and yields — that is the object for which the world exists. Napoleon is only an enormous mirror of the will to live.

The difference between the man who causes suffering and the man who suffers it, is only phenomenal. It is all a will to live, identical with great suffering; and it is only by understanding this that the will can mend and end.

What chiefly distinguishes ancient from modern times is that in ancient times, to use Napoleon's expression, it was affairs that reigned: *les paroles aux choses*. In modern times this is not so. What I mean is that in ancient times the character of public life, of the State, and of Religion, as well as of private life, was a strenuous affirmation of the will to live. In modern times it is a denial of this will, for such is the character of Christianity. But now while on the one hand that denial has suffered some abatement even in public opinion, because it is too repugnant to human character, on the other what is publicly denied is

secretly affirmed. Hence it is that we see half measures and falsehood everywhere; and that is why modern times look so small beside antiquity.

The structure of human society is like a pendulum swinging between two impulses, two evils in polar opposition, despotism and anarchy. The further it gets from the one, the nearer it approaches the other. From this the reader might hit on the thought that if it were exactly midway between the two, it would be right. Far from it. For these two evils are by no means equally bad and dangerous. The former is incomparably less to be feared; its ills exist in the main only as possibilities, and if they come at all it is only one among millions that they touch. But, with anarchy, possibility and actuality are inseparable; its blows fall on every man every day. Therefore every constitution should be a nearer approach to a despotism than to anarchy; nay, it must contain a small possibility of despotism.