

THE WHOLE DUTY OF MAN

BY DR. GEORGE YEISLEY RUSK

I

IN recent years belief in a revealed religion has become impossible for the great majority of people who have become informed with regard to the historical origins of Christianity. For them it is necessary that ethics assume and merit the position of authority formerly held by the practical teachings of Christianity,—if they are to be saved from an unperceived drifting toward the rapids of practical materialism which after not many days can issue only in the vortex of pessimism. Man is too logical a creature to live happily with *no* answer to the ultimate questions of his duty to his fellows, and he is too spiritual to do so with any answer which does not somehow do justice to his very spirituality.

Candor forces us to admit that up to the present time no system of ethics intellectually and spiritually satisfactory has ever been formulated. In so far as an ethics has been self-consistent it has necessarily been written from one rigidly defined point of view. Therefore, although it has dealt in some fashion with all the problems of conduct, it obviously has done so from only one point of view, and so has not been able to do full justice to all ethical truth. This is often inadvertently acknowledged even in the systems themselves. And therefore each system, if consistently carried out in practice, would lead to flagrant injustice.

Let us consider first, for example, the a priori ethics of Kant. If, as Kant teaches, an act is not moral which is in accord with inclination, none is moral which will make anyone happy. If so, then one ought constantly to do what will harm, or at most be indifferent to the good of, himself and others. But this conclusion contradicts the conception of ethics held in common by Kant and

all men, and it permits the commission of every injustice. Again, Bentham, in naming the greatest good of the greatest number as the end of ethical action, evidently repudiated the utilitarian basis of his ethics, for utilitarianism cannot deny itself long enough to look beyond immediate passion to the whole of the personality and to the entire company of mankind. But if utilitarianism does not supply a basis for disinterested action, it must, like the Kantian absolutism, countenance every form of injustice. And finally, the theories of self-realization provide no objective definition of the self, and so at least permit an identification of the self with immediate desire. But actually immediate desire never is regarded by these systems as the whole of the personality. Thus these theories also are self-contradictory and set no bar to indulgence in every injustice. Ethics has had a history quite as contradictory as has theology—each system being opposed to all others and not even at peace with itself. If the history of ethics has not been as turbulent as that of theology, it has not been so only because to ethics humanity has never entrusted its supreme interests. The ethics of the future, the true ethics, while forming a consistent system and recognizing all concrete values, must not be a one-sided, contradictory, organization of human relationships—a mere abstraction. But how can we conceive of such an ethics?

We can construct a valid and authoritative ethics, I believe, if we bear in mind that we get into our unfortunately abstract ethics by forgetting that ethics is ultimately *practical*. We forget that it deals with full-orbed acts and not with one-sided abstractions. Let us therefore cast about for some *acts* to be the basis of ethics—its organizing principle, if such a phrase is not already too abstract a designation for the basis of a *concrete* system of ethics—a designation which will lead us imperceptibly into an abstract system. I would suggest that we consider if we shall not have in the following acts that basis of a concrete system of ethics for which we are looking:—

- (1) The provision for one's self and dependents of a comfortable way of living.
- (2) The provision of a fund for taking part in various charities.
- (3) The cultivation of the non-competitive values.

It will be noticed that these acts form a necessary, Hegelian, trilogy of thesis (personal and family interest), antithesis (the in-

terest of others) and synthesis (the common interest of self and others). The acts ascend from the practical to the spiritual. Let us consider each of these fundamental duties in some detail.

II

Everyone would admit, I believe, that it is the duty of every able-bodied and able-minded man to provide a comfortable way of living for his dependents. But they would differ as to just what constitutes comfortable living. I think that all would agree that it certainly includes the provision of the conditions of efficient living. That is, I think that everyone would agree that it is the duty of every normal man to strive to earn wages large enough to buy a healthful environment and labor-saving devices for his family, for thus his family is enabled to produce the most for itself and the world. Since some families are capable of making better use of formal leisure than are others, it is ethically right for some to spend much more on themselves than for others. A trip to Europe, for instance, may bring forth a hundredfold in the soil of one family, but leave sterile that of another. In the former case the taking of such a trip would be ethical; in the latter it would not be so.

But when we have gone this far in a definition of ethical expenditures we have not exactly prescribed the duty of man with regard to his standard of living, and I for one am glad that we have not done so. Exact definition of ethical duty prevents the rhythmic action of the human mind within limits which modern psychiatry teaches us is absolutely essential to psychic health. Man needs a goal but not a straight-jacket for normal, effective, happy living. Duties cannot be exactly defined because the values to which they refer cannot be rated absolutely. One value can frequently be substituted for another. No one value is essential for ethical living. We often come to appreciate a certain new value only because we have by chance played the harlequin to another now held in high reverence.

Perhaps we can best make clear how values can be substituted for each other, and show why it is impossible to enumerate those which should govern the lives of men—in particular with regard to their expenditures—by quoting a passage from Lamb's *Essays of Elia* (Everyman Edition, p. 288). In this passage the delights of an intense enjoyment of a few objects of art, such as is forced

upon the poor, are substituted for the superficial enjoyment of many such objects which is inevitable for the rich:—

“‘I wish the good old times would come again’, she (Lamb’s fictitious cousin) said, ‘when we were not quite so rich. I do not mean that I want to be poor; but there was a middle state’—so she was pleased to ramble on,—‘in which I am sure we were a great deal happier. A purchase is but a purchase, now that you have money enough and to spare. Formerly it used to be a triumph. When we coveted a cheap luxury (and, O! how much ado I had to get you to consent in those times!)—we were used to having a debate two or three days before, and to weigh the *for* and *against*, and think what we might spare it out of, and what saving we could hit upon, that should be an equivalent. A thing was worth buying then, when we felt the money that we paid for it.’

“‘Do you remember the brown suit, which you made to hang upon you, till all your friends cried shame upon you, it grew so threadbare—and all because of that folio Beaumont and Fletcher, which you dragged home late at night from Barker’s in Covent Garden? Do you remember how we eyed it for weeks before we could make up our minds to the purchase, and had not come to a determination till it was near ten o’clock of the Saturday night, when you set off from Islington, fearing you should be too late—and when the old bookseller with some grumbling opened his shop, and by the twinkling taper (for he was setting bedwards) lighted out the relic from his dusty treasures—and when you lugged it home, wishing it were twice as cumbersome—and when you presented it to me—and when we were exploring the perfectness of it (*collating* you called it)—and while I was repairing some of the loose leaves with paste, which your impatience would not suffer to be left till daybreak—was there no pleasure in being a poor man? or can those neat black clothes which you wear now, and are so careful to keep brushed, since we have become rich and finical, give you half the honest vanity, with which you flaunted it about in that overworn suit—your old corbeau—for four or five weeks longer than you should have done, to pacify your conscience for the mighty sum of fifteen—or sixteen shillings was it?—a great affair we thought it then—which you had lavished on the old folio. Now you can afford to buy any book that pleases you, but I do not see that you ever bring me home any nice old purchases now.’”

A second question naturally arises with regard to man's duty in providing for his family: how far should he injure others in securing what he wants for himself? He should get out of his present business if, when conducted honestly in respect to both consumer and employee, it does not provide an adequate living—even at the cost of reducing his family to the bare necessities of living. If he can earn an adequate living at other employment, he should do so; if not, he should without shame depend upon charity, for society owes an honest man a living. In every concrete case, however, the question arises whether the reason a man cannot make a living is his honesty or is some lack in himself either of mental ability, of emotional stability due to psychological complexes or of imperfect training. Since society demands such a high standard of efficiency today and since it is always possible to read a man's failures in terms of the environment (luxurious or poverty-stricken) in which he was brought up, when a man finds himself *for any cause* unable to provide for his family he should turn to charity for support till an adequate position can be secured for him and he be fitted for it. If adequate charity, even, cannot be secured for him, a man is justified in being dishonest, for a society which does not provide even charity for its members cannot make any ethical claims upon the individual and should be destroyed as a result of a growing lack of mutual confidence. One can make evident the evils of society only by himself acting evilly in view of them. If an earthquake, war, or other "act of God" has made temporarily impossible the earning of a living for one's self or family, the duty to do so does not exist. The suffering which ensues has nothing at all to do with human morality,—whatever we may think about the way it ought to affect the divine conscience.

In support of the contention made above that in extreme and irremediable need a man may be dishonest, I shall adduce the opinion of the leading Christian theologians in the days before property became sacrosanct in the western world:—

"The Fathers, as we have seen, held that almsgiving was an act of justice, not of mercy, because the rights of private property cannot alter the fact that God meant the earth to furnish its fruits for the maintenance of all men. The Canonists, too, set out very clearly the principle that no man has really the right to hold for himself more than he needs. Gratian cites, as from St. Ambrose,

a passage denouncing as unjust and avaricious the man who consumes in luxury what might have supplied the needs of those who are in want, and maintaining that it is as great a crime to refuse the necessaries of life to those who are in want as it is to take from a man the things which are his . . . St. Thomas . . . maintains that . . . if there is evident and urgent need, a man may legitimately take either openly or by stealth what he needs . . . In the case of extreme necessity, St. Thomas says, all things are common." (*Property*, edited by Bishop Gore, p. 136).

A nice, critical question arises when one considers what a man ought to do if he faces this situation: that he cannot earn his living honestly if he has a child, but that he knows ways of earning dishonestly the money necessary for the wise rearing of a child. He should not be dishonest and bring a child into being, for a life based upon persistent dishonesty would not be worthwhile for either parent or child. But the man would be justified in bringing a child into the world and then in accepting all possible charity and in joining whatever reformatory movements exist in order that larger opportunities might be provided for all workers of average ability.

It may be claimed, however, that decisions as to whether or not to bring children into the world are not based on abstract ethical considerations—as the foregoing discussion would imply. I am not so sure. I believe that abstract considerations do lie behind the concrete problems which parents consider when discussing procreation. Certainly it is a general rule that outstanding idealism grows dim when marriage and family responsibility press upon a man, and often the necessities of the family, hovering like a bird of prey over a man's head, lead him to employ shady business methods. One need not be too careful, however, about foreseeing how one's family will be provided for before bringing it into being. For the struggle against odds and the necessity of taking advantage of every opportunity—however adventitious—which a family which is plainly not secure must experience will give the children in it just the training essential to great success—as an acrobat, the minister of an unorthodox church, a candidate for the presidency of the United States or a stock broker. I once heard a man say of another that he had the native ability to be a great success—and would have become so if only he had been born a bastard.

III

In addition to providing for one's family a man should earn and set aside funds to be expended in charity. The size of these funds should be proportioned to the smallness of the increment of additional cost which its amassing would necessitate in the sale price of the article which he manufactures, or upon the size of his income if he cannot dictate the sale price of his "line"—either because of the severely competitive conditions in his industry or because he has not an executive position; or if he is in a profession and works on salary. Thus a man who needs to add, say, ten cents on the hundred dollars to the retail price of his article or deduct ten cents on the hundred dollars from the pay of his employees in order to amass a million dollars for charity should do so. But one who would need in the former case to add one dollar on a hundred or in the latter to deduce one on a hundred ought not to create a fund of more than perhaps ten thousand dollars for charity. Of course a man who works on a fixed income or on a salary should give to charity in proportion to his income or salary and in inverse proportion to his necessary expenses.

It is not right for a man to amass a great charity fund at the expense of his ultimate consumers or of his employees. If this were generally done, too large a place would be given to charity in the general economic scheme of things and honest labor would be discouraged. Yet it is requisite that some money be earned in order that it may be given to others. In the first place, the very fact that a man can earn the money suggests that for it he can give more immediately valuable service to society than can anyone else. Therefore it is socially important that he earns it—earn it even if he cannot well spend it on himself and so will find it almost necessary to give it to charity. In the second place, many people who are capable of making excellent deferred payments to society for all they receive can give small service till aided by charity. Them it is morally necessary to aid. They may produce a hundred-fold upon the investment made in them by their benefactors. The provisions for the needs of the able poor also have this subsidiary effect: it enables them to force the comfortably rich to remain at work in order to retain their relative place in society. Thus one may through wise giving to specific institutions or persons raise to some extent the general level of national attainment. In the

third place, there is an element of chance in human success and failure. As we have already pointed out, it is always possible to read a failure—if not due to congenital weakness, in which case society must assume permanent charge of the sufferer—as due to the warping effect of an environment in which society has allowed the mal-adapted person to grow up from earliest infancy. It is only right, therefore, that society should seek increasingly by wise charity to rectify the more glaring freaks of fortune and the effects of unfavorable environments upon the individuals who have been harmed by them. And finally, in establishing the poor in comfortable circumstances their benefactors increase the actual consumption of goods (physical and mental) by society—including those which the benefactors themselves produce. Thus by their charities they increase their own incomes. Also by increasing the number of efficient workers by their charity they decrease the cost of living in the country, and so the cost of their own living.

IV

The third duty of man is to cultivate the non-competitive values. By the non-competitive values we mean, in the first place, the artistic values, for these a person can enjoy without lessening their enjoyment by others, for instance,—listening to music, viewing art, taking part in conversation. Perhaps the chief question which naturally would arise with regard to their cultivation is: how much should one spend in doing so? That depends upon the extent of his genius and upon whether or not he hopes ever to entertain others by the use of his gifts. If there is no marked ability, there can be no absolute rule. We must revert to what we said above about the expenses which a man is justified in incurring for his family. Even if by certain concrete expenditures some values are neglected, others, however, will nevertheless by the same expenditures be advanced; and so, if the cultivation of values is the consistent aim of one's life, his life will be as full as possible of some sort of value, and that is the only justified goal for anyone.

By the non-competitive values we mean, in the second place, the virtues. The cultivation of no virtue prevents its cultivation by others; and most virtues immediately, all ultimately, bring men into reconciliation. We mean *all* the virtues, but *no one* taken singly, for each virtue taken singly leads off upon a path diverse from the

others, a path at length ending in a quagmire of absurdity. Thus if with Paul of Tarsus one puts love upon the supreme throne, high and lifted up, he finds that the requisite devotion to it requires that he approve of unworthy forms of conduct. If he enlarges the boundaries of love to include hate of the unloveable, he has robbed love of any distinctive meaning. If to avoid this predicament, one name redemption of wrong-doers as the final purpose of his life, he will become oversensitive to the faults of others, self-righteous, hard. Ever reasoning acutely in defense of his own position, he will be incapable of seeing what lies beyond it. But something always does lie beyond every concrete judgment of creatures of time and space. No judgment is absolute, fit to be the standard to which all other truth must logically conform,—except only a devotion to *all* values such as we here advocate. If one attempt to be faithful to every virtue taken singly, he will be plunged into a "sad weighing and discussion of sin," from which the tortured soul can never be set free. For, as we have seen, each virtue leads in an opposite direction. No sooner would one heed the call of one than he would hear the cry of the rest. And in the service of no one of the others would he find greater peace. The only possibility for ethical living lies in a serene devotion to *all* the virtues conceived as an ultimate unity. But, it will be asked, how can such a general law determine concrete speech and conduct?

(1) A general law of morality can determine concrete speech and conduct, in the first place, because the mind in the last analysis is one. There is only one stream of consciousness. Therefore there is no such thing at the time of action—however we may botanize afterwards—as a general intention as separated from the determination to do some specific act.

(2) In the second place, the life of one who has sworn high fealty to all the virtues is so ennobled that he envies no one. Not all the wealth of Atlantis could enrich him. Therefore, for him it is not possible to encroach upon the rights of others. His acts and speech must be essentially just. Noblesse oblige in all his relations with his fellow men becomes the inevitable expression of the acknowledged imperial nature of his soul. Yet as his patent of nobility has come only from his service to the non-competitive values, it cannot inspire within his soul a prideful distinction between himself and other men. He must simply rejoice at every

evidence that he can find in the lives of others that the ancient virtues increasingly extend their sway.

(3) In the third place, one who governs his life by all the virtues acts virtuously in concrete situations because he will not allow any virtue taken singly to assume undue importance in his decision. He will act in view of the sum total of all his past experience and of his unprejudiced understanding of the situation before him. These will give the special form that his general ethical purpose will take. If his decision is not in accord with that of another man, he will listen to the argument of the other without prejudice. He will listen without the arbitrary protruding of any special part of past experience which prevents the judging of the argument on the basis of the totality of past experience. When one does this he is acting normally. Of course one who claims that he is acting in view of all past experience and the objective facts of the present situation may not actually be doing so; but in that case he is not sincerely trying to serve non-competitive values either—whatever his claims may be. If through some defect of past experience one act unjustly in any case, the injustice is not a moral fault on the actor's part, and knowledge of its consequences will soon repair the defect in his experience upon which it was based. By describing ethics so one makes it practical. He makes the good life possible for all men. For all men, except those under unrealized nervous strain, can control the obtruding special idea by the sum total of experience.

(4) In the fourth place, a general devotion to ethical values can determine concrete deeds because it is possible to embody in a concrete deed several conflicting values. This can be done by the use of different organs of the body,—while condemning with words one can reveal a brotherly feeling by putting a hand on the shoulder. It can be done by expressing a position as one's own which is a compromise between all the various truths implicit in a situation. It can be done by expressing successively (perhaps at different times) the various truths implicit in a situation.

Concrete ethical decisions, we say, depend upon the special nature of one's past experience and the special nature of each situation that presents itself. Therefore it is impossible more exactly than we have done to show how a general devotion to ethical ideals determines concrete deeds. It is never possible to recount fully the

sum total of a man's past experience (conscious and unconscious) and to describe fully any concrete situation. Even the United States Supreme Court with its libraries of precedents to guide its judgments will not attempt to say what the general law means concretely—except in application to the exhaustive descriptions of a concrete situation given by opposing counsel. And it is willing to give judgment on the basis of even such descriptions only because no completer knowledge can be had. And when the decision is rendered, ideal justice is never done. The judgment of the court at best is what the litigants should have known that it would be in view of all previous relevant judgments. But we are considering the problem of absolute right, for with it alone does ethics deal. We are concerned about facts that can never be even approximately determined and about the inner elusive motives of men's deeds—not merely, like the courts, in their proved deeds in certain largely standardized relationships. Therefore we cannot apply a general devotion to ethical values to concrete situations *with any exactness*, that is, we cannot relate them by any logical process. We can only affirm, as we have done, that devotion to all ethical values enables one to be just in concrete decisions because every mind is ultimately one, because such devotion ennobles men, because men are thus saved from being led astray by any separate virtue, and because they are able to express many conflicting values in a single deed. We can only add, as we did in the case of the artistic values, that in so far as one in any case fails to advance one value he will be advancing another—if he is sincerely devoted to all values. Thus if one tells a minister that his discourse was very interesting—with a particular intonation—the minister is not as hurt as if he had been told the full truth, and so charity has been promoted, but even so he probably gets as much of the truth as he can use.

V

If one accepts the doctrine of ethics which has been advocated in this paper, then, in the first place, all meticulous, distressing self-examination and inexorable self-condemnation for not equally forwarding every virtue in every deed will be done away. They will flee like shadows before the ascending sun. Then one will take a carefree, joyous, welcoming, and so vital, attitude to life. And this

attitude will enable one easily to correct, as opportunity presents itself, the inevitable onesidedness of any particular action. But if one repudiates it, if he tries to be absolutely correct in every instance, the soul will become so sensitive to evil that it will cling to its accustomed virtues in increasingly specialized forms, carry them to extremes, ignoring the others, and in the resultant conflicts with the sum of virtue and with persons with different codes the personality will become permanently distraught, suspicious, unjust.

In the second place, those who take what I may call the vital attitude to ethics, will not, as the legalist must, by a priori standards automatically rule out from consideration large classes of action which, although innocent and relaxing are not the most worthy of pursuit at the time. Thus the vitalists get the experience and enjoyment of these kinds of action as they pass through the mind prior to rejection in favor of the actions to be preferred. Therefore their lives are incomparably richer than those of the legalists. And their lives are not as defenseless before temptation as are those of the legalists because, having often viewed all aspects of experience, none can take them by surprise; and because their moral natures are strong by reason of repeated exercise upon innumerable occasions.

In the third place, the ethical vitalist may find support for his ethical living in religion. For God is simply that unity of all values, which we have named the true standard of all living. The only absolute unity is personality; so if all values are unified, it must be in a personal God. John Calvin, as part of his doctrine of election, taught that no deed could be good unless done unto the greater glory of God. So we have taught that each act derives its virtue from devotion to the sum total of ethical values. Religion, then, differs from ethics only in emphasizing the *final unity* of non-competitive values in personality, that is in God, and in inviting the neophyte to make the non-competitive values regnant in his life by using the most powerful motive known to men,—that of personal attraction and devotion. So viewed, religion loses its special, contradictory, obsolete commands. It strips itself of every impediment and is prepared to stride thru the ages abreast of the race, ever calling mankind to transcend this or that partial truth in a synthetic truth, because at all times it reminds of the holiest, highest. And the deliverance from the questioning pursuit of this or

that one-sided abstraction of duty thus wrought will bring to the human spirit a unity, a peace, a freedom and a power which in the past it has fully known only when the saints have mounted upon the concrete commandments of their religions into the throne room of the Eternal, and there have received words which made them unwilling to serve aught less perfect than God forever more.

To labor for those whom we freely love and for those who need succor from our abundance and to cultivate those values which, like the widow's cruse of oil, ever replenish themselves for our need and the need of all men—this is the whole duty of man. Surely the way of life is broad and straight. Wherefore, having divested ourselves of every needless anxiety from the days of our ignorance, let us, O child of man, with fortitude and rejoicing, fare forth upon it!