

CHRISTIAN ETHICS

R. C. Mortimer

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CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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CHAPTER I

THE BIBLE AND ETHICS

THE Christian religion is essentially a revelation of the nature of God. It tells men that God has done certain things. And from the nature of these actions we can infer what God is like. In the second place the Christian religion tells men what is the will of God for them, how they must live if they would please God. This second message is clearly dependent on the first. The kind of conduct which will please God depends on the kind of person God is. This is what is meant by saying that belief influences conduct. The once popular view that it does not matter what a man believes so long as he acts decently is nonsense. Because what he considers decent depends on what he believes. If you are a Nazi you will behave as a Nazi, if you are a Communist you will behave as a Communist, and if you are a Christian you will behave as a Christian. At least, in general. For a man does not always do what he knows he ought to do, and he does not always recognize clearly the implications for conduct of his belief. But in general our conduct, or at least our notions of what constitutes right conduct, are shaped by our beliefs. The man who knows about God—has a right faith—knows or may learn what conduct is pleasing to God and therefore right.

The Christian religion has a clear revelation of the nature of God, and by means of it instructs and enlightens the consciences of men. The first foundation is the doctrine of God the Creator. God made us and all the world. Because of that he has an absolute claim on our obedience. We do not exist in our own right, but only as His creatures, who ought therefore to do and be what He desires. We do not possess anything in the world, absolutely, not even our own bodies ; we hold things in trust for God, who created them, and are bound, therefore, to use them only as He intends

that they should be used. This is the doctrine contained in the first chapters of Genesis. God created man and placed him in the Garden of Eden with all the animals and the fruits of the earth at his disposal, subject to God's own law. "Of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat." Man's ownership and use of the material world is not absolute, but subject to the law of God.

From the doctrine of God as the Creator and source of all that is, it follows that a thing is not right simply because we think it is, still less because it seems to be expedient. It is right because God commands it. This means that there is a real distinction between right and wrong which is independent of what we happen to think. It is rooted in the nature and will of God. When a man's conscience tells him that a thing is right, which is in fact what God wills, his conscience is true and its judgement correct; when a man's conscience tells him a thing is right which is, in fact, contrary to God's will, his conscience is false and telling him a lie. It is a lamentably common experience for a man's conscience to play him false, so that in all good faith he does what is wrong, thinking it to be right. "Yea the time cometh that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service." But this does not mean that whatever you think is right is right. It means that even conscience can be wrong : that the light which is in you can be darkness.

It is impossible to lay too great a stress on this fundamental principle, that there is a real and objective difference between right and wrong which is rooted in the will of God. It is the acceptance of this principle which distinguishes Christian ethics from Utilitarianism and Relativism. Utilitarianism distinguishes between right and wrong solely by reference to pleasure or expediency. That is right which tends to make me happy. The rightness of an action is to be judged by whether its consequences will bring more pleasure than pain, either to me or to society. By that, and that alone. When a man judges by reference to his own pleasure only, he is called a hedonist. Such a man is essentially selfish ; for even though he may perform actions which give pleasure to

others, his reason for doing so is that he himself derives pleasure from giving pleasure. That is why he thinks the action right. Utilitarians, properly so called, are those who think that right conduct consists not in pursuing their own pleasure but in promoting "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." In either case the decisive objection is that there is no means of distinguishing between one pleasure and another, except by its intensity. It is as right, perhaps more right, to indulge a passion for another man's wife than to listen to a classical concert. Moreover any action may be justified by its end : if, on balance, it causes more happiness than pain, it is right. Thus it would be right to murder an irritating mother-in-law and so restore peace and harmony to a whole family.

It is a curious irony that in the public mind Christian ethics have become identified with hedonistic utilitarianism. "Christian" conduct has come to mean kindness. And by kindness is meant giving people what they want. Thus it is unkind and "unchristian" to insist that married people should live together if they do not want to. It is unkind and "unchristian" to insist that a man should keep his word, when it has become irksome to do so. He would be so much happier if he broke his word, and we ought to promote happiness. The cause of this ironical situation lies in the partial truth contained in Utilitarianism. God does indeed desire men's happiness, and it is a duty to promote happiness and not to cause pain. But the human happiness which God desires is the happiness of maturity, of having reached our human goal of perfection. And for this many lower and transient pleasures have to be sacrificed, the good giving way to the better. The rightness of conduct has to be judged not in reference to the present only or to the immediate future—though these are relevant—but in reference also to the total good of the whole man, a good which extends beyond this life and is only fully realized in the society of heaven. Every man's true happiness lies in acquiring a full and developed personality, harmonious and controlled, and in taking his place in a community of such persons. Many of the things which we call happiness are, when persisted in, fatal obstacles

to the growth of such a personality : many of the things which we call tragedies are its unavoidable birth-pangs. The distinction between right and wrong is the distinction between those things which foster and those which fatally hinder man's growth to perfect manhood, his attainment of his eternal destiny to be fully himself. What these things are which advance a man towards the true end of his nature, are determined, and immutably determined, by God the author of that nature. He has laid down the path of growth. Man cannot alter it. He can only fail to perceive it.

Relativism holds that there is no ultimate and objective distinction between right and wrong. It is all a matter of taste and opinion. Different people have different ideas. They are all equally right or equally wrong. Because there is not any real distinction. It is all a matter of how people feel about things. And that depends chiefly on how they were brought up. There are as many different codes as there are different societies and cultures. But these codes are only convenient patterns of behaviour. They do not correspond to anything in the nature of things, but either they are only devices on the part of those in power to keep their subjects docile, or else they are general, if unconscious, agreements between the individual members of a society for the sake of a quiet life. The logical conclusion from such a view is that superior and intelligent persons who see through this pretence are above the so-called moral law, and are free to do what they like. Their behaviour is not to be limited by any moral considerations but only by their power to get what they want. Might is right. The conclusion for less powerful and superior persons is that it is never any good arguing with people about right and wrong. People have different ideas. Live and let live. It is as stupid to be angry with a person who sees no wrong in being cruel to a child as it is to be angry with a person who likes eating snails. In the end this comes to a position of complete scepticism. Nobody *knows* anything about anything. They merely have ideas and opinions, likes and dislikes. It is improbable that anyone holds this view in its fulness, for we all have a strong bias towards believing and asserting that our own opinions are actually true and

those of other people false. But it is this kind of relativism which underlies the modern tolerance of divergent codes of behaviour.

As against Utilitarianism and Relativism alike, Christianity holds strongly to the objective distinction between right and wrong. It appeals to the common-sense conviction that "I ought" does not mean the same thing as "I want" or "it would pay me." It appeals to the universal innate consent to the proposition that we must do good and avoid evil, and to the conviction that, in general and in outline, what is good and what is evil is the same for all men at all times, being determined by the intrinsic nature of man.

There is such a thing as human nature, which is the same in all men. It exists, like everything else, in order to become fully itself, to achieve its end. What that end is can be perceived, at any rate to a great extent, by the use of reason alone, unaided by any special divine revelation. For example, everybody has some idea of what is meant by a good man or a noble man. Everybody has some idea of what makes a society "advanced" or developed and what makes it primitive or decadent. Or again, that mind should control matter, the reason order the emotions, is clearly demanded by the very structure of our nature, in which there is a hierarchy of spirit, mind and body. To make the body obey the reason is in harmony with nature, to allow the body to dominate the mind is to violate nature. Temperance, self-control, has always been recognized as a virtue. Indeed there has always been a general recognition of what the virtues are : justice, courage, temperance, consideration for others. The man who has these is well on the way to realizing his true nature, to becoming a man. The coward, the thief, the libertine, the ruthless oppressor is stunting and maiming himself. He becomes less and less a man, as he becomes more and more the slave of some dominant impulse and obsession. He is unbalanced and only partially developed.

All this means that there is a pattern of general behaviour, a code of things to do and not to do, which derives necessarily from nature itself, from the simple fact that man is man. It is what is called natural law. The knowledge of it is not

peculiar to Christians : it is common to man. It may make things plainer, to give an illustration or two.

It is clear that man's power of memory, by means of which he can use the experience of the past as a guide for the present and can in some measure forecast the future and so provide for coming needs out of present superfluity—it is clear that this power of memory indicates the duty of thrift and prudence and condemns prodigality as unnatural. Man is meant to acquire control of his environment by such use of reason and to live free of the bondage of chance and desperate need. Wilful neglect to make provision for the future is to violate the law of nature and to incur the risk of the penalties which such violations incur.

Again, nature makes it abundantly clear that the survival and education of human offspring require a long and close union of the two parents. Kittens and puppies may survive birth from promiscuous unions, being adequately cared for by the mother alone, and quickly reaching an age of self-sufficiency. Not so human babies, whose slow development to maturity involves them in a long helpless dependence on their parents, and creates for the parents a long period of shared responsibility for the lives they have brought into the world. Hence the institution of marriage, found at all levels of human culture, and the general recognition of the virtue of chastity and of fidelity to the marriage bond.

Again, it is clear that the isolated individual man, the fictional solitary inhabitant of a desert island, cannot, or does not easily attain to, the full development of his personality and power. It is by sharing the fruits of their diverse labour, by each contributing that for which he has a special aptitude, that men accumulate wealth, and by wealth get leisure. It is by mutual intercourse and the exchange of thought that men acquire and distribute wisdom, and are able to practise and appreciate the arts. It is by living together that men develop their spiritual and mental powers and become persons. In other words, as Aristotle said, Man is by nature a political animal. He is not meant to live alone but in society. From this follows the universal recognition of the virtue of justice. Without justice there can be no stable society.