40

STYLES IN ETHICS

In all ages and nations positive morality has consisted almost wholly of prohibitions of various classes of actions, with the addition of a small number of commands to perform certain other actions. The Jews, for example, prohibited murder and theft, adultery and incest, the eating of pork and seething the kid in its mother's milk. To us the last two precepts may seem less important than the others, but religious Jews have observed them far more scrupulously than what seem to us fundamental principles of morality. South Sea Islanders could imagine nothing more utterly wicked than eating out of a vessel reserved for the use of the chief. My friend Dr Brogan made a statistical investigation into the ethical valuations of undergraduates in certain American colleges. Most considered Sabbath-breaking more wicked than lying, and extra-conjugal sexual relations more wicked than murder. The Japanese consider disobedience to parents the most atrocious of crimes. I was once at a charming spot on the outskirts of Kioto with several Japanese socialists, men who were among the most advanced thinkers in the country. They told me that a certain well beside which we were standing was a favourite spot for suicides, which were very frequent. When I asked why so many occurred they replied that most were those of young people in love whose parents had forbidden them to marry. To my suggestion that perhaps it would be better if parents had less power they all returned an emphatic negative. To Dr Brogan's undergraduates this power of Japanese parents to forbid love would seem monstrous, but the similar power of husbands or wives would seem a matter of course. Neither they nor the Japanese would examine the question rationally; both would decide unthinkingly on the basis of moral precepts learned in youth.

When we study in the works of anthropologists the moral precepts which

men have considered binding in different times and places we find the most bewildering variety. It is quite obvious to any modern reader that most of these customs are absurd. The Aztecs held that it was a duty to sacrifice and eat enemies captured in war, since otherwise the light of the sun would go out. The Book of Leviticus enjoins that when a married man dies without children his brother shall marry the widow, and the first son born shall count as the dead man's son. The Romans, the Chinese, and many other nations secured a similar result by adoption. This custom originated in ancestor-worship; it was thought that the ghost would make himself a nuisance unless he had descendants (real or putative) to worship him. In India the remarriage of widows is traditionally considered something too horrible to contemplate. Many primitive races feel horror at the thought of marrying anyone belonging to one's own totem, though there may be only the most distant blood-relationship. After studying these various customs it begins at last to occur to the reader that possibly the customs of his own age and nation are not eternal, divine ordinances, but are susceptible of change, and even, in some respects, of improvement. Books such as Westermarck's *History of Human Marriage* or Müller-Lyer's *Phasen der Liebe*, which relate in a scientific spirit the marriage customs that have existed and the reasons which have led to their growth and decay, produce evidence which must convince any rational mind that our own customs are sure to change and that there is no reason to expect a change to be harmful. It thus becomes impossible to cling to the position of many who are earnest advocates of *political* reform and yet hold that reform in our moral precepts is not needed. Moral precepts, like everything else, can be improved, and the true reformer will be as open-minded in regard to them as in regard to other matters.

Müller-Lyer, from the point of view of family institutions, divides the history of civilization into three periods—the clan period, the family period, and the personal period. Of these the last is only now beginning; the other two are each divided into three stages—early, middle and late. He shows that sexual and family ethics have at all times been dominated by economic considerations; hunting, pastoral, agricultural and industrial tribes or nations have each their own special kinds of institutions. Economic causes determine whether a tribe will practise polygamy, polyandry, group marriage, or monogamy, and whether monogamy will be lifelong or dissoluble. Whatever the prevailing practice in a tribe it is thought to be the only one compatible with virtue, and all departures from it are regarded with moral horror. Owing to the force of custom it may take a long time for institutions to adapt themselves to economic circumstances; the process of adaptation may take centuries. Christian sexual ethics, according to this author, belong to the middle-family period; the personal period, now beginning, has not yet been

embodied in the laws of most Christian countries, and even the late-family period, since it admits divorce under certain circumstances, involves an ethic to which the Church is usually opposed.

Müller-Lyer suggests a general law to the effect that where the state is strong the family is weak and the position of women is good, whereas where the state is weak the family is strong and the position of women is bad. It is of course obvious that where the family is strong the position of women must be bad, and vice versa, but the connection of these with the strength or weakness of the state is less obvious, though probably in the main no less true. Traditional China and Japan afforded good instances. In both the state was much weaker than in modern Europe, the family much stronger, and the position of women much worse. It is true that in modern Japan the state is very strong, yet the family also is strong and the position of women is bad; but this is a transitional condition. The whole tendency in Japan is for the family to grow weaker and the position of women to grow better. This tendency encounters grave difficulties. I met in Japan only one woman who appeared to be what we should consider emancipated in the West—she was charming, beautiful, high-minded, and prepared to make any sacrifice for her principles. After the earthquake in Tokio the officer in charge of the forces concerned in keeping order in the district where she lived, seized her and the man with whom she lived in a free union and her twelve-year-old nephew, whom he believed to be her son; he took them to the police station and there murdered them by slow strangulation, taking about ten minutes over each except the boy. In his account of the matter he stated that he had not had much difficulty with the boy, because he had succeeded in making friends with him on the way to the police station. The boy was an American citizen. At the funeral, the remains of all three were seized by armed reactionaries and destroyed, with the passive acquiescence of the police. The question whether the murderer deserved well of his country is now set in schools, half the children answering affirmatively. We have here a dramatic confrontation of middle-family ethics with personal ethics. The officer's views were those of feudalism, which is a middle-family system; his victims' views were those of the nascent personal period. The Japanese state, which belongs to the late-family period, disapproved of both.

The middle-family system involves cruelty and persecution. The indissolubility of marriage results in appalling misery for the wives of drunkards, sadists and brutes of all kinds, as well as great unhappiness for many men and the unedifying spectacle of daily quarrels for the unfortunate children of ill-assorted couples. It involves also an immense amount of prostitution, with its inevitable consequence of widespread veneral disease. It makes marriage, in most cases, a matter of financial bargain between parents, and virtually proscribes love. It considers sexual intercourse always justifiable within

marriage, even if no mutual affection exists. It is impossible to be too thankful that this system is nearly extinct in the Western nations (except France). But it is foolish to pretend that this ideal held by the Catholic church and in some degree by most Protestant churches is a lofty one. It is intolerant, gross, cruel and hostile to all the best potentialities of human nature. Nothing is gained by continuing to pay lip-service to this musty Moloch.

The American attitude on marriage is curious. America, in the main, does not object to easy divorce laws, and is tolerant of those who avail themselves of them. But it holds that those who live in countries where divorce is difficult or impossible ought to submit to hardships from which Americans are exempt, and deserve to be held up to obloquy if they do not do so. An interesting example of this attitude was afforded by the treatment of Gorki when he visited the United States.

There are two different lines of argument by which it is possible to attack the general belief that there are universal absolute rules of moral conduct, and that anyone who infringes them is wicked. One line of argument emerges from the anthropological facts which we have already considered. Broadly speaking, the views of the average man on sexual ethics are those appropriate to the economic system existing in the time of his great-grandfather. Morality has varied as economic systems have varied, lagging always about three generations behind. As soon as people realize this they find it impossible to suppose that the particular brand of marriage customs prevailing in their own age and nation represents eternal verities, whereas all earlier and later marriage customs, and all those prevailing in other latitudes and longitudes, are vicious and degraded. This shows that we ought to be prepared for changes in marriage customs, but does not tell us what changes we ought to desire.

The second line of argument is more positive and more important. Popular morality—including that of the churches, though not that of the great mystics—lays down rules of conduct rather than ends of life. The morality that ought to exist would lay down ends of life rather than rules of conduct. Christ says: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'; this lays down one of the ends of life. The Decalogue says: 'Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath Day'; this lays down a rule of action. Christ's conduct to the woman taken in adultery showed the conflict between love and moral rules. All His priests, down to our own day, have gone directly contrary to His teachings on this point, and have shown themselves invariably willing to cast the first stone. The belief in the importance of rules of conduct is superstitious; what is important is to care for good ends. A good man is a man who cares for the happiness of his relations and friends, and, if possible, for that of mankind in general, or, again, a man who cares for art and science. Whether such a man obeys the moral rules laid down by the Jews thousands of years ago is

quite unimportant. Moreover a man may obey all these rules and yet be extremely bad.

Let us take some illustrations. I have a friend, a high-minded man, who has taken part in arduous and dangerous enterprises of great public importance and is almost unbelievably kind in all his private relations. This man has a wife who is a dipsomaniac, who has become imbecile, and has to be kept in an institution. She cannot divorce him because she is imbecile; he cannot divorce her because she affords him no ground for divorce. He does not consider himself morally bound to her and is therefore, from a conventional point of view, a wicked man. On the other hand a man who is perpetually drunk, who kicks his wife when she is pregnant, and begets ten imbecile children, is not generally regarded as particularly wicked. A business man who is generous to all his employees but falls in love with his stenographer is wicked; another who bullies his employees but is faithful to his wife is virtuous. This attitude is rank superstition, and it is high time that it was got rid of.

Sexual morality, freed from superstition, is a simple matter. Fraud and deceit, assault, seduction of persons under age, are proper matters for the criminal law. Relations between adults who are free agents are a private matter, and should not be interfered with either by the law or by public opinion, because no outsider can know whether they are good or bad. When children are involved the state becomes interested to the extent of seeing that they are properly educated and cared for, and it ought to ensure that the father does his duty by them in the way of maintenance. But neither the state nor public opinion ought to insist on the parents living together if they are incompatible; the spectacle of parents' quarrels is far worse for children than the separation of the parents could possibly be.

The ideal to be aimed at is not lifelong monogamy enforced by legal or social penalties. The ideal to be aimed at is that all sexual intercourse should spring from the free impulse of both parties, based upon mutual inclination and nothing else. At present a woman who sells herself successively to different men is branded as a prostitute, whereas a woman who sells herself for life to one rich man whom she does not love becomes a respected society leader. The one is exactly as bad as the other. The individual should not be condemned in either case; but the institutions producing the individual's action should be condemned equally in both cases. The cramping of love by institutions is one of the major evils of the world. Every person who allows himself to think that an adulterer must be wicked adds his stone to the prison in which the source of poetry and beauty and life is incarcerated by 'priests in black gowns'.

Perhaps there is not, strictly speaking, any such thing as 'scientific' ethics. It is not the province of science to decide on the ends of life. Science can show

that an ethic is unscientific, in the sense that it does not minister to any desired end. Science also can show how to bring the interest of the individual into harmony with that of society. We make laws against theft, in order that theft may become contrary to self-interest. We might, on the same ground, make laws to diminish the number of imbecile children born into the world. There is no evidence that existing marriage laws, particularly where they are very strict, serve any social purpose; in this sense we may say that they are unscientific. But to proclaim the ends of life, and make men conscious of their value, is not the business of science; it is the business of the mystic, the artist and the poet.

(*Our Changing Morality*, ed. Freda Kirchwey, New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1924.)