Why We Are Moral

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Although—and as we have many times explained—morals are modes of conduct which have become customary, and the intent of the passionate rage in support of the moral is to shield these customs from anything which may cause them to vary, this exposition does not explain why these modes, primarily special and particular, adapted to serve the interests not of All but of a Few should have become customary for All: so much so in fact that the guardianship of morals is in the safest hands when it is left to the fierce partisan feelings of the "Crowd." Before going into the psychology which explains this problem, so perplexing on the surface, it is advisable to indicate a nice distinction which has come to exist between kinds of conduct to which, in popular usage, is given the term "Custom," and conduct equally customary but to which the term morals ordinarily is given.

Custom is habitual conduct, but to the observance of which public opinion attaches small weight either by way of approval or disapproval. The emotion which failure to observe it calls up is, in the main, surprise, not the blind, passionate rage which the bulk of people show at the infringement of morals. Its observance or otherwise is left to individual whim; judgment as to its benefits or disadvantages is left to the caprice of private opinion. It is a habit which lies open and unprotected from vulgar inquiry and personal individual tests of its value. Its valuation is not fixed though its observance be wide-spread and general. What separates Morals from Custom (popular version) is the value which Authority (which commands public opinion) sets upon the habit's significance. If the reference is to customary conduct of which the continuance is necessary for the maintenance of the power which keeps the articulate class in authority, such conduct is carefully extracted from its association with mere customs and elevated by Authority to the plane of the Sacred by the laying of the Taboo on all discussions as to its origin and the fundamental nature of its motives, so that in time it comes to be regarded as the Mysterious, the Occult, the Supernatural, the Divine. Whereas customs are exposed and open to valuation, their ancestry apparent and their future the possible victim of whim and caprice, morals are kept unsullied from the common and mundane touch and their origin and valuation one may question only under pain of becoming impious and a blasphemer. Naturally many customs are on the fringe between the status of Customs and that of Morals, a fact to which elegant if delicate young intellectuals owe many hours of exciting and dangerous sport. The debating clubs of the Literary and Philosophic Societies and of the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Society, of the Y.W.C.A's, not to mention the Smart Set and the Cranks: what violent intellectual striving has

given these birth if not the desire to settle points of such cosmic significance as the Right and the Wrong of church-going, theatre-going, gambling, racing; of those crimes or larks for women: smokes, bicycles and bloomers, dyed hair and paint ? To decide whether these things belonged to the go-as-you-please realm of Custom or to that realm which supports the Cosmos high above Chaos —Morals, has provided occasion for the exercise of the strong and daring young wits of the last half-century.

This popular distinction between Morals and Custom throws into relief the question which still awaits an answer as regards the genesis of morals.

If men *have* held to custom, common sense is ready to suggest that this is not due to accident, and if customs have been fostered it has been because— sheer ease apart—the results which come from doing so are such as seem to serve their interests best. Did they not, the custom would surely if not speedily have been abandoned. And if not from a prescience of this willingness of men to abandon a custom productive of disappointing results, what other motive would the authorities have had for taking measures to ensure such customs as they consider significant from the possibility of such a fate, by protecting them with that "Mystery" which results in their conversion into Morals. Customs are habits which *may* be kept up. Morals are customs which Authority insists *must* be kept up, good results or no. What, then, is the instinct, primary and fundamental as it must be to have held good for so long, which makes the great mass of people, the governed classes, not merely faithful to morals in face of their ill-effects, but faithful in an ardent and passionate spirit which does not seek to spare either themselves or those near and dear to them? The character and working of the inducements which are responsible for this seeming miracle, reveal how unerring is the instinct which leads men steadily to track down their major satisfactions through a whole complex tangle of conflicting considerations.

The basis of any scheme of morals is altruism. The moral claim that its observance, against or in conformity to inclination is for "Good," obviously is prepared to demand the over-riding of the private "good" of him whose inclination is against it in favour of the "good" of those "others" who constitute the All: in which remote good the thwarted one is vaguely enjoined to believe that he will once again refind his own.

An element of strong, if vague, distrust of the belief that one finds one's interest served best in the good of All, does not encourage a close observer to seek for the clue of unswerving moral action in the influence of this generalisation: the Unity of Humanity. One is tempted rather to look about for definite egoistic rewards in altruism itself than to believe there exists so much solid weight in flighty conceptual stretches for the popular intelligence. What, then, does Altruism offer to these egoists of not-too-intelligent an order? On its face value the theory of Altruism appears to be a tactful statement of the case for peaceful submission among the Dominated, and is made current by the powerful egoists who are the backbone of the dominant class what time it suits the latter's interests to remain at peace: that is, while refraining from those more violent forms of competition called war. It is the inculcation of the principle that it is wise to make peaceful terms with, and good friends of, those who have established a dominance by respecting their

status, their interests and their wishes. That it is the *dominated* class which practises altruism whereas the dominant practise it only in so far as their necessities, *i.e.*, their interests, permit them, in no way detracts from the weight of evidence which goes to prove its origin among the dominant: it merely supplies additional testimony as to the fine quality of the tact employed in its inculcation. Thus morality, *i.e.*, the habitual practice of altruism made compulsory by Authority and Public Opinion, is part of the great game of egoistic war—the interplay of interests—which ebbs and flows ceaselessly wherever life is. In that warfare, however, morality represents such a distinction as to method that it is convenient to label it separately and allocate it to a niche of its own. Morality is the mode of warfare made use of during the "civil" periods, its rôle corresponding to the physical slaughter which is the mode when the warfare of civilisation gives place to a special kind of warfare ordinarily called war. The difference consists in the substitution of weapons—of Words in place of Armaments. The nature of moral warfare necessitates a sort of seige-action in place of the aggressive physical assaults of armed warfare. The moral concepts fence round the authoritarian class as effectually as, if not more than, concrete fortifications do a city; the action of these Sacred Words being not so much to withstand the savagery of an onslaught as to paralyse the forces of the enemy before he can lift up an arm against them.

Their effect, handled as Authority tactfully handles them, amounts to that of hypnotism: results not however due to a brilliantly conceived, conscious artifice or planned contrivance of means to purposed ends on the part of the dominant: but of a semi-conscious exploiting on their part of an elementary human instinct too obviously in existence for its possibilities to be ignored. On the other hand the practice of altruism as opposed to its theoretical exhortation, subserves urgent egoistic needs on the part of the second-rate egoistic powers. If its observance by the dominated serves the egoism of the dominant inasmuch as it spares their energies from the necessity of constant reassertion of superiority, it spares at the same time the vanity of the dominated. The "status quo" which at first blush was accepted through necessity and fear by the class which that "state" leaves subjected, is, thanks to morality, afterwards accepted in happy submission by dint of the tactful assaults which the moral concepts make on their vanity. Owing to the comforting hypnotism of "morality" and its "altruism" the submissively dominated are able to flatter themselves with the thought that the "Great" most scrupulously desire and strive after the formers' own special and particular "good": that these actually make themselves anxious on account of the state of their souls in addition to care for their temporal good; and. later, in return for the adoption of the course of action enjoined by the conceptual scheme—action which always turns to the Good of the established, by the way—they are rendered happier still by the sound of the inflating "well done" of their betters. It all works extremely well. Man is the vainest of the animals, and individual men are vain in inverse ratio to the stoutness of their spiritual stamina. The "Crowd" the Non-distinctive, the Majority being the vainest, the appeal of Morality realises its own special hunting-ground in their midst. The "Crowd" provide the country's moral backbone. They even make a boast of it. And sensibly enough since such Conduct as we arrange to live by, we arrange also to praise if we value our own comfort. And the adoption of Morality is as much a piece of distinctive human ingenuity—a display of intelligence—as is the adoption of Arms. That it is more definitely connected with the swagger of the dominated, whereas prowess in Arms is the swagger of the Dominant, need not necessarily induce the former to misprise the solaces of their class.

Tennyson somewhere sings, not without a gasp of surprise indeed at his unexpected discovery, of the speech which half reveals and half conceals the thought within. As far as the speech, which moral concepts are wrapped in is concerned, the poet has gone wrong in his proportions. Their *whole* intent is to conceal: and the motive is as purposive with those who practice them as with those who teach. That both sides are inarticulate and only semi-conscious does not detract from the superlative skill with which the set purpose is achieved. It enhances it rather. Moral principles resting on altruism, by a skilful sleight of hand conceal the fact that altruism is an illusion created to subserve motives wholly egotistic; that the interchange can be effected without raising a breath of suspicion, is due to the suffusing influence of one of the most fundamental elements affecting human emotion: to the action of vanity.

Vanity skilfully played upon goes a long way towards confounding even the soundest human judgment. As palpably as heat expands a gas, flattery expands the human spirit beyond the normal. It is this sense of expansion which causes men to feel pleasure; it is the sensation of conscious life in actual being: it is in fact the sense we call power. A flouting of vanity depresses spirit and creates despondency. Both actions—inflation and depression—tend to take place the more readily the flimsier the vital force on which repute acts, but it is probable that on no single intelligent human being can they fail to make some little variation. It is true that those who are concerned with their own self-initiated interests and with whom the powers which have play over their spirits are more self-centred and self-impelled, are less responsive to outside treatment. It happens however, that with the vast majority of men, obedience and imitation are the strongest springs of action. To be capable of acting from a self-interested motive is extremely rare. Hence it turns out that the balance of pleasure for most men must be come at by way of honour conferred by stronger and more definitely conscious egoistic powers. The balance of satisfaction when all has been counted in fear of failure, fear of envy, of punishment, hostility, fear of lonelessness, and a deadening sense of uncertainty—for the vast majority of men falls on the side of honour rather than on the other. Accordingly men's actions inevitably set towards Honour and the earning of Applause. Whereupon propitiation rather than aggression becomes their natural rôle. It becomes their virtue and all forces— men and things.—which make little of propitiation— which is peace, love—are their natural enemies. All things propitiatory become thereupon "good": propitiatory proposals, offers of peace, civility, mildness of temper, and all species of intra-mediation are "good": and those w h o make them are "good": and it is "good" to fall in with them. "Good," that is, for those who love Honour, for Morality, for the reputation of Altruism. Hence the moral demands find in these second-rate egoists a mind and temper ready prepared for them: those who desire to be persuaded are already waiting for those who will persuade them: the two come together by an inevitable attraction: the outcome of a natural desire to make use of each other. United, they make a compound hard and resistant enough to baffle all attempts to break in upon it: a nugget to break one's teeth against rather than to crack. Between the ardour of each for the other there is nothing to choose.

There are unobserving persons who imagine that human beings desire a commodity which they call Truth. Now truth is a much-used word which may mean anything or nothing according as one is pleased to employ it: but allowing for the moment that it means what such persons imagine it to mean, *i.e.*, a faithful description of passions and motives and of the relative powers

among the individuals of a community, it is the crassest stupidity to think that people desire truth or anything approaching it. You, dear reader, don't want such truth about yourself. I, dear reader, won't have it about myself. The maximum quantity of this species of truth which you and I can stand is just as much as we are compelled to swallow from our own disillusioning experiences; and even this amount we prefer not to discuss with any, particularly not with familiars—families and friends. But many of us are not averse from airing this truth as it relates to others: our rivals and acquaintances, though even here we must be content with a reasonable amount: penetration must not penetrate too far because instinctively we are aware that some short distance beneath its surface-layer the fabric of truth is in one piece: lower than a certain depth the same fabric covers us all; penetrate inwards too deeply and w e all stand with our motives naked and exposed. And our motives are far more elegant clothed, as clothed they are. Men have clothed them partly, perhaps, on account of use and comfort, and partly because they have conceived a shame for them: a shame which is the reverse side of the cult of Honour in fact. Only the external motive-— the altruistic motive—is kept in evidence: the motive which was the motive of the show of altruism is concealed: instinctively men know that it is of the egoistic and dishonourable kind, and a poor specimen at that. Men would never indeed have fallen into the attitude which makes them ashamed of it had they not been aware that it was poor. Altruism is egoism at the second and tenth rate, adopted because of one's inability to make headway in the best. If men do not feel themselves possessed of the power to make themselves respected on account of their skill in getting what they want they compound in a purely egoistic bargain and become Moral. And serviceably and comprehensibly enough. The pleasure they will get from applause is likely to exceed any satisfaction they expect to get from enterprises initiated by themselves: and on show of the balance their egoism makes choice—for a cloak of altruism. (The disadvantages they meet will form another story.) But because they are not proud of the necessity which forces them they conceive a quite sound detestation for the "Searchers for Truth ": alongside their approval of the preachers of the Moral Ideal, They are suspicious of the evidences of "Truth": they are not suspicious of the Moralist's praise: they have no need to be, because praise to them is an end in itself: it is what they want: the bona-fide exchange for the services they have rendered.

The Trojans were advised to be on their guard against the Greeks when they came offering gifts; and sensibly, because such gifts to the Trojans were of small concern: had these gifts been more to them than Troy itself what would there have been to fear in receiving them? So with the Moral and the Dominated's reception of the praise of the Moralists. Their praise is Honour and Honour they have made into the crown of life: how should they then allow the prying chatter of so-called "Searchers for Truth" to endanger that which can confer on them their most desired boon: allow the spoil-sports and kill-joys a free hand amongst their own selected "good." And a moral community is not going to welcome with a shout of glad surprise a too closely probing inquiry into the reasons of morals ! They consider it is enough that they are moral because it suits them, *all things considered.* And they are not prepared to regard it as good manners to inquire beyond a point what those things are. Their elaborate altruistic make-believe : their artificial moralist construction is built round about what for them constitutes the charm of life: subtly flattered vanity. The fact that it is all on an "artificial" basis: a verbal basis does not affect them: indeed the fact is lost sight of until civilisation gives place to war: when this base proves to have been not only artificial but a trifle flimsy.

Men find morality none the worse, *i.e.*, it gives no less satisfaction because it is artificial than a picture or a novel does because it is artificial; the subtlest situations in life gather round just those

things which are most frail at their foundations, assumptions which, by a tacit understanding are allowed for, but which are too perishable to be battered about in discussion. The artificialities of civilisations are not despicable because a sword may one day shatter all their delicate and subtle tracery; they are to be despised only when they fail in that which they set out to accomplish, *i.e.*, to provide satisfactions equal to or greater than those which they might have attained by a more natural, *i.e.*, a more frankly egoistic application of ability would have furnished. One would be for instance an ingrate, not to say a fool, to cavil at those aids to beauty which an ill-favoured human adopts to avert at least the repulsion of his fellows, just because they were artificial: if they serve their purpose. Very amusing, charming, important, and impressive are the things which are "artificial." Even a Krupp gun is artificial. In fact it is not artificiality which affects the question: it is utility. The measure of the value of artificialities like the measure of the value of everything else is gauged by the purpose to which they are set, and their efficacy in achieving that purpose. And purposes depend on the men who propose them: their spiritual size among other things. He is a sad and sorry man who seeks to frame a purpose bigger than he has the capacity to enjoy the achieving of. So a man with a passion for big schemes but without the capacity to effect them draws greater satisfaction from being a doorkeeper in the houses of the great than he could eating out his heart toiling at his own bench, the independence of which his taste cannot relish: it is, in fact, too independent for him. What he would gain in satisfaction, of course by so doing, he sacrifices in status: but then all satisfactions demand their price. When these are greater than our natural competence provides for we perforce let ourselves out into bondage if bent on securing them. Our too great wants and our too small abilities are the exploiter's opportunity.

One begins to understand why cranks and their works come to so little. They have the misfortune to witness an indiscretion: one little brick in the wall of pretence has fallen away and one thin shaft of light has revealed egoism and duplicity at some point in the scheme of things. And for the rest of their lives they live in wonder and uneasiness at their own discovery. They devote their energies to the blocking-out of that one gleam. They inaugurate a "propaganda." That it is but one thin pencil streak of an ever-shining sun-like orb does not occur to them. The world, to be sure, is heedless of their "discovery," and is in no WAY "upset" to meet their "exposure.' Nor is it alarmed by those who cry out against "Cant." Though men do not clearly *know*, they instinctively *feel* that one who makes a fuss about "cant" does not understand cant. They feel it is not cant that is objectionable but poor cant: cant that is so badly sung that it fails in its purpose, *i.e.*, the complete deception of those whom it is intended to impress. The way to deal with him who objects to cant is to ignore him or soothe him as the case may demand, but never to follow up his argument. The Church of Rome has the prescient understanding which knows this: it does not make the mistake of thinking that doubts can be laid to rest piecemeal. It knows its business and promptly anathematises doubt. It knows that the correct answer to all the arguments of the Devil is to kill the Devil. Nor is the World greatly put about by those who make light of its morals on the big scale: it forgives its Napoleons as soon as their immediate disagreeableness is forgotten and withdrawn: while as for the immoral on a small scale, men content themselves with administering the usual and necessary severe rebuke and punishment. It is a different person for whom they reserve their full implacable rancour. Napoleon at the close of a single century after his

death is already held in honour more or less: but four centuries have passed since Machiavelli wrote the "Prince," and he still remains "Old Nick." In fact, the Devil is a symbolic generalisation of all the injuries done to the Altruistic Interpretation by those who dare to crumble the moral concepts, and lay bare their egoistic foundations: so robbing them of their popular title to Honour. The Devil is the common spirit of all Blasphemers everywhere: Blasphemers being those who speak injuriously against the Sacred Words. The Blasphemers are the figures drawn up in antithesis to those of the Heroes. A Hero is one who represents the sublimation-point of adhesion to the Divine; his distinguishing attribute is his close kinship with the Gods to whose greater glory his bold deeds minister: that is, he is one whose deeds establish the Word-System, the Moral-Scheme, the Altruistic-Good, by providing them with a supremely hypnotising Crown of Honour. Of course the Moral or Altruistic Scheme holds good only within the limits of the particular community which has conceived its own sum-total of the "All" as the single Organic Unit. Morality can only find a place in a community in which the various factions have tried their strength, and have more or less contentedly accepted the verdict and settled down in their suitable classes as Servers and Served, Dominant and Dominated. When two such moral communities are at logger-heads and proceed to violent war, moral blandishments are at a discount. As it is not the common people—the practisers of the altruistic and the moral—who make international wars, but rather the dominant and more strongly egoistic classes, the warring parties do not attempt to address each other in terms of morals save in so far as it is necessary to spare the moral susceptibilities of their own respective following—their respective crowds. Otherwise, in war, it is bluntly a struggle of Might against Might: and all the weapons of Might are pressed into service precisely in so far as they give promise of success, *i.e.*, of crushing the opponent. But articulate spokesman of neither side could say as much openly because of the attentive ears of their followers as was said above: They know that sooner or later this specific kind of warfare, fierce as for the moment it is, will cease for a period and no matter which side wins or loses each will have to settle down in their own communities and make good once more the Altruistic Tale among their fellows. A wise economy, therefore, teaches them that though war compels them to stand face to face with all verbal veils withdrawn before the eyes of an acknowledged enemy, it is not necessary to destroy these veils. If they have no place in war they have a place of extreme importance among subjected peoples as long as ever the Dominant seek to perpetuate submission by dint of the artifices of peace: by Words in preference to the Sword.

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