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Ethics and Politics

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Ethics and Politics.

"MAN is by nature," said Karl Marx, "if not a political animal, at any rate a social one." It would be more accurate to say that as man is a social being he is inevitably a political one. In the interests of accuracy, too, we may take exception to the term, repeated to the point of tedium in these days, which describes man as a "social animal." In the first place it is a redundancy, since all the animals are social and, in the second, if man is no more than an animal politics may be applicable to him but ethics can never be; the beast of the field has yet to be found which takes an interest in moral laws.

Because man is both a social and a political creature, and because there is at the present time a universal yearning for a better world, the relation of ethics to politics is of indisputable importance. The greatest of the thinkers have always regarded the two as being intimately related, in fact as but two aspects of one inquiry. For the Greeks there was no gulf fixed between them. Plato, envisaging in his *Republic* the ideal State, declined to see the just man as anything else but an essential component of the just society. To separate the ideal of the good man from the ideal of the good State was to him unthinkable, and his vision of the perfect State in this immortal book is as much an essay in ethics as it is an essay in politics, because one without the other is inconceivable. Aristotle likewise wrote his *Ethics* as an introduction to his *Politics*. For these two pre-eminent thinkers, as for the Greek mind generally, an antithesis, far less an antagonism, between the nature and end of the individual and the nature and end of the State simply did not exist and, what is more, had never even occurred to them. The modern man may, therefore, learn from them at least two things, that ethics and politics are inseparable and that it is erroneous, if not indeed impossible, to consider a man as a mere isolated unit, for the springs of his moral life are found as much in his association with his fellows as within his own soul.

It is to the Renaissance, not to the Reformation as the critics of Protestantism affirm, that we trace the rediscovery of the individual with his right to private judgment in things secular and sacred alike and, therefore, the beginning of that sense of antagonism between individual and community which has grown steadily stronger as the years have gone by, and which has now reached, and probably passed, its climax. Writing as far back as forty years ago, Dr. James Seth, in one of his books on ethics, declared that the doctrine of non-interference by the State had very nearly reached its reduction to absurdity and that we had escaped from the serfdom of feudalism to the serfdom of uncontrolled individualism. To-day most people see only too clearly

that this point has been fully reached and that a far closer co-operation in all the spheres of human life is imperative and, if necessary, must be enforced. With, on the one hand, the evils of totalitarianism, the reaction against individualism, wherein the person is submerged under the claims of the State and, on the other hand, the evils of unregulated individualism as two object-lessons compelling attention thinking men are asking how society can steer a course between the Scylla of deadly totalitarianism and the Charybdis of riotous individualism. The answer to that question can only be discovered by asking another; what is the ethical basis of the State? How, in fact, may ethics and politics be brought back into something approaching the close relation they bore to each other in the Greek view of life?

In the quest for a clear answer it is, however, necessary to reverse the Greek order and make ethics precede politics. The manner in which society can be ethically organised can only be decided after a coherent and luminous view of what is good has been conceived. Principles have to be formulated and clarified before the practice of them can be initiated. It is clear that the State is coming into its own again, and one of the perils of post-war reconstruction is that having battled to the death, paying an appalling price in blood and sacrifice, with a monstrous totalitarianism we may find ourselves saddled with a gentlemanly one. That danger can be averted only if the citizens will pursue, before it is too late, a serious enquiry into the ethical foundations of society and will resolve that ethics and politics shall never be separated. One of the tragedies of contemporary history has been that not merely have nations abandoned ethics, but many Christians have abandoned politics. They can atone for this great error by ensuring that in the future ethics shall not cease to be political and politics shall never cease to be ethical. To separate the two, in thought or in practice, is false, and because it is false it leads to disaster.

Such an enquiry into the ethical foundation of the State discloses immediately a number of primary principles, the first of which is that the ethical unit is the person. In all human relationships the person is the fundamental factor, and reverence for personality must be the eternal concern of organisations and States if life is not to become intolerable. Of all the varied phenomena of life on this planet, only the person is rational, only the person is conscious of values and has the desire and capacity to pursue them, only the person feels the pull of moral obligation. The ultimate unit to which all organisations, all spheres of activity or speculation must be referred is man, and history with its forward leaps and backward lapses is an affair, not of concepts and ideas, but of men and of God, while the clue to the understanding of the

universe is that reality is personal. To say that the ethical unit is the person is, however, not the same thing as saying it is the individual. The individual becomes truly a person only in contact and community with others, and to isolate a man from other men is to make him less than a person, because it denies to him those opportunities of self-fulfilment that can be found only in society. The person is therefore the individual in society.

Following upon this first principle is another of primary importance. Every man is to be treated as an end in himself and never as a means to an end. When that principle is fully honoured it serves as a guarantee against a multitude of evils, not the least of which is that of the absolute State. It is a guarantee against the State being regarded as an end in itself, having a mystical nature as though it were a personality itself and possessing rights that in fact only belong to the person. This great Kantian principle, which is really a Christian one, establishes a basis upon which can be secured the dignity and value of the person and formulates the idea of "reverence for personality" into a rule of guidance.

Arising out of this comes the next fundamental principle, that the State is instrumental. While the person is an end the State is a means. Hegel has a great deal to answer for in giving rise to that perverted view of the State which has in these latter days brought misery untold to millions of men and women. "The existence of the State," he declared at one point, "is the movement of God in the world. It is the absolute power on earth; it is its own end and object." But the State is merely a convenient piece of social machinery, an expedient, which has come into being for certain desirable purposes and may, at some future date, dissolve before the construction of some new, more convenient expedient which will be necessary to meet the needs of future generations of men. The State exists for the person, to promote his well-being and so order affairs that it is possible for every man to pursue that form of the good which seems to him the right one. If the State is to be regarded as though it had personality of its own it is equally logical, or illogical, to ascribe the same qualities to other forms of human association as, for instance, trade unions, clubs or churches. But no one in his right senses would regard any of these as ends in themselves. Certainly no Christian with a true conception of his faith would regard a church as anything but instrumental to the will and purpose of God. The mystical view of the State is not only an absurdity, it is a menacing perversion. The State is instrumental and its object is the development and fulfilment of the person.

By what means may the person find self-realisation, how may the personality be developed to the full height of its possible

stature? The answer of ethics to that question is that the true development of the person is attained by the living of the good life. Here we are not concerned to declare what form the good life ought to take. It ought never to be imposed from without, and each man must decide for himself. We are only concerned to lay down the primary principle that fulfilment of personality is achieved through the good life and to assert that the aim and purpose of the State is to promote the good life of every member of the community. It is not the function of the State to take upon itself the task of indicating to the citizens the kind of life they ought to live, the ends they must pursue and the values they must cherish, but it is the function of the State to ensure that every person is able to follow that life which seems good to him and it must, therefore, secure to every man his liberty of thought, worship and action so long as that liberty does not encroach upon the liberty of others.

This involves another fundamental of equal importance. In order to foster the good life of its citizens the State addresses itself to two imperative functions, the one negative and the other positive. The first is legal justice, which must be established and maintained to restrain those who would encroach upon the rights, liberties and happiness of their fellow-citizens, and to defend the people from such transgressions. This form of justice is to protect the person from aggression from whatever quarter it is likely to come. A legal system has to be formulated which approximates as closely as any such system can to the moral law and which must have behind it sufficient force to compel obedience. The second and more positive function is social justice. There are many forms of society where the conditions of life are such that it is impossible for the person to attain self-realisation because it is impossible for him to live the good life. In order that the good life may be possible for all the State has the task of setting up and preserving a desirable standard of general conditions. This involves compelling any who are unwilling to make their just contribution to the common welfare to attend to their duties and to discharge their obligations, and it also involves a certain amount of State interference in the lives of the people to ensure that conditions are what they ought to be, that every man is obliged to take advantage of his right to work, that every man enjoys a reward for his work that is sufficient for his needs, that every citizen shall be educated to an agreed standard, that the State shall, in short, so determine the social environment in all its aspects as they affect the well-being of the citizen that the ethical life is possible for everyone without exception. Safeguards, however, must be assured that the State does not carry this interference too far and so over-step its ethical limits that it ceases to be the

guardian of the person and becomes the proprietor of the person.

The relation of ethics and politics demands that the conception of sovereignty be defined and the seat of sovereignty be determined. In modern times a distinction of great importance has been drawn between legal sovereignty and political sovereignty. The legal sovereign is that power which interprets and administers the laws of a people, while the political sovereign is the supreme power, the final authority in the State from which all other authority, legal and otherwise, is ultimately derived. "Behind the sovereign which the lawyer recognises there is another sovereign to whom the legal sovereign must bow." Ultimate authority is therefore located in political sovereignty, for the true seat of which thinkers of various schools have searched for many centuries. But without diverting to discuss all the possible theories and counter-theories of political thought, it seems right to maintain that from the ethical point of view sovereignty must reside in the will of the people as a whole. This entails a democratic form of state-organisation, which to be truly successful must be an educated and enlightened democracy, allowing freedom of discussion and criticism to minorities and in which all the citizens play their due part and take seriously to heart the responsibilities that lie upon their shoulders. Political sovereignty abides in the whole body of the people, "whatever forms of expression or outlet it may find, and whatever agents may be legally empowered to act or think for it. The real or 'political' sovereign lies in the will of the people."

In the fulfilment of its ethical functions and in all its subsidiary activities, the State must look ahead to that time when the State, as at present constituted, shall have gone out of existence. To look forward to such an event is not to decry the purest forms of cultural nationalism or the noblest type of patriotism, but it does mean the hope that political nationalism will in due course give way to political universalism, that the goal of all human endeavour should be the withering away of the independent nation-state before the evolution of the one and indivisible world-state. The State as it now appears is, after all, but a stage in a long social and historical process which will eventually move on towards another and higher stage. Aristotle was not far wrong when, looking back over this process, he stated, "The family arises first; when several families are united . . . then comes into existence the village. . . . When several villages are united . . . the city comes into existence." From the city stage the process has gone on, and we now have the nation-state. But about this particular form of social and political organisation there is nothing sacrosanct and there is no reason for supposing that it represents the final level to which the historical process can attain; in fact, there is

every reason to the contrary. A theory of man's social life which comes to a sudden stop with the present arrangement of many independent sovereign States is clearly inadequate and, judged by the criterion of either ethics or history, obviously false. Men must therefore look forward to, and work for, the advance of that process, step by step and stage by stage, until the nation-state as we know it at present, has been superseded by the world-state. Beyond that it is, at this level of human knowledge and experience, impossible to see.

Thus we have laid down for our guidance certain primary principles which are drawn out and made plain by any discussion of the inter-relation of ethics and politics. The demands of Christian ethics would call not so much for modification or alteration of any of the foregoing, as for a difference of emphasis and an approach to the whole question from a rather different angle. Beyond the person as the ethical unit, beyond the social organisation lie the truths that personality is highest in fellowship with God, and that form of the State which should be striven for is that which approximates to the City whose builder and maker is God. The purpose of man and the function of the State will be to serve the ends of God while, as Alexander Miller has said in his *Biblical Politics*, "The Christian is called to use the machinery of justice, the social organisation which distributes bread and defends freedom, as an instrument by which he can make His Love operative towards all sorts and conditions of men." The Christian view of life will demand that all questions of sovereignty, whether legal or political, shall be interpreted in the light of the fact that God is Judge and Creator of man and his world; while the hope that out of the present conglomeration of independent nation-states there shall arise one, united world-state will be regarded from the standpoint which Paul adopts in *Ephesians*, that it is the will of God, indeed it is a Purpose even now inexorably moving forward to ultimate fulfilment, to bring the world into a unity around the throne of Christ. Certainly the Christian attitude calls for urgent and unceasing political thought and action on the part of Christian men, provided they bear always in remembrance the fact that life cannot be divided into sacred and secular departments since all is of God, and that even more basic truth that man is a fallen creature whose various and progressive structures all must in time decay, yet whose citizenship is not only of the cities of this earth but of that continuing city in the heavenlies which constitutes his real home. Christians and all others who take a serious view of ethics, however, will unite in seeing that ethics and politics are two sides of the same question. Ethics asks in what does the good life consist, while politics asks how the community may be so organised that the good life is a possibility for every citizen.

GRAHAM W. HUGHES.