

## MORAL CRISES UNDERLIE OUR OTHER CRISES

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### 1. Crises

Numerous persisting crises intensify their urgency. This fact seems so obvious that it will not be labored. Pollution, overpopulation, maldistribution, unemployment, wars and overkill war budgets, and now increasing crime rates, inflation, and energy shortages, to say nothing of Watergate dramatics, are among the better known crises. These crises are not self-solving, and they show no signs of abating. Whether they foreshadow extinction of mankind, or merely warn of aggravated viciousness ahead, many debate. But that something tremendous is needed, surely all will agree.

### 2. Causes

Causes of our crises are not so well known. But studies and comments about them are numerous. Such causes are complex. Some have been long in developing. Some result from our ignorance and from our general indifference to the need for planning for mankind as a whole. The conditions of the origin and nature of man developing in ecological interdependence with physical, geological, geographical, botanical, and zoological evolutionary trends set the stage. Invention of culture, including language, speeded productivity, travel, commerce, the industrial revolution, urbanization, science, and technology with ever-increasing ratios of advancing novelties. Nationalism as a political system, which was most useful in promoting some developments, has now become not merely an anachronism but a genuine obstruction to the kind of world-wide cooperation needed to deal with our crises. Although some, even many, crises occur, or seem centralized, within some nations, others, including our major ones, expand inexorably to include persons in all nations. It is not my purpose to explore all of these causes here. For it is my purpose to focus attention on an almost-completely neglected crisis and pervasive cause of our other crises, namely, our moral crisis.

### 3. Moral Crises

Without enumerating varieties of personal and social demoralization, I wish to claim that much of the excess aggravated by current crises is due in a fundamental way to decline in the power of traditional mores, including

sectarian religious mores, to provide assurance about the ultimate bases for moral appeals. This decline in power is variable, affecting different people, and different groups, in varying ways and degrees. Prevalence of primary group intimacy is a persisting source of the personal sense of worth and of shared values worthy of loyal support. But megalopolitan living not only diminishes primary group experience in children but also, according to one child psychologist, "parents see morals as relative and prefer to raise their children in a moral vacuum."

Underlying the crises multiplying in practice is a neglected crisis in moral philosophy. There are reasons why ethical theorists have failed to prepare us for present predicaments and to be ready to show us a way out. These will not be reviewed here.<sup>1</sup> But that both our theory and our practices increasingly lack a sound foundation needs to be made clear.

### 4. Moral Bases

Since personal and social survival and happiness depend upon some minimums of willingness to coexist, cooperate, and share in the world's goods, some minimums of common bases for agreement about the ultimate source of moral appeals are needed. I do not advocate discovering a new basis for morality but only discovering the bases which already actually exist and operate in human nature. I claim that these have been partly clouded from vision by emphasizing the peculiarities of particular sectarian explanations, on the one hand, and by hasty generalizations about moral relativism, based partly on findings of anthropologists, on the other.

We cannot see these ultimate bases if we do not look for them. Some sects claim that they already have them, so there is no need to look farther. Some anthropologists claim that there are none except the local mores ("The mores can make anything right."), so further search is needless. Some scientists claim that science cannot properly investigate moral and value phenomena, and so there is no need to try. Some philosophers (British Empiricists) claim that knowledge, and thus moral knowledge, is relative to the individual, so there is no need to look elsewhere. And some antiphilosophers (Existentialists) claim that ultimate reality is momentary, i.e., is the self-enacted existence of each momentary will, which may or may not choose to want morality; morality is relative not merely to the individual, but to the moment, so there is no need to look for any common basis for morality.

But I claim that, since persons are alike in some respects as well as different in some respects, such likenesses are common bases which may be observed. And further I claim that people around the world are more alike than different, both biologically and culturally, and that we can see these likenesses if we are but willing to look for them in sufficiently

general ways. I believe that common bases for moral appeals can be found which function somewhat already in people in every culture. Cultural traits can inhibit, modify, and obscure these bases; but adequate scientific effort can reveal them again and demonstrate their power and value for human survival and happiness.

#### 5. *Research Is Needed*

Even though presentation of my hypotheses may provide some with initial incentive for quick discovery, the majority of mankind, accustomed to traditional modes of moral justification, or at least their own personal habits of belief and action, will require considerable evidence before persuasion. Effort will be needed to marshal the facts in ways which are convincing, even after the effort to discover and demonstrate what are the ultimate bases for effective appeals.

#### 6. *Research Institutes Now Avoid Such Research*

Although my quest for information about research institute policies and practices is incomplete, thus far I have discovered no research institute which has, or plans to, reexamine the theoretical value and ethical foundations of current practices with a view to discovering both the ultimate nature of moral appeals and the divergence of current opinions, given as explanations of such practices, from such ultimate nature. Despite the claim of some to be comprehensively interdisciplinary, the fields of value and morality tend to be omitted from conceptions of comprehensiveness. Some claim to be concerned about values and morality. But problems of value and morality tend to be specific, such as abortion, pollution, drugs, maldistribution, conflict of interest, which supposedly may be resolved in terms of already-accepted theories of value and ethics. Some of these call for new standards of morality, or more humanistic ideals of moral practice; but none that I know of call for a rethinking of the underlying theories needed before such more humanistic ideals can become workable in practice.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>See my *Ethics as a Behavioral Science* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1974)

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