

NATURE, SOCIAL CONVENTIONS, FREEDOM AND IDEALS

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In this essay I wish to challenge the notion that: assuming the non-existence of God, assuming that man is the source of right and wrong, and assuming that he has no fixed nature, that it then follows that there are no objective standards of morality.

Nature

At least as far back as the early Greeks men have discerned that whatever comes into being also passes away. This is reflected in the etymology of the word for "nature" in Greek which is *physis*. It is even more clearly reflected in the etymology of the word *Natura* in Latin which is the feminine future participle of *nascor*, and means "about to be born." Nature, then, in our tradition has always meant for the reflective mind a perpetual coming into being and passing away. Plato at least as much as Aristotle was impressed by this impermanency of what we might call the furniture of the universe, and felt required by the thrust of reason (or perhaps the bewitchment of language) to postulate the Eternal if anything were to be truly said *to be*.

We have reason to be even more impressed and convinced of the all pervading character of change, movement, process. Some permanencies are found only at the level of sub-atomic particles if we are willing to concede either or both of two propositions: a) that when these structures enter into combinations with other structures they remain what they were, b) that these structures have never entered into combination with other structures. What is characterized by being alive is conspicuously *natura* in this etymological and traditional sense of the term "nature." Of course this coming into being takes place for the most part according to quite definite and limited patterns—that is supereminently obvious and incontrovertible on the biological domain, where the on goings and comings into being of a living being must take place according to certain very sharply definable modes. If the coming into being of a living being does not take *this* particular form within *these* time spans, it will cease to come into being, that is it will die.

When we say that *natura* is "fixed," we must have in mind, to speak with care, those patterns or structures according to which events take place always or for the most part. Only insofar as some event has a structure of recurrence can we say that the *nature* of what is coming to be *is so and so*. The *is* that we are using here is a timeless *is*, an atemporal *is*, and

an inchoate error. A recurrent structure or form of coming to be is what we should mean when we say *something is*, if it is part of nature.¹

With the emergence of life teleology enters into entities that are coming into being. Embarked on life, an entity is committed to maintaining a certain balance and harmony in its coming into being. Without a minimum of striving to retain its structure it ceases to be. At this level of life, value is sheer survival and a kind of commitment to that striving is a condition of its survival. A type of responsibility to that commitment is an indispensable condition to its survival. Only in persons do we encounter a deliberate and reflective bringing into being of anything.

The Greeks, Aristotle in fact as far as I know, established the distinction between *techne* (art) i.e., what comes into being through the agency of man, and *nature* whose coming into being is unreflective and indeliberate. But the terms are misleading as separate categories, for nature includes man. It is man's nature to bring himself into being, to fashion himself in his own image, according to his own ideal. Man's concrete lived history is the process in his artistry in Aristotle's sense, not only in material edification, but in the other artifacts he has made such as morality, religion, science, and so forth. Man's *nature* is to be an *artificer*. Everything man does is *artificial* when contrasted to any indeliberate coming into being.

However, man has constructed his science in the general sense in virtue of something that came into being without man—an impulse toward speaking about reality. Man's primordial impulse toward truth came into being without him, the carrying out of that impulse is in his hands. The myriad forms of man's speaking about being and about beings remain under the aegis of this primordial impulse, and when man diverges from that impulse he has failed his own nature, he has lied, been deceived, or made a mistake.

Likewise man has constructed his morality in virtue of something that came into being without his deliberation—an impulse toward care or love of being. Man's primordial impulse toward caring came into being without him, the carrying out of that impulse is in his hands. In carrying it out, he self-consciously and deliberately alters the form of his coming into being. For him not to retain any care or love of being is for him to cease to be the kind of entity that was thrown up on the shores of the world. To the extent that man is irresponsible he is a rebel or a recalcitrant against this coming into being. On the other hand the full object of man's care is all of being in an unqualified sense of the world, himself, others, all life, the cosmic process—and God, if there be one. Man's morality is co-extensive with his care.

Now, something can be faulty or correct, right or wrong only in terms of the rules of a game so to speak. When we believe that God has drawn

up the rules and revealed them we believe we have the standards prepared for us. When we believe that the standards are built into man's "nature" (his rationality say) then the standards are inherent in rationality. As long as any of these variants are considered satisfactory there is no paradox in speaking of failure and success in moral action. But when we grant that, save for the primordial thrust of morality which is to care, that it is men who have drawn up the rules of morality, a paradox arises. The paradox is that if man makes the rules he can never be mistaken unless he decides that something will count as a mistake. Of course one group of men will make such and such rules and others will make others that are out of phase with them, and in that case they are mutually wrong to each other. Are there any rules that would hold good for all men everywhere?

I have already attempted to show that there is one primordial standard built into man's very being—to care. Any rules man would make that would advocate ceasing to care would advocate annihilating value. This would be to attempt to step out of morality completely, to step out of humanity. I say *attempt* among other things because there is a paradox again in "advocating" ceasing to care which is a form of care—the caring to do away with care.

Now it is counter-intuitive or perhaps meaningless to say that man as maker of himself and of his standards of achievement could not possibly do wrong. Among other things this would entail the consequence that man can be guilty only if he sets his sights too high. Sin or failure would be possible only for the arrogant man, the man of *hubris*. His ideals proposed by himself would be the logical precondition of his "doing wrong."² The notion that man could not possibly do wrong would involve the logical precondition that he be content with whatever he did regardless of what it was. If this included that he be not obliged to care, again he would attempt to step out of morality, and by so doing would attempt to step out of humanity.

Nietzsche the grand nihilist speaks of going beyond good and evil, but this turns out to be a destruction before the rebuilding, for Nietzsche will turn around and tell us what good and evil are. And in general, is it not true that those who insist that there are no rules, turn around and make new ones? The moral question then should be an attempt to delineate the full stature of great human caring, and to this humanity is, as it were, condemned to by being born.

There is no absolute up and down, but it is the law of men's being to grow into entities who will make up and down a ninety degree angle running through their nose and navel to whatever they are standing on. Man is the source of his morality, but it is the law of man's being to grow into entities who will recognize oppression as evil and murder as well. These achievements, judging from history, take generations upon

generations to reach maturity, and it is even apparently possible for a society to insulate itself from some of these demands upon it and not experience them as universally binding.

The key problem for a morality that recognizes that standards are self set standards is that they *eo ipso* seem to lose their ultimate justification and even significance. This leads to our discussion of social convention as opposed to morality.

Social Convention

To say that morality is *merely* social convention is to equate two categories of approbation or disapprobation, one of which (the moral) is reducible to the other. In that case there is no contrast, there is no morality, the word is a useless appendage in the language and can do no work. Now if it were merely a matter of types of phonemes that one is to use, a philosopher would have no business discussing it. We can call morality anything we please, but if we call it social convention, then we tend to say that moralities are merely social facts, and our evaluations of such social facts are more social facts. To cry "outrage" at merciless exploitation of another or murder is merely a complex cry of sympathetic pain or at most the expression of a parochial sentiment that has become widespread through persuasion.

When Ivan Karamazov is overwhelmed with the horrifying thought that "Since there is no God everything is permitted" he is in the grips of essentially the same conviction and anguish as was Nietzsche when he announced the death of God. Both are reacting quixotically. Neither of these men are the type who could then sit down and work out with Bentham and Mill a so-called empirically testable principle of morality based on utility. These men are reacting prosaically.

Man's standards of restraint and achievement which are the domain of his morality are self-set standards, but he fails himself as an individual whoever does not live up to his possibilities, moreover he fails everything with which he has concern when he fails himself. It is a capital error to focus upon the human person as a spatio-temporal local event, and even more capital an error to focus on him as a space defined and determined substance. The person and all his circumstances, including everything he can know and care for is the field of man's reality and being. Beauty ceases to be when the person is not there to create it or enjoy it, hence human reality is one of the poles of a *logically necessary* correlation for beauty to be. Whatever of truth is possible requires man also as the logical correlate in a subject and object relationship. Man must take care of truth, and beauty and goodness, they are in his hands, and he can corrupt them or fulfill them. And each individual has his part to play in the preservation of them. If he sets his standards high then there will be the beauty, truth

and goodness that man's very being cries out for and demands of itself. The true nature of man is only known by reference to the best that he can make of himself. The standard then is after all an ideal, which it is in his power to define in his historical epoch.

Ideals

If we insist on thinking of the standards and rules of human conduct as somehow antecedent and fixed, rather than as emergent products of genial creators in our history, we are forced back into the notion of a fixed human nature that rings hollow. There are no antecedent and fixed principles. We are not born with inalienable rights. Those "rights" are in fact ideals, something to be striven for and struggled for by humanity insofar as it cares not merely for itself but for the rest of humanity, past, present and future. Our "rights" are forms of freedom dimly espied as possible achievements for all mankind, and their apparent fixity is merely due to the fact that the genius of men espied them as possible despite their almost non-existence in former eras. They appear quixotic to the prosaic mind. They appear prosaic to the quixotic mind. The reason why they remain sound to the classical mind is that nothing has yet come along that seems to be any better. The natural law is not something antecedent and fixed, it is like the rest of nature, coming into being. And if we can detect the main outlines of what can come into being as worthy of our fullest care as a community of mankind two thousand years before they are put into effect, that does not make them antecedent and fixed. The natural law does not hover over us, nor is it written in the heart of all men. The kingdom of ends that Kant spoke of is within *some* men, those who have developed their dedication to its coming into being.

Certainly to cry "outrage" at oppression and murder is a movement of the lips, but it is more. Certainly it is a convention, but it is more. It is a condemnation made with universal intent—and if any speaking being does not proffer it under those same circumstances the judgment that he is insensitive and immoral is backed up by decent men everywhere forever, and is backed up by the invocation of our being attempting harmony with the best in the cosmic process, and even by whatever gods or God there may be. Of course it is a human act to make such evaluations, but to say that it is *merely* human is systematically misleading. Whatever truth there is is human truth too, but unless it is proffered with universal intent there would be no such word as "truth." Human reason is concrete actual human reason, not Kant's abstraction of pure reason as such. There is only historical reason, the one found in an evolving humanity. And the natural law is clearly not built into every human being or society—we need only recall human sacrifice, slavery and exploitation to illustrate that.

Man is "free," we may say, to make himself into almost anything, but

he *will do it well* only if he listens to the promptings of the best he can know, feel and believe. What, then, does it mean to be free?

Freedom

Freedom is often contrasted with constraint, but that is only one way of using the word. If I make a movement which is a genuine action and not a convulsion, the movement will have a structure that makes sense however minimal. That structure is not a constraint, but the very form of a free act. The quixotic idea of structures as constraint, a commonplace of our counter-culture, is then a capital confusion. Further confusion is added by failure to distinguish between the *abstract* "individual" and the *concrete* individual-in-society.

An individual abstractly considered I may be free to swing my arms in any way I feel. But as a concrete man-among-other-men, I am not "free" to swing my arms where someone else's nose begins. This is not an infringement on freedom-as-a man-among-other-men, it is the form of freedom among men. As individual I am not free, but this is a misleading expression because I am not an individual only, I am a part of the life that is social existence.³

The task of civilization is to find the rules that most truly implement the individual's, and the societies' capacity for full existence. It is not the task of civilization to do away with rules altogether, but to find the structure of highest freedom for all.

Now it may be conceivable, however fantastically remote, that each individual exercising his spontaneity to the maximum will also obey the rules of his own coming into being, and those of the society he lives in. Then and only then would the inherent struggle and tension between freedom of the individual with himself, his society, and the rest of nature come about. This is a mere limiting notion. Individuals living wholly in harmony with themselves, their fellows and nature are either a community of saints (this is a quixotic idea) or a kind of anthill (this is a prosaic idea). The fact would remain that these saints or ants would be living in a structured society.

The positive law is a set of rules, and failure to comply with them, which one is always *able* to do, is a violation of the structure of the society governed by those rules. The natural law conceived of as the rules of justice emerging in a growing humanity are the unwritten rules of sound historical reason, and the failure of a society to attempt to match its law to that reason is a violation of the structure of freedom for men living at the period of time in which such rules of justice have emerged. On the view maintained here "objective" means the concretely realizable ideals, conceivable and practicable by men of outstanding rationality and outstanding goodwill.

To be free is surely "not to be shackled," and if we had no urge to achieve, to come into being, we could not be said to be shackled: a hindrance to our will to be is restraint on our freedom. But consider this. We may distinguish at least three forms of uttering a poem. The first would be the creative act of the poet, the second the repetition with conviction and personal appropriation by one who has found the poem superb, and the last one a rote rendition without feeling or understanding by one compelled to recite.

We cannot all be genial poets of new forms of human excellence in action or thought. However, none but the mentally retarded or feeble-minded have no capacity for being able to repeat with conviction and personal appropriation the forms of conduct and aspirations of the geniuses of morality—and this is sufficient justification for blaming those who do not acquire them. The genius alone, then is a *good* rebel, for he carves out new, superior forms of human living. The rest of us have to take our place among those who repeat in our individual and unique way, variations on a theme, with improvisations on the order of our individual gifts. It is true that all too often one merely apes those themes, turning them into a caricature of themselves, like the Christian who after reading the parable of Christ and the barren fig tree goes out and curses the heretic and considers him fit only for the fire, the patriot who proudly displays his wounds suffered in a senseless imperialistic war.

The phrase "to submit to principle" cannot avoid the savor of some repression, just as "commitment to an ideal" may have the ring of fanaticism in it. To submit to principle may tend to mean that one has abandoned his own direction to follow an imposed one. To be free then tends to mean to be free *from* that principle. I am not free if I live by a principle that I do not recognize as my own ideal. If I am guilty before a law that I do not recognize as my own I am foolish, and perhaps neurotic. If I feel guilty at failing to live up to an ideal I have appropriated, then I am simply recognizing my failure in sorrow. To have joy without guilt, regardless of what one does, would be not merely to abandon "principle," but every ideal except perhaps an after-the-fact approval of whatever one did. Principle is ossified ideal turned into a Frankenstein monster, an alienated once-upon-a-time ideal ravaging those who submit to it. It is the letter of the law without its spirit, it is static religion as opposed to dynamic religion, it is clanishness, factionalism or nationalism instead of brotherhood of men, it is marriage as contract, rather than personal human commitment without reservation between man and woman, and so on, and on.

I would shun the man of principle because he does submit to it and will require me to submit with him. I would cherish a man of ideals, for he

will invite me to find joy and beauty and goodness in whatever way it is in the power of men to have them in their time.

The position advanced here does not lend transcendent or "overman" significance to man's freedom and dignity, but it is not advanced from the standpoint of the quixotic mind. Nor does it, to borrow a title from a recent book, go "beyond freedom and dignity" for it is not advanced from the standpoint of the prosaic mind.

NOTES

¹ I believe that Aristotle, Aquinas, Hegel, Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty, to name just a very few philosophers have had a keen sense of the activity character of "whatever there is" often *called* substance. Substance as impenetrable, unchanging and extended in space is a materialistic and atomistic conception. And what is truly ironical is that the materialistic and atomistic conception of substance is not even considered a "metaphysical conception" by "non-speculative" philosophers! Substance has had very bad public relations in modern philosophy, and nature has suffered with it.

² There is a very touching attempt by Gide in *Symphonie Pastorale* to deal with an analogous problem raised by the writings of St. Paul with regard to the law, love, faith and salvation. *cf.* Romans viii, 8-13.

³ The unit (if we accept Gestalt theory of structuralism, or some kind of "whole is prior to the parts" doctrine) is anything we choose to consider a unit. The "real" ones are any structure at all (even the universe as a whole). Those have priority as "real" in ordinary discourse which have a high degree of "tightness"—the "tighter" they are, the more they are likely to be considered "real" i.e., a substantive (noun) is more readily applicable to them. A gang is a unit, but we do not usually think of it as being substantial, even though we use a substantive for it.

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