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A study of the influence of custom on the moral judgment

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Chapter III - Authority

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CHAPTER III

AUTHORITY

The preceding chapter has attempted to exhibit the morality of the forms of conduct there described as determined by their perceived relation to the welfare of some or all of the persons affected. Even if, however, the validity or the significance of this conclusion from our data be denied, positive evidence was collected during the investigation to show that the account of the sources of the moral judgment put forth by the foreign pressure theory is without adequate foundation. This material the present chapter will pass in review.

The theory in question, as has already been pointed out,¹ recognizes that the pressure of God's will is capable of bringing about the same effects as the pressure exercised by society. This is explicitly admitted by Professor Paulsen.² In any event, it is a necessary implication of the theory. For the former pressure does not differ from the latter in its nature as experienced by the individual who feels it, and where the presence of God is a living reality in the mind the one will be no less than the other in intensity. If then the theory is valid, judgments created by this pressure should appear in considerable numbers among those persons who believe that the Bible is an authoritative record of the divine will. To determine how far the facts would meet such a requirement an examination was made of the effects of the dicta of the Bible upon the judgments of those who professed to regard it as the ultimate guide in matters of faith and practice. The material was supplied by the answers to I and V of Series I, and X of Series II. The two former questions will be found above, pages 21 and 22, the last reads as follows:

A young man came to New York from the country without

¹ See above, page 20.

² *System of Ethics*, 345, 363, 364.

money and without friends. He was soon befriended by a prosperous business man who took him into his employment and into his home, and, in the end, made him his partner. The new partner took advantage of his position to cheat his benefactor out of all his money, deprived him of his share in the business, and turned him out of both shop and home, penniless. More than that, he openly boasted of it to certain persons, evidently considering it not merely a smart trick, but also a good joke. Suppose the benefactor, knowing not merely what had been done to him, but also the brazen effrontery of the man in boasting of his misdeeds, having no prospect before him of obtaining restitution from the courts, had found himself able to secure the aid of powerful influences that by diverting custom and withdrawing loans could have ruined the business of the younger man, would he have been morally justified in so doing? This story of ingratitude, I may add, is true in every detail.

The above questions are, of course, susceptible to either of two answers. Either, obey the rule, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not kill, Love your enemies, or break it. Among those who elect the second alternative we may distinguish four different attitudes towards the authority which they claim to accept.

(1) The statements or commands contained in the Bible are considered as valid in the abstract, but they are interpreted so as to conform to the individual's own standards. Thus 139 writes in answer to Question V: "It is wrong for a physician to give poison to a man suffering from cancer, because the Scriptures expressly forbid the taking of another person's life, and that is exactly what the physician would be doing." In I, he had said it was right for the man to steal. In reply to the inquiry whether the Scriptures do not expressly forbid the taking of another's property, he replied: "Yes, but I think it is right because the man did not do it for himself. If he had it would have been wrong." 51 supplies another slight variation upon the same theme. Her answers were all obtained in the interview.³ Question I she could not decide. "On the one hand there is the lives of these people, on the other stealing is wrong."

³ See above, page 34.

The latter conviction was not due to any of the reasons enumerated in the Appendix. "Was it that the Bible forbids it?" "Yes, I remember distinctly that the minute I read this over the words came to my mind: 'Thou shalt not steal.'" Apparently this consideration did not entirely convince her, but when she answered V (3) in the affirmative "because it would be merciful to relieve him of his sufferings," I could not but inquire if she had forgotten the command "Thou shalt not kill." To this she at once replied: "If he consents it is not murder." In each of these cases, the principles of interpretation, including the principles by which definite commands were interpreted out of existence, were evidently obtained from the conscience of the person judging.

(2) is similar in principle to the first, differing in this, that certain commands are declared to be "counsels of perfection," valid enough for the angels, no doubt, but never intended for the guidance of ordinary human beings. Thus in answer to X of Series II, 37 writes: "If the man had followed strictly the law of Christ, he would not have taken advantage of an opportunity to retaliate. But if he was any less than divine, I don't see how he could keep from taking vengeance. No one would blame him for it, I think. Perhaps in the strictest sense he was not morally justified, yet I don't think he would really be doing wrong to take vengeance."

(3) The best example of this is the answer to IV of Series II, given by 10. The question was as follows: In the lives of the early Christian saints occurs the story of a certain monk who stole leather from the shop of a rich merchant in order to make shoes for poor children. Assuming that the leather could have been obtained in no other way, was this right?

The answer reads: "The monk did no wrong in taking the leather from the rich merchant. He was not disobeying God's commands in taking it but was obeying His commands to aid those who are distressed. The two commands are here seemingly in opposition, but the latter far outweighs the former." A similar reply was given to I and V of Series I. Let it not be said that the conviction that the latter command "far outweighs" the former is due to the paramount position accorded by the founder of Christianity to the precept: "Thou shalt

love thy neighbor as thyself." A mind that has no standards of its own can only accept what is given to it in the form in which it comes. It can only assume then that the definite commands "Thou shalt not steal," "Thou shalt not kill," are really in harmony with the love of our neighbor, whatever the appearances to the contrary, and are therefore to be unquestioningly obeyed.

(4) In the preceding types there is some pretence of guiding one's conscience by the express statement of the Bible. In the present one this pretence is thrown aside and the authority of God's commands is simply repudiated. The answer to V given by 19 appears on her paper as follows: "No in cases 1, 2, and 3. It would be murder, no matter how you look at it. It would be interfering with Divine Providence." Then below in another ink were written these words: "N. B.—Upon reconsideration I believe it would be an act of mercy, allowable under condition three." She informed me in the interview which naturally followed this declaration that the change in her opinion was due to hearing the description in vivid form of a peculiarly horrible case of death by cancer. I held the biblical prohibition squarely up in front of her face, but she showed no inclination to recant.

This student was able to assign a reason (or perhaps I should say, cause) for repudiating the commands of God, but where nothing of the kind can be formulated, that is not allowed to make any difference in the result. The following is a conversation which I held with a hard-working but very "slow" student who was soon afterwards dropped from the university for failure in three studies. He had answered in his paper the question on revenge as follows: "In one way I might say yes, but if we go according to teaching of the Scripture the answer should be *no*. Love thy enemies." This he informed me in the interview meant: "If a man believes in God and the Christian religion [as he did] it would be wrong. Otherwise it would be all right." For the sake of argument I assumed this statement to mean: Revenge is wrong because God has forbidden it, and asked him how he made his answer in I (which had been latitudinarian) agree with the VIII. commandment. "Well," he answered "what are you going to do about it? Are

you going to let those children starve?" "But," I urged, "the *commandment* says: Thou shalt not steal." "Every commandment," he replied, "has exceptions. For instance there is the command, Thou shalt not bear false witness. But we do not think it wrong for a doctor to lie to his patients." "If there can be an exception to that rule, why not to the rule: Do not revenge yourself?" "This is quite different. If a man ruined the man who had ruined him, others must suffer, his family, his creditors, *et cetera*." "That may be a very good reason for not seeking revenge, but it does not touch the main difficulty. The VIII commandment simply says: Thou shalt not steal. Now how can there be any exceptions to that?" "That question is too deep for me." "But you nevertheless believe there are exceptions?" "Yes, I do." After that he admitted that the reasons for not revenging oneself would hold whether a man believed in the Christian religion or not.

We now turn to the other class of answers, those in harmony with the commands of the Scriptures. Here the respondents showed in one way or another that they approved of obedience to the command because it was in harmony with their own standards, rather than because it was commanded. This appears in the answers c and d to V on pages 26 and 27, where the eudaemonistic and (probably) the dysdaemonistic standards are respectively employed. It appears equally from a declaration made by a young woman in one of the interviews that it was the duty of Abraham to obey the command of God to kill his son Isaac "because we must believe that God meant it in the end for his good." Six students who based a rigoristic answer to V upon the authority of the Bible without making any farther explanation of their position, were asked whether Prometheus was justified in disobeying the gods by bringing fire to man. Without exception they replied in the affirmative on the ground that the gods in forbidding him to do it were unjust or cruel.

All of these persons would probably have asserted, if asked in general terms, that their conceptions of right and wrong were determined by the teachings of the Bible. An interesting illustration of how far a person may be deceived in this matter is offered by the following statement of 104 made to me in an interview. "I started out to answer these questions" said the

student "with the principle that there are certain laws, laws of the state and laws of God—particularly the latter—which are absolutely binding. My first impulse would have been to say, the law must be obeyed in each case regardless of circumstances. But the more I thought about them, the more necessary I found it to admit certain exceptions. I made the first admission with a kind of surprise. Finally I awoke to the fact that I held the laws, Thou shalt not steal, and so forth, binding only in so far as they appealed to my own conscience." So great may be the gap between what we believe and what we believe we believe!

The significant fact about these five types is not so much that they exist as that among the hundred persons who answered the questions not one was found whose answer did not fall into some one of these categories. No systematic attempt was made to determine the number of those who believe the Bible to be the infallible revelation of the will of God. But there are at least thirty-six persons who appeal in their answer to the will of God or the commands of the Bible or in some way offer unmistakable evidence of believing that we may know the mind of God in matters of right and wrong. Everyone of these was carefully questioned in an interview, where necessary. The outcome was that no one was found who did not belong in one of the groups described.

It will be objected to the foregoing that our results prove too much. The statements of the Bible have been accepted by countless millions of human beings in matters of science and history. Autonomism itself admits the possibility of the same thing in morals also.⁴ Why then is it not found here? The explanation will throw much light upon the true significance of our results. Men do believe the creation myths of Genesis, to be sure, but only until they, or others whom for one reason or another they trust, collect a mass of data incompatible with such stories. Then they either reinterpret the statements of their authority, converting, for instance, a day into an epoch, or they reject the accounts entirely, adjusting their theories of inspiration to the results, each in his own way. So in morals. In points where they have no serious convictions of their own,

⁴ See Chapter I, above, page 13.

where they do not see clearly just what their ideals demand, as perhaps in the matter of divorce, or again, where they are wavering in their allegiance between two ideals, as often in the matter of revenge, there they may accept the statements of the Bible. But where their own ideas are clear and firmly rooted they either explain away the plain significance of the text, where a discrepancy arises, or repudiate it entirely.

Such a view enables us to find a place for the few traces of deference to authority that are actually discoverable. They are confined to two persons and for each the authority is not God but man. The importance of this subject for a theory of moral education will perhaps justify an account of each case. In both we are concerned with answers to X of Series II. 17 wrote: "He would not be justified in taking revenge. I have been taught that revenge is wrong and take for granted it must be." I inquired whether the principle of retaliation appealed to her. She said it did and she indulged in it herself. But she admired more a person who refrained and she thought it right to refrain. She used to believe that retaliation was right, but about four years ago the question came up with her father and he said very positively it was wrong. Since that time she has believed it to be wrong. Her father gave no reasons for his statement, but she now believes that his influence was in part at least due to the fact that it revived memories of her past self. For several years before this incident she had "thrown everything over." She had among other things indulged her desires for revenge, especially when aroused by jealousy. Previous to that, while she had not indeed said to herself, Revenge is wrong, she had had no revengeful desires. She believes, then, that her father's words called up her past self. "And you felt that to be a better person?" "Yes." Her father, she added, had a great influence over her although she did not accept everything he said.

49 wrote: "The benefactor would not be morally justified in taking revenge. Perhaps I have been influenced by what Mr. ——— said in Sunday-school, on revenge." Before having heard Mr. ———, (which was but a Sunday or two before writing the answer), she informed me orally, she would have said he ought to revenge himself. "What did he say? Did he

give any reasons?" "No, he gave no reason. He just quoted the words: 'Whosoever will smite thee on the one cheek, turn to him the other also.' " "Did you believe this because it came from the Bible?" "No" [the young woman is not a church member]. "Why then?" "Because I thought he would probably know." I regret to say that I did not carry the investigation farther and am therefore unable to make any report upon the totality of conditions which motived this sudden *volte face*. In attempting to explain this and the preceding case the reader must not forget that they form an insignificant fraction of the field which we have been exploring.

If the foreign pressure theory were true, it is impossible to see how the results presented in this chapter could have been obtained. According to it, authority may demand what it will. For the mind has no basis of its own for criticism, for selection and rejection. The nearest semblance to such a basis would be when one authority contradicted another. That, however, will not help us to explain the instances we have been studying where what generally passes as public opinion and the laws laid down in the Bible are quite in harmony. And if the pretensions of authority be reduced to the claim that it is merely one standard among others, we shall find it difficult to understand why in almost forty cases that which was regarded as the highest authority was not powerful enough to demonstrably determine the outcome in a single instance.

Perhaps it may be thought that the case for the foreign pressure theory is improved if the dogma of immediacy is surrendered and its claims are reduced to the assertion that the acceptance of conduciveness to welfare as the standard is due to authority. This modification of the theory will demand a few moments of our attention.

The authority in question may be the teachings of the Bible for those persons who regard them as representing the will of God, or it may be public opinion. We begin with the former alternative. We must note in the first place that even if it can explain the adoption of the eudaemonistic standard, it certainly can not explain an equally striking fact, the adoption and use of the dysdaemonistic standard, the principle that evil must be requited with evil. The words of Jesus himself with regard to

the forgiveness of enemies are too explicit for evasion by any other means than sophistry and too well known to make it possible to ignore them otherwise than deliberately. Yet such evasion and ignoring are indubitable facts.

But direct evidence is available to show the inadequacy of this view. It would rest its claim, I suppose, upon the fact that the Golden Rule has always been regarded as an epitome of the Christian code and that Jesus himself set forth the commandments, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, as covering the entire content of the moral law. From these, common sense might infer that what God demands throughout is action conformable to the requirements of welfare. In this way it would be easy to explain the eudaemonistic answers of I and V.

To this hypothesis it is possible to urge a number of objections. In the first place if the source of these judgments is the precepts of the Gospel we can not but wonder why these precepts themselves appear so infrequently in papers and interviews. As the alleged starting point of the respondent's thinking, they ought to spring to his mind spontaneously, yet this almost never happens. Again, if the average attendant upon the services of the church has interpreted the Golden Rule and the commandment: Love thy neighbor, as resolving morality into the promotion of welfare he has done so in practical defiance of, or, in any event, not as a result of the exegesis of his spiritual adviser, and that whether the latter is a Protestant or a Catholic. If the one he is almost certain (in the United States) to know and believe enough of Intuitionism, if the other, of Thomism, to look with hatred and scorn on such rank Utilitarianism as "a manifest and blatant error."

Neither of the above objections is capable of doing more than creating a presumption of rather indefinite force in the mind of the reader, but the following ones, it seems to me, go to the root of the matter. In the third place, then, the hypothesis under criticism does not meet the actual situation revealed in our study. Many, probably a majority of the respondents of classes (1), (2), and even (3), had supposed they regarded the Sixth and Eighth Commandments as ultimate, and discovered that they held them subject to eudaemonistic qualifications only when

they were placed face to face with a situation where conscience refused to sanction their application. This is shown either by the actual acceptance of one commandment as ultimate at the very same moment that the other is being interpreted out of existence, as in 139 and 51 above, page 50, or by the respondent's own statements, as that of 104, page 53. The fact is, if, at least, I can trust the impressions gathered during the course of the investigation, this view swings as much too far from the centre in one direction as the doctrine of immediacy does in the other. It replaces the unrelated injunctions, Thou shalt not steal, and the like, of the latter theory with some such maxim as, Right conduct consists in doing good and refraining from doing harm. But I feel quite certain as a result of my investigation that this does not accurately represent the situation. With only a few exceptions in the College of Letters and Science, these students do not seem to be aware, either vaguely or clearly, that they are using the welfare principle as a standard at every turn. When given a concrete problem they ask, What good or harm will be done? but for the most part they do not ask this because they have in mind any such general principle as, That is right which makes for the greatest good of the greatest number. There exists here, to modify slightly what was said of 104, a great gap between what they believe and what they are aware of believing.

Another objection remains to be urged. If the moral code of common sense has its source in authority, it must exhibit a gap where authority is silent. Now if the reader will look over the list of questions contained in the Appendix, he will find a considerable number that can be answered by an application of the injunction, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, only if "as" be interpreted in a very special sense, namely to mean "as much as." And the Scriptures will be searched in vain for any other principle by which to decide them. Nevertheless, of one hundred and forty-five persons who answered IX of Series I in an inquiry made in 1896 and 1897, only six declared themselves unable to decide it, while thirty more, by asserting that the child should be saved, showed they were using some other principle than the one here under consideration. The returns of 1905 were practically identical. Why not say, then, it may be in-

quired, that the majority were actually guided by the principle that we ought to love our neighbor as much as ourselves? I reply, because most of them showed by their answers to a parallel question that this was not what was guiding them. I have no data on this point from the investigation of 1905, but the students of 1895 and 1896 were asked their opinion concerning the following problem: The following might have happened at the Johnstown (Penn.) flood. A man found he had just time to warn either his wife or two other women who were not relatives. All these women have family ties, etc., so that looked upon purely from an objective standpoint the death of any one of them will involve as great a loss to all concerned as the death of any other. What is it his duty to do?

If the principle of equal love of neighbor and self were here being used, the returns would be identical with those from the preceding question. As a matter of fact they are directly reversed. One hundred and nine reply, Save the wife; thirty-one are for saving the two women; six are unable to decide.⁵ An investigation just completed among the students in this year's Short Course in Agriculture by the fellow in philosophy in this university, Mr. Otto, shows directly what is inferable from the above data, that those who decide in favor of the larger good in the first question and the nearer good in the second have not in mind any general principle whatever upon which their decisions are based. Their alleged authority, then, has left them in the lurch, yet they answer these and several other questions where the same thing is true with as little hesitation as they do any of the rest.

The case against the authority of society as the source of the acceptance of the principle of welfare is even stronger. For it is open to the more serious objections that have been urged against attributing this function to the Bible and involves difficulties of its own besides. In the first place I must point out, though it does not bear directly upon the precise topic under discussion, that wherever opportunity is presented for a test, there the influence of public opinion, or what ordinarily passes as such,

⁵ For details see *The American Journal of Psychology*, 9: 203 ff.

turns out to be far too small for the rôle which the foreign pressure theory attributes to it. Thus of the Agricultural students who thought it wrong to make children believe in Santa Claus twenty were carefully questioned to discover what had been the attitude of their parents in this matter. In seventeen cases they themselves as well as their brothers and sisters and—where I inquired—their boyhood companions also had been led to believe in the reality of the children's saint. Only one of these had ever heard either of his parents condemn the practice. Of the three students who had not been taught to believe in Santa Claus only one, again, had ever heard any expression of disapproval on the subject from his parents. Again in V public opinion, I should suppose, would be considered as siding with those who would prolong the life regardless of circumstances. Yet among the Agricultural students 56 per cent., and among the "Hill" students 60 per cent. were in favor of administering the poison. This certainly looks as if they were doing their own thinking. And the impression which such facts make will be strengthened greatly by a careful reading of the reports of the ten interviews that will be found in Chapter IV.

In reply it will, of course, be urged that this is not the point at issue. When applying the principle of welfare, it will be admitted, common sense may show any amount of spontaneity, but the matter under discussion now is whether the adoption of the principle itself is not due to the authority of public opinion. To this contention I can only reply as before: This principle appears not to exist in the consciousness of the average man in the way which the hypothesis requires; and where public opinion has taken no position (as is true of those of our problems which involve the comparative imperativeness of different and conflicting claims to welfare) the individual finds his way with the same sense of security as anywhere else. Here, however, one more consideration can be added. Whereas it can be argued with some plausibility that the Gospels reduce all genuine morality to the attempt to increase welfare, I, at least, am acquainted with no organ of society, either the parents or teachers whom I personally know, the newspapers I read, or any other representative of public opinion, that is placing

today or was placing in my youth this position before the rising generation. Common sense does not know how eudaemonistic it is, and for this reason if no other is neither with nor without intention forcing this point of view upon the wills of those who come within the range of its influence.