

MORAL STANDARDS

GERARD PRECOURT, O.P.



ANY contributors to the magazines of the less popular class are proclaiming the complete collapse of Christian morality. They claim in eloquent terms that the ethics of former times are no longer consonant with either the trends of modern thought or the conditions of the modern world. It is of course an erroneous state of mind caused by a partial understanding of man's nature and that of the world. In particular these writers fail to comprehend the nature of morality, the foundations upon which it must be based or the sanction which it must have.

Morality is determined by the conformity or non-conformity of our free and voluntary acts with the correct rules of moral conduct. That this is so follows from an analysis of our acts. For if these are considered in their physical nature alone all our acts are good since they are the perfections of our faculties; yet from this consideration alone they can not be other than indifferent acts in the moral order. A further consideration must therefore be added before they can be classified as good or evil acts. This is done by comparing them to some rule of morality and those which are in conformity with the rule are designated as having the quality of moral goodness. Although philosophers may discuss the nature of this conformity of our actions with the rule, there is no difficulty in maintaining the fact of such a relation even among the offending writers. The crux of the present day trouble lies in the rule of morality.

If at first reading we are inclined to be impatient with these writers we should hesitate in condemning them. We have indeed passed through very trying times. The post-war reaction of our then young people was to confuse liberty with license. Later the economic crisis occasioned the collapse of many of our cherished institutions. To add to the confusion scientists have advanced theories of evolution and relativity until the popular mind has been driven to the belief that nothing is stable and nothing is universal and absolute. Everything including morality they assume is in the process of changing. Outside the true church various norms have been advanced as the

guiding principles of man's ethical conduct. Thus there has been transient morality based on such concepts as civil law, social contract and collective conscience. It was inevitable that these norms should suffer at the hands of time, for none of them offer sufficient foundation for a true code of morality.

Any ethical system based on the civil law is not sufficiently inclusive. Although a lawfully constituted authority be it civil or ecclesiastical may make laws which bind in conscience, there must be some acts of ours which are good or bad in themselves abstracting from any consideration of their prohibition or prescription by such laws. Evil is the denial of some good. Therefore we class as evil that act of ours which lacks some perfection due it. If this due perfection which is lacking is in the moral order then the act is morally bad. The perfection of a moral act requires that all conditions of time, place, quantity and so on be satisfied. Among the moral duties of man are found those which govern his relations with God, his relations with his fellow man and his use of external goods. There are some acts of ours which of their very nature tend to harmony in these matters and others which similarly tend to discord.¹ Murder is contrary to our duty to our fellow man and is wrong whether or not it is prohibited by civil law. It is forbidden by law and punished because it is in its nature reprehensible; but not reprehensible because prohibited by the law. Likewise we owe a debt to our creator, hence no civil law can ever make it immoral for man to offer true worship to God his Father.

Neither can sociological codes of moral conduct ever solve the problem. They too are based on faulty premises. They take into account only one side of man's nature and neglect entirely the higher dignity for which man is created. They assume that man exists only for society as a whole, and that he enjoys no autonomy other than as a part of this entity. While striving only for the betterment of the community they do absolutely nothing for the salvation of man's individual soul. They would offer us as an ideal a race of supermen, we who are made a little less than the angels and in the image and likeness of God.

Finally collective conscience is entirely insufficient to be accepted as the supreme norm of morality. Various classes and nations of people have fallen into error regarding particular points of morality even as they have done regarding particular conclusions of the natural sciences. Yet at no time can it be said that they have not had

¹ *Contra Gentiles*, III, 129.

some ideal of morality or have not clung to the basic principles of the moral law. More will be said later concerning this point.

Simultaneously with the propagation of these norms we have had the specialists in this or that branch of knowledge focussing their minds trained to a single point of view upon this important question. This is a most unscientific procedure even though the culprit be a scientist. Who even among them would advise one desiring the solution of an abstruse problem in higher mathematics to go to a biologist? Who among them would advise the man physically ill to consult a mathematician? Yet many of them have unblushingly set themselves up as moralists and have unhesitatingly cluttered the world with their illegitimate brain children. Thus for example they have given us biological ethics, physical ethics and political ethics. But not a one of these can become the systematic guide of moral conduct since they do not satisfy the full capacity of our nature and do not accept the actual conditions of this world through which we are passing on our way to eternity. What wonder then that their unsuccessful efforts to find a true code of morality have prejudiced many against all systems of ethical conduct.

That system of morality which is to be accepted must be based on a supreme unchanging universal norm. Its essential principles must be known to man and its secondary conclusions must be accessible to him. It must consider man as he is essentially and that in all places and at all times. Yet it must also acknowledge that there are accidental differences in nations, classes and groups of men. Finally it must have that sanction which will assure us that its observance will have its reward and its non-observance will have its punishment. In a word it must face reality and not sidestep the issue.

Fortunately there is in the midst of the present day confusion a commanding voice which teaches in unequivocal terms the one guide of moral conduct which bears these marks. It is our holy Mother the Church who teaches that morality which is based on a supreme unchanging norm; the eternal law. It is known to man because its first principles are ingrained upon the hearts of men. Its conclusions are accessible to man because right reason can discover them, at times even they have been the subject matter of revelation. Lastly it has that sanction which will encourage us in fulfilling its requirements and deter us from its infraction.

Thus supreme norm is, of necessity, universal and unchanging for it is based on the divine essence. It is a dictate of the divine intellect ordaining that man should do that which God sees and knows

as good. It is the divine uncreated wisdom insofar as it is directive of all human acts. The necessity of basing morality on the eternal law of God follows readily from a consideration of man's last end. Man, since he is destined to enjoy the everlasting beatitude of heaven, must in all his acts tend to his last end which is God. Thus his each and every moral act will be good or evil according as it brings him closer to his last end or draws him from it.²

Right reason makes known to man the principles of moral life as contained in the eternal law and from these principles deduces those conclusions which are implicitly contained therein. It must be right reason which seeks out these moral truths for as St. Thomas says:

Corrupt reason is not reason just as a false syllogism is not properly a syllogism and therefore not any reason is a rule of human act but right reason.³

It may be objected that reason can not attain to the eternal law. But although the eternal law is not known immediately in itself, it is known in part at least through natural reason for natural reason is an image of the eternal law.⁴ Moreover some of the dictates of the eternal law have been made known to man through revelation. It is the office of our reason to apprehend the end of our acts and likewise the means which will realize that end for us. Since it is its duty to rightly ordain our free and voluntary acts to our last end, it is the proximate rule of our moral life.

Many refuse to accept this doctrine because they observe a diversity in the moral codes of various peoples. From this fact which no one will gainsay they conclude that there is no moral conscience native to man and that there is no universal and immutable law which governs man's life. However, what they assume as proved by this fact is on the contrary thereby refuted. For if there is any moral observance at all then it must follow that there is such a supreme law which these peoples attempt to observe, though their observance be imperfect and confused. What correctly follows from this fact is that many peoples have corporately fallen into error concerning the moral nature of certain practices. Our own St. Thomas observed this seven centuries ago and explained the causes of this variety in moral standards.⁵

² *Summa Theol.*, I-II, q. 19, a. 4.

³ *II Sent.*, Dist. 24, q. 3.

⁴ *Summa Theol.*, I-II, q. 19, a. 4, ad 3.

⁵ *Ethicorum*, I, 3.

It must be realized that besides the essential principles which are universal and immutable there are secondary principles which are grasped with assurance only after years of study. Then too, these principles must be applied by men to concrete individual cases. Human reason can fall into error either in drawing these conclusions from the principles or in the applications of these conclusions. Many factors contribute to the bringing about of these differences. St. Thomas cites the influence of the passions, the unequal degree of cultural development and the variety of environment.⁶

Thus the universal principles can never be erased from the hearts of men while the particular may be, for man may be hindered in the right application of these laws to the concrete act through the influence of his passions. Similarly vicious habits even though culpably initiated may later become so intimate a part of the life of a certain people that they will fail to recognize even unnatural vices as sin.⁷

Cultural development affects the moral judgments of communities. Primitive peoples have not advanced in the deduction of secondary conclusions from first principles as far as those who have had centuries of leisure time for disciplined study and quiet meditation. There is here an evident evolution of moral standards, not in the sense of the present day proponents of purely relative morality, but in the same sense that our knowledge of truth in any field is constantly advancing toward greater perfection. The Angelic Doctor says:

Christ's law alone brought the human race to perfection, bringing it back to the state of newness of nature. Wherefore in the law of Moses and in human laws what was contrary to the law of nature could not be totally removed.⁸

Finally the applications of the law to particular cases must always be made with a consideration of the environment. It is easily understood that conditions of time and place enter into the moral life of everyone. These variations of applications, however, never change the universally recognized law. By way of example the virtue of modesty demands certain proprieties in the matter of dress. There is no question that the belle of the African jungle is not immodest in her scanty attire, yet the same would be quite immodest on Fifth

⁶ This point is treated adequately and concisely in the article: "The Concept of value: The Scholastic Viewpoint" by Jules A. Baisnée, S.S., in the *Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Meeting of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 1933.

⁷ *Summa Theol.*, I-II, q. 94, a. 6.

⁸ *Summa Theol.*, Supplem. q. 67, a. 1.

Avenue. Social customs change the maid's "not at home" from a lie into a perfectly understood usage; but it does not thereby change the essentially evil nature of a lie.

There is then both a static and a dynamic side of morality. It is static insofar as its essential principles are immutable and universal. It is dynamic insofar as it becomes more and more perfectly known. It might also be called dynamic inasmuch as it is the norm of a virtuous life, that life indeed which is the way to a higher and fuller life in eternity.