

## MORALLY GOOD AND MORALLY RIGHT

Let us understand at the outset that by "morally good" we mean the *state* of possessing what is generally regarded as good character, rooted in virtue, in the broad sense of this term that embraces a variety of particular virtues such as courage, justice, temperance and the like. It is the meaning behind such popular expressions as 'he is a man of upright character', 'a solid citizen', or, simply, 'he is a good man'. Let us understand by 'morally right' the individually right or good actions a man performs, as in such expressions as 'he acted bravely', 'he made the right decision', or, simply, 'he did the right thing'. How closely are the two related? Presumably, being morally good and doing what is morally right cannot be identified, though one is ever tempted to wonder why not. Yet we know from the experience of others, if not of ourselves, that a morally good man is quite capable of not doing what is morally right, and often enough does not. On the other hand, there clearly seems to be some connection between being morally good and doing the morally right thing, even allowing for the fact that an admittedly bad man, in the moral sense, can do the right thing at times.

This question of the relationship between morally good and morally right is, of course, an old one; indeed, it is one faced often enough by Plato and Aristotle in ancient times, not to mention many subsequent thinkers. Various themes have been pursued in investigating the matter resulting in quite different resolutions. The very persistence of the problem shows both the difficulty posed by the question as well as the central importance for human conduct the question has, and this is reason enough for raising the problem again. Moreover, there are at least two current points of view which provoke further consideration of the matter.

The first point of view is found principally in the existentialist approach to the moral order. Although there is always some inherent risk in generalizing a point of view among a variety of writers, nevertheless it can be fairly said that an existentialist approach to the question of the relation of being morally good and

doing what is morally right tends to ignore the dimension of *being* morally good insofar as that means having an established moral character or nature, and accordingly puts exclusive emphasis upon doing the right action here and now. Man has no nature, so the remark goes, but only a history. Let us be quick to note the large element of truth contained in that position, though perhaps as subject to some interpretation. It may be granted that man has no nature in the sense of not being endowed at birth with, or inheriting, a *moral* nature; such a nature man must acquire as life is experienced in a multitude of individual acts which can be performed only at given intervals of time. The "history" of man is the succession of individual acts he has performed, and the rightness of each act cannot be determined beforehand but only at the moment it is to be done in the given circumstances. Much of this position holds when stated more or less in this manner. At the same time, it seems clear that the question of relating moral goodness and doing right acts is skirted; or, it may be more apt to say, doing right acts at individual times is *all* that being morally good can mean, and such a formulation of the situation would in effect deny that there is really any question at issue.

A second point of view touching on the problem arises in the political order. This point of view further divides according to the way the moral and political orders are related. Woodrow Wilson can be taken as a clear apostle of the primacy of the moral to the political, that is, he constantly sought to use moral standards as a guideline for solving political situations, even to the extent of demanding that new governments in foreign lands be based on certain moral principles. A decade or so ago, John Foster Dulles used a similar approach. This position in effect argues not only the primacy of the moral to the political but also maintains that *being* morally good is a prerequisite for *doing* what is morally right. The other alternative to this point of view is one that divorces the moral and the political and, in terms of the question we are raising, claims that doing what is right, at least politically, is independent of moral considerations, and certainly of moral character. The roots of this position go back to Machiavelli.

The foregoing points of view are offered primarily to show the relevance of the question being raised, both at the present time and in the past. And the question becomes more thorny the more one

considers it. What seems fairly clear at the outset, however, is that the extreme positions indicated above will not constitute a sound resolution of the question. Doing the right thing at the right time is not unconnected with, nor wholly independent from, being morally good; conversely, being morally good is not simply of itself a guarantee for doing the right thing.

How, then, should we see the relationship between the two? Let us first recognize that a certain primacy must be given to *doing* what is right. It is action that counts in the practical order. No amount of good intention or well formed character can suffice without its issuing into concrete acts. One might urge Hamlet as a powerful instance of a failure to recognize this point; with a number of good and even appealing qualities, nevertheless he fails to act when he should, and when he does, his moral complications, though enmeshed in good intentions, dispose him to take a wrong course of action. Should one argue that had he not been so preoccupied with matters of conscience, with a moral formation, he would have more readily done the right thing? Could it be said that were he less morally concerned, perhaps even not morally good, he would have resolved his problem better? Such an approach, however, seems untenable on two scores. First, the sense of tragedy would vanish, and while our context here is in the realm of drama, still artistic tragedy has its significant reference to the real human situation. Being at least morally disposed to the good seems to be a powerful prerequisite for real tragedy, certainly in drama, and at least in great measure in actual life. Second, this line of approach offers no resolution to the question raised; no satisfactory answer is available to show how or why one in fact does the right thing. It seems to be more by chance than by design.

The citing of Hamlet to show (though negatively in Hamlet's case) a certain primacy that should be accorded to doing what is right adds a certain dimension to the consideration of our problem. The tragedy of drama, as we have noted, points to a certain tragedy in human life which, in some measure, is closely connected with the understanding of our question. The failure of the good man at times to do the right thing is often enough a real human tragic situation. And we must reiterate that it is only because someone is basically good morally and yet does not do what is right that we properly have a tragic situation. We thereby see, though not fully or

clearly yet, that granted a certain primacy to right action a fundamental relation must nonetheless exist between morally good character and right action; the failure of the relationship to work out positively precisely generates something tragic or, if not always tragic, at least in some way deplorable.

Let us adopt provisionally a somewhat existential and also phenomenological approach to the question. What happens to a human being as he goes through life? Let us push the human being back to his childhood and even to his birth. What have we at the outset? Clearly, a wholly budding individual who at birth and for some time after has no discernible moral nature at all—man has no (moral) nature at this stage. But the very young human being is nonetheless acting, in great measure spontaneously though, in increasing measure, with a growing determination within himself. He is responding to his environment in the broadest sense of the term as well as to inherited dispositions. He is responding also to the pervasive influence of his parents or guardians. The importance of this developing period of human life cannot be stressed enough. What we are at this early stage and what we are becoming will dictate much of what we do the rest of our life. In a celebrated passage on this point Aristotle insists that it makes all the difference in the world, with regard to our moral condition, how we are brought up in this formative period.

It is in this relatively early stage of human life that we can begin to see an emerging relation between the moral state of a human being and his sphere of activity. While it is quite true that a human being starts out without a moral nature, nonetheless he rapidly begins to acquire one. How does this take place? Primarily, by the individual acts he performs, for in doing these various individual acts he becomes proportionately disposed to perform similar acts subsequently in determinate ways. Here again there is a primacy in the realm of action, for the only way a human being becomes determined toward qualities of character is by experiencing the succession of acts he does.

But what we come to see more and more as youth stretches to maturity is the reciprocal relation between one's developing character and his actions. Initially, the acts introduce dispositions into the young, plastic human nature, susceptible to the influences engendered through these acts. Subsequently, the implanted and

growing moral determinations in turn guide and mold the actions the individual does. From the initial state of actions affecting an almost empty moral nature we see, as a human being progresses through adolescence to full maturity, almost a reversal; having become the sort of person a human being now is, through what he has done, he now often has so determinately a certain kind of moral nature that his actions flow from it with high predictability. It almost seems as though the original situation has undergone a complete reversal such that the primacy now goes to the formed moral nature rather than to the continuing succession of individual acts. Drama again is illustrative in this respect. It appears that Oedipus cannot help doing what he does because of the sort of person he is, in the moral sense of the term. His fate unfolds, not primarily because of the gods, but from the complex character he has now so determinately become. In this sense, we are all strongly fated.

There is likely no novelty in the foregoing exposition, yet the main point emerging from it deserves emphasis since it has tended to be ignored, both in regard to moral philosophy generally and specifically in relation to the question inaugurating this discussion. This main point is that not only is there a deep, underlying connection between a man's moral nature and his actions, but also that the relation is highly reciprocal such that a normal adult is influenced in his conduct almost equally by character and action. (The insertion of the qualifier "almost" is important, as we shall see.) In any event, what is now clear is that the extreme positions taken in regard to the question at issue simply are not tenable. Mature human actions are not independent from the character of the agent performing them; in this perspective, man definitely has a moral nature. On the other hand, no matter how fixed a person's moral nature has become, it is not an infallible guarantee of how in fact the individual acts of a person will take place; it alone does not solve the problem of human conduct.

However, the question originally raised is only partially answered. Let us stake out the dimensions of the question as it now appears. Most simply put, the question now is: to *what extent* is doing the right thing at this time affected or influenced by a man's being morally good? We are concerned here only with a human being who is basically good in the moral sense and who, by defini-

tion, is seeking to do what is right. We exclude from consideration the sort of problem that can arise as to how much a bad or weak man is influenced by what character he has to do what he does; this problem is an interesting one in its own right, but is not relevant to our present consideration.

The facts of experience strongly manifest the point that a man with a well formed, stabilized character can be counted upon to do good acts most of the time. Social intercourse and relationships of friendship rest on such a presumption which, in turn, is validated by the way in which events normally transpire. It is clear, then, that doing the right thing at the right time is greatly affected by a person's being morally good in character. The further question which arises, and is the troublesome one, is why being morally good does not *insure* doing what is right. Plato's presumed explanation that evil is done, even by the good man, owing to a lack of knowledge does not seem to hold even if one takes a quite broad and flexible meaning of 'knowledge'. Even the wise man, in the practical sense, remains capable of doing gravely evil acts, and in fact sometimes does them. If, on the one hand, the facts of experience indicate that the morally good man is strongly disposed because of good character to do what is right, the facts of experience likewise show, on the other hand, that the same man by no means always does what is right, and at times does very much what is wrong. If lack of knowledge were all that was responsible, this situation could be remedied, even solved. By education, man could transcend the age-old problem of achieving full knowledge and therefore mastery of good and evil. But we are quite aware that the question cannot be solved in this way.

We are therefore forced to recognize that, in a real sense, an unbridgeable gap obtains between the realm of being morally good and the practical arena of concrete action. However tantalizing it is to suppose that this gap can be bridged or eliminated, tantalizing particularly to those influenced by an analytic frame of mind (and who, accordingly, would still seek refuge somewhere and somehow in the domain of knowledge, or who think that man in some way can be so "programmed" that the gap can be obliterated), the painful but clear fact remains that this line of approach will not work. In theological terms, the "mystery of sin" is substantiated by a lot of evidence. Man's knowledge in this matter is hedged in by inescapa-

ble limitations. To put the matter in another way, doing the right thing is not only a matter of cognitive or computerized determination. Appetitive rectitude is also required.

But what is meant by this rather elusive phrase 'appetitive rectitude'? In attempting to clarify this phrase, we shall see that while there still remains the unbridgeable gap, the gap can be increasingly narrowed. Clarifying the meaning of 'appetitive rectitude' obliges us to return again to what being morally good entails. Let us admit, if an admission is required, that knowledge is required in the development and formation of good character—the important knowledge of what is right and what is wrong, of tested moral principles, and so on. Yet knowing all this and being inclined to wish to act accordingly are still distinct. Appetitive rectitude first means, then, the willingness to do what we know is right to do, and it is clear that a viable distinction emerges here in that we are all aware that we can well know what is the right thing to do without being willing to do it. Add on, then, this appetitive rectitude to sound moral knowledge, and the aforementioned gap can be narrowed, and increasingly so in proportion as this willingness to do what is right becomes ever more marked.

Yet the soundest knowledge and the best of intentions, as we have already suggested, still leave open the question of whether the right thing here and now in fact will be done. Our gap, even if little, remains. It is at this juncture that another, or perhaps an extended, meaning of appetitive rectitude arises. In confronting the doing of this act right now, fortified by sound knowledge and good intention, we are still aware that we *might not* do the right thing. Such awareness is well founded in that in any given situation in which we are to act, unforeseen circumstances (part of the limitation of our knowledge) may affect our doing of the act such that it may not turn out right, or wholly right, or quite wrong—or, of course, perhaps right after all. Appetitive rectitude again comes into play. We act *nonetheless*—we *will* to act nonetheless—because we are aware that we are doing the best we can at the given moment with what knowledge and good intention we have. Failure to act at such moments, because of the constant awareness that "it may not turn out right" is a failure of appetitive rectitude when it is most of all needed. Do it!—this is the crucial step the morally mature person will take, with due reflection and intention, and in so acting

he will exhibit the last stage of appetitive rectitude so essential for dealing responsibly with the elusive order of contingent action. Here we see the ultimate primacy of the order of action in relation to character, in relation to being morally good. In the practical order, acts count most of all since hell can be paved with even good intentions. And if, as may well happen, the act turns out wrong, a person's moral or appetitive rectitude remains intact. For after all, a human being does not simply *create* the situation in which he must act; he can only *live* with it, and do his best to experience it humanly, which is to say, engage himself morally with the situation facing him.

The answer to the question of the relationship between being morally good and doing what is right, to the extent there is an answer, comes down to the following. There is an intrinsic and fundamental relationship between the two, but the relation is not a necessary one in the sense that given the first, the second invariably follows. Yet the relation is basic and significant. In general, in proportion as a person has, in the course of his life, developed a good moral character he is more and more likely to do what is right. This relevance of being morally good to doing what is right has been slighted, if not ignored, by the existential emphasis on somehow doing what is right irrespective of the state of one's moral nature. The Machiavellian tendency in the political order to diminish or even remove the role of moral principles and moral character has likewise cut asunder moral goodness and right action, even granting a recognizable measure of independence to the political sphere. The history of political activity in this century, to go no further, hardly argues for the viability of political life when it advances in partial or utter disregard for fundamental moral values. On the other hand, just as a naive moralizing of the political sphere is not the sound alternative, so the assumption that being morally good somehow automatically solves the problem of what is right to do is also without solid foundation.

For we always have our little gap between the level of being morally good and that actual sphere of concrete action. No straight philosophical analysis can provide a full answer to the problem of closing and eliminating this gap, for the simple reason that there is no way to do so. But through moral maturity, man can learn to cope with it and live with it. Such moral maturity, a lifetime



process, comes primarily from what we have called "appetitive rectitude." This rectitude rests both on being morally good and upon being willing to do what at least seems right in each occasion that arises. With the achievement of such rectitude in intention and in act, it could then be said that for all practical purposes, being morally good leads to doing what is right. At least for the most part, and this is the most that can be appropriately said on the matter.

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