

THE MORAL SANCTION

THE idea of a moral sanction has given rise to innumerable disputes in the past due in large measure to the wrong starting point taken by the thinkers who discussed this subject. Both the philosophers who defend the existence of a moral sanction and those who combat this doctrine seem at times to have entered into a veritable conspiracy against a correct understanding of the subject, with the result that oftentimes the arguments of each side miss fire and generally end nowhere. In this paper it is our purpose to throw some light on this problem and to try to make our solution of it acceptable to every school of philosophical thought.

I quote a text from St. Thomas which sums up perfectly the point I should like to make. He writes:

Wherever there exists a well-regulated order of ends it is necessary that this established order lead to an end; anything which separates itself from that order at the same time separates itself from its end. That which exists by reason of an end becomes necessary given that end, and this to the extent that if the end is to be attained the means necessary to achieve it must be adopted. Given these means, freed of course from any outside interference, the end necessarily follows. God has ordained a certain order for human acts in as far as their end is concerned, and this end is happiness. It follows, therefore, assuming this order to be solidly established that those who follow its dictates will obtain their end, happiness; in other words, they will be rewarded; and that those who disturb this order by the commission of sin will not obtain their end, happiness; in other words, they will be punished.

In the above quoted statement, St. Thomas defines very clearly both his own and my position on the subject of moral sanctions. For man, ethics is the art of arriving at his final end; this is its only rôle and ultimate purpose. Now, the end of man is the good, that is to say, it is the perfection itself of

man, either individually or collectively taken. Therefore, *moral* good must be understood as, over and above the acceptance by man of his end, fidelity in the use of the means which alone can bring him to this end. According as this end, the good, is achieved, happiness or unhappiness comes to us. Given this moral sanction, we experience joy in its achievement; in its absence we are haunted and tortured by our loss.

Now it is easy to see that these ideas are homogeneous. But it is only by joining them together in a sound and logical union that we can hope to discover the solution of our problem. To separate them would be to create innumerable difficulties for ourselves.

If virtue can be looked upon as the means to happiness, virtue must of itself be able to produce happiness. On the other hand, since vice is a denial of these means, it cannot but fall short of ever producing true happiness. Those writers, therefore, who advocate an ethics different from ours must be attacked from the side of the fundamental difficulties which their systems present in the light of the above fact; that is to say, if they are prepared to deny the existence of all moral sanctions this can only mean that they are prepared at the same time to maintain that the end and the means necessary to the achievement of this end, in as far as the eternal destiny of mankind is concerned, have no causal dependence one on the other. In other words, they must be prepared to defend the idea that we, for example, can go to London by going to Berlin, that we arrive nowhere even though we do proceed by the correct route, or that it is even virtuous on our part to be completely disinterested as regards our journey towards eternity, provided only that in our actions we are guided by and follow our own fancies.

Such assumptions are, of course, entirely unacceptable. It is simply not true that the means can be separated from the end, either psychologically or in fact. Nature is the creation of an

All-wise God; even human thinking is destined by the very law of its being to try to unite itself with this Wisdom. These two fundamental ideas contain within themselves the power to settle satisfactorily our whole problem. We must be careful, however, to analyze these ideas in as thorough a fashion as possible so as not to be led by our analysis to conclusions which are not contained in the premises.

The ancient Greeks, from whom we should not refuse to borrow any sound doctrine which they held (and the efforts which they made to establish an acceptable ethics were really surprising from whatever point of view we study them), declared that man, like everything else in this universe was made for the attainment of certain purposes, purposes which are determined by his very nature, which his will, if it be upright, must seek, and which all his efforts should tend to realize. These efforts naturally should be crowned by happiness, since happiness is nothing but the perfection of that which is experienced in each of our actions. It is in the correct union and subordination of these actions, one to another, that we find true happiness, the flowering of good.

Admirable as all this is in theory, the Greeks were not able to guarantee that virtue should necessarily be followed by the possession of its natural and logical result, happiness. I have no doubt that both Plato and Aristotle would have given their approval to the following sentiment of St. Thomas: "If human order has been solidly established it is necessary that those who accept and govern their lives according to these principles should attain happiness."

Facts, however, in this case conquered theory, and in spite of that optimism which was so characteristic of Greek thought, they were obliged to acknowledge that human order has not been *solidly established*, that in large measure nature is governed by chance and that the triumph of the wicked, to use a Biblical expression, and the oppression of the just is nothing

short of a shock to the religious soul and a scandal to all mankind. The optimism of Christianity, on the other hand, is more robust and vigorous than was that of an Aristotle, for the simple reason that it is not only founded on firmer principles but because our whole philosophy is shot through and through with it. In this context, however, we must never forget that moral sanctions are not merely a sort of reward extrinsic to effort on our part or unrelated to duty. On the contrary, they are the natural result of these very things, a real achievement on our part. They are not to be thought of as a kind of outside intervention in our moral autonomy since God, Who by His law commands such actions, must be regarded as a part of this autonomy, being its Creator and its Source.

I have prefaced the above remarks in order to make the more easily intelligible the arguments which are to follow.

My contention is that morality is simply the correct attitude of mankind in its search for happiness. A good act is one which binds together the desire for happiness with happiness itself. A bad, or sinful act, is one which cannot attain such a purpose; that is to say, one which cannot achieve happiness.

With reference to the means leading to happiness, these means are good, and are, at least theoretically, what we call virtues. But, in order that we may be able actually to achieve happiness, by means of an act of virtue which *per se* is capable of achieving happiness, it is necessary that order be solidly established. By this we mean to assert (1) that the means and the end be joined together in a way that is soundly logical; (2) that this union of end and means be not hampered in its working and results by any extrinsic obstacles in the presence of which morality is helpless. Given these conditions, morality achieves by and of itself a sanction, for the bond which joins the virtuous act with its resultant, happiness, is as unbreakable as is the relation which exists between a determined cause and its necessary effect. Of course the obstacles which may inter-

vene between the good we seek and the good we actually achieve are legion in number. There are, for example, obstacles due to heredity, to environment, obstacles which beset the course of the interior life, all of which conspire to shatter that inner harmony which reason can see should exist between our acts and their natural results.

All are agreed that a particular virtuous act may not profit a man personally, yet may be of great value to other people, or to the welfare of society. Much has been written recently on the question of the so-called collective effects of virtuous living on the part of the individual. Certainly such an idea contains some truth, nor is its value negligible, for individual effort can scarcely be thought of as virtuous from every angle unless it be subordinated to the welfare of the group. But it is evident that such an answer to our problem only serves to push back the real difficulty, for collective results cannot be guaranteed any more than individual results can be. They, too, are beset, as far as their consequences are concerned, by the selfsame obstacles which diminish the results of the actions of individuals.

Moreover, since morality is so essentially a personal matter, it should and must produce results, first of all, in terms of the individual. We are willing to agree that those results which are beneficial to the individual should likewise be of value to others, thus giving added proof of the solidarity which binds the members of the human family one to another; and morality of its very nature includes such an idea. But it is also necessary to hold that the individual should not be sacrificed to the good of the whole, since the welfare of the individual is, in the last analysis, the ultimate objective of all group action. The desire for happiness which is implanted in every individual is not a matter relative to the individual alone; it embraces all who are human beings like himself; it even includes God.

This desire for happiness, too, prescinds in a certain manner

from self, for if *the order*, of which we have spoken, is *solidly established*, virtue should be its own reward. Certainly, if a virtuous man by any chance should succumb irrevocably to the powers of evil, such defection might be considered an absolute evil. It is not, however, in any sense of the word a total evil, in spite of the fact that it must be looked upon as irremediable. Even the complete happiness, present and future, of the race would not of itself compensate for such an evil, for humanity is nothing but the individuals who in every century have gone to make it up, and for that reason humanity cannot but experience in itself the effects of the good or evil acts of every man who has ever lived upon the earth.

It must be conceded, therefore, that an order solidly established is not of itself capable of causing happiness to flow from virtue. But we may well ask: Is such a situation definitive or is it merely transitory? Does it represent a total or merely a partial and fragmentary outlook on human destiny? A pagan or paganizing philosophy considers such a view as totally and completely representative of all the facts, and so convinced argues from this assumption. A Christian philosophy, on the other hand, protests against such an attitude for it regards human destiny as something both wider and loftier than the pagan makes it out to be, and by consequence the Christian concludes that reality, including God and human life as well, is continued beyond all our experience here below, and because of this fact good actions contain within themselves the seeds of happiness, while evil acts can only lead to unhappiness.

Perhaps the metaphor of the seed to which reference has just been made may serve somewhat to clarify this thought. If a seed is kept in a granary, manifestly it does not produce fruit, despite the fact that it has within itself the power to do so. It can be said to have within itself fruit potentially, and we can even express the belief that later on it will actually produce fruit. The same may be said of the position which Christian

philosophy takes on this subject. According to our view, merit, the concomitant of every good act, is the equivalent of happiness, a paper money, as it were, given to us in place of happiness, the value of which is assured and which shall be redeemed by us in another world. As a matter of actual fact, virtue encounters and becomes one with happiness under the aegis of merit. Now, this is precisely what we mean by a moral sanction. For such a sanction becomes a surety bond since we expect and look forward to happiness when this sanction has succeeded in furnishing us with a justification for our acts.

It now remains to be seen whether we are justified in believing in the idea of merit as sanction. If we cannot do so it would be easy to show, by means of a more or less developed treatment of the obstacles which are always found in the path of those who attempt to do good, that the very idea of an adequate moral sanction is false, and that, by consequence, the idea of merit has no real value either.

It was Herbert Spencer who praised to the very skies the so-called natural sanctions of morality. By natural sanctions I mean those which have their origin in nature itself. These sanctions, however, are but pseudo-sanctions and are devoid of any ethical character. The reason for this statement is that they do not possess any *intent* and are, therefore, outside the realm of morality strictly taken. Nor are the so-called social sanctions much different in character from natural sanctions for the reason that social environment acts upon us according to law much in the same way as nature itself does. Sociology is interested only in the facts of environment. But morality, in the abstract at least, has little or nothing to do with, and is more or less shut off from, the influence of environment. According to this point of view, the sanctions of conscience have a value, even if it be only available for literary purposes. Of course such sanctions possess no real and lasting value, since the internal life of man, from which these acts proceed, is itself subject to change.

In order that an accord between morality and its normal consequences may be hoped for, it is necessary that morality regulate not only the goodness or evil of our acts but the universal reality which exists both in and outside of us as individuals, that is to say, that it govern nature, society, the body and soul of the moral subject, for all these play their parts in the sanctioning of human acts. In short, we must appeal to the creative will itself. That is precisely what we do when we act according to the dictates of reason.

In nature there is no action without its corresponding reaction. Everything which rebels against an established order necessarily meets some resistance from that order; on the contrary, everything which acts in accordance with an established order is itself developed thereby. This, of course, is nothing but the law of self-preservation, a law which is applicable to the realm of living beings where punishment or reward for actions follows almost spontaneously on the commission of such acts. The same law holds good as far as human beings are concerned. We look upon it as an act of justice that he who does good should be rewarded, while he who sins against order should be punished, that the order itself may be restored thereby. The popular expression 'restoration of public order' is profoundly philosophical for it is towards the restoration of order that every reaction works. As a matter of fact, it is really but another way of expressing the instinct of self-preservation.

There exists, we must not forget, a certain instinct looking towards the preservation of order in general as well as towards the preservation of any particular order, for being in general is certainly a type of being. Being in general also defends its right to existence. If it is a question of the internal unity which makes up human personality, conscience, the rector of this unity, reacts either by means of remorse or by means of the happiness begotten of a virtuous action. If it is a question of the body social, authority, the representative of the unity of

the group, reacts by means of penalties or rewards. If it is a question of the totality of beings, in a realm where morality is supreme, there will continue to exist certain incomplete reactions for the reason that the order of the universe, while embracing individuals within itself, does not, however, suppress their existence. However, God, the Author of all order, plays the principal rôle in the work of bringing to a conclusion, of embracing, and of setting right all possible particular reactions. Certainly it is the duty of him who represents an order to defend it against all disturbances of that order and to reward those who act in harmony with its demands. And this conclusion is all the more true as we approach an order which is more perfect than every other order. Where anarchy reigns, the individual must look to his own defense. In a civilized country, justice defends both the individual and the community. And the moral order which is, because of God its Author, both absolute and perfect, must centralize, as it were, its punishments, not in the sense that every punishment must come directly from God, but that, in the last analysis, every punishment must be His work and even some punishments must come directly and personally from Him.

Many reasons are advanced by writers who share with us this opinion. All these reasons merely develop the argument from St. Thomas which we have already cited. "Wherever there exists an order well established for the attainment of an end, it is necessary that this order lead to the end; to deviate from such an order is at the same time not to attain the end." Both Christian optimism and the honor due God demand that we believe that the order which He has ordained is well-established. Since virtue is proposed to us as a means of obtaining happiness, and has no other reason for existence, it should produce happiness for all those who live virtuously. Nor can there be any question of God abandoning us; we may even go so far as to say that God cannot abandon us and be true to

Himself. It is on some such assurance as this that at bottom the whole duty of man rests. As Kant has said somewhat obscurely but nevertheless profoundly: "The free will should be able to place itself in accord with that to which it is subject." We ought to subject ourselves to the moral law because it represents order, the universal means for the attaining of those beneficial results which the very functioning of all things demands. It is also a means to happiness for ourselves for we are, as all must realize, in constant relation with the whole of reality. If this means reveals itself as multiple, or if it manifests itself to a point where it must be considered purely contingent, if the results sought by a vigorous virtuous effort are not certain, then in whose name, we ask, can we bestow an absolute character upon the moral law? Has the order of the universe the right to command me without guaranteeing me beforehand for the sacrifices I shall make?

Egoism does not enter at all into this problem; it is a question purely and simply of the efficacy of action itself. We cannot be assured of the results of moral actions, strictly taken, unless we accept and live under the regime of justice, unless our environment makes up a moral order, unless the universe itself be subject to the law of God as we individuals are subject to its sway. If this world is, on the contrary, 'rooted in evil,' as the Apostle says, and if only evil exists as the final cause of all things, as the last and definitive truth and not as something merely temporary, then neither am I, the individual, bound by any law. In such a case we might be able to have recourse to a morality of pure sentiment founded on sympathy or on pity, on the love of danger, etc., but moral obligation could not be said to exist under such circumstances. If, on the other hand, the world is governed by the good, if all reality is moral, then by consequence it follows that a good action or a bad action done in this kind of an ambient will not be able to produce each the selfsame results. Moreover, and a fortiori, the

reactions themselves are not interchangeable, that is to say, good cannot become evil or evil, good. If it should happen, a thing which is daily occurring, that our immediate environment produces evil, that vice helps one to succeed and virtue only brings failure, that egotism is profitable and brotherly love but injures one, then we cannot but conclude that there must exist somewhere in the moral order which is far distant from our present environment an Omnipotent God Who will make His presence and intervention felt in our affairs, and Who as the Supreme Governor and Chief of this moral order will restore it to its equilibrium; in other words, that the head of this order will himself vindicate the rights of the order. "Revenge and reward are mine," saith the Lord.

Given these principles, it is easy to answer an argument which has an apparent value but is at bottom extremely superficial. It is the argument which, since Guyot's time, has been repeated *ad nauseam* by our contemporaries to the effect that a sanction against evil only serves to double the evil done, while a sanction for good does away with whatsoever good there may be in an action.

To the superficial observer it does appear that a sanction for evil can but double the evil under the pretext of curing it. There is a grain of truth in this statement, but the truth does not lie where the proponents of the argument place it. They would like us to believe that a sinful act is an evil and that the punishment must be super-imposed on this original evil, thus making two sins instead of one. To argue thus would be like saying: Gangrene is an evil; the amputation of a limb infected by gangrene is also an evil; therefore, the amputation of a gangrenous limb is a double evil. But it is evident that in this argument the actual number of evils is confused with their summation, a process which changes altogether the kinds of evil under consideration. Two evils do exist in the case of moral evil; on the one hand, a sin, on the other, punishment

for sin. But they stand in such a relation to each other that from a synthesis of them good itself is produced, the good of the moral order.

Sin is an evil; punishment abstractly considered is likewise an evil, but that sin should be subjected in this manner to a sanction, is a good, inasmuch as the sanction shows forth the order of nature over which justice presides. If it were otherwise sanction would be a universal evil, an evil of God Himself, if one may be permitted to use such a phrase. What I mean to say is that a sanction instead of being a relative would be an absolute evil.

It is also contended that a sanction for good ends by corrupting even the good done. This statement can be understood as meaning that either on the part of the divine order the sanction corrupts the good done because it corrupts virtue by the very act of sanctioning it, or on the part of the moral agent who should act at all times from wholly disinterested motives and should therefore, under penalty of not being really ethical, refuse to accept or even to desire a sanction for his acts. The first alternative is but the expression of an outrageous paradox. To contend that it is sinful to do good for one who has acted virtuously, for the reason that the subsequent approval may alter the purity of his actions, is simply a gamble. If it were as true as it may be at the same time false that a moral agent should disregard all sanctions, it follows that it would be no less illogical to say, it is an evil to insist upon even this kind of sanction. For we can then truly say that the less a man desires any sanction, the more he shall merit by his acts. The soldier who fights out of a sense of pure patriotism merits a military decoration more than he whose aim in fighting, no matter how legitimate that aim may be, was solely to obtain a decoration.

This, however, is only one and that a small side of the question. In this context it is important to appreciate that the

above argument disregards completely the fundamental nature of a moral sanction. It assumes that sanctions are heterogeneous to virtue, for the reason that they are to be regarded as a species of disturbing element in the pursuit of good. We have demonstrated that there exists a perfect homogeneity between virtue and its sanction, which is nothing but the perfection of virtue itself. One is but the natural and logical means to the attainment of the other. Virtue contains the idea of sanction in its very definition for virtue is, if it exists at all, the means we use to reach our end. It is very much like a father promising a reward to his son for progress in school. If the father said: "Study and you shall receive a watch from me," we can say that the father had given the son a wrong incentive to study. But if the father said: "Study in order that you may become some day a learned man," it is easy to see that the latter sanction is quite different from the former. To attain learning is a natural and adequate reward for a student. Learning is the normal outcome of study, and it is essentially ethical that such a result should follow upon study. If, however, such a result does not follow, this is due to influences not moral, but physical and psychological. Good to the good: this is precisely what our thesis presupposes, an assumption which is based on the idea that reality, because of its creation by God, is moral and that, therefore, the good is not only the law but the principle of all things. Now, when we say, good to the good, we mean, of course, the truly good, the good which both defines morality and bestows upon it its proper object. Why should any one attempt to depreciate the value of this good? We assert again and again that sanctions are not something extrinsic to the moral order, something added to it like a chocolate frosting to a cake, or a whipping given to a bad child. Sanctions are the normal consequences of our actions. They must, therefore, be viewed not only in their

relation to our immediate environment, but in relation to their own total environment, which is divine.

We may now say a word concerning the other aspect of the objection made. Why, we ask, should not one desire sanctions since they are included in the very reason for willing? The will is an appetite for the good. The good will is that which tends towards the highest good; such a definition exhausts its nature. The good is the end of man. Therefore, since the sanction sought by a moral agent is nothing but his own end, the reason for his virtuous acts, where is there any egotism involved in such a desire? Is it egotistic to will the end which we are in duty bound to strive for? The egotist acts out of a false conscience of self, unmindful of the Divine Self and all other selves bound to Him. But he who acts within the limits of the regimen of order acts for the good of the whole, including his own welfare. Should not the individual desire that which is the complement of all being? Can the individual make of himself an exception to universal law? Every individual is in command of his own destiny and welfare, but these are necessarily included in the welfare of others. The individual, however, must first of all seek his own happiness, since it has been committed to his care.

According to the Christian tradition, sanction is a greater good than even virtue itself, inasmuch as sanction is the end of virtue. An ethics like that of Kant, which believes in a morality without an object, may refuse to virtue the actual achievement of a successful outcome, led to this conclusion by the theory that in morality not the *being* but the *intent* alone is of value. As a matter of fact, we do not put a value on the intent until after we have accepted the being, and because of our evaluation of being. Merely to act, in our eyes, has no meaning at all, except on condition that we are acting to achieve something. This something, the end of man, is first willed by us and then achieved, otherwise all our efforts would be in vain.

As in the absolute realm which God rules over, there can be no unsuccessful activity since all acts must attain His purposes, so likewise the end-result of our moral effort is precisely that sanction which we have been discussing.

In conclusion, the very nature of the moral good as we have defined it, demands the existence of an adequate sanction. Certainly, that which we possess mentally as the so-called intent at the beginning of an act must be realized when the act itself is completed. If the chief of our ethical desires is a well regulated will to happiness, the pursuit of an end in every way conformable to human nature, then the pursuit of that end which is so conformable to the nature of man must itself be conformable to the laws of nature. Happiness is precisely that result which we should discover as the terminus of every moral effort on our part, provided, of course, that we do not fail in observing all the conditions requisite to the attainment of such happiness.

The conditions which depend upon us we are obliged to meet and to fulfill personally. As for the conditions which do not depend upon us, the Stoics claimed that they do not count, since happiness or sorrow flows only from those conditions over which man has control. But Aristotle, Plato, or a modern pagan finds himself incapable of accepting such a paradox, and therefore takes refuge in fatalism. The Christian has recourse to the idea of Providence, by bringing God into his theories of nature and of man. By reason of God that which appears not to depend upon us is found to depend upon us after all. The moral will becomes the rule of the universe, it fashions the universe according to its own ideals, it successfully achieves that which it desires, using both the universe and the self as means towards such an achievement. Certainly, this is a lofty conception of man. However, its fundamental optimism is but faith in God and the philosophical acceptance of the Kingdom of God, which includes and sanctifies all things by making

moral that which appears at first sight something quite foreign to a moral order, and in the end by bringing to God all those beings which are travelling in His direction as likewise those, but by a different route, that of justice, which will to separate themselves from Him.

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