Man, Society, and Morality

Phillip D. Adams
Western Michigan University

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Man hangs from a precipice—his fingers clawing for a firmer grip: knowing that regardless of whether he falls or in some manner is able to pull himself up and gain surer footing, he will be unable to claim his distinctiveness as man. His one position of distinctiveness is that he is hanging from that precipice. As the French gentleman of the fifteenth century would say: "Rein ne m'es sure que la chose incertaine." (I am sure of nothing except the uncertain.)

The differences between man and animal are few. However important these differences may be, it must be realized that while they are the basis of man's elevation above the animal kingdom, these same differences are the cause of most of man's conflicts—both personal and social.

First of all, man is characteristically a rational being. He is able to withdraw into himself and contemplate his future actions. He can reflect upon the past, analyzing the acts he has committed, and can, according to a notion that has prevailed for many centuries, "learn from his mistakes and the mistakes of others."

Secondly, man is endowed with imagination. He can imagine, or dream of, what the ideal status, actions and accomplishments of man could and should be. Although the element of imagination is dependent upon man's rationality to a certain extent, it is still the major source from which man draws his moral idealism. It is by combining imagination and rationality that man forms the means by which he realizes and judges the motives under which he acts and the interests of others. Imagination, while providing man with his ideals is also one of the basic debasing elements in man's nature, "Man will always be imaginative enough to enlarge his needs beyond minimum requirements and selfish enough to feel the pressure of his needs more than the needs of others."

An animal acts by instinct and necessity. A hungry animal realizes it is hungry and it instinctively attempts to satisfy its hunger. The means by which the animal obtains the food it craves is largely a matter of instinct, but in addition there may also be a conditioned reaction as taught, perhaps, by its parents: It must not be confused with the rationality of man—it might be called "developed instinct."

The animal has nothing to restrain its natural instincts and cravings and, hence, there can never be any guilt attached to its actions. Animals are non-rational—unconscious of their instincts. Since they are unconscious of their instincts and have no means at their

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disposal to restrain them with, they cannot be held responsible for their actions or reactions. Thus there is never an actual moral problem when one is concerned with the actions of an animal.

There is an inherent element in man's nature that prompts him to strive towards a state of self-transcendence in which he is able to consider the desires and needs of others, and to strive towards the achievement of a harmonious relation with them. In the process of attempting to establish a harmonious relationship with others man restrains his natural impulses and instincts by a will guided and controlled by the workings of his rationality and imagination.

Man is aware of himself and those around him. He is conscious of them, and with this consciousness there arises the consideration of others that makes man tend to restrain his actions. Restraint usually lies in dependence upon rationality, but, as Reinhold Niebuhr points out: "No man will ever be so intelligent as to see the needs of others as vividly as he recognizes his own, or to be as quick in his aid to remote as to immediately revealed necessities."

Because man is able to restrain his actions with respect to those around him, he must be held responsible for his actions. Men do possess, with all their other moral resources, a sense of obligation toward the good as their mind conceives it. As long as man is conscious of this obligation, he can, and must be held responsible for it. "If man loses his consciousness he cannot be found guilty because he is not responsible."

One of the most important features of man's attitude at the present time, and perhaps all time, is that even though he is completely conscious of this responsibility he consistently ignores it. Ortega y Gasset notes two fundamental traits of the mass-man of today: "the free expansion of his vital desires, and therefore, of his personality; and his radical ingratitude towards all that has made possible the ease of his existence."

In other words, man ignores the worth of other men and their desires while being conscious of them. The trait of man, as Gasset states it, is ingratitude, not unconsciousness or unawareness. "In the last resort...each individual has the responsibility of choice (between moral and immoral); and it is a responsibility that is not to be escaped." Man does not tend, however, to recognize moral responsibility. If man recognized this moral responsibility for his deeds society could be remade by remaking man. The obvious fact remains that

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2 Ibid., p. 28.
3 Ibid., p. 37.
6 The addition in the parentheses is mine.
while man is conscious of his moral responsibility he is not responding to it.

Man's make-up is also characterized by a conscience, which may be defined as "any emotionally-toned experience in which a tendency to act is inhibited by a recognition, socially conditioned, that suffering evil consequences are likely to result from acting on the impulse to act." Conscience is a moral resource, but it is a resource dependent upon social relationships and only be made actual in the light of the ideals of conduct which man professes. The Stoics and Kantians have placed too much emphasis on the natural obligatory force of the conscience—it is not as powerful as they would have us believe. Their position has been that by emphasizing and developing man's rationality mankind could develop a sense of duty adequate enough to provide mankind with a totally moral society. But no man will ever be so intelligent as to completely subjugate himself to a sense of duty.

Man is, by his very nature, a social being. He associates with other beings and to a certain extent is concerned with their welfare, or at least their existence. It must be pointed out, however, that the individual and social existences of man are at the same time distinctively separate and intricately woven together. "The moral life is a way of life for men in society," and, "it has at the same time a personal relevance and dimension or sphere of being." The moral life is both a personal and a social effort.

Religion is a personal moral force. And although it produces, in varying degrees, many moral influences upon the attitudes of society, it nevertheless retains its individual nature, for it is upon the individual that the moral ideals of religion have their greatest force.

The most characteristic ideal of the religious morality and, indeed, of individual morality, is unselfishness. And while the moral ideal of unselfishness is worthy of a great deal of respect, it must be noted that it is not without pitfalls. It is distinctly different from the politico-ethical ideal of justice that is both characteristic of and necessary for social harmony.

The religious ideal of Love, as manifested in unselfishness, is totally unrealistic. Men who have in the past claimed that the hope of a moral society lay only in the absolutism of religion must be made to realize that "All men cannot be expected to become spiritual any more than they can be expected to become rational." Furthermore there is always the possibility that the perfectionism, which prompts religious generosity, is more interested in the perfect motive than in ideal consequences. Preoccupation with motive is an unvarying characteristic of the religious life, which has its own

10 Niebuhr, p. 73.
virtues, but it is also responsible for the many absurdities which have been committed in the name of religious philanthropy; absurdities which are inevitable when the benevolent spirit disregards the social consequences of a generous action."

Preoccupation with motive is also true of the rational moralists, such as Kant and the Stoics, who, while professing duty, hold that the motive upon which an act is committed is all-important. Perhaps motive is as important as they make it on a personal basis, but one must be careful to always take into consideration the possible social consequences of an action to be committed, even though there is an ideal motive prompting the action. No one has the right to do injustice to another simply because he acts from a perfectly unselfish motive.

The truly religious person generally tends towards one or the other of two extremes: he becomes a religious ascetic, thereby absolving himself from all social responsibility, or he convinces himself that he has more influence on the morality of his society than he actually has. As a religious individual, however, the rewards that are to be reaped will be reaped only by him, and have a bearing on society only in so much as he is a member of that society.

All this is not to imply that the religious ideals expounded and acted upon by man do not have some influence upon the attitudes and the morality of society. Indeed, the leavening effect that religious altruism has upon society has great significance and cannot be denied.

As one progresses from normal personal relationships to collective or group life another weakness of religious altruism, with regard to its moral practicability, becomes increasingly apparent. The social ideal of justice is difficult to attain, if it is ever attained, but it is even more difficult to attain the religious ideal of love (unselfishness). There is always present, however, in every movement towards social justice, an element of religious altruism.

Whether it be on a religious or a rational basis, as individuals, men believe that social justice should be established, but whenever they are members of an economic, racial or social group they use all the power that they can command in order to take whatever they desire or in order to justify their own social position and actions on moral grounds.

Whereas individuals proclaim the moral ideal or unselfishness, the ideal society holds highest is that of justice. Unselfishness is primarily a product of the heart, while justice is a product, at least partially, of man's rationality. Justice is man's answer to the evils of social inequality. Society needs greater equality not only to advance but to survive. The basis of social inequality is, basically, the unequal distribution of power within the society.

There are, primarily, two types of social power—economic and military. It is with these two types of power that men rise above their

11 Ibid., p. 74.
fellow human beings and assert themselves as members of a privileged class or group.

Military power has always been and probably always will be a prime source of social cohesion, especially where nations are concerned. The oppression that comes with a conquering force is characteristically unjust. The methods employed to combat military power and economic power have often met with little success, and yet have had tremendous influence on the attitudes of those possessing the power.

There have been, first of all, the attempts to combat the imposed injustices with open violence. This is perhaps the most common way to fight injustice. It is the type of resistance offered by the French, under the leadership of General DeGaulle, after the Nazi occupation of World War II. And at the present time it is the type of resistance being offered by many of the Latin American countries where the people are revolting against the tyrannical oppressions of dictators.

The second type of resistance offered by oppressed groups is non-violence, which takes two distinct forms: non-violent resistance and pure non-violence (pacifism).

Pure non-violence, or pacifism, is the only means of resistance (actually it is complete submission to oppression) which has no resulting consequences that can injure or cause hardship for any other member of the society.

The consequences that follow pacifism vary according to the will of the oppressive group. Often times the pacifists are simply annihilated, but the effect that the pacifistic attitude may have may be far-reaching and may influence, ultimately, the moral principles of the oppressing force. Needless to say, pacifism often results in martyrdom which in turn tends to strengthen the faith of those united in the pacifist movements. Pacifism is connected primarily with religion, as exemplified in the practices of the Anabaptists and the Mennonites.

There is another extremely important point that should be brought up whenever one discusses pacifism; that is, if everyone were to follow the pacifistic principle of Christ's doctrine "Resist not evil" (Matt. 5:39) without devoting himself coordinately with equal integrity to a complete moral doctrine, society would soon be reduced to a state of anarchy.

Non-violent resistance is by far the most common of the two forms (Ghandi is generally considered the leading exponent of non-violent resistance), and is usually expressed by civil disobedience, boycott or strike. Non-violence has been misunderstood by a large portion of mankind for a long period of time, and it is often confused with pacifism. The moral implications of non-violent resistance are sometimes as disastrous as those resulting from violent resistance. The consequences of non-violent resistance are definitely more difficult

12 For a thorough explanation of the nature of non-violent resistance and its moral implications, see Reinhold Niebuhr's Moral Man and Immoral Society, pp. 240-256.
to measure than those of open violent resistance, but non-violence, too, can destroy property values and even human life. Although it is negative in its expression it may have very weighty and positive consequences. A strike, for instance, may destroy property values of an industry, and men, women and children, not engaged in the conflict, may suffer from the resulting hardships. Any form of resistance is inevitably bound to affect in some manner or another the other members of a community.

In truth it would seem that the only morally justifiable position is that of a pacifist: It, for the Western World, is the only one of the above enumerated modes of meeting with oppression or force that is at all coincidental with the Christian ideals of religious benevolence, humility and Love. In the Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, we also find that moral emphasis is placed on the ideals of humility and unselfishness.

Yet, generally speaking, we find that man has always considered himself to have a dual nature, and finds no difficulty in morally justifying his position of fighting for ideals of morality, social or personal, by wielding a bloody sword in direct opposition to the ideals he holds most high. The position that man takes on this issue is, perhaps, an attempt to reconcile the immediate needs of the present with the concept he has of the ideal future.

But, as long as there is any formidable amount of social power which provides the basis for social inequality, the ideal future can never be attained. As long as there is social inequality there will be majorities and minorities, whose conflicting interests can never be completely resolved. Regardless of the effect of the resistance offered in opposition to the injustice of the superior power, we find, for the most part, that majorities or minorities must yield to those who possess either military or economic power. As Reinhold Niebuhr so aptly states:

Moral factors may qualify, but they will not eliminate, the resulting social conflict. Moral goodwill may seek to relate the peculiar interests of the group to the ideal of a total and final harmony of all life. It may thereby qualify the self-assertion of the privileged, and support the interests of the disinherited, but it will never be so impartial as to persuade any group to subject its interests of the group to the ideal of a total and final harmony of all life.

If the moral factors will not resolve conflicting interests man must rely on a certain amount of coercion to resolve the conflicting interests, and, reciprocally, the use of this power tends towards injustice.

The technological civilization that we live in "has created an international community, so interdependent as to require, even if not powerful enough to achieve, ultimate social harmony" This technological civilization is characterized by the centralization of industrial ownership (the source of economic power) in the hands of a few in-

13 Niebuhr, p. 272.
Industrial lords. The individual has been lost in the mass of laborers. Hence, mankind is faced with a situation in which the possessors of economic power, and likewise the laborers en masse, are not responsible to anyone other than themselves.

Those who hold power in a group generally consider themselves as privileged. In fact, they regard their privileged status as just reward for achievements of the past. Perhaps carried over from this attitude of the privileged class is the tendency of that class to perform philanthropic acts. The generosity of the privileged classes has been interpreted in various ways. It may be that they are attempting to incite the envy of those in the lower status. It is more likely that their philanthropy is a means of justifying their privileges. Nevertheless, they who have the power exercise it to maintain their privileges—justifiable or not.

There have been many attempts to overcome the injustice that is associated with social inequality and privileged groups. Perhaps in the past few years the most prominent or favored means of trying to undermine the established privileges of the power classes has been enacted in the name of the Marxist theory.

The Marxist theory holds that the injustice found in social life is due to the unequal distribution of power within a society. The significant moral contribution that has been brought to light through Marxist thought is that special privilege is intricately involved with the ownership of the means of production.

The error in Marxist philosophy is that those who profess it ignore individual life and its moral problems. They assume that all problems of morality and life are social, and that society can be manipulated like a machine. They hold that once the construction and workings of the social machine are understood all personal problems will automatically be solved. This error is comparable to believing that a corn on the toe of an individual should be treated by cutting off the whole foot.

Henry David Thoreau states: "There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly." Thoreau was of course a person who sometimes anti-everything that was associated with civil law and power. There is, however, some merit in what he says, for the individual, as the basic element in social life, must be considered in the workings of society and his ideals and aspirations taken into account.

The moral problem that man faces is unquestionably: Can he be moral? Is it possible to have, within the personal and social spheres, a perfect moral life?

As was noted before, man has elemental distinctions that raise him above the animal world—rationality, imagination, conscience, etc. These elements are present in man's nature to be sure, but with-

14 Ibid., p. 49.
out an interdependence upon each other they near meaninglessness. It is only when they are combined and coordinated that they have significance, for ultimately the one major distinction of man is that he has moral potential. The previous elements discussed are important, but unless they are culminated in the development of a morality they do very little to make man anything other than a superior animal. It is extremely important to note, however, that unless man is moral he cannot lay claim to his distinctiveness.

It appears paradoxical to say that man's great distinctiveness is his morality, and then conclude that man is incapable of attaining complete social and personal morality, yet, this is the situation in which man finds himself. He is unable to attain social harmony and the ultimate ideals of perfect morality simply because he is man, and because there are forces present within society that tend to make man immoral. Paul Tillich, a prominent figure in contemporary theology states the same thing when he says:

Man is bound to sin in all parts of his being, because he is estranged from God in his personal center. Neither his emotion, his will, nor his intellect is excepted from sin and, consequently, from the pervision of their true nature. This intellect is as distorted and weakened as his moral power.16

Tillich is concerned mainly with the individual and his relation to moral limits, but if we conclude that individuals are incapable of becoming "sinless" we cannot expect to establish perfect morality in the social orders.

This is not to say that man's position should be considered as completely hopeless, for there are great possibilities for man to improve his moral stature by developing the capacities that make his morality at all possible. If man applies his rationality with integrity it can greatly aid him in the suppression of his dishonest pretensions and ego-centered desires. Human intelligence can increase the benevolence of man and help him to consider the desires, needs and rights of other human beings.

Thus it is that man hangs from that precipice. He is unable to raise himself up to the level of perfect morality and social harmony, and he does not dare to allow himself to lose his hold and drop into that position where he will be unable to claim his distinctiveness as man.