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Crane Brinton

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LORD ACTON'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY¹

CRANE BRINTON

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

"I have never had any contemporaries," said Lord Acton toward the close of his life; and, in the main, he was right. His broad cosmopolitanism made him impatient of English insularity. His belief in the necessity of freedom of conscience alienated him, in spirit if not in form, from the church of his birth. His insistence upon the absolute validity of the moral law as the final measure of all things isolated him in the midst of a century which seemed largely to have concluded that morality and success are synonymous. Certain it is that his own age did not estimate him over highly. At his death in 1902 there were not a few who asserted that for all his depth of erudition, Acton had contributed nothing to the sum of human knowledge. He had been an omnivorous reader and possessed a greater knowledge of the sources of modern history than any other man of his day. Yet all this store of learning had been of no avail to the world, for Acton had written nothing. At his death, a lecture in English, a letter in German, were all that represented Acton on the shelves of the library of his own university, Cambridge. Even today, after his lectures, his letters, and his periodical writings have been collected and edited, his output remains small: two volumes of lectures, three of letters, two of historical essays contributed to the reviews of his time. Yet in spite of the scantiness of his written work, Acton must be numbered among the great historians of the last century. Great-

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ness is not susceptible to quantitative analysis. A historian's influence is not to be measured by the number of volumes in octavo he brings forth. Acton's few pages are sufficient to define his attitude toward history. His life shows how intimate for him was the bond between a knowledge of the past and a reasoned course of conduct in the present. What is important for the world in Acton is not the extent of his writings, but the depth of his thinking. We are interested, not so much in his broad erudition as in the living core of his thought, his philosophy of history.

John Acton was born in Naples on the tenth of January, 1834. His father, Sir Richard Acton, came from an old family of English country squires which had kept to the Catholic faith. His mother was a Dalberg, a member of a distinguished South German family. John was educated first at Oscott, one of the leading Catholic colleges in England, and then at Munich under Döllinger. Acton is thus marked off from the majority of his countrymen by his religion and his cosmopolitanism. It is precisely these factors that determined his outlook on life, that served most to forge his character. He was a sincere Catholic. To this he owed his moral austerity, his sense of the gravity of history and its ethical import. The German element in Acton shows itself in a scientific thoroughness of research, in a fund of scholarship not wholly free from a sort of unwieldy bulkiness. He is at bottom, however, an Englishman. His ideal of liberty is determined by an English respect for law and custom, an English recognition of the principle of growth in political institutions. He had none of the blindly doctrinaire idealism of the continental liberal; rather, he follows the tradition of the Whigs. The cosmopolitan character of his interests, however, lifted him above the pettiness of partisan standards. His Whiggism is never the Whiggism of a Macaulay. Acton strives to draw

from every historic occurrence its universal application, its truth; and this truth is an absolute, a principle whose distortion is crime.

Acton's attitude toward history is thus blocked out in the circumstances of his birth and education. For those who would understand his position as a historian his later life marks but two important events — his struggle with ultramontaniam and his professorship at Cambridge. On his return to England from Germany, Acton edited successively the *Rambler* and the *Home and Foreign Review*, journals through which, as some one has said, he set out "to convert the world to a synthesis of learning, liberalism, and Catholicism." Such ideals soon brought him into conflict with Rome. His journals were officially condemned and he was forced to suspend their publication. His long struggle with ultramontaniam culminated in the utter defeat of the Liberal Catholics at the Vatican Council of 1870. After the declaration of papal infallibility by the council, Acton withdrew from open ecclesiastical controversy. Believing, however, that the decree of infallibility might be so mildly interpreted as to rob it of its dangers, he never took the decisive step of withdrawing from the Catholic communion. The conflict, however, had left a permanent impression upon him. It confirmed his conviction that absolute power, whether in church or in state, is an evil not to be endured; it gave him a motive for a searching inquiry into the past of his church, an inquiry which served to strengthen his hatred for religious persecution in all its forms.

The next twenty years of Acton's life were passed in diligent reading in preparation for his projected *History of Liberty*. He welcomed his appointment as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge in 1895 as an opportunity to carry out his plan. The *Cambridge Modern History*, as Acton originally conceived it, was but a fragment of a greater work which was to trace the

slow progress of the human race toward freedom. But the task was too gigantic even for a scholar of Acton's calibre; and Acton himself pursued his passion for absolute certainty of evidence so far that most of his time was spent in investigation, and little left for creative work. Acton died with the *History of Liberty* still unwritten. His Cambridge years, however, were by no means barren. In these few short years his personality stamped itself upon the historical thought of the university; and the two volumes of his lectures on modern history and on the French Revolution give us in their full ripeness the sum of his historical judgments.

History was not to Acton a mere academic pursuit. With that view of history which considers it, beneath the dry light of science, as a series of phenomena capable of detachment from the present, susceptible to separate analysis, he had no sympathy. Still less did he consider history a mere form of literary exposition. The one justification for the study of history was to Acton its value as a guide in the affairs of the every-day world. The present is what it is because of what the past has been. Human development has been a continuous chain of cause and effect. Any course of action in the present must be based upon a knowledge of the way in which things we now do are hedged in, limited by what men have done before us. History thus becomes a great mentor, a schoolmaster of action.

Acton does not mean by this that we are to become blind worshippers of the past. He dislikes that type of conservatism which obstinately faces backward to glue its eyes on the days of old as much as he does that doctrinaire revolutionism of the French which would abolish history. History is a valuable guide, not only because it serves to delimit our field of action, but because it allows us to profit by the errors of our predecessors. As Acton says, "If the Past has been a burden, a knowledge

of the Past is the safest and surest emancipation." Moreover, a knowledge of history prevents us from confusing what is transitory and unimportant with the things that really count; it forces us to fasten on abiding issues. Only through historical insight can we separate in the maze of present-day politics selfish interests from social principles. In the highest sense, history is to Acton a philosophy. It is the sum of man's achievement; its proper interpretation affords the key to his destiny.

To Acton, then, "history, the record of truths revealed by experience, is eminently practical, as an instrument of action and a power that goes to the making of the future." But to achieve this function it must not take the shape of a mass of uncoördinated details. The great bulk of historical data must be given an orderly shape, must be interpreted. The historian cannot, however, be content with the mere winnowing of patiently acquired data. He must appraise the place of events in the scheme of things. He must not read his own prejudices into events, nor must he seek in history an orderly system in which every item can be properly pigeon-holed. Acton gave an excellent summary of his own historical method in reply to a correspondent who had quoted Vinet's "*Il faut que l'historien ait un parti; amour de vérité abstraite, chimère.*" "*Oui et non,*" wrote Acton. "*Oui, l'historien doit avoir un parti . . . mais il doit faire aussi la part de ce qui est incertain, du côté faible, de la vertu, du talent et du mérite des malfaiteurs. En l'histoire, tout est porté, limité, interprété par une masse d'antécédents qui ne souffrent pas une désignation exclusive.*"

Acton believed that history could be rendered truly significant only by testing the conformity of its content with two fundamental principles: first, the right of every man to freedom of conscience; second, the unfailing authority of the moral law. These principles are not injected into the mass of historic detail in some esoteric

manner, like the Kantian categories into the world of sensation. They are not metaphysical absolutes applied to history, not *a priori* rules to rationalize historic data. They are rather truths which result from a historic induction; they are to be inferred from a study of the course of history. Once recognized and applied to the course of events, these principles serve to give meaning to separate phenomena, as the laws of modern science serve to bring various physical activities into orderly connection. History thus gives us the account of the gradual and painful progress of the race toward freedom and morality. A given historical event, once every fact of evidence which can be known about it has been discovered by an impartial investigation, must be judged by its part in this upward progress, by its contribution to ethical freedom. The absolute paramountcy of these standards of freedom and morality was to Acton the lesson of history. That others, starting with a similar basis of historic evidence, should draw from it a teaching as diametrically opposed to his as "Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht" merely proved to him how strong were the forces of evil in this world. Acton was profoundly convinced of his own rightness. His conception of the significance of history is undoubtedly the reflection of his character. However much he may seek for objectivity of judgment, however much he may wish events themselves to mould his generalizations, we cannot but feel that in the end he is interpreting things in terms of his own personality. Hence there appears in his standards of historic judgment a certain rigidity, a certain absoluteness, which removes them, in a way, from subjection to that historic growth which produced them. In brief, Acton does not wholly succeed in making history a true induction; there remains in his categories of freedom and morality a suggestion of fixity and immutability which divorces them from the every-day world.

All this will appear more clearly in an examination of the precise nature of these standards.

Acton's definition of liberty has become famous. "By liberty I mean the assurance that every man shall be protected in doing what he believes to be his duty against the influence of authority and majorities, custom and opinion." Surely it is an ideal which does not lack in force of aspiration. Freedom of conscience is to Acton the highest ideal of human progress. Liberty, in this sense, is not a means of attaining a better political system; it is in itself the highest end of all political effort. It is just because liberty is the goal of the race that it forms a criterion for the judgment of history. Though this definition of liberty is perhaps a counsel of perfection, Acton does not mean it to be purely Utopian in character. Liberty is something which operates here among us. It has never been completely realized; it has been subject to violation and abuse by those who did not understand it. But it has persisted, and all history records its increasing sway over the minds and action of men.

Acton defines liberty in terms of the individual will; but that does not mean that the individual is free to act at his own caprice. Acton realizes that absolute freedom, like absolute despotism, is an impossibility. No man can have complete control over another, even over his slave, for the slave always has the alternative of suicide. Similarly, no man can be unqualifiedly free as long as another human being exists and has relations with him. Acton saw the full truth of Aristotle's statement that man is a social animal. Hence he saw that an individual's liberty is always contingent upon the liberty of others. Freedom is in a sense merely the harmonious functioning of all parts of the social order. Because he considered social progress as necessarily evolutionary, Acton made respect for law and tradition an important factor in true freedom. Nothing is to be

achieved by seeking to wipe out all that mankind has done and then attempting to make over the world completely. Such a process is impossible, and founded upon a false reasoning, which seeks to remove man from his social and historical background and consider him as an abstract entity. In his respect for law and order, his doctrine of the gradual evolution of institutions, his dislike for the political theory of the French Revolution, Acton is a lineal descendant of Burke. His notion of liberty is essentially English, a less partisan, less selfish, and less insular form of the doctrines of 1688.

The surest test for the existence of liberty in a society is for Acton the amount of security enjoyed by minorities. In the Oriental despotism there are no minorities — and no freedom. It is through the existence of a variety of opinion within a state, such as is afforded by the freedom of minorities, that men's minds are kept open to the possibility of progress. Acton is at base an individualist, and he has no respect for authority apart from knowledge. He dreaded an absolute power in the state as the possible — nay, the inevitable — enthronement of error. Only by a recognition of the rights of minorities can there prevail that open-mindedness essential to the reign of truth. From the very fact that he founds his whole philosophy on the duty of the individual to base his conduct on the dictates of his conscience, Acton denies the right of the state to absorb completely the personality of its citizens. The Hegelian concept of the good of the state as the highest goal of human endeavor is to him as dangerous as the blunter absolutism of the Roman Empire. Modern democracy, in so far as it stands for the tyranny of the majority, is equally harmful to true liberty. For what assurance have we that the majority will be right? True liberty can exist only when the state is recognized as possessing a limited competence. The state cannot, for instance, transgress upon the domain of

religious bodies, unless the practice of those bodies prove injurious to the welfare of society as a whole. Each one of these bodies has a life, a purpose, a will, just as does the state. Where their purposes do not conflict with the higher end of the state, the law of freedom forbids the state to interfere with them. This is the real significance of the security of minorities. It means that no power stifles the free play of conscience, that within the state various other social groups may work out in freedom their contribution to the good of humanity.

Recognition of the evolutionary character of social progress, respect for law and order and our whole historic inheritance, security of minorities — all this is for Acton implicit in the definition of liberty as freedom of conscience. Because he was a man of profound religious conviction, Acton could base everything on the individual's sense of right and wrong. If a man is truly moral — and for Acton morality is not purely intuitionist with the individual, but a reasoned obedience to a perfectly definite code of laws — he will make his liberty founded upon an appreciation of his obligations to society. Liberty of conscience does not imply a state of anarchy where each one will go his own way regardless of his fellows. On the contrary, its perfect realization would mean the attainment of that mean between anarchy and despotism which is the aim of political endeavor. Freedom of conscience would attain this result because it would subject all to the moral law; and the moral law is a given norm, uniform and unchanging, recognizable by all. Ideally, all consciences are thus guided by the same force. This conception of the moral law is the key to Acton's thought. Once the precise meaning he gives to morality is known, and his philosophy of history becomes clear.

The value of a historical event in moulding our conduct is measured by its ethical teaching. It is the

office of the historian to see that everything that has occurred in the past is appraised for its moral content. He must see to it that no shams live to perpetuate themselves. He must first of all investigate thoroughly the facts of a given case. But his function is not merely one of research; he must judge. He has as the basis of his judgments the moral law, perfect and unalterable. "Opinions alter, manners change, creeds rise and fall, but the moral law is written on the tablets of eternity." Acton is able to conceive of the moral law as absolute because, for him, ethics is a religion. Christianity meant to him primarily the Golden Rule, and for its more strictly theological aspects he cared little. He once wrote to Creighton: "You would imply that Christianity is a mere system of metaphysics which borrowed some ethics from elsewhere. It is rather a system of ethics which borrowed its metaphysics elsewhere." Since the moral law is thus a matter of religion and finds its source in inspiration, Acton is able to give it a character of fixity and oneness.

With all the austere majesty in which Acton clothes his ethics, the good life yet remains something we can all recognize, strive for, and in a measure obtain. Only the most opinionated of pragmatists can accuse him of having failed to give us a system of ethics which will get down into the dirt of every-day life and help clean up that dirt. Acton's moral code is simple. "It is the common, even vulgar code that I appeal to," he once said. The distinction between good and bad does not involve fine-spun philosophical arguments. It is to a certain extent intuitional. We can all agree on certain things that are good and others that are bad. For Acton, the Christian code of morals summed up all that was best in human nature. It formed an eternal truth of religion and just for that reason it was eminently practical, something that could be a real part of our lives. Acton believed

that he had found the heart of the moral law in the principle that human life is a sacred gift, and that it must be treated as sacred. It is the greatest of crimes to take human life without reason. Around this central principle Acton groups the rest of his ethical teachings, as a whole very simple, and summed up in the teachings of Christ.

With this conception of the nature of morality and its function in the interpretation of history, Acton was naturally bitterly opposed to many of the tendencies of his age. He combated with all his strength the notion that history shows that the capable is always the moral, and that therefore what has been has of necessity been right. Viewed in the light of a superior law of right and wrong, history shows countless incidents in which wrong has triumphed, but remained wrong. It is the duty of the historian, in Acton's mind, to point out these incidents, to hold them up for condemnation, to exhibit them as errors to avoid. Wrong is in itself a thing of evil, even though it may be victorious. The distinction between good and evil is based upon a law which is prior, superior to the happenings of the day; it does not consist in the result of those happenings. Acton's view of the moral law likewise caused him to condemn the inclination to excuse the sins of a period as due to the "spirit of the time." Different ages cannot have different moral standards; what is wrong in one age must be wrong in another, for the moral law is timeless.

Acton would not for a moment admit the possibility of a divorce between politics and ethics. Statesman and private citizen are alike subject to the demands of morality. Indeed, the transgressions of the statesman are the more serious, for they affect the policy of whole peoples. "I cannot accept the canon that we are to judge Pope or King unlike other men, with a favorable presumption that they did no wrong. If there is any presumption,

it is the other way, against the holders of power, increasing as the power increases. Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. . . . The inflexible integrity of the moral code is to me the secret of the authority, the dignity, the utility of history." The activities of states are in Acton's view equally bound by the demands of morality. He saw clearly the danger to civilization which lies in the doctrine that the state is above all restraint, that only the dictates of its own convenience or advantage govern its relation with other states.

History, then, is a practical guide to action, the lesson taught us by the experience of the race. It is easily intelligible because through its complicated course run two inseparable truths: the right of every man to give unhindered obedience to the voice of his conscience, and the eternally binding force of that unalterable moral law which governs his conscience. In broad outlines, this is Acton's historical philosophy. It will gain in meaning if we consider its application to specific historical problems.

Acton's estimate of our Civil War is an illustration at once of the strength and weakness of his attitude toward history. The American state, he says, was founded on the federative principle; that is, certain smaller bodies surrendered to a larger one created by their own union definite rights, while each contracting body retained other definite rights for itself. Through the effectiveness of this distribution of power, America prospered for several generations. Gradually, however, the Jeffersonian idea that the will of the majority is law and that no one can have rights over against the majority began to take root. Opposed to this was the theory that the principles of law and order and morality are superior to the popular will, and that minorities too have positive rights. Those who held to the first view naturally supported the power

of the federal government over the states, for through the federal government could best be secured that uniformity which was the goal of democratic absolutism. The other party maintained the doctrine of states' rights. The North and South went to war not because of slavery — this was but the match that kindled the fire — but because absolute power and restrictions upon its exercise cannot exist together. The whole position of the South is "a repudiation of the doctrine that men can enforce no rights, and that the majority can do no wrong."

Acton's main thesis, that the American government has been tending toward a deification of the will of the majority and that the Civil War was a great step toward centralization, is undoubtedly correct. The victory of the North was primarily a blow at the doctrine of states' rights. Just here, however, can be distinguished the limitations of a historical method which, like Acton's, judges everything by wholly inelastic standards. He picks out some one aspect of things which best serves him to set off or expound his standards and neglects other equally important aspects. His desire to make the moral lesson of history clear cut causes him to oversimplify the content of historic fact. He admitted that in history no sharpness of outline must be sought, that everything is qualified, limited. But in his own work he failed to carry out this method. Granted that on the whole the political philosophy of the North can be embodied in the statement that the will of the majority is law; might not the temporary ascendancy of this doctrine be less damaging to the good of America and persistence of freedom than that of the theory that the union is merely one of convenience? In other words, if Northern centralization tended to tyranny, did not Southern particularism tend to anarchy? Acton, as a true liberal, ought surely to have looked with apprehension at the narrow utilitarianism which lay behind the doctrines of nullifi-

cation and secession. Moreover had Acton applied completely his own principle, that a historical event is to be judged by its moral effect, his conclusion must have been different. A community which subjects some of its members to bodily enslavement is obviously transgressing the spirit of Christian morals. The effect of the institution of slavery upon a people is to render it callous to human rights and to introduce the very principle of absolute power which was the chief object of Acton's hatred. It would seem that in regard to the Civil War the problem is this: given the circumstances of the case, which would prove less disastrous to the attainment of ethical good, the Northern doctrine of the divine right of the majority or the Southern institution of slavery, coupled with the Southern doctrine of secession? Viewed in the light of the consequences which are implied in the opposing principles, moral justification must be given the North. Had Acton been less intent on finding in the federal victory a regrettable success of Jeffersonian democracy over true liberalism, he must have seen that there were elements of right and wrong on both sides, and that the final result must be measured by the balance of ethical values.

Acton lived in the midst of the period which witnessed the rise of nationalism and the unification of Italy and Germany. His attitude on the nationalist movement affords an excellent example of how he sought to apply a knowledge of history to the solution of the problems of his own day. Furthermore, his conclusions have a living value as bearing upon a problem which confronts us imperatively at this moment. His essay on "Nationality," published in 1862, soon after the virtual completion of Italian unity under Cavour, embodies the practical application of his philosophy to contemporary problems.

Acton finds the source of the national movement, like that of the liberal movement, in a protest against the

abuses of the old régime. Nationalism, as the feeling of "a community which imposes upon its members a consistent similarity of character, interest, and opinion," had been throughout history a normal characteristic of many European race groups. The absolutist dynasties of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had waged wars and cut up kingdoms wholly for their own selfish interests, without considering the character and interests of the population. This state of affairs came to a head in the partitions of Poland, and it was these partitions which awoke the Polish people to a sense that they were really one and united them against their oppressors. Then came the French Revolution, and the doctrine of nationalism was grafted upon its other precepts. The state was brought into being to register the general will. But the general will is one and all-compelling, and the state must therefore be one and absolute. The logical application of Rousseau's doctrines meant the unlimited power of the state as expressed through popular sovereignty. If the state is to be one, it cannot permit the existence of community interests within it; hence, racial, lingual, provincial, and national differences within it must be abolished. Several nationalities cannot form a state, for state and nation must be coextensive. In pursuance of this theory the Convention proceeded to attempt to eradicate all traces of local differences in France and sought to make of France a perfect ethnographic unit. This spirit is characteristic of the nationalist movements of the nineteenth century. They are not so much movements for national liberty as for national unity. Harsh intolerance of other races inhabiting the same state is an invariable accompaniment. In many cases the dominant race forcibly imposes its language and civilization on the weaker ones. Acton lived to see this practice in its worst form in the Magyarization of Hungary and the Germanization of Alsace-Lorraine and Posen.

The evil results of this theory of nationality, continues Acton, are many. The perfect nation-state is an ideal entity, an abstraction, a body founded without regard for historic growth and racial diversity. It shares the doctrinaire character of the other tenets of the Jacobin Revolution. Put to the test of contact with the world, such a theory leads to absolutism of the worst kind. There is nothing between the individual and the state, and there can thus be no guarantee of private rights. Acton's own words on the subject are well worth quoting: "Whenever a single definite object is made the supreme end of the state, be it the advantage of a class, the safety or power of the country, the greatest happiness of the greatest number, or the support of any speculative idea, the state becomes for the time inevitably absolute. Liberty alone demands for its realization the limitation of public authority."

In contrast to this theory Acton brings forward another theory of nationality, based not on national unity, but on national union. It is quite obvious that the aspirations of every European nationality to sovereign statehood cannot be realized. Sufficient testimony to this fact is afforded by the mixture of races in Austria-Hungary and the Balkans. Moreover, even if nation and state might always be coextensive, such a condition would not be desirable. The existence of several national groups under one government forms a positive guarantee of liberty. These groups resist the tendencies of centralization and absolutism in the state; they form associations which help give expression to diverse interests, make political life richer by preventing dire uniformity, insure progress through healthy rivalry, balance group interests for the good of the whole.

For still another reason state and nation ought not to coincide. Patriotic attachment to one's racial nation is largely physical, primitive, while allegiance to the

political nation is ethical. The first is founded upon instincts which, like love of family, are primarily selfish. Race feeling is merely an extension of tribal feeling, and is based on the instinct of self-preservation. Only in the political order is self-preservation transformed into a higher moral purpose which may involve self-sacrifice, for the state is organized for public interests which transcend those of private individuals. In no case, however, must the individual allow love for his nation or obedience to his state to transcend every moral consideration. Here, as everywhere, the individual must appeal to his conscience. "The man who prefers his country before every other duty shows the same spirit as the man who surrenders every right to the state. They both deny that right is superior to authority."

State and nation, then, are fundamentally different, and the only guarantee of true liberty is the existence of several nationalities in federal organization under one government. The theory that nation and state must be one inevitably leads to absolutism and to this extent it is a retrograde step in history. It has, however, successfully carried out its function, the destruction of the old régime. The democratic movement alone, without the aid of nationalist enthusiasm, could never have accomplished this end. Moreover, the nationalist theory marks the culmination and hence the exhaustion of the revolutionary principle. It aims neither at liberty, as did the early French revolutionists, nor at prosperity, as did the socialists of 1848. It sacrifices everything to the sterile purpose of national interests. The individual will is submerged in the collective will, which is guided, not by law and reason, but by the mere accident of race. In this very excess the nationalist theory carries the germ of its own dissolution.

Acton's treatment of nationalism thus brings out very clearly how his theory of liberty is one of balance of

interests, how much it is a protest against sweeping denials of historic forces in favor of a single doctrine. His conclusions on the historical purport of the movement seem borne out by the course of recent events. That national feeling can become the invaluable auxiliary of state despotism of the worst kind is shown in the rise of the German Empire. The present war is largely the outcome of the doctrine of the absolute nation-state, supreme within its own borders, bound in its relations to other states by no law, because itself above all law. Acton's own theory of nationalism is of value in its bearing upon the reconstruction which must follow the war. It is becoming increasingly evident that the only possible solution of the national difficulties in Europe is the recognition of an authority higher than national interests. A really federative organization in which each nationality would possess self-government and local independence seems the only way out of the complicated racial tangles of eastern and central Europe.

Acton's political philosophy is, as we have seen, basically individualistic, in that he believes that every man must appeal to his own conscience for the ultimate sanction for all action. The conscience of mankind is determined by a common ethical inheritance, by a distinction between right and wrong which is clear and valid in all cases. Along with this insistence upon absolute freedom of conscience Acton maintains that deep respect for the forces of law and historic tradition which forms the essence of Whiggism. Obviously, we have here a form of the eternal antithesis — liberty and authority. Shall the individual always obey the dictates of his conscience, or shall he sometimes, aware of the futility of protest, find it expedient to yield to an authority which he knows to be wrong? Given his belief in the supremacy of the moral law, Acton could but answer that right alone is expedient. The difficulty here arises that most of us

take our ethics upon authority and that for the average man no such sharp division exists between the two as Acton would create. It has been the function of the church to disseminate its ethical teachings among its members. The Christian believer looks to his church for his moral standards — that is, he bases his ethics on authority. The church then has a peculiarly sacred position as guardian of public morality. The slightest deviation from right on the part of the clergy may thus prove most detrimental to the good of the community. Evil committed by the clergy can least of all be condoned, for it is the most penetrating of all evil. The general principles of morality are eternal and immutable, superior to narrow sectarian interests. If the governing powers of any church violate the moral law, the individual who is truly moral will refuse to abide by their action. This is precisely the conclusion to which Acton is led. It might be urged against him that, in view of the lofty purpose of the church, some slight debasement of the moral coin might be countenanced if only good resulted in the end. If opposition to a course not strictly moral would lead to disruption of the church and its failure to carry out its mission, would it not be better to acquiesce in the wrong, especially if it may be glossed over and its consequences minimized? Briefly, the problem is this: Given a moral code which absolutely separates right and wrong, can the commission of a wrong be justified on the ground that it will lead to a greater right? Acton's relations to his own church serve as his final answer to this, the crucial problem of his philosophy.

Acton's faith in his religion was profound and unquestioning; it was not for that reason narrow and intolerant. He once wrote of himself as a man "who started in life believing himself a sincere Catholic and a sincere Liberal; who therefore renounced everything in Catholicism that was not compatible with liberty and

everything in Politics that was not compatible with Catholicism." It was no light task. As Acton viewed the historic career of the Catholic Church, he could not but see that many of her acts were wholly incompatible with his own convictions. We have seen that his religion was primarily an ethical system. In so far as those who controlled the policy of the Catholic Church violated those ethical precepts upon which the Catholic religion is founded, Acton would repudiate their acts. If the body of the Church consented to the immoral acts of its rulers, it had ceased to be perfectly Catholic. In other words, Catholicity and the policy of the Catholic Church have not been identical save when church policy has been in accordance with that moral law which forms the heart of the Catholic faith.

Acton found that the history of his church disclosed many offences against the principle of liberty and the moral law. Church organization made the pope an absolute sovereign. But absolutism in the church is open to the same objections which make absolutism in the state intolerable. It is bound to lead to arbitrariness, subjects the ruler to the temptations of misuse of power, and affords no guarantee that the moral law will be respected. It becomes inevitably immoral. The history of the papacy bears this out. The boundless and unattainable claims of Boniface were the result of lack of limitation on papal power. Luther came largely as a protest against papal tyranny and misgovernment. On the other hand, it is not sufficient that the Conciliar movement attempted the limitation of papal absolutism to gain Acton's approval for the movement. He finds the Councils imbued with purely worldly motives. They wished to restrict the papacy partly for their own aggrandizement, partly in the interests of the secular states of Europe. Gerson and the rest of the reformers were first of all promoting their own selfish ends. Then too, the Councils carried out

a vigorous policy of persecution. To Acton, the burning of Hus alone suffices to condemn the whole Conciliar movement.

Religious persecution, along with papal absolutism, have been the chief crimes of the Church against liberty. Persecution is always a useless thing, for belief is a spiritual force, and can never come from the outside, from sheer physical pressure. Moreover, persecution is immoral not only because it reacts upon the persecutor and makes him careless of law, brutal, bigoted, but because it may result in the suppression of truth. Toleration is vindicated by the fact that truth can never suffer in open conflict with falsity. Give truth free rein and it will by its very nature emerge victorious. Falsity, however, must always depend not on moral but on physical force. The danger in persecution lies in the fact that it may be employed on the side of the false. Indeed, as soon as any great and good principle enlists the aid of persecution it falsifies itself. Liberty of conscience is the only guarantee for the triumph of moral principles in the life of a community. When the Catholic Church made use of persecution to stamp out heresy it was acting contrary to the spirit of Catholicism.

The most serious offence of the rulers of the Church has been their failure to adhere to the moral law. The stamping out of heresy, the extension of papal influence in European courts, papal acquisition of worldly wealth, all were achieved by methods distinctly at variance with the Golden Rule. Jesuit possibilism, which comes down in practice to the profession that the end justifies the means, seemed to Acton the highest degree of immorality. If the means is immoral, it incorporates itself in the end attained, and taints that end. He has best expressed this attitude in a letter written in German: "Die Unsittlichkeit besteht darin, dass man glaubt, die Sünde höre auf, Sünde zu sein, wenn sie für die Zwecke der

Kirche begangen wird. Raub ist nicht Raub, Lüge nicht Lüge, Mord nicht Mord, wenn sie durch religiöse Autoritäten oder Interessen sanktionirt wird. . . . Eine solche Lehre is nicht Irrtum, sondern Sünde, nicht gefährlich, sondern tödtlich. . . . Solche Männer scheinen mir nur fluchwürdig im höchsten Grad, mehr als die gemeinen Verbrecher, weil sie die Religion selbst verwenden, um die Seelen zu verderben."

It is obvious that the Catholic Church has contravened the moral law as Acton understood it. Acton did not hesitate to apply the unfailing canon of morality to church history with even more rigor than to secular history. His essay on "The Massacre of St. Bartholomew" is an unanswerable indictment of religious persecution. The loftiness of the papal position, the greatness of the principles at stake, did not cause him to soften a whit the severity of his judgments upon the popes. Much of the error of centuries past still encumbered the Church as he found it. Acton determined to obliterate that error, to liberalize the Church and to bring it back to true Catholicism. Within the Church, however, the current was flowing in quite the opposite direction. The Ultramontanes were fast gaining for the pope an even more complete absolutism, and were turning the Church away from the life and thought of the time, back to the days of the Schoolmen. The Syllabus of 1864 came as a challenge to all who hoped to reconcile the Church with the progress of the century and to make it a living force for moral improvement. Acton accepted the challenge and put all his strength into the struggle. The declaration of papal infallibility shattered once and for all his hopes of liberalizing the Church. The pope's word was to be supreme and unquestioned. But was not this, judged by Acton's canons, immoral? Must not the man who is truly moral repudiate the decree? Acquiescence here would mean the worst of sins, the putting of authority

above right. It would seem that Acton, like Döllinger, Tyrrell, and Lamennais, must turn away, as a true Catholic, from a church which had ceased to be Catholic. Some years before, Acton had written in answer to the question, "Is it better to renounce the papacy out of horror for its acts or to condone the acts out of reverence for the papacy?" that only the former alternative was possible. Yet now, at the moment of crisis, he did not hesitate to accept the latter.

We have seen how he accepted defeat, remained faithful to the papacy, and strove to minimize the danger of the doctrine of infallibility. It is precisely in this act that his own ethical system breaks down. His choice was simple. The inexorable force of the moral law condemned the papal stand. Acton himself had repeatedly insisted that the true Catholic must maintain the moral law unsullied, that the clergy cease to be God's ministers when they do wrong. He did not, however, choose to repudiate the action of the pope. The reason is simple. Acton must have felt that the disruption of the Church meant a greater moral loss than the admission of papal infallibility. Against the absolutist evil a campaign of education and enlightenment could make real headway. The decree itself, moreover, was so qualified as to deprive it of most of its sting. On the other hand, active opposition meant a schism in the ranks of the Church, the weakening and perhaps the destruction of its power for good. Acton's faith was bound up in the Catholic Church, as such, and he never lost sight of the sacredness of its mission of universality. Better incur a temporary loss of part of its moral strength than wholly abandon that mission. The commission of a wrong may be justified on the ground that it will lead to a greater right. Acton had thus introduced into his moral life that very principle of relativity which he had so sternly rejected from his ethical theory.

As a whole, Acton's philosophy of history is relatively free from complexity and subtlety. It stands out clear-cut, embodied in the cardinal principles of liberty and morality. This simplicity makes it more readily understood, and at the same time more susceptible to critical attack than a system more broadened by qualification. Three general criticisms suggest themselves in an estimate of the value of Acton's work as a historian.

In the first place, it is not always clear that Acton maintains an attitude of impartiality in his judgments of history. It is true that he did not desire impartiality in the sense of scientific aloofness; he did, however, insist on the impartiality of the judge who administers the moral law. "In judging men and things," he said, "ethics go before dogma, politics, or nationality. The ethics of history cannot be denominational." Yet in the greatest crisis of his own life he put dogma before ethics, and we cannot but feel that a man who in private life preferred Catholic unity to moral consistency must have seen history through glasses tinted, if ever so slightly, with doctrinal prejudice. Acton is assuredly harsh enough with sinners in his own church. The man who could write of the popes of the Inquisition that "they were not only wholesale assassins, but they made the principle of assassination a law of the Christian Church and a condition of salvation," was certainly no papal apologist. Save in a vague feeling that the Middle Ages, when one faith ruled all Europe, were a sort of Golden Age, Acton's bias does not appear in his treatment of his own church. When it comes to the services of Protestant statesmen, however, he fails to give the full meed of credit. William the Silent is to him a selfish adventurer, a man who turned lightly from Catholicism to Lutheranism and from Lutheranism to Calvinism as the interest of the moment dictated; in William's case, assassination was almost justifiable. This seems a narrow estimate of a man who

did so much for European liberty and religious toleration as did William. Similarly, Acton's dislike for Cavour is occasioned at bottom by the attacks of the Piedmontese minister upon the Catholic Church. Even his use of the word "infidel" as applied to Protestants, though perhaps natural enough from a Catholic pen, sounds harsh and discordant from a man who held as sacred the principle of toleration.

Moreover, Acton's desire to bring everything under his standards of historical judgment caused him, as in his estimate of the American Civil War, to pick out only the element of a situation which best fitted into those standards. He tends toward sweeping condemnations and equally unrestrained praises. There is a failure to recognize the diversity of life, the nature of the purposes and cross-purposes which actuate man. The mass of historic data is treated as though it can be sorted out into definite piles, the good and the bad. Acton wishes to maintain a definitely scientific attitude toward history in the sense that it must be a true induction. As a matter of fact, he tends to categorize the matter of history, and falls into that very *a priorism* he seeks to avoid.

In the second place, Acton's insistence upon the place of law and tradition at times borders upon an unthinking veneration of what has already grown up. He desires above all things to avoid the futilities and impracticalities of the French Revolution. He accordingly tends to subject everything to the test of conformity with English Whiggism, without considering whether the circumstances of the case made such a conformity desirable. Authority and tradition are emphasized to such an extent as to outweigh the other term in the balance, the ideals and demands of the present. We have a feeling that Acton's liberty after all would only transfer the individual from the authority of external political power to that of a historically determined conscience. There is a lack

of growth in the system. In our anxiety to subject revolution, we seem to have thrown evolution too by the board.

Lastly, this same fixity appears in Acton's ethics. The moral law is given out *en bloc*, as something rigid and immutable. It is the eternal Right which is set up in contrast with mere Authority. Now a more realistic view of morality would see in it the product of social life, a set of rules which man has worked out for himself in his social experience. If this is so, morality has grown and will grow in the future. If the main outlines of the moral law seem permanently established, it is only because man's experience has since the earliest time centred around a few fundamental principles which have proved indispensable guides in life. "Honesty is the best policy" gives expression to one of these principles which have become part of our moral tradition. Around this core there is, so to speak, a margin of morality which is not static, but shifting, growing. The moral law has not had the same content throughout the ages. Primitive man had of necessity views upon the sacredness of human life very different from those of Acton. Bodily slavery is now, among Christian nations, held to be an immoral thing; yet Plato based his ideal state upon the institution of slavery. In other words, our notions of what is right and what is wrong depend upon the specific problems we have to solve, upon all the varied factors of our environment.

In solving these problems, however, we must bring to our aid precisely those results of historic experience which have hardened into the moral law. We must not seek to cut ourselves loose from prevailing notions of right and wrong, to overturn completely the moral law. We cannot, if we would, divorce the present from the past. It was Acton's great service to recall to us, alike in politics and in ethics, the existence of this heritage of past cen-

turies in the shape of the abiding principles which must govern our conduct. In ethics, even more than in politics, he errs by making these principles not abiding, but eternal; not general, but absolute.

Acton's relations with his church show that even he could not apply this austere moral code to his life, and that he could not label everything as specifically and solely good or bad. In the confusion and turmoil of life, we must denominate as good that which seems most likely to result in right; and that right we must identify with harmony, with success. But it is not success in the vulgar sense of mere prevailing, becoming accepted. It is rather a success in conformity with those principles which form our moral inheritance. It is a harmony which develops out of past conflicts through compromises and readjustments governed by the moral law. To Acton, however, the moral law is a static absolute. For this very reason, his system does not at bottom contain that spirit of meliorism which actuated his life, and which caused him to turn to the study of history. The moral law is perfect, and for that very reason we have no way of attaching ourselves to it, no assurance of ethical progress.

Acton's whole philosophy of history thus tends, in the last analysis, toward the setness of a completed system in which there is no room for growth. The great problem of all thinking and all action seems to be the achievement of a proper mean. The problem is everywhere and pervades all problems. We must respect historic rights; yet the exaggeration of this duty leads to Chinese ancestor-worship. We must provide for progress, we must change outworn things; yet the exaggeration of this principle leads straight to the excesses of the Jacobin. In ethics we perceive the same dependence on past standards and the same desire to create new ones. Success can only come through a balance of forces. Acton

errs in overemphasizing the element of permanence; his moral law becomes not so much our guide as our jailer.

As a matter of fact, Acton never hunted down his ideas to their logical conclusion. His life shows an appreciation of the evolutionary character of change, a recognition of the place of the novel in the order of things. It is only a matter of emphasis that permits us to believe that he held rather more with things established than with things that are seeking to establish themselves, rather more with the past than with the present — in short, that if he was a liberal, he was a very conservative one indeed.

In spite of this implied attitude of conservatism, Acton's salient ideas are essentially forward-looking. It is because he had something to teach the world that his name will live. His influence was not confined to his written work. Small in volume though this proved to be, it contains the kernel of his thought and serves to render it accessible to the world. His most potent influence has been felt through the men who studied under him at Cambridge. Though only a few college generations came in contact with him, these few sufficed to take up the thread of his thought and carry it on. That from among his former pupils a considerable school of historians has arisen bears evidence to his power as a teacher. These men look at the world from different points of view. In many cases, they have profoundly modified Acton's teachings. To his fundamental idea, upon which rests the value of his contribution to the world, they have faithfully adhered.

"We have no thread through the enormous intricacies of modern politics except the idea of progress toward more perfect and assured freedom and the divine right of free men." This is the lesson which Acton sought to teach. It is easy to pass into rhapsodic emptiness over

this "divine right of free men." As Acton has said, men have throughout history included under liberty many and conflicting ideals. Yet if history is to mean anything beyond the purposeless conflict of blind desires or the equally purposeless game which the Absolute of Hegel chooses to play with itself, it must be interpreted as the gradual advancement of the individual to the complete and untrammelled expression of his moral self. It was Acton's service that he never ceased to insist upon the true meaning of history in an age which seemed to have forgotten it. The minds of men have not always been proof against the subtle poison of the doctrine that "*Der Gang der Weltgeschichte steht ausserhalb der Tugend, des Lasters, und der Gerechtigkeit.*" The discoveries of Darwin, misunderstood and misapplied, served the nineteenth century as proof of the fact that success alone counts, no matter how attained. Against that dangerous philosophy which, from the Sophists to Nietzsche, has asserted that might is right, Acton maintained that there is a right beyond the mere exigencies of the moment, that there is a jural principle of ethics by which we may judge an action, and that it is the mission of history to teach that principle. "I exhort you," he said to his pupils at Cambridge, "never to debase the moral currency, but to try others by the final maxim that governs your own lives, and to suffer no man and no cause to escape the undying penalty which history has the power to inflict on wrong." He could have no finer epitaph.