

### III.—THE PHENOMENAL SANCTIONS OF THE MORAL LIFE.

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IN a former number of *MIND*<sup>1</sup> under the theme "Phenomenalism in Ethics" the writer outlined his conviction that in conduct the phenomenal thought and act are solicited by motives mostly dissociated from absolute sanctions. This former article in the end promised a more concrete account of this phenomenally perceived moral life. The following is a tentative essay in this direction of concreteness.

It is significant that those ethical systems most scandalised by the impulse-driven life have themselves seldom issued in any system of practical norms. Ethical idealism both by its romantic spirit and in its impractical outcome has affronted the more robust impulses and openly discredited the more practical results of empiricist systems. The method of "trial and error," the sharpening of instincts, the ordering of impulses through experience, the life of practical reason with its partial yet vital adjustments to its realistically perceived world—in all this the absolutist temper remarks only bare irrationality, mere animality. Not by compromising but by radical treatment, the complete healing over in absolute experience of all its apparent gashes of finitude, may this irrational be rationalised, this animal thing transmuted into a transcendental Person. While this perfect idealising of conduct has indeed sublimed our modern culture, has imported into the moral life a deeply romantic tone; yet despite its occasional variations from this solemn, *underlying* theme—its overtones against lying, contract-breaking, suicide; its swelling out of finite spirit through family to state—idealism has subdued many of life's most concrete motives within its too solemn and too recurrent monotone. Certain opinions, certain modes, certain experiences have always remained discordant, unimpressed within their proper Ideas, Substances, Absolutes. Men in their hours of crisis have not

<sup>1</sup> *MIND*, No. 54, pp. 221-234.

ordered their conduct by excessively speculative norms—however categorically they may have conceived their habitual days. Idealism in its absolute sessions has announced practical resolutions, norms for daily conduct; but with unconscious plagiarism, by a sort of romantic licence, it has copied these enactments from the records of man's past experience. Conformity to these tentative recommendations out of his own past man has naturally held to be not an affair of absolute duty but a matter of prudential habit.

It has been retorted often enough that this case of practical ethics when argued thus upon wholly unspeculative grounds is hopelessly compromised. Norms of conduct are no laws at all save they establish themselves somehow upon an absolute support. Within these frankly practical lines there could be no assurance of absolute loyalty, no protection against defalcation. Thinking and acting would proceed, if not through by-ways of marginal business with their unmitigated risks yet at best through paths of activity so beaten into hardness and flatness as to be unyielding either of pleasure or of inspiration. The secure life, it is urged, though it may experience episodic pleasure, must in its permanent business act upon a thoroughly rational ground. It must be an expression, a foretaste of the Absolute. The prudential in morals, if indeed not productive of lawlessness, anarchy, immorality, is certainly, at the bottom unmoral.

There is, it may be admitted, a sound core of truth in all this romantic protestation against the phenomena-infected life. Ethical theory upon a frankly practical basis must deal in remnants cut out of a supposedly whole cloth of truth. It must show partiality by its every recommendation of prospective activity. The moral life must indeed be relative and stumbling so long as the moral outlook stops short of being absolute. But the defensive demurrer of common sense against all this solemn tautology of accusation is becoming more and more articulate and in the end must be reckoned with. Again and again does the plain man in his life of practical adjustments admit error, blunder, ineffectiveness, but he refuses to confess any sense of depravity or guilt. He argues for exoneration on the ground that omniscient insight of the only sort made out by a rigorously consistent absolutism is of no such nature as to issue concretely in special experiences, in finite moralities. Such an absolute experience—he honours for the argument's sake the really incredible condition that it should own on its proper account an absolute moral insight—never does on any finite account articulate that insight with his partial experience. And here

common sense, unaware of humanist courts of equity, has usually rested its hopeless and prejudged case.

And yet this plain man, though he has failed to construct any absolute sanctions for his experiments with reality and with life, has heroically opened two resorts for practice in living. In one of these he fixes his life as solidly as he may upon a purely prudential foundation; he secures as many and as good as possible of the satisfactions to be had from the world of things and of persons; he licenses his own tastes, i.e., his inner organism, to judge which among several available satisfactions are relatively highest for him; he recognises that in a phenomenal span of time and in a world with others not all satisfactions legitimate enough in themselves can be practically assured; but meanwhile he is unable in his monadic life to relieve its blind and fugitive infelicity by any certain outlook upon time well-ordered into eternity;—with respect to others akin to him he regards as natural and unquestionable a certain adjusting, a certain mutualising of their native, uncommon impulses.<sup>1</sup> Or in emergencies unwontedly puzzling man has on second thought resorted to an ultra-human consciousness, a humane experience, which precisely because not yet conceived as complete in its own account of reality may credibly attend to his partial appeals, may articulate its experimental recommendations with the exigencies of his finite situations. In a word he has resorted to an Experience like his own only *more experienced* and accordingly handier, wiser, perhaps gentler and more poised.<sup>2</sup>

In their long history men have repeatedly drawn from this latter sanctional source. Their ethic has been humanely theistic. In their moral crises when their impulses have stumbled, their instincts failed, men have conceived no absolute experience implicated in these self-transcending emergencies; in their deep-breathing uncertainty of life they have postulated a God both immediate and useful; sometimes a group of gods, each a competent specialist in his proper field; or again a several-aspect God, each Person in Whom is designed to meet effectually a special set of human emergencies; or an ingenuously deified man of their tribe who yet perpetuates within his divinity his erstwhile anthropomorphic

<sup>1</sup>The astonishing thing is that this simple growth through human history of adjusted and adjustable impulses should ever have suggested an ultimate and ontological unity of Persons in Absolute Self. Nor is the case of social ontology furthered by the claim of ontogenetic psychology that in the individual social is prior to self-regarding consciousness.

<sup>2</sup>In both resorts "Better and Worse" are conspicuously bulletined as the "Fundamental Categories". See Santayana's *Life of Reason*, i., p. 46.

outlines and anthropopathic impulses. Indeed his moral crises have at times precipitated even more concrete impulses; appeals to angels, to a virgin, to an image, to a discarnate ancestor, to Eons, to saints,—to *anything short of absolute being*.

How different all this is from the decorous sanity of the romantic, conservative conventions! In this common life there is on the whole development of function through useful habitudes of thought; but there are vicissitudes, fatigue, atrophy as well. Life conceives itself as alternative between development and satisfaction through struggle on the one hand and disorganisation and decay through lassitude on the other. Action postulates reality as changing, shifting, reformulating itself every moment, at one moment richer or poorer in harmonies by comparison with the system of experience of a moment before. The moral agent experiments now with one world and then with another. His impulses, animal though they be, mere "physical facts" are yet creative processes. Their annotations and addenda by changing the world at its open margin alter indeed the entire page of time on which they have recorded their comments and protestations. The free processes of common life are too fugitive to feel any circum-pressure of categorical imperatives, of absolute norms. Nothing significant in this living world can be categorically fixed, embalmed as sacramental. Reality is alive, pulsating in every organ, sweating at every pore. Blunders, disasters, tragedies as well as triumphs, escapes, romances are imminent everywhere. Each man claims his own property in being and works it zestfully. His religion, if he have any, is fiducial not ontological. He profits in time: feeling unfit to-day he changes his place in being on the morrow; he allows his temperament, his sex, his irritability, and seeks throughout a goodly adjustment, a harmonious organisation with his world of things and of persons. There is but only on the whole development toward larger, stabler satisfactions.

All this, as a matter of psychology, means that every motor response is conditioned upon the presupposition of discreteness among the elements of the cognitive life. Whether that life be conceived as human or divine, and whether its elements be interpreted by an expert psychology as sensational or as sub-sensational, or with common sense as perceptual and even as conceptual<sup>1</sup>—in any case it is the diversity and not the

<sup>1</sup> The untutored man often regards, as elemental, perceptual or even conceptual experiences which an expert psychology holds to be complex. But in this connexion it should be observed that a bit of experience within which the subject himself discriminates no parts is a literal

unity in that experience which permits and solicits reaction. In the degree that a systematic type of experience becomes submerged in its sense of well-ordered unity in that measure is it withdrawn from the ferments of life.

The fundamental nature of experience is its atomic character. Corresponding to the plural constituents of experience in its cognitive aspect there is a plural array of feeling-tones. From these latter there flow the plural issues, the multifold purposes, the manifold undertakings, the partial and growing harmonies of life. These purposes are tolerant of pursuit just because they summarise desires plenteous and outreaching toward objects clearly discerned, their atomic weights being estimated in terms of their feeling-tones. Only in this self-conscious assessment of life in terms of feeling may action find phenomenal sanction for its otherwise restless motion, its else neutral acquisitiveness of mere being. The value of the action and the worth of the being are measured by the kind and degree of emotive peace they import into the agent's organism.

That which differentiates conduct from automatic action is the degree of self-consciousness with which the moral end is sought. It is in those processes called "moral" that there occurs that vigorous volitional and emotional strain in which phenomenal self-consciousness consists. And it is the stimulus of unique and ultimate feeling-tones within the ends called "moral" that arouses this stirring self-consciousness. Phenomenal self-consciousness is absolutely nothing transcendent but merely a summary in feeling and consequent action of all the concrete details in the moral crisis itself. The moral life is builded upon the assumption whether defensible by an expert psychology or not, that the feeling-tone of a sense-experience is its measure of worth. Whether ethical theory and moral practices can ever transcend primitive feelings, the physiological satisfactions sought and the pains avoided by the first moral agents;<sup>1</sup> whether the perfect sobriety of the civilised man has not estranged him too largely from these primitive impulses; whether his common belief that these supposedly low and contracted hedonic motives of

element of consciousness. A psychology that from without discredits this obvious canon of psychic atomism, inadvisedly imports into its data of conscious experience purely physiological units or even physical atoms; herein are the defects of the Münsterbergian and panpsychic atomisms respectively.

<sup>1</sup> As a fact the probability increases that all the convenient groups of emotion are derivatives of this pleasure-pain group; and that even the latter is itself a differentiation of a primitive and perfectly undifferentiated feeling, an amœbous absolute.

the animal and primitive man ought to be transcended is not founded after all upon a really false and unideal interpretation of things bodily we need not digress by inquiring here. For if these primitive hedonic pursuits should ever be thus outgrown and abandoned the substitution for them of some other order of emotion would be inevitable.<sup>1</sup> The moral life may conceivably be persuaded not by ontological nor even by actional motives but only by the amount and quality of feeling-tone aimed at and realised in its being and action. It is indeed incredible that a cognitive situation bare of any felicity of being or that action *quâ* action with no prevision of the at least momentary poise of satisfaction crowning its fulfilment should be pursued as ends in themselves. A pale excess of being, *ontic* anæsthesia; a blind unfeeling acting upon all practically available fulcra, mere physical exercise;—it is not to celebrate these sapless fruitions that men cultivate their impulses and develop their instincts.

How then shall we conceive the sanctions concrete in the moral life? Shall conduct spend its days in the incessant weaving together of the loose ends of experience, avoiding all romantic excesses of the imagination? Shall such a life, no longer seeking its coronation, discerning at last the "irrelevant infinity" of its ideals, deliberately concentrate its concrete moments upon the bare elements of reality, the obviously attainable ends,<sup>2</sup> living each disparately perceived moment among the multifold "given's" of its life,—restless, perpetually self-dirempted by these brute-facts of its world?

This emphatic ethical pluralism is not remote from the precise facts of the moral life. That life in its ultimate motives, in its critical moments is by no means so self-complacently unified as the social traditions of the race have led idealism to suppose. Habitual norms, those forms of conduct really conventional yet ideally regarded as categorical,—these conservative forces in human society do indeed impose upon humanity a sort of unity; but often it is positively impedimental, and at best it concerns mostly the outer raiment, it protects merely the skin and bones of the man; it hardly secures his deeper, his heartier being. After he has done his

<sup>1</sup> In this general sense the much abused dictum of Mr. Mill is thoroughly sound and infeasible. The tautology of his utterance is abundantly justified by the inability of his perfectionist accusers to comprehend why it is tautology. Mr. Mill's repetition is not verbal, as they seem to suppose but *psychological*—the futile attempt of words to dip themselves even once into the same stream of passional experience. Mr. Mill approaches as nearly as words may the fluent phenomena of the moral life.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. Rauh's *L'Expérience Normale*, pp. 223-224.

conservative and conventional duty the natural man is as free and as fugitive as pleasure is fleeting. It is indeed the tragedy of self-conscious morality, of action, *i.e.*, above the stage of merely automatic conventionality, with its manufactured properties, that it must act toward the most elusive of all ends; namely, those evanescent situations sought only because of their feeling-tones.

Herein lies the seeming paradox of pleasure-seeking; while cognitions are relatively static and utterable, the emotive processes through which alone these cognitions are sorted over and their worthiness of response assessed are themselves fluent and accordingly unstable and unutterable. Meanwhile the fact is that men have regarded this preoccupation with pleasure-seeking and pain-avoiding activities as their supreme concern in life. Pleasures and pains whether of the pettier, physiological sort or of the nobler classes (Fear, Anger, Hate, Love)—these low and these high feelings alike exemplify the hedonist paradox; and they all alike have sanctioned the progressive and impulsive conduct of men. Awareness of this coquettish character of pleasure has not yet deterred men from their restless pursuit of these hedonic ends even despite and even until self-diremption; nor has the repeated failure of the lower impulses toward pleasures bred in men a perfect regard for the more temperate, Platonic affections, the unimpulsive contemplation of ideal, self-transcendental ends in which idea and will are one in unconsciousness. At best this awareness of the futility of hedonic purposes has chastened men into the pursuit of the relatively more stable satisfactions. Meanwhile the chronic incontinence of emotion constantly disturbs the harmony of even these more static processes of life. But it is indeed only upon this condition of fluency, only through the self-conscious insight that there are no fixed places, no secure resorts for feeling,—it is only on this condition of fugitive optimism that life can be perpetuated.

The usefulness of those hard places in experience called "cognitions" is two-fold. (1) They afford a solid basis in reality for action; and thus mitigate the fugitive character of emotion. It is his concrete cognitions that perpetuate the naïve realism of the natural man and for ever restrain him from a too romantic idealism.<sup>1</sup> (2) They serve moreover as a basis of reproduction; *i.e.* they are the centres, the *fundamenta* among which may operate the unifying functions of experience, as

<sup>1</sup> The concept of the absolute is nothing except undifferentiated feeling,—a concept, namely, with no perceptual elements to give it body and solidity.



memory, association, imagination, anticipation, etc.<sup>1</sup> Emotive experience is immediate, fluent. It is this very fugitive character of feeling-tones that quickens reflexion into activity, that articulates the scattered elements of cognition into harmonious life. But, just because they are immediate, they have no capacity of deliberation, memory or anticipation; they alone would make of life mere volatility, frothiness, frivolity. Only cognitive processes can solidify and order feeling-tones into peaceful sobriety. Life is through and through a function of emotion; and this intemperate fluency of life is tempered by cognitions only that it may endure the longer within the consuming fire of daily passion.

A little psychologising about the nature of feeling and conception will exhibit this phenomenal character of the concrete sanctions of the moral life.

1. Feeling is the one aspect of experience that has within it what we may call the *quality of infinitude*. Only in its attachment as a tone to a fixed and disparate cognition does it appear as a finite content. Let it detach itself from cognition either by perfect intensity of passion (unmitigated protoplasmic feeling without strains or discharges) or by perfect placidity of abstraction and in either case the content of experience becomes distinctionless, absolute;—perfectly fluent, we may suppose, but acknowledging no vortices, no “squirts” of cognitive causes and consequences. Herein lies the explanation of that sense of infinite worth which according to M. Rauh characterises even obviously finite pursuits. Feeling alone glorifies and sanctions action; and every feeling, as it happens, is infinite after its own kind. The infinitude moreover is through and through current and phenomenal;—in every way the precise opposite of the absolutist infinitude

<sup>1</sup> How largely reason in excess of mere association may enter into moral processes it would be profitless to inquire until genetic investigations into the moral movements of animals and of primitive men have supplied more abundant data than we now have. Perhaps nowhere does a metaphysic of ethics fall more pathetically short of a really profitable account of the phenomena of the moral life than just here. It has accustomed us to affirm without distinction that moral processes do begin with self-conscious rationality. Meanwhile for the genetic researches through which alone “self-conscious rationality” could be filled with phenomenal meaning idealism has shown scant sympathy; probably because such researches have invariably described that self-consciously rational morality as the selection of pleasurable ends through complex processes of association. What systematic ethics most needs just now is not this conventional restricting of Personality as narrowly as possible but a new idealism generously radical in its extension of these self-conscious processes even into the work prejudged as “animal” by the poetic informality of the romantic school.



with its static concepts and noumenal fixtures. The prime concepts of ethics and of religion, *e.g.*, Perfection and Absolute, if they be defined as static, normal only structurally and not functionally, must be abandoned by the new empiricism. Phenomenal infinitude is only a functional and (sometimes) humane postulate of the fugitive life.

2. Moreover conceptual unity partakes of the nature of this phenomenal feeling. Not only is this true of those concepts that summarise the moral processes of the agent. No one in these days would be likely to deny that phenomenally the moral life is a feeling-series. But it may be affirmed that concepts of whatever order have in them this core of feeling, this significance-affirming quality of emotive infinitude. The psychologists have for long granted against the old sensationalist account of the concept a certain uniqueness in the unity of conceptual life. But they have for the most part omitted all inquiry into the inner nature of that uniqueness. They have seemed contented either to report the uniqueness as so much physical fact or else to yield the whole problem to the apriorists. The truth is that this conceptual unity is susceptible of exact psychological description. The unity is emotive. The manifold data of sense-perception have grown together along the lines of their significance for life. Inwardly this significance expresses itself in interests in the objects thus grouped. But the significance of objects and of actions thereto, as I have already urged, is measured by the degree of satisfactory feeling they import into the agent's organism. The sense of sameness usually isolated in a concept as its quintessential feature is not a cognitive affair at all but merely a living postulate—the declaration with respect to the object or objects thus conceived that the same quality of up-to-date satisfactoriness in virtue of which it or they have been thus canonised and supplied with conceptual halos,—this same virtuous sanctity it or they shall continue to import into life world without end. The solidifying of concepts in reality, an enterprise that has monopolised philosophic industry since Plato and with its grotesque fixtures has furnished and conventionalised our moral and religious institutes, is in fact in precise violation of the real character of the conceptual life. The meanest and the noblest concept—lapidity and divinity, let us say—commune over this mutual *fluency* of the beings they connote. The very fibres of association, the probable physical organ of conception, function in transition alone. The purity of a concept varies inversely as the continence of its sensory elements. As the experience omits more and more of the imagery characteristic of halting perceptual processes

the experience becomes more and more purely conceptual. The difference therefore between a really pure concept and the bare feeling of organisms below the level of differentiated sense-areas, we may suppose, is a difference of history merely. Perfect mysticism would be perfectly amœbous feeling. A plurality of concepts, as concepts, neither psychology nor metaphysics has ever been successful in justifying. Only in virtue of its certain pollution by percepts realistically interpreted has one concept been differentiated from another. A world of more than one concept would exhibit perceptual duplicity. All those qualities that seem to differentiate concepts from feelings, *e.g.*, the former's references backward and forward, are in fact not indigenous to the conceptual area at all but are rather the qualities held over in the concept from the realistically interpreted world of percepts through which it has passed and by which its otherwise fugitive passion has been chastened.

The rarity of a pure concept, the utter futility of action upon purely conceptual grounds, *the completely self-contradictory character of ultimate action* is therefore apparent;—unless indeed such ultimate conduct flatten itself completely against a too solid absolute and thus render its activity pointless. The moral life to be concretely pointed and sanctioned must in self-control<sup>1</sup> and in self-defence seek the disparate elements presented in its daily percepts. Its optimism must yet be fugitive, its absolute values only functional, its ultimate good only a postulate.

The concepts by which the moral life summarises and solicits its processes—if indeed they be not merely slightly conscious expressions of functions already well on the way towards purely habitual and automatic operations—are emotion-suffused ideals. These tend to unify themselves completely under an increasingly vague Ideal, as Happiness, Perfection, Well-Being, Self-Realisation and the like. So long as this vague conceptual outlook upon life focuses concrete, perceptual contents all goes well. The system works; something besides absolute and well-ordered self-representation is going on; life is no mere stuttering self-repetition, the mulling over of self-appreciations in innutritious perpetuity.

<sup>1</sup>Prof. Kate Gordon's articles on the relation of Feeling to Discrimination and Conception ought to be elaborated into a complete and final account of the nature of pure conception: see *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, vol. ii., pp. 617-622, 645-6; vol. iii., pp. 123-127. Her discussion on page 621 of feeling as an "instrument of control over discrimination" is especially suggestive for the purposes of the neo-hedonism, the self-conscious and chastened hedonism of the modern mind.

But here as in conceptual experiences of whatever sort the conceptualising impulse tends to spread itself over its proper perceptual area so generously, with such romantic excess as inadvertently to defraud itself of all perceptual interests whatsoever. Just as every concept is legitimated only by the concreteness and the vicissitudes of its historic percepts, so Happiness, Perfection and the like are functional only through points of special happinesses, plural perfections and the like. In this life, fluent through its partialities, its hardnesses, the difference between the agent's real and his ideal attainments is a matter of degree only; sometimes a disparity productive of tragedy, catastrophe, madness; but more often a lesion which even the agent himself may meet with a cheerful prognosis estimating in terms of time his period of convalescence into relative wholeness of life with respect to that particular perversion.

These moral crises, these sicknesses of the soul, themselves partial and thus partially remediable are nevertheless symptomatic of the self-diremptive, the imperfectly self-sacrificial character which is eternal and fundamental in the very heart even of ultimate experience. Reality, no matter how largely we may conceive it, is intermittent between the terms of its relationships, everlastingly alternative between the high and the low places it ranges over. Reality, even ultimate, is atomic, gashed through and through by the assaults upon it of partial and human impulses. The same dialectic that affirms that no two terms can exist in a world of absolute experience without a relationship between them must grant conversely no relationship except there be in reality at least two terms between which the feeling of relationship moves; —in moral terms then duplicity of pleasure and pain, of satisfactoriness and unsatisfactoriness, of good and ill, of Jahveh and Devil, Ahura-Mazda and Ahriman. Perfect automaticity or perfect quiescence would alone release the moral agent from these partialities, these sharp contrasts, these tragic insecurities. But such poor methods of relief would pauperise experience itself; in the one case altogether and in the other by transmuting all the points in an otherwise rich and concrete experience into a sheer excess of feeling—a feeling too inarticulate to be even painful.<sup>1</sup>

Life therefore can never be completely unified, never concretely sanctioned by absolute experience. On the assumption of a total experience as fulfilling really all that is implied in partial, self-contradictory experience life everywhere

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Stanley's position, *Philosophical Review*, vol. i., p. 493 ff.

ought to be fluent in absolute norms. But on the contrary the inner lights, the intuition and the inspiration, fail; the glimpses of good the agent affords in virtue of his patient experiments and frugal speculations with reality, though they extend somewhat toward desirable realisations and encourage certain future adventures, yet do invariably lose themselves in dim margins of inconceivable failures or successes. And the agent must become either heroic or pessimistic. If he be indeed heroic he finds no time for acquiescences, no place for absolute dependence, no occasions for prognostic anticipations of a final fulfilment of his life in a completed system of experience.<sup>1</sup> Moral reason ought to depend more and more self-consciously—it has always depended impulsively—upon retrospective inquiries into the actual course of human development up to date; upon investigations in comparative psychology and in anthropology; upon experimental enlargements of man's moral range. The present generation ought in every way to operate and cultivate its empirical moods. By the method of "trial and error" the curve of this growing life may be plotted; but, while the curve may be thus dotted forward in the direction actually taken with profitable harmonies in the past of the race or of an individual, there exists always the possibility that owing to new insights brought on by new and critical experiences the curve will fail to follow the predicted plot. But beyond this neither finite prudence nor absolute insight can make whole the life of man.

<sup>1</sup> "If we must have an absolute, why not absolute conflict?" is Prof. Gordon's virile (I depend upon it—she will pardon the masculine root of the term) way of stating this case of moral heroism (*op. cit.*, vol. iii., p. 127).