

Ethics and Logic

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ETHICS AND LOGIC.

NORMAN BOARDMAN

THE loosening of the bonds of moral authority has brought with it a prevalent conception that ethics is a matter of expediency. Idealism has fallen into disrepute to such an extent that the term is synonymous with "dreamism." This is particularly true in the realm of politics. The change from an enthusiastic internationalism to a "safe" nationalism has been marked and complete. If it is a far cry from the France that fought and bled for civilization to the France that spoke in the Washington Conference it is a far cry from the America that sent Woodrow Wilson to Versailles in 1918 to the America that sent him to exile in 1920. Both recognize the ethics of logic apart from the logic of ethics. The ethics of logic makes the practical *ideal*; the logic of ethics makes the ideal *practical*. The one finds right in immediate self-interest; the other projects self into the future to find its right as related to self-interest. We censure France but glorify ourselves! If France were as fortunately situated as are we, she, too, might escape the condemnation of the world. If it is not safe for the United States to abandon its cherished policy of isolation, much less ought it to be safe for France to relinquish its heavy armaments. "Right" is determined by expediency in both instances. We cannot blame France for being unwilling to take a risk which we are unwilling to take ourselves.

The political problems of law and freedom, authority and liberty have their ethical counterparts in the relationship between the practical and the ideal, the conservative and the liberal. Just as freedom may degenerate into licentiousness and authority to tyranny, so may liberalism in its revolt against rigidity of moral standards become so liberal that it ceases to have any standards. There is no right and wrong; neither is there good nor evil. The world becomes neutral regarding these terms. The philosophy that "there

is nothing fundamental except to be able to see that there is no one thing that is fundamental" without intelligence in its application and a conscience in its interpretation, may rob the world of values and leave it moving, just moving, like Professor Perry's negro, without any place to go, just leaving the place that it was at. (Conscience and intelligence are here used for a purpose to be brought out later in the discussion.) Authority is equally as dangerous. A scoundrel may often hide under the garb of idealism, and absolute standards only become the tools by means of which he accomplishes his mischievous ends. At the close of the war the interests of humanity suffered because of special interests hiding under the guise of patriotism. A reconstruction of the world upon a peace basis might have been possible had it not been for the appeal of special interests to lofty motives. Never has a nationalistic patriotism been so well exemplified as in the case of the German people in the recent World War. Between the abuse of freedom and the abuse of authority there is not much choice. Socialism with all its weaknesses could not get the world into much more of a mess than has nationalistic capitalism.

If the choice between two abuses were a necessary one there would be little hope for getting rid of war. History would continue to move from pole to pole. If there now seems to be an apparent lack of standards, it by no means follows that the reaction will take refuge in authority. Such an assumption fails to recognize the rôle of intelligence in guiding the social process. Indeed, intelligence is too much alive to permit such a reaction. But does intelligent direction necessarily mean progress? Yes and no, according to our conception of intelligence.

Does intelligent adjustment necessarily mean *better* adjustment? better being used in an ethical rather than a purely practical sense of the word. Intelligence may have two meanings, a narrow and a broader meaning. In its narrow meaning it is strictly logical, *i.e.*, it seeks an adjustment to an immediate situation; it is the ability to adapt oneself to a new situation. In its broader sense it is ethical,

i.e., it not only seeks an adjustment to a new situation but it seeks a social adjustment. Here someone will interrupt to say that there is no *purely practical* or *strictly logical* situation. An intelligent adjustment, if it be intelligent, will be both logical and ethical. An ethical adjustment that is not logical simply is not ethical, nor is a logical adjustment that is not ethical really logical. This is true in the world of oughtness but does it square with the facts?

A man may see an object that he would like to possess. He does not have the means to obtain it. He commits robbery in order to obtain the desired object. He handles the situation in such a way that he is not caught in the act. If by intelligence we mean merely the ability to adjust the individual more satisfactorily with reference to an object this was a highly intelligent act. The same is true in the use of business methods that are anti-social but which as yet have not been labeled as crime. Tommy O'Connor is intelligent but his kind does not make desirable citizens. A man may be able to do many things legally that he could not do morally. The more shrewd and clever he becomes the more intelligent he is. According to this conception of intelligence it simply becomes a matter of what one can get by with. Competition in armaments represents intelligence directed toward destructive ends. Efficiency is an index to intelligence but it does not spell progress unless it is preceded by the word *social*.

Perhaps ethical adjustments apart from practical considerations are not so numerous as are the logical adjustments apart from moral considerations but they are not difficult to find. Although war is concrete in its beginnings, it is usually necessary to indulge in a mass of meaningless ethical abstractions in order to wage it successfully. The concepts of Justice and Democracy are a case in point. It is rather a perverted conception of humanity that would regard modern warfare as humanitarian but it was, nevertheless, a war for Humanity, despite the fact that practically every concrete piece of humanity was suffering and bleeding to the core. A rather peculiar conscientious paradox is

apropos in this connection. A conscience may be so keen that it ceases to be a conscience. Rather than accept anything short of perfection, unnecessary suffering and hardships are endured. This is a false idealism and fails to recognize the problematic character of moral situations.

An ethical situation is like a logical situation in that it involves a problem. Both represent an incomplete, an unfinished situation. The ethical situation presents a conflict of ends, of values; the logical situation presents an end toward which a means is sought. An ethical element may be involved in a logical situation. In this case the various means for bringing about the desired result become conflicting immediate ends. Logic asks: "How can this situation be met?" Ethics asks: "How ought it to be met?" The can and the ought may coincide but not necessarily so. The ethics of logic considers the "what" as well as the "how" of a problematic situation. Is the object sought a worthy object? What value does it possess? The narrow use of intelligence inquires neither as to the "how" nor the "what" of its object. It simply seeks an effective "can." It is to prevent the pursuit of an illegitimate object either in a legitimate or illegitimate way or the pursuit of a legitimate object in an illegitimate way that logic needs ethics.

Absolute standards in ethics fail to recognize the problematic character of moral situations. The attitude produced does not lend itself to logical treatment. Moral convictions are necessary but unless a string is tied to these convictions so that they may be changed for a given occasion, all hope for a scientific attitude toward the situation is thereby precluded. The problem is made to fit into a principle—and often times it will not fit—instead of using the principle to throw light on the problem. There is so much good in its opposite, and even so much good in the very evil itself in a moderate form, that it is only through abstraction that absurd enthusiasm can be gained for principles. The placing of ethics in a logical situation minimizes the conflict of opposites and may eliminate it. England and France hold conflicting views regarding German

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reparations. The one sees the European situation as primarily economic, the other as primarily political. Each is right from its viewpoint. The result might be a war for principle on both sides but it would be a very unintelligent method of procedure because it would fail to recognize the problematic character of the European situation. Without the introduction of the logical factor into a moral situation, war is inevitable. Ethics needs logic to give its principles meaning.

Metaphysics reaps no more mischief than when it attempts to treat morals apart from a given logical situation. It sets up an abstract virtue which it is wrong to compromise. The ideal, instead of growing out of the situation, is artificially thrust upon it. It consequently has no meaning but gains power only as an abstraction. Does anybody know where *Justice* was located at the Paris Conference? Fitting a moral problem into a logical situation, principles, instead of being unyielding and unbending ends, become guides for the formation of hypotheses. They help to interpret the data and may even serve as data themselves. The ethical ideal becomes the logical hypothesis, *i.e.*, it is the idea the acting upon which points toward the bringing about the best results out of the given situation. Virtue is not compromised but it, itself, arises out of the situation. It is the hypothesis or idea. The idea and the ideal are one. The ideal gets its meaning with reference to the problem.

A logical situation may be an ethical situation but unless logic recognizes ethical principles as data for the problem, its solution will be merely logical. The adaptation may be regarded as intelligent and yet be unethical. The logical idea in this case is not the ideal for the problem. The student who does dishonest work in an examination has the problem of getting through the examination. If this is all he wants and he can get by with dishonesty better than with fair work, the idea has logical value. With reference to his problem as he sees it, it is a good idea because it meets his needs. The narrow use of intelligence would regard this as

a true idea. It is a true idea and it is a good idea with reference to the problem as stated but is it *good*? Unless the *good for* is with reference to something that is *good* we do not call it good. Here the end sought was legitimate but the logical and ethical values become distinct due to the narrow statement of the problem. Likewise a lawyer who has as his problem that of defending a guilty man, may win the case and be highly esteemed for his intelligence.

An ethical content is not involved in all problematic situations. Problems of research and problems of constructive work may not have ethical aspects but may take on such before solution or completion. An individual may be involved in a moral situation but not recognize it as such. He is not morally blameworthy unless it is a voluntary act on his part. He may be morally judged, however, and blamed for his stupidity in failing to recognize his responsibility in the outcome of the situation. An individual may be judged ethically as to his conduct and yet be ignorant of the moral situation in which he is involved. This is true in the case of the lawyer who looked upon his problem purely as a professional problem but did not consider its ethical aspects. A well-intentioned individual may be regarded as unintelligent because he fails to recognize the problematic character of moral situations. If his convictions are such that he cannot get along peacefully with his fellows, he may be regarded as unintelligent because of inability to make necessary social adjustments. He may be quite unaware of the fact that his intelligence is being measured by the sublimity of his convictions.

Failure to see the relationship between ethics and logic is one of the prime causes of war. The ethical aspects of logical situations are frequently overlooked in daily adjustments and the logical aspects of ethical situations are ignored when the crisis comes. "We will answer with guns" in reply to Von Hertling, may have awakened great emotional thrills and received great moral applause but it could hardly be regarded as an intelligent response to a problematic situation. It cut short the possibility for a scientific

treatment of the situation. Peace needs the logic of ethics and War the ethics of logic.

That an ethical adjustment is not ethical unless it is logical and that a logical adjustment is not logical unless it is ethical are true but it does not follow from this that ethics can be reduced to logic nor that the logical and the ethical are synonymous. The ethical ought to be logical and the logical ought to be ethical just as duty and desire ought to coincide. That these do not always coincide is a commonplace experience. That individual interests and social welfare ought to coincide is also true but this is not always the fact of experience. Simply to say that they do so coincide does not make it so; likewise with the relationship between ethics and logic. Intelligence in the narrow sense will not mean progress; it will not keep us from war. Intelligence in its broader sense implies a conscientious intelligence. Intelligence without a conscience is as undesirable as an unintelligent conscience. To be able to see rightly logical and ethical values with reference to the right object at the right time, at the right place and in the right way, is a mark of intelligence. It is a persistent problem of Philosophy, of Sociology and of Education, yes, and of History.

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