

MORALITY AND SOCIAL PROGRESS

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THE Eddington Memorial Lectures were founded to foster interest in the relationship of the natural sciences to religion or ethics, with the hope of finding some common basis between different methods of seeking truth. In particular, as Professor Polanyi says at the beginning of this year's lecture,¹ the founders were preoccupied with the tardiness of moral improvement as compared with the swift advances of science; this aspect, neglected by his predecessors, he proposes to examine. But in the first place he doubts the assumptions which lie behind the 'problem', for, he writes:

Never in the history of mankind has the hunger for brotherhood and righteousness exercised so much power over the minds of men as today. The past two centuries have not been an age of moral weakness; but have, on the contrary, seen an outbreak of moral fervour which has achieved numberless humanitarian reforms and improved modern society beyond the boldest thought of earlier centuries.

He is not, in fact, here saying that moral improvement does or does not lag behind the advances of science, but that the problem with which we should concern ourselves is something quite different.

With the subject to be discussed, and the first stage in Polanyi's answer laid before us, we can already see some of the difficulties which lurk within the lecture, although others, scarcely less important, will arise as the arguments develop. Leaving aside for the moment Polanyi's criticism of the problem, we may doubt its validity for more fundamental reasons. The advance of science—in which we must include such things as transport and communications and the growth of a world economy—is made up either of initial discoveries and inventions or developments following from them, which, by and large, can be automatically applied to the whole world. Moral improvement is of quite a different sort: if it is possible at all, it is possible only within the person, by means of a constant struggle, and, we should say, by the grace of God. If we look around us we may certainly see in some communities general improvements in social behaviour—a higher value set on human life, the almost

¹ *Beyond Nihilism*: The Eddington Memorial Lecture, 1960. By Michael Polanyi, F.R.S. Cambridge University Press; 3s. 6d.

total disappearance of prostitution and theft due to poverty, movements against cruelty to children and animals, anti-semitism or the colour bar. These improvements in social behaviour are largely based on social, political and economic changes which remove certain temptations, and they must of course be warmly welcomed. Our best hope for human survival may be that peoples who have nothing to lose but their chains will feel less warlike or revolutionary when they possess what the old politicians used to call 'a stake in the country'. But while no one can doubt (for example) that it is both right and necessary for over-developed countries to help the under-developed, it is not a sign of moral improvement if it is done by the democracies to forestall Russia, to keep a country within the Commonwealth, or even to make the world economy sounder. When Englishmen volunteer, or even agree, to lower their living standards by one-third (assuming this to be economically viable) to help starving Asians or Africans, one may cautiously discuss the phrase 'moral improvement'.

Again, while it has recently been pointed out that race riots which in the earlier part of the century passed unobserved now meet with a public outcry, it is very doubtful if pressures on behaviour caused by the shrinkage of the world can be accurately described in any phrase which includes the word 'moral'. Motives are extremely mixed; they may include (in another phrase of Polanyi's) moral fervour, but they are also due to the fact that the coloured races are numerous and powerful, they have come to stay, they are news. Many people who want abstract justice for them will not have them in their houses or employ them in skilled trades. In a word, if the shrinking of the world is due to the advances of science, there is no reason to suppose that this will effect moral improvement any more than earlier social and economic changes.

The same difficulty is carried over into Polanyi's criticism of the problem, which I quoted above. There is no proof that a hunger for brotherhood and righteousness is exercising an unparalleled power over men's minds today—many people would deny it. Even assuming that it exists, and that it is the same thing as moral fervour, is there any reason to equate it with moral improvement, or moral improvement with the numberless humanitarian reforms which have altered 'modern society' out of all recognition? Although Polanyi does not specify any of these reforms, it is again doubtful, if one glances at recent improvements in western Europe, how far they can be attributed to moral fervour at all. (Indeed, at a later stage Polanyi himself congratulates the English on their capacity for business-like reforms without fervour—it is an integral part of his argument.)

To take a few examples at random: the administrative and sanitary reforms achieved by hard-headed Englishmen in the early nineteenth century; Bismarck's introduction of social security to outflank the Socialists; the betterment of working-class conditions by trade union action—when, and when only, the trade union élite was able to organize efficiently for limited objectives, and when the country's economy could stand it. Who would presume to assess in each piece of humanitarian planning the role of each impulse involved—to plan, to be efficient, to have power, to see results, to do good? The possibilities are limitless, the more so if we add to individual impulses those of party or national prestige, desire for political power or, in the international field, survival. To subsume them all under the term 'moral fervour' would seem an oversimplification.

On the basis of these misconceptions—which are symptomatic of the growing ignorance of the purpose and content of religion and morality—Polanyi concludes (still in the first paragraph of his lecture) that all great modern politico-social disasters are due to 'moral fervour' having over-reached itself. As we shall see later, he also blames Christianity for this moral fervour and for all its excesses. He goes on to argue that moral nihilism, with which he is here particularly concerned, is a form of moral excess. This creates a further difficulty, since no definition is offered, and there seem to be two kinds of moral nihilism abroad today: the political or official, and that common among individuals. In the first sense, if we are willing for the moment to classify any strong desire to improve social and political conditions as 'moral fervour' we may concede, as an example, that there is an explosive humanitarian force behind Communism—a desire to help starving mankind by a possibly brutal short cut—which we might then loosely call 'moral excess'. But if we are discussing moral nihilism in the second sense, it seems impossible to associate it with moral fervour or moral excess in any generally-understood sense. While Communism (together with Nazism and Italian Fascism) has been associated with the subordination of all other standards to the ends of the State, moral nihilism as a personal disease seems to flourish more freely in France, England, Scandinavia and the United States than in puritan Russia. If it is what I take it to be—a feeling (leading to action) that no standards are valid and that one opinion or action is as good as another—this has been slowly coming to a head for a long time. It appears to be on the one hand a by-product of science and philosophy, and on the other hand a result of the absence of any body or bodies able and willing to set standards. If in the democracies

'education for character' is now unfashionable, if politics are coming to be regarded as a mechanical counting every few years, if mass media are mainly in the hands of men whose only criteria are sensation or news-value, if even church-goers² (themselves a small minority) are doubtful if there is any proof that one thing is right and another wrong, I do not see how this can be attributed to any sort of 'moral fervour', and am forced to conclude that Polanyi is using the word 'moral' in all its contexts in an unusual as well as an undefined sense. Finally, unless we are to attribute to Christianity every good impulse, however mixed with impure motives and indefensible methods, it is difficult to see what the Christian tradition has to do with it all.

I have indicated the confusion arising from a terminology so loose as to be surprising in a social philosopher of Polanyi's calibre. Within a single field, such as sociology, the meaning of a phrase might be assumed to be commonly known, but it is part of Polanyi's genius that he ranges over a variety of subjects—science, religion, history, ethics, politics—which might be expected to use words in different ways. In fact, he himself implies the necessity for a definition when he declares that in speaking of *moral passions* he is on completely new ground.

Moral nihilism (he writes) is a moral excess from which we are suffering today. . . . To speak of moral passions is something new. Writers on ethics, both ancient and modern, have defined morality as a composed state of mind. . . . So novel is the present state of morality that it has been overlooked by all writers on ethics. The idea that morality consists in imposing on ourselves the curb of moral commands is so ingrained that we simply cannot see that the moral need of our times is, on the contrary, to curb our inordinate moral demands, which precipitate us into moral degradation and threaten us with bodily destruction.

In this extract, where the word 'moral' occurs seven times (and 'morality' three) the variations in meaning would repay lengthy study. The least comprehensible phrase seems to be 'inordinate moral demands': this might mean demands made by a nation or a man on behalf of himself, or on behalf of others; the difference in meaning is considerable. The simplest explanation, which would cover both, is that people are today expecting too much, and falling into apathy or violence when they cannot get it. But can this be

² I have used this expression to describe that group of people who may be expected to be familiar with the Gospels, and who should believe in moral standards because they hold one of the many possible positions between 'This is right because God commands it', and 'God commands this because it is right'.

what Polanyi means? For if so, this is a fault in human nature which the Christian Church, following Christ, has been trying to correct for nearly two thousand years—though it is true that inordinate desires have been accentuated in the recent past by advertisement and propaganda. Yet the entire central Christian tradition has always pointed out that it is impossible to construct the kingdom of God on earth, that we must act with humility, through personal relationships, and not expect startling results. In the acceptance of pain and sorrow, sickness and disappointment, lies in fact our prospect of moral improvement.

I say the *central* tradition of the Church because this is what Polanyi seems to ignore. In the passage quoted above, where he refers to writers on ethics both ancient and modern, he confesses that he would have omitted Judaeo-Christianity from his account—since its religious zeal was not primarily moral—if it had not been essential to his line of argument. Again the use of the word ‘moral’ is obscure. If it means that in both Judaism and Christianity man is adjured first to love God, he is right; if he thinks this can be separated from a *moral* relationship with one’s neighbour, he is wrong. (‘Lord, when did I see *you* hungry?’) He does, however, continue to discuss Judaeo-Christianity because, following Norman Cohn,³ he believes that it is from certain Christian revolts in the middle ages that modern nihilism takes its rise. Sweeping aside the complexities of history, he blames Gregory VII for all the messianic rebellions in central Europe between the eleventh and the sixteenth centuries. For, he says, wherever a Church or a Christian society fails to live up to its too high ideals, the result will be revolts leading inevitably to a ‘nihilistic messianic rule’.

If the Christian has already parted company with Polanyi over his views on moral improvement, and the linguist over his terminology, it is now the turn of the sorely-trying historian to pack his bags and depart. Every trade has its proper pride, and it is a perpetual irritation to historians to watch sociologists and social philosophers—from Machiavelli through Montesquieu to Hegel and Toynbee—dabbling in the past and extracting useful illustrations for hypotheses derived from some non-historical source. Not merely at this point, but throughout the lecture Polanyi shows a complete disregard of social and economic factors, and a total absence of historical perspective. Ideas for him operate in a vacuum. He leaps—still with Norman Cohn—from the messianic revolts of the middle ages to the followers of Bakunin and Nietzsche, where ‘for the first time the

³ In *The Pursuit of the Millennium*.

excesses of Christian morality turned . . . into fierce immoralism'. If the reader has kept his head so far, and has not, like Alice, begun to mutter 'Immoral, moral; moral, immoral' to see which sounds better, he will be protesting mildly here: 'But surely at least *Nietzsche* did not attack Christianity for failing to live up to its ideals, but simply because he didn't like them? Where have I lost the thread?' But worse is to follow. Under the same head are lumped Rousseau's 'flaunting immoral individuality (*sic*) in contemptuous defiance of society', Byronism, the murder committed by Raskolnikov, nihilist assassinations in Russia, and the S.A. and S.S. in Nazi Germany, who were 'inspired by the same truculent honesty and passion for moral sacrifice which turned the Nihilists of Russia into the *aparatchiks* of Stalin'. All these are (apparently) moral excesses springing from the moral fervour introduced into the world by Christianity. Is it necessary to say that to gain anything like a complete picture of any of these incidents or movements one would have to set each in turn against its proper background? Rousseau must be seen in the perspective of the romantic and emotional revolt from the rationalist Enlightenment—a normal swing of the pendulum. Nor, indeed, is he homogeneous as an immoralist symbol: although in private life he was an undisciplined romantic in full revolt against the actual society of his time, in the *Contrat Social* he seems to be groping confusedly after a moralizing of men through social life, which would teach them to prefer the general to the particular good. Byron was, of course, *déraciné*—a wealthy aristocrat, a poet, an expatriate. And was not Russian nihilism a reaction to the impossibility of constructive work in a police state? Nor do I believe that we can justly leap from the nihilists to Stalin's *aparatchiks*, for surely when the power of the machine (scientific, political or military) enters history, this is a new element, almost as important as the ideas it uses or is used by. It is possible to be as unintelligently caught up in a democratic machine as in a totalitarian one, and in the end it may prove equally disastrous.

Enough has been said to show that there is something dubious about 'moral fervour' considered as an explosive liquid which can be poured into a number of neutral vessels. It would appear to be simpler, though much less original, to accept the fact that, as undeveloped nations and classes are given their heads, they are bound to act more rashly and dangerously than prosperous and settled nations, and that wars undermine improvements in social behaviour. Do we need to look much further than this to explain the great catastrophes of our time? Professor Polanyi himself at one point abandons the phrase 'moral fervour' in favour of a better

description of the enthusiasm which he regards as the curse of the modern world; he calls it 'secular fanaticism'. With this verbal change the reader is able to see more clearly and to identify Polanyi's tradition of political ideas: it is the anti-rationalist school, which is charmed by the English and the Englishness of English politics. Professor Oakeshott, in his well-known attacks on rationalism in politics, has the consistency to dismiss the entire Enlightenment as politically misguided, in its attempts to provide blueprints for society; for him it is as dangerous as the French Revolution itself, perhaps more so. Polanyi, however, seems to wish to have the best of both worlds. Though admiring the different practice of England, he cannot quite bear to jettison the Enlightenment; thus he somehow creates a confusion between the Anglo-American tradition (which he calls 'the eighteenth-century framework of thought') and the only partly English-inspired ideas of the continental Enlightenment, which he thinks were admirable until they became filled with fervour. He esteems England because she 'avoided the self-destructive implications of the Enlightenment', but does not seem to think that in the political, social and economic circumstances of France, revolutionary ideas were bound to come to fruition. That England avoided the implications of the Enlightenment was simply owing to her continuous development for centuries, which made change come less destructively and suddenly. The last English 'moral passions' (in a sense on which we might all agree) exploded in the seventeenth century, and we met modern problems with those passions, and with most of our religion, burnt out. This is what Polanyi approves and would like to see more widespread. Well and good, but do not let the English take credit for it, or believe that, except in some very long run, it can be imitated by countries which have not yet had our placid centuries of security.

For Polanyi, Rousseau and the French Revolution, as vehicles of moral fervour, are the villains of the piece—Rousseau, whose thought so widened those channels (i.e. of the Enlightenment) that they could be fraught eventually with all the supreme hopes of Christianity, the hopes which rationalism had released from their dogmatic framework. . . . But for this infusion of Christian fervour, Voltaire's vision of mankind purged of its follies and settling down to cultivate its garden might have come true. . . . However, the legacy of Christ blighted these hopes.

How could Voltaire have suspected that

the spirit of St Francis would enter into the teaching of the philosophers (i.e. *philosophes*) and set the whole world ablaze?

This is a remarkable passage. We are already familiar with much of

its argument, which reflects, *inter alia*, the continuing failure of trained scientists to take account of the findings of psychology. The startled modern reader is as surprised as Voltaire would have been to find St Francis claimed as a prophet of the French Revolution—worthy as were many of its aims, and valuable some of its results. As for the 'supreme hopes of Christianity', what can Professor Polanyi mean? It is impossible to conceive of any type of Christian who would not define those hopes in some such terms as these:

Through the infinite mercy of God to be forgiven our sins, and finally to see God face to face in a state of happiness unknown before.

The argument, still based on the assumption that a passion for social justice is the only factor in Christianity, has here become ludicrous.

The chain of reasoning is now complete: it begins with the assumption that Christianity is only valid for Christians when it can be lived perfectly, a modernist misconception which ignores the fact that the Church is composed of and exists for sinners; from this it is an easy transition to a belief that human beings are perfectible on earth, and that this perfectibility depends on social justice. From this point of view it is of course saddening to find that much of the world is not in the least like the placid English reforming gentry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Something must explain the failure to progress, and Polanyi is constrained to introduce on the scene a full-scale devil—none other than Christianity itself, with its misplaced fervour.

Of course there is some truth in this, or it would not be worth discussing. It is true that if Christians in France or Russia had been perfect, or even a great deal better, their revolutions might not have occurred at all, or at least would not have been so anti-religious; but it is equally true that, in view of the great difficulty of leading a good life in communion with God, there will always be, in any society, Christian or otherwise, more people below than above par. But this is not what Polanyi is trying to say—or at least it does not seem to be. Secular fanaticism, if it is interpreted as attempts to perfect earthly societies, may be an error of minority sects, of the Enlightenment, of Marx, but the entire message of central Christianity points in another direction.

The title of this lecture is *Beyond Nihilism*, and Polanyi's analysis of what is wrong with the world today leads in the second half to some conclusions about how to put it right and what is likely to happen in the future. In discussing the French Revolution and the fortunate escape of England, he writes:

England—like America . . . effectively relaxed the internal con-

traditions inherent in any Christian or post-Christian (*sic*) society by gradually humanizing society, while strengthening the affection between fellow-citizens for the sake of which they may forgive moral injustice. . . . It was this achievement that has preserved the eighteenth-century framework of thought almost intact in these countries up to the present day.

While it is hard to discuss things which are stated in such general terms, a citizen of one of these countries would scarcely recognize the description of himself or his community, it is so rosy. A book could be written—indeed, many have been written—on the disappearance from England of the eighteenth-century framework of thought. The ‘effective relaxation of internal contradictions’ presumably means an improvement in social behaviour coupled with a lowering of Christian standards. We do not yet know what this is going to lead to; improvements in social behaviour often prove skin-deep in times of crisis. (I shall not enquire what mutual injustices we are prepared to endure for the sake of our bonds of affection.)

Englishmen and Americans certainly share that dislike of political passions which is proper to peoples no longer in need of them and who observe with disquiet their drastic use elsewhere. Yet the failure to ‘sell’ democracy to uncommitted nations bothers politicians and political theorists alike. Among the dangerous ideologies there seems no doubt that nationalism should be included, despite Pasternak’s belief, quoted here, that its humanizing influence in Russia has been a turning point. As to what is beyond nihilism, Polanyi’s clearest answer is that ‘the healer’s art must rely ultimately on the patient’s natural powers of recovery’. This is not, as it seems at first sight, a *laissez-faire* answer, but a profoundly moral belief (in the normal sense of the word moral) that tyranny cannot last for ever, that men will recoil at last from cruelty and propaganda, ‘that a system based on the total inversion of morality’ is ‘intrinsically unstable’. Polanyi is, indeed, a notable fighter in the cause of the freedom of the human spirit, which makes it doubly sad that in this memorial lecture, and in similar courses of lecture in Edinburgh and elsewhere, he should be tilting at windmills. We must all agree when he says that men have a basic hunger for the truth, which will come to the surface when they have time to turn from striving or being forced to strive. We may also agree that some spread of pragmatism in politics is desirable, and in the final analysis it is on these two things that Polanyi’s hopes for the future rest. He does not pretend to prophesy, and goes little further than the Milan Conference of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, where the West

felt that it had come to the end of ideologies, but found that Africa and Asia had not.

One could have wished that he had felt able to go further, but perhaps it was beyond the scope of this lecture to discuss if all is well with the democracies. Do people not need moral imperatives of some sort? Is it enough to say that we must be tolerant and not bigoted, and not be moved by 'moral fervours'? Will people not ultimately gag as much on an exclusive diet of social improvement as on propaganda? Liberal democracy distrusts any public encouragement to moral advancement, any direction of cultural activities or educational content. If we ask whether this may not be the business of some other organization, such as the Churches, we are told by Polanyi that 'the rule of a dogmatic authority is no more acceptable today than it was in the days of Voltaire', and, looking round at the general public, we must agree with him. The hold of Christianity—attacked here as the author of all our catastrophes—is steadily weakening. For redress of social wrongs we must rely on the ordinary post-Christian good-will of the man who is comfortable enough, but not too comfortable to be uneasy when he sees others in discomfort—and who likes to administer. The strength of this is, of course, that communications now make us able to see more and more people in distress. This is perhaps all that Polanyi hopes and expects, for he seems to prefer no fervour at all to the dangers inherent in moral fervour of any kind. This is Stoic *apathy*, and the problem today is what it was in the Hellenistic period—to find enough wise but dispassionate men.

Its Stoic affiliations make it difficult to say whether this lecture is closer to a pre-Christian or a post-Christian view of the world—possibly they resemble one another. We are accustomed to the personal nihilism of today being attributed to a revulsion from too much hypocritical moralizing, in a period vaguely called 'Victorian times', and sometimes this appears to be what Polanyi means. We are also used to the view that Christianity no longer acts as a curb: a pity, we must look for something else. And despite his talk of moral excess Polanyi, too, is looking for a curb of sorts. At other times one feels that he is simply in the nonconformist tradition that religion is an absolutely private matter and should at all costs 'keep out of politics'. All these strands, and many others, are woven into the texture of the argument.

From the standpoint of clarity alone, it is a pity that his presentation is so confused. A much more convincing case could have been built up, based on historical evidence, that moral fervour, defined as a love of one's neighbour and a desire to put it into practice, did not

exist before Christianity. This would have led on to a clear distinction between true moral fervour and secular fanaticism, with some account of where they parted company. But to blame Christianity for every kind of fervour over the last thousand years or more is a *post hoc* argument of the weakest kind. And this, with evasive leaps over the most threadbare parts, is what the argument amounts to. It is also noteworthy that Polanyi, like his predecessors, fails to discuss the relationship between scientific advancement and moral improvement. Social improvement is substituted for moral, and science and technology are barely mentioned. The theme of this interesting but unsatisfactory lecture is the relationship of Christianity to political and personal extremism.

RUSSIAN OPINION

Theological Studies in the U.S.S.R.

IN Moscow, the Patriarch has recently permitted the publication of a new annual under the title *Theological Proceedings*. Its editors describe it as a re-institution of the tradition of periodical publication of the work of Russian Orthodox theologians. Its aims are threefold: to reveal the spiritual treasures of Orthodoxy; to acquaint other Christian bodies with modern Russian theology, and to broaden the outlook of the Russian clergy themselves. 'Volumes will contain works devoted to dogmatic and moral theology, sacred history, the liturgy, patrology, sacred art and other matters affecting the life of the Orthodox Church.'

The first volume does in fact cover a wide range of subjects. It opens with a discussion of the Orthodox rite of Vespers, written by Professor Uspensky of Leningrad. His approach is unusual for a Russian in that he rejects the symbolical interpretation of the details of the rite which sufficed for all previous Russian theologians in favour of a study of the existing rite as the result of a long process of historical development. He therefore begins with the Jewish ceremony of prayer and the lighting of a candle at evening, a practice taken over by the early Christians with a symbolical interpretation of the light as a representation of Christ in his Church. He then traces the development of the Russian ritual from that of Jerusalem described by Aetheria in her *Peregrinatio ad loca sancta*. Although the ritual has altered considerably within Russia, Professor Uspensky shows that it is derived from this source and not, as one might expect, from the rather different liturgy of Sancta Sophia.