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## KANT AND OLD TESTAMENT ETHICS

IN current literature, and specifically in college text books, we meet frequent distortions of Christianity. One such is the subject of the present discussion. Two quotations from two text books by two well-known American Professors set forth the distortion in question and furnish this article with an appropriate point of departure.

"Perhaps the best way to introduce Kant is to conceive him as the last and most logical of the long line of Hebrew prophets and Christian Apostles."<sup>1</sup>

Consider also a second quotation. "Either then there is some way of defining a good end—an end which justifies the means—or else there must be a moral excellence that belongs to certain types of act irrespective of what they may lead to, if indeed they lead to aught in common. . . . The second interpretation is in the spirit of the Decalogue. . . . This world, we might call it the Old Testament world, is then exactly the kind of world in which morality as Kant defines morality could and would exist."<sup>2</sup>

That some have had doubts as to the truth of the view given in the quotations is attested by the following footnote of the second writer. "This image of the Old Testament World is not of course supposed to be that of the ancient Hebrews. Rather does it represent this world as reflected in the thought of a modern Christian community."<sup>3</sup>

### I

Now whatever the force of this last admission may be, the two quotations strongly suggest a fundamental similarity between the ethics of Kant and of the Old Testament. Because of the footnote, however, this discussion needs to distinguish between the Testaments themselves and what that vague entity, a modern Christian community, might happen to think of those ancient documents. But both authors imply, and the second distinctly asserts, that common opinion makes Kant's strict morality essentially that of the Hebrew-Christian religion.

<sup>1</sup> T. V. Smith, in *Readings in Ethics*, by Clark and Smith, p. 223.

<sup>2</sup> E. A. Singer, in *Modern Thinkers*, pp. 132, 137.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

This opinion, permit me to repeat, seems to be a definitely mistaken one. And why those who express such an opinion without some qualification like that in the second author, are mistaken, admits of an easy psychological explanation. The modern Christian community is simply not Christian. The views of the intelligentsia artistically if sometimes flippantly expressed in dilettante magazines err through a profound unfamiliarity with the contents of the Old and New Testaments. The modern educated community is largely pagan, so largely in fact that the condition usually escapes notice. Owing to an educational system originated to preserve religious freedom, the victims of public instruction have been kept not so much free as ignorant. By means of a deliberate silence through the schools, a silence relieved occasionally only by a slur or a sarcasm, the great majority of college graduates go through life either with distorted views of the contents of Christianity or none at all—alternatives which in reality amount to the same thing. When asked in class the most authentic sources for the examination of early Christian thought, the instructor named certain twenty-seven books; the student then asked again if the Epistles of Paul had been included in the list. Yet this particular student (a Roman Catholic) knew more than another student who thought Christianity taught mainly that the universe was created in six periods of twenty-four hours. Aside from scholars who are both trained in research and have made this particular research the educated people of the United States are not in general capable of deciding whether Kant is fundamentally similar to the Old Testament or not. Nor does their inability arise from any meagre acquaintance with Kant. If they were presented with the pamphlets of Luther and Eck, the *Institutes* of Calvin or the Tridentine symbols, these writings would appear not so much untrue as unintelligible. In matters of religion these people are as advanced as High School pupils who think *hors d'oeuvres* means "out of work". It may, therefore, seem appropriate to show that any similarity between Kant's ethics and the Hebrew-Christian system is accidental and superficial.

## II

There are two main views respecting the intent of the Old Testament which we must consider. One is that of the Jewish

people both of Christ's day and, so far as I am informed, of to-day as well. The second is the Christian view. We anticipate little difficulty in showing that the Pharisees of the first century were not in harmony with the categorical imperative. For them, no one will deny, morality was the means of winning God's favour, of improving oneself until acceptable by God, in short of achieving salvation. Omniscient Jehovah knows and balances each fault against each good deed and if by observing the multitudinous regulations of the Pharisees, a man's good deeds exceed his evil ones, God accepts him as worthy of heaven. Far from any suggestion that man should do his duty regardless of consequences, purely from the motive of vindicating an abstract formal duty, the Pharisees act deliberately for reward. Whether the reward be crudely or more intellectually conceived does not alter the matter. Any reward as a motive of action is inconsistent with Kant's theory.

Sometimes articles are written to show how primitive the Hebrews, or more strictly the Old Testament is in making fear of punishment so prominent in moral exhortation. Kant, whose position is sounder, higher, more ethical, would never, or ought never, to avoid evil through fear of punishment. With perhaps the exception of some obvious exaggerations, this attack on the Old Testament is far more accurate historically than the view we are here opposing. There is no need to make this article appear scholarly by quoting the penalties attached to the infraction of the Mosaic code. Occasionally, through the lack of historical perspective, as in the case of eye for eye and tooth for tooth, these laws are understood more as vicious savagery than as an alleviation of the customary eye for an insult and a life for an eye; nevertheless the penalties, both civil and religious, are enunciated very explicitly. Likewise there are numerous promises to those who will honour father and mother, who will pay the tithe or who have the faith of Abraham. Nor, in this respect at least, can there be drawn any antithesis between the Law and the Prophets. The Prophets protest against violating the law by means of evasive technicalities, they inveigh against a self-complacency in obeying parts of the law and not other more important parts, but they never annul the rewards and punishments, nor preach duty for duty's sake. Amos in particular is singled out as having attained to high ethical standards of social justice. But his very first verses give warning of punishment in a tone indiscernible

from the thunder of Mount Sinai. These facts, it seems reasonable to conclude, suffice to show that both the writers of the Old Testament and the Pharisees of Christ's day do not agree with any system which removes reward and punishment as motives toward morality.

### III

But, it is maintained, Jesus attacked the Pharisaic interpretation of the Old Testament. He objects to their praying on the street corners to be seen of men, adding pointedly—they have their reward. Does His attack therefore apply to the point in question? Did He add some new spiritual principle abrogating the reward and punishment morality? No one can object to referring to the Sermon on the Mount as an important piece of evidence. Some members of the modern Christian community have placed this sermon, especially its specifically moral injunctions, in a position more systematically basic than sound scholarship would show it deserved. By making Jesus principally if not solely an ethical preacher, they have reversed the relation that obtains in the New Testament between ethics and theology. Yet on an ethical question, the Sermon on the Mount demands appeal. Its opening words are: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Blessing and reward begin the sermon; rains, floods, winds and destruction end it. Can then anyone seriously maintain that Jesus preaches a categorical imperative in the Kantian sense? "For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Take heed that ye do not your righteousness before men, otherwise ye have no reward of your Father. Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth, and thy Father shall recompense thee." Not less than three times in the sixth chapter of Matthew is the reward mentioned. In other discourses punishment is as clearly stated as reward. "Depart from me ye cursed into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment but the righteous into life eternal."

We have no intention of minimizing the differences between the Pharisees and Jesus. They held thoroughly inconsistent views respecting the sense of the Old Testament. They differed radically on the effective power of human morality with God, but neither obscured, it is quite permissible to say both emphasized reward and punishment. If Jesus objected to the Pharisees,

it was not because they wanted a reward but because of the measly reward they wanted. Perhaps then it was the Apostles who changed Jesus' teaching in a Kantian direction.

Peter on the day of Pentecost testified and exhorted with many words, "Save yourselves from this untoward generation." At the Beautiful Gate he declares, "Repent so that there may come seasons of refreshing." Paul in 2 Thess. i asserts, "It is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you." Or should we proceed to quote the Apocalypse? Indeed Christianity must be a strange thing to draw upon itself the attacks of those who consider heaven and hell a barbarous philosophy and at the same time to be understood as teaching duty for duty's sake.

This confusion results from assuming that modern communities are Christian. Scholarly opinion is still in process of recuperating from the effects of nineteenth century criticism. Historical investigations are showing that certain popular conceptions of the God of the early Christians derive more from Kant than from the early Christians. The God of the New Testament strikes Ananias and Sapphira dead for fraud. He is indeed a God who so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, but He is also a God who reveals His wrath from heaven against all ungodliness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. At the present moment there are two classes of scholars who have seen something of the Christian genius. First are those who definitely and consciously oppose it. Among others we may cite the example of George Santayana in *Winds of Doctrine*. This distinguished gentleman has some peculiar notions about Christianity; he thinks, for example, that the universe was created for the glory of man (*Winds of Doctrine*, p. 45, and *Genteel Tradition at Bay*, p. 42) but for all of that he sees clearly that modernism is not Christian. He judges modernists to be in a state of "fundamental apostasy from Christianity", "worship(ing) nothing and acknowledge(ing) authority in nothing save in their own spirit". He accuses the modernist who thinks he is Christian of "an inexplicable ignorance of history, of theology and of the world", and of substituting a theory which "steals empirical reality away from the last judgment, from hell and from heaven". Santayana may have some queer views on the nature of Christianity, but the views of our modern Christian community are still queerer.

## IV

The second class of scholars who grasp the essence of Christianity is that small group which definitely and consciously accepts it. More and more is it being seen that the absolute anti-Christian radicals and the ultra-conservative Evangelicals are historically accurate, while the third class, the "modernists", are befogged in a cloud of subjective mysticism. This is a mere modern sentiment; the communities, to which the influence of Kant has finally seeped, insistently argue that the term Christian has noble connotations and therefore, refined and cultured as they know themselves to be, they must naturally be Christian. In order to discover what Christian thought is, therefore, it is no longer necessary to study the New Testament or make erudite investigations into ancient centuries; one needs only to express his own fine ideals and Christianity is thereby defined. Mysticism saves one so much trouble, you know.

This attitude, however, comes from Kant through Ritschl. These are the men who in separating scientific truth from value judgments, have led, consistently or inconsistently, to the discarding of historical in favour of psychological investigation in religious matters. These men attempted to enclose intellect and religion in separate pigeon-holes so that neither should disturb the other. Yet such a separation is a complete reversal of the Christian world-view. Now, while this modern development may be much nearer the truth and the Testaments largely nonsense, as is usually assumed without much research, this is just one more reason for not confounding Kant's morality with that of the Old Testament.

The Hebrew-Christian system is more likely to cut the knot than follow the subtle wisdom of Kant. If we have no reason to believe there is a God, why should we act as though there were one? The early Christians were more empirically-minded than the modern development would lead one to believe. John in his first epistle insists on the testimony of ears, eyes and hands. Paul in his defence before King Agrippa requests consideration of evidence, "for this thing was not done in a corner". The Christian preacher demands faith to be sure, but the faith he demands is a belief based on evidence. Those who reject Christianity act unwisely in refusing to engage in archæological

argument to demonstrate the mythical character of the Testaments. Such a demonstration would be far more convincing and presumably more scholarly than the actual publications of the day.

## V

There still remains the question whether Kant and his followers, now shown to be at variance with Christianity, have provided a philosophically more acceptable ethic. It is doubtful. Any ethic to prove acceptable must, at least in my opinion, provide room for one principle among others, which Kant would be sure to deny, viz. each individual should always seek his own personal good. Such a principle is usually designated egoistic, and egoism usually carries unpleasant connotations. Yet when unnecessary implications are avoided and misunderstandings removed, it is my opinion that even apart from any discussion of Christianity, only some form of egoism can withstand criticism. A universalism, like Bentham's for instance, finds embarrassment in considering the possible incompatibility of an individual's good with the good of the community. Kant, representing a different system, is forced to resort to elements discordant with the rest of his philosophy when he considers the possible conflict between an individual's good and the same individual's duty. It is true Kant attempts to harmonize duty and good by providing a *Deus ex machina* to reward duty, but he makes hope of that reward immoral.

Christ, on the other hand, did not think it immoral to seek one's own good. If you judge that Hebrews xii. 2, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross", does not warrant any conclusion as to the nature of Christ's motives in undertaking the work of redemption, still we think we can insist that both Christ and the Apostles made abundant use of hope and fear in appealing for converts. So if anyone reproach Christianity as being egoistic and based on fear, partially, ask the objector if fear and self-interest are or are not worthy motives for preferring orange juice to carbolic acid for breakfast. The Bible appeals directly to fear and self-interest; it teaches that absolute destruction awaits him who rejects Christ; and it also teaches that although the Christian may have temporary tribulation, he ultimately loses nothing but gains everything in accepting Christ.

Now this is what egoism means, and Kant would have none of it. Unfortunately, however, egoism is sometimes regarded as countenancing sharp practices and shady morality. Yet it requires but little reflection to conclude that sharp practices do not pay in the long run. Honesty and all other forms of virtue are the best policy. Egoism when correctly understood cannot in the least sanction violation of conscience. In this relation no better reference can be made than to a paragraph from the good Bishop Butler. "Conscience and self-love, if we understand our true happiness, always lead us the same way. Duty and interest are perfectly coincident ; for the most part in this world, but entirely and in every instance in the future and the whole."

If we follow Bishop Butler and many others who have held that egoism does not counsel shady actions, that virtue is the best policy precisely because it is an indispensable means to our end, we are ready to consider the position assigned in this scheme to the good of others, for egoism in general and Christianity in particular have been attacked as selfish.

This is not quite the same problem as that usually raised about the compatibility of the good of all people. An egoist, Christian or not, will find quite a little difficulty in proving that the good of one individual harmonizes with the good of all other individuals. As a matter of fact the Christian might well conclude that had Judas done what was best for him, it would be too bad for us. Apparently, then, the good of some people is incompatible with the good of others. But whether we do accept this conclusion or not, that the good of two people may under given conditions conflict, it does not follow that egoism teaches selfishness. And yet Christianity has been assailed as selfish. That one must save his own soul first, and only afterwards turn his attention to others, and that his helping others reacts again to benefit himself, Hastings Rashdall for example frankly considers "nauseous". To me, however, the attempt to help others before attending to one's own condition is a case of the blind leading the blind. Nor have I been able to find anything disgusting in regarding one's own development as a motive in missionary activity. We sing about stars in our crown, we speak of souls for our hire. If, then, I may be an instrument of effectual calling in God's hands, and if such instrumentality brings a blessing, I can see no good reason for denying that that blessing may properly be a part of the evangelistic motive.

Now, to bring this discussion to an end and perhaps to a conclusion as well, we should say that if portions of the modern Christian community regard Kant as the last of the prophets, a polite acquaintance with the Bible would remedy their misapprehension. And second, when our opponents claim that Christianity is a selfish soul-saving, egoistic religion, we should advise Christians not to be apologetic in the colloquial sense of the word but to be apologetic in the technical sense, and, with the aid of oranges and carbolic acid, follow the examples of Christ and the Apostles in holding out to them the hope of heaven and the fear of hell as legitimate motives for availing themselves of Christ's gracious redemption.

GORDON H. CLARK.

University of Pennsylvania.