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Lecture Girton College 1945

A. D. Lindsay

Excerpt

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## THE GOOD & THE CLEVER

I WISH to take, as it were for the text of what I have to say, those charming verses of Miss Wordsworth's, the first Principal of Lady Margaret Hall. A text, however familiar, is read at the beginning of the discourse, so I shall begin by reading the verses:

If all the good people were clever,  
And all clever people were good,  
The world would be nicer than ever  
We thought that it possibly could.

But somehow 'tis seldom or never  
The two hit it off as they should,  
The good are so harsh to the clever,  
The clever so rude to the good!

So friends, let it be our endeavour  
To make each by each understood;  
For few can be good like the clever,  
Or clever, so well as the good.

I want to consider the old and familiar distinction, and the different views which have been taken of it, to try to show that nothing will make sense of it, except to acknowledge that goodness is in its own way as rational as cleverness, if not more so, and that that means there is a reason of the will as truly as there is a reason of the intellect, and finally when we see the distinction of the reason of the

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will from the reason of the intellect, and their complementary natures, we may see why, especially in the sort of world in which we are now living, few can be good like the clever, or clever so well as the good.

Let us begin with the Greeks. Aristotle knew that goodness and cleverness were not the same, and he marked the difference by saying that cleverness was a power which could work opposite ways—for good or for evil. It is the power of discovering and employing the means which lead to any end which happens to be in view, no account being taken of the morality of the end. Cleverness, that is, is what people nowadays call ethically neutral. That is, I imagine, the last word about it. It is well to remember that it was as being ethically neutral that Aristotle put it below the other intellectual virtues. For there are enthusiastic scientists and philosophers who use ethically neutral as a term of praise. I lately read the MS. of a scholar who purported to have discovered that if you read the genuine MSS. of Jeremy Bentham before they were bowdlerized by John Stuart Mill you would see what a remarkable fellow Bentham really was. On reading his account of the genuine Bentham I concluded that what faint gleams of sense I had once thought to exist in Bentham were due to John Stuart Mill. My author remonstrated. Did I not see that Bentham had been the first to see that all science was ethically neutral and that therefore a scientific ethic must also be ethically neutral? An illuminating remark, for it means that for Bentham goodness was only being sufficiently clever.

But while Aristotle understood cleverness, he never got

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right the relation of goodness to thought. Consider how admirably, with that consummate common sense of his, he saw the elements which make up moral character. He knew that it started with habit and disciplined behaviour, something neither irrational nor wholly rational; he knew that to pass from the stage of the morality of habit to rational goodness there was needed an experience which he called friendship: he knew that moral insight involved the understanding of ends or purposes and that that was a different kind of understanding than that which showed itself in technical skill. Yet for all that it is difficult to read the *Ethics* without feeling that something is wanted to make all those insights click together, and that in the absence of that something Aristotle, like Plato, over-intellectualized goodness. He does not perhaps go so far as Plato and hold that only higher mathematicians can inherit the Kingdom of Heaven, but he does seem to believe that only superior persons, and certainly not women or slaves, can be good.

To knock all that nonsense on the head took the teaching of Judaism as to paths in which wayfaring men though fools should not err, and of Jesus that to enter the Kingdom of Heaven men had to become as little children, and then the indignant remonstrances of St Paul: 'For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called: but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise.'

The reaction of goodness against ethically neutral cleverness went indeed so far as to provoke the pleasant remark

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of St Gregory Nazianzen that the Kingdom of God is not necessarily confined to fools. Nevertheless, it ought to have been impossible for any future moral philosopher to have produced an ethical theory which did not find room for the supereminent goodness of the unlettered saint.

Let us consider for a moment the facts about simple goodness for which I submit that room has to be found in any moral theory. Of course everyone admits that there are differences in goodness and badness which are not differences in being learned and being unlearned. But it might be held that the goodness of the simple man was goodness produced by habituation, as I think Plato held, or that there were certain moral truths which were so obvious and immediate that everybody, however unreflecting or ignorant, must perceive them. On either of those views the goodness of the simple man, however genuine, is of a low standard. Such a theory does not account for the unlearned saint, or for the fact that there are people who though neither learned nor clever are outstanding in effective goodness and moral insight. It may be put by saying that some people have a wisdom for life which is not got by learning or by cleverness. Perhaps I may be allowed to read what I have written about this elsewhere:

It is an old story that wisdom in conduct is not learnt from books or technical study, but from experience and character. We know what we mean when we talk of men or women of 'sound judgement' or of 'common sense'. We distinguish them from the expert whom we rather distrust. We should defend this attitude by saying that the

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expert is a specialist: that what is wanted for conduct is all-round experience of people and things. 'Sound judgement' or 'common sense' are not the products of ignorance. They are produced by experience of a certain kind, by responsibility, by a varied acquaintance with men and things and by an *all-round* experience. The expert or specialist on the other hand has probably paid for his expert knowledge by having had to undergo a long training which has removed him from the ordinary rough-and-tumble of life. He has probably not had to check his judgements by practical experience. He has perhaps not had to pay for his mistakes. He has never had to count the cost of them. He has become 'academic' in the bad sense of that term.

If we think about the men and women whose judgement on practical affairs and on conduct we respect, we should certainly agree that academic education did not seem to be very important in their production. We should say that some of them were learned and some not, some rich, some poor. They have no special training or accomplishment. That is why we contrast the one-sidedness of the expert with the good sense or common sense of the *ordinary* man and why democrats think that the proposals of the expert should be approved by the ordinary man.

There clearly is something in this, but we must be careful. 'Common sense', it is sometimes said, 'is one of the rarest of qualities.' The word 'common' is used in New England as a term of uncommon praise. It means, I think, much what the word 'plain' means in the north of England or Scotland. We were proud as children when someone described our mother as 'the plainest woman I have ever met', though we used the ambiguity of the remark as a weapon to tease her. 'Plain' meant, as I think 'common'

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means, that she took people as she found them, and entirely disregarded their external attributes, their rank or class or anything else. Such an attitude of mind, receptive and humble, is essential to the true understanding of men and of life. It is found in all sorts of people who may have no other particular accomplishments and are therefore regarded as ordinary. But in reality such people are neither common nor ordinary.

The Greeks never sufficiently distinguished the good and the clever because they did not distinguish between the social and the natural sciences and therefore did not conceive of any science as being ethically neutral. The Greeks thought throughout in terms of purpose. As men's actions are inspired and explained by their purposes, and as the difference of the rationality of their purposes, i.e. their comprehensiveness and all-embracingness, made the difference in the rationality or goodness of their actions, so for them the differences in the behaviour of natural objects were explained by the differences in the purposes which inspired them. Science, therefore, involving like goodness apprehension of ends or purposes was mixed up with goodness. The difficulty of the Greeks was to understand that the unlettered could be good, but, further, to understand how the appreciation of purpose could be so differentiated from the pull or drive of action that a man might know the good and not do it.

Modern science at the Renaissance threw overboard final purposes, and therefore made natural science ethically neutral. It is significant that while continued attempts to

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reduce the social sciences to the same condition as physics in this respect have always been resisted, no one in physics has proposed to restore final purposes there. It has been accepted that this separation of the physical sciences from final purposes, and therefore from consideration of good and bad, has had and continues to have enormous advantages. And notice the result on our subject. It means that cleverness became what it was not for Aristotle, respectable, as is evident if we call it technical ability. Technical ability as we know to our cost in these days is a 'power of opposites' and can serve the purposes of death as well as the purposes of life, and its independence gives it such a degree of power as it never had before.

But the Renaissance reaction in favour of cleverness, as St Paul's in favour of goodness, went too far, as is usual with such reactions. For a new conception of nature was introduced with the birth of the physical sciences. The conception of purpose was given up and its place taken by the conception of a machine. The distinctive nature of a machine's working is that the details of its action come entirely from the complication of its static parts. Its drive is an undifferentiated push or pull; at most a push *and* a pull.

When the prestige of the new sciences suggested to moral theorists that conduct should be explored on the lines of physics, the natural result was an assumption that the same pattern could be found in conduct as in physical phenomena. Theorists assumed a pull, an undifferentiated drive, the desire for pleasure; or a push and pull—aversion to pain

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and desire for pleasure. All variation in conduct comes from the static circumstances. All thinking about conduct is on this theory a study of existing circumstances in order to predict future circumstances as they will affect the push or the pull, the flight from pain and the pursuit of pleasure. As I have said, Bentham worked out this view systematically and deliberately. He produced a 'scientific' account of conduct at the cost of completely disregarding the facts. Aristotle says of some views, that no one could possibly hold them unless he were defending a thesis. That is surely true of Bentham's Utilitarianism, and few moralists have followed his view that goodness is nothing but cleverness. What has been much more common is the assumption that all the rationality which is observable in conduct is the rational appreciation of circumstances and a calculation of what will happen under certain circumstances, on the lines of the ordinary workings of the scientific intelligence. The drive which produces action may be of one kind or another, but the one thing which can be said about all the *drives* is that they are irrational. One kind of drive or emotion produces goodness, another badness. This is roughly the position expressed in the famous remark of Hume's that reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions.

This is quite consistent with holding that some passions are good and some are bad and that we ought to enslave our reason to the good ones. For this view does not say, as does Benthamism, that goodness just is cleverness. It recognizes the distinction between the two. It holds, like Aristotle, that cleverness is concerned only with means to



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ends. But unlike Aristotle it holds that reason can have nothing to do with ends themselves. These are determined by the passions, by forces which, however necessary to social life, are irrational. If then cleverness must follow the ends which goodness prescribes, and the clever do what the good tell them, they will still be free to despise the good whose authority they follow, and can continue to be rude to the good and to point out what fools the good are.

But we have to agree, on this view, that if we talk of rational or sensible or intelligent behaviour, we mean the rationality or the intelligence of the thinking which accompanied or preceded the action; not of the will or the motive or the drive to action or whatever we call it. In my judgement all such analyses of moral action fail to account for what I have called simple goodness. To their prevalence is largely due the present remoteness of most moral theory from anything which happens in real life.

The contrasted theory, for which I wish to say something, maintains that 'rational' is an adjective as legitimately applied to will as to the intellect, that we can will rationally or irrationally as we can think rationally or irrationally. There is rational action and rational thinking. The characteristics of rationality display themselves in both spheres. A man may be highly capable of rational action and not highly capable of rational thinking and, on the other hand, we are all familiar with the clever ass. It may perhaps be thought that these remarks are platitudinous. Indeed, they seem to me to be so, but I do not think many moral philosophers would accept them. If we are to take them

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seriously they will be seen to have some interesting implications both for theory and practice.

The great exponent of this view is, of course, Immanuel Kant, but Kant himself said he learned it from Rousseau. There are two interesting passages in which Kant acknowledges his debt to Rousseau. In the one he says that he had been apt to take great pride in his character of learned man and to think that because of his intellectual attainments he was a superior person. Rousseau put him right and restored his belief in the common man. To quote his own words: 'Rousseau put me right; this blinded prejudice disappeared. I learned to honour men, and I should regard myself as much more useless than a common labourer if I did not believe that my work could accomplish something of worth to all in restoring the rights of humanity.' Kant had the great advantage of being the child of parents to whom, simple people as they were, he never ceased to look up. To feel superior is an obvious temptation to young people who are much cleverer than their elders, but Rousseau put Kant right. He was put right about the significance of the simple goodness of unlettered men and women.

The second passage is perhaps more remarkable. For in that Kant brackets Newton and Rousseau as the two great pioneers of modern thought, Newton in physics and Rousseau in the understanding of conduct:

'Newton saw for the first time order and regularity combined with simplicity, where before him disorder and scattered diversity were discoverable, and since then the comets move in geometrical paths: Rousseau discovered