

Chap. 11 / PPCR

ETHICS IN THE STUDY OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

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## ETHICS IN THE STUDY OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

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It is one of the significant facts of our time that we are deeply concerned with the ethics of the democracy we seek to defend. Are we a generation with a guilty conscience created by the observation of the ruins of order, regimes, and economies? Are we trying to justify ourselves before the bar of reason? Or, might we say that this concern for values in political life shows a determination that we must do a better job when we have another chance to fashion history with intelligence?

What I shall have to say will be essentially a plea on behalf of the conservative moral tradition of the West. From the days of the Greeks to our own we have recognized in our better moments that we must work for the realization of justice in society. We have recognized that whatever may be the form of government, it is legitimate because it sustains in some degree political justice. When we speak on these subjects, we are, at the moment, both very ambitious and very humble. We are ambitious because we would like to say what justice is; we are humble because we recognize a standard or measure of ourselves that is beyond us. I recall Montesquieu was once said to have remarked that he knew a woman who could walk very well, but when anyone looked at her she became self-conscious and always began to limp. This, I fear, must be my fate on this occasion, for what we say on this program is subjected to pretty close scrutiny. At our best we are still a little lame.

Democratic ends and values is the central theme of this meeting. For the support of democracy today we must accept principles, because we reject the experience of a large part of the social world. We cannot rely on practice to defend democracy; we cannot justify ourselves by our success. Slowly but surely, and I think correctly, we are becoming less the pragmatist and more the doctrinaire. We are less casual about ends, and we must be more rigid in our attitude toward means. If we would be democrats, we must recognize that legitimate ends are to be attained by legitimate means. We speak from the valley of historic failure, not from the confidence born of past success.

At the middle of the last century most serious thinkers were sure of progress. When Lecky wrote less than a hundred years ago on rationalism, the future was bright. Superstition had all but been banished; science everywhere shed its energizing light; peace was coming, since industrial civilization implied and assured the permanent maintenance of peace. Democracy, liberty, nationalism, and international co-operation had arrived to stay. And at the close of the last century E. L. Godkin could say that there would never again be another man on

horseback to upset the progressive march of mankind. True, there were voices which spoke of pessimism in a contingent way. Henry George told us that unless we solved the problem of land monopoly we would go the way of other great civilizations. And the many voices of socialism insisted that doom was at hand unless the whole economy was reshaped. In general, however, it was not respectable to pay any attention to those who decried the achievements of what was truly a great century in the history of material human progress.

Now, in a twentieth century that is probably more bloody than any century in the past, we realize that something was wrong with the picture drawn by the optimistic liberals of a few short generations ago. Well, what was wrong? Why did the prophets of the nineteenth century fail so surely in their prophecy? Incidentally, they considered themselves highly moral, though admittedly they were secular in tone and sometimes anticlerical. If we look back upon these thinkers in general, certain defects may be readily noted. Many of the prophets of progress were little concerned with the source and importance of the moral dignity of man. Today we can see that the possibility of totalitarian thought is always present if the human being is not regarded as having an inherent moral dignity which political regimes must respect. Also, many nineteenth century thinkers failed to apply their principles with any depth to the existing historical situation in which they lived. Perhaps we should not blame them too much for this, because our own situation presents almost insuperable difficulties. There are, it is said, two hundred and six plans for the postwar world, and the authors of each believe they understand the future better than any thinker of the nineteenth century understood the twentieth.

The theory of democratic progress thus was uncertain in its metaphysics and it thereby failed to develop its conception of the source and nature of moral values; but it also tended to substitute for historical realism a philosophy of history that began and ended in the notion of scientific and secular progress. In the present day, so resolute a democrat as Reinhold Niebuhr has insisted that in history men face frustration, not because of ignorance as the last century said, but because of the selfish and self-interested nature of man. One might say, indeed, that a philosophy of history relies on factors outside of the choice of men; that is, factors that are objective as to the human will. In the nineteenth century progress was of this nature, since man was destined to make progress; it was, as Kant might say, a rational necessity which none could evade. May we cite also the example of the near-destitute Neapolitan Giambattista Vico who dreamed of a rational chronology that men must live whether they would or no? Or might we remember briefly Hegel's belief in the inevitable triumph of reason—

a triumph which he indeed saw shining between the sordid details of the Germanic world of his day? Then as now the essential conditions of moral living were violated, but because of the contrast today between the moral tradition of the West and those who would reject reason, it is possible to see a little more clearly.

Reflection on many details that may not be introduced into this discussion has suggested to me that as the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries succeeded in the attack on theology, they also moved forward to attack morality itself. This latter attack was plausible only because of faith in progress. The falsification of progress, as in the present bloody period, suggests immediately that the attack was too bold, and fraught with consequences that many an ancient writer saw or experienced. Let us substitute for the philosophy of history the principle of history as an end-means relationship. The deterministic, objective and nonvolitional aspects of the philosophy of history can thus be rejected for a principle in which men may choose their ends, and the means which may be used through labor in history to attain these ends. Social history as ends and means in relation does not give us the right to sit idly by while the goals for which man lives are realized by an inevitable social process. Nor should we assume there is no frustration in history, for there must be degrees in which ends can be realized. There are conditions under which the democratic goals we defend must be attained.

The comments I have made on democratic theory in the nineteenth century should not be misunderstood. No one in his right mind is opposed to science, but science has changed greatly since the middle of the last century, and scientists are perhaps more cautious than they were. When we argue that there must be in democracy a reasonable defense of goals as we are able to state them and believe them, we face squarely another question. What about the naturalistic explanations of man, such as psychology and the imposing edifice which bears the name of Freud upon its portal? What about the facts of economics which, we have been told, govern us willy-nilly? Shall we say that technology and its managerial revolution shall be master in our house? Shall we say that the recurrence of war is almost as fixed as the cycle of the stars? Shall we, as democrats, describe merely what is happening in a punch-drunk world? Long ago Lord Acton pointed out that philosophies or interpretations of history have clustered around many startling ideas. We do not need to reject in the interest of ends or purposes any data obtained by science; but we do need to accept them as conditions under which the realization of goals must take place. We must likewise recognize that "value-free" discussion is essential in the development of science.

Thus we may say that the psychological interpretations of human

behavior involve most closely the question of values. We have all become amateur psychological analysts. But the amateur displays on a large scale what may be present on a small scale in the mind of the scientist. We have tried to by-pass the validity of ends or goals. A goal or a value, or even virtue, becomes simply an aspect of psychological investigation. Now the war and the crisis of civilization have brought us back sharply to the necessity of going beyond mere description; we must inquire by reason whether there are valid purposes or ends toward which we must labor. We may admit the conditioning factors as they arise, but to set limits to realization is not in itself to deny that an end or purpose may be true or valid. It may suggest even that a reasonable morality may set limits to and govern the use of science. We do not permit lunatics to possess dynamite, and we propose after this war to limit the utilization of science by aggressors. But we will do this in the name of purposes which we deem to be reasonable and valid.

Now democracy, I take it, is a form of government in which the masses of the people somehow participate in the work of government. It is an approach to that deep paradox of politics—the problem of self-government. We may admit that all legitimate governments rest finally on the consent of the governed, and this may include almost any form of government except tyranny or despotism. We cannot conceive of a people consenting to such governments in the first place. The devices of democratic government have evolved slowly through a long history, and we are never quite sure of the structural point which divides democracy from other systems. But as a legitimate form of government, democracy has a responsibility to accept the principles of justice. We do not believe that any democracy can ignore the rights of individuals who compose society. Democracy does not stand for the principle that “what the public wants” is always the test of right, though it certainly must be one basis of interpreting social needs at any given time. What we believe is that democracy can, and that democracy must, assume a responsibility greater than other regimes for the justice of its action. In other words, democracy must have a deeper and truer philosophical sense if it is to be preferred to other regimes. Since democratic peoples do in some degree govern themselves, they must individually show a greater responsibility before the labor of reason and the judgment seat of history.

Aside from the technical problem of actually making the masses of the people more influential in government, democracy must mean that citizens and leaders show the respect for human personality that our tradition in the West has taught us. This is the weapon of democracy in the struggle for the loyalty of the modern, civilized man. That there

are so many opponents of democracy in the world suggests that, in spite of the brave words of the nineteenth century, the democracies have not done a very good job in this respect. There is, I think, nothing per se democratic in human rights, but it is the test of democracy to show that it knows and solves the social problems connected with rights better than other regimes.

The criticism of democracy is in the nature of a taunt. Democracies claim so much for themselves, it is said, but look at what has happened. It is not any different after all, so why not try less ambitious regimes which will make the trains run on time, even if they do not win wars? The critic notes the failure of democracy on the ethical level. Democratic goals are poorly, or bombastically, stated, and they are poorly realized in practice. Its most learned exponents—the professional students of society—are evasive and noncommittal on moral issues. In less sublime theaters than the academic, it is argued that the struggle for equality becomes a single phase of an immoral struggle for power. American life, some say, has degenerated into a struggle between competing oligarchies and pressure groups. Again, on a new front, those in power are moving forward to a greater control over the mind of the citizen, so that this implicit suppression makes meaningless popular participation in government. Techniques or means tend to absorb ends, and finally ends or goals are merely verbal tokens in the struggle for power. The reconciliation of the interests of class or groups, which has been so central in the doctrine of progress, becomes in itself one of the symbols of class imperialism. Finally, it may be suggested that the modern state is so complex that no single agency, whether popular or bureaucratic, can control it all at one time. The nerve centers of the state, so to speak, are scattered about in odd places in its anatomy. Administrative procedure, perhaps, has a life all its own.

The problem so stated is depressing enough. If democracy is to remain the aspiration of humble men and women throughout the world, it must show rare skills on the different levels of politics. Obviously, we need social inventiveness just to make the government of the people more real and to render fallacious the plausible argument for the irresponsible oligarchy. As all labors in time, perfection cannot be expected; but greater achievement can. If new techniques of democratic government are needed, we cannot be respectors of tradition as to techniques. T. S. Eliot has argued that every tradition must be subjected to the criticism of an orthodoxy. Tradition must be refined, as metals are refined in the process of manufacturing.

But when we move beyond the level of political technique, we enter the kingdom of ends. We are discussing the philosophy of political goals; we are, like Plato, inquiring into the nature of justice and the

practicability of realizing it here and now, or sometime in the future. Reason is the orthodoxy which must be used to criticize the tradition of justice. It is the work of reason to validate, to add and subtract from our conception of nature. Reason must be the modernizer of the democratic tradition. Our Christian tradition of justice stands for us today as a great conservative symbol; it is the point, I believe, to which we must return in order to face adequately the issues of the present.

With so much revolution going on around us, it is difficult to tell who are today the intellectual revolutionaries. But if we return to the Marxian dream of a generation ago, such a suggestion as I have made would be the essence of reaction. The intellectual revolutionaries demand, as do others, a solution of our problems. At bedrock the issue involves the kind of values which would find their way into practical politics. In specific detail, it is a question of the kinds of freedom that will be tolerated by those in power. The materialist—the modern revolutionary—would deny in general the wisdom of tradition, even when subjected to the orthodoxy of reason. But, of course, as long as we have the totalitarian rejection of tradition, reason, and morality, it is difficult to distinguish the conflicting parties within democracy itself.

Let us assume that the great historical continuity in the West is in the field of principles, or reasonable and intelligent appreciation of living together in societies. We must hope, therefore, that the time will soon be here, if it is not already, when we can examine again our democratic ends and our whole scheme of political values. Let us hope that we can proceed from freedom as a generality to the detailed construction of a democratic life in which men in all justice can recognize that they are free. But such a purpose implies the use of sound reason and a fruitful imagination in the consideration of ends and means. For one thing, we should study those minority groups which are believers in the tradition of justice and which are essentially democratic in outlook. For it is here rather than in the inner circles of power that the conception of a new society is most real. Our task is the examination of the issue of freedom in industrial and urban society and the conditions of freedom and justice for those who live on the land. From the narrow question of the ownership of those things which make family security possible, we must proceed to the world-wide questions of freedom of all peoples; in other words, to the end of imperialism and the regeneration of the politics of power. Even if we agree with Jacob Burckhardt that there has been no progress in man's moral sense, we can still insist that we should use what moral sense we have and that all moral appreciation is expressed under particular social conditions.

For the social scientist the challenge is very disturbing, for it means

that the student of society cannot be content with the collection and organization of information. It means that such labors are only one-half of his task. It means that the other half is the consideration of the ends approved by democracy and the means adopted to bring them closer to historic realization. For many, social science has lacked poetry because in its concern for the average it has ignored the imagination. Social science has lacked religion because it has ignored the problems that the religious approach to society inevitably raises. And finally, the scientific quality of social science has suffered because it has not faced the problem of ends in organized society. It has indeed at times pretended that there is no philosophy worthy of attention. Because of these things it has been unable to offer insight to those who seek it. Some have even argued that social science has been as traditionless in the large sense as the traditionless people among whom it has labored.

I think that I may close my remarks by taking a saying from Aristotle's *Ethics* (Book IV, Chapter IX) that "you must have a right end, [and] pursue it in a right manner and right time."