Living Philosophies

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IT IS strange how very rarely one hears men explain frankly and clearly their faith, what they actually believe in their innermost selves and in their sincerest moments; what higher powers they admit, if any; what future. Is this because of a kind of shyness, a consideration for the convictions of others which they do not wish to disturb? Or is it because many people have not been able to arrive at any conclusion as to what they actually believe? Perhaps both. When Charles Darwin was asked about his faith, he answered: "What my own views may be is a question of no consequence to anyone but myself. But, as you ask, I may state that my judgment often fluctuates. . . . I think that generally (and more and more as I grow older), but not always, an Agnostic would be the more correct description of my state of mind."

But although a man's faith is, to some extent at least, his private affair, nevertheless it may have a great effect upon his actions and conduct, and may thus be of importance to his fellow men. It is especially urgent to examine the beliefs of the remarkable age in which we are now living, for in spite of the tremendous advances made by science and the constant evidence of the continuing ability of the white race—portents which might be expected to give confidence, buoyancy, and hope—one often hears the anxious question: Whither mankind? What is the future of Western civilization? The war may have contributed greatly to this gloomy foreboding of some catastrophe to come, but the real cause lies deeper. The real cause lies in the fact that the thinking world is now in a difficult transitional period: old, established truths are shaken and overthrown, old creeds and dogmas are largely abandoned, and there are no new ones ready to take their place.

Whether there are absolute truths we cannot prove or disprove. But having got the capacity of thinking, we ought certainly to use it in deciding those questions which are of most importance in our whole conduct of life, and we must let our reasoning be guided by what we recognize to be the truths of our time. To allow our faith, our views of existence, to be tyrannized by the commands—whether illogical or not—of some other person, "a prophet of God," has nothing to do with morality or goodness. The command "thou shalt believe" is not moral; if we can force ourselves to obey it, we do so not because we are convinced that it is the naturally good and right thing to do, but for fear of displeasing some divine power, and of thus exposing ourselves to punishment. This is the contrary of morality, for we make ourselves subject to an alien despotism in order to gain something by it. Commands such as this are remnants from times when people believed in war gods, gods of vengeance and reward, like the Yahweh of Israel. In our day it might be expected that we should have outgrown such superstitions, and that we should consider it our duty to try, as best we can, to bring our views of life, our faith, our principles of morality, into harmony with our reasoning, and to base our conduct of life on principles which we consider to be right and just.

When we try to form our view of existence and of the system of the world, we have nothing to be guided by but our observations—that is, our scientific research—and our logical thinking. We are thus led to assume that the whole universe-the inanimate as well as the animate world, the physical as well as the spiritual sphere—is ruled by what we, with a general term, call the laws of nature, and that these laws determine the past and the future. We can discover no fundamental difference between inanimate and animate matter, or between the physical and the mental processes. They are all parts and processes of nature. Organic life is a form of energy, and is subject to the same laws that determine the motions of electrons and of heavenly bodies. We do not know yet how organic life and its forms first came into existence on our planet; but that does not prove that we can never know. We know that it must once have begun here, and that it will some day cease, when the sun is cooled so much that the temperature at the earth's surface sinks below a certain level. This is an inevitable process in the endless circulation of the

universe. Furthermore, we know that organic life is inseparably bound up with forms of matter and is sustained by supplies of energy, and that it ceases with the destruction of those forms and with the lack of that energy. We can sterilize matter and destroy all life. It is therefore hardly logical to assume that organic life is something fundamentally different from the processes of inanimate matter: they are both produced by physical or chemical energy.

And now the soul? It is an inseparable part of all forms of organic life—animals and plants. We cannot really imagine any living form without a soul, or a soul without a living form. Where life begins the soul begins, and where life ends the soul ends. We can speak about an unconscious and a conscious soul, but we cannot possibly draw the line where the individual, conscious soul begins in the ascending scale of organic forms from the lowest plants and animals to the highest mammals and man, any more than we can in the development of the individual man from the ovum to the adult. When is the individual soul of a man created? Is it at conception? I believe it is. If so, it cannot originally be an indivisible entity, for it arises from two primary components, the spermatozoon and the ovum, and it derives its specific qualities from both sources. But then we have the development of some eggs—for instance, those of bees—without sexual fertilization. This does not detract from my thesis. The processes which constitute the elementary soul are transferred with the sexual cells from the parental forms to the offspring, and the sexual cells are differentiated and set aside at the earliest stages in the development of each individual. The soul may thus be considered as continuous, like life itself, through all generations, but it grows "self-conscious" in the development of each individual of the higher animal forms.

Closely connected with this question of a conscious soul is the old postulate of its *immortality*, which arises from our fear of annihilation, or rather from our desire to live. The claim that the soul should continue to exist after the decay of the body and its organs—by the processes of which it was produced—is so contrary to all reason that it cannot be dealt with as a scientific problem. The question naturally arises: at what stage in the development of the animal forms is it assumed that the immortality of the individual soul was introduced? Is it a prerogative of man only? But if so, had the Neanderthal man, or the Pithecanthropus an immortal soul? Has a gorilla, or even an elephant, a dog, a tiger, a chicken, a serpent, a fish, a lobster, an oyster—has each of these an individual, immortal soul? Where can we possibly draw the line?

And where in space are these enormous quantities of individual souls continuing their immortal existence? The Mohammedans are perhaps the most exclusive, claiming that immortality is a prerogative of the human males, and that not even the human females possess it; but against this our modern champions of women will probably make a violent protest.

The soul in its higher forms is impulses, feelings, memories, conception, consciousness, will, thoughts. We cannot imagine these activities to be attached to solitary electrons or atoms; we must rather assume that they arise by a cooperation of electrons or atoms in an immensely complicated system. Our investigations prove that these activities of the body and the soul are based on the supply of chemical energy. When the body and its organs are destroyed, and the parts of the complicated system forming the seat of the soul are scattered, these mental activities must cease, and the individual soul can no more exist as such; if it continues, it must be something entirely different, deprived of all the characteristic qualities of the individual soul that was a part of the body. And what is our individual soul really? It is inseparably bound up with every part of our body, not only with the brain and the nervous system, but with every functioning organ, every muscle.
Alterations not only of the brain, but of other parts of the body-the sexual and other glands—may entirely change the nature of a man's soul, of his whole character, and make him a very different personality, good or bad, moral or immoral. For example, by an operation a hopeless sexual criminal may be made a

fairly decent and moral person. The specific qualities of the soul can be cut away slice by slice from the brain, until nothing but the mental activity of a low animal is left. Notice the gradual degeneration of the soul of a man attacked by general paralysis. Which soul is going to survive?

For numbers of people it may be a consolation to think that the soul is immortal, and that there is a life after this where there may be some compensation for the sufferings and shortcomings of this earthly existence; but certainly it is a less selfish, nobler, and a more wholesome faith to believe that our life is *here* and *now*, that we are passing links in the continuous chain from the past to the future, that we survive only in the effects of our thoughts and acts, and in our descendants, and therefore that we have to do our very best in this one life. This view is apt to strengthen the feeling of solidarity, and it forms a sounder basis for our conduct of life and for the progress of the community than obsolete illusions and postulates, and a doctrine based upon the selfish idea of the salvation of the individual in another life.

Inseparably bound up with these questions is the old problem of free will. When everything that happens is subjected to the laws of nature, when all our actions, great or small, are determined by the endless series of causes and effects in the past, there is, of course, no room for a free will, and there cannot really be any responsibility in the manner in which we generally understand it. All the ingenious attempts which have been made by great thinkers to get round this simple fact, seem more or less futile. The laws of nature are inexorable, and admit no more of a free will than of an absolute cause, whether we call this cause "will" or "God." The whole personality of an individual—his qualities, his character—is determined by birth and environment, by inheritance and education. It may perhaps be said that a strong man can more or less educate himself and shape his own character by his own will. But this will is not free and independent. It is itself a quality which has been inherited and may have been strengthened or weakened by education and environment; its functioning at any moment is determined by previous causes. In reality, therefore, an individual can no more shape his own character than a tree can shape its branches. Whether a man becomes what is called good or bad, moral or immoral, and what views he holds, depend entirely on his inherited qualities and how they have been influenced and developed by education and environment.

Those people who fear that this doctrine may wipe out the feeling of responsibility, which is so important for all social life, may find consolation in knowing that in the moment when we act, we all of us believe that we are free to decide. Even the most positive determinist acts under the illusion that when he is doubtful about what to do, his final decision depends on himself and not upon the workings of previous causes. This idea, even if it is an illusion, seems to be necessary for the welfare of the community, and it is hardly possible to exterminate. it in practice from the conscious soul of which it is a part—a soul whose existence is determined by previous causes.

Closely connected with the doctrine of determinism is the question of purpose. If everything is determined by the laws of nature, how, then, can there be any purpose of the whole? The truth is that the eternal laws are because they are, and can serve no purpose outside themselves. Some people argue, however, that if there is no purpose, then the whole universe becomes meaningless. But this proves nothing. Who has any right to say that the universe must have a meaning? Meaning and purpose—are they not really egotistical ideas belonging to our little organic world? Can they be applied to the universe and its endless circulation?

When on a starlit night our eyes are lifted to the heavens and wander far into infinite space toward other Milky Ways, and we are inspired by the wonderful grandeur of the whole, by the sublime majesty, we get a feeling that it is, always was, and always will be, and demands for meaning and purpose dwindle into petty impertinence. Once, a long time ago, our organic living world arose and developed on this little

planet, and some day it will again disappear. Is it not to ask too much that it should also have a meaning, a purpose, outside its own changing processes? We may say that the purpose of the grain growing on our fields is to provide food for human beings, since grain-growing is a specialty of ours, but it would be ridiculous conceit to say that the sun is shining in order to make our grain grow, or to think that the purpose of matter and energy is to make our existence possible on this planet.

To many people it may seem even harder to give up the idea of a purpose of existence and a wise scheme of things, than to have to accept the doctrine of determinism and to abandon the idea of a free will, though the one is an inevitable consequence of the other. But just as in the instance of free will, we do not act according to theory: in practice we all act as if there were a purpose in our lives. We can no more get away from this idea than from that of a free will; it is too deeply rooted in human nature, being determined by previous causes.

It is obvious, however, that as the so-called materialistic views of life, mentioned above, spread and pervade the thoughts of the common people, their whole philosophical and religious conception of existence is radically shaken. Old creeds, old religious systems, dogmas, and superstitions, which formed the mainstay of their views of life, can be upheld no longer; and there are hardly any adequate and satisfactory new doctrines ready to take their place. Worse than this, however, is the fact that the idea of morality was hitherto generally bound up with religion, that the current moral rules had their origin chiefly in superstition, and one had to obey them in order to please some supernatural beings, or to obtain some reward here or in another life. People who discover the fallacy of their old superstitions and throw them overboard, may, therefore, be likely to throw their moral rules overboard too, without being able to find new ones. Thus they lose their mental balance, their foothold on life. Their moral and social ideas fall prey to the winds, or disappear in the melting pot. This state of things will inevitably create unrest, uncertainty, confusion, aberrations, often spreading in wide circles, like some forms of communism, and it has an unfortunate effect upon all social life and on the welfare of the community. It paralyzes the hope of a better future.

But nevertheless we dream of a new era for mankind, a time of a better life, of lasting peace, of brotherhood and good will between individuals, classes, and peoples, of mutual confidence and cooperation. Can this dream be realized? Some people think that a better world can be created by sudden improvement, by dictatorial commands, by force, or even by revolutions. It was people of this frame of mind who proposed to wage a "war to end war," but all they reaped was destruction. The old proverb that Beelzebub has to be driven out by Beelzebub is a dangerous one: the use of evil will create more evil, war more hostile feelings, and the use of force more need of force. The lasting betterment of the world cannot be reached by short-cuts of this kind; it must come by gradual growth from within. It can only be attained by education, and time is needed.

It helps nothing to say that men have first to seek the Kingdom of God, unless we know what God it is, and whether He can satisfy modern requirements. No longer can the God be a despotic, supernatural being, giving commands which we have to obey, whether we find them reasonable or not. He has to be the principle of good, the code of ethics which should guide our whole activity and conduct of life.

Moral rules cannot be expected to be any more absolute or everlasting than any other ideas of men. What is considered to be moral will naturally change with time and circumstances. Many moral commands still proclaimed to-day are flagrantly out of date and even harmful. Let us take as an example what is considered to be sexual morality. According to one code, the object of sexual intercourse is to produce children. It is therefore moral to get them and immoral to prevent conception, even if the children will inevitably be born to spend their lives in misery and bad health. This is cruelty and not morality.

Again, let us think of the nationalistic moral code. When a man acts for his country, he has to give up his own private moral principles; if he can gain something for his nation by this surrender, it is supposed to be his moral duty to lie, betray, steal secret documents, rob, and murder. And if he succeeds, he is highly praised as a great patriot and benefactor of his country. If a man is ordered to go as a spy into a hostile country, it is his moral duty to go and to do his best to discover by trickery the secrets of the enemy. If he is caught, he has to be shot, and the soldiers who get the order to shoot him are morally obliged to do so, even though they may be convinced that he is really an excellent man of high moral qualities.

It is necessary to build up a new, sound moral code in harmony with modern views, freed as much as possible from superstition, and based on the old principles of solidarity and love. It should be clearly understood that moral rules are not commands which have to be obeyed through fear—the lowest instinct in man—but they are good in themselves, because their observance furthers the welfare of men in this life, and has nothing to do with the egotistical idea of an individual salvation in another world. As a general rule it may well be said that moral acts are those which in their final effects do good to the individual as well as to the community, while immoral acts are those which finally do harm to the community or the individual, or to both.

If we really hope to be able to approach a better future for mankind, the first condition is to have courage and not to be dominated by fear. We need courage to throw away old garments which have had their day and no longer fit the requirements of the new generations; we must work calmly and with confidence to lay a new and safer foundation for the ethical life of the individual as well as the community. Above all, we must not allow fear to keep alive the distrust and hostile feelings between classes and nations which are the most serious threat of the future. Nations fear each other and think that in order to safeguard their future it is necessary to be armed against every neighbor. We see that some of them even think that armament increases their ability to keep a potential enemy in subjection, but to an impartial spectator this method must seem to have just the opposite effect. It is obvious that as long as views of this kind prevail among nations, there is no hope of securing a lasting peace. If nations could overcome the mutual fear and distrust whose somber shadow is now thrown over the world, and could meet with confidence and good will to settle their possible differences, they would easily be able to establish a cooperation which would secure a lasting peace to the benefit of every one of them, and would further the welfare of the whole world.

Another distressing fact is the lack, up to the present, of almost any kind of morality in international politics and in the conduct of nations toward each other. Whatever they may have professed with their lips, there has in practice been a perfect anarchy which gave a nation the right to do anything, if only it had the necessary power. It may be said that since the establishment of the League of Nations and the Permanent Court of International Justice at The Hague, this condition, at least to some extent, has changed. But perhaps these institutions were established not so much from love of justice as for the sake of security. We have yet to see the Powers which sponsored them make any worthwhile reduction of their armaments.

Now as to class warfare, it is indeed difficult to understand why all these strikes and lockouts are still necessary and why the classes have not yet been able to find any more rational means of settling their differences. It is evidently the result of a deplorable lack of the feeling of solidarity on both sides. By all modern inventions and progress in science, by better hygiene and medical care, it is certainly possible to improve materially the conditions of life for all classes, to make life fuller, richer, healthier, and happier for all citizens, and greatly to reduce the difference between the poor and the rich. By modern improvements in architecture, lodgings can be made much better and, for the poorer classes, more

comfortable. The greatly improved transportation systems—automobiles, motor busses, tramways, railways, and so on—make it possible for people to live farther apart, instead of being crowded together in narrow streets. Radios, movies, phonographs, and other contrivances make it possible for almost everybody to get entertainment. With the cheap clothing procurable, most people can be fairly well dressed. We have thus the means to create a brighter, more satisfactory existence for all men. It is left to us to use them. We should, therefore, have reason to look with confidence and hope upon the future.

Social problems can no longer be solved by class warfare any more than international problems can be solved by wars between nations. Warfare is negative and will sooner or later lead to destruction, while good will and cooperation are positive and supply the only safe basis for building a better future.

If all classes meet in perfect confidence, equally anxious to cooperate for a lasting betterment of the social condition of their whole people, then, and only then, can an arrangement be attained which will benefit all parts. Citizens will have to examine calmly the natural possibilities of their country, what trades they condition, and how these trades and their profit can be divided among the classes and among the people in the fairest manner.

But this, of course, involves the determination of each class to make the sacrifices necessary for the attainment of the desirable end. What is needed is the feeling of solidarity and love pervading all our actions and thoughts. And we should always remember that love and tolerance are the most beautiful trees in the forest.