



On Mending and Ending Things

Illustrated London News, December 23, 1905

A certain politician (whom I would not discuss here on any account) once said of a certain institution (which wild horses shall not induce me to name) that “It must be mended or ended.” Few people who use this useful phrase about reform notice the important thing about it. The important thing about it is that the two methods described here are not similar but opposite; between mending and ending that is not a difference of degree but of vital antagonism of kind. Mending is based upon the idea that the original nature of a thing is good; ending is based upon the idea that the original nature of a thing is bad or at least, has lost all power of being good.

If I “mend” an armchair it is because I want an armchair. I mend the armchair because I wish to restore it to a state of more complete armchairishness. My objection to the armchair in its unmended state is that its defects prevent it from being in the fullest sense an armchair at all. If (let us say) the back has come off and three of the legs have disappeared, I realize, in looking at it, not merely that it presents a sense of general irregularity to the eye; I realize that in such and such respects it does definitely fall short of the Divine and Archetypal Armchair, which, as Plato would have pointed out, exists in heaven.

But it is possible that I might possess among my drawing room furniture some object, let us say a rack or a thumbscrew, of which the nature and *raison d'être* was repellent to my moral feelings. If my thumbscrew fell into slight disrepair, I should not mend it at all; because the more I mended my thumbscrew the more thumbscrewy it would be. If my private rack were out of order, I should be in no way disturbed; for my private code of ethics prevents me from racking anyone, and the more it was out of order the less likely it would be that any casual passer-by could get racked on it.

In short, a thing is either bad or good in its original aims and functions. If it is good, we are in favor of mending it; and because we are in favor of mending it, we are necessarily opposed to ending it. If it is bad, we are in favor of ending it; and because we are in favor of ending it, we ought to fly into a passion at the mere thought of mending it. It is the question of this fundamental alternative, the right or wrong of the primary idea, which we have to settle in the case of receiving money for charity from members of dubious or disputed trades, from a publican or a pirate.

This is an extremely good example of the fact I have often enunciated, the fact that there is nothing so really practical and urgent as ideal philosophy. If being a publican is a bad thing in its nature, the quickest way of getting a good settlement is to punish the man for being a publican, to suppress him like a smuggler, to treat the man who administers beer like a man who administers poison. But if being a publican is a good thing in itself, the quickest way of getting a good publican is to admire the man because he is a publican, to follow him in great crowds, and crown him with laurel because he is a publican. It is a practical course to destroy a thing; but the only other practical course is to idealize it. A respected despot may sometimes be good; but a despicable despot must always be despicable. If you are going to end an innkeeper, it can be done quite easily with a hatchet. But if you are going to mend an innkeeper, you must do it tenderly, you must do it reverently. You must nail an extra arm or leg on his person, keeping always before you the Platonic image of the perfect innkeeper, to whose shape you seek to restore him.

So I would deal with the seller of whiskey or of battleships, whose contributions to charity were spurned for conscience' sake by Mr. Bernard Shaw's latest dramatic creation. Certainly Major Barbara's rejection of the alms cannot rationally be imitated unless we suppress the trades. If we think these tradesmen wrong, it is absurd merely to refuse their contributions to charities. To do so amounts merely to this: that we tolerate them all the time they are doing evil, and only begin to insult them when they begin to do good.