



Negative and Positive Morality

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A vast amount of nonsense is talked against negative and destructive things. The silliest sort of progressive complains of negative morality, and compares it unfavorably with positive morality. The silliest sort of conservative complains of destructive reform and compares it unfavorably with constructive reform. Both the progressive and the conservative entirely neglect to consider the very meaning of the words “yes” and “no”. To give the answer “yes” to one question is to imply the answer “no” to another question. To desire the construction of something is to desire the destruction of whatever prevents its construction. This is

particularly plain in the fuss about the “negative” morality of the Ten Commandments. The truth is that the curtness of the Commandments is an evidence, not of the gloom and narrowness of a religion but of its liberality and humanity. It is shorter to state the things forbidden than the things permitted precisely because most things are permitted and only a few things are forbidden. An optimist who insisted on a purely positive morality would have to begin by telling a man that he might pick dandelions on a common and go on for months before he came to the fact that he might throw pebbles into the sea. In comparison with this positive morality the Ten Commandments rather shine in that brevity which is the soul of wit.

But of course the fallacy is even more fundamental than this. Negative morality is positive morality, stated in the plainest and therefore the most positive way. If I am told not to murder Mr. Robinson, if I am stopped in the very act of murdering Mr. Robinson, it is obvious that Mr. Robinson is not only spared, but in a sense renewed, and even created. And those who like Mr. Robinson, among them my reactionary romanticism might suggest the inclusion of Mrs. Robinson, will be well aware that they have recovered a living and complex unity. And similarly, those who like European civilisation, and the common code of what used to be called Christendom, will realize that salvation is not negative, but highly positive, and even highly complex. They will rejoice at its escape, long before they have leisure for its examination. But, without examination, they will know that there is a great deal to be examined, and a great deal that is worth examination. Nothing is negative except nothing. It is not our rescue that was negative, but only the nothingness and annihilation from which we were rescued.

On the other side there is the same fallacy about merely destructive reform. It could be applied just as easily to the merely destructive war. In both cases destruction may be essential to the avoidance of destruction, and also to the very possibility of construction. Men are not merely destroying a ship in order to have a shipwreck; they may be merely destroying a tree in order to have a ship. To complain that we spent four years in the Great War in mere destruction is to complain that we spent them in escaping from being destroyed. And it is, once again, to forget the fact that the failure of the murderer means the life of a positive and not a negative Mr. Robinson. If we take the imaginary Mr. Robinson as a type of the average modern man in Western Europe, and study him from head to foot, we shall find defects as well as merits. And in the whole civilisation we have saved, we shall find defects that amounts to diseases. Its feet, if not of clay, are certainly in clay, stuck in the mud of a materialistic industrial destitution and despair. To say it is a positive good and glory to have saved Mr. Robinson from strangling is to miss the whole meaning of human life. It is to forget every good as soon as we have saved it, that is, to lose it as soon as we have got it. Progress of that kind is a hope that is the enemy of faith, and a faith that is the enemy of charity.

When our hopes for the coming time seem disturbed or doubtful, and peace chaotic, let us remember that it is really our disappointment that is an illusion. It is our rescue that is a reality. Our grounds for gratitude are really far greater than our powers of being grateful. It is in the mood of a noble sort of humility, and even a noble sort of fear, that new things are really made. We adorn things most when we love them most. And we love them most when we have nearly lost them.