

Foundations of Morality



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# The Moral And Mysterious

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Henry Hazlitt's *The Foundations of Morality*. (Van Nostrand, \$9.95) is an ambitious attempt to ground a system of ethics in the pragmatic necessities of daily life. The book, which is in the great line of utilitarian thinking that comes down from Hume, Adam Smith, and Bentham, is lucid, persuasive, and soundly argued; and in a nonreligious age one can only hope that Mr. Hazlitt will succeed in converting those who insist that the claims of morality are purely relative to the moment and subject to change without notice.

But if Mr. Hazlitt takes us a good distance, it should also be said that he doesn't reach the end of the road. My own fundamental objection to Mr. Hazlitt's reasoning is that he refuses to admit that he, too, makes a few assumptions, or value judgments, that are intuitive. In his own way he is just as mystical, say, as Albert Schweitzer, or any of the philosophers of natural law whom he chides in ever so gentle terms.

Before going into the subject of intuitive assumptions, however, one must pay tribute to Mr. Hazlitt's refinement of the grosser view of Bentham's "pleasure-pain" explanation of ethics. He thinks Carlyle did Bentham a great disservice in calling Benthamism the "pig philosophy." To get around Carlyle, Mr. Hazlitt says, "It seems the part of practical wisdom, and the best way to minimize misunderstanding, to use the terms 'pleasure' and 'pain' very sparingly, if not to abandon them almost altogether in ethical discussion." The terms confuse everybody by bringing up visions of the rewards and penalties of purely carnal pleasure. What Bentham was really talking about, according to Hazlitt, was "happiness as an aggregate," which could, of course, include a good deal of denial of short-run pleasures in order to create the basis for long-term satisfactions.

the word "soul" and ended up by substituting for it the word "psyche," which, like the "soul", is also an impalpable thing that nobody has yet succeeded in situating in any specific part of the human anatomy, besides, as Chesterton said, "psyche" means "soul" in Greek. Mr. Hazlitt thinks that the term "natural rights" is unfortunate in that it has helped to perpetuate a "mystique" which regards rights as having existed since beginning of time. But he is willing to accept the "concept" of natural rights as long as it is understood to mean: "ideal rights," or the "legal rights that every man ought to enjoy."

It is at this point that one comes aware of Mr. Hazlitt's own dependence on the Schweitzer intuition that human life is, or should be, held sacred, not because of any utilitarian reason connected with the "greatest happiness of the greatest number," but for reasons that can only be called religious. Under a cannibal system, the "greatest happiness of the greatest number" could be mathematically fixed at the point where a majority would be consuming a minority without leading to the extinction of the species. But this would not be "right" even though it might be called "rational". One has to fall back on intuitive assumption at some point in the discussion of rights, which is not a pleasant predicament for anyone who believes in the supremacy of reason. Yet there it is, and I, for one, find it less offensive to accept certain truths as "self-evident" gifts of a Creator than I do to make no assumptions at all.

For the fact is that every human being who abstains from suicide proceeds on the assumption that life is worth living, which in itself is not susceptible of "proof" in any scientific sense of the word. One lives, one accepts the Schweitzerian intuitions.

Prudence, benevolence, social cooperation, and altruism all find a place in Mr. Hazlitt's refined utilitarianism, for they all help to create a livable community. If Mr. Hazlitt remains an unreconstructed believer in competitive capitalism, it is because he thinks economic competition between separate business units is the only really workable way of inducing to co-operate to the end of raising the standard of living. This isn't a paradox, for the competitive spirit is what hones any team to the supreme cooperative effort.

### Capitalist vs. Socialist Ethics

The most telling chapters in Mr. Hazlitt's book are those on the ethics of capitalism versus the ethics of socialism. Capitalism, he says, is not "ethically indifferent" or "ethically neutral," for it depends on voluntary social cooperation through mutually beneficial exchanges. Quoting Murray Rothbard, Hazlitt insists that in a system of beneficial exchanges one man's gain is necessarily another man's gain. The system naturally develops more practical social sympathy than any other, even though some capitalists may be mighty egoists.

In any case, it is socialism, not capitalism, that emphasizes the jungle competition of tooth and claw. The discipline of competition between units disappears, and men cut each other's throats in the scramble for preferment within the one big unit of the state. "Office politics" under communism are magnified beyond belief. Socialism means coercion of the individual, and he who does not

co-operate naturally, a great majority of men become sly malingers under such a system. And, as Hayek said long ago in *The Road to Serfdom*, in a system that depends on coercion, the "worst get on top."

Hazlitt, following Hume, makes the point that no society can be happy if its citizens are not willing to abide by general rules. It may seem cruel to apply the principle of "equality before the law" to a man who steals because he is in need, but if individuals are to become the judges of their own need a society must thereby become a jungle of distrust. When judges and juries begin to exercise too much compassion, delinquency grows by leaps and bounds.

### Somewhere, A Premise

Most of Mr. Hazlitt's book comes under the heading of eloquently expressed common sense. But when he comes to discuss such things as intuitionism and natural law he reminds me of the psychologists who organized a valiant crusade to kill

tion of the sacred value of one's own body and soul (or psyche), just as one accounts the facts of digestion, blood pressure, reproduction, and a lot of other things. There is no need to try to "ground" the perception of "natural right" in anything; it is simply there.

From this initial assumption the whole doctrine of "natural right" flows. If one has a right to life, one has rights to liberty and property as the necessary means to sustain life.

### A Starting Point

Without the first assumption of human life as a sacred gift from a Creator (whatever or whoever the Creator may be), Mr. Hazlitt's chosen economic system becomes a purely arbitrary thing. Why, indeed, should a Soviet commissar give up his post of power merely to satisfy the craving of a peasant for his own plot of ground unless the peasant has rights to control his own life? There is no reason why the strong should not oppress the weak if the right to life is not "self-evident," i.e., beyond the necessity of proof in a scientific sense.

There are deep waters, and I don't feel comfortable when trying to navigate them. Nobody ever spoke to me out of a burning bush, so I have to take the felt conviction of a basic right to life on intuitive trust. But there is no sense denying that existence is rooted in mystery. My only objection to Mr. Hazlitt's book is that it does not make enough allowance for mystery. He tries to put the Deity in a hole by propounding a conundrum; Is a thing right because God wills it, or does God will it because it is right? Now it is entirely possible that, as the Deity sees it, the very formulation of such a conundrum proceeds from a deficiency in the human ability to penetrate mystery. Cats can't do algebra, the amoeba can't think as a cat — and why should human beings at this particular stage in evolution be expected to know everything?