

Wisdom Remains Key to Morality

BY JOHN M. JOHNSTON

THE MORAL CLIMATE is the topic of much wind-jamming and some honest soul-searching. One new element sharpens the age-old discussion. There is a recognized weakening of the authority of religion in prescribing rules for human conduct.

So the question becomes: What precepts, for the non-religious, can take the place of Divine commandment, enforced by threats of hell and hopes of paradise?

With such a lofty theme, a good start is to decide what is meant by moral conduct. Henry Hazlitt has examined this subject readably, rationally and persuasively in a book "The Foundations of Morality" just published by Van Nostrand.

He reaches the only possible answer to the search for a basis for a secular moral code: wisdom. A wise person will conduct himself with prudent self-discipline so that his actions will yield him the utmost, long-run satisfaction.

HOW can one really appraise the future consequences of an action? The most reliable guide is the accumulated experience of mankind, but neither Hazlitt nor anyone else has a formula for convincing the young that they have not somehow stumbled upon a brilliant exception to the general rule.

Furthermore, acceptance of the self-discipline rule would not stay the hand of a man who, say, decided that shooting his wife would be a satisfaction outweighing all the resulting hardship and punishment. But then neither have the commandments "Thou shalt not kill" nor "Love ye one another" put a final end to murder.

Best known for his books on economics, Hazlitt applies his contemplation of morals and ethics to contemporary problems. A conservative himself, he finds a moral basis for

the condemnation of such policies as price subsidies, feather-bedding, deficit-financing and inflation.

IF PRESIDENT Johnson should put us all on the payroll at \$100 a day, we might be happy as jaybirds while the money retained its value. But it is clear to most that the joy ride would be so brief that the greatest long-run satisfaction is to be had by earning our living and keeping the dollar stable — well, relatively stable.

The end result of other economic legerdemain is not apparent. The Keynesians point to the immediate satisfactions of inflationary policies, and to warnings of long-term penalties they reply mockingly, "In the long run we are all dead."

This, Hazlitt contends, is cynicism as irresponsible as that of the French aristocrats who quipped "After us the deluge." We cannot plan for eternity, but a prudent man takes thought for the future of himself, his children and his country.

IT WOULD be an injustice to Hazlitt's book, however, to leave the impression that it is a polemic for economic conservatism. He has brought scholarship and extensive research to a broad treatise, on a subject as important as any before us.

As individuals, we seek lives of beauty, order, peace and usefulness. But there are disturbing evidences that lying, cheating, disloyalty and violence are looked upon with less aversion than formerly. Examining human action and seeking the basis of morality may seem a roundabout approach to this problem, but short of a fresh revelation from Heaven there appears to be no other.



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