

## Book Review

# Hazlitt's 'Foundations of Morality'

Reviewed by WALTER TROHAN

In one of the most interesting and ambitious books of this season, the distinguished journalist, Henry Hazlitt, puts his thinking mind to the evolution of a rational basis of private and public ethics. Perhaps he did so because, while ethics have occupied thinkers for 25 centuries, no period of world history stands in greater need of a code and understanding of ethics than our own.

In *The Foundations of Morality*, (Van Nostrand, \$9.95) Hazlitt surveys the field of morality, from the beginnings of thought until today. He found that though problems of individual and social emergency are being worked out by economists, contemporary moral philosophers seem to be marking time, possibly because in our day moral injunctions are losing their sacred origin, in the eyes of many, especially the more articulate, and secularization of morals is the fashion.

As an economist, Hazlitt is especially fitted for finding a rational basis for ethics, being able to draw a parallel between economic values and moral values. This doesn't conflict with the religious basis,

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The Foundations of Morality  
By Henry Hazlitt  
Van Nostrand, 1965  
\$9.95

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but argues that the social cooperation that promotes the best interests of society must best promote the long-run interests of the individual, where the religious basis argues that the moral code that betters the individual best promotes society.

Hazlitt examines the conflicting claims of egoism, the doctrine that the self-interest of the individual is the valid end of all action, and altruism, the doctrine that regard for others is the mainspring for action. He reconciles them in an extension of mutualism, the doctrine of the mutual dependence of the individual and social welfare, which he terms co-operatism.

"What has hitherto been insufficiently recognized is that social cooperation is the indispensable and foremost means to realization of all our individual ends," Hazlitt concludes.

"Thus social cooperation is the essence of morality. And morality, as we should constantly remind ourselves, is a daily affair, even an hourly affair, not just something we need to think about only in a few high and heroic moments.

"The moral code by which we live is shown every day, not necessarily in great acts of renunciation, but in

refraining from little slights and meannesses, and in practicing little courtesies and kindnesses. Few of us are capable of rising to the Christian commandment to 'love one another,' but most of us can learn to be kind to one another—for most earthly purposes this will do almost as well."

In his study Hazlitt offers a unified theory of law, morals and manners. He traces the connection between the principles of ethics and the principles of jurisprudence, as well as the relationship between the moral code and the code of good manners.

The work contains a most interesting discussion of the ethics of capitalism and the ethics of socialism. In this he argues that capitalism promotes freedom and justice and productivity, and therefore deserves to be called social more than its despotic alternative, which has given birth to a religion of immorality.

No doubt few men rise to the Christian commandment of love, and only a few more will rise to the Hazlitt code of kindness, but all can aim at the former and perhaps achieve the latter.

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