

A Code of Moral Rules For a Rational Society

* * *

Long a sturdy and consistent champion of the free economy, with the free market and the profit system as its foundation stones, Henry Hazlitt in "The Foundations of Morality" brings the familiar gifts of his felicitous writing style, lucid exposition, persuasive logic, lightened by a good sense of humor, to the subject of the moral rules which should govern human conduct. What he offers is a system of practical ethics, not bound to but also not excluding any specific religious commitment.

Modestly admitting that it would be presumptuous for any writer to claim very much originality in a subject that has engaged the earnest attention of the world's greatest minds over 25 centuries, Mr. Hazlitt takes his stand pretty definitely in the tradition of the British utilitarian moralists, beginning with Hume and proceeding through Adam Smith, Bentham and Mill. There is also a dash of pragmatism, suggestive of Benjamin Franklin and William James, in his view that there is seldom a clash between morality and happiness—that, in his own words, "immoral action is almost always shortsighted action."

Mr. Hazlitt sees in generally accepted rules of moral conduct an instrument for eliminating clashes between individuals and also between the individual and society. Believing that the word utilitarianism has perhaps outlived its usefulness, he calls his own ethical system by a new term, co-operatism.

Rejecting extremes of egoism and altruism, he rejects as a false antithesis the question whether moral rules should be framed to promote the long-run happiness of the individual or the long-run happiness of society. For, as he argues, only a rule that would do the first would do the second, and vice versa. Society is the individuals that compose it. If each achieves happiness, the happiness of society is necessarily achieved.

Author's Advantages

In considering public, as distinguished from private ethics, Mr. Hazlitt enjoys an advantage over his 18th and 19th Century predecessors. Socialism and communism are no longer theories, of which the validity can be neither proved nor disproved by actual experience. Now about one-third of the world's population lives under Communist rule, and a considerable number of other states have introduced varying degrees of socialism.

In view of the author's lifelong preoccupation with economics, it is not surprising that two of the most vigorous and incisive chapters in his book are devoted to the ethics of capitalism and the ethics of socialism, which he equates, as did Karl Marx, with communism. He comes close to the heart of the question when he remarks that the central issue between capitalism and socialism is liberty, and expands this idea with a significant quotation from Friedrich Hayek:

"Free enterprise has developed the only kind of society which, while it provides us with ample material means, if that is what we mainly want, still leaves the individual free to choose between material and non-material reward. . . . Surely it is unjust to blame a system as more materialistic because it leaves it to the individual to decide whether he prefers material gain to other kinds of excellence, instead of having this decided for him."

Mr. Hazlitt lists as follows five basic characteristics of the free economy: Private property, free markets, competition, division and combination of labor and social cooperation. And he establishes a close, intimate relationship between the free economy and the maintenance of morality and civilization. For free enterprise is possible only within a framework of law and order and morality. Not only does free enterprise presuppose morality; it also helps to preserve and promote it, most of all by making possible the freedom of choice, which is a basic characteristic of any meaningful ethical system.

Immoralism of Communism

The author emphasizes the basic immoralism of communism, the contempt for ordinary rules of decent conduct expressed in the writings of Marx, Lenin and Stalin. It is not the least of the virtues of the free enterprise system that it makes for tolerance and discourages the fanatical willingness to sacrifice all principles of humane conduct in the name of an abstract goal to be realized at some time in the future.

Mr. Hazlitt does not hesitate to grasp the nettle of the "rather Red than dead" slogan. If the alternative were submission to Communist slavery or the prospect of destruction in nuclear war, many of us, as he says, would choose annihilation as the lesser evil. But the alternative is false. When President Kennedy took a firm stand against Soviet missiles in Cuba he improved the long-range prospects of peace. And, as Mr. Hazlitt says, appeasement on the part of the West, in the face of Soviet threats, merely increases the danger to the West. And he drives home this point with a little parable, "Johnny and the Tiger," which he originally published in The Saturday Evening Post and which is worthy of George Orwell, in the vein of "Animal Farm."

Mr. Hazlitt has composed an excellent manual of conduct for a rational and humane society. If there is a fault in the work, it is perhaps inadequate consideration of the forces in human nature which make for irrationality and inhumanity.

Mystics receive scant consideration from Mr. Hazlitt and one misses some discussion of the philosophic Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, perhaps the most inspiring of stoic thinkers. The work stands squarely in the framework of British commonsense rationalism of the 18th and 19th centuries, supplemented by such modern libertarian thinkers as Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises.

For its erudition, its exposure of the fallacies of statism and political and economic coercion, its smooth development of a system of practical ethics that is closely linked with jurisprudence and economics, "The Foundations of Morality" deserves a high rating among the many books that have been the fruits of Mr. Hazlitt's long and distinguished career as a publicist. Its appearance is an excellent accompaniment to the author's recent celebration of his 70th birthday.

—WILLIAM HENRY CHAMBERLIN

The Foundations of Morality. By Henry Hazlitt. Van Nostrand. 398 pages. \$9.95.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL,
Wednesday, December 23, 1964