

The Goal Is Well-Being

THE FOUNDATIONS OF MORALITY. By Henry Hazlitt. 398 pp. Princeton, N. J. D. Van Nostrand Company. \$9.95.

By BRAND BLANSHARD

HENRY HAZLITT is not a philosopher by profession; he has never, I think, taught philosophy; his field is economics and his profession journalism. Yet in this book he sets his lance in rest and makes an all-out, one-man assault on the central citadel of ethical theory, where the most formidable problems are concentrated. It is a stirring foray, over which academics may shake their heads as a foredoomed failure. They will be wrong; it is a success. Not that there is anything here in the highest sense original. But Mr. Hazlitt has seen the issues with singular clearness, has thought them freshly through and has cast his reflections in the firm prose of a practiced writer.

He has good precedent for his adventurousness. After all, the most influential philosophers of the English-speaking tradition have been laymen. Run down the list—Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Mill, Spencer, Bradley—not a professor among them. Compare that list for intelligibility with the great Germans—Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, professors all, writ-

Mr. Blanshard wrote "Reason and Goodness" and other books.

ing for other professionals. When laymen write for intelligent laymen, they have to make themselves clear. Mr. Hazlitt takes useful leaves from their admirable old books.

He follows tradition in another way. His true affinities are with the moralists of an earlier time who believed that there was a firm basis in reason for the distinction of right and wrong. Indeed he has no high opinion of current fashions in ethics. He writes: "A great part of the ethical literature of the last 60 years has been like an enormous detour in which the drivers have become so fascinated by the strange and unexpected scenery that they have forgotten to get back on the main road and have even forgotten their original destination." "The great digression," which started with G. E. Moore's "Principia Ethica" in 1903, first wandered off into the "boohurrah theory" of the emotivists and then bogged down in a waste of linguistic analysis.

Cultural relativists tell us that because people differ so widely in their morals, nothing can be called objectively right; Mr. Hazlitt thinks this conclusion (and I agree) to be both invalid and untrue. "The statistical theory of ethics"—supported by some Freudians and popularized by Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey—suggests that if we find a type of conduct very common, we can no longer call it immoral, from which it seems to follow that mugging and vandalism

are rapidly ceasing to be immoral. Mr. Hazlitt thinks this absurd.

What is the ground of his confident judgments? Mr. Hazlitt takes his stand on utilitarianism, though he does not like that "seven-syllabled sesquipedalian monstrosity." (I should have thought the number was eight.) He holds, as Jeremy Bentham did, that each man is an egoist in the sense that he is out for his own happiness. But if he has any intelligence, he sees that the best way to his own happiness is cooperation with others in their quest of happiness. A society of intelligent egoists would act like altruists, for each can be effectively for each only if each is for all. What, then, is the test of right conduct—conduciveness to my own good or to that of society? Take your choice, Mr. Hazlitt would answer, for in the long run the two tend to coincide.

Though there are echoes of Bentham here, Mr. Hazlitt differs from the older school of utility in at least two notable respects. First, he sees that the great maxim of the utilitarians—so act as to produce the greatest good—would sometimes lead us wrong. Suppose you are poor and need a dinner; you can pilfer a bill from a rich man's pocket that he would probably never miss. Would you not produce the greater good by a little dexterous transfer of wealth from where it is not needed to where it is? The old maxim would seem to jus- (Continued on Page 26)

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tify this. But if so, it must be revised, for such conduct is plainly wrong. The true test is not the consequences of this particular act but of the rule involved in the act. Allow such conduct to one person, and you must allow it to all others in like case; but if you do, no one will be safe. That is why it is wrong.

Mr. Hazlitt's "utilitism," as he calls it, differs from the older teaching in another way. He agrees that happiness is the end to be sought, but then happiness is not mere pleasure or agreeable feeling. It is rather to be taken, in the manner of Aristotle, as well-being or fulfillment. This needs a sharper refinement than it gets. Mr. Hazlitt is not here at his best.

Where he really is at his best is in the discussion of applied ethics with which the book concludes. He is an economist with the strongest convictions about the superiority of free enterprise. His powerful defense of this system and his scathing indictment of socialism make one wonder whether the whole book was not written as an argument for these convictions. Whether one accepts his argument or not, one can only agree with its major assumption, namely that the larger issues of politics are all in the end moral. Few writers on politics can carry the argument firmly back to its ultimate ethical grounds. The strength of his book is that Mr. Hazlitt can and does.

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