

# THE CHALLENGE TO MORAL CONVENTIONS\*

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## I

IT has become a commonplace that the men and women of a generation ago would have looked with horror on some moral aspects of our time. Probably this could always have been said. Our pessimists may be reminded that concern as deep as theirs, and forecasts no less ominous, have been directed again and again to just the same peril, and yet the collapse of civilisation has not yet occurred. Subtle moralists, from St. Jerome to Dean Inge, have always seen the end coming, but it has been constantly postponed. One may comfort a parent who has become over-anxious about a wayward son or daughter, by showing him the inscription on an Assyrian tablet, perhaps seven thousand years old, which laments that children are *ceasing* to respect their elders. This age, said a caustic philosopher recently, is unlike others in that it is content to argue the same questions in just the same futile way over and over again. Alas,—did not John of Salisbury reproach his contemporaries for just that fault, seven hundred and fifty years ago?

But there is a point at which we can be no further encouraged by remembering that other periods, properly investigated, would seem as blameworthy as our own, or that men may one day look back upon our groundless fretfulness as we look back on that of our predecessors. It is true that our grandfathers and grandmothers worried over problems of conduct whose record we can hardly read with patience. They were distressed about fine points of Sunday observance, and by no means at their ease about the theatre. They were horrified at the thought of an atheist like Charles Bradlaugh sitting in parliament. With some misgiving, the bolder spirits were ready to risk the admission of women to the universities, and to one at least of the learned professions, but to admit them to the franchise was judged a dangerous and indeed an outlandish proposal; while those who suggested that women might actually sit in parliament, and sooner or later enter the Cabinet, were thought to be making the whole discussion intention-

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ally ridiculous. Not very long ago, conscience was exercised about the essential wickedness of all strikes, and indeed of any combination of workmen to negotiate collectively for an increase of wages. And which of us does not remember a time when people doubted whether one should sacrifice the life of an unborn babe that the life of the mother might be saved, whether divorce should not be altogether prohibited, and whether a widower should under any circumstances be allowed to marry the sister of his deceased wife?

Our generation is discussing very different problems. To recall scruples such as I have mentioned sounds now like an antiquarian tale of crinolines and night-caps and canopied beds. The law against gambling is indeed still unrepealed, so that private debts of honour remain unrecoverable, because the contract they involve was for an illegal thing. But the British Chancellor of the Exchequer now seeks revenue by a tax on such illegalities, and an ingenious machine called the "Totalisator" has been installed to facilitate public collections from a source which for private collections is still outlawed. Recall the baccarat scandal which affected so seriously the repute of Edward VII when he was Prince of Wales, and the quite considerable disfavour into which Lord Rosebery fell for his record on the turf. Such explosions of temper would now be unintelligible. The spirit in which the gambling tax was debated in the House, with shy reference to scruples which would have been fiercely emphasised thirty years before, testifies to a change.

A corresponding difference is obvious when one thinks of the general attitude towards divorced persons. In the actions for divorce, multiplied of late in British courts, observe the transparent subterfuge by which, amid much laughter, the letter of the law is fulfilled while its purpose is defeated. Objectors who still protest against a decree obtained by mutual consent, and still take seriously the law against collusion, are mocked as Puritans. Writers of fiction know the change. There are hardly any tolerable novels, says Mr. Wells, to justify now the traditional prohibitions. How odd to think how Ruskin once shocked his contemporaries with his *Ethics of the Dust*, how Charlotte Brontë was so severely censured for *Jane Eyre*, and how Mrs. Besant was prosecuted for publishing *The Fruits of Philosophy*! A glance at the novels now issued to high-school pupils by a circulating library in one of our provincial towns would amaze those who ceased a dozen years ago to make acquaintance with current fiction.

British people cannot now say, as they long said, that such moral instability is *continental*. They cannot limit it to what

George Gissing called that land of notorious profligacy known to the Englishman as "abroad".<sup>1</sup> A crowning evidence of change is the timidity with which, among ourselves, moral contrasts are now drawn, and moral demands are pointed out. In public affairs, where an earlier age liked to quote Nelson's message that England expects every man to do his duty, we are more likely to be reminded of the sagacious words of Sir John MacDonald, that elections are not won at a prayer meeting, and after an election—however corrupt—few will speak in an austere tone, lest they should be suspected of what is called "preachment". "My country right or wrong" has become a diplomatic motto which only doctrinaires are supposed to dispute, and whose strength is illustrated by the increasing unpopularity of the League of Nations.

Who can miss the contemptuous intonation with which the word "idealist" is now pronounced? It has become the badge of those who talk, as De Quincey said, about "backslidings", and of the spirit that he called "horribly tabernacular".<sup>2</sup> For financial and business transactions, whatever their method, if they remain within the law and accumulate a fortune, only the sort of people known as cranks have any serious censure, and even the cranks are becoming better disciplined to average opinion. Not a few of those who are still concerned about the kind of issue our predecessors called moral now betray an eagerness to find some other sort of justification for what they ask, some disguise of aesthetic sensibility, or material advantage, or patriotic purpose. You can see this from contemporary sermons, for there is no better barometer than the pulpit to show how the atmosphere of a time is laden. The imperative note which characterised preachers of even a recent past has given way to a note almost indescribable,—half apologetic, half cajoling. Fearing to invoke the old sanctions, and yet earnest for a cause which those sanctions once guaranteed, they appeal in the name of the one deity whose throne is still unshaken. Temperance is commended because the sober man is more likely to keep his job and to save money. The habits which preserve health are justified as conducive to efficiency in earning. Fair business methods are said to rest upon some Rotarian or Kiwanian proof that by this means the ledger will be made to show a better balance, if not immediately, at least at the end of a considerable period. The pursuit of knowledge, previously fallen into discredit, is revindicated by Mr. Roger Babson's evidence that the educated man will on the average draw a higher salary than the un-

1. *Demos*, p. 80

2. *Essay on Protestantism*,

educated. There has even arisen a moving economic argument for the quality of mercy, based on actuarial calculation that it is cheaper in the end to save human lives than to waste them, and on the verdict of preventive medicine that in the case of health, as in that of the frigidaire or the oil furnace, a large initial outlay is economical in the end. The late Lord Birkenhead's address to the students of the University of Glasgow, deriding all concern for any interest except one's own, and reconsecrating the ideal of selfishness as alone worthy of clear-eyed mankind, drew forth rapturous applause from Scotland's ingenuous youth, while those who protested were told that they had remained too long alive. I understand that a little volume entitled *The Pocket Birkenhead* has been compiled, in a size suited to the vest pocket, so that maxims from the author of that rectorial address may be read on the morning journey by train or boat or car, by those whose fathers carried for a like purpose *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* or even the *Imitatio Christi*.

Observe that so far I am not criticising, but merely recording. Whether this surge and swell of change should be welcomed as a movement of reform or abhorred as a return to chaos, is a question I have not yet raised. I simply point out how extensive and how fundamental it is, so that little augury can be drawn from the consequences of changes in the past which were by comparison so superficial and so narrow. It is true that previous movements seemed tremendous at the time, especially to those who disliked them, and one cannot be certain that posterity will not think our age guilty of exaggerating after the same style. But it is to be remembered that proximity is not the only source of such mistake. That keen psychologist, George Eliot, once pointed out how deceitful is the logic of habit, how a man will tell you that he has worked in a mine for forty years unhurt by an accident as the reason why he should apprehend no danger though the roof is beginning to sink.<sup>3</sup> In our present argument, then, as we make allowance for other prejudices, it is right to remember one's risk of being blinded to the consequence of a change that is vast by long habituation to changes that were slight.

## II

Not even the keenest of our optimists will regard this moral restlessness of our age as in itself a desirable thing. Man's quest for the values of life must plainly be more or less ineffectual if we are at variance—constantly with one another, not infrequently

3 *Silas Marner* V.



even with ourselves—on the question what the values are, and in what proportions they are valuable. I want now to consider one suggestion by which this disquieting state of things is often explained, and is so explained as to be made appear at least innocuous. An optimist commonly argues that there has been no change in the fundamental concept of value, that morality stands for ever the same, and that what changes is *convention*, the detachable fringe of man's moral nature, often mistaken for its essence, but at most only its transient form. The contemptuous implication in the term "conventional morality" indicates that there is a morality higher or deeper than the conventional.

In this way, for instance, the spirit of universal goodwill is held a moral obligation, unchanging with the lapse of time or difference of place, though it has expressed itself in various more or less inadequate conventions which have successively passed away. There has been the convention of savages that goodwill is due only from fellow-tribesmen to one another, while illwill may and perhaps should be shown abroad. There has been the convention of the Greeks that nothing was due to the non-Hellenic world, and that of the Hebrews that the rights of the Chosen People were generically superior to those of all the rest of mankind. And there has been the convention about the merit of indiscriminate almsgiving, which descended from those ages when mendicancy was thought peculiarly pleasing to God, and the duty of productive labour was not yet appreciated.

One might illustrate from virtue after virtue in turn, arguing that those who followed very different conventions about the form in which to manifest it have been agreed regarding the virtue that was to be manifested. One might speak of the Southern planters whose sense of justice was by no means dull, but who adopted without protest the conventional system of slavery into which they were born. One might describe the mediaeval rulers, as sensitive as other men to the claims of fair play, who nevertheless acquiesced without a murmur in the convention of their time which made it a duty to persecute and which anathematised the weakness of a tolerant mind. Or one might discuss those unimaginative folk in every period of the world who in all innocence—because they have no real picture of the consequences of what they do—encourage one another in maxims of cruelty, of fraud, or of vice.

Again, it is pointed out by those who urge this plea that not only *may* there be such discord between morality and convention, but that from the nature of the case there *must* be. Conventions are rough and ready practical rules, framed to fit the average case

under habitual circumstances, but calling for constant amendment when circumstances alter, and even requiring to be boldly disregarded in many a case that is exceptional. What happens when convention is followed blindly has been set forth with especial power in the plays of Ibsen; but those plays, according to the plea I am now considering, are no attack upon morality. They are a summons to independent thinking, a call to cease taking one's direction for conduct from the current formula of one's surroundings, and in thus defying the tyranny of majorities one is not false but true to one's own conscience. How else than by such courageous and unpopular individualism has the moral code of any community been improved?

Our optimist who argues thus is sure to insist that the great mark of the present generation is its superior *truthfulness*. It says what it thinks, and on what it thinks it is not afraid to act, masks and gags being alike thrown away. No longer is there the old compulsion to pretend coincidence with the moral estimates of the neighborhood, and thus to an extent never before seen we know one another's genuine convictions. It is, of course, needless to dwell upon the examples of moral advance through the enterprise of unconventional thinkers. That distinction is acknowledged even by those who least intend to act upon it in their practice, and who have no belief that in practice it is respected by anyone in their own circle. They are like the duenna in *Gil Blas*, who declared herself thoroughly fortified against *moral* prejudices, but an eager student of the way to turn to account the prejudices that are *conventional*. Therein, she said, her system was that of all mankind in the long run, for real virtue was a very expensive article, plated goods looked just as well, and were within the reach of all purchasers.<sup>4</sup>

Granted, then, the validity of that lady's contrast, and the appositeness of the metaphor in which she set it forth, what I want to ask is this: Does the present situation of acknowledged unrest indicate that it is the real but elusive and costly virtue which is being sought? Is this high temper among our heralds of revolt due to a disdain of spurious substitutes?

### III

Let me compare this with another familiar plea. Just as morality is said to be all the more vigorous when conventions decline, so we sometimes hear that religion continues to flourish though the churches are being emptied. And if you ask how a

4. *Gil Blas*, II, 7.

progressive neglect of the Church is compatible with concern for religion, you meet with the reply that church-going was formerly compelled by public sentiment; but since that sentiment has ceased to act, it has become voluntary, and in consequence means far more. Doubtless, we are told, if a real statistical survey could be made, it would appear that there has been no diminution in the number who go to church from genuinely religious motives. Likewise, I suppose, it might be argued that in our intellectual age a sharp increase in the population of the gaols need not indicate a weakening in respect for law, because people are now thinking for themselves rather than tamely following the legal conventions, and under such higher freedom avoidance of gaol means far more than formerly. I confess to a sense of alarm in presence of an argument capable of such indefinite application, and apparently available for the support of so many extraordinary theories.

When one reconsiders the case, is it not plain that a more enlightened and independent understanding either of citizenship or of faith should show itself not in reduced but in intensified regard for the great community systems in which faith or citizenship can be seen embodied? Why does the public sentiment which once ensured their reverential treatment as a matter of course now no longer protect and promote them? That a long and steady increase in the volume of crime means lowered respect not only for the institution of the courts but for the law which the courts exist to enforce, that progressively shrinking church attendance means waning interest in the cause for which the Church stands, should surely be taken as obvious. Those who think otherwise may fairly be asked to show how a patriotism too lofty for the common restrictions of State law is expressing itself among these rebels in some higher form, and how religion, alienated from the Church, is acting with equal vigour through some other channel. In the attempt to do this, religion and the State are commonly described and defined in such terms as to render them, in Gladstone's famous phrase, no longer recognizable by either friend or foe. In like manner, the alleged disappearance of convention, without prejudice and perhaps with distinct advantage to essential morality, suggests that the earnestness which old conventions embodied can now be seen under other shapes, more instructed, but not less austere. That this describes the social order of our time, few who read our novels will agree.

I am going to argue that conventions, though quite distinct from morality, are its constant and indeed inevitable expression, so that their widespread break-down is a token of morality's decay.

But of the two theories, it is at least far easier to make out a case for their complete coincidence than for their radical contrast. If you go back upon the origin of the names, you find that the Latin words *mores* and *convenio* suggest a majority vote which has hardened into general practice. Varying kinds of scruple as one travels between East and West, even as one crosses the Straits of Dover, seem to indicate a purely geographical or racial difference. "The Calatian Indians", says Herodotus, "ate their dead; the Greeks burned their dead; and each felt it to be shocking when the habits of the other were even named. Just custom, you see; nothing but custom counts." Twenty-four centuries afterwards, Anatole France has a like reflection. "Morality", he said, "is but a name for the custom of the greatest number." What else do we mean by the moral tone of any race or period, but just the level of average feeling? Dictionaries define the climate of any place as its prevailing weather. Is not the moral climate just the system of approval and disapproval which prevails?

Of course there are heralds of revolt. But one must distinguish, I think, between the resolute dissentient—an extremely rare figure—who stands by his personal conviction though he should stand alone, and that other sort of dissentient, quite common, himself the very embodiment of conventionalism, who will hold out for anything against the community as a whole if only he is backed by his profession, his trade, his church, or his social circle. Every order has a sort of freemasonry whose rules bind its members, and often strike athwart the rules which an outsider would call conscience. From the unwritten etiquette of the loftiest profession, down to the oath that unites Chicago gangsters in a brotherhood of crime, these group conventions have an incomparable strength. What the doctors, the lawyers, the financiers adopt as the ethic of their respective callings may amaze and appall a layman to whom it has been accidentally disclosed. But strong in the support of their own class, they listen to the reproaches of an outside critic with amused indifference. Nor is there any reason to suppose that this contempt is affected. A quasi-reverence for the rule of what is done, and a quasi-moral remorse for having been guilty of what is not done, have been developed to a high degree. So complete is the control of professional conventions, and so feeble in comparison is independent thought. No one, perhaps, is more thoroughly wedded in this way to the conventions of his own circle than just the man who has made a profession of repudiating conventionalism. Watch the aesthetic bohemian, whose cult of self-development (or whatever he calls it) has now a well-understood

and an inflexible ritual, and whose studied irregularity of conduct serves all bohemians alike as a rule.

A further curiosity of our time is to be noted. Amid the wreck of other conventions, there remains one, certainly no better attested than many of the others, and no easier to state with defensive precision, yet enjoying a peculiar sanctity among those over whom the rest have no control. I mean the intense feeling about traditional rights of property which is shown by men most free in other matters from what is called the "dead hand" of a tradition. Every historian of institutions is aware that this custom of ownership has undergone the most varied and complicated changes, so that if a moral idea should be held invalid because it has been different at different places and at different times, this one is liable in a special degree to attack. Every psychologist, too, knows that if the convention about it should fail, and its protection were left to the independent judgment of each individual, the sanctity of ownership would collapse elsewhere as it has collapsed in Soviet Russia. But, strange to say, those most ruthless in their analysis and unsparing in their scorn for other moral conventions, develop often a sudden sensitiveness about this one. The broadest of Modernists on the virtues of temperance and chastity, they reveal at once a hard Fundamentalism on the rights of ownership, and make haste to reconstruct those defences which are certainly no stronger for the institution they value than they were for the institution they have overthrown. It must have amused many of us to observe that bootlegging, which had so long been treated as a harmless if not a commendable adventure when it was merely undermining public morals and respect for law in general, has acquired all of a sudden a solemn character of crime where it has diminished the revenue through smuggling. Not only has the convention about ownership thus survived all the rest, but the rest are being held valid in so far as they are reducible to this one, and no farther. As Anatole France liked to put it, the very name "property" is uttered with a quasi-reverential feeling, such as the moon inspires in dogs.<sup>5</sup>

Thus not even the fiercest assailants of the conventional seem to be consistent in their crusade. Rare indeed, if not quite unknown, is the inflexible individualist, puzzling out problems of conduct for himself as if none had lived before him, and as if he had not even contemporaries whose judgment had a *prima facie* title to respect. Nowhere, perhaps, does doctrinaire speculation drift more completely loose from the moorings of evidence than in this piece of sheer mythology about a moral agent who thinks alto-

5. *L'Orme du Mail*, XVII.



gether for himself. Mr. Bertrand Russell,<sup>6</sup> I suppose, is the closest contemporary approximation. Judge, then, from the bewildering changes in that solitary apostolate, almost too rapid to follow, and impossible to reconcile. But can anyone imagine Mr. Russell examining a moral issue in real detachment from the groups with which he habitually acts, the sort of detachment, I mean, that he would show in examining a mathematical theorem? He is a Socialist, a Pacifist, an Atheist, besides being—in some sense or other—an Individualist. How far allegiance to any one of these cults is likely to determine judgment on a moral problem beforehand, it is needless to point out. How impossible it is that allegiance to all of them should be shown simultaneously, I ask no further evidence than Mr. Russell has supplied in that amazing ethical treatise called *Education and the Good Life*.

## IV

Here, then, is our problem. Morality and convention are at once coincident and conflicting. On the one side, what can be more contemptible than docile complaisance towards the ideas of good and evil which chance to be those of the society in which one was brought up? What value can remain where there has been no intelligent exercise of the will,—nothing but mechanical imitation of what the majority do, and mechanical repetition of what the majority say, in readiness always to change if the balance of votes should begin to incline otherwise? Has not progress everywhere depended on the rise of one man or a few men with enough insight to see and enough courage to proclaim that the majority maxim was absurd? When the Greek sophists argued that virtue is nothing but submissiveness to convention, their quick-witted audience understood them to mean that virtue has no rational defence. Surely the audience was right? Wordsworth blamed his contemporaries for judging those persons wisest whose opinions stooped the least to known restraints;<sup>7</sup> but might not his contemporaries have quoted against him the name of every ethical leader of the past who had achieved anything for mankind? Just as fast as a conventional, that is, an agreed, sentiment becomes operative, virtue seems to lose its disinterestedness, and to belong to him who resists the general will rather than to him who acquiesces in it.

On the other side, what sort of a community must that be in which martyrdom is the price still to be paid by the initiators of

6. Now Earl Russell.

7. *Excursion* II.

reform? Have we learned so little from experience of reforms in the past that we must continue to make them thus extremely difficult? A neighborhood must surely be low indeed which does not show a general sentiment supporting the great civic and domestic and personal duties, with admiration for those who fulfil them, and with a censure for their neglect that is strong enough to be feared. Does the performance, then, lose its moral quality merely because the environment is not hostile? Do we not even see here and there that in revolt against the obscurantism of the past there is now an over-hospitable welcome for novelty as such? Thus public opinion, reflecting the social conscience, is among the legitimate and proper authorities for the average man. The most discerning of the ancients, said Hegel, held that wisdom consists in living agreeably to the *ethos* of one's own people, and it is a familiar aphorism of Descartes that he has lived best who has lived most quietly. These cannot be dismissed as mere counsels of intellectual indolence or selfish precaution. Singularity for its own sake is plainly not desirable, though it is no less plainly in our time increasingly desired. It is even worth some sacrifice of the ideally best if we may thus secure the stability of a uniform practice. Our dilemma is as old as ethical controversy itself. Virtue, said Aristotle, is what makes a man do virtuous acts, and yet it is only by doing virtuous acts that virtue itself can be acquired.

But, after all, is that dilemma quite insoluble? It is commonly for the *youth* of our time that the crusaders against convention profess their chief solicitude. Is it not then remarkable that what they propose with respect to youth in the field of moral development is so unlike what is either proposed or practised elsewhere? All around us are conventions which represent a slowly consolidated consensus of opinion—the convention that Shakespeare is the first of British dramatists and Milton the first of British epic poets; the convention that Greek sculpture of the Periclean age is superior to its later rivals; the convention that the work of the Old Masters in painting is preferable to a modern daub, and that classical music is higher than jazz. One does not hear it argued that literary and artistic taste would be better cultivated if these conventional judgments were in the first instance concealed from the beginner, if he were encouraged at the outset to doubt whether they had any intelligent basis, and even to suspect that they were not honestly held by those who profess them most loudly. Nor, I suppose, does anyone feel at all confident that, without the suggestiveness of this traditional set of values to help him, the average person would find his way with success in

either literature or art. On the contrary, all our educational effort proceeds on the assumption that the quickest route to the capacity of judging for one's self is to take for granted, experimentally, that the consensus of the generations before has at least an element of important truth.

## V

Let me now sum up the main thesis that I want to commend to you. Putting aside the extraordinary people, who are very few, and who will carve their own way in any event, one can see that the morality of the average must be only in part—usually a small part—*independent choice*. For the rest, they will follow what is called convention. This is a psychological law which, for good or for evil, cannot be removed. Where the average man or woman thinks that convention has been successfully overcome, what has happened has been that one convention has been exchanged for another. As von Hartmann<sup>8</sup> put it, the great mass of people will never be either autonomous or heteronomous, but a mixture of the two,—*eine Konkurrenz beider*. And where there is a mixture, the ingredients may or may not, as the tea advertisement has it, be “blended right”. The proportions may be wrong. My thesis is that this particular blending shows in our time the fault precisely opposite to what it used to show. There was once far too much convention, far too little independence. We have reversed that.

The Victorians often mistook local prejudice for eternal truth, and turned into a moral law what was no more than a maxim of British etiquette. Our age, in its disillusionment, has concluded that moral law and eternal truth have no existence, because the Victorians were often in error in deciding upon them. “The danger of our time”, says Miss Julia Wedgwood, in speaking of the late nineteenth century, “lies in the very opposite direction from an insincere echo of other people's opinions, rather in a hasty and exaggerated expression of our own beliefs”. That danger has at least grown no less, now that the first quarter of another century, with all the disturbances of a world upheaval, has run its course. And is it not an ironical fact that our contemporary novelists, so intent upon preaching the need to free one's self from the usages of the past, should continue the burden of the novelists of a generation or two generations ago, long after the situation which justified those older novelists has passed away, and the very reverse situation has taken its place? If there is a hidebound conventionalism

8. *Ethische Studien*, pp. 110, 114.

anywhere, it is in the novels of our age, whose *denouement* and in great part whose plot can be foreseen so quickly.

What I have written this lecture to dispute is the prevailing doctrine, now hardened into a sort of dogma of the intellectuals, that the most urgent social need is to compel everyone, in American phrase, to "do his own thinking" on problems of conduct, and that to this end a contempt for generally accepted products of past thinking should be carefully stimulated. Tennyson called it leaping the rotten pales of prejudice, and disyoking one's neck from custom. George Meredith spoke of shocking the world of spinsterdom and clergy. If I am not greatly mistaken, our immediate need is just the opposite, and the really original novelist—comparable in enlightening his age to his predecessor who enlightened a very different age—would be the novelist who should exhibit how deep is the foundation of truth and value in the slowly formed moral usages of mankind. Fifty years ago the independent publicist was the man who dared to attack old institutions, and display wherein they were hollow. To-day the writer of real independence would be he who should dare to defend them, and display wherein they are sound. Nor am I at all alarmed at the inevitable rejoinder that my defence of conservatism would have inhibited the Moslem from ever questioning his Koran or the Hindu from asserting his individual judgment against the authority of the Brahmins. I am quite prepared to argue that Islam and Brahminism, like all the other systems which have attained a firm hold upon great masses of men, have within them principles of value which the Arab or the Hindu should first seek to appreciate, that only through appreciation will he ever reach effective criticism, and that the missionary who bids him abandon the system he has without any assurance of a better to take its place has done a gross injury both to morals and to religion. It is true indeed, said Condorcet in one of his most reflective passages, that we should overthrow all errors. But we should also act like prudent architects who when forced to pull down a building take precautions to prevent its fall from being dangerous.

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Let me offer, finally, just a few concrete examples of what I mean. It is desirable, I think, that facilities for divorce should be wider and more elastic than in the English law of a generation ago. But a dramatist or a novelist, with that sense of apostolic mission which Mr. Shaw and Mr. Wells profess, would scarcely choose this aspect of the domestic problem for emphasis at present in California or Florida. Milton wrote this:

Whoso prefers either Matrimony or other Ordinance before the Good of Man and the plain Exigence of Charity, let him profess Papist or Protestant, or what he will, he is no better than a Pharisee.

An excellent sentiment! But not quite the most timely provocative with which to rouse dormant faculties of independent thinking in Los Angeles or San Remo. In like manner a literary artist may well expose the consequences of a too obstinate pacifism. He may draw a striking picture of those who refuse under any circumstances to take away life, and who thus place everything at the mercy of men whom only a fear for their own lives can deter from injustice. Satire has at times been well directed against the Quakers, and the conscientious objector fifteen years ago—rightly or wrongly—drew mordant wit of the same kind. But a novel or a play ridiculing effeminate scruples about shedding blood is not what is just now needed in Chicago, and the literary artist who has access to the circle of Mr. Al Capone or Mr. Jack Diamond had better bring to their attention what preachers would call “a somewhat different facet of the truth”. In the middle of last century the stubborn assertion of individual rights against public necessities prompted Dickens to many a passage of incomparable irony—like the one about the mill-owner in *Hard Times* who would rather pitch his mill into the sea than have it subjected to Government inspection, but in whom patriotism was in the end so strong that he kept his mill out of the sea and worked it with profit both to the public and to himself. It seems, however, as if neither in Russia nor in Italy, at least at present, is the selfish individualist in need of exposure, nor does the first timid experimenting in public control require there a literary stimulant. If it be true, as Mr. Shaw is constantly telling us, that the theatre has supplanted the Church, and that the dramatist is the real preacher to our time, then some sense of apostolic obligation may fitly be required. But what we see among our men of letters on a great scale is just that old vice they charged against the clergy—addressing an audience on the sins it is in no danger of committing, and securing popularity by denunciation to one group of the faults that are notoriously characteristic of another. What I want especially to see our unconventional moralists do is to cease preaching the oldest sermons in the repertory of their profession, and begin addressing themselves in this profoundly different age to the faults which are not those of the Victorians but our own.

What are the concrete problems just now most conspicuous? One sort of person would perhaps reply—the problem whether



Sunday in British countries is to become a replica of Sunday on the continent of Europe. Another sort, holding that to be a mere trifle, would say that the most urgent question is whether we are to accept such lax and indulgent divorce laws as prevail in certain American States. Yet a third would mention that whole field of problems in Eugenics which is summarily known as birth control. The point on which I want to insist is this—that those questions are still unsolved even if you have triumphantly shown that old usages about Sunday, about divorce, and about the family originated in a docile literalism about Bible or Church which no one can any longer defend. However they began, these usages have been preserved by generation after generation that knew nothing of their origin, but found in them a guarantee of what they greatly valued. With dogged obstinacy, old-fashioned people refuse to give them up, though when pressed to say why, they commonly answer with reasons sadly incoherent. What that suggests is this—that the innovator, even when he has proved an old custom irrational and its defenders illogical, has not completed his task. He has to approach some convention, which has proved hard to change, with the tentative assumption that it has stood so long because it has served some social end of value, and he has to show how the sacrifice his proposal must involve would bring more than compensatory advantage. In short, he must proceed by that golden rule of criticism, so well stated though so persistently violated by Carlyle,—that he who has not first appreciated the degree of truth in what he attacks is thereby disqualified from pointing out the degree of its error.

This, I believe, is what the impetuous reformers of our time are forgetting. It is what was in the mind of Josiah Royce when he said that conventional morality is a sort of Pentateuch, made up of many different documents dating from different times, and requiring always to be re-edited. We have had, and we still have, though in reduced number, our moral Fundamentalists, insisting on every letter of the past. We have had, and have in number fast increasing, our unbelievers, who in many directions destroy our moral Pentateuch, indignant only that the stubborn good sense of the public stops them from destroying the whole. What we now need is our moral higher critics, the Modernists of the ethical world, who while they realise that they have much to overthrow, will remember as they do it how precious is the thing they have to preserve.