

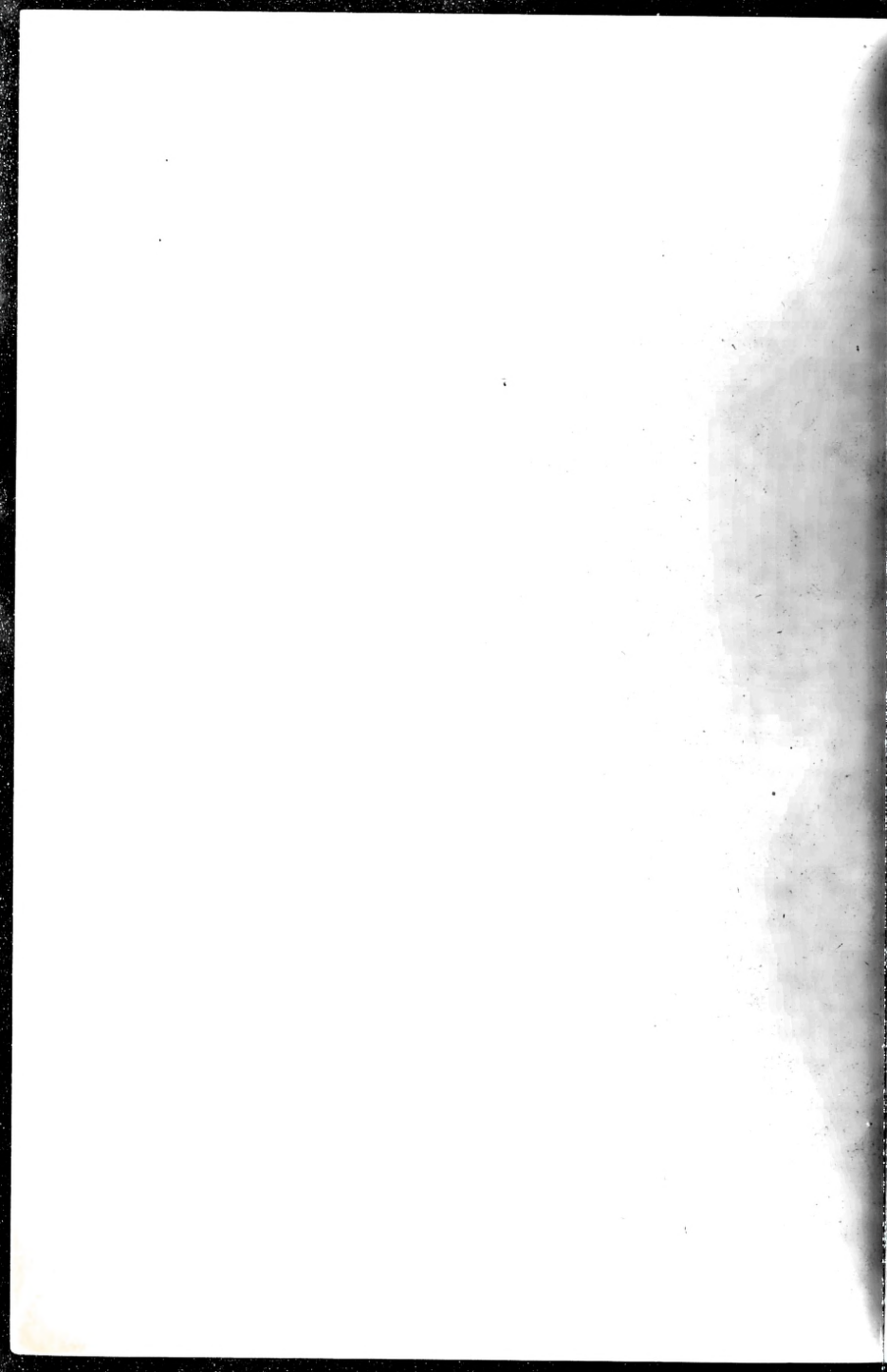
**Pamphlets
for the People**

No. 2

**MORALITY
WITHOUT
GOD**

CHAPMAN COHEN

—THE PIONEER PRESS—



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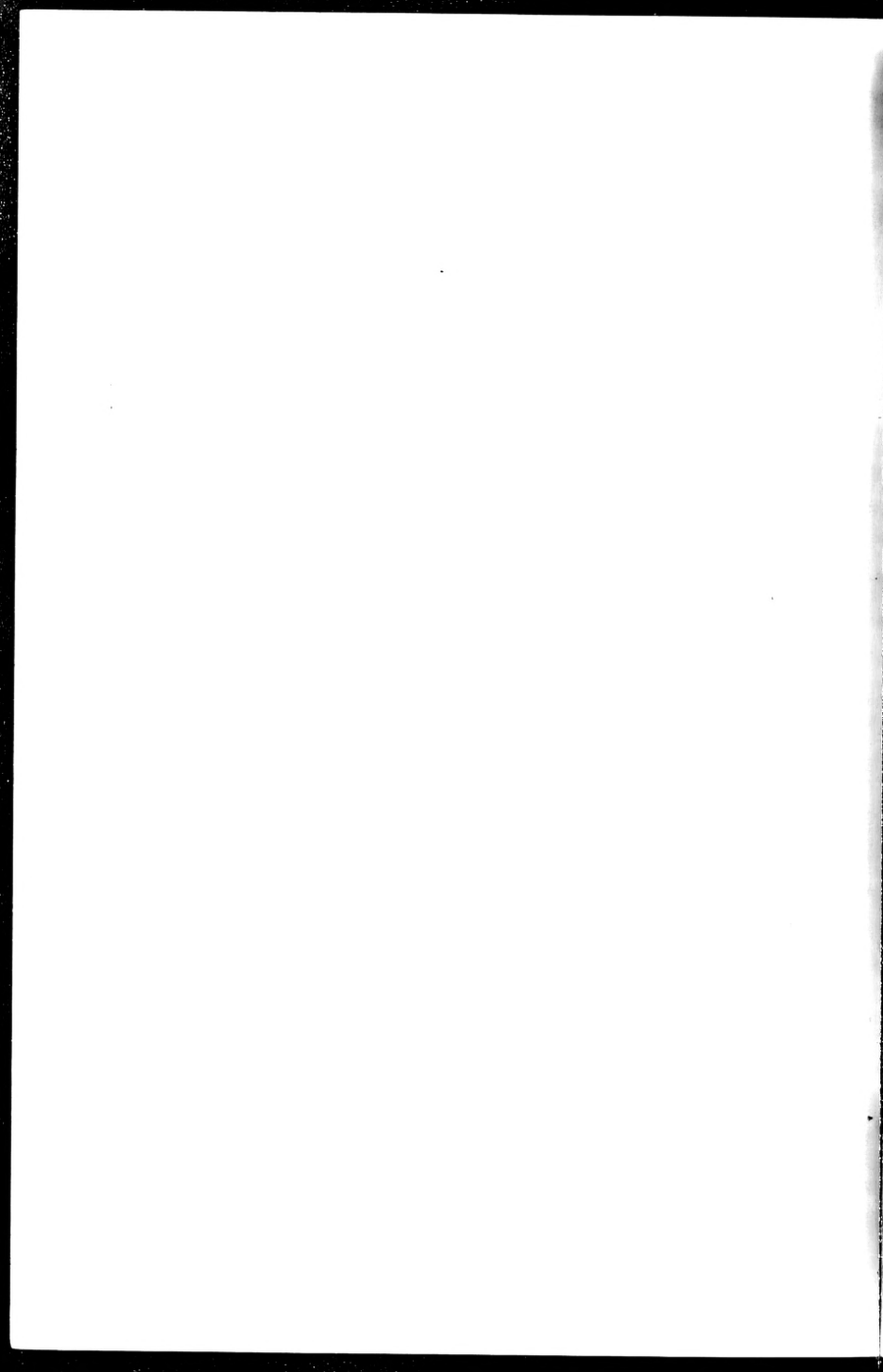
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Morality Without God

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I.

CHRISTIANITY is what is called a “revealed” religion. That is, God himself revealed that religion to man. In other religions man sought God—some god—and eventually found him, or thought he did. In the case of Christianity God sought man and revealed himself to him. The revelation, judging by after events, was not very well done, for although a book made its appearance that was said to have been dictated or inspired by God so that man might know his will, yet ever since mankind has been in some doubt as to what God meant when he said it. Evidently God’s way of making himself known by a revelation is not above criticism. There seems a want of sense in giving man a revelation he could not understand. It is like lecturing in Greek to an audience that understands nothing but Dutch.

What was it God revealed to man? He did not reveal science. The whole structure of physical science was built up very gradually and tentatively by man. He did not teach man geology, or astronomy, or chemistry, or biology. He did not teach him how to overcome disease, or its nature and cure. He did not teach him agriculture, or how to develop a wild grass into the life nourishing wheat. He did not teach man how to drain a marsh or how to dig a canal so that he might carry water where it was needed. He did not teach him arithmetic or mathematics. He taught him none of the arts and sciences. Man had no revelation that taught him how to build the steam engine, or the aeroplane, or the submarine, the telegraph or the wireless. All these and a thousand other things which we regard as indispensable, and without which civilization would be impossible, man had to discover for himself. There is not a Christian parson who would to-day say that

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God gave these things to man. That, perhaps, is not quite true. Some of the clergy will say that God gave everything to man, inasmuch as he let him find them out. But at any rate none of the things I have named is said to have been revealed to man. He had to discover or invent the lot. And in inventing them or discovering them he behaved just as he might have behaved had he never heard of God at all.

What was there left for God to give man? Well, it is said, he gave man morality. He gave man the ten commandments. He told him he must not steal, he must not commit murder, he must not bear false witness; he told children they must honour their fathers and their mothers, but somehow he forgot the very necessary lesson that parents ought also to honour their children. He mixed up with these things the command that people should honour *him*, and he was more insistent upon that than upon anything else. Not to honour him was the one unforgivable crime. But, and this is the important thing, while there is no need for an inspired arithmetic or an inspired geometry, while there was no inspired chemistry or geology, there had to be, apparently, an inspired morality, because without God moral laws would be without authority, and decency would disappear from human society.

Now that, put bluntly, lies behind the common statement that morality depends upon religious belief. It is not always put quite so plainly as I have put it—very absurd things are seldom put plainly—but it is put very plainly by the man in the street and by the professional evangelist. It is also put in another way by those people who delight in telling us what blackguards they were till Christ got hold of them, and it is put in expensive volumes in which Christian writers and preachers wrap up the statement in such a way that to the unwary it looks as though there must be something in it, and at least it is sufficiently unintelligible to look as though it were good sound theological philosophy.

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Is the theory inherently credible? Consider what it means. Are we to believe that if we had never received a revelation from God, or even if there were no belief in God, a mother would never have learned to love her child, men and women would never have loved each other, men would never have placed any value upon honesty or truthfulness, or loyalty? After all we *have* seen an animal mother caring for its young, even to the extent of risking its life for it. We *have* seen animals defend each other from a common enemy, and join together in running down prey for a common meal. There is a courting time for animals, there is a mating time, and there is a time however brief when the animal family of male, female and young exist. All this happened to the animals without God. Why should man have to receive a revelation before he could reach the moral stage of the higher animal life?

Broadly, then, the assertion that morality would never have existed for human beings without belief in a God or without a revelation from God is equal to saying that man alone would never have discovered the value of being honest and truthful or loyal. He would not even have had such terms as good and bad in his vocabulary, for the use of those words implies a moral judgment, and there would have been no such thing—at least, so we are told.

I am putting the issue very plainly, because it is only by avoiding plain speech that the Christian can “get away” with his monstrous and foolish propositions. I am saying in plain words what has been said by thousands upon thousands of preachers since Paul laid down the principle that if there was no resurrection from the dead, “let us eat and drink for to-morrow we die”.

Sometimes the theory I have been stating is put in a way that throws a flood of light on the orthodox conception of morality. It is so glaringly absurd to say that without religion man would not know right from wrong, that it is given a very slight covering in the expression, “destroy

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religion and you remove all moral restraints". Restraints! That expression is indeed a revelation. To the orthodox Christian morality stands for no more than a series of restraints, and restraints are unpleasant things, because they prevent a man doing what he would like to do. It is acting in defiance of one's impulses that makes one conscious of "restraints". A pickpocket in a crowd is restrained by the knowledge that there is a policeman at his elbow. A burglar is restrained from breaking into a house by hearing the footsteps of a policeman. Each refrains from doing as he would like to do because he is conscious of restraints. It may be God; it may be a policeman. God is an un-sleeping policeman—I do not say an unbribable one, because the amount of money given to his representatives every year, the Churches that are built or endowed in the hopes of "getting right with God", totals a very considerable sum.

From this point of view, what are called moral rules are treated much as one may treat the regulation that one must not buy chocolates after a certain hour in the evening. The order is submitted to because of the "sanctions" that may be applied if we do not. So to the type of Christian with whom we are dealing the question of right or wrong is entirely one of coercion from without. If he disobeys he may be punished, if not here, then hereafter. He asks, "Why should a man impose restraints on himself if there is no future life in which he is to be rewarded or punished? Why not enjoy oneself and be done with it?" On this view a drunkard may keep sober from Monday morning till Friday night on the promise of a good "drunk" on Saturday. But in the absence of this prospect he may say, paraphrasing St. Paul, "If there be no getting drunk on Saturday, why should we keep sober from Monday to Friday? If there is to be no drunkenness on Saturday, then let us get drunk while we may, for the day cometh when there will be no getting drunk at all".

But all this is quite wrong. The ordinary man is not conscious of restraint when he behaves himself in a decent

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manner. A mother is not conscious of restraint when she devotes herself to nursing her sick child, or goes out to work to supply it with food. A man who is left in the house of a friend is not conscious of restraint when he refrains from pocketing the silver, or when he does not steal a purse that has been left on the mantelpiece. A person sent to the bank to cash a cheque does not feel any restraint because he returns with the money. The man who is conscious of a restraint when he does a decent action is not a "good" man at all. He is a potential criminal who does not commit a crime only because he is afraid of being caught. And when he is caught the similarity of the Christian frightened into an outward decency and the detected pickpocket with the policeman's hand on his shoulder is made the more exact by the cry of, "O Lord be merciful to me a miserable sinner", in the one case, and "It's a fair cop" in the other.

The religious theory of mortality simply will not do. It turns what is fundamentally simple into a "mystery", and then elevates the mystery into a foolish dogma. It talks at large of the problem of evil, when outside theology no such problem exists. The problem of evil is that of reconciling the existence of wrong with that of an all-wise and all-good God. It is the idea of God that introduces the conundrum. The moral problem is not how does man manage to do wrong, but how does he find out what is right? When a boy is learning to ride a bicycle the problem is not how to fall off, but how to keep on. We can fall off without any practice. So with so many opportunities of doing the wrong thing the moral problem is how did man come to hit on the right one, and to make the treading of the right road to some extent automatic?

But in the philosophy of orthodox Christianity man is a potential criminal, kept from actual criminality only from fear of punishment or the expectation of reward in a future life. If the Christian teacher of morals does not actually mean this when he says that without the belief in God no such thing as "moral values" exists, and that if there is

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no after-life where rewards and punishments follow, moral practice would not endure, then he is more than mistaken; he is a deliberate liar. Fortunately for the world, Christians, lay and clerical, are better than their creed.

II.

WE are back again with the old and simple issue of the natural *versus* the supernatural. This is one of the oldest divisions in human thought, and there is no logical compromise between them. Morality either has its foundations in the natural or in the supernatural. In asserting the first alternative I do not mean to imply that there is a morality in nature at large. There is not. Nature takes no more heed of our moral rules and judgments than it does of our tastes in art or literature. A man is not blessed with good health because he is an example of a lofty morality, nor is he burdened with disease because he is a criminal in thought and act. Nature is neither moral nor immoral. Such terms are applicable only when there is conscious action to a given end. Nature is amoral, that is, it is without morality. The common saying that nature "punishes" us or "rewards" us for this or that is merely a picturesque way of stating certain things; it has no literal relation to actual fact. In nature there are no rewards or punishments, there are only actions and consequences. We benefit if we act in one way; we suffer if we act in another. That is the natural fact; there is no ethical quality in natural happenings. Laws of morals are human creations; they are on all fours with "laws" of science—that is, they are generalizations from experience.

So morality existed in fact long before it was defined or described in theory. Man did not first discover the laws of physiology in order to realize the need for eating or breathing, to digest food or to inhale oxygen. Nor did the rules, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, etc., first make stealing and killing wrong. A moral law makes

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explicit in theory what is implicit in fact. The fact creates the rule; it is not the rule that creates the fact.

Non-recognition of this simple truth is mainly responsible for the rubbish that is served up by so many teachers of ethics, and also for the unintelligent attack on ethics by those who, because they are, often enough, dissatisfied with existing standards of moral values, feel justified in denouncing moral values altogether. As we shall see later, moral rules stand to human society pretty well as laws of physiology do to the individual organism. They constitute the physiology of social life, with the distinction that whatever rules we have must be modified in form from time to time to meet changing circumstances.

Let us feel our way gradually, and in as simple a manner as possible. We begin with the meaning of two words, "good" and "bad". What is their significance? There are many religious writers and many of those who aim at founding a religion of ethics—as though the association of religion with moral teaching had not already done sufficient harm in the world—who speak of certain actions as being good in themselves, and who profess a worship of the "Good" as though it were a substitute for "God". There are others who puff themselves out with a particularly foolish passage from Tennyson that to follow right because it's right "were wisdom in the scorn of consequence", and there is a very misleading sentence cited from the philosopher, Immanuel Kant, expressing his "awe" at man's moral sense. We should always be on our guard when the sayings of great men become very popular. It is long odds that they embody something that it not very wise, or that its wisdom has been lost in the popularization.

It should be very obvious that it is the height of stupidity to do things in "scorn of consequence", since it is the consequences of actions that give them their quality of goodness or badness. If getting drunk made people happier, better, and wiser, would anyone consider drunkenness a bad thing? In such circumstances the moral rule would be "Blessed is he that gets drunk", and the more drunken

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he was, the better the man. If we can picture any actions that are without consequences, they would not come within the scope of morals at all.

The first point to remember is that there is no such thing as good in the abstract. A thing is good in relation to its consequences, or as it realizes the end at which we are aiming. Tennyson was talking nonsense. These ethical and religious philosophers who "blather" about the "reality" of good in itself, are talking nonsense. It is not possible to do right in scorn of consequences because it is the consequences that make the action either good or bad. It may be unpleasant or dangerous to do what is right, and we admire the one who does right in such circumstances, but this does not affect our standard of value.

It must also be remembered when we are seeking a natural basis for morals, that—if the teleological language may be permitted—nature requires but one thing of all living creatures. This is efficiency. The "moral" quality of this efficiency does not matter in the least. A Church without a lightning conductor is at a disadvantage with a brothel that possesses one. A man who risks his life in a good cause has, other things equal, no advantage over a man who risks his life in a bad one. Leave on one side this matter of efficiency and there is not the slightest attention paid to anything that we consider morally worthy in the organism that survives.

Finally, efficiency in the case of living beings is to be expressed in terms of adaption to environment, a fish to water, an air-breathing animal to land, a carnivorous animal to its capacity to stalk its prey, a vegetable feeder to qualities that enable it to escape the attack of the carnivora, and so forth. An animal survives as it is able to adapt itself, or as it becomes adapted to its environment. It is well to bear in mind this principle of efficiency, because while what constitutes efficiency varies from time to time, the fact of its being the main condition determining survival remains true whether we are dealing with organic structure or with mental life.

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Now if we take ethical terminology, it is plain that the language used implies a relation, and one of a very definite kind. The part of the environment to which these terms are related is that of other and like individuals. Kindness, truthfulness, justice, mercy, honesty, etc., all imply this. A man by himself—if we can picture such a thing—could not be kind; there would be no one to whom to be kind. He could not be truthful; there would be none to whom he could tell a lie. He could not be honest, or generous, or loyal; there would be none to whom these qualities would have any application. Every moral quality implies the existence of a group of which an individual is a member. And as the group enlarges so moral qualities take on a wider application. But this cardinal fact, that ethical qualities, whether they be good or bad, have no significance apart from group life, remains constant throughout.

Now let us revert to man as a theoretically solitary animal, a condition that has nowhere existed, for the sociality of man is only a stage in advance of the gregariousness of the animal world from which man has descended. But as an animal he must develop certain habits and tastes in order to merely exist. Somehow man must usually avoid doing things that threaten his existence. Even in matters of food he must develop a taste for things which preserve life and a distaste for things that destroy it; and, as a matter of fact, there are a number of capacities developed in the body that automatically offer protection in the case of food against things that are too injurious to life. But it is quite obvious that if a man developed a taste for prussic acid, such a taste would not become hereditary.

Human life, in line with animal life in general, has to develop not merely a dislike for such things as threaten life, but also a liking for their opposite. The development of this last capacity means that in the long run the actions which promote pleasure, and those which preserve life, roughly coincide. This is the foundation and the evolu-

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tionary basis of the theory of Utilitarianism, or one may say, of Neo-utilitarianism.

But man never does exist as an individual only, one that is fighting for his own hand, and whose thoughts and tendencies are consciously or unconsciously concerned only with his own welfare. Man is always a member of a group, and the mere fact of living with others imposes on the individual a kind of discipline that gives a definite direction to the character of his development. The law of life is, that to live an organism must be adapted to its environment, and the important part of the environment here is that formed by one's fellow-beings. The adaption need not be perfect, any more than that the food one eats need be of the most nutritious kind. But just as the food eaten must contain enough nutrition to maintain life, so conduct must be such as to maintain some kind of harmony between an individual and the rest of the group to which he belongs. If an individual's nature is such that he will not or cannot adapt himself to his fellows then he is, in one stage of civilization, killed off, and in another he is subjected to pains and penalties, and various kinds of restraints that keep his anti-social tendencies in check. There is a selective process in all societies, and even more rigid in low societies than in the higher ones, in which those ill-adapted to the common life of the group are placed at a disadvantage even in procreating their kind.

And side by side with this process of selection within the group there is going on another eliminative process on a larger scale in the contest of group with group. A group in which the members show little signs of a common action, of loyalty to each other, is most likely to be subjugated, or wiped out and replaced by a group in which the cohesion is greater and the subordination of purely individualistic tendencies to the welfare of the whole is greater.

The nature of the process by which man becomes a moral animal is therefore given when we say that man

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is a social animal. Social life is in itself a kind of discipline, a training which fits a man to work with his fellows, to live with them, and to their mutual advantage. There are rules of the social game which the individual must observe if he is to live as a member of the tribe. Man is not usually conscious of the discipline he is undergoing, but neither is any animal conscious of the process of the forces which adapt it to its environment. The moralizing of man is never a conscious process, but it is a recognizable process none the less.

It may also be noted that the rules of this social game are enforced with greater strictness in primitive societies than is the case with later ones. It is quite a mistake to think of the life of savages as free, and that of civilized man as being bound down by social and legal rules. Quite the opposite is the case. The life of uncivilized man is bound by customs, by taboos, that leave room for but little initiative, and which to a civilized man would be intolerable.

But from the earliest times there is always going on a discipline that tends to eliminate the ill-adapted to social life. Real participation in social life means more than an abstention from injurious acts, it involves a positive contribution to the life of the whole. A type of behaviour that is not in harmony with the general social characteristics of the groups sets up an irritation much as a foreign substance does when introduced into the tissues of an organism. Thus we have on the one hand, a discipline that forces conformity with the social structure, and on the other hand a revolutionary tendency making for further improvement.

There are still other factors that have to be noted if we are properly to appreciate the forces that go to mould character and to establish a settled moral code. To a growing extent the environment to which the human being has to adapt himself is one of ideas and ideals. There are certain ideals of truthfulness, loyalty, obedience, kind-

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ness, etc., which surround one from the very moment of birth. The society which gives him the language he speaks and the stored-up knowledge it possesses, also provides him with ideals by which he is more or less compelled to guide his life.

There are endless differences in the form of these social ideals, but they are of the same mental texture, from the taboo of the savage to the "old school tie".

The last phase of this moral adaption is that which takes place between groups. From the limited family group to which moral obligations are due, we advance to the tribe, from thence to the group of tribes that constitute the nation, and then to a stage into which we are now entering that of the relations between nations, a state wherein, in its complete form, there is an extension of moral duties to the whole of humanity.

But wherever and whenever we take it, the substance of morality is that of an adaption of feelings and ideas to the human group, and to the animal group so far as they can be said to enter into some form of relationship with us. There is no alteration in the fundamental character of morality. Its keynote is always, as I have said, efficiency, but it is an efficiency, the nature of which is determined by the relations existing between groups of human beings.

If what has been said is rightly apprehended, it will be understood what is meant by saying that moral laws are to the social group exactly what laws of physiology are to the individual organism. There is nothing to cause wonder or mystification about moral laws; they express the physiology of social life. It is these laws that are manifested in practice long before they are expressed in set terms. Human conduct, whether expressed in life or formulated in "laws", represents the conditions that make social life possible and profitable. It is this recognition that forms the science of morality; and the creation of conditions that favour the performance of desirable actions

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and the development of desirable feelings constitutes the art of morality.

Finally, in the development of morality as elsewhere, nature creates very little that is absolutely new. It works up again what already exists. That is the path of all evolution. Feelings of right and wrong are gradually expanded from the group to the tribe, from the tribe to the nation, and from the nation to the whole of human society. The *human* environment to which man has to adapt himself becomes ever wider. "My neighbour" ceases to express itself in relation to those immediately surrounding me, begins to extend to all with whom I have any relations whatsoever. It is that stage we are now entering, and much of the struggle going on in the world is due to the attempts to adapt the feeling already there to its wider environment. The world is in the pangs of childbirth. Whether civilization will survive those pangs remains to be seen, but the nature of the process is unmistakable to those who understand the past, and are able to apply its lessons to the present and the future.

There is, then, nothing mysterious about the fact of morality. There is no more need for supernaturalism here than there is room for it in any of the arts and sciences. Morality is a *natural* fact; it is not created by the formulation of "laws"; these only express its existence and our sense of its value. The moral feeling creates the moral law; not the other way about. Morality has nothing to do with God; it has nothing to do with a future life. Its sphere of application and operation is in this world; its authority is derived from the common sense of mankind and is born of the necessities of corporate life. In this matter, as in others, man is thrown back upon himself and if the process of development is a slow one there is the comforting reflection that the growth of knowledge and of understanding has placed within our reach the power to make human life a far greater and better thing. If we will! !

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