22 VIRTUE AND MORALITY

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Every crisis in human existence—religious or moral, social or political—is, at root, a rupture of the equilibrium between man and the created order; for when the individual strives to enhance his freedom of action, to emancipate his ego, he comes into conflict with the created order, and this means leveling an attack against Almighty God, no matter how marginal it may seem.

Man's assault on the created order never begins with externals—attacks against his surroundings, against institutions or standards of value. The initial disturbance of equilibrium, occurs in the human soul. For man is not only an image of God—"the Kingdom of Heaven is within you"—but also an image in microcosm of the whole created order. He carries within himself not only God, but the world.

Now it is incumbent upon man to fulfill the God-given mandate of putting the world beneath his dominion, and the starting-point does not lie in externals, as moralists and reformers believe, but in the inward attitude, the inner awareness determined by divine truth. Equilibrium in the created order comes neither from outward rules and standards nor from moralistic and social activity; it is attained through man's inward state, through his certainty that his earthly mandate is a limited one subjected to the will of the Almighty.

In inward certainty, relying upon God's grace to bless our willing effort to hold fast to everything implied in the word "faith," we have strength to go out into the world without courting disaster. But even faith, "that can move mountains," may go astray. Men can devote themselves to a doctrine, and yet find the direct sincerity of that devotion threatened, and a life of faith can lose its spiritual health and vitality if sentimentality gains the upper hand. A man who seeks to shape his spiritual life aright must be guided by the twofold criterion of doctrine and life. He must build his life in the world on two pediments, the first of which is orthodoxy; but then, lest it be subverted by Pharisaism and the letter that kills the spirit, orthodoxy must be illuminated with enlivening virtue, for virtue is the second pediment.

Virtue is a meeting-point between divine perfection and human life as an ideal state. Confronting the ideal prototype, man finds

himself face to face not with a moral "must" but with an "is." Virtue stands thus "midway" between God and moral imperatives. It is virtue, as the ideal prototype, that gives men their scale of moral values and their standards of behavior, and virtue must take precedence over morality, defining and determining it. But it is not, and never can be, an outward ordinance of acts and attitudes. Its life is an inward one, directed not to "spiritual goals" formulated subjectively, but to ideal archetypes as objective realities. In this sense, virtue is ontological re-integration, not the product of subjective aspirations.

This re-integration is far from being the passive contemplation of some lofty exemplar, as of a man absorbed in contemplation at the altar. Virtue is life, the will's engagement in a struggle towards the ideal prototype. As "the Word was made flesh," so also is virtue an endeavor to involve the whole man—in the deepest sense. Like faith, virtue is "synthetic," striving for wholeness; unlike morality, it is neither formal nor separative, but essential and unitive. It seeks to unite—on a spiritual plane—and not to divide, as morality does, on the plane of forms and regulations.

If this is the positive function of virtue, it has also a negative one—to destroy egoism, to be for ever actualizing our sense of nothingness in the face of God's Omnipotence. For egoism is the relentless center, within every man, from which separativity springs.

When we say that virtue is the meeting-point between Divine Perfection and human life as an ideal state, we are speaking of the aspect that concerns Infinity and Perfection. The other aspect concerns life in the world and the world's imperfection. Virtue is life, and life is to live in the world, even in the spiritual sense. It is, therefore, above all, a confrontation with our fellow men and our attitude when confronting them. The import of virtue is, not least, that we should constantly correct the false interpretations and erroneous judgments which we make when we "transpose" our nothingness before God's Omnipotence into our relationships with our fellow men.

Virtue thus has a twofold aspect, as relating to man himself and to man as a member of society; but this implies no cleavage within the concept of virtue, for there is no operative difference between the two aspects. It is certainly not one aspect acting as the source of impulsion and the other as its operative outlet. On the contrary, virtue is a spiritual and inward entity that does not "seek its own" by outward acts laying claim to merit. It is an inner striving towards the spiritual center and, at the same time, for totality. Virtue is not a striving outwards.

Like a tree, virtue has a root and a trunk from which, however, there grows a branch where the fruit ripens. The tree is now and always one and the same, but the branch and the fruit are to the tree what virtue is to the human collectivity. Virtue exists like a tree that grows and branches out to bear fruit, but it is always, and unalterably, a tree. Yet virtue is also the Divine Existence in the human will that gives it its dynamism. In will informed by virtue, man is able, like Jacob in his dream of the ladder with its summit in Heaven, to attain his spiritual goal and, at the same time, to descend into the world with all its imperfections, armed with this same virtuous will.

To qualify virtue in worldly terms—to attempt to describe all its alternating situations—would be as difficult as trying to describe and put a name to every leaf on the verdant branch. Nevertheless we can, according to Frithjof Schuon, define what is essential under the three main headings of humility, charity, and truthfulness.* The first of these, humility, is always to be aware of our nothingness before God. This awareness has also an aspect that relates to the world, including our relations with our fellow-men. Imperfection is an inherent part of our life on earth, and our awareness of our fellows' failings is imperfect likewise. We must recognize, in all moments of humbled pride and dispute, that worldly setbacks are grounded in an imperfection that we all share.

The "I" is a fragment; it can never practice righteousness. It is precisely from manifestations of the "I" that there arise manifold injustices, conflicts, and tyrannies in the world. Secular man seeks to avoid this dilemma by making shift with the concept of mutual tolerance, an utterly unreal premise which maintains that life's contradictions can be reconciled by a thoroughgoing heterodoxy. But virtuous awareness involves admitting, on the contrary, that controversy is part of our earthly imperfection, that we all share in this imperfection, that it is inevitable, and that only the soul's humility can outweigh it. The secular concept of mutual tolerance is as unreal as the awareness is real which keeps us humble.

Humility in relation to our fellow men means to be conscious of what is separative in existence. Charity on the contrary is a spiritual attitude that oversteps the bounds that hold "I" and "you" apart. Charity is to put oneself in one's neighbor's place and to crack the

* Editors' Note: See especially Frithjof Schuon's chapter "The Virtues in the Way," in *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (Pates Manor, Bedfont: Perennial Books, 1981), pp. 101-115.

hard shell of egoism and self-centeredness. The romantically heedless "egotism" of a Stendhal, is countered with another attitude which aims at its opposite; unthinking indulgence of the ego, which displays all that is most transient, lacking, and fragmentary in man, gives places to an inner striving, to a realization in which one's fellow man is no longer a hindrance along the way but a very brother.

Humility and charity are intimately bound; the one cannot exist without the other. Humility leads to charity, and charity to humility. Both work to destroy egoism. Frithjof Schuon describes them as being like the two linked arms of the Cross. The third virtue, truthfulness, is simply to love truth. Both humility and charity are "subjective" in the sense that they strive for an attitude that consistently bears the stamp of the personal; our mental powers need also to be involved in our virtuous endeavors. However, these mental faculties can, in their well-intentioned efforts to sustain virtue, place excessive emphasis on sentimental aspects which, in fact, deprive it of its purity, innocent primordiality, and objectivity. The result is that man is tempted to occupy himself with worldly matters which virtue proper should leave behind.

It is the function of truthfulness to correct and objectivize the "subjective" dangers which threaten virtuous endeavor. Love and hate are passional elements which have a large place in our lives and, as such, are inevitable and necessary. But virtue cannot join them: its independence bears, in all things, the stamp of objectivity. Our attitude must be determined not by emotional motives, but by truth and reality. We must implant this impartial and objective attitude in the will, in order to be able to achieve an upright endeavor free from all considerations of passion. We can thus correct the tendency, inspired by humility and passion, to deviate towards subjective voluntarism, which leads to overestimation of oneself and to self-glorification.[1]

It is only in virtue that man attains to his inward, primordial equilibrium; it is only in virtue that God confronts the world within a man's soul; it is only in virtue that a man may go out into the world without bring corrupted. To be virtuous means "not to seek one's own." This freedom from egotistic and passional leanings gives human inwardness an entirely universal meaning. Virtue is both center and whole for the individual viewed as a microcosm. It is virtue that real-

[1] Frithjof Schuon, *Language of the Self* (Ganesh, 1959), pp. 84-89 [Editors' Note: pp. 52-57 in the more recent World Wisdom edition of 1999].

izes the Creator's intention at the microcosmic level—a work of love and harmony. And this is why everything that is primordial bears the stamp of equilibrium, and why all virtue strives towards primordial equilibrium as an ideal prototype.

But human existence, by reason of its worldly separativity, is constantly upsetting the equilibrium. Man is, microcosmically, a great fountain of energy, using his body, soul, and reason to protect himself against the forces of nature and to overcome them by his will, which enables him to choose and discriminate. But in so doing he disturbs cosmic equilibrium. A world without man would be a world of simple biological cycles, an uninterrupted process of growth, bloom, and decay.

Man intervenes, however, and he does so with a recognition of his place in the hierarchy of the created order, with his intelligence, will, and passion. He carries his immortality within him, is conscious of good and evil, and has free will to choose between them. But he is at the same time a part of the created world, "condemned" to be a segment of cosmic totality and, like the rest of creation, to be imperfect. He imposes himself on existence as a conqueror who "must people the earth and lay it beneath him." But in his all-conquering march, he drags his imperfections along with him. Suspended "between Heaven and earth," he carries and transmits Divine Truth, but it is he—by reason of his very rank—who also disrupts the equilibrium of the cosmos.

Man is endowed with reason, and he knows that he cannot allow himself to engage with his fellows in the anarchical power-struggle of which he is capable. The "Law of the Jungle" constrains him to abstain from such anarchy. The theorists of natural law are right to maintain that man strives to rise beyond his "state of nature," as Aristotle insists in asserting that man is a "social being." But what is more important is that man has an inner certainty and also a higher task for which his life on earth is a period of preparation and trial. On earth he can discriminate between good and evil, for he has free will, and is therefore his own law-maker.

Morality, understood here in both the private and the social sense, is not only the outward formulation of norms for human living, nor is it simply to consider means, or to cooperate, in order to promote the "conquest of nature." Morality is first of all a "descent" by Truth into formal existence, which is characterized by contradictions and imperfections. Morality belongs to the world of forms and must therefore be "made substantial" and clothed in the forms of which created

existence consists. The attitude of soul that would actualize virtue must needs transform itself, on a lower, earthly plane, into norms and rules, and become a set of standards. This is the functional aspect of morality.

But morality is likewise a prolongation into the formal world of the spiritual state that has its source in the Divine and whose channel of transmission is man. Morality seeks to quicken man's awareness that, with all his imperfections, he yet carries perfection within him. Yet morality is itself imperfect, fragmentary, separative, and shot through with contradictions; which means that man, its envoy, is afflicted with these same failings. Morality is inexorable, but within narrow bounds, for its field of application in space and time does not bear the seal of infinity. Morality must therefore submit to the domination of virtue, deriving its strength, validity and, indeed, its entire *raison d'être* therefrom. Virtue is immutable, universal, absolute, beyond space and time; it is everything that morality lacks and can never acquire.

The hierarchy is, therefore, that morality is subordinate to virtue, and that virtue is the link binding earth to Heaven. If this link is lost, morality and law become a collation of expedient rules with no underlying authority. The administration of oaths is then mere form, and a legal judgment is no more than an expression of incidental power relationships. But if, on the contrary, the hierarchical nexus between virtue and morality remains unbroken, it means that the social order retains its legitimacy in the most outward aspects, at the same time as maintaining its underlying authority; it means also that man, aware of his nothingness before Almighty God, remains conscious of his place in the cosmic order and, thus, of the limitations of his power. It is against this cosmic order that all disobedience, rebellion, and striving for the expansion of man's power are first directed.

All heresy is an attempt to upset total equilibrium to man's advantage, for greater emancipation, or freedom of action. An attack, however marginal, is thus leveled against Divine Omnipotence—and, thereby, against the hierarchical order. Heresy—using the word in its broadest sense and not in its orthodox, exoteric one—does not pit itself against moral standards; on the contrary, heresy is always imbued with moral vehemence. Nor again, does it set out to oppose Divine Omnipotence; on the contrary, the heretic frequently aims to "reinforce" God's authority, as did William of Ockham in declaring Omnipotence to be a voluntary exercise of Will—a definition which precludes necessity. Heresy does not, in fact, oppose Divine Omnipotence, but it opposes the cosmic order which is the support of Omnip-

otence. To make a parallel with the institution of monarchy, it is not the king who is being attacked, but the throne.

It is neither God nor morality that sustains the first attack of the heretic, but virtue. The first objective is to destroy virtue, and thereby to sever the link between what is of Heaven and what is of earth. The hierarchical structure, which is the throne of the Heavenly Sovereign, can no longer remain upright. The ladder in Jacob's dream, joining earth to Heaven, is pulled away. With virtue destroyed, men are "isolated" from God, and morality now opens up to the heretic a field of activity of an entirely different kind.

Humility, the foremost virtue of all, becomes cut off from virtue and transformed into something exclusively moral, most frequently into a striving self-abasement, which is quite different from humility. For humility is a virtuous attitude which includes dignity, confidence, and even pride in our spiritual gifts, for which we owe the Creator grateful acknowledgment; whereas self-abasement precludes and denies this pride and dignity, and thus amounts to ingratitude.

To be humble is, moreover, to be "poor in spirit," which is the deepest meaning of poverty. Heretical moralism makes of poverty a purely material manifestation, maintaining that it must start by being "tangible"; but this is to rob poverty of its true, inward, and spiritual context. Poverty then becomes a rule of social conduct to be adhered to with unquestioning obedience like other social standards, and it can sink down to the merely secular plane, and become the object of human society's checks and controls. Heresy limits itself to bringing men together who believe that material poverty is right and natural as a way of life; this is not poverty of the spirit but of the purse and, as such, it comes to be urged upon all.

All heresy has a single motivating impulse—a striving for inwardness, in the sense of turning one's back on the world in order to rescue spiritual values that are threatened. There is a desire—as is implied in the word "heresy" (which means "self-choice")—to cleanse spiritual life of its dross. But this inwardness is worlds apart from virtue since it aims not to destroy the ego—which is the task of virtue—but to achieve spiritual realization in and through the ego. Heretical inwardness is therefore a moralistic striving exclusively within the confines of tangible existence. Heresy seeks to realize inwardness in the very world it is turning away from, and this inwardness is, in fact, material, individualistic, rationalistic, and sentimental—narcissism in the trappings of religion. It relies on the individual's mental powers, and shifts

religious experience to the realm of the ego, which is rationalistic and sentimental.

This is the process which annuls virtue and gives the heretic a "free hand," but he is then powerless to take hold of three central elements in religious experience, namely the cosmic, the hierarchical, and the symbolic; he becomes incapable of realizing that man is no more than a small component in the cosmos—the mirror in which he beholds "God's visage"—, that the cosmos itself is a hierarchically structured order which reflects the heavenly hierarchy and, finally, that the "language" in which God speaks unceasingly to His creation is the abstract imagery of symbolism, which emerges in both virgin nature and in life sanctified by religious worship.

Humility therefore becomes self-abasement, and spiritual poverty a kind of worldly egalitarianism in relation to purely material resources. Charity is confined to the field of outward activities, and truthfulness does not go beyond individual, subjective, and mental experience. The entire created order, and everything that this order bespeaks and reveals about Divine Omnipotence, is explained as a structure without any inwardness. This enables Nature, now deprived of its celestial aspect, to be treated simply as an object of exploitation. Sacred institutions and the religious hierarchy take on the appearance of self-appointed intermediaries between God and man. Man's lonely pilgrimage is then worked out in the direction of a strictly individual solution which comes to replace God's universal compassion to the cosmos. The symbolism of the sacred retreats before the pressures of collective, democratic life with its popularly elected trustees and preachers; and rationalistic, literal belief then comes to the fore with the assertion that all men are capable of interpreting the Holy Scriptures.

All heresy starts out by attempting to "purify" and "restore"; its tragic error is to open the door to worldliness, and the individual then lays claim, under the cover of religion, to greater scope for himself and his own. This prepares the ground for further secularization; no longer at home in the intuitive world of symbols, man is forced to resort more and more to rational and sentimental modes of thought; as the world of the spirit shrivels, man relapses into subjection to the letter, which makes the word into an object of rational conjecture. Heresy has "purified" nothing and "restored" nothing, but simply brought spiritual life down to a lower level.

It may seem paradoxical that heresy should strive at one and the same time for both inwardness and extroversion. It is simply that

morality, in its struggle to be free of virtue, transposes religious life to the everyday world, thereby presenting heretical spirituality in two tangible contexts, the life of the mind and the senses, on the one hand, and outward actions, on the other. If virtue seeks to destroy the ego and realize human destiny on a higher plane, morality, for its part, seeks to affirm itself, when no longer linked to virtue, as an independent entity in both the inward and the outward sense. In virtue, man's immortal being is brought back to its source, man's divine prototype; in morality, the sensory world manifests itself in terms of the human ego. Virtue is spiritual realization; morality is manifestation according to tangible and sensory norms.

For the virtuous, to live in the world is to serve. A ruler too is one who serves, in the twofold sense of serving the higher power who has ordained him in his role, and serving the men and estates over which he rules; expressed in the terms appropriate to virtue, he is performing the office of a deputy. In the world of secular morality, humble service has a quite different import; it is no longer service, but servility. The servile man does not serve, for service is an inward prompting. He acts under the compulsion of behavioral patterns that impose themselves with the authority of an outward—not an inward—moral force, as if to say "observe how I abase myself, and how correct I am!" This moral compulsion smooths the path for the servile man to achieve what, in his soul, he is really aspiring to; and that is power.

Power is seized in indirect fashion by undermining the ground which supports humility, namely spiritual readiness for service, and by perverting the moral context of service to spiritual pride, which is the most calamitous of all sins in the world of virtue.

This gives righteousness a new meaning, as it does humility, charity, and truthfulness. "Seek ye first the Kingdom of Heaven and its righteousness" assigns to the realization of virtue uncompromising priority, but secular morals assert with the utmost rigor—the more secular they become—that righteousness has to do with this world, with variable emphasis and relevance. Sentimental self-pity joins hands with the resentment occasioned by the egalitarian mentality, and the result of this alliance is presented as brotherly love. In the same way, charity is transformed into an unremitting struggle on behalf of the "weak" and against the "mighty."

Servility leads to an enhancement of self-love. Governance should not then come from above—and this very concept negates virtue—but from below, from the weak and pitiable; these, in their turn, are moved to respond by asserting that it is only rule from below

that is justified. This vindication has nothing to do with being "poor in spirit," for spiritual poverty can never be observed, registered, checked, or governed from below. It must depend instead upon a display of morality with its rules resting firmly in worldly legitimacy and the will of the worldly law-giver, and its execution depending on the vigilance of an earthly ruler.

God's actions are limned in beauty and love; beauty and love are all-embracing, as are also God's works. Man must recognize this cosmic totality and equilibrium. Constantly upsetting this equilibrium, he has nevertheless opportunities to re-instate primordial equilibrium in his own heart, and virtue is the means. We must be conscious that it is a limited and fragmentary re-instatement, and modest on the cosmic scale. But endeavor—the search to restore his own equilibrium—is the token of a true man, who is a microcosmic image of created wholeness, answerable, to the limit of his strength, to his Maker. The mirror-image that is revealed by all creation can be distorted and shattered, but the reflection carried by each man in his soul can, despite everything, be safeguarded. Virtue makes it possible.