

THE SOUL AND THE SOIL

THE man who lays down moral principles runs the risk of laying down platitudes. When a priest meddles with the affairs of this world he is regarded—rightly—as being professionally incapable of laying down anything except moral principles. It is not surprising, therefore, that he should be regarded as a purveyor of platitudes. He may indeed be regarded as professionally incapable of saying anything rational at all; but with this error I am not immediately concerned. On the other hand, to call priests platitudinous is not, as such, to convict them of talking rubbish; if it were so, their case would indeed be pretty hopeless.

Yet even granting the connection of moral principles and platitudes and the distinction of these from nonsense, it does not follow that it is good to be thought platitudinous, still less that it is good to acquiesce in the imputation. Much of what I have to say in this article will sound platitudinous, but it is a pity that it should. Platitudes, if true at all, are truths worn smooth like old coins—truths ready for falsification. That honesty is a virtue, is true and platitudinous, but that it simply consists in paying your bills and avoiding theft, as the platitude tends to suppose, is not true. A truth gone dull is a truth nearly lost. But to grasp a truth closely is to lose a platitude, is to be free from a platitude. This freedom, freedom not of or from but by thought, Father Vincent won for himself and expressed for others. The proof is that whereas many people said he talked nonsense, no one accused him of talking platitudes.

We, however, must run the risk. We are concerned with moral principles, and the principle of anything is its starting-point; and once things have started the starting point is taken for granted. It is very likely a platitude. If you become conscious of it you may say, shamefacedly, 'Of course that's obvious, a platitude'; or, if you want to question it, you may call it a prejudice. In either case it is presumed to be presumed. Now it is necessary to have presumptions, but it is not good always to take them for granted as such, for this is to cease to look at them, to disregard them. The Word, says St. John, is the Absolute Starting Point; and It became flesh because It was disregarded. And this, in its turn, has become a platitude.

All platitudes about Christ should be taken back to their starting point, expressed in that sentence of St. John's. Similarly, as I see

it; all platitudes on justice and injustice should be brought back to questions of ownership or the right to own; and so my present platitudes on the just use of the soil involve the question, Who owns or should own the soil? And this question implies both 'owner' and 'thing owned.' Who is this 'owner' and why should he own this particular thing, the soil? What title to ownership has he, from within or from without, by nature or by grace? As a unique being or as member of a group? If soil be the fundamental economic reality, then our answer to these questions will be the spear-head of our reform, aimed straight at the essential target. One question must be answered: *Who ought to own the soil?* In this article an argument leading to the question's answer is taken to a certain point and no further; but as a statement of presumptions, as an explanation of our platitudes, I think it suffices.

By Soil, then, I mean that part of the earth's crust which can support vegetable life and, in particular, so much of it as can support enough edible vegetation to be worth cultivating by man for his own food and that of his beasts. 'Soil' is the food-bearing earth, not the earth in general but the earth in relation to the nourishment of man and beast, and of beast only so far as the animal itself feeds man in some way. 'Soil' here and now means or implies 'man,' and 'man' means or implies man's soul. What is this soul?

First, we mean something that depends somehow on the soil. We do not think that man's soul would do quite as well without the body, that the state of the body can ever be a matter of utter indifference to the soul. On the contrary, we affirm its need of the body for its own soul-life. As the body lives and grows in time, so we affirm that time is not a matter of indifference to the soul; and because time is only significant if something is achieved through growth in time, so we affirm that the soul itself achieves something through time gradually, that it also grows. In this sense it also grows out of the soil.

The human soul, even the townsman's, grows from the soil; but in its own way. It reacts in its own way: responsibly. It knows far more than anything else under heaven; hence it is far less restricted by time, place, material circumstance, than anything else; it is far more free, therefore. The human soul is master of the earth, and the source of its power is knowledge. We can act so widely and freely because we can see so many possible courses of action. What we call deliberation is a comparison of different courses of action one with another. To decide between them is to make up one's mind about them; and to make up one's mind about a

thing to be done is the same as knowing one's mind about that thing—because knowledge is our only guide. And if, having deliberated, I choose and act accordingly, I have completed a fully rational action whose immediate cause lies in my own knowledge of the situation and reflection on my knowledge and decision and choice. In a word the action is mine because the knowledge it springs from is mine. It is a responsible action because it comes from the kind of knowledge that is called rational. We are responsible for what we do because we are aware of things we might do; and because, among these, we determine the particular thing we will do.

This is always our presumption, that man's soul is *essentially* responsible. Its proper action is responsible action; it is a capacity for taking responsibility. To keep it withdrawn from responsibility is to starve it.

The correlative of starvation is eating. The body eats; the mind also eats. It eats the world by knowing it. It knows the world as a field of action, its own action. It acts upon the world and its action is an extension of its knowledge into the particular—not into the particulars which it merely *finds* in the world, things as they are, wild nature (including stones and the sky), but into particulars which have passed into the mind, into *images*. Man only acts responsibly by this extension into the particular; by realising his images. Short of doing this he does nothing as a man, as a moral agent. As a man he realises his images; his imagination is his own; therefore its external realisations are his own too. Private property begins in the mind. Thoughts and images are what I first own; then, through moral acts, a world of particular realisations. Acts and dispositions (good or bad) and things or states of things outside me—they are all mine if they come from my thought and imagination. I 'own up' to sins because I own them, they are mine. So with good deeds. So with all that bears the trace of my knowing. Precisely so far as it bears this trace it is mine, I 'own up' to it. Private property, as an 'institution,' only fixes my particular field of action by excluding everybody else from this particular field. It works by exclusion; but intrinsically, naturally and inevitably I own already something and am able to own more. I am responsible and I can extend my responsibility. My life is an extension of responsibility.

Through the body the soil nourishes my responsible soul; and my soul, reacting, controls the nourishing soil. I control it responsibly and as controlled by me it becomes an effect of my action, something for which I am responsible in the same way as I am responsible for the action itself. The landscape is man-made. For the land and

the landscape and all his material surroundings man must therefore take responsibility.

To take responsibility implies not only being responsible, but being 'answerable' also; and being answerable implies something or someone that requires an answer. I am not only responsible for my actions and for their effects, I am also responsible to something or someone. I act responsibly like a free man controlling my materials, but I am not alone in the universe; there is something outside myself which, because all things are interconnected in the universe, will be affected in some way by my responsible actions. What I control in the universe is what I am responsible for. What I do not control but is none the less affected somehow by what I do control is what I am responsible to. In other words, my actions take place in an objective order. They are measured from without as well as from within. I act towards something as well as upon something. In a word, there is an order of Justice.

I cannot discuss 'soul and soil' without bringing in Justice. 'Soul and soil' is mere alliteration unless between these two realities is a connection which matters to both of them. Where any two realities are connected there may be a right or a wrong connection, order or disorder; and in the sphere of morals, the human sphere, order is justice, disorder is injustice. Justice might be called personal order: it occurs when personality enters into connection. I mean by this that where you have two things interconnected and one of them is a human soul or is controlled by a human soul, then the connection becomes a responsibility and the human soul is bound to the connection by *reason* as well as by any other bond; i.e., it is bound in justice, it has a duty. But since duties are meaningless without rights, since I only have duties towards that which has a right to oblige me, and since I cannot be obliged by my inferiors but only by my equals or superiors, it follows that I am duty-bound in respect of the rights of other human souls and/or in respect of the rights of something superior to the human soul. Ultimately we should find, if we reasoned it out, that all our duties are grounded in the absolute rights of God; and all our rights are grounded in our duties towards these absolute rights. It is sufficient for my purpose to note that the interconnection of soul and soil involves responsibility on the **part** of the soul (and therefore justice), and that this responsibility is properly towards other souls and towards God. It is because God and other men exist that I can use the soil justly or unjustly; it is because God exists that the human race as a whole, the community of mankind, can use the earth as a whole justly or unjustly.

If just or unjust use is an exercise of responsibility and responsibility implies a kind of possession—limited, however, by the objective order which it also implies—then we are back at the question of ownership. Incidentally, too, the mention of ‘other souls,’ ‘other men’ to whom I may be responsible, and of the community of mankind, leads to the same question. Can you have a community without common ownership? In a sense, clearly, you cannot. You cannot acknowledge *A* as your fellow-man without admitting that he shares with you a need of and claim on the means of life. You acknowledge a common claim and right to the same *general* object—in the last resort to the same fundamental economic reality, the soil in general, the skin of the earth. Every real community is a commonwealth.

Necessity knows no law—that is, nothing less than the natural law. Hence a starving man may take what he needs. You may take from men the actual control of the land, you may not withhold from them its produce so long as they do not utterly reject their social obligations. Each man is naturally a co-heir of the skin of the earth. ‘A starving man needs food not instruction’ (St. Thomas). A measure of economic security must precede the ‘higher things.’ Poverty is precisely this *measure*. *Misère*—the word and distinction have been developed by Péguy—is what falls short of this measure; *misère* is starvation or chronic insecurity. It is a sub-human or rather an inhuman condition. In a world riddled with economic insecurity you can hardly blame men for wanting security first of all, and then, only when this has been found, asking for creative work, responsibility, private ownership. I have heard someone call ‘Freedom from Want’ the freedom of slaves; but it is the freedom of children too. Admittedly it implies no *positive* freedom, no responsibility; it is, as such, pre-adult and every baby unconsciously claims it and a great many slaves have consciously enjoyed it. I am not for the moment asserting that the Beveridge Report implies the servile state; I am only saying that although economic security as such has nothing intrinsically and humanly noble in it (and it would be a ghastly debasement of language to put ‘freedom from want’ on a level with other ‘freedoms’), still this security is a starting-point, like childhood; and in a mad world it may be a necessary starting point, even by its own poor little self, for adults also. It implies at least the basic principle of community life: co-heirship. Granted this, we can then be as bold as we please in seeking to extend responsibility.

It may be noted too that this ‘co-heirship’ answers to something objective in the soil itself. The soil has a kind of *extensive fertility*,

or productivity: properly cultivated any piece of land sufficient to absorb and sufficiently worked by the reasonably hard labour of one man tends to yield more food than one man needs for himself alone. Put another way, this means that it is normal and reasonable for one man to grow more than one man needs. The soil assists sociability. Furthermore it assists or implies a sociability with the future as well as the present; it refers constantly to the next generation. It is permanent through time. The present soil is potential with future crops. It is naturally linked with posterity, through the labour of man. Seed from the present crop, waste matter restored now, the labour of tillage—this is the present moment's debt to the future. A permanent lasting dependence of man on the land and the land on man; children depending, fathers owning a debt, through the common permanent soil, to their children.

If all this is true, what follows? Platitudeously but necessarily two consequences follow. First, each occupier and worker of the land is morally obliged, after satisfying his own and his family's needs, to supply (in *some* way) the needs of those who do not occupy or work the land, but still depend on its produce. Incidentally, it may be doubted whether those who merely work the land without ownership and with no direct control over its produce are likely to feel much responsibility for what happens once their own needs are satisfied. (On the other hand, of course, aren't we always being reminded of the grasping peasant?) Secondly, it follows that each generation has a duty to its children, a duty to pass on, with the gift of life, the land in a fit state to nourish that life, its fertility maintained. And even a waste untilled plot may be of more use to our children than a super cinema.

If, as it seems, we are going to be 'planned' rather more than our fathers were, we may draw some consolation from the fact that accompanying the plans is a reassertion of the principle of common ownership. It may, of course, go too far. Half a loaf is better than no bread because it is already bread; whereas any plan is not better than none because any plan may mean any form of regulated soul starvation. But so far as the primary economic basis of community—*commonwealth*—so far as this is affirmed we are still in the presence of Truth¹; and so far as the primary economic condition of

¹ A truth on which the moralists' doctrine of *Altum dominium* depends: i.e., the right of the supreme and legitimate ruling power to dispose of the goods of private individuals—in the name and according to the need of the community, for a very good reason and as an exception.

responsible personal activity—a measure of security—so far as this is sought after we are still moving towards the good. Provided, of course, that we don't lose our sense of a more inclusive Truth and a greater good.

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