

A DISCERNMENT OF MOTES

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THE opinion that it is impossible to make moral judgments about other people is sufficiently widespread amongst Christians to be worth attacking. It is of course a Christian doctrine that it is hardly ever my business to pass adverse moral judgments on people, but that is an entirely different matter. It is Christian teaching that I am very rarely justified in killing a man by shooting him with a gun, but we ought not to confuse this with the theory that it is *impossible* to kill a man by shooting him with a gun. In practice the latter theory will lead to a whole lot of death; similarly the theory that moral judgments are impossible leads to a whole lot of slander.

The theory is that while we can judge the behaviour of a man and say whether his *external actions* are good ones or bad ones, we cannot penetrate to his soul to see if *he himself* is good or bad. I can say that Peter did something that was 'objectively' or 'materially' wrong, but only God can say whether Peter was 'subjectively' or 'formally' committing a sin. This peculiar view is slightly encouraged by a misreading of some novelists like Mr Greene and M. Mauriac who have taken an especial interest in the paradoxical case of the man who in spite of all external appearances is holy. Of course this is a perfectly legitimate choice of subject matter, and heresy-hunters have only themselves to blame if they mistake novels for theological treatises *de homine*. It takes very little thought to realize that the theory of the total invisibility of sanctity and sin would undermine the whole dramatic contrast in, say, *The Power and the Glory*. Indeed, if we cannot make moral judgments it is difficult, in any case, to see why novels are usually more interesting than descriptions of pieces of machinery.

One pernicious deduction from the theory of the invisibility of morals is that it is no business of a court of law to decide on the *moral* guilt of the prisoner, it is solely concerned with his *legal* guilt. There is a good use for this distinction, but this is not it. Legal crimes are a small sub-class of moral offences. They are those which in the opinion of law-makers do a great deal of harm

to the common good and can be checked by police action without too much public disturbance. A court is concerned with these sins just in so far as they harm the common good and not in so far as they are offences against God. Thus a man may get three years for a comparatively minor sin of theft, while for the much more serious sin of blasphemy he may merely be reprovved by a policeman. And this is reasonable and just; it is entirely unjust (not merely 'intolerant') to penalize a man for heresy or blasphemy unless this harms the common good. This traditional doctrine that legal guilt (liability to human punishment) is a particular kind of moral guilt (liability to a quite different *scale* of punishments) is wholly different from the view that since morals are invisible, courts are only concerned and can only be concerned with something quite different from morals called 'legal guilt'. The logical consequence of such a view is that the moral innocence of the prisoner need not trouble the court at all. The thought that half the people condemned for crimes are morally innocent should not trouble us any more than the thought that half the people condemned have names beginning with B, since the court is supposed to be as indifferent to the one as to the other.

The attraction which this view has for some people is partly due to a certain moral attitude and partly to certain unexamined philosophical presuppositions. Those who maintain it are often kindly people who try hard not to despise men who have been convicted of crimes; they recognize that there is something inappropriate about feelings of contempt or moral indignation for such men. But they are also people who can only avoid such feelings by saying to themselves, 'Perhaps the man is not really guilty in the sight of God'. The notion that they ought not to despise but rather to love a man even if they are quite sure he is guilty in the sight of God is outside the scope of their kindliness.

The argument by which this theory is maintained usually runs somewhat as follows: the moral goodness or badness of an action depends on the motives of the man who does it; now, while we can easily see the external action that the man does, we cannot see what his motives are inside him, these are visible only to God.

One cannot say everything at once, so we must leave uncriticized the suggestion that an action is only morally bad if accompanied by an interior activity called a 'bad motive'; extremely wicked people can and frequently do have excellent

motives. It is at any rate true that an action done with bad motives is never morally good.

The difficulty about the general proposition that motives are invisible is that we often say about a particular man that his motives are unfathomable. We say, 'The trouble is, I don't know what Peter's motives were in buying that house.' Here we mean to give information about a particular man. Had it been Andrew or Charlie, we imply, it would have been different, but with Peter you can never tell. But how can we say that just Peter is inscrutable if everybody is necessarily inscrutable? The word 'inscrutable' was invented to distinguish people like Peter from people like Andrew and Charlie; clearly if we are going to say that everybody suffers from inscrutability we must be using the word in some uncommon sense.

Now there is nothing in principle wrong with using words in an extended and uncommon sense (all philosophers and theologians, for example, have to do this), but it is well to recognize it when we do it. There is an ordinary sense in which we say that some people are emotional and others are unemotional, and there is also an uncommon sense in which we say that all men are emotional (i.e. have emotions, unlike plants). From the fact that someone is emotional in the ordinary sense it perhaps follows that he is more suitably employed on the stage than in the laboratory; but from the fact that everybody is emotional (in the technical sense) it would be unsafe to conclude that everybody is more suitably employed on the stage than in the laboratory. In the same way, there is an ordinary sense in which I do not know Peter's motives (perhaps he is an inscrutable type, or perhaps I just haven't been told enough about him), and this may make it impossible to pass a moral judgment on him. But from the fact that in some uncommon sense I do not know anyone's motives it can by no means be concluded that I cannot pass moral judgment on anyone.

What in any case is this uncommon sense in which another's motives are necessarily hidden from me? In what way can we say that all men are by nature inscrutable? That there is such a sense I am perfectly willing to admit; the old-fashioned and accurate way of saying it was to say that a man can keep a secret. Of course a man can hide his motives as he can hide his thoughts; how else could he play poker? A man can think that his friend is being

silly without letting him know that he is thinking this. But having a thought and hiding it is a more *complicated* activity than just having a thought. You say, 'I had the thought that he was silly, but I hid it.' Here you have described the thought by explaining what you *would have said* if you had not concealed it (i.e. you would have said that he was being silly). There is no other way of describing thoughts.

Lots of things can be hidden but motives and thoughts can be so well hidden that only God can find them. This is the grain of truth in the notion that we cannot know another's motives. We may be deceived, and this means that we cannot know infallibly what another's inmost thoughts are. It is, however, merely an elementary blunder to suppose that what we do not know infallibly we do not know at all. As a result of years of education I know a certain amount about chemistry, history, Hebrew, and Berkshire. None of this do I know infallibly, yet if this is not knowledge, what is?

One cause of confusion on this point is that if all I am told about a man is that he killed his wife, I am in no position to make more than a guess at his moral state. This is supposed to be because I have only had his external act described to me and not his interior act which is known only to him and to God. In fact my difficulty is that I have not had *enough of his external activity* described to me. If he is an intimate friend whom I have known for years I may be fairly certain that he is guilty of murder or that he is innocent, but this is not because I have seen into his inside, it is because I have seen a very great deal of his behaviour. A psychiatrist may tell us that a particular killer is not in fact guilty of murder, but a psychiatrist does not rely on divine inspiration, he is just a man who is more expert at watching external behaviour than I am. We could invent a parallel case about life itself: supposing that all I see is a film of the killing, I may not be sure that the killer is really alive, perhaps after all he is a carefully constructed robot. Nobody (except possibly some philosophers) would claim that this is a point known only to God and the man in question. Ordinarily we do not think that only Harry really knows if Harry is alive. We think that although life does not consist in doing any particular external action we can tell whether Harry is a living being or not by examining his external actions. The difference between moral guilt and innocence is harder to

determine than the difference between a robot and a living thing, but it is possible to determine it.

I hope I have succeeded in showing that, however difficult it may be to do it rightly, we can judge other people, because only when we realize that it *can* be done do we understand the *command* not to do it. We then realize that slander and detraction are not eliminated by the employment of such qualifications as ‘. . . of course I’m not impugning his motives’ or ‘No doubt he is innocent before God, but . . .’ any more than they are eliminated by the prefix ‘It seems to me that . . .’. There are certain clearly defined situations in which we have to pass moral judgment upon other men, and in which it would be wrong not to do so; outside such situations it is forbidden not by logicians but by God.



ART AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION¹

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ART is the servant of beauty and beauty is God, ‘Beauty’s self and Beauty’s giver’, and it is only when beauty is seen by the artist and by those who study his work as in no way reflecting God that art becomes an end in itself. We know, of course, the fame of the Church as patron of the Arts; yet her direct influence upon the kind of painting done began to slip late in the fifteenth century.

‘In the minds of many’, writes Berensen, ‘painting, although a very familiar art, was too much connected with solemn religious rites and with state ceremonies to be used at once for ends of personal pleasure. So landscape had to slide in under the patronage of St Jerome, while romantic biblical episodes, like the “Finding of Moses”, or the “Judgment of Solomon”, gave an excuse for

¹ The text of a paper read at the Newman Association Summer School, 1956.