

POLITICAL MORALS FROM THE LEFT

THE people who are restrained in their communism by a tug from their tradition of culture form a considerable body of opinion in this country. Their state of mind is hinted at in the title of the periodical they patronize, for the *New Statesman* incorporates the *Athenaeum*, and the *Week-End Review* into the bargain. Catholic publishing has entered popular journalism and has also admirably engaged the Tory temper; it has not yet succeeded in addressing itself to this Liberal-Marxist sentiment, though at one time the *Catholic Herald* promised fair to do so. Accordingly the book Mrs. Mitchison has written¹ to clear her own mind should be of more than biographical interest. Her object is to bring some kind of order into the modern economic and political scene. She advances in Indian file, from question to question, or rather from questioning to questioning, sensitive to the rustle in the undergrowth, and not by deployment from massed and established premisses. To reduce this Socratic method to scholasticism reminds one of the general from home who tried to make the Virginians fight according to the drill-books. Still, they both wanted the Ohio Fork, and it may be profitable to indicate here some strategic positions held in common by St. Thomas and the symbolic Mrs. Mitchison.

The first is that contemplation cannot be replaced by mere activity. The way men act is determined by their vision of what is good. Did not Cardinal Manning observe that all controversies are at bottom theological? Mrs. Mitchison finds that political activity as such is easy enough, but when you come to examine the underlying purpose of it all, then thought is muddled and contradictory. The difficulty is largely one of moral theology. For as Mr. Aldous Huxley observes, in *Ends and Means*, from Isaiah to Karl Marx there has been general agreement about the

¹ *The Moral Basis of Politics*. By Naomi Mitchison. (Constable. Pp. xxi, 376. 8/6.)

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goal of human life, but confusion and contradictions with regard to the roads leading to it. St. Thomas says the same,² that men may live for happiness in general terms yet differ as to where and how it may be found. Moral theory is directly occupied with these differences and it must attempt to settle them by referring to the true nature of happiness and the goal of human life which it derives from the higher sciences of theology and anthropology in the widest sense. Living merely practically on a series of day-to-day improvisations may be energetic and exciting, yet all specifically human action must take its direction and be intelligible on a theory.

The next point follows. Mrs. Mitchison is rightly doubtful about the value of measuring sticks in moral and political matters, yet she sees that the idea or vision making for action must be approached and indeed largely determined by the reason. Our instincts and desires make us contagious rather than communicative and humanely social; it is only through what the Vulgate calls *conversatio* (*politeuma*) that rights and duties can be enduringly established. And this implies an accepted rational framework. We may have no more success than the Meleans had when they met the Athenians with discussion and not force, yet only on this "liberal democracy" (the ideal is still worth fighting for though the word be unfashionable) can there be relations that are truly political, not despotic.³ Human activity is voluntary, that is coming from within with a reason. The violence of imposed force is unnatural and indeed is the death of action at the human level.⁴ Profounder than its pacifist sense is the truth of Our Lord's saying: *All that take the sword shall perish by the sword*. In social even more than in individual affairs do we forsake the reasonable and voluntary at our peril. The less than reasonable is never more dangerous than when it masquerades as the supernatural, a mysticism of race or state or religion which re-

² *Summa Theologica*. 1a-2ae: I: 7.

³ cf. 1a-2ae: LVI: 4, ad 3.

⁴ 1a-2ae: VI: 5.

fuses to appear before the judgment of reason. The *realpolitik* which results, whether it be cynical or exalted, is necessarily irresponsible. With the destruction of personal voluntary activity a decline appears in man's regard for truth, and not only when propaganda springs from vanity and hatred, as is seen when religious zeal smudges the clear characters of theological science. A totalitarian morality cannot respect the proper natures of things in themselves, but must break them to its general will; it cannot respect the unforced action of its members, which, to St. Thomas, is essential to political virtue.⁵

Mrs. Mitchison is of the opinion that a final and single pattern and purpose in human affairs has not yet been proved to exist, and for that reason the morals she puts forward are provisional. Nevertheless she would agree that politics are not autonomous and self-supporting, but must fit in with a wider scheme and be subordinate to higher principles if they are to play their proper part in the development of human life and happiness. Moral integrity, she says, is necessary for those who work in politics.⁶ In this connection, Mr. Aldous Huxley is inclined to be stringent, he regards economic and political reform as a branch of what may be called preventive ethics, the aim of which is to create social circumstances of such a nature that individuals will not be given opportunities for behaving in an undesirable, that is to say an excessively "attached," way.⁷ St. Thomas is more cautious,⁸ and it seems to be in accordance with his general theory to say that politics is the science and art of the morally permissible in society.

A fourth point of agreement is established when Mrs. Mitchison comes to criticize the several kinds of political vision. Industrial Liberalism, for all its promises, has not in fact allowed freedom as more than a luxury for a minority, while Totalitarianism is condemned on the prin-

⁵ 2a-2ae: L: 2.

⁶ cf. 1a-2ae: LXI: 5, ad 4.

⁷ *Ends and Means*. Chap. III.

⁸ cf. 1a-2ae: XCVI: 2.

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ciple that human persons are ends, not means. "I think the U.S.S.R. has to be very careful about this," she says staunchly, "there has been an only too obvious tendency to treat persons as means. However," she adds hopefully, "I believe there is already a reaction against this among the youngest generation of Russian Communists." For morality is only about people,⁹ and when they are treated purely as means they cannot truly be themselves. Persons are not utilities, but members of the Kingdom of Ends.¹⁰ Mrs. Mitchison belongs to a class disposed to go beyond admiration of the Russian experiment while at the same time being deeply suspicious of the attitude of the Catholic Church with regard to it, imagining a common front of Nazism and Catholicism against Bolshevism. But if she will take the evidence of official documents rather than of the popular press, she will recognize that the Catholic criticism of Russian Communism springs from much the same principle of human dignity she herself cherishes, and not from the obstructionism of a vested interest. Persons are personages, all of them, and inasmuch that Catholicism is not a totalitarianism does it condemn the collectivization of human life.

For St. Thomas what is virtuous and what is delightful coincide in the end.¹¹ He may be frugal in fun,¹² yet it does not escape him that playing is a matter of ends, not means.¹³ Since it helps to release the right relationships between persons, Mrs. Mitchison touches on play as essential in the ideal society. Play is necessary to everyone, we are the kind of animal that plays. But play by original definition

⁹ cf. 1a-2ae: XXI: 1.

¹⁰ cf. 1a: V: 6. VI: 4. XCIII, on man as the image of God. 2a-2ae: II: 3. Mrs. Mitchison writes (p. 60), "It seems possible that ultimately and beyond politics we may be all means to (or at least parts of) some end which we scarcely perceive, an end which Olaf Stapledon calls 'worship' . . . But if this is so, the end is beyond *all* of us and is not in the hands of any class of priests or prophets, nor can it be brought down to political or social terms."

¹¹ 1a: V: 6. 1a-2ae: XI: 3. XXXIV: 4.

¹² 2ae-2ae: CLXVIII.

¹³ 1a-2ae: I: 6, ad 1.

is free and it cannot possibly be play if it is run by experts. Nor should the term be restricted to its present narrow category.

With this *ultimum et delectabile* we can take leave of Mrs. Mitchison. There are questions she leaves undeveloped and inevitably twists here and there that are not ours. Moral questions, which concern the adaptation of human activity to human ends, cannot be thrashed out except on a more fundamental philosophy concerned with the nature of things. We must agree first as to what is meant by "being oneself." This is not merely a personal matter, for the self is not just an undifferentiated centre of energy, but elicits *kinds* of action in a world of *kinds*. Here we are in a cosmology and a metaphysics, and metaphysics, as Aristotle said, is a theological science. Then, also, there are passing references that suggest a too casual appreciation of Catholicism¹⁴ or a too easy association of mechanical with psychological freedom.¹⁵ But, in brief, *The Moral Basis of Politics* displays the mind that can charge words with sensibility and the mind that can filter their meaning.

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¹⁴ "The Roman Catholic doctrine of the sanctity of human life claims that a married woman must virtuously wear herself out and reduce the quality of her own life so as to produce the maximum number of children, even of poor quality." (p. 294.)

¹⁵ "The other way of change is by archaizing, by cutting out as far as possible the new materials of civilization with their results on society. This is the Nazi way. They cut out the products of the rubber and quinine trees, and with them the resultant freedom of women." (p. 309.)