Chapter (XII)

J. S. Mackenzie: The Source of Moral Obligation, International Journal of Ethics, Vol. 10, No. 4, (Jul., 1900), The University of Chicago Press, 1900, pp. 464-478.

THE subject that I have selected for discussion this evening is the problem of moral obligation, that is, in general terms, the question, Why are we bound to do what is right? as distinguished from the question, X What is the nature of right doing? Perhaps it may seem to some of you that such a question is somewhat too speculative, somewhat too remote from any practical bearing on the concrete problems of life, to be deserving of much consideration in such a society as yours. Indeed, even some speculative moralists have affected to treat the problem to which I refer with contempt. Referring to such questions as, Why should I do what is right? Why should I appreciate what is beautiful? Why should I want to know what is true? Mr. Bradley, who is certainly one of the subtlest of our philosophical thinkers, says that the only proper answer is, We do not know, and we do not care. I am doubtful, however, whether this can be quite the proper answer to any question about human aims and obligations. Still, I should like to try to disarm criticism at the outset by saying that it is not my object at present to discuss, in a purely speculative way, the correct answer to the question that I have suggested. I believe it would be more suitable for such a society as this, whose objects, as I understand them, are not purely theoretical, to consider the importance, from a practical point of view, of having some convictions with regard to the right way of answering this question. I intend, accordingly, to begin by

indicating the way in which this question seems to arise in connection with some of the most urgent practical problems of our own time, then to proceed to refer to some of the answers that may be given to it and to explain, in a somewhat brief and summary fashion, the answer that seems to me the most correct one, and, finally, to point out the practical significance of the answer that is given.

Recurring for a moment to the answer that is suggested by Mr. Bradley we do not know, and we do not care I should say that this is perhaps the kind of answer that would be appropriate in what Carlyle described as an Age of Faith. There are times when people see so clearly what are the claims made on them by the conditions in which they find themselves, that the question why they should meet these claims appears not only superfluous, but impious. Perhaps all of us find this to be the case with respect to the larger half of the work that we find before us. When the content of our moral obligations is perfectly obvious, it hardly occurs to us to inquire why we are bound to fulfil them. We hardly seem to have even the choice of doing otherwise than we do. Perhaps in times of faith this may appear to be the case with regard to the whole of life . Ich kann nicht anders-I cannot do otherwise-may be the feeling not only of a Luther, possessed with the passion for reform, but even of the majority of mankind. But in general it seems to be true, at any rate, in times that are not specially Ages of Faith, that there is a considerable margin in most men's lives, a region of doubt and indecision. It may be said that the doubt in such cases is generally with regard to the content of our obligation; but this does

not appear to be entirely true. Perhaps when we are perfectly clear as to the con -tent of our obligation we can hardly raise the question, Why ?But I believe there is a double region of doubt in many men's minds, consisting on the one hand of things about which they are not quite clear what they ought to do, and on the other hand, of things about which they are on the whole convinced that they ought to do something, but are doubtful whether it is worthwhile.

Now, on the whole, I do not think we can flatter ourselves that we live in an Age of Faith. By this I do not mean merely to call attention to the obvious prevalence of scepticism and agnosticism with regard to certain speculative problems; for I believe that such scepticism is quite compatible with the existence of an Age of Faith in the sense chiefly emphasized by Carlyle-i. c., in the practical sense. 'What I mean is rather that in our time scepticism has distinctly begun to cree'p-a it did in the time of the Greek Sophists-into the practical aspects of life, as well as into the more purely theoretical. I do not think that this would have been as true of the last generation as it is of this. In the last generation practical faith was not only represented among us by those two Hebrew prophets, Carlyle and Ruskin; but it would be easy to point to prominent men-in general the most prominent men-in all departments of public life, in poetry, in fiction, in politics, in science, in philosophy, in history, in art, even in military and commercial affairs, who were dominated by a somewhat similar spirit. Speculative doubt did not in many such instances materially affect practical moral conviction. Whatever may be true of other countries, our country has in the

main been faithful, in profession, if not in practice (for some people call us hypocrites), to the great moral traditions which are broadly associated with the ideas of Christianity. Now, no doubt ‹there is something of the same still; and, indeed, perhaps, quite as much of it still among those who do not accept the specific doctrines of Christianity as among those who do. But I think there is some change. It hag been pointed out by some, and I think it is on the whole true, that it would be difficult, in the various departments of life to which I have referred, to name men of equal eminence with those who could have been singled out in the last generation, as representing the same consistent elevation of tone and strength of conviction on the practical problems of life. I do not mention this as a sign of deterioration; for I am not at all sure that it is. I merely mention it as a point that has been noted, and that, I think, is on the whole true. And I may, perhaps, make my meaning more definite by saying that such teaching as that of Nietzsche would have seemed more surprising in the last generation than it does in this.

Here again I do not mean to imply that I regard Nietzsche as a bad influence. I only mean that he illustrates, more definitely, perhaps, than any other writer, the tendency to carry into the region of practical morality that sceptical habit of mind which had previously been applied in the main to more purely speculative problems. For Nietzsche has boldly questioned the whole standpoint of Christian morality, which he describes as the morality of slaves, and has sought to substitute for it a morality of freemen or lords, which would involve a complete

transmutation of moral values. Something of this was, perhaps, involved in Carlyle's doctrine of heroes; but on the whole, our British moralists, even when most revolutionary in speculative doctrine, have tended to write as if the general basis of morality was not to be called in question. It seems to me probable that this questioning attitude of Nietzsche will become more common as time goes on, and will render it more and more necessary for those who believe in moral principles to be able to give some reason for the faith that is in them.

Now, some of those who have noted this tendency of recent thought view it with a good deal of alarm. They fear that we are losing our old anchorage before we have found any new moorings, and that a general decay of moral purpose is to be anticipated, giving rise to a recrudescence of barbarism. Some even point to recent events as showing already the beginnings of such a decline both in this country and in others. They point to the revival of the spirit of nationality, with the violent passions which it breeds. and the appeal to brute force which is its inevitable resort. They point to the increase of armaments in Germany, the dominance of militarism in France, and the growth of the imperial spirit in both the great Anglo-Saxon peoples. They say that in all these nations the development of this kind of patriotism-which means, not so much love of one' s own country as hatred of the countries of others is accompanied by the spread of calumnies, the dread of open inquiry, the attempt to suppress freedom of opinion, and the appeal to the worst prejudices and passions of the mob. They say that we saw all this at a distance in France, and that we now see it close at

hand among ourselves. Such are, I believe, the pessimistic conclusions of several prominent members of ethical societies, and of others who are interested in the maintenance of the moral standard.

Now, I am not by any means prepared to deny that there is a considerable amount of truth in all this; but I think it is possible to regard it all in a much more hopeful light. If men's passions have been roused by national crises in this country and others, and if some have for a time lost their heads in connection with them, that does not justify us, who are in the position of calm students of human nature, in being carried away by the current, and mistaking the turmoil of the moment for the spirit of the age. I believe that there are deeper influences at work, and that perhaps those that are making for good may be stronger than those that are making for evil.

Hence, if I call your attention to such recent events, which must no doubt have a prominent place in all our minds, it is not with the view of suggesting a moral deterioration, in which, on the whole I do not believe, but rather of illustrating what I mean by the practical necessity for a clear consciousness of the true source of moral obligation.

Great problems are being forced upon our attention-problems that are in many respects old enough, but that in some respects also are essentially new-and these problems, unless we are very callous in -deed, must make us think a little, and ask ourselves where we stand. Let me try, then, to state, by way of

making my point more definite, what appears to me to be the great practical problem of the present time.

A generation or two ago the world woke up, one may almost say suddenly and this country, perhaps, woke up more suddenly than any other to the presence of a new problem among us, viz., the economic or social problem. It was talked about ‹written about. preached about, sung about, till everybody realized that it was there. It is, perhaps, an exaggeration to say, as has been said, that we are all socialists now; but it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that we are all social problemists. And the recognition of this problem has, to a great extent, altered men's moral conceptions.

The good man of two generations ago was an individualist-not in the sense in which an individualist is opposed to a socialist, but in the sense in which one who thinks mainly of personal obligations is opposed to one who thinks mainly of social obligations. We have changed all that. The good man of our time is one who thinks, not of personal virtues and duties, but of trades-unions and municipalities and model dwellings. This transformation has meant an enlargement of our interests, a shifting of our center of gravity, a readjustment of our moral estimates. But we have accommodated ourselves to all that, and it no longer suggests any very searching inquiry into the basis of moral obligation. We see our way more or less; and, though the great social problem is still very prominently with us, yet I cannot but believe that we are well on the way to its solution ‹ simply because we have so fully recognized it. To see a

problem is almost the same as to see through it; to face it is almost to conquer it.

But now it seems to me that in quite recent days another great problem has emerged in this country, at least as suddenly as the last one-the imperial problem. Just as our grand -fathers woke up to find that they were not, as they had fancied ‹merely individual human being, but parts of a great social organism, with the most complex interrelation of elements, and the most momentous interaction of results, so have we woke up, almost on a single day, to realize, as we had never realized before, that we are members, not of a country, but of an empire, that we have ties and obligations that carry us round the world. This, I cannot but think, is a great awakening, just as the other was. It is in truth but an extension of the same process. It is a further enlarging of our conception of the system to which we belong. Of course we have, in a way, had this enlarged conception all along, just as our grandfathers had a sort of social conception all along,; but it had not come home to us before; most of us have, I believe, been far too little awake to the demands which it made upon us.

It must be admitted, I am afraid, that this enlarged con - sciousness of our relations to the world has come to us in a somewhat disagreeable way, and has been accompanied by much that is in the highest degree objectionable-by much ‹even, that might not unreasonably lead us to fear that we are losing some of the best results of our past civilization, rather than advancing to anything better. But it should be remembered that the same might have been said of the early beginnings of our

social consciousness. Our wider social relationships and the economic and political problems involved did not at first present themselves to men's minds in any considerable degree as an enlargement of the moral consciousness.

They did not bring a sense of new obligations. They rather tended to make men more individualistic than they had been before, more inclined to insist that "business is business," and is quite outside the province within which conscience has sway.

It was only by slow degrees, by the labors of such men as Robert Owen, Carlyle and Ruskin, that the moral claims implied in the economic revolutions became at all apparent .Hence we need not he surprised that the consciousness of the obligations of empire does not at once come upon us as a matured and sobered sense of new duties, but is rather accompanied in some cases by the abrogation of duty and an apparent relapse to lower standards-by the contention, for instance ‹that empire is empire, and that such an end sanctifies almost any means. But I am hopeful enough to believe that this is only a passing phase of popular feeling-which generally attaches itself in the first instance to the most superficial aspect of things -and that in this case, as in the other, we shall find a gradual development of an enlarged sense of our duties and responsibilities. Hence I think the occasion calls, not for despair, but only for a renewed effort to understand what our obligations are.

Perhaps I may bring out what I mean a little more definitely by referring once more to some views of a writer to whom I have

just alluded. I am by no means a great admirer of Nietzsche; and I do not at all admit the truth of his view that Christian morality is a morality of slaves, and that we have to advance to a new morality which shall be that of masters. But I think this statement may be applied with some truth to express the general nature of the advance that is at the present moment demanded.

The moral consciousness of this country a couple of generations ago was not that of slaves; but I think it was too much that of men who did not sufficiently realize how far it was possible for them to control the conditions of their lives. The economic changes of the past century have to a large extent impressed on men's minds the great possibilities that lie before them in the way of improved organization, and have thus enabled them to feel more and more that they are masters of their fate, and that it is both their duty and their privilege to act as such. In this sense it may fairly be maintained that there has been a partial advance from an attitude of servitude to one of freedom. And I think it will be simply a carrying onward of the same advance if we learn more and more how great a part we may have, by wise exertion, in ordering the affair of other parts of the earth with which we are closely connected, and so of forwarding what has been, perhaps somewhat too magniloquently, described as "the parliament of man, the federation of the world."

I think we are bound to recognize that this is a thing to strive for, just as most of us have already to some extent recognized that economic reorganization is a thing to be promoted. It

would be low indeed, it seems to me, if we were to renounce these great obligations ،and hark back to those merely individual ideals which were indeed by comparison little better than a morality of slaves.

In this sense we may well reecho the language of Nietzsche - "The sea is in storm. Everything is in the sea. Up! Up !Ye old seamen's hearts. Fatherland, say ye? Our helm is set thitherward where our children's land is. Thither, stormier than the sea, storms our great longing ".Now it is, I think, when we find ourselves to be in such an attitude of fresh adventure that we feel the force of the demand for a right understanding of the source of moral obligation. The morality which does not know and does not care about its authority is seldom a progressive morality. It is rather one that holds fast by established traditions. It is of such that Nietzsche says again, "The good, verily, they cannot make anything new; they are always the beginning of the end.

They crucify him who writes new values on new tables; they sacrifice the future; they crucify all men's future." And it is because we stand face to face with great problems that concern what is distant and future, that we are called upon, more than ever before, to understand the source of our obligations .With respect to individual morality, inquiries of this kind are apt to seem uncalled for. Our ideas of individual morality ،of the kind of conduct in the ordinary affairs of life that is suitable for a gentleman and a Christian, is the result of a long course of development, and is, in the most cultured natures, a finely polished product, about which any further inquiry seems almost sacrilege. The relations of men in their

more complex modes of social intercourse are in a much more crude condition; and we may often discover there traces of an earlier barbarism which in the more purely personal relations of life has been long outgrown. And I believe it will be found that this is still more decidedly true with respect to imperial and international affairs. The way in which a gentleman believes with reference to his servants would probably be found in general to show traces of a finer development than we could commonly discover in the way in which a dominant race behaves towards a subject one. And similarly the way in which a gentleman behaves towards his neighbor shows, I think, in general a refinement and consideration for others for which we should look in vain in the behavior of one nation towards another. I do not merely mean that the attitude is different. This is perhaps involved in the nature of things; since a nation is not an individual. But I mean that in the one case we seem to see a crudity which reveals relative want of development, whereas in the other case we have something that looks more like a finished product. A small illustration may suffice. When we speak of the "honor" of a nation, most people seem to understand by it very nearly the same as they would have understood by the honor of a gentleman in the old dueling days. We have, I fancy, quite ceased to understand this now by the honor of a gentleman. We should all take it to have reference to the uprightness of his actions. Now, the actions of a nation must no doubt be of a somewhat different character from the actions of a gentleman. But it seems doubtful whether there is any sufficient ground for giving a different meaning to the word honor in the two cases. I believe the difference is due almost

entirely to the relative lack of development in our conception of a nation's obligations.

In all this I have been trying to bring out, by reference to questions of the day, how the pressure of practical problems may lead us to reflect on the source of moral obligations. But there is another point in the illustration that I have been using.

For, when we ask ourselves what the source of moral obligation actually is, we shall find, I believe, that the view that has the longest history, and that still exercises a good deal of influence over most men's minds, is that which connects our obligations with the authority of the state-a view which is at once found to be inadequate when we begin to think of the obligations of the state itself, whether towards its subject races or towards other sovereign powers. But it can hardly be doubted that for all primitive peoples the will of the tribe, usually as expressed by its chief, is the supreme law. "Tell the Spartans that we lie here in obedience to their law," is the supreme expression of the primitive conception of duty. And probably there is nothing that comes more directly home even to the modern mind than such appeals as-"England expects every man to do his duty"; "Here and here did England help me -How can I help England? Say." Yet we readily see that there are many aspects of the life of the modern man which such appeals do not at all touch; and this becomes especially apparent when such a nation as ours is being swept out of its insular seclusion by the call of more distant obligations. Accordingly, I refer to this primitive view of the source of

moral obligation ،only to set it aside at once, and to go on to notice some other views that have from time to time dominated men's minds .I suppose the view that has, on the whole, had the greatest influence, next to the conception of the state-if, indeed, its influence has not been even deeper and more far-reaching-is that which finds the source in the will of a divine power. This view seems to connect itself very closely with the first: for most nations have believed themselves to be under the protection of some God, from the time of the Jews, whose conception of the "Lord of H-osts" probably seems to many of us to have something in it that is sublime, to the present Emperor of Germany, whose confidence in his "Old Ally" probably appears to most of us to have more than a touch of the ridiculous. But the idea of a divine law-giver has seldom been used merely as an added sanction to the authority of the state. It has generally implied the recognition of obligations that are deeper and more far-reaching than any national laws. And this is a way of thinking of the source of moral obligation that even in quite recent times has been employed with much effect by moral teachers among ourselves-most notably, I suppose, by Carlyle. But the instance is significant; for it is always a little doubtful how far Carlyle's references to a divine law are to be taken as literal and how far they are rather symbolic. At any rate, most people at present would recognize that this way of expressing the nature of the source of moral obligation is un - satisfactory; not merely because so many doubt its reality, but because modern thought tends to invert the relation-not to proceed from the idea of God to the idea of morality, but rather from the idea of morality to the idea of God. I expect it would

be so fully recognized by the members of such a society as this that the latter would be the proper order, if there is to be any such process at all, that it is probably quite unnecessary to dwell upon the point.

Conscience is, I think, the next of the great sources that have been recognized for moral obligation; and this again connects itself very closely with the last. For most of those who have upheld conscience as an ultimate authority have regarded it as the voice of God within us. And, indeed, unless it is regarded either as the voice of God, or as the voice of reason, it is very difficult to treat it as an ultimate authority at all. Apart from such ulterior support, a man's conscience does not appear to be much more respectable than any other disagreeable feeling that he may have. It would be very nearly on a par with indigestion. Most people would recognize that the conscience of the fanatic requires some chastening. Even Butler did not deny this. The conscience of such a one may be the best guide he has; but it stands in need of education to make it reasonable. This means that we take reason, rather than conscience, as our final authority. And here again this transition is made so inevitably by almost everyone in modern times that I need not emphasize it further.

And so we are led at last to reason as the ultimate source of moral obligation. And T do not believe that it is really possible to go further than this. As reasonable beings, or beings who hope that they are reasonable, we cannot but be convinced that whatever it is reasonable to do it is right to do. The only doubt is, whether this source of moral obligation is not a

some -what dry one, whether it can of itself furnish us with any real content for the moral life. Kant did his best to show that it could; but most people are convinced that he was not really successful. Most people who have reflected much on the subject are agreed that all that reason can do is to point us to some end at which it is reasonable to aim; and that then the thought of that end becomes the ultimate source of moral obligation.

And thus we are led away from the idea of a law that stands as an authority above us to the idea of some good at which it is reasonable for us to aim.

And here, perhaps, we come upon the best meaning that can be given to that antithesis of Nietzsche's between the morality of slaves and the morality of freemen. For there is something slavish in the thought of an authority which we are simply to obey. I do not mean that the freeman is always "agin' the government"; but he has some other reason for being for it than simply that it is the government. And it is true that modern thought, as contrasted with the thought of the ancient Greeks, has tended too much to express moral ideas as if they depended on some law above us, instead of on some end that we seek to realize. We are only gradually learning to go back to the Greeks again in this, as in many other respects. But I think it is hardly fair to say that Christianity was responsible for the falling off in this respect. I believe that the morality of Christianity was in essence a morality for freemen, as well as that of Plato and Aristotle. But its significance had partly been

forgotten; and, I think, it is true that we have to learn to emancipate ourselves again.

Well, then, what finally is the end to which reason points us as the source of moral obligation? To this some would answer- Happiness. But if this means pleasure, it does not seem a sound answer to give. I need not trouble you here with the theoretical objections to regarding pleasure as the end. It is enough for practical purposes to say that any such answer must be comparatively empty unless we can point to those modes of human realization in which an abiding happiness is to be found. I think the best modern thought is concentrating itself on the view-which in essence is the view of Plato and Aristotle as well-that we can only get to understand the end which it is reasonable for man to pursue by studying human nature in the concrete in relation to the conditions under which it has to develop. I believe there is no royal road to such an understanding. It is not an end that can be summed up in some simple formula. Rather it involves, as Carlyle was fond of saying, a swallowing of all our formulas, and a resolute attempt to grasp the concrete reality of things through the experience of life. It is only thus that we can feel our way and learn by degrees how much there is of value in the life of the family, of the city, of the state, and of still wider human relationships. And I believe it is only in the gradual understanding of all these that we can find the ultimate source of moral obligation. The great lesson of modern thought is that our whole life is a development, that it is only through its growth that we can learn by degrees what its meaning is; and that its claim upon

our devotion lies simply in its being the only way in which we can realize what we truly are. To attempt to unfold the nature of this development would, of course ،carry us far beyond the limits of such a lecture as this .An answer of this kind-which practically amounts to saying that the end of life is the whole of life, rather than any particular thing that we can point to in it-is apt at first to seem discouraging. But I do not think it is so in the end. The moral life seems to be like walking or eating or playing a game.

We get to know both how to do it and what is the good of it, if we try, and hardly in any other way; and it is in this sense that Mr. Bradley's answer, to which I referred at the outset, is right. But, perhaps, it would be better expressed -We know, but we would rather not tell. I do not think that such an answer is discouraging. It is rather stimulating to know that we cannot discover our d unties in any mechanical way, but that life is its own interpreter, and that we can only grow into the understanding of the duties of life by living.

At any rate, if we accept this as the best result of modern, as it was of ancient, wisdom, the great lesson that it seems to bring to us is the need of incessant thought and vigilance. If the source of our moral obligations were some external law, whether of the state or of a divine power, we might learn it by rote and follow it blindly-"ours not to reason why." Or if we had simply to listen to the voice of conscience, we might afford to let our reason and all our other powers fall asleep . Or if the end were merely happiness, we might hope to reckon it out and be done with it. The idea that the source of our moral

obligations is the demand for the complete realization of human powers, is the only idea that makes incalculable demands upon us, and calls for constant wakefulness. But for beings like us, I believe that a demand of that kind is the most truly encouraging.

At any rate, it is not in a spirit of hopelessness that I have sought to put it before you. And by way of emphasizing the encouraging aspect of it, I should wish to recur to the point from which I set out. In the light of what I have said, you may perceive that it was not so much of a digression as some of you may have thought to refer to the great practical problems that are in front of us as a nation at the present moment.

If the view that I have indicated of the source of moral obligation is true, it is precisely in such problems that we should find the inspiration of our lives-that which fills them with their most real content. There is every reason, I think, why we should regard such problems, not only with courage, but with hope. The great need, here as always, is to be in touch with reality. We must see clearly where we stand. We, for instance, as members of this nation, must, I think, recognize once for all that, for good or ill (I believe for good), we have relations and obligations all over the surface of the earth. We cannot altogether refuse the imperial crown, even if it should seem, to some of us, to be a crown of thorns. But we must be careful in what spirit we accept it. True imperialism would mean, I think, the recognition that we have our part to play with others in the great task of advancing humanity, that we have to join heartily with others in the promotion of peace,

liberty, justice, and enlightenment, to which we hope all nations will be more and more devoted. Such a spirit would, I believe, be equally far removed from what are known in cant phraseology as Little Englandism and Jingoism-the one meaning, as I suppose, the failure to recognize the greatness of our obligations, the other the failure to recognize that the only true greatness is greatness of obligation. If we can learn to take our Imperialism in that sense, we need not despair of our country. We have, no doubt, like others, had great faults ،made great mistakes, even, I am afraid, committed what can hardly be called less than great crimes. But there is always room for repentance. If we truly grasp the situation before us, if we see clearly where our obligations lie, we shall, I am convinced, find nothing but good in the breaking down of our insularity, in the widening of our horizon, whether it be in Africa, in India, in Australia, or, it may be, nearer at home, in Ireland. If we seize the situation in the right spirit, there is every hope for us still, that when "the tumult and the shouting dies" there will be some fruit of our labors that is not wholly vain, an honor that is not rooted in dishonor, a flag that is something better than a "commercial asset." But if we do not seize the occasion in some such spirit as this, if we do not see the new duties which the new situation brings, then, I dare say, like so many other nations before us, we shall have our decline and fall; and, indeed, it will be high time that we should.