

## CHAPTER 12

# INTEREST AND MORALITY

In the history of ethical theory the differentiation between 'interest' and 'morality' finds clear expression in Plato's *Republic*. At the beginning of Book II we are introduced to a discussion between Socrates and his friends on the nature of justice; and one of the younger men says that, if we really wish to persuade people to live the life of justice, we must show them not that the life of justice 'pays dividends' but that it is good in itself. Virtue is to be shown to be its own dis-interested reward.

This is morality according to 'the Greeks': the pursuit of good for its own sake. With this in our minds, we may turn to the Bible. But need we even turn to it? Is it not a commonplace that the Bible is one prolonged appeal to pains and penalties; not to morality, but to interest? And when it contains, as it does occasionally, a hint of a further life, there too is not the keynote the same, the treasure laid up for the righteous, the fire awaiting the wicked? Morality seems to become a superior kind of commerce—if indeed it be superior.

That this is not in accord with the facts has been noted earlier (pp. 23 f.; cf. below, pp. 208 f.). The basis of Biblical morality is far from being utility in any shape. But the contrary opinion holds the field and the man of the Bible, confronted with the Greeks, is in a sorry pass. Goodness and interest stand opposed to one another. And goodness—morality—would seem to be in the hands not of the Bible but of the Greeks.

We may now turn to Maimonides. I quote first from the earliest of his great books, the Commentary on the Mishnah:

‘Understand the following simile.

‘Figure to yourself a child young in years brought to a teacher to be instructed by him in the Torah. This is the greatest good he could acquire in respect of the attainment of perfection. But the child, on account of his tender years and intellectual immaturity, does not grasp the measure of that benefit or the extent to which it leads him towards the attainment of perfection. The teacher, who is nearer perfection than the pupil, must therefore necessarily stimulate him to learning by means of things in which he delights by reason of his youth. Thus he says to him: “Read, and I shall give you nuts or figs, or a bit of sugar.” The child yields to this. He learns diligently, not indeed for the sake of the knowledge itself since he does not know the importance of it, but merely to obtain that particular dainty; the eating of that dainty being more relished by him than study and regarded as an unquestionably greater boon. And consequently he considers learning as a labour and a weariness to which he gives himself up in order by its means to gain his desired object, which consists of a nut or a piece of sugar.’

‘A nut or a piece of sugar’—this is ‘interest’; but interest not as opposed to, or distinct from, morality but as *leading to* morality.

We need not pursue the analogy in its fuller elaboration. Its point is clear. We cannot start with the ideal. Men have to be trained gradually in the right direction. So, like the teacher in Maimonides’s parable, the Bible promises reward for right action in the hope that, the habit of right action being once inculcated through the expectation of reward, its essential rightness would in the end be recognized for itself and be followed for its own sake.

Maimonides has no difficulty in showing that his solution of the moral perplexity is in line with the tradition of Judaism. The ideal of serving for love is a Rabbinic commonplace. One of the earliest recorded statements of any Rabbinic teacher runs:

‘Be ye not like servants who minister to their master upon the condition of receiving a reward.’ A later Rabbi, commenting on the Psalmist’s ‘Happy is the man who delighteth in God’s commandments’, says: ‘who delighteth in God’s commandments, not in the reward for his commandments’. Or again, the words of Deuteronomy ‘And it shall come to pass that if ye shall surely hearken to my commandments which I command you this day to love the Lord your God’ are caught up at once by the Rabbis who note: Whatsoever you do, do for the love of the Lord your God. ‘Let not a man say’—I am now quoting Maimonides’s second great work, the Code:

‘Let not a man say: “I shall observe the precepts of the Torah and occupy myself with its wisdom in order that I may obtain all the blessing written in the Torah, or attain life in the world to come”; or “I shall abstain from transgressions against which the Torah warns, so that I may be saved from the curses written in the Torah, or that I may not be cut off from life in the world to come.” It is not right to serve God after this fashion, for whoever does so serves Him out of fear. This is not the standard set by the prophets and sages. Only those serve God in this way who are illiterate or children, whom one trains to serve out of fear till their knowledge shall have increased until they serve out of love.

‘Whoever serves God out of love occupies himself with the study of the Law and the fulfilment of the commandments, and walks in the paths of wisdom, impelled by no external motive whatsoever, moved neither by fear of calamity nor by the desire to obtain material benefit; such a man does what is truly right because it is truly right, and ultimately happiness comes to him as a result of his conduct. This standard is indeed a very high one; not every sage attained to it. It was the standard of the patriarch Abraham whom God called His “lover” [Isaiah xli, 8, Heb.] because he served only out of love. It is the standard which God, through Moses, bids us achieve, as it is said: “and thou shalt love the Lord thy God”.’

It is thus the Love of God which, for both Code and Commentary, is the motive of right action, not the hope of reward or fear of punishment. Interest in the sphere of morals is seen to be like miracle in the sphere of logic: belief in it is a sign of imperfection. And we may carry the parallel further. Just as the denial of the false miracle directs the mind to the true one, so the denial of false interest directs the mind to a true interest. The true miracle, as we have seen, is not the infringement of natural order but its establishment and continued existence; and the true interest is not the reversal of self-less morality but the recognition of the necessity of self-less morality as the requirement of the moral self.

This profound vindication of morality is to be found in Maimonides's third great work, the *Guide*. It is its second master-theme. The first was the vindication of science. And just as science finds its justification not in the theological doctrine of miracle but in the Biblical doctrine of God's activity in the creation of nature as one ordered whole; so ethics finds its justification not in the theological doctrine of rewards and punishments, but in the Biblical doctrine of God's activity in the creation of man as a moral and intelligent being. This is the subject of two of the most striking chapters of the *Guide*, the very first and the very last.

The first chapter of the *Guide* is an examination of the word Tzelem ('form' or 'likeness') used in Genesis i, 26 and translated in the English versions: 'and God said, Let us make man in our *image*'; the last chapter (iii, 54) turns on the prophetic statement (Jer. ix); 'Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth, and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise loving-kindness, judgement and righteousness in the earth; for in these I delight, saith the Lord.' Maimonides points out that this passage is remarkable not only for its emphasis on the moral attributes of God but for its insistence that morality means action on this earth; and

since it affirms that it is in moral action that God 'delights', the meaning is that perfection for man lies in his imitation, in this life, of the ways of God in performing acts of 'loving-kindness, judgement and righteousness'.

The nature of these virtues is expounded in the preceding chapter (53). The first, Maimonides says, is pure, supererogatory, kindness; the second (judgement) is decision in action. The third ('righteousness': *Tsedakah*) is derived from *Tsedek* which denotes giving every one his due and showing kindness to every being according as it deserves.

'In Scripture however the expression *Tsedakah* is not used in the first sense, and does not apply to the payment of what we owe to others. When therefore we give the hired labourer his wages, or pay a debt, we do not perform an act of *Tsedakah*. We perform an act of *Tsedakah* when we fulfil these duties towards our fellow-men which our moral conscience imposes on us. Thus Scripture says, in reference to the returning of a pledge to a poor debtor: "And it shall be *Tsedakah* (righteousness) unto thee." When we walk in the way of virtue we act righteously towards our rational faculty and pay what is due to it.—*Tsedakah* ('righteousness') is thus kindness prompted by man's moral conscience, and it is a means of attaining perfection for his soul.'

This distinction between *Tsedek* and *Tsedakah* which is drawn by Maimonides is very close to that between 'justice' and 'love'. *Tsedakah* is something like 'equity'<sup>1</sup> in the sense of the attempt to redress the necessary hardship of law. It is 'kindness prompted by man's moral conscience' and is a 'means of attaining perfection for his soul'. The soul of man craves perfection, and finds it in performing acts of kindness beyond those demanded by law. Our rational faculty has claims on us, and we act righteously when we seek to meet them. So morality consists not in satisfying material interest (gaining reward,

<sup>1</sup> And is so translated in Munk's (French) *Guide*. It has been called (Hastings D.B.) the 'humanitarian virtue par excellence'. Later Hebrew uses it for charity (cf. above p. 92), presumably because it is an attempt to redress the wrongs of social inequality.

avoiding punishment), but in fulfilling the demands of the rational soul, that is, the soul of man as an intelligent being.

But we may still ask why we need worry about our souls. The answer is (to put it briefly), because our souls worry about us. Man is of such a nature that he must rise above himself. He is more than mere man. And here the enquiry of the first chapter of the *Guide* has its relevance, the enquiry into the meaning of the 'form' or 'likeness' in which man is made. The first chapter tells us that the phrase: 'man is made in the likeness of God' means that man has in him something of the divine intelligence; the last chapter draws the consequence that sharing in the divine intelligence means for man walking in the divine way: it is the making actual of the latent potentialities expressed in the phrase: 'likeness' of God. If I may adapt an old philosophic tag: rules of life are the twigs; moral virtues are the branches; the moral personality is the trunk; and the root is the divine likeness which God set in the mind of man.

The problem of the last sanction of morality thus finds its philosophical solution in a genuinely Biblical concept; and an examination of Rabbinic literature shows that the thought was never lost and that the tradition is essentially continuous. If the favourite name for God is the 'Holy One, blessed be he', a favoured synonym for man is 'the created in the likeness'; and the Midrash says on the verses 'Behold the man has become as one of us' and 'God made man upright': 'The Holy one, blessed be he, who is called [Deut. xxxii, 4] "Just and right" only created man in his likeness in order that man should be just and right like him.' Or again, on the verse 'And thou shalt not go up by steps unto my altar that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon':

'Stones have no understanding either of good or of evil, and yet God said: use them not contemptuously. *A fortiori* your fellow, who is in the likeness of him who spake and the world was made, must not be used by you contemptuously.'

To contemn man is to contemn God because man is made in God's likeness:

'It is as if a king of flesh and blood came into a country and set up statues and made of himself likenesses, and they coined for him coins. After a while they threw down his statues and broke his likenesses and annulled his coins and diminished the stature of the king. So everyone who sheds blood is accounted by Scripture as if he diminishes the stature of the King, as it is said: "He who sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the likeness of God made he man."

Or again, but more forcefully still and with the widest possible moral reference:

'R. Akiba said: "And thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself"—this is a great principle in the Law.

'Ben Azzai said: The verse "This is the book of the generations of man: in the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him" (Gen. v. 1) is a greater principle. It teaches us that we must not say [as we might if we only loved our neighbour *as ourselves*]: "Since *I* have been contemned, let my fellow too be contemned just as I was; since *I* have been cursed, let my fellow too be cursed just as I was."

'R. Tanchumah [a later teacher] explained: If you do that, know who it is whom you contemn: you contemn God in whose likeness man was made.' (Ber. R. xxiv, 8; Rabad on Siphra to Lev. xix, 18)