

## Ethics in Andalusia, Aldous Leonard Huxley

### Ethics in Andalusia

Two newspapers are published at Granada, one Catholic, one liberal and anti-clerical. Their inky warfare rivals that of Mr Potts and his detested colleague in *The Pickwick Papers*. A recent sojourn on the Moorish acropolis was pleasingly enlivened for me by the spectacle of the battle's daily vicissitudes. One skirmish in particular delighted me. It was over a play—one of those pleasant little farces which Spanish authors turn out with such facility and Spanish actors perform with such a lively brilliance. Produced at one of the local theatres, it had won from the critic of the liberal sheet unqualified praise—columns of it; for Spanish journalists of the second rank possess an almost unbelievable capacity for clothing the minimum of significance in the maximum of verbiage. I do not pretend that I read the article, for it was strictly unreadable; but I glanced at it for a sufficient number of seconds to know, not what it was about, for it was about nothing, but what was the sentiment that inspired it. Next day the clericals launched a counter-attack. They were not going to recommend immoral plays to their readers, not they.

They left it to the liberals to commit such infamies. They had been disgusted, but not at all surprised, to see that the critic of their contemporary had so far pandered to immorality as to praise—I forget the name of the piece. For their own part, they had no hesitation in pronouncing it an infamous production. But if any of their readers wished to go to a moral play, they could recommend—Here the name of the translation of an English crook play, which had just been put on at the other theatre. Needless to say, after reading this article I rushed to procure tickets for the farce. The reality, however, was bitterly disappointing. The infamy denounced so lyrically by the Fathers of the Church turned out to be the mildest little affair, such as French parents take their children to for a Christmas treat. There were a few jokes about the tender passion, a character who found the bonds of matrimony irksome; that was all. I came home feeling that I should like to sue the proprietors of the clerical paper for the price of my ticket. What swindlers! And it occurred to me that perhaps all the great scourgers of past immoralities were perhaps as fraudulent, in their loud denunciations, as the very right-thinking journalist who warned the Granadines against the corrupting influence of an ingenuous little farce.

Suppose some time-machine could transport us back into the world described so glowingly and with such obvious gusto by Juvenal; or into that, at the very end of the imperial epoch, denounced with so much Christian zeal (and for the ungodly, so alluringly!) by Salvianus: I have a strong suspicion that we should be sadly disappointed. What, only this? And we should immediately take our return ticket to twentieth-century Paris or New York. For the truth is that, if you speak about it in the appropriate language, practically any act can be made to seem practically anything, from saintly to infamous. Read George Sand, and you will be convinced that the best, the infallible way to please one's Creator is to satisfy one's amorous caprices, even if they should be focussed on the footman. Read, shall we say, Charles Maurras's comments on George Sand, and you will be made to feel that the lover of de Musset and Chopin was an insatiable man-eater, and that her doctrines were both silly and profoundly immoral.

It is entirely a question of language. If you have strong moral feelings (or else no moral feelings, but merely malice, merely a desire to show

off) and a talent for using intemperate language in an effective manner, you can make people believe that the world is fairly bristling with the most appalling iniquities. For those who have the right sort of literary or oratorical talent, taking the high moral line is one of the most paying of professions. Even in Granada. For, as I have said, the lash was unsparingly applied by the clerical critic. When he had done with it, the poor little farce might have been, at the least, Lord Rochester's Sodom. His review, I am sure, must have doubled the box office receipts.

Looked at dispassionately and with Martian eyes, perhaps the oddest thing of all was the fact that the right-thinking critic who had denounced the farce should have proceeded to recommend, as eminently moral, the crook play. The farce, it is true, dealt with adultery, which is one of the manifestations of the deadly sin of lust. But the crook play dealt with murder and robbery, which are manifestations of the equally deadly sins of anger and avarice. Moreover, the murder and the robbery were done, in spite of the rules of classic art, coram populo, on the stage, whereas the adultery took place, discreetly, off. What is more, one at least of the crooks was decidedly a sympathetic character, whom any suggestible and hero-worshipping young person might almost justifiably desire to resemble.

It will thus be seen that the right-thinking critic was recommending as moral a play in which two deadly sins were painted with extreme vividness and in attractive colours, while he denounced as infamous the much less vivid representation of another deadly sin. The judgment of the right-thinking critic of Granada would undoubtedly be approved by right-thinking critics in all other parts of the world. It is highly significant, in this context, that the word 'immoral' should have acquired among the English-speaking peoples a specialized and technical meaning. When we say of a millionaire that he is a very 'immoral' man, we are not referring to his vulture-like rapacity, his avarice, his swinish gluttony, his vanity and cruelty; we are referring exclusively to his habit of pinching the fleshier parts of his typists' anatomies and taking chorus-girls out to supper. Similarly, an 'immoral' book is one which deals with acts—it may be, perfectly licit and conjugal acts—of a sexual nature. An 'immoral' picture is a nude, not necessarily even in a specifically amorous posture; in England, at least, a nude is, legally speaking, immoral if it has not been freed from its superfluous hair. What censors cut out of films is never the shooting, the burglary, the profitable swindling and gambling; it is the kisses.

What justifies the right-thinking attitude is the fact (in my opinion enormously creditable to human nature) that the deadly sin of concupiscence is, for most people, much more attractive than the deadly sins of anger and even avarice. Granted the preliminary assumption that concupiscence is wicked, right-thinkers are justified in specially discriminating against the representations of this sin. For such representations are likely to lead more people into sexual crime than would be led into crimes of violence by the representations of murder and robbery.

Among the right-thinking the doctrine of the inherent wickedness of concupiscence is still held with an extraordinary intensity. Parnell was ruined because the Nonconformist supporters of Irish Home Rule were shocked by his adultery; the possibility of his being implicated in the campaigns of murder had left them relatively unmoved. In the famous Thompson-Bywaters murder case we were shown the spectacle of a woman passionately in love, but so respectable and embedded in such an

intensely respectable stratum of society, that she preferred murdering her husband to going and living in open sin with her lover.

Bywaters and Mrs Thompson were hanged—pathetic martyrs to a system of ethics which assigns the palm of immorality to the sin of concupiscence. A more recent example will serve to confirm my thesis. Some few days after leaving Granada, I picked up a copy of the Paris edition of the Chicago Tribune, belatedly arrived in Andalusia, and read that some unfortunate person in California had been condemned to fifty years' imprisonment for assaulting a young lady. Now, people who assault young ladies are obviously intolerable nuisances, and should be firmly dealt with; but when it comes to fifty years' imprisonment—well, really, isn't that carrying firmness a little too far? My own idea of a suitable punishment for masculine assaulters would be to subject them in their turn to the assault of a dozen or two of sturdy and active females.

In his fascinating book on The Sexual Life of Savages (so infinitely more sensibly, hygienically, and morally arranged than the sexual life of ladies and gentlemen), Professor Malinowski describes the treatment to which masculine trespassers are subjected by the women of certain tribes of Trobriand Islanders. I will not go into details; suffice it to say that the methods of the Trobriand ladies are exceedingly drastic. My suggestion is that these methods should be used, by a picked band of female executioners, on all men found guilty of assault on a member of the opposite sex. It seems to me very doubtful whether any man once punished in this way would ever offend again. But professional justice is not poetical—that is to say, not sensible; punishments do not fit crimes. The assaulters get sent to gaol—in California, for half a century at a time. A sentence of such enormity is only possible in a society where the word 'immoral' has come to connote, almost exclusively, acts of a sexual nature. The incorrect sexual act corresponds, in certain contemporary societies, to the expression of heretical opinions in Catholic and early Protestant Europe during the ages of faith.

There are indications that the scale of values in our ethical system is now undergoing a gradual modification. In large sections of contemporary society the importance of sexual acts has been minimized—unduly, even. At the same time, the dislike of cruelty seems to be steadily growing, and also (which is pregnant with the most important consequences) a certain tenderness of conscience with regard to the manifestations of avarice and the love of money is beginning to be noticeable. The mediaeval Catholic Church professed a passionate hatred for the love of money and used all the weapons in both its spiritual and temporal armouries to prevent men from indulging too freely in this sin.

Under Calvin and the later Protestants the Christian attitude towards money underwent a great change. The Old Testament notion, that prosperity was a sign of virtue (which indeed it is, if you limit virtue to prudence, industry, thrift, and the like), was revived. Today, under the influence of Socialists, Tolstoyans, William-Morrisites, and the various other modern protestants against industrialism, a certain reaction towards the mediaeval standards of economic morality has begun to set in. The time, it may be, is not so very far distant when the most hateful heresies, in the eyes of all right-thinking people, will be, not amorous, but economic heresies; when fifty years behind the bars will be the fate of the over-monied rather than of the over-sexed. Whether this state of things will be preferable to the existent state I cannot say; it will be different, that is all one can be certain of. It is fashionable nowadays to call every change a progress. I myself prefer the older, the less presumptuous and self-congratulatory name.

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