INTRODUCTION

To a certain extent, the problem of morality is changeless. "The moral state of men," wrote Christian Wolff, "is that which is determined by their rights and by their obligations. Moral man is man considered as the subject of these rights and obligations." ¹ But if the problem remains the same, the answers have differed widely. There was perhaps more homogeneity, a greater consensus gentium, during the Christian Middle Ages than there has been at any other time. The break up of the Christian metaphysical hegemony led to new views of man and of morals.

Although, strictly speaking, no positions were discovered that had not been anticipated by the Greek philosophers, we may nonetheless speak of a renewal of ethical thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The rationalistic emphasis of Descartes, and later of the Cambridge Platonists and others, brought about the powerful reaction first of Hobbes and then of Mandeville. Hobbes sees no real moral difference inhering in actions, since he derives obligation from power and justice from the social compact. Mandeville uncovers the path to utilitarianism, while apparently conserving the rigoristic distinction between virtue (nongeoism) and vice (egoism). In France, Bayle's corrosive skepticism questioned all accepted notions and abetted the upsurge of a "morale laïque" which social and psychological changes in the cultural

¹ Principes du droit de la nature et des gens, I, p. 13.
complex of his time were fostering. The rise of rational scientific materialism threw a new light on man's place in the world, on his nature and motivation. He was seen as moved by appetite, fear, and pride; his reason was often derogated as an instrument of self-interest, his moral conscience reduced to habituation or fear of sanctions. To many it now seemed doubtful that a divine influence was immanent and operative in the conscience, or at least that it produced a firm, valid, and (in the Kantian sense) practical awareness of obligation—a doubt which had already been announced by the Augustinian and Reformation conceptions of Christianity. Even deists, men of moderate tendencies, although hoping that somewhere in the universe there is a power which is on the side of right, thought they had better seek out a more concrete foundation in man's nature as a social being, a naturalistic foundation independent of metaphysics.

Such solutions at least left the hope of either inducing or compelling men to conform to moral principles in their conduct. Where Christianity broke down, something had to be put in its place, lest the human moral world succumb before the onslaught of those who insinuated that there was no right but only might, no valid law but only tyranny, and no hope for changing what had to be. Somehow, the light would be kept burning in the human habitation, even if it were true that outside was nothing but the dark night of an indifferent universe.

The history of eighteenth-century ethical speculation is, then, one of challenge and response. The first challenge came from the emptiness which ensued in the minds of many thinking men from the collapse of the Christian cosmos. It seemed at first not too difficult to replace what had been lost, and even to set the new structure on firmer ground. But then the second challenge came

3 I have already pointed out that confidence in reason—at least in a kind of practical reason—was reintroduced by some of the same writers in the doctrine of enlightened self-interest, and in the belief that "enlightenment" can be increased among men. (L. G. Crocker, An Age of Crisis. Man and World in Eighteenth Century French Thought, p. 253.) Rationalism increased in the second half of the century, even as its antithesis, sentimentalism, also did.

3 "Eighteenth century philosophers," writes J. L. Talmon, "faced a mighty challenge." The Church accused secular philosophy of destroying the two essential conditions of morality—an absolute point of reference, and the unity of human existence—thereby undermining society. "The philosophes felt the challenge so keenly that, as Diderot put it, they regarded it their sacred duty to show not only that their morality was just as good as religious ethics, but much better." [Cf. An Age of Crisis, chap. 13.] "A great deal of eighteenth century thought would assume a different complexion, if it was constantly remembered that though a philosophy of
from those who tore down whatever such humanists tried to build. These challengers declared that mankind had to live permanently in the ruins and rubble of the collapsed moral world, perhaps with armed guards to keep looters and snipers in check, perhaps with none. This group of radicals, although they were few, could not be ignored. They reintegrated man within the all-embracing fold of nature to a degree which denied him any transcendence or exceptional status. Diderot, for instance, warns us that "it's every man for himself in this world," and that "the world is the house of the strong." This was the second challenge. It grew out of the critical rationalism of the eighteenth century, its psychology, its theories of determinism and materialism. Robespierre, speaking to the Convention on the eighteenth Floréal of year II, summarized with understanding this aspect of the century which lay behind him. "In a large part we owe them [the philosophes] that kind of practical philosophy which, reducing egoism to a system, considers human society as a war of ruse, success as the rule of justice and injustice, probity as an affair of taste and convention, and the world as the patrimony of clever crooks." How accurate this diagnosis was we shall have ample occasion to observe in this volume. But any student of the eighteenth century will realize to what extent it is confirmed, even outside of the philosophic writings, in the theatre from *Turcaret* to *Le Mariage de Figaro* and in the development of the novel.

Robespierre's diagnosis, however, is only a partial truth. The vast majority of writers were concerned, quite to the contrary, with a positive response to the challenge, with avoiding that position which he sets forth as the heritage of the philosophes. The facts of nature, they recognized, may include those which the immoralists cited as their justification. There is, however, another fact: the moral world in man. It is here that the problem of the genesis of moral experience becomes important, and we can understand why so many writers were concerned with it. If we knew the origin, it was thought, we would know the status of the moral life: whether it was natural or artificial (to use the vocabulary of the time); whether it was primary—that is, coequal with the egoistic protest, revolt and spontaneity, [it] was intensely aware of the challenge to redefine the guarantees of social cohesion and morality. The philosophes were anxious to show that not they, but their opponents, were the anarchists from the point of view of the natural order." (*The Rise of Totalitarian Democracy*, pp. 21–22.)
impulses, even though at variance with them—or secondary, the product of culture; and whether it was instinctual, emotional, or rational. The two principal traditional approaches to ethics, the intuitional and the utilitarian, reveal their shape in this inquiry and foreshadow their responses to the major substantive problem of ethical value.

Certainly, the epistemological inquiry would not in itself solve the moral problem. No matter what the truth happened to be concerning the origin and status of "moral knowledge," it could never do away with the ineradicable reality of moral dilemmas and decisions. It would not tell us, in any troubled situation of life, what is the right thing to do, or determine us to do that right thing even if we knew it. Indeed, in some cases it may have had a contrary effect and discredited moral conventions by uncovering irrational or scandalous origins. At the least, it seemed evident that the development of the moral notions in any culture does not, in itself, confer absolute authority on our traditional and instinctive moral feelings.4

On one thing the defenders of morality, religious or humanistic, were agreed, although they would not have expressed it in the same phrases or concurred on the ultimate motivating goal. The essence of the moral problem, it was clear to all, was that of the socialization of the egoistic individual. This was the basic reason why ethics and politics became inseparable. The nihilists were precisely those who denied any status to this problem or solved it in favor of the natural egoistic propensities. On the one hand, there is the moral conscience, whatever its origin, commanding us to think in terms of others, or more exactly, of standards and acts which underlie and safeguard the existence of society.5 On the other hand, there are the instinctual, egoistic drives of the individual toward pleasure, power, and pride. Since men are free, as many observed, from the compelling fixity of instinctual animal behavior, they are free to violate conscience and prefer self to collectivity. The measure must be balanced, or social life and the survival of the species become impossible. And yet there were some who asserted, and innumerably more who acted as if they, too, asserted that such limitations on the individual egoistic

4 Cresson: Le Problème moral et les philosophes, p. 182.
5 This is clearly and precisely stated by Raynal, Histoire des Deux Indes, Livre XIX, chap. XIV.
vitalities violated the universal natural law which makes the weak
the victims of the strong. For them moral law was an artifice of
the weak to frustrate nature, and as such can command no status
in the eyes of the strong.

Eighteenth-century ethics, consequently, does not separate theory
from the practical need to make men virtuous. A twentieth-century
ethical philosopher writes: “The author does not undertake to
teach the duties of the gentleman, nor to show that virtue is
preferable to vice and that he who submits to its rules is not the
dupe of his prejudices.” Such a statement would have been
deemed most strange in eighteenth-century France. The basis of
values, the nature of virtue, the reasons why we should be virtuous,
and the methods of making men virtuous were all considered as
the phases of a single problem, and the last two phases tormented
philosophers not the least. Mandeville, for instance, contrasts the
state of nature in which the self only is considered with the social
state. In the latter, the problem is to make men believe “it was
more beneficial for every Body to conquer than indulge his inter­
est, and much better to mind the Publick than what seemed his
private interest.”

Furthermore, this problem supplied the link between ethical
and political speculation which were so closely allied at that time.
“All men,” states Hume, “are sensible of the necessity to maintain
peace and order, and all men are sensible of the necessity of peace
and order for the maintenance of society. Yet, notwithstanding
this strong and obvious necessity, such is the frailty or perverseness
of our nature! it is impossible to keep men faithfully and unerr­
ingly in the paths of justice. Some extraordinary circumstances
may happen in which a man finds his interests to be more pro­
moted by fraud or rapine than hurt by the breach which his in­
justice makes in the social union. But much more frequently he is
seduced from his great and important, but distant interests, by
the allurement of present, though often very frivolous, tempta­
tions. This great weakness is incurable in human nature. Men
must, therefore, endeavour to palliate what they cannot cure.”

This problem, in France at least, was further conditioned by

6 Dupréel, Traité de morale, p. v.
7 Kaye, The Fable of the Bees, I, p. 28 (original pagination).
the prevailing theory that the quest for happiness or pleasure and the avoidance of pain or displeasure were the motives of all action. Such a supposition slants the problem in a definite direction and leads to d’Holbach’s concise formulation: "To make men happy through virtue: that is the great problem which ethics must undertake to resolve." This direction of thought was, in fact, apparent much before d’Holbach. Butler had already written, "I suppose it may be spoken of as very much the distinction of the present to profess a contracted spirit and greater regards to self-interest than appears to have been done formerly." This turn toward naturalism projects another aspect of d’Holbach’s problem. If self-love is the center of the psychic life and its unique motivation (a debated question which we analyzed in the first volume of this study), how could one explain the fact that man is inevitably a moral being? Nor could one escape this fact by denying, as some sought to do, the existence of God and valid imperatives. The moral facts, such as self-sacrifice, and the ethical judgments were irremovable.

There were, then, two principle general questions (each having many facets) in eighteenth-century ethical speculation. The first concerns the origin of our moral judgments. Does "right" refer to inherent characteristics of actions, or does it only indicate approval? By what principle of our constitution are we led to form such distinctions? Is it, for instance, by our reason, which also perceives the distinction between truth and falsehood, or perhaps by some other peculiar power of perception or of intuition? Why do we approve of some acts as right and disapprove of others as wrong? Is the root to be found in the emotion of pity or in self-interest? Are these distinctions necessary or local and conditioned? This entire problem which was not of interest to the ancients now becomes important, in part because it is related to the wider problem of knowledge.

The second question relates to the object of moral approbation. Is there a common quality of rightness in the different modes of virtue (benevolence, rational self-love, proper action in a given situation)? If this quality is the unegoistic, that which tends toward the common good, what is its relation to the egoistic? Again we inquire, first, how it made its appearance beside the egoistic, and

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9 Le Système social, III, p. 164.
10 Five Sermons, Sermon IV, p. 1.
then, wherefrom it derives a superior validity in choice, and after that, why men should be guided by its sway (the practical problem of inducing them to be so guided).

On the question of origin, it might be held that both egoistic and altruistic impulses are among the original endowment of human nature, or that the egoistic becomes altruistic as a result of rational meditation, or again, that the altruistic grew out of the facts and needs of society. In the first case, man is held to be naturally a moral being. This does not necessarily mean that he would be a moral being without society, but that he brings to social experience innate moral attitudes, predispositions, and even, perhaps, criteria. The Natural Law and moral sense theories fit in here. The other two theories implied that the moral life is an artificial accretion, resulting in different ways from society. These theories did not, in turn, deny innate potentialities, but they emphasized the implantation and inculcation of moral experience. They also held such experience to be a valuable and necessary supplement imposed upon the natural. This attitude contrasted with the view of the immoralists, who also considered the ethical as an artificial adjunct, but concluded that it was invalid and to be abandoned, if not by all of society at least by the superior and the strong.

Other questions followed from these, inevitably, but they were mainly rephrasings or special aspects of the main question. Is justice prior to law or does it derive from law? This is really to ask again whether the feeling of right and wrong is prior to society, or whether it stems from it, or is at least validated by it. Either of these views involved the assumption that society—in the sense of stable relations and codes—came into being. Still another way of approaching the problem hinged on a decision as to whether moral notions depend on an immutable, absolute order, such as God's will, universal reason, or human nature, or whether they grew up as an empirical reaction to the particular experience of various cultures. Followers of the traditional Natural Law theories adhered to the idea of an immutable order. Moral sense theorists found another absolute basis in human nature. Utilitarians and naturalists might prefer the solution of experiential development; but often,

12 "Natural" is taken here in the sense of "original," "spontaneous." For definitions of these and other terms, see *An Age of Crisis*, Prefatory Note.
like Voltaire and Diderot, they mingled two or more theories. The force of the belief in a universal human nature was too great to be ignored entirely by most writers, but the content of this universal was subject to a variety of interpretations. Rivarol, near the close of the period, summarizes this thinking. “Morals, like the political body itself, is founded on homogeneity: for there is none between man and beast, nor between man and God. Among animals, they would be founded on animality; among angels on spirituality; among men, they would be founded on humanity, mother of all virtues, for it leads first to justice and then to beneficence.” A natural morality, then, would be one based on universals in the human psyche, which might, in turn, depend on universals in our physical and social life. “The philosophes,” writes R. R. Palmer, “obtained the advantages of theology by appealing to an absolute humanity . . . they invoked the judgment of man in general. Diderot in particular took this course. He deplored the fact that Helvétius should call ideas of right and wrong mere local and variable conventions.” Morality might be “artificial,” in the sense that it developed from social living, but it was nonetheless a natural development. With this even Rousseau would have agreed. On the other hand, it was also possible to conceive of nature not as a fixed order, but as a living process devoid of finalities, as a history pregnant with the unforeseeable. Either attitude permitted the belief that mankind could be organized for the achievement of definite objects, and in ways so opposite as to foreshadow the cleavage between a totalitarian or a liberal society.

Reason in the Age of Enlightenment, as in any other age, demanded a conceptual morality objectifying and projecting its own existence. Whether such concepts formed a body of knowledge or truth was another question which vexed inquiring minds. It was also assumed by most that the will has the capacity to direct action in accordance with such universals and the demands of a particular situation. Here, however, great complexities arose for those who argued that actions are necessarily determined, and for those who maintained that reason is only the servant of the passions.

13 See An Age of Crisis, chap. 7.
We shall encounter many other problems which grew out of the effort of exploration and reconstruction. We shall see that the French writers of the eighteenth century—both *philosophes* and others—were deeply and constantly concerned with abstract questions relating to the moral life (even as they were with abstract questions relating to human nature, the political and economic organization of society, the origins of religion, societies, myth, etc.). They could not easily forget their preoccupation with the basic, multifaceted problem of our moral and social coexistence. 16

History is a succession of evolving cultural complexes, each of which is a tension of conflicting polarities, themselves ever-evolving, creating moments of unstable stability like the points in the flight of Zeno’s arrow, leading to a new cultural complex. The “unity” or “character” of a period lies in the unique dynamic equilibrium it achieves; that is to say, in the peculiar forms and emphases given to the polarities, resulting in the unique form of the relatively stabilized tension of evolving contraries which prevails; a uniqueness which includes, among the factors, the peculiar shape of the questions that are asked and the “preconceptions” and other tools which are brought to bear in the quest for their solution. Independence and dependence (the individual and the whole), the universal and the particular, the absolute and the relative; authority (conformity) versus criticism (originality), reliance on pure intellect versus trust in feeling (in its physical and emotional forms), nature versus art—these are among the unending polarities whose metamorphoses and recombinations, impelled by the changing facts of culture and the natural restlessness or dissatisfaction which characterizes the species, lead us, insensibly or by brusque revolution, from one cultural complex to its equally self-liquidating successor.

It is the aim of this study to supply a view of many of the conflicting elements of the cultural complex of eighteenth-century France, a view of their peculiar nature (reflecting the facts of that cultural moment), and of the peculiar balance of their opposing

16 Cf. J. L. Talmon: “But Carcassonne himself had to admit that the nearer we get to the French Revolution, the more prevalent, not to say universal, becomes abstract and dogmatic thinking, and that in the more strictly political field.” (Op. cit., p. 261.) The statement is even truer in regard to ethical thinking and the two are, as we shall see, indissolubly linked.
force which created a dynamic tension with sufficient stability to warrant the appellation, "Age of Enlightenment." 17

17 A word of caution. The reader will, it is hoped, discriminate between the objective analysis of eighteenth-century ideas and the author's critical perspective upon them. It is nowhere suggested that materialism and amoralism are interchangeable words; or that there is any logical connection between moral idealism (or lack of it) and a given metaphysical position. Where a logical connection is asserted, in this volume or in An Age of Crisis, between ideas and events, reference is usually to a particular historical framework, outlook or intellectual climate, that of the period under study, rather than to abstract logic. Finally, it is worth repeating that the word "nihilism" is always to be taken in the ethical sense, as the denial of the validity of all distinctions of moral value.