

THE SEPARATION OF ETHICS FROM POLITICS

By Lewis Berens

From *LAND VALUES* (1909)

The most fatal error that ever happened in the world was the separation of political and ethical science.—Shelley.

The truth of the above words are too often impressed upon our minds when listening to discussions of political or social questions, more especially by professedly religious men, whose political or social views are so often in direct contradiction to the ethical conceptions which form the basis of the religion they avow to follow. In truth, however, Shelley should have said “the attempted separation,” for there can be no science of politics apart from the science of ethics—separated from ethical principles, politics degenerate into mere questions of expediency: and such questions cannot form the subject of a science.

A group of armed men, or of men having usurped the control of the armed forces of the nation, may temporarily have the power of enforcing on the community any enactments they may please: rules or laws determining their respective relations to the natural resources of the country they are inhabiting, or as to the portion of their individual earnings they shall be forced to surrender to others or to the State; or as to the terms and conditions under which they shall be permitted to exchange services or commodities with their fellow-workers in their own or in other, “foreign,” countries. Their discussions as to what laws they shall enforce upon others, or allow to be altered, may be dignified by their own chroniclers or historians as “political discussions,” even though those indulging in them might sneer and smile at any appeal to ethical principles or ethical considerations. Nor is this surprising, since any such government, no matter how long established, is necessarily based upon might, not upon right. Hence their impatience of any appeal to right—even though some few of them may avow themselves followers of the great philosopher, who first proclaimed to the world that “Men should seek to follow what is right, not what is established.”

Those living under Constitutional Government, however, under government representing and responsible to those whose ill-being or well-being will be so greatly determined by the laws for which they themselves are more or less directly responsible, are under the impression that their government is necessarily based upon right, and exists, as far as they are concerned, to enact and enforce the right. Hence it is, probably, that in discussions among such people on any proposed change or legislative enactment, one is almost sure to hear the question raised—“Would it be right? Would it be just?” As Henry George well says—“This tendency of popular (political) discussions to take an ethical form has a cause. It springs from a law of the human mind; it rests upon a vague and instinctive recognition of what is probably the deepest truth we can grasp: That alone is wise which is just; that alone is enduring which is right.”

To provide the test, touchstone, or criterion of what is right, is acceptedly the special function of the Science of Ethics. Ethics has been well defined as “the science of the conduct of life in society.” And surely politics is neither more nor less than the art of regulating and determining the conduct of life in society, of determining and enforcing rules or laws of social life and social conduct conducive to the well-being of all, and which consequently all may be called upon to respect and to obey. Therefore it is that to us it seems self-evident that it is in the Science of Ethics alone that we may hope to find the fundamental principles necessary to the creation of a rational or scientific politics.

Ethics, in truth, is the science of human relationships; and the fundamental concept of any rational system of ethics is equity or justice, or, in other words, the recognition of the equal claim of all to life, and all that this involves. Hence it is that, despite all the teachings of the many pseudo-political philosophies of to-day, the instinctive feelings of “the man in the street” lead him on the right road, when, with Aristotle, with whose very name he is probably unacquainted, he ventures to appeal to Justice as “the social virtue,” as the one criterion of what is socially or politically right.

In the social world, as in all others, mankind are slowly commencing to attempt to trace effects to their causes. Hence they are beginning to leave off blaming Dame Nature, Fate, Fortune, Destiny, or Chance for the effects they see around them, and for which their own actions, more especially their own social laws and institutions, may be directly responsible. Hence, too, the soul-killing Fatalist Creed, and with it the accompanying sense of utter impotency, despite all its many influential supporters, is commencing to yield pride of place to more healthy, more inspiring, and more rational beliefs. The thoughtful amongst mankind are becoming dimly conscious of the fact that in the social or political world, as elsewhere, men reap what they themselves have sown; that if they would reap very different effects from those they see everywhere around them, they must themselves sow very different seeds; that we are suffering the effects of our own sins and the sins of our fathers, just as we are being benefited by our own and their well-doing; and that if they would remove certain social effects, they can only do so by removing the causes that produce them.

Therefore it is that in every part of the civilised world the study of Sociology, or Politics, is being pursued with an ardour and enthusiasm aroused in no other field of thought. And everywhere students are turning to the Science of Ethics for principles on which to build the new Science of Politics, which, as De Tocqueville pointed out many, many years ago, “is indispensable to a new world.” Justice, the fundamental principle of every rational system of Ethics, is being acknowledged as the only possible fundamental principle of a rational system of Politics. And so the unnatural divorce of Ethics from Politics, against which Shelley rebelled, and which is undoubtedly due to the subservience of the prevailing religious, ethical, political, economic, and social thought to the interests of the all-powerful privileged classes, is rapidly coming to an end.

In common with all lovers of truth and of humanity we rejoice at this fact, so big with promise of reasoned and beneficial social changes. And all the more so since we, and those who work with us, are inspired by the conviction that, as our Great Master expressed it, “Justice is the natural law—the law of health and symmetry and strength, of fraternity and co-operation,” and that the cause we exist to promote is itself based on this basic, life-giving principle of Ethics and Politics. ■