



the moral law by-passed

*the science of good and
evil is necessary for
survival.*

A lecture by Dr. Borsodi, October 1976, before the Fellowship of Religious Humanists, St. Louis, Mo.

by RALPH BORSODI

About 2,500 years ago, in ancient Greece, Plato made a statement which I have always cherished: "It is not the life of knowledge, not even if it includes all the sciences, that creates happiness and well-being, but a single branch of knowledge—the science of good and evil. . ." At about the same time, on the other side of the world in ancient China, Confucius said much the same thing. "The moral law," he said, "applies to everything and governs everybody: you may climb to the top of the highest mountain and fly to the uttermost reaches of the sea, and no matter where you go or what you do you will find no escape from the obligations of the moral law."

I ask you to consider a fact established, I believe, by overwhelming evidence: that the technological and industrial civilization of which we are so proud is corrupt from top to bottom. I ask you to consider the possibility that it was immoral in its inception nearly 200 years ago; that it is becoming more and more immoral day after day.

I believe that this is unrecognized due to the fact that the leaders and teachers of our world, ever since the industrial revolution, have been engaged in the commission of a kind of moral treason.

The fact that industrialism has provided us with abundance and affluence explains, but does not justify, our indifference to its immorality.

What a man believes is of almost no consequence when compared to how he behaves. He may believe in the most outrageous superstitions, in a world governed by gods and by demons, in a future with a hell and a heaven, but so long as he does nothing to violate the moral law, he is a better man than is the leader or teacher who ignores the moral law.

Religious liberals of all persuasions believe that there is no moral law—that there are only moral customs. Believing this, they feel justified in down-grading or even ignoring altogether the most important problem: That every human action, every existing institution and every social movement has a moral dimension.

Some kinds of actions make for individual and social well-being. These are good. Others make for individual and social ill-being. These are evil.

I do not mean to say that there are no well-intentioned individuals and that nobody who is a part of our civilization is trying to behave decently. There are millions of such people, thank God. But their problem is that which Reinhold Niebuhr discussed in his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.



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Industrial society and industrial civilization manifests itself as does every society and every civilization in two ways: (1) in what the individuals who are a part of it believe and value and do, and (2) in the consequences of their institutionalized activities. I use the word institution as sociologists and anthropologists use it—to designate a prevailing and accepted pattern of activities, a pattern practiced by people to provide for their various needs and desires. The distinction between individual and institutional evils is therefore crucial.

Murder and robbery, and all the other crimes about which we read daily, are individual evils because they are actions which are committed by individuals and actions which are individually motivated. That these are evils is a matter generally recognized. But that industrialism is an evil is not. It is not recognized for what it is because it is an institutionalized evil.

The pattern of activities which lies at the heart of industrialism is the division of labor—a pattern imposed not only upon labor but upon society itself during the industrial revolution. There was a veritable revolt against it where it began in England less than 200 years ago. But the historians condemn not those who imposed it upon society but the revolters—the famous Ludgate rioters, for instance. Adam Smith, who so ironically was a professor of moral theology, began the process of rationalizing what took place at that time in his epoch-making *Enquiry into the Wealth of Nations*—a process which economic historians, capitalist economists, and even social revolutionists are still justifying today.

The rationalizers and justifiers of industrialism have led the leaders and teachers of the modern world to accept and to value above all else what they like to call progress. Though progress at first only produced scandalous profits for the factory owners and shameless exploitation of the workers, it led eventually, it is true, to a high scale of living for nearly everybody.

But it wasn't progress; it was greed which provided the dynamic for the industrial revolution. And it is still greed which is providing the dynamic for industrialism and industrial growth today.

Troubled by greed as a motivator of human action, Adam Smith said that an invisible hand transformed what was doubtfully moral into a system which made for the material well-being of everybody. A little more than a hundred years later, Samuel Gompers, whose claim to fame rests upon what he did to unionize American labor, was asked what he was really after. He replied with one word: "More." A little less than a hundred years after that—with America the richest nation in the world and American labor earning the highest wages in the world—everybody, both rich and poor, not only in America but in every nation, both developed and underdeveloped, is still struggling, and often fighting and warring, for "More."

Materially it is not how much, but what and how, that is commendable. Greed, no matter how glossed over, can never be made morally commendable.

Adam Smith began his *Enquiry into the Wealth of Nations* by contrasting the pattern of activities central to the factory system with that central to the craft system. He called this new pattern the division of labor. He called attention to the fact that it made

ten-fold increases in the volume of production possible. But he said nothing about the morality of what this involved.

It was a Cornell University economist, Simeon Patten, who put his finger on the truth when he distinguished between the elevation and the degradation of labor. It is morally commendable to provide work which involves an elevation of labor. But it is morally condemnable to require human beings to do work which debases and degrades them.

To substitute unskilled assembly-line work for the skilled work of a craftsman—no matter how much it may increase the production of wealth—does not alter the fact that it involves degradation.

Treating a human being as a machine—as a means not an end—was denounced by Emmanuel Kant in his great categorical imperative long before the success of the industrial revolution made us indifferent to its moral implications.

No one, for instance, can buy an automobile without becoming a party to the degradation of the workers on the assembly line of the factory which produced it. No one can drive it without consuming gasoline and becoming a party to the destruction of one of the earth's irreplaceable natural resources. And no one can use it without contaminating the air and become a party to its pollution. In fact, no one can use any industrially produced product at all without becoming a party to the evils involved in its production and use.

No one generation, no matter how wealthy and affluent it may make itself by doing so, has the moral right to destroy gifts of nature to which future generations are just as much entitled as are those who happen to be living at this time. Profligacy with what belongs to others, is morally condemnable. It may be enjoyable but ignorance of the truth about it does not make it any less condemnable.

Wall Street—America's money center—promotes and expands industrialism. Washington—America's power center—protects and defends it. Everybody in America seems to accept and tolerate it. But no one can escape from the moral infection for which it is responsible. The moral insensitivity and the indifference to morality which this engenders creates the climate not only for corruption but for the frightening increase in crime of all kinds.

A little over a year ago, the Lockheed Corporation was shown to have been bribing government officials all over the world. So far 225 of the biggest corporations of the country have admitted the payment of such bribes. In Japan alone 15 officials including a former prime minister, were jailed for accepting millions in bribes from the company.

A few years ago, in a scandal that shook the nation, the most influential bankers in Wall Street were shown to have looted the Penn-Central Railroad—the biggest in the United States—after having bamboozled investors out of tens of millions of dollars in the merger of two bankrupt railroads.

The moral sickness typified by this is not confined to big business. Big labor is equally corrupt.

But the moral infection which encourages this is not confined to the nation's leadership. It tends to infect everybody, and what is worst, to infect the young. Every year the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which compiles the crime statistics of the nation

BORSODI'S CRITIQUE OF MODERN INDUSTRIALISM [IN 1928] IS NOW ECHOED WEEKLY BY IRATE YOUNG RESEARCHERS BEFORE CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEES ON INFLATION AND RISING FOOD PRICES, WHILE HIS ADVICE ON HOME ECONOMY FINDS A READY AUDIENCE FROM READERS AS WIDELY SEPARATED AS MOTHER EARTH NEWS AND FAMILY CIRCLE. —Dr. Robert Fogarty, Antioch College, Ohio.

shows increases in the per capita rate for crime, and for many years now, an increase in the proportion of crimes committed by the young. Our juvenile court system has been reduced to a shambles by its inability to cope with a constantly rising tide of juvenile vandalism and violent crime. Something in modern life seems to be making each succeeding generation less and less decent and more and more vicious.

At the time when ancient Rome was at its perihelion, when wealth was pouring into the city from every corner of the Empire, Horace, Rome's greatest lyric poet, foresaw its decline and fall and wrote these terrible lines:

Our fathers, viler than our grandfathers,
Begot us, who are still viler,

And we shall bring forth progeny even viler still.

We need to set up a task force to lay the foundation for the realization of Plato's call for a science of good and evil and so make possible the kind of moral re-education and the kind of moral revolution so desperately needed.

Moral relativism and moral traditionalism will have to be given up. The doctrine that good and evil are mere matters of custom will have to be discarded. One of today's most generally accepted pragmatic doctrines is untrue; that all problems, big and little, can be left to resolution by the competition of personal interests, group interests, and national interests.

It is indifference which is responsible for the continuing exploitation of man by man and nation by nation. It is indifference which creates the desperation which erupts into violence and terrorism, and warfare and revolution. It is indifference which is responsible for the ever-increasing pollution and devastation of the Earth. Unless some movement is launched, continued indifference to the fact that every human activity has a moral dimension will end with mankind perishing from the Earth.

Humanist organizations and humanist churches will have to become a great positive force engaged in shaping individual behavior, individual beliefs and individual values in the light of the moral law.

Once equipped with an empiric and scientific basis for evaluating both individual and institutional behavior, inculcation of the moral law will not only have been made justifiable but mandatory.

What is needed cannot be done politically by the enactment of laws. No political change, not even a complete social revolution, can cope with the problem we face. Mankind cannot be made moral by using ballot boxes, by using police clubs, and least of all by using the point of bayonets. What humanists will find themselves faced with is really a two-fold educational problem, in part intellectual and in part emotional. We face the challenging task of making it clear that science itself both justifies and mandates the substitution of a positive-scientific morality for the dogmatic moralities of the past and the relative customary moralities of today.

For nearly 2,000 years the whole Christian world whole-heartedly and unquestionably accepted the Biblical doctrine that every

species of animal had been divinely created and that man himself had been created in the image of God. When Charles Darwin, after 20 years of study, finally published *The Origin of Species by Natural Selection*, the whole of Christendom exploded. It is impossible for me to find words which adequately describe the fury and excitement of the debates which took place. Christendom was at bay. Its leaders felt that they were battling on the field of Armageddon. If Darwin was right, the Holy Bible was wrong.

It took Thomas Huxley about a decade not only to get a hearing for Darwin's startling thesis but to secure its acceptance by the whole scientific world. What Darwin and Huxley did was to launch a scientific and moral revolution.

If Jacques Ellul in his *Technological Society*, if the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's study of *The Limits of Growth*, if Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*, and if Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle*, are even half right in their predictions, industrial society cannot last another hundred years.

A single fact alone is enough to prove the truth of what they are saying: the increase in the volume of plutonium which must be stored for thousands of years as nuclear power plants proliferate all over the world. Here in the United States with only 63 plants in operation, we have already accumulated 75 million gallons of high-level radioactive wastes. In one location alone they have already had to cope with 18 serious leaks involving thousands of gallons. According to a report of the Federal Energy Research and Development Administration, these wastes will "constitute a radiological hazard for hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of years."

This is only one of the many hazards of industrialism capable of making life on the Earth impossible.

Imagine what would happen if such a task force as I have tried to describe published a first report—perhaps in the form of a manifesto—signed by hundreds of thoughtful and concerned men and women, calling for a re-evaluation of what the leaders and teachers of mankind were doing in the light of a real science of good and evil.

Imagine what would happen if that science were used to evaluate the world's devotion to industrialism and its dedication to industrial growth, and that such an evaluation proved that industrialism itself was morally indefensible.

Imagine what would happen if it suddenly dawned upon people that the reason it is impossible for the most highly industrialized nation in the world to cope with its social, economic and political problems is because industrialism itself makes it impossible to do so.

Twenty-five hundred years ago in a simpler, fresher world, Plato called for a science of good and evil. In spite of the thousands, perhaps the hundreds of thousands who have read what he wrote so long ago, we still have no such science. We have hundreds of sciences of which he never dreamed, but the science—without which he said none of the other sciences would make for the well-being and happiness of mankind—is still missing.