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The Seven Deadly Virtues, 1924.

If men could be classified simply as good or bad, and if we could tell immediately when a thing was right or wrong, the problem of ethics would be a very simple one, indeed; and there are people who regard the problem of ethics a very simple one. There are some people who are more ready to judge others than to be judged themselves; who swiftly characterize a person as either good or bad, without knowing definitely or conscientiously what the standards of judgment or evaluation are. If you were to press that individual who is making moral judgments upon someone else, as to just what standards he has employed, you will perhaps find that he has none, that he is following some primitive emotional reactions to certain deeds which ~~he has been~~, and his ancestors were, accustomed to regard as good or bad.

Now, to the thoughtful man it is quite apparent that there is no man who is absolutely good or absolutely bad, and that perhaps there is no one single act which is absolutely good or absolutely bad. The rabbis were wise when they advised men to look upon themselves always as half guilty and half innocent. For life is not a very simple thing but a very complex thing, and our actions, the simplest of them, are the results very often of tremendous conflicts within us. We are what our ancestors have made us, what our environment has made us, what our own will has made us, and these three influences

are constantly at work struggling for mastery of us and determining the simplest of our actions.

So that the more thoughtful of us have come to judge other men's actions not so much by the actions themselves as by the motive back of the action. But even there you are not on safe ground, for a man may perform the most praiseworthy of deeds prompted by a most unworthy motive; and a man may perform a most damnable act prompted by the best of motives. The zealot who kills in the name of religion, or the patriot who slays in the name of the honor of his country, or the young son who carries on a family feud in order to defend the honor of his family,--each one of these may be performing an absolutely immoral act prompted by a most moral impulse.

And very often we ourselves are at a loss to know whether what we are doing is really the result of a moral impulse or an immoral impulse. Sometimes we do a thing and consciously we are absolutely sure that we are doing it for some good purpose, and yet if we were able to go down beneath the surface of our life into the secret chambers, almost subterranean, where our emotions and our sentiments are hidden in the labyrinthian recesses of our soul,--if we were able to descend there and to discover just what are the unseen hands that are guiding us to do that particular act, we would oftentimes be frightened and ashamed of ourselves.

We do not always know what is good and what

is bad. Now just as it is difficult to know when a man is good or a man is bad, so is it difficult to know when a quality of the soul is good or bad. Virtue and vice are not at the opposite sides of an impassible gulf. They are not at all poles asunder, as some people imagine. Virtue or vice are perhaps like unto rungs on the same ladder, so that a man can pass swiftly through ascent or descent from one to the other. Vice and virtue are grounded in the same basic human instincts which are neither bad nor good. The same instinct which is resident in every human being, given free expression along social channels, becomes a virtue; the same instinct given expression along a selfish channel becomes a vice.

Fundamentally virtue and vice derive from one source. Take the instinct of food. If food is employed in order to preserve life, that instinct becomes a virtue, because self-preservation is the first law of nature; and the first law of human nature, and the first law of civilization. That instinct driven into an egotistic channel leads to gluttony, to the abuse of self, to degradation of self, and becomes a vice. You take the instinct of sex. Driven into social channels it leads to some of the most beautiful things we have in social life--to family, to love, to sympathy, to the building of homes. Deviated into selfish channels that instinct becomes the source of the worst of degradation and the worst of perversion, the most anti-social instinct.

You take the instinct that is resident in you

and in me, and in every human being--the gregarious instinct, the desire to be with other people and among other people--that makes for society, that makes for companionship, that makes for civilization--a most desirable instinct. But when it becomes ingrown and self-centered, it leads to clannishness, it leads to racial and national chauvinism, it leads to exploitation, it leads to imperialism, it leads to war. So the same thing may be a bane or a boon to human life, as it is used or abused.

Now, in olden days, when men knew less about the intricacies of the human soul and regarded life as a much more simple proposition than we do today, they were in the habit of systematizing and simplifying their virtues and their vices. The Greeks were the first people to have drafted a list of basic, fundamental virtues. They said there are four cardinal virtues: Wisdom, Courage, Temperance and Justice. The first three are individual virtues; the last, Justice, is a social virtue. These three or four virtues are based upon the natural constitution of man. Man has a mind, man has feeling, man has will. The virtue of the mind is wisdom, the virtue of the feeling is courage, the virtue of the will is temperance, and the harmony of the three, the harmonious organization of life, the proper balance in structure of one's life, is Justice.

In later days the church, because of its theologic convictions, added three more virtues to this list--Faith, Hope and Charity--giving us seven cardinal

virtues. These three virtues--Faith, Hope and Charity--are not so much based on the natural constitution of man; they are aspirational qualities, qualities to be reached up to; they are formative impulses in human life. Faith, Hope and Charity are driving urges in human life, and not so much descriptions of the elements of human life.

So there you have the list of the cardinal virtues which the church accepted and transmitted to this day. The number seven was selected largely because seven has always had a mystic and sacred significance. And similarly, the church, to balance the seven principal virtues, drafted a list of seven deadly vices. This list was largely drawn up under the monastic influence of Christianity during the Middle Ages, and they betray that particular bias of the monastic life.

The seven deadly sins are--if you are not acquainted with them--Pride, Covetousness, Lust, Envy, Gluttony, Anger and Slothfulness" - a rather imposing array of caput capitalia, the principal sins to which poor man is addicted.

Now, in Israel no attempt was made to classify virtues and vices until a comparative late time, but already in the Bible you find attempts to designate which are the outstanding, and above all else, desirable virtues; and so in the Book of the prophet Isaiah, speaking of the the prophet said, "And the spirit of God shall rest upon him the spirit of wisdom and understanding (the Greek.....)

the spirit of counsel and might (the Greek courage), and the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord," which is the Hebrew version of temperance. And that is significant. Greek ethics had nothing to do with religion; it was evolved through logic and reason; it began in man and ended in man. Jewish ethics began in God and ended in God.

The Greek placed as his first virtue Wisdom. The Jew said, the psalmist and the sage said, "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord." The great Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, gives a most perfect expression of this ethical concept of the Jew. The Jew never built up an ethical culture system apart from God. The Jew could not conceive of ethics unrelated and ungrounded in divinity. If God did not exist then all attempts to build up ethical systems and all preachments for the moral life was vague and meaningless and stupid; then "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die."

And Maimonides, in his last chapter of the Guide to the Perplexed, the most marvelous philosophic book which the creative mind of Israel produced, says man strives after perfection. That is the goal of all ethics--perfection. Now, he says there are four kinds of perfection. There is the perfection as regards property; each man strives to protect himself against want; perfection as regards the having of all things which we desire--money and homes, and even titles; position and reputation. That is the first kind of perfection we seek after, and the lowest kind, for,

after all, that type of perfection is concerned with things which have no essential connection with our life. I say "This is my home." In reality it is not mine at all. Just a legal fiction has established my relationship to that house. Tomorrow it may belong to another one. I say "I am king." That, too, is an imaginary relationship. Tomorrow I may cease to be king, and neither kingship nor myself will be changed through this change in relationship. That is the first kind of perfection.

The second kind is the perfection as regards the body, as regards our health, as regards our physical constitution--perfection of looks, perfection of strength. That, too, we all seek after. But that, too, is an inferior kind of perfection, for that perfection is not peculiar to man. It belongs to us not as men but as living beings. The animal may share that perfection with us.. However strong we may become, and however swift we may become, there is some animal that is stronger and swifter than we are. Breitbart can carry two motorcycles on his chest, but any mule, says Maimonides, can throw out of commission the strongest of men. That is the second kind of perfection.

Now there is a third and a still higher type of perfection, and that is the perfection of character, moral excellencies. We try to develop all the moral impulses within us, and yet, says Maimonides, even that perfection is not an end in itself but a means, a means to something else and something higher; for those moral

excellencies a man can exercise only when he is with his fellowmen. Take that man and put him on an island all by himself and those moral qualities of his remain latent and dead; he will never have a chance to exercise them. The quality of justice, the quality of wisdom, the quality of courage, the quality of benevolence can only be exercised by a man when he is in relation with other men, when he is in society. By himself and alone they have no function in life.

There is, therefore, says Maimonides, a fourth and the highest kind of perfection--the goal of all ethical effort, and that is to perfect ourselves spiritually and intellectually, so that we may know and understand and reach up to God. That perfection is our own. We share that with no other man and with no beast of the field. That perfection we can exercise and utilize when we are alone in the world. That is life in its fullest and highest--the life in God. And that is the uniqueness of Jewish ethics.

I hear from time to time mothers and fathers say, "Well, if my boy or girl grows up to be a good man or woman, and follows the Golden Rule, that's all that is necessary. They don't need any religious training; they don't need to attend religious school. I'll just teach them to be good, and that's all they need in life." That point of view is hostile to the whole Jewish attitude and to our traditional point of view. Unless that boy or girl takes into life the impulse towards God, the consciousness of

doing things because God wills it and God commands it; unless back of the few ethical dicta and moral precepts which a young boy or girl receives, is the overpowering feeling that there is a wise and knowing and seeing and providential spirit in whose hand we live, by whose will we exist and for whose glory we live, those ethical precepts will be cast to the four winds when an overpowering temptation comes to the life of that boy or girl later on in life. They are not grounded in the stability of a powerful faith, and without faith, hope and charity, the other four virtues remain formal and inoperative in human life.

But this morning I want to speak a moment about certain virtues which are on the borderland--borderland virtues; but what I call deadly virtues. And I want to demonstrate to you this morning how readily, if we are not very cautious, a virtue, a seemingly fine virtue, may by the slightest over-emphasis or the slightest deviation turn into a most deadly affair.

You take the virtue of ambition--a most laudable quality to have. The man who has no ambition is dead; the man who does not endeavor to pass from one degree of excellence to another does not partake of the zest and the relish of life. Life without ambition is a very dull and stupid affair. And yet how often this very virtue, through the very slightest of distortion and over-emphasis, becomes a deadly and destroying thing. How often by the slightest shifting of the objective of ambition from that of

being to that of having, that virtue of ambition becomes the vice of avarice, and he who partakes of it destroys himself; because ambition, when it attaches itself to the pursuit of things, can never be satisfied. The more it is endowed the more insatiable it becomes--like a devouring fever which feeds and grows upon the very things which are employed to still and allay that fever.

I very often see old men, who feel the shadow of the hand of death come upon them, and in their eyes there comes a haunted and a frightened look; and oftentimes I can see into their souls, and I know that they feel that life has cheated them of something. Here they have spent thirty or forty years of their lives at the beckoning hand of some overpowering ambition. They had slaved and toiled and given of the sweat of their body and soul to realize that ambition, hoping that when they are sixty or sixty-five they would be able to retire and enjoy those things which they could not enjoy while they were furiously pursuing that ambition, and now when they have come to that long longed for period in life, life is cheating them, because the messenger of death is at the door.

And yet those men have cheated themselves. They pursued not ambition but avarice. Ambition is to be more; avarice is to have more. If a man tries every day of his life to be more, to refine his emotions, to increase his knowledge, to extend his grasp upon the world, to open new windows out upon life,--if he strives for that he will

never feel cheated. He may die young, but he will have partaken of that peace which passeth all understanding. He will have experienced the joy of some perfection. But one whose ambition is concerned with things, with having more, with putting close control upon more things,--that man will never be satisfied.

Take the virtue of contentment. That is a fine virtue--to be content. By the slightest over-emphasis that virtue becomes a vice, and contentment turns into complacency and shiftlessness and indifference to the world about him. We accept the status quo, and so we pass our life in status quo until the day of our death. Whenever we develop, we never experience the lure, the urge, the drive of an exhilarating enterprise; we never can feel the thrill of experimentation, we never can feel the joy of thrusting aside curtains and veils and peering into a new world and seeing new horizons, because we are content to stay where we are; the pull of gravity is holding us down, chained to our little, small world - and contentment becomes a vice.

Discontent is often the greatest of virtues. But there, too, not discontent with the number of things which you have, not discontent with having, but discontent with being. That kind of discontent makes for progress, for evolution, for development, for spiritual growth.

Take the fine quality of prudence, tact, discretion; social relations are facilitated and felicitated by the use at times of a little bit of discretion and a

little bit of tact, and yet raised to a higher multiple and that virtue becomes the fashionable sin and vice of fashionable society; that virtue becomes insincerity; that virtue becomes hypocrisy. Prudence is a good thing, but when prudence tells you to compromise when you ought not to compromise; when prudence tells you to be cautious for your skin and for your position and for your peace of mind, when you ought not to be cautious; when prudence tells you to adapt yourself and to yield a point or two for the sake of peace or for the sake of convention--what's the use of incommoding yourself and what's the use of hurling yourself into a controversy, why, just yield--then prudence becomes an enemy of society. For only he who at times is ready to throw caution and prudence to the winds, only he who at times is ready to champion an unpopular cause because life demands it,--only he can become a leader of men. Prudence over-emphasized destroys manhood and devastates character.

Take the virtue of self-respect. Self-respect makes for dignity; self-respect makes for confidence; and no man can do a big thing in life who hasn't a sense of confidence, who does not think much of himself. I have no use for the man who does not think much and very much of himself. But that virtue of self-esteem distorted just the slightest bit makes for snobbery, makes for conceit, makes for the besetting sin of the wealthier classes of society. Self-respect is based upon the essential humanity of all men; self-respect is based on the belief that God

dwells in me, but also in you. Conceit is based on the assumption that some imaginary excellence, not shared by other people, dwells for some unknown reason, perhaps because of my own memory, in me. Snobbery bases itself on the stupid assumption that some preference has been given by life to me, which cannot be shared by another man. Self-respect is ready to acknowledge the same privilege and the same prerogative of dignity and honor to every human being who works for it and exercises it.

Take the laudable virtue of loyalty. You give me a man who is loyal to his friends, a boy or girl who is loyal to his or her father and mother, men who stand by one another in weal or woe, and I will show you God's choicest creation. And yet you read a play like Galsworthy's "Loyalties" and you are startled when the thought is brought home to you that loyalty can become a deadly thing; that lesser loyalties and the conflict between lesser loyalties may kill when the highest loyalty, the loyalty to truth, is forgotten in the lesser loyalty of friends, of family, of profession, of what not.

You take patriotism. It is right and proper that a man should lay down his life for his country. Man has conceived of no nobler symbol of self-sacrifice than he who dies for his homeland. Patriotism is a supreme virtue, and yet over-emphasized, ingrown, it becomes the breeding place of international rivalries, of racial antipathies, of imperialism, of war. Every soldier that fought in this late

war on this side or on that side was a patriot; and every boy who laid down his life on the battlefield on this side of the battle line or on the other was dying for a noble cause; and yet both of them were engaged in a most immoral and destructive enterprise--war!

And lastly, for I, too, have selected seven deadly virtues; not because there are only seven--I know of many more, myself--but because it is a sacred and mystic number: you take the virtue of purity, of whiteness of soul, of holiness, which is the same as perfection, that surely is a virtue, and yet just through the least bit of over-accentuation the purity becomes prudery, and the love of that which is innocent becomes the worship of that which is ignorant. A false sense of purity makes possible all your censorship movements in the country today; censorship of books, of plays, of paintings, of sculpture, based upon one's narrow, limited, perhaps distorted because suppressed, psychologic qualities. White is white because it is made up of all colors, and the highest type of innocence is not that which is based on ignorance, the ignorance of a babe, but that which is based on a sound understanding of all that goes into the making of human life--of the struggles and the temptations and the sufferings and the sins of the world. Only he is pure who has known the miseries of suffering and the temptations of life, and has through sacrifice and self-restraint and self-discipline overcome them, resisted them, translated them into the fuller life.

And so to sum up: virtue and vice derive from one source--the instincts of the human being. These instincts, given social expression, make for the life victorious; given selfish expression, make for the destruction of life. Virtue is moderation; virtue is spiritual normalcy. Vice is too high or too low a spiritual temperature, too high or too low a spiritual blood pressure. Virtue is health and harmony of being. And that is why the Greeks said that when wisdom and courage and temperance are obeyed, are made regnant in life, the resultant will be a harmony which they called Justice.



RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER,

"THE SEVEN DEADLY VIRTUES."

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

JANUARY 20, 1924, CLEVELAND.



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ARCHIVES



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