

INCENTIVES FOR GOODNESS BY JP.

In days gone by men ~~it~~ tried to be good, impelled by some higher moral force in which they believed; and goodness meant such things as truthfulness, honesty, kindness, chastity, unselfishness. Men felt that it was the highest moral beauty to try to be good. Whether they succeeded in their trial, or whether they tried at all, was a different matter. The important point is that society provided every individual with the motive to be good; it was the command of religion, of God; it was necessary for one's highest growth, for self realization; it brought peace and supreme happiness; it brought salvation and freedom from births and deaths.

In present society, with the hold of religion gone, faith in God shaken, moral values discarded as dead weights of the dark ages of history; in short, with materialism enthroned in men's hearts, are there any incentives to goodness left? Indeed, has the question any relevance ~~as~~ at all to present facts, problems and ideals of human society? I

I hold emphatically that no other question is more relevant to us today.

In spite of what may be broadly described as the materialistic climate of present society, men everywhere are engaged, in their different ways, in creating a heaven upon earth - in remaking, refining, perfecting human society. These efforts, even the most idealistic and ambitious, such as communism of its original conception, seemed, however, to be shipwrecking on one obdurate rock - human baseness. It is clearer today than ever that social reconstruction is impossible without human reconstruction. Society cannot be good unless individual men are good and particularly those men who form the elite of society.

Here then is the crux of the modern problem. Men wish to create, if not an ideal, at least a good society. Modern science and technology make that task far easier than ever before. But men lack the tools with which to make themselves. And the ideas are forgotten and they begin to fight for power, position, spoils, bringing down the whole edifice of the new society.

Therefore, the problem of human goodness is of supreme moment today. The individual asks today why ~~it~~ should he be good. There is no God, no soul, no morality, no life hereafter; no cycle of birth and death. He is merely an organization of matter, fortuitously brought into being, and destined soon to dissolve into the infinite ocean of matter. He sees all around him evil succeed - corruption, profiteering, lying, deception, cruelty, power politics, violence. He asks naturally why he should be virtuous. Our social norms of today and the materialist philosophy which rules the affairs of men answer back; he need not. The cleverer he is, the more gifted, the more courageously he practices the new amorality; and in the coils of this amorality the dreams and aspirations of human kind become warped and twisted.

For many years I have worshipped at the shrine of the goddess - dialectical materialism - which seemed to me intellectually more satisfying than any other philosophy. But while the main quest of philosophy remains unsatisfied, it has become patent to me that materialism of any sort robs man of the needs to become truly human. In a material civilization man has no rational incentive to be good. It may be that in the kingdom of dialectical materialism, fear makes men conform, and the Party takes the place of God. But when that God himself turns vicious, to be vicious becomes an universal code.

I feel convinced, therefore, that man must go beyond the material to find the incentives to goodness. As a corollary, I feel further that the task of social reconstruction cannot succeed under the inspiration of a materialist philosophy.

It may be asked if any social conditioning is at all necessary for man to acquire goodness. Is not man essentially good? Our not most men in every society decent?

Yes and No

Man is a socio-organic being: he is partly the product of "nature" and partly that of society. What man is by nature cannot be said with certainty. Indeed, the very concepts of good and bad are supernatural or super-organic. There is nothing good or bad in nature. Human nature, apart from the instincts of self and race preservation, is most likely of a neutral character which acquires moral tones in accordance to social conditioning.

It is true that in every society, most men are decent and good. These men go through life without being called upon to make any vital moral judgements. Their routine of life runs within narrow circles, and custom and tradition answer for them the questions concerning right and wrong.

But, firstly, these harmless decent men are apt to undersocial stimuli to turn suddenly wild and vicious. Decent Hindus and Muslims, living peaceably together, didn't hesitate as we know to our cost, to fly at each other's throats when the social patterns were aroused.

Secondly, what is vital for the character of society, and for the direction of its growth, is not so much the character of the inner mass as that of the elite. It is the philosophy and action of this ~~small~~ group of the select that determined the ~~the~~ destinies of men. To the extent the elite becomes godless or amoral to that extent evil overtakes the human race.

Let me hasten to remove a possible misunderstanding. I do not mean to suggest that all of those who profess ~~the~~ philosophy of materialism are vicious nor that all non-materialists are good. But what I do assert is that there is no logic in materialism for the individual to endeavour deliberately to acquire and practice goodness. On the other hand, those who go beyond matter will find it difficult to justify non-good.

Non-materialism - I am using this negative phrase because I have no particular school in mind - by rejecting matter as the ultimate reality, immediately elevates the individual to a moral claim, and the urges him, with reference to any objective outside of himself, to endeavour to realise his own true nature and fulfill the purpose of his being. This endeavour becomes the powerful motive force that drives him to his natural course to the good and the truth. It will be seen as an important corollary of this that only when materialism is transcended does individual man come into his own and become an end in itself.

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