

RATHER RESPONSIBLE THAN SUBMISSIVE

An Editor's Comment

Précis: Morality involves norms and laws. One who submits to laws as though they were from outside the self is either immature or a rebel, and not free. Genuine freedom requires accepting responsibility. We are ordinarily pressed to that by hard experiences. We reach real freedom in relationship with others. We reach moral maturity only with a sound spirituality--in the Christian anthropology of this publication, ignatian. The force driving mature morality is love for all that is.

The way of individual people's lives, like that of society as a whole, is lighted by a whole parade of norms and regulations, clearly set out in lists of things to do or not to do. Whoever wishes to be good is invited to regulate behaviour according to these innumerable precepts that press in from every side. This is the price of being good. It develops in the human heart a constraint to bend to whatever categorical imperative presses it. The witness of a good conscience compensates the feeling of enslavement, while the bite of guilt sanctions an emancipation boldly seized in the name of liberty. Thus people go along in the moral life in a state of permanent childhood.

56

A "morality of laws" creates either overly obedient children or immature revolutionaries. Held in check by the sense of guilt--that relentless tormentor of good people--many live weighed down by fear. Should it happen that life (always stronger) blaze out, demanding its due or exacting some revenge, its original Paradisal joy turns up tarnished by the punishment that life inflicts on itself. And if in a flicker of revolt, throwing off the yoke of "the morality of laws," some have claimed to be free...well, that does not mean they are free. Freed, but still in rebellion.

Those who strive to lead good lives often content themselves with following conventional rules of life, on the pretext that they are set down by religion, the dominant culture, or biology. But whether it feels like a protection or whether it feels like prison, the chain-mail of morality remains a constraint. As long as the norms defining good and evil are perceived as imposed by another's will--even if it is the divine will--human conduct is marked either by surrender or by revolt. Who has decided that this act is good and that other, evil? And as Adam and Eve asked themselves one day, What if we decide otherwise?

A thing is not good or bad because someone--in this case, God--has decided it is, but because the thing does good or does evil, because it leads to life or to death. *One sins only in the measure that one wrongs oneself* (Thomas Aquinas). Since the guarantor of the moral order is the God who creates, it is in creation that we are to search for the ultimate criterion for discernment. Ignatius of Loyola finds it in the *élan vital* that

constitutes humanity, characterised by belief and love. All that favours life and allows it to flourish is good. All that hinders or diminishes it is suspect. One is thrown back on one's own conscience, that formidable arena where one forges one's own destiny. Alone, yes, but not solitary as some would affirm.

In their desire to ensure humankind's freedom and restore to us our independence, some condemn us to individualism. Sealed in an unbearable solitude, one cannot realise oneself or progress.

Created rather for dialogue, the human being can fully find self only in relationship to another. To accept the other in that others' uniqueness, to respect the other, to allow the other to live in their own mould, to take up their interests, to love to the point of letting oneself be drawn with them towards something higher--that is the one reliable norm of good and evil. The Creator has written it in the human heart and on human flesh as the rationale of existence and the way to happiness. One truly finds oneself when one becomes responsible, able to grasp all summonses and to take upon oneself one's response.

*as long as the norms defining
good and evil are perceived as
imposed by another's will,
human conduct is marked
either by surrender or by
revolt*

*one truly finds oneself when
one becomes responsible,
able to grasp all summonses
and to take upon oneself
one's response*

To escape from moral stagnancy, we must at some time throw off all imposed or mistakenly embraced conditioning. This happens in moments of deep experiences of love or death that strip us and confront us with stark truth. One who lives through these can no longer talk about obedience--not in its usual sense--when an issue rises of doing good or avoiding evil. For one then proves not one's ability to submit but rather one's ability to be responsible. At this stage, commands and categorical imperatives are not much help. These might serve, at best and for a time, as sign posts.

This "morality of responsibility" can unfold only when grounded in a spirituality. For the Christian, it implies a characteristic way of living faith, hope, and love. One draws from communion with Christ the inspiration and courage required to live one's relationships to people, material goods, and creation in freedom. Prayer and reflection clarify and strengthen how one reflects on and analyzes reality.

The articles in this issue [...] reflect a concept of humankind that we choose to be identified with. It carries with it a responsibility: More than lists of rights and obligations, it is love of all that is beautiful and good (Philocalia) that lights the way through.

Editorial, reprinted from *Choisir* num..454 (October 1997), with permission.