

**CONSCIENCE &
FANATICISM: AN
ESSAY ON MORAL
VALUES, PP. 1-109**

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GEORGE PITT-RIVERS

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CONSCIENCE & FANATICISM

AN ESSAY ON MORAL VALUES

BY
Henry Lane Fox
GEORGE PITT-RIVERS

"Æquam memento servare mentem"



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PREFACE

IN presenting this little volume to the public I am fully conscious of my presumption in introducing my personal views in a region where many hundreds of better qualified writers have devoted their best efforts. Since, however, no apology can justify a profitless task, if such it be, or add to its utility, if indeed it possesses any, I will not attempt to make one.

If I have contributed in ever so slight a degree towards an understanding of the mental state or attitude we call fanaticism, for the purpose of guarding against the catastrophes it begets, I shall have achieved my purpose. It is unfortunately inevitable that a discussion which involves current opinions and beliefs must necessarily encounter strong prejudices and opposition, but it is less on this account that this little work is likely to fail than for the reason to which Hume attributed the failure which attended the publication of his "Treatise of Human Nature," which he described as his guilt "of a very usual indiscretion, in going to the press too early." A circumstance which prevented that "unfortunate literary attempt from reaching such distinction as even to excite a murmur among the zealots." *

* Hume's "Autobiography."

Needless to say, I have relied for my interpretation of human notions and ideas, and the conduct which results from them, very largely upon the works of past and contemporary writers; and my indebtedness to those with whom I differ no less than those with whom I agree is but very inadequately acknowledged in my references to the works of some of them.

The earlier portions of the essay are devoted chiefly to an examination of moral ideas, the latter portions more exclusively to the facts of nature and of mind from which they derive their meaning. Throughout I have attempted to keep the argument as free as possible from the thin air of philosophical and scholastic dialectic, and as far as possible in terms of common usage and thought. With this end in view, and for the sake of brevity, the authors to whose works I have referred most frequently have been selected either because they are better known or because their opinions are more widely held than in the case of others. But in any case no claim to exhaustive or even adequate treatment can be made for so slight a review of so vast a subject.

The first problem which I have attempted to deal with is one which confronts all moralists. It consists in the difficulty of deriving ethical notions from notions which are not ethical, or of deducing the moral law from the facts of experience and of nature. The attempt to escape from this difficulty often takes the form of adopting

a theory by which the whole world is divided into two unrelated worlds, a world of values and a physical world of mechanical sequences. In order to bring these two independent and self-consistent systems within the same reality and to weld them together, God is postulated. God is necessary, it is argued, to prove the objectivity of morality. That is to say, that since moral values are eternally valid, independently of man's capacity to be conscious of them, they can only have existence in the one eternal mind.*

The purpose of this essay is to offer a different solution. As this question of the status of moral values is of great importance to the moral argument, a preliminary examination of the ground may be helpful.

The predication of value to an object which elicits moral approbation is not, as most Theistic writers stubbornly maintain, an implicit acknowledgment of the objectivity of the goodness predicated, it is merely the act of appreciating the subject or valuer's attitude in relation to the object (the relationship may be purely hypothetical), but it may, and usually does, invite a similar attitude on the part of any number of subjects.† The relation of subject to object—

* This is the position of the Idealistic schools and is adopted in Professor Sorley's recently published Gifford Lectures, "Moral Values and the Idea of God."

† This relationship may be expressed in psychological terms. Dr. McDougall expresses it thus: "Objects have value for us in proportion as they excite our conative tendencies; our consciousness of their value, positive or negative, is our consciousness of the strength of the conation they awake in us."—"Body and Mind," p. 829.

this also applies to all relations—may belong to objective reality, but not the moral worth we ascribe to the object as a result of that relationship. This distinction is important and involves, necessarily, a discrimination (not always made) between the treatment of knowledge and of value. Hume, by denying the objective character of the relations and connexions of nature equally with moral judgment, in his interpretation of individual experience, treated moral judgment and knowledge of natural science in an identical manner. In the following discussion truth, to which I have denied relativity, is accorded a position altogether distinct from value. Appreciation of truth and interest in knowing is treated as a value, but not truth itself to which subjectivity is denied. The method I have adopted of treating this fundamental point may perhaps be made clearer by a simple illustration. Let us take any particular moral judgment, for example, "A [a conscious individual] is good." The assertion implies that A is the habitual doer of desirable actions, or is benevolently disposed towards the valuer, Society at large, or God, according to the valuer's idea of goodness. In any case A's conduct or his attitude must have evoked approbation by reason of its effect (emotional or material) upon the valuer or those with whom he is in sympathy. The valuer might attempt to refute this definition by maintaining that A's habitual conduct does him the greatest injury, but that his predication of good

in respect of A is the assertion of an objective fact. In spite of such an objection, I would reply that the moral judgment may indeed be intended to imply certain definite objective qualities or properties *because* the valuer considers these desirable, and chooses arbitrarily to define "good" as containing those definite properties, or because in the community to which he addresses himself they are customarily so defined. The veracity, however, of the moral judgment, considered as a statement of fact, can only be tested after an agreement has been reached as to the content of the symbol "good." It has then been given a meaning which alone it does not possess. The validity of moral judgment, when it is not merely the expression of individual attitude, will therefore always depend upon the criterion of conduct previously adopted. In this way it is held that a moral judgment differs from a statement of fact, which is valid irrespective of the existence of any mind capable of apprehending that fact.

In the last two chapters, where an examination of psychological processes has been necessary, I have experienced no slight difficulty in finding appropriate terms by which to distinguish certain conceptions which are in some respects new. An inapt terminology and the misuse of terms is so grave a fault, and so habitually results in errors, obscurity, and confusion, that it may not be superfluous to call attention to the terms that are more liable to misinterpretation and in many