

## CORRESPONDENCE

### HAVE "RIGHT" AND "WRONG" ONE MEANING FOR ALL MANKIND? <sup>1</sup>

*The author of the following letter has been professor of philosophy at Harvard since 1913, is the author of many books, a former president of the American Philosophical Association, and chairman American Defence, Harvard group.*

There are two teachings that are skilfully propagated in our own time and have a wide audience. The first of these is the teaching that convictions do not matter. It is simple-minded, so the argument runs, to suppose that historical events are deliberately planned. Tolstoy is cited as an authority to show that Napoleon's defeat in Russia was due not to the greatness of Prince Kutuzov, but to the inevitable trend of things. Great men do not make history, but are made by history. They are fortunate enough to profit by a collective will which moves the mass of mankind. They simply sense its direction and fall into step at the head of the column.

The application to the present crisis is evident. The rise of the Axis menace is not the work of Hitler or of Mussolini or of the Japanese military party. It is not to be explained by the ideas which these nations or their leaders profess. It is the result of a "world revolution" of which these leaders are the puppets and the profiteers. It is idle, therefore, to blame either these leaders or their ideas. They are being swept along by the tide.

Those who would resist them, like America and the other United Nations, will recognize that it is idle to oppose this sort of cosmic surge. The best that can be done is to climb onto the driver's seat and seize the steering wheel. Then it is possible that we can alter the direction—slightly.

#### NOT WHOLLY CLEAR

But even this is not clear. According to the strict letter of the doctrine, steering wheels are not in order at all. Events are marching by and one gets aboard, merely displacing the passengers already there, or asking them to move over.

That this teaching tends to weaken moral conviction needs no proving. It is impossible to hold moral convictions firmly and at the same time be persuaded that they make no practical difference. Those who are really persuaded that they exert no power over external events proceed to narrow the sphere of morals to their own inner consciousness, where they can exert power. The two things are inseparable—the conviction of what ought to be, and the confident effort to bring it to pass.

This doctrine of the impotence of individuals and ideas is seductive because it saves one from the pains of making moral decisions and the greater pains of putting them into practice. It is easier to ride on a wave than to swim, since it saves the trouble of choosing a destination and of propelling one's self toward it. And if Goebbels wanted to weaken our convictions he would seek to persuade us first that history is made by waves, and second that the Axis powers are on the crest of the present wave. Then having seen the folly of resistance, we would conclude that much the easiest and most sensible thing was to become a fellow-traveller.

This doctrine is not only dangerous to our convictions and hence to our hope of success, but discredited and false. It is the old doctrine of "fate" dressed up in modern clothes. It was revived in the nineteenth century to offset the overconfidence of the eighteenth century. Fate is simply a name for those causes which we do not understand, or which are so complex that mechanisms have not yet been devised for their control. Weather, for example, is still accepted as a fatality.

<sup>1</sup> This letter appeared in *The New York Times* of May 31, 1942, under the title "We are Warned Against Subversive Schools of Thought." The Editor has kindly consented for it to be reprinted in PHILOSOPHY.

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### TOLSTOY NO SCIENTIST

Tolstoy was a great novelist, but he was not a scientist. His account of Napoleon's Russian campaign is a hodgepodge of agnosticism, fatalism, piety, patriotism and hero-worship. Great historical events are not caused by "the will of a single man"; they came about "step by step, event by event, moment by moment," "as the result of an infinite number of heterogeneous conditions."

It is impossible to answer the question, "When Moscow was abandoned," and as to the return to Moscow, "the Russian Army could have done nothing else." Greater than the "great" are those "solitary men who, being able to comprehend the will of Providence, subordinate their own wills to it."

Such was Prince Kutuzov, whom the will of Providence had apparently appointed its agent for "the salvation and glory of Russia." And then, finally, it appears that Kutuzov was peculiarly qualified for this assignment, because he refused to identify the salvation of Russia with the defence of Moscow, because he alone "understood the meaning of what was taking place," and because, knowing the condition of both armies, he fitted his action, or inaction, to the times and circumstances and to the requirements of grand strategy.

The lesson to be learned from Nazi Germany and her more apt pupils is the precise opposite of the doctrine of fate. The Germans have so developed the technical arts, and the power of co-ordinating them, that they are pretty well re-making Europe with a blueprint.

### PROPAGANDA A TOOL

Their development of the most formidable war machine of modern times, the timing of their aggressions, their depopulation of Poland, their destruction of the Jews, their integration of Central Europe and construction of an economic bloc based on barter, are not the results of any primal and inscrutable urge which happened to emerge in the fourth decade of the twentieth century. They are the achievements of highly intelligent men who know what they want and devise the necessary means.

They do not underestimate the difficulties; but they avail themselves of the latest and fullest knowledge, for they understand that knowledge and control are the same thing. Because they recognize the importance of the will of the masses, they have developed to an unparalleled degree the art of propaganda. And one of their most effective methods of making history is to persuade the men who might otherwise oppose them that history is not made by men but men by history.

The second way of weakening men's moral convictions is to convince them that all moral convictions are equally right. For it is almost impossible, despite their large capacity for self-contradiction, for men to hold a definite moral conviction and at the same time harbour the idea that the opposite conviction is equally justified.

Here the Axis ideologists find us extremely vulnerable. We believe in freedom and tolerance, and is it not a corollary of freedom and tolerance to respect the other man's belief even though it be a belief in slavery and intolerance? In short, the more pure and scrupulous the liberal is, the more surely can he be counted on to befriend the enemies of liberalism. And once they are morally befriended, and their code is given an equal standing with our own, it becomes ridiculous to fight about it.

### MUDDLE NEEDS CLEARING

There may still be other things to fight about, such as life, property and territory, but the moral motivation is gone.

It is very important to clear up this muddle. For muddle it is. It arises from a failure to distinguish between a moral difference and a merely emotional difference. There is a moral difference between ourselves and the Nazis, because we believe that freedom is right and they believe that slavery is right. Both beliefs cannot be true, and whichever is true is true for any believer, whether he be American or Nazi.

If we say "freedom is right" and the Nazis say "slavery is right," and if we then say their opinion is just as true as ours, we talk nonsense; precisely as though we

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were to say, we believe that 2 plus 2 is 4, they believe that 2 plus 2 is 5, and their judgment is as true as ours.

If "right" is to be used as the predicate of a sentence which is true or false, then right must have a meaning. In spite of the moral scepticism which has run riot in the world during the last century there is little disagreement as to what that meaning is.

If two people needed food and there was only one loaf available, it would be right to divide the loaf rather than give it all to one. The right act is the act that best satisfies all claims as they are viewed by a disinterested observer. Slavery is not right, because it totally ignores the claims of the slave. Freedom is right, because it gives to each as fully as is consistent with giving to all.

This is not the whole of morality, but is its central core—whether it be expressed in the Golden Rule, or the standard of justice, or the gospel of love, or the goal of social welfare.

It is to be noted that when the Axis ideologists show a "decent respect for the opinions of mankind" they borrow the moral vocabulary of mankind. They complain of the injustices which they have received, encourage the aspirations of oppressed peoples, and boast of a classless society. But they have another code which they both profess at home and practise abroad.

### TRIBALISM THE TERM

The best name for this code is tribalism—the supreme exaltation of the racial group. The folk, the nation-state united by common blood, is taken as the ultimate standard and authority.

This tribal entity creates obligations, but has none—either to its individual members or to the rest of mankind. It is a colossal ego which affirms itself, and against which there is no appeal.

In relation to the tribe the individual has duties of loyalty, discipline, self-sacrifice and military valour. But the tribe itself has no duties whatever. It is a law unto itself, and the ruler of the tribe, whether he be a hereditary monarch or a self-appointed Fuehrer, speaks in the name of the tribe and claims the same moral immunity.

Of this code the Nazi ideologists find illustrious exponents in their own past, choosing what suits their purpose and ignoring the rest. Whatever is universal and moral in Martin Luther, Fichte, Schiller, Goethe, Wagner or Nietzsche they omit; whatever is tribal and immoral they underscore and quote. They so write the history of German thought and culture as to make it appear that from the earliest days of the Niebelungen legends or the Teutonic Knights, Germans have felt themselves to be a chosen people who were devoted to no end beyond their own power and mastery.

To admit that this cause of tribalism is as right as that for which we fight not only robs us of our own convictions but amounts to an acceptance of the enemy's. For if one cause is no better than another, or is right in no sense that is not equally applicable to its opposite, then the ultimate appeal is to force. The better can then mean only stronger, and the evidence is survival and expansion.

### WAR IS EXALTED

In order that this test may be applied it is necessary that the rival causes should resort to war; and war, instead of being a calamity or relic of barbarism, is thus exalted to the role of a final tribunal before which all international disputes are adjudicated.

At best this is a revival of the Teutonic ordeal by battle, in which victory in combat is accepted as a test of justice or of divine favour. At worst it means a return to the primitive practice of fighting out a quarrel without regard to its merits. It implies that the quarrels of war have no merits.

There are two ways of persuading us that as between the enemy's cause and our cause there is no moral difference. The first is to prove that theirs is as good as ours, since theirs is theirs as ours is ours, both being pursued with the same loyalty and devotion. This is the doctrine of the relativity of creeds, and is designed to appeal to our sympathy and our liberalism. Love thy neighbour's creed as thine own.

The second way of equalizing the two creeds is to say that ours is as bad as theirs.

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This is an appeal to our cynicism or sense of guilt. This, it is said, is a war between imperialisms, one old and the other new, but otherwise the same. Who are we of the United Nations to cast the first stone? Are we not guilty of every imperialistic crime? Should we not first cast the beam out of our own eye before attempting to pull the mote out of our brother's? Or, since both parties are imperialists, why not wash one's hands of the whole business and let the guilty destroy one another? Or, why not frankly admit that all eyes have beams and motes, and let it go at that? Admitting that we are no less imperialistic than they, and having got rid of all hypocrisy, we can then fight it out honestly and let the stronger possess the earth.

That Britain and the United States have both been guilty of imperialism is, of course, true. But by what standard are they "guilty"; and to this the answer is, their own standard.

There are two ways of condemning these old imperialisms. They are condemned by the jealousy and covetousness of new imperialisms—by the have-nots who would like to have and to enter in their turn upon a new phase of aggrandizement and exploitation. But they are also condemned from within by those of their own people who would like to rid the world of imperialism together, and extend the blessings of freedom to all mankind.

### THINGS TO REMEMBER

No American should be allowed to forget that although we fought for our independence against George III and his "hired Hessians," the ideas which inspired that struggle, and which were embodied in the American Declaration of Independence and the bill of rights, were the ideas of Englishmen. Precisely the same thing has happened in the later evolution of the British Empire into the British Commonwealth of Nations.

Those whose conscience was most offended by the British conquest of the Boers were men like John Morley and the "Little Englanders," or their American cousins. Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada have become free nations without wars of independence because their peoples are imbued with the Anglo-Saxon traditions of liberty, and because the British Government has long had to reckon with the libertarian sympathies of its own people.

And the same is true of Ireland—for, despite the cruelties and blunders of the British Government, the most powerful force for Irish freedom has been the fact that modern Britain could not treat Ireland as Germany has treated Poland without violating the sentiments of her own people.

### DOCTRINE TRANSFORMED

The Indian Agent General at Washington says, in defending the right of his people to independence, that they have been nourished on the "literature of freedom" introduced by their British rulers.

The same pattern of development has been followed in our own briefer imperialistic career. We have transformed a Monroe Doctrine into a Good Neighbour Policy. We have given our dependencies independence—not because we could not have them in subjection, but because that policy would have been inconsistent with our institutions and with the traditional creed of Americans. We conquered Aguinaldo despite the protests of our anti-imperialists, but though the anti-imperialists of 1898 were derided as sentimentalists and were outshouted and outvoted at the time, it was their spirit rather than that of the definitely jingo majority that fought so memorably on the Bataan Peninsula.

Let us grant that Western imperialism is suffering in this hour of crisis for its past sins. The important fact is that the sense of its moral bankruptcy is felt most keenly by the Anglo-Saxon mind itself. To our enemies Western imperialism is merely weak, needing to be strengthened by a change of masters and a new technique of mastery. To the Anglo-Saxon mind it is wrong, and needs to be transformed into a new and more radical system of freedom.

### UNIVERSAL FREEDOM

I am not interested in claiming a monopoly of the tradition of freedom for

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English-speaking countries. Chapters of the literature of freedom are written in every tongue and inscribed in the hearts of men of every nation. The rapid shrinking of the world has spread the infection wide and brought a growing conviction that there can be no lasting freedom anywhere without freedom everywhere.

In a world which is now, for better or for worse, one world, not only in theory and before God, but in the everyday practical experience of its human inhabitants, we have to-day to decide which it shall be, the better or the worse. The worse way is to subject the whole of that world to one of its parts—to whatever part may be bold and powerful enough to achieve and hold the mastery. The better way is to create a federation of the whole which is stronger than any of the parts, and which may preserve peace and promote co-operation among them.

The rise of the Nazi and Axis power has forced this issue. It drives us to choose between a worse evil and a better good than mankind has ever known before. We must be visionary and utopian if we are not to be unprecedentedly base; in order to be realistic we must be loftily idealistic.

But this ideal has long been working in us. It is humanism, Christianity, liberalism, and democracy, carried to their logical conclusions. It means having the courage of our humane, Christian, liberal, and democratic convictions. It means attending to the unfinished business which was long ago included in our agenda. Most certainly we have a right to call it ours.

RALPH BARTON PERRY.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

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TO THE EDITOR OF *Philosophy*

DEAR SIR,

Even after his death much has been written about Henri Bergson and his Philosophy. But little appears to have been said about his "profound interest," as he himself repeatedly put it, in Indian thought. Having had the privilege and pleasure of meeting him in Paris in 1937, I wish to say a few words now on what transpired then. Here I may be permitted to state that I happened to refer to some points bearing on this subject in a short speech at the Philosophical Association of the University of Mysore, in January 1942, at a meeting held in honour of this great philosopher's memory. I am now writing out what I said on that occasion, as I am growing very old, and I fear I may by postponing fail to discharge a debt I owe to men like him, whom I met in my European tours, and whose minds were exceptionally free from all prejudices.

When I called on him he was ill and the attendant (probably the medical) hinted to me that the interview should not be prolonged beyond ten or fifteen minutes. But the patient would not permit me to take leave even after an hour and a quarter. Such was his love of matters philosophical even in his illness.

Having been asked about the peculiarities of Indian thought, I commenced with a reference to the *ONE* and *only* distinguishing feature of Philosophy in India. The West, I said, mistook India's Religions, Scholasticisms, Mysticisms, or Speculations for her Philosophy. In Europe and America multiplicity and variety characterize even what is called Philosophy. From Thales down to the present day, every thinker, be he philosophic, be he religious and the like, gives his own interpretation of life or existence, criticizing every other. Many, I added, had already disagreed with Bergson himself. This must go on to the end of time. And the evil *social* consequences of such continued multiplication of differences are quite patent.

The Indian thinkers say that *endless* antagonisms, wranglings, or wanderings in mazes of this kind are a characteristic of religion, scholasticism, mysticism, speculation and the like. And they ask, "Is there no knowledge revealing truth *common, universal, and harmonizing*?" Of what value is *Philosophy* if there be no certainty attached to its solutions? Truth common or universal, they say, must be the quest of *Philosophy*. What are called "truths" could only be degrees of or approximations to "Truth" *as such*.