

Editorial: The Quest for Moral Certainty

by *M. Ali Lakhani*

A good man, though his striving be obscure,
Remains aware that there is one right way.

Goethe: *Faust*, Prologue in Heaven, 328

One of the basic questions confronting mankind is how to live a moral life. The two principal solutions that present themselves as answers to this question are the absolutist morality of religious dogmatism and the constructed morality of secular dogmatism. Neither of these alternatives is appealing. Neither meets the criterion of “objectivity”, or conformity to the nature of things, on which any morality must ultimately rest. It is this objectivity which provides the moral certainty that is centered in our own primordial nature and is premised on the transcendent Intellect of an engaged conscience which discerns and conforms to the nature of things, as opposed to the “certainty of folly” that is blind to it. It is through objectivity alone that one can achieve true serenity in the face of moral dilemmas, as opposed to what Frithjof Schuon has termed the “false serenity which becomes the accomplice of evil” and which is no more than the blind indifference of a disengaged conscience, not premised on the kardial vision of objectivity.

The absolutist morality of religious dogmatism is sclerotic. Its certainty is a form of righteous folly based on the simplistic assumption that moral laws are absolute and of universal application, appropriate to every situation, regardless of circumstance. Now, it is meet that there be moral laws, such as those of the Decalogue, that there be institutional guardians of such laws, and that one should strive to obey these,

but always subject to the guidance of genuine authority rooted in the transcendent Spirit or Intellect. For laws, rules and codes address generalities and not particulars, and are expressions of underlying principles from which they are derived, principles which are both revealed and accessible to the awakened Intellect. Moral dilemmas are situational, therefore demanding more than a simplistic application of moral laws: they demand instead a morally engaged conscience, rooted in a particular soil, but reaching with every branch to the heavens above. In other words, morality is not so much a search for a code of laws that is absolute and applied indifferently to every context, as much as a quest for objectivity that is rooted in the particular details and differing contexts of each moral dilemma.

The problem with the secular alternative is that secularization disconnects morality from its metaphysical foundation, that is to say, from any transcendent principles that inform rights and responsibilities. Secularism, whether it absolutizes tyranny (either as fascism or as communism) or absolutizes democracy (either as conservatism or as liberalism), seeks in the end to construct a reductive or relativized morality based on preferences, not on objective principles rooted in metaphysics. Its laws may set moral “trends” or follow moral “fashions”, in each case employing reason to justify its changing norms, with rationalizations that range from pragmatism and utilitarianism, to “principles” of “laissez-faire” and a quantitative egalitarianism touted under the banner of “equal rights”. But “rights”, too, are subordinate to the principles from which they derive, and these principles are both transcendent (centered beyond particulars and contingencies) and objective (in conformity with reality). Morality cannot therefore be reduced to simply a matter of preferences, nor is it merely a matter of consensus. It is a quest for objective and transcendent principles. Its roots are metaphysical.

Traditional metaphysics teaches that there are two sources of morality, and these are, first, Revelation (i.e. that which is “above” us, corresponding to transcendence or “height”), and, second, the Intellect (i.e. that which is “within” us, corresponding to immanence or “depth”). These two function as “transmitter” and “receiver”, respectively, and are the sources of all objectivity. “Revelation” here is to be understood in its most general sense, which includes not only the revealed laws of the scriptures or those conveyed by the teachings of traditional teach-

ers, but also the natural symbols of the ever-renewing cosmic theophany. In other words, all that exists possesses a metaphysical transparency capable of transmitting to the receptive “Intellect” a reality that is “the Face of God”, a Presence that is participatory, yet “out of the swing of the sea”. The “Intellect” here is to be understood as the supra-rational Center of awareness within the Self, “the ear of my ear” and “the eye of my eye”, the discerning heart which is the locus of spiritual insight and the seat of the conscience. It is the awakened Intellect, aware of its universal and participatory nature, that ignites virtue, engaging our conscience to enter into the heart of a moral dilemma, to not merely *apprehend* the solution to a moral problem, through reason or dogma, but to *comprehend* it by participating inwardly in its particulars, through compassion (corresponding to love of the neighbor), but from a vantage that is nevertheless centered in the transcendent Self (corresponding to love of God).

According to tradition, man exists in two dimensions, the vertical, which corresponds to his theomorphic, inner spiritual reality, and the horizontal, which corresponds to his psycho-physical, outer material existence; in simpler terms, the inward and the outward. These dimensions are inter-related, so that the vertical (inward) pull of divine attraction (corresponding to the supreme commandment in its primary aspect, namely, to love God) entails the horizontal (outward) conformity to cosmic equilibrium (corresponding to the supreme commandment in its secondary aspect, namely, to love one’s neighbor). Similarly, and conversely, it is by conforming to the cosmic equilibrium that one is drawn to the divine. The two supreme commandments of traditional metaphysics, namely, love of God and love of the neighbor, thus correspond to the two dimensions of human existence, and constitute the essential and principal foundation of all morality, to which all religious laws are subordinate.

Moral dilemmas may not always appear amenable to absolute resolutions because they exist at the level of contingency. The created world offers moral dilemmas which at times appear impossible to resolve: a kind of “Sophie’s Choice” that requires us to decide, for instance, whether to prefer one life over another. This kind of dilemma cannot be resolved simply by applying the commandment “Thou shall not kill” or by recourse to the principle of the sanctity of life. A different level of

engagement is required; a deeper level of understanding in which all physical life is seen as perishable, yielding to the transcendent Self, which alone survives. Moral objectivity is the immanent reflection of this transcendent Self, whose substance, in accordance with the metaphysical adage that identifies the True, the Good and the Beautiful, is virtue. Like Arjuna on the battlefield, we must do our duty (*dharma*), even if this involves killing, abhorrent though this choice may be, so long as the duty is the expression of virtue and reflects our innermost Center. Like the Good Samaritan, we must open our hearts to discern our neighbor, to understand that the boundaries that separate each from the other are as ephemeral as the boundaries of space and time, which are constantly dissolving, and that, through the oneness of the divine Self in which all beings participate, we are ourselves the neighbor. “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me... Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me” (*Matthew 25:40 and 45*).

If the allegory of Arjuna engaged in battle against the evil Kauravas represents the divine attribute of Rigor, then the parable of the Good Samaritan helping the man who fell among thieves represents the divine attribute of Mercy. In a certain sense, all morality can be viewed as an attempt to reconcile the divine attributes of Rigor and Mercy, but allowing always that “God’s Compassion precedes His Wrath”. That is to say that His Rigor is a part of His Mercy. It is important to keep this in mind because, while it is obvious that evil can be wrathful, it is less obvious that goodness may also involve rigor. Tradition teaches that outer burdens yield inner blessings. All spiritual practitioners know this when, for instance, they engage in spiritual disciplines such as fasting or penance, that involve renunciation or sacrifice. When judging the morality of a situation, one must have the wisdom and humility to judge, like Khidr in the famous story of his teaching to Musa (Moses) (see Qur’an, *Surat al-Kahf*, 18: 66-82), so that one sees with the eyes “of the spirit”, not “of the flesh”. As Khidr taught, one cannot make moral judgments based on appearances alone: divine mercy may indeed operate through rigor: “Sometimes He gives while depriving you, and sometimes He deprives you in giving” (*Ibn ‘Ata’illah*). Let us recall that it was Christ, the preacher of the Gospel of Love, who overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple (*Matthew 21: 12-13*), and who elsewhere

exclaimed: “Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword” (*Matthew* 10: 34). Therefore, there will be situations which appear conventionally immoral, but are objectively moral or virtuous, and vice versa.

What, then, is the vantage from which moral judgments can be made? Moral objectivity, as stated earlier, lies neither in fickle convention nor in petrified moral codes, but in the living heart of a morally engaged conscience, guided by an Intellect that is receptive to the Presence of the divine. It is only by entering the kardial Center that one can perceive the nature of things, obtaining a sense of the cosmic equilibrium into which all disequilibriums are fated to dissolve. “Good doers leave no tracks” (*Tao-te-Ching*, 27). Moral objectivity, then, is conformity to the cosmic equilibrium. It is achieved by one’s discernment of the metaphysical ordering of reality and by one’s conformity to that order. Moral conduct, in this sense, is a reflection of our innate nature. Its roots are ontological, embedded in transcendence, flowering in the fragrant blossoms of virtue. Such conduct requires us to yield in some circumstances and to resist in others, conscious always of the sacred Presence of the divine operating through and around us, in our hearts and in all things. In the quest for moral certainty, one must possess the humility and patience equal to the knowledge that there are no easy or simple answers to some moral questions. Hence the admonition: “Judge not”. But this admonition does not absolve one of moral responsibility. On the contrary, the quest for moral certainty is a necessary part of human existence, and calls on us to strive for moral objectivity, to abjure judgment “by the flesh” and instead to pray for the grace to judge “by the spirit”. It is to eschew the morality of abstraction, that is, the moralism that elevates a “cause” above the sacred vision of the Presence in all creatures. It is to perceive that the “flesh” is ennobled by the “spirit”, and yet transcended by it. Moral objectivity and the serenity it brings, lie in this dual vision. They lie, not in precepts, preferences or reasonings of the mind, but in the virtue that emanates as both a radiance and a fragrance from the wakeful heart, the innermost and innate center of our selves, that is compassionate, yet detached, gifted with the simultaneity of dual vision. For God is in the world, and therefore one must love one’s neighbor; and yet God is above all creation, and therefore one must submit to His dominion.