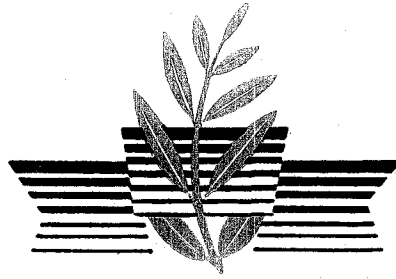


What I Believe

Living Philosophies XVII



Drawings by John Melching

by JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH

Author of "The Modern Temper"

DURING THE COURSE of the Middle Ages it was, I believe, commonly assumed that man is an animal plus. No Darwinian researches were necessary to indicate the obvious fact that his body is constructed along the same general lines as the body of a cow or a pig, and that a very considerable number of his instincts and his desires are related in similar fashion to those of the humbler creatures. But something left out of the lower animals had, it was assumed, been put into man. A soul — something not only immortal but capable of desires and motives quite unknown to beasts — had been mechanically added. This soul came into frequent conflict with the animal part to which it was temporarily linked, but it should and it could (with the aid of God) triumph over it — indecisively in life, but definitively in some future when the troublesome body should have been completely cast off.

Now there are various reasons why it is difficult to accept this theory to-day. Indeed, very grave objections have been raised to even that modern variant called vitalism which assumes that life is something which has, in much the same way, been added to matter. But the theory itself is more than merely delightfully simple, for it serves to symbolize a problem quite as real just now as it ever was. We know even better than they knew in the Middle Ages how much of man is simple animal. We know that his body is, organ for organ and nerve for nerve, almost identical with that of the ape. And we know how much

I

of his conduct can be explained in terms of animal behavior.

Yet try as hard as we may, we cannot quite succeed in bridging the gulf which still lies between us and the creatures whom, all too distressingly it sometimes seems, we so closely resemble. Even the most materialistic among us must distinguish, if only for the sake of convenience, between the human mind and the mind of the beast. We still desire passionately things which no animal could understand. We are still capable of motives unparalleled in animal psychology. And we still need very urgently to know what this difference means.

What of the values which we assign to love, to art, and to knowledge? What of the scruples which afflict us concerning duty, and right, and purity? It is true that the materialistic student of manners and customs may reply that morality cannot possibly exist, because every conceivable action has been at some two times and places considered both obligatory and forbidden. But the fact remains that man has the power and the need to conceive of those abstractions to which he has given the names of right and wrong, and it is that power and that need with which we must deal. Even if it be granted that there is nothing outside of man which corresponds to these conceptions, at least the conceptions are there. They are capable of modifying his conduct very profoundly indeed, and they are a part of the data which any adequate view of man must consider.

You may phrase as you like the question

which results. Posing it as one of practical morality, you may ask whether the wise man will cultivate all the quixotic scruples of which his imagination is capable, or whether, brushing them aside, he will strive to attain to a Machiavellian ruthlessness. Putting it in a form more general and abstract, you may inquire whether instinct is, as the naturalists maintain, his only safe guide, or whether, as the dualists insist, man is man only in so far as he denies these natural instincts in the interests of something which he calls the human. But at bottom all of these questions are the same: how great is the difference between man and nature, and what does this difference mean?

II

IF WE DO NOT set up as either metaphysicians or scientists, we may neglect if we like the metaphysical and the scientific aspects of the question. Granted that man can conceive a standard of values apparently different from any which is recognized by nature, we may leave to others the attempt to decide whether or not this fact necessarily implies that there must, after all, be something outside of him which corresponds to this standard. And to science, anxious to establish the continuity of phenomena, we may delegate the further problem of determining how the mind — which thinks and wills and judges — has been constructed out of the atoms of matter.

Some scientists, clinging still (and a little desperately) to purely mechanistic theories, may maintain that the most delicate spirit is only the most complicated of the machines which, somehow or other, have gradually got themselves built up out of the dead particles which constitute the ultimate stuff of the universe as it is conceived of in classical physics. Others, hardly less desperate, may lose themselves in the maze of more modern theories and, by speaking of the "free will of the atoms," attribute to even what seems the deadeast of dead matter the attributes of mind.

But whatever our theories may be or however great our willingness to leave theories to others, we are faced by the fact that, for all practical purposes, there still lies a gulf between the two worlds which we as human beings must simultaneously inhabit — between, on the one hand, the world of matter

and of animal instinct which we call nature, and, on the other hand, that world of human motives and values which, for convenience's sake, we distinguish as the world of exclusively human things.

Nothing is clearer than the fact that we must deal very often and very intimately with nature. In the first place, we must handle matter both as it exists in the form of that dead material out of which we construct our houses and in the form of those living organisms, plant or animal, which we kill in order that we may eat. Even the most fanatical ascetic must either surrender life itself or acquiesce to some extent in this necessary traffic going on between the human being and that which, living or dead, is at least not human.

But this is not all. For nature is within as well as without that thing which we call ourselves. We have the instincts, the needs, and the desires of the animal. We can no more deny them completely, we can no more refuse to accept that part of nature which is woven into the body with which we act and the mind with which we think, than we can deny that part of her which our hands touch and our eyes see. At every moment of our lives we must be animal in part at least.

And yet the latitude which is nevertheless permitted to us remains enormous. We can be, on the one hand, so nearly a creature of instinct and appetite that we deviate hardly once in a fortnight from the pattern of animal behavior. But we can be, on the other hand, a being so wrapped up in contemplation, so obsessed by scruples, so devoted to quixotic principles, and so hemmed in by the No's which come to us from God knows where, that the average human being can hardly recognize in our emaciated bodies and tortured minds a creature like himself.

III

NOR IS THERE in the specious doctrine of the golden mean any more than a definition which does not define. For where, between extremes which are separated by a distance at once so great and so difficult to measure by any yardstick yet invented, does any actually determinable mean lie? Indeed, the very fact that the adjective "golden" is traditionally added to this mathematical term should in it-

self constitute a sufficient warning of the subjective nature of the conception. It is not difficult to observe that in actual practice those who sing its praises agree better among themselves concerning its aureate nature than they do in determining just which human creature — a St. Augustine or an Alcibiades — has most nearly attained it.

By comparison, the doctrine of extremes is logical at least, for though we may not wish to



emulate the conduct of St. Simeon on his pillar, we do know what is meant when we are told to mortify as completely as possible the instincts within. But no man, I think, can be very much aided by instructions which consist of no more than the advice to give to the natural and to the human each its "proper" place.

Man has, to be sure, no monopoly on the virtues. The lower animals can be brave just as they can be — toward their offspring at any rate — self-sacrificingly loyal. Indeed, even the insects are said to exhibit a disinterested concern for the welfare of their community and to be capable of something to which the pragmatist at least can hardly refuse to give the name of patriotism.

But in the realm of the lower animals no conflict arises. The virtues appropriate to each creature's way of life are as truly instinctive as the impulses which lead him to defend his individual existence or to gratify the most elementary of his appetites. *His* golden mean — that balance of tendencies which serves to make him just what a tiger or a rabbit or an ant ought to be in order to lead exactly the life characteristic of his kind — is established for him. But though the problem is at least as old as Plato, no one has yet been able to define a good man in the sense in which it is possible to define a good horse, or a good pig, or a good bee.

Nor does there ever arise in the animal realm one of those other conflicts which result from the fact that, with us, all too many of the

possible excellences are mutually exclusive. The glorious self-assertiveness of a Cellini is not compatible with the admirable self-negation of a St. Francis; and if the majority of us are hardly capable of becoming either the one or the other, yet we are faced with a thousand choices, similar except for their reduced scale.

Granted that we are not likely either to cultivate a Nietzschean lust for power and glory or to retire to St. Simeon's pillar, granted that (to be still more specific) we are not willing either to renounce the pleasures of the flesh or to devote ourselves whole-heartedly to the career of a Don Juan, then what portion of ourselves are we going to allot to the cultivation of the ego and the pleasures of sense, what part to the denial of instinct in the interest of benevolence and "purity"?

Considered merely as a problem in the calculus of pleasures, the question is unsolvable; no man can really know whether it is more pleasurable to worship an idealized Beatrice from afar or to take one's more substantial pleasures as one finds them. If a worldling cannot imagine the recompenses of the saint, it is no more to be denied that the withered ascetic is no judge of the pleasure enjoyed by the man who is also a vigorous animal, little troubled by those scruples which, so candor compels one to admit, can multiply quite as rapidly as the seeds of what the moralist calls self-indulgence or sin. And if to this mere calculus of pleasures be added the consideration of some "ought," then the already insoluble problem is still further complicated by the addition of another unknown.

IV

YET ALL the problems of which this one may be taken as the type reduce themselves ultimately to that same problem of the relationship between man and nature. All these choices are in some sense choices between impulses which are clearly recognized as the common property of all living things and those which exist — at least in other than rudimentary forms — in man alone. He only can be "too virtuous." He only can deny nature to an extent which is ruinous to the good animal within.

In all other creatures some sort of stable equilibrium or harmony is established, auto-

matically and unchangeably, but the power of choice which in him has been so often and so highly lauded is in reality only the sign of an unstable equilibrium — of impulses not completely reconcilable, of potentialities not to be developed together, and of diversely possible excellences all of which can be conceived but of which, in a given man or a given society, only one may be realized.

If ever that missing link hypothesized by the evolutionists should be actually discovered, and if ever we should be called upon to decide whether some creature apparently midway between the ape and the man should be classified as beast or as human being, then we have in this fact a delicate but decisive test. A creature in which harmony is not only possible but instinctive is a beast. One which is aware of a divided allegiance, one which is capable of feeling, however dimly it may be, standards of value different from any plainly perceptible in the world around him and yet conflicting with others no less categorically insistent, is human.

He may imagine, as have the members of most human societies, some invisible world presided over by a spirit which understands the unnatural part of himself. Or he may, like the sophisticated people who have grown weary of many faiths each equally improbable, choose rather to confess himself probably alone in a universe which shares neither his consciousness nor the processes of his mind. But if he is part of nature and yet not really at one with it, then he is surely a human being, for it is the lines which the perception of such a dilemma have worn into the soul which constitute the mark — not of the beast, but of the man.

Doubtless it would simplify things much if there were some guide to which we could submit ourselves as the animal submits himself to his instincts. Doubtless it would be pleasant if there were something which would lead us on to be good men as the tiger is led on to be a good tiger and the ant to be all that an ant should be. And indeed the skeptic can hardly be denied the right to remark that most moral philosophies consist in the philosopher's proclamation that he has discovered just that.

All the naturalistic religions from Rousseau on are founded upon the assumption that nature — which "never did betray the heart

that loved her" — is discoverable and ready to serve as an infallible guide. On the other hand, all religions essentially anti-naturalistic in their tendency proclaim that something outside of nature — some revealed code, some theology arrived at by reason, or some inner voice having its origin in the supernatural realm — is equally infallible.

But these faiths unfortunately cancel one another. Nature cannot lead us to anything



except herself; and the categorical imperative which seemed to Kant so dependable turns out to be no more than the civilized version of one of those systems of taboos which instruct the savage in an equally categorical fashion that a tattooed face is "right" or that, under certain circumstances, it is immoral to allow oneself to be seen in the act of eating.

All moral codes are true in the sense that each is capable of forming one kind of individual or one kind of culture. As one or the other of them achieves an ascendancy over any united group, it forms a corresponding civilization — a Puritan New England, a Renaissance Italy, or that association of monks which made the Thebaid famous. But the very fact that no one of these civilizations endures, the very fact that humanity ultimately becomes dissatisfied with the limitations of each, is in itself a sufficient proof that no one of them can be described as affording the pattern of *the Good Life*.

Each represents, in other words, an unstable equilibrium. Each is a temporary compromise effected between the natural and the human, but a compromise destined — like all compromises between things essentially irreconcilable — to be no more than temporary. The civilization of the Renaissance comes to an end because human nature finally revolts against the increasing dominance of the animal. The civilization of the Thebaid comes no less surely to an end because nature revolts against the tendency to deny more completely than she will permit the claims which she makes.

OBVIOUSLY the variety of compromises temporarily possible is great. Obviously a great distance lies between the monk on the one hand and the man of Machiavellian *virtu* on the other. But neither can break the chain which binds him. Neither can cease to be, in some measure, both animal and human. Nor is there any mid-point, permanently fixable by reason, to be determined; for that mean which seems golden is merely the point which we have taken up on the road which is leading to either indulgence or denial.

And thus though all moral codes are, in the sense just defined, equally true, all are nevertheless, and in a more fundamental sense, equally untrue, because none is alone in its power to form a civilization and because no one of these possible civilizations is demonstrably the best or the proper one. Hence it is that when a radical skepticism like that which I here profess comes to deal with the problem of ethics, it expresses a doubt which is more than merely a doubt concerning this system or that. As a matter of course it doubts the all-sufficiency of natural instinct just as it doubts also whether either the Quakers with their inner light or the Roman Catholics with their logically self-consistent corpus of theology have succeeded in getting in touch with anything outside of themselves which may be depended upon to guide them aright.

But these doubts are only corollaries, for the cardinal point of this skepticism is the doubt whether or not there exists anything to get in touch with—whether or not there exists any Idea of Man which actual mankind tends to approach, any “ought” which obligates him to go in any direction, or even any practically applicable epicurean test which will establish any particular sort of life as indisputably the most pleasurable.

The skeptic moreover—and this is fortunate for him—is not obliged to explain how the human dilemma arose. It is indeed one of the advantages of his position that it enables him to shirk that obligation which others seem to feel—that of accounting for all phenomena by some explanation, however improbable.

But he is, nevertheless, permitted to specu-

late; and if he happens to be (as I confess myself) temperamentally inclined to rationalistic theories, he may find in biology a suggestive clue. It may be that the tiger is not aware of any conflict between things which he would call nature and tigerishness, that the ant is not aware of any conflict between nature and true anthood, simply because no animal is capable of very many or very great deviations from a set type of conduct. But some animals are more variable than others. Man is the most variable of all; and the thing which we call intelligence is, biologically, only the means of utilizing this variability for the purpose of making biologically useful adjustments.

Is it, then, just possible that the sense of conflict of which man is aware is merely the bi-product of this variability and that his persistent hypothesization of “oughts” outside himself is merely the effect of a puzzled realization that he can be, not merely one kind of animal, but any one of several? Is it possible that there is, therefore, no more reason in the question whether it is better to be a St. Francis or a Cellini than there is in the question whether or not a tiger is better than an ant? Both exist and both are interesting.

And yet the individual human being is left with the necessity of making choices and with a need of having them made for him so great that he persists in adopting one or another of the faiths which are, quite obviously, contradictory enough. Not even the skeptic is relieved from the necessity of making them, although he may be aware that he chooses in more or less haphazard fashion and without that illusion of knowing what he “ought” to choose which is so comforting to others.

Nor is it likely that any ultimate scientific discovery will solve the dilemma. Man may be part of a purely mechanical nature, or the stuff of matter itself may possess those rudiments of volition which some physicists seem ready to attribute to it. But neither fact would alter the practical aspects of the dilemma. Even the demonstrated existence of a not quite mechanical atom would hardly serve to define an “ought” or prevent individuals and cultures from achieving, for a short while, their own individual but unstable equilibriums.

Irwin Edman will contribute the next paper to this series of Living Philosophies.

Hard Times and Soft Thinking



Drawings by Geoffrey Norman

by **FABIAN FRANKLIN**

WHAT SHOULD government do to promote business recovery? Few are so ignorant or so presumptuous as to think that this is an easy question to answer. But many persons of high standing, who are neither ignorant nor presumptuous, seem to think it perfectly easy to say what government should *not* do. Whether or not their conclusions are correct, it is surely not too much to ask, in regard to any reasonable proposal, that they should accompany their verdict of rejection with something like an adequate statement of the grounds for it. But what we actually find in the most important quarters is unhesitating pronouncement of conclusions with hardly so much as a trace of reasoning.

The President, in his message to Congress at the opening of the December session, declared that "the government must not undertake works that are not of sound economic purpose," and very properly left this declaration to speak for itself, since it is hardly open to dispute. But when we pass from this simple matter of principle concerning the *nature* of government undertakings to the question of the *volume* of government expenditures for them, we enter upon a very different and very debatable field. Yet Mr. Hoover was content to dispose of that question likewise in a single

sentence: "To increase taxation for purposes of construction defeats its own purpose, as such taxes directly diminish employment in private industry."

Now, surely, this is far from being self-evident; and indeed, in the sense in which it must be understood in order to make good Mr. Hoover's position, it is far from being true. For, though increase of taxation is likely, in greater or less degree, to "diminish employment in private industry," it would be absurd to contend that no matter what form the tax might take, it would be sure to diminish employment to the full amount, or anything like the full amount, of the tax. It is quite possible, on the other hand, that the *psychological* effect of a serious increase in taxation would be very injurious at a time like this; but that is quite another matter. All that I wish to say is that the President's pontifical deliverance on the subject is not calculated to have much influence on the mind of anyone not previously disposed to accept it.

And not only did the President dispose in this summary fashion of the possibility of obtaining by taxation the means of undertaking great government works, but he did not even mention the other obvious possibility — that of borrowing. A loan of half a billion dollars,