

# SUPERNATURAL AND RATIONAL MORALITY

BY

CHARLES BRADLAUGH

*From Charles Bradlaugh's Theological Essays*

Printed by Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh, 63, Fleet St., E.C. 1886

**Rosings Digital Publications**



# SUPERNATURAL AND RATIONAL MORALITY

BY CHARLES BRADLAUGH

THE essential of all religion is supernaturalism, and every religious system therefore involves at least dualism; as creator and created, ruler and ruled. This definition would, of course, exclude Pantheism from consideration as a religion. Supernaturalism is for a rationalist a word of self-contradiction. Nature to him means all phenomena, and all that is necessary to the happening of every phenomenon; that is, nature is the equivalent of everything. To the rationalist there can be nothing supernatural. He is a Monist. There is, he affirms, one existence; he knows only its phenomena. These phenomena he distinguishes in thought by their varying characteristics. To the rationalist the word "create" in the sense of absolute origin of substance is a word without meaning. He cannot think totality of existence increased or non-existent. "Substance," "existence," "matter," is to him the totality: known, and, as far as he can yet think, knowable only in its phenomena.

It has been assumed so generally by religious advocates that some theologic dogma is necessary to every system of morality that the assumption needs direct traverse. It is put to-day by many of those who are attacking secular education for the young that without religious teaching there is no morality possible. This inaccuracy of speech is the result of centuries of supernaturalistic bias. Buckle considers Charron's "Treatise on Wisdom" as the first "attempt made in a modern language to construct a system of morals without the aid of theology." Charron says (Book II., chap. 5, sec. 4) that moral duties "are purely the result of a reasonable and thinking mind."

It will be contended here that every system of "supernatural" morality is necessarily uncertain, arbitrary, and confusing. That moral progress is only made in the ratio in which supernaturalism is diminished.

## THE RATIONALIST VIEW

To the rationalist that act is moral which tends to the greatest happiness of the greatest number of the human family with the least injury to any. That is, the test of the morality of any act is its utility. The experience of all ages, collated and classified by the most careful and accurate amongst investigators and profound thinkers, and checked and verified by each day's new discoveries and newer speculations, furnishes each individual with a sufficient but not infallible moral guide. Morality is social; that is, all acts are moral which tend to promote, build up, and ensure the perma-

ment well being of society. Tendencies to moral conduct are transmitted partly by the training of the young by those already with recognised habit of life, and partly by the influence of heredity. In England Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill have been chiefly identified with the modern affirmation of this utilitarian theory, and R. Hildreth, the translator of Dumont's "Bentham," says: "Whatever may be thought of the principle of utility, when considered as the foundation of morals, no one now-a-days will undertake to deny that it is the only safe rule of legislation." Theologians object to the rationalist presentment of morality: (*a*) That, according to the rationalist, morality varies, or, (*b*) that at any rate the conceptions of morality vary. That with different persons, therefore, there may be different views of what is moral, and there being no reliable, unchangeable, and definite standard, the rationalist position is chaotic. (*c*) The theologian asks, who is to judge on each act, whether or not it is moral? and (*d*) the theologian alleges that the measure of rational morality is the equivalent of mere individual selfishness, *i.e.*, that the rationalist only seeks his own happiness, that is, only seeks to gratify his own desires.

The rationalist answers (*a*) that the test of rational morality never varies; that the ability to apply the test does vary with the higher education of the masses. (*b*) That the standard, though not infallible, is sufficiently reliable for everyday life, and that rationalists seek each day to improve the efficiency of the standard by enforcing generally more accurate knowledge of life-conditions, thus developing a sound healthy public opinion. (*c*) Each individual must judge for herself or himself, and therefore should be well taught, or at least should have fair opportunity of being well taught, and should be encouraged to be well taught. It follows from this that morality develops with education. Immorality and ignorance are inseparable. (*d*) That if it be selfish to desire personal happiness, knowing that to permanently secure such happiness it is necessary to always promote the happiness of the majority, avoiding injury to any, then the rational moralist must be content to be called selfish. He suggests that if there is anything in the objection, it equally, if not with greater force, applies to the Christian supernaturalist who desires to be eternally happy though he knows that "few are chosen," and that "many shall strive to enter in and shall not be able."

## THE SUPERNATURAL VIEW

That act is moral which is in obedience to or in accord with the commands of deity. That these commands are known (*a*) by direct revelation from God; or (*b*) through the human conscience,

which it is alleged is implanted by God in each individual, and which infallibly decides for each person what acts are right and what are wrong.

“For those who believe in the God of Christian morality,” says the Rev. J. Llewellyn Davies, in the preface to his discourses on social questions, “the ultimate sources and rule of morality can be no other than His will;” and Mr. Davies contends that rationalists “can find no scientific basis for duty, no adequate explanation of conscience.”

The rationalist objects (*a*) that the commands of deity must be expressed either (1) to individuals or (2) to the whole race. In the first case the rationalist asks, How is it to be determined when any individual is reliable who professes to be the recipient and interpreter of God’s commands? In the second case he asks, Is it conceivable that any such command should have been given to the whole human race without its most complete recognition on the part of the recipients? When an individual claims to be the medium of transmission of divine communication, how is his claim to be tested? How is it clear that the communication was made? that the individual understood it? and that he has correctly interpreted it? If by the quality of the communication he makes, then by what standard is the quality to be judged? The Mahdi claimed to be God-sent; Joseph Smith declared himself charged with a special revelation; so did Mahomet; so did Jesus. How, in either case, is it to be determined whether the prophet is sane and truthful? Is it to be decided by the numbers who accepted or rejected the prophet? and if yes, at what date or within what limits does the numerical strength become material? There are more Mormons now than there were Christians within a like period. Mahomedanism in some countries would poll an overwhelming majority. Buddhism counts to-day far more heads than can be claimed for Christianity. And what is called Christianity is subdivisible into many sects as hostile to each other, though Christian, as the Christian is to the Mahomedan.

There is most certainly no one revelation to the whole race universally admitted to be the revealed command of God. It is asserted by some that the Bible is such a revelation, but the large majority of the world’s inhabitants do not now accept it: the largest proportion of the human family have never accepted it. And even of the minority who nominally accept the Bible as God’s revelation, there are many, calling themselves Christians, who declare that the Old Testament is now very imperfect as a moral guide, and that it was only given to the Jews on account of the hardness of their hearts; whilst the Jews on the other hand entirely reject the New Testament. Christians are divided into Roman Catholics and Protestants. The latter say, or at any rate in majority say, that the Bible is an infallible moral guide. Roman Catholics deny that the

Bible is a rule of faith except under the interpretation of the Church. Protestants are divided as to the value of various versions and translations, and as to the extent to which the Old Testament is to be regarded as superseded by the New. Even in the Church of England there is an authorised version and a revised improvement as yet unauthorised.

(b) The rationalist further objects that what is described by the supernaturalist as the human conscience is not a special faculty, unvarying and identical in all, but that it is in each individual a variable result of heredity, organisation, education, and general life-surroundings, enabling judgment by the individual on the consequence of events; that it affords no reliable clue to what is moral, for the general judgments of public conscience as embodied in public opinion, or in statute law, have varied in the same country in different ages to the extent sometimes of absolute and irreconcilable contradiction. That the individual conscience, so-called, varies in the same individual at different periods of his life and under different conditions of health. That at the present moment the judgments of conscience are on most material points in direct conflict in different parts of the world. Two hundred and fifty years ago it was moral in England to believe in witches, and it was a moral act to kill a witch. To-day it is held immoral to believe in witchcraft; to kill a witch would now be at law a criminal act. Witchcraft is so admittedly false that palmistry, conjuring, and fortune-telling are treated as punishable frauds. Yet from the supernatural point of view the reality of witchcraft is unquestionable, and the praiseworthiness of witchkilling is indisputable (*vide* Exodus xxii, 18; Leviticus xix, 26-31, xx, 27; Deut. xviii, 10, 11; 1 Sam. xxviii). And in some of the districts of England where school boards are yet without influence and where godless education has been prevented, the pious ignorant folk still believe in charms, wise women, and white and black magic.

One hundred years ago it was moral to trade in slaves, to own slaves, and to breed slaves. Even twenty-five years ago it was moral to own and breed slaves in the United States of America. Pious Bristol slave-traders in the 18th century endowed churches from the profits of their commerce. To-day slave-holding is not only punishable by law, but the theory of slavery is indignantly repudiated by all decent English folk. And yet supernaturalism maintained and legalised slavery (Leviticus xxv, 44-46). Wilberforce, the English abolitionist, himself a professing Christian, noting that infidel France had set its negroes free, asked in the House of Commons, on February 11th, 1796: "What would some future historian say in describing two great nations, the one accused of promoting anarchy and confusion and every human misery, yet giving liberty to the African; the other country contending for religion, morality, and justice, yet obstinately continuing a system

of cruelty and injustice?." In the American Congress, in 1790, the representative of South Carolina affirmed that the clergy did not condemn either slavery or the slave-trade, and Mr. Jackson, of Georgia, maintained that religion was not against slavery. On the 4th September, 1835, the *Courier*, Charleston, South Carolina, reports that at the celebrated pro-slavery meeting held there, "the clergy of all denominations attended in a body, lending their sanction to the proceedings, and adding by their presence to the impressive character of the scene." The rationalist asks, What was it that the consciences of these Christian men said on the subject of slavery only fifty years ago? Even in Boston, Massachusetts, William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist, though an earnest Christian, was shut out of Christian society; and the only building in that city of many churches in which he was at first allowed to publicly plead for the abolition of slavery was a hall owned by Abner Kneeland, an infidel who had been convicted and sent to gaol as a blasphemer. Why for centuries did Christians trade in slaves, if supernatural morality is dependent on the immutable judgments of a God-ordained conscience? Why, if slavery was defensible by supernatural moralists only twenty-five years ago, has it now become utterly indefensible?

In England it is immoral to marry the sister of your deceased wife, and the immorality is so clear and flagrant that any children born of such a marriage are bastardized, and in the event of an intestacy are excluded from sharing the property of either of the parents. In Canada it is moral to marry your deceased wife's sister, and the children are respected as legitimate. A few years ago a great supernaturalist, a leader in the religious body to which he belonged, an eloquent preacher, an otherwise good man, desired to marry his deceased wife's sister. It being immoral in this country he went abroad to another country where the act was moral, and there he married. The rationalist asks, How is this explicable from the supernatural standpoint?

In any part of Great Britain or Ireland it is immoral to have more than one wife, and the law will punish the parties to the union and put disabilities on the issue. In India, under British law, it is moral to have more than one wife, and the Christian law-courts sitting in London will recognise the children of that union. Christian supernaturalists will admit: That good men like Abraham had more than one wife; that specially-rewarded men like David practised polygamy; but they say that this is an old practice, which, though once good, is no longer to be followed.

In England it is clearly immoral for one man to prepare and use dynamite or other explosives so as to destroy the life and property of Englishmen. But in England it is as clearly moral for men in the Woolwich government laboratory to prepare and use similar explosives to blow to pieces people in Egypt, the Soudan, or

elsewhere. The morality is vouched by the fact that an archbishop issues a special prayer to be offered in all the churches for the success of the expedition carrying the explosives.

Belief is moral from the supernatural standpoint; unbelief immoral and punishable. The rationalist says that the varying beliefs of the world are the natural result o[f] organisation of transmitted traditions and present life-surroundings; that beliefs are not criminal even when they are erroneous, and that wrong beliefs should be met by refutation, not by punishment.

The rationalist affirms that there are only two logical standpoints; one, that of submission of opinion to arbitrary authority. This, in Christianity, is the position of the church of Rome. The other, that of the assertion of the right and duty of private judgment.

The Christian supernaturalist has, in England, considerably modified, in recent times, his action on the immorality of unbelief. In the time of Lord Coke a Turk was an infidel with whom no agreement was binding. From the reign of William III, until late in the reign of George III, Unitarianism was a crime by act of Parliament.

Until late in the reign of George IV Roman Catholicism was a crime punishable by law. Until 1859 a Jew was considered sufficiently wicked to be deprived of many civil rights. Two hundred and thirty years ago Quakers were immoral men, and as such were publicly whipped.

The supernaturalist recommends right conduct that you may be rewarded when you are dead. The rationalist recommends right conduct because in increasing the present total of human happiness you increase your own happiness now, and render future happiness more easily attainable by others.

These are only a few of many like-charactered illustrations which entitle the rationalist to return on the supernaturalist the weight of the Rev. J. Llewellyn Davies' above-quoted contention.

*PRICE ONE PENNY*

Printed by Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh, 63, Fleet St., E.C. 1886