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Man's Moral Law

Sylvia Townsend Warner^{*}

Editor's note: Warner's essay on 'Man's Moral Law' was her contribution to Man, Proud Man: A Commentary, edited by Mabel Ulrich (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1932). The essays in the volume all took the form of a title that opens up a gap between the human and the masculine: 'Man the Master. An Illusion' (Mary Borden), 'Man and Personal Relations' (E. M. Delafield), 'Man as Pleasure-seeker' (Susan Ertz), 'Man the Helpmate' (Storm Jameson), 'Man the Magpie' (Helen Simpson), 'Man – Without Prejudice' (G. B. Stern), 'Man's Moral Law' (Warner) and 'Man and Religion' (Rebecca West).

The philosopher Kant, celebrated for having written the *Critique of Pure Reason* and practising so exemplary a punctuality that the citizens of Jena set their clocks by his afternoon walk, gave it as his considered opinion that there were two things that beat him, or, as the English translation of this saying more elegantly puts it:

filled his soul with awe;
The starry heavens and man's moral law.

Since Kant's day the starry heavens have lost a good deal of their aloofness. In fact, they may be said to have become a Palm Beach of the intellect. The nebulae in Andromeda are now within the grasp of quite modest ambitions, and the meanest diner-out can speak of express trains proceeding intermittently through time-space with the authority of a Bradshaw. Also, telescopes have been considerably improved. But the subject of Man's Moral Law is still as imposing a mystery as it was when it baffled Kant. Science, so brisk and dauntless in her dealings elsewhere, trembles here, and veils her face. Research drops the scalpel, even women, said to be so inquisitive, lapse into silent wonderment before this massive phenomenon and have learned by experience to provoke its manifestations as little as possible.

Non ragionam di lor. Guardate e passa.¹

From many points of view this reverence is admirable. History and fable combine to enforce upon us the teaching that it is not good for us to know everything. As Sir George Beaumont demanded the brown tree in the landscape, the human mind instinctively craves for one point of dusk and repose, one door that may not be opened, one branch whose fruit may never be plucked. Such considerations rushed into my mind when I was first requested by the Editor of this Symposium to undertake an investigation into this aspect of the male of the human species. Why, thought I, seek to lay the axe to the root of this brown tree, why invade this privacy, why imperil the majestic shade which for so long has brooded over this unknown? In a world where so little romance is left, where every *ultima thule* of the imagination has been mapped and charted and where the bison is fast becoming extinct, would it not be better to leave Man's Moral Law alone? And for a moment I experienced an abashed awe such as I used to feel as a child when my nurse would point to a local gas-container and tell me that if I were ever so wicked as to stick a pin into that vast cylindrical bulk painted a threatening crimson, an instant explosion would hurl me and the neighbourhood to disintegration.

If action is the only test of assertion, then for all I know my nurse was right; for I have never stuck a pin into that gas-vat or any other. Nevertheless, so I argued with myself, I do not now believe in the correctness of her statement, and people better qualified to speak with authority in this matter have since assured me that she was talking arrant nonsense. But how to know, so urged the more speculative and superstitious part of my mind, that this statement of hers, though actually erroneous, was not mystically true, and sent as a warning? And again it seemed to me that I had better stay my hand, and content myself with the awe which was good enough for Kant, and should surely be good enough for me. For suppose — and now my super-rational self began to talk with the utmost loudness and plausibility — suppose that Man's Moral Law were indeed what my nurse's theory of gas-vats so grossly boded forth, and might, at one unadvised and sacrilegious prod, explode, and bring about the disintegration of society. Where should I be then, meddling creature?

To cut a long story short, I said that Man's Moral Law was a subject which had always interested me, and that I should be very glad to undertake an enquiry into it.

Before I begin an account of my enquiry a word or two should be said as to my qualifications. In these days of specialization the

empirical method is rightly suspect, and some may wonder at me for my readiness to attack a question of which I have already confessed my ignorance. But Man's Moral Law is perhaps the only subject left to us which may be approached with any hope of profit from a datum line of incompetence. Before so dense a mystery one eye may be as good as another, and the very fact of knowing nothing may condition a valuable freedom from bias.

It is only in the strictest sense of the word, moreover, that one can say one knows nothing of Man's Moral Law. Of its origin, its constituents, its chemistry and dynamics we are indeed ignorant; but it is scarcely possible to spend an hour in the company of man without being made aware that it exists and functions, and that it is, most emphatically, a force. Our position in this respect is much the same as the position of humankind before the discovery of electricity. Though no one could say what caused the lightning, the lightning was there, sometimes latent, sometimes leaping from a cloud, a thing to be dreaded, admired, and if possible avoided. Certain conditions of weather, so experience would teach, a sultriness in the air, a certain bulginess and discoloration in the clouds, heralded its appearance; and in a similar way we know by experience that certain physical aspects of man, an appearance of slight inflation, a special tense quality in his silences, prelude the manifestations, more or less devastating but always impressive, of his Moral Law. To establish a connection between the lightning flash and the peculiar properties that could be elicited from amber by briskly rubbing it with a woollen stocking would seem, did we not know that it had been done, a task beyond human ingenuity. Yet little by little, by research, observation, and experiment, the task was accomplished; and there seems to be no absolute reason why an application of the same methods may not end in the disclosure of the nature or Man's Moral Law. Indeed, upon some counts, Man's Moral Law seems a more promising subject than electricity, which in its major demonstration of lightning is too swift and intermittent a phenomenon to afford a satisfactory subject for research. And though a too rash exploration into the former may provoke alarming reactions, the actual danger to life and limb is probably less than that which attends experiments with lightning. Lastly, though this may seem almost too fantastic a consideration for mention, last year, 1931, saw the centenary of the birth of Faraday; and since Man's Moral Law must be looked into some time or another, one could not begin one's investigations in a year of better augury.

We have learned from Freud what rich results may be gained from an examination of traditional idioms, idioms that have become

so much a part of common speech that their import passes unnoticed. I propose to base the first part of my examination of Man's Moral Law upon three such common phrases. The first of these is the expression, *Playing the game*; the second, the often-heard reproach, *It's not cricket*; the third the exclamation, always used in a slighting or belittling sense, *Skittles!* or, *That's all skittles*. This may seem an arbitrary choice. But in the prolegomena of so virgin a subject one must begin somewhere; and I hope that I may presently show that the choice is not quite so arbitrary as at first sight it may seem.

Let us first observe what these phrases have in common. It will be seen that while (a) they are all based upon pastimes, they all (b) convey a moral judgement; and (c) they are all masculine phrases. Should it be objected against this last statement that women may and frequently do use these phrases with exactly the same connotation and emphasis as they bear in the mouths of men, I must bring forward the counter-objection that women have produced no equivalent phrases drawn from the specific interests and occupations of femininity. It is absurd to suppose that Penelope or Lucretia would condemn a lapse from conjugal fidelity with the expression, *It's not needlework*; and though cookery has supplied the term of reproach, *half-baked*, this is used as a plain metaphor of semi-imbecility, and conveys none of the earnest moral censure inseparable from the male phrases above.

We now arrive at the consideration of the first common quality of these three phrases, their origin in pastimes. It may seem at first sight peculiar that the moral judgements implicit in them should be vested in a terminology proper to games, and that so serious a matter as the reprobation of vice or ill-timed frivolity should be thus connected with activities which their very generic name of pastimes announces as a method of whiling away an otherwise negligible and unoccupied duration of time. Why, one might ask, arguing upon a purely rationalistic basis, should the conduct of one who betrays a trust, sets fire to his neighbour's hayrick, or puts poison in the children's milk, be condemned by the statement that it is not a highly organized method of passing the time which demands for its full execution twelve variously-formed pieces of wood, a small leather sphere, and two opposing bands of players, each band consisting of eleven participants and a twelfth man in case of accidents, together, should the rite be performed in its most perfect form, with two umpires, and a large expanse of smooth and levelled grass with defined boundaries? Apart from the poetical excitement inseparable from the use of metaphor, would it not be actually more emphatic, more condemnatory, to say of such behaviour,

It is treachery, It is arson, It is murder? — in the two latter instances offences which involve severe punishment by legal code.

Yet a small amount of reflection will show an overwhelming speech-tendency to apply terms proper to pastimes to the graver aspects of life, and always with an implied moral overtone. And further examination will show that the preponderance of these terms are drawn from games predominantly or exclusively masculine. In England cricket and football, in the United States baseball, supply a rich harvest of such terms; tennis supplies fewer; croquet — a female game — and lacrosse, none.

In this connection it will be of interest to examine the variations of sense in the word *sporting*. To be sporting or Not sporting are terms which now rival To be cricket or Not cricket in their implications of moral worth or unworth. But it is only of recent years, comparatively speaking, that *sporting* has come to bear this moral overtone; and it is in the same lapse of time that its use has been transferred almost entirely from the blood to the bloodless sports. In the days of our grandparents to be sporting meant to be given to shooting, fishing, or hunting. *Good sport* expressed either an opinion that an adequate number of grouse, salmon, hares, foxes, etc., had been killed, or a friendly aspiration that it might be so. Now this sense of the word has been practically supplanted by a secondary meaning in which it expresses a favourable moral judgement upon character or actions quite unconnected with the ability to sit a horse, reel in a salmon or bring down a pheasant with either barrel.

This bleaching, as one might express it, of the word *sport* and its derivatives — this transference from blood to bloodless sports by which it acquires at the same time a connotation of moral excellence — might suggest to some hasty humanitarian that the moral overtone implies approbation of harmlessness. Recollection, however, of the high accident rate in football and baseball — games profoundly embroiled in the sports-morality compound — should be enough to warn one off from following this specious hypothesis. Illumination must be sought elsewhere; and for that illumination we must turn to the third phrase of my three examples: the exclamation, *Skittles*.

It is at once evident that common usage has established an antithesis, as it were, between cricket and skittles. Morally speaking, whatever is skittles isn't cricket, whatever is cricket isn't skittles. Skittles is something light, negligible, despicably easy, calling out none of the better nature of man. A life that is *All beer and skittles*, however alluring such a life might sound, is in sum worthless and morally insignificant.

Cricket, on the other hand, is serious, strenuous, laudable. It is in the antithesis between these two games, both alike originally devised as pastimes, and both based on the common principle of knocking down one object with another, that we must seek the clue. What quality is it, present in the one, lacking in the other, that gives rise to their opposed moral significances, and elicits this responsive gush from the mysterious hidden fountain of Man's Moral Law?

The difference is not far to seek. The merest tyro, the most inattentive looker-on at a game of cricket, is aware that cricket is a game with a great number of rules. Skittles, on the other hand, is only surpassed by rounders for lawlessness.

It seems clear, then, that it is by the absence or presence of their rules that we may expect to find games linked up with Man's Moral Law. And there is striking corroborative evidence for this conclusion in the moral import or overtone taken on by the word *sporting* as it is transferred from the blood to the bloodless sports. Necessity was the mother of the blood sports, the necessity to kill for food or self-defence; and necessity knows no law. There are no penalizing rules, except the game-laws, conditioning the bringing-down of pheasants or the catching of salmon. And though the hunting field has its conventions, rigid enough, it cannot be doubted that these would disappear should expediency demand it; and that in a Leicestershire overrun with foxes as Kenya is sometimes overrun with locusts, foxes would be attacked with machine-guns worked from motor-cycles with no one, morally, a penny the worse for it.

Compare this with the moral overthrow involved if the rules of the highly organized bloodless sports should be tampered with; if the offside rule should be discarded by a football team, a superstitious bowler insist upon the luck of a seventh throw, or a billiard player consistently pot his opponent's ball. Under such circumstances the moral value of games, so much insisted upon by every educationalist, would be utterly lost, and cricket would be, indeed, no other than skittles.

So, having established that, ethically speaking, games are good or not good according as to whether they have many or few rules, we may proceed to lay down as a first conclusion in this study of Man's Moral Law the axiom that: In any law there is intrinsically a quality of goodness; or, to put it more simply: Laws are good in themselves.

This point of view is not an easy one for women to receive. That a law may be a good law, granted; or that the law-abiding are commonly considered good, granted again. But that a law, merely by being a law, should, irrespective of any other considerations, immediately secrete

a quality of absolute goodness, must seem to the female intelligence a trifle metaphysical, to put it mildly. Yet, as far as Man's Moral Law is involved, I do not see how the truth of this axiom can be denied. It has been arrived at by the strictest reasoning, proceeding from irrefutable facts; and the light which it sheds upon many manifestations of Man's Moral Law which must otherwise remain absolutely inexplicable establishes it, at any rate to my thinking, as unassailable.

Moreover, by the acceptance of this axiom we are guided to a better understanding of the fact, so strange at first sight, that it is in metaphors drawn from games that man expresses his deepest moral judgements. For where else among male activities, except perhaps in the matter of social drapery, shall we find the arbitrary nature of law in such a pure state as in the highly organized games? It is exactly because the laws of these games are based upon no apparent reason or expediency, and because games themselves are a purely artificial contrivance for passing unwanted time that these laws call forth the profoundest veneration.

Further, we may assume that in insisting as they do upon the tonic value of organized games our most eminently moral males are in truth bent upon insinuating into the minds of the young this very axiom that laws are in themselves good and venerable. For the young of the human species are apparently quite as devoid of the sense of Moral Law as are women of any age; and though it would seem by what we know of the taboo system of primitive man that there is in all males a natural tendency for the feeling for Moral Law to emerge at or round about the age of puberty, our educationalists rightly leave nothing to chance, but see to it that by the practice of games this tendency is, as it were, schooled and initiated, young males learning, as they learn to respect and keep holy various codes of game-playing, the estimable and inherently moral quality of laws *per se*. But women, however well they may play games, and however carefully they may observe the rules, remain outside the veil. The implicit doctrine is hidden from them, and even should they make use of the male metaphors, and say of such and such an action that it is not cricket, or that it is all skittles, they speak with the lips only, not the heart. This fact is instinctively grasped by every man. And it is admirable, in the light of this truth, to observe the unflawed tranquillity of the male mind before a growing female aptitude for men's games, and how, with women challenging and overcoming them in countless contests of endurance and skill, men can still say — and do — with unshaken certainty, that women will never be any good at games.

Accepting as a basic axiom of Man's Moral Law that all laws are good, it is clear that we must be prepared, in any further exploration of this subject, to find a mystical approbation given to qualities which in a feminine judgement would be, if approved of at all, approved of on grounds of expediency. Indeed, this element of mysticism in Man's Moral Law seems at times to extend almost to fetichism; and if we bear in mind how cloistered a life Man's Moral Law has led through the ages, how closely and esoterically guarded from rational criticism, how implicitly received and uncompromisingly demonstrated it has been, it is not altogether surprising that it should still retain an impress of a primitive method of thought. Based, as I believe it to be, upon the attribution of a positive quality of goodness to an abstract entity of law, Man's Moral Law appears to be of such a mystical constitution that it can still, without awkwardness, anthropomorphize a considerable section of the universe which reason considers purely material and inanimate. To put this more simply, as primitive man attributed supernatural powers to natural objects, and bowed down to wood and stone, man, even now, in the privacy of his Moral Law bows down to boots, and sees a possible soul of goodness in everything pertaining to himself.

This cannot be better realized than by a study of the advertisements in our Daily Press which are directed to men, and a comparison of these advertisements with those aimed to catch the eye of a woman. By such a study it would appear that man will not contemplate the purchase of wearing-apparel, shaving-soap, whisky, automobiles, purgatives, footwear, or tobacco, unless he be assured that these articles are morally satisfactory.

Here, for an example, are two advertisements, taken at random from the *Daily Mail* of September 16th, 1931. One is male, one is female; and any reader of advertisements will see that they are typical of their kind, and in no way constitute a special pleading for my point.

'Treat them rough,' the first begins. 'Wear them day in and day out in the foulest muddiest weather on the roughest of roads — these boots will "stick it" with dogged steadfast endurance.'

Boots, admittedly, should be durable; but so should lipstick. In the second advertisement, of a lipstick, the permanence of the particular brand is especially stressed.

'It holds where others smear and wear — yet leaves no trace of greasy residue. It ends that artificial smear that women have

tried for years to overcome. A colour that glorifies the lips to pulse-quickenng loveliness — trust the *French* for that! On sale everywhere in 4 shades.’

It is impossible to imagine an advertisement of lipstick which praised its dogged steadfast endurance — as impossible as it is to imagine men countenancing a hint of sexual appeal in their boots. Even when the same quality is urged in recommendation of a ware, the approach, so to speak, is different as chalk from cheese. For women are realists — grim realists, as is shown by that painful phrase about the greasy residue. But man at all time[s] refers his choice to the implicit idealism of his Moral Law, and will buy no article without its sanction.

Here is another advertisement in which this fact has been so completely accepted that the real advantages of the article in question are mentioned only to whet by contrast the superior moral allure.

‘It’s not alone the reasonable first cost or the light fuel-consumption — it’s the intrinsic quality of our material, the built-in sturdiness ... the downright goodness of the car that makes satisfaction assured.’

One would suppose that it was not a car that was recommended thus, but a wife for a colonial Bishop—were it not that men, even Bishops, sadly aware of female non-morality, abandon, in the choice of a wife, the standards by which they choose their pipe tobacco and their underwear.

The mention of underwear occurs here with singular propriety, since it leads me on to a further conclusion. This conclusion may seem far fetched, perhaps even offensive; but it forces itself upon me, and I should not feel justified in omitting it.

I have shown that an essential ingredient, perhaps even the mainspring, of Man’s Moral Law can be summed up in the axiom that in any law there is intrinsically a quality of goodness; I have shown also that this semi-mystical point of view is extended into an attribution of moral qualities, such as steadfastness, high-mindedness, etc., to material objects not in themselves susceptible to such attributions, and that man as a purchaser is greatly influenced by this idealistic notion. No student of man can have failed to observe his preference for wearing wool next to the skin — a preference so deeply ingrained, so piously put into action, and so unconvincingly accounted for by the adduced reasons of health and comfort, that there can be no doubt that Moral Law is deeply involved in the choice. I have already, though but tentatively, glanced at the possibility that Man’s Moral Law may include a certain element of

fetichism. In its general outlines it presents some striking resemblances to what we know of the taboo system, being, as that is, powerful in its effect, rigid in its tradition, and esoterically conveyed to the initiates. Moreover, the distance between fetichism and idealism is not so great as it may seem; and the peculiar variety of idealism which is exhibited in a readiness to attribute 'downright goodness' to automobiles might well be a rarefied development of the primitive impulse which deifies a tree.

One of the most persistent traits of fetichist thinking is the belief that actual or attributed qualities may be sacramentally transmitted; that by drinking the blood of bulls man can become strong, or that the wearing of a necklace of tigers' teeth will bestow ferocity. It is to the animal kingdom that man turns for these supernatural transfers, feeling here a nearer relationship than with vegetable or mineral aspects of matter. Have we not here, then, an explanation of why, at the mysterious dictates of his Moral Law, modern man is faithful to wool next to the skin? It is true that the sheep is neither a powerful nor a sagacious animal; but it is proverbially virtuous; and in these days a prudent inoffensiveness has taken the place of the earlier virtues of strength and combative ability. In this sense man may truly utter the Biblical boast that righteousness is the girdle of his loins.

It must be noticed that very few animals provide a satisfactory textile. Expense makes the weaving of the lion's mane out of the question, and though both poodles and Persian cats carry coats that may be woven up, the poodle is too intelligent to be dignified, and there is something about the cat which makes it abhorrent to Man's Moral Law. We are left with the sheep, the goat, and the camel. Goats are liable to much the same objections that rule out the cat; but the sheep and the camel, animals in their different spheres so closely akin to the behaviour-standards of present-day life, animals useful, moderate, and enduring, possess exactly the qualifications we might expect to find in demand, and are rightly chosen to impress by intimate contact with the epidermis their social and moral qualities.

Whether in actual fact such a transference takes place lies beyond the scope of this enquiry. In the light of modern chemistry it seems not impossible; but my concern is with Man's Moral Law, and I must leave it to the biologist to determine by observation and experiment if the wearing of wool does actually impart a sheepishness to the wearer, or if the persistent use of a camel's-hair dressing-gown results in a notable willingness to bear obligations uncomplainingly, and do without drink. My part is done if I have succeeded in displaying Man's Moral Law at once preserving the vital beliefs of fetichism and adapting them

to modern conditions — a process so intricate and so obscured from unsympathetic analysis that we need scarcely wonder that the system from which it springs was too much for Kant. Indeed, I must admit that in many ways Man's Moral Law is still too much for me. For example, although I am convinced that in the matter of trouser turn-ups we have a significant manifestation of its workings, I have not been able to see how it works. Phenomena such as these I must leave to other labourers in this field, only remarking that they may be compared to the properties of amber mentioned in my electrical analogy — seemingly in themselves insignificant and undeducible from the full blaze of Moral Law in its most direct and forceful manifestations, yet indubitably connected with it. And as the early researches into the nature of electricity were most profitable when conducted along the humbler lines of investigation, I venture to prophesy that the final revelation and understanding of Man's Moral Law will be most swiftly, safely, and surely arrived at by such a method as I have here, however modestly, inaugurated — an examination of its minor phenomena. Something perhaps parallel to the lightning-conductor or the system of insulation will need to be invented. Any enquiry by women into so jealously guarded a male mystery as Man's Moral Law is likely to arouse anger and ill-feeling, and I am prepared for obloquy. Yet, while enquiry may with justification hope for such rich results, it would be weak-minded to hold back; nor, on his own showing, has man anything to fear from an impartial investigation of this subject, claiming as he does, and no doubt rightly, that it is by the very possession of a peculiar Moral Law that he is eminent among created things, and while following its dictates, infallible in judgement and conduct. Accordingly, it is without hesitation, though at the risk, maybe, of calling out a temporary resentment, that I venture to indicate a line for future research which, in my opinion, is likely to yield most valuable results. In this short essay I have succeeded in carrying back Man's Moral Law to primitive man. Such an antiquity is respectable enough; yet I believe that research should be carried a step further; and it is with confidence that I recommend to those who may come after me a patient enquiry into the conduct of baboons.

Note

* 1893–1978.

1 Dante, *Inferno*, Canto III, line 51. 'Let us not speak of them. Look, then pass on' (tr. Robin Kirkpatrick).