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Some aspects of William Paley's Social Views*

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The Violence of a Meek Divine: Some aspects of William Paley's Social Views

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Leaving Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and turning to William Paley's *Reasons for Contentment addressed to the Labouring Part of the British Public* is like entering a peaceful harbour after having weathered a storm. Instead of Burke's violent denunciations – which in fact he later admitted were plain “eructations”¹ – of the French Revolution and its agents wavering, according to him, between cynical irresponsibility and sheer wickedness, Paley sticks to his clerical function and delivers a gentle homily on the best of all possible worlds enjoyed by the labouring part of the British public who do not have “independent property” and should be pleased to do without it. Here are no recriminations, no reprimands, no attacks: the French Revolution is not even mentioned, but only a hypothetical “public disturbance” that could only produce confusion, and a metaphorical “stormy sea” for which, by definition, nobody is to blame. The meekness advocated by the preacher is one which his very mode of address exemplifies: by using the pronoun “we” the preacher / teacher shows that he is one of us, stating the obvious we all agree upon; most of the time the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enounced are one and the same. This consensual tone at a time of violent rifts in public opinion produces a discourse “so good, so fair, so debonaire” that it has hardly ever been listed among the major contributions to the English debate on the French Revolution.

And yet, unassuming as it is, Paley's sermon preached in 1790 and issued as a pamphlet in 1793 to counteract the spreading influence of Paine's dangerous doctrines², is part and parcel of the propaganda campaign launched by Pitt's government to avoid a revolution in England; it was appreciated as such by his ecclesiastical superiors since the Bishop of London rewarded him for it with a prebend at St Paul's³. As a matter of fact, from the very beginning of his sermon, Paley's tone is warped: his comparison between human life and “the situation of spectators in a theatre”, as if the theatre was the most popular entertainment of the “labouring” class, shows that he is not really concerned with the people he is pretending to address. This is of course further strengthened by the give-away admission that Paley could not get his “livelihood by labour” and that the worker with whom he might have swapped job would derive no pleasure from his own activities. It makes it clear that the community postulated by the first person plural pronoun is permanently divided into opposed classes and that the author is on one side of the social fence while the audience he aims at is on the other. His sole object is to prevent the labouring part of the nation from joining forces with all those who are dissatisfied (including a number of middle-class dissenters and all the Painites) and pulling down the fences that protect the minority of haves against the appetites of the swinish have-nots. While Burke can be said to write in order to avoid what might be a fatal split among the ruling classes, Paley complements his efforts by trying to avoid a union of the craftsmen, the domestic and industrial servants with the unemployed and dissatisfied against the ruling minority. Far from being opposed to each other, Burke and Paley are part of a two-

¹ T.W. Copeland, ed., *The Correspondence of E. Burke*, Cambridge and Chicago, 1958-1978, IX, 347.

² Cf. J. T. Boulton, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963, pp. 256-7.

³ William Roberts, ed., *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs Hannah More*, London, 1835, II, 427. For the general context, see the excellent study by Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.

pronged attack against the “sophists and incendiaries of the revolutionary school”⁴ who are trying to disturb the peace of the kingdom.

What is particularly interesting in Paley’s text is that, in its meek blandness and self-righteous complacency, it displays more violence than many other admonitions meant to upbraid a profligate populace. Here Paley does not scold, still less does he castigate. He merely does violence to a number of facts, to logics and to the feelings of the average labouring Englishman.

Of course, the main fact he misrepresents is poverty itself⁵. The misrepresentation is caused by a number of omissions. He does not mention unemployment (the only unemployment he refers to as being “tiresome and insipid” is that to which the rich are inevitably condemned), or work in factories and mines or, again, the lot of vagabonds, of the sick, the aged and destitute. But plain distortion of facts also plays its part: anyone acquainted with Adam Smith’s masterpiece well knows that it is grossly misleading to speak of the relation of employer and employee as a contract guaranteeing “a fair exchange of work for wages, an equal bargain”, since it is a contract between unequal parties meant to enable the stronger to extract a neat surplus value from the weaker; and it is, at best, wishful thinking to assert that the law is there to protect the weak against the strong (Goldsmith, for one, knew better who wrote: “Laws grind the poor and rich men rule the law”⁶). If we may, by a stretch of our charitable imagination, believe that the owner of a great estate does not eat or drink more than the owner of a small one, does it follow that the large estates of the nobility feed as many people as if they were more equally distributed and more usefully employed? Which human beings are fed by the hundreds of thousands of acres devoted to sublime landscape gardening or to the horses used by the rich for their amusements?

But the violence done to logics by Paley, aggravates his case. The most outrageous example of his sophistry, and one from which all the others follow, consists in his definition of poverty: he only is poor and really suffers the pains of poverty, whose expenses exceed his resources, which is another way of saying that there are more really poor people among the rich than among the so-called poor, who at least know the art of making both ends meet. The rich, on the other hand, are those who never know the “pleasures of frugality” and the delights of “taking out” of a dwindling and soon exhausted “fund”. As for rest, the rich are doomed to remain unacquainted with its comforts since “no man can rest who has not worked.” In fine, the only people who deserve to be pitied are the rich. One must readily confess that Paley strains common-sense to breaking-point and beats all the sophists of the revolutionary school who never uttered anything so palpably absurd.

Such violence amounts to insulting the real distresses of the poor, and the meek tone in which the homily is delivered, instead of blandishing the audience, is very likely to set its nerves on edge. Nowhere is this more blatant than when Paley comes to mention the advantages poor parents enjoy in providing for their off-spring: as these hardly need anything to engage in a “happy” life, their parents are always in a position to supply them with this nothing, whereas rich parents cannot always afford the expenses incurred in settling their children in a position suitable to their station in life. He could have added that the children of the poor, on average, died earlier than those of the rich, another instance of divine foresight and benevolent Providence. By playing down the importance to happiness of “ease”, “sensual pleasures” and “difference of rank and fortune”, Paley ends up by contradicting the Gospel according to which “the meek shall inherit the earth.” He does not do so by substituting “heaven” for

⁴ The expression is from Coleridge, *A Lay Sermon addressed to the higher and middle Classes on the existing distresses and discontents*, 1817.

⁵ This is what is explained at length in *A Letter to William Paley from a Poor Labourer*, 1793 (Cf. O. Smith, op. cit., 58).

⁶ Goldsmith, *The Traveller; or, A Prospect of Society. A Poem*, 1765, line 386.

“earth” in this prophecy, as was the common practice of those political Christians for whom eternal justice hereafter went blithely hand in hand with gross injustice here and now. But he boldly and originally asserts that the meek have already inherited the earth and that they have, on the whole, nothing left to wish for. He bolsters up his statement by introducing two charming vignettes of rural life – that of the proudly resting labourer “in the summer evening of a country village”, and that of the healthy young man going out to work for his jolly family⁷ – which significantly ignore the growing importance of urban life and its pleasurable pestilential slums.

Three series of reasons can account for such a misrepresentation of reality and subversion of common sense. The first is obviously political. Confronted with the unmanageable problem of poverty at the end of the eighteenth century, politicians supporting the *status quo* could adopt one of three positions. They could sympathize with the poor, lament over their condition and try tentatively to suggest some measures which, without introducing any significant and real changes, would defuse discontent and ward off all dangers of rebellion. Or else they could, while admitting that the situation of the poor was appalling, assert that nothing could be done to alter it simply because the problem was beyond the power of any body, private or public. This was Burke’s position which he never tired of repeating:

To provide for us in our necessities is not in the power of government. It would be a vain presumption in statesmen to think they can do it. The people maintain them, and not they the people. It is in the power of government to prevent much evil; it can do very little positive good in this, or perhaps in anything else. It is not only so of the state and statesmen, but of all the classes and descriptions of the rich – they are the pensioners of the poor, and are maintained by their superfluity. They are under an absolute, hereditary, and indefeasible dependence on those who labour, and are miscalled the poor.

This view bases an admission of impotence on a perfectly scientific conception of the origin of rent (contrary to what Paley suggests, the rich do *not* support the poor, but the poor the rich). And it leads logically to the rejection of the compassionate and inefficiently reforming stance:

Nothing can be so base and so wicked as the political canting language “the labouring *poor*.” Let compassion be shown in action, the more the better, according to every man’s ability; but let there be no lamentation of their condition. It is no relief to their miserable circumstances; it is only an insult to their miserable understandings. It arises from a total want of charity, or a total want of thought. Want of one kind was never relieved by want of any other kind. Patience, labour, sobriety, frugality, and religion, should be recommended to them; all the rest is downright *fraud*. It is horrible to call them “The *once happy* labourer.”⁸

The fact that Paley adopts a third position shows that the previous two have become untenable. The charitable posture, the affected pity, was dangerous because it tended to increase the discontent of the labouring people and to make them imagine that there was a solution to their problem. But Burke’s position itself, especially its scientifically grounded element, is becoming dangerous as well. For granting that the rich “are maintained by the superfluity” of the poor, once the poor have no longer any superfluity (if they ever had any), the rich should disappear as such: even if poverty does not disappear with them, at least the wealth of the few will cease to insult the misery of the many; when there is little to share, an equally distributed frugality is better, psychologically and morally speaking, than starvation at one end and lavish consumption and gluttony at the other. In other words, and to put it mildly, Burke’s position ends up by highlighting the absolute impossibility for the interests of the

⁷ This image was remembered by Burke in the *Third Letter on a Regicide Peace with the Directory of France*, in *Works* (Bohn’s British Classics, 1854-89) V, 322: “I do not call a healthy young man, cheerful in his mind, and vigorous in his arms, I cannot call such a man, *poor*; I cannot pity my kind as a kind, merely because they are men.”

⁸ Burke, *Works*, V, 83 & 84 respectively.

poor and the rich to be always the same. As a book often read by Paley (and also by Burke who quotes it now and again) states:

What peace can there be between hyena and dog,
what peace between rich man and pauper?
As lions prey on the wild asses of the desert,
so the rich batten on the poor.
As humility disgusts the proud,
so is the rich man disgusted by the poor⁹.

Under these circumstances, neither affected pity nor an appeal to “the nature of things” can prevent or stem discontent. The only solution left is to play down all opposition of interests, to play up the advantages of “miscalled” poverty and to concentrate on what rich and poor have in common: their human nature. That Paley adopts this position testifies to the mounting pressures of popular discontent.

But he is also led to misrepresent poverty for what might be called theological reasons. As opposed to Joseph Butler (among others) who tended to take a stern view of moral obligation (we have to obey the commands of God because they are God’s) but who could, by the same token, call a spade a spade and poverty an evil, Paley sticks, in 1790 and 1793, to the notion of moral obligation as he had defined it in 1785 in his *Moral and Political Philosophy*:

A MAN is said to be obliged, ‘when he is urged by a violent motive resulting from the command of another.’ [...]

We can be obliged to nothing but what we ourselves are to gain or to lose something by; for nothing else can be ‘violent motive’ to us. As we should not be obliged to obey the laws or the magistrate unless rewards and punishments, pleasures or pains, somehow or other, depended upon our obedience; so neither should we, without the same reason, be obliged to do what is right, to practise virtue, or to obey the commands of God.

That this theological utilitarianism has more to do with the four canons of Epicurus than with Butler’s more traditional and orthodox conception of Christian morality, Paley makes it quite clear when, later in the same work and after having said that in all cases “we consider solely what we ourselves shall gain or lose by the act”, he tries to distinguish between prudence and duty:

The difference, and the only difference, is this: that in the one case we consider what we shall gain or lose in the present world; in the other case we consider also what we shall gain or lose in the world to come¹⁰.

Which means that there is no such thing as “duty” for those who do not believe in a world to come. Now, once he holds this view of moral obligation, Paley is inevitably condemned to stress the moral and psychological advantages of poverty and meekly define happiness, not in material or “sensual” terms, but in term of “the exercise of domestic affection.” He has to discard, that is, the quantitative and concentrate on the qualitative: the quantitative is the realm of contention and strife, since it enables everybody to measure the immeasurable distance separating rich from poor; the qualitative, on the other hand, is the realm of peaceful communion, the republic, rather, of equal moral agents. Domestic passion, endearment, tenderness, solicitude, pleasure, attachment, gratitude, all these affects are common to great and low, rich and poor. To insist on this community of feeling is one way, and a very effective one, of preserving the peace of society with all its unjust inequalities.

What Paley does in fact is to adopt a sentimental strategy appealing to man as a sensible being, instead of a rational entity; or, more precisely, leading man rationally to admit that what matters in human life is sentiment and sensibility. All the rest is outward pageant and vain show not worth a moment’s consideration. It would therefore appear that Paley’s effort is not only due to political and theological reasons, but is also powerfully influenced by the vast

⁹ *Ecclesiasticus*, XIII, 18-20.

¹⁰ W. Paley, *Moral and Political Philosophy*, London, 1795, Bk II, chap. II & III respectively.

movement of sensibility which, in the eighteenth century, vies with an imperialist rationalism. This is probably true, provided one keeps in mind that sensibility is not a univocal notion at the time, but rather an elusive – and, therefore, extremely useful – term employed by a great variety of writers and thinkers. Goldsmith is usually considered as an important figure in the “sentimental school” of the time, and yet the following can be read as an attack on the Smith of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and, by extension, on Paley himself:

They who would know the miseries of the poor, must see life and endure it. To declaim on the temporal advantages they enjoy, is only repeating what none either believe or practise. The men who have the necessaries of living, are not poor: and they who want them, must be miserable [...] No vain efforts of a refined imagination can soothe the wants of nature, can give elastic sweetness to the dank vapours of a dungeon, or ease the throbbings of a broken heart. Let the philosopher from his couch of softness tell us that we can resist all these: alas! the effort by which we resist them is still the greatest pain. Death is slight, and any man can sustain it; but torments are dreadful, and these no man can endure¹¹.

That this is taken from what passes for one of the best instances of a sentimental novel, shows that an appeal to sensibility or to sentiment may cover a fairly wide range of responses to a given situation and may, or has to, vary with the situation itself. What is certain is that Paley is not so much following Goldsmith as he is illustrating the pronouncement offered by Ubsek in *Les Lettres Persanes*:

Il n’y a rien de si affligeant que les consolations tirées de la nécessité du mal, de l’inutilité des remèdes, de la fatalité du destin, de l’ordre de la Providence, et du malheur de la condition humaine. C’est se moquer de vouloir adoucir un mal par la considération que l’on est né misérable. Il vaut bien mieux enlever l’esprit hors de ses réflexions, et traiter l’homme comme sensible, au lieu de le traiter comme raisonnable¹².

Paley favours a unifying sensibility as against divisive reason, even if this entails doing violence to reality. His *Reasons for Contentment* is a good illustration of that movement which has been convincingly analyzed in a recent book by Terry Eagleton and which consists in aestheticizing morality and society. Once moral responses are made to appear as being as self-evident and as “natural” as one’s love for one’s children, there can be an ideological consensus, all the deeper as it is based on a pre-reflective lived experience. The rationality of the social whole is apprehended “in the least reflective aspects of our lives, in the most apparently private, wayward of sensations. Is there even any need for some cumbersome apparatus of law and the state, yoking us inorganically together, when in the genial glow of benevolence we can experience our kinship with others as immediately as a delectable taste?”¹³ The safest social order is that which is spontaneously self-imposed and internalized; in other words, that which is not perceived as *a* social order (among others possible ones), but as *the* natural horizon of life needing no separate justification, needing, in fact, no justification at all.

But this account does not do full justice to Paley’s violence. One aspect of it is particularly fascinating as it goes against the general trend of his argument and even seems to undermine it. If he dutifully stresses the common humanity of rich and poor, he, at the same time, explicitly and implicitly says that the poor are more human than the rich, that they constitute a norm, a standard, judged by which the rich appear in their true light: a strange, unaccountable lot, oppressed with listless dejection or beastly sottishness.

Near the end of his homily, Paley asserts the equality of rich and poor as far as domestic affections are concerned: “The poor man has his wife and children about him; and what has

¹¹ O. Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, 1766, Chap. XXIX. That the author of this novel was poor and an Irishman is, of course, significant.

¹² Montesquieu, *Les Lettres Persanes*, 1721, Lettre XXXIII.

¹³ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, p. 38.

the rich more? He has the same enjoyment of their society, the same solicitude for their welfare, the same pleasure in their good qualities, improvement and success; their connexion with him is as strict and intimate, their attachment as strong, their gratitude as warm.” This is perfect equality indeed! And yet, the next minute, Paley introduces the notion of *envy* and, thereby, implies that behind this avowed equality there exists a stubborn inequality, but *in favour of the poor*. For we have been told that the desires of the rich “are dead”; because of undue indulgence, all types of pleasures (including therefore the domestic ones) pall on them: their fate is to be tired and worn out without having worked, satiated even of the most extraordinary dainties; how could such degenerate beings enjoy the plain homely delights of conjugal and family life?

Or, again, when Paley condemns what he calls a “sudden or violent change of condition” resulting in “an elevation of fortune” and shows that it does not bring with it any increased enjoyment, one could imagine that he is indulging in a Smollettian fling at the “upstarts of fortune”. The trouble is that the vices occasionally displayed by these upstarts are those self-same congenital infirmities constantly displayed by the rich. A further proof of this can be found in the two exceptions which confirm that the rich are “unnatural”: according to Paley some men of independent means make strenuous and generous efforts in the interest of humanity at large; and “some great men” can be found among their children or in their garden “pursuing some rural diversion, or occupied with some trifling exercise.” These are the few rich men endowed with some of the wisdom of the poor; but the great majority of them confess by their folly that the condition of the poor meet the essential requirements of the good and human life.

Of course, this insistence on the humanity of the poor (as opposed to the bestiality of the rich which is hinted at now and again) could be considered as the demagogic finishing touch given to his main argument: you, poor people, are not only as well-off as the rich in the most important respects, but you are essentially superior to them. Yet, under the circumstances, such soft-sawdery can be as dangerous as affected pity: both imply a strong call to action, either to remove an unbearable poverty or to free the rich from the oppression under which they suffer and to enable them to share in the delectable common virtues of humanity.

It is in fact unlikely that Paley would have used this argument as part of his conscious counter-revolutionary propaganda. For one thing, as a priest, he was in a very good position constantly to compare the “humanity” of rich and poor: his everyday experience of both would not be long in telling him where cheerful self-denial and generosity were to be found, and where self-indulgence, arrogance and miserliness prevailed. And this meek priest delivering his political homily was after all the same Paley who was nicknamed “Pigeon Paley” because in Book III of his *Moral and Political Philosophy*, in order to describe human greed, he had compared the conduct of the greedy rich with the behaviour of a flock of pigeons fighting tooth and nail for a few vile worms. This was long before any significant sign had heralded the French Revolution.

But it was also a long time after he had first read the Bible and noticed its insistence on the poor who are “blessed”: not only the objects of God’s blessings but the prophets of the kingdom of God. Being deprived of everything, having nothing but the “spirit of poverty” to cultivate, they are constantly represented as having access to the plenitude of being: the less they have, the more they are, whereas every thing which the rich possess is something subtracted from their essence which is, therefore, stunted “from the very reason of the thing.” “Rich poverty”, or “the fortune of the poor” as Paley says, is one of the most pregnant themes in European culture and reappears in the early writings of Marx in the shape of the proletariat as the only “generic being”, the only class in a position to abolish all classes and liberate both masters and slaves. Whatever the status granted to this theme – myth or reality, regulating

idea or eschatological expectation¹⁴ – there is no doubt that this is a revolutionary idea at odds with Paley’s main purpose. Through it he can liberate a pent-up violence, this time against the rich whose self-proclaimed superiority lose all moral or cultural justifications: far from embodying a norm or a social ideal, they only represent alienation. The only rich people that are human are those who live, and feel, and think like poor people.

This does not of course cancel the avowed aim of Paley’s pamphlet. It simply means that univocal messages are seldom to be found, and certainly not when a dialogic use of the Bible interferes with their apparent simplicity.

Such as it is, *Reasons for Contentment* is interesting because of its “rich” posterity: from Malthus, through Macmillan’s “You never had it so good”, to the way in which the arch-conservative historian Ian R. Christie¹⁵ uses Paley (but not this particular text which is too blatantly partisan), its ideas have served again and again, and always the same cause: a passive acceptance of the *status quo*. They may serve again, which is one reason for offering them again to the public.

But a word of advice may be timely to those who might otherwise base a tactless message on them. If these ideas have a posterity, they also have ancestors. Among them a remarkable character in *The Faerie Queene* who pithily expressed what Paley was to develop much later:

Sleepe after toyle, port after stormie seas,
Ease after warre, death after life, does greatly please.¹⁶

But the character who taught this older version of *Reasons for Contentment* was... Despair!

¹⁴ See Ernst Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum. Zur Religion des Exodus und des Reichs*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1968, passim.

¹⁵ I.R. Christie, *Stress and Stability in late Eighteenth Century Britain. Reflections on the British Avoidance of Revolution*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.

¹⁶ E. Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Book I, Canto IX, stanza XL.