

# **“Do We Need a New Moral Outlook?”**

**by**

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**As**

**Presented and Amended**

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We are accustomed to hearing it said that our age is an age of transition. Every progressive people is always in a stage of transition, but the rapidity with which we have been changing in the sphere of religion and morality has never been greater than it is now. During the past several decades a number of factors have deeply influenced and transformed religion and consequently the moral outlook. Perhaps the most important of these were the doctrine of evolution and the so-called higher criticism. The former has changed humanity's whole point of view and has wrought a veritable revolution in every phase of human thought, while the latter has so transformed the traditional view of the Bible that it now placed in the same class as the other books embodying the aspirations and inspiration of humanity.

The general advance in all branches of the physical sciences has also weakened, I might say destroyed, the belief of well-informed people in the intervention of a divine power in physical events. It is not so very long ago that almost everyone had no doubt as to the possibility of interference on the part of the Creator in physical affairs, and their prayers were made-up of petitions for this intervention. This is no longer true ... But a more important result of the recent gains in science has been to disturb the accepted belief in the power of God to make his will felt in the world of thought and feeling, which strikes at the very heart of Christianity and makes it almost unrecognizable ... But the most important consequence of all is the breakdown of belief in God as the author of morality and the judge of moral deeds and the enforcer of moral law. The great mass of humanity has always believed that the moral law was enacted by God, that it was interpreted by God, and that disobedience to it was punished by God; and along with the belief in this kind of God has gone the reason for paying any attention to the moral law at all.

Now shall we rejoice at this loss of a cardinal faith, or shall we lament it? We may indeed be delighted that what we call a superstition has fallen to the ground; but those whose hearts are yearning for a more enriched individual life and a better world cannot help but feel that a great danger lies in the passing away of such a belief ... The belief in a perfect judge, a great helper, a kindly father, has been a source of immeasurable strength to humanity ... By whom and how is this loss to be met?

The task, as it appears to me, is just this and no less than this: To replace the great father; to provide for those who needed him that which they were in the habit of receiving from him; and to replace the great enforcer of the moral law with new sanctions for doing what is right. And this duty falls upon both the individual and society at large. People must so organize their boundless physical and moral resources as to multiply steadfast and intelligent friendships, so that all the unsatisfied cravings of a yearning soul shall find their

remedy in human fellowship and in varied social activities. In like manner we must teach people the natural and actual reasons why what we call the moral law should be observed, so that their moral satisfactions may arise from the mere fact of doing right rather than of pleasing god.

Is it possible for humanity to provide such a substitute—I do not say for God—but for the belief in the particular God of which I have been speaking? I believe that it is. The loss of the transcendent father will hasten the establishment of the kingdom of heaven on earth, for it will make us feel our mutual dependence more keenly, and it will help us develop a morality based upon the love of good rather than the fear of punishment. This conviction rests in the first place upon the observation that God never did what he was supposed to do for mankind; and, in the second place, upon a faith in the growing goodness of humanity. Hence, this change in our conception of God is the first reason for our need of a new moral outlook; and it is this reason which I shall now consider more at length.

### I.

In view of this general breakdown of the belief in a supernatural God, it is necessary to show people that morality is natural and not statutory ... That it is composed of the laws which make for individual and social welfare, wrought out of mankind's experience, and not of arbitrary commandments handed down by a supernatural being ... As soon as the evolutionary theory of the origin of morals has been accepted, great strides in the development of an improved morality will surely follow.

The origin of morality is a long story and a very fascinating one ... So long as people believed in what I might call supernatural morality, the study of its origin was comparatively simple. The supernaturalist presupposes the existence of a God who is a moral being, in fact a perfect moral being; and this God with his perfect knowledge of what is right and what is wrong, has in times past imparted some of this knowledge to humanity. In fact, he has with his own finger written on tablets of stone some of the more important moral precepts as embodied in the Ten Commandments. Therefore, it is right to obey these commandments and wrong to disobey them. In other words, supernatural morality is founded on the arbitrary commands of a supernatural being ... Some have differed as to the channel through which this knowledge came—the Bible, the Church, individual conscience—But they all agreed as to its divine source.

But with a breakdown of supernatural religion, we get the collapse of these stupendous claims in regard to the origin of morality; and we realize that people have found out what is right and wrong in their relations with other people. Right is nothing more nor less than an idea, a word, by which we express the truth that has been wrought out of human experience that certain kinds of thinking, certain ways of feeling, certain methods of conduct, are helpful to humanity while others are harmful. We know today that stealing and killing are wrong, not because some imaginary being in the skies said so; but because they are inimical both to the individual and the group life; and this is the real reason they have always been

made moral prohibitions, their source having been assigned to the gods only later in order to give them authority.

As a matter of experience certain things have been found to be injurious to mankind, either individually or socially and are spoken of as bad and wrong. Other things have been found to be helpful to mankind—things that prolong our lives and increase our happiness—and are called good and right. And so more or less general ideas of what good and bad and what right and wrong are have arisen in the world ... The human race did not first have the idea of morality and then inquire whether this, that, and the other thing, were moral. By actual and tolerably uniform experience it learned that some things are injurious and disintegrating to society, and other things are useful in fortifying ... Refraining from hurting one another, refraining from stealing one another's property, refraining from injuring one another's reputation—these things the members of a community would find tended to build up the community and make it strong; and still more would be keeping their word with one another and caring for one another; In short, truth, affection, public spirit—these are the things we lump together and call morality.

I do not mean by this that the right and wrong of everything has been decided ... The whole meaning of morality simply simmers down to this: that there are certain conditions according to which life must be lived; and that if we knew all of these conditions then the right and wrong of everything would be determined, because right action is the action which tends to the preservation and enrichment of both the individual and social life, and wrong action is that which tends to the destruction and impoverishment of life ...

Now what is our sanction for morality? Why should people observe these moral laws? This question is answered the moment we ask another question as to the purpose of life. What is life for? The only answer I have ever been able to give to this question is that life is to live. What is the end game of life? Why, life itself. What is it that people are striving for? Why, life—the full, free, rich, abundant life. The supreme and perfect end of life is to live. As Tennyson puts it:

“’Tis life whereof our nerves are scant,  
Oh, life, not death, for which we pant;  
More life, and fuller, that we want.”

This great desire for life, coupled with the knowledge that those things which foster, enlarge, liberate, and ennoble the lives of human beings are right; while those feelings and courses of conduct which can, enslave, degrade, impoverish and destroy life are wrong, gives us the perfect moral sanction, the strongest motive in the world for doing right.

## II.

Now in accordance with this evolutionary idea of morality there is another sense in which we are greatly in need of a new moral outlook ... We hear a great deal about revolutions, past and present; but we hear very little of the one really significant revolution in human

history. I refer, of course, to the industrial revolution which took place in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. While political revolutions have had a considerable effect upon human lives, the industrial revolution has completely transformed the conditions of life upon this planet ... Here within a period of only a few years inventions and discoveries were made which changed the whole face of the industrial world ... The little individual workshops in which one worked for oneself, with complete control over one's hours and conditions of labor, gave way to the great roaring factories in which each worker became the wage-slave of an industrial monarch. The little cottages scattered throughout the country, in which each man was his own landlord, had his own well, kept his own cow, and split his own wood, disappeared; and the great industrial centers with their crowded tenement houses arose, in which an individual is dependent upon others for every necessity of human existence.

In 1800 the population of the United States was about five million. Today it is hundreds of millions. In 1800 it was chiefly agricultural, and the cities were few and comparatively unimportant. Today far more than half of us live in cities. In 1800 there stood on the southern shore of Lake Michigan a Fort with a population of less than fifty people. Today on that same site stands one of the largest cities in the world ... Similar changes have taken place in every great industrial country, and it doesn't take much to understand the tremendous significance of these changes resulting from the industrial revolution. As Woodrow Wilson put it, “Ever since society began, men were related to one another as individuals... Now the everyday relationships of men are largely with ... complex organizations, not with other individual men ... this is nothing short of a new social age, a new era of human relationships, a new stage setting for the drama of life.”

Now this is especially significant in consideration of our need for a new moral outlook. For the old ethical system in which we have been trained deals almost exclusively with individual relationships. This was perfectly natural, because the complex social relationships with which we are now familiar had not yet come into existence. The real evils of the past were those committed by one individual against another, but today we all live in a vast network of social relations where the old moral laws do not seem to apply. Practically all the things which a few generations ago individuals did for themselves are now done for them by groups of people over which they have no control. In those days if a man wanted water he went out to his well and drew a pail of water. Today he must take the kind of water that is supplied to him by the city in which he lives. If then he wanted milk, he went out and milked his cow. Today he is absolutely dependent upon the great milk corporations for milk for his children. In those days, if he desired fuel he went out and chopped down a tree and split it into wood. But today he is entirely dependent upon the coal trust to keep himself warm. As professor Ross of the University of Wisconsin says: “My vital interests are now entrusted to others. Nowadays the water main is my well; The trolley car my carriage; The banker's safe my old stocking; The policeman's billy my fist. I rely upon others to look after my drains, invest my savings, nurse my sick, and teach my children.”

This interdependence puts us at one another's mercy and so ushers in a multitude of new forms of wrongdoing, with the result that people do not see (to use professor Ross's words

again) that “bribery is treason; that blackmail is piracy; that embezzlement is theft; that speculation is gambling; that tax dodging is larceny; that railroad discrimination is treachery; that child labor is slavery; that pollution is murder.” We do not realize today that, as Jacob Riis used to say: “You can as surely kill a man with a rotten tenement house as with an axe.” And I judge that for everyone killed with an axe there are hundreds killed by rotten tenements ...

And so, we find ourselves today facing situations with which our old morality does not deal, and the old question of right and wrong is not so simple as it once was ... The moral principles are the same as always, but we have outgrown their old individualistic forms and they must be translated into their social equivalent, so that we will cease to condemn only the man who steals a loaf of bread, while we pay honor to the man who steals a million dollars; or that we will cease to condemn only the man who beats a child, while we honor the man who kills thousands of children's by means of child labor; so that we will cease to condemn only the man who assaults a woman, while we respect the man who by means of economic pressure robs a thousand women of the dignity they deserve. The moral unrest of our times I think is largely due to the inadequacy of the old system which deals only with individual relations and knows nothing of our complicated social relations. We need to formulate a new social morality if our social life is to have the guidance which it needs.

New varieties of sins have grown up with our evolving civilization, great glaring sins in our commercial and political relations which are darkening our skies ... Our commercial and political giants play havoc with human rights on a tremendous scale, and we have not advanced ethically as far as they have financially, so as to classify their offences in such a way as to criticize and condemn them. Does anyone doubt that in this respect we need a new moral outlook?

### III.

Let me show you as briefly as I can why we must now make morality the very heart of our religion, both for the sake of morality and for the sake of religion. In the past these two things have been more or less divorced. Religion in the beginning was little more than a method by which mankind gained the favor or warded off the enmity of the gods ... But this had practically nothing to do with the way in which people dealt with each other, which we call morality ... But once people realize that only those laws which contribute to the good of the community, which make it strong and happy, are the moral laws, they will realize also that as long as these are not observed, it is foolish to sacrifice to the gods or pray for their favor. For it is silly to pray for health while breaking the rules which make for health, or to pray for social welfare while living the kind of life which contributes to social disintegration. On the other hand, once they realize that welfare and happiness are not arbitrary gifts from the gods, but the natural results of human conduct, then the natural order in which we live will become the real object of reverence and awe.

The purpose of religion has always been to secure blessings for mankind. It's worship, its sacrifices, its prayers are all to this end ... The very ends which religion craves lead it to pay attention to the real conditions of life, to study the laws of the physical world upon which life depends. So, instead of praying or sacrificing for peace and happiness, instead of imploring Apollo or Jehovah, Allah or God to stop a pestilence, they search out and remove the cause of the pestilence; and religion instead of being separate from morality, becomes ethical and scientific. It believes that morality guided by science is its very life and soul, and thus becomes a real power in human life ...

There are many definitions for religion, but fundamentally religion is merely a set of feelings and a set of practices which result from those feelings ... Morality is a way of acting rather than a way of feeling. But when we see that true morality is the way of life, and that immorality is the way of death to people and their communities, then there is no reason why people, conscious of their responsibilities and of the great issues at stake, should not be touched with reverence and awe as they think of these things ... In this sense religion and morality may become one because religion is a general term, meaning whatever one holds sacred, whatever one venerates, whatever gives one his supreme rule of life.

And so I stand here this morning ready to preach a new moral outlook. I believe that in this enlightened age of the world the moral ideal is the only fit object of intelligent worship; that morality alone is fit to be a religion; that the prevailing types of religion are outworn and should be cast aside; that only so far as religion concentrates its worship upon the moral ideal has it any saving power ... What use are all sorts of mystical emotions, all sorts of philosophical speculations, all sorts of scientific inquiries, if we have not the emotion necessary to keep us straight in our daily lives; if we have not an eye for cause and effect here and now; if we have not the real secret of happiness and peace from day-to-day? The religion that will teach us how to live; that will hold up clear and high the laws of life and win our obedience to them—this is the religion the world needs, and it is the only true religion. All other religions, all that seek to make something else sacred, that cause us to put out trust in a church or a creed, in Christ or in God, divert us from the real issue—obedience to the natural conditions of life. And so do we need this new moral outlook—promoting human welfare and happiness—which enthrones the moral ideal as the supreme object of religious worship and makes devotion to this moral law the supreme object of our religious practice.