

## On Doing the Right Thing

By Albert Jay Nock

### I

FOR my sins I had to spend a good deal of time in London lately, while an east wind was blowing and under these depressing circumstances I had some notion of showing cause why the much-touted understanding between the English people and ours can never really exist. In spite of the Sulgrave Foundation, and of all the per fervid buncombe fired off at Pilgrims' dinners about cousinship, hands across the sea, common tradition, common ideals, and what Mr. Dooley called "th' common impulse f'r th' same money"—only that, I believe, is never mentioned — the two peoples will never understand each other as long as the world stands. There are many obscure, unregarded, and potent reasons against it of which, for example, language is one. An American can make sounds to which an Englishman will attach approximately the same meaning that the American does, and hence each assumes that they have a common language, when actually they have nothing of the kind; that is to say, language does not enable a true understanding of each other, but rather the contrary. Indeed, I believe that they would come nearer a real understanding if each had to learn a new language to get on with. There are many other reasons; and the reasons proceeding from recondite and apparently insignificant differences in training, habit, social and institutional procedure, and in the ordinary technique of living, account for more, I think, than those arising from weightier matters. As I said, I had the vagrant thought of tracing out and expounding some of these, but indolence interfered so persistently that it never was done and now, probably, never will be. One item on the list, however, recurs to me at the moment as worth salvaging for another purpose.

The English are addicted to a curious practice which is apprehended by an American only with great difficulty, and to which they give the rather conventional and indefinite name of "doing the Right Thing." The name at once brings to mind the late Sir Harry Johnston's fine novel; the best novel in that genre that has been written in our language since *The Way of All Flesh*. As far as I have been able to discover, the addiction to this practice pervades all classes of English society. The lower and middle classes do a good deal with it. The upper orders do not do as much with it as formerly, but they still do something; and even the official class does not quite escape. It is not a rationalised process, apparently, but on the contrary, one would perhaps say that it amounts to a kind of ritual. Given a certain set of circumstances, that is, an Englishman may be trusted to take a certain course of conduct, and to take it with energy, resolution and courage, for no reason in particular except to satisfy some inward sense of obligation. He may not, usually does not, have much light on the subject; doing the Right Thing may be far enough, indeed, from doing right. In other circumstances, too, where the inner sense is quiescent, he may do something much worse; but in *those* circumstances he is sure to carry through with a darkened and instinctive allegiance to what he believes to be the Right Thing.

### II

Aside from the apparently irrational character of this addiction, what strikes the American as odd is that casuistry has no place in it. When an Englishman is bitten by a sense of the Right Thing, it seems never to occur to him, for instance, to raise the question whether the Right Thing, after it is done, will have enough practical importance to be worth doing. Again, it seems never

to occur to him to put a mere personal desire, however strong, in competition with the Right Thing, and then to cast about him for plausible ways of justifying himself in following his desire. This uncommonly useful faculty seems largely left out of the individual Englishman, though collectively they show more of it than any other nation—a curious anomaly. The great French scholar, M. Nisard, once complimented Matthew Arnold on belonging to a nation that had the *savoir se gêner*, that did not take a mere powerful desire to do something as a sufficient reason for doing it, but could, if need be, bottle up the desire and cork it down and go steadily on doing something quite different. A dozen times a day one will hear Englishmen mutter in an apologetic tone, "Beastly bore, you know!—oh, dev'lish bore! —but then, you know, one really must do the Right Thing, mustn't one?" The formula and the intonation never seem to vary, whether the matter at issue be utterly trivial or so important as to redetermine the whole course of a life.

I have always been interested in this trait of the English because of the connection which it immediately established in my mind with the principle of liberty. The theory of freedom rests on the doctrine of natural rights, and I have always held with the Declaration of Independence that this doctrine is a sound one, that mankind is endowed by its Creator with certain inalienable rights, and that one of them is liberty. But the world is fast going away from old-fashioned people of my kind, and I am told that this doctrine is debatable and now quite out of style; that nowadays almost no one believes that mankind has any natural rights at all, but that all the rights it enjoys are legal and conventional, and therefore properly subject to abridgement or suppression by the authority that confers them. Aside from theory and principle, however, this matter of freedom has a practical side which is undebatable, and about which, for some reason, very little is said; and this curious trait of the English serves admirably to bring it out.

A comparison drawn between the English and ourselves in the matter of devotion to the Right Thing seems at first sight unfavourable to Americans; and so, to some extent, it is. But the great point is that an Englishman keeps up his susceptibility to the Right Thing very largely because he is free to do so; because, that is, he is free to regulate so large a portion of his life in such way as he sees fit. In respect of control, the whole general area of human conduct may be laid off into three regions.

First, there is the region in which conduct is controlled by law, *i.e.*, by force, by some form of outside compulsion. A man, for instance, may not murder or steal, because an organized power outside himself will withstand him before the fact, if possible, and make trouble for him after the fact. Second, there is the region of indifferent choice, where, for instance, a man may use one kind of soap or safety-razor rather than another. Third, there is the region where conduct is controlled by unenforced, self-imposed allegiance to moral or social considerations. In this region, for instance, one follows the rule of "women and children first," takes a long risk to get somebody out of a burning house, or, like Sir Philip Sidney, refuses to slake one's own thirst when there is not water enough to go round.

Now, for whatever reason and however it came about, the Englishman's first region, the region of compulsion, is relatively small. He has not many laws to obey, and most of these relate to property; and what few of them bear on personal conduct are quite obviously bottomed on reason and good sense. He has too many laws, of course, and the present tendency over there, as

everywhere, unhappily, is to multiply them; his situation is not ideal; but as compared with the American, he lives in an anarchist's paradise. Moreover, his second region, the region of indifferent choice, is relatively large because there is no great pressure of unintelligent and meddlesome public opinion to reduce it. Hence life in England is an affair of much more individual responsibility than here. With so little law and so much choice, the sense of things "up to" the individual is correspondingly quickened. Therefore the third region of conduct, the region controlled by allegiance to the Right Thing, is less trespassed upon and does not tend to shrink, but on the contrary, should normally tend to enlarge by the progressive transference of items from the first and second regions.

One is really astonished by the magnitude of the part that this sense of individual responsibility plays in the ordinary routine of living. Let me give two examples, one at each end of the scale of social importance. One Sunday morning in May, on the top deck of a Piccadilly bus, I saw a superb old specimen of sixty-five or so, looking precisely like du Maurier's cartoon of Sir Digby de Rigby. He wore a white plug hat with a two-inch black band, and a long shadbelly black coat, a purple-and-gold figured waistcoat, a high collar of antique design—something like a stock—a red tie, red socks, russet shoes and a pair of black-and-white checked pants such as no American has seen, I dare say, since the days of Christie's minstrels. Exclusive of jewelry, I estimated the whole layout at something like five hundred dollars; there was not a shoddy thread in it. He had a couple of ladies with him, and his conversation was entertaining and delightful; and as they disembarked opposite St. James's, I judged they were headed for church, the time being right for it. The thing to be remarked is that no one commented on all this gorgeousness or paid any attention to it. If the old chap liked to dress that way, why, that was the way he liked to dress, and since he was not actually annoying anybody, it was up to him—why not? Anywhere in America, on the other hand, a man who got himself up like that to go to church would have attracted a charmed and enthusiastic rabble from the moment he put his nose out of doors.

So much for a small matter. At the other end of the scale of social importance, it is noteworthy that in England fornication is not a crime (I am told, to my astonishment, that neither is it a crime in the State of Maryland!). An unmarried couple may set up housekeeping in London and remain undisturbed by the law as long as they live, and if anyone else disturbs them the law will protect them; for English law protects those against whom it has no stated grievance, even though their conduct may not be exactly praiseworthy or popular. They may register at an hotel under their several names, and the law will not only leave them at peace but will protect their peace. English law interferes in sex relations only in the case of minors, to safeguard immaturity; and in the case of adultery, to safeguard a property interest, or the vestiges of one. Other cases are put over into the third region of conduct and left subject to the individual sense of the Right Thing.

### III

In America, on the other hand, the first region of conduct is egregiously expanded. I remember seeing recently a calculation that the poor American is staggering along under a burden of some two million laws; and obviously, where there are so many laws, it is hardly possible to conceive of any items of conduct escaping contact with one or more of them. Thus, the region where conduct is controlled by law so far encroaches upon the region of free choice and the region

where conduct is controlled by a sense of the Right Thing, that there is precious little left of either. What is left, moreover, is still further attenuated by the pressure of a public opinion whose energy and zeal are in direct ratio to its meddlesomeness and ignorance. The complaint of critics against what they call our "standardisation" is a complaint against this pressure; and it is so just, and its ground so obvious, that it needs no reiteration here. The only thing I wish to remark is the serious and debilitating deterioration of individual responsibility under this state of affairs. In this respect, living in America is like serving in the army; ninety per cent of conduct is prescribed by law and the remaining ten per cent by the *esprit du corps*, with the consequence that opportunity for free choice in conduct is practically abolished. This falls in very well with the indolent disposition of human nature to regard responsibility as onerous and to dodge it when possible; but it is debilitating, and a civilisation organised upon this absence of responsibility is pulpy and unsound.

Indeed, a vague sense of this unsoundness has lately been pervading our people; but it has expressed itself, so far, only in a panicky hospitality to political nostrums of the "liberal and progressive" type, whose tendency is all to aggravate the complaint that they are advertised to remedy. To get a correct measure of our Liberals and Progressives, all one need do is to observe that they contemplate a further enlargement of the first region of conduct; they would have us even more closely controlled by law than we already are! They are more for this, more for indulging an ignorant and licentious zeal for law-mongering than even the hidebound Tories. As well as I can make out, Chief Justice Taft or Mr. Coolidge or even Mr. Hughes would organize far less trespass on the second and third regions of conduct, if they had their way, than would the late Mr. Roosevelt or the late Senator La Follette; and certainly, of all men I ever knew, the Liberals of my acquaintance have the greatest nervous horror of freedom, the most inveterate and pusillanimous dread of contemplating the ideal picture of mankind existing in free and voluntary association. From such as these, then, nothing may be expected but an exacerbation of the social trouble whereof they seem able to contemplate nothing but the symptoms.

#### IV

It is not to the point to protest, for example, that Mr. Roosevelt's laws or Senator La Follette's would all be good laws, that their enlargements of the first region of conduct would all be for our own good. The point is that *any* enlargement, good or bad, reduces the scope of individual responsibility, and thus retards and cripples the education which can be a product of nothing but the free exercise of moral judgment. Like the discipline of the army, again, any such enlargement, good or bad, depraves this education into a mere routine of mechanical assent. The profound instinct against being "done for our own good" even by an Aristides—the instinct so miserably misinterpreted by our Liberals and Progressives—is wholly sound. Men are aware of the need of this moral experience as a condition of growth, and they are aware, too, that anything tending to ease it off from them, even for their own good, is to be profoundly distrusted.

The practical reason for freedom, then, is that freedom seems to be the only condition under which any kind of substantial moral fibre can be developed. Everything else has been tried, world without end. Going dead against reason and experience, we have tried law, compulsion and authoritarianism of various kinds, and the result is nothing to be proud of. Americans have many virtues of their own, which I would be the last to belittle or disparage, but the power of quick and independent moral judgment is not one of them. In suggesting that we try freedom,

therefore, the anarchist and individualist has a strictly practical aim. He aims at the production of a race of responsible beings. He wants more room for the *savoir se gêner*, more scope for the *noblesse oblige*, a larger place for the sense of the Right Thing. If our legalists and authoritarians could once get this well through their heads, they would save themselves a vast deal of silly insistence on a half-truth and upon the *suppressio veri*, which is the meanest and lowest form of misrepresentation. Freedom, for example, as they keep insisting, undoubtedly means freedom to drink oneself to death. The anarchist grants this at once; but at the same time he points out that it also means freedom to say with the gravedigger in *Les Misérables*, "I have studied, I have graduated; I never drink." It unquestionably means freedom to go on without any code of morals at all; but it also means freedom to rationalise, construct and adhere to a code of one's own. The anarchist presses the point invariably overlooked, that freedom to do the one without correlative freedom to do the other is impossible; and that just here comes in the moral education which legalism and authoritarianism, with their denial of freedom, can never furnish.

The anarchist is not interested in any narrower or more personal view of human conduct. Believing, for example, that man should be wholly free to be sober or to be a sot, his eye is not caught and exclusively engaged by the spectacle of sots, but instead he points to those who are responsibly sober, sober by a self-imposed standard of conduct, and asserts his conviction that the future belongs to them rather than to the sots. He believes in absolute freedom in sex-relations; yet when the emancipated man or woman goes simply on the loose, to wallow along at the mercy of raw sensation from one squalid little *Schweinerei* to another, he is not interested in their panegyrics upon freedom. Instead, he is bored and annoyed, and sometimes casts hankering glances towards the trusty fowling-piece, vainly wishing he could convince himself that a low rake or a dirty drab is worth the price of a dozen buckshot. Then he turns to contemplate those men and women who are responsibly decent, decent by a strong, fine, self-sprung consciousness of the Right Thing, and he declares his conviction that the future lies with them.

The anarchist, moreover, does not believe that any considerable proportion of human beings will promptly turn into rogues and adventuresses, sots and strumpets, as soon as they find themselves free to do so; but quite the contrary. It seems to be a fond notion with the legalists and authoritarians that the vast majority of mankind would at once begin to thief and murder and generally misconduct itself if the restraints of law and authority were removed. The anarchist, whose opportunities to view mankind in its natural state are perhaps as good as the legalist's, regards this belief as devoid of foundation. Seeing how much evil-doing is directly chargeable to economic pressure alone, the anarchist maintains that the legalists and authoritarians have no proper means of estimating natural human goodness until they postulate it as functioning in a state of economic freedom. They have no proper estimate of the common run of moral sensitiveness, strictness and scrupulousness until they postulate the moral sense as functioning in a state of social and political freedom based upon economic freedom. Indeed, considering the disabilities put upon this sense, and the incessant organised efforts to deform and weaken it, the anarchist makes bold to marvel that it functions as well as it does.

## V

But I have no intention of digressing into a syllabus of anarchist philosophy. I have thought it worth while to write out the foregoing thoughts, however, merely to make clear that there is a

practical side to this philosophy, as well as a theoretical side, and one which is not perhaps wholly unworthy of consideration. The anarchist does not want economic freedom for the sake of shifting a dollar or two from one man's pocket to another's; or social freedom for the sake of rollicking in detestable license; or political freedom for the sake of a mere rash and restless experimentation in system-making. His desire for freedom has but the one practical object, *i.e.*, that men may become as good and decent, as elevated and noble, as they might be and really wish to be. Reason, experience and observation lead him to the conviction that under absolute and unqualified freedom they can, and rather promptly will, educate themselves to this desirable end; but that so long as they are to the least degree dominated by legalism and authoritarianism, they never can.