

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Authority: Conscience and the Offences

Dora Marsden

1914

I do not remember which of Matthew Arnold's commentators it was-though all my readers doubtless will-who made the observation that the poet in the lyric lines "Meeting," addressed "To Marguerite," is unconsciously confused by a mistake as to identity among his *dramatis personae*. Says Arnold:

"I spring to make my choice,
Again in tones of ire
I hear a God's tremendous voice
'Be counsell'd and retire.'"

Of course, says the critic, Arnold had confused God with Mrs. Grundy. The remark shows how completely an earnest critic may gaze with blind eye upon the most pronounced characteristics of his subject. The critic has failed to see that there is in those four lines the unmistakable cachet of the epicure in blended emotions. Perhaps it is in part due to the unseeing visions of such commentaries that Arnold is not much read now, which is a pity, because he is the cultured choice flower of that

Dora Marsden
Authority: Conscience and the Offences
1914

Retrieved on 11/04/2021 from https://web.archive.org/web/20000831202821/http://pierce.ee.washington.edu/~david/egoist/marsden/TheEgoist/8_1_1914.html

Originally published in *The Egoist*: No. 15, Vol. 1, August 1st,
1914.

theanarchistlibrary.org

superabundant species which at present threatens to cover the earth, but which is found only in its meaner varieties.

With Arnold, the knowledge how to treat the thin and febrile among emotions was a consummated instinct. Just where the strength of emotions ended, he made actual his opportunity as confectioner and played the artist with them as a good cook will with an insipid vegetable, the insipidity of which occasions the opportunity to work in the foreign flavours.

Where the strength of emotion equates into the fear of discomfort and the clacking tongues of—

“All the rest,
Eight parents and the children, seven aunts,
And sixteen uncles and a grandmother ...
besides a few real friends,
And the decencies of life,”

which (in Mr. Aldington’s opinion) worked up such “extraordinary emotional intensity’s in Mr. Hueffer’s new poem “On Heaven” for instance: just here, right in the nick of time, he works his God into the scheme. The raucous squealing of the parlour cockatoos first melts then swells into the organ tones of a “God’s tremendous voice”: the angry screams of the horde waiting to pick the flesh off your bones merges into the voice of the Almighty Lord stooping to counsel you in gentleness and give you a tip for your own good. Call these compelling tones the voice of Mrs. Grundy, Mr. Critic, and you reassemble the entire harping brood: the act of an unseeing crude man unversed in the game of life! A child might do it, as it might break a watch to look at its insides, but not an arch-priest of Culture. Not Mr. Arnold at anyrate, nor millions of others less finished in sleight of hand, but with an equally sure instinct for the value of White Magic.

We are told that some of the sweetest scents are distilled from origins of very evil odour: but this whether or no, certain it is that all the powers of the gods and smaller authorities are distilled from the lack of power in their creators. Men begin to “acquire merit” at the point where they are unable to exercise strength: the verbal virtue begins where the living strength ends. Authorities conveniently “forbid” where “I can’t” or “I daren’t.” And it is reasonable enough. Gods and other authorities are soft cushions of words placed near the vague rim where power fringes off into limitation. They are creations designed to protect us from a too particular view of our own limitations. They cover our fears and save our vanity. The recognition of their limitations is the vision which men can least tolerably bear: that is why whenever it becomes necessary to reveal them *in actual fact*, men are most particular *in words* to make them the basis of edification! a proceeding very explicable, though in its effects in no small degree, misleading.

The *bouleversement* of values thus brought about has however, managed to turn the chagrin of ineffectualness into a possibility of deep-seated delight. Under the shelter of its expressed form in human speech (of which it is the masterpiece); it has provided men with a second nature, which almost invariably they keep in more constant practice than the original. So does the human become the coy one amongst the animals; most coquettish and playful; serious only when bent on make believe; and very adorable indeed when he mimes well-like Arnold. To make necessity’s compulsions wear the graceful air of a conceded virtue is really exceedingly clever: too clever indeed to be conscious; as is proved by the fact that it is seen to perfection only among the coxcombs. Conscious intelligence acts on it like a sharp frost; conscious humour eats it up like an acid. To be able to say of one’s ineffectual love affairs,

“A God, a God, their severance ruled,
And bade betwixt their shores to be
The unplumb’d salt estranging sea,”

requires a triple-plated vanity as well as a trusting, playful nature.

It is because the vanity of this is so unconsciously complete that it is so extremely engaging. And certainly it is very comprehensible. The desire to feel oneself so important that the gods are called upon to interfere in our affairs, even if only to boggle them: to feel that one is cutting the deuce of a fine figure in the eyes of the cosmos distils a subtler delight for the epicure in slender emotions than the satisfaction of any one thin and timorous desire. Yet it only becomes really essential to feel something encouraging of this sort when one is obviously playing a losing game. Only when we have conducted our mundane affairs with such a degree of ineffectualness that our original way of assessing values would lead us almost to apologise for our existence, does it become comforting to feel that our modest matters are so important as to draw gods to earth to interfere. Let our affairs make it clear to us that we are feeble, impotent, ignorant, timid, fearful, and let us be vain: above all things, vain-and we must either conceive and bring forth the omnipotent omniscient admiring god or prepare for a bad quarter of an hour with ourselves. It is the feeling that one is small that makes us look round for stilts, as it is our meagreness which provokes us to swell out into that exiguous extensiveness which we call vanity.

It is because Mr. Arnold would have found it an indignity as well as a misfortune to appear to be afraid of his aunts that he works gods-the external authority-into his canvasses. That is why it is likely we shall always have authorities with us.

There are some interesting fictions called duties to ourselves. They do not, however, share in the High Game, and would best be deferred to a sequel.

awed height of a religious observance. And this brings us to the stateliest measure: the very minuet of the Conscience-dances. It is the religious Authority itself, the one built out of the vast blank stretch of the unknown from which all those fears that are the more fearsome because they are nameless, spring. The Authority which is the Holy Ghost is the shadowiest dweller in the unlit mists, and is built round with the Holy of Holies—a wall between men's souls and the vision of that which they fear most. And Conscience calls, "Obedience to God, to His Ministers and to His Church, to all its ordinances, and to the Holy Spirit." This is the dance in which you foot it with the solemnity of a Rite. Trip and fall short here, and: You Sin. The heavens themselves, the sun, moon and stars frown and scowl blackly upon you. Conscience, the Voice of God, the Ambassador of the offended Lord, then takes up his seat in your very heart, nestling snugly in your deepest fears; and to him you tender your heartstrings as faggots with which he may pile up and keep ever burning the consuming Wrath of God. Conscience convicting a man of sin is Conscience in Excelsis. It then fully lets itself go, becomes orgiastic, and reveals that Feast of Conscience which, viewed from the human side, men have called Hell.

And thus the play goes on. The gentle buffoon still clutches his magic mantle: his role is the tragic and comic both at once. They are matters of light and shade, and he is playing the one or the other according to the angle from which the observer views him. His life has its full compensations. His pleasures are real if his pains are formidable. And he has all the thrills of the gamble. Though to-day he writhes in Hell, tomorrow he may become reconciled and, like Browning's believer, full-fed, beatified, he may find himself smiling on the breast of God. A good game and a spirited competition, anyway.

What one has not the desire strong enough to obtain, but would like to appear as strongly desiring; what one's verbal education tells us we should admire desiring, but deprecates the venturesomeness necessary to obtain it, becomes artistically the "forbidden of the authority." Which explains why authorities are so secure: impotence and fear compounded with vanity make so exceedingly strong an amalgam; and also why against them none need to fight or cry. One has effected the uttermost against an authority when one has understood it. Whether thereafter it can be overcome depends upon other and more absolute factors, but the cement which holds it together can be dissolved by understanding merely.

Authority is like opportunity; not something given and fixed, but adjusting itself from moment to moment. All seeming to the contrary notwithstanding, the seats of authority can never be occupied by a usurper. None can sit there without first being duly installed. The first essential for the creation of sitters-in-authority is the existence of such as are desirous that authority should be exercised over them. Authority takes shape and form on a principle like to that on which the solids and liquids and gases take on the characteristic which make them such: upon lines carved out by the limitations of those to whom they seem what they seem. A solid is that which we cannot easily penetrate; they are the points at which we feel resisted to such an extent that our power falls short. If our power were more the resistance would be less, and by as much as our power is more that characteristic which makes the impression of a solid would be less. Or our powers might be different; then the resistance would appear different. To a fish, doubtless, the atmosphere will have all the appearance of a solid. To men the essential difference between a granite wall and a block of glass is that our power as departmentalised in sight penetrates easily

the second and with almost insuperable difficulty the first. To the being whose eyes had some of the qualities of the rontgen rays the difference must be considerable. So the appearance of solids and other substances are the reverse side of the impress, beaten into form by the dead pressure of our impotence. So, too, are the authorities over us. And just as a craftsman creates his wares by niggling at the resistance, forcing it by this and that increase of his own power to give way in some degree after the manner of his desire, we, by the exercise and constant increase of our power, penetrate authority, of which the changes which subsequently appear as the reverse side have first been operated on the hither side. So those in authority represent not those who know and are powerful, but those who as we loosely argue "must" know and "must" be powerful because we don't and aren't. They symbolise our negative qualities. It is not the positive qualities of the great which ensure their instalment in office. but the negative quality of those who permit them there. The stretch of authority in any sphere expands or shrinks automatically with the impotence or power of those who recognise it. The spheres in which we recognise no one's authority are those of which we know ourselves what there is in them to be known. But where we are timid and lack knowledge, where we desire to save ourselves the risk of experimentation as well as a realisation of the limitedness of our knowledge: we set up an authority. One may be ignorant and yet have a desire to know and have courage enough to be ready to pay the price for coming by knowledge. Such a one is not a creator nor a respecter of authorities. The fruitful creators of authorities are those who, being without knowledge, elect to remain without, and in lieu of it espouse-Belief.

Belief is thereafter accepted as knowledge, whereas belief is essentially one with doubt. Belief and doubt are two names

the make believers-the believers, as they henceforward shall be called-is based on Belief in Authority. The Authorities we believe in, Conscience tells us we must obey. Such action is our Duty. What form the Duty will take the Authority decides. It is the Authority's business to make out the due-bill, as it is Conscience's to see that it is paid: that duty is done. Let Conscience be what you elect to term it-the "Voice" of Authority, its Ambassador, its Bailiff, Procurer, Pimp, Master of Ceremonies. Duty shall be what Wordsworth called her "Stern daughter of the Voice of"-the Authorities. Like its parent and grandparents, it comes of the stock of the impotent, feeble, timid, fearful, ignorant. It, as they, takes birth where living virtue ends, and, as into theirs, an incursion is made into its territory with every degree of increase in power.

Just as Conscience has never been divorced from Authority it is never divorced from Obedience and Duty. Always it prompts obedience to whatever authority can impose itself. It is equally obliging to all authorities, no matter what their sphere. As the Master of Ceremonies in the Festival of the Impotent it calls the Conscience-dances. They vary in character and measure. Some are stately and solemn and others are the reverse; but they all have one characteristic in common: they are all movements to rhythm, and the rhythm is Obedience. If it is the legal authority Conscience calls the measure "Obedience to the law: which same dance is your Duty." Disobey or trip, and Conscience and the offended Authority in chorus pronounce your tripping: Crime. Or it is the Social Authority, and the dance Conscience call is "Obedience to the common custom," Trip here and it is: Immorality. Or perhaps it is a dance in obedience to a lesser Authority, so minor in the popular estimation that its ordinances dwindle down to mere rules: a schoolmaster's, or a railway company's by-laws. The dance Conscience in such case will announce will be a two-step: a polka: in which tripping is mere naughtiness, though there are schools, for instance, in which a rule by sedulous exaltation is raised to the

Duty, Sin, Immorality, Crime, Belief, Doubt, we have recognised the conventions-i.e., the piece names of the game. Aces, Jacks, and Kings, Pawns, Knights, and Castles, to each we have allowed its game value. To have done otherwise in this, their most solemnest sport, would have been to rouse more rage than is conducive to understanding; as if a visitant from Mars quite new to the game, say of chess, should interfere with the pieces, to criticise their labels during the progress of the play for the world's championship. It would not save him from the wrath of the players if he were to plead that the Kings and Castles did not greatly resemble kings and castles. To the players they do: they are them, in fact. They have become so accepted in the game that if we would describe it we ourselves must for the moment accept its word conventions as well as its rules. More over, most of them are hearthstone generalities, unlike some others, Justice or Freedom, throned triumphantly because remotely eternal in the heavens. They hover about our dwellings: nearer than breathing, closer than hands and feet, some of them.

So at their game-value let us spread the pieces out- Conscience, Duty, Obedience, Immorality, Crime, Sin, Conscience, the Ambassador of all Authorities, Voice of God, Authority at its height, begets Duty-Poetic Duty. Not, of course, the simple and vulgarly limited form of duty which is recognised as debt, the wiping out of which is merely just in that secondary sense which we recently have defined as the keeping of a promise: Duty as debt which we disburse from motives like those which induce us to pay our gas bills because the owners otherwise would cut off the supply. This sort of duty is of too low an order to be admitted into the great poetic scheme built up on Authority and Conscience and Duty about which the parsons preach and poets sing. The poetic duty recognised by

for a particular process in a particular condition, i.e., of thinking as an unfinished product; of thinking, not carried to the issue where the process of thought (which necessarily retains uncertainty as its moving factor until it is finished) finishes; where thought being dissolved knowledge is born in its place. Whether this state of ignorance as to the facts involved in the issue one has in mind shall be called by the name of doubt or its other name, belief, depends upon several things; but in the main upon a difference of tension in the mind. If the mind is tight-braced, strung up and alert, it is likely to recognise its condition for what it is; of being only partially aware. It bluntly says "As to this issue I do not know; my thinking has proceeded thus and thus far, I have a vague feeling that the next stage of thinking will reveal so and so, but actually of the ultimate issue I am still in doubt." But let it be a slacker mind which speaks, one less braced for effort, and such a mind will shrink from the realisation of uncertainty which the word doubt expresses and which is in itself a challenge to think to a finish. Such a mind will say: "I think I know" (a colloquial contradiction in terms) or "I believe"; the latter would serve well enough were what the words say accepted at their nominal value; but belief, owing to the false associations which authorities have cunningly caused it to have with knowledge, has lost its exact connotation, i.e., that of decision left open. The derivation of belief is from *lyfan*, to leave, which serves to throw a bright gleam of light on the bemused psychology of believers. To believe a thing is not only to be in doubt about it; it is a resolve of the mind to leave it so, and to this extent is unlike doubt, which implies that the debate proceeds and the enquiry is going on. It also makes clear why it is the mind which doubts rather than that which believes which leads in the way towards knowledge. Why, too, the voices of authority echo one to another all the world round with the cry of "Believe, believe." They mean, "Leave decision, leave it, leave it to us," in effect asserting that knowledge is a spurious form, a degraded type

of the ideal which is lack-of-knowledge. The excessive unction with which authorities invest the word “sacred” reveals its purpose, i.e., the guaranteeing that vexed questions shall be left untouched; left whole and unquestioned. The sacred is indeed the first weapon of defence against the prying questions of intelligence. Raise any issue which touches upon the fundamentals of the word-games, as distinguished from moves made within them, and the authorities encompass themselves about with the label “sacred,” as promptly as a threatened city would hasten to ensure the integrity of its walls. Very naturally, therefore, all that one believes is by the acquiescence of belief made sacred. “My beliefs are sacred”; they would be no doubt, were the decision left with the believers, but the believer, as the history of belief shows, is encompassed about with enemies: both from within and without, he is hard pressed. Not only do those who know and those who doubt alike beset him; every spark which flashes from every gleam of his own stirring intelligence are as so many maggots gnawing into the fabrics of his beliefs. Spontaneously bursts from him the cry: “I believe help thou my unbelief. I have abandoned the quest: do thou (namely, sluggishness, comfort, whatnot) smother this itch I have to return to pry and poke.”

Of course, the seats of the authorities have been occupied too long for the sitters therein not to have realised the necessity of guarding against a potential danger that even the stupidest may develop towards intelligence; so in the game full provision of language to carry off the overflow is always made. Thus men will justify every step towards enlightenment with the remark, “I must follow my Conscience,” and will permit themselves to be persuaded-i.e., they will believe that Conscience upon occasion boldly bears the torch of defiant power through the darkness, in opposition to Authority. It is one of the neatest maneu-

vres, considering that the realms of Conscience and Authority are one. The pride which one occasionally appears to have in “following one’s Conscience” is a subconscious pride not in Conscience, but in the intelligence which has been able to make Conscience fall back a degree and make Authority write down Duty less. We can only track the pride in the assertion “I must follow my Conscience” to its source when we invert it to read, “My Conscience must follow me,” and always this path along which Conscience is compelled to follow “me” i.e., the ego-is that leading from less to greater intelligence and knowledge. Where the ego becomes more powerful and more aware, the Conscience shrinks by just so much as is this increase: just as, when the sun comes out, the mist retreats as far as the sunlight penetrates. If the sun, in glowing admiration of the bright sunshine, were to say, “I must follow the mist” instead of “To the limits where I have power to act I drive out the mists,” it would provide an exact analogy to the person who says “I must follow my Conscience.” Like the positive power of the sun, the “I” as far as it shines out consumes the Conscience, and where courage and knowledge are at the greatest the area governed by Conscience is at the least. And vice versa.

Just as the stretch of Authority, whether of knowledge or of action, in any sphere, expands or shrinks with the impotence or power respectively of those over whom it is exercised, so does the dominion of Conscience: which is Authority’s ambassador. We have pointed out how men, since they learnt how to forge magic armour out of generalised speech, and so become endowed with the power to invert all values and meanings, have ceased to be serious save in the make-believe of the great word-games. Initiate the game, erect the word-pieces, and solemnity is invoked and at hand. Accordingly, in treating of these generalised words, God, Authority, Conscience,