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Who Are We? What Do We Want?

Andre Lorulot

1911

We don't have the pretension of responding in one article to questions as vast and interesting as these. This is the goal that our "Idée Libre" proposes to fulfill, and we only want to indicate here an overview of the work to be carried out, a work whose urgency and necessity escape no one.

For too long we have contented ourselves with responding to these questions with a few pompous clichés or sonorous phrases. For too long we have limited ourselves to purely sentimental declarations or virulent affirmations. We can't be satisfied with words or dreams, and we think it is time to substitute precise concepts based on discussion, experience, and knowledge for abstract formulas and puerile declamations.

Determining the rational and tangible goals of our activity and envisaging the most serious and rapid means for realizing them: this is the fruitful task we must seek to carry out. It is this task that we want to collaborate here as best we can. In a few lines we are going to today attempt to pose the question on its true terrain while of course reserving the right to later

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return to the different parts of the problem in order to debate them more completely.

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In the midst of the unspeakable chaos of philosophies of all kinds and of various moralities we can cull out the constant and persistent tendency which pushes the *individual* towards life. Towards an ever better life, freer and more noble: that is, towards happiness.

We are thus headed towards happiness, like all humans and all organized beings of whatever kind. The essential aspiration of every living being consists, in the first instance, in safeguarding his life, and then in improving it. Egoism? Instinct of preservation? Law of universal equilibrium? This is of no importance, and without quibbling over the interpretation of this fact we will limit ourselves to noting it.

And so we want to live. As long and as well as possible, and it will be easy for us to determine what this means. To be sure, men have never managed to come to an agreement on the meaning of the word happiness. It is understood that this word expresses something variable, individual, impossible to fix in a collective and immutable ideal. But we have noted that everywhere and always the individual has sought happiness. And so we don't have to concern ourselves with general or planetary happiness, but with our personal happiness. In any event, could we impose happiness on those who don't desire it or who see it in a different way than us? Do we have the capacity to make our neighbor happy without his assistance? Not at all, and this is why the realization of happiness must above all be the work of the individual, and the fruit of his own efforts.

Far from us the pretension to want to dictate acts or to present a new gospel. On the contrary, it is by the destruction of all credos, of all beliefs, that the individual can find the path to his happiness, his life. But we say that the happiness of the

individual can only consist in the rational flowering of his faculties, the free and conscious satisfaction of his needs, the preservation of his vitality, and the equilibrium of his functions. This is not a metaphysical definition engendering interminable and sterile discussions. It rests upon an experimental basis, easily controlled and of incontestable importance. Everything that is susceptible of atrophying one of my organs, one of my senses, everything that diminishes or can diminish my intelligence, my energy, everything that can trouble the functioning of my organism, dull my will, pervert my instincts, lead me to harmful acts, all of this is contrary to my life, contrary to my happiness, and consequently, contrary to myself. "With all my might I will seek to cast aside these obstacles, to overcome these obstacles, to defend myself against aberrations, against absurd acts, for I want to realize my personality as fully as possible." This is what the reasoning individual will say in the face of life, after having swept the tables clean of all constraints.

Enemies of collective morality, of rules of conduct imposed on the individual, we want the latter to determine his morality for himself, freely, with no other guide than his reason constantly enlightened by study and experience, as well as by his knowledge and his observations of his like, controlled and verified by himself when this is needed.

Let us then repeat it: our work will consist in furnishing to each the elements that will permit him to establish his individual morality and to act as much as possible with conquering his happiness and improving his life in view. In our opinion this will be the best means for everyone to be able to usefully respond to the primordial questions that we often pose ourselves: "Who are we?" Men in love with the ardent, free and conscious life. "What do we want?" To know the laws that preside over our existence in order to conduct ourselves both intensely and reasonably. An unlimited field of action is open before such efforts, capable of allowing us fertile results and radiant realizations.

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Inevitably, the putting in practice of such concepts will lead us to engage in a struggle with social forces. It isn't enough to know where the good lies, it is necessary to want to and to be able to conquer it. It isn't enough to know the value of one act or the absurdity of another, one must have the strength to effectuate the former and avoid the latter. The individual will thus be led to rebel against the institutions that pretend to maintain him in evil, against the men who do harm to his will, impose upon him a form of life whose failings he recognizes. He becomes the adversary of all tyrannies, he rebels against all economic, material and moral constraints. By reason of the numerous ties that attach individual life to collective life, the individual cannot proclaim a lack of interest in the social question, since his personality will develop all the better if his ambient milieu is more propitious, more favorable, less authoritarian, constituted by men less close-minded and more tolerant.

Nevertheless, before beginning the struggle it is good to know where you are going and what you want. Before acting, you must *know*. Let us thus learn.

Man will only be able to act usefully when he will have managed to destroy all lies, freed himself from all the superstitions given birth to by error, sought the truth in the jumble of knowledge and observations. I will respond in the following way to those skeptics who will object that the truth doesn't exist: we call truth a controlled relationship among phenomena. These latter can vary, in the same way as the properties of bodies and the manifestations of beings, and in this case it is obvious that the truth transforms itself. We should thus not look upon it as a dogma, but must seek it in all domains, without any preconceived spirit, relying on the exact data we possess. This will be its only true and solid foundation.

So it is necessary that man know what his place is in nature, and that he study the laws of universal evolution. He must give

individually and forever advancing towards the better through honest solidarity. In the face of dogmas, of despots, of the sentimental, of charlatans and regimenters, humanity's future belongs to reason.

himself over to positive study, i.e., study entirely based on facts, the phenomena he participates in, and the beings that surround him. This study can be both gradual and universal, should scrutinize every living being, every organ, every part of every animal and raise itself to the level of the understanding of the relations that tie the part to the whole, the cell to the body and the universe. Through the study of phenomena and the laws of instinct, the morality of animals, of their collective groupings, he will prepare himself to no be longer ignorant of the laws that guide the functioning of human reason, of psychological and social manifestations, of the evolution of the ideas and customs of our societies. By examining historical documents relating the efforts of those who preceded him, as well as through the knowledge of their labors, of their ideas, he will find matter for fruitful reflections and profitable learning. When he will have acquired the knowledge that will permit him to consciously guide him the individual will fortify himself through reflection and discussion, which will aid him in assimilating his intellectual nourishment in a more perfect way, and will develop his faculties of discernment and comprehension.

It goes without saying that we must not neglect our physical culture and that all those sciences that are concerned with the maintenance of our health must be investigated. We want to live, that is, be able to ward off all that can degrade us, all forms of partial or total suicide, conscious or unconscious. The sciences dealing with general hygiene will teach us to search for the correct means of existence, to love pure air, the sun, cleanliness, healthy foods, rational exercise, healthy and agreeable lodgings. They will inspire hatred in us for slums, overwork, filth, ugliness, the hatred of artificial joys, of puerile vanity, of perversions that stupefy or taint. We will advance towards beauty, the reasonable and strong life, towards harmony and joy.

We then must develop our will so that it becomes apt at seconding our intelligence, which will have been enlightened. "To

think and not act is the same as not thinking,” one of our friends correctly said. We insist that education must be total, that it must develop all our faculties, all our senses. It doesn’t consist in book learning alone, and he who will be satisfied with retaining a few phrases and a certain number of poorly digested notions will not have brought together the conditions we have laid out, he will not know to — will not be able to — properly comport himself. The will requires educating, just like the intelligence, of which it is the auxiliary. We will exercise our will by casting aside those errors that can be dangerous, and we will maintain it through action, resistance to atavisms, the passions, to evil, by training it in the suppression of harmful acts, by the cultivation of daring, of initiative, of courage.

How unlimited is the horizon that opens up before the individual! He will be able to quench his thirst for knowledge, his desire for healthy joys without ever fearing of tiring of them. Each of his efforts will bear within itself its “recompense” by increasing his happiness and that of his kind.

For moral education is as necessary as purely intellectual education. As I said above, we cannot be uninterested in the life of others, since our personal acts depend on those of other humans. It is here that the error appears of those who use an extreme individualism to legitimize anti-social acts. After having established the rules for his conduct as concerns himself, the true individualist will concern himself with that part of morality that keeps in sight the relations of men among themselves. Not being able to ignore the benefits of solidarity and association he will want to analyze the attitudes of his like in order to draw the greatest profit, personal and durable, from mutual assistance. Through a prior selection and agreements based on affinities he will obtain the maximum amount of profit with the least concessions, and the happiness of the individual will thus be in harmony and equilibrium with that of his comrades.

Acting consciously towards himself and others: this is the goal the man desirous of blossoming through reason and free agreement will propose to himself.

It is obvious that he must turn to those of his kind who are still in error, who accept their servitude. It will be in his interest to work for the emancipation of those capable of evolving and who can — after having escaped from ignorance — become fraternal and dedicated comrades, increasing the wealth and power of his life.

To be sure, the question will not be resolved by this summary exposé, nor do we have the naïve pretension to believe this. We have simply attempted to indicate the overall picture of a flexible and individual morality based on liberty and reason. At the same time we have sketched the plan for a colossal but marvelous labor. Is this not our entire task? Improve ourselves, reform ourselves, become more conscious, less flawed, less proud and impulsive and through our friendly criticism, our propaganda and comradely efforts strive to show the ignorant and the submissive the renovating path of revolt and education.

We will search in this very place — and this will be the reason for this publication — to study and determine the multiple rules of individual conduct. Stripped of all dogmatic spirit, but also of all mysticism and skepticism, we will advance towards life with something other than literary witticisms and sentimental impressions. Everything capable of elevating man’s mentality, everything that can assist him in piercing nature’s mysteries, in tasting science’s teachings universally applied, all of this will interest us. We want men who know how to conduct themselves, who know what they are doing and what they want, and not chatterboxes, the regimented the infatuated, or vain, and authoritarian fools. The task is difficult, but it is fascinating and fruitful! Accomplished methodically and seriously it will be the true anarchist task, since it alone can form better individuals, capable of living without authority, of blossoming