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FIRST THINGS

THE BEAUTY OF THE ETHICAL

AN EVERYDAY ETHICS THAT BRINGS GRACE TO LIFE

by
Ross McCullough
April 2011

*How, then, shall he be a god,
who has not as yet been made a man?*

—St. Irenaeus

Malcolm Muggeridge entitled his reflection on Mother Teresa *Something Beautiful for God*. Perhaps the force of that expression does not immediately strike us, but consider how curious a statement it is: that here was something—an act, a project, a life—beautiful for God. By far the most curious aspect, and the hardest to see afresh and not as mere formula, is that it was *for God*; but I leave that to a subsequent essay, with only the saints, here Teresa and Irenaeus, to point toward my sequel. For now note instead that it was something *beautiful*.

What I am trying to suggest is perhaps best indicated by its absence. There is a traditional worry about secularism and its slide into amorality, a worry that you cannot have ethics without God; but whatever the merits of that case, it is more about where our secular neighbors are headed than where they are now; it is more prediction than description. For our neighbors, warmly secular or tepidly religious, do believe in morality, even if they lack the metaphysics to explain what it is, and they do act on that belief, even if they cannot say exactly why. One need only glance at their general behavior and their public-policy proposals, comparing them to a mental image of what truly amoral behavior and amoral policy would look like, to see that this is so. The average secular man does not deny the wrongness of theft; he is willing to say that

genocide is evil; he will raise moral objections to murder and rape and domestic abuse.

But notice how far his moral judgments stand from immediate practical application to his life. He does not struggle with a temptation to murder or rape, he may puzzle over the best means to end genocide, but these do not affect how he behaves on the subway. The one set of moral judgments that he entertains frequently are political ones—the secular liberal will think with regularity how much more the state should be doing for the poor, the secular libertarian how much less it should be doing to his freedoms—but these do not bear on his everyday actions: At most they touch how he votes and perhaps how he gives his money, not how he greets a coworker in the morning or looks at a woman on the street. If his moral judgment encompasses both political and individual behavior, where it concerns the individual, it is to condemn the unsocialized and criminal—things that have never had much attraction to him—and where it concerns the political, it affects him only as donor and citizen, roles that occupy little of his day.

This I think is the distinctive feature of the secular world's approach to morality: not a flat denial or a discomfort with invoking it, but its division from everyday behavior. Compare the evangelical struggling toward chastity or the Catholic attending regular confession: By social expectation, by institutional pressure, by the internal force of his system of ideas, each confronts moral demands in the regular commerce of life. Such people conceive not just the world in general but their lives in particular in moral terms. Perhaps this is why they suggest the secular man tends toward amorality, because his moral code is such that he need not think about it day in and day out; perhaps they cannot conceive of the survival of a morality banished from the everyday, and perhaps they are right. But I do not propose to treat this as a prophetic fact here; I propose to take it as it is, indicating not our man's future but his present.

And his great fault is that he lacks a sense of the intimacy of ethics. I do not mean just its everyday character: We can each of us bring to mind the familiar caricatures in Birkenstocks and Volvos who talk all the time in moral terms, who indeed won't stop talking, whose righteous indignation is as tired as it is tiring. These are insufferably, if implicitly, ethical—but they are not intimately ethical. They live their ethics in the selection of sandals, in the choice of coffee stands, in the produce aisle: common enough situations in life, but hardly the stuff of it. They think always in grand terms, as if good politics made a good life, or love of man were the same as love of men, or philanthropy charity. They judge their moral success always by the fate of the world and never by the fate of their marriage.

But here is the first and farthest step in understanding Muggeridge's *beautiful*: It is as much about the smile and nod you give the bag boy as the products he bags, about friendliness by force of will and a happy nod in an unhappy mood. Some would call it "small scale," but it seems small only because we are accustomed to oversized thinking; really, it is human scale. It is neither bigger nor smaller than everyday life. For the secular world, the nods and smiles are judged necessary, when judged necessary, as the grease in the social machine, as the niceties that minimize the smoke and sputtering in the engine of the world. What they are also is the substance of the moral life—not, as some might have it, the definition of the moral life, as if the good were equivalent to social oil, as if we are always to bring peace and never the sword, but its substance, the matter in which it is worked out. These are the thousand innumerable opportunities that make of life a moral endeavor.

What I am trying to indicate, in brief, is an ethics incumbent on us not as consumers but as neighbors. For what goes with that is a sense of the beauty of the ethical, a sense that acting rightly and well can be attractive and even in a way—here a pregnant ambiguity—graceful. It is when one conceives it as an everyday affair that one begins to see the difficulty and fragility but also the supreme draw of the well-lived life. *Here* is something worth doing. John Duns Scotus remarks that "the moral goodness of an act is a kind of décor it has, including a due proportion to all to which it should be proportioned." It has what the Greeks called *kairos*, the right moment, the perfect time—and not just the when, but what is done, and why, and where and how it is performed. It is *just right*.

In that sense moral behavior is a graceful thing, and the saint behaves in something like the way that Astaire danced or Sugar Ray boxed or (to sample the life of the mind) Capablanca played chess. The examples can be multiplied indefinitely, but the point is this: There is a beauty to the moral gesture, the moral life, the moral soul; there is a quiet harmony to the parts of the act and to the priorities of the life and to the passions of the mind; and there is from all this a beauty that spreads slowly and subtly but unstoppably out across this sleeping world, like the first signs of the sun.

For there is no doubt that here the world is asleep. Whatever we think of the politics and prohibitions of modern morality, there is little draw to them. We lie dumb and desensitized in a picturesque moral landscape and dream in browns and grays. I frame this as a secular sleep, but I do not see why such dreams

should be inherent to secularism. There is no straight-forward syllogism to show why in denying Providence we must deny beauty or goodness, including the beauty of goodness. I spoke of Birkenstocks and Volvos and righteous indignation, but I spoke in caricatures; there are also atheists who live a patient, everyday sort of nonviolence, who do approach the beautiful in their moral life. This indeed is why I am making a sort of pretheistic argument, because this is a thing available to the unconverted atheist, because I am urging on him something other than simple conversion, because this is more about becoming a man than becoming a god.

And importantly, the inverse is also true: None of this is guaranteed the theist. Intimacy and the everyday are all well and good, but the Catholic might be confessing through sheer legalism and scrupulosity, the evangelical might be chaste in pure terror, thinking always of avoiding the dancing demons and never of joining—in this very act, however imperfectly—the dancing God. We all know to act for the glory of God, even if the saints and my sequel have much to do in unfolding its meaning, but we some-times forget that we can act in and with that glory, that our acts can be shot through with the rhythm and symmetry of a supernatural elegance. We must first see ethics in the everyday, but we must second see beauty there, and the serious theist is often only halfway along.

I will not attempt a full genealogy of the problem here: The exercise too often proves facile and unconvincing. Somewhere along the way the traditional scheme of virtues was greatly flattened. Morality was collapsed into justice and justice reduced to its political dimensions: Prudence came to be conceived as cleverness, temperance as a lifestyle choice, fortitude as an admirable but not a moral thing. General prohibitions and political action items became the substance of everyday moral thought: Do not rape; end global warming. We lost sight of the truth that chastity is no more about avoiding rape or even adultery than kindness is about avoiding murder: Certainly the two are incompatible, but cultivating the virtue goes far beyond avoiding its most flagrant violation.

Some blame may be laid at the feet of moral philosophy, which in the anglophone world has been dominated by utilitarian and Kantian theories, and, whatever their merits, the first tends to focus us on the grand social problems—a thing is good in proportion to the quantity of goodness it produces, so that the everyday actions of a life matter not at all in relation to large social currents—and the second has the popular effect of destroying any positive category for moral action, sorting everything into prohibited and

permissible with little room for the startling, splendid, and wonderful.

Still, an etiology is not always necessary for a cure, and I am interested here more in medicine than in moralizing. How do we awaken from our unconsciousness? How do we rediscover that the fully alive are not those who have traveled far and collected amazing experiences, but that the full life is the well-lived life and the most animate souls are those with the grace and moral poise of the saint? How do we discover again the spontaneity of the chess prodigy, the force and fluidity of the boxer, the delicate hesitations and accelerations of the dancer, and all this ethical?

Here I but limn out the healthy in the hope that it will inspire the sick, here I but re-mind them that it is attractive and let it attract them, but somewhere this must be lived. There is an-other and more famous line from St. Irenaeus: "The glory of God is man fully alive." Theists would do well, in acting for God's glory, to remember this advice and to remember the intimate charm it demands they exhibit in their lives. Only thus will they stand again as lights in the twilit world; only then will we have the reminder that, if I may take liberties with the words of St. Paul, whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, we can do all *with* the glory of God.

Ross McCullough is a writer living in Seattle, Washington.