

The Moral Obligation To Be Intelligent

by John Erskine

From the "Introduction" to *American Character and Other Essays*, by John Erskine, in which this essay appeared:

The essay on "The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent" was composed as a Phi Beta Kappa oration, and delivered at Amherst College just before the war [World War I] began. It was first printed in the Hibbert Journal, and on its appearance it was attacked by some British readers who saw in it a bumptious criticism of the Old World from an up-start American. These pages, however, were written with only the American audience in mind. When the essay appeared in this country it was criticized again by certain well meaning people as a menace to religious faith and a peril to the young. By some ingenuity which I have never been able to follow, such critics found in my praise of intelligence an attack on conventional morals. I still feel that the essay says clearly what I meant – that to be as intelligent as we can is a moral obligation – that intelligence is one of the talents for the use of which we shall be called to account – that if we haven't exhausted every opportunity to know whether what we are doing is right, it will be no excuse for us to say that we meant well.

I

If a wise man would ask, What are the modern virtues? and should answer his own question by a summary of the things we admire; if he would discard as irrelevant the ideals which by tradition we profess, but which are not found outside the tradition or the profession – ideals like meekness, humility, the renunciation of this world; if he would include only those excellences to which our hearts are daily given, and by which our conduct is motivated, – in such an inventory what virtues would he name?

This question is neither original nor very new. Our times await the reckoning up of our spiritual goods which is here suggested. We have at least this wisdom, that many of us are curious to know just what our virtues are. I wish I could offer myself as the wise man who brings the answer. But I raise this question merely to ask another – When the wise man brings his list of our genuine admirations, will intelligence be one of them? We might seem to be well within the old ideal of modesty if we claimed the virtue of intelligence. But before we claim the virtue, are we convinced that it is a virtue?

II

The disposition to consider intelligence a peril is an old Anglo-Saxon inheritance. Our ancestors have celebrated this disposition in verse and prose. Splendid as our literature is, it has not voiced all the aspirations of humanity, nor could it be expected to voice an aspiration that has not characteristically belonged to the English race; the praise of intelligence is not one of its characteristic glories.

“Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever.”

Here is the startling alternative which to the English, alone among great nations, has been not startling but a matter of course. Here is the casual assumption that a choice must be made between goodness and intelligence; that stupidity is first cousin to moral conduct, and cleverness the first step into mischief; that reason and God are not on good terms with each other; that the mind and heart are rival buckets in the well of truth, inexorably balanced – full mind, starved heart – stout heart, weak head.

Kingsley’s line is a convenient text, but to establish the point that English literature voices a traditional distrust of the mind we must go to the master. In Shakspeare’s plays there are some highly intelligent men, but they are either villains or tragic victims. To be as intelligent as Richard or Iago or Edmund seems to involve some break with goodness; to be as wise as Prospero seems to imply some Faust-like traffic with the forbidden worlds; to be as thoughtful as Hamlet seems to be too thoughtful to live. In Shakspeare the prizes of life go to such men as Bassanio, or Duke Orsino, or Florizel – men of good conduct and sound character, but of no particular intelligence. There might, indeed, appear to be one general exception to this sweeping statement: Shakspeare does concede intelligence as a fortunate possession to some of his heroines. But upon even a slight examination those ladies, like Portia, turn out to have been among Shakspeare’s Italian importations – their wit as part and parcel of the story he borrowed; or, like Viola, they are English types of humility, patience, and loyalty, such as we find in the old ballads, with a bit of Euphuism added, a foreign cleverness of speech. After all, these are only a few of Shakspeare’s heroines; over against them are Ophelia, Juliet, Desdemona, Hero, Cordelia, Miranda, Perdita – lovable for other qualities than intellect, – and in a sinister group, Lady Macbeth, Cleopatra, Goneril, intelligent and wicked.

In *Paradise Lost* Milton attributes intelligence of the highest order to the devil. That this is an Anglo-Saxon reading of the infernal character may be shown by a reference to the book of *Job*, where Satan is simply a troublesome body, and the great wisdom of the story is from the voice of God in the whirlwind. But Milton makes his Satan so thoughtful, so persistent and liberty-loving, so magnanimous, and God so illogical, so heartless and repressive, that many perfectly moral readers fear lest Milton, like the modern novelists, may have known good and evil, but could not tell them apart. It is disconcerting to intelligence that it should be God’s angel who cautions Adam not to wander in the earth, nor inquire concerning heaven’s causes and ends, and that it should be Satan meanwhile who questions

and explores. By Milton's reckoning of intelligence the theologian and the scientist to-day alike take after Satan.

If there were time, we might trace this valuation of intelligence through the English novel. We should see how often the writers have distinguished between intelligence and goodness, and have enlisted our affections for a kind of inexpert virtue. In Fielding or Scott, Thackeray or Dickens, the hero of the English novel is a well-meaning blunderer who in the last chapter is temporarily rescued by the grace of God from the mess he has made of his life. Unless he also dies in the last chapter, he will probably need rescue again. The dear woman whom the hero marries is, with a few notable exceptions, rather less intelligent than himself. When David Copperfield marries Agnes, his prospects of happiness, to the eyes of intelligence, look not very exhilarating. Agnes has more sense than Dora, but it is not even for that slight distinction that we must admire her; her great qualities are of the heart – patience, humility, faithfulness. These are the qualities also of Thackeray's good heroines, like Laura or Lady Castlewood. Beatrice Esmond and Becky Sharp, both highly intelligent, are of course a bad lot.

No less significant is the kind of emotion the English novelist invites towards his secondary or lower-class heroes – toward Mr. Boffin in *Our Mutual Friend*, for example, or Harry Foker in *Pendennis*. These characters amuse us, and we feel pleasantly superior to them, but we agree with the novelist that they are wholly admirable in their station. Yet if a Frenchman – let us say Balzac – were presenting such types, he would make us feel, as in *Père Goriot* or *Eugénie Grandet*, not only admiration for the stable, loyal nature, but also deep pity that such goodness should be so tragically bound in unintelligence or vulgarity. This comparison of racial temperaments helps us to understand ourselves. We may continue the method at our leisure. What would Socrates have thought of Mr. Pickwick, or the Vicar of Wakefield, or David Copperfield, or Arthur Pendennis? For that matter, would he have felt admiration or pity for Colonel Newcome?

III

I hardly need confess that this is not an adequate account of English literature. Let me hasten to say that I know the reader is resenting this somewhat cavalier handling of the noble writers he loves. He probably is wondering how I can expect to increase his love of literature by such unsympathetic remarks. But just now I am not concerned about our love of literature; I take it for granted, and use it as an instrument to prod us with. If we love Shakspeare and Milton and Scott and Dickens and Thackeray, and yet do not know what qualities their books hold out for our admiration, then – let me say it as delicately as possible – our admiration is not discriminating; and if we neither have discrimination nor are disturbed by our lack of it, then perhaps that wise man could not list intelligence among our virtues. Certainly it would be but a silly account of English literature to say only

that it set little store by the things of the mind. I am aware that for the sake of my argument I have exaggerated, by insisting upon only one aspect of English literature. But our history betrays a peculiar warfare between character and intellect, such as to the Greek, for example, would have been incomprehensible. The great Englishman, like the most famous Greeks, had intelligence as well as character, and was at ease with them both. But whereas the notable Greek seems typical of his race, the notable Englishman usually seems an exception to his own people, and is often best appreciated in other lands. What is more singular – in spite of the happy combination in himself of character and intelligence, he often fails to recognize the value of that combination in his neighbors. When Shakspeare portrayed such amateurish statesmen as the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, Burleigh was guiding Elizabeth's empire, and Francis Bacon was soon to be King James's counselor. It was the young Milton who pictured the life of reason in *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, the most spiritual fruit of philosophy in *Comus*; and when he wrote his epic he was probably England's most notable example of that intellectual inquiry and independence which in his great poem he discouraged. There remain several well-known figures in our literary history who have both possessed and believed in intelligence – Byron and Shelley in what seems our own day, Edmund Spenser before Shakspeare's time. England has more or less neglected all three, but they must in fairness be counted to her credit. Some excuse might be offered for the neglect of Byron and Shelley by a nation that likes the properties; but the gentle Spenser, the noblest philosopher and most chivalrous gentleman in our literature, seems to be unread only because he demands a mind as well as a heart used to high things.

This will be sufficient qualification of any disparagement of English literature; no people and no literature can be great that are not intelligent, and England has produced not only statesmen and scientists of the first order, but also poets in whom the soul was fitly mated with a lofty intellect. But I am asking you to reconsider your reading in history and fiction, to reflect whether our race has usually thought highly of the intelligence by which it has been great; I suggest these non-intellectual aspects of our literature as commentary upon my question – and all this with the hope of pressing upon you the question as to what you think of intelligence.

Those of us who frankly prefer character to intelligence are therefor not without precedent. If we look beneath the history of the English people, beneath the ideas expressed in our literature, we find in the temper of our remotest ancestors a certain bias which still prescribes our ethics and still prejudices us against the mind. The beginnings of our conscience can be geographically located. It began in the German forests, and it gave its allegiance not to the intellect but to the will. Whether or not the severity of life in a hard climate raised the value of that persistence by which alone life could be preserved, the Germans as Tacitus knew them, and the Saxons as they landed in England, held as their chief virtue that will-power which makes character. For craft or strategy they had no use; they were already a bulldog race; they liked fighting, and they liked best to settle the matter

hand to hand. The admiration for brute force which naturally accompanied this ideal of self-reliance, drew with it as naturally a certain moral sanction. A man was as good as his word, and he was ready to back up his word with a blow. No German, Tacitus says, would enter into a treaty of public or private business without his sword in his hand. When this emphasis upon the will became a social emphasis, it gave the direction to ethical feeling. Honor lay in a man's integrity, in his willingness and ability to keep his word; therefore the man became more important than his word or deed. Words and deeds were than easily interpreted, not in terms of absolute good and evil, but in terms of the man behind them. The deeds of a bad man were bad; the deeds of a good man were good. Fielding wrote *Tom Jones* to show that a good man sometimes does a bad action, consciously or unconsciously, and a bad man sometimes does good, intentionally or unintentionally. From the fact that Tom Jones is still popularly supposed to be as wicked as it is coarse, we may judge that Fielding did not convert all his readers. Some progress certainly has been made; we do not insist that the more saintly of two surgeons shall operate on us for appendicitis. But as a race we seem as far as possible from realizing that an action can intelligently be called good only if it contributes to a good end; that it is the moral obligation of an intelligent creature to find out as far as possible whether a given action leads to a good or a bad end; and that any system of ethics that excuses him from that obligation is vicious. If I give you poison, meaning to give you wholesome food, I have – to say the least – not done a good act; and unless I intend to throw overboard all pretence to intelligence, I must feel some responsibility for that trifling neglect to find out whether what I gave you was food or poison.

Obvious as the matter is in this academic illustration, it ought to have been still more obvious in Matthew Arnold's famous plea for culture. The purpose of culture, he said, is "to make reason and the will of God prevail." This formula he quoted from an Englishman. Differently stated, the purpose of culture, he said, is "to make an intelligent being yet more intelligent." This formula he borrowed from a Frenchman. The basis culture must have in character, the English resolution to make reason and the will of God prevail, Arnold took for granted; no man every set a higher price on character – so far as character by itself will go. But he spent his life trying to sow a little suspicion that before we can make the will of God prevail we must find out what is the will of God.

I doubt if Arnold taught us much. He merely embarrassed us temporarily. Our race has often been so embarrassed when it has turned a sudden corner and come upon intelligence. Charles Kingsley himself, who would rather be good than clever, – and had his wish, – was temporarily embarrassed when in the consciousness of his own upright character publicly called Newman a liar. Newman happened to be intelligent as well as good, and Kingsley's discomfiture is well know. But we discovered long ago how to evade the sudden embarrassments of intelligence. "Toll for the brave," sings the poet for those who went down in the Royal George. They were brave. But he might have sung, "Toll for the stupid." In order to clean the hull, brave Kempenfelt and his eight hundred

heroes took the serious risk of laying the vessel well over on its side, while most of the crew were below. Having made the error, they all died bravely; and our memory passes easily over the lack of a virtue we never did think much of, and dwells on the English virtues of courage and discipline. So we forget the shocking blunder of the charge of the Light Brigade, and proudly sing the heroism of the victims. Lest we flatter ourselves that this trick of defense has departed with our fathers – this reading of stupidity in terms of the tragic courage that endures its results – let us reflect that recently, after full warning, we drove a ship at top speed through a field of icebergs. When we were thrilled to read how superbly those hundreds died, in the great English way, a man pointed out that they did indeed die in the English way, and that our pride was therefore ill-timed; that all that bravery was wasted; that the tragedy was in the shipwreck of intelligence. That discouraging person was an Irishman.

IV

I have spoken of our social inheritance as though it were entirely English. Once more let me qualify my terms. Even those ancestors of ours who never left Great Britain were heirs of many civilization – Roman, French, Italian, Greek. With each world-tide some love of pure intelligence was washed up on English shores, and enriched the soil, and here and there the old stock marveled at its own progeny. But to America, much as we may sentimentally deplore it, England seems destined to be less and less the source of culture, of religion and learning. Our land assimilates all races; with every ship in the harbor our old English ways of thought must crowd a little closer to make room for a new tradition. If some of us do not greatly err, these newcomers are chiefly driving to the wall our inherited criticism of the intellect. As surely as the severe northern climate taught our forefathers the value of the will, the social conditions from which these new citizens have escaped have taught them the power of the mind. They differ from each other, but against the Anglo-Saxon they are confederated in a Greek love of knowledge, in a Greek assurance that sin and misery are the fruit of ignorance, and that to know is to achieve virtue. They join forces at once with that earlier arrival from Greece, the scientific spirit, which like all the immigrants has done our hard work and put up with our contempt. Between this rising host that follow intelligence, and the old camp that put their trust in a stout heart, a firm will, and a strong hand, the fight is on. Our college men will be in the thick of it. If they do not take sides, they will at least be battered in the scuffle. At this moment they are readily divided into those who wish to be men – whatever that means – and those who wish to be intelligent men, and those who, unconscious of blasphemy or humor, prefer not to be intelligent, but to do the will of God.

When we consider the nature of the problems to be solved in our day, it seems – to many of us, at least – that these un-English arrivals are correct, that intelligence is the virtue we particularly need. Courage and steadfastness we cannot do without, so long as two men dwell on the earth; but it is time to discriminate in our

praise of these virtues. If you want to get out of prison, what you need is the key to the lock. If you cannot get that, have courage and steadfastness. Perhaps the modern world has got into a kind of prison, and what is needed is the key to the lock. If none of the old virtues exactly fits, why should it seem ignoble to admit it? England for centuries has got on better by sheer character than some other nations by sheer intelligence, but there is after all a relation between the kind of problems and the means we should select to solve it. Not all problems are solved by will-power. When England overthrew Bonaparte, it was not his intelligence she overthrew; the contest involved other things besides intelligence, and she wore him out in the matter of physical endurance. The enemy that comes to her as a visible host or armada she can still close with and throttle; but when the foe arrives as an arrow that flieth by night, what avail the old sinews, the old stoutness of heart! We Americans face the same problems, and are too much inclined to oppose to them similar obsolete armor. We make a moral issue of an economic or social question, because it seems ignoble to admit it is simply a question for intelligence. Like the medicine-man, we use oratory and invoke our hereditary divinities, when the patient needs only a little quiet, or permission to get out of bed. We applaud those leaders who warm to their work – who, when they cannot open a door, threaten to kick it in. In the philosopher's words, we curse the obstacles of life as though they were devils. But they are not devils. They are obstacles.

V

Perhaps my question as to what you think of intelligence has been pushed far enough. But I cannot leave the subject without a confession of faith.

None of the reasons here suggested will quite explain the true worship of intelligence, whether we worship it as the scientific spirit, or as scholarship, or as any other reliance upon the mind. We really seek intelligence not for the answers it may suggest to the problems of life, but because we believe it is life, – not for aid in making the will of God prevail, but because we believe it is the will of God. We love it, as we love virtue, for its own sake, and we believe it is only virtue's other and more precise name. We believe that the virtues wait upon intelligence – literally wait, in the history of the race. Whatever is elemental in man – love, hunger, fear – has obeyed from the beginning the discipline of intelligence. We are told that to kill one's aging parents was once a demonstration of solicitude; about the same time, men hungered for raw meat and feared the sun's eclipse. Filial love, hunger, and fear are still motives to conduct, but intelligence has directed them to other ends. If we no longer hang the thief or flog the school-boy, it is not that we think less harshly of theft or laziness, but that intelligence has found a better persuasion to honesty and enterprise.

We believe that even in religion, in the most intimate room of the spirit, intelligence long ago proved itself the master-virtue. Its inward office from the

beginning was to decrease fear and increase opportunity; its outward effect was to rob the altar of its sacrifice and the priest of his mysteries. Little wonder that from the beginning the disinterestedness of the accredited custodians of all temples has been tested by the kind of welcome they gave to intelligence. How many hecatombs were offered on more shores than that of Aulis, by seamen waiting for a favorable wind, before intelligence found out a boat that could tack! The altar was deserted, the religion revised – fear of the uncontrollable changing into delight in the knowledge that is power. We contemplate with satisfaction the law by which in our long history one religion has driven out another, as one hypothesis supplants another in astronomy or mathematics. The faith that needs the fewest altars, the hypothesis that leaves least unexplained, survives; and the intelligence that changes most fears into opportunity is most divine.

We believe this beneficent operation on intelligence was swerving not one degree from its ancient course when under the name of the scientific spirit it once more laid its influence upon religion. If the shock here seemed too violent, if the purpose of intelligence here seemed to be not revision but contradiction, it was only because religion was invited to digest an unusually large amount of intelligence all at once. Moreover, it is not certain that devout people were more shocked by Darwinism than the pious mariners were by the first boat that could tack. Perhaps the sacrifices were not abandoned all at once.

But the lover of intelligence must be patient with those who cannot readily share his passion. Some pangs the mind will inflict upon the heart. It is a mistake to think that men are united by elemental affections. Our affections divide us. We strike roots in immediate time and space, and fall in love with our locality, the customs and the language in which we were brought up. Intelligence unites us with mankind, by leading us in sympathy to other times, other places, other customs; but first the prejudiced roots of affection must be pulled up. These are the old pangs of intelligence, which still comes to set a man at variance against his father, saying, “He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me.”

Yet, if intelligence begins in a pang, it proceeds to a vision. Through measureless time its office has been to make of life an opportunity, to make goodness articulate, to make virtue a fact. In history at least, if not yet in the individual, Plato’s faith has come true, that sin is but ignorance, and knowledge and virtue are one. But all that intelligence has accomplished dwindles in comparison with the vision it suggests and warrants. Beholding this long liberation of the human spirit, we foresee, in every new light of the mind, one unifying mind, wherein the human race shall know its destiny and proceed to it with satisfaction, as an idea moves to its proper conclusion; we conceive of intelligence at last as the infinite order, wherein man, when he enters it, shall find himself.

Meanwhile he continues to find his virtues by successive insights into his needs. Let us cultivate insight.

“O Wisdom of the Most High,
That reachest from the beginning to the end,
And dost order all things in strength and grace,
Teach us now the way of understanding.”

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