

From Virtue to Love

Arthur Zajonc

Around 1300 the Catholic Church faced a moral dilemma. One of its most pious members, Margarete Porete, had written a book in which she described her dramatic conversion from a parishioner in the “Little Church” of obedience to the “Great Church” of Love. As a consequence of learning to “love Love,” she wrote: “Virtues, I take leave of you for evermore. Now my heart will be freer and more at peace than it has been.” In other words, Porete sought to live the maxim of Augustine, “Love, and do what you will.” The conventional moral teachings and rules of the Church were no longer binding on her. She was a moral universe unto herself through her direct and loving relationship to God. Her every action would be right and true not because it was endorsed by the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Church but because it flowed directly from her union with Love.

The Church fathers saw this as a dangerous precedent, one likely to wreak havoc on the discipline the Church practiced over its millions of members. The moral authority of the individual could not be allowed to challenge that of the establishment, and so Porete was arrested and tried by the Inquisition in Paris. Ultimately she was condemned for the “The Heresy of the Free Spirit” and burned at the stake in the Place de Grève.

I see Margarete Porete as one of the world’s first “ethical individuals,” to use the language of Rudolf Steiner’s *Philosophy of Freedom*. Another who would shortly follow Porete was the young Maid of Orleans, Joan of Arc, who obeyed the dictates of her conscience and the guidance of her angels until her own end on the pyre.

We should have sympathy for the 14th century Church. It was reacting to the development of a new and still rare moral capacity in human beings, one destined to take on greater signifi-

cance following the dawn of the Consciousness Soul in the 15th century.

Educators today likewise know that moral intuition is a high human capacity that unfolds and matures slowly over years. Following the lead of Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg detailed a stage theory of moral development. In stage one a child presumes external moral authority and punishment; by stage six the locus of all moral authority is derived from personal judgments guided by conscience and an appreciation for universality. In our work with children and young adults we are educating them toward freedom, which also means toward moral autonomy. This is, however, a long and challenging process, one in which the pedagogy we use should match the developmental stage of the child or young adult.

Another teaching relevant to our considerations, this time from modern science, instructs us that we inhabit a relational universe. From quantum physics and relativity, we discover that the

common view of conventional reality as being “out there,” enduring with its own invariant attributes, is a false image. Reality arises in a manner that depends on the marriage of sense and thought, of percept and concept. This seems like a philosophical view, but it has become increas-

ingly supported by the most sophisticated understandings of science. The implications for our view of “moral reality” are at least as significant as for physical reality. In my opinion, conventional legal and ethical standards are of great importance but are, nonetheless, conventions. The rules we legislate or receive from religious authorities may derive from enlightened sources and may be generally in alignment with high moral principles, but they are not “out there,” for they are not the moral analogs of physical elements. In the end, they remain temporal and partial.

Rudolf Steiner’s view of ethics held that the

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ultimate basis of true moral action cannot be anything conventional. No rules, no commandments are immutably true. We do inhabit a moral universe, but it is one in which the intersection of the specific situation with our moral sensibilities defines the crucial relationship. Moral intuition is the practice of loving as a way of knowing in relationship.

Increasingly, as traditional bases of ethical support fall away, we will be called on to follow the examples of Porete and the Maid of Orleans.

Margarete Porete and Joan of Arc, as pure souls open to Love, were entirely right to hold to the spiritual and moral guidance they received and for which they perished. The non-violent resistance movements of Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King grounded their conduct, likewise, on a post-conventional moral capacity that all of us possess, but which must be nurtured and refined over decades before we can be trusted to “take leave of the Virtues” of family, church, and state.

Formation of Ethical and Moral Values

When children experience adults regarding the phenomena of nature in wonder, when they see how their teachers meet all that lives with respect, joy, and reverence, a deep sense of responsibility takes root in them, a sense for morality. An inner certainty ripens that the forces and relationships governing nature also govern human thinking. Children experience the world as reliable and ordered by law, and thus they gain trust in their own existence and a positive mental outlook toward their environment. They regard the world as a place where they feel at home. It is fundamentally important that children experience the world as a good and well-ordered place in their first few years of life because this will give them the basis and the strength they need to meet life's dangers and problems.

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