

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

State Morality.

IN the *Spectator* for February 3rd an article appeared over the signature of Dr. Edwyn Bevan bearing the arresting title, "Should States be Unselfish?" We know only too well that in actual policy and practice States are apt to be otherwise; but the point of Dr. Bevan's argument was that in the nature of things unselfishness, an admirable virtue in individuals, was forbidden to States as something definitely wrong. Such a pronouncement from such a quarter appears to support certain tendencies in our modern civilisation which are far from being desirable; but it should be recognised at once that Dr. Bevan's purpose was not by any means to argue that moral imperatives exist for individuals but not for national or imperial communities. He affirms, however, that for States and Governments these imperatives are restricted to the ethics of justice and equity, and fall short of the law of love; they can never demand self-devotion: for no State policy has any right to be generous and altruistic to the point of national self-sacrifice. Governments, he declares, exist "to secure the interests of the people they serve, and it would not be admirable, it would be a gross breach of trust, if they were 'unselfish' in the sense . . . [that], they spent the blood and treasure of their own people in a cause from which their own people did not derive an adequate profit."

Now whatever view we may take of this contention, it is plain that it deals with a subject which affects us all, and our convictions concerning it lie at the roots of our moral life as a people—and indeed as individuals. For we all belong to the State; we are all encouraged—never more so than now—to identify ourselves with its aims and activities, just as we are all taught to regard it as the organised expression of our own genius and character as a people. To teach, therefore, that the State—the highest expression, save the Church, of humanity's life—must always be incapable of generosity and of high, sacrificial decision, and must always, though with just regard for the rights of other States, seek its own self-interested ends—to teach this must be to inculcate a doctrine which cannot but affect the character of the individual citizen.

For, on the face of it, it seems to offer the simple citizen a very depressing and cynical picture of his world. National generosity, self-sacrifice, and heroism in the protection of the weak—these virtues, which his history-books taught him to regard as part of his country's tradition, now appear to be faded out. As between States, they have no right to exist, and when they do exist they change their character and become "gross breaches

of faith." What pride, then (the simple citizen may ask himself) can one take in belonging to a close corporation concerning which, in an uncertain world, only this is certain, that never on any account, no matter what urgencies, distresses or inhumanities might exist outside its frontiers, nor what poignant appeals might be made for succour—never in any circumstance could that national corporation or imperial syndicate be expected to intervene, except on terms of "adequate profit"? And if all other States are the same, and this not by reason of general human infirmity, but of right, and according to a profound philosophical principle—well then, what is left for a simple citizen to do but surrender his ideals and make terms with the inevitable? "I am no longer anti-Government," says a disillusioned revolutionary in one of Ignazio Silone's moving stories, "I am anti-life."

Dr. Bevan's argument, however, is clearly stated. It is based upon the analogy of the ethical relationship between a trustee and his ward on the one hand, and the outside world on the other. The trustee's duty is to see that all the capital intrusted to him is soundly invested, and all the property maintained so as to preserve, and if possible increase, its value. Obviously this does not carry with it a liberty to indulge in fraud in his ward's interest; the rights of others must be scrupulously respected; but just as obviously this principle of strict honesty and justice must not be stretched to the limit of charitable benevolence. The trustee has no right to be charitable at his ward's expense, no matter how heartbreaking may be the appeal of the needy but extraneous "case." If, of course, a benevolent response were found consistent with his ward's interests—if, for example, a profitable loan could be negotiated on good security—then, naturally, the appeal could be favourably considered; but to make an advance without reasonable expectation of "adequate profit" would be "definitely wrong."

And this, according to Dr. Bevan, illustrates the relation between State and people. The State is the trustee, the people are the ward. We may assume also that the national or imperial territory and revenue, with all other assets, constitute the ward's estate. Therefore, for a Government (and the action of Governments is the action of States) to embark upon a policy of heroic "unselfishness" and pledge the blood and treasure of its own people in a cause, however good, from which they did not derive an "adequate profit," would be a gross breach of trust. States cannot be unselfish. For, moreover, even if the ward (the people) expressly charged the trustee (the Government "acting for the State") to make this sacrifice of blood and treasure—even so, the trustee might not be justified in yielding. For the ward may not really know his own mind, may not be unanimous

within himself, may be obeying only a rash and temporary impulse, or may not appreciate the possible consequences of the action he urges; in which case the wise trustee may well set aside his ward's mandate as one that does not represent his ward's better judgment, and is therefore ill-informed and irresponsible.

* * * *

Now it may be admitted that arguments from analogy call for close examination, and in this instance we may be justified in inquiring if Dr. Bevan's analogy is comprehensive enough to sustain the ethical inferences which he draws or the conclusions which he indicates. For is it dealing fairly with the complicated human situation as it exists to-day to invite us to concentrate upon an analogy in which we are presented with a trustee and his ward on one side and an unspecified, nondescript accumulation of needy "cases" on the other? Or, if it is not wholly fair to Dr. Bevan to say that his analogue presents only a trustee and his ward against a background of troublesome and esurient outsiders, at least it must be said that the whole emphasis of his analogy falls upon the obligation of the trustee to the ward, and that the existence of other wards and other trustees is recognised only to show that there is no real bond between the first pair and the others—between *any* pair and the rest—save that they should deal justly by one another.

But is it not true that, in this reference, all our ethical thinking is likely to go astray if it begins with the nation and not with Humanity? Our duty to Humanity takes ethical precedence of our duty to the national State. Nothing has transpired in the last hundred years to invalidate Mazzini's exhortation to his Italian working-men in 1846:

"Your first duties, first not in time but in importance, since without understanding these you can fulfil only imperfectly the rest, are to Humanity. You have duties as citizens, as sons, as husbands and as fathers, duties sacred and inviolable; but that which makes them sacred and inviolable is the mission, the Duty, which your nature as *men* demands of you."

Therefore, if Dr. Bevan's analogy is to represent the human situation, must we not enlarge it? Must we not bring *all* the wards fairly into the picture and show that they are members of one and the same family? And must we not show, therefore, that all the trustees discharge their responsibilities within that family—that is, that each trustee represents the interests, not of an isolated individual, but of a ward who is brother to all the other wards and who possesses a share, however unequal, in what

is really the family estate? In other words, before we begin to draw profound ethical inferences about the duties of a national or imperial State towards its people and towards other peoples, must we not first of all recognise that Humanity exists and that all nations belong to it? Humanity is the family and the nations are the individual members of that family; the common family estate, however unequally parcelled out, is the world and its resources: and States and Governments exercise their functions within this comprehensive relationship.

Of course, it may be urged that this picture, agreeable though it may be to moralisers of an idealistic sort, is well outside the sphere of political realism. But "realism" in the political sense hardly defines the limits of Dr. Bevan's argument, for the question which he poses is not primarily a question of political expediency but of ethics—"Should States be Unselfish?" And certainly Dr. Bevan would not object to this elaboration of his analogy as a representation of an ideal polity. It is indeed in line with the idea of so close a link-up of States as to make it consistent with the self-interest of each to serve the interests of all—an idea which it is possible to trace in faint outline in his own article. But in the sphere of ethics, does not this idea represent obligations and responsibilities that are already with us? Humanity is not a fantasy or an expectation, but a moral fact; the solidarity of the human race is a fact; it is a fact that all nations and peoples are related to one another as members of the human family. That this fact is not reflected in the actual organisation of the world does not constitute a denial of its existence. To work it out into a *polity* belongs to the responsibility of States as trustees, collectively, of the interests of mankind.

Now to grant the validity of this enlargement of Dr. Bevan's analogy is to concede that the simple relationship of trustee and ward, from which he draws his ethical inference, has now become vastly more complex, so that the inference needs re-examination. We must imagine a *family* of wards, each with a trustee in charge of his interests. Suppose, then, that by reason of some natural calamity, or by the sharp practice of one or more of the trustees, the property of one of the wards were taken out of his hands and he himself reduced to beggary: would any one of the remaining trustees be justified in defining his obligations as governed by one sole consideration—his regard for the material interests of his own ward? Would he be justified in saying, "I will agree to help only if there is adequate profit in it"? For Dr. Bevan concedes, or rather insists, that the trustee's devotion to his ward's interests must be subordinated to the rule of justice. He may not over-reach others to secure advantage for his ward. Therefore he must acknowledge an imperative

superior even to his ward's interests. At what point does this imperative cease to function?

What, in any case one might ask, would the wards themselves have to say in this matter? Would there be no such thing as family feeling, no family loyalty, no regard for the family's good name? Can there in no conceivable set of circumstances emerge a crisis in which the utter need of one member of the family—perhaps by reason of some flagrant breach of faith practised in the name of another member—becomes so pressing and poignant that in the presence of its urgent claims all considerations of self-interest must give way to the demands of kinship, of family honour? And must we be told that no trustee who knows his duty ought to allow his ward to recognise these higher claims except on a basis of "adequate profit"?

In that case two questions arise. One is, What does Dr. Bevan mean by "profit"? (And if the trustee must concentrate upon the "interests" of his ward, what are the limits of those "interests"?) Is it not precisely here that we are brought into that region of paradox into which all ethical considerations are apt to lead us? Is it indeed "profitable" to sacrifice everything to "adequate profit"? What shall it profit a ward if, through his trustee's single-eyed devotion to "profits," he increase his estate and lose his soul? The trustee must regard his ward's interests as always the decisive consideration? Then is there not a possibility that by so doing he will betray them? Will it be to his ward's *interest* that, for the sake of his "interests," he lose his honour, his good name, through a selfish disregard for the good name of the family? Verily his action may be strictly "just" and "within the law," but by offering such a defence he may defend himself not at all, but utterly expose and rout his reputation.

And this is no academic quibble, no piece of irrelevant casuistry. Dr. Bevan's article was called forth by our foreign policy in relation to the Spanish question. Clearly that specific question cannot be discussed here; but one must press the main issue: Is it true to say that a Government, acting for the State as trustee of the interests of the people, can never, without a gross breach of trust, pursue a policy whose aim is other than "adequate profit" for its own country? Is not the State (and the Government acting for the State) the trustee also of a nation's honour, its conscience, its *morale*, its loyalty to the cause of humanity; and may not these imponderable but most precious values conceivably be destroyed by a policy of "adequate profit"? Moreover, is it not exactly in terms of these imponderables, in terms of honour, of self-sacrifice, of chivalrous devotion to the weak and oppressed, that States and Governments are apt to

describe their policies in the critical hour? And does it belong to the honour and fidelity of trustees that they should dupe their wards with monumental lies? To argue that any doctrine of the altruism of States could be perverted by zealotry into something bizarre and ruinous is beside the point; just as it is beside the point to affirm that States must be duly mindful of their own interests. What is in dispute is that States are principled in a necessary selfishness, that each one is a close corporation whose policy must always be that of "adequate profit" for itself, and that on no account can it act generously and sacrificially or recognise the claims of any cause as higher than its own interests. Such a theory, endorsed by the wise and prudent, and elevated to the level of a moral principle, seems to constitute a denial of Humanity and a real degradation of the currency of conscience.

And so we come to the second, and final, question. Dr. Bevan, in his analogy of the trustee and his ward, assumes that all judgments and decisions rest with the trustee, who has the right to over-rule the will of his ward. This is an analogy which is certainly applicable to Totalitarian States and their people, but does it apply to democratic Governments? One had imagined that, in theory at least, the broad lines of national policy, whether self-interested or generous and self-sacrificing, were determined by the people: but apparently, even in respect of democracies, Dr. Bevan thinks otherwise. "Might a Government [he inquires] not conscientiously sacrifice the interests of its own people for some other people, if it had first ascertained that its own people desired the sacrifice?" And he replies: "It would, I think, be enormously difficult for a Government to be sure of this—to be sure that, if there was some wave of generous emotion which made the people cry out for an action by which its own interests were sacrificed, the full implications and consequences of the action were realised, and whether, if they were realised, the people as a whole would still be willing to consummate the sacrifice." The popular mandate may be set aside as emotional and irresponsible if it challenges the one inviolable principle of the selfishness of States.

GWILYM O. GRIFFITH.