
The Sermon in Tristram Shandy

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THE SERMON IN *TRISTRAM SHANDY* *

BY ARTHUR H. CASH

In his sermons, Laurence Sterne developed a consistent moral philosophy which is well represented by *The Abuses of Conscience Considered*, the sermon he introduced into *Tristram Shandy*. It has not been previously recognized how this pleasant and deceptively simple sermon is typical of Sterne's ethic as a whole. In fact, despite sporadic, if profitable, dippings into the sermons, no scholar has found in them a structured moral philosophy. Wilbur Cross and Lansing Hammond, discovering that Sterne had little of interest to say about *religion*, gave up altogether on his ideas, as such.¹ But Sterne's *moral* theory is much more imaginative than his orthodox religion and far more complete as a philosophy. Its implications for his fiction are provocative.

Sterne's moral "system" becomes especially meaningful when seen in relation to other ethical writings of his age. Although Sterne appears to have been affected by several contemporary moralists, he does not belong to any single mid-century "school." He has some affinity with the earlier Latitude-Men, with Tillotson, Stillingfleet, Norris, and Clarke, from whom he borrowed so liberally. But the modern spirit of psychological probing in his sermons is not typical of their writings, and I rather think their influence is primarily indirect. The most immediate and powerful influence upon Sterne's moral thought is that of John Locke, whose *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was to Sterne, as he had Tristram say, "a historybook, Sir, (which may possibly recommend it to the world) of what passes in a man's own mind"

* This study was made possible by a grant from Colorado State University Research Funds.

¹ Cross, in *The Life and Times of Laurence Sterne*, 3rd ed. (Yale University Press), 1929, makes a very fair appraisal of the style and general tone of the sermons. See pp. 245-249, 372-380, 506-508. Hammond, in *Laurence Sterne's 'Sermons of Mr. Yorick'* (Yale University Press), 1949, ably defends Sterne against the charge of dishonest plagiarism in the sermons.

(p. 85).² Of course, Sterne was much too original to have simply aped Locke. Nevertheless, most of the doctrines of his sermons are paralleled in the *Essay. The Abuses of Conscience Considered*, my central concern in this study, sports only one ill-developed notion which is not Lockean. The rest of the ideas, if not exactly traceable to the *Essay*, have their counterparts in that great work.

I

Conscience, says Sterne, is “unavoidable”—that is, every man has one. But some are to be trusted, some not—the central problem of the sermon in *Tristram Shandy*.

Conscience is made up of, first, a “knowledge,” which “the mind has within herself,” and, secondly, a “judgment, either of approbation or censure” which the mind “makes upon the successive actions of our lives” (p. 126).³ Sterne describes the process through a brief allegory of a court. The judge is Reason. The defendant is some particular action. The motives to the action are represented collectively by the character called Passion, or individually as “bias,” “self-love,” “little interests,” “favor,” “wit,” and a more general principle called “interest.” Though these affections appear in the court as witness and advocates of the accused action, they are really his accomplices. It is they, represented as “Passion,” who cause the failures of conscience. Sometimes Passion slips into the bench in the place of Reason in order to acquit some action which is actually guilty. However, because Passion *always* favors accused actions, he always pronounces them innocent. Consequently, a clear conscience is suspect, for the sentence may have been pronounced by Passion usurping the place of Reason. A guilty conscience, on the other hand, can be trusted, for only one principle of mind ever makes a condemnation—the Reason.

Sterne’s allegory stops there. He does tell us, however, that false judgments of conscience are fostered by “long habits of sin”

² My references to *Tristram Shandy* are to the edition of James Aiken Work (New York: Odyssey Press), 1940.

³ My references to *The Abuses of Conscience Considered* will be to the version published in *Tristram Shandy*, the Work edition (above, n. 2). Sterne published the sermon first in 1750 as a pamphlet, a second time in the novel, and a third time as the final sermon in the collection he himself saw through the press (*The Sermons of Mr. Yorick*, Vol. IV, 1766).

which cause the conscience to become "hard" and, "like some tender parts of his body, by much stress and continual hard usage, [to] lose, by degrees, that nice sense and perception with which God and nature endow'd it" (p. 127).

We see at once that Sterne has thought of the personality as having three fundamental elements—a set of natural passions, a temperament fixed by habit, and reason—the traditional faculty psychology as old at least as Plato's *Republic* (Book IV). These radical elements Sterne usually takes for granted. All of the sermons contain off-hand comments about reason. He speaks frequently and casually of particular appetites and specific passions, sometimes in the Pauline tradition of condemning "the worst of human passions,—pride . . . hypocrisy, self-love, covetousness, extortion, cruelty and revenge" (Vol. I, p. 99).⁴ At other times he speaks with greater caution about natural affections of benevolence and "a certain generosity and tenderness of nature which disposes us for compassion, abstracted from all considerations of self" (Vol. I, pp. 38-39; also Vol. I, pp. 73, 86; Vol. II, pp. 34-39; see especially Sermons III and VII).⁵ Without going out of his way to explore the mechanism of habit, Sterne frequently attacks "uncontrolled custom" that leads to sinfulness (Vol. II, pp. 318-319; also Vol. I, pp. 66, 277; Vol. II, pp. 7, 259); or he suggests ways we can form "a settled principle of humanity and goodness" (Vol. I, p. 45; also Vol. I, pp. 50-51).⁶

⁴ My references to sermons other than *The Abuses of Conscience Considered* (above, n. 2) are to the edition of the *Sermons*, 2 vols., included in the *Works*, intro. by Wilbur Cross (New York: J. F. Taylor), 1904. 12 vols. Re-issued by the Clonmel Society, 12 vols. bound as 6, the same pagination throughout.

⁵ Sterne makes two more points about the natural passions which have little to do with *The Abuses* but are important for any evaluation of his fiction. (1) He follows the lead of Bishop Butler and, possibly, David Hume in distinguishing between *particular* drives and appetites, on the one hand, and *general principles* of benevolence and self-love, on the other. (2) He accepts the popular notion of the "ruling passion" (see *Sermons*, Vol. I, pp. 147-154). For a detailed discussion of these points in relation to the *Sentimental Journey*, see my study, *Sterne's Comedy of Moral Sentiments*, now in press for the Modern Humanities Research Association and the Duquesne University Press.

⁶ The notion of habit as an important moral principle is common in almost any age, including the eighteenth century. See, for instance, Bishop Joseph Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, I, ii, 13 (Vol. I, p. 48 of *Works*, ed. W. E. Gladstone, Oxford: Clarendon, 1896) or Samuel Johnson's *Vision of Theodore* (*The Preceptor*, ed. Robert Dodsley, London, 1748, Vol. II, pp. 516-526). The concept of habit held by Butler, Johnson, and Sterne should not be confused with the theory of the association of ideas. The new association psychology, which laid the foundation of twentieth-century psychology, consisted of an involved theory (including habit formation) which pur-

The Abuses of Conscience Considered is a sermon about moral knowledge, rather than practice; as such, it is directly concerned with the reason, and only indirectly with the faculties of passion and temperament. Sterne sets out to explain how one knows what he ought to do, basing his argument upon a clever adaptation of two concepts of Locke—those of judgment and self-awareness.⁷

"If a man thinks at all," Sterne writes in the sermon, "he must be privy to his own thoughts and desires;—he must remember his past pursuits, and know certainly the true springs and motives, which, in general, have governed the actions of his life" (pp. 125-126; repeated in *Sermons*, Vol. I, p. 53). Sterne is arguing Locke's well known thesis that "having ideas" amounts to the same thing as "perception" (II, i, 9).⁸ Locke's doctrine was certainly not new—except in the sense that he made of it a *doctrine*. Previous to the *Essay* most people had accommodated the notion comfortably side-by-side with a belief in innate ideas. Locke pointed out the conflict between the two theories. The upshot was that he clarified the issues as to whether or not unconscious thoughts were possible, and then he flatly declared they were not. In this position Sterne stands with his philosophic master, using the concept to set up the fundamental paradox of his sermon: it would seem to follow, he says, "from the very terms of the proposition," that conscience, a judgment of perfectly remembered actions along with perfectly known motives, must necessarily be accurate. But not so.

The difficulty rests elsewhere. The problem is not what the mind *can* know, but what it will *bother* to know. Sterne's use of the word *judgment* is not fortuitous. He is following Locke, who had described conscience as "our own opinion or judgment of the moral rectitude or pravity of our own actions" (Introduction, II, 8). Judgment, then, would seem to be a key notion. Accord-

ported to explain the *development* of the mind. Sterne was not much affected in his thinking by association theory, as was not John Locke—much criticism to the contrary. See my article, "The Lockean Psychology of *Tristram Shandy*," *ELH*, XXII (June, 1955), pp. 125-135.

⁷ Sterne's adaptations are not highly original. He took the major theme from Swift's sermon, "On the Testimony of Conscience," and he was influenced by Swift's "The Difficulty of Knowing One's-Self," as well as by Butler's sermon "Upon Self-Deceit." See Hammond, pp. 110-111, 151-154.

⁸ *I. e.*, Book II, Chapter I, Section 9 of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. References made in this manner are to the edition of Alexander Campbell Fraser (Oxford: Clarendon), 1894; re-issued (New York: Dover) 1959, with the same pagination throughout.

ing to Locke, judgment is one type of rational affirmation—the reason compares ideas to determine a probable truth (IV, xiv, 3-4; xvii, 16-17). Judgment, however, is often inaccurate, and the causes for its failures Locke describes entertainingly in his chapter called “Wrong Assent, or Error.” Some of these fallacious judgments closely parallel the failures of conscience in Sterne’s sermon. Although, as Locke explains, we are forced to recognize an agreement or disagreement of any ideas which actually appear together in consciousness, still “we can hinder both *knowledge* and *assent*, by *stopping our inquiry*, and not employing our faculties in search of any truth” (IV, xx, 16).⁹ In other words, one must have the *will* to discover the truth—something both men find all too rarely. Sterne makes the point in Sermon IV:

With all the power which God has given him [man] of turning his eyes inward upon himself, and taking notice of the chain of his own thoughts and desires—yet, in fact, he is generally so inattentive, but always so partial an observer of what passes, that he is as much, nay often a much greater stranger to his own disposition and true character, than all the world besides. (Vol. I, p. 54)

This reluctance to judge precisely, as Sterne pointed out in *The Abuses*, is brought about by competing passions and desires. The point had also been made by Locke—who could hardly control his indignation.

Let ever so much probability stand on one side of a covetous man’s reasoning, and money on the other; it is easy to foresee which will outweigh. Earthly minds, like mud walls, resist the strongest batteries. . . . Tell a man passionately in love, that he is jilted; bring a score of witnesses of the falsehood of his mistress, it is ten to one but three kind words of hers shall invalidate all their testimonies. (IV, xx, 12)

The notion is a favorite of Sterne, one to which he devotes his fourteenth sermon, “Felix’s Behavior towards Paul.”

The judgments of the more disinterested and impartial of us, receive no small tincture from our affections . . . but in the more flagrant instances . . . ’tis melancholy to see the office to which reason, the great prerogative of his nature, is reduced; serving the lower appetites in the dishonest drudgery of finding out arguments to justify the present pursuit. (Vol. I, pp. 313-314)

⁹ Locke appears to distinguish between two sorts of errors in judgment—the failure to carry through the reasoning process (IV, xx, 16) and the failure to present to reason all of the evidence (IV, xx, 6).

Although in that sermon the explanation of such errors is not cast in terms of conscience, the argument is essentially that of *The Abuses of Conscience Considered*. If a man of quiet conscience is really only "a bubble to himself," he simply has not *tried* to know the truth about his own moral conduct.

Sterne understood an implication for morality in these doctrines of which Locke himself hardly seemed aware. Locke, exploring the uses and limitations of reason, saw only an intellectual fault in man's failure to know and judge himself. Sterne made of it a central theme in his moral teaching. He wrote two sermons on the subject, "Self-Knowledge" (IV) and "Self-Examination" (XIV) and devoted to it a considerable part of two others (XVIII and XIX). His thesis was quite clear: complete self-knowledge being available when diligently sought, accurate self-judgment being possible upon demand, no one could beg his moral faults upon grounds of ignorance.

At bottom Sterne's ethic was conservative. His keen interest in psychology, expressed so well in both the sermons and novels, did not lead him to adopt that attitude so familiar to us in the twentieth century—psychological determinism. For him self-knowledge, self-judgment, and self-correction were, in the long run, products of the moral will.

Sterne's outlook bespeaks a gap between his books and the fiction of our own century written by authors who do not share his view. Today we admire the modernity of Sterne's works, praising them as psychological fiction comparable to the novels of Proust or Woolf. Sterne has this much in common with such writers—he broke loose from the bonds of conventional plot and concentrated upon problems generated from within. However, the fact that people are largely determined by inner as well as outer forces, is a truism of no particular interest in itself. What we learn from an artist is the *quality* of these determinations and the *ways* people react to them. Here Sterne's moral orientation separates him from the twentieth-century novelist. Today the inner forces are often treated as mysteries, to be understood only with great effort and then only imperfectly—as they are for Gertrude Stein's character Melanctha in *Three Lives*. In other novels the forces are not hidden from view, but are so powerful that any struggle against them is largely hopeless—as with Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Sterne writes about inner

forces which are neither mysterious nor overpowering—"When a man gives himself up to the government of a ruling passion,—or, in other words, when his HOBBY-HORSE grows head-strong,—farewell cool reason and fair discretion!" (p. 93). A man must "give himself up" to such a passion; it does not overwhelm him.

The distance between Sterne's psychological ethics and modern psychology is most especially apparent when we compare his thought to that of Sigmund Freud.¹⁰ To Freud man is tragic because he *cannot* know his own motives without the great pain and long effort of analysis. His inward drives or even his own past actions are lost from view in an unconscious mind. To Sterne man is not tragic, but deplorable or laughable (depending on whether Sterne is writing sermons or novels) because he *will* not look at his own passions squarely. Yorick in the *Journey* goes through all sorts of tricks to hide from himself his desire for the *fille de chambre*, misnaming his emotions, excusing them as benevolent concern, channeling them into moral lectures to the girl. But he cannot escape the truth about himself—"I felt something at first within me which was not in strict unison with the lesson of virtue I had given her the night before" (p. 169).¹¹ This is hardly Freudian fiction. A passage in Sermon IV comes as close as anything in Sterne's writing to a description of what we would call the unconscious mind. If a man will search his own thoughts, says Sterne,

He will see several irregularities and unsuspected passions within him which he never was aware of:—he will discover in his progress many secret turnings and windings in his heart to which he was a stranger, which now gradually open and disclose themselves to him upon a nearer view; in these labyrinths he will trace out such hidden springs and motives . . . as will make him rather sorry and ashamed of himself, than proud. (Vol. I, p. 67)¹²

No analyst is required, no couch, no transference, no struggle, no pain. It is a simple matter of "turning his eyes inward upon himself" (Vol. I, p. 54; cf. *Essay*, IV, xx, 6). Around him and within him Sterne found an amusing world of self-deceit, but nowhere a Freudian unconscious mind.

¹⁰ A. R. Towers directly challenges my view in "Sterne's Cock and Bull Story," *ELH*, XXIV (March, 1957), pp. 12-29.

¹¹ My references to *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* are to the World's Classics edition, intro. by Virginia Woolf (Oxford University Press; London: Humphrey Milford), 1928.

¹² Most of the passage is plagiarized from Swift. See Hammond, pp. 153-154.

Wisely, he ruled out of his fiction those blackguards of his sermons, such as Herod, who, upon his principles, must inevitably be uninteresting because their sins cannot be extenuated. An author who believes sin is conscious and controllable had best write about the small faults of people—the hobbies and foibles rooted in blameless emotions but carelessly grown out of hand, harming at last their “cool reason and fair discretion.” Walter Shandy, who is not avaricious or slanderous or cruel, discovers that his love and tenderness for his brother is no match for a pet theory about the backsliding of Aunt Dinah in her orbit (p. 68; see also pp. 114-115, 211-212). There is no mystery here, nothing uncontrollable. It is only a failure to communicate love, a frustration of sympathy by egoistic concerns, ultimately a lack of will to love. Yorick says, after he insults the Monk in the *Sentimental Journey*, that he was “predetermined” to coldness and rudeness. In retrospect, however, he points out how we use “the ebbs and flows of our humours” as handy excuses:

... they may depend upon the same causes, for ought I know, which influence the tides themselves—’twould oft be no discredit to us to suppose it was so: I’m sure at least for myself, that in many a case I should be more highly satisfied, to have it said by the world, “I had had an affair with the moon, in which there was neither sin nor shame,” than have it pass altogether as my own act and deed, wherein there was so much of both. (p. 5)

Yorick’s determination is fleeting and superficial and, consequently, blamable. “My heart smote me the moment he shut the door.” So he tries the case at once in the court of conscience and decides that he was wrong (p. 10). Here is psychological fiction of a very high order, and not a whit less admirable because it deals with problems less dramatic than murder or sexual aberration. Misleading foibles become moral follies, amusing just because, as Sterne argues in *The Abuses*, they are knowable, judgable, and controllable *at will*.

This is not to say that Sterne is naively optimistic about practical ethics. On the contrary, he argues very strongly in the sermon that most men disguise their true selfishness, painting their motives “with all the false beauties, which a soft and flattering hand can give them” (p. 131; repeated in Vol. I, pp. 63-64). The first four examples of the sermon (pp. 128-131) demonstrate how the most terrible of sins need not disturb the conscience of the sinner.

Thus conscience, this once able monitor,—placed on high as a judge within us, and intended by our maker as a just and equitable one too,—by an unhappy train of causes and impediments, takes often such imperfect cognizance of what passes,—does its office so negligently,—sometimes so corruptly,—that it is not to be trusted alone. (p. 132)

II

If, as Sterne thought, conscience is not to be trusted alone, man must look elsewhere for help. At this point Sterne brings into his ethical system two buttresses to the weak psychological structure—a metaphysics of morality and a dogmatic religious creed.

Call in religion and morality—Look,—What is written in the law of God?—How readest thou?—Consult calm reason and the unchangeable obligations of justice and truth;—what say they?

Let CONSCIENCE determine the matter upon these reports;—and then if thy heart condemn thee not . . . the rule will be infallible; *thou wilt have confidence towards God*;—that is, have just grounds to believe the judgment thou hast past upon thyself, is the judgment of God; and nothing else but an anticipation of that righteous sentence which will be pronounced upon thee hereafter by that Being, to whom thou art finally to give an account of thy actions. (pp. 132-133; part of the statement occurs in Sermon XXXIII, Vol. II, p. 205)

Sterne maintains that the duties of morality and religion cannot be separated without destroying both (cf. Vol. II, p. 129)—though he adds that “the attempt is often made in practice.” We, of course, must divide them for purposes of our analysis.

As Sir Herbert Read has pointed out, there is a classical element in the thought of Laurence Sterne which is represented by that “morality” he would have us call into the judgments of conscience. It is not a subjective moral standard, but an objective one, something discovered from outside the mind. The final passage of the sermon makes the point strongly:

And, in your own case, remember this plain distinction, a mistake in which has ruined thousands,—that your conscience is not a law:—No, God and reason made the law, and have placed conscience within you to determine;—not like an *Asiatic* Cadi, according to the ebbs and flows of his own passions,—but like a *British* judge in this land of liberty and good sense, who makes no new law,

but faithfully declares that law which he knows already written. (p. 140)

Herbert Read, commenting upon this passage, says that conscience operates within a *fixed* world: "This is anything but a romantic doctrine; it is, indeed, the essential classical doctrine. And that is why, in spite of his popularity among some of the romantics, Sterne's genius is really to be reckoned on the side of the classical forces in literature."¹³

As we might expect, Sterne discovers part of this absolute moral code in the Scriptures. No one who ever looked into the sermons could doubt Sterne's orthodox view of divine commands. But Sterne means more than revealed codes: God *and reason* made the law. That puts a different slant on things. Our moral duty is "to govern our actions by the *eternal measures* of right and wrong," to "consult *calm reason* and the *unchangeable* obligations of justice and *truth*" (pp. 135, 132; italics mine). All these terms are traditional and would have left no doubt in the mind of an eighteenth-century reader—Sterne is advocating the ethics of "right reason" so closely associated with the classical values.

The earliest records of the doctrine of right reason are those of Plato and the Stoics. The idea was taken into Christian theology, playing a major role from Paul to the Cambridge Platonists.¹⁴ During Sterne's lifetime it was advocated by Samuel Clarke, William Wollaston, John Balguy, Richard Price, and many others.

The rationalist sees the world as having a logical order and coherence. Each thing has its own essence, and the relationships among these essences are describable in terms of logic. Consequently, between one man and another, or between man and God, we can discern such relationships, among them the moral relations. If one man benefits another, for example, the recipient is put into a new relation to the benefactor which logically "demands" that he respond in a certain way—that he show gratitude. Gratitude is, therefore, a moral law which is obligatory from its very nature. It is understandable to man's reason and obliges him irrespective of any command from God. In fact, as a *relation* it has nothing to do with the will of God: it is eternal and immutable because the law arises logically from the very idea

¹³ *Collected Essays in Literary Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber), 1938, p. 260.

¹⁴ See the recent, excellent survey by Robert Hoopes, *Right Reason in the English Renaissance* (Harvard University Press), 1962.

of benefactor and benefitted, regardless of whether or not God has actually created human beings who will fall under this obligation. God might choose to create or destroy men; but if men are given existence, God does not or cannot make or unmake the relationships between them. In this sense, the law of gratitude is not subject to the will of God.¹⁵ The rationalist refers to such laws by a variety of terms—"eternal verities," "the fitness of things," "eternal truths" or "ratios," and most especially the traditional term, "Laws of Nature." The obligation to obey these laws he calls "eternal and immutable obligation."

The difficulty of distinguishing this sort of Platonic rationalism from other moral theories is obviated by contrasting *a priori* and *a posteriori* reason. A philosopher of the Platonic tradition, seeking out the relations among the *essences* of things, approaches the problem upon an abstract, *a priori* level—which for him is the greatest reality. Other philosophers, who also claim to be rational, maintain that one can reason only about the data of experience; for them, sensational or emotional experience is the only reality, and reasoning is entirely *a posteriori*. This was the sort of argument advanced by David Hume in what today is considered the definitive answer to rational priorism. To be sure, the Platonist does not deny the reality of experience; he only assumes a hierarchy in which the dictates of abstract reason have a higher place than experience. He too admits the validity of *a posteriori* reasoning, insisting at the same time that this problem-solving approach to life is not enough by itself.¹⁶

Paradoxical as it may appear, Laurence Sterne, the comic and sentimentalist, accepted this classical view of the moral universe. Heretofore the point has not been made with vigor sufficient to impress most of those who undertake to explain his novels. It is true, as we shall see, that Sterne qualified his rationalism; the other doctrines he held—his benevolism and orthodox religion—have arrested the attention of the literary historian. Nevertheless,

¹⁵ This particular example of the law of gratitude is traditional, cited by almost every rationalist. See, for instance, John Balguy, *The Foundation of Moral Goodness* . . . (first published 1728), in *A Collection of Tracts Moral and Theological* . . . (London), 1734, p. 70. Also Arthur Ashley Sykes, *The True Foundations of Natural and Revel'd Religion* . . . (London), 1730, pp. 13-14.

¹⁶ The most instructive brief discussion of the rational theory in comparison to other competing ethical systems is that of L. A. Selby-Bigge in the introduction to his anthology *The British Moralists* (Oxford: Clarendon), 1897. 2 vols.

there can be no doubt that Sterne believed in the reality of moral Laws of Nature conceived in the tradition of Plato.

In *The Abuses of Conscience Considered*, Sterne's confidence in a *a priori* reason appears side-by-side with his common-sense advocacy of a *a posteriori* reason. The judge who presides—or rather *ought* to preside—in the court of conscience is reason functioning *a posteriori*; it judges only of given data, comparing actions and their motives to a set standard. But that sort of reason is insufficient in itself. The moral standard must be “called in”—reason must operate *a priori* to discover the moral law. The agent must turn philosopher; thinking speculatively about the implications in his acts and thoughts, he must work out the logical order of the moral world and the obligations arising from it.

The argument is no contradiction to Sterne's orthodoxy. He seems to take for granted a traditional belief of all Christian Platonists that no conflict can arise between these rationally discovered laws and the revealed commands of God. Sterne's “eternal obligations of justice and truth” are not constituted as laws by the command of God, but God commanded them because they were obligatory antecedently.

In the sermons Sterne speaks to the point of obligations which are independent of God's word. In discussing Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*, always a favorite among rationalists, he argues that the Romans were blamable for their sins even during the period before they had received the teachings of Christ:

That there was one supreme Being who made this world, and who ought to be worshipped by his creatures, is the foundation of all religion, and so obvious a truth in nature,—that reason, as the Apostle acknowledges, was always able to discover it. (Vol. II, p. 84)

He explicitly says that reason alone could work out the moral laws men need. About the Jewish code, he comments,

As for the moral part of it, though it was unexceptional in itself,—yet it was a piece of intelligence they did not stand in want of; men had natural reason always to have found it out,—and wisdom to have practiced it, without Moses' assistance. (Vol. I, pp. 337-338; also Vol. II, p. 197)

For Laurence Sterne the “weightier matters of the law” are “of eternal and unchangeable obligation” (Vol. I, p. 105) quite aside from the commands of God. Thus, in *The Abuses* he asserts

without supporting argument that both God *and reason* made the law.

Since the discussions of rational ethical theory were so widespread, it would be idle to insist that Sterne learned it from Locke. However, the *Essay* does contain much rationalist speculation. Locke announced the concept dramatically, claiming that morality might some day become a "science capable of demonstration" such as the science of mathematics.

For the ideas that ethics are conversant about, being all real essences, and such as I imagine have a discoverable connexion and agreement one with another; so far as we can find their habitudes and relations, so far we shall be possessed of certain, real, and general truths; and I doubt not but, if a right method were taken, a great part of morality might be made out with that clearness, that could leave, to a considering man, no more reason to doubt, than he could have to doubt of the truth of propositions in mathematics, which have been demonstrated to him. (IV, xii, 8; also see III, xi, 16; IV, iii, 18-20; IV, iv, 7)

It should not surprise us that Locke, whose favorite preacher in London was the Cambridge Platonist Benjamin Whichcote, should have thought of morality in this way. Although Locke may be most famous for his "empiricism," his argument that all ideas derive from experience and cannot be innate, he intended this theory to show only that ideas come into the mind *as a result* of experiences—either those of sensation or those of reflection. He did not hold, as do modern positivists, that no idea is valid unless it is directly derived from sense impressions. On the contrary, he explained how one type of knowledge is found "only in our minds . . . only the examining of our own ideas." Such "general knowledge," as he called it, can be derived only by the contemplation of "essences," and reveals "eternal" truths belonging to those essences (IV, iii, 31; IV, iv, 6). Sterne might have found ample grounds in Locke for his own confidence in rational morality.

Laurence Sterne was an ethical "realist." He believed that the laws and obligations known to reason (sometimes also revealed beneficently by God) are the highest reality, not figments of the imagination or empty words. Nothing whatsoever in his sermons suggests any sympathy with the "nominalist" (or "voluntarists"), who brushed aside all Laws of Nature as merely imaginary. This group had been represented in the fourteenth century by William of Ockham, in the Reformation by John

Calvin,¹⁷ and in the eighteenth century by Daniel Waterland.¹⁸ Rejecting the Platonic tradition altogether, these men emphasized the unlimited power of the deity. Moral laws, they argued, cannot be discovered by reason, for the essences of things cannot be scrutinized. If gratitude is an obligation, it is so only because God commands it. For that matter, all relationships derive their characters from the fiat of God. Two plus two may equal four, but only because God so commands; he might as easily have commanded that they equal seventy-eight. Goodness is goodness because God so ordered it; he might as easily have declared those acts we now call sinful to be virtuous. Reason, consequently, cannot aid man. Faith and unquestioning obedience are his only hope.

Sterne, the vicar of Sutton and Stillington, was indubitably a man of faith, but he feels no more conflict between reason and faith than does Locke (IV, xviii). Locke argues that it is a mistake to set reason in opposition to faith, which he defines as "an assent founded on the highest reason" (IV, xvi, 14). Sterne follows his teacher closely in this point, defining faith as a "rational assent of the understanding to truths which are established by indisputable authority" (Vol. II, p. 284; see Vol. II, p. 271).

In *The Abuses of Conscience Considered* Sterne expresses this doctrine negatively in his castigation of the Inquisition and militant Papism (pp. 137-139) — "religion without morality." All of his scattered attacks on Methodism, Romanism, and enthusiasm in general (especially Sermons XXV and XXXVIII) are intended as rebukes of blind, unreasoned faith, which to Sterne is always pernicious. In these passages he captures the spirit (even at times the very words)¹⁹ of Locke's chapter on enthusiasm (IV, xix). "As expressly as we are told to pray for the inspiration of God's spirit," Sterne writes,

there are no boundaries fixed, nor can any be ever marked to distinguish them from the efforts and determinations of our own reason. . . . there never was a Christian of a cool head and sound judgment, that, in any instance of a change of life, would presume to say, which

¹⁷ See Hoopes (above, n. 14), pp. 88-93, 106-114.

¹⁸ See Sterne's sly dig at Waterland in *Tristram Shandy*, p. 427. The best discussion of Waterland's philosophy I have discovered is that of William Whewell, *Lectures in the History of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell; London: Bell and Daldy), 1862, pp. 152-153.

¹⁹ See Hammond, pp. 139-140.

part of his reformation was owing to divine help,—or which to the operations of his own mind. (Vol. II, pp. 70-71)

Indeed, for Sterne reason is a divine quality given to mortals.

We . . . were raised by the same creating hand, from nothing, to the dignity of rational creatures, made, with respect to our reason and understanding, after his own most perfect image. (Vol. II, p. 339)

Man comes forth, says Job, like a flower, and is cut down;—he is sent into the world the fairest and noblest part of God's works,—fashioned after the image of his Creator with respect to reason and the great faculties of the mind. (Vol. I, p. 162)

It is time for critics to stop decrying Sterne's lack of philosophy. For nearly a century they have been quoting the passage in *Tristram Shandy* which reads, "REASON is, half of it, SENSE," and claiming that Sterne meant to say that the body or senses are indistinguishable from or have an authority equal to reason. The most recent occurrence of the argument appears in Ernest Tuveson's article, "Locke and Sterne."

By showing us how mind and body are one nature, how words and gestures, for example, bring to all minds associations supposed to be lower than the spirit, he uses an old satirical method to make his point. Bodily impulses help the spirit realize man's natural, therefore divinely purposed end, for those impulses are themselves part of the spiritual being. Swift's scatology seems intended to warn us to be on our guard constantly against the physical side, and not to preen ourselves with a false confidence that we have ever conquered it. Sterne, however, calls for a co-operation of the two; let us, he urges, be 'natural.' But opinion has given us a fictitious impression that the two are enemies, and thus the 'natural' man has been divided against himself. 'REASON is, half of it, SENSE; and the measure of heaven itself is but the measure of our present appetites and concoctions—.' 'Soul and body are joint-sharers in every thing they get. . . .' ²⁰

In context the REASON-SENSE passage has quite another meaning. It is made by Tristram during his speculations upon an odd opinion held by Bishop Hall about the verse in *Psalms*, "Make them like unto a wheel" (83:13). In the opinion of the Bishop, says Tristram, this line is

one of the severest imprecations which *David* ever utter'd against the enemies of the Lord. . . . So much motion, continues he, (for he was

²⁰ *Reason and the Imagination: Studies in the History of Ideas, 1600-1800*, ed. J. A. Mazzeo (New York: Columbia University Press; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 1962, p. 261.

very corpulent)—is so much unquietness; and so much of rest, by the same analogy, is so much of heaven.

But Tristram, being very thin (like his author), thinks differently, that so much of motion, is so much of life, and so much of joy—and that to stand still, or get on but slowly, is death and the devil—

Tristram then goes on to make his point, which is quite the opposite of that which the critics read into the passage. His point is just that the body *distorts* our reason.

I love the Pythagoreans (much more than ever I dare tell my dear Jenny) for their . . . “*getting out of the body, in order to think well.*” No man thinks right whilst he is in it; blinded as he must be, with his congenial humours, and drawn differently aside, as the bishop and myself have been, with too lax or too tense a fibre—REASON is, half of it, SENSE; and the measure of heaven itself is but the measure of our present appetites and concoctions—(pp. 493-494)

The passage is of decided importance in *Tristram Shandy*: it is that rare instance when Tristram reveals his moral values by telling us that he and his family have been the dupes of their appetites and senses—the very point Sterne makes in *The Abuses of Conscience Considered* when he describes how passions trick the reason.²¹

Sterne takes great delight in experiences of passion, of course—the delight of a humorist who never forgets the fundamental irony of human nature. Yorick in the *Journey* cries,

If nature has so wove her web of kindness, that some threads of love and desire are entangled with the piece, must the whole web be rent in drawing them out?

Yorick constantly demands that we respect his passions—most especially when he has just been teased by a little slut of a serving girl. The part of his speech we cannot ignore is that part which reveals the rational man of God, who in the long run gains the upper hand.

Wherever thy providence shall place me *for the trials of my virtue*—

²¹ The other line cited by Professor Tuveson occurs in the following passage: “Soul and body are joint-sharers in every thing they get: A man cannot dress, but his ideas get cloath’d at the same time; and if he dresses like a gentleman, every one of them stands presented to his imagination, genteelized along with him—” (pp. 616-617). Yorick is here explaining comically Locke’s empiricism—that our ideas are born out of experience. He is not saying that the body has authority equal to that of the mind.

whatever is my danger—whatever is my situation—let me feel the movements which rise out of it, and which belong to me as a man, and if I govern them as a good one, I will trust the issues to thy justice—for thou hast made us, and not we ourselves. (p. 173; italics mine; in part the passage is taken from the earlier Sermon XVIII, Vol. II, p. 290)

The court of conscience is ever present in the fiction of Laurence Sterne.

III

Sterne is never an extremist, no more in his rationalism than in anything else. He specifically qualifies his position on reason. It can point out the duties of morality, but it cannot alone motivate them. "We can have no dependence upon morality," he writes in *The Abuses of Conscience Considered*, "without religion" (p. 136). He repeats the theme frequently in the sermons (e.g., Vol. I, pp. 175-176) and makes it the thesis of "The Advantages of Christianity to the World" (Sermon XXVI).

Sterne sees the duties of religion very simply—"to have the fear of God before our eyes" (p. 135). In his ethical system it provides "the strongest of all motives," without which the "next most powerful motive in the world" would take over—interest.

In the *Tristram Shandy* sermon, Sterne attempts to explore "morality without religion" through his examples of a banker and a physician (pp. 135-136). It is instructive that Sterne fails miserably in this attempt. He cannot really conceive men who are truly moral while they are irreligious. The two characters never come alive. They certainly do not represent "morality without religion," for they are motivated only by the most flagrant selfish considerations—"that honesty serves the purposes of life," that "success in the world depends upon the fairness of their characters," or such "capricious" principles as "honour," "pride," "ease." Sterne must have meant what he said when he commented that morality and religion cannot be separated "even in imagination."

By his admission that moral practice can be effected only through a fear of God's retribution, Sterne acknowledges a fundamental self-concern in man. The concession sets him apart from the more sophisticated rationalists of his own generation, who argued that true morality had to be practiced *for its own sake*.

John Balguy, for instance, while allowing that "we are certainly obliged to do whatever appears to be the will of God," still insists that "our obligation to act conformable to Reason is even superior to this, because the Divine Will itself is certainly subject to the original Law or Rule of Action."²² Interest or pleasure of any sort, Balguy argues, are the ultimate ends of man as a *sensible* agent, but not as a *moral* agent: "What a *Moral Agent* primarily proposes, is to act reasonably; let the consequence be as it may. If it be asked, why a *Moral Agent* proposes to act *reasonably*; then I ask why a *sensible Agent* proposes to act *pleasurably*?"²³ Such absolute, unqualified deontological ethics Sterne does not recognize. He may attack selfish worldly interests, but he thinks they can only be combatted by other-worldly interests which in the long run appear equally self-centered.

If we can conclude that Sterne admits an ethical pleasure principle, we must not go so far as to think he carries it to the extremes of hedonism. In Sermon I, "Inquiry after Happiness," he distinguishes between *pleasure*, which is worldly and sensual, and *happiness*, which is the anticipation of union with God—an argument which, again, is paralleled in Locke's *Essay* (II, xxi, 45). To be sure, Sterne cannot stomach asceticism, which he always associates with Papism (Vol. II, p. 253). He argues strongly for the right, nay the *duty*, to take advantage of such innocent delights as God has provided "for the refreshment and recruit of our souls and bodies" (Vol. II, pp. 263-265). At times he is almost carried away with the thought of those beautiful "caravansaries of rest" which God has so graciously granted man. But he always returns to a consideration of that true "place of rest and happiness," reminding his parishioners that "the way to get there is not so much to please our hearts, as to improve them in virtue" (Vol. I, pp. 20-21; also see Vol. II, pp. 123, 250).²⁴

²² *The Foundation of Moral Goodness* (first published 1728), in *A Collection of Tracts* . . . (above, n. 15), pp. 68-69.

²³ *Second Part of The Foundation of Moral Goodness* . . . (first published 1729), *ibid.*, p. 173. Virtually the same argument is made by Catharine Trotter Cockburn, *Remarks upon Some Writers* . . . (first published 1743), in *Works*, Ed. Thomas Birch (London), 1751, 2 vols., Vol. I, p. 420. Also see Arthur Ashley Sykes, *The True Foundation of Natural and Reveal'd Religion* (above, n. 15), pp. 14-15; William Adams, *The Nature and Obligation of Virtue* . . . (London), 1754, pp. 11-12; and most especially Richard Price, *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals* (first published 1758), ed. D. Daiches Raphael (Oxford: Clarendon), 1948, pp. 104-113.

²⁴ Nor must we confuse Sterne's doctrine with the "self-love" school. Nothing

Sterne's pleasure principle has a philosophic basis in Locke. Consciousness itself, thinks Locke, depends upon pleasure and pain. Contrary to popular opinion, pleasure and pain are not states of the body (though influenced by body). They are a condition of mind—the essential of self-awareness, the matter of consciousness (*Essay*, II, xx, 2-3, and editor's footnote 1). As a consequence of this stand, Locke insists that all good and evil "are nothing but pleasure and pain, or that which occasions or produces pleasure or pain to us." He must, then, define moral good and evil in these terms—"pleasure or pain, attending our observance or breach of the law by the decree of the law-makers" (II, xxviii, 5). Given these principles, the notion of intrinsic rational obligations, as they are understood by John Balguy, would be meaningless. Locke emphasizes instead the pleasure-pain motive: "For, since it would be utterly in vain to suppose a rule set to the actions of men, without annexing to it some enforcement of good and evil to determine his will, we must, wherever we suppose a law, suppose also some reward or punishment annexed to that law" (II, xxviii, 6). This holds for all laws, including the divine,

which God has set to the actions of men,—whether promulgated to them by the light of nature, or the voice of revelation. . . . This is the only true touchstone of moral rectitude; and, by comparing them to this law, it is that men judge of the most considerable moral good or evil of their actions; that is, whether, as duties or sins, they are like to procure them happiness or misery from the hand of the ALMIGHTY. (xxviii, 8)

The similarity of this view to that of Sterne is apparent.

Locke's concept of a substratum of pleasure and pain which is the stuff of both consciousness and passion (II, xx, 4-17) must have led Sterne to his opinion that reason is limited as a motive force. Reason might guide the affections, but only by helping one to supplant another. It cannot destroy them in a direct confrontation. Yorick, in the *Journey*, defends his use of literature to generate feelings of love in just these terms. A man does not "disquiet himself" by such reading, Yorick argues;

. . . he oftener does so in trusting the issue of his commotions to

in his sermons suggests the egoist philosophers' attempt to reduce all psychological motivations to a single principle of self-love. Sterne specifically attacks the egoistic view of man in Sermon VII, "The Vindication of Human Nature."

reason only.—I can safely say for myself, I was never able to conquer any one single bad sensation in my heart so decisively, as by beating up as fast as I could for some kindly and gentle sensation, to fight it upon its own ground. (p. 160)

Twice in his letters Sterne comments that “one passion is only to be combatted by another.”²⁵ In Sermon XX, he maintains,

Lessons of wisdom have never such a power over us, as when they are wrought into the heart, through the ground-work of a story which engages the passions: Is it that we are like iron, and must first be heated before we can be wrought upon? (Vol. I, p. 319)

Sterne believes that man must be bamboozled into virtue.

It is for this reason that Sterne, like Locke, relies upon Heaven and Hell in his moral teachings. Reason can make all the preparations and furnish the guidance. It can discover the eternal laws and obligations; it can uncover the internal springs and motives. Still a man will not be virtuous until he is prodded. The really important prod is the fear of God.

If the hopes or fears, either the reason or the passions of men are to be wrought upon at all, it must be from the force and influence of this awakening consideration in the text:—“that all these things shall be dissolved” . . . that we who now tread the stage, must shortly be summoned away. . . . (Vol. II, p. 158)

Although, as Locke says, reason may discover the law, or as Sterne puts it, may “make” the law, for both men God’s will makes the obligation to obey the law. Yorick, the author of the sermon in *Tristram Shandy*, describes a morality made meaningful only by “that Being, to whom thou art finally to give an account of thy actions” (p. 133). Yorick, the narrator of the *Sentimental Journey*, never loses sight of that same Being, “before whose tribunal I must one day come and give an account of this work” (p. 18).

IV

In one respect only does Sterne’s moral thought differ significantly from that of Locke. Sterne has a warm-hearted optimism about the goodness of man which seems more a product of tem-

²⁵ *Letters*, ed. Lewis Perry Curtis (Oxford: Clarendon), 1935, pp. 76, 79.

perament than of philosophy. Almost every sermon sounds a note of sympathy and tolerance and faith in man. Sometimes it takes the form of maintaining that "humane and benevolent inclinations" are somehow "natural to the soil" of humanity (Vol. II, pp. 313-314). Or Sterne reveals a confidence in natural reason as well as affection: God's "all-bountiful hand," he says in Sermon XIX, made man's "judgment like his heart, upright" (Vol. I, pp. 312-313; also Vol. I, p. 144). He writes in Sermon V,

What divines say of the mind, naturalists have observed of the body; that there is no passion so natural to it as love, which is the principle of doing good—and . . . it is not to be doubted, but that every hard-hearted man has felt much inward opposition before he could prevail upon himself to do aught to fix and deserve the character: and that what we say of long habits of vice, that they are hard to be subdued, may with equal truth be said concerning the natural impressions of benevolence, that a man must do much violence to himself, and suffer many a painful struggle, before he can tear away so great and noble a part of his nature. (Vol. I, p. 85; see also Vol. I, pp. 39-41)

This "soft view" of man Sterne expresses only once in *The Abuses of Conscience Considered*: "I make no doubt," he writes, "but the knowledge of right and wrong is truly impressed upon the mind of man" (p. 127). The comment is made long before Sterne brings up the matter of calling in "morality" as a guide. Unlike that fixed and objective standard, this knowledge is subjective, "impressed" upon the mind. What can Sterne mean? Does his remark about "the law written in their hearts" in Sermon XXVI (Vol. II, p. 83) refer to the same knowledge? For Herbert Read, the comment in *The Abuses* suggested a moral sense. It may be that Sterne is here bowing to the ethics of Hutcheson or Hume—though both of those philosophers would surely have objected to the word *knowledge* to describe a moral awareness they believed was *sensed*. Or is Sterne returning to the older view of innate ideas, departing sharply from Locke? I do not find answers to these questions, for Sterne never attempts to justify philosophically his belief in man's natural goodness.

To a student of the novel, this aspect of Sterne's ethic is very suggestive. In the sermons, Sterne seems unaware that his uncritical faith in man clashes with his Lockean ideals. In the novels, he appears to have become highly conscious of the conflict and to have made comic capital of it. Sterne does write "sentimental" stories which reveal a pervasive, effortless benevolence in man—

the stories of the ass of Lyons, of Maria, and the Moorish girl. But he insists over and over that inner springs of love and sympathy are not alone sufficient for virtue; the result is Sterne's unique sentimental comedy. Tristram, at the very moment he is gentle to a donkey, has a pang: "there was more of pleasantry in the conceit, of seeing *how* an ass would eat a macaroon—than of benevolence in giving him one" (p. 524). In the *Journey*, Parson Yorick's pity for Maria is mocked by his rising sexual passion for this lovely imbecile. And brother Tom passes from the gentle negress, who shoos the flies instead of swatting them, into the back parlor to pursue one of the most mercenary, vulgar (and funny) pornographic courtships in literature. Without the aid of reason and religion, it would seem, benevolent man is laughable.

But Sterne's creatures are always lovable. His sympathy prevents Sterne from becoming a rigorous satirist in the great tradition of the Augustans. He has no strong impulse to correct a foolish, but well-intentioned and aimiable mankind. Imagine what Swift would do with Susannah, a servant who, at the death of little Bobby, can think only of the gowns she will be given by a mourning mother! But Sterne finds no harm in her. He is only amused.

—Now I love you for this—and 'tis this delicious mixture within you which makes you dear creatures what you are—and he who hates you for it—all I can say of the matter, is—That he has either a pumkin for his head—or a pippin for his heart,—and whenever he is dissected 'twill be found so. (p. 364)

* * * * *

Sterne is the most philosophic of novelists. Though his books have always a moral dimension, he will not be limited to ethical problems alone. Many other sorts of intellectual concepts are indigenous to *Tristram Shandy*—witness the play upon time and duration. The mind of the narrator is so mercurial, the Shandy family is such a machine, "set in motion by so many different springs, and acted upon . . . from such a variety of strange principles and impulses" (p. 358), that one could hardly expect the novel to correspond point-by-point with an abstract ethic articulated in a brief sermon.

The Abuses of Conscience Considered does reveal that Sterne had assimilated the most liberal, enlightened tradition of Christian philosophy. The Christian Platonist, be it Paul, Aquinas, or

Benjamin Whichcote, had always a humanistic element in his thought which freed him from any stifling fear of Omnipotence. These were the philosophers who discovered a divinity in man which allowed him to approach his Maker with dignity, not in primitive dread. Sterne wrote in this liberal spirit. He never robbed his comic creatures of their self-respect. He never devastated them. Sterne had no neurotic fear of sin. He was free of the Puritan's over-confident condemnation of others and of the anguished self-doubt which drives the Puritan frantically through life. He was trustful of man's moral capacity and secure in an orderly universe ruled by a just God of reason. Consequently, Sterne glossed no faults, crusaded for no reforms. He delighted in the scatological story or the teasing sensualism, but he was certain to remind us on the next page of the nearness of death and the watchfulness of the great Judge. He was the modern Democritus, the "laughing philosopher." Like that ancient Greek he admired, Sterne believed in the superiority of mind over body, in natural morality, and in the salubrity of laughter. "Was I left like *Sancho Pança*, to chuse my kingdom," says Tristram,

it should be a kingdom of hearty, laughing subjects: And as the bilious and more saturnine passions, by creating disorders, in the blood and humours, have as bad an influence, I see, upon the body politick as body natural—and as nothing but a habit of virtue can fully govern those passions, and subject them to reason—I should add to my prayer—that God would give my subjects grace to be as WISE as they were MERRY; and then should I be the happiest monarch, and they the happiest people under heaven—(p. 338)

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