

The Individual and Society

Earl C. Davis

Pittsfield, MA

November 14, 1909¹

I do not want to treat this as a theoretical and an academic question, but simply as a principle of guidance in common everyday life. I want to recall some of the commonplace acts and sayings in which we express our commonsense philosophy upon this problem of the adjustment of the individual to society. There are two extreme academic views held on this question. On the one hand, we have that view of determinism. According to this view, the nature of personality is absolutely determined by the environment. Our thoughts, our desires, our purposes, our conduct is the product of our conditions, past and present. We are but the willing or unwilling atoms cast about through life by the working of tremendous and irrevocable laws, over which we have no conscious control. We are ships, rudderless, and unguided, beating around the ocean of life, now in the grasp of some raging storm, and now floating idly by in some calm belt. Whatever is, is the inevitable result of remorseless and unchangeable laws. This point of view appears in various forms through history. One of the most uncompromising doctrines based on this deterministic position is that of predestination, and election. We find it today in the doctrine of absolute economic determinism.

On the other hand, we have the extreme doctrine of personal responsibility. There are but few, who hold to this with consistency, even in theory. But the substance of it is that every man is the absolute captain of his soul. He is, and becomes, just what he wills to be. If he is vicious and irresponsible, he is that, not because he is the victim of circumstances, but because he wishes to become vicious. If he but wishes, he may break through all the conditions of his life, and by sheer force of his personality, climb to the heights to which he would attain. All the world is his for the asking. This point of view has figured in history also. We note it in the

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #4"—that includes sermons from February 14, 1909 to December 26, 1909.

doctrine that is behind the evangelical theology. It rests with the individual. "You may be saved, if you but give your heart to Christ, and believe in him." We come across the same thing in practical affairs, in the eulogies that are bestowed upon men who, being born poor, have died rich. Then the tale is passed around that all men may accomplish the same thing. We get the extreme statement of this position in the philosophy of the Christian Scientist. All these limitations are but error of the mortal mind. If we have faith enough, and each one may have enough, we shall rise above the limited conditions, and achieve our aims in the rarefied realm of pure truth.

Some people hold to one of these extreme theories, and some to the other, but as a matter of fact we all, in actual practice, take the middle of the road position, recognizing the truth of each position, and being sensible enough not to carry either to its absurd conclusion. Let me point out, in the first place, some of the common things in which we all recognize the truth of the influence of environment on personality. Take the matter of choosing a place in which to live. We do not voluntarily choose the worst place in the worst town as our place of residence, simply because we think that the overcoming of the obstacles thus placed in our way is just the stuff to try our souls on, or just the stuff to bring out the good and noble qualities in our children. We know better than that. We do not make sacrifices to send our children to school at the reform schools, and jails, because we think that the more difficulties they have to overcome in achieving their personality, the better it is for them. As a matter of fact we recognize the profound influence of environment upon individual personality, and up to a point we strain every nerve to have that environment such as will tend to assist us in realizing our aims and purposes. We try to make our homes beautiful, not simply for the sake of expressing our love of beauty, but quite as much because we know that the attractive and pleasing environment will react upon us, and tend to produce that which we aim to become. We try to make our cities as good as possible not simply because of our irrepressible impulse to make beautiful cities, but because we know that as a matter of fact the condition of our civic life is bound to react upon us and our children, and will tend to mold and shape us after the pattern of its aims and ideals. The human being is like the plant. There are constantly appearing numberless variations. Those variations which are best adapted to the environment, are the ones bound to survive. If the environment is such as to make

the undesirable variations the stronger, and more useable, those variations will become permanent, and fixed. The only way to change them is by changing the environment. As a matter of plain cold fact we do recognize the profound influence of environment in molding and shaping, not only the physical and mental, but the moral and spiritual life of man. To those who deny this, one can only reply as one replies to the person who claims that all portions of the Bible are equally inspired and helpful. We have only to ask them to turn over the pages of any Bible that is used, and find the soiled pages. The pages that are soiled are the ones used, and the ones used are the ones that help, and the ones that help are the inspired ones, and they are inspired because they are human and sensible and practical. The final test of all theories is the practical test, and in the light of the practical test, we believe in the profound influence of environment upon the individual personality.

But this doctrine is one that has good and evil possibilities in it. When we use it to excuse our own shortcomings, and hold the other fellow responsible for overcoming his obstacles, we are the cheapest of the pharisees. The only true way of applying this doctrine to life, is just the other way round. Hold ourselves accountable to a high standard of unflinching struggle with the hostile environment, always on the alert to change and modify that environment not only for ourselves but for others to the end that it may tend to conserve the good values of human life, and leave behind the bad values. If this doctrine is to be applied to excuse and condone for shortcomings in human thought and conduct, let it be applied to others and not to ourselves. That, I take it, is the meaning of that passage in which Jesus exhorts people to judge righteously.²

But from the same point of view, and by the same practical test, we affirm our faith in the power of personality, and the influence of personality upon conditions, of the capacity of great personalities to mold and reshape conditions and environment. We manifest this faith in the first place, when we choose men to places of responsibility. We do not take the first man that comes along, depending upon the environment into which he is going to make him the kind of a person that we want. We know full well that the environment is to be influenced and modified by his personality, just as his personality is to be

² See Matthew 7.

influenced and modified by the environment into which he goes. Thus, take a most practical illustration. Supposing we have a business plant which is in good shape, well-ordered, and effective. Do we, for that reason, take the undisciplined man to manage it, trusting to the influence of conditions to make him effective? Not at all. On the other hand, if our institution seems to be going wrong, do we not select to put it to rights, a man who is effective, and has effective principles? Is not the influence of personality one of the most profoundly recognized facts of life? It is indeed the function of human life in the long run to take the raw-material of [the] environment and mold it according to the pattern of our ideals. To aspire to do that and to have faith that it can be done, and that all the universe is working with us, that is religion. So, apply the same test, we come to see that we believe in the original and spontaneous influence of the individual human life upon the conditions of environment.

Now this doctrine of the power and the capacity of the individual human personality to stamp environment with the imprint of its ideals and convictions, is a grand doctrine to apply to ourselves. Our strength, our efficiency for the common good, for the realization of our aims, is in a large measure determined by the intensity of the conviction that we may make a contribution to the constructive development of human society and human life. For ourselves, let us hold that there is no unsurmountable obstacle between us and our promised land. But, on the other hand, let us be slow in passing our judgement upon others, whose struggle for life seems to carry them ever nearer to the husks in the swine trough.

You can see how far we have traveled from the old idea that the kingdom of God is a perfect and completed place, ready-made for us, and whose doors will swing open to us just as soon as we may pass the entrance examinations. That belongs to the long-ago and the far-away. WE have not only to fit ourselves for the kingdom, but we have to make the kingdom for which we are fitting ourselves. The two go together. Into the fabric of our environment, as into the fabric of our personality, is woven all the fruits of the rich romantic ages of evolution. That which we are, and that which is, around us, become the raw material which we, in our turn, shall work up into the realization of our purposes, weaving thought by thought, and deed by deed, after the pattern of our own design, the human personality, individual

and social that shall be. I know of no one who has expressed this idea so dynamically as Walt Whitman.

I am the acme of things accomplished, and I am encloser
of things to be.

My feet strike an apex of the apices of the stairs,
On every step bunches of ages, and larger bunches between
the steps,
All below duly traveled—and still I mount and mount.

...
Immense have been the preparations for me,
Faithful and friendly the arms that have helped me.

Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like cheerful
boatmen;
For room to me stars kept aside in their own rings,
They sent influences to look after what was to hold me.

...
All forces have been steadily employed to complete and
delight me,
Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul.³

And what shall I do with this robust soul of mine? To what end shall I work in this world to which I have been born? "All things are yours,"⁴ says the ancient prophet. What does it mean? Here am I, the product of the ages, packed to the edge with the desire to live, to preserve and to maintain my individuality, and to achieve aims, and to develop personality. All things are mine. All things are to be used by me to achieve my ends. The contribution that I make to the world is to be measured by the extent to which I develop in myself power and wisdom and culture. To this end I go forth, exacting tribute from nature to maintain my physical needs, from men to satisfy my mental and spiritual ends. I take the very forces of nature and make them work for me. I take men and make them work for me that I may have leisure to develop my intellectual powers, and give scope for the development of my aesthetic nature. Grasping, eating, and devouring, I go about my life. But stop. Where shall I end if I carry this too far? Suppose by virtue of my industry, and my skill in laying tribute upon man and nature, I become the very ruler and king of all. What is my satisfaction? Wherein do

³ Walt Whitman (1819-1892) American poet. This is from his *Leaves of Grass*, Brooklyn, New York: 1855, p. 50.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 3:21.

I gain delight? In what is my happiness? Lo, I have all thought, all power, everywhere men have become my servants. I am alone. There is no one with whom I may talk, no one with whom I may share in my power, my cultured and refined ideas. I am alone on the heights, and I can tell no one of the beauty that I see. I am benumbed and un-human. The greatest power of happiness in life, I have pushed ruthlessly from me in making others pay tribute to my culture. In brutalizing, and subjecting them, I have brutalized and enslaved myself. I have killed the heart within me, in killing those whom the heart should love. In my zeal for self-preservation, I have destroyed the only thing worth preserving, the power and the capacity for human fellowship. This is the stern logic of individual self-culture. But as a matter of fact, we seldom follow it to its logical and its bitter end. Sometimes we come across the tragic cases, where men and women have followed this God of self-preservation, and have sacrificed every tie and ideal, enemies, friends and family even, on the cold and bloody altar of their desires and aims. It makes little difference whether this altar is dedicated to the lusts of the flesh, or the lusts of the spirit, the result is the same, loneliness, isolation, desertion, personal and social death. The tragedy of Napoleon alone at St. Helena,⁵ in physical and spiritual misery, is true to the laws of human life. He sacrificed the world for his ambition, and when it was realized, there was no one to share the fruits with him. Most of us do not carry our selfishness to its extreme logical end. We make most of the world pay tribute to our development and our comfort, but we are wise enough to reserve a small un-exploited group of people, with whom we may share our happiness and perchance some of our burdens.

But impossible is the man whose sole aim is self-preservation. Equally impossible is the man whose sole aim self-sacrifice. We come across occasionally a being who has been carried off his feet by the idea that he must do nothing for himself. Every thought, every deed must be directly for others. He will sacrifice all that he has upon the altars that others have erected. He cannot take time to care for his body, because he

⁵ Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) French military commander, de facto leader of the French Republic as First Consul from 1799 to 1804, then Emperor of the French from 1804 until 1814, and again during 1815. In October, 1815 he was exiled to Saint Helena Island where he died in 1821.

must care for the body of others. He cannot take time to develop his mind, because he must see to it that the minds of others must be developed. He cannot take time to attend to his own business affairs, for he must be forever meddling with the business of others. For others he will sacrifice all. But pray, what is that all? If he has nothing or is nothing in himself that he values, that he honors, that is dear to him, pray, what is the meaning of his sacrifice? It is nothing. It is worthless, it does not count. He who gives, must have something to give, besides sheer goodwill. No, the tale is not told in the word, self-sacrifice. He is a shallow reader indeed, who thus reads the golden rule. Love thy neighbor as thyself.⁶

The true story is not the story of self-preservation of the individual at the expense of the social, or the complete sacrifice and obliteration of the individual for the social, but the self-preservation, and the self-expression, personal and social, in and through the social. If we take the truth of those magnificent words put into the mouth of Jesus by the writer of the Gospel of John, and translate them into our own language, we shall see what I mean. "I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me."⁷ To this end have I been born and to this end have I come into the world that I should bear witness to the truth. I am here not merely to realize my own personal aims, but to grasp the meaning of human life, and let the high aims of human life find their expression in and through me. I am born, not to feed at the crib of a common idealism, but to translate that idealism into a living reality, personal and social, to bear witness to the beauty and the truth of human life. History shows the truth of this. The men who have become the milestones of human progress, are not characterized by what they have taken out of the common life, but by what of truth they have translated into reality. The power and the strength of their personality, achieved at great cost and unspeakable toil, has not so much been given to the world, as it has been plowed into the very soil that we live on. Your end is not in yourself, nor is it in society, but it is in both. The truth comes when we realize that our true relationship is not expressed by the phrase, "me and the world," the one over against the other, the one sacrificing to the other, but rather when we realize that our relationship is expressed by the

⁶ Matthew 22:39.

⁷ John 6:38.

phrase, "myself in the world," when the world becomes ours, and is so engrained into us, and we into it that every least bit of its wellbeing or its ill-being we know as our well-being and our ill-being. I would die for you, I would sacrifice my life for you. My life means nothing when compared with yours, I am willing to die that you might live, I might say to you in the ecstasy of emotion. Oh, go on, what do I care for your sacrifice? What do I care? Would I ask you to die that I might live? Would I glory in your death that gives me life? Then why all this complaint? We honor and our heart thrills at the devotion of the martyr not because he sacrifices his life, or holds his life of no account, but rather because he sees his larger life in his great pulsating world, and sees full-well that his true self-preservation, and his true self-effectuation comes in plowing his ideals and his hopes, his purposes in the great social life in which he moves, blood of its blood, bone of its bone, and soul of its soul.

In truth, then the individual is realized only in the social, and the social is realized only in the individual. What does a man profit if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? And again, whosoever loseth his life for my sake shall find it, and whosoever would find his life shall lose it.⁸

There are some men and women, who live under conditions that make for nobility in thought and achievement. There are some who live under conditions that make for viciousness and evil. The conditions react on the individual, and the individual reacts on the conditions. The world is ours, in the last faint pulse of its seething life. Its purpose is ours, and all its powers work together with us, when we swing into accord with its laws. We ought to build a bridge across the bay of our limitations to a future of surefire goodness. That's our task. That's what we have to do. In this task, if God gives us happiness, we will not decline it: ask for it; we want to seek for it we have no time.

⁸ See Matthew 10:39.