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Ethics: Morality of the State

Mikhail Bakunin

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The existence of a single limited State necessarily presupposed the existence, and if necessary provokes the formation of several States, it being quite natural that the individuals who find themselves outside of this State and who are menaced by it in their existence and liberty, should in turn league themselves against it. Here we have humanity broken up into an indefinite number of States which are foreign, hostile, and menacing toward one another.

There is no common right, and no social contract among them, for if such a contract and right existed, the various States would cease to be absolutely independent of one another, becoming federated members of one great State. Unless this great State embraces humanity as a whole, it will necessarily have against it the hostility of other great States, federated internally. Thus war would always be supreme law and the inherent necessity of the very existence of humanity.

Every State, whether it is of a federative or a non-federative character, must seek, under the penalty of utter ruin, to become the most powerful of States. It has to devour others in order not to be devoured in turn, to conquer in order not to be conquered, to enslave in order not to be enslaved — for two similar and at

the same time alien powers, cannot co-exist without destroying each other.

The state then is the most flagrant negation, the most cynical and complete negation of humanity. It rends apart the universal solidarity of all men upon earth, and it unites some of them only in order to destroy, conquer, and enslave all the rest. It takes under its protection only its own citizens, and it recognises human right, humanity, and civilisation only within the confines of its own boundaries. And since it does not recognise any right outside of its own confines, it quite logically arrogated to itself the right to treat with the most ferocious inhumanity all the foreign populations whom it can pillage, exterminate, or subordinate to its will. If it displays generosity or humanity toward them, it does it in no case out of any sense of duty: and that is because it has no duty but to itself, and toward those of its members who formed it by an act of free agreement, who continue constituting it on the same free bases, or, as it happens in the long run, have become its subjects.

Since international law does not exist, and since it never can exist in a serious and real manner without undermining the very foundations of the principle of absolute State sovereignty, the State cannot have any duties toward foreign populations. If then it treats humanely a conquered people, if it does not go to the full length in pillaging and exterminating it, and does not reduce it to the last degree of slavery, it does so perhaps because of considerations of political expediency and prudence, or even because of pure magnanimity, but never because of duty — for it has an absolute right to dispose of them in any way it deems fit.

This flagrant negation of humanity, which constitutes the very essence of the State, is from the point of view of the latter the supreme duty and the greatest virtue: it is called patriotism and it constitutes the transcendent morality of the State. We call it the transcendent morality because ordinarily it transcends the level of human morality and justice, whether private

all, he is guilty against the State in arrogating to himself one of its most precious privileges.

This explains to us why ever since history began, that is, ever since States came into existence, the political world has always been and still continues to be the stage for high knavery and unsurpassed brigandage — brigandage and knavery which are held in high honour, since they are ordained by patriotism, transcendent morality, and by the supreme interest of the State. This explains to us why all the history of ancient and modern States is nothing more than a series of revolting crimes; why present and past kings and ministers of all times and of all countries — statesmen, diplomats, bureaucrats, and warriors — if judged from the point of view of simple morality and human justice, deserve a thousand times the gallows of penal servitude.

For there is no terror, cruelty, sacrilege, perjury, imposture, infamous transaction, cynical theft, brazen robbery or foul treason which has not been committed and all are still being committed daily by representatives of the State, with no other excuse than this elastic, at times so convenient and terrible phrase Reason of State. A terrible phrase indeed! For it has corrupted and dishonoured more people in official circles and in the governing classes of society than Christianity itself. As soon as it is uttered everything becomes silent and drops out of sight: honesty, honour, justice, right, pity itself vanishes and with it logic and sound sense; black becomes white and white becomes black, the horrible becomes humane, and the most dastardly felonies and most atrocious crimes become meritorious acts.

What is permitted to the State is forbidden to the individual. Such is the maxim of all governments. Machiavelli said it, and history as well as the practice of all contemporary governments bear him out on that point. Crime is the necessary condition of the very existence of the State, and it therefore constitutes its exclusive monopoly, from which it follows that the individual who dares commit a crime is guilty in a two-fold sense: first, he is guilty against human conscience, and, above

or common, and thereby it often sets itself in shard contradiction to them. Thus, for instance, to offend, oppress, rob, plunder, assassinate, or enslave one's fellow man is, to the ordinary morality of man, to commit a serious crime.

In public life, on the contrary, from the point of view of patriotism, when it is done for the greater glory of the State in order to conserve or to enlarge its power, all that becomes a duty and a virtue. And this duty, this virtue, are obligatory upon every patriotic citizen. Everyone is expected to discharge those duties not only in respect to strangers but in respect to his fellow-citizens, members and subjects of the same State, whenever the welfare of the State demands it from him.

The supreme law of the State is self-preservation at any cost. And since all States, ever since they came to exist upon the earth, have been condemned to perpetual struggle — a struggle against their own populations, whom they oppress and ruin, a struggle against all foreign States, every one of which can be strong only if the others are weak — and since the States cannot hold their own in this struggle unless they constantly keep on augmenting their power against their own subjects as well as against the neighbourhood States — it follows that the supreme law of the State is the augmentation of its power to the detriment of internal liberty and external justice.

Such is in its stark reality the sole morality, the sole aim of the State. It worships God himself only because he is its own exclusive God, the sanction of its power and of that which it calls its right, that is, the right to exist at any cost and always to expand at the cost of other States. Whatever serves to promote this end is worthwhile, legitimate, and virtuous. Whatever harms it is criminal. The morality of the State then is the reversal of human justice and human morality.

This transcendent, super-human, and therefore anti-human morality of States is not only the result of the corruption of men who are charged with carrying on State functions. One might say with greater right that corruption of men is the nat-

ural and necessary sequel of the State institution. This morality is only the development of the fundamental principle of the State, the inevitable expression of its inherent necessity. The State is nothing else but the negation of humanity; it is a limited collectively which aims to take the place of humanity and which wants to impose itself upon the latter as a supreme goal, while everything else is to submit and minister to it.

That was natural and easily understood in ancient times when the very idea of humanity was unknown, and when every people worshiped its exclusively national gods, who gave it the right of life and death over all other nations. Human right existed only in relation to the citizens of the State. Whatever remained outside of the State was doomed to pillage, massacre, and slavery.

Now things have changed. The idea of humanity becomes more and more of a power in the civilised world, and, owing to the expansion and increasing speed of means of communication, and also owing to the influence, still more material than moral, of civilisation upon barbarous peoples, this idea of humanity begins to take hold even of the minds of uncivilised nations. This idea is the invisible power of our century, with which the present powers — the States — must reckon. They cannot submit to it of their own free will because such submission on their part would be equivalent to suicide, since the triumph of humanity can be realised only through the destruction of the States. But the States can no longer deny this idea nor openly rebel against it, for having now grown too strong, it may finally destroy them.

In the face of this painful alternative there remains only one way out: and that is hypocrisy. The States pay their outward respects to this idea of humanity; they speak and apparently act only in the name of it, but they violate it every day. This, however, should not be held against the States. They cannot act otherwise, their position having become such that they can hold their own only by lying. Diplomacy has no other mission.

Therefore what do we see? Every time a State wants to declare war upon another State, it starts off by launching a manifesto addressed not only to its own subjects but to the whole world. In this manifesto it declares that right and justice are on its side, and it endeavours to prove that it is actuated only by love of peace and humanity and that, imbued with generous and peaceful sentiments, it suffered for a long time in silence until the mounting iniquity of its enemy forced it to bare its sword. At the same time it vows that, disdainful of all material conquest and not seeking any increase in territory, it will put an end to this war as soon as justice is re-established. And its antagonist answers with a similar manifesto, in which naturally right, justice, humanity, and all the generous sentiments are to be found respectively on its side.

Those mutually opposed manifestos are written with the same eloquence, they breathe the same virtuous indignation, and one is just as sincere as the other; that is to say both of them are equally brazen in their lies, and it is only fools who are deceived by them. Sensible persons, all those who have had some political experience, do not even take the trouble of reading such manifestos. On the contrary, they seek ways to uncover the interests driving both adversaries into this war, and to weigh the respective power of each of them in order to guess the outcome of the struggle. Which only goes to prove that moral issues are not at stake in such wars.

The rights of peoples, as well as the treaties regulating the relations of the States, lack any moral sanction. In every definite historic epoch they are the material expression of the equilibrium resulting from the mutual antagonism of States. So long as States exist, there will be no peace. There will be only more or less prolonged respites, artfully concluded by the perpetually belligerent States; but as soon as the State feels sufficiently strong to destroy this equilibrium to its advantage, it will never fail to do so. The history of humanity fully bears out this point.