

Journal Title: The Expositor.

Volume: 3 (series 8) **Issue:**

Month/Year: March 1912 **Pages:** 236-242

Article Author:

Article Title: John Oman; Dependence and
Independence

PERSONALITY AND GRACE.

IV. DEPENDENCE AND INDEPENDENCE.

SET apart by itself, Personality, like Grace, presents a comparatively simple problem. To explain it we should only require to emphasise its autonomy, to insist that it is self-conscious, self-directing, self-determining.

By thus setting it in isolation, however, the same danger besets our view of personality as besets our view of grace. We are led to think of it in a half-material figure. As we think of grace acting like a direct material force, the moral personality becomes little more to our imaginations than an engine with its fires shut up within it, operating by its own mechanism.

That simplicity is attained by overlooking more than half the problem. Only by relating grace to personality and personality to grace is it possible to have a spiritual conception of either. Grace is grace and not a force precisely because it is the succour of our moral personality; and a person is a moral personality and not a machine precisely because he must depend upon life yet should be master over it.

Theologians and moralists alike are misled by their abstract and partial conception of personality. They seldom take it in the concrete from their own experience, but accept it in a more or less systematised form from the philosopher, and what they do see for themselves is only with the eyes of their special interest. Thus the moralist recognises only its independence and the theologian its dependence, and both miss the actual movement of life in which dependence and independence are not opposed. They fail to see that personality does not follow the rule of space that where it is nothing else can be, nor any rule of exclusion which would

make all succour by another personality necessarily a limitation of our own independence and freedom.

A moral personality is a self-conscious, self-legislating, self-determining being. But that is only half the reality. The other half is that it is self-conscious, self-legislating, self-determining in a world.

The idea that the moral personality builds its own world is after all a very superficial view even of morality. The strange thing is that it should be able to find its morality the meaning of a world already built for it. Its self-consciousness is not merely conscious of self, but also of a world which is no less independent of us because it is only the world of our consciousness ; its self-legislation is not merely the law of its own being, but is also the meaning of reality, the final law of the actual world ; its self-determination is not merely an activity of the soul, but also works actual changes in a world which is perhaps only realised to be independent of us because we have control over it.

Let us first consider self-consciousness.

M. Bergson tells us that the shape and extent of it are determined by our relation to a world which acts upon us and upon which we act. Our window is designed, not for the view as it were, but to look out upon the road along which events continually march, so that we may guess at them as they come and preserve their lesson as they depart. If by chance it also take in a wider landscape, the accident is happy, but the direct purpose of consciousness is to give us just such knowledge of reality as practically concerns our lives, and not to afford us the widest possible knowledge of the world.

That may not be all the truth, but it is at least so far true that self-consciousness is little concerned with contemplation of itself except in so far as self is concerned with the

conduct of life. Self-consciousness is, therefore, in a very real sense a moral phenomenon. Even personal memory, without which self-consciousness could not have any existence, would seem to have a moral basis, something like imputation of one's doings.

Without a world, therefore, in which we had personal business, we should have no self-consciousness. But that personal business can only be done in subjection to reality. Though our world is strictly the world of our consciousness, we can only reign in it by subjecting ourselves to a reality quite independent of us. Perhaps the very basis of self-consciousness itself is something akin to moral sincerity. Hence we are faced from the very beginning of experience with the problem that in a world which is our own we have to seek our own by what of all things is most independent of us, that is, truth. The world of our consciousness is thus a moral sphere in which we must find our independence by discovering the right kind of dependence.

Our self-legislation still more clearly shows us the same dependence upon an outside reality and the same independence of it.

A moral judgment at the dictate of another is, by that very fact, not a moral judgment at all. To be a moral judgment it must be first of all our own conscience of right. The more utterly personal it is, the purer it is. Yet our own judgment is never isolated from the ideals and tasks around us, but is inextricably mixed up with the development of all mankind's ideal judgments of worth, that is to say, with the things men esteem because they judge them worthy in themselves. The forming of our own judgments of right, which is our supreme personal attainment, is set, as it were, on the eminence of that development of all human ideals which is the supreme attainment of historical progress. Yet that dependence upon the moral ideals of our

time in no way modifies the independence of our own sincere personal judgment of right. Nay, we are the more independent, the more open we are to the best influences around us.

Furthermore, the utterly personal nature of a true moral judgment, instead of making us regard it as a mere matter of private opinion, is above all else what makes us confident of its universal validity. It is legislation by the self, yet it is the legislation which, not the self, but whatever we call ultimate reality decrees, and it asserts itself as life's only safe guide, though life should seem to be antagonistic in all its doings.

Our self-determination involves a similar dependence and independence.

Self-determination is just determination by the self. But that convenient formula does not take us far. The mystery of it is its strange interaction with a world on which it depends, and of which, nevertheless, it should be independent. On the one hand, the self cannot act on any impulse, however external be its origin, till the impulse has transplanted itself within and become our motive. On the other hand, it is not an unimportant part of the moral situation that the impulse springs from a reality outside and independent of us. For that reason loyalty to the self and self-surrender which is just loyalty to a reality outside of self, are in our moral progress not opposed, but identical.

This relation of the moral personality to a reality outside of it upon which, in one aspect, it should wholly depend and of which, in another, it should be wholly independent, is most keenly felt in moral failure. By it we are made to feel that we should at once have had less regard to ourselves and been truer to ourselves, and that we should at once have been less dependent upon outside influences and better served by them.

In consciousness as a moral sphere, in conscience as moral legislation, and in will as moral self-determination alike, our moral personality is related to an outside world upon which we are dependent and which becomes our moral sphere precisely because we are dependent upon it, and yet which would leave no room for any moral reality, if we could not at the same time be its master and not merely its creature.

Our dependence and our independence ought not to be in antagonism, but the one should succour the other, and, in the end, both should be one. We are not made independent, as if we could ride over reality ; but also we are not made dependent as if reality could ride over us. That is the point where morality issues in religion.

In that case the idea of a direct force, either from without or from within, or a mixture of both, explains nothing either in morality or religion for the simple reason that it neither explains the relation of the moral personality to reality, nor the relation of reality to it.

The moral personality is not absolute and self-centred in itself, nor is it overridden by a force absolute and self-centred without. It is not related to the infinite except by having something of the Infinite in itself, so that as it were it must ever live abroad, yet be always at home. It has no knowledge except by going out of itself, but it can only garner what it brings back as its own knowledge ; it has no ideals except in so far as it seeks them as the ultimate meaning of things, but then it returns and finds that they spring from its own constitution ; it knows nothing of will except as it responds to the attractions of a varied outside world, but the will can only possess all things by not being itself under the power of any. Personality is thus both utterly penetrable and utterly impenetrable, and that means it needs religion as well as morality.

Moreover, it is all centre, as it were, and no circumference.

Its world moves its horizon as we move. Thus we have ever a world new and provided, which yet always comes within our horizon and is ours. Nor is it merely ours to look at. It is ours to possess, ours to find our kingdom in, ours even when it is a monster, because it has trembling on its lips the secret of how it is to be turned into our fairy princess. Religion is the discovery of that secret.

That is the experience which makes abstract and especially mechanical speech about a spiritual order unedifying and misleading. The one supreme fact that our relation to our world is personal, escapes it. On both sides the relation is personal, and that fact the rudest polytheism, dealing with an actual pulsing life and not with dried sections of life in abstract thought, has better understood. When men speak of gods they mean that life is to them a personal intercourse, not a mechanical clash of things.

Only when they felt it was one intercourse, through which everything could be made to serve one moral purpose in life, did they speak of God and not of gods many and lords many. Their ground was not philosophical argument but moral victory. It was a discovery not of the thinker, but of the prophet who had been taught how, in spite of every evil, to live his own life in a way which enabled him to say: the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.

Here we find the true relation of moral freedom and religious trust. We cannot have moral freedom in a world which has no moral relation to us, but, on the other hand, the existence of our moral freedom alone can prove the reality of such a moral relationship to us of the world. Wherefore, moral independence and religious trust are essential to each other, and if they seek their road each alone, they can only wander in the wilderness where there is no way and where their hopes turn out to be the mirage.

Grace in that case must be personal. It is only a name

for that personal relation of the world to us whereby we attain our own personal emancipation. With that foundation of moral mastery, to speak of its source as God, does not mean surely that, in an obsession of vanity, we see the reflection of our own faces in the world like Narcissus in the pool, but it has the practical meaning that we have found a relation to life upon which we can wholly depend, yet which is only the way to rely on ourselves. When alike with humility and with courage, with moral independence and with religious trust we can say, "By the grace of God I am what I am," and be in an otherwise alien world masters in our own household, we can have some confidence that we are not self-deluded, but have laid hold of life's real secret.

JOHN OMAN.