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**CHOICE • ACTIONS • RESPONSIBILITY**  
**A CODE OF ETHICS**

There has been much comment in the press in recent years concerning the apparent collapse, in modern society, of accepted standards of conduct. The press comment has been supported, almost exclusively, by statistics of the growth illegitimacy and of the spread of venereal disease. This undue emphasis upon standards of sexual conduct has thrown the issues out of focus and the result has been that the remedies proposed have also been out of focus.

Sexual morality is but a part of a total, more-embracing, ethical morality. In this pamphlet we search for the general principles underlying such a morality, the principles on which a universal code of ethics may be formulated. We learn much on this count by referring to a recent news item relevant to the present discussion.

There appeared in the Brisbane **Courier Mail** of 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1965, an article by Lady Cilento entitled: "Sexual freedom is bringing a big disease increase." Lady Cilento shared the concern, now being expressed in other countries such as Sweden, at the collapse in standards reflected in greatly increased illegitimacy and venereal disease rates.

Community reaction to this article was at least as instructive as the article itself. The reaction was: 'blame the government.' It was not seriously suggested that the government – an apparently mystical body possessed of superhuman powers – was responsible for the increases revealed by the statistics. What was suggested was that "the government" should improve treatment facilities for venereal diseases. Community self-criticism, on a positive basis, was conspicuously absent.

So it was at this level of 'blame the other fellow' that the matter rested.

The real disease indexed by the figures given by Lady Cilento was mental, not physical. And it is one for which no government has to accept responsibility. In short it is:

1. A refusal by the individual to accept his responsibilities,
2. Acceptance by society of irresponsibility as the norm of personal conduct.

The attitudes reflect a generally held, but erroneous, view of the rights of the individual. Or rather – and this is where the danger lies in these attitudes – they reveal a perversion of a correct view of the rights of the individual.

## **Personal Irresponsibility**

Personal irresponsibility takes many forms and is by no means restricted to sex. In today's affluent society more and more irresponsible is being provided with more and more outlets for their irresponsibility. One has only to analyze a few issues of the daily newspapers to become aware of the many fields in which – and the many ways by which – personal irresponsibility is finding expression. Only recently we were reading such headlines as “500 will be cut by glass on the coast beaches,” “Bottle tops, wire and chicken bones a beach hazard,” to mention but two among many similar headlines all indicating the growth of individual irresponsibility. It is not possible to design a Penal Code that can deal with the situation effectively even though, before the law, every man is held individually responsible for his own actions. The post-war trials of German leaders, particularly of Eichmann, made clear this individual responsibility before the law. What is needed to meet the present situation is a Code of Ethics that will foster and develop awareness in society of the need for responsibility in the actions of every individual. Such a code would state general principles in such a way as to make it possible to classify all actions as either responsible or irresponsible

## **Rational Decisions**

In constructing such a code, our concern is with actions, which are the result of choice. That is, those actions which follow decisions by rational individuals. In the multitude of decisions made by rational individuals every day, and in the actions that follow such decisions, we are able to discern the following four main steps:

A realisation by the person concerned that he has a choice between two alternatives. (To smash the bottle on the beach or to carry it to a rubbish bin; to stay behind the car in front or to overtake it on a hill; to attempt to board a moving tram or to wait for the next one and so on). In some cases the individual will not be consciously aware that he has been presented with a choice, through long disuse of his critical faculties.

1. An evaluation of the alternatives.
2. Choosing between the alternatives.
3. Making a decision.
4. Action giving effect to the choice that has been made.

Points 1 to 3 should normally be a precondition of 4. These points refer to mental processes; and the choice, which results -whether responsible or irresponsible, is the result of mental reflexes conditioned by experiences to act within split seconds. The production of attitudes which result in responsible decisions is more properly the field of education, and it is at this level that a code of ethics should be expounded. However, in all too many cases modern education systems are geared for everything else but educating minds for responsibility. It has even been alleged that education at University level accelerates the process of individual disintegration rather than assisting to retard it.

It is only through his actions that an individual is brought into relationship with other individuals in such a way as to raise the question of responsibility. (In certain cases a man may act irresponsibly towards himself; in the limits of this pamphlet we need not be concerned with this aspect). It is therefore with

point 4 that our Code of Ethics is concerned. We are interested in actions. On what principles will we classify some actions as responsible and others as irresponsible?

## **Actions and Choice**

There are various schools of thought that say that the discovery of such principles is impossible. (If this be true then it must also be impossible to discern between responsible acts and irresponsible acts). The central argument of those who reason in this manner is that an individual should be free to set his own standards under all circumstances. A code of ethics, or list of principles (runs the argument), represents an attempt to impose standards on the individual; the individual should not have standards imposed upon him by any person or force external to himself. Such a code of ethics would be 'authoritarian', 'fascist', and 'repressive'. Government or society should not regiment the individual. Each individual should be free to choose for himself.

This argument is, of course, perfectly correct as far as it goes. Every individual should be free to choose for him or herself. But our code of ethics would simply say that – once he had chosen to continue residing in an organised society – an individual is not always free to act as he chooses. It is important to observe that we are no longer concerned with freedom and choice at all, but with the relationship between actions and responsibility. The individual has limited his choice by electing to remain a member of society. No rational person is free to act without a responsible regard for the rights of those with whom he is, or with whom he may be, brought into relationship through his actions.

Take, as a practical example, the driver who decides to cross double lines to overtake on a hill. He is quite free to choose to do so. He is not free to put his decision into action. A code of ethics would instruct him that he cannot ignore the rights of others when giving effect, through action, to his choice. His action is irresponsible because it involves no sense of obligation to others. His crime, as we shall see in a moment, is that of arrogance. The rights of oncoming drivers to use that same section of road at the same period of time within their legitimate rights have been ignored.

We are now in a position to draw some conclusions concerning the nature of an irresponsible act. If freedom of the individual is to mean anything, it must mean that **every** individual is free. That being so, every individual has both rights and obligations: rights to his own freedom and obligations to respect the rights of others. Actions affecting, or possibly affecting, other individuals carry with them an obligation, in equal measure, to respect the rights of those involved. To every force or action there is always an equal and opposite force or reaction.

## **Arrogance and Irresponsibility**

Not to respect the rights of others is to arrogate portion of their rights to oneself. This arrogation can not be justified in the name of '**freedom of the individual**' and has been perverted by this form of crooked thinking into justification of '**arrogance of the individual**'. An irresponsible act is an arrogant act, an act which fails to respect the sovereign rights of others. It emphasises rights at the expense of obligations: therefore, basically, it is an unbalanced (self-centred) act. On the other hand, a responsible act is an act which takes both rights and obligations into account. Before initiating a cause, it attempts to measure (and takes responsibility for), the infinity of effects to which the cause may give rise. It is a measured act. A well balanced, or responsible, society is one which has found the balance between rights and obligations in such a way as to respect the freedom and sovereignty of every individual.

## **A Code of Ethics as a Code of Action**

Lady Cilento catalogued, in her article, those results that indicate that individuals have acted irresponsibly – towards themselves and towards others, including the individual newly born – in matters of sex. As such, the fact index not the potential for freedom that each individual has, but rather the potential for irresponsibility which signalises both his own decline and that of the society of which he is a part. Personal freedom is being usurped in the name of arrogance masquerading as ‘freedom’. Responsible people are therefore obliged to resist those who encroach upon their areas of personal sovereignty. For not to do so is to encourage irresponsibility!

The following quotation provides us with a simple working code of ethics. The code is flexible; it provides a positive standard rather than an absolute standard. It appeared in the Saturday Evening Post of 1<sup>st</sup> December 1962, as a favourite quotation of Governor Nelson Rockefeller:

“I believe in the supreme worth of the individual...that every right implies a responsibility, that every opportunity an obligation; every possession a duty...I believe in the dignity of labor; that the world owes no man a living, but that it owes every man an opportunity to make a living...that...service is the common duty of mankind.”