TO WHAT EXTENT OBEDIENCE MAY BE CONSIDERED AS A VICE.

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IF by Obedience we mean the submission of the individual will either to the will of another person or to some natural or moral law, it seems absurd to speak of it as a vice or a virtue. We might almost as well question whether electricity were virtuous or vicious, or whether literature or music were in themselves good or evil. And indeed it is evident, when we begin to think of it, that Obedience is a force more powerful than electricity, and an art requiring a greater devotion to its study than painting or music or literature. But this great force may be wrongly used, or used for evil ends; and the fine art may be degraded or debased so that instead of a virtue it may become a vice in our hands according to the manner in which we deal with it. To use another simile, Obedience may be looked upon as a process, an evolution rising continually from a lower to a higher form, which must on no account be checked or interrupted in its development.

When we pause to consider what is our object in life, at what mark we are aiming, the obvious answer seems to be that we are striving to bring ourselves into harmony with the laws of the universe of which we form a part.

If our bodies are in harmony with the physical laws of nature we are physically strong and rejoice accordingly. If spiritually we are in harmony with the divine laws that control all things human and superhuman then we experience spiritual well-being and possess a joy that cannot be taken from us.

When we look back through the years towards the beginning of our lives we find that the first three of those years, perhaps the most momentous of them all, are shrouded in a mist; and if there are some rents here and there in the veil they are very few,
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allowing us only to catch an isolated glimpse or so—some two or three unconnected pictures. It is really by observing our juniors that we learn something of what we were ourselves, of what strange processes we went through in a period which memory fails to reach.

From what we perceive of their experiences we infer that, at some period to which our memories do not reach, we too were cast like shipwrecked sailors, after a life and death struggle, upon the shores of an unknown land, where all is unfamiliar, where the inhabitants were strange in form and speech, where our very faculties were beyond our control; and where the laws of our new being seemed entirely incomprehensible.

The baby cannot focus his eyes, he cannot direct his hands, he cannot distinguish sounds. The mediums of communication between his brain and the various organs of his new body are all existent; but he has not learned yet how to use them, and the first three weeks of his life are spent in an effort to bring them under control. At last the brain succeeds in sending a message to the eye, the eye responds and a thrill of joy runs through the baby's whole being. The outward sign of this establishment of communication is that first smile for which mothers and nurses watch with breathless interest—and which they are generally inclined to consider as a tribute to their own attractions.

This first esson [sic] of obedience learned the work goes on apace and in eighteen months the newcomer has entered into his kingdom and has come to govern it with

extraordinary skill while for the most part this gaining of self-control and learning the laws of his own being has been a sheer delight.

To realize the working of a law or to set it in motion oneself is as thrilling and fascinating an experience as to turn the handles or press the levers of some new and interesting machine. Of course the machine may occasionally behave in an unexpected and even disagreeable manner, but one learns to adapt oneself to these accidents and is never deterred by them from making further experiments.

The young human creature while rapidly becoming lord of himself gradually acquires the perception that, while he is exacting and receiving obedience from his own faculties and from other beings of whose existence he is only uncertainly aware, he is also called upon to submit his own will and to yield obedience to these dimly realised beings. All through his life he will have to consider this question from these two points of view. He is bound to demand obedience, he will certainly be called upon to yield it, and the problem will always be with him as to how he can demand it with justice and how he may yield it without loss of individuality.

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The first form of obedience demanded from the baby is for its protection and must be absolute. Here we may go to school to the wise animals that we call “lower.” The mother bear, or wolf, or deer exacts unquestioning and immediate submission to her laws from her offspring, knowing well how many and imminent are the surrounding dangers and clearly understanding that the life of a disobedient cub or fawn is likely to be short. But if we study the habits of these wild instinctive creatures we soon discover that their strictly enforced rules are invariably used as a means to an end, and that this end is the perfect development and finally the absolute independence of the young creature in question. Independence, that is to say, of parental care, for with many animals the question of communal obedience arises just as it does with human beings.

The first question we parents have to face is to what extent and in what manner this necessary protective obedience should be enforced, and for how long. The problem at first is a fairly simple one, the tiny infant is not very difficult to deal with, he can be lifted out of a dangerous position with great speed and his health can be protected by attention to rules. If he be a normally sound child and his caretakers are both firm and reasonable he soon learns that food can only be expected at regular intervals and that there are times when hi [sic] demands to be taken from a lonely bed and carried about in comfortable arms will be refused. The young human being is very adaptable and naturally amenable to law and order, but if those who control the early stages of his destiny are either despotic or erratic in their government he may learn to obey them, he may be protected by them, but his obedience will be started on wrong lines.

The obedience yielded by parents and nurses may very easily become a vice. The nurse or mother who has inherited the accumulated unwisdom of generations of old women can become very dangerous criminals and so can the one who continues a bad precedent of her own devising. We all know the story of the woman who resented any interference with her manner of feeding her baby because she had buried eleven and must in consequence know all about rearing children.

The anxious and conscientious young mother too is inclined to make a vice of her obedience to text-books when instead of studying the many excellent rules laid down in them and adapting these ‘warily and discreetly’ to the use of her individual infant ‘as he may be able to bear them,’ she spends her time and energies in a distracted attempt to adapt

the infant to the rules, often with most disastrous results.

Later on the crawling baby must learn that at an emphatic
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'No' from father or mother he must restrain his natural desire to pick up a wasp, or make a grab at a boiling kettle, or try experiments with a razor. The more carefully a child has been trained to prompt obedience to a command the safer he is up to a certain extent; but even here we must learn to discriminate. There is a real danger in over-protection and we must be upon our guard against it. The over-protected child is only safe so long as he is under protection. If he is always waiting for direction he loses his own initiative and becomes a helpless creature unable to take proper care of himself. I remember well the contempt shown by his contemporary cousins for a child of five who was put into a swing and promptly fell out because he had not sense enough to hold on to the ropes. He had probably been watched over and told what he ought to do on every emergency as it arose, and had never been left to make his own discoveries at the risk of a few bumps or scratches.

The conclusion then that we may draw from this is: that Protective Obedience is absolutely necessary up to a certain point, but it must not go beyond that point and if we allow it to do so we are weakening the child's character and depriving it of the faculty of self-protection. The Obedience which has left its own sphere and has ousted a necessary faculty becomes a danger and a vice.

The young child is an observer of phenomena. He has been taking mental notes of his surroundings for a long time before he realizes hat [sic] there is any connection between these phenomena, and that certain actions will be followed by certain results. His point of view is also distinctly personal. His first idea naturally is that he is the centre of his own universe and that his immediate satellites, though they appear to claim some sort of jurisdiction over the conduct of his life, are in reality subservient to him. It is something of a revelation to him when for the first time he perceives that he is not a planet surrounded by pale moons; but himself a small moon among myriads of others, each one of which has an identity as assertive as his own.

I have a distinct remembrance of how a very small boy made these two discoveries at one and the same time. The discoveries namely that he was a communal animal and that certain actions entailed certain consequences. For some nineteen months he had ruled supreme in his own nursery; but after that time he became conscious of an intruder in his domain, an interloper who took up much of the attention of his mother and nurse; and who, so far as he could see, was of no earthly use to him.

One end of this creature was soft and downy and seemed to ask to be hammered with a brick, while to suspend one's weight
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from the other end, which was conveniently furnished with handles, appeared to be an eminently reasonable amusement. To his astonishment he found that these natural actions were interfered with, were even followed by disagreeable consequences. He was overheard one day remarking to himself (he had a most useful habit of soliloquy), "If I hit Baby I go in dark cubbid. I don' want go in dark cubbid."—The inference was obvious and was acted on with good results to all concerned. It may be mentioned in parenthesis that there were no terrors connected with the dark cupboard, it only acted for a very short time as a restraint on his many activities.

A few months later another overheard soliloquy showed he had learned a somewhat similar lesson, though the manner of his acquiring it has not transpired to this day. "Horsies"

he murmured to the surrounding air, “have hind legs. You mustn’t tickle um.”

Now this child had gained two most important pieces of information. One, that he was a member of a community; the other that he must, upon occasion, submit his own will to that of other members of the community, be they of a higher or a lower order of intelligence than his own, or abide the consequences.

Both of these lessons were necessary to his education and are necessary to that of all communal beings; but if he had stopped at that point, if he or his parents had been content with this crude and elementary form of obedience then his would have been a case of arrested development; and if at any time the fear of consequences had been removed there would have been no barrier between him and the vices of selfishness, cowardice and cruelty.

That form of obedience then, which is dependent upon fear on one side and force upon the other may occasionally be absolately [sic] necessary for the protection of the family or the community; but it must always be considered as a transitory or provisional form and only made use of in emergency. Should it become permanent or be used in any other way than as a stepping stone to something based on higher principles it degenerates of its own nature into a vicious form of obedience and will only wait for opportunity to end in disaster.

The next question that is likely to present itself to the developing intelligence of a child is that of submission to authority for the sake of a person. By the time this question arises he has probably arrived at an age when he is ready to reason consecutively and to listen to reason—also to ask questions which are exceedingly difficult to answer.

An instance occurs to me of a very small boy who was reproved by his mother for some breach of good manners. “May

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I do it when you are wunned over by wailway twain?” he asked. His mother was rather taken aback by this and somewhat puzzled to find an answer. She knew that he was a very affectionate child and would have been heart-broken if any misfortune were to overtake her. The idea that was evidently working in his mind was whether he was being required to submit himself to an individual person or to a general principle. I am afraid the parent of whom I am speaking evaded the question by asking “Well, what do you think about it yourself?” “I think it is howwid,” was his reply, and that particular difficulty never arose again.

Of course this way of dealing with the position did not cover the whole ground, for a general principle cannot be finally decided by private opinion; but it was a step in the right direction, for it showed the child that he must himself be the chief critic of his own conduct.

This mother was in the habit of saying to her children as they grew old enough to understand what she meant: “Whom have you to obey?” “You,” was the answer generally given. “No,” she replied, “you have to obey yourself.” This statement was usually received in silence but with a particular narrowing of the eyelids and a sideways turn of the head which meant that the proposition would receive attention.

Even a very young child is quite capable of understanding that to be self-controlled is a very different thing from being uncontrolled. That to submit oneself to the great basic laws of communal life of one’s own free will is a more difficult but a finer thing than to submit to authority; and also that those who refuse to control themselves are bound sooner or later to find themselves being controlled by others in a manner that is often far from agreeable.

Loyalty is a particular case of obedience yielded to a person instead of a principle. It is often a most beautiful quality and has led to actions of marvellous devotion and unselfishness: but it has its dangerous side and this must be avoided with great care if our shining virtue is not to become a vice.

Loyalty taken for granted and demanded as a right leads to selfishness and want of consideration for others in him who exacts it; and loyalty, yielded blindly and with a single heart to one adored person, leads to jealousy of the claims of others on the person adored and very often to acts of serious injustice.

We have seen that obedience becomes a dangerous, or if we prefer to call it so, a vicious quality when it goes beyond its own province; but when it usurps the place of qualities that ought to be cultivated for their own sakes it is entirely reprehensible.

Courtesy and tact are pleasant and gracious plants in the garden of life but they must spring from their own roots; and we

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should no more confuse them with obedience than we should try to grow melons and cucumbers in the same hot-bed.

The girl who wrangles with her mother or governess over all the small details of her daily life is not disobedient but unmannerly; and if courtesy be demanded from her as an act of obedience she will see no reason for being ready to fall in with other people's plans and ideas once the constraining influence is removed, and will develop into the woman who is a worry to her friends and a scourge on committees.

The boy who refuses to do what he is asked til [sic] he has argued the necessity for doing it to weariness is not a disobedient but a tactless person; and, if not better instructed, will grow into the man who asks his wife why she is kicking him under the table:—And from such husbands may our daughters be preserved!

Perhaps I may be pardoned for giving an illustration of my meaning. Mine is not a mind that deals willingly with abstractions.

A friend of mine was once in charge of a motherless niece, a child about seven years of age. One afternoon another aunt called in to see the little girl and asked if Maud would sing for her. Little Maud was always ready to make music and had a decided preference for doleful ditties, so she immediately chose for her song a Highland lament for soldiers going to battle. Now this happened in the early days of the Boer War and the visitor's eldest son had gone to the Front a few days before. My friend felt that the song chosen would be almost too painfully appropriate to the occasion and said "No, Maud would sing something else." The little girl looked surprised but acquiesced without making any demur and after the visitor had gone her aunt explained to her why she had made the change. "I was sure you had done it for some good reason," said Maud, and there was great satisfaction on both sides. Now this child did not consider that she had been obedient but she quite realized that she had been courteous and tactful and was pleased with herself to the verge of priggishness. Of course priggishness is not to be encouraged either, but then we must remember that children are but men and women of a smaller growth and we cannot expect them to be entirely free from the failings of their elders.

The obedience of Drill or Discipline is one that appeals very strongly to human nature. Its uses are so obvious and the results obtained by it are so marvellous that there is a temptation to look upon it as a thing admirable in itself. A very small child, as soon as his attention is called to it will observe with joy and interest how rapidly his limbs respond to the messages sent from his brain; and will easily understand how by practice and attention

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these responsive movements can be made more certain and rapid.

When Father Wolf checks himself in mid-spring on Mowgli's first appearance and again when he avoids the skinning-knife with only an expression of contempt for the slowness of the thrower, the child who listens to those perfect stories is much impressed by the glory of having one's physical powers in absolute control. In that kind of obedience it is hard to discover any element of vice.

The drill and discipline of the army also makes a great appeal to the child. He realizes, and the story of the Charge of the Light Brigade helps to make it clear to him, how much it must mean to a general to be able to depend on the immediate response of each regiment to the word of command; and he is quite inclined to look with pitying disdain on the "awkward squad"—that company of unformed soldiers who have not yet learned to obey.

He will thrill with interest too over the story of "Soldiers of the Queen" and thoroughly enjoy the answer given by an Indian Officer to the old grizzled, long-haired Central Asian Chief who asks "Now in what manner was this wonderful thing done?"

And the officer answered: "An order was given and they obeyed."

"Would it were so in Afghanistan" said the Chief, "for there we only obey our own wills."

"And for that reason" said the native officer, twirling his moustache, "your Amir, whom you do not obey, must come here and take orders from our Viceroy."

But with all his admiration for prompt and disciplined obedience the child must learn that there is a difference between obedience yielded loyally and with intelligence, and a blind unreasoning obedience yielded either from slavishness or sheer indolence of mind. He must feel that there is a danger of disciplined obedience falling from its high estate and becoming first a weakness and then a vice.

We need not go farther than Rudyard Kipling to learn that "a man, or a thousand men for the matter of that, are the like of sheep in keeping between right and left marks" or that a whole regiment has been known to walk "crabways along the edge of a two-foot water-cut 'stid [sic] of thinking to cross it."

Of course these are not instances of obedience, they only illustrate the state of mind brought about by always depending upon another mind for guidance, and show that over-dependence on drill and discipline is in danger of reducing a man to a condition of mental weakness and indolence. That it may also lead to crime we had an instance of only a short time ago, when officers, who on their own confession were guilty of breaking the laws of civilized warfare, were acquitted on the grounds that they were
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only obeying the orders of a superior and were therefore not responsible for their actions.

This verdict came as a shock to most of us and one could hardly help thinking of the decision by one of our greatest and wisest generals when a question arose in our own army concerning the obedience due from a subordinate to his superior. The ethics of the incident need not be discussed, for Lord Roberts did not lay down the law about a particular case but expounded a broad general principle. He declared, in better terms than I can think of, or remember, that, while obedience was the first duty and the greatest glory of the soldier, still there was a certain point beyond which it can be neither rightly demanded nor conscientiously yielded. That every member of the army was a man before he was a soldier and that loyalty to one's superior does not mean abandonment of individuality or

conscience.

In the seven years that have passed since this question was debated we have seen the difference between the army that accepted obedience on its higher, more spiritual level; and the one that brought the mechanical side of it to the highest possible pitch of perfection and in its action too often degraded it into organised vice.

From the discipline of the Army to the discipline of Art the transition is easy. We learn from Michelangelo that it is only 'the hand obedient to the master mind' that can release the sculptor's dream from its imprisoning marble; and we know what years of toil must be given by every artist to the mastering of his medium. But if it is not a master mind that guides the obedient hand, the result can hardly be called art, and if the development of the hand, or the voice, or whatever the medium of expression may be, lead to the stultifying of the mind, then the result is a vicious form of art.

Giotto's O demonstrated that he had a mastery over his hand and the spirit of mockery shown by submitting such an instance of his skill pointed perhaps to a greater confidence in his own power than in the judgment of his critics. A girl in a factory, as has been pointed out before now, will paint thousands of circles as round as Giotto's without thinking anything about them; but her manual dexterity does not prove her to be an artist. Her mind is dominated by her hand and the overtrained artist who will allow his technique to dominate his thought is on a level even lower than hers. In her case art is absent, in his it is depraved and his obedience to this lower form of art becomes actually a vice.

It is perhaps in music that obedience to the master mind shows itself in its most perfect form. Those of us who have watched Richter conduct an orchestra have seen
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a marvellous exhibition of loyal, intelligent, sympathetic obedience. We can never forget the thrill of seeing all those intent faces, all those eager eyes, fastened on their leader; and of knowing how strong was the bond between them, how their thoughts would leap to meet his thought, and how he could play upon all those individualities as though they combined to form one single instrument. But at the same time we realised that that perfect obedience was yielded spontaneously and with understanding; that if even one of those instrumentalists had come in the spirit of a drudge, had worked as a mechanic instead of an artist, the spell would have been broken and the creation of that perfect harmony destroyed.

Of obedience to tradition there is no need to speak, that question was settled for us long ago; and the same rules that apply to traditions apply to conventions, which may be described as pocket traditions. They are often most useful, exceedingly convenient, and, so long as they are animated by a living spirit and employed intelligently for a reasonable purpose, it is right and proper to accept and follow them. But if the spirit has departed from them and they have become mere empty shells, then they are only fit to be cast up on the shore of inanimate things; where they may be admired for their beauty or collected as curiosities, but where they cannot be looked upon as forming part of the ocean of life.

But it is when Obedience is made into a fetish and worshipped for its own sake that it becomes most dangerous and degenerates into the most deceptive of vices. Temples have been built in which to worship it on which the lives and intellects and friendships of humanity have been sacrificed. And the most tragic part of this form of idolatry is that the gentlest and most saintly of men have bowed their heads in its temple and made sacrifice on its altar of the great gifts entrusted to them for the good of their fellow-creatures.

It is pathetic to think of the estrangement that arose between St. Francis of Assisi

'that most devoted servant of the Crucified' and his first and much loved disciple Frate Bernardo because each of them, in the name of holy obedience, had laid upon the other a burden too hard for him to bear. We read in the Fioretti that St. Francis, in order to punish himself for an impatient thought, commanded Frate Bernardo in the name of holy obedience to put upon him a severe and humiliating penance. This was a hard thing to ask of his friend, but having carried out the command 'as courteously as was in his power' Frate Bernardo in his turn laid it upon St. Francis, also in the name of holy obedience, that every time they met he should reprove and correct him sharply for his faults. The story goes on to to [sic] say
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that "At this St. Francis marvelled greatly: for the holiness of Frate Bernardo was such that he held him in great reverence and did not consider him worthy of blame for anything whatever, and therefore from that time St. Francis was careful not to spend much time with him, because of the said obedience, in order that no word of correction should be used by him to one whom he knew to be of such sanctity; but when he wished to see him or to hear him speak of God, as speedily as was possible he separated himself from him and went away." Thus his happy friendship with the first of his disciples was offered up as a sacrifice on the altar of holy obedience and the converse between two saintly souls was brought to an end.

Different in kind but of even greater consequence was the sacrifice made by Thomas à Kempis, who ranks high among those whom all creeds count beatified. According to his biographer, himself of a most devout and saintly character, we learn that "The clergy of several churches were opposed to Gerard, and instigated by jealousy, resolved to arrest his career and for this end surreptitiously procured his suspension from public preaching." Most humbly he submitted to their wrath, and, fearing above all things to excite ill-feeling between the people and the priests he said to the crowd who were indignant at his suspension, "They are our superiors, we will obey their commands, it is our duty to do so, and becoming. God forbid that we should seek to injure any man or cause a scandal." "Gerard ceased to preach" continues his biographer. "Great a man as the holy missioner was, what act of his life equals this grand obedience?"

The sacrifice is so nobly made, so unhesitatingly given, the man himself stands on a level so much higher than our own, that it seems presumptuous of us to ask if he were really justified in this act of submission. But was he right? Was this grand act of obedience truly demanded of him? Did he offer up only his own will and desires, or did he sacrifice a gift not his own, a gift entrusted to him for the good of his fellow-men? If we were to choose this one of his actions, this one of his qualities to copy, would not obedience in our hands become a weakness, a vice?

In our own time we have seen another notable instance of a great sacrifice made in the name of holy obedience. Some of us may remember that a good many years ago a very beautiful translation of the gospels was made and brought out by a French-man called Lasserre. There was an immense demand for the book and a great number of copies had been sold when suddenly the edition was withdrawn and he was forbidden to publish any more. This was of course a great grief and disappointment to him, but he considered that it was his duty to submit and he submitted.
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Years after this happened I met friends of his who told me that they had implored him to publish his book again knowing what a treasure it would be to his nation; but though

he felt convinced that his work was right and good he was equally convinced that obedience was in itself the greatest of virtues and he refused to rebel against authority.

Still more years passed by and a little Church magazine came in my way in which I read an obituary notice of Henri Lasserre. In it much was said of the beauty and holiness of his life, but of all his many good deeds the one most highly extolled was the sacrifice of the thing he held most precious, the gift for his fellow-man with which he fully believed he had been entrusted. Can we believe that he was not mistaken, that his acquiescence was not a form of weakness, a weakness leading to a conscientious cowardice, a virtue that had become a vice?

We may conclude then that Obedience is a mighty force which must be controlled by a skilled hand and must not be allowed to go beyond the limits of its nature; otherwise being misused it will tend to vice. It is a process which must not be checked in its development, but must continually rise from a lower to a higher plane, under peril of becoming stultified and degenerating into a vice. It is an art which must be studied with all our powers of mind and soul, but which if not so studied, if it be allowed to become a mechanical degraded thing, will fall from its high estate and sink to the level of a vice.

If then we practise, and preach, obedience in its higher forms, carefully eliminating from it all its attendant vices as we press our way with pains and patience along the upward spiral of life, we may at last attain to such a relation to the great laws of the Universe as we see in the spontaneous movements of the infant or the instinctive sagacity of the wild beast. But we shall attain it on a higher plane than theirs because what we do we do with understanding. From this position we may look up to a further curve of the spiral, far above our heads, and catch a glimpse of that greater liberty, that absolute harmony of which we read in the Divine Comedy when Virgil takes leave of Dante in these words:

> “No longer look to me for word nor sign,
> Free is thy will, upright and sane. Fail not
> To yield it full obedience. O’er thyself
> I consecrate and crown thee, priest and king.”