

science at all, not merely because all truth has not yet been appropriated by the mind of man, but because life is a moving affair in which old moral truth ceases to apply.

Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, III, 7

- 41 There is a peculiar inconsistency in the current idea that morals *ought* to be social. The introduction of the moral "ought" into the idea contains an implicit assertion that morals depend upon something apart from social relations. Morals *are* social. The question of ought, should be, is a question of better and worse in social affairs.

Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, IV, 4

- 42 Morality comprises two different parts, one of which follows from the original structure of human society, while the other finds its explanation in the principle which explains this structure. In the former, obligation stands for the pressure exerted by the elements of society on one another in order to maintain the shape of the whole; a pressure whose effect is prefigured in each of us by a system of habits which, so to speak, go to meet it: this mechanism, of which each separate part is a habit, but whose whole is comparable to an instinct, has been prepared by nature. In the second, there is still obligation, if you will, but that obligation is the force of an aspiration or an impetus, of the very impetus which culminated in the human species, in social life, in a system of habits which bears a resemblance more or less to instinct: the primitive impetus here comes into play directly, and no longer through the medium of the mechanisms it had set up, and at which it had provisionally halted. In short, to sum up what has gone before, we should say that nature, setting

down the human species along the line of evolution, intended it to be sociable, in the same way as it did the communities of ants and bees; but since intelligence was there, the maintenance of social life had to be entrusted to an all but intelligent mechanism: intelligent in that each piece could be remodelled by human intelligence, yet instinctive in that man could not, without ceasing to be a man, reject all the pieces together and cease to accept a mechanism of preservation. Instinct gave place temporarily to a system of habits, each one of which became contingent, their convergence towards the preservation of society being alone necessary, and this necessity bringing back instinct with it. The necessity of the whole, felt behind the contingency of the parts, is what we call moral obligation in general—it being understood that the parts are contingent in the eyes of society only; to the individual, into whom society inculcates its habits, the part is as necessary as the whole.

Bergson, *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, I

- 43 A mock feeling and a true feeling are almost indistinguishable; to decide that I love my mother and will remain with her, or to remain with her by putting on an act, amount somewhat to the same thing. In other words, the feeling is formed by the acts one performs; so, I cannot refer to it in order to act upon it. Which means that I can neither seek within myself the true condition which will impel me to act, nor apply to a system of ethics for concepts which will permit me to act. . . . No general ethics can show you what is to be done; there are no omens in the world.

Sartre, *Existentialism*

9.2 | Custom

The line between conduct that conforms to moral rules and conduct that exemplifies customary manners is often shadowy. The word "mores," which signifies the established customs of a society or culture, has an obvious etymological connection with the word "morals." A certain brand of skepticism about the universality of moral princi-

ples derives from the tendency of sociologists and cultural anthropologists to identify what they call the "value system" of a community, and hence its morality, with its *mores*—its customary patterns of conduct, its customary standards of approbation, its customary taboos or prohibitions. Since the *mores* differ from community to community

and, in a given community, from one time to another, the conclusion is easily—but, perhaps, illicitly—reached that morality is relative to the institutions of a particular society and varies with the time and place. Quotations taking the opposite point of view, in defense of universal moral truths, will be found in Section 9.1 on MORAL PHILOSOPHY AND MORALITY and in Section 9.3 on the MORAL LAW.

The quotations collected here discuss custom as a conservative force in society, relate social customs to the stable habits of society's members, call attention to and

comment on the wide diversity of customs, assess the authority that attaches to or derives from social conventions, and discuss the causes and effects of change in customs. The consideration of established customs as having the force of law occurs both here and in Section 12.1 on LAW AND LAWYERS. The effect of custom on standards of taste in the sphere of art and on the prevalence of certain opinions in the sphere of thought is touched on here, but it is also discussed in Section 16.7 on CRITICISM AND THE STANDARDS OF TASTE and in Section 6.5 on OPINION, BELIEF, AND FAITH.

- 1 If one were to offer men to choose out of all the customs in the world such as seemed to them the best, they would examine the whole number, and end by preferring their own; so convinced are they that their own usages far surpass those of all others.

Herodotus, *History*, III, 38

- 2 *Callicles*. Convention and nature are generally at variance with one another.

Plato, *Gorgias*, 482B

- 3 *Athenian Stranger*. All the matters which we are now describing are commonly called by the general name of unwritten customs, and what are termed the laws of our ancestors are all of similar nature. And the reflection which lately arose in our minds, that we can neither call these things laws, nor yet leave them unmentioned, is justified; for they are the bonds of the whole state, and come in between the written laws which are or are hereafter to be laid down; they are just ancestral customs of great antiquity, which, if they are rightly ordered and made habitual, shield and preserve the previously existing written law; but if they depart from right and fall into disorder, then they are like the prows of builders which slip away out of their place and cause a universal ruin—one part drags another down, and the fair superstructure falls because the old foundations are undermined. Reflecting upon this, Cleinias, you ought to bind together the new state in every possible way, omitting nothing, whether great or small, of what are called laws or manners or pursuits, for by these means a city is bound together, and all these things are only lasting when they depend upon one another; and, therefore, we must not wonder if we find that many apparently trifling

customs or usages come pouring in and lengthening out our laws.

Plato, *Laws*, VII, 793A

- 4 If you are at Rome live in the Roman style; if you are elsewhere live as they live elsewhere.

Ambrose, qu. by Taylor, *Ductor Dubitantium*, I, 1

- 5 Ignorant men who apply the tests of their human minds, and measure all the conduct of the human race by the measure of their own custom . . . are like a man handling armour and not knowing what piece is meant for what part of the body and so putting a greave on his head and a helmet on his feet and complaining that they do not fit.

Augustine, *Confessions*, III, 7

- 6 Actions which are against the customs of human societies are to be avoided according to the variety of such customs; so that that which is agreed upon by the custom, or decreed by the law, of state or people, is not to be violated at the mere pleasure whether of citizen or alien. For every part is defective that is not in harmony with the whole.

But when God orders something against the custom or covenant of a state, though it never had been done it must be done; and if it was . . . allowed to lapse, it must be restored; and if it was not a law before, it must be made a law now.

Augustine, *Confessions*, III, 8

- 7 When men unacquainted with other modes of life than their own meet with the record of such actions, unless they are restrained by authority, they look upon them as sins, and do not consider that their own customs either in regard to marriage, or feasts, or dress, or the other necessities and adorn-

ments of human life, appear sinful to the people of other nations and other times. And, distracted by this endless variety of customs, some . . . have thought that there was no such thing as absolute right, but that every nation took its own custom for right; and that, since every nation has a different custom, and right must remain unchangeable, it becomes manifest that there is no such thing as right at all. Such men did not perceive, to take only one example, that the precept, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them," cannot be altered by any diversity of national customs. And this precept, when it is referred to the love of God, destroys all vices; when to the love of one's neighbour, puts an end to all crimes.

Augustine, *Christian Doctrine*, III, 14

8 When a thing is done again and again, it seems to proceed from a deliberate judgment of reason. Accordingly, custom has the force of a law, abolishes law, and is the interpreter of law.

Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 97, 3

9 And what all philosophy cannot implant in the head of the wisest men, does not custom by her sole ordinance teach the crudest common herd?

Montaigne, *Essays*, I, 23, Of Custom

10 The principal effect of the power of custom is to seize and ensnare us in such a way that it is hardly within our power to get ourselves back out of its grip and return into ourselves to reflect and reason about its ordinances. In truth, because we drink them with our milk from birth, and because the face of the world presents itself in this aspect to our first view, it seems that we are born on condition of following this course. And the common notions that we find in credit around us and infused into our soul by our fathers' seed, these seem to be the universal and natural ones. Whence it comes to pass that what is off the hinges of custom, people believe to be off the hinges of reason: God knows how unreasonably, most of the time.

Montaigne, *Essays*, I, 23, Of Custom

11 Each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in.

Montaigne, *Essays*, I, 31, Of Cannibals

12 We are nothing but ceremony; ceremony carries us away, and we leave the substance of things; we hang on to the branches and abandon the trunk and body.

Montaigne, *Essays*, II, 17, Of Presumption

13 True is, that whilome that good poet sayd,

The gentle minde by gentle deeds is knowne:
For a man by nothing is so well bewrayd
As by his manners, in which plaine is showne
Of what degree and what race he is growne.

Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, Bk. VI, III, 1

14 *King Henry*. Nice customs curtsy to great kings.

Shakespeare, *Henry V*, V, ii, 291

15 *Corin*. Those that are good manners at the court are as ridiculous in the country as the behaviour of the country is most mockable at the court.

Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, III, ii, 46

16 *Polonius*. Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,
But not express'd in fancy; rich, not gaudy;
For the apparel oft proclaims the man.

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I, iii, 70

17 Where a man will plead a title of prescription of custom, he shall say that such custom hath been used from time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary, that is as much as to say, no man then alive hath heard any proof to the contrary.

Sir Edward Coke, *Commentary Upon Littleton*, 170

18 Men's thoughts are much according to their inclination; their discourse and speeches according to their learning and infused opinions; but their deeds are after as they have been accustomed. And therefore as Machiavel well noteth (though in an evil-favoured instance,) there is no trusting to the force of nature nor to the bravery of words, except it be corroborate by custom.

Bacon, *Of Custom and Education*

19 I . . . recognised in the course of my travels that all those whose sentiments are very contrary to ours are yet not necessarily barbarians or savages, but may be possessed of reason in as great or even a greater degree than ourselves. I also considered how very different the self-same man, identical in mind and spirit, may become, according as he is brought up from childhood amongst the French or Germans, or has passed his whole life amongst Chinese or cannibals. I likewise noticed how even in the fashions of one's clothing the same thing that pleased us ten years ago, and which will perhaps please us once again before ten years are passed, seems at the present time extravagant and ridiculous. I thus concluded that it is much more custom and example that persuade us than any certain knowledge, and yet in spite of this the voice of the majority does not afford a proof of any value in truths a little difficult to discover, because such truths are much more likely to have been discovered by one man than by a nation.

Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, II

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20 For we must not misunderstand ourselves; we are as much automatic as intellectual; and hence it comes that the instrument by which conviction is attained is not demonstrated alone. How few things are demonstrated! Proofs only convince the mind. Custom is the source of our strongest and most believed proofs. It bends the automaton, which persuades the mind without its thinking about the matter.

Pascal, *Pensées*, IV, 252

21 Montaigne is wrong. Custom should be followed only because it is custom, and not because it is reasonable or just. But people follow it for this sole reason, that they think it just. Otherwise they would follow it no longer, although it were the custom; for they will only submit to reason or justice. Custom without this would pass for tyranny; but the sovereignty of reason and justice is no more tyrannical than that of desire. They are principles natural to man.

It would, therefore, be right to obey laws and customs, because they are laws; but we should know that there is neither truth nor justice to introduce into them, that we know nothing of these, and so must follow what is accepted. By this means we would never depart from them. But people cannot accept this doctrine; and, as they believe that truth can be found, and that it exists in law and custom, they believe them and take their antiquity as a proof of their truth, and not simply of their authority apart from truth. Thus they obey laws, but they are liable to revolt when these are proved to be valueless; and this can be shown of all, looked at from a certain aspect.

Pascal, *Pensées*, V, 325

22 Ideas that in themselves are not all of kin, come to be so united in some men's minds, that it is very hard to separate them; they always keep in company, and the one no sooner at any time comes into the understanding, but its associate appears with it; and if they are more than two which are thus united, the whole gang, always inseparable, show themselves together.

This strong combination of ideas, not allied by nature, the mind makes in itself either voluntarily or by chance; and hence it comes in different men to be very different, according to their different inclinations, education, interests, etc. *Custom* settles habits of thinking in the understanding, as well as of determining in the will, and of motions in the body: all which seems to be but trains of motions in the animal spirits, which, once set a going, continue in the same steps they have used to; which, by often treading, are worn into a smooth path, and the motion in it becomes easy, and as it were natural.

Locke, *Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. II, XXXIII, 5-6

23 How many men have no other ground for their tenets, than the supposed honesty, or learning, or number of those of the same profession? As if honest or bookish men could not err; or truth were to be established by the vote of the multitude: yet this with most men serves the turn. The tenet has had the attestation of reverend antiquity; it comes to me with the passport of former ages, and therefore I am secure in the reception I give it: other men have been and are of the same opinion, (for that is all is said,) and therefore it is reasonable for me to embrace it. A man may more justifiably throw up cross and pile for his opinions, than take them up by such measures. All men are liable to error, and most men are in many points, by passion or interest, under temptation to it. If we could but see the secret motives that influenced the men of name and learning in the world, and the leaders of parties, we should not always find that it was the embracing of truth for its own sake, that made them espouse the doctrines they owned and maintained. This at least is certain, there is not an opinion so absurd, which a man may not receive upon this ground. There is no error to be named, which has not had its professors: and a man shall never want crooked paths to walk in, if he thinks that he is in the right way, wherever he has the footsteps of others to follow.

Locke, *Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. IV, XX, 17

24 Custom . . . is the great guide of human life. It is that principle alone which renders our experience useful to us, and makes us expect, for the future, a similar train of events with those which have appeared in the past. Without the influence of custom, we should be entirely ignorant of every matter of fact beyond what is immediately present to the memory and senses. We should never know how to adjust means to ends, or to employ our natural powers in the production of any effect. There would be an end at once of all action, as well as of the chief part of speculation.

Hume, *Concerning Human Understanding*, V, 36

25 Since no man has a natural authority over his fellow, and force creates no right, we must conclude that conventions form the basis of all legitimate authority among men.

Rousseau, *Social Contract*, I, 4

26 Most peoples, like most men, are docile only in youth; as they grow old they become incorrigible. When once customs have become established and prejudices inveterate, it is dangerous and useless to attempt their reformation; the people, like the foolish and cowardly patients who rave at sight of the doctor, can no longer bear that any one should lay hands on its faults to remedy them.

Rousseau, *Social Contract*, II, 8

27 [The] most important [law] of all . . . is not given on tablets of marble or brass, but on the hearts of the citizens. This forms the real constitution of the State, takes on every day new powers, when other laws decay or die out, restores them or takes their place, keeps a people in the ways in which it was meant to go, and insensibly replaces authority by the force of habit. I am speaking of morality, of custom, above all of public opinion; a power unknown to political thinkers, on which none the less success in everything else depends. With this the great legislator concerns himself in secret, though he seems to confine himself to particular regulations; for these are only the arc of the arch, while manners and morals, slower to arise, form in the end its immovable keystone.

Rousseau, *Social Contract*, II, 12

28 The great art of living easy and happy in society is to study proper behaviour, and even with our most intimate friends to observe politeness; otherwise we will insensibly treat each other with a degree of rudeness, and each will find himself dejected in some measure by the other.

Boswell, *London Journal* (Dec. 1, 1762)

29 Johnson's profound reverence for the Hierarchy made him expect from bishops the highest degree of decorum; he was offended even at their going to taverns; "A bishop (said he,) has nothing to do at a tipping-house. It is not indeed immoral in him to go to a tavern; neither would it be immoral in him to whip a top in Grosvenor-square. But, if he did, I hope the boys would fall upon him, and apply the whip to *him*. There are gradations in conduct; there is morality,—decency,—propriety. None of these should be violated by a bishop. A bishop should not go to a house where he may meet a young fellow leading out a wench."

Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (March 1781)

30 Mere *customary life* (the watch wound up and going on of itself) is that which brings on natural death. Custom is activity without opposition, for which there remains only a formal duration; in which the fulness and zest that originally characterized the aim of life are out of the question—a merely external sensuous existence which has ceased to throw itself enthusiastically into its object. Thus perish individuals, thus perish peoples by a natural death; and though the latter may continue in being, it is an existence without intellect or vitality; having no need of its institutions, because the need for them is satisfied—a political nullity and tedium. In order that a truly universal interest may arise, the spirit of a people must advance to the adoption of some new purpose; but whence can this new purpose originate? It would be a higher, more comprehensive conception of itself, a transcending of its principle, but this very act

would involve a principle of a new order, a new national spirit.

Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, Introduction, 3

31 No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof. What everybody echoes or in silence passes by as true today may turn out to be falsehood tomorrow, mere smoke of opinion, which some had trusted for a cloud that would sprinkle fertilizing rain on their fields. What old people say you cannot do, you try and find that you can. Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new.

Thoreau, *Walden: Economy*

32 Nobody denies that people should be so taught and trained in youth as to know and benefit by the ascertained results of human experience. But it is the privilege and proper condition of a human being, arrived at the maturity of his faculties, to use and interpret experience in his own way. It is for him to find out what part of recorded experience is properly applicable to his own circumstances and character. The traditions and customs of other people are, to a certain extent, evidence of what their experience has taught *them*; presumptive evidence, and as such, have a claim to his deference: but, in the first place, their experience may be too narrow; or they may not have interpreted it rightly. Secondly, their interpretation of experience may be correct, but unsuitable to him. Customs are made for customary circumstances and customary characters; and his circumstances or his character may be uncustomary. Thirdly, though the customs be both good as customs, and suitable to him, yet to conform to custom, merely *as* custom, does not educate or develop in him any of the qualities which are the distinctive endowment of a human being. The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, are exercised only in making a choice. He who does anything because it is the custom makes no choice. He gains no practice either in discerning or in desiring what is best. The mental and moral, like the muscular powers, are improved only by being used. The faculties are called into no exercise by doing a thing merely because others do it, no more than by believing a thing only because others believe it. If the grounds of an opinion are not conclusive to the person's own reason, his reason cannot be strengthened, but is likely to be weakened, by his adopting it: and if the inducements to an act are not such as are consentaneous to his own feelings and character (where affection, or the rights of others, are not concerned) it is so much done towards rendering his feelings and character inert and torpid, instead of active and energetic.

Mill, *On Liberty*, III

33 It is important to give the freest scope possible to

uncustomary things, in order that it may in time appear which of these are fit to be converted into customs.

Mill, *On Liberty*, III

- 34 A man's *fame*, good or bad, and his *honor* or dishonor, are names for one of his social selves. The particular social self of a man called his honor is usually the result of one of those splittings of which we have spoken. It is his image in the eyes of his own "set," which exalts or condemns him as he conforms or not to certain requirements that may not be made of one in another walk of life. Thus a layman may abandon a city infected with cholera; but a priest or a doctor would think such an act incompatible with his honor. A soldier's honor requires him to fight or to die under circumstances where another man can apologize or run away with no stain upon his social self. A judge, a statesman, are in like manner debarred by the honor of their cloth from entering into pecuniary relations perfectly honorable to persons in private life. Nothing is commoner than to hear people discriminate between their different selves of this sort: "As a man I pity you, but as an official I must show you no mercy; as a politician I regard him as an ally, but as a moralist I loathe him"; etc., etc. What may be called "club-opinion" is one of the very strongest forces in life. The thief must not steal from other thieves; the gambler must pay his gambling-debts, though he pay no other debts in the world. The code of honor of fashionable society has throughout history been full of permissions as well as of vetoes, the only reason for following either of which is that so we best serve one of our social selves. You must not lie in general, but you may lie as much as you please if asked about your relations with a lady; you must accept a challenge from an equal, but if challenged by an inferior you may laugh him to scorn: these are examples of what is meant.

William James, *Psychology*, X

- 35 In general, parents and similar authorities follow the dictates of their own super-egos in the upbringing of children. Whatever terms their ego may be on with their super-ego, in the education of the child they are severe and exacting. They have forgotten the difficulties of their own childhood, and are glad to be able to identify themselves fully at last with their own parents, who in their day subjected them to such severe restraints. The result is that the super-ego of the child is not really built up on the model of the parents, but on that of the parents' super-ego; it takes over the same content, it becomes the vehicle of tradition and of all the age-long values which have been handed down in this way from generation to generation.

Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, XXXI

- 36 The girl thought for a time of what he had said. "I suppose," she then said, "that even in your country you have parties, balls and *conversazione*?"

"Yes," he said, "we have those."

"Then you will know," she went on slowly, "that the part of a guest is different from that of a host or hostess, and that people do not want or expect the same things in the two different capacities?"

"I think you are right," said Augustus.

"Now God," she said, "when he created Adam and Eve . . . arranged it so that man takes, in these matters, the part of a guest, and woman that of a hostess. Therefore man takes love lightly, for the honor and dignity of his house is not involved therein. And you can also, surely, be a guest to many people to whom you would never want to be a host. Now, tell me, Count, what does a guest want?"

"I believe," said Augustus when he had thought for a moment, "that if we do, as I think we ought to here, leave out the crude guest, who comes to be regaled, takes what he wants and goes away, a guest wants first of all to be diverted, to get out of his daily monotony or worry. Secondly the decent guest wants to shine, to expand himself and impress his own personality upon his surroundings. And thirdly, perhaps, he wants to find some justification for his existence altogether. But since you put it so charmingly, Signora, please tell me now: What does a hostess want?"

"The hostess," said the young lady, "wants to be thanked."

Isak Dinesen, *The Roads Around Pisa*, IV

- 37 The life-history of the individual is first and foremost an accommodation to the patterns and standards traditionally handed down in his community. From the moment of his birth the customs into which he is born shape his experience and behaviour. By the time he can talk, he is the little creature of his culture, and by the time he is grown and able to take part in its activities, its habits are his habits, its beliefs his beliefs, its impossibilities his impossibilities. Every child that is born into his group will share them with him, and no child born into one on the opposite side of the globe can ever achieve the thousandth part. There is no social problem it is more incumbent upon us to understand than this of the rôle of custom. Until we are intelligent as to its laws and varieties, the main complicating facts of human life must remain unintelligible.

Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, I

- 38 Custom did not challenge the attention of social theorists because it was the very stuff of their own thinking: it was the lens without which they could not see at all.

Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, I