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THE SAGAS OF ICELANDERS - POSSIBILITIES OF ETHICAL
CRITICISM

There is much truth in the assertion that the "Icelandic family sagas are works easy to enjoy, powerful in their effect, but difficult to criticize".¹ The Sagas of Icelanders (or family sagas) can be critically examined for the purposes of establishing their origins or they can be investigated for the purposes of refuting or confirming their historicity. I have always been interested in the Sagas of Icelanders mainly as examples of imaginative writing. I, therefore, welcomed T.M. Andersson's book, The Icelandic Family Saga (1967). At that time he wrote: "The saga is plane narrative with no vertical dimensions" . "there is no guiding principle laid down by the author in order to give his material a specific import" ... "the saga comes very close to pure narrative without ulterior motive of any kind, much closer, for example, than the modern practitioners of objectivity, whose work is, after all, socially or philosophically loaded" (p. 32). According to this view the saga writer in his objectivity produces a work of non-judging, non-questioning neutrality.

Andersson admits that the sagas are not "free of moralism" (p. 31), but the moral or ethical concern is

presumably merely external or peripheral. The people of the sagas live and act in a society, and it is false to consider that social life is one thing, morality and ethics another, and that there exists merely an external and contingent relationship between them. The truth rather is that ethical concepts are embodied in forms of social life.

If the saga is considered as imaginative literature, then the character of a saga figure is the sum total of his actions and words. A meaningful interpretation of these words and actions will enable us to understand what he is. In making this interpretation, we must take into account the ethical norms of the period in which the work was created or in which the story is set, or both periods.

Ethics are concerned with human actions, human behaviour in situations. This behaviour serves a purpose which constitutes part or whole of the agent's intention in doing what he does. Furthermore, the agent's purpose is only to be made intelligible as the expression of his desires and aims. In considering a saga for the purposes of ethical criticism, one should keep in mind questions such as these: Does the saga reflect the intellectual or social or ethical pre-occupations of its time? What view of man does it present? How or why does a man assert himself or his will (or refrain from asserting himself or his will)?

Richard Hoggart has said very wisely:

Every writer - not necessarily in a tragic or comic or in any other manner - means what he says. Sometimes he will deny that there is a meaning. 'I only wanted to write an interesting tale' he will say, ignoring that the interest of a story almost always comes from seeing the human will in action against chaos or against order ... By his choice and arrangement of materials, by the temper of his treatment of them, a writer is implicitly saying: this is one way in which we can face experience or succumb to it or seek to alter it or try to ignore it. ²

The saga writer seems to be doing just that. Auerbach asserts that

He who represents the course of a human life, or a sequence of events extending over a prolonged period of time, and represents it from beginning to end, must prune and isolate arbitrarily. Life has always long since begun, and it is always still going on. And the people whose story the author is telling experience more than he can ever hope to tell. ³

What is isolated in this sense in the sagas is the conflict; the reaction of the individual to a particular situation; the assertion of the individual will, or the non-assertion of it. The method of story-telling is ethically-oriented. The saga writers do not see social forces, they see the vices and virtues, strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures of individuals.

What then are the primary ethical assumptions of the saga heroes? For many years honour has been extolled as ethically the "key-concept". T.M.Andersson has in a recent article⁴ examined the "primacy of honour" and has come to the conclusion that honour is not the writers' chief concern: the "primacy of honour" can be justified only on the basis of an episodic reading of the sagas. P. G. Foote⁵ places the ethical emphasis elsewhere, although his concept is not entirely unrelated to the idea of the preservation and defence of honour at all costs. He writes:

They (saga writers) were dealing with pre-Christian men and women ... and it suited neither their philosophy nor their prejudices to make their characters mentally and morally subject to the heathen pantheon. The gods might be held responsible for a man's good or bad fortune, but they had nothing to do with his character - and it is the individual human character in which the writers were most deeply interested. A code of conduct must exist, however, and the writers endowed their characters with a heroic outlook: they saw them ultimately at the mercy of an inexorable fate and interpreted their careers as examples of courage and defiance in the face of misfortune and death that fate brought upon them.

Foote is right about the deep interest in human character, but the importance of fate is overemphasized.

Andersson, as I have said, has raised doubts about the importance of honour:

It is perhaps time to raise the question of theme; is a given saga just a story, or is there some underlying concern which informs the events and which requires interpretation? Does the author impose values on the action, and if so, is the chief value really honour? Are the real heroes of the sagas the men who guard honour sedulously, and if not, who are the real heroes? (p. 577).

After an examination of ten sagas (or more correctly the behaviour and attitudes of certain important persons in them), Andersson dethrones "honour" and enthrones "moderation" in its place. His conclusions are:

What gives a consistency to the ethical temper of these sagas is precisely a sense of proportion and moderation. They are written against excess ... I can find no better key to the spirit of these sagas than the concept of sophrosyne (p. 577).

The heroic ethics of honour and valiant struggle against fate have now been replaced by the social ethics of moderation. As Andersson says:

They (the sagas) tell the stories of strong individuals who disrupt the social fabric, but despite the respect paid to many of these strong personalities, the sagas are ultimately opposed to social disruption. This is why the heroic lay regularly ends on a note of individual grandeur while the saga, from its social vantage

point, always ends with conciliation and with the restoration of social balance (p. 593).

It seems that from "plane narrative" without "vertical dimensions" the sagas have now become exempla either extolling moderation or condemning excess.

Now there is justification for according honour and its implications a high place in the scale of values celebrated in the Sagas of Icelanders; there is even more justification for asserting the primacy of moderation. In the "moderation" view the author's chief concern is taken to be society, whose highest values are "flexibility and moderation" (Andersson, p. 593), and man's aim is now the restoration and/or preservation of social balance.

That the characters of the Sagas of Icelanders lived in a society implies some degree of social interaction and a recognition of (not necessarily obedience to) the strictures imposed on individual freedom of action and speech. Nevertheless, the centre of gravity seems to me still to be the individual and his actions. Social forces as such are not much taken into account; the "countryside" may make what are presumably value-judgements on an action, but the action is the result of the individual's exercise of his will and his self-determination. He is not restrained from acting by an acute awareness of social forces, by a desire for social harmony and social balance, but by his disposition and inclinations. His actions are

mostly self-oriented (with implications for his kin) and the result of the exercise of his individual will and choice.

From the Sagas of Icelanders one gains a picture of a society that was static and oriented towards tradition, in which people did not question the customs and basic assumptions that governed their lives. This social structure is in the background; in the foreground are the individuals and their actions. What Auerbach says about the realistic literature of antiquity may well be applied to the saga writers' view and use of society:

The existence of society poses no historical problem, it may at best pose a problem in ethics, but even then the ethical question is more concerned with the individual members of society than with the social whole. No matter how many persons may be branded as given to vice or as ridiculous, criticism of vice and excesses poses the problem as one for the individual; consequently social criticism never leads to a definition of the motive forces within society (Mimesis, p. 32).

In support of his "moderation" view Andersson examines Hávamál and concludes that Hávamál "propounds the values of the middle way and social accommodation" (p. 592). I am, however, inclined to accept Foote's view:

Many verses in Hávamál counsel caution and moderation, but these are essentially regarded as pragmatic aids to the maintenance of life and a tolerable position of equality in society. The need for effectiveness was necessarily stressed where in the end a man had only himself to rely on, so much so that the poet of Hávamál also recommends cold guile ... Doubtless the average man's aim was to attain just such self-preserving efficiency.⁶

The Social Contract framed by the Icelanders shows that the individual was more important than the collective or society.

As Foote observes:

The absence of any central executive authority is in keeping with the love of independence which had brought them to the island in the first place. They seem to have been prepared to accept a system designed rather to preserve them from interference than to ensure their complete security - they had little doubt of their ability to look after themselves (p.58).

This lack of a strong central authority meant that uniformity could not be imposed; that personal liberty was more a fact than an ideal; that a man could choose for himself what action he would take and how he would handle any given situation.

I view the Sagas of Icelanders as embodying a system of ethics that I should like to call personalism. This system upholds values that each individual considered he required for his own survival or for his self-esteem;

they are values produced by his own desires, emotions, aspirations and needs. Life is an end in itself, so every human being is an end in himself. The suffering of others is of little concern; what matters is the preservation of one's self-esteem.⁷ This system contains no abstract concept of a "social whole" whose claims could override the actions of individuals - a man acts the way he wants to. There are, admittedly, laws, the transgression of which could lead to an imposition of a sentence, but the execution of that sentence was an individual matter.

Each man is responsible for his actions; he asserts his will or refrains from asserting it according to his own reason and disposition; he aspires to power for himself, even at the expense of others. Personalism upholds a man's right to his own property and the right to dispose of it as he wishes; it recognises that man must never accept an unearned guilt, but if he has earned it, he must not leave it uncorrected. Within the framework of this system the saga hero is neither a puppet nor a paragon, but his conduct, whether or not it outrages our sensibilities and sense of justice and morality, depends upon his self-determination. A man makes his choices largely for the benefit of himself, not in order that he may sacrifice himself to the welfare of society, or that he may restore social balance. When the "countryside"

expresses its approbation or disapproval, such moral judgment is applied to the conduct of man as man, without implicit or explicit reference to the general welfare of society. The blood-feud is perhaps for us the most abhorrent feature of the ethics of personalism, but for the Icelander it was valid.

I shall briefly examine two sagas and one páttir to illustrate some of the tenets of personalism. These works are all either discussed or cited by Andersson in his article in Speculum as examples of sagas praising moderation.

Hoensa-Póris Saga⁸

I suggest that the central ethical principle of this saga is stated by Þorvaldr, son of Tungu-Oddr, and it is the violation by individuals of this principle that leads to conflict:

Bærr er hvern at ráða sínu (p. 20).

Everyone has the right to dispose of his own property. Tungu-Oddr is introduced as an unjust man. It was his practice to fix the price of traders' property and to determine how they are to dispose of it. The Norwegian merchant Qrn lands in the district and refuses to comply with Tungu-Oddr's demands. Qrn is granted lodging by Blund-Ketill, and this is bound to lead to conflict between Tungu-Oddr and Blund-Ketill: the instrument will

be Porvaldr, son of Tungu-Oddr. Both Hersteinn, Blund-Ketill's son, and Qrn predict that father and son will incur the hatred of others in return for this hospitality. However Blund-Ketill has made his choice - forebodings do not deter him. Tungu-Oddr hears of this, and the talk is that Blund-Ketill has shown himself no friend to Tungu-Oddr. Tungu-Oddr is prepared to let the matter lie for the moment, recognising that Blund-Ketill is a man blessed with friends and as brave as they come. Neither is concerned with what others say. They act or refuse to act out of their sense of self-determination.

Blund-Ketill, a man of great bravery, greater wealth and the greatest popularity, handles his own property as he considers best, although always with generosity. During a particularly severe winter he gives his tenants of his own hay, until he has no more to spare. Two more tenants come to request hay. Blund-Ketill goes to Hænsa-Pórir, offers to buy hay from him at a very generous price, but he refuses. Hoensa-Pórir's behaviour is perhaps to us irrational in the situation, but nevertheless true to the type of man he is: a pathetic, mean, miserly, wretched scoundrel, who demands his pound of flesh, and because he is a self-made man, wishes to cling tenaciously to his own property, as he has every right to do. Blund-Ketill, conscious of his superiority over him, appropriates hay, but pays for it:

Blund-Ketill mælti: "Þá mun fara verr, ok munu vér allt at einu hafa heyit, þó at þú bannir, en leggja verð í staðinn ok njóta þess, at vér erum fleiri." (p. 16)

Blund-Ketill said: "So much the worse then, for we are minded to have the hay all the same, even though you forbid it, and put down money here, and take advantage of this that we are more strongly placed."

The fact that he pays for the hay and that, previous to taking it, he made extremely generous offers does not entirely excuse him. Hoensa-Þórir is enraged and goes around whimpering that he has been robbed. Those to whom he complains range themselves on the side of Blund-Ketill, not because they have a fine sense of justice, but because of Blund-Ketill's reputation.

Þorvaldr, son of Tungu-Oddr, takes up Hoensa-Þórir's case in return for money: he is interested only in the fact that Blund-Ketill took another man's property against his will. The scene in which Þorvaldr accepts the case is central to the story. Þorvaldr asks for news:

Hann svarar Þórir: "Raun var þetta, er Blund-Ketill rænti mik." Þorvaldr spurði: "Er sæzk á?" "Fjarri ferr um þat," segir Þórir. "Hví gegnir þat, Arngrímr," sagði Þorvaldr, "at þér hefðingjar látið þá skömm fram fara?" Arngrímr svarar: "Lýgr hann mestan hlut frá, ok er alllítit til haft." "Var þat þó satt, at hann hafði heyit?" segir Þorvaldr. "Hafði hann

víst," segir Arngrímr. "Bærr er hverr at ráða sínu," sagði Porvaldr ..." (pp. 19-20)

Pórir answered him: "It was an ordeal, when Blund-Ketill robbed me."

Porvaldr asked: "Has that been settled?"

"Far from it," said Pórir.

"How does it come about, Arngrímr," said Porvaldr, "that you chieftains allow such things to take place?"

"He lies for the most part," said Arngrímr, "and there is very little in it."

"Was it nevertheless true that he took the hay?" said Porvaldr.

"He took it indeed," said Arngrímr.

"Everyone has the right to dispose of his own property," said Porvaldr ...

Blund-Ketill is summoned. His guest Orm notices his anger, rushes out, shoots, and the arrow strikes Helgi, son of Arngrímr. Pórir announces that Helgi's dying words were: "Brenni, brenni Blund-Ketil inni" (p. 23). The burning is duly carried out. The surprising thing is that there is no comment from the "countryside" about this atrocious deed. Here Blund-Ketill passes out of the story.

Revenge must obviously be taken. Þorbjörn and Hersteinn go to Tungu-Oddr. He promises help out of self-interest: instead of giving aid he simply expropriates the dead Blund-Ketill's property. They then secure an offer of help from Þorkell Trefill, but before he knows

of the burning. He states quite clearly that he would not have been so ready to offer his help if he had known of the burning beforehand. Next they go to Gunnarr Hlífáson, ostensibly to ask for his daughter Þuríðr to be betrothed to Hersteinn. Gunnarr is at a loss to understand why they are so eager to have an immediate answer. After threatening him they secure his agreement to a betrothal - then they tell him of the burning of Blund-Ketill. What is his reaction?

Gunnarr svaraði fá, lastaði lítt, enda lofaði eigi.
(p. 30)

Gunnarr said few things in reply, blamed little, but did not praise either.

Gunnarr now takes them to Þórðr Gellir, his brother-in-law, who was fostering Þuríðr. Gunnarr forces Þórðr to pledge Þuríðr, then tells him of the burning. He realizes he has been fooled, but is bound to help. Finally Hersteinn himself kills Hoensa-Þórir, winning for the deed great honour and warm commendation.

The epilogue to the main action again involves the misuse of another's property. Þóroddr, son of Tungu-Oddr, asks for the hand of Jófríðr, daughter of Gunnarr Hlífáson, but he is refused because of family hostility. Meanwhile Gunnarr and Hersteinn have exchanged properties so that Gunnarr now occupies Blund-Ketill's land which Tungu-Oddr had expropriated. Tungu-Oddr decides to press his claim to the land. The first attempt is frustrated and Tungu-

Oddr now plans a direct attack on Gunnarr. Þóroddr assures Gunnarr that they want a reconciliation and Gunnarr agrees. Tungu-Oddr is ignorant of this supposed desire for reconciliation and is ready to burn Gunnarr's house and everyone in it. Þóroddr informs his father of the reconciliation between Gunnarr and himself. This infuriates Tungu-Oddr. Þóroddr's opinion is that a fight between him and his father will be the only way to settle things, if nothing else proves acceptable. Men, however, intervene between them. Jófríðr is promised to Þóroddr, to Tungu-Oddr's intense displeasure. It is clear that the reconciliation between the opposing parties here is the result of Þóroddr's emotional self-interest, not the result of a desire to restore "social balance".

An important question arises: If Blund-Ketill is the hero (as he is according to Andersson in Speculum) exemplifying moderation and deserving of universal respect, why do the chieftains hang back from helping to avenge his burning? Those chieftains who render aid are implicated in the feud through the use of guile! They hang back because they put themselves before any considerations of healing disruptions in the social fabric. Everyman has a right to his own property; every man has a right to his own life. Given the choice and opportunity he will not allow himself to be sacrificed by others in the interests of society.

Þorsteins Þáttur Stangarhöggs⁹

Here again the plot springs from the words and deeds of individuals. Þórarinn, a fierce viking in his day, is now nearly blind and has only his weapons as symbols of his former martial glory. Nevertheless, he still adheres firmly to the old concept of honour, and in his impotence still makes the appropriate heroic gesture. When he learns about the horsefight at which his son received the blow, he says:

"Ekki mundi mik þess vara, at ek munda ragan son eiga." (p. 70)

"I'd never have expected that I would have a coward for a son."

When at the end of the story Bjarni comes to challenge Þorsteinn to a duel, Þórarinn says:

"Þykki mér ok betra at missa þín en eiga ragan son." (p. 75)

"It seems to me better to lose you than to have a coward for a son."

At the end of the duel Bjarni falsely announces to him that his son has been slain. He immediately asks whether he had put up any kind of defence. Bjarni then offers to take the old man in and to give him a seat of honour.

Þórarinn replies:

"Svá er mér farit," kvað karl, "sem þeim, er ekki eigu undir sér, ok verðr heitum heimskr maðr feginn. En svá eru heit yður hqfðingja, þá er þér vilið fróa mannið eptir slíka

atburði, at þat er mánaðarfró, en þá erum vér virðir eptir þat sem aðrir framfærslumenn, ok fyrensk við þat seint várir harmar." (p. 77)

"I am now in the same position as those who have little in their power," said the old man, "and fair words make a fool's heart leap for joy. And such are the promises of you chieftains, when you wish to comfort a man after any such mishap, that the comfort lasts for a month, but then our worth is fixed at that of other paupers, and with that our sorrows are slowly forgotten."

To lose his independence, to compromise his sense of honour and his own worth as a man, is anathema to him, so he tries to kill Bjarni. His ethical values are valid for himself. The fact that physically he can no longer assert them does not invalidate them. He does nothing else in the story, but he has made his point.

Bjarni's servant, Þórðr, is an Ójafnaðarmaðr (a characteristic apparently not restricted to chieftains) and behaves accordingly. Þórhallr and Þorvaldr are scandal-mongers and pay with their lives for meddling in affairs that do not concern them. Bjarni is not characterized. Þorsteinn, son of old Þórarinn, is strong, but even-tempered (vel stillr); yet he kills Þórðr for having struck him in the face.

When Bjarni learns of the killing of Þórðr he succeeds in getting Þorsteinn outlawed for manslaughter. Þorsteinn

ignores the sentence and continues working on his father's farm. Bjarni does nothing about enforcing the sentence of outlawry. They both obey the dictates of their own consciences: Þorsteinn has to help his father; Bjarni allows him to do so.

Months pass. Rannveig, Bjarni's wife, in traditional manner proceeds to goad him to take revenge on Þorsteinn. She tells him:

"... menn þykkjast eiga vita, hvat Þorsteinn stangarhogg mun þess gera, at þér muni þurfa þykkja at hefna. Hefir hann nú vegit húskarla þína þrjá. Þykkir þingmönnum þínum eigi vænt til halds, þar sem þú ert, ef þessa er óhefnt, ok eru þér mjök mislagðar hendr í kné." (p. 74)

"... men do not seem to understand what Þorsteinn Staff-Struck must do so that it would seem necessary for you to take revenge. He has now killed three of your housecarls, and it seems to your thingmen that there is no hope of support where you are concerned if this is unavenged. You do all the wrong things and leave the right undone."

The point is not as she puts it - he acts the way he considers right. His opinion is that Þorsteinn has killed few without good reason.

The next day he goes alone to settle the matter with Þorsteinn, much to his wife's alarm. He goes because his patience has been tried beyond endurance by

all the taunting of his wife and others, not because a social disruption has to be breached.

Bjarni challenges Þorsteinn to single combat. They play at fighting. After a while Þorsteinn says:

"en gjarna vilda ek nú hætta þessum leik, því at ek em hræddr, at meira muni mega gæfa þín en ógípta mín, ok er hverr frekr til fjörsins um alla þraut ..." (p. 76)

"and I would gladly leave off this game, because I am afraid that your good luck will prove stronger than my bad luck, and every man is eager for life in the last resort ..."

Perhaps Þorsteinn is afraid that either of them will be provoked into making the fight a real one. If this happens, then good luck or bad luck will be blamed for the consequences, since they do not themselves want it to happen. The main characters in the story all wish to pursue their lives in their own way. Some suffer for it; others do not.

Vápnfirðinga Saga¹⁰

Attitudes towards other people's property rights run strongly through the plot of this saga. Brodd-Helgi is introduced as a big man, strong, sturdy, comely, outstanding, not much of a talker in his youth, overbearing, headstrong, tricky and capricious. He does not have to develop as a character. He will no doubt manifest behaviour in accordance with this catalogue without consideration for social forces.

Brodd-Helgi kills Svartr who had been outlawed. The dying Svartr predicts that such kin-hurt will persist in Brodd-Helgi's family that it will be remembered as long as the land is inhabited. This prophecy is a literary device to heighten tension, to rivet interest. The events will take their course in spite of Svartr's prophecy, without regard for social order and balance, because individuals will act according to their own ethical standards.

Brodd-Helgi becomes rich and ostentatious. Great friendship develops between him and Geitir. A ship comes in belonging to Hrafn, a Norwegian, a miserly, taciturn, self-contained man. He is rich and renowned for his treasures. Helgi offers him a place to stay, but he refuses, having learnt that Helgi is haughty and greedy for money. Geitir takes him in. At a feast Geitir and Helgi are deep in conversation. Later Geitir strongly urges Hrafn to attend the games. Hrafn does so and is killed. Þorleifr, Hrafn's partner, collects Hrafn's property and sails off. The attempt of Helgi and Geitir to intercept him is frustrated. Helgi then asks Geitir about the box that belonged to Hrafn; Geitir in turn enquires about Hrafn's gold ring. Each denies knowledge of the respective objects. A coolness begins to develop between them.

Porleifr returns to Iceland, having handed over Hrafn's property to his heirs. Helgi now wants Porleifr summoned for non-payment of temple-tax, and uses a certain Ketill for the purpose. Porleifr, a Christian and an individual, is of the opinion that what is paid to a temple is put to very bad use. Because Porleifr takes a personal view of a public matter, Ketill is prompted to reply:

"Pat er mikil dul, at þú þykkisk betr kunna en allir aðrir menn." (p. 34)

"That is very conceited of you that you think you know better than all other men."

Ketill goes to summon Porleifr, but receives from him such hospitality before departing that he promises to see that the charge against Porleifr falls through. This happens later. Helgi blames Geitir for this humiliation and their friendship is on the wane.

Halla, Geitir's sister and Helgi's wife, now leaves her husband. Geitir comes to ask for Halla's property, but Helgi refuses to hand it over. In the spring Geitir goes to claim the property a second time - again without success. Geitir summons Helgi, but is overborne by sheer force both at the Sunnudalr Thing and the Althing. Open hostility now develops between them.

Þórðr, one of Helgi's thingmen, quarrels with Þórmóðr, one of Geitir's thingmen, over pasturage and timber. Helgi supports Þórðr by maliciously slaughtering

Pormóðr's cattle and felling his timber. After some reluctance to help Pormóðr, Geitir finally advises him to go for aid and summon Helgi for tree-felling. However, some of the party of summoners are killed and left to lie unburied. A plan to recover the bodies is now put into operation. Geitir and a few men loiter near Helgi's house. There is an exchange of words between Helgi and Geitir, who expresses distress at not being able to bury kinsmen.

Helgi answers:

"Þat er enn líkligra, at inn lægri verði at lúta."
(p. 43)

"That is only to be expected that the weaker
must bow down."

Society can neither sanction nor condemn this manifestation of personalism, but other individuals can, and no doubt will, if they have the personal resources. The bodies are recovered and Helgi admits:

"ok er ávallt, at Geitir er vitrastr vár,
þótt hann verði jafnan ofríki borinn." (p. 43)

"and it is always so that Geitir is the cleverest
of us, though he is always borne down by force."

Halla, who is now very ill, sends for Helgi. His callous behaviour at this point perhaps alienates our sympathy, but it is quite in keeping with the type of man he is. Halla dies, Geitir is told the whole story, and everything is quiet for a while.

Helgi continues his encroachments, and at last Geitir's thingmen take counsel and Þórarinn, their spokesman, issues an ultimatum to Geitir:

"Hversu lengi skal svá fram fara," segir hann, "hvárt þar til er yfir lýkr með þllu? Nú gengr margt manna undan þér, ok lagask allir til Helga, ok virðum vér þér þrekleysi eitt til ganga, er þú hlífisk við Helga. Þú ert ykkar snarari, en þó hefir þú eigi með þér minni garpa en hann hefir með sér. Ok eru nú tveir kostir af várri hendi, at þú farir heim í Krossavík á bú þitt, ok flyt þaðan aldri síðan, en ger í mót Helga, ef hann gerir þér nokkurn ósóma heðan í frá, elligar munum vér selja bústaði vára ok ráðask í brottu, sumir af landi, en sumir ór heraði." (p. 46)

"How long must this go on?" he said, "Until there is an end to everything? A lot of men are now leaving you, and are all drawn to Helgi, and we consider that your lack of fortitude is the only reason why you hold back from Helgi. You are the sharper-witted of the two of you, and besides you have no worse fighters with you than he has with him. There are now two choices at our hands: that you go back to Krossavík to your farm and never move again from there, but take action against Helgi if he does you any dishonour from now on, or else we will sell our dwellings and move out, some from the country, and some from the neighbourhood."

It is clear that the thingmen strongly object to Geitir's moderate views and reactions. Roused by these threats

Geitir prepares to return home. He consults, among others, Ólvir inn spaki, who asks after Helgi. Geitir surprisingly speaks of Helgi as an outstanding man, quarrelsome and headstrong, but a good fellow in many respects, but admits that he has suffered a great deal from Helgi's injustice. Geitir is not being ironical when he expresses a kind of admiration for some of Helgi's qualities. This is his assessment of Helgi as a man.

Later (from a reconstruction of the lacuna in the manuscript) Geitir kills Helgi. Bjarni, Helgi's son, is goaded by his stepmother, Þorgerðr, into avenging his father. He kills Geitir in a contemptible way, but is repentant and drives his stepmother away. In the spring the bændr do away with the local Thing:

Þótti óvænt í millum at ganga þeira manna,
er í slíkum stórmælum áttu hlut. (p. 53)

They considered it hopeless to intervene
between men who were engaged in such great feuds.

This shows that a public institution is powerless to deal with people who subscribe to the ethics of personalism.

Porkell, son of Geitir, returns to Iceland. Bjarni offers him honourable redress and the right to award his own damages. He ignores these offers and everyone assumes he is bent on revenge. His first two attempts fail. On the day agreed on for the third encounter, the proposed burning of Helgi, Porkell falls ill. Helgi, son of

Droplaug, accuses Porkell of cowardice, and he and his brother withdraw their help.

The following spring Porkell and Bjarni set out for the Althing together. At the end of the meeting Porkell leaves first. A fight between the contending parties then takes place on a small farm owned by a certain Eyvindr, a fight which ends in a most unheroic manner: Eyvindr rushes between the fighters with a beam, while women throw clothing over their weapons. Both Porkell and Bjarni are wounded.

Porkell, although his wounds are healed, remains unfit for much work. That summer there is little haymaking, and the outlook was so unpromising that it seemed that the stock would have to be killed off. Bjarni comes to Porkell's aid and the two are reconciled. Bjarni is perhaps still repentant; Porkell is prevented by his reduced circumstances and physical incapacity from pursuing the feud. The reconciliation arises from their personal decision and choice, not because they are opposed to social disruption.

I hope sufficient evidence has been presented to justify the tentative conclusion that the authors of the Sagas of Icelanders were chiefly interested in individual man and his personal ethical values: man in his successes

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and failures; his cowardice and bravery; his moderation and brutality; his affection and hatred; his respect for and encroachment on the rights of others; man, the creature who believes he is an end in himself; whose system of values is what I called personalism.

NOTES

1. Richard F. Allen, Fire and Iron (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), p. 3.
2. Richard Hoggart, "Why I Value Literature", Speaking to Each Other (London, 1970), pp. 11-12.
3. Erich Auerbach, Mimesis (trans. Willard Trask, Princeton, 1968), pp. 548-9.
4. T. M. Andersson, "The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas", Speculum XLV (1970), pp. 575-93.
5. P. G. Foote, "An Essay on the Saga of Gisli", in The Saga of Gisli (trans. G. Johnston, London, 1963), p. 63.
6. In Peter Foote and David Wilson, The Viking Achievement (London, 1970), p. 425.
7. Sometimes this attitude did not imply a life that was reasoned and sensible, cf. the behaviour of the Ójafnaðarmaðr; sometimes it was no more than making the right gesture at the right time. There are also instances where what is celebrated as a stirring example of the maintenance of one's honour is nothing but savagery and brutality.
8. Page-references are to the edition in Íslenzk Fornrit III (1938).
9. Page-references are to the edition in Íslenzk Fornrit XV (1950).
10. Page-references are to the edition in Íslenzk Fornrit XI (1950).