

Recent Tendencies in Ethics eBook

Recent Tendencies in Ethics by William Ritchie Sorley

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Contents

Recent Tendencies in Ethics eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	5
Page 1.....	6
Page 2.....	7
Page 3.....	8
Page 4.....	9
Page 5.....	10
Page 6.....	12
Page 7.....	13
Page 8.....	15
Page 9.....	16
Page 10.....	17
Page 11.....	18
Page 12.....	19
Page 13.....	20
Page 14.....	21
Page 15.....	22
Page 16.....	23
Page 17.....	24
Page 18.....	25
Page 19.....	26
Page 20.....	27
Page 21.....	28
Page 22.....	29



Page 23..... 30

Page 24..... 31

Page 25..... 32

Page 26..... 33

Page 27..... 34

Page 28..... 35

Page 29..... 36

Page 30..... 37

Page 31..... 38

Page 32..... 39

Page 33..... 40

Page 34..... 41

Page 35..... 42

Page 36..... 43

Page 37..... 45

Page 38..... 46

Page 39..... 47

Page 40..... 48

Page 41..... 49

Page 42..... 51

Page 43..... 53

Page 44..... 54

Page 45..... 55

Page 46..... 57

Page 47..... 58

Page 48..... 59



Page 49..... 61

Page 50..... 64

Table of Contents

Section	Table of Contents	Page
Start of eBook		1
I.		1
II.		13
III.		30
INDEX.		48

Page 1

I.

Characteristics.

A survey of ethical thought, especially English ethical thought, during the last century would have to lay stress upon one characteristic feature. It was limited in range,—limited, one may say, by its regard for the importance of the facts with which it had to deal. The thought of the period was certainly not without controversy; it was indeed controversial almost to a fault. But the controversies of the time centred almost exclusively round two questions: the question of the origin of moral ideas, and the question of the criterion of moral value. These questions were of course traditional in the schools of philosophy; and for more than a century English moralists were mainly occupied with inherited topics of debate. They gave precision to the questions under discussion; and their controversies defined the traditional opposition of ethical opinion, and separated moralists into two hostile schools known as Utilitarian and Intuitionist.

As regards the former question—that of the origin of moral ideas—the Utilitarian School held that they could be traced to experience; and by ‘experience’ they meant in the last resort sense-perceptions and the feelings of pleasure and of pain which accompany or follow sense-perception. All the facts of our moral consciousness, therefore,—the knowledge of right and wrong, the judgments of conscience, the recognition of duty and responsibility, the feelings of reverence, remorse, and moral indignation,—all these could be traced, they thought, to an origin in experience, to an origin which in the last resort was sensuous, that is, due to the perceptions of the senses and the feelings of pleasure and pain which accompany or follow them.

With regard to the criterion or standard of morality,—the second question to which I have to call attention,—they held that the distinction between right and wrong depended upon the consequences of an action in the way of pleasure and pain. That action was right which on the whole and in the long run would bring pleasure or happiness to those whom it affected: that action was wrong which on the whole and in the long run would bring pain rather than pleasure to those whom it affected.

From their view as to the origin of moral ideas, the school might more properly be called the Empirical School. It is from their views on the question of the standard of value, or the criterion of morality, that it claimed, and that it received, the name Utilitarian[1]. On both these points the Utilitarian School was opposed by an energetic but less compact body of writers, known as Intuitionists.



Page 2

[Footnote 1: It seems to have been through J.S. Mill's influence that the term obtained currency. It was used by him as the name of a "little society to be composed of young men agreeing in fundamental principles" which he formed in the winter of 1822-23. He "did not invent the word, but found in one of Galt's novels, the 'Annals of the Parish.'" "With a boy's fondness for a name and a banner I seized on the word, and for some years called myself and others by it as a sectarian appellation" ('Autobiography,' pp. 79, 80; cf. 'Utilitarianism,' p. 9 n.) A couple of sentences from Galt may be quoted: "As there was at the time a bruit and a sound about universal benevolence, philanthropy, utility, and all the other disguises with which an infidel philosophy appropriated to itself the charity, brotherly love, and well-doing inculcated by our holy religion, I set myself to task upon these heads.... With well-doing, however, I went more roundly to work. I told my people that I thought they had more sense than to secede from Christianity to become Utilitarians, for that it would be a confession of ignorance of the faith they deserted, seeing that it was the main duty inculcated by our religion to do all in morals and manners to which the new-fangled doctrine of utility pretended." Mill is wrong in supposing that his use of the term "was the first time that any one had taken the title of Utilitarian"; and Galt, who represents his annalist as writing of the year 1794, is historically justified. Writing in 1781 Bentham uses the word 'utilitarian,' and again in 1802 he definitely asserts that it is the only name of his creed ('Works,' x. 92, 392). M. Halevy ('L'evolution de la doctrine utilitaire,' p. 300) draws attention to the presence of the word in Jane Austen's 'Sense and Sensibility,' published in 1811.]

The Intuitionists maintained—to put the matter briefly—that the moral consciousness of man could not be entirely accounted for by experiences of the kind laid stress on by the Utilitarians. They maintained that moral ideas were in their origin spiritual, although they might be called into definite consciousness by the experience of the facts to which they could be applied. Experience might call them forth into the light of day; but it was held that they belonged, in nature and origin, to the constitution of man's mind. On this ground, therefore, the school was properly called Intuitionist: they held that moral ideas were received by direct vision or intuition, as it were, not by a process of induction from particular facts.

And, in the second place, with regard to the criterion of morality, that also (they held) was not dependent on the consequences in the way of happiness and misery which the Utilitarians emphasised. On the contrary, moral ideas themselves had an independent validity; they had a worth and authority for conduct which could not be accounted for by any consequences in which action resulted: belonging as they did to the essence of the human spirit, they also had authority over the conduct of man's life.

Page 3

Now the ethical controversies of last century were almost entirely about these two points and between these two opposed schools. No doubt the two questions thus discussed did go very near to the root of the whole matter. They pointed to the consideration of the question of man's place in the universe and his spiritual nature as determining the part which it was his to play in the world. They suggested, if they did not always raise, the question whether man is entirely a product of nature or whether he has a spiritual essence to which nature may be subdued. But the larger issues suggested were not followed out. Common consent seemed to limit the discussion to the two questions described; and this limitation of the controversy tended to a precision and clearness in method, which is often wanting in the ethical thought of the present day, disturbed as it is by new and more far-reaching problems.

This limitation of scope, which I venture to select as the leading characteristic of last century's ethical enquiries, may be further seen in the large amount of agreement between the two schools regarding the content of morality. The Utilitarians no more than the Intuitionists were opponents of the traditional—as we may call it—the Christian morality of modern civilisation. They both adopted and defended the well-recognised virtues of truth and justice, of temperance and benevolence, which have been accepted by the common tradition of ages as the expression of man's moral consciousness. The Intuitionists no doubt were sometimes regarded—they may indeed have sometimes regarded themselves—as in a peculiar way the guardians of the traditional morality, and as interested more than their opponents in defending a view in harmony with man's spiritual essence and inheritance. But we do not find any attack upon the main content of morality by the Utilitarian writers. On the contrary, they were interested in vindicating their own full acceptance of the traditional morality. This is, in particular, the case with John Stuart Mill, the high-minded representative of the Utilitarian philosophy in the middle of last century. "In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth," he says, "we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. To do as one would be done by, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality."^[1]

[Footnote 1: Utilitarianism, 9th ed., pp. 24, 25.]

No doubt Mill was a practical reformer as well as a philosophical thinker, and he wished on certain special points to revise the accepted code. He says that "the received code of ethics is by no means of divine right, that mankind has still much to learn as to the effects of actions on the general happiness."^[1] He would even take this point—the modifiability of the ordinary moral code—as a sort of test question distinguishing his own system from that of the intuitional moralists; and in one place he says that "the contest between the



Page 4

morality which appeals to an external standard, and that which grounds itself on internal conviction, is the contest of progressive morality against stationary—of reason and argument against the deification of mere opinion and habit. The doctrine that the existing order of things is the natural order, and that, being natural, all innovation upon it is criminal, is as vicious in morals as it is now at last admitted to be in physics and in society and government." [2]

[Footnote 1: Ibid., p. 35.]

[Footnote 2: Dissertations, ii. 472.]

A passage such as this leads us to ask, What exactly is the extent of the modifications which Mill seeks to make in the ordinary scale of values? Does he, for instance, wish to invert any ordinary moral rules? Would he do away with, or in any important respect modify, the duties of truth or justice, temperance or benevolence? Far from it He only suggests, as many moralists of both parties have suggested, that in the application of moral law to the details of experience certain modifications are required. How far he goes in this direction may be seen from his own instance, that of truth. He would admit certain exceptions to the law of truth; he would give the less rigorous answers to the time-honoured questions as to whether one should tell the truth to an invalid in a dangerous illness or to a would-be criminal. But Mill always asserts the sanctity of the general principle; and, on this account, he holds that "in order that the exception may not extend itself beyond the need, and may have the least possible effect in weakening reliance on veracity, it ought to be recognised and, if possible, its limits defined; and if the principle of utility is good for anything, it must be good for weighing these conflicting utilities against one another, and marking out the region within which one or the other preponderates [1]." He holds that there are such limits to veracity. He even thinks—though here he is not quite correct—that such limits have been acknowledged by all moralists [2]. He would have been correct if he had said that they had been acknowledged by moralists of all schools: the admission of these limits is not peculiar to Utilitarians. But he vigorously defends the validity of the general rule, and maintains that, in considering any possible exception, we have to take account not merely of the present utility of the falsehood, but of its effect upon the sanctity of the general principle in the minds of men. The Utilitarian doctrine is expressly used by him to confirm the ordinary general laws of the moral consciousness. Nay, these rules—such as the duties of being temperate and just and benevolent—were, according to Mill, themselves the result of experiences of utility on the part of our predecessors, and from them handed down to us by the tradition of the race. No doubt in this Mill is applying a theoretical view too easily to a question of history. It is one thing to maintain, as he does, that utility is the



Page 5

correct test of morality; it is another thing altogether to say that our ordinary moral rules are the records or expressions of earlier judgments of utility. The former statement is made as a controversial statement which is admitted to be so far doubtful that most men need to be convinced of it. The latter statement could only be true if nobody had ever doubted the former—if everybody in past ages had accepted utility as the standard of morality. But, for our present purpose, his attitude to this question is of interest only as bringing out the point that the different schools of ethical thought during last century had a large basis of common agreement, and that this basis of common agreement was their acknowledgment of the validity of the moral rules recognised by the ordinary conscience.

[Footnote 1: Utilitarianism, p. 34.]

[Footnote 2: Ibid., p. 33.]

The Utilitarians no more than the Intuitionists sought to make any fundamental change in the content of right and of wrong as acknowledged by modern society. Their controversies were almost entirely of what may be called an academic kind, and, however decided, would have little effect upon a man's practical attitude. But it would not be possible to make any such confident assertion regarding the ethical controversies of the present day. We have no longer the same common basis of agreement to rely upon that our predecessors had a generation ago. There are many indications in recent literature that the suggestion is now made more readily than it was twenty or thirty years ago that the scale of moral values may have to be revised; and it seems to me that the ethical controversies of the coming generation will not be restricted to academic opponents whose disputes concern nothing more than the origin of moral ideas and their ultimate criterion. Modern controversy will involve these questions, but it will go deeper and it will spread its results wider: it appears as if it would not hesitate to call in question the received code of morality, and to revise our standard of right and wrong. One school at any rate has already made a claim of this sort, and the extravagance of its teaching has not prevented it from attracting adherents.

It is on this ground, therefore,—because I believe that the ethical question is no longer so purely an academic question as it was some years ago, because it affects not only the philosophic thinker but the practical man who is concerned with the problems of his day,—that I have selected the topic for these lectures. It is not merely that many modern writers assert some general doctrine as to the relativity of right and wrong. So much was implied, though it was not much laid stress upon, in the utilitarian doctrine. For the utilitarian conduct is right according to the amount of happiness it produces: goodness is relative to its tendency to produce happiness. But a much greater importance may attach to the assertion of the relativity of morals when one couples that

doctrine with the idea now prevalent of the indefinitely great changes which the progress of the race brings about, not only in the social order but also in the structure and faculties of man himself.

Page 6

Hence it is not surprising to find that there are at the present day some writers who ask for nothing less than a revision of the whole traditional morality, and in whose minds that demand is connected with the dominant doctrine of progress as it is expressed in the theory of evolution.

Perhaps we might trace the beginnings of this controversy as to the content of what is right and what is wrong to an older opposition in ethical thought, an opposition which especially affects the utilitarian doctrine—the controversy of Egoism and Altruism. If we look at these two conceptions of egoism and altruism as the Utilitarians did, if we regard the conception of egoism as having to do with one's own personal happiness, and that of altruism as describing the general happiness, the happiness of others rather than of oneself, then obviously the questions arise whether the conduct which produces the greatest happiness of others will or will not also produce the greatest happiness of the individual agent, and which should be chosen in the event of their disagreement. Is my happiness and that which will tend to it always to be got on the same lines of conduct as those which will bring about the greatest happiness of the greatest number?

The Utilitarian writers of last century were of course conscious of this problem, conscious that there was a possible discrepancy between egoistic conduct and altruistic conduct; but they agreed to lay stress upon altruistic results as determining moral quality. Their tendency was to minimise the difference between the egoistic and the altruistic effects of action, and in so far as a difference had to be allowed to emphasise the importance of the claims of the community at large, that is, roughly speaking, to take the altruistic standpoint. Recent and more careful investigators have brought out more exactly the extent and significance of the divergence. In particular this was done with perfect clearness and precision by the late Professor Sidgwick. He showed that the difference—although it might be easily exaggerated—was yet real and important, that the two systems did not mean the same thing, that we could not rely upon altruistic conduct always being for individual benefit, that there was no 'natural identity' between egoism and altruism. He held that morality, to save it from an unsolved dualism, required a principle capable of reconciling the discrepancy between the conduct in accordance with the axiom of Benevolence and the conduct in accordance with the equally rational axiom of Self-love.[1]

[Footnote 1: Professor Sidgwick's last words on the question are as follows: "If then the reconciliation of duty and self-interest is to be regarded as a hypothesis logically necessary to avoid a fundamental contradiction in one chief department of our thought, it remains to ask how far this necessity constitutes a sufficient reason for accepting this hypothesis.... Those who hold that



Page 7

the edifice of physical science is really constructed of conclusions logically inferred from self-evident premises, may reasonably demand that any practical judgments claiming philosophic certainty should be based on an equally firm foundation. If, on the other hand, we find that in our supposed knowledge of the world of nature propositions are commonly taken to be universally true, which yet seem to rest on no other grounds than that we have a strong disposition to accept them, and that they are indispensable to the systematic coherence of our beliefs,—it will be more difficult to reject a similarly supported assumption in ethics, without opening the door to universal scepticism” (‘Methods of Ethics,’ 6th ed., pp. 506, 507).]

But while this question of egoism and altruism has thus been recognised as a possible source of perplexity, affecting the ethical standard itself, both egoists and orthodox utilitarians have commonly agreed—though for different reasons—to insist that morality means the same for them both, and to hold with Epicurus that “we cannot lead a life of pleasure which is not also a life of prudence, honour, and justice.” It is only in quite recent days that a thoroughgoing attempt has been made to revalue all the old standards of morality. And the attempt is made from a point of view which is certainly not altruistic. The Utilitarian writers of last generation, if they admitted the conflict of egoism and altruism, weighted every consideration on the side of altruism. They emphasised therefore the agreement between their own utilitarian doctrine and the Christian morality in which altruism is fundamental. On the other hand, the more recent tendency to which I refer emphasises and exalts the egoistic side, and thus accentuates the difference between the new moral code—if we may call it moral—and the Christian morality.

The boldest and most brilliant exponent of this tendency is Friedrich Nietzsche[1], already the object of a cult in Germany, and an author to be reckoned with as one of the new forces in European thought. It is true that some of the most characteristic products of his genius are closely akin to the insanity which clouded his later years. Yet it is impossible to read his writings without recognising his penetrating insight as well as his abundance of virile passion. Besides, in spite of all his extravagances—or, perhaps, because of them—he is symptomatic of certain tendencies of the age. Nietzsche’s demand is for nothing less than a revision of the whole moral code and a reversal of its most characteristic provisions. And he has the rare distinction of being a writer on morality who disclaims the title of ‘moralist.’

[Footnote 1: Friedrich Nietzsche, the son of a clergyman, was born in Saxony in 1844. In 1869 he became Professor of Classical Philology in Basel, and held this post for ten years, though his work was interrupted by ill-health for a long period. His first book was published in 1871; the preface to the last was dated “on the 30th of September 1888, the day on which the first book of the Transvaluation of all Values was completed.” He became hopelessly insane in 1889, and died in 1900. The reader will find a luminous

estimate of his work in the essay on “The Life and Opinions of Friedrich Nietzsche” in Pringle-Pattison’s ‘Man’s Place in the Cosmos,’ 2nd ed., 1902.]



Page 8

The ideas which Nietzsche expresses go to the root of the matter. In the first place, he drew a distinction between what he regarded as two different types of morality. One of these he called the morality of masters or nobles, and he called the other the morality of slaves. Self-reliance and courage may be cited as the qualities typical of the noble morality, for they are the qualities which tend to make the man who possesses them a master over others, to give him a prominent and powerful place in the world, and to help him to subjugate to his will both nature and his fellow-men. On the other hand, there are the qualities which form the characteristic features of Christian morality—such as benevolence or love of one's neighbour, the fundamental precept of the Gospels, and the humility and obedience which have been perhaps unduly emphasised in ecclesiastical ethics. These are the qualities which he means when he speaks of the morality of the slave.

In the second place, therefore, what is distinctive of Nietzsche is this: that he explicitly rejects the Christian morality, in particular the virtues of benevolence, of obedience, of humility: these are regarded by him as belonging to a type of morality which is to be overcome and which he calls the servile morality. He deliberately sets in antithesis to one another what he calls Christian and what he calls noble virtues: meaning by the latter the qualities allied to courage, force of will, and strength of arm, such as were manifested in certain Pagan races, but above all in the heroes of the Roman Republic. He would, therefore, deliberately prefer the older Pagan valuation of conduct to the Christian valuation.

In the third place, he attempts what he calls a transvaluation of all values. Every moral idea needs revision, every moral idea, every suggestion of value or worth in conduct, must be tried and tested afresh, and a new morality substituted for the old. And with this claim for revision is connected his idea that the egoistic principle which underlies the Pagan virtues preferred to the Christian, and the higher development of the self-capacities to which it will lead, will evolve a superior kind of men—"Over-men" or "Uebers Menschen"—to whom, therefore, we may look as setting the tone and giving the rule for subsequent conduct.

Nietzsche is an unsystematic writer, though none the less powerful on that account. He is apt to be perplexing to the reader who looks for system or a definite and reasoned statement of doctrine; but his aphorisms are all the more fitted to impress readers who are not inclined to criticism, and might shirk an elaborate argument. It is difficult, accordingly, to select from him a series of propositions that would give a general idea of the complete transmutation of morality which he demands. So far as I can make out, there is only one point in which he still agrees with the old traditional morality, and that point seems to cause him no little difficulty. No thinker

Page 9

can afford to question the binding nature of the law of Truth, least of all a thinker so obviously in earnest about his own prophetic message as Nietzsche was. All his investigations presuppose the validity of this law for his own thought; all his utterances imply an appeal to it; and his influence depends on the confidence which others have in his veracity. And on this one point only Nietzsche has to confess himself a child of the older morality. "This book," he says in the preface to one of the least paradoxical of his works, 'Dawn of Day,' "This book ... implies a contradiction and is not afraid of it: in it we break with the faith in morals—why? In obedience to morality! Or what name shall we give to that which passes therein? We should prefer more modest names. But it is past all doubt that even to us a 'thou shalt' is still speaking, even we still obey a stern law above us—and this is the last moral precept which impresses itself even upon us, which even we obey: in this respect, if in any, we are still conscientious people—viz., we do not wish to return to that which we consider outlived and decayed, to something 'not worthy of belief,' be it called God, virtue, truth, justice, charity; we do not approve of any deceptive bridges to old ideals, we are radically hostile to all that wants to mediate and to amalgamate with us; hostile to any actual religion and Christianity; hostile to all the vague, romantic, and patriotic feelings; hostile also to the love of pleasure and want of principle of the artists who would fain persuade us to worship when we no longer believe—for we are artists; hostile, in short, to the whole European Femininism (or Idealism, if you prefer this name), which is ever 'elevating' and consequently 'degrading.' Yet, as such conscientious people, we immoralists and atheists of this day still feel subject to the German honesty and piety of thousands of years' standing, though as their most doubtful and last descendants; nay, in a certain sense, as their heirs, as executors of their inmost will, a pessimist will, as aforesaid, which is not afraid of denying itself, because it delights in taking a negative position. We ourselves are—suppose you want a formula—the consummate self-dissolution of morals." [1]

[Footnote 1: Nietzsche, 'Werke,' iv. pp. 8, 9 (1899). The translation is taken (with corrections) from the English version by Johanna Volz (1903). Nietzsche has so shocked and confused the English printer that when the author writes himself an 'immoralist' the compositor has made him call himself an 'immortalist.' And errors of the sort do not affect the printer only. Nietzsche's sneer at 'Femininism' is deftly turned aside by Miss Volz, by the simple device of substituting for it the word Pessimism. And Dr Tille, the translator of his best-known work, 'Thus spake Zarathustra' (1896, p. xix), has been bemused in an even more wonderful manner. He enumerates "the best known representatives" of Anarchic tendencies in political thought as "Humboldt, Dunoyer, Stirner, Bakounine, and Auberon Spencer"! The vision of Mr Auberon Herbert and Mr Herbert Spencer doubled up into a single individual is 'a thing imagination boggles at.' Perhaps it is the translator's idea of the *Uebermensch*.]

Page 10

Perhaps it is impossible to understand Nietzsche unless one admits that his writings show traces of the disease which very soon prevented his writing at all. But at the same time, while that is true, there is much more in his work than the ravings of a distempered mind. There may have been little method, but there was a great deal of genius, in his madness. While he always overstates his case,—his colossal egoism leads him to exaggerate any doctrine,—and while I do not think that the actual doctrines of Nietzsche in the way he puts them will ever gain any general acceptance, while his system of morality may not have any chance of being the moral code of the next generation or even of being regarded as the serious alternative to Christian morality, yet it is not too much to say that he is symptomatic of a new tendency in ethical thought, a tendency of which he is the greatest, if also the most extravagant exponent, but which has its roots in certain new influences which have come to this generation with the ideas and the triumphs, scientific and material, of the preceding generation.

There are two quite different kinds of influence to which the formation of an ethical doctrine may be due. In the first place, there are the moral sentiments and opinions of the community and of the moralist himself; and, in the second place, there are the scientific and philosophical doctrines accepted by the writer or inspiring what is loosely called the spirit of the time. In most ethical movements the two kinds of influence will be found co-operating, though the latter is almost entirely absent in some cases. The incoherence of popular opinions about morality is a potent stimulus to reflexion, and may of itself give rise to systematic ethical enquiry. This is more particularly the case when a change of social conditions, or contact with alien modes of life, force into light the inadequacy of the conventional morality. In such a case the new ethical reflexion may have a disintegrating effect upon the traditional code, and give to the movement the character and importance of a revolution. The reflective activity of the Sophists in ancient Greece—a movement of the deepest ethical significance—was in the main of this nature. It consisted in a radical sifting and criticism of current moral standards, and was due almost entirely to the first class of influences, being affected only in the slightest degree by scientific or philosophical ideas.

Influences of the same kind combine with science and philosophy in moulding the ethical thought of the present day. Contemporary ethical speculation is by no means exclusively due to the thinkers who attempt to arrive at a consistent interpretation of the nature of reality; and it has features which constantly remind us how closely moral reflexion is connected with the order and changes of social conditions.

Page 11

Every age is no doubt apt to exaggerate its own claims to mark an epoch. But, after a century of achievements in applied science, there seems little risk of error in asserting that the world is now becoming conscious as it never was before of the vast power given by material resources when under the control of a cool intelligence. And in the competition of nations it is not surprising that there should be an imperious demand for the most alert and well-trained minds to utilise these resources in war and in industry. It is not surprising; nor would it be a fit subject for regret, did not the concentration of the outlook upon material success tend to the neglect of 'things which are more excellent.' Writing many years ago J.S. Mill remarked that "hitherto it is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day's toil of any human being." [1]

[Footnote 1: Political Economy, Book iv. chap. vi. sec. 2.]

There is a further question which ought to be asked of every new advance in material civilisation, Does it foster, or at least does it leave unimpeded, the development of man's spiritual inheritance? Certainly, the control of nature by mind is not necessarily hostile to the ideals which give dignity to the arts and sciences and to man himself. And yet it does not always favour their presence. The weak nations of the world in arms and commerce have contributed their full share to the higher life of the race; and the triumphs of a country on the battlefield or in business give no security for the presence among its people of the ideals which illumine or of the righteousness which exalts. The history of Germany herself might point the moral. A century ago, when she lay crushed beneath the heel of Napoleon, her poets and philosophers were the prophets of ideals which helped to bind her scattered states into a powerful nation, and which enriched the mind of man. To-day we are forced to ask whether military and industrial success have changed the national bent: for poetry seems to have deserted her, and her philosophy betrays the dominance of material interests.

Material success and the struggle for it are apt to monopolise the attention; and perhaps the greatest danger of the new social order is the growing materialisation of the mental outlook. It would be needless to point to the evidence, amongst all classes in the mercantile nations, of the feverish haste to be rich and to enjoy. For to point to this has been common with the moralists of all ages. This age like others—perhaps more than most—is strewn with the victims of the struggle. But it can also boast a product largely its own—the new race of victors who have emerged triumphant, with wealth beyond the dreams of avarice of the past generation. Their interests make them cosmopolitan; they are unrestrained by the traditional obligations of ancient lineage; and the world seems to lie before them as something to be bought and sold. Neither they nor others have quite realised as yet the power which colossal wealth gives in modern conditions. And it remains to be seen whether the multimillionaire will claim to figure as Nietzsche's 'over-man,' spurning ordinary moral conventions, and will play the *role*, in future moral discourses, which the ethical dialogues of Plato assign to the 'tyrant,'



Page 12

General literature, even in its highest forms, seems to reflect a corresponding change of view as to what is of most worth in life. Already the strong hold on duty and the spiritual world which Tennyson unfalteringly displayed, even the deeper insight into motive and the faith in goodness which are shown by Browning, are read by us as utterances of a past age. We have grown used to a presentment of human life such as Ibsen's in which the customary morality is regarded as a thin veneer of convention which hardly covers the selfishness in grain, or to the description of life as a tangled mass of animal passions,—a description which, in spite of the genius of Zola, does not fail to weary and disgust,—or perhaps as only a spectacle in which what men call good and evil are the light and shade of a picture which may serve to produce some artistic emotion. An attitude akin to these becomes an ethical point of view in Nietzsche, the *enfant terrible* of modern thought, who maintains that man's life must be interpreted physiologically only and not spiritually, and who would replace philanthropy by a boundless egoism.

Influences of the second kind are usually more prominent than the preceding in the case of the philosophical moralist, and they are not always avoided by the moralist who boasts his independence of philosophy. The former influences are more constantly at work: they supply the facts for all ethical reflexion. Ethical thought is not so uniformly influenced by the conceptions arrived at in science or philosophy. But there are certain periods of history in which conceptions regarding the truth of things—whether arrived at by scientific methods or not—have had a profound influence upon men's views of good and evil. At the beginning of our era, for instance, the view of God and man introduced by Christianity, resulted in a deepened and, to some extent, in a distinctive morality. Again, at the time of the Renaissance, the new knowledge and new interests combined with the weakening of the Church's and of the Empire's authority to bring about the demand for a revision of the ecclesiastical morality, and led to some not very successful attempts to find a firmer basis for conduct.

At the present day also it is the case that philosophers of different schools are for the most part agreed in claiming ethical importance for their conceptions about reality. In particular, the scientific thought of the last generation has been reformed under the influence of the group of ideas which constitute the theory of evolution. There is hardly a department of thought which this new doctrine has not touched; and upon morality its influence may seem to be peculiarly important and direct. The theory of evolution, as put forward by Darwin, has established certain positions which have been regarded as of special significance for ethics.

Page 13

In the first place, it is an assertion of the unity of life. And we must not limit the generality of this proposition. It is not merely a denial of the fixity of species, an assertion that there are no natural kinds so inseparable from one another that each must be the result of a distinct creative act. It is also an assertion that human life must be treated as a part in the larger whole of organic being, that the mind of man is continuous with animal perception, that moral activity is continuous with non-moral impulse. And the assertion of the unity of life is at the same time an assertion of the progress of life. What we call the higher forms are in all cases developments from simpler and lower forms.

Further, the method of this progress has been described. Herein indeed lay Darwin's most important achievement. He detected and demonstrated the operation of a factor hitherto unsuspected. This new factor to which he drew attention as the chief agent in organic development was called by him 'natural selection.' The name has a positive sound and suggests a process of active choice. But Darwin was fully aware that the process to which he gave this name was a negative and not a positive operation; and as such it was clearly recognised by him. The name was, no doubt, chosen simply to bring out the fact that the same kind of results as those which man produces by conscious and artificial selection may be arrived at without conscious purpose by the operation of merely natural forces. Instead of the 'fit' being directly chosen or encouraged, what happens is simply that the 'unfit' die out or are exterminated, so that room to live and means of life are left for the survivors.

What may be meant by this idea of 'fitness'—which meets us in the famous phrase that the 'survival of the fittest' in the struggle for life is the goal of evolution—is a question which brings us at once to the consideration of the ethical significance of the theory. For it seems to lay claim to give both an explanation of progress and an interpretation of what constitutes worth in conduct.

II.

Ethics and evolution.

There are two things which are not always kept distinct,—what may be called the 'evolution of ethics' and the 'ethics of evolution,' The former might more correctly be called the evolution of morality,—the account of the way in which moral customs, moral institutions, and moral ideas have been developed and have come to take their place in the life of mankind. Clearly these are all features of human life; and, if the theory of evolution applies to human life, we must expect it also to have some contribution to make to this portion of man's development,—to the growth of the customs, institutions, and ideas which enter into and make up his morality.



Page 14

But by the 'ethics of evolution' is meant something more than the 'evolution of ethics' or development of morality. It signifies a theory which turns the facts of evolution to account in determining the value for man of different kinds of conduct and feeling and idea. When one speaks of the ethics of evolution one must be understood to mean that the evolution theory does something more than trace the history of things, that it gives us somehow or other a standard or criterion of moral worth or value. This additional point may be expressed by the technical distinction between origin and validity. Clearly there is a very great difference between showing how something has come to be what it is and assigning to it worth or validity for the guidance of life or thought. It may be that the former enquiry has some bearing upon the latter; but only confusion will result if the two problems are not clearly distinguished at the outset,—as they very seldom are distinguished by writers on the theory of evolution in its application to ethics.

It may be said that the evolutionist writers on ethics seek to base an ethics of evolution upon the evolution of ethics, but that they are not always aware of the real nature and difficulties of their task. Sometimes they seem to think that in tracing the evolution of ethics they are also and at the same time determining and establishing a theory of the ethics of evolution. We must avoid this error, and keep the two problems distinct in our minds. Yet from the nature of the case it holds true that it is only through the facts which the theory of evolution establishes or can establish as to the development of morality that it is able to make any contribution to the solution of the further question as to the criterion of morality—the question, that is to say, of moral worth or value.

We cannot, therefore, avoid dealing with the evolution of ethics. But in what follows I am not considering it for its own sake—though it is an interesting and important question. In order to simplify the argument, we may allow what is claimed for it, and give the evolutionist credit for even greater success on the field of historical investigation—which is his own field—than he would, if fair-minded, claim for himself. The problem I have in view lies beyond this historical question. It is the problem how far the known facts and probable theories regarding the development of morality can make any contribution towards determining the standard of worth for our ideas, our sentiments, and our conduct. Now if we read the accredited exponents of the doctrine of evolution we shall find amongst them a considerable variety of view regarding the bearing of the theory of evolution upon this properly ethical problem—the problem of the criterion or standard of goodness.



Page 15

In the first place, it is desirable to characterise briefly Darwin's own contribution to this matter. The suggestion made by him deals almost entirely with what I have called the development of morality, not with the ethics of evolution; and perhaps it may seem to us now a rather obvious suggestion. But he was the first to make this suggestion; and it comes from him as a direct application of the theory he had established with regard to animal development. His suggestion is simply this—that moral qualities are selected in the struggle for existence in much the same way as purely physical or animal excellences are selected, that is, by their contributing to the continued and more efficient life of the organism. But Darwin saw very clearly that the qualities which are recognised as moral are not by any means in all cases contributory to individual success and efficiency. They are not all of them qualities that contribute to the success of one individual in his struggle with other individuals for the means of subsistence. We may say that courage, prudence, self-reliance, will have that effect, and that consequently in the struggle for life the individuals who show such qualities will have a better chance of survival than those without them. But what about qualities such as sympathy, willingness to help another, obedience, and faithfulness to a community or to a cause? Clearly, these are not qualities which are of special assistance to the individual. But they are qualities which are or may be of very great importance to the tribe or community of individuals. Supposing such qualities of mutual help, of willingness even to sacrifice oneself for others—the qualities which are commonly grouped as expressions of the social instinct,—supposing these to have been somehow developed in the members of a tribe, that tribe would, other things being equal, have an advantage in a struggle with another tribe whose members did not possess these qualities. Now the advantage thus gained in the struggle would be a case of the operation of natural selection: it would exterminate or weaken the tribe without these social qualities, and it would thus give opportunity for the growing efficiency of the tribe that possessed them.

Put in the briefest way, this is the explanation which Darwin gave of the growth of the social qualities in mankind; and the social qualities make up, to a large extent at any rate, what we call moral qualities. Darwin, however, saw further than this: he saw that, while this might account for the development of what we may call savage and barbarian virtues, there was in civilised mankind a development of sympathy which went far beyond this, and which one could not with good reason account for by asserting that it rendered assistance to the community in its struggle for existence with other communities.

Thus, with regard to the former question, he says: “A tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection[1].”

Page 16

[Footnote 1: Descent of Man, Part I. chap. v. p. 203 (new ed., 1901).]

But when he comes to the case of civilised men he finds a difficulty. "With savages," he says, "the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated; and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health. We civilised men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination; we build asylums for the imbecile, the maimed, and the sick; we institute poor-laws; and our medical men exert their utmost skill to save the life of every one to the last moment.... The aid which we feel impelled to give to the helpless is mainly an incidental result of the instinct of sympathy, which was originally acquired as part of the social instincts.... Nor could we check our sympathy, even at the urging of hard reason, without deterioration in the noblest part of our nature[1]." This sympathy, which natural selection cannot preserve or vindicate even in the struggle of communities, is nevertheless recognised by Darwin as having a moral value outside of and above natural selection and the struggle for existence,—a value of which these have no right to judge. He thinks that if we followed hard reason—and by 'hard reason' he obviously means an imitation on our part of the action of natural selection—we should be led to sweep away all those institutions by which civilised mankind guards its weaker members. But this, he says, would be only to deteriorate the "noblest part of our nature." What is noblest in our nature, then, is not that which natural selection has favoured or maintained. There is, therefore, implied in his view a limitation of the ethical significance of the principle of natural selection. For, when we come to this crucial question of conduct, it is not allowed to give any criterion of moral validity. More comprehensive attempts on the same lines as Darwin's have been made subsequently; and various writers have tried to show how the moral criterion may be resolved into social efficiency, or how it may be derived from a problematic future state of the human race on this earth when the need for struggle has disappeared and all things go smoothly. The former view may be found in Sir Leslie Stephen's 'Science of Ethics'; the latter is the peculiar property of Mr Herbert Spencer. Somewhat unwillingly I must for the present leave these special views without consideration,[2] because I wish to bring out still more plainly the various attitudes of the evolutionists to morality, and especially to draw attention to a view very different from those just mentioned, though not altogether without support in Darwin, which, as put forward some years ago by the late Professor Huxley[3], produced no little flutter in scientific doves.

[Footnote 1: Descent of Man, pp. 205, 206.]

[Footnote 2: For a discussion of these views I may be allowed to refer to my 'Ethics of Naturalism,' chap. viii. (chap. ix. in the new edition). The same volume contains a more exhaustive examination than is possible in this lecture of the whole subject of evolutionist ethics.]



Page 17

[Footnote 3: The Romanes Lecture, 1893, "Evolution and Ethics." In 1894 this was republished, with prolegomena, in vol. ix. of 'Collected Essays,' with the title, "Evolution and Ethics, and other Essays."]

Professor Huxley reviewed what he called the cosmic process as it was guided by the law of evolution. He showed how at each step of that process new results were only attained by enormous waste and pain on the part of those living creatures which were thrust aside as unfit for their surroundings, and he held consequently that the whole cosmic process is of an entirely different character from what we must mean when we use the term 'moral.' According to him morality is opposed to the method of evolution, and cannot be based upon the theory of evolution. It is of independent worth; but Professor Huxley, perhaps wisely, refrained from investigating its justification, while enforcing "the apparent paradox that ethical nature, while born of cosmic nature, is necessarily at enmity with its parent"

"The practice of that which is ethically best—what we call goodness or virtue—involves a course of conduct which, in all respects, is opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence. In place of ruthless self-assertion it demands self-restraint; in place of thrusting aside, or treading down, all competitors, it requires that the individual shall not merely respect, but shall help, his fellows; its influence is directed, not so much to the survival of the fittest, as to the fitting of as many as possible to survive. It repudiates the gladiatorial theory of existence.... Let us understand once for all that the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it." [1]

[Footnote 1: Evolution and Ethics, pp. 81-83.]

Here, then, is a view very different from the easy optimism of Mr Herbert Spencer. The cosmic order has nothing to say to the moral order, except that, somehow or other, it has given it birth; the moral order has nothing to say to the cosmic order, except that it is certainly bad. Morality is occupied in opposing the methods of evolution.

Still another view is possible. It may be held that the morality of self-restraint and self-sacrifice are opposed—as Huxley says they are opposed—to the methods of cosmic evolution; and yet the "gladiatorial theory of existence" may not be repudiated; but morality may be modified to suit the claims of evolution. This is the position adopted by the philosopher Nietzsche, whose whole thought is permeated by the idea of evolution. Like Professor Huxley, Nietzsche might say that morality is opposed to the cosmic process. But by morality he would mean something that is not to be encouraged, but that is to be shed from human life, or at least fundamentally transformed, just because it is in opposition to the laws of cosmic progress. On the other hand,

Page 18

the morality—if we may use the term—which the cosmic process teaches us will be a development of the conceptions of self-assertion and self-reliance, qualities which, according to ordinary morality—the morality, for instance, of Professor Huxley—require to be permeated and even superseded by self-restraint and possibly self-sacrifice in order that the moral law may be satisfied. Not obedience, not mutual help, not benevolence, but the will to rule or desire of power, is with Nietzsche fundamental, the primary impulse in the history of the whole progress of the world, and still of first importance for the further development of mankind.

This view is at the opposite extreme from Huxley's, for it overlooks the advantages mankind has gained by means of the social instinct and the social solidarity which it secures. But there is a further point in Nietzsche's reflexions which is suggested by the theory of development. Natural selection is not the sole agent in the development of organic life: it cannot be too often enforced that natural selection produces nothing, that its operation is purely negative. It does not properly select at all, it only excludes. What it does is to cut off the unfit specimens of living beings which nature supplies. It would have no field of operation were it not for the variety of nature. While individuals tend to repeat the characteristics of their parents, they do not repeat them without change: the principle of heredity is counterbalanced by a principle of variety equally hard to explain. All organic life exhibits this tendency to variation; and one variation proves better adapted than another to the environment. It is this which makes possible the operation of 'natural selection.' Unfit varieties are exterminated by natural selection, and room is thus left for varieties which are fit to perpetuate themselves and to increase in efficiency.

Now, if we apply this conception to human conduct, should we not encourage all varieties to carry on their experiments in living and in morality so that we may see whether success will justify them? An affirmative answer to this question is sometimes vaguely hinted at; by Nietzsche it is proclaimed from the housetops.

"There is no monopoly of morals, and every morality which exclusively asserts itself destroys too much good strength, and is too dearly bought by mankind. The straying ones, who so often are the inventive and productive ones, shall no longer be sacrificed; it shall not even be deemed a disgrace to stray from morals either in deeds or thoughts; numerous new experiments shall be made in matters of life and society; an enormous incubus of bad conscience shall be removed from the world—these are the general aims which ought to be recognised and furthered by all honest and truth-seeking people." [1]

[Footnote 1: Nietzsche, Werke, iv. 161, 162; Dawn of Day, sec. 164.]



Page 19

Reflecting for a moment on what precedes, we may observe that, from the mouths of the evolutionists themselves, we have encountered three different views regarding the ethical significance of evolution. In the first place, there is the view of Darwin that natural selection is a criterion of moral fitness only up to a certain stage, and that the noblest part of man's morality is independent of this test; in the second place, there is the view of Huxley that morality is entirely opposed to the cosmic process as ruled by natural selection; and, in the third place, there is the view of Nietzsche that the principles of biological development (variation, that is to say, and natural selection) should be allowed free play so that, in the future as in the past, successful variations may be struck out by triumphant egoism. Neither these views, nor the still more elaborate treatment of Spencer, do I propose to examine in detail. But I wish to offer some reflexions upon the fundamental conception underlying them all, accounting in this way, perhaps, for the differences of opinion between Darwin and Spencer, Huxley and Nietzsche. The conception of natural selection and of evolution by natural selection is applied by men of science and by philosophers in three very different spheres, to three very different kinds of struggle or competition. There may be many different kinds of competition: it will be sufficient here to consider the three following:—

First, there is the competition between individuals for individual life and success. Now, so far as we are dealing with this competition, the only qualities which natural selection will favour are of course the qualities which lead to the continuance and efficiency of the individual organism. The qualities 'selected' in this process are therefore only the self-assertive qualities,—the qualities of strength, of courage, of prudence, and also of temperance.

But in the second place there is also, as I have already indicated and as was seen by Darwin (though he did not draw this distinction), a second kind of competition, the competition between groups. Now the group competition has as its end the continuance and efficiency of the group, be it horde or tribe or nation, or be it one of those subsidiary groups which enter into national life. In this competition between groups it is clear that those qualities will be favoured by natural selection which contribute to the efficiency of the group; and the qualities which contribute to the efficiency of the group are not those only which contribute to the efficiency of the individual, but also qualities implying self-restraint and even self-sacrifice on the part of one member of the group for the sake of other members of the group or of the group as a whole. The habit of obedience, for example, obedience to the authority of the group or its representative, may be of fundamental importance in maintaining the existence of the group as a group, although that habit of obedience has no place at all in promoting the interests of the individual when he is competing with other individuals.

Page 20

Thirdly, there is still another kind of competition which is a little more difficult to make quite clear, because it is not on the plane of individual life and it is not to be identified with the life of the community. It is a competition on the intellectual level, the competition between ideas, and with this one may also couple (so far as it does not directly concern the struggle for social existence and thus belong to the second class) the competition between institutions, including therein also habits and customs. The various institutions in our national life, and the various habits of our life, may be said to be forms which have to maintain themselves often in competition with other and antagonistic forms of institution. The same holds of our various ideas or general conceptions, whether about morality, which we have now specially in view, or about matters more purely intellectual. For instance, forty or fifty years ago, there was a fierce controversy amongst biologists between the group of ideas represented by Darwin's theory and the group of ideas represented by the traditional view of the fixity of species. There was a long conflict between these two groups of ideas, and we may now say that the Darwinian group of ideas has emerged from the conflict victorious.

Now, when the phrase 'natural selection in morals' is used, the reference is commonly to a conflict of this last kind. The suggestion is that different ideas and also different standards of action are manifested at the same time within the same community, that they compete with one another for existence, and that gradually those which are better adapted to the life of the community survive, while the others grow weaker and in the end disappear. In this way the law of natural selection is made to apply to moral ideas and moral standards, and also to intellectual standards and to the institutions and customs in which our ideas are expressed.

These, then, are the three ways in which the competition in man's life and the selection between the competing factors is carried out. And sometimes I think one sees a tendency to suggest that this needs only to be stated, and that the whole question of the application of evolution to ethics is then settled. You may say that such and such moral qualities, as for instance the quality of sympathy, do not aid the individual in competition with other individuals. The reply might be No, but they aid the group in competition with other groups. Or you may say, as Darwin said, that even this competition will not account for the civilised development of sympathy. But even so we are not at the end of our tether; and we can fall back on the conflict of ideas. The idea of sympathy or of altruism, for instance, may conflict with some other idea, such as that of egoism. At first the competition is a group-competition, in which the group with altruistic members succeeds at the expense of the egoistic group. By the victory



Page 21

of the former our society becomes more and more a society whose basis is sympathy and all that sympathy implies, while conflicting ideas lose the lead. So in general with the competition of ideas: the idea which fails to adapt itself to its conditions will disappear, and the idea which is thus adapted will persist; and this also (it is said) is just natural selection. Now I venture to ask the question, Is it? I will put the question whether all these three processes are really forms of the same process, or, in other words and to put the matter more simply, Is it simply natural selection that is operative in all these different forms of competition?

For the sake of clearness I will take first this last-mentioned form of competition, the process by which one idea drives another out of the intellectual or moral currency of a community. The competition between the idea of fixity of species and Darwin's idea of the unity of life has been already cited as an instance; and it was pointed out that, gradually and after a controversy of some forty years, the former idea almost disappeared, and in the minds at any rate of those who know, the Darwinian theory became victorious. Was it natural selection that brought about the result? To test the matter let us ask once more how natural selection operates. Its mode of operation is always simply negative. And if, in the struggle of life, it selects the courageous man rather than the coward, the temperate man rather than the intemperate, the method by which this result is reached is simple: when it comes to a conflict the courageous man kills the coward or reduces him to subjection; the intemperate man has less vitality than the temperate: he too disappears, although perhaps gradually.

Take again the group-competition so far as it is influenced by natural selection. The tribe which manifests the qualities of social solidarity is selected simply in this way, that when it comes into conflict with a tribe which has not this solidarity the latter is beaten, and is thus unable to obtain the pastures or the hunting-ground which it desires, and therefore gradually or swiftly it is exterminated or left behind in the race for life. Now, I ask, Did this process take place when Darwinism supplanted the traditional theory of the fixity of species? Surely it is clear that it is only in the rarest cases that false or inadequate ideas on such subjects have any tendency to shorten life or weaken health. Bishop Wilberforce was killed by a fall from his horse, not by the triumphant dialectic of Professor Huxley. Sir Richard Owen lived to a patriarchal old age, and did not disappear from the face of the earth because he still clung to an idea which the best intellect of his time had relinquished. There is nothing in the doctrine of the fixity of species—if you hold it—which will in the least degree tend to diminish vitality. Natural selection has practically no effect at all in exterminating those who adhere to this idea. There is no means of livelihood from which it would exclude them except indeed that it might prevent them from occupying Chairs of Biology. Apart from that I do not think it will hinder them in any of the various modes of activity in which the struggle for life is manifested.

Page 22

What was it then that led to the victory of the one idea over the other? The cause was intellectual. With the experts, it was logical conviction: one set of ideas was found to fit the facts somewhat better than the other set of ideas. With men in general the intellectual change came more slowly and in a different way: they adopted or imitated the ideas of those who knew. It was therefore not natural selection at all which led to the presence and power of the one idea rather than the other in the minds of thoughtful men. One idea was deliberately accepted and the other deliberately rejected. The former was accepted on grounds of which the most general account would be, if we may use the term, to call them subjective. But natural selection is a physical, external, objective process. It is carried out without the individual's volition: he is not aiming at the end. It is simply natural law which, with many varieties of living beings before it, exterminates the unfit individuals. Thus nature in its own blind way produces a result of the same kind as that which the will of man would bring about by subjective selection.

The origin of this term 'natural selection' is overlooked when people talk glibly about 'natural selection' of ideas. Darwin used the term 'natural selection' because he thought he saw an analogy between the tendency of nature and the selective purposes of intelligent beings. It was because nature, working without intelligence, produced the same kind of result as man does by intelligent selection, that he ventured to use this term 'selection' of the process of nature. Perhaps he was hardly justified in adopting the term, as nature does not select; she only passes by. At the same time, artificial selection also includes, although it is not limited to, this negative or weeding-out process. When you select a certain plant for growth in your garden you weed out the neighbouring plants which encroach upon it, so as to give it a chance to grow and thrive. By removing its competitors, you let air and light surround the plant, and it spreads its leaves to the sun. The healthy growth which results is due to the removal of obstacles by an external power; and it is in this way—by the removal of obstacles—that natural selection works.

Intelligent or artificial selection is not restricted to this negative method of working; and its operation, positive as well as negative, was certainly well known long before Darwin's day. Starting with the familiar facts of artificial or purposive selection, Darwin showed how results similar to those aimed at and reached in this way might be brought about by the operation of certain natural laws, working without purpose or design. Purposive selection pursues its ends more directly and in general attains them far more quickly than does natural selection. A still more striking characteristic is the fact that it does not entail the waste and pain which mark the course of natural selection. Witness the records

Page 23

of natural selection in the vegetable and animal kingdoms, where thousands are called into fruitless being that one alone may survive and prosper. Wastefulness is the most striking feature of its method, and its path is strewn with wreckage. In all these respects the conflict of ideas belongs to the level of purposive and not of natural selection. It involves consciousness of the end, which natural selection never does; it is comparatively rapid in reaching its goal and comparatively direct in the route it takes; and the victory of an idea does not take effect through any general extermination of the individuals who cherish ideas 'unfit' for survival.

I do not deny that there may be a certain natural selection in the case of human beings; but that process is always clumsy and slow and wasteful, and the purposive intelligent selection which takes its place is one of the greatest possible gains to living beings: its presence distinguishes men from animals; its predominance distinguishes civilised men from savages; the higher the stage of civilisation, the more marked is the development of selective intelligence. And in the conflict of ideas, whether moral or intellectual, the issue is determined by a selection which is predominantly purposive, and only in the slightest degree natural.

If we return to the conflict of groups we shall see that even there purposive selection enters. How (we may ask) do those qualities of obedience, willingness to help another, and the like, arise in a community and thus enable it to win the victory over a less organised or more savage enemy? Surely it is not a sufficient answer to say that these qualities have been somehow developed, and then have contributed to the victory of the community possessing them. All through civilised life, and probably throughout a great part of savage life, there is the keenest enquiry into and perception of the qualities which will make for success. These qualities are carefully selected and positively fostered. You drill your armies—that is, you cultivate the habit of discipline and all that discipline implies—so that the victory may be gained; in other words, the quality is not produced by natural selection at all. The issue may resemble the result of natural selection, for it leads to conflict and defeat of the unfit; but the conqueror is he who has foreseen the conditions of the struggle: has deliberately equipped his forces for the fight, and been the intelligent organiser of victory.

Even in the case of competition between individuals, at least among civilised men, it is clear that natural selection is very far from being the only factor. A man trains himself for a profession. It does not just somehow come about that a number of people accidentally develop certain varieties of occupation, and that natural selection makes play with this result, cutting off the unfit and leaving only those who are fairly well adapted to their positions. Something

Page 24

of this sort no doubt takes place to a limited extent; but, so far as it does take place, our methods are denounced as defective and, perhaps, as old-fashioned. 'Haphazard' is a wasteful principle, and should be superseded by intelligent initiative and deliberate preparation. And this indeed is the usual process. One adapts oneself carefully and of set purpose to the conditions of one's life, instead of simply waiting for natural selection to cut one off should one happen to be unfit.

Even among animals there are certain processes which cannot be brought under natural selection. There are the first efforts, slight as they may be, towards learning by experience. There are also all those facts which Darwin classes under sexual selection, where there is a positive choosing, due no doubt not to intelligent purpose but nevertheless to a subjective impulse. This marks the beginning of the end of the reign of natural selection, because in it for the purely objective or external factor there is substituted an internal, subjective factor; instead of the process of cutting off unsuitable individuals among chance varieties there appears the process of selecting that variety which pleases or attracts.

The result of this whole investigation is that natural selection cannot be properly applied so as to explain the conflict of moral ideas. It is not able to account for all the phenomena of the competition between groups. Even in sub-human life there are indications of the processes which supersede natural selection. From this result the ethical consequence may be drawn, that there is no good ground for taking the lower, the less developed, method of selection as our guide in preference to the higher and more developed. Surely we are not to take natural selection as the sole factor of ethical import because we see it at the crude beginnings of life on this earth, while the process of life itself in its higher ranges passes beyond natural selection. The physiological interpretation of life and conduct put forward by Nietzsche, and by a good many biological philosophers, would take natural selection, and its bearing upon the animal nature of man, as the sole test of efficiency and ethical value. But this interpretation of man's life disregards the achievements of evolution itself for the sake of pinning its faith to the humble beginnings of the organic process.

After this long enquiry into the nature and scope of natural selection, we should be better prepared to understand the degree and kind of ethical significance which can be rightly assigned to the theory of evolution. In the first place let us consider the now familiar claim that man must be taken as part of the cosmos, and that man's conduct must be regarded and studied in its place in the cosmic process. At the time when it was first made this claim may have seemed a startling one; but I think that we must admit that, keeping to their own ground and using the instruments that are theirs by right, the evolutionist writers have succeeded in showing man's connexion with the animal kingdom and with organic life generally, and thus his place in the whole cosmic process. The claim must therefore be admitted.

Page 25

But if man is part of the universe, then the universe is not intelligible apart from man, and the cosmic process is not fully understood unless we also have an understanding of human activity. This, therefore, is the counter-claim that I would suggest. The course and method of evolution, or of the 'cosmic process'—to use Huxley's term—is imperfectly described if the methods and principles of human action are left out of account.

No doubt the reply may be made, as the reply has been made, that after all man occupies but a minute space in the cosmos, that he is but an insignificant speck on an unimportant planet. But, if this is at all meant to imply that we may safely leave the peculiarities of human activity out of account, then I say that the suggestion hardly deserves consideration. Surely the assumption is too gross and unwarrantable that material magnitude is the standard of importance, or that the significance of man's life can be measured by the size of his material organism. We must therefore never delude ourselves with the idea that we have a full account of the cosmos or the cosmic process unless we have taken account of the peculiarities of man's nature and man's activity.

In the second place, the discussion of the principle of natural selection suggests a further reflexion. The process of natural selection is a process which always tends to some end, because by it some organisms are selected, and they are the organisms which are fittest to live. By 'fittest' is of course meant that which is best adapted to the environment, or, as it is simply a question of survival, that which so fits the conditions of the environment that it is able to survive. The canon of the principle of natural selection is on the face of it relative. No one would say that the principle can be interpreted as an absolute law for conduct, after the fashion of the absolute laws laid down by the rationalist moralists; what is involved is simply a relation to one's surroundings. One must keep in touch with them, one must adapt oneself to them, in order to live.

But I wish to point out that the principle is not only relative, but that its relation is limited to certain features of the environment which surrounds mankind, namely, to those features and those features only which prevent organisms unsuited to the conditions of life from surviving at all. The only way in which natural selection works is by killing off rapidly or gradually the organisms which are not fitted to obtain from the environment the means of life—that is to say, it has to do with life only, with the continuance of life as a possible material phenomenon. Given that the organisms are fit enough to survive, given that their animal vitality is not diminished, a question remains: what is the standard of worthy survival? and to that question the process and principle of natural selection can give no answer. To use the old distinction: even if it is able to account for being, it can give no standard for wellbeing.



Page 26

Now the environment of civilised man is a great deal larger in range than those material phenomena which contribute to his nourishment and thus to his existence as an animal organism. No doubt his first effort is to maintain himself as an animal—that is the condition of all his subsequent activity—but he seeks also to suit himself to an environment which is wider and subtler than merely animal conditions of life; to adapt himself to society, perhaps only as a member of it, perhaps also as a leader or reformer; to adapt himself to the dominant ideas of his time, absorbing them, perhaps also modifying them; to adapt himself to a whole region of interests which may in our life be built upon an animal basis, but of which the animal basis gives no explanation—interests social, artistic, intellectual, spiritual.

It is correct, therefore, to say of man that his environment is much larger than the material universe; it is whatever he conceives the universe as being, and whatever it can be for him: whether he seeks from it merely intellectual understanding, whether he regards it as a vehicle for artistic production, or whether he may see in it an opportunity for realising his own being by fulfilling the will of God—perhaps by submerging his own individuality in deity. The objects of philosophy, art, and religion,—all these are parts of the environment of civilised man, and yet his self-adaptation to them has no direct effect whatever upon his continuance on the earth as an animal organism. In other words, the process of natural selection can give us no canon at all for putting a value upon these various activities, or upon the way in which man adapts himself to these parts of his environment.

It is said by Mr Herbert Spencer that “we must interpret the more developed by the less developed”;^[1] and the inference would seem to be that, as animal existence is the basis of all higher activities, we must interpret these by it. But if this claim can be admitted at all, it can only be if our aim goes no further than to trace a historical process. If we desire to understand capacity or function—still more if we speak of worth or goodness—then it is much more correct to say that we must interpret the less developed by the more developed. If you wish to trace the growth of the oak-tree from its earliest beginnings to maturity, then study the acorn and the soil; but if you wish to know what the capacity and the function of the acorn are, then you must interpret the less developed by the more developed, you must see what an oak is like when it spreads its branches under the heavens.

[Footnote 1: Principles of Ethics, i. 7.]

In the third place, the way in which the action of natural selection differs according to circumstances affects its ethical significance. It operates as between individuals, and it operates as between groups,—although in the latter operation especially it is always mixed with other forces than natural selection. The competition between individuals favours egoistic qualities, the competition between groups favours qualities which may be called altruistic.

Page 27

Now no principle whatever can be got out of the theory of natural selection, or out of the evolution theory in general, which will decide between these divergent operations. The question may be put, Are we to cultivate the qualities which will give us success in the battle of individual with individual, or are we to cultivate in ourselves qualities which will contribute to the success of the community? All the answer that the evolution theory can give to this question is, that when individual fights with individual, the man with stronger egoistic qualities will succeed, and that when group fights group, those groups that possess stronger altruistic qualities will tend to success. But which set of qualities we are to cultivate, or whether we are to manifest a sort of balance of the two, is a question upon which we can get no light from the theory of evolution considered by itself. And consequently we find a very prevalent, though perhaps hardly ever definitely expressed, code of conduct according to which the individual takes as the guide for his own action the egoistic qualities which give success in the struggle between different individuals, but recommends to all his fellows in the same community that they should cultivate those altruistic qualities which will lead to the advantage of society.

The theory of evolution makes no contribution at all to these questions of worth or validity or moral value which we have been discussing. All one can get out of it is certain canons for living, but none for good living. It may draw one's attention to this fact, if anybody's attention needs to be drawn to it, that existence is prior to wellbeing; but what the nature of wellbeing is—upon that it throws no light.

We have been met by the suggestion that we should interpret by means of the lower or less developed, and again that we should set up a purely physiological standard. But the suggestion overlooks two things: first of all, the difficulties in the application of natural selection itself with its divergent tendencies; and, secondly, the fact that this process of evolution has itself resulted in the development of certain higher activities and higher tendencies, and that there is no good ground for holding that their worth is to be tested by means of the lower qualities out of which they have grown.

Now a good many evolutionist moralists seem to see this, and accordingly restrict themselves almost entirely to what we may call the historical point of view. They show how moral customs and moral ideas adapted to them have arisen, and how these ideas and customs have corresponded with the institutions of the time to which they belonged. Their tendency, accordingly, is to restrict ethics to the question of origin and history and description, to deprive it altogether of what is sometimes called its normative character—that is to say, its character as a science which lays down rules or sets up ideals for conduct. They would take away from it altogether the power of determining and establishing a criterion between right and wrong. In other words, the fundamental ethical question would be entirely excluded from the scope of the science of ethics.[1]



Page 28

[Footnote 1: Cf. Green, 'Prolegomena to Ethics,' p. 7: "A philosopher who would reconstruct our ethical systems in conformity with the doctrines of evolution and descent, if he would be consistent, must deal less scrupulously with them than perhaps any one has yet been found to do. If he has the courage of his principles, having reduced the speculative part of them to a natural science, he must abolish the practical or preceptive part altogether."]

That, so far as I can see, is the tendency of a good deal of quite recent writing from the point of view of the evolution school: in the face of controversy and in the face of difficulties to give up the attempt which they started on so confidently thirty years ago, —the attempt to show that evolution affords a means of deciding between right and wrong and of establishing an ideal for human conduct. Failing in this attempt, they seem to turn round and say that ethics should content itself with describing facts instead of laying down a law or setting up an ideal.

Now, whatever truth there may be in the assertion of the difficulty of determining an ideal for conduct, there is one thing certain: that whether or not the ideal can be philosophically or scientifically defined and established, some ideal is always being set up. Human action implies choice, implies the selection of one course rather than another; and the course that is chosen is always chosen for some reason, because it seems better than the course which is passed by. Choice always follows some kind of principle. We may use different principles at different times, we may use badly established principles, we may use uncriticised principles, but principles we do use, and we cannot act voluntarily without using them, even when we are not definitely conscious of them.

It is not possible, therefore, to entertain the suggestion that these principles should be excluded from ethics. Ethics must consider them, even if it should fail in reaching a correct account of them. We are bound to ask, for instance, what principles can decide between those divergent tendencies brought to light by natural selection, between the conditions of success for the group and the conditions of success for the individual? The conflict between individual development and group development is continually pressing to the front. The individual cannot reach a high stage of development except in and through a highly developed society. But the efficiency which a highly developed society requires of its members is not the same as individual development; it more commonly implies a specialisation which tends to warp or cramp individual capacity. This is a long familiar opposition. And the theory of evolution can do nothing to reconcile it. All it can say is that in certain cases natural selection points one way, and that in certain cases it points the other way. If ethical significance be claimed for it, it must be said that natural selection is divided against itself, and that it is without any principle for reconciling its own divergences.



Page 29

It is because biological evolution is essentially an historical doctrine that its votaries should not be too eager to apply it directly to ethics. It has accomplished much if able to tell us how things have happened in the past, without also dictating how they ought to take place now. It is specially absurd to say that earlier methods must govern later developments. That is what is done when we are asked to take as our guide in voluntary choice a principle which ignores volition. The whole progress from animal to man and from savage to civilised man shows a gradual supersession of the principle of natural selection by a principle of subjective selection which steadily grows in purposiveness and in intelligence. To say that intelligence should take nature as its guide is to ask civilised man to put off both his civilisation and his manhood.

The course of evolution may describe the working of different principles; but it cannot of itself supply a test of their value. How then is such a test to be got? Can Metaphysics help us? I have pointed out that the evolutionist ethics is relative—implying always a relation between organism and environment—but this relativity is qualified by its objective character. It does do something for morals: it brings man's conduct into relation with the world as a whole. No doubt the environment which more immediately surrounds man is a succession of changing phenomena, so that although the basis we get is objective, nevertheless it is unable to give us a permanent standard of reference. At the same time we may trace in this theory some advance on the older types of ethical thinking spoken of in last lecture. Subjectivity adhered even to the Utilitarian type of thought: for what can be more subjective than the pleasant feeling upon which morality is made by it to depend? There was also a certain subjectivity attaching to the Intuitionist type of thought, because the Intuitionists simply referred their judgments to conscience, the law in man, and did not connect conscience with a wider or more objective view of the universe.

The suggestion remains that we may get a basis for morality which is both objective and permanent from that more complete view of the universe which is given or which is sought by metaphysics. Metaphysics aims at completeness. That is, indeed, its predominant characteristic as a body of knowledge. It may begin with the part, if you like, with the 'flower in the crannied wall'; but when that is seen in all its relations to the rest of the world, then you will 'know what God and man is,' If the universe is a whole, then, beginning at any point, with any detail, if you only push the enquiry far enough, you are bound to become metaphysical: for you are attempting to understand reality as a whole.

In this Metaphysics resembles Religion. Both seek the ultimate, the final, the whole. But Metaphysics is distinguished from Religion in seeking the whole only by way of knowledge. So far it is like any other science. It is a process or the result of a process of knowledge. It seeks to know reality as a whole, and in knowing a part to know it in its relations to the whole. Religion also considers everything in its relation to the whole. But in religion knowledge is not the fundamental thing: its object is to relate man to God, in his consciousness, and in his life as a whole.



Page 30

The theory of evolution itself very often tends to become a metaphysical theory. It does so when it holds the course of development which it traces to be either itself the ultimate reality or the most adequate appearance of that reality. This theory is now commonly known by the name of Naturalism; according to it the facts dealt with by the natural sciences are the only reality which is knowable; man's nature is part of these and has to be adapted to them, and there is nothing further with which it can be brought into relation. This theory is not the same as the scientific theory of evolution, nor is it a necessary consequence of it; but in the minds of many the two go together. The conclusion of the preceding argument—that the ethical significance of evolution is not deep enough to give any answer to the fundamental question of morals—is not a criticism of the theory of evolution so far as restricted to the domain of science, but it is a criticism of the Naturalism which professes to be a final philosophy.

III.

Ethics and idealism.

There has been no movement of metaphysical thought in our time which can be compared for its widespread influence or for its general acceptance with the theory of evolution in biological science. Intimate as is its connexion with the progress of science, metaphysics does not keep step with it,—any more than it simply marks time as the former advances. It reflects the influence of each new generalisation of science; but if and so far as it reflects this influence only, it cannot be an adequate metaphysics. Metaphysics must re-think each new fact brought to light, each new generalisation established by science. It must think them in their relation to the whole, and attempt to understand them by setting them in their place in the complete system of knowledge and reality. This complete system is indeed an ideal, never adequately comprehended by the human mind; but it is nevertheless the ideal which determines all efforts of constructive philosophy—including those efforts which take the generalisation of some special science as their all-comprehending principle. An attempt of this kind to make a philosophy out of a scientific generalisation has in our own time been the obvious result of the theory of evolution, and has given new vogue to the philosophical system called Naturalism. That system draws its strength from the scientific doctrine of evolution; but as a philosophy it gives an extended application to the generalisation established by a group of sciences, and valid for the facts within their range. It interprets the law of development which rules the sequences of nature as the highest attainable principle for explaining the system of things. Some of the questions which it leaves unanswered, and some of the facts which it overlooks, have been pointed out in last lecture. Of this theory perhaps enough has already been said.

Page 31

In spite of the increased vogue which naturalism has obtained from its alliance with triumphant evolutionism, it cannot be said to represent the prevailing type of thought amongst the English metaphysicians of the last generation. That generation was remarkable for the reappearance in this country of a reasoned Idealism; and all forms of Idealism have at least this in common, that they refuse to look upon the material process as the ultimate character of reality—so far as reality is known or knowable.

It may also be said—and this is a characteristic which is not merely negative—that all forms of Idealism agree in ascribing special significance to the moral and religious aspects of life. This holds true of the great idealists, different as their types of thought may be—of Plato and Aristotle, of Spinoza and Leibniz, of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel. It holds true also of the leading representatives of recent English idealism. But the ethical tone of a treatise and the ethical interest of its author are not always a guarantee that ethical conceptions have a secure position in his system of thought. This is the case, I think, with Spinoza; and it seems to me to hold also of some writers of the present day. Mr Bradley, for instance, is perhaps the most influential, as he is without doubt not the least brilliant, of contemporary metaphysicians; he carries on the tradition of a school of thought predominantly ethical; his first book was a defence of the ethical positions of that school; but, if we turn to the elaborate metaphysical treatise which has resulted from his mature reflexion, its most impressive feature will be found to be the almost complete bankruptcy of the system in the region of ethics.

Not only had this idealist movement in its beginnings a predominantly ethical tone. It was really started in the interest of moral ideals as well as of intellectual thoroughness; and its contribution of greatest value to English thought was a work on ethics. The 'Prolegomena to Ethics' of T.H. Green was a fitting result of his unwearied controversies in defence of the spiritual nature of man and the universe. No one is more worthy than he to be called by the Platonic name a 'friend of ideas,' And he was a friend of ideas because he saw their necessity for maintaining and realising the higher capacities of human life. Green's 'Prolegomena' was published in 1883, the year after his death. And, had I been speaking twenty years ago, I should have had to emphasise the ethical character of the metaphysics of the day. His metaphysical thinking, through all its subtleties, never strayed far from the moral ideal. Owing to his teaching that ideal, and the general character of the philosophy with which it was associated, have permeated a great part of the better thought of the present day, and have influenced its practical activities in various directions,—social, political, and religious. But the magnetism of his personality has been removed; and those whose business it is to test intellectual notions have been impressed by the difficulties involved in Green's metaphysical positions and in his connexion of them with morality.



Page 32

The single word 'self-realisation' has been taken to express the view of the moral ideal enforced by Green. And it is as suitable as any single word could be. But it is clear that, in every action whatever of a conscious being, self-realisation may be said to be the end: some capacity is being developed, satisfaction is being sought for some desire. A man may develop his capacities, seek and to some extent attain satisfaction—in a manner, realise himself—not only in devotion to a scientific or artistic ideal or in labours for the common good, but also in selfish pursuit of power or even in sensual enjoyment. So far as the word 'self-realisation' can be made to cover such different activities, it is void of moral content and cannot express the nature of the moral ideal. Green is perfectly alive to the need of a distinction—and to the difficulty of drawing it. According to his own statement it is true not only of moral activity but of every act of willing that in it "a self-conscious individual directs himself to the realisation of some idea, as to an object in which for the time he seeks self-satisfaction."^[1] And he proceeds to ask the question, "How can there be any such intrinsic difference between the objects willed as justifies the distinction which 'moral sense' seems to draw between good and bad action, between virtue and vice? And if there is such a difference, in what does it consist?"^[2] Now we may define a good action as the sort of action which proceeds from a good man; or we may define a good man as a man who performs good actions. And for each method of definition something may be said. But if we adopt both methods together and say in one breath that good is what the good man does and that the good man is he who does good, is our logic any better than that of the ordination-candidate who defined the functions of an archdeacon as archdiaconal functions? And yet Green comes very near to describing this logical circle. "The moral good," he says, is "that which satisfies the desire of amoral agent"; but "the question, ... What do we mean by calling ourselves moral agents? is one to which a final answer cannot be given without an answer to the question, What is moral good?"^[3]

[Footnote 1: Prolegomena to Ethics, sec. 154, p. 160.]

[Footnote 2: Ibid., sec. 156, p. 163.]

[Footnote 3: Prolegomena to Ethics, secs. 171, 172, p. 179.]

When Green really grapples with the difficulty of distinguishing the moral from the immoral in character or in conduct, it is possible to distinguish different ways in which he attempts to draw the distinction—these different ways being, however, not independent but complementary to one another in his thought. The first suggestion is that good is distinguished from evil, or the true good from a good which is merely apparent, by its permanence. It gives a lasting satisfaction instead of a merely transient satisfaction: "the true good ... is an end in which the effort

Page 33

of a moral agent can really find rest.”[1] In this statement two points seem to be involved which the use of the rather metaphorical term ‘finding rest’ tends to confuse. If we are looking for the distinction simply of a good action or motive from a bad one we may point to the approval of conscience in the former case: this has a permanence—or rather an independence of time—which distinguishes it from the satisfaction of some temporary desire. But I do not think that this is what Green means. He wished to avoid falling back upon mere disconnected judgments of conscience after the manner of the intuitional moralists. The ‘true good’ for him seems to mean the attainment, the complete realisation, of the moral ideal. Were this reached we should indeed ‘find rest,’ for moral activity as we know it would be at an end. But the moral ideal is never thus attained; its realisation, as Green holds, is only progressive and never completed. Consequently ‘rest’ is never ‘found.’ It is of the nature of the moral life to press onward constantly towards a goal which it cannot attain; each achievement leads to a further effort and a higher reach.

[Footnote 1: Ibid., sec. 171, p. 179.]

By itself, therefore, the assertion that the moral agent ‘finds rest’ in the ‘true good’ does not enable us to distinguish the moral agent or the moral action from the immoral. For we are unable to define the ‘true good.’ It is not a part of experience; it is an ideal: and Green allows that we can give no complete account of it; he even says that we can give no positive account of it. At the same time this consideration leads to another and connected method for distinguishing good from evil.

“Of a life of completed development,” Green holds, “of activity with the end attained, we can only speak or think in negatives, and thus only can we speak or think of that state of being in which, according to our theory, the ultimate moral good must consist.”[1] But the development is a real process which manifests itself in habits and social institutions; and from these its actual achievements we can to a certain extent see what the moral capability of man “has in it to become,” and thus “know enough of ultimate moral good to guide our conduct.” One of the most valuable portions of Green’s own work is his description of the gradual widening and purifying of human conceptions regarding goodness in character and conduct. But all this implies some standard of discrimination and selection between what is good and what is evil in human achievement. Which developments are truly realisations of “the moral capability of man,” and so tend to the attainment of ultimate good, and which developments are expressions of those capacities which seek an apparent good only and are to be classed as evil, as impediments to the realisation of the good,—these have to be discriminated; and is it so clear that from the mere record of human deeds we are able to draw

Page 34

the distinction? Do we not need some criterion of goodness to guide our judgment? and does not Green himself use such a criterion when he appeals to the tendency of certain institutions and habits to “make the welfare of all the welfare of each,” and of certain arts to make nature “the friend of man”?[2] Common welfare and the utilisation of nature in the service of man seem to be taken as tests of the true development of moral capabilities. The criteria themselves may be excellent; but they are not got out of the mere record: they are brought by us to its contemplation. To this special question I can find no answer in Green. He is indeed aware that there is a difficulty; or rather he admits that something has been “taken for granted.” He has assumed that there is “some best state of being for man”; that this best state is eternally present to a divine consciousness; and further, that this “eternal mind” is reproducing itself as the self of man.[3] On this supposition only, he says, can our moral activity be explained; and he holds that the supposition can be justified metaphysically and has been so justified by himself in the earlier part of his treatise.

[Footnote 1: Prolegomena to Ethics, sec. 172, p. 180.]

[Footnote 2: Prolegomena, sec. 172, p. 180.]

[Footnote 3: Ibid., secs. 173, 174, p. 181.]

Now I am willing to admit that Green showed a correct instinct in examining the nature of man before entering upon his properly ethical enquiry. One must know what man is before one can say what his ‘good’ or his duty is; and it is only because man’s nature cannot be accounted for as a merely natural or animal product that the way is open for an idealist ethics such as Green’s. But perhaps Green laid too much stress on the problem of historical causation. What matters it how we came by our knowledge, provided it is the case that we can know ourselves and the world? If we can now distinguish right and wrong, can ally ourselves with the good, and follow a moral ideal, of what great importance are the steps by which the moral consciousness was attained? And the question here is whether the special results reached by Green in his metaphysical enquiry into human nature have brought us any nearer to a solution of the present ethical difficulty. As we have seen, the metaphysical view which Green arrives at is that the consciousness which is in man and which raises him above nature is the manifestation of—the “reproduction” of itself by—an eternal self-consciousness. Man’s own self-consciousness in knowledge and volition is simply God’s self—consciousness “reproduced” (to use Green’s term) in man’s animal nature: so that the animal body and its temporal activities become in some unexplained (and no doubt inexplicable) way “organic” (to use Green’s terminology once more, where no terminology seems adequate) to a spiritual reality which is eternal and infinite.



Page 35

I am far from denying the greatness of this conception or its practical value. There is no stronger support to moral endeavour than the conviction that the moral life is a realisation of the divine purpose, that in all goodness the spirit of God is manifest, that the good man is the servant of God or even His fellow-worker. By whatever metaphor this may be expressed—and Green's statement that the divine self—consciousness 'reproduces' itself in human morality is also a metaphor—it betrays the assurance that moral achievement is permanent, and that (in spite of all apparent failures) goodness will prevail. He who fights for the good may be confident of victory.

This is the practical value of the conception; but in order that it may have this practical value, the distinction of good from evil must be first of all made clear. Green's appeal to an eternal self-consciousness does nothing of itself to elucidate this distinction. Tendencies to exalt selfish interest over common welfare, and to prefer sensual to what are called higher gratifications, enter into the nature of man, and have fashioned his history. Green does not even ask the question whether these also are not to be considered manifestations or 'reproductions' of the eternal self-consciousness. But his metaphysical view does not exclude them; and if they are included, morality disappears for lack of any criterion between good and evil. If good is to be discriminated from evil, it must be by some other means than by describing the whole conscious activity of man as a reproduction of the divine. Instead of doing anything to solve the problem of the meaning of goodness, Green simply brings forward a new difficulty—that of understanding how the temporal process in which human morality is developed can be related to a reality which is defined as out of time or eternal. This difficulty cannot be avoided in a metaphysical theory of morality. And it does not stand alone. Green's own dialectics were directed against the Sensationalist and Hedonist theories which used to be regarded as typical of English thought; and on them they acted as a powerful solvent. His own views of the spiritual nature of man and its relation to the eternal self-consciousness were worked out with the confidence and enthusiasm of a reformer rather than with the caution of a critic. But criticism has followed, and not only from the representatives of opposed schools. Writers whose intellectual affinities are on the whole the same as his have let their dialectic play around his fundamental conceptions with a result very different from that which he contemplated. Mr Bradley, like Green, has faith in an eternal Reality, which might be called spiritual, inasmuch as it is not material; like Green, he looks upon man's moral activity as an appearance—what Green calls a reproduction—of this eternal reality. But under this general agreement there lies a world of difference. He refuses, by the use of the term self-consciousness, to liken his Absolute to the personality of man, and he brings out the consequence, which in Green is more or less concealed, that the evil equally with the good in man and in the world are appearances of the Absolute.



Page 36

Mr Bradley's whole work is ruled by the distinction between "Appearance" and "Reality," which gives his book a title. On the one hand there is the Absolute Reality, spoken of as perfect, and described as all—comprehensive and harmonious throughout. Neither change nor time nor any relation can belong to it. But intelligence works by discrimination and comparison; knowledge implies relations; it is, therefore, excluded from reality. Truth is mere appearance. The same judgment must be passed on our moral activity. We strive after and perhaps reach an ideal, or, as Mr Bradley says, we aim at satisfying a desire; and this, too, is a process far removed from reality.[1] Goodness, like truth, is mere appearance.

[Footnote 1: Appearance and Reality, pp. 402, 410.]

This needs no elaboration. If all predication involves relation, and relation is excluded from reality,[1] then no predicate—not even truth or goodness—can be asserted of the real. Nay more, to be consistent, we ought not even to say that reality or the Absolute (for the two terms are here interchangeable) is perfect, or one, or all-comprehensive, or harmonious: for all these are predicates. *Ens realissimum* is the only *ens reale*; all else is mere appearance.

[Footnote 1: Ibid., pp. 32-34.]

Just here, however, lies an indication of another line of thought. For what is an appearance, and what is it that appears? It can only be reality that thus appears; the 'mere' appearance is yet an 'appearance of reality.' It might seem that this is to catch, not at a straw, but at the shadow of a straw. For if we say that 'reality appears,' are we not thereby predicating something of reality, making it enter into relation? But let that pass. Among these appearances we may be able to distinguish degrees of significance or of adequacy, nay—strange as it may seem to the reader who has followed Mr Bradley's first line of thought—"degrees of reality." Relations are excluded from reality; and degree is a relation; but reality has degrees. The logic is unsatisfactory, but the conclusion may perhaps have a value of its own.

Here, then, is another view of the universe—not an unchanging, relationless, eternal reality, but varying degrees of reality manifested in that complex process which we call sometimes the world and sometimes 'experience,' But the two views are connected. For it is assumed that the Absolute Reality is harmonious and all-comprehensive; and it is further asserted that these two characteristics of harmony and comprehensiveness may be taken as criteria of the "degree of reality" possessed by any "appearance." The more harmonious anything is—the fewer its internal discrepancies or contradictions—the higher is its degree of reality; and the greater its comprehensiveness—the fewer predicates left outside it—the higher also is its degree of reality. No attempt is made at a measured scale of degrees of reality, such, for example, as is offered by the Hegelian dialectic; but a sort of rough classification of various 'appearances' is offered. In this

classification a place is given to goodness which is comparatively high, and yet “subordinate” and “self-contradictory.” [1]



Page 37

[Footnote 1: Appearance and Reality, p. 420.]

Mr Bradley's Absolute, we may say, has two faces, one of which is described as good, while the other is inscrutable. "Obviously," he says, "the good is not the Whole, and the Whole, as such, is not good. And, viewed thus in relation to the Absolute, there is nothing either bad or good, there is not anything better or worse. For the Absolute is *not* its appearances." This is the inscrutable side. But yet "the Absolute appears in its phenomena and is real nowhere outside them;... it is all of them in unity. And so, regarded from this other side, the Absolute *is* good, and it manifests itself throughout in various degrees of goodness and badness."^[1] What would be contradiction in another writer is only two-sidedness in Mr Bradley. And it is this second side which interests us, for here "the Absolute *is* good," and yet, good as it is, manifests itself in badness as well as goodness, and that in various degrees. If we are to follow another statement of the doctrine, however, we shall have to allow that the "badness" is also good, and that the "various degrees" are all equal. For "the Absolute is perfect in all its detail, it is equally true and good throughout."^[2] Whether or not the good is contradictory, as Mr Bradley maintains,^[3] we must allow that he succeeds in making his account of it contradictory.

[Footnote 1: Appearance and Reality, p. 411.]

[Footnote 2: Ibid., p. 401.]

[Footnote 3: Ibid., p. 409.]

I will try to put the gist of the matter in my own words. Mr Bradley's Absolute is eternal, relationless, ineffable. To it goodness cannot be ascribed; indeed no predicate can be properly applied to it, for any predication implies relation: in earlier language than Mr Bradley's it involves determination and therefore negation. Even to say that the Absolute appears or manifests itself is to predicate something, to imply relation, and thus is an offence against the absoluteness of the Absolute. But nevertheless there *is* a world of phenomena, which the most mystical of philosophers must recognise, if only as a world of illusion. The sum-total of these phenomena may be called the appearances of the Absolute; and the Absolute, according to Mr Bradley, "is real nowhere outside them." In this sense of reality we may make predicates about it. Indeed all our predicates, Mr Bradley teaches in his 'Logic,' have reality—the universe of reality—for their ultimate subject.

In this sense it may be possible to speak of reality as good (though it is a misapplication of the term "Absolute" to call it good). But the question remains what we mean by "good" in this connexion, and what justification we have for using the predicate. And the answer must be that Mr Bradley means very little, since the goodness is manifested "in various degrees of goodness and badness," and that the justification for using the term is not made clear. It seems to

Page 38

be used of reality in a somewhat vague sense, as it were *jure dignitatis* and to have as little ethical significance as “right honourable” when applied to a politician or “reverend” to a clergyman: cases in which it might be consistent to say that right honourable gentlemen manifest various degrees of honour and dishonour, or that reverend gentlemen are worthy of various degrees of reverence and the opposite. All the details of the phenomenal world are bound together by chains of necessity; each is an essential part of the sum-total.[1] How can the distinction of good and evil apply as between these parts?

[Footnote 1: Appearance and Reality-Appearance and Reality, p. 401.]

We may speak of parts as higher or lower; and Mr Bradley defines the “lower” as “that which, to be made complete, would have to undergo a more total transformation of its nature.”[1] The meaning of this is not clear. The reference may be to the complete state which a thing may reach in process of growth. Thus an early stage of a rose-bud may be said to be “lower” than its later stage because it requires a greater transformation before it produces the bloom. But here ‘lower’ does not mean ethically lower, unless immaturity be confused with evil. Or the complete state may be regarded as the type of some order or class, from which different individuals differ in greater or less degree. This meaning is not suggested by the author; and it could have ethical implication only if the type had been first of all shown to have an ethical value. Or again, the completeness referred to may be that which is alone complete in the strict sense of the word, namely, the universe. And we might say that a rose-leaf would require greater transformation in order to become complete in this sense than a rose-bush, or that the act of giving a cup of cold water was less complete than the far-reaching activity say of the first Napoleon. But this difference in completeness would not entail a corresponding difference in moral worth or goodness.

[Footnote 1: Appearance and Reality, p. 401.]

Where all stages are essential, it is not possible to say that one is good and another evil. Is not the good something that ought to be striven for, attained, and preserved? and is not evil something that ought not to be at all? And how can we say that any part ought not to be when every part is essential?

From the monistic view of reality, as set forth by Mr Bradley, there is no direct route to the distinction between good and evil. If the distinction is reached at all, it will be found to be psychological rather than cosmical, to be relative to the attitude of the human mind which contemplates the facts, and in this strict sense to be, what Mr Bradley calls it, appearance.



Page 39

And this is the view which Mr Bradley takes when he proceeds to describe what he means by the 'good.' It is, he says, "that which satisfies desire. It is that which we approve of, and in which we can rest with a feeling of contentment."^[1] "Desire"—"approval"—"feeling"—to these mental attitudes the good is relative: they are expressed in its definition. Mr Bradley, it will be seen, re-states Green's doctrine with a difference which makes it at once more logical and less ethical. Green had said that "the moral good is that which satisfies the desire of a moral agent"; and in so saying had simply walked round the difficulty, for he was unable to say wherein consisted the peculiarity of the moral agent without reference to the conception of moral good which he had started out to define. But Mr Bradley dispenses with the qualification, and says simply that the good "satisfies desire." And in so far his definition is more logical. The question is whether it distinguishes good from evil. Both the practical importance and the theoretical difficulty of the problem arise from the fact that evil is sometimes desired, and that the evil desire may be satisfied. The desire of a malevolent man may be satisfied by another's downfall, and his mind may even "rest with a feeling of contentment" in that result, much in the same way as the benevolent man is satisfied and content with another's happiness. Fortunately, the case is not so common: the dominant leanings of most men are in sympathy with good rather than with evil: but it is common enough to make the emotional characteristics of the individual an uncertain basis on which to rest the distinction of good from evil.

[Footnote 1: Appearance and Reality, p. 402.]

There is also another way of putting the matter: "the good is coextensive with approbation."^[1] If by 'approbation' we mean simply 'holding for good,' then the sentence will mean that the good is what we hold for good—that is to say, that our judgments about good are always true judgments,—a proposition which either ignores the divergence between different individual judgments about good, or else implies a complete relativity such that that is good to each man at any time which he at that time approves or holds to be good; and this latter view would make all discussion impossible. But this is not what Mr Bradley means. "Approbation is to be taken in its widest sense"; in which sense "to approve is to have an idea in which we feel satisfaction, and to have or imagine the presence of this idea in existence."^[2] And here the criterion is the same as before, and equally subjective. In desire idea and existence are separated; they are united in the satisfaction of desire; and approbation is said to be just the feeling of satisfaction in an idea which is also present (or imagined as present) in existence. Not only actual satisfaction of the desire but also imagined satisfaction is covered by "approbation"; but this approval is still simply a feeling of some individual person.



Page 40

[Footnote 1: Appearance and Reality, p. 407]

[Footnote 2: Appearance and Reality, p. 418.]

We need not concern ourselves at present with the adequacy of this statement as an account of the way in which we come to 'approve' or hold something as good. The point is, that it does not advance us at all towards determining the validity of this approval, or towards an objective criterion for distinguishing 'good' from evil.

Mr Bradley draws a distinction between a general and a more special or restricted meaning of goodness. For the former it is enough that existence be "*found* to be in accordance with the idea"; for the latter, it is necessary that the idea itself produce the fact.[1] In the former sense "beauty, truth, pleasure, and sensation are all things that are good,"[2] quite irrespective of their origin; in the latter sense, only that is good which the idea has produced, or in which it has realised itself, which is the work, therefore, of some finite soul. In this narrower meaning goodness is the result of will: "the good, in short, will become the realised end or completed will. It is now an idea which not only *has* an answering content in fact, but, in addition also, has *made*, and has brought about, that correspondence.... Goodness thus will be confined to the realm of ends, or of self-realisation. It will be restricted, in other words, to what is commonly called the sphere of morality,"[3] Even in its more general meaning, as we have seen, Mr Bradley has not succeeded in giving an objective account of good. For the correspondence of idea and existence in which it is said to consist is defined in relation to desire, and to some kind of feeling on the part of the conscious subject. Nor was his account successful in distinguishing good from evil: to that distinction feeling is a blind guide. When he goes on to discuss goodness in the narrower sense, in which it belongs to the results of finite volition, he adopts, as expressing the nature of goodness, that conception of 'self-realisation' which, as put forward by Green, has been found inadequate. The same conception was used by Mr Bradley, in his first work, as "the most general expression for the end in itself," "May we not say," he asked, "that to realise self is always to realise a whole, and that the question in morals is to find the true whole, realising which will practically realise the true self?"[4] It is easy to make the distinction between good and evil depend upon this, that in the former the true self is realised, and that what is realised in the latter is only a false self. But it is equally easy to see that this is only to substitute one unexplained distinction for another. This short and easy method is not that which Mr Bradley adopts in his later work. He has something of much greater interest to say regarding the nature of the self-realisation in which goodness is made to consist; and upon it he lays stress, "solely



Page 41

with a view to bring out the radical vice of all goodness." [5] Goodness, it is said, is self-realisation; and Reality—it was assumed at the outset—is harmonious and all-comprehensive. These last characters are also criteria of degrees of reality, and consequently of degrees of self-realisation. There are, therefore, two marks of self-realisation—harmony and extent; and these two may and do diverge. No doubt "in the end," they will come together; but "in that end goodness, as such, will have perished." [6] "We must admit," says Mr Bradley, "that two great divergent forms of moral goodness exist. In order to realise the idea of a perfect self a man may have to choose between two partially conflicting methods. Morality, in short, may dictate either self—sacrifice or self—assertion," [7] "The conscious duplicity of the hypocrite," according to an outspoken adherent of Mr Bradley's, is "but the natural exaggeration of the unconscious duplicity which resides in the very heart of morality." [8]

[Footnote 1: Appearance and Reality, p. 412.]

[Footnote 2: Ibid., p. 410.]

[Footnote 3: Appearance and Reality, pp. 412, 413.]

[Footnote 4: Ethical Studies (1876), pp. 59, 63.]

[Footnote 5: Appearance and Reality, p. 414.]

[Footnote 6: Appearance and Reality, p. 414.]

[Footnote 7: Ibid., p. 415.]

[Footnote 8: A.E. Taylor, Problem of Conduct (1901), p. 65.]

It is worth while considering this view of the contradictions inherent in morality. To start with, goodness was defined by relation to desire: the good was said to be what satisfies desire. Desire is plainly a mental state in which idea and existence are separated. As such it cannot be attributed to the Absolute Reality. It will involve a contradiction, therefore, if we identify goodness with Absolute Reality; for goodness implies a distinction (between idea and existence) which cannot find place in the Absolute. But if "degrees" of reality be asserted, we must admit stages short of the Absolute, and goodness may belong to such a stage in which process or development is allowed as a fact. But Mr Bradley will have it not only that it is a contradiction to identify this process with the Absolute, but also that the conception of goodness is itself contradictory. "A satisfied desire," he says, "is, in short, inconsistent with itself. For, so far as it is quite satisfied, it is not a desire; and, so far as it is a desire, it must remain at least partly unsatisfied." [1] Of course, if the desire is satisfied, it ceases. It was and it is not. But there is no more contradiction here than in any other case of temporal succession. A

satisfied desire is, it is true, no longer a desire. But the phrase is contradictory only in appearance; for it means that the desire has been satisfied and in its satisfaction has ceased to exist as a desire. A much more important discrepancy is asserted when

Page 42

it is said that “two great divergent forms of moral goodness exist.” The fight for moral goodness is ‘under two flags’—self-assertion and self-sacrifice. And the allies “seem hostile to one another,” “at least in some respects and with some persons.”[2] We have here the time-honoured opposition of egoism and altruism, with a difference. Mr Bradley’s most notable adherent in the region of ethical enquiry prefers to overlook the difference and to return to the older opposition of conflicting ideals.[3] But Mr Bradley himself declines to rate the social factor in conduct so high. It is not altruism or social activity which is the opponent of self-assertion or egoism, but self-sacrifice; and both self-assertion and self-sacrifice are kinds of self-realisation: in the former the self seeks its realisation by perfecting its harmony; in the latter, by increasing its extent. It is not in content that the two modes of self-realisation differ: social factors, for instance, may enter into both; it is in the diverse uses made of the contents:[4] ‘system’ is aimed at in the one; ‘width’ in the other.[5] The harmony of these two methods is attained only when both morality and the individual self are “transcended and submerged.”[6]

[Footnote 1: Appearance and Reality, p. 410.]

[Footnote 2: Appearance and Reality, p. 415.]

[Footnote 3: Taylor, Problem of Conduct, p. 179 ff.]

[Footnote 4: Appearance and Reality, p. 416.]

[Footnote 5: Ibid., p. 414.]

[Footnote 6: Ibid., p. 419.]

This discrepancy of aim, and then coming together of the hostile factors only in the annulling and disappearance of both, is a process quite in accordance with the general dialectic of Mr Bradley. But two things may be noted with regard to it. In the first place the effort after system is called self-assertion, and the effort after width or expansion is called self-sacrifice. Perhaps the author may claim a right to give what names he likes to the processes he describes. But in this case the names have a recognised meaning in the literature of morals, and no hint is given that they are used here in any meaning other than the ordinary. And surely the term ‘self-sacrifice’ is an inappropriate term for describing the conduct which seeks expansion by multiplying the objects of desire—by the pursuit of whatever offers a chance of widened interests, whether social or intellectual, aesthetic or sensual,—even although “my individuality suffers loss” thereby, and “the health and harmony of my self is injured.”[1] Loss may be the result; but aggrandisement is what is sought, though the effort fails through lack of organisation or system. And again ‘self’ is not the only possible centre for the systematisation of conduct. System in conduct may be realised in other ways than as self-assertion. It is



sought as truly by the man of science who gives up everything for the pursuit of truth or by the philanthropist who forgets himself in promoting the social welfare. Such modes of life as these—and not merely self-assertive conduct—may become centres of a moral activity which aims at system.



Page 43

[Footnote 1: Appearance and Reality, p, 417.]

The second remark which has to be made on this final point is, that neither on the method of system and self-assertion nor on the method of expansion and self-sacrifice has the author given or suggested any criterion for the distinction of good and evil. He has cast his net so wide as to include all conduct within it without discrimination of moral worth. His own result is that "the good is, as such, transcended and submerged."^[1] But this result loses all significance if it is the case, as our enquiry seems to prove, that the good as such has never been reached at all, nor any tenable suggestion offered for distinguishing it from evil.

[Footnote 1: Appearance and Reality, p. 419.]

This is the fundamental question for any philosophy of ethics; but it receives no answer at all from the prevailing school of metaphysical thought. This school offers no solution of the problem which was found insoluble by the type of philosophy whose aim is to co-ordinate the results of science. A comparison of the purposes and results of the two schools may be instructive.

Mr Herbert Spencer has told us that since the time of his first essay, "written as far back as 1842," his "ultimate purpose, lying behind all proximate purposes, has been that of finding for the principles of right and wrong in conduct at large a scientific basis.... Now that moral injunctions are losing the authority given by their supposed sacred origin, the secularisation of morals is becoming imperative. Few things can happen more disastrous than the decay and death of a regulative system no longer fit, before another and fitter regulative system has grown up to replace it.... Those who believe that the vacuum can be filled, and that it must be filled, are called on to do something in pursuance of their belief."^[1] But more than fifty years after the publication of this first essay, as, with the completion of the 'Principles of Ethics,' his whole system of philosophy lay unrolled before him, he made the significant and pathetic confession that "the doctrine of evolution has not furnished guidance to the extent I had hoped.... Right regulation of the actions of so complex a being as man, living under conditions so complex as those presented by a society, evidently forms a subject-matter unlikely to admit of definite conclusions throughout its entire range."^[2] And the lack of confidence which the author himself felt in these parts, there is good reason to extend to the whole structure of evolutionary ethics.

[Footnote 1: Preface to Data of Ethics, 1879.]

[Footnote 2: Preface to Principles of Ethics, vol. ii., 1893.]

Page 44

Neither the purpose of their structure nor its collapse is so explicitly proclaimed by the metaphysicians with whom this lecture has dealt. But we hardly need to read between the lines in order to see the prominence of the moral interest in all that Green wrote; and it was after he had shown the inadequacy of the empirical method in the hands of Hume to give any criterion or ideal for conduct that he made his significant appeal to “Englishmen under five-and-twenty” to leave “the anachronistic systems hitherto prevalent amongst us” and take up “the study of Kant and Hegel.”[1] His call to speculation has been widely responded to; but, if we turn to the most important product of this speculative movement, we have to extract what enlightenment we can from the dictum that, in the only sense in which the Absolute is good, it “manifests itself in various degrees of goodness and badness.”[2]

[Footnote 1: Green, Introduction to Hume’s Treatise (1874), ii. 71.]

[Footnote 2: Bradley, Appearance and Reality, p. 411.]

The most notable recent systems of philosophy, idealist as well as naturalist, are thus presented to us, almost confessedly, as void of application to conduct. This result, and foresight of this result, have led to a widespread suspicion of any attempt at ethical construction which is based upon a theory of reality. In consequence, recourse is sometimes had to a purely empirical treatment of morality such as that indicated at the close of the second lecture. Such an account, however, can never rise from the description of conduct to setting up an ideal for life. And accordingly some thinkers have remained convinced of the necessity of ideals for the moral life, although unable to find an adequate ground for these ideals in their system of reality.

This attitude was adopted by F.A. Lange, who, at the close of his History of Materialism, declared that there was need for an Ideal of Worth to supplement the deficiencies of the facts of being. “One thing is certain,” he said, “that man needs to supplement reality by an Ideal World of his own creation, and that in such creations the highest and noblest functions of his mind co-operate. But must this free act of the mind bear ever and ever again the deceptive form of demonstrative science? If it does so, materialism will always reappear and destroy the over-bold speculations.”[1] It would thus seem that moral life postulates an ideal which the mind is able to frame, but for which it can establish no connexion with the world of reality.

[Footnote 1: Geschichte des Materialismus, 3rd ed., p. 545 f.]



Page 45

More recently a brilliant French writer, who has attempted to establish a system of “morality without obligation or sanction,” has suggested that the place of the categorical law of duty may be taken by a speculative hypothesis, and that hope may serve where there is no ground for belief. “The speculative hypothesis is a risk taken in the sphere of thought; action in accordance with this hypothesis is a risk taken in the sphere of will; and that being is higher who will undertake and risk the more whether in thought or action.”[1] Thus, “for example, if I would perform an act of charity pure and simple, and wish to justify this act rationally, I must imagine an eternal Charity at the ground of things and of myself, I must objectify the sentiment which leads to my action; and here the moral agent plays the same *role* as the artist.... In every human action there is an element of error, of illusion”: and it is conjectured that this element increases as the action rises above the commonplace: “the most loving hearts are the most often deceived, in the highest geniuses the greatest incoherences are often found.”[2]

[Footnote 1: Guyau, *Esquisse d'une morale sans obligation ni sanction* (1885) p. 250.]

[Footnote 2: *Ibid.*, pp. 226, 227.]

This solution can hardly be regarded as other than a counsel of despair. Its ethical value is merely apparent. What is of importance for ethics is not so much the presence of some ideal: it is the kind of ideal that matters. It is possible to have an ideal of selfishness as well as an ideal of love, a sensual ideal as well as a spiritual. Nietzsche's over-man is an ideal; the Mohammedan paradise is an ideal; and conduct can be modelled on them. But it is not enough to have system in conduct, irrespective of the worth of the ideal which determines the system. Some criterion is needed for deciding between competing ideals. As long as they are looked upon as mere illusions, as expressions of doubt, or as a hazard staked on the unknowable, caprice takes the place of law; where all is equally uncertain there is no security for the worth of the ideal itself.

Unsatisfactory as they are in this form, the opinions referred to are echoes of a pregnant doctrine of Kant's—the doctrine that the moral consciousness brings us into closer touch with reality than the merely theoretical reason can reach. Various lines of recent thought may be said to have been suggested by this view. Almost every idealist metaphysician has tended to look upon thought itself as constituting the inmost reality of the universe which it conceives or understands; and Kant's doctrine may make us pause and ask whether this tendency is not simply an assumption without warrant.

Again, the psychological analysis of knowledge has brought out the fact of its constant dependence upon practical interests. It is the need to perform or attain something, which is the motive that leads to the understanding of things; and the understanding of things with which alone we are satisfied is commonly that which helps us so to describe our experience as to be able to control some practical result. ‘Knowledge is power’; and

not only so, but in its early stages and in most of its later developments, knowledge is *for* power: it is for purposes of his own that man becomes the 'interpreter of nature.'



Page 46

It is to men of science rather than to philosophers that we owe the 'descriptive theory' of scientific concepts which, within the last few years, has gone far to revolutionise the prevailing attitude of philosophy to science. Concepts, such as 'mass,' 'energy,' and the like, are no longer held to express realities the denial of which would be treason to science; they are simply descriptive notions whose truth consists in their utility: that is to say, in their ability to comprehend all the relevant facts in a simple description. And, in the same way, scientific principles are of the nature of postulates, whose justification is no necessary law of thought, but must rather be sought in the results of scientific investigation.

These three doctrines—the descriptive theory of science, the practical nature of knowledge as it is brought out by psychological analysis, and the special claims of the moral consciousness—have combined to bring about a tendency strongly opposed to the older idealist tradition, the tendency to regard practical results as the sole test of truth.

This conception is put forward now in philosophical literature as a new and independent point of view. The point of view is only in process of being hardened into a theory; but, under the name of Pragmatism, it has already become the subject of a vigorous propaganda. With the value of this doctrine as a general theory of reality we need not at present concern ourselves. In spite of the high claims it makes for the theoretical significance of moral ideas, its adherents have not as yet devoted much attention to the question of the worth of these moral ideas and the criteria by which that worth may be determined. Yet this surely is the fundamental question for ethical theory. On the other hand, as against a merely theoretical interpretation of the universe, into which the moral element enters only as a sort of loosely-connected appendix, the pragmatists are amply justified. Practical ends are prior to theoretical explanations of what happens. But practical ends vary, and some measure of their relative values is needed.

There is one thing which all reasoning about morality assumes and must assume; and that is morality itself. The moral concept—whether described as worth or as duty or as goodness—cannot be distilled out of any knowledge about the laws of existence or of occurrence. Nor will speculation about the real conditions of experience yield it, unless adequate recognition be first of all given to the fact that the experience which is the subject-matter of philosophy is not merely a sensuous and thinking, but also a moral, experience. The approval of the good, the disapproval of the evil, and the preference of the better: these would seem to be basal facts for an adequate philosophical theory: and they imply the striving for a best—however imperfect the apprehension of that best may always remain. Only when these facts—the characteristic facts of moral experience—are recognised as constituents of the experience which is our subject-matter, are we in a position profitably to enquire what is good and what evil, and how the best is to be conceived.

Page 47

The recognition of these facts would only be a beginning; but it would be a beginning which would avoid the cardinal error fallen into not only by the leading exponents of evolutionist morality, but also to be found in much of the ethical work of idealist metaphysicians. It seems to have been assumed that moral principles can be reached by the application of scientific generalisations or of the results of a metaphysical analysis which has started by overlooking the facts of the moral consciousness. Even as a metaphysic this procedure is inadequate; and the interpretations of reality to which it has led have erred by over-intellectuality.

The systems of naturalism and of idealism, whose ethical consequences have been passed in review, have one feature in common; and it is a feature which from of old has been regarded as a mark of genuine philosophy. They both seek the One in the many; but they seek it on different roads. For the naturalist the most comprehensive description of things may be the conception of mass-points in motion; or it may be some more recondite conception to which physical analysis points. In either case the unity reached will be mechanical. For the idealist, on the other hand, reason may be said to be the central principle of things: the unity of reality is a rational unity. I have contended in these lectures that neither the mechanical unity of the naturalists nor the rational unity of the idealists has succeeded in comprehending within its unifying principle the essential nature of morality with its deep-going dualism of good and evil. But while I have maintained that even the conception of reality as the reproduction of itself by an eternal self-consciousness is an inadequate conception, it is still possible to hold that reality is a connected whole, and that its true principle of unity is an ethical principle.

If I were asked what is meant by an ethical unity, I should answer, in the first place, that it implies purpose. The unity of reality is not exhibited by a description of its present or past conditions or even by an account of its causal connexions. These modes of description are all affected by the fragmentariness which always belongs to temporal apprehension. But, when things are seen in the light of a purpose, a view of them as a whole becomes possible, and the fragmentariness of time is transcended. And, in the second place, I should say that an ethical unity implies the presence within itself of different finite centres of conscious activity, whose freedom is not inconsistent with their relation to one another and to the Whole.



Page 48

In his own life, so far as it is a moral life, each individual seeks system or unity. And this unity is realised on three different levels—as we may call them—which may be distinguished for clearness' sake, though it is not possible actually to separate them. On each level morality is realised through system, and system is brought about by the rule of the morally higher and the submission of the morally lower: in this goodness lies, in the opposite evil. If we isolate the individual and consider him apart, he may be said to attain goodness by the due ordering and control of his sensuous and passional nature by rational or spiritual ends. The result may be described, negatively, as the suppression of sensualism. But the positive description remains imperfect until we can say what the rational or spiritual principle is which is to weld all man's 'particular impulses' into an organic whole.

And this cannot be done so long as we contemplate the mere individual in isolation. We cannot remain at the level of bare individuality. Personality itself is not a merely individual product: neither the knowledge nor the activity of the individual can be explained without reference to his position as a member of society; his inheritance is a social inheritance. Nor can the individual establish a claim to deal with his own personality as a merely individual end. It is a factor in social life; and, in systematising his own life, he must have regard to the social factor. In this respect he attains goodness only when his individual life seeks a unity higher than that of his own individuality, and not centred in his selfish interests. From this point of view we may say, again negatively, that goodness consists in the suppression of selfishness. But once again there is a difficulty about the positive description. Many moralists, undoubtedly, are content to rest with the social aspect: to regard the 'health' or 'vitality' of society as the final expression of morality. But a life which is simply absorbed by society cannot be said to be a perfect unity. Society itself is a process; and its changes are determined in large measure by the moral ideals of its members. For its unity we must look to an end—an ideal—of which its actual forms can offer indications only. Both man and society are factors in a universal order; and their perfection cannot be independent of the purpose of this order. When the consciousness of it fills man's life, morality is merged in religion.

INDEX.

Absolute, the, 101 ff.
 as good, 105.
 as not good, 104.
Altruism, 15 ff., 74 f., 118.
Appearance, 101 ff.
Approbation, 111 ff.
Aristotle, 87.
Artificial selection, 61 ff.
Austen, Jane, 4 n.



Benevolence, 16.

Bentham, J., 4 n.

Bradley, F.H., 88, 100 ff.

Browning, R., 31.

Characteristics of goodness, 113.

 reality, 103.

Competition between groups, 52 f., 58, 74, 79.

 ideas, 53 ff.

 individuals, 52, 74, 79.

Content of morality, agreement as to, 7.

Christian morality, 7, 18, 20.

Cosmic process and moral order, 46 ff.



Page 49

Darwin, C., 35 ff., 39 ff., 57, 60, 62.

Degrees of reality, 103 ff.

Descriptive ethics, 76 ff.

theory of science, 129.

Desire and goodness, 90 ff., 102, 110 ff.

Distinction of good and evil, 93 ff., 113.

Egoism, 15 ff., 74 f., 118.

Empiricism, 3.

Ens reale, 102.

realissimum, 102.

Environment, moral, 70 ff.

Epicurus, 17.

Eternal mind, the, 96 ff.

Ethical controversies at present day, 13 ff.

in nineteenth century, 1 ff.

Ethical unity of things, 133 ff.

Ethics of evolution, 36 ff.

Evolution, ethical significance of, 51, 67 ff.

Evolution of ethics, 36 ff.

Evolution, theory of, 33 ff., 36 ff.

Exceptional cases, 11.

Experiments in morality, 50.

Fichte, J.G., 87.

Fittest, survival of the, 35, 69 ff.

Galt, J., 4 n.

Good, the true, 92 ff.

Goodness as appearance, 102 ff.

Goodness as contradictory, 117.

Green, T.H., 77 n., 89 ff., 123.

Guyau, 125 f.

Halevy, E., 4 n.

Hedonism, 100.

Hegel, 87, 104, 123.

Higher and lower, 107 ff.

Huxley, T.H., 45 ff., 68.

Ibsen, 31.

Idealism, 87 ff.

Ideals, need of, 125.

Illusions as ideals, 127.



Immoralist, 24.
Individual and group, 40 ff.
Influences forming ethical thought:
 current morality, 26 ff.
 science and philosophy, 32 ff.
Intelligent selection, 61 ff., 80.
Intuitionism, 2 ff., 81.

Kant, 87, 123, 127 f.

Lange, F.A., 125.
Leibniz, 87.

Material and moral progress, 29 f.
Mechanical unity, 133.
Metaphysics, 82, 85 ff.
Mill, J.S., 3 n., 8 ff., 28.
Modifications of general rules, 9.
Monism and ethics, 109.
Moral consciousness and reality, 128.
 environment, 70 ff.
 experience, 131.
 ideas, origin of, 1 ff.
 order and cosmic process, 46 ff.
 value, criterion of, 1 ff., 75.

Natural selection, 35, 43 ff., 49.
 in morals, 55.
Naturalism, 83 f., 86 f.
Nietzsche, F., 18 ff., 31 f.,
 47 ff., 67., 127.
Nobles, morality of, 20.

Origin and validity, 37, 97.
Over-man, the, 22, 31.
Owen, Sir R., 59.

Physiological interpretation
 of life, 67, 76.
Plato, 31, 87.
Practical nature of knowledge, 128.
Pragmatism, 130.
Progress of life, 34.
Progressive morality, 9.
Psychological ethics, 109 ff.
Purposive selection, 61 ff., 80.



Rational unity, 133.
Religion, 82 f., 136.
Renaissance, 33.

Science and metaphysics, 85.
Self-assertion, 116 ff.
Self-love, 17.
Self-realisation, 90 ff., 113 ff.
Self-sacrifice, 116 ff.
Selfishness, suppression of, 136.
Sensationalism, 100.
Sensualism, suppression of, 135.
Servile morality, 20.
Sexual selection, 66.
Sidgwick, H., 16 f.
Social qualities, 40 ff.
Sophists, the, 27.
Spencer, H., 44, 47, 51, 73, 122.
Spinoza, 87 f.
Stephen, Sir L., 44.
Subjective selection, 60, 66, 80.
Subjectivity in ethics, 81.



Page 50

Taylor, A.E., 116, 118.

Tennyson, 31.

Tille, A., 25 n.

Transvaluation, 21.

Truth as appearance, 101.

as moral law, 9 ff., 22 f.

Uebersch, the, 22, 25 n.

Unity of life, 34.

Utilitarianism, the term, 3 n.

the theory, 2 ff., 81.

Variation, 49.

Volz, J., 24 n.

Wellbeing, 71, 75.

Wilberforce, S., 59.

Zola, 31.