

The Basis of Morals.

A COLLEGE ADDRESS.

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II.

WE come at length in our analysis of the moral nature to the word *conscience*, which marks the central point of our rational activity, as duty supplies its discursive sphere. For three centuries our language has had a double term for *conscience* and *consciousness* (like the German *Gewissen* and *Bewusstsein*), which are both contained in the Old English *inwit*, as in the Latin *conscientia*, the French *conscience*, and the Greek *syneidésis* of the New Testament. Now, this modern English discrimination is an interesting etymological fact, and an aid to clear expression. But the oneness of the two ideas in other principal languages is also significant. It indicates that conscience is not a separate faculty superinduced upon our consciousness; it is the organic function of consciousness. Conscience is, as Kant called it, 'practical reason,' reason applied to conduct. We cannot think of our conduct at all, nor of the activity of other persons, without thinking of it in terms of conscience, as dutiful or undutiful, right or wrong. The earliest movements of the child's intelligence show this as clearly as the experience of the mature man. The consciousness of the bad man witnesses to the fact no less than that of the good. As self-knowing, self-directing creatures, rational and free, we are bound to have a conscience; as a society of such creatures, we are still more bound to have some sort of conscience. Human life has never been discovered anywhere, it is in fact inconceivable, without an inner sensibility of this sort, without some initial aptitude for the recognition of moral order. Beings like ourselves, in a world like this, compounded of soul and sense, wrought upon by wild, struggling forces within and without, require for tolerable existence some ideal scheme of life, some law lodged in the understanding and informing the will. Otherwise we are lost at the outset, and bound for shipwreck as certainly as any vessel sailing into wintry seas without chart or compass, rudder or pilot. Morality is the chart, drafted by religion; rectitude is the compass; duty, the rudder; and conscience, the steersman at the helm. Only, in this case, pilot and rudder are

not things separate from the vessel; it is the soul, the ship of life herself, thrilling with intelligence and purpose in every part, that bends her powers to the direction of her course, and wins her perilous way through reefs and quicksands, and against buffeting storm and treacherous current, till she reaches the far haven where she would be.

This is, substantially, the argument of Bishop Butler in the famous 'Three Sermons upon Human Nature.' Butler argues the necessity and supremacy of conscience from the mixed constitution of the soul and the combination in it of higher and lower faculties, with their various and conflicting aims, which make the control of a superior internal principle indispensable. Butler's reasoning is as valid now as it was a century and a half ago. Evolution and psychological research have detracted nothing from its real force. Education, in the individual or the race, does not generate conscience; it is there to begin with, the fulcrum of education. Without conscience in the child or the savage, there is nothing to educate. Education elicits and trains our powers; it never originates. You cannot 'make a silk purse out of a sow's ear,'—nor a moral out of a non-moral being, by any deftness of manufacture. Social development does not in the least account for the individual conscience: it presupposes it. The conscience of society is nothing more than the aggregate, or average, of the consciences of its constituents; and the causes of the advance or retrogression of society have their spring in the spirit of individual men. Unless the reason of man were fundamentally moral, as it is fundamentally mathematical, unless there were what the theologians call an 'original righteousness' proper to our nature, the developed life of civilised society were impossible, as impossible as a plant without root and seed, as running without feet, as arithmetic without the certainty that two and two make four.

It is true that experience justifies moral wisdom; and we are, on the whole, greatly the gainers in material utility by the practice of virtue. But

virtue must be practised for conscience' sake before the gain appears; and experience too plainly shows that no experience of the advantages of virtue will sustain it against the sophistries of passion, when higher motives fail. You will never make children good by teaching them that it pays, and without awakening in their souls the pure love of goodness.

The very consciousness of self, we contend, carries with it some conscience of right and duty. If it were not so, if goodness did not in some sort commend itself to every man, and command his respect because he is a man, our race would have destroyed itself long before this in selfish passion. Man's intellectual progress, if imaginable at all upon non-moral terms, would have been that only of an infernally clever brute. Conscience is the pivot of our existence as reasoning and self-directing and related beings. It is the focus of personal life, the generating centre of character. As science has for its realm the ordered world subject to our intelligence, so conscience rules the world of voluntary action. The scientific man strives to comprehend his world as it is, the conscientious man strives to fashion it as it ought to be. With the former we may, with the latter we must, participate.

We cannot pass from the topic of conscience without remarking on the specific character of the emotions that attend its exercise. The intensity and ardour of these sensibilities in the healthy mind, the singular delicacy, variety, and complexity of which they are susceptible, their long continuance and power to colour and temper our whole experience, the way in which they break out from unsuspected depths, and in their painful forms of remorse or indignation will sometimes by a sudden upheaval rend the entire fabric of a man's previous life, or change the current of a nation's history—this incomparable vividness and electric force of the moral feelings proves that the conscience, whose servants they are, is the sovereign factor of personality. These thunders and lightnings of the soul are wielded by that power which sits on the throne of our being.

Another step, and we are at the end of our course of self-examination. We have seen that there belongs to us as persons a *goodness*, a *moral* excellence, which cannot be resolved into lower elements or referred to any material source; that *virtue* is the quality of the man himself (the *vir*),

of the self in the man. The various forms of goodness we conceive under the form of *right*, as they are reduced to general rules for conduct and so prescribed. These rules, endorsed by our own minds and brought to bear upon daily action, define our *duties*, which we are free to discharge or neglect, and which involve us in a far-spreading web of obligation and responsibility, and constitute the moral world reaching indefinitely beyond us. It is in the sphere of duty, and as beings capable of moral goodness, that we become properly aware of ourselves; and consciousness wakes up in us each in the form of *conscience*. Our reason, in its rudiments, is a moral and not a mere intellectual discernment; it instinctively judges, and through the will guides conduct, and it has its principles, explicit or implicit, to go by in so doing. And the emotions that our moral judgments excite in us are the most powerful and ardent known to the soul.

So far we have advanced, with some degree of unanimity. Our goal is the point from which Aristotle sets out in the first paragraph of his immortal *Ethics*. 'Every art,' he says, 'and every science, and similarly every moral act and decision of the will, has some *good* at which it aims. . . . The material crafts and professional arts have their several ends. But there is surely some master art and higher end to which these are subordinate. There is *the art of life itself*, the final end of human pursuits. And this end we call the chiefest good, the perfect consummation of human aims.' Thus far Aristotle.

Reason is prospective, no less than retrospective. It assumes a purpose, as well as a cause, for the objects of its knowledge. To bid it, because of its past mistakes, renounce the search for ends and be content with causes, as the Positivists do, is to require the human reason to mutilate itself. The *end* is alone the true reason of things. Plan and purpose, order and design, are terms correlative. We cannot see order without believing in design: our error is to presume too quickly that we *see* the design. In every organism there is a structural idea, towards which its development works, from the germ to the finished growth. Irrational beings work blindly towards their ends, fulfilling a purpose unknown to themselves. It is the distinction of rational beings to grasp the purpose of their structure, to will and seek their own ends, instead of passively accepting those

determined for them; or, as Scripture puts it, to be 'workers together with God,' who 'worketh in us to will and to work.' We share our Maker's plans for us. Self-determination implies self-conceived ends. Each one of us has his ideals in life, whether wisely or unwisely formed, clearly or vaguely conceived, resolutely or slackly pursued. Those ideals hold the promise and potency of our future. What we mean to be, with real meaning, that we tend to be.

Now the goal tests the course. The proof of every system of morals lies in its doctrine of the *summum bonum*, of man's chief end. Only two reasoned answers to the question are possible; they have divided between them the schools of ethical thought, and the ranks of practical life, in all ages. The end of our present life, is it to be found in *character*, or in *pleasure*? My chief personal aim, is it to enjoy myself as much as possible, or to be as good and worthy a man as possible? No one denies that pleasure is desired, and desirable: few will question that virtue is desirable, and desired. But which is the main thing? which is to control and determine the other? Is the end of life intrinsic or extrinsic to our being? Has the soul a real value, or is it of use only as a machine to yield pleasure? Your answer and mine to this question cannot for a moment be doubtful. *Hedonism*, or the pleasure theory of life, is in all its forms to be repelled. It is the great heresy in morals. Its results are disastrous, as its principles are degrading. Its prevalence is the forerunner of social and national decay. Select philosophers may, by their qualifications and refinements, escape the natural consequences of their doctrine. The common mind invariably understands by pleasure the sensuous and measurable enjoyments; and it is consistent in doing so, for the higher pleasures are only distinguished as higher by a criterion outside of pleasure, and are constituted pleasures only to a mind that loves the objects concerned on their own account. Accepting pleasure as the aim of life and the criterion of good, men come to regard prudence as the only restraint on their desires. So philosophy is made the patron of vice; and materialism in faith breeds sensualism in morals.

Thomas Carlyle, in his rough way, called Hedonism 'the Pig-philosophy.' But that was scarcely fair to the animal. The pig does not guzzle his swill impelled by a voluptuous imagina-

tion; but from the craving of his swinish nature for excessive food. If he could explain himself, he too is an idealist, and is working to fulfil the end imposed upon him by nature and the art of man, which is obesity,—certainly not an unmixed pleasure! Only man, through the perversion of his intellect, is capable of the debasement of Hedonism, of abstracting the delights attached to life's ends and erecting them into factitious ends on their own account, of becoming (in the language of Scripture) 'a lover of pleasure rather than a lover of God.' Hedonism is biologically, as well as ethically, false. Pleasure and pain are functional incidents; they are like the smooth working or jarring of machinery, and supply a zest or deterrent to action already in course. But to set them up for cardinal ends and prime motors is another thing. To be always hunting pleasure and dodging pain, and to make this pursuit and flight the guiding rule of conduct, is at once the meanest and the most futile theory of life that an intelligent being can frame.

In ourselves, and nowhere else, in our common rational manhood, must we seek the mark of our strivings; we climb upwards to reach the ideal self. We endorse Kant's noble maxim: 'So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, and never as a means only.' When Aristotle and the old philosophers spoke of 'happiness,' and the saints of 'blessedness,' as the aim of life, they meant the soul's *welfare*, the highest state of personal being,—a state attended, as one must suppose, by suitable feelings of delight, but not constituted by those feelings, no more than the health dancing in the limbs of a happy child is determined by the laughing glee which is its witness. Health of soul and joy of heart are bound together, by the nature of things and the ordinance of God; but to crave the former for the latter's sake, to desire goodness for the emoluments of goodness, is to go the sure way to lose both. Pleasure, the Hedonists say, determines desire, and desire determines good: good, we say, gives the law to desire, and desire gives birth to pleasure. It is not love, but lust, that loves for love's delights, and does not count the worth and beauty of the beloved its true prize.

The modern socialistic Hedonism, commonly termed Utilitarianism, is nobler than the old egoistic theory; but only at the expense of consistency.

It substitutes 'social utility' for personal goodness as the end of moral action, and takes 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' for its watchword. But Utilitarianism is, strictly speaking, only a doctrine of *means*. I am bidden to pursue a certain course, because it is *useful* to the community. Very well: but useful, I ask, *to what end?* what sort of happiness do you wish me to seek for 'the greatest number'? Is it the mere comforting of their bodies; or is it, beyond and above that, the saving of their souls, that you intend? In what can the welfare of a *number* of persons consist, however great, except in that which constitutes the welfare of each individual, the worth, the perfection, and consequent felicity, of personality itself, viz. character? I do not think so meanly of my neighbour as to suppose that he will be content with pleasure, while I can only be satisfied with virtue. The end of life is the same, for the single person and for the race. The greatest happiness of each lies in the greatest goodness of all. What makes you and me miserable is, that so many of our kind should be wicked. When the Good Shepherd laid down His life for the sheep, that was the act of supreme 'social utility.' Not when He turned the water into wine or made five loaves food for five thousand men (these were but incidents in His blessed work), but when He shed His blood to 'redeem us from iniquity,' was the grand service of Jesus Christ to our race accomplished.

We have now surveyed rapidly one side, the subjective aspect, of the ethical problem, glancing here and there at its objective bearing. We have sought for the basis of morality in our own constitution; and we have found that it is grounded in human reason, in the necessities of daily thought and action, and in the ends of life as we intelligently realise them for ourselves and for our fellows. But does this world of our moral experience exist for human thought alone? Is its source and issue confined to our own breasts, and to the horizon of the present? Men cannot, and do not, believe this. In the phenomena of moral life they find a witness, direct and manifold, to God and immortality. These two, as Kant affirmed, are the 'postulates of practical reason.' Many who, like Kant, distrust the arguments for the divine drawn from the external world, find here its irresistible proof.

Let me indicate, in a concluding paragraph or

two, how this inference is drawn and how we pass from the psychological to the metaphysical view of ethics, how the moral personality of man assumes its basis in the eternal ground of things. Our human consciousness, being without a counterpart or explanation in the world of nature, reaches out to some *over-consciousness*, some personal God, in whom it may rest and find its element; the finite spirit demands the infinite, as each atom of matter the boundless space. And if goodness is proper to the human person, is its essential excellence, such goodness, infinitely enhanced and glorified beyond human measure, we ascribe of necessity to *Him*; we conceive of God as 'the Holy One who dwells in eternity,' such as we have seen Him in the face of Jesus Christ. Our conscience forbids the worship of any lesser or lower being, when once He is discerned. From such a One we can understand our existence as derived; and we see in humanity His blurred and broken, but still living image. Then we can account for the form of *law*, in which goodness addresses itself to us; for the majesty of *the right*, which rises immeasurably above civil legalities and tribal customs, and lends its sanctions and dignity to them; for the stern imperativeness of *duty*, and the fearful punishment its neglect entails in the lashings of remorse. There is a magnitude, a mystery about these phenomena, that speaks for the operation in them of a superhuman personal force, as the tides of the ocean are explained by no terrestrial cause, but by attractions issuing from the sky. Goodness we interpret as the image of God; right as the determination of His law; and duty as His daily and precise command. The consciousness of responsibility in us now reveals its meaning, arising as it does apart from human cognisance or censure; it is the soul's echo of the Omnipresent and Holy Consciousness of the universe, the sense, dim or clear within us, of the All-seeing Eye piercing the depths of the spirit. The sentence of our conscience rehearses, more or less faithfully, the pronouncement of the Supreme Tribunal, and notifies that 'every one of us must give account of himself to God.'

'If, as is the case,' wrote Cardinal Newman, 'we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is One to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear. If on doing wrong we feel the same tearful, broken-hearted sorrow which overwhelms

us on hurting a mother; if on doing right we enjoy the same sunny serenity of mind which follows on receiving praise from a father—we certainly have within us the image of some Person to whom our love and veneration look, in whose smile we find our happiness, for whom we yearn, towards whom we direct our pleadings, in whose anger we are troubled and waste away. These feelings within us are such as require for their exciting cause an intelligent being. . . . “The wicked flees when no man pursueth”: then why does he flee? Whence his terror? Who is it that he sees in solitude, in darkness, in the hidden chambers of the heart?’

For those who have known the LORD, the world is no longer a riddle, nor its moral problems insoluble and maddening. Cast down, they are not destroyed; perplexed, they are not in despair. The injustices and outrages of society, the apparent triumphs of evil, will not dishearten us, if we know that the present is a period of discipline and sifting, under His hand who will ‘thoroughly purge His floor, and gather the wheat into His garner’; that there is enthroned on the seat of Almighty Power, and awaiting the hour decreed in Omniscient Wisdom, a ‘Judge of the whole earth, who

will do right.’ In the light of this belief we trace the instalments of such justice dealt out in the life of men and nations; and history becomes to us, as we read it, an august and steady evolution of the eternal righteousness.

Finally, the end of life as conceived from the human standpoint, appears now to be but a relative end, a finite *summum bonum*, which points beyond itself to the infinite good, the absolute ground and end of being, which is God Himself. So the rivers flow back to the sea, the circle of existence is complete; and the stream of our brief lives moves onward with the moral universe, and with the march of the circling worlds, to the one sure issue, that ‘GOD may be all in all.’ ‘Man’s chief end,’ as the old Catechism taught us, ‘is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever.’ Happy they who have learnt that lesson early, and who hold it fast.

Here is the ultimate basis of morals. Here is the fountain of life, the light in which we see light. And all the prophets and preachers sing, with Samuel’s mother—

There is none holy as the LORD;
For there is none beside Thee:
Neither is there any rock like our GOD!

At the Literary Table.

BOOKS OF THE MONTH.

PART I.

THE CLUE TO THE AGES. PART I. CREATION BY PRINCIPLE. BY ERNEST JUDSON PAGE. (*Baptist Tract and Book Society*. 8vo, pp. 283.) It may be difficult to find the clue to the ages, but it cannot be much more difficult than to find the clue to this book. There is acuteness in it, of the critical kind, undoubtedly. There is a really searching criticism of Darwinism, for one thing. But who is sufficient to discover the reason and purpose of the book itself? The progress of the world, says Mr. Page, has been ‘by ebb and flow,’ and he is a close imitator of nature. But when he adds that ‘always the point touched by the highest wave of progress of one century is higher than the highest wave of the preceding,’ he seems to let the world run away from him. But the great mistake

was the decision not to publish all the book at once. To find the clue to the ages and issue it in two (or more) large volumes was hard enough upon us; but to issue only one of the volumes at a time was surely wanton cruelty.

THE CAUSES OF THE CORRUPTION OF THE TRADITIONAL TEXT OF THE FOUR GOSPELS. BY THE LATE J. W. BURGON, D.D. EDITED BY EDWARD MILLER, M.A. (*Bell*. 8vo, pp. ix, 290.) *Audi alteram partem* is a good motto. The wonder is that this has become ‘the other side.’ But there is no denying it, that in the matter of New Testament textual criticism the adherents of Westcott and Hort hold the field. Dean Burgon directed his light artillery against the