

SOME CONSIDERATIONS IN ETHICS.

IN what respect, if in any, does our knowledge of right and wrong differ from our other knowledge? Are the methods appropriate for obtaining information concerning the wickedness or righteousness of actions different from, or similar to, those adequate to acquaint us with the other qualities of things? Is there required, or does there exist, any separate means or specialized sense or faculty, differing in nature or function from the other senses, as the eye for instance differs from the ear, in order to enlighten us as to those characteristics of actions which denote goodness or badness? For the purpose of judging of the excellence of a man's life, is it necessary to refer to any criteria differing in kind, demanding different treatment, from those used in acquiring knowledge in any other branch of the inquiry after truth? Is the correctness of a proposition in ethics to be demonstrated by the use of any other mental powers than those called into action in substantiating any general statement in natural history or physics? Is the classification of actions into good and bad a process like, or unlike, that by which we classify animals or flowers or the inorganic substances? Why do we declare that a certain course of action is wicked? What makes it wicked, and not right? Upon what basis do we make the distinction? Is it some feeling or emotion? If this be so, what is the nature of this feeling; from what does it arise; and whence comes its binding force? Does this basis consist in some intellectual perception? Then, upon what qualities of things, or tendencies of events, does this perception rest, and in what manner does there follow from it a classification of acts into those that are good and those that are bad?

All these inquiries are only parts of another wider question, and the answers to them taken together form the complete an-

swer to it. In its general form, it is: What is our theory of right and wrong? It is upon this general subject of ethics, being the widest generalization of all our thinking upon right and wrong, and by inferences from which we establish practical rules for public and private right living, that it is proposed to offer a few considerations in the present paper.

All men, of course, who have beliefs about the morality of actions, have also back of, or underlying, these special beliefs in individual cases some general theory or first principles applicable to all actions. The general theory is held more or less clearly and thoroughly, according to the intelligence of persons. To it they refer always tacitly, and, when called upon, expressly, and from it they deduce their particular moral judgments in all stated instances. They ascribe correctness to the latter only so far as these accord with, and rest for their validity upon, those previously established generalizations. Certainly, this reference to the first principles underlying all moral judgments should always be made, though without doubt this is too seldom consciously done. It surely is demanded in order to make our decisions in special instances consistent, and without such reference it is impossible to think intelligently upon the subject. For to predicate goodness of any special act without reason, — that is, without either bringing the act under some general rule applying to all acts of the same class, or without understanding that our judgment in regard to it is ultimate, and why it is ultimate, — is evidently to stultify one's self. There is not opportunity in the compass of the present article to examine the whole question which has been introduced. Nor is such the intention. It is purposed only to suggest a few considerations which are regarded as essential to the proper treatment of the subject.

It has frequently been pointed out that all knowledge is in reality only a perception of likeness and unlikeness among things around and within us, together with inferences resting upon these perceptions; and that, at each step in acquiring knowledge, our information depends upon the observation of new differences and the drawing of new distinctions. The final analysis of the process of obtaining knowledge, — whether it be the first indefinite and crude knowledge of an infant, such as the distinguishing of a strange face from a familiar one, or the widest

scientific generalization of a Newton, or even the still wider philosophic ones of later thinkers, — shows that the process in all cases is in kind the same, and consists, in fact, simply in the establishment of different ideas within us correctly corresponding to the likenesses and unlikenesses in objects around us or feelings within us, and of sequences of ideas in harmony with the external order of events. The attainment of knowledge upon subjects into which moral considerations enter is by no means an exception to this general statement.

Let us begin by referring to a familiar distinction. Every human action may be regarded from two separate standpoints, and in each instance the action must be judged by different criteria, according as it is looked upon from one or the other of these points of view. The marked contrast between these criteria, and the apparent antagonism which sometimes is found in the decisions arrived at from looking upon human conduct from one or the other of these different points of observation, can be the most vividly realized by considering the lives of any of the ecclesiastics of the Middle Ages, who were the most distinguished among the men of their time for intelligence, piety, and goodness, but who lived at a time when conduct which we now in more enlightened days condemn was believed by all not only to be right, but also to be commended as especially pious and desirable. If we examine the lives of these men, taking into consideration the purity of their desires, the unselfishness of their motives, their unswerving loyalty to their highest ideas of duty, their unquestioning obedience to what they regarded as divine commands, we must have praise and not blame as the result of our examination. But if we look at their lives without reference to the unselfishness of the motives involved, and consider their acts and conduct in the light of modern advancement, with all the narrowness and bigotry which they displayed and the fruit which these characteristics inevitably bear, the persecutions which they favored and in which they rejoiced, their incorrect and crude ideas of Deity, their unworthy ideas of manhood, their days degraded by superstitious rites and disgraceful penances, — in brief, if we consider all those misapplications of endeavor and energy which made up so large a part of the life of the ecclesiastic in the age in which they lived, and if we compare these with what we now re-

gard as the proper contents of a good life, we must, on the contrary, decide that the lives of these men were far from good. Thus, while we praise and admire the men, we are compelled to judge that their endeavors were misdirected and unworthy, and that their lives were full of evil-doing.

And with no necessary inconsistency. For it is an apparent and familiar truth that an act in reference to its motive is one thing, but that the same act, when considered by itself and in reference to its necessary results alone, is quite another thing. From the consideration of the one we obtain a judgment of the moral worth of the agent; from that of the other, a judgment simply of the rightness or wrongness of the act. Nor can we, it may be suggested, infer at our pleasure from one of these phases to the other. The honest unselfishness of a man by no means necessitates goodness in any of his actions. Neither does the excellence of an action prove the doer of it to be good. These inferences from one judgment to the other may be made, however, as a matter of probability in cases where the experience of mankind justifies it.

There is, then, a distinction which must not be lost sight of between our judgment of the subjective morality of conduct regarded relatively to the intention, and that of the objective morality of conduct considered out of relation to motive. Conduct may be subjectively praiseworthy and objectively blamable. The English philanthropists, in their endeavor to suppress the slave-trade, obtained the passage of a law relating to the construction of vessels. They soon found that the enforcement of this law only made the slave-trade more barbarous, and were as eager to have the law repealed as they had been to have it enacted. Again, actions in themselves good may be relatively wicked, as when one saves a person from drowning with the intention of robbing him afterwards. The two remaining cases, — one of agreement in demerit, and the other of agreement in excellence, of conduct considered in these two lights, — make up the four possible combinations, one of which obtains in each supposable instance.

There is not much real disagreement among people in regard to the criterion of the subjective excellence of conduct. All seem to be at one in regarding the quality of the motive as the

single and only test. No matter how wrong in itself the action may be, or how disastrously it may result, provided it be done with unselfish intention, we all are ready to approve of and praise the doer. In fact, the nature of the conduct itself does not enter at all into consideration, except for the purpose of judging of the internal impulse or purpose. When that is found, the problem is solved. There is, indeed, no real disagreement upon this point; but the greater portion of the civilized world, who accept the belief that the distribution of praise and blame by the divine mind which they desire to imitate depends upon the reception or rejection of certain intellectual judgments, and not upon the motives of conduct, — upon belief, and not upon intention, — would be logically compelled to deny this conclusion that the test of the subjective goodness of conduct is to be found in the motive alone; yet, as a matter of fact they are happily inconsistent, and practically act according to this rule when called upon to approve or disapprove.

Concerning the basis of our judgment of the objective morality of conduct, there is a wide disagreement among those who have thought upon the matter, though all are agreed that generally the motive forms no part of it. In so far, however, as conduct reacts upon the doer, and influences him and others who are acquainted with the motive, this, though no longer the sole criterion, becomes one of the qualities of the action, and, as such, is properly treated as one of the many factors which enter into the problem. For all other persons, the test must be sought elsewhere and without reference to the internal cause of the action.

It is because this general and fundamental distinction is not always kept in view, and also because there is a lack of accuracy in the use of language, that the holding of some intellectual opinions is frequently called wicked, or the acceptance of certain scientific theories is declared to be morally wrong. Now, there is no question that the assertion of a certain opinion, or the announcement of a belief in some statement of physical fact, may be made from selfish motive or harmful design, and on that account be within the sphere of rules of morality; but it seems evident that the opinion itself, or the belief in so far as it is honestly held, being the result of an intellectual process of observation and inference, is properly to be judged only by the canons

of correct thinking, and not by reference to principles of ethics. An opinion about facts may be correct or incorrect, but it is difficult to see how, if honestly arrived at, it can be right or wrong. Propositions about external things may be true or untrue, according as the subjective order of our ideas is in complete or incomplete harmony with the eternal order of events; but where is there place for moral merit or demerit unless, in addition to the propositions, there is ground for the imputation of beneficial or harmful purposes in stating them? It is to be observed in this connection that it is common to include beliefs and opinions within the sphere of ethical rules only in those branches of human knowledge which are regarded as having an immediate or important effect upon human welfare. We may conclude, indeed, that a person must be lacking in intelligence who denies that the world is spheroidal, but it is not customary to hold that such a person is wicked on account of such a denial. On the other hand, we are very ready to impute wickedness to any one who holds and expresses opinions that are opposed to those which we cherish upon any question about political or social institutions, or in relation to religious tenets. Yet the questions concerning the best form and the proper functions of government, the social relations most appropriate for a community, or the correct conceptions of the nature of Deity, are in reality only questions of fact, and are to be settled no less by intellectual processes than is the problem of the form of the earth.

In questions of sociology and theology most men found so much of their judgment upon inherited feeling and acquired educational prejudice that, as would naturally be expected, they are apt, supposing that feeling different from theirs must be wrong, to ascribe the origin of antagonistic beliefs to this wrong feeling. It is only with difficulty that they admit that those who disagree with them are honest. So we find that to hold a conception of Deity less spiritual than the current one is to act in a manner which proves inherent wickedness, on the ground that the conception is materialistic in its tendencies: to hold one that is more spiritual, or less anthropomorphic, is no less wicked on the plea that the conception is atheistical. An opinion that government should be more centralized is also wicked because such a government tends to despotism; one that government should be

less centralized is no less wicked, since such a government is anarchical. A proposition in social science that social arrangements should be less free is wicked, because it is degrading to human dignity; one that they should be freer is also wicked, being licentious. And so throughout the whole series. Yet all these propositions concerning theological, political, and social subjects are about matters of fact, and are the same in kind as those of trigonometry or natural history. One person does not find in the facts of meteorology that regular sequence of antecedent cause and consequent effect which he perceives in other better understood portions of Nature. Therefore, he prays for pleasant weather, although he never seeks, as did those living in former ages, by such means to cause the sun to stand still or an ominous comet to go away. A second, indeed, expects an interference with the existing order of things no more in the sequences of weather than he does in the power of gravitation, but, nevertheless, supposes that he has good grounds for a belief in the probability of supernatural obstruction of the regular order of events in cases of severe illness or unusual pestilence. Therefore, he uses his best endeavors by supplication to obtain that obstruction. A third differs from these two in being convinced that all physical events occur in a fixed order, but still believes that interference is probable in spiritual things, and depends upon the efficacy of petition to obtain for himself and others strength of will, tenderness of heart, or patience under tribulation. A fourth, who has a different conception of prayer, and who believes that all events external and internal continue in a fixed order of regularity, simply tries to bring his conduct into harmony with this regularity. Now, the ideas of these four persons concerning the nature of things are widely different and mutually exclusive. Only one of them can be correct, and three of them must be incorrect; but no reason can be found why one of these men should accuse the other three of wickedness. Species may have been created by means of natural forces which are still in action around us, or their creation may have required others which do not now exist. This is a question of fact, a problem to be decided by extended observation, careful research, and rigidly logical mental operations. It seems entirely uncalled for that those holding the latter of these views should start out in a confident search,

not only for the seeds, but also for the full developed plant of wickedness in the innermost hearts of those who agree in holding the former theory.

While such a restriction as has been suggested in the foregoing seems to be necessary, an enlargement of the sphere of ethics until it embraces all possible human actions also appears to be demanded. It is difficult to predicate goodness or badness of an action considered out of relation to the motive inducing it, except so far as it has results. It would seem that, for an action to be good, it must be good for something, and have some beneficial effect. It seems impossible to conceive of any goodness inhering in an action which has no results whatever. Were such an action possible, it would appear to be ethically neutral or ultra-moral. But as all events have results, even to the position of Fichte's noted grain of sand, all events may properly be classed as moral or immoral. If this be so, there can be no acts morally indifferent, and no conduct that is outside the rules of ethics. Of all possible courses of action under any special state of circumstances, one is best; all others must be immoral. It is true that there are questions in æsthetics to be solved by reference to appropriate tests, but yet these are also questions in ethics. In so far as the gracefulness or awkwardness of actions, for instance, have effects upon the human race, just so far must gracefulness or awkwardness be moral or immoral. A similar truth obtains in relation to matters of taste. There can be no neutral ground between the kingdoms of right and wrong, in which taste or decorum or respectability or custom is sole and supreme ruler. These are only deputies at most, and the empire of morality is coextensive with all possible conduct. So also must it be extended not only to all conduct towards human beings, but also to the treatment of animals and plants, and still further to our dealings with all inanimate things.

The use of the word Law suggests another consideration. The criticism upon the current misconception of the real import of the phrase "Law of Nature" in regard to physical events is familiar and trite. Nevertheless, this misconception is so insinuating, and seems so much to be involved in the meaning of the word *law*, that even the most careful writers repeatedly use forms of expression which show that, though they cannot be ignorant

of the real limitations of the meaning of the word when used concerning physical events, they yet find it exceedingly difficult to keep these limitations in view. And so, though no one really questions that a law of Nature is only a generalized statement of observed facts and of inferences from such facts, or — what to the theist is the same — a statement of God's method of action, yet it is very common to hear of things "obeying" the laws of their nature, or of events happening "on account of" or "through the agency of" some physical law. A law in hydrostatics "causes," it is said, water to become level and to stand at equal heights in opposite arms of a bent tube. A stone falls "because" the law of gravitation "compels" it to fall; while, in a correct statement of the matter, the law only alleges that stones, unless prevented, do fall, and not that they must. And the same limitation obtains in regard to the contents of every physical law.

The argument is that, because human law is composed of edicts or commands, a physical law must be of the same nature, and consist of an edict of some power which matter obeys. Because the two things happen to be called by the same name, it is inferred that they must necessarily be alike. This is much like saying that the "Republic" under Thiers must be similar to the "Republic" of the United States; that a "Communist" of Paris must be identical in doctrine with a "Communist" of Oneida; or that the "spring" of a watch can differ in no respect from the "Spring" of the year. Now, the sum of all our knowledge is that events occur in certain sequences, and that things exist in certain relations. The "why" of these sequences and relations we do not know, however many generalizations we may make. This volume would fall to the floor, if the reader did not prevent it. Why it would fall no one knows. Nor is the fact understood any more clearly because it is also known that all other things on the surface of the earth tend likewise to fall, which is a statement of the law of gravitation. The tendency of other things to fall does not explain why this book would fall.

Is not a misconception similar to this one frequently shown by our use of the phrase "violation of moral law"? In what respect do the laws of actions which involve questions of ethics differ in kind from the laws of other portions of Nature? A

physical law is only a generalized statement of an observed regularity in physical things. Is a moral law any thing more than a generalized statement of observed regularity of antecedent and consequent in moral things? Must there necessarily be, in the content of such a law, any thing like an edict or in the nature of a command or directing statute? The law of gravitation that matter tends to fall toward the earth does not seem to contain any command that we should not fall from high precipices. Does the moral law that lying is harmful any more command us not to lie? And as we do not abuse our freedom so much as to fall from precipices simply because it is not forbidden by the law of gravitation, so there seems to be no danger that we should use all our energy in telling lies simply because we find nothing involved in the law of moral things in the nature of an edict against lying. There appears to be no ground for regarding the moral law as composed of commands, except this insinuating fallacy founded upon a misconception of the word law. And this misconception arises from an incorrect idea of what human law is. For this, on analysis, will be found to be not so much a collection of commands to do or not to do, as a series of authoritative declarations that certain acts will be followed by certain results, which were not in the previous order of events, and which have been arbitrarily added for certain purposes by the power making and announcing the law.

Besides, the assumption of an edict does not help us in any respect in deciding what are the grounds or reasons of morality. For the query immediately arises, concerning the reason of the existence of the edict, what the intention or purpose was in making it. Why was it made just as it is assumed to be, and not otherwise? To this question there is first the answer that we do not know, which is a confession that the assumption of an edict does not aid us at all in obtaining the ultimate test of rightness or wrongness in conduct. This reply demands that we should be satisfied with arbitrary commands, the reasons of which are unknown, and be content with the view that acts are wrong simply because they are forbidden, even though they are forbidden unreasonably and from causes which it is impossible for us to investigate. There is also the second answer that conduct is commanded or forbidden, according as it is for our benefit or

harm. The real test in this view is to be sought in the resulting benefits or disadvantages of conduct. Then why not say so at first and once for all? It is unnecessary to take two steps, when one of them will do as well. The assumption of authoritative commands either gives no explanation whatever, or by a circuitous route brings us back to the proposition that the test of morality is found in the beneficial or harmful effects of conduct. It would seem to be better not to use an assumption which is proved to be unnecessary for the purpose, and to go straight to the conclusion that the fundamental principle of ethical philosophy is that all morality is summed up in the disinterested service of the human race. To attempt to explain by reference to divine command is to forget that "God, while being the cause of all things, is the explanation of none."

But if questions in morality are to be settled upon the theory of authoritative command, the belief in the existence of these commands must be justified. This can be done only on two grounds. The first is that these commands are to be found among things divinely revealed to us and contained in written documents now in our possession. Whether this proposition be true or not, the argument of this discussion does not call for an opinion. All that is here claimed is that, even if we assume that this proposition is true, it gives us no help whatever in finding a logical basis for our theory of morality. The existence and genuineness of these writings are to be decided by the methods applicable to the treatment of those of other writings, — that is, by the use of our faculties of observation and inference. Their authenticity is a matter of historical research. They are to be interpreted by the same canons of philological criticism as those appropriate in the case of other printed and written documents. When these processes are completed, the claim is made upon the results obtained that the moral precepts contained in these documents are divinely revealed, and therefore binding. Upon the validity of this claim no opinion is intended to be expressed. If we assume that it is entirely valid, and ask for information of those asserting it as to the ground upon which they rest their assertion that these precepts are divinely revealed, we are answered, as the question is usually answered, that the proof is to be found

in the internal evidence of the documents themselves. Further inquiry will show that by internal evidence is meant that the books contain the purest and highest code of morality the world has ever seen. But why is this code called the purest and best? The only possible answer is that it is so called because, if its precepts were universally obeyed, the effect would be more strikingly beneficial to the whole human race than that which would follow the enforcement of any other proposed code; that there would be no further need of creating crime or of inflicting punishment; and that all men would be so completely in harmony with each other and with social requirements that civilization would approach perfection. Now, what is this conclusion to which we are necessarily brought, though by a circuitous course, in attempting to account for the belief that the commands upon which morality depends are revealed and written, but the one at which we have previously arrived in attempting to account for the origin and purpose of the commands themselves? By either attempt on the part of those who would explain the matter by reference to commands, they after all come back to this simple proposition that the morality of actions is to be tested by their beneficial or harmful effects upon the human race.

But it may be said that the commands are revealed not indeed in writing, but in the course of Nature and in the effects of conduct. Advantageous conduct implies a command, and disadvantageous conduct a forbidding, even though no written rules exist. This may be so, and we are willing here to grant it. Yet, after granting it, we are still as remote as before from finding a basis for moral rules. For the commands must in this case also be accounted for, and our belief in them justified; and to account for them and for our belief in them we shall be again compelled to assert the main proposition to which we have come so many times. If we try to explain our belief in the existence of the unwritten commands or the origin or purpose of them, we shall inevitably find ourselves, by the same steps which have been already denoted, compelled to say that both the belief and the origin are to be accounted for only by asserting anew that main proposition. Those who favor the view that acts are right or wrong because they are commanded or forbidden sum up their ar-

gument by saying that a certain course of conduct is beneficial; that, therefore, it is enjoined; and that, because enjoined, it is right: instead of saying, in a still briefer summary, that the act is beneficial, and, because beneficial, right. It will be seen that they interpolate a command and draw a conclusion from it, when they cannot account for their belief in the command or for the reason of the command's existence, except by assuming the very proposition which they afterwards infer from the command, — a course of reasoning that is evidently circular.

If the suggestions which have been briefly presented are well founded; if, in our search through the moral as well as the physical world, we do not find any thing in the nature of authoritative command, but only order and regular sequence, — it is difficult to perceive how the solution of a question in ethics differs from that of one in chemical physics as far as instrumentalities and method are concerned. Our emotions evidently are not sufficient means with which to solve a problem in chemical combination; neither are they adequate to decide for us whether conduct is moral or immoral. It is not claimed by any one under any view of the subject that the moral sense or conscience has the power of informing us what, in a stated condition of circumstances, is the right course of action. The most that is claimed by any writer upon morals is that conscience gives only the first simple general axioms of conduct in accordance with which we are to regulate our lives, but that it never can be a trustworthy guide in the complicated affairs of social life until these are analyzed, simplified, and reduced to their first elements. Others assert even less than this, and claim that conscience does not give any rules whatever in regard to specific conduct in stated cases, but only enjoins upon us to do what is right after we have found out by other means what course of conduct is in fact right. They allege only that conscience enforces the obligation of doing our duty after we have decided by appropriate tests what our duty really is, — making conscience the guide in our choice of and obedience to motives, and limiting its functions to the province of subjective morality. They look upon conscience as the impulse to right conduct, and as useful only when we have already settled which line of conduct is right. To them it is analogous to the steam which propels the vessel, and not to

the pilot who holds the helm and selects the course. Under either of these views of conscience, the acquiring of knowledge concerning the objective morality of any specific act or particular line of conduct is still left to be exclusively an affair of intellectual research, and not of emotion or feeling.

T. F. BROWNELL.

THE REVOLUTION.

THERE is no pause. Still blow resounds on blow,
The order old making to shake and reel
From base to pinnacle. To dust brought low,
Crescent and Cross the shock of ruin feel.
Shallow Reaction tries in vain to stem
The Revolution's surge, which more and more,
Drowning tiara, throne, and diadem.
Spreads undulating wide from shore to shore.
What though Priest, Kaiser, Sultan, King still sit
Sceptred and crowned above the encroaching flood?
Belshazzar's legend is above them writ,
And they grow pale before Man's altered mood.
Voices of Revolution, trumpet-clear,
Byron and Shelley, lo, your day is near!

B. W. BALL.