

CHAPTER IV.

The Utilitarian Theory of Punishments.

OUR opponents virtually adopt the utilitarian ethics, for on it they found a famous objection to the gospel doctrine of substitution. They proceed thus: God is love. But a ruler whose single consummate moral attribute is benevolence can punish one of his creatures only from a benevolent motive. They find this motive in God's desire to administer a healing medicine to the spirit of the creature whom he loves, which he perceives is suffering from the disease of sin; and also the benevolent desire to deter the other thoughtless creatures from sinning. They suppose that God in his punitive providence regards sin only as a natural mischief, injurious to the welfare of creatures, and not a moral evil incurring his righteous displeasure, and carrying an inherent ill-desert. They suppose that the sentiment of the loving God in view of sin is only compassion, and not moral resentment, just like the feeling of the good, kind mother towards the sickness of her amiable child. This mother, prompted by love alone and prudential expediency, imposes restraints upon the sick child quite irksome to it, and administers remedies which

afflict the sufferer with additional nausea, gripings, and burning pains. But in all the treatment, there is nothing vindicatory; her sole object is to deliver the child from the greater miseries resulting from unremedied disease. Exactly such, say they, is God's punitive policy toward sinners; it is only to be explained as remedial. And on this theory of punishment they found a famous objection against penal substitution. The sick child must swallow his own physic himself. It will be no remedy for him to have it swallowed by a healthy comrade. So, the punishment of a substitute is utterly futile for any medicinal result, and, therefore, foolish and cruel. The shallowness of this boasted argument is revealed by a simple question: Do not our opponents claim for Christ's sufferings great medicinal or remedial effects?

And according to them, were not the sufferings borne by one person, Jesus, and the benefits received by others, converted sinners? Here, then, we have the same case which they pronounce absurd: the healthy person drinking the medicine, and the sick persons healed by it without tasting it. But this explanation of God's punishments is notoriously that of the utilitarian ethics. The famous book of Dr. Wm. Paley, his *Moral and Political Philosophy*, with those of Hobbes, Locke, Helvetius, Hume and other advocates of the "Selfish System," once gave currency to the ethics of ex-

pediency in New England. To all sound philosophers, that sorry system is dead, slain by the unanswerable logic of Bishop Butler, Dr. Richard Price, Cousin, Jouffroy, Kant, and indeed, a great host in America, Britain, France and Germany.¹ This theory of punishments is an integral part of that utilitarian system of ethics; since the parent stock is dead, this branch must be but rubbish, fit only to be burned. The recital of the general refutation would lead too far away from our special object in this discussion. Such refutation ought to be needless for well-informed men. For the demolition of this remedial theory of punishments, these remarks are sufficient.

We were about to say that it finds no support in the Holy Scriptures; but we remember that this old book may carry little authority with our opponents. While the Scripture often describes God as administering medicinal chastisement to his reconciled children for their good, it nowhere ascribes to him such a motive for his retributions upon the condemned and reprobate. His objects here are always different, the satisfaction of his own moral indignation, the meetings of the claims of justice, the vindication of his law.

In order to hold this remedial theory we must adopt very degrading views of God's omniscience,

¹ The reader may see an exhaustive refutation of it in my recent work, *The Practical Philosophy*.

not to say of his sagacity; and we must conclude that as a moral governor he is very much a failure (*absit blasphemia*)! For even our creature experience has shown us that the temporal miseries visited upon sin by divine providence mostly fail to reform sinners. The prodigal usually goes on, in spite of the evils of poverty, to repeat his sins of waste and idleness. The drunkard experiences the miseries of disease, but returns again to his strong drink. The miseries of pagan life are more severe than those experienced in Christian lands, and they are mostly traceable to their idolatries; but we do not see that they convert any pagans. In truth, whenever we see instances of sanctified affliction, that is to say, of the temporal penalties of sin reforming the sinners, the good result is accounted for, not by the operation of the mere pain, but of the word and Spirit of God, employing it as a timely occasion for the sanctifying impressions. If God is infinitely knowing and wise, does not he also see this? If he is infinitely benevolent, why does he continue to employ this pretended remedial policy when he sees it futile, and therefore cruel? It may be added that if this theory of remedial penalties is relied on to justify the criminal laws of states, then it shows their punitive policies to be wretched and contemptible failures. What felon repents in a *Penitentiarium*? We demand, then, of our rationalistic and humanitarian

opponents, why they permit their boasted commonwealths to continue civil punishments if they believe that penalty can only be justified as a benevolent remedy for transgressions?

But a more fatal objection is found in every case of those moral creatures of God who are punished, but not for their restoration. If there is any authority in the Bible, it makes known to us two very numerous classes of such culprits, reprobate men and the fallen and condemned angels. Their punishment cannot be designed to be remedial; because for them there is to be no remedy, but perdition. Of course, therefore, God does not design the penal sufferings of these creatures as benevolent; they simply are retributive, or they are inexplicable.

This theory is utterly inapplicable to an infinite heavenly Father. Human parents seek to cure the diseases of their children by using distressing remedies. They know that their remedies are as real natural evils as the disease itself, although smaller and briefer evils. They know that their curative policy is, after all, "a choice of evils." Why do they not employ some relief for their beloved children which is no evil at all? Because they cannot help themselves; their knowledge and power are quite limited. Were they omnipotent their love would surely cause them to prefer another remedy. They would complete the curative work upon those they love by their simple word

of power: "Be healed!" But the heavenly Father is sovereign, and infinite in wisdom and power. If benevolence were his sole motive in punishing, why did he not choose some other painless remedy? When we add that, being omniscient, he must have foreseen the complete failure of the distressing remedy in multitudes of sufferers, and that, being almighty, he must have felt himself able to use any other remedy he chose, equally painless and potent, our question becomes crushing. The theory of the remedial policy, as applied to God's government, stands exposed as equally shallow, thoughtless, and worthless.

It breaks down equally when tested in another way. If the ruler's motive in punishing were only remedial and deterrent, without any eye to retributive justice, then every consideration should decide him to punish where the punishment would be most effective for these ends. Upon this plan many cases would arise in which it would be more politic, and therefore more just, to punish some innocent person, without his consent, closely connected with the real culprit whose reform is designed. For instance, here is a fallen reprobate woman, guilty of frequent disorders, and several times chastised for them by law. But she has become so callous and desperate that the legal penalties fail to influence her. In this arid heart there is yet one green spot; she still has one daughter, the

child of her better days, who is innocent and charming. The mother still loves this child with all the passion which centres upon a sole remaining object. The magistrate punishes this child with stripes. As the hardened mother witnesses her torments and her screams, she relents; she resolves to reform, and her mother love keeps her to her resolution. Do we therefore say that it was more wise and just to scourge the innocent child than the guilty mother? This is abhorrent to every right mind. But according to the theory we combat, it should be entirely acceptable to our consciences.