

CHAPTER IV.

SENSUALISTIC ETHICS IN GREAT BRITAIN.

THE moral sentiments of man, as has been indicated, afford us a capital test, both of the pretended truth and value of the Sensualistic philosophy. The undisputed facts are these: that we have certain judgments and feelings, which are called, by common consent, moral or ethical; and the very fact, that mankind gives them distinct names, shows that they are popularly supposed to form a class separate from our other perceptions and judgments. We speak of certain acts of rational agents as *right or wrong*. We ascribe to these *merit or demerit*. We think them deserving of reward or punishment. We speak of *obligation* to do the one sort and refrain from the other. We *express* a vivid *approbation* of the right, and *disapprobation* for the wrong acts. Especially when we are ourselves the agents of them, we feel sometimes *remorse* in view of our wrong acts, and a vivid peace and *satisfaction* in view of our right acts. We judge that we and our fellows have, in certain cases, a peculiar kind of claim, which we call *our right*, which we think to be a moral title fortified by *obligation*, to certain things or a certain treatment. It is manifest that the common element of all these judgments is the apparent distinction between right and wrong. For, it is the right act which is meritorious; which earns reward; which answers obligation; which wins love; which, seen in ourselves, gives satisfaction of conscience; which fulfills the claim of right of our fellow. *What is the nature of that distinction?*

We talk of *conscience*, as what perceives it. Is conscience a faculty, or merely a complex artificial function? It is in the answer to these radical questions that we apply a crucial test to our philosophy.

Obviously, this moral distinction is not sensuous. Virtue is neither a primary nor a secondary property of *material bodies*. Obviously it is not such an attribute as can be perceived by sight (like color), or touch (like smoothness), or hearing (like harmony), or taste (like sugar), or smell (like fragrance). If men call it tropically, a sweetness, or harmony, or brightness, they know that it is only so metaphorically. Literally, no man has sense-perception of it. Now, then, if the great maxim of the Sensualistic philosophy is true, *nihil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu*; our souls have no such original rational function as conscience. Conscience must be a complex or an artificial result of other, simpler powers of the soul. If men think it original, they must deceive themselves, as they do in imagining that they directly see relative distances or relative magnitudes of visual objects; when, as Bishop Berkeley has taught us, they are only making a rapid and facile interpretation of certain primary sensations of extension, shade, etc. The great frequency of the process makes them cease to notice the parts of the association. So, habit and association construct what we call the functions of conscience, out of our natural perceptions and feelings, in some mode or other, and we have forgotten the real process, in our familiarity with the result. And last: as mankind popularly suppose that they have an original judgment of a moral distinction, it is logically incumbent on the Sensualist to show some process by which the illusion has grown out of simpler elements, *if he can!*

The student has seen how these philosophers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries recognized this task, and how they attempted to comply with it. On

their principle, there was nothing else for them to do. We have seen how Hobbes, whose giant and ruthless tread broke the way for all of them, undertook to accomplish the task, by reducing all moral sentiments to simple, instinctive selfishness, acting upon the ultimate and simple fact of sensation, that some impressions are pleasurable and some painful. Thus, with him, the moral good is identical with natural pleasure. Pleasure is the only rational end. Self-love, directed to pleasure, is the whole moral motive. The laws devised by Leviathan (the autocratic *Imperium*), and accepted by the community as the necessary expedient for ending the intolerable anarchy of the "state of nature;" these laws originate all moral distinction. Here we have the Epicurean ethics revived in the baldest form. Even the pious Locke is driven by the Sensualistic creed to accept this scheme in its chief principle: that the distinction of good and evil is, in rudiment, no other than that of pleasure and pain. When his philosophy was transplanted into France, Hobbes' conclusions were yet more fully revived by *Condillac*, and pursued to their most loathsome results by the impudence of *Helvetius*.

Returning now to Great Britain, we see the later Sensualistic philosophers pursuing the same fated course. Hume presents us what is virtually the same analysis, in his utilitarian ethics. What men call the virtuous, says he, is simply what experience has shown to be, on the whole, the useful. When we say, "we approve the virtuous," this is simply a result of association, combining the pleasure experienced from the utility, with the idea of the action which causes it. Thus, in experience and association, we have all the elements, as he thinks, to account for our seeming judgments of obligation, merit, and right. This is still, as we shall show in its place, a selfish system.

Dr. Paley, the philosopher of the clerical devotees of

the Sensualistic philosophy, proceeding from the same starting-point, presents us with a religious, utilitarian, or selfish system. Virtue, according to his definition, is "the doing good to mankind, in obedience to the will of God, and for the sake of everlasting happiness." Obligation, with him, is "a forcible motive arising from the will of another." The distinctive quality of the virtuous act is, according to him, again, its utility. The rule of distinction, instead of being the imperfect experience of the natural man (as with Hume), is God's wise will. The motive is still simple selfishness; but selfishness enlightened by a revealed immortality and its rewards and punishments.

Bentham presented a slight modification of the Utilitarian scheme of Hume, in assigning the "greatest good of the greatest number,"* as the moral end. There was, in his theory, a certain sound of patriotism, equity, and benevolence, which rendered his speculations very attractive to many ingenious minds. To him who looks at the subject of morals only from the point of view of the human legislator, there is much of plausibility in Bentham. His practical rule of life was summed up in the favorite maxim, "*Minimize* the evil." The largest resultant aggregate of advantage is so often the practical end of the legislator and magistrate, and an enlightened and beneficent expediency is so often his guide, that many supposed they had found in this maxim the fundamental truth of morals. The acute Utilitarian can also explain, upon his principles, many of the rules of public and social morality. But the theory, like the more obviously selfish system, confounds natural with moral good, and advantage with the moral motive. If the question be asked: why is it always virtuous to "seek the greatest good of the greatest number?" no other answer can be given, than that this

* He doubtless borrowed it from Beccaria.

good is man's properest end at all times. Why the greatest good of the *greatest* number, instead of the greatest good of the *worthiest*? It can only be because, again, natural good is the exclusive rational end of man; so exclusively so, that it is to attract the right reason by its mere mass, as matter attracts matter. By this theory, aggregate humanity is made our supreme end again; and this assigns self-interest as the ultimate motive of all moral action. For the agent cannot forget that he is an integer of that aggregate, and therefore the principle on which the virtuous action is required—that of the self-interest of the mass—must also be the principle upon which it is rendered.

Very near akin to this, again, is the theory of morals known as the benevolence scheme. This identifies virtue with the love of beneficence, (making no recognition of the love of moral complacency as a distinct species of the affection). According to this scheme, benevolence is the one virtue, inclusive of all others. That which makes sin odious, and ill-deserving, and punishable by justice, is simply its mischievousness. The merit of virtue is simply in its beneficence. The rational ground of rewards and punishments is to be found in the politic tendency of these sanctions to "minimize" the mischiefs which sin naturally tends to inflict upon the welfare of man. This theory wears, at the first aspect, an air of peculiar amiability and disinterestedness. Its advocates advanced it as the opposite of the selfish system; for does it not propose our fellow-creature, and not self, as the object of the all-including virtue? And what can be more disinterested than benevolence? Hence many divines gave into this scheme; especially of those who had imbibed the optimistic opinions of Leibnitz and the reasonings of Grotius on Christ's Satisfaction. It was naturalized in parts of America by the Hopkinsian school and their founder, Dr. Samuel Hopkins, of New England. The

clerical advocates of the benevolence scheme could not fail to make the plausible claim, that the Scriptures themselves are founded on it, inasmuch as they represent love as "the fulfilling of the law," and define God's own nature as love. Yet its affinities with the selfish system are obvious to a little reflection. Why should one desire to analyze the ultimate idea of the virtuous into anything but the virtuous, except at the bidding of that sensualistic maxim, which can admit no original sources of man's judgments and affections, save the sensitive? Why is benevolence the sum of all virtue? Because it is beneficent, these philosophers answer. Its moral value, then, is solely in the fact that it promotes well-being; and we are thus led back to the old sensualistic analysis, which recognizes no other original quality in acts than their pleasurable or painfulness as the standard of their moral quality. Thus, again, moral good is identified with natural good. It is equally easy to show that self-interest lies at the root of the moral motive upon this scheme. If virtue is nothing but benevolence, and acts are obligatory only because they confer natural good, then it is the plainest thing in the world that whenever I prefer my moral claim of right upon a fellow-creature, my desire of natural good is my valid reason for doing so; that is, my self-interest. Thus we reach the conclusion that my self-interest grounds my moral right. So must it reciprocally ground my neighbor's moral right on me. What is this but to reduce the interchange of virtuous offices into the traffic of self-interest?

Dr. Thomas Brown, in his treatise on Cause and Effect, besides other features of his philosophy, betrays a certain remainder of bondage to the Sensualistic philosophy. His theory of the moral distinction contains the same. It is true that in his eloquent lectures he attacks the selfish systems with vigor, and utters many noble and elevating sentiments touching duty

and virtue, for which he deserves the thanks of all the good. Yet, in his final analysis, he reduces virtue to a generic expression for a certain class of sensibilities. With him, the affections or feelings of approbation and disapprobation are the rudimental fact; and he regards them as simply the instinctive impressions upon a sensibility. Certain acts impress us immediately with the peculiar pleasure called approbation; certain others, with the instinctive pain called disapprobation. It is as when the visual perception of an azure tint gives instinctive pleasure to the sense. The soul, recognizing in its experiences these two classes of impressions on its sensibility, connects them by association with the acts which cause them, and colligates these into two classes. The virtuous acts are simply that class which affect this peculiar sensibility pleasurable; the vicious are that class which affect it disagreeably. This account of the moral distinction differs from the correct one in one important respect, that it refuses to find, as we do, the source of the distinction in a primitive judgment of the reason. Instead of making the acts of conscience primarily such a judgment, and secondarily a peculiar emotion, Dr. Brown makes them primarily an impression made from without on the distinctive sensibility, and secondarily a reference of acts to classes, by the generalizing faculty. Why should he thus depart from the analogies of sound philosophy? If we may surmise from the parallel speculation upon cause and effect, it was because his mind was too much tinctured with the Sensualistic principles, to be entirely freed from the prejudice against *à priori* laws of the reason. His scheme is thus, obviously, a sentimental, as distinguished from a rational scheme of ethics: and it is better entitled to that name than the theory of Adam Smith, which he successfully exposes.

After we have completed our grouping of the essential points of the erroneous philosophy by this historical

review, we shall be better prepared to deal with the refutation of the ethical theories above stated.

The explanation which the Sensualistic philosophy is obliged to give of our affections of taste is exactly parallel to its moral theory. It recognizes no rational æsthetic judgment whatever. It recurs again to the original fact, that sensations are either pleasant or painful. These experiences, modified and combined by associations, are, with them, sole source of our sentiments of beauty, sublimity, and their opposites. The Sensualist is impelled to this shallow solution by the same influence which corrupted his ethical theory; his creed will not permit him to ascribe to the mind a supersensuous primitive power of judgment. Thus, the refutation of this æsthetic scheme would give us a similar test of the error of the creed. But only one point will be raised here. If the same power of association is the instrument, and the same natural pleasures and pains of sense are the materials, both of the ethical and æsthetic sentiments, how is it that they do not form one general class in men's minds? Why do all men regard the two kinds of sentiments as essentially different? While a virtuous object and a tasteful object both give certain pleasures when contemplated, why do we always recognize the pleasures as unlike? The beautiful action pleases and also wins our moral approbation; the beautiful animal pleases, but wins no moral esteem. Why, in fine, is it that the notion of obligation is always combined, by the healthy mind, with the moral judgment, and never with the æsthetic? I am bound to be like the man Jesus, and am unworthy and ill-deserving if I do not strive to be: I am not bound to be like Adonis, and forfeit no moral esteem by not being so. This one question, insuperable for the Sensualist, is enough to bring both his moral and his æsthetic analysis into discredit.