

ETHICAL CULTURE VERSUS ETHICAL CULT.

BY MONCURE D. CONWAY.

IN the *Standard Dictionary*—the latest and best—occur the following definitions :

"CULTURE. (3) The training, development, or strengthening of the powers, mental or physical, or the condition thus produced ; improvement or refinement of mind, morals, or tastes ; enlightenment or civilisation."

"CULT. (1) Worship or religious devotion, as contrasted with creed ; especially, the forms of a religion ; a system of rites and observances ; a cultus."

Etymologically "Culture" and "Cult" are related, both being from the Latin verb *colere* which means both to cultivate and to worship ; but in sense and substance they are fundamentally different, and the things respectively are historically opposed to each other. "Cult" implies a religious devotion to forms or rites apart from any creed or belief they symbolise ; "Culture" means a development and strengthening of the mental or moral powers and their improvement, which involves a growth in thought and knowledge inconsistent with devotion to forms and rites. One implies fixity, the other change.

Let us now turn to the word "Ethical." Both "moral," from the Latin *mos*, custom, and "ethical," from the Greek *ethos*, custom, had the same sense originally, and alike signified the social regulations and conventional conduct held obligatory on each member of the community. But "mos" (plural "mores") more definitely than "ethos" connoted religious as well as social observances, customs, manners, while "ethos" more connoted character ; and gradually *ethic* or *ethics* has been adopted as the word suited to the philosophical or scientific investigation of moral systems, and of individual conduct.

This has been a comparatively modern development. It has followed on the perception that morality is by no means the fixed system of rules which it was long supposed to be, and that a high

morality required certain individual deviations from the *mos*, the custom or fashion prescribed by society or by the community. Best men have often found themselves impelled by their moral sense to confront usage, to oppose custom, to obey some conviction of duty which appeared to them higher than that of others around them. To justify this apparent eccentricity such have had to search into underlying principles of existing moral usages, point out those that appear to them untrue or unscientific, and set beside them the principles they believe true and higher.

This situation, philosophically considered, is anomalous. The rules, manners, customs,—the morals,—of a community, were they genuinely developed out of its actual needs and its common sense, would not be liable to any radical challenge by science or by justice. Moral growth would be normally represented only in improving means and methods of application of universally approved principles. The scandal—for it amounts to such—that there should be different and even antagonistic standards of morality in one and the same community must be sought for in the adulterations of traditional morality.

In the new Dictionary already cited, the *Standard*, the following is the first definition of the word "Moral":

"Of or pertaining to the practises, conduct, and spirit of men toward God, themselves, and their fellow men, with reference to right and wrong and to obligation to duty; pertaining to rightness and oughtness in conduct; ethical."

It will be observed that in this quite correct definition of the word "moral" the supposed obligation to God comes first, personal and neighborly conduct being subordinate. But is duty to God consistent with duty to one's neighbor, one's fellow men, one's self? That obviously depends on the question whether the God is a moral being in the strictly human and social sense of moral. Suppose the God is one requiring the blood of human victims on his altar. In the community believing in such a God any attempt to rescue the victims would be supremely immoral, but in the view of "civilised" communities, so called, the rescuers would be the supremely moral people and those fulfilling their duties to God immoral. But the moral system of every nation calling itself civilised was formed amid similar beliefs to those which under "heathen" names and forms we pronounce savage, and every such system, however modernised and refined, is fatally adulterated by survivals of traditional duties to some God. For every such duty, so far as it differs from duty to man, is a human sacrifice, whether bloody or not, and is immoral morality.

I have said *fatally*,—weighing the word. People may imagine the morals grown around Mumbo Jumbo eliminated in the services paid to their own deity, but the most refined conception of a God now known in Christendom cannot be introduced into the sphere of ethics without bringing with it a virus more fatal to human morality than any idolatry reeking with blood on its altars. Human sacrifices in the literal sense have now nearly ceased in every part of the world, and it is doubtful whether within any year of the nineteenth century as many were sacrificed as were last year murdered by American lynchers. But when the so-called “heathen” sacrificed men to his God it was not from worship but from fear; it was not because he believed his God good, but because he believed him bad, and that unless a few were offered to appease his bloodthirstiness the whole tribe would suffer his vengeance. He did not—this “heathen”—hold up the invisible monster as a model for imitation; he did not suggest that the bloodthirsty God was a loving Father demanding slaughter for the victims’ benefit; the tribal ethic was thus not corrupted at the root. The evil was cured because it resulted from natural ignorance. Natural ignorance is easily outgrown, but not so educated ignorance. The once terrible Mumbo Jumbo has vanished from Africa as a supernatural phantasm, as the mediæval devil has vanished from Protestant Christendom; but whereas the African demon has left no theoretic Mumbo-Jumboism to succeed him, Protestant religion has long been educating the foremost nations to attribute to God all the evils formerly attributed to the devil. Whatever happens,—not only Galveston cyclones but Chinese Boxer cyclones, Maine explosions and consequent slaughter, Transvaal invasions, all despotisms and mobs and lynchings,—they all occur under God. All were foreseen by his omniscience, therefore had to occur, and through them is worked out a divine purpose hid in the depths of the universe.

There were Roman sceptics who having listened to Paul’s theistic doctrine—“He will have mercy on whom He will, and whom He will He hardeneth”—asked the apostle, “Why doth He still find fault? For who withstandeth His will?” Paul could only reply, “Nay, but who art thou, O man, that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it ‘Why hast thou made me thus?’ Or hath not the potter a right over the clay?”

No further report of the discussion is given by Paul, but there is reason to believe that one of the sceptics answered, “Nay, but who art thou, O Paul, but clay like ourselves affirming that we

are all shaped by an invisible potter, and venturing to expound the potter's purpose? If one pot may affirm, may not another pot reply?"

"But I am an inspired pot," said Paul.

"I too," said a second sceptic, "feel inspired enough to declare that I am not a pot; but even if I were a pot, and so badly fashioned that I couldn't stand straight, I would have a right if I could talk to ask the potter why he made me so. Therefore I do not believe, Paul, in your notion of a divine Potter."

"I *do* believe," said the fourth Roman, a centurion. "And I am much indebted to you, great apostle, for your lucid exposition. There is a neighbor of mine who has a farm with a gold mine in it, also a pretty wife; I have long wanted both, but have had some hesitations. But now that I know that I cannot possibly do anything but what the divine potter fashioned me for, I go to have that farmer slain and to appropriate his farm and his wife. Good day, dear Brother Paul!"

"See," said the second sceptic, when the centurion had gone, "see, Paul, what your pot-theism amounts to: it is a mere version of that old pan-theism which some ancient Greek theologians devised, but which Roman common sense discarded because it rendered moral responsibility impossible."

"Well," cried Paul, "all I can say is that you have either to accept my God or none at all. If God is omniscient he must foreknow everything that will occur, and if he is omnipotent nothing can occur unless He supplies the power. Are you vile Atheists?"

"Even if we were, we would be, according to your doctrine, pots fashioned for Atheism, as you for Theism, by the same Potter. I for one refuse your Pot Theism. If there were such a deity, creative, omniscient, omnipotent, I could not respect him, much less love him, for he would be the ordainer or the permitter of all the evils, agonies, villainies of the world,—a supremely immoral God."

"You will burn in hell-fire forever," cried Paul, "for daring to measure the morality of God by the morality of man."

"Ah, Paul, that is enough. I had rather go to Hell forever than worship a God who would send there even a worm. But whence came this moral sentiment of mine?"

Paul did not reply.

Centuries have overlaid the bald fatalism of Paul's theism with metaphysical moss and rhetorical flowers, but no euphemism can escape its inexorable logic. For God's "Will" may be substituted

“divine laws,” and the future Hell may be turned to a metaphor, but the actual hell—the innumerable hells on earth—remain, and no modern Theism, however refined, (as by Newman, Parker, Martineau,) can theoretically relieve a creative and sovereign deity from responsibility for all evil, all crime.

It will be said that theory and practice are very different, and to a certain extent this is true: evolutionary laws render it necessary that in social life individuals must be held responsible for their conduct. But there are large general interests where evolutionary laws work in a reverse direction. In political life dishonesty is often the best policy, and the moral sense is brought to its aid by the convenient doctrine that the hand of God shapes the destinies of States. If Jehovah commissioned “a lying spirit” to get “in the mouth of all his prophets,” in order to deceive a king to his destruction, as related in the Ethical Manual of Christendom (1 Kings xxii) what conscience need be troubled about a manipulation of ballots in order to fulfil the destiny of the white race to rule over the black? “For,” says Paul, “if the truth of God has more abounded through my lie unto His glory, why yet am I also judged as a sinner?”

I recently attended a lecture on the Washington family by Mr. Ellsworth, in New York, and was much struck by his interpretation of General Washington's motto: *Exitus acta probat*. Mr. Ellsworth translated it: “The end justifies the means.” The sense really is—“The action is testēd by its result.” Even as a prudential maxim the motto is not always true, but to translate it into a flagrantly immoral maxim, without any protest, though it may seem a mere straw, appeared to me a straw showing the direction of the popular breath. To do evil that good may come is humanly immoral in the view of Ethical Science, but in religion it is the fundamental morality of God. All the evils and villainies of the world are apologised for on the ground that the moral method of God is to do evil that good may come.

If God can so act righteously, why not man also? The reply of Theism is, that for Omniscience the beneficial result is certain, but ignorant man cannot be assured of the result of his action. Apart from the consideration that omnipotence could not have been under any necessity of adopting evil means, Ethical Science cannot admit that any certainty of good results could justify a deed morally wrong, such as Abraham's intended murder of Isaac. Social necessity prevents the imitation of sacred examples of atrocity by individuals, but when it comes to the will of the popular ma-

jority in democratic countries such majority is not more amenable to moral principles than Jupiter or Jehovah. No pope in history was ever accorded a divine authority more supreme above moral considerations than that now accorded by democracy to the popular majority.

In an article on "The Future of the Anglo-Saxon Race," in the *North American Review* for December, 1900, Lord Charles Beresford says: "'The voice of the people is the voice of God,' says an old Latin proverb, and in the main that is true." The proverb is altogether English, though it has been Latinised. Hearing the proverb, John Wesley said, "No, it cannot be the voice of God, for it was *vox populi* that cried out 'Crucify him! Crucify him.'" But an American democrat answered that the crucifixion being necessary for human salvation, the cry of the people "Crucify him" was in exact accord with the will and purpose of God. And this is precisely the ethical corollary of *vox populi vox dei*. If the people vote that fifty cents shall be a dollar, or that a foreign nation shall be crushed, the sanction of God goes with the vote, and considerations of morality and justice are swallowed up in the divine decree. As a matter of fact, however, there is no such thing as the *vox populi*; what we really get is the voice of some Croker, or Hanna, or Chamberlain. The Boss is spokesman of the Collectivist God, and the deluded people are politically valueless as ciphers, except as they are added by order to one partisan figure or the other.

Although, as already said, divine authority is not admitted to the same extent in the internal affairs of a community, yet there are several vitally important social interests in which progress is obstructed by an ethical cult. For example the Episcopalian Church finds it necessary to regulate marriage and divorce by words ascribed to a religious teacher in ancient Judea. It seems vain to argue with the textual moralists that if the divorced are not permitted to re-marry they will form illicit relations, that both virtue and happiness will be sacrificed: what is mere human morality in the presence of God? And when we pass from the Episcopalian to the less educated churches we find that each has an ethical cult in which moral fictions,—such as Sabbath-keeping, abstinence from balls and theatres, prayer,—are the supreme things. The rigid irrational sects enhance the charms of immorality.

There is in America a notable effort to recover the lost authority of theology under the mask of morality. It is shown in the demand that "immorality" shall be punished legally as crime.

But what is immorality? It is the other man's morality, that doesn't accord with mine. If my morality has in my eyes a divine sanction, if it is a cult, it is but natural that I should try to crush the other man's morality by force. In that way personal liberty is sacrificed to the Sabbath, and if those agitators for "God in the Constitution" should succeed, atheism will be punished as immorality.

Every now and then there occurs in New York a "crusade against vice," and it always becomes a question whether the vices or the methods taken against them are the more immoral. The houses lyingly called "disorderly" are generally so orderly that they can only be detected by men sneaking about, and pretending to be patrons of such places: espionage, treachery, falsehood, intimidation, are freely employed, and then the citizens are shocked when it turns out that a police trained in such methods can equally deceive their "virtuous" employers when that is more advantageous. Emerson met at Concord station a friend who asked him where he was going; and he replied, "I am going to Boston to get an angel to do housework." New York will need a police force of angels to carry out the statutes against vices which do no calculable damage to any non-consenting party, nor disturb public order, and can only be proved by mere verbal police testimony. Wherever there are law-made crimes there must be blackmail. This is the gangrene of New York, and it will continue so long as the citizens suppose that their moral system is divine, infallible, and continue to substitute violence and its immoral methods for moral culture and removal of the physical conditions out of which the tares grow.

So far as I can learn there is not a school in New York in which children are taught good manners. Of the deference due to age, of the respect due from boys to girls, from men to women, of the thoughtfulness for others and the self-respect that make the gentleman and the lady, the millions of children are taught nothing. Yet this is the foundation of all morality, and it is only as manners that morals can be taught children at all.

The movement for Ethical Culture has for its foremost task the removal of the Ethical Cult. Morality must be founded solely in human conditions and needs. Milton says:

"God doth not need
Either man's work, or his own gifts."

No traditional system of morality, however sanctified, must be allowed to impede the development of new ethical ideas. Science

admits no sacramental obligations. Ethical science is the most backward of all inquiries because of the intimidation of thinkers by the semi-theological ethics of monastic ages. The old theological polemics are ended. The dogmas have been weighed and found wanting by thinkers; their defence is professional; they continue automatically among those who dare not or cannot weigh them. There seems nothing left for the twentieth century but a great ethical reformation. The worship of an immoral deity, the circulation of an immoral Bible, the sacrifice of human freedom and happiness to ancient notions,—these must all be severely challenged. Possibly this entire humanisation of ethics may be attended by some outbreaks of moral anarchy, but even that is better than moral slavery. When philosophic and scientific minds are perfectly free there is little doubt that a purely human ethic will be developed able to bear great fruits. For the whole aim of ethics is human happiness. Those now described as immoral are really seeking happiness in the only way left open to them by personal and social conditions. Diffuse happiness and you diffuse virtue.

Meanwhile let not the ethical philosopher despise the immoral nor confuse them with the criminal. The Crusaders would like to make every city into a prayer-meeting, relieved only by salvationist amusements. Because they are "virtuous" there are to be no more cakes and ale. But the so-called "immoral" are there, finding and conferring happiness in their own way, just as genuine products of the world as the pious, and hitherto it is they rather than the handful of ethical cultivators who have saved the world from a deluge of superstition and moral despotism. That English Bishop who said he would rather have a free England than a sober England hit the nail on the head. The definition of Liberty in the French Declaration of Rights is impregnable: "Liberty consists in the power to do whatever is not contrary to the rights of others; thus, the natural rights of each man have no limits other than those which secure to other members of society enjoyment of the same rights." If any one injures another he is not immoral but criminal; and the statute that encroaches on the personal liberty of any one who wrongs no other is a criminal statute. It is a supreme task of ethical culture to maintain and defend moral freedom. To overthrow this principle because of even the worst vices is like burning down one's house to get rid of rats. Ethical Cult, like the theological Cult which preceded it, may propose such sacrifices of the large to the little; but Ethical Culture realises that social evils can be got rid of only as farms are rid of skunks and foxes. Agriculture, unrestrained by any superstition, clears away weeds and wild creatures, and Ethical Culture, when equally unrestrained, will replace with innocent pleasures the vices that nestle in untilled social swamps.