

THE MORAL CONCORD.¹

BY THE LATE HENRI POINCARÉ.

TO-DAY'S assemblage brings together men of very different ideas, who are united only by a common good will and an equal desire for the good; doubtless nevertheless they will readily understand one another, because though they may not be agreed as to the means, they are in accord as to the aim to be attained, and it is only that which counts.

We have recently read, and may still read on the walls of Paris, bills announcing a contradictory conference on "the conflict of morals."

Does this conflict exist, could it exist? No. Morality may buttress itself with a multitude of reasons. Some of them are transcendent; these are perhaps the best and surely the noblest, but they are the ones debated; one there is at least, perhaps a little more of the earth earthy, upon which we cannot fail to be in accord.

The life of man, in reality, is a continual struggle; against him rise up forces, blind doubtless but formidable, which would promptly down him, which would destroy him, overwhelm him with a thousand misfortunes, if he were not constantly up in arms to resist them.

If we enjoy at times a relative rest, it is because our fathers have fought hard; let our energy, let our vigilance relax but an instant, and we lose all the fruit of their battles, all they have won for us. Thus humanity is like an army in war. Every army has need of discipline, and it is not enough for it to submit to discipline upon the day of battle; it must bend to it in times of peace. Otherwise defeat is certain, no bravery can save the day.

¹ Read by Henri Poincaré at the inaugural meeting of the French League for Moral Education, three weeks before his death, his last appearance in public. Translated by George Bruce Halsted.

What I have just said applies equally well to the struggle mankind must sustain in order to live; the discipline it must accept is called morality. The day when this should be forgotten humanity would be vanquished beforehand and plunged into an abyss of evils. On that day, moreover, it would undergo decadence, it would feel itself less beautiful and, so to speak, smaller. We should mourn not only because of the evils which would follow, but because the beautiful would be obliterated.

On these points we all think alike, we all know whither it is necessary to go; why do we differ when it is a question of the way thither?

If arguments could accomplish anything, it would be easy to be in harmony. Mathematicians never argue when it is a question of knowing how one should demonstrate a theorem, but here the matter is wholly different. To establish morality by arguing is to have your labor for your pains; in such matters there is no argument that cannot be answered.

Explain to a soldier how many evils defeat engenders, and that it will compromise even his personal safety, and he may always answer that this safety would be still better guaranteed if others did the fighting. If the soldier does not answer thus, it is because he is mute from some force or other that silences all argument. What we need is a force like that.

Now the human soul is an inexhaustible reservoir of forces, a fertile source, a rich spring of motor energy. This motive force is the emotions, and it is necessary for the moralists to capture, so to speak, these forces and direct them in the right way, just as the engineers subjugate the forces of nature and bend them to industrial needs.

But—and here the diversity arises—to make the same machine go, the engineers may have recourse indifferently to steam or to hydraulic energy; just so the professors of morals can at their will put in action one or another of the psychologic forces. Each will naturally choose the force he feels in himself. Those which might come to him from without, or which he might borrow from a neighbor, he would handle only clumsily; they would be lifeless and without efficacy in his hands. He will forego them, and with reason. It is because their arms are different that their methods must be; why should they bear ill will toward each other?

And meanwhile, it is always the same morality that is taught. Whether you look toward the general good, whether you appeal to pity or to the emotion of human dignity, you always reach the

same precepts, those which can not be forgotten without the nations perishing, without at the same time miseries multiplying and man beginning to decline.

Why then do all these men who, with different weapons, combat the same enemy so rarely recall that they are allies? Why do some at times rejoice over the defeats of the others? Do they forget that each of these defeats is a triumph of the eternal adversary, a diminution of the common patrimony? Oh, no! we are in too dire need of all our forces to have the right to neglect any; so we repress not one, we only proscribe hate.

Truly hate also is a force, a very powerful force; but we can not use it, because it contracts, because it is like a telescope into which one can only look through the large end. Even between races hate is fatal, and it does not make true heroes. I know not whether, beyond certain frontiers, they hope to find advantage in making patriotism with hate; but that is contrary to the instincts of our race and to its traditions. French armies have always fought for some one or for something, and not against some one; they have not fought less well for that.

If within the country the parties forget the great ideas which make their honor and the reason for their existence and recall only their hate—if one says: "I am anti-this," and the other replies: "I am anti-that"—immediately the horizon narrows, as if clouds had fallen and had veiled the peaks. The vilest means are employed; men recoil neither from calumny nor from secret accusation, and those who show surprise at this become suspects. We see people arise who seem to have mind only for lying and heart only for hate. And souls that are not vulgar, if only they take shelter under the same flag, reserve for them treasures of indulgence and at times of admiration. In the presence of so many opposing hates, we hesitate to wish for the defeat of one, which would be the triumph of the others.

Behold all that hate can do, and this is exactly what we do not wish. Let us then draw closer together; let us learn to know each other and thus to esteem each other, in order to pursue our common ideal. Let us guard ourselves against imposing uniform methods upon all. It cannot be done, and besides it is not to be desired. Uniformity is death because it closes the door to all progress; and moreover all constraint is sterile and hateful.

Men differ, some are refractory; just one of your words may win their heart, while all the remainder of your discourse would leave them indifferent. I cannot know whether this decisive word

is not the very one you are about to say when I forbid you to say it! . . . But then, you see the danger: these men, who will not have received the same education, are called to knock against one another in life. Under these repeated shocks their souls will be shaken, will be modified, perhaps they will change faith.

What will happen if the new ideas they come to adopt are those their old masters represented to them as just the negation of morality? Will this habit of mind be lost in a day? At the same time, their new friends will teach them not merely to reject what they once adored, but to scorn it. They will not retain for the generous ideas which cradled their souls that tender memory which survives faith. Their moral ideal risks being involved in this general ruin: too mature to undergo a new education, they will lose the fruits of the old.

This danger will be exorcised, or at least diminished, if we learn to speak only with respect of all sincere efforts which others make by our side; this respect would be easy for us if we knew one another better.

And this is just the object of the League for Moral Education. To-day's celebration sufficiently proves that it is possible to have an ardent faith and to do justice to the faith of others, and that in sum, under different uniforms, we are only, so to speak, different divisions of the same army, fighting side by side.