

THE EVOLUTION OF ETHICS.

BY F. W. FITZPATRICK.

WHILE wrestling some time ago with a more or less philosophical problem I found it necessary, and at the same time a pleasure, to make frequent reference to Kant, Spinoza, Maudsley, Spencer, Fouilleé, Mills, and to that sublime pessimist, Schopenhauer. The last made most appropriate reading for that particular time, the one hundred and thirty-second anniversary of his birth, and exactly seventy years since he said: “. . . when I note the profound impression my philosophy has made upon even the laymen of today I hardly dare to think of the role it will play in 1900. . . .”

Now 1900 has come and gone and twenty-one more years and we are, perhaps, as profoundly impressed with the various systems of philosophy as their authors could well have desired or hoped for, yet all things appear to us much as they did to the men of 1800, to those of 100, and those of 10,000 before our era, in different aspects, under varying colorings, sometimes brilliant and pleasing, and oft'times dull and gloom-inspiring, depending upon the age, the hour, whether a healthy activity forces one out into Nature, or that we allow ourselves to lapse into sombre introspection, within ourselves. The universe changes not, we are the changeful element.

Reading these masters, one feels, with Beaussire, that it is difficult indeed to establish anything like a direct connection between any system of philosophy and the actual state of our ideas of today. Skepticism regarding all such systems and even all questions of principle has become general. They are superannuated, and we fight shy of all that lies beyond positive, actual, palpable fact. They are considered dangerous and some of us believe actually compromising to that confidence that is or ought to be the principal directing force in our notions of morality. They are set aside in

the name of positive science and in the interest of moral order itself.

Even the idealists, those sensitive souls whose very idealism is but a sort of sauce or savory that they dare not subject to a too analytical examination, look not with favor upon those systems, those questions. Renan, himself, an idealist among idealists, refined and delicate of touch, claimed that the origin of virtue was in each one of us, not a system, and that "of the twenty or more philosophical theories upon the 'foundation of duty' not one of them could stand the light of even a most superficial examination. The transcendental significance of a virtuous act is, and justly, that in doing it we do not exactly know why we do it. A hero, if he begins to reflect upon his heroic actions, soon feels that he has acted unreasoningly, perhaps idiotically, and it is exactly for that reason that he is a hero. He obeys an order from the highest authority, an infallible oracle, a voice that orders most clearly within each one of us, and that never prefaces its orders with reasons and explanations. . . ."

This joining of a skepticism, so satisfied with itself, to sentiments so near akin to mysticism is perhaps refreshing to one accustomed to the grosser "positivism" of our day that seems to dominate all things. But it is only a momentary pleasure, for we have to face such general peculiarities, not to say degeneracy, of conduct, of mind, and of heart among men that the mirage of an "infallible oracle" soon vanishes in their mist, and the important questions of principles and of morals cannot be set aside as easily as the skeptical positivist and the skeptical idealist would have us believe.

Vices and errors are of all times, but when there were firm beliefs they were universally known without being universally common. Consciences were troubled though the flesh was weak; the best established maxims were susceptible of captious interpretations; but, at least, there were common rules of conduct, a moral code that was a law to all; there was basic certainty.

Today all this is changed.

Religious faith has lost control over many, and its control over others is of most doubtful tenure, no philosophical beliefs have replaced it, no civil or lay authority receives the respect that faith used to call its own, there is a preponderance of democratic governments—dependent upon all men, they no longer create opinions, but are subject to them. All is in doubt, not only these principles and systems of philosophy but even those individual inspirations of

conscience to which some would have us subject all questions of ethics, of morals.

But in all this the progress of skepticism is far from producing absolute indifference, never have those questions of ethics and of morals been debated so hotly and excited such general and keen interest. They are the absorbing ones in public debate, political caucus, the drama, our literature, and private conversation. If it be a matter of international comity or of rights, yes, or peace or of war, nations weigh other considerations in the scale than mere interests; they at least prate of justice, the most elevated notions of generosity, protection of the weakly, etc.; or, if it be party-strife, there each reproaches the other with all that can be found against it that is immoral or unjust, and it has effect with the people who, however used they may be to corruption, or however unwilling to change the order of things political, still desire the ideal; or in private life, that most of our acts are in harmony, whatever our beliefs or our doubts, with hereditary traditions that are strong in us.

Our crimes, our lesser sins are, as in times gone by, as attributable to momentary passion, thoughtlessness, as they are to a spirit of skeptical "Don't care", and they are more numerous than in those times when men had far better defined codes.

Still, is it not astonishing to listen to the discussion anent these crimes or lesser sins, the paradoxical justifications advanced for their commission, their defence in the name of "advanced thought", that, in nine cases out of ten, is undertaken by men who would shudder at the thought of being guilty of them?

That same spirit obtains apologists, the able ones, for commercial crimes, extortion and fraud, in the name of "business methods", and impels us to laugh at what we term excesses of probity, scruples—a conscience, public or private!

Then, again, in all such casuistic discussions, why is it that we, in spite of our new definitions and upsetting of old maxims, are invariably carried on by some irresistible current to those old principles that the positivist and the critic would have us believe are condemned to an eternal oblivion? Is it merely an hereditary taint not yet outgrown?

Modern skepticism, forsooth; absolute indifference! Why, these is hardly an assembly, a meeting of a few friends, a banquet, the most frivolous "five o'clock tea", at which, at some time or another, you will not hear the weightiest questions of ethics, of

morals discussed, perhaps flippantly but discussed nevertheless, aye, even as abstruse questions as that of the existence of God.

These old principles that crop out with such assiduity, contradicted, or approved, show us how indelibly they are imprinted upon the consciences of some persons, and at the same time how little influence they have upon their acts, and it is surprising indeed to note how unconsciously we of today ignore the old necessity of having one's conduct harmonize somewhat with one's principles—even modern principles. We are proud of our good thoughts, our elevating ideals, our principles on paper, and do not blush to live by a diametrically different code or the absence of all codes. We naively and sincerely wish to be troubled neither in our beliefs nor in our pleasures. In real life, as in the play or in our reading, we despise the traitor and applaud the hero; not merely for art's sake, but because we are in accord with and feel attracted to the good.

But what shall we deduce from all these strange contrasts in contemporaneous conscience? We certainly cannot depend upon any professed principles to reach any conclusion. Yet we must not imagine that those self-same principles count as nought. If many set aside, disdainfully, sometimes with asperity, the traditional basic ethics and religious dogmas there are also many who preserve them most sacredly, even though their acts do not always bear witness to their beliefs. Then there are those "of the great majority" who are neither completely absorbed into skepticism nor yet entirely ruled by principles. These principles, therefore, continue, between the believers, the skeptics and the middle-of-the-road philosophers, to be the principal points of contention and at the same time agreement. We may say they form a most unstable foundation, but it will take much digging and blasting yet to prove it such to those who have resolutely built thereupon, or who fear to extend their structures of thought much beyond its lines.

Some have sought to establish another code, outside of previous ones, more substantial, upon a better foundation of facts, that all men can be in accord upon—common ground. Facts, human nature studied as is a positive, an applied and known science, by psychology, by physiology, by anthropology, and by history. These cannot be principles in the metaphysical sense, but rather, as Spencer calls them, "the data of ethics". Two insurmountable obstacles confront them all, however: First, there is no common accord in what is understood by "human nature". According to spiritualistic, ideal psychologists, morals, consciences are inherent in the nature of man;

it is what distinguishes him from the lower animals. The difference, again, is but of degree, "a chimerical distinction" claim the materialists, the positivists. There is a difference between man and the lower animal, say they, but the difference in degree in animal evolution, as between the highest development and the lowest faculties of the mind, or "soul", and only in the successive periods of the double evolution working through all creation since all time and in each individual during the brief period of his life. And these differences will always exist so long as there are psychologists to contend as to "free-agency" against the distinction as between reason and the instincts, the soul and the body of man and of the animal.

But let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that that difficulty should be disposed of; are we very far advanced in the solution of the question of morals?

It is not merely a case of what *is* man and what are the laws of his nature, but it is far more what he *should do* in deference to a law of individual character that is not always obeyed necessarily, but that commands in no uncertain terms nevertheless. There is no common accord upon the moral qualifications of an act. One condemns it, the other condones, if he does not approve it. But Nature, in its general laws, is the same with the one as with the other; one acts one way, while the other without any violent metamorphosis does the contrary and each is assured that he is right. Would you suggest personal interests merged into the greater good? And do you make any distinction between pleasures, for instance, and claim, with John Stuart Mill, that there are degrees, that a hog cannot be as happy as a refined, intelligent, sensitive human being? You cannot distinguish between pleasures any more than you can between moral acts except in the former case by their degree of intensity, and in the latter by the way they impress your moral sense.

Whatever may be the destiny of naturalistic ethics, it is certain that a great majority of us continue their claims, and will continue to make them for a long time to come; that these questions are of a higher order than mere material interests; that this solution is unnecessary, they are established; we can but obey the laws and live up to the code laid down by the Fathers, believe in the existence of a God and the immortality of the soul, and all is well!

And it is most legitimate that all the efforts of the churches should be to prop our conscience, our moral sense, as it were, against their dogmas, their creeds.

You may say these are but fragile supports, and that their weak-

ness is most manifest in these times when luke-warmness is so common, even amongst the "true believers", the faithful, and that it is a confounding of universal moral rectitude with the individual interests of each church, that it authorizes that monstrous conclusion that there is no bond or tie betwixt the believer and the heretic and that all those separated from the church are as exempt from all moral as they are from ecclesiastical control.

It is right here that the so-called liberal churches have done much good, by throwing a mantle of more ample fold around those who fretted in the rather close-fitting garments of orthodoxy, and at the same time exerting a liberalizing influence even upon those older churches, resulting in the establishing of closer bonds between all men and a more common code of public morals—a step in the direction of the "brotherhood of man".

But even the old theology may answer that it is in matters of faith that men differ the least; that all the unbelievers together agree upon exceedingly few doubts; that it penetrates regions and souls, for their good, where positivists and materialists never dream of going, and that today, in these very irreligious times, conversions to its dogmas are frequent, oft'times among the most enlightened, the greatest thinkers, and that in times when its downfall seemed most assured while nations awoke to great and unexpected religious revivals.

A strange world, indeed!

Theological ethics do not necessarily exclude natural, rational, philosophical ones, Faith in all great religious bodies goes hand in hand with Conscience—sometimes with Reason.

There is danger here, not in theology, however, but in its application; the tendency—and a natural enough one—of those in authority is to be more solicitous for the interests of the Faith than those of mere morality; they are ever ready to excuse lapses for fear of scaring away souls by a too exacting application of the code. Yet we are prone to exaggerate the scandalous contrasts these conditions do create, and to wrongly attribute them to hypocrisy rather than to what may be in part, at least, good policy.

The search after and discussion of moral principles belongs as legitimately to all churches as to all philosophies and schools; but a code of morals purely theological hardly seems sufficient or desirable for either church or society. New elements of morality must develop with the progress of ideas. We had to open our minds to tolerance before tolerance became a factor in our customs.

Progressive ethics are necessarily mobile, and their authority, always open to discussion, is as necessarily unstable as their evolution is progressive. A weakness, if you wish, yet, paradoxical as it may seem, a very element of strength. Was it not Kant who, while he recognized in the existence of a God and of a future life two conditions necessary to morality, was yet well pleased that neither proposition could withstand a too searching analysis? He wanted his God and his Eternity to be wonderful, awful, and thought it dangerous to dispel any of the mysticism and clouds that surrounded both.

One of the greatest dangers to morals is to wrap their ethics about with too binding formulas, accepted in all confidence, as oracles of divine wisdom. The most exact formulas fail to cover specific cases. Acts become legal without being moral. A moral act must conform to the spirit as well as to the mere letter of a formula and one can enter into the real spirit of a thing only by going back to its very principle, its source.

Morality can but begin when we have risen above the merely literal observance of its decrees. Nothing can so clearly show the insufficiency of formulas as the philosophical doubts and the serious discussions of which they are the subjects.

No precept or principle is vast enough to take in or to regulate all our actions. Consciences require personal acts, initiative and independent, to test these principles.

It is by such efforts that nobly liberal spirits have in all times created the reactions against abuses and false maxims generally admitted and sustained by all about them, even by their own doctrines and tendencies.

Philosophical doubts should extend even into one's self. Thought and Analysis should be the jury before which we try our "reasonable doubts", our "impulses of the heart", as well as the accepted maxims, creeds, formulas and all else about us.

But, then, philosophical thought and the weighing of ethics, of morals, of maxims, are confined to so few that it becomes a very duty, and today particularly, for all who do think to call attention to the meritorious in philosophical systems, to the evolution of ethics. The thinking man may hope, and that without any unappreciation of the limitations of thought, to ever enlarge its sphere, its scope, by its very force to carry further and further the subordination of Nature even to their ideals, moral and social, and, in consequence thereof, to carry onward the evolution, the progress we should all

strive for from the lower to the higher. With Fouilleé we may exclaim, when we see Science confronted with the enigma of the origin of the world, "Ignorabimus!" but when Morals confront the enigma of the destiny of the world we may with equal justice exclaim "Sperabimus!"