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ARTICLE I.

THE MORAL FACULTY.

By Rev. Joseph Haven, Professor in Amherst College.

THE subject proposed is one of which it would not be easy to decide which is the greater, the importance or the difficulty. Its importance is seen in the fact that it concerns, at once, the psychologist, who would explain the laws of the human mind; the moralist, who would propound a system of ethical truth; the theologian, who would base his doctrines on a correct philosophy of mind and of morals; and, more than all, the individual man, who seeks to conform, in the practical government of the conduct, to the dictates of his moral nature. Its difficulty is apparent from the fact that it has, for so long a period, employed the energies of the ablest minds, giving rise to so many questions, so many discussions, by so many writers, with conclusions so diverse.

In entering upon the investigation of this subject, it is hardly necessary to raise the preliminary inquiry, as to the *existence* of a moral faculty in man. That we do possess the power of making moral distinctions, that we do discriminate between the right and the wrong in human conduct, is an obvious fact in the history and psychology of the race. Con-

sciousness, observation, the forms of language, the literature of the world, the usages of society, all attest and confirm this truth. We are conscious of the operation of this principle in ourselves, whenever we contemplate our own conduct or that of others. We find ourselves, involuntarily, and as by instinct, pronouncing this act to be right; that, wrong. We recognize the obligation to do, or to have done, otherwise. We approve, or condemn. We are sustained by the calm sense of that self-approval, or cast down by the fearful strength and bitterness of that remorse. And what we find in ourselves, we observe also in others. In like circumstances, they recognize the same distinctions, and exhibit the same emotions. At the story or the sight of some flagrant injustice and wrong, the child and the savage are not less indignant than the philosopher. Nor is this a matter peculiar to one age or people. The languages and the literature of the world indicate, that, at all times, and among all nations, the distinction between right and wrong has been recognized and felt. The *τὸ δίκαιον* and *τὸ καλόν* of the Greeks, the *honestum* and the *pulchrum* of the Latins, are specimens of a class of words, to be found in all languages, the proper use and significance of which is to express the distinctions in question.

Since, then, we do unquestionably recognize moral distinctions, it is clear that we have a moral faculty. For a faculty is simply the power of doing something; and, if we find ourselves in possession and use of the power, we conclude that we have the faculty.

Without further consideration of this point, we pass at once to the investigation of the subject itself. Our inquiries relate principally to the *nature* and *authority* of this faculty. On these points, it is hardly necessary to say, great difference of opinion has existed among philosophers and theologians, and grave questions have arisen. What *is* this faculty as exercised: a judgment, a process of reasoning, or an emotion? Does it belong to the rational, or sensitive part of our nature: to the domain of intellect, or of feeling, or both? What is the *source* and *origin* of these ideas: how come we

by them ? What *constitutes*, in what consists, the right and the wrong of actions : what is the difference ? What is the *ground of our obligation* to do, or not to do, any given thing ? What is the value and correctness of our moral perceptions, and especially of that verdict of *approbation*, or *censure*, which we pass upon ourselves and others, according as the conduct conforms to, or violates, recognized obligation ? Such are some of the questions which have arisen respecting the nature and authority of conscience.

A careful analysis of the phenomena of conscience, with a view to determine the several elements, or mental processes, that constitute its operation, and then a careful examination of those several elements, in their order, may aid us in the solution of these questions.

#### *Analysis of an Act of Conscience.*

Whenever the conduct of intelligent and rational beings is made the subject of contemplation, whether the act thus contemplated be our own or another's, and whether it be an act already performed, or only proposed, we are cognizant of certain ideas awakened in the mind, and of certain impressions made upon it. First of all, the act contemplated strikes us as *right* or *wrong*. This involves a double element an idea, and a perception or judgment. The idea of right and its opposite are, in the mind, simple ideas, and therefore indefinable. In the act contemplated, we recognize the one or the other of these simple elements, and pronounce it, accordingly, a right or a wrong act. This is simply a judgment, a perception, an exercise of the understanding.

No sooner is this idea, this cognition, of the rightness or wrongness of the given act, fairly entertained by the mind, than another idea, another cognition, presents itself, given along with the former, and inseparable from it, viz. that of *obligation* to do, or not to do, the given act: the *ought*, and the *ought not*—also simple ideas, and indefinable. This applies equally to the future and to the past, to ourselves and to others : I ought to do the thing ; I ought to *have done* it

yesterday. He ought, or ought not, to do, or to have done it. This, like the former, is an intellectual act, a perception or cognition of a truth, of a reality, for which we have the same voucher as for any other reality, or apprehended fact, viz. the reliability of our mental faculties in general, and the correctness of their operation in the specific instance.

There follows a third element, logically distinct, but chronologically inseparable, from the preceding: the cognition of merit or demerit in connection with the deed, of good or ill desert, and the consequent approval or disapproval of the deed and the doer. This also is an intellectual perception, an exercise of judgment, giving sentence that the contemplated act is, or is not, meritorious, and awarding praise or blame accordingly.

This completes the process. I can discover nothing in the operation of my mind, in view of moral action, which does not resolve itself into some one of these elements.

Viewed in themselves, these are, strictly, intellectual operations; the recognition of the right, the recognition of obligation, the perception of good or ill desert, are all properly acts of the intellect. Each of these cognitive acts, however, involves a corresponding action of the sensibilities. The perception of the right awakens, in the pure and virtuous mind, feelings of pleasure, admiration, love. The idea of obligation becomes, in its turn, through the awakened sensibilities, an impulse and motive to action. The recognition of good or ill desert awakens feelings of esteem and complacency, or the reverse; fills the soul with sweet peace, or stings it with sharp remorse. All these things must be recognized and included by the psychologist among the phenomena of conscience. These emotions, however, are based on, and grow out of, the intellectual acts already named, and are to be viewed as an incidental, and subordinate, though by no means unimportant, part of the whole process. When we speak of conscience, or the moral faculty, we speak of a *power*, a faculty, and not merely a feeling, or susceptibility of being affected. It is a cognitive power, having to do with realities, recognizing real distinctions, and not merely a pas-

sive play of the sensibilities. It is analogous to the power of memory which gives us the actual past ; of perception which gives the actual present as external and material ; of imagination which gives us the ideal. Like these, it has its own proper sphere and province, logically distinct from all others. Like these, it brings before us what we should not otherwise know. It is simply the mind's power of recognizing a certain class of truths and relations. As such, we claim for it a place among the strictly cognitive powers of the mind, among the faculties that have to do with the perception of truth and reality.

This is a point of some importance. If, with certain writers, we make the moral faculty a matter of mere feeling, overlooking the intellectual perceptions on which this feeling is based, we overlook and leave out of the account, the chief elements of the process. The moral faculty is no longer a cognitive power, no longer in truth a faculty. The distinctions which it seems to recognize are merely *subjective* ; impressions, feelings, to which there may, or may not, be a corresponding reality. We have at least no evidence of any such reality. Such a view subtracts the very foundation of morals. Our feelings vary ; but right and wrong do not vary with our feelings. They are objective realities, and not subjective phenomena. As such, the mind, by virtue of the natural powers with which it is endowed by the Creator, recognizes them. The power by which it gives this, we call the *moral faculty* ; just as we call its power to take cognizance of another class of truths and relations, viz. the beautiful, its *aesthetic* faculty. In view of these truths and relations, as thus perceived, certain feelings are, in either case, awakened, and these emotions may with propriety be regarded as pertaining to a part of the phenomena of conscience, and of taste ; full discussion of either of these faculties will include the action of the sensibilities ; but in neither case will a true psychology resolve the faculty into the feeling. The mathematician experiences a certain feeling of delight in perceiving the relation of lines and angles, but the power of perceiving that relation, the faculty by

which the mind takes cognizance of such truth, is not to be resolved into the feeling that results from it.

As the result of our analysis, we obtain the following elements as involved in, and constituting, an operation of the moral faculty :

I. The mental perception that a given act is right or wrong.

II. The perception of obligation with respect to the same, as right or wrong.

III. The perception of merit or demerit, and the consequent approbation or censure of the agent, as doing the right or the wrong thus perceived.

Accompanying these intellectual perceptions, and based upon them, are certain corresponding emotions, varying in intensity according to the clearness of the mental perceptions, and the purity of the moral nature.

As we proceed now to discuss, more in detail, these various elements which the preceding analysis has furnished, the several questions already suggested will naturally present themselves for consideration.

As to the perception of the moral quality of actions, it will be in place to inquire : what is the *origin* of such perception, on our part ; whence we derive our ideas of right or wrong ; how we come to make such a distinction.

As to the element of obligation, it will be in place to inquire : what is the *ground* of such obligation.

As to the decision of approval or condemnation, it will be pertinent to consider : what is the value, and what the power, of such verdict.

To these points, accordingly, our attention will be mainly directed as we proceed to examine one by one, in their order, the several mental processes now indicated.

I. *The perception of an act as right or wrong.*

When we direct our attention to any given instance of the conduct and voluntary action of any intelligent and rational being, we find ourselves, not unfrequently, pronouncing upon its character as a right or wrong act. Especially is this the case when the act contemplated is of a marked and unusual

character. The question at once arises, is it right? or, it may be, without the consciousness of even a question respecting it; our decision follows instantly upon the mental apprehension of the act itself; this thing is right, this thing is wrong. Our decision may be correct or incorrect; our perception of the real nature of the act may be clear or obscure; it may make a stronger or a weaker impression on the mind, according to our mental habits, the tone of our moral nature, and the degree to which we have cultivated the moral faculty. There may be minds so degraded, and natures so perverted, that the moral character of an act shall be quite mistaken, or quite overlooked in many cases; or when perceived it shall make little impression on them. Even in such minds, however, the *idea* of right and wrong still finds a place, and the understanding applies it, though not perhaps always correctly, to particular instances of human conduct. There is no reason to believe that any mind, possessing ordinary endowments, those degrees of reason and intelligence which nature usually bestows, is destitute of this idea, or fails altogether to apply it to its own acts, and those of others.

But *whence come* these ideas and perceptions; their origin? How is it, *why* is it, that we pronounce an act right or wrong, when once fairly apprehended? How come we by these notions? The fact is admitted; the explanations vary. By one class of writers our ideas of this nature have been ascribed to *education* and *fashion*; by another, to *legal restriction*, human or divine. Others again, viewing these ideas as the offspring of nature, have assigned them either to the operation of a *special sense*, given for this specific purpose, as the eye for vision; or to the joint action of certain associated emotions; while others regard them as originating in an exercise of judgment, and others still as natural intuitions of the mind, or reason exercised on subjects of a moral nature.

The main question is, are these ideas *natural*, or *artificial and acquired*? If the latter, are they the result of education, or of legal restraint? If the former, are they to be referred to



the *sensibilities*, as the result of a special sense, or of association, or to the *intellect*, as the result of the faculty of judgment, or as intuitions of reason?

1. *Come they from education and imitation?* So Locke, Paley, and others have supposed. Locke was led to take this view, by tracing, as he did, all simple ideas, except those of our own mental operations, to sensation, as their source. This allows, of course, no place for the ideas of right and wrong, which accordingly, he concluded, cannot be natural ideas, but must be the result of education.

Now it is to be conceded that education and fashion are powerful instruments in the culture of the mind. Their influence is not to be overlooked in estimating the causes that shape and direct the opinions of men, and the tendencies of an age. But they do not account for the *origin* of anything. This has been ably and clearly shown by Dugald Stewart, in answer to Locke; and it is a sufficient answer. Education and imitation both *presuppose* the existence of moral ideas and distinctions; the very things to be accounted for. How came they who first taught these distinctions, and they who first set the example of making such distinctions, to be *themselves* in possession of these ideas? Whence did *they* derive them? Who taught *them*, and set *them* the example? This is a question not answered by the theory now under consideration. It gives us, therefore, and can give us, no account of the origin of the ideas in question.

2. Do we then derive these ideas from legal restriction and enactment? So teach some able writers. Laws are made, human and divine, requiring us to do thus and thus, and forbidding such and such things, and hence we get our ideas originally of right and wrong.

If this be so, then previous to all law there could have been no such ideas of course. But does not law *presuppose* the idea of right and wrong? Is it not built on that idea as its basis? How then can it originate that on which itself depends, and which it presupposes? The first law ever promulgated must have been either a just or an unjust law, or else of no moral character. If the latter, how could a law

which was neither just nor unjust, have suggested to the subjects of it any such ideas? If the former, then these qualities, and the ideas of them, must have existed *prior* to the law itself; and whoever made the law and conferred on it its character, must have had already in his own mind the idea of the right and its opposite. It is evident that we cannot in this way account for the *origin* of the ideas in question. We are no nearer the solution of the problem than before.

In opposition to the views now considered, we must regard the ideas in question as directly or indirectly the work of nature and the result of our constitution. The question still remains however: in which of the several ways indicated does this result take place?

3. Shall we attribute these ideas to a *special sense*? This is the view taken by Hutcheson and his followers. Ascribing, with Locke, all our simple ideas to sensation, but not content with Locke's theory of moral distinctions as the result of education, he sought to account for them by enlarging the sphere of sensation, and introducing a new sense, whose specific office is to take cognizance of such distinctions. The tendency of this theory is evident. While it derives the idea of right and its opposite from our natural constitution, and is so far preferable to either of the preceding theories, still, in assigning them a place among the sensibilities, it seems to make morality a mere *sentiment*, a matter of feeling merely, an impression made on our sentient nature—a mere subjective affair—as color and taste are impressions made on our organs of sense, and not properly qualities of bodies. As these affections of the sense do not exist independently, but only relatively, to us, so moral distinctions, according to this view, are merely subjective affections of our minds, and not independent realities.

Hume accedes to this general view, and carries it out to its legitimate results, making morality a mere relation between our nature and certain objects, and not an independent quality of actions. Virtue and vice, like color and taste, the bright and the dull, the sweet and the bitter, lie merely in our sensations.

These sceptical views had been advanced long previously by the sophists, who taught that man is the measure of all things, that things are only what they seem to us.

It is true, as Stewart has observed, that these views do not necessarily result from Hutcheson's theory, nor were they probably held by him; but such is the natural tendency of his doctrine. The term *sense*, as employed by him, is in itself ambiguous, and *may* be used to denote a *mental perception*; but when we speak of a sense, we are understood to refer to that part of our constitution which, when affected from without, gives us certain sensations. Thus the sense of hearing, the sense of vision, the sense of taste, of smell, etc. It is in this way that Hutcheson seems to have employed the term, and his illustrations all point in this direction. He was unfortunate, to say the least, in his use of terms, and in his illustrations; unfortunate, also, in having such a disciple as Hume, to push his theory to its legitimate results.

If, by a special sense, he meant only a direct perceptive power of the mind, then, doubtless, Hutcheson is right in recognizing such a faculty, and attributing to it the ideas under consideration. But that is not the proper meaning of the word *sense*, nor is that the signification attached to it by his followers. But if he means, by sense, what the word itself would indicate, some adaptation of the sensibilities to receive impressions from things without, analogous to that by which we are affected through the organs of sense, then, 1. It is not true, that we have any such special faculty. There is no evidence of it; nay, facts contradict it. There is no such *uniformity* of moral impression, or sensation, as ought to manifest itself on this supposition. Men's eyes and ears are much alike, in their activity, the world over. That which is white, or red, to one, is not black to another, or green to a third; that which is sweet to one, is not sour, or bitter, to another. At least, if such variations occur, they are the result only of some unnatural and unusual condition of the organs. But it is otherwise with the operation of the so-called special sense. While all men have probably some idea of right and

wrong, there is the greatest possible variety in its application to particular instances of conduct. What one approves as a virtue, another condemns as a crime.

Nor, 2. have we any need to call in the aid of a special sense to give us ideas of this kind. It is not true, as Locke and Hutcheson believed, that all our ideas except those of our own mental operations, or consciousness, are derived ultimately from sensation. We have ideas of the true and the beautiful, ideas of cause and effect, of geometrical and arithmetical relations, and various other ideas, which it would be difficult to trace to the senses as their source; and which, equally with the ideas of right and wrong, would require, in that case, a special sense for their production.

4. Shall we, then, adopt the view of that class of ethical writers who account for the origin of these ideas by the principle of association? Such men as Hartley, Mill, Mackintosh, and others of that stamp, are not lightly to be set aside in the discussion of such a question. Their view is, that the moral perceptions are the result of certain combined antecedent emotions, such as gratitude, piety, resentment, etc., which relate to the dispositions and actions of voluntary agents, and which very easily, and naturally, come to be transferred, from the agent himself, to the action in itself considered, or to the disposition which prompted it; forming, when thus transferred and associated, what we call the moral feelings and perceptions. Just as avarice arises from the original desire, not of money, but of the things which money can procure; which desire comes, eventually, to be transferred, from the objects themselves, to the means and instrument of procuring them; and, as sympathy arises from the transfer to others of the feelings which, in like circumstances, agitate our own bosoms; so, in like manner, by the principle of association, the feelings which naturally arise in view of the conduct of others, are transferred from the agent to the act, from the enemy or the benefactor, to the injury or the benefaction, which acts stand afterward, by themselves, as objects of approval or condemnation. Hence the disposition to approve all benevolent acts, and to condemn the opposite; which dis-

position, thus formed and transferred, is a part of conscience. So of other elementary emotions.

It will be perceived that this theory, which is indebted chiefly to Mackintosh for its completeness, and scientific form, makes conscience wholly a matter of sentiment and feeling; standing in this respect on the same ground with the theory of a special sense, and liable in part to the same objections. Hence the name *sentimental* school, often employed to designate collectively the adherents of each of these views. While the theory now proposed might then seem to offer a plausible account of the manner in which our moral *sentiments* aim, it does not account for the origin of our *ideas* and *perceptions* of moral rectitude. Now the moral faculty is not mere sentiment. There is an intellectual perception of one thing as right, and another as wrong; and the question now before us is: whence comes that perception, and the idea on which it is based? To resolve the whole matter into certain transferred and associated emotions, is to give up the inherent distinction of right and wrong as qualities of actions, and make virtue and vice creations of the sensibility, the play and product of the excited feelings. To admit the perception and idea of the right, and ascribe their origin to antecedent emotion, is moreover to reverse the natural order and law of psychological operation, which bases emotion on perception, and not perception on emotion. We do not first admire, love, hate, and then perceive, but the reverse.

The view now under consideration, while it seems to resolve the moral faculty into mere feeling, thus making morality wholly a relative affair, makes conscience itself an acquired, rather than a natural faculty, a secondary process, a transformation of emotions, rather than itself an original principle. It does it, moreover, the further injustice of deriving its origin from the purely *selfish* principles of our nature. I receive a favor, or an injury, hence I regard with certain feelings of complacency, or the opposite, the man who has thus treated me. These feelings I come gradually to transfer to, and associate with, the act in itself considered, and this with other acts of the same nature; and so at last I come to have

a moral faculty, and pronounced one thing right, and another wrong.

This view is quite inadmissible; at variance with facts, and the well-known laws of the human mind. The moral faculty is one of the earliest to develop itself. It appears in childhood, manifesting itself, not as an acquired and secondary principle, the result of a complicated process of associated and transferred emotion, requiring time for its gradual formation and growth, but rather as an original instinctive principle of nature.

Adam Smith, in his "Theory of Moral Sentiments," has proposed a view which falls properly under the general theory of association, and may be regarded as a modification of it. He attributes our moral perceptions to the feeling of *sympathy*. To adopt the feelings of another is to approve them. If those feelings are such as would naturally be awakened in us by the same objects, we approve them as morally proper. Sympathy with the gratitude of one who has received a favor, leads us to regard the benefaction as meritorious. Sympathy with the resentment of an injured man, leads us to regard the injurer as worthy of punishment, and so the sense of demerit originates; sympathy with the feelings of others respecting our own conduct gives rise to self-approval and sense of duty. Rules of morality are merely a summary of these sentiments.

Whatever credit may be due to this ingenious writer, for calling attention to a principle which had not been sufficiently taken into account by preceding philosophers, we cannot but regard it as an insufficient explanation of the present case. In the first place, we are not *conscious* of the element of sympathy in the decisions and perceptions of the moral faculty. We look at a given action as right or wrong, and approve of it, or condemn it *on that ground*, because it *is* right or wrong, not because we sympathize with the feelings awakened by the act in the minds of others. If the process now supposed intervened between our knowledge of the act, and our judgment of its morality, we should know it and recognize it as a distinct element.

Furthermore, sympathy, like other emotions, has one *imperative* character, and, even if it might be supposed to suggest to the mind some idea of moral distinctions, cannot of itself furnish a foundation for those feelings of *obligation* which accompany and characterize the decisions of the moral faculty.

But more than this, the view now taken makes the standard of right and wrong *variable*, and dependent on the feelings of men. We must know how others think and feel, how the thing affects them, before we can know whether a given act is right or wrong, to be performed or avoided. And then, furthermore, our feelings must agree with theirs; there must be sympathy and harmony of views and feelings, else the result will not follow. If anything prevents us from knowing what are the feelings of others with respect to a given course of conduct, or if for any reason we fail to sympathize with those feelings, we can have no conscience in the matter. As those feelings vary, so will our moral perceptions vary. We have no fixed standard. There is no place left for right, as such, and absolutely. If no sympathy, then no duty, no right, no morality.

We have, as yet, found no satisfactory explanation of the origin of our moral ideas and perceptions. They seem not to be the result of education and imitation, nor yet of legal enactment. They seem to be natural, rather than artificial and acquired. Yet we cannot trace them to the action of the sensitive part of our nature. They are not the product of a special sense, nor yet of the combined and associated action of certain natural emotions, much less of any one emotion, as sympathy. And yet they are a part of our nature. Place man where you will, surround him with what influences you will, you still find in him, to some extent at least, indications of a moral nature; a nature modified indeed by circumstances, but never wholly obliterated. Evidently we must refer the ideas in question, then, to the intellectual, since they do not belong to the sensitive, part of our nature.

5. Are they then the product and operation of the faculty

of judgment? But the judgment does not *originate* ideas. It compares, distributes, estimates, decides to what class and category a thing belongs, but creates nothing. I have in mind the idea of a triangle, a circle, etc. So soon as certain figures are presented to the eye, I refer them at once, by an act of judgment, to the class to which they belong. I affirm that to be a triangle, this, a circle, etc.; the judgment does this. But judgment does not furnish my mind with the primary idea of a circle, etc. It deals with this idea already in the mind. So in our judgment of the beauty and deformity of objects. The perception that a landscape or painting is beautiful, is, in one sense, an act of judgment; but it is an act which presupposes the idea of the beautiful already in the mind that so judges. So also of moral distinctions. Whence comes the *idea* of right and wrong which lies at the foundation of every particular judgment as to the moral character of actions? This is the question before us, still unanswered; and to this there remains but one reply.

6. The ideas in question are *intuitive*; suggestions or perceptions of reason. The view now proposed may be thus stated: It is the office of reason to discern the right and the wrong, as well as the true and the false, the beautiful and the reverse. Regarded subjectively, as conceptions of the human mind, right and wrong, as well as beauty and its opposite, truth and its opposite, are simple ideas, incapable of analysis or definition; intuitions of reason. Regarded as objective, right and wrong are realities, qualities absolute, and inherent in the nature of things, not fictitious, not the play of human fancy or human feeling, not relative merely to the human mind, but independent, essential, universal, absolute. As such, reason recognizes their existence. Judgment decides that such and such actions do possess the one or the other of these qualities; are right or wrong actions. There follows the sense of obligation to do or not to do, and the consciousness of merit or demerit as we comply, or fail to comply, with the same. In view of these perceptions emotions arise, but only as based upon them. The emo-



tions do not, as the sentimental school affirm, originate the idea, the perception; but the idea, the perception, give rise to the emotion. We are so constituted as to feel certain emotions in view of the moral quality of actions, but the idea and perception of that moral quality must *precede*, and it is the office of reason to produce this.

There are certain simple ideas which must be regarded as first truths, or first principles, of the human understanding, essential to its operations, ideas universal, absolute, necessary. Such are the ideas of personal existence and identity of time and space, as conditions of material existence; of number, cause, and mathematical relation. Into this class fall the ideas of the true, the beautiful, the right, and their opposites. The fundamental maxims of reasoning and morals, find here their place.

These are in a sense intuitive perceptions; not strictly innate, yet connate; the foundation for them being laid in our nature and constitution. So soon as the mind reaches a certain stage of development they present themselves. Circumstances may promote or retard their appearance. They depend on opportunity to furnish the occasion of their springing up, yet they are nevertheless the natural, spontaneous development of the human soul, as really a part of our nature, as are any of our instinctive impulses, or our mental attributes. They are a part of that native intelligence with which we are endowed by the author of our being. These intuitions of ours, are not themselves the foundation of right and wrong; they do not make one thing right and another wrong; but they are simply the reason why we so regard them. Such we believe to be the true account of the origin of our moral perceptions.

We have directed our attention, thus far, to the first of the several elements that constitute the moral faculty, viz. the perception of the right and wrong in actions. We proceed, now, to discuss the second of these elements or mental processes.

## II. *The perception of obligation.*

No sooner do we apprehend a given act as right or wrong,

than we recognize, also, a certain *obligation* resting on us with respect to that act, either to do, or to avoid, the same. It is a conviction of the mind, inseparable from the perception of the right. Given : a clear perception of the one, and one cannot escape the other. The question arises here, *what is the ground of this OUGHT*, what *constitutes* it ; what is that, in any given action, that imposes on me the obligation to do, or not to do, the same ? I ought to do this, and that. *Why* ought ?

Whatever answer we may give to this question, we must come back ultimately to the simple position, we ought, *because it is right* ; the *rightness* of a given course constitutes the obligation, on our part, to adhere to the same. Given : the one ; given, also, the other. The question, then, What constitutes obligation ? resolves itself into this : What constitutes right ?

This is a question of no little moment. It has received, at different times and from different writers, widely different answers ; and these various answers constitute so many different theories of morals. They lead us over an interesting and important field of inquiry, involving one of the deepest and most difficult problems in the whole range of philosophy.

This is altogether a distinct question from the one already discussed, though often confounded with it by ethical writers. The question is not, now : Whence our *ideas* of right ? but, What *makes* right, what is right itself ? It is quite possible that what is, to me, the source of the idea of right, may not be the foundation of right itself. I derive my idea of time from the succession of events, my idea of space from extension ; but succession does not constitute time, nor extension space ; on the contrary, time is necessary to succession, and space to extension. The latter presuppose the former, and could not be without them. So with respect to moral distinctions : I may, or may not, be indebted for the idea of right, as it exists in my mind, to that which is the foundation of right itself.

The principal theories of morals, or grounds of obligation, proposed by different writers, may be reduced, perhaps, to

these four: 1. Utility; 2. Law; 3. The nature and character of God; 4. The eternal and immutable nature of things. Each of these has been regarded as the true ground on which to place the distinction of right and wrong, and the consequent moral obligation. The two former of these, again, have each a twofold aspect: Utility, as the ground of right, may denote either the *happiness*, the pleasure accruing from a given course (which is itself a species of utility), or the more direct *advantage* resulting from it. Or, if we place the matter on the ground of legal enactment, the law which makes the right and the wrong, may be man's law, or it may be God's.

We leave, then, these divergent paths opening before us, each proposing to conduct to the true solution of our problem, each trodden by many a mighty man in the domain of thought: the *utilitarian* theory, with its twofold aspect, the pleasure and the advantage of the thing; the *legal* theory, twofold also, as of human or Divine authority; the theory which makes the *Divine character* the foundation of right; and, finally, that which bases it on the immutable and eternal nature of things.

Let us, then, examine these several theories in their order:

1. The *utilitarian*. Understanding by this term, in the first place, *pleasure*, rather than advantage, the doctrine is this: the reason why we pronounce one thing right, rather than another, is, that we find the one act to be attended, uniformly, with pleasure to the doer; the other, with pain; one contributes to his happiness, the other detracts from it. Now the pursuit of happiness, it is contended, is the grand motive and spring of all human action; and if it be once established that the actions which we call right, are such, invariably, as to promote our happiness, no other reason need be assigned why we thus regard them. And this, it is contended, is the case. If we select any instance of what we call right action, we find it to be an action which is accompanied with pleasurable emotion. And this is the ground of our approval, the reason why we pronounce the action right.

Now it is not to be denied, that to do right brings with it a present satisfaction and true happiness. Such is the constitution of our nature. The question is, whether this tendency to produce happiness is what *makes* a given act right. Is the thing right *because* it produces happiness? or does it promote our happiness *because it is right*? Which is the true statement? When I pronounce some past act of my life to be right, and approve it as virtuous, is it because I remember that it gave me great pleasure? and when I cherish the feeling of self-reproach and remorse, in view of past conduct, is it on the ground that the given action was accompanied with unpleasant and painful sensations?

The simple statement of the question would seem sufficient. We feel, instinctively, that our decision and approval rest on far other and higher grounds. Virtue and happiness are, by no means, identical. We have different terms for them, and mean different things by them. The one cannot be resolved into the other. If it be true that all right things are pleasant, it does not follow that all pleasant things are right, much less that their pleasantness makes them right. Many are the propensities of a corrupt nature, the indulgence of which is attended with present gratification, which still are evil and only evil; and in their pleasantness consists the very strength of the temptation they present. The man who yields to the force of such temptations, however, by no means approves the course that he pursues. He goes to the commission of the wrong, not with a conviction that he is doing right, but under a protest from his conscience, and with a feeling of self-reproach and self-condemnation. This ought not to be, according to the theory now under consideration. He ought rather to approve his conduct, on the ground that he was seeking, therein, his own happiness; and his self-approval ought to rise and increase, in proportion to the pleasure he receives.

Nor is the case materially altered by substituting the happiness of others, in place of personal happiness, as the ground of right. No doubt right action contributes to the happiness of the community, and swells the sum total of the world's en-

joyment ; but is it this, that constitutes the rightness of the act ? Is the noble consciousness of doing right, with all its power to sustain the spirit of a man under the pressure of the heaviest calamities, and the gloom of the darkest hour, merely this : the conviction that somehow, in consequence of what he has done, men will, on the whole, enjoy themselves better ? Independent, and irrespective of all such considerations, is there not a far nobler satisfaction in having done that which was right, in itself considered, and for its own sake ?

The view now considered was the distinctive tenet of the ancient Epicurean philosophy ; and has been held, in later times, by Hume and Shaftsbury in England, and by their followers generally.

Considering, now, utility as denoting *advantage* or *expediency*, we come upon somewhat different ground ; capable, however, of attack and defence by essentially the same arguments. In fact, the former view may be regarded as a modification of the latter, the one specific, the other generic, in its form ; pleasure being, itself, a species of advantage, at least in the opinion of those who make it the rule of right. Hence, very generally, the advocates of the former view are advocates also of the latter. Still the latter is, of the two, the broader and higher ground.

Self-love, according to this view, is the grand motive of human action. Men do what they think for their advantage. Now it is found by experience that a certain course of conduct is for the advantage, and the opposite for the disadvantage, of the doer, and of all concerned. Hence they come to regard the one course as right, and to be pursued, the other as wrong, and to be avoided. In a word it is the utility or expediency of the thing that constitutes the ground and reason of its rightness. Such is the doctrine of Bentham and his followers.

And here it is admitted, on all sides, that virtuous action does contribute to the advantage, in many ways, of the doer. The question is, whether this is what *makes* it virtuous, whether this constitutes its rightness. Is it right because expedient, or expedient because right ?

Let us see what follows from this theory. (1) If expediency is the ground of right, then *interest* and *duty* are identical in idea, synonymes for the same thought. To prove a given action right, all that is necessary is to show that it is advantageous to the doer. The same act performed from the same motives, with the same spirit and intentions, is right to one man, and wrong to another; nay, is right to one and the same man, at one time, and wrong at another, according as it turns out for his advantage or not. We can never be sure that we are acting virtuously, until we know how the action is to affect our personal interests. Men have acted from the highest and purest principles, yet have been in reality far from virtuous, because what they did proved not for their own interests. They ought therefore to cherish feelings of self-reproach, and remorse, in view of their conduct.

(2) It follows from this theory, that there is no such thing as *intentional* wrong-doing. Men always act, it is said, from the principle of self-love. They do what they think is for their own advantage. Finding by experience that certain actions tend to their advantage, they come to regard such actions as right, and the opposite, for the same reason, as wrong. What have we here for a syllogism!

Man acts always with reference to his own good. To act with reference to one's own good, is to act right. Therefore, man invariably acts right! He may mistake, and do what is in the end disadvantageous; but it was a mistake, an error of judgment, and not an *intentional* wrong. This is on the whole a very favorable view of things, and may serve to relieve somewhat the sombre aspect in which the world and poor erring human nature, present themselves to a certain class of minds. Men are not so bad, after all. They do as well as they know how. They *mean* to be selfish, and to consult their own interests, and if they sometimes come short of duty in this respect, it is an error of the head and not of the heart.

(3) It follows also, that there is no such thing as *disinterested* virtue. Utility is the ground of rectitude, the foundation of

obligation. We ought, therefore, to give a man credit for his conduct, just in proportion as we perceive him to have been governed throughout by a regard to his own personal advantage. To act thus is to act right, and to comply with the claims of duty. There can be no virtue which springs not from this source. The more fully a man promotes his own interests, and seeks his own personal advantage, in all he does, provided only there be no direct violation of the rights of others, the higher esteem ought we to cherish for that man in our hearts. On the other hand, where an action is of such a nature, that we are not quite sure whether the man *was really seeking his own advantage* or that of *others*, in what he did, we ought to withhold our approbation.

But strange to say, selfish as the world is, it does not so decide. It does sensibly diminish our moral approbation of any act, to see, or suspect even, that self-interest was the leading motive of conduct; it heightens our admiration and esteem, to perceive that the act was performed without the least regard to that, but from entirely different motives.

And this leads us to remark, in general, that the theory under consideration *contradicts the facts of consciousness*. If utility were the ground of moral obligation, the foundation of right, then whenever we recognize such obligation, we should be *conscious* of this element as the basis of it; should be conscious of perceiving the tendency of the given act to promote the personal happiness, or the personal advantage of the doer, and that our conviction of obligation, in the case, arose from that circumstance; whereas, in fact, we are conscious of no such thing, but in many cases of directly the reverse. The sense of obligation exists, not only irrespective of the idea of happiness or of advantage to be derived from the given act, but often in opposition to it; the desire of happiness, or of personal advantage, drawing us in one direction, the sense of obligation, in another. It is not true that duty and interest are identical. We have different names for them, we mean different things by them. We are conscious of acting, now from one, now from the other, of these principles. It is not true, that men never intentionally

do what they know to be wrong. This was the capital defect in the ethical system of Socrates and also of Plato, who make virtue a matter of science, and sin to be merely ignorance. Whose consciousness does not testify the opposite of this? Who will not say with Ovid :

“ *Video meliora, proboque, deteriora sequor;* ”

or with Euripides : “ I know that what I am about to do is evil, but desire is stronger than my deliberations.” Surely the facts in this case are more nearly right than the philosophers. Who has not reason to say with Paul : “ That which I do, I allow not.”

Neither is it true, that we act always from personal and selfish considerations. We are conscious of the opposite, conscious of doing that which is right, *because* it is right, and not for the sake of personal advantage. Nor in such cases is the verdict of conscience against us ; but on the contrary, it is precisely such actions that draw forth the testimony of her warmest approbation ; so far from reproaching us for not acting with more direct and uniform reference to our own advantage, conscience more frequently condemns us for having acted from no higher principle.

We cannot but regard the facts of consciousness, then, as altogether at variance with the theory under consideration.

Suppose, now, we give the term utility, a still wider extension, meaning by it, not the advantage of the *individual* merely, but the good of the *greatest number*, does it become, in this sense, the foundation of right and of moral obligation? There are still insuperable objections.

In the first place, how can it always be known, what *will* promote the interests of the greatest number? The tendencies and results of actions, are often hidden from human perspicacity. We do not know how they will affect the interests of any considerable number of persons. A laborious calculation of consequences, would, in most cases, be necessary, in order to such a conclusion, and even then, we could never arrive at certainty, never be sure that our reasonings



and conclusions were correct. We should be in suspense, therefore, as to the morality of actions, unable to decide whether they are right or wrong, until we could first know their ultimate bearing on the general welfare. Such a calculation of consequences is quite beyond the capacity of the mass; only the more enlightened and far-seeing, are competent to form such judgments, and even they, not with any certainty. Only the few, therefore, are competent to form ideas of right or wrong, and apply them to human conduct, while the vast multitude are left without any such faculty to guide them.

Furthermore, it may be justly objected to this theory, in the form in which it is now stated, that it is directly at variance with the facts in the case. As a matter of fact, we *do not* always calculate the consequences of an action before we pronounce it, in our minds, right or wrong. We are conscious of no such procedure. We do not stop to know what bearing it is likely to have on the public welfare. We do not raise the question at all. We neither know, nor care. Instinctively we decide as to the propriety and rightness of the given act; we approve and condemn without reference to consequences, and on other grounds than that of expediency.

It is fatal to this theory of utility, in whatever form it is stated, whether as referring to the happiness of the individual, or the happiness of the community; to the advantage of the individual, or the advantage of all, that, so far from being conscious ordinarily of any such considerations, in our estimate of the morality of actions, we are conscious of quite the opposite. Our moral decisions are often pronounced under circumstances which preclude the *possibility* of all such prudential considerations. Narrate to a child, just old enough to understand you, some story of flagrant injustice and wrong, the flush of indignation, the glow of resentment, are visible at once on that cheek; the decision of that moral nature, its verdict of disapproval and condemnation, is to be read at once in that eye, that brow, that clenched hand, the whole mien and aspect of the miniature man. Has it been

calculating the expediency and utility of the thing, the consequences to society of what its outraged nature condemns?

But there is a further objection to making utility, in any of its significations, the ground of moral obligation. It is, that all these principles, as thus applied, virtually *presuppose* the existence of moral obligation, and therefore cannot be the ground of it. I perceive such a course to be conducive to happiness; therefore, says the advocate of this view: I am under obligation to pursue that course. But why *therefore*? Why *ought*? Suppose I chose to do that which is *not* on the whole for my happiness; what then? Whose business is it but my own? Either there is no manner of obligation in that case, or else it lies out of, and back of, the principle now supposed. The same may be said of utility in the sense of advantage. It presupposes an obligation to do what is seen to be useful and advantageous, and the question still remains: what is the *ground* of that obligation which the doctrine of utility presupposes?

2. Let us look, now, at the theory which places the foundation of moral obligation on the ground of *positive enactment*. Laws have been made, human and Divine, requiring, forbidding, etc. Hence our approval and condemnation of actions, and our conviction of obligation. The just and the unjust, the right and the wrong, in human conduct, are simply its conformity, or want of conformity, to law.

Of those who take this ground, some look no higher than to human enactment, as the ground of rectitude and the foundation of moral obligation. The laws of man make the right and wrong of things, and are the sufficient and ultimate standard of morals. There is no higher law. No other reason need be given, why I should do, or not do, a given thing, than that the laws of my country require it.

Such, among the ancients, was the doctrine of Epicurus and of the Sophists. Plato, in the "De Legibus," and Aristotle, in his "Ethics," make mention of the doctrine as maintained by some in their day.

Among the moderns, Gassendi and Hobbes are almost the

only writers of distinction who have had the boldness to avow, and the consistency to maintain, a doctrine at once so shameless, so obnoxious to the common sense and common honesty of mankind, and so destructive of the first principles of morality. Occasionally, indeed, the spectacle is presented of some one, more patriotic than discreet, who, in his zeal to defend the constitution and laws of his country, so far forgets himself, in the pressure of the exigency, as to take the general position that the laws of the land are, to us, the final court of appeal, and that we are to look no higher for authority. Even such persons, it is to be presumed, are not fully aware of the true nature and legitimate consequences of this doctrine, nor of the company they keep in maintaining such a position. They would shrink, it is to be hoped, from the doctrine, reduced to its simple elements, and affirmed as a principle in ethics, that *might makes right*, a sentiment that even a German rationalist has pronounced *infernal*, and from the atheism that discards the Deity, and overlooks the moral nature of man, while proclaiming human law as the standard of morals, and the foundation of right.

If it were of any use to reason against a doctrine so little deserving the name of philosophy, or the notice of a calm reply, it were sufficient, perhaps, to ask how it is possible, on this principle, since law is, itself, the source and foundation of right, to compare one law or code with another: those of Draco, e. g., with those of Solon or Lycurgus; the edicts of Nero with those of Constantine; and because one system is mild and humane, another barbarous and inhuman, pronounce one to be more right and just than the other. If law is its own authority, if it makes right, if back of it there is no appeal, no ultimate standard of rectitude, then, of course, everything which is once enacted, and obtains the sanction of established law, is right and binding, no matter what it may be — one equally so with another — and it is absurd to make a distinction between them. The commands of the veriest despot are as just and right, as obligatory on the conscience, as those of the wisest and mildest ruler. Law is law, and that ends the matter. A law morally wrong is an

impossibility, an absurdity. Inasmuch as laws vary, moreover, in different lands, what is right in one country is wrong when you cross a river or a mountain; what is a virtue in Holland, is a sin in Belgium.

Much more reasonable and philosophical is the view of those who regard the *Divine* will and law as the foundation of moral rectitude. This view was maintained by Occam among the scholastics, by Paley and many others among the moderns. Yet, even to this view, insuperable objections arise :

(1) If this view be correct, then we have only to suppose the will of Deity to change, and what is now wrong becomes instantly right : the good and the bad, the virtuous and the vicious, change characters at once. We have only to suppose him other than he is, and to have commanded other than he has ; to have reversed the decalogue, and the things now commanded would then have been wrong, and the things now forbidden would have been right. Murder, adultery, false witness, theft, covetousness, would have been virtues, commendable and obligatory ; while to honor our parents, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, would have been morally wrong. In other words, there is no difference, in respect of moral character, between these actions in themselves considered ; the difference lies wholly in the fact that one is commanded, and the other forbidden ; they are right or wrong, only as they are, or are not, the will of Deity.

It is no answer to this, to say that God is holy, and therefore will not command that which is evil ; nor, that he is immutable, and therefore will not change ; the question is not as to the *matter of fact*, but as to what *would* be true, in case he and his law were not what they are. If it were possible for God to throw around sin the sanction of his law, would it, because of that sanction, *cease* to be sin, and become holiness ? Does the rightness of an act consist wholly and simply in its being lawful ?

(2) It follows also, that, had there been no Divine law to establish the character of actions, human conduct had been neither virtuous nor vicious, neither good nor bad, but all

actions would have been alike indifferent: to hate our neighbor, to take his property, his good name, or his life, would have been not only allowable, but equally as commendable and meritorious, as the opposite. Nothing would have been unjust, nothing wrong.

(3) There is no propriety or sense in speaking of God's law as just and good, in affirming that his statutes are right, his commandments holy, etc.; for moral approbation is wholly misplaced and uncalled for. It is without meaning. For, if there is no standard of right, and no ground of obligation but the law itself, how can its requirements be any other than right and binding, whatever they may be? To say that his statutes are just and right, is to say, simply, that his statutes are his statutes. More than this; when we speak of the law as holy, just, etc., do we not attribute a moral character to the law itself? But how can this be? If the law creates moral distinctions, how can law itself possess a moral character? how can it be either right or wrong? This is to suppose right to exist before it was created.

4. Further: for the same reason we are shut out, on this principle, from attributing to Deity himself any moral character. Law is the foundation of right, and law is from God. Back of his will there is no law, and, of course, no ground of rectitude. God has himself, therefore, aside from his own law, no moral character, no virtue; for, beyond his own will and pleasure, there is no *law* imposing obligation, and constituting, for him, the right and the wrong. One thing is as right as another, for him; everything is equally right; and, strictly speaking, nothing is, for him, either right or wrong. It is language without meaning when we say, with one of old: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God, just and true are all thy ways." Before he enacted the first law, there was no such thing as right. It depended entirely on his pleasure whether to enact that law. There was no obligation to enact it, for no law, as yet, existed to create obligation. Suppose he had not done it. Right would not have existed; and of course, in that case, could not have pertained to the divine character. Not until he creates the right, by making

law, can he, by any possibility, possess a moral character; and even then it is a moral character which he himself creates, and imposes upon himself, by arbitrary enactment. Had he made a law precisely the reverse of the actual one, it would have been equally right and binding, and himself equally holy. But it is difficult to see how the thing made can put the maker himself under obligation; how, from his own work, he can derive the foundation of a character which he had not, in himself, prior to the work. It is difficult to estimate the intrinsic excellence of that holiness which owes its origin to a purely arbitrary enactment; which might just as well never have been made, or have been entirely other than, and the reverse of, what it is; a holiness which, when strictly viewed, amounts merely to this: that the being who possesses it, *does what he does*.

It may be supposed, perhaps, by some, that the divine law, while it may not absolutely create the distinction of right and wrong, does nevertheless create the *obligation*, on our part, to do, or not to do, the things required; that it is to me the sufficient reason why I ought to do thus and thus. This is a view entitled to a careful consideration. I must do thus, *because* such is the will of Deity. The question is now as to this word *because*. Granting that the will of Deity is as affirmed, what has that to do with my conduct; wherein and how does that place me under obligation to do what the Deity wills? Where lies the binding power of the law itself? Manifestly not *in itself*, as law, but in something else. There must be something to make the law binding, or it can bring with it no obligation to obedience on my part. And in saying this, we really *abandon the position, that law is, itself, the basis of obligation*.

This something, we may find in one of three things: It may be in the *character* of the law given; a holy, just, and good law, and one which we ought therefore to obey. But this is to place the ground of obligation, not in the law itself, but in something else, viz. moral rectitude. I am bound to obey, not because there is a law, but because there is a *holy* and *just* law.

Or we may turn the binding power of the law to the *rela-*

tion which the Deity sustains to us. He is our creator, preserver, benefactor, and as such has the right, it is said, to control and govern us. But does this, we reply, give him the right to govern and control, *irrespective of moral distinctions*? If it does, then right and wrong are the mere arbitrary creations of his will; a view which we have already considered and rejected. If it does not, then the ultimate ground of obligation is to be found in the *rectitude* of the divine requirements. In either case, it is not the law itself that constitutes the obligation.

Does, then, that which constitutes the binding force of the divine law consist in this: that the Deity is in himself such a being as he is, the greatest, the wisest, the best; and therefore his will is obligatory on other beings? This again is to recognize moral distinctions as lying back of the law itself, and as giving to that law its character and its force. When you say that God is good, just, holy, the best of beings, and, on that account, ought to be obeyed, you abandon the position, that law itself creates moral distinctions, and that it contains in itself the ground of obligation. His being and nature are prior to his law, and the foundation of it; and if his being and nature are themselves good, then certainly it is not his law that makes them so; and if it is from them that our obligation to obedience springs, then certainly not from the law itself.

Whatever view we take, then, of this matter, we are compelled to give up the position that the divine law is the ground of moral obligation. An action is right, not *because* God wills it; on the contrary, *he wills it, because it is right.*

The distinction between the rightness and the lawfulness of an act, is admitted by some, who still place obligation on the ground of law. This is the case with Chalmers. In general it may be remarked, that no writer breathes, throughout, a higher moral tone and purpose, or utters truth with more eloquence and earnestness than he. His style is an avalanche broken loose, a sea of expression, rolling sentence after sentence, wave upon wave, with a loftiness and force quite irresistible. It is the style of the orator, however,

rather than of the philosopher, indicating fervor and strength of feeling, rather than precision and clearness of thought. There is a certain nobleness of sentiment that wins our admiration. We feel sure that some leviathan is ploughing up those waters, and making them to boil; but it is a leviathan not willing to be caught and classified, for purposes of science. In the present case, Dr. Chalmers, if we understand him, derives *obligation* from the divine law, but *right* from the divine character; thus separating the two. While he rejects the view of Paley, that makes the divine command the foundation of right, he still makes that command the foundation of our *obligation to do* the right. Not until Deity interposes with his authority in its behalf, does the right become obligatory.

It is difficult to perceive the justice of this distinction. In the first place, it limits the term *obligation*, to a strictly *forensic* use, a sense to which it is by no means restricted. A wider sense belongs to it. We are under obligation, ethically speaking, to do many things not specifically required by law. But more than this, it seems to *divorce* obligation from right, as if right did not carry in itself a corresponding obligation, but was dependent on law to come in and give it authority; or as if, on the other hand, obligation might sometimes, or might at least be supposed to, run counter to right.

We cannot think such a distinction either necessary or allowable. On the contrary, we regard right and obligation as coëxtensive, and on a common basis. The foundation and origin of the one, is also the source and foundation of the other. Given: the right, and there is given along with it, the obligation to do the right. We cannot conceive them separate; the former, without the latter; a right thing which we are under no obligation to do, or a wrong thing which we are under no obligation to avoid. This obligation is universal, absolute, complete. Law cannot add to it, or make it more perfect than it already is. Law may indicate and enforce, but cannot create, moral obligation. Show me that a thing is *right*, and you show me a reason, and the



best of all reasons, why I *ought* to do it. The moment I perceive the rightness, I perceive also, the obligation. If the one is founded in law, so is the other; if the divine character is the foundation of the one, it is the ground of the other also.

It is admitted, that, in respect to matters in themselves indifferent, as for instance the ceremonies of a ritual observance, law may impose an obligation not previously existing. But such is not the case now under consideration. We are concerned, in this discussion, only with such matters as come under the cognizance of the moral faculty, as being in themselves right or wrong; and the question is: what *constitutes* the obligation to do, not a thing indifferent, but a thing which we perceive and know to be right? Our answer is: the very *rightness* constitutes the obligation. The question returns then: on what does the *rightness* depend? Not on utility, not on law. An action is right, not because expedient, but expedient because right. It is right, not *because* God wills it; on the contrary, *he wills it because it is right*. What then constitutes rightness?

3. It may be said that right and wrong lie not in any of these things: not in the pursuit of happiness or of personal advantage; not in law, human or Divine; but in the nature and character of God himself. This, as we have already stated, is the view of Chalmers. It is the view, also, of many others. We have discussed so fully the previous theories, that there is no need of dwelling long upon this. The same objections that lie against the theory of Divine law, as the source of obligation and the ground of right, apply with equal force to this view. God's law is but the expression of his will; and his will is but the expression and transcript of his character. It is his nature in action. To say that his law constitutes right, then, is virtually saying, in another form, that his nature and character are the ground of right; and whatever objections lie against the one view, are, in reality, equally objections to the other.

If right or wrong depend, ultimately, on the character of God, then we have only to suppose God to change, or to

have been originally other than he is, and our duties and obligations change at once : that which was a virtue, becomes a crime ; that which is a crime, is transformed into a virtue. Had he been precisely the reverse of what he is, he had still been, as now, the source of right, and his own character would have been as truly good, and just, and right, as it is now. This is, virtually, to rob him of all moral character. We may still say that he is holy, and that his ways are right ; but we mean by it only this, when we come to explain : that he is what he is, and does what he does. The holiness of his acts consists, not at all in the essential character of the acts themselves, but only in the circumstance that they are *his* acts.

It does not meet this objection to say that God is holy, holy by a necessity of his nature ; and that he can never be otherwise ; that is not the question ; but simply, whether his being what he is, is the ground of all rectitude and of all obligation ; whether that which he does is right *because it conforms to his character*, or whether his character is holy *because it conforms to the right*. This is a very important distinction.

We have this objection, then, to the view which resolves virtue into the Divine character, and makes right inherent originally in the Divine nature ; that while it seeks to honor God by making him the source of all excellence, it really takes away from his character the highest excellence and glory that can pertain to it, that of conforming to the right.

4. We seem to be driven, then, to the only remaining conclusion, that right and wrong are distinctions immutable, and inherent in the nature of things. They are not the creations of expediency, nor of law ; nor yet do they originate in the Divine character. They have *no* origin : they are eternal as the throne of Deity ; they are immutable as God himself. Nay, were God himself to change, these distinctions would change not. Omnipotence has no power over them, whether to create or to destroy. Law does not make them, but they make law. They are the source and spring of all law and all obligation. Reason points out these distinctions ; the moral nature recognizes and approves them. God's law, and will,

and nature, are in conformity to these distinctions ; else that law were not just and right, nor that nature holy. Our moral nature is in conformity to these distinctions ; hence we approve and disapprove, as we do, the various actions of men. The deeds are right, not *because* we approve them ; on the contrary, we approve them *because they are right*. They are right, not *because* they are commanded ; but they are commanded *because they are right*.

There is a sense in which Deity himself is subject to this eternal and immutable law of right. There are things which it would not be right for even Deity to do. So fully does his moral nature approve the right and abhor the wrong, that the Scriptures declare it impossible for him to do evil. There is no purity like his ; no approval of the right, no condemnation and abhorrence of the wrong, so strong and intense as his, in the whole universe. This his moral nature is to him a law, the highest possible and conceivable, placing him under obligation, not indeed to another, but to himself, to adhere ever to the eternal principles of right, and truth, and justice.

In their anxiety to honor and exalt the Divine Being, some have shrunk from the idea that there is any law or obligation, resting on the Deity, to do one thing rather than another ; that there is, or can be, anything which it would be wrong for him to do. But which most honors and exalts God, to resolve the distinction of right and wrong into the arbitrary decisions of his will, thus leaving him without moral character, or to regard that distinction as immutable and eternal, extending even to the throne and will of him who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters, and hangeth the earth upon nothing ? Which most honors him, to make his nature and his will the foundation of right, or the eternal principles of right and justice the foundation of his character and his law ? Which gives the noblest and most exalted conception of the Divine Being ? Which of these two views imparts the loftier significance to that sublime anthem of the angels, that goes up unceasingly before his throne, and shall yet go up from the entire universe : " HOLY, HOLY, HOLY, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come ;" and to that song of the redeemed

that stand upon the sea of glass : " *Just and true* are thy ways, thou king of saints. Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name ? "

It may be said, perhaps, that to make right and wrong inherent in the nature of things, is virtually to place their foundation and origin in God, since the nature of things depends, after all, on him. He who made all things, is the author of their nature also.

This objection derives its force from the somewhat indefinite expression, " nature of *things* ; " a phrase used with great latitude of meaning. As used to denote material objects and their qualities, it is true that both *things*, and the nature of things, are the work of God. As used to denote finite intelligences, the same is true ; they are the work of the Divine Intelligence, they and their original nature. But when we speak of things, and the nature of things, as applicable to this discussion, we do not, of course, refer to material objects, nor yet to spiritual intelligences, but to the actions and moral conduct of intelligent beings, created or uncreated, finite or infinite. We mean to say, that such and such acts of an intelligent voluntary agent, whoever he may be, are, in themselves, in *their very nature*, right or wrong. Now God does not create the actions of intelligent free agents, and, of course, does not create the nature of those actions. To say that the moral character of an act is created by Deity, is simply to beg the question in dispute.

When we say that right and wrong are inherent, then, in the very nature of things, we simply assert that certain courses of conduct are, in themselves, in their very nature and essence, wrong, certain others, right ; that they are so, quite independent and irrespective of the consequences that result from them, or of the sanctions and authority with which they may be invested ; that they are so, not because of the laws, either human or Divine, that give them force ; that they would be so, were there no law, or were it the opposite of what it is ; that even the actions of Deity himself, fall within the range of this universal principle ; and that it does not depend on his will, or even his nature, much less on his

power as Creator, to establish or abolish this immutable distinction.

We say it is in the very nature of things, that the whole is greater than a part; that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points; that two straight lines cannot enclose a space. We cannot conceive the opposite to be true. It does not depend on the will of Deity whether these things shall be so or not. He does not create these relations. They are eternal and necessary truths. In like manner there are certain truths pertaining to the conduct of all rational and intelligent beings, certain moral distinctions, which we regard as immutable and eternal, inherent in the very nature of things. And on this firm eternal basis, rests the foundation of our moral obligation.

We have discussed, as yet, but two of the elements, or mental processes, into which our analysis resolved an act of conscience. It remains to notice briefly the third.

III. *The perception of merit and demerit, with the consequent approbation or censure of the agent.*

No sooner do we perceive an action to be right or wrong, and to involve, therefore, an obligation on the part of the doer, than there arises also in the mind, the idea of merit or demerit, in connection with the doing; we regard the agent as deserving of praise or blame, and in our own minds do approve or condemn him, and his course, accordingly. This approval or censure of ourselves and others, according to the apprehended desert of the act and the actor, constitutes a process of trial, an inner tribunal, at whose bar are constantly arraigned the various deeds of men, especially our own, and whose verdict it is no easy matter to set aside.

It is in point here, to consider how far these decisions are correct and reliable; what authority they have for the control of the conduct; and what is their actual influence over us.

The question arises, as to the correctness and reliableness of the decisions of the moral faculty. This question, though pertaining directly to the final verdict of approval or condemnation, relates also to the previous perceptions on which

that verdict is based, and so covers in fact the entire ground of the operations of this faculty. The final verdict will be correct or not, according as the previous judgments are so. If conscience correctly discerns the right and the wrong, and the consequent obligation, she will be likely to judge correctly as to the deserts of the doer. If she mistake these points, she may approve what is not worthy of approval, and condemn what is good.

How are we to know, then, whether conscience judges right? What voucher have we for her correctness? How far is she to be trusted in her perceptions and decisions? Perhaps we are so constituted, it may be said, as invariably to judge that to be right which is wrong, and the reverse, and so to approve where we should condemn. True, we reply, this may be so. It may be that I am so constituted, that two and two shall *seem* to be four, when in reality they are five; and that the three angles of a triangle shall *seem* to be equal to two right angles, when in reality they are equal to three. This may be so. Still it is a presumption in favor of the correctness of all our natural perceptions, that they are the operation of original principles of our constitution. It is not probable, to say the least, that we are so constituted by the great author of our being, as to be habitually deceived. It may be that the organs of vision and hearing are absolutely false; that the things which we see, and hear, and feel, through the medium of the senses, have no correspondence to our supposed perceptions.\* But this is not a probable supposition. He who denies the validity of the natural faculties, has the burden of proof; and proof is of course impossible; for the simple reason, that, in order to prove them false, you must make use of these very faculties; and if their testimony is not reliable in the one case, certainly it is not in the other. We must then take their veracity for granted; and we have the right to do so. And so of our moral nature. It comes from the author of our being, and if it is uniformly and originally wrong, then he is wrong. It is an error, which, in the nature of the case, can never be detected or corrected. We cannot get beyond our constitu-

tion, back of our natural endowments, to judge, *à priori*, and from an external position, whether they are correct or not. Right and wrong are not indeed the creations of the divine will; but the faculties by which we perceive and approve the right, and condemn the wrong, are from him; and we must presume upon their general correctness.

It does not follow from this, however, nor do we affirm, that conscience is infallible, that she never errs. It does not follow that our moral perceptions and judgments are invariably correct, because they spring from our native constitution. This is not so. There is not one of the faculties of the human mind that is not liable to err. Not one of its activities is infallible. The reasoning power sometimes errs; the judgment errs; the memory errs. The moral faculty is on the same footing, in this respect, with any and all other faculties.

But of what use, it will be said, is a moral faculty on which, after all, we cannot rely? Of what use, we reply, is *any* mental faculty, that is not absolutely and universally correct? Of what use is a memory or a judgment, that sometimes errs? We do not wholly distrust these faculties, or cast them aside as worthless. A time-keeper may be of great value, though not absolutely perfect. Its authorship and original construction, may be a strong presumption in favor of its general correctness; nevertheless its hands may have been accidentally set to the wrong hour of the day.

This is a spectacle that not unfrequently presents itself in the moral world—a man with his conscience pointing to the wrong hour; a strictly conscientious man, fully and firmly persuaded that he is right, yet by no means agreeing with the general convictions of mankind; an hour or two before, or it may be, as much behind the age. Such men are the hardest of all mortals to be set right, for the simple reason, that they are conscientious. ‘Here is my watch; it points to such an hour; and my watch is from the very best maker. I cannot be mistaken.’ And yet he is mistaken, and egregiously so. The truth is, conscience is no more infallible than any other mental faculty. It is simply, as we have

seen, a power of perceiving and judging, and its operations, like all other perceptions and judgments, are liable to error.

And this which we have just said, goes far to account for the great diversity, that has long been known to exist, in the moral judgments and opinions of men. It has often been urged, and with great force, against the supposed existence of a moral faculty in man, as a part of his original nature, that men think and act so differently with respect to these matters. Nature, it is said, ought to act uniformly; thus eyes and ears do not give essentially conflicting testimony, at different times, and in different countries, with respect to the same objects. Certain colors are universally pleasing, and certain sounds disagreeable. But not so, it is said, with respect to the moral judgments of men. What one approves, another condemns. If these distinctions are universal, absolute, essential; and if the power of perceiving them is inherent in our nature, men ought to agree in their perception of them. Yet you will find nothing approved by one age and people, which is not condemned by some other; nay, the very crimes of one age and nation, are the religious acts of another. If the perception of right and wrong is intuitive, how happens this diversity?

To which we reply, the thing has been already accounted for. Our ideas of right and wrong, it was stated, in discussing their origin, depend on circumstances for their time and degree of development. They are not irrespective of opportunity. Education, habits, laws, customs, while they do not originate, still have much to do with, the development and modification of these ideas. They may be by these influences aided or retarded, in their growth, or even quite misdirected, just as a tree may, by unfavorable influences, be hindered and thwarted in its growth, be made to turn and twist, and put forth abnormal and monstrous developments. Yet nature works there, nevertheless, and in spite of all such obstacles, and unfavorable circumstances, seeks to put forth, according to her laws, her perfect and finished work. All that we contend is, that nature under favorable circumstances, develops in the human mind, the idea of moral



distinctions, while, at the same time, *men may differ much in their estimate of what is right, and what is wrong*, according to the circumstances and influences surrounding them. To apply the distinction of right and wrong to particular cases, and decide as to the morality of given actions, is an office of judgment, and the judgment may err in this, as in any other of its operations. It may be biassed by unfavorable influences, by wrong education, wrong habits, and the like.

The same is true, substantially, of all our natural faculties and their operations. They depend on circumstances for the degree of their development, and the mode of their action. Hence they are liable to great diversity and frequent error. Perception misleads us as to sensible objects, not seldom; even in their mathematical reasonings, men do not always agree. There is the greatest possible diversity among men, as to the retentiveness of the memory, and as to the extent and power of the reasoning faculties. The savage, that thinks it no wrong to scalp his enemy, or even to roast and eat him, is utterly unable to count twenty upon his fingers; while the philosopher, who recognizes the duty of loving his neighbor as himself, calculates with precision the motions of the heavenly bodies, and predicts their place in the heavens for ages to come. Shall we conclude, because of this diversity, that these several faculties are not parts of our nature?

We are by no means disposed to admit, however, that the diversity in men's moral judgments is so great as might, at first, appear. There is, on the contrary, a general uniformity. As to the great essential principles of morals, men, after all, do judge much alike, in different ages and different countries. In details, they differ; in general principles, they agree. In the application of the rules of morality to particular actions, they differ widely, according to circumstances; in the recognition of the right and the wrong, as distinctive principles, and of obligation to do the right as known, and avoid the wrong as known, in this they agree. It must be remembered, moreover, that men do not always act according to their own ideas of right. From the general neglect of virtue, in any age or community, and the prevalence of great and revolting crimes,

we cannot safely infer the absence, or even the perversion, of the moral faculty.

It is important to bear in mind, throughout this discussion, the distinction between the idea of right, in itself considered, and the perception of a given act as right; the one a simple conception, the other an act of judgment; the one an idea derived from the very constitution of the mind, connate if not innate, the other an application of that idea, by the understanding, to particular instances of conduct. The former, the idea of moral distinctions, may be universal, necessary, absolute, unerring; the latter, the application of the idea to particular instances, and the decision that such and such acts are or are not right, may be altogether an incorrect and mistaken judgment. Now it is precisely at this point that the diversity in the moral judgments of mankind makes its appearance. In recognizing the distinction of right and wrong, they agree; in the application of the same to particular instances, in deciding *what* is right and *what* is wrong—a simple act of the judgment, an exercise of the understanding, as we have said—in this it is that they differ. And the difference is no greater, and no more inexplicable, with respect to this, than in any other class of judgments.

We have admitted that conscience is not infallible. Is it, then, a safe guide? Are we, in all cases, to follow its decisions? Since liable to err, it cannot be, in itself, we reply, in all cases, a safe guide. We cannot conclude, with certainty, that a given course is right, simply because conscience approves it. This does not, of necessity, follow. The decision that a given act is right, or not, is simply a matter of judgment; and the judgment may or may not be correct. That depends on circumstances, on education partly, on the light we have, be it more or less. Conscientious men are not always in the right. We may do wrong conscientiously. Saul of Tarsus was a conscientious persecutor, and verily thought he was doing God service. No doubt many of the most intolerant and relentless bigots have been equally conscientious, and equally mistaken. Such men are all the more dangerous because doing what they believe to be right.

What, then, are we to do? Shall we follow a guide thus liable to err? Yes, we reply, follow conscience; but see that it be a right and well-informed conscience, forming its judgments, not from impulse, passion, prejudice, the bias of habit, or of unreflecting custom, but from the clearest light of reason, and especially of the divine word. We are responsible for the judgments we form in morals, as much as for any class of our judgments; responsible, in other words, for the sort of conscience we have. Saul's mistake lay, not in acting according to his conscientious convictions of duty, but in not having a more enlightened conscience. He should have formed a more careful judgment; have inquired more diligently after the right way. To say, however, that a man ought not to do what conscience approves, is to say that he ought not to do what he sincerely believes to be right. This would be a very strange rule in morals.

Another point to be noticed, before we leave the subject, is the *power* of conscience, the influence which its verdicts of approval or condemnation exerts over the human mind. Very great is this power, as evinced in operation. We all know something of it, not only by the observation of others, but by the consciousness of our own inner life. In the testimony of a good conscience, in its calm, deliberate approval of our conduct, lies one of the sweetest and purest of the pleasures of life; a source of enjoyment whose springs are beyond the reach of accident or envy; a fountain in the desert, making glad the wilderness and the solitary place. It has, moreover, a sustaining power. The consciousness of rectitude, the approval of the still small voice within, that whispers, in the moment of danger and of weakness: "*you are right*," imparts to the fainting soul a courage and a strength that can come from no other source. Under its influence the soul is elevated above the violence of pain and the pressure of outward calamity. The timid become bold, the weak are made strong. Here lies the secret of much of the heroism that adorns the annals of martyrdom and of the church. Women and children, frail and feeble by nature, ill fitted to withstand the force of public opinion, and shrinking

from the very thought of pain and suffering, have calmly faced the angry reproaches of the multitude, and resolutely met death in its most terrific forms, sustained by the power of an approving conscience, whose decisions were, to them, of more consequence than the applause or censure of the world, and whose sustaining power bore them, as on a prophet's chariot of fire, above the pains of torture and the rage of infuriated men.

Not less is the power of an accusing conscience. Its disapprobation and censure, though clothed with no external authority, are more to be dreaded than the frowns of kings or the approach of armies. It is a silent constant presence that cannot be escaped and will not be pacified. It embitters the happiness of life, cuts the sinews of the soul's inherent strength. It is a fire in the bones, burning when no man suspects but he only who is doomed to its endurance; a girdle of thorns worn next the heart, concealed, it may be, from the eye of man, but giving the wearer no rest, day nor night. Its accusations are not loud, but to the guilty soul they are terrible, penetrating her inmost recesses, and making her to tremble as the forest trembles at the roar of the enraged lion, as the deep sea trembles in her silent depths, when her Creator goeth by on the wings of the tempest, and the God of glory thundereth. The bold bad man hears that accusing voice, and his strength departs from him. The heart that is inured to all evil, and grown hard in sin, and fears not the face of man, nor the law of God, hears it, and becomes as the heart of a child.

How terrible is remorse! that worm that never dies, that fire that never goes out. We cannot follow the human soul beyond the confines of its present existence. But it is an opinion entertained by some, and in itself not improbable, that, in the future, conscience will act with greatly increased power. When the causes that now conspire to prevent its full development and perfect action, shall operate no longer; when the tumult of the march and the battle are over; when the cares, the pleasures, the temptations, the vain pursuits, that now distract the mind with their confused uproar, shall

die away in the distance and cease to be heard, in the stillness of eternity, in the silence of a purely spiritual existence, the still small voice of conscience may perhaps be heard as never before. In the busy day-time we catch, at intervals, the sound of the distant ocean, as a low and gentle murmur. In the still night, when all is hushed, we hear it beating, in heavy and constant surges, on the shore. And thus it may be with the power of conscience in the future.

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## ARTICLE II.

### THE DEMANDS OF INFIDELITY SATISFIED BY CHRISTIANITY.

By Samuel Harris, D. D., Professor in Bangor Theological Seminary.

You are associated,<sup>1</sup> gentlemen, to inquire respecting the interests of Christ's kingdom; to study its dangers and the means of averting them; its resources and the means of making them available. At this moment no enemy threatens the churches so deadly in its nature, or so formidable in its position and resources, as infidelity. It is befitting this occasion to consider how this enemy may be most successfully opposed.

It may aid us to consider, for a moment, the true relation of Christianity to heathenism. The heathen religion is not unmingled diabolism. It is the expression, though distorted, of universal spiritual wants which Christianity alone can satisfy; wants buried, with their immortal life in them, beneath mountains of error and depravity, and therefore manifesting themselves, like Enceladus beneath Aetna, only in volcanic groans and struggles that terrify the world; and

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<sup>1</sup> This Article is an Address delivered in the Seminary Chapel at Andover, on the Anniversary of the Society of Inquiry, July 31st, 1855.