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ARTICLE IV.

THE SUPREME LAW OF THE MORAL WORLD.

BY THE REV. JOHN MILTON WILLIAMS, D. D., CHICAGO, ILL.

THE most marvellous event of history, if we except the Incarnation, is probably the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai. That law, termed the Ten Commandments, is a wonderful production. Whence came it? is a problem infidelity has never solved. Equally awe-inspiring is the *mode* of its communication. It was written twice by the finger of God on tables of stone, and once proclaimed by his voice from the summits of Sinai in human speech, and in the presence and audience of millions of men and women.

Its first utterance, "Thou shalt have none other gods before me," in other words, Thou shalt make me supreme, is the great primal law of the moral world, including, in its great imperative, all moral beings and moral obligations. These claims are what constitute moral agency, and distinguish man from the lower animal.

From the universality of this law it is plainly inferable:

1. That the idea of God is universal; as evidently a being who has no idea of God cannot be under obligation to make him supreme.
2. That the idea of God is an *intuitive and necessary* truth; that, like time and space, it is one of the spontaneities of the reason; otherwise it could not be universal. I hold the idea of God not only universal, but essential to moral agency, and postulate it as one of the great axioms of moral science.

I shall not be understood to say the reason reveals the moral character of God, or all his natural attributes, or even,

in all cases, his personality; but it reveals God, it seems to me, as an infinite, overshadowing, ever-present cause, to whom the soul recognizes itself amenable. Were it not so, were the divine existence an empirical truth to be learned as we learn the earth is round, multitudes would fail to spell it out; others who had been so fortunate would forget it, and on all minds would rest doubt and uncertainty in reference to the great problem. Cousin, I think, is right in denying the possibility of reaching the idea of the infinite other than through the intuitions of the reason. Things that appear, it is conceded, require an adequate cause, that is, a being of immeasurable resources only, but between such a being and God—the finite and the infinite—the infinite intervenes, a gulf no human understanding or a *posteriori* proof ever spans. This truth is clearly established by the universality of the *idea of obligation*, which no one doubts is intuitive. Not a rational being exists who is not in possession of this idea. The words right and wrong, ought and ought not, obligation, duty, good and ill desert, or their equivalents, are household words on the darkest continent, and in the wildest wastes pressed by human foot, and are as well understood as in our theological lecture-rooms. But this idea of obligation carries with it the idea of God, and is inseparable from it. The awful presence stands behind every human conscience, speaks through it, and invests this minister of God with an authority before which men cower and tremble as before no other tribunal. Why should the soul shrink under a sense of guilt and anticipated punishment if there be in it no ever-present idea of a punisher? How can the soul account itself amenable, and amenable to nothing?

No doubt to many unreflecting minds the idea of God is shadowy, little more perhaps than that of the Parcae, the Nemesis, or the Fates. Yet it is there, and there to stay forever.

The divine existence, like other first truths, is incapable of proof. Nor can it be conveyed to a mind not already in possession of it. As in the attempt to prove mathematical axioms, the syllogism will always lack the major premise, or furnish one less evident than the conclusion. The Bible is chargeable with no such attempt. It everywhere assumes the divine existence as a truth needing no proof. It commences with the declaration, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." So far from offering proof of his being, it calls him a fool who denies it.

Assuming the universality of the idea of the divine existence and authority, our inquiry is, What is the supreme law of the moral world, and what are its claims upon moral beings? A full and perfect expression, no one will doubt, is given by the great Lawgiver himself: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second like unto it is this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hangeth the whole law, and the prophets." (Matt. xxii. 37-40.) The Saviour here makes *love* the one law of the moral world, the sole duty of man. Its two tables are but two applications of the same principle, differing only as to the measure or degree in which it is enjoined. The apostle repeats and emphasizes the same truth in the assertion, "Love is the fulfilling of the law," and after enumerating its leading precepts, lest some one might think there were obligations not embraced in love, he adds, "If there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." The question, then, Precisely what is love? is one of vital importance.

As love is due to all beings, the evil and the good; and as it is *all* that is required of moral beings, it cannot be an intellection, nor can it be an emotion of any kind or degree: the idea is too preposterous to be for a moment entertained.

There is then no room left for doubt that the word, as used in the great law, designates a *state* or *choice of the will*. We recognize two classes of choices: 1. Ultimate choices, or choices of *ends* or objects for their own sakes, which we usually designate motives or intentions. 2. Choices of *means* to secure ends, termed relative or executive choices. As the latter strictly possess no moral character other than that which is reflected from the former,¹ love must be an *ultimate choice*, or the choice of something for what it is in itself.

This something, the choice of which constitutes love, must evidently be a *good*, something in itself valuable. Any other idea is unthinkable. It is inconceivable that the law, including all obligation and all the activities of moral beings, is simply a mandate to secure that which, when secured, is of no value. Love then is the choice, for its own sake, of *good*, the good of all, the valuable. In other words, *benevolence*, good will to being, is the definition of love, and stands for the *total* of obligation resting upon moral beings.

This, I need not say, is the theory of the great Edwards.² "True virtue," he contends, "most essentially consists in benevolence to being in general. . . . What can it consist in but in a consent and good will to being in general? . . . It is abundantly plain by the Holy Scriptures, and generally allowed, not only by Christian divines, but by the most considerable deists, that virtue most essentially consists in love." "The choice of good," says President Mark Hopkins, "as the supreme end is the love required by the law."³ "There can be no doubt," says President Fairchild, "as to the nature of love, when we remember that Christ represents it as due to God and to man, to the evil as to the good, to enemies as to friends. The love which is due to all beings irrespective of character and relations, can only be benevolence or willing

¹ See Rational Theology, pp. 81-84.

² See his Nature of Virtue, Vol. ii. p. 262.

³ Law of Love, p. 9.

good to all. If any doctrine is clearly taught in the Scriptures, it would seem to be that benevolence is the sum of duty."¹

This view identifying love and benevolence and *making them the total* imperative of the divine law, strikes me, not only as a revealed truth and a logical necessity, but one of the spontaneities of the reason, of which no rational mind can divest itself. Who is not conscious of obligation, so far as in him lies, to relieve suffering and do good? and who can disregard this obligation without conscious ill-desert? "He that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin," is an irrepressible utterance welling up from the deep soul of every man, and not infrequently the compunction and remorse, consequent upon neglect, have driven their victim to despair and suicide. If my child is dying in the street, and I know it, and have the ability to rescue him, I am under obligation, no geometry can measure, to do it. I am under similar obligation to every other child. "I am a debtor to the Greek and to the Barbarian." The moan of the sufferer, whoever and wherever he may be, is the moan of my child, or my brother. Mystic ties bind all moral beings into one great household, having common interests, each under obligation to all, and all to each, and contributing to its welfare includes all that is right. Sacrificing it includes all that is wrong. There is no other virtue and no other sin.

It will be asked, What is included in the word *good*? All, I answer, that is valuable for its own sake, nothing more. Holiness, then, cannot be included. Did no good come of it to any being or thing, it would be worthless. It is not, therefore, a good in itself. Holiness is a state or choice of the will. Choosing it, then, is choosing a choice, a thing which cannot be an end, or be valuable for its own sake. What other good then, I ask, can there

¹ Moral Philosophy, p. 47.

be but *happiness*, felicity, blessedness, enjoyment? "By good," says President Hopkins, "I mean some result in the sensibility which has value in itself. It may be my own, or that of another, but it must be known as having value in itself, or it cannot be a good." "Absolute good," says President Fairchild, "is an actual experience, a state of the sensibility of a sentient being. . . . Well-being, satisfaction, happiness is the true good, the *summum bonum*, not merely in the sense of the highest good, but of that final, ultimate, absolute good, that in which all other goods terminate and have their value." While I prefer the term *well-being* I fully concur in the theory that *happiness* in its largest sense is the equivalent of all value, and that consecration to its promotion is the exact meaning of the *love* which fulfils the divine law, and exhausts all human and divine obligation. It will be asked, If the mind is capable of choosing as an end nothing but good, how do the holy and unholy differ? The one, I answer, in accord with conscience and the divine law, choose, as their end of pursuit, the welfare of the kingdom of God. The other, disregarding these divine voices, choose as their end *personal gratification*, an inferior and comparatively worthless good. The one class are servants of God, the other are servants of self. The one may be generous and self-sacrificing in obedience to noble and divinely implanted impulses, yet their activities and good deeds fall within the plane of self-pleasing, the law and end of their lives.

The view taken in this paper is not, it is conceded, universally accepted. There are those who hold that the *divine will* is a higher law than love, and it is simply its behests which make love, or any other virtue, obligatory. The will of God is admittedly supreme, but not in such a sense that it can obliterate the distinctions between right and wrong, make falsehood and cruelty virtues, integrity and benevolence crimes. The divine law, we suppose to be as eternal, un-

created, and unchangeable as God; not a creation of his *will*, but an emanation from his reason; that, like ourselves, he is under obligation to conform his ways to its behests; and that in this conformity, and in nothing else, consists his holiness. The objection, if we can call it an objection, is that the will of God unexpressed, which is in no sense a law, is of higher authority than an expression of his will.

Others, with vastly more plausibility, hold that *right* is the supreme and ultimate law of the moral world, and discard the idea of expediency or utility as the rule of human conduct. Neither benevolence nor any other virtue, they assure us, is obligatory because good comes of it, but because, and only because, *it is right*. This theory of obligation, making right its ultimate ground, is widely accepted, yet no one will deny that it encounters difficulties not easily surmounted.

1. If this objection be valid, the inspired declarations, "*Love* is the fulfilling of the law," and on it hangs the "whole law, and the prophets," cannot be true. The idea that "right" is more generic and fundamental, and includes virtues not included in love, is certainly excluded by the language in which the divine law is enunciated.

2. It is by no means certain that "right" is the ultimate law of the moral world, or that it can properly be called a law at all. It is by no means certain an act ever is, or ever should be, performed for the ultimate reason that it is right. Let us suppose your neighbor has done you a great favor—has saved your life we will say—and as you are about to express your gratitude, he assures you it was done, not out of regard to your welfare, or your life, but because it was *right*, that he had an end in view of more importance than your good. You would probably excuse a remark so uncomplimentary and inhuman, on the ground of his ignorance. You certainly could not on any other.

The assertion "I did it because it was right," meaning because it was obligatory, is admissible, and never misunder-

stood. But to assert that right was the *ultimate reason* for doing it, is not admissible. Right is the quality of an act, and cannot be its end, inasmuch as it is the end which determines its quality. Think of doing a brave act, saving a child from a burning wreck, not because the child's life is valuable, but because the act was brave! Think of a man's doing good to another, not from good will, but for the sake of the rightness of his own act! How absurd the assertion of Dr. McCosh, "Right is an ultimate idea, and an ultimate end, inferior to no other, subordinate to no other"! "No man," says Dr. Hopkins, "is under obligation to do an act for which there is no reason beside its being right, and on account of which it is right." By definition an end is something chosen for its own sake, and for no reason except for what it is in itself. To say, then, it was chosen for the reason it was right, is a self-contradiction.

3. I am in accord with many of our ablest thinkers in asserting that "right," so far from being the supreme ultimate law of the moral world, is a mere *abstraction* and no law at all. In its generic sense, it is the mere quality of a choice or thing, meaning "conformable to rule," as when we speak of the right height or length. In its moral sense, it means "*conformable to obligation*," nothing more. The word properly used is an *adjective*, and the assertion "an act is obligatory because it is right" is simply asserting an act is obligatory because it conforms to obligation, or it is obligatory because it is obligatory, and the assertion "it is right because it is right" is just as profound as the assertion "it is brown because it is brown," and the talk about "*the eternal right*" carries as much thought as the talk about the eternal straight or the eternal crooked.

When we speak of the "right" we mean the right thing or choice, or the thing or choice which conforms to obligation, and by obligation we mean obligation to do or choose something, if our language have any meaning; and what that

something is, if it be not *good*, we challenge any mind to conceive. Then the whole of obligation is obligation to do good, and "Love is the fulfilling of the law."

The popular idea of right seems to me exceedingly vague. "The word right," says Professor Haven, "represents a simple ultimate idea. It is capable therefore of neither analysis nor definition."¹ Yet he holds it to be the ground of obligation, or that the ultimate reason why one should do his neighbor good and not evil, lies, not in the value of his neighbor's good, but in "a simple ultimate idea," a mere abstraction. Not quite satisfied with this, he vouchsafes another definition, to-wit: "Right and wrong is a mere distinction, immutable and inherent, in the nature of things." It is not quite apparent how "a mere distinction in the nature of things" can be the ultimate reason a moral being should make the kingdom of God supreme. It strikes me as more philosophical to find the reason and the obligation of a choice, in the thing chosen. An apple, or anything else, chosen as an end, is always chosen for what it is. To choose it for any other ultimate reason, as has already been said, is not possible. The theory that right is the ultimate ground of obligation is an absurdity.

Professor Goodwin presents about the same idea. "Love," he says, "is a pure primary notion, undefinable except in itself, underivable, and underived from sense, and the world of sense."² Then if right be the ground of obligation, we should love God not for what he is, and we should promote his kingdom not for its intrinsic value, but for "a pure primary notion." This looks like putting a pure primary notion above God, and his empire, like making his kingdom and interest a means, a stepping-stone to a more important end. I cannot but regard this theory of right, more widely accepted probably than any other,

¹ Moral Philosophy, p. 74.

² New Englander, Jan. 1891, p. 64.

as both absurd and dishonorable to God. Obligation is the logical sequence, not of right, but of *value*. While I assert value to be the ground of obligation, I am not quite willing to pronounce it the *ultimate* ground. I prefer, with the author of "Rational Theology," to say, "Obligation is an ultimate absolute truth. Then in asking for its ground we fall into the absurdity of asking for something more ultimate than the ultimate, deeper than the deepest, beyond the farthest, the ground of that which by definition stands alone, and has no ground. When a rational being sees good, he is bound to prefer it to evil. This is one of the eternal verities of the universe. It *is* so. It eternally has been and will be so. This is all we can say about it. To ask *why* is as unphilosophical as to ask why space, time, or God is, or why a straight line is the shortest distance between two points. When we come to such questions, we reach the boundaries, not of knowledge, but the absolute boundaries of thought."¹ It is as absurd to ask for the foundation of moral as of mathematical axioms.

There is, on this subject of right, about as much practical as theoretical confusion in the public mind. A class of well-meaning reformers, for illustration, assure us that the use of intoxicants is wrong, and consequently to sell, or license their sale, is wrong; that they do not believe in licensing sin, and therefore they have set their face *against license*, high or low. When told of cases where intoxicants seemed necessary, and have saved life, as in case a man has been bitten by a venomous snake, they assure us they "have nothing to do with consequences," "consequences belong to God," that they believe in doing right irrespective of consequences. "Do right," they tell us is their motto, "if the heavens fall." While I admire unyielding integrity, I am not impressed with the cogency of their logic. These men should be told there is but *one* thing in itself right, that is an ultimate

¹ Rational Theology, p. 64.

choice of the highest good, that this choice and its execution exhaust the obligation of moral beings. The only question then to be asked about an act viewed objectively, is, Will it promote this end? If we are satisfied that, in the circumstances, *license* is the best available means of suppressing the rum traffic, and promoting the highest good, it is a duty to favor it, and a *crime* to oppose it. So far from having nothing to do with consequences, we have everything to do with them, since consequences, and nothing else, determine what is objectively right and wrong. The motto do right irrespective of consequences involves a self-contradiction. It is the equivalent of saying "do right, no matter how great a wrong it may be." "Making the heavens fall" would be an enormous wickedness. It is not in place here to discuss the "license question," each case must be determined on its own merits, but it is in place to say, in such a world as this, where such interests are pending, to rush along regardless of the question whether our actions are gathering with Christ, or scattering abroad, is both irrational and criminal.

Does the end, it will be asked, justify the means? *Always*, I answer, when the end is right; *never* when it is wrong. A choice to secure the right end can never be wrong, and one to secure the wrong end can never be right. "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit." It may be objected that as consequences largely stretch out beyond our vision, if made the criterion, we can never know what is right and what is wrong. This cannot be said of actions subjectively considered, inasmuch as their character is determined by the motives or ultimate choices they execute. The question of actions viewed objectively, is only a question of wisdom or unwisdom, and it is conceded we are almost daily confronted with problems difficult to solve, and just here comes in the divine injunction, "be wise as serpents." But in these per-

plexities we are encouraged to seek wisdom from above, and comforted by the assurance, "It is acceptable according as a man hath, and not according as he hath not."

It is objected to this benevolence theory that it utterly leaves out of view the *principle of justice*. Benevolence and justice are largely regarded as separate and distinct virtues—as truthfulness and temperance are distinct—and to some extent antagonistic, the one impelling to mercy, the other to punishment. Says Dr. McCosh, "Love to God and justice are virtues quite as much as benevolence." He denies that love includes all virtues. There is, it is conceded, in all minds a constitutional impulse to treat beings as they deserve, analogous when aroused, or identical, with indignation, usually termed *retributive justice*. This impulse is admittedly entirely distinct from benevolence, but it is no more a virtue or a duty than the impulse for food or knowledge, and lies wholly outside the sphere of morals. Confounding this mere impulse with rectoral or moral justice, or failing to discriminate between the two, is the source of endless confusion. Justice, in its true moral sense, is but a *phase of benevolence*. "Justice," says Dr. N. W. Taylor, "is a benevolent purpose to render to every one his due." "Justice," says President Fairchild, "is but another name for benevolence dealing with the interests and deserts of men." What does the highest good require, is the only question justice ever propounds, and with whatever best subserves this end, its claims are perfectly satisfied.

The theory that the honor or nature of God, the divine law, or any other divine or human thing, demands the satisfaction of retributive justice in any mind, or anywhere, is just as absurd as that it demands the satisfaction of any other passion or impulse. As the word justice is not in the all-embracing law of the moral world, we may rest assured it is either included in the word *love*, or it is not a moral exercise. I know of no word in the science of morals more

misapprehended and abused than this word *justice*. O justice, how much of injustice and absurdity finds shelter under thy name! If prevalent opinion respecting it is reliable, that grandest assertion, "*God is love*," should be interpreted, "God is retributive justice." This mere instinct of the divine mind is not only elevated to the rank of a moral attribute, but made more authoritative than any other of the divine character. Divine love and mercy, compassion and pity, must yield their claims, justice never. The pound of flesh must, in every case, be delivered, or God is false to his own nature. "God's immutable nature," says Professor A. A. Hodge, "*demand*s the punishment of sin. . . . It is inconceivable that he should, in a single instance, fail to punish sin. . . . The sinner is never forgiven except on condition of condigned punishment."¹ In other words, the penalty must be inflicted upon some one as a condition of pardon! Pardon fails to annul or even soften the stern decrees of justice!

The theory widely accepted makes the *Atonement* consist in "the satisfaction of divine justice," that is,—the language can mean nothing else—in the satisfaction of a divine impulse to punish, or a holy indignation at sin. Only on condition of such satisfaction is pardon possible. As the great law of love is the supreme law of the moral world, and its obligation rests upon God, as upon other moral beings, we are authorized in saying with reverence, that any deviation on his part from that law,—such as inflicting pain for reasons other than the demands of benevolence,—would be an infraction of that law.

This truth, it is hardly necessary to say, puts to rest the popular idea that sin is punished for the ultimate reason that it deserves punishment. It is admitted that ill-desert is the indispensable condition of punishment, but if the *ultimate reason*, it follows: (1) That the highest good is not the

¹ *Atonement*, p. 40.

reason, that there is a law in the moral world determining the divine conduct other than the law of love. (2) That neither atonement nor pardon is possible, inasmuch as ill-desert once incurred cleaves to the soul forever, creating the same obligation and necessity to punish forever it does to punish at all. But if, on the other hand, the necessity of punishment grows out of the interest of government, anything which equally or better subserves these interests may be substituted for it. Hence atonement and pardon are possible. (3) As ill-desert and sin are nearly or quite synonymous terms, the assertion sin is punished because it deserves punishment is the equivalent of saying sin is punished because it is sin, and carries no meaning. There is a fitness between ill-desert and punishment, and a feeling, where one does not follow the other, that the order of things is interrupted. Hence the impression that ill-desert should be punished because it deserves punishment, but the whole truth is, it should be punished for the reason that the general good requires punishment, and for no other. To punish where no possible good could come from it, would be an infraction of the law of love, and as senseless as to punish a stone or tree.¹

1. The views presented in this paper greatly simplify Christian living and Christian work. The saint or the sinner may dismiss all anxiety about conversion, about feelings, inbred corruptions, or latent sin, and heartily enlist as co-workers with God in doing good, as he has strength and opportunity. Here he will find the peace of God and the supply of every want, and here the burdened, the anxious,

¹ "John Bradshaw, a thirteen-year-old boy, who was convicted, and sentenced for one year to the penitentiary, for burglary, was pardoned to-day by Governor Fifer. The Governor finds that Bradshaw does not belong to the criminal class, and he is convinced that imprisonment would result in *more harm than good* to the prisoner and to the community."—Chicago Tribune, May 29, 1891.

and all the broken-hearted will find rest and healing unto their souls.

2. In labors for the conversion of men, it is all-important to bear in mind that the motive which secures a choice is always *the thing chosen*. If the motive be *money*, money will be the thing chosen. If the prevailing motive to accept Christ be personal loss or gain, whether pertaining to the life that now is, or that which is to come, it will be, not Christ, but *personal good*, which will be chosen, and an intensified selfishness will be the result. The importance which attaches to the choice the sinner makes, attaches to the motives by which the choice is secured. Would we lead a sinner to choose Christ as his friend and Saviour, we must find the motive in what Christ is, and is able to do; or, what is the same thing, would we lead him to seek first the kingdom of God, we must find the motive in what that kingdom is—its grandeur, the immeasurable interests it involves, the obligations to make the choice, and the guilt of refusing.

3. May we not, it is asked, "have respect to the recompense of the reward?" Certainly, I answer. But personal interests, though they must be regarded according to their relative value, will be found—more than eye hath seen or ear hath heard—in the mighty end we are privileged to choose. The motives too of hope and fear have an important place, but they are not the final considerations which bring the soul into harmony with God. The motives employed by Christ and his inspired followers were not largely heaven and hell. The claims and authority of God, the guilt of rejecting his Son, the beauty of holiness, and the degradation of sin, and of a fruitless life, were far more conspicuous. "The weapons of our warfare," said an apostle, "are not carnal, but mighty through God to the casting down of strong places."

4. I am impressed with the conviction that one of the imperative needs of our times is a clear apprehension of what the religion of Christ is. The general acceptance of the fact

that it consists in good will to being and in *nothing else*, it seems to me, would be as life from the dead. It could but dissipate a thousand misapprehensions, and prove a vast accession to the courage, the faith and zeal of the churches and vastly deepen their attachment to our holy religion. It would present to the world a faith so rational, so valuable, so beautiful, and so divine, and in such deep harmony with every fact and every want of man's nature, as to disarm prejudice and commend itself to the conscience and good sense of every man. Who can knowingly oppose the religion of doing good, or goodness in its very essence? It was to meet this need God sent his Son into the world, the incarnation of love, and when he is lifted up he will draw all men unto him.

5. The thought, so imperfectly presented in this paper, seems to me not simply in harmony with the word of God, but to constitute its whole trend, and I may say, that of the universe beside. God is love, and *God-likeness* is all it requires of men. Christ was incarnate benevolence, and the same mind that was in him, is all Revelation was given to secure. The angels of God are "ministering spirits sent forth to minister," and this seems to be all we know about them. Not a leaf stirs, not an atom floats, not a comet swings over its mighty orbit, not a thing exists but to minister to well-being. The insect and animalcule lay their little offering on this altar, and then pass away forever. This offering "is pure and undefiled religion, before our God and Father." It was the one thing lacking in the young man of the Gospel, the thing without which, no matter what his gifts or sacrifices, he was sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. It is this which entitles one to a right to the tree of life, and to enter through the gates into the city, and to stand, by-and-by, with the great multitude which no man can number, before the throne of God and the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palms in their hands.