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SCIENTIFIC LIGHTS ON RELIGIOUS PROBLEMS.

VI.

CHRISTIANITY'S PLACE IN MORAL EVOLUTION.

THE question has often been asked, What is the precise line of separation between the animal and the man? It is not a question of origin. We make a mistake, in my opinion, by attaching so much importance to beginnings. In my view things should be studied in their latest, not in their earliest, manifestations. We have been long searching for the missing link between the animal and the human. I do not think if we found it we should find what we expected to find. We are seeking a line of demarcation. Lines of demarcation are not marked at the beginning. It is no scientific disadvantage that we have been born late; it is the contrary. He who would study the first day of creation must begin with the seventh. It is by the light of the afternoon that we must read the records of the morning. Accordingly, the question is not whether Nature reveals *at the beginning* a contrast between the animal and the man; it is whether in the *completed process* we can tell precisely where the contrast lies. The place for inquiry is not the foot, but the top, of the hill. We have to consider the animal at its highest and the man at his highest, and to say where at this present moment lies the essential difference. At first it might seem an easy task; try it, and you will find it very hard. Science has found the problem no playground. It is very easy to say that the man has left the animal far behind. So he has; but, if the animal has travelled one inch the same way, that is only a difference of degree, not an essential difference. If, on the other hand, we select some special point as a vantage ground of comparison, we are often surprised to discover that the

thing we thought distinctive of the man is not distinctive, but is common to him with the beast of the field. The briefest consideration will illustrate this experience.

Shall we say that Man is endowed with the power of reason and that the animal is guided by instinct. But there are cases in which the process is reversed. There are acts of the animal world which are done by pure intelligence, and there are acts of the human world which are done by pure instinct. Intelligence is a factor of the animal; instinct is a factor of the man. The only difference there is is one of proportion; the man has *more* of the former, the animal more of the latter; the contrast is only in degree. Or, shall we say that the man has the power of language and the animal has not. That would not be correct. The latter may have no language but a cry; but if a cry is used for purposes of communication, it is itself a language—as veritable a form of language as any word. That the animal does employ its cry for purposes of communication is beyond question; and the fact constitutes its right to be enrolled among the possessors of a gift of tongues. Or, yet once more, shall we say that the man is endowed with sympathy and the animal is not. Here again we should commit a mistake. We have seen that Altruism had its birth in the lower creation. We have seen that the gregarious life, however much it may have originated in conscious need, has by heredity become instinctive, existing for no reason but itself. What is this but to say that sympathy is not limited to Man—that the tendency to emerge from the life of an individual into the life of a community is a tendency which Man has inherited from the fowl of the air and the beast of the field.

In none of these respects, then, is Man original. To explain his present place of absolute superiority, what we want to find is something which he holds *alone*. Is there such a possession? if so, where? Is it the sight of the

beautiful?—but the *bird* can admire gay plumage. Is it the sense of music?—but there are *creatures* which can be charmed by song. Is it the love of home?—but the home is an expanding of the *nest*. Is it the power of architecture?—but the bee leaves us far behind. Is it intuitive perception?—but we are eclipsed in this by *all* the creatures. Is it the feeling of nothingness in the presence of a higher power?—but I think the animal must have that feeling for *Man*. None of these things is a distinctive element. *Is* there such an element? Is there an attribute which marks the man, which forms a definite boundary between him and all beside? Is there something which distinguishes the human soul, not only in degree, but in kind, from the lower fields of creation, and which indicates that the identity of their origin has not prevented a separation of their destinies?

Yes, there is one such attribute, *one* point in which Man as the result of his latest development stands alone. I say “as the result of his latest development.” For we must remember that Man has to outstrip not only the animal in the world, but the animal in his own soul. He is born with the animal nature in him; he has to conquer it step by step; and only in the afternoon of the day has his victory been perfected. What, then, has his victory been? Where lies the vantage ground he has won? What is that point of supremacy which now, henceforth and for ever must constitute his essential separation alike from the beast of the field and from the animal nature which once dominated his own will? I shall express the answer in a single sentence. The developed man is distinguished from the animal nature everywhere in the fact that he alone of all creatures has a power of sympathy sufficient to leap the wall of his own species. Other creatures are sympathetic *within* their species—within the barriers which evolution has assigned them; Man has the power to break these

limits, to overleap the boundary of his native province, and to enter into the wants of those who are supposed to possess a nature other than his own.

You ask if this difference between the animal and the man is a scientific difference. I answer, it is supported by one who is not only a leading apostle of modern science, but who is at the same time the one who has striven most to minimize the distinction between the animal and the man. If there ever was a writer who has laboured to explain away the contrast between the animal and the man, that writer is Romanes. He has an extravagant sense of the powers inherent in the lower creatures. In his book on *Mental Evolution in Animals* he tells a story of a parrot which, if admitted, would, as St. George Mivart says, separate the bird by only an accidental line from Sir Isaac Newton. I think, then, that where Romanes confesses a limit you may conclude with confidence that you have found a veritable mark of the beast. Now, Romanes does find such a limit to the powers of the animal nature. In that remarkable posthumous work, *Thoughts on Religion*, in which, without deserting the standpoint of the scientist, he reveals the leanings of the Christian, he says of the lower creation, "There is no instance of an entire species using its instinct exclusively for the benefit of another species."

Notice two qualifying words in this statement—the word "entire" and the word "exclusively"; they are inserted to remove possible objections. You see a dog plunge into the water to rescue a drowning child; is not *this* one species coming to the help of another? Romanes would answer, no. He would say: "This is not an act characteristic of the entire species. It results only from forced and special training of an individual member of the species—a training which would be equally successful if the object to be rescued were a stick or an umbrella."

Again, you see the bee go to the flower in search of honey and shake down the pollen which fertilizes the stem beneath; is not *this* one species coming to the help of another? Romanes could answer, "Yes, but the bee is not coming with that object; its action is not exclusive of self; its help has been given in the pursuit of another end." I have sometimes put the question to myself, What if the time were to come when the bee should cease to gather honey from the flower and yet continue to come to the flower and repeat the fertilizing process? I should call this a genuine development of Altruism on the part of the insect—exactly such a development of Altruism as is seen in the man—the change from help unconscious to help deliberate. In point of fact we do not see this transition in the bee or in any animal species; we do see it in the man. That is the reason why we poise the animal over against the man. Man alone has an unlimited sympathy. Man alone can break over the wall of his own species. I do not mean that he breaks over the wall when he meets Mr. Darwin; there ceases then to be any wall. The charity of Man comes out in this, that while he still believes himself to be a separate species, he passes over from his own enclosure to carry help to that which he considers alien to himself. Whatever his position may be at the beginning of the evolutionary process he reaches at the end of the line a unique place in the history of creation—a place which makes him different not only in degree but in kind from all the other inhabitants of the earth.

You will notice, however, the expression "at the end of the line." The true moral antithesis to the animal is not the *primal* man. The primal man is morally very much in the position of the animal; the difference is merely one of latent capacity. The savage has an Altruism within those limits which he believes to constitute his species. His species is his tribe. Any other tribe is to him another species; this

he can rob, cheat, plunder. It is sometimes said that the primitive man is ignorant of moral distinctions. He is not; he is ignorant that moral distinctions extend beyond his *species*—his tribe. I have no doubt his conscience would reproach him heavily were he to steal from his own tribe. He is an Altruist within his limits; but they are animal limits. Nay, they are originally *narrower* limits than those of the animal. The first human tribe is very small. No creature of field, air, or sea has such a circumscribed area for its Altruism as has the primitive man. Numerically speaking, we should say that Nature had declined—had lessened the moral possibilities of her creatures. Man starts with a more limited sphere for his Altruism than do the herded cattle and the flocking birds. These have a vast range for their communion; Man can count the objects for his possible fellowship at first only by fifties and hundreds. His species is not yet Humanity; it is only an insignificant tribe of men. Truly there are heavy odds against the progress of his Altruism!

By-and-by the area is extended. The extension comes by conquest. One tribe subdues another tribe or collection of tribes. When they are subdued they become incorporated—parts of the one. There follows a numerical increase of Altruism. But it is still only numerical; there is no expansion of the sympathetic principle. It is merely because the many tribes have become a portion of his own tribe that the primitive man consents to give them fellowship. Sympathy is still limited to species, and you can only widen sympathy by widening species. I venture to think that the pre-Christian world as a whole never emancipated itself from this idea. We have applied it to the primal man because the smallness of his sphere makes the principle conspicuous. But, if we turn to the great centres of civilization in the ancient world, we shall find, it seems to me, a state of things in no way different from the Altruistic level of the

savage races. Take Rome. From one point of view she exhibits a cosmopolitan power; she gathers within her dominion all sorts and conditions of men. But then, it must be "within her dominion." Rome will accept any amount of divergent opinions on every subject but one—her own supremacy; but on this she insists pertinaciously, unqualifiedly; the many tribes must become her tribes. What is this but the old primitive régime. Is it in any essential respect beyond the Altruism of the primal man. He too will accept any amount of divergence in the sentiments of surrounding tribes provided only they will submit to be conquered—to be called by his name. The primal man and the man of the Roman Empire represent the extremes of the old world's culture; yet, when all is said, they stand upon one base of Altruism. Neither the one nor the other has transcended the limits of his own species. Neither the one nor the other has been able sympathetically to leap that wall which divides the life of each from what each regards as alien.

Or, look at another centre of the old world—the Jew. Here again we have an apparent cosmopolitanism; we see a nation aspiring to embrace every other nation. But on what terms? On the terms of the primal man. The Jew summoned together all the tribes of earth; but whither did he summon them? To Jerusalem. It was really a call to enter within his own gates. It was sympathy within the walls of the house—but not outside of them. The gates were to be widely opened—but men must become proselytes of the gate. The privilege was to be universal—but the condition was to be universal too. All the tribes of earth were to enter into the city—but they were first to become the tribes of Israel. It was still but the Altruism of the species—the standard of sympathy reached by the primal man. There was as yet no going forth of charity from the limits of home, no excursion of sympathy into the land of

the stranger, no leaping of the wall to carry help to races deemed outside the pale.

Look, once more, at India. There is a system of India which commonly gets the credit of being universal. It is that marvellous creed, or want of creed, which men call Buddhism. Universal it certainly is—in the sense of *inviting* all. But to what does it invite them? To the sacrifice of everything that is alien to itself. Buddhism was not an Altruistic religion. At no time did it enter into sympathy with the *world*. It called upon men to leave the world and come within its own gates. They could bring nothing with them of the old life. All earthly desires were to be left outside the temple door. The desire of life itself was to be left outside the door. They who entered there had to abandon their varieties of species—the things which made them different from one another. There could be only one species—the species of the dying, of the consciously dying, of the joyfully dying. The ground of union was a unity of sentiment—the welcome of release from the events and changes of life. Is *this* really beyond the creed of the primal man? Without hesitation I answer, No. It is a refrain of the old cry, “Come into my garden; give up your own peculiarities; make all your tribes a part of my tribe!” It is not a *step* beyond the Altruism of primal humanity, nay, so far as results go, it is not a step beyond the Altruism that is manifested in the animal world. It is simply the gospel of sympathy within the boundaries of a single species.

The truth is, the overleaping of the wall of species has been almost entirely due to one great historical force—Christianity. You will understand, of course, that I am not alluding to anything supernatural. When a man makes reference to Christ in the field of science, the men in that field commonly say, “He seems to be a preacher.” Why should he be a preacher! Is Christianity not as secular a force in the world as the electric telegraph or the steam

engine! There is a question which has not yet received much attention either in religion or in scientific circles, and that is, the place of Christ in the system of Evolution. When the book comes to be written on that great subject, it will not be necessary that it should be written by a theologian or even by a churchman. It is a question more for the scientist than for the psalmist—a question which the scientist cannot escape and which belongs as much to his province as the origin of species or the place of natural selection. One thing is quite certain—that the influence of Christianity upon organic life must have been enormous. Directly affecting the lives of its followers, it has not been confined to its followers. It has modified the life of men outside, of nations outside. It has placed every portion of the earth in a position different from that which it occupied before its coming. It must have modified even the organisms of some of the lower animals, for it has sweetened Man's relation, not only to his brother man, but to many a bird of the air and to many a beast of the field. The preacher makes Christianity a question of salvation; but it is assuredly also a question of science. Its origin may be left to the theologian; its effects are within the scope of the British Association. We may leave it to the one to discuss where it comes from; we must ask the other to tell what it has done.

For my part, I think the position of Christianity in the system of Evolution is that of the missing link between the Altruism of the animal nature and the Altruism of the man. It seems to me that in Christianity Man for the first time transcended the limits of what he believed to be his own species—for the first time leapt the wall which debarred his sympathies from those not recognised as already his brothers. I cannot find in any other system of faith or philosophy a call of sympathy addressed to the world outside its own opinions. Christianity, so far as I know, is the earliest

manifestation of Altruism towards the foreigner as foreigner. It is Rome stretching out her hands to tribes who have not yet become Roman. It is Judea greeting races which are still alien to Israel. It is India turning aside from her Buddhist pessimism to share in the joy of those who sit at a marriage feast or partake of a banquet in the wilderness.

This view of Christian Altruism is the earliest view. It is the place claimed for Christ by His first foreign missionary—Paul of Tarsus. In a letter to the Church of Philippi that missionary says, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, though in the form of God, thought equality with God a thing not to be snatched at, but emptied Himself, and took upon Himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.” I have quoted these words purely for their scientific value—as indicating what was the earliest interpretation of the Christian ideal. And what is this ideal, this model for imitation? It is the sympathetic abandonment of one form for another form. Paul appeals to the Christian to follow his Master in His great leap of Altruism. He bids him come out from that which he believes to be perfect into that which he believes to be inferior—from God’s form to the servant’s form. He bids him “empty himself”—not into nothingness, but into the limits of a life below his own. He bids him claim that life as a part of himself, as a member of his own body, as something which henceforth he will feel instinctively bound to protect, to preserve, to support in the struggle for survival.

If, again in the interest of science, you refer to that other utterance of Paul which I would call the Completed Confession of Altruistic Faith—the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, you will find, I think, a remarkable corroboration of the view here set forth. It is the famous hymn in praise of love. But what is the nature of that love which is praised? Read it clause by clause, and you will come to

one conclusion. The love here eulogized is love for things not like ourselves. It is far nearer to the idea of the Authorized Version than to that of the Revised Version, and would be much better rendered by the word "charity" than by the word "love." It is essentially charity—the power of coming down to the wants of men beneath. It is a power that can be longsuffering, slow to anger, free from the pride of superiority, looking beyond personal gain. "Love seeketh not her own" are the words which sum up in a sentence this New Confession of Altruism. They imply that sympathy is now to enter upon a wider field, to break the barriers that held it within its own species, and to find a foothold in those other regions which have hitherto been outside the wall.

And this new Altruism has been the permanent feature of Christianity—the feature which has remained when tongues have ceased and prophets failed and knowledge vanished away. The watchword of modern charity is "brotherhood beyond the species"—brotherhood beyond the sphere which constitutes *our* community. Why did the Jews send out the demoniac to dwell among the tombs? Because they thought he belonged to another species—the devil species. Jesus did not tell them they were under a delusion; what He did say was this, "Assuming him to be under the influence of another species, is that any reason you should not come to help him? ought not your Altruism to leap the wall of species and claim brotherhood beyond your boundaries!" That is the principle which, ever since, has regulated human Altruism. Why did men agitate for the abolition of slavery? Was it because they had become convinced that all human beings had sprung from one stock? Not at all. The outburst was independent of any such conviction—would have been unaffected by the demonstration that the slave had *other* blood than that of Adam. It came from the fact that the question of

species had been held in abeyance, and that the needs of the creature had become the only incentives to sympathy. Or, what is the origin of that movement against cruelty to animals? Is it the result of Darwinism? Does it spring from the fact that we have accepted the scientific dogma that we and the animals belong to the same tribe? No. Our gentleness to the animal is independent of our acceptance of Darwinism. We have reached in Christianity an Altruism which "seeketh not her own"—which is not dictated by identity of lineage nor stimulated by similarity of life. Rather is it wakened by the sense of diversity, by the perception of inferiority, by the sight of that which makes others *less* than ourselves. Unlike the animal world, unlike the primal man, the Christian man begins with the outside. He leaves his country and his kindred and his father's house. He forgets the unity of species. He leaps his garden wall. He makes for the highways and the hedges. He seeks that which is alien to him, foreign to him. He sojourns in a strange land. He pursues that which is furthest away. His search is for that which is lost, and his mission is to the Gentiles.

G. MATHESON.