

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jtvi-01.php

JOURNAL OF
THE TRANSACTIONS
OF
The Victoria Institute,
OR,
Philosophical Society of Great Britain.

EDITED BY THE SECRETARY.

VOL. XXXIII.



LONDON :

(Published by the Institute, 8, Adelphi Terrace, Charing Cross, W.C.)

DAVID NUTT, LONG ACRE.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

1901.

ORDINARY MEETING.*

SIR G. G. STOKES, BART., F.R.S., PRESIDENT,
IN THE CHAIR.

The Minutes of the last Meeting were read and confirmed, and the following paper was read :—

ETHICS AND RELIGION. By the Rev. Prebendary
WACE, D.D.

THE purpose of this paper is to offer a few materials for consideration in reference to what was correctly described by your Secretary, in a preliminary announcement of my subject, as "An aspect of modern thought." That aspect is the view which is taken by a considerable body of earnest men of the possibility and the desirableness of treating ethics apart from religion. A number of "Ethical Societies," as they designate themselves, have of late years come into existence, which are based upon this conception. An account of them has been given in an interesting volume published this year, entitled *Ethics and Religion*, which is said on the title-page to be "edited by the Society of Ethical Propagandists." The volume consists of Essays by several persons of distinction in the sphere of moral philosophy and literature, such as Sir John Seeley, Professor Sidgwick, and Mr. Leslie Stephen, and it may therefore be regarded as a trustworthy, and even authoritative, exposition of the views in question. In this volume (on p. 72) a statement is put forward as "intended to define the attitude of the ethical movement towards Religion." It has, we are told, never been "passed upon by the Societies, and should not be understood as in the nature of a formal declaration; but it expresses the views of the present lecturers of the

* Monday, May 21st., 1900.

American Ethical Societies." This statement explains that there are two senses in which the word "Religion" is commonly used. "In the one sense it describes a passionate devotion to a supreme cause. In the other sense it is applied to affirmations concerning the connection between man's being and the Universal Being." The ethical movement, then, is said to be a religious movement in the former sense, but not in the latter. "In regard to the connection between man's being and the Universal Being, dissent among members and lecturers of ethical societies is admissible; hence the ethical movement as such is not a religious movement in the latter sense." Lecturers and members of the Societies "are free to hold and to express on the Sunday platform theistic, agnostic, or other philosophical beliefs. But they shall clearly indicate that these beliefs do not characterize the movement." Lecturers are expected to possess a sure conviction of the cardinal truth of the supremacy of the moral end, but they are not even required to express a belief that the moral end is the supreme end of human existence. "For though the supremacy of the moral end is implied in the very nature of morality, it is not to be expected that this implication shall be clear to all whose interest is serious and capable of further development." Accordingly several of the Essays urge this general ethical purpose as supplying the basis of a new fellowship. One is on the "Freedom of Ethical Fellowship," another on "The Ethical bond of Union." It is the aim of the Ethical Societies, says one lecturer (p. 32) . . . to unite "men of diverse opinions and beliefs in the common endeavour to explore the field of duty; to gain clearer perceptions of right and wrong; to study with thorough-going zeal the practical problems of social, political, and individual ethics, and to embody the new insight in individual institutions."

Now such efforts, with which much sympathy must be felt, are necessarily based upon the supposition, which is elsewhere explicitly stated, that ethical questions can be adequately treated without reference to any religious belief. The concluding lecture commences, for instance, with the following three propositions, which the lecturer says are made or implied "in the reports or manifestoes of all Societies for Ethical Culture, so far as I know." They are as follows:—

"1. Character and conduct are the most important factors in life.

“2. These are independent of a man’s religious and theological beliefs.

“3. Material resources, political changes, social institutions, are valuable only so far as they contribute to the moral well-being of the community.”

Of these propositions it would seem that the second ought to come first; for if character and conduct are not independent of a man’s religious and theological beliefs, those beliefs may after all be the most important factors in life, and the value of institutions may to some extent be directly dependent on their promotion of such beliefs. But in any case it is evident that the key to the whole problem discussed in the book, and involved in the position of the Ethical Societies, lies in the question whether ethical and theological principles can properly be separated, so that ethics can be satisfactorily treated apart from theology. Of course, this question is raised from motives which deserve great respect and sympathy, and which are of immediate practical consequence. As the case is put with touching force by one of the lecturers (p. 59):—

“To many of those who have joined the Ethical Societies, this gospel of Righteousness has become a veritable salvation. There was a time when their life seemed utterly dark and desolate. Through no fault of their own, the faith which had been transmitted to them at their mother’s knee had become uncertain; corroding doubt had attacked their most cherished beliefs; and, in the bitterness and anguish of the inner struggle which they underwent, it seemed to them that the world was emptied of all that is most sacred, and that life was robbed of all that gave it worth and meaning. But, as a star in the night, there rose above their heads the star of duty, and, as the dawn of day, there came into their hearts the conviction that, whatever else might go, something infinitely precious and sacred remains, something which they could not lose. They felt that the distinction between the better and the baser life remains, and that they could lead the better life if they only would, and that even in the attempt to do so there is inspiration and support and solace. Though the waters of scepticism might sweep away the whole superstructure of religious belief, the Rock of Righteousness remained upon which they could build up their lives anew.”

Deep homage is due to the spirit which is expressed in such statements, or rather such confessions, as this; and it

will be honoured by none more than by those who are convinced that the attempt to treat religion and morality separately is equally disastrous to both. If a man loses his hold of religious belief, let him by all means cling to his convictions of morality. They are the only means by which his religious belief can be recovered; and they may at least save him from shipwreck. But it is no disparagement to them to consider whether in the long run, and on a large scale, they can be maintained, or whether they can be rendered duly effective, without the support and guidance of religious belief; and this is the sole point on which the suggestions of this paper are respectfully offered for consideration.

Let it then, in the first place, be distinctly understood that no suggestion is here made, such as is sometimes deprecated in these lectures, that morality is destitute of all support if religious beliefs are withdrawn from it. The example of the great ethical teachers of Greece and Rome, and of the East, is sufficient to exhibit the unreasonableness and injustice of such a supposition. Some of the most vital principles of the moral law—such as the golden rule, of doing as you would be done by—are so deeply embedded in human nature as to be universally acknowledged as a general rule of action. The principle on which one of the lecturers in this volume lays such stress—“that duty binds a man”—is not less generally acknowledged. Conscience, and the sense of the supremacy of conscience, have been shown by Bishop Butler to be part of the true nature of man, and they assert themselves by the mere force of nature. The appeal to the obligation of “whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report,” comes home to the heart whatever a man’s religious beliefs may be. The promoters of the ethical movement hold a position in that respect from which no friend of religion would wish to dislodge them. But it is in no way inconsistent with respect for that position to inquire whether the true interests of ethics do not require an advance beyond it—whether, in short, it is not a position enforced upon those who rest in it by a temporary necessity, and not one to be adopted as the permanent citadel of ethical forces. The view which the following considerations would endeavour to recall is first that the ultimate foundation of Ethics must, in great measure, be sought, not so much in

religion as in revelation, and secondly that their highest and final development is inseparable from the truths of the Christian religion.

On the former of these points, let us first inquire how the general standard which this ethical movement has in view came to be discerned. Its great object is to promote the good life; the star they follow is that of righteousness. The gospel which they preach," we are told (p. 57), "is essentially this, that the good life is preferable to all without the previous acceptance of any creed, irrespective of religious opinion or philosophic theory; that the way of righteousness is open, and can be entered directly without a previous detour through the land of faith or philosophy." But what is a good life, and what is the righteousness here contemplated? It will not, I think, be questioned that, generally speaking, the good life which all these Societies have in view is that which is recognized as the ideal in modern civilization—generally speaking, the ideal of a Christian gentleman.

It must be from this point of view that Sir John Seeley, in the opening lecture of the volume (p. 26), advises the Society he addresses to "enter once for all into the heartiest and most unreserved alliance with Christianity," and says (p. 30) that "After all Christianity is the original Ethical Society. It has the ancient tradition and store of precedents, it has the ubiquitous organization, it has the unapproachable classical literature; it has the long line of prophets and saints. We are all, morally, its children, and most of us are not even its grown up children." A similar recognition of the ethical standard of Christianity, and a similarly generous recognition of the ethical services of the Christian Church pervades all the Essays, with perhaps one exception. "A good life" and a true ethical standard is, in short, in the main the Christian life and the Christian standard, though no doubt these writers and societies reserve the right of questioning and modifying it in detail. But taking it on the whole as indicating the ideal in view, it is pertinent to make some inquiries respecting it.

How was it originally called into existence, and how has it since been maintained? There can, I think, be no question that it was called into existence by the authority of Christ and His Apostles. The primary moral principles of Christianity were asserted, no doubt, by the Jewish Church; and deep and noble moral truths and ideals had grown up under

the influence of the best Greek and Roman Philosophy, particularly under Stoicism. But neither in a Jewish prophet, nor in a Stoic philosopher, will you find that specific ideal which is presented by the Christian life. The reason is a simple one. The Christian family did not exist, and it is from the Christian family life that the specific Christian ideal arises. It is Christian family life which has made the position of women in our civilization; it is the position of women, in its action and reaction upon the other elements of social life, which in great measure involves the specific characteristic of our ethical ideal. It is the Christian family life, and the position held by women which, in great measure, maintains among us the principle of charity in all our relations, and thus softens the action of every other motive.

Now to what is the Christian family life due? Can there be a doubt that it is entirely dependent on the Christian marriage law, as laid down by Christ and by the Apostles, and rigidly enforced in the early Church? It is true, our Lord expressly says that that law is involved in the primary constitution of mankind, and no doubt so far as it is adopted and acted on, its harmony with that constitution is more and more deeply felt. Men and women who have lived up to that law appreciate its unison with their best instincts, and its tendency to develop all the higher capacities of their nature. They realize that it is essential to the "good life" and to the "righteousness," which the Ethical Societies recognize as their aim and as the source of their inspiration. But how could its excellence in this respect be realized until it was put in practice, and how, as a matter of fact, did it come to be put in practice but under the authoritative revelation and command of our Lord? It is evident in St. Paul's Epistles that this Christian law of the relation between the sexes had to be enforced by the severest exertion of Apostolic authority, and similar authority had to be exerted in order to maintain it in subsequent ages. It might be thought that the relation of the sexes in the ancient Germans, as described by Tacitus, affords evidence that the law has a strong hold on uncorrupted human nature. But, a few centuries after Tacitus, it was among some of those Teutonic races that the Church had the most difficult struggle in maintaining that law, and it is difficult to see how it could at any time since then have been effectively upheld without the authoritative sanction of the Christian revelation.

Is there not too much ground for apprehension with

respect to its due observance, if deprived of that support, in modern civilization? Forces sufficiently dangerous are undermining its observance among ourselves, and the statistics as to the relation of the sexes in some parts of the continent exhibit a widespread revolt against it. Now the difficulty in this case arises from the fact that many of those who break away from this law do not recognize that they are violating any principle of righteousness. They do not regard the Christian law on this subject as a just one, and they make a boast of breaking through it. They say that a freer system is in conformity with nature, and they are determined at all events to try the experiment. On the principles of the Ethical Societies, who is to say them nay? The only rule recognized according to the principles of such societies is harmony with the higher dictates of nature; but who is to determine what those dictates are? Mr. Leslie Stephen, in the essay he contributes to this volume on *The Aims of Ethical Societies*, says (pp. 262-266) that "it is naturally our opinion that we should promote all thorough discussion of great ethical problems in a spirit and by methods which are independent of the orthodox dogmas" . . . "We must abandon much of the old guidance. . . . We must question everything, and be prepared to modify or abandon whatever is untenable. We must be scientific in spirit, in so far as we must trust nothing but a thorough and systematic investigation of facts, however the facts may be interpreted." What, on these principles, is to prevent well meaning people—people who would say that they want to lead a "good life"—from saying that they question the Christian law of marriage, and wish to experiment on the Mahommedan law? If I mistake not, this is no more than has been actually said and done.

It will also be obvious, from the latter consideration, that a much wider problem is raised by this simple and everyday difficulty. If, indeed, it were allowed that the Mahommedan civilization is in this point as deserving of respect as our own, the dilemma would arise that a man in pursuit of the good life might legitimately act on either the Mahommedan or the Christian law of marriage, except as far as other and collateral reasons restrained him. But if it be recognized that the Mahommedan law is inconsistent with the best moral development of human nature, by what arguments is a Mahommedan to be persuaded to abandon it? In his view, no such inconsistency exists. An appeal to his higher

instincts on the subject is necessarily ineffectual, for he has a rooted conviction that his own system is most in harmony with those instincts. It may well be doubted whether, if you have no other argument to press upon him, than that it is worth his while to make the experiment of a new system, you have any right to disturb his allegiance to his existing social order. If, however, you can press upon him an authoritative command and revelation, you are then in a justifiable position, and you are offering him an adequate guarantee that he will be right in deserting the law of his race, and of his ancestors. As a matter of fact, nothing less than that conviction established the Christian law on the subject, and nothing less can be expected to maintain it, in conflict with the passions of human nature. There are some moral laws, such as the golden rule, on which, as Hooker says, all nations of the world are agreed. But the true law of the relation of the sexes is not one of them. Take the world as a whole, and it does not prevail except under the authority of the Christian revelation. By that authoritative revelation it was established, and on that law its effective force must always to a great extent depend.

We may observe that on this vital subject—a subject of the most intimate importance to the welfare of human nature—we find ourselves exactly in the position in which human nature is depicted in the earliest of our sacred books. Human nature is laid under a certain prohibition, by an authoritative declaration, and is left to develop its life and its capacities with perfect freedom, subject only to that restriction. “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it.” It has often been objected against such a command, and against the form of the Ten Commandments, that they are of a negative and restrictive character; but in point of fact this negative form is really the best fitted to give human nature as much freedom of action as possible. It may be illustrated by an adventure which befel a friend of mine in Ireland. He alighted at a country railway station, and asked the way to a friend’s house. The porter indicated to him a hill in the distance, with a road on its left side, and asked, “Do you see that road? Well,” he said, “you are not to go that way.” Then he pointed out another road, saying, “And you are not to go that way,” and having thus barred several wrong directions which my friend might have

taken, he started him forward on the road at their feet. In the same way, human nature, in pursuing the happiness which it is its instinct to seek, has always been exposed to the danger of taking a wrong road. For the most part, looking at the world at large, it has taken roads which, according to our deepest convictions—according to the convictions, for instance, represented by these Ethical Societies—have led it into customs and rules of life which are fatal to its true welfare. Every man at the outset of life is exposed to a similar peril, and the passions often create illusions by which men and women are exposed to the greatest dangers. Alike at the outset of the human race in the path of civilization, and in the ever fresh experience of individuals, an authoritative warning against certain courses of action is indispensable to moral security. How much our English morality owes to that reiteration, which is peculiar to our public worship, Sunday by Sunday, in every village in the country, of certain “Thou shalt nots,” is perhaps far beyond our appreciation. But their virtue lies, in the main, in their authority. Once begin to speculate about one or two of them, and human nature is soon entangled in a dangerous labyrinth. But let those roads be regarded as authoritatively barred, and its speculation and its experience may range freely over the vast garden of pleasure and knowledge opened before it. In other words, morality cannot, for practical purposes, be left to rest on scientific experience. Human beings had to act, and still have to act, before the experience can be gained. Few among us will doubt that the experience of the Christian centuries has practically demonstrated the supreme excellence and necessity of the Christian laws of marriage and family life. But the demonstration has only been rendered possible by action having been taken in accordance with them, before they were demonstrated, in obedience to an authority believed to be divine. When our Lord said in reference to the existing marriage laws of the Jews, “From the beginning it was not so,” He seems to imply that human nature, or at least that portion of it which was under a revealed dispensation, started under a similarly authoritative law, from which, however, it broke away. Similarly, it is too familiar to us that individuals are continually subject to the temptation of making their own experience for themselves. If they do so, it is often at a grievous, sometimes at a fatal, cost, and it is thus essential, in practice, to the welfare of individuals

and of society alike that the chief false routes of moral life should be barred by plain and authoritative prohibitions.

But there is another ground on which the need of some such authoritative guidance on the main principles of morality is apparent. Perhaps one of the strangest points in the position of human nature is that the primary and fundamental principles on which morality should be based are admitted by the best authorities to be undetermined. No one in this country can be regarded as a more decisive witness on this subject than Professor Sidgwick, of Cambridge, whose methods of ethics and outlines of the history of ethics, are recognized text books among us; and one of his lectures in the volume now under notice has some remarkable statements on this point. He is dealing (pp. 148 *sq.*) with the need which is felt by men of really practical character for some higher guidance than ordinary experience can give them in the difficulties of life—"men whose reflection has made them aware that in their individual efforts after right living they have often to grope and stumble along an imperfectly lighted path." Practical men of this stamp, he says, "will recognize that the effort to construct a theory of right is not a matter of mere speculative interest, but of the deepest practical import." It is desirable, therefore, he says, "that philosophers should co-operate with earnest and thoughtful persons who are not philosophers in constructing an ethical system."

But how is it that this work has not already, after the long centuries during which it has been under discussion, been already accomplished by philosophers? "The reason," says Professor Sidgwick, "why the work remains to be done, lies in the fundamental disagreement that has hitherto existed among philosophers as to the principles and methods of ethical construction; and so long as this disagreement continues, how is co-operation possible?" He thinks there is more willingness now among philosophers to co-operate than there has been in other times; but still he apprehends that "even under these favourable conditions, the labour of this construction is likely to be long; and how in the meantime—so long as their fundamental disagreements are unremoved—can they effectually combine to assist individual and social efforts after right living? So long as they are not agreed on the ultimate end of action—so long as one holds it to be moral perfection, another 'general happiness,' another 'efficiency of the social organism'—how can any counsels

they may combine to give, as to the right way of living so as best to realize the end, be other than discordant and bewildering to those who seek their counsels." What a picture of the state of moral philosophy, apart from the authority of revelation, some two thousand five hundred years after the rise of moral speculation in Greece! Philosophers in complete disagreement as to the ultimate end of human action—so complete that any counsels they might combine to give as to the right way of living could not be otherwise than discordant and bewildering to those who seek their counsels! And this being the condition of moral philosophy after Socrates, and Plato, and Aristotle, and the Stoics, and the Schoolmen, and Spinoza, and Butler, and the English moralists, and the German philosophers, and the evolutionists of our own day, we are seriously expected to believe that morality will be placed on a firmer ground by abandoning its basis in authoritative revelation and trusting to the simple ethical motive of the attraction of a good life, assisted by the speculations of these distracted philosophers!

Professor Sidgwick, "in the perplexing choice of alternatives" which he so candidly confesses, falls back upon the comforting fact that "there is much greater agreement among thoughtful persons on the question what a good life is than on the question why it is good." When philosophers "are trying to define the ultimate end of right actions, the conceptions they respectively apply seem to be so widely divergent that the utmost efforts of mutual criticism are hardly sufficient to enable them even to understand each other." But happily "there is no important difference of opinion among philosophers as to the details and particulars of morality." That is a happy circumstance for philosophers. But unhappily, as has been pointed out, there are the widest differences among mankind on some of these details and particulars, and unless we are to confine our interest in moral problems, and in the development of morality, to the limits of the best Christian civilization, Professor Sidgwick's consolation will not carry us far. But he proceeds most materially to diminish even this degree of consolation for us. When philosophers of the most diverse schools have combined "on the basis of this broad and general agreement with each other," what are they to undertake? "They may hopefully co-operate in efforts . . . to free this current ideal from all that is merely traditional and self-contradictory, and thus to widen and

perfect it." With the charming candour which marks these confessions of the most distinguished of the professors of moral philosophy at our Universities, Professor Sidgwick proceeds to say that he is afraid his hearers "will think that our task, as I conceive it, is like the climbing of a mountain, of which the peaks are hidden one after another behind lower peaks; for when one difficulty is surmounted it brings another into view." We have just seen that the business of the moral philosopher is "to free the current ideal of what is right from all that is merely traditional; but we are also agreed—it is one of our express principles—that the good life is to be realized by accepting and acting in the spirit of such common obligations as are enjoined by the relationship of family and society." But when "we look closer at these common obligations, we find that they are actually determined by tradition and custom to so great an extent that, if we subtracted the traditional element, it would be very difficult to say what the spirit of the obligation was."

That is exactly what a Mahomedan might urge in refusing, on grounds of mere moral philosophy, to entertain any proposal to alter his traditions and customs in the Christian direction. Professor Sidgwick himself proceeds to point the moral by reference to the subject already urged in this paper—that of the family relations. When we turn, he says, "to scrutinize our own ideal of family duty, how are we to tell how much of it belongs to mere tradition, which the river of progress will sweep away, and how much belongs to the indestructible conditions of the well-being of life, propagated as human life must be propagated." Is it not an astonishing and pathetic spectacle? A professor of moral philosophy, whose office it is to instruct our young men in the principles of morality, and who is invited to give some guidance to a London Ethical Society, inquires, in sheer perplexity, how he and his audience are to tell how much of our ideal of family duty—the first and most pressing duty of all—"belongs to mere tradition, which the river of progress will sweep away." The floodgates of "the river of progress" are thus opened on the very standards of family duty, and the Professor stands on the banks, calmly speculating how much of the ideals we have inherited from our parents will be swept away. "Of this difficulty," he concludes, "there is, I think, no complete solution possible, until our task of constructing a theory or science of right has been satisfactorily accomplished"—accomplished, of course, by that mutual

co-operation of philosophers whose conceptions of the ultimate end of right actions "seem to be so widely divergent, that the utmost efforts of mutual criticism are hardly sufficient to enable them even to understand each other." And while these gentlemen are trying to understand each other, the great problems of human civilization and of human society have to be dealt with day by day; men and women, and the young men and women whom such a professor addresses, have to live some sort of family life, and to decide for themselves how much of the old sacred ideal they will pursue as "belonging to the indestructible conditions of the well-being of life."

What wonder if, when such vague speculation on the primary principles of morality are let loose at the fountains-heads of English thought, another honoured writer in this series of lectures, Sir John Seeley, should say (p. 11) that "never surely was the English mind so confused, so wanting in fixed moral principles as at present . . . The scepticism which undermines and enfeebles us now is partly, indeed, but only partly, a scepticism about religion. It extends to everything else. We have misgivings about morality; we suspect law itself to be a pedant, government to be a tyrant, justice and honesty to be Philistine virtues . . . And the old national character seems to have disappeared with the old principles . . . We have everything except decided views and steadfast purpose—everything in short except character. We have emotion, sentiment, thought, knowledge, in abundance, only not character!" What wonder that the fiction of the day has for some time past exhibited precisely that practical perplexity as to the permanent elements in the ideal of family life which Professor Sidgwick confesses from the speculative side? Are we not reminded of that pathetic passage in an ancient moral poem, in which the patriarch exclaims, "Where shall wisdom be found and where is the place of understanding?" And when his eye has ranged nature in vain for an answer, he falls back upon the old solution, "God understandeth the way thereof, and He knoweth the place thereof; for He looketh to the ends of the earth and seeth under the whole heaven . . . and unto man He said, Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding." The ends of morality, about which the philosophers, some thousands of years after Job, are still perplexed, can only

be determined by that omniscient eye which "looketh to the ends of the earth, and seeth under the whole heavens," and it is to an authoritative revelation that we must still look for the answer to such questions as Professor Sidgwick propounds, respecting the "indestructible conditions of the well-being of life." By all means let moral criticism consider from time to time what liberty may be desirable in the details of family and social duty; but let it always be remembered that, in Luther's ever-memorable phrase, it is only Christian liberty—liberty subject to the cardinal prescriptions of the Christian law in essential points—which can be safely indulged, and that moral progress and moral life must thus rest, alike for its permanence and for its freedom, on the authority of the Christian revelation.

It remains to indicate, as may be done more briefly, the manner in which the recognition of this authoritative basis for morality deepens and enhances its whole character. An entire misconception pervades these Essays as to the relation which subsists, from the point of view of Christian philosophy, between morality and religion. It is conceived as a purely speculative relation; whereas, in point of fact, it is mainly practical. There is one Essay in this volume which is entitled "Ethics and Theology," and is expressly directed to the relation between the two, and which starts by saying (p. 161) that "the whole of ethical investigation has exhibited the groundlessness of the statement that morality rests upon theology: we do not find it anywhere necessary to bring the doctrine of theology to the support of morality"; but nevertheless the writer proposes "to subject the doctrine of the independence of ethics to a more special and searching proof."

He proceeds, however, to conduct this searching proof by misapprehending the main propositions which a reasonable statement of the relation of Ethics to theology would involve. He says that the statement to be examined, "declares, if we are to give it a clear and definite meaning, that conscientious, upright conduct, rests on a belief in a personal God, and in the immortality of the soul." It has been sufficiently indicated already that this is in no way the question at issue. No reasonable man could doubt that individuals can and do act in a conscientious and upright manner without the support of these beliefs. The question is whether without the guidance of revelation, which involves theology, men in general can have an adequate assurance of what the highest

dictates of morality are. You may have, of course, and you have, morality without theology; but the question is first, whether without it you have a sufficient basis for such cardinal moral principles as we have been considering, and secondly, whether all moral obligations are not enhanced by the theological and religious motive which the Christian revelation puts forward. I have dealt with the first question, and it only remains to touch on the latter. Now this depends not simply on the question whether there is a personal God, and whether He has given us certain commands, and whether His promise of eternal life is an indispensable motive amidst the dangers and temptations of life; or even whether an enlightened idea of God, purely as such, possesses a high significance for the moral elevation of mankind, or whether the apprehension of God's omnipresence and omnipotence is a valuable support to moral action—which are the points this writer discusses. He is at issue, indeed, even on these points, with one of his colleagues, who admits (p. 299) that “although we emphasize and believe in a direct appeal to the moral sentiments in man, nevertheless we recognize that belief in a personal God, and the hope of immortality, have helped to keep men up to the line of duty; and if we had nothing to fall back upon but the direct love of righteousness, we should count our movement weak indeed.” That admission may well be thought to give up the case of the whole movement, so far as it rests upon the independence and sufficiency of the ethical motive apart from religious beliefs. But, from the point of view of Christian philosophy, it is important to put our own case a great deal higher. The Christian belief—I am not now defending it, which would be out of place at the present moment; I am only stating it—the Christian belief is that a personal God has not merely given revelations of man's moral duty and issued commands, but that He has placed Himself in direct personal relation with us; that He has taken part, side by side with us, in the moral struggle of the world; that He has voluntarily, in human form, submitted to the severest sufferings in that struggle, and that He now adds the appeal of personal obligation and personal affection to that of His supreme authority.

It is only possible, on such an occasion as the present, thus briefly to indicate the nature of the Christian position on this subject; but this will be sufficient to illustrate the nature of the addition which it makes to ordinary moral forces. It

superadds to them all, without exception, the obligation of one supreme personal relation. Sufficient attention, perhaps, has not yet been paid to that view of morality which treats it primarily as a matter of personal relations. The Aristotelian Ethics reflected too strongly the individualism of the Greek mind, and treated virtue mainly as the perfection of the individual nature. The Roman mind, in accordance with the whole bent of the Roman character, regarded it rather from the point of view of mutual duties, as is indicated in the title of Cicero's treatise *De Officiis*; but the Jewish, and above all, the Christian mind, rose to a still higher point of view, when it resolved all moral and religious excellence into love—into the true relation of persons to persons. The late Mr. Maurice, when he held the Chair of Moral Philosophy at Cambridge, treated the subject under the same point of view in his lectures on Social Morality. Ordinary virtues are best defined, indeed they can only be satisfactorily defined, in terms of the relation which one person holds to others. The self-respecting virtues, as they have been termed, have sometimes been excepted from this rule; but under Christian Philosophy they fall within it, as resulting from the relation of a man or woman to their Divine Lord; and it is upon this basis that St. Paul treats, for example, the virtue of purity.

It would take us far beyond the limits of a paper to develop this view in detail. But for our present purpose it may be sufficient to point out how every moral excellence becomes, under this view, animated and illuminated by the spirit of personal loyalty and devotion. I venture to think it is a high point of excellence in this consideration that it enables the idea of self to be everywhere suppressed or superseded. If virtues are self-regarding, that chord of self, of which Tennyson speaks, is still heard vibrating, and there is no little danger in this survival of self, even in our best achievements. But when every virtue becomes an act of homage and of love to another, all thought of self is absorbed in an unselfish devotion. It will be universally acknowledged that moral excellence consists in the due realization of our personal relations as children, as parents, as citizens, as friends. Is it not a still higher, and the highest privilege, to add to all these one further stage of personal relation—the eternal relation of the heart to a perfect Being, towards whom every emotion of love and of gratitude can be indulged to the highest degree. Of course, the possi-

bility of such a transformation and elevation of morality is dependent on the question of the truth of the Christian revelation; and that, as is often urged by the school of writers to whom I am referring is not evident to everyone. It is quite true, as has been said more than once, that it would be at once incorrect and unjust to treat all morality as depending on such a belief. But the highest morality may be dependent on it; and those who disbelieve it may consequently shut themselves out from the highest form of moral development. That belief, moreover, may itself, in some respects, be the highest moral test to which human nature can be put, and its acceptance may be a primary moral act of the most vital significance. The only point it is requisite for the present purpose to urge is that if the belief be true, and if the moral relation it declares to a divine and human Lord be duly recognized, it adds to morality a supreme grace and power. The due recognition of our relation to such a Being, and the due fulfilment of that relation in love to Him, must, in fact, by its very nature, become the first of moral duties, in which all others find their support and their glory.

We may, perhaps, in conclusion, take an illustration from natural science of the influence upon morality of these Christian truths. The greatest, probably, of all discoveries in the realm of natural science was that which established the law of gravitation as the governing force of the whole universe; so that, in the most distant stars and suns, we behold vast worlds held in mutual relations by mutual attractions, and those attractions precisely the same in character as that by which the smallest elements of the physical life around us are controlled. We look into the distant heavens at night, and are overpowered by the thought that one and the same law of mutual attraction, according to a fixed proportion, maintains those orbs in their order; and then our eyes and thoughts are recalled to the little forces and atoms of our daily experience, and we are the more sensible of the supremacy and universality of the laws by which the circumstances of our daily life are regulated. So it was with the Apostle of Love as his eye ranged from those depths of divine life, which it had been his privilege to witness, to the daily and ordinary relations of men and women. One and the same law, the law of love, controls alike the most divine and the most human relations, keeping them in harmony, peace and beauty, if it be obeyed,

and avenging itself in terrible convulsions and wrecks if it be neglected. The law of love is the law of gravitation of the moral world; with this only difference, that it is in the power of human beings to violate it, and thus to bring on their nature that destruction, that moral, and ultimately physical, disorder which is its curse.

Such is the intimate connection between Ethics and Theology, and it has been conspicuously illustrated in history. Whenever, and in whatever religion or civilization, the personal life and love within the Godhead has been obscured, there you find the principle of love similarly obscured. When, as in Mohammedanism, God is regarded, so to say, as a solitary despot, simply as the absolute Lord of all His creatures, human beings apprehend their relation to each other in a similar manner. There you have government assuming the form of a pure despotism, and the relations of men to one another, and of men to women, become relations of power and possession, and not of mutual love and devotion. Slavery, the absolute possession of one human being by another, is a natural institution under such a religion, for it is but the reproduction of the relations which God is regarded as holding to men. The woman is similarly regarded as the mere possession of the man, and the son is under the absolute power of the father. The ultimate connection between Ethics and Theology, in short, lies in the fact that the highest ideal of men is always represented by their conception of God, and where the idea of God is that of power and dominion, there the highest developments of human relations take a similar character. But the Christian conception, of a personal life of love within the Godhead, has established among Christian nations the idea of mutual love, and consequently of mutual rights and mutual devotion, as the highest form of the relation between human beings. If that theology could not be maintained, it would, indeed, be unworthy of human nature to say that all morality must go with it. But it would be true that the highest glory of morality, and its profoundest source, would be removed.

DISCUSSION.

The PRESIDENT.—I will allow anyone who is present to make remarks on this subject.

Dr. WALTER KIDD, M.D., F.L.S.—It is very important at the present time that attention should be called as in Dr. Wace's valuable paper, to the proposed divorce of Religion and Ethics. There is one point in this matter to which I should like to draw special attention. It is that the proposed secularization of ethics, if it takes place at all, must be dealt with by science and its methods. Mr. Spencer has announced that the old sanctions of religion are passing away and a fitter regulative system, to use his own words, is the great need of the time. In passing, one may remark that this system of Philosophy and Ethics is stated by Mr. Spencer to be valid only for optimists. Whether or not the present state of the World even in Western and progressive nations justifies this optimism, is not very clear. Indeed Prince Hohenlohe in a very serious public pronouncement lately spoke in a solemnly different tone. But it would seem that science is to regulate conduct. Sir Michael Foster hinted the same in his presidential address last year at Dover. But what says one of the most prominent scientific men of the day? "*All our knowledge is, and remains throughout provisional.*" Weismann contrasts with this changing body of theory and progressive investigation which belongs to Science, and which is her glory, with the more glorious *semper eadem* of Christian Ethics, which has survived eighteen centuries of often poor performance on the part of its exponents. Here, at any rate, we know where we stand. The minor differences of Christian sects, the divergence in doctrines of secondary or tertiary importance, "the minute anise and cummin" which so many mistake for the weightier matters of the law, these may vary; but the essential and fundamental ethics for Christianity to-day, as *e.g.*, in the second table of the moral law, are the same as for the primitive Christians—no more, no less.

Are we then to assume that serious danger to national morals will come from studying ethics apart from religion? Dr. Wace has well shown us how much there may be in the proposed new system which agrees with the old, but that the highest forms of morality must be in extreme danger from such treatment. Optimism would say "no," the general spread of education, the average good sense of

mankind, will never depart seriously from the old highways. But this movement, if anything, must be according to evolutionary doctrines, and what do these tell us? Among others this, that the fittest survive. That sounds very plain, and so far Christianity *does* survive and *does* flourish. But the other side of this is equally important. *Whatever survives is fittest.* A most serious and alarming corollary, I maintain. The French are a nation of people who are nothing if not intellectual and logical. With them every theory is as soon as possible put to the test of practice. The result of Darwinian doctrines applied to morals, as in the writings of Zola, are so alarming to a nation of clear-headed people, that a man like M. Brunetiere, the mouthpiece of the University of Paris, can speak of *the bankruptcy of science*, on account of its failure in the sphere of morals.

Are we alarming ourselves for nothing? I think not. The alarming consequences we allude to are with us, and we have but to look to the writings on social subjects of an eminent man like Professor Karl Pearson, the Huxley of to-day, in another sphere of science, in his ethics of free thought as to marriage, and we find "a new sex-relationship will replace the old. The Socialistic movement with its new morality, and the movement for sex equality, must surely and rapidly undermine our current marriage customs and marriage laws," and much more to this effect.

It is only too easily conceived and to be apprehended that, if the sanctions of religion be removed from the sphere of conduct, if the antiseptic of Christianity be operative no longer in civilized nations, our children's children might live to see a reversal of the 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th and 10th Commandments, such as it makes one shudder to contemplate. If "whatever survives be fittest," it is thereby right to do or forbid now things very different from what were done and forbidden of old, and what will be done and forbidden a generation or two hence. *Morality thus is relative to the times and to the nations concerned.* It is however through the direct reversal of this system of relative ethics that the Christian Gospel with its pure morality has spread from pole to pole till a third of the human race is under nominal Christian government. The unvarying unyielding character of the Christian code in spite of much inconsistency of its followers in all ages, has been at once the keynote of its success and its glory.

The moral ideas of Greece and Rome as expounded by Plato,

Socrates, and Cicero, have a noble and true ring about them till we come to the actual state of conduct as it existed in those days, and as Aristophanes, Juvenal and Tacitus depict it. As a matter of fact a degradation of conduct was reached in the glorious periods of Greece and Rome which no one could imagine from the high tone of the philosophers mentioned.

I venture to say it is not the pure morals and high teachings of Sir J. Seeley, Mr. Leslie Stephen and Professor Sidgwick which will prevail if the old moorings be unloosed, but a greatly lowered general tone in that day when "the laws of comfort" shall be "the laws of conduct."

Mr. DAVID HOWARD, D.L., F.C.S.—I think we must all feel that we owe very hearty thanks to Dr. Wace for bringing before us, in such clear and eloquent language, thoughts which many of us have been striving to express, but have failed to measure so clearly or so well as he has done.

It is a vital point nowadays to make up our mind on what basis ethics are to exist, and directly you get from the religious basis (I do not say the merely Christian basis) we find that there is a hopeless lack of foundation. As far as experience goes the conceptions of morality are so linked with religious conceptions from the very earliest times that it may be a very grave question how far they exist without them. The conceptions of the Greek philosophers are derived from their religious conceptions. They rose above the religious conceptions of their time, but at any rate, they were derived from them, and the religious conceptions, such as they are, of the wild savage are derived from his religion, and so mixed with it that it is impossible, always, to distinguish cause and effect. A merely scientific basis for ethics is incompatible with the belief that right is grounded in the will of God, and misconception on this point is a common cause of delusion. Take the lowest conception such as telling the truth. Why do we tell the truth? I believe Professor Moseley is right in saying that the conception of telling the truth all round is not natural to us, especially outside our own family. Then comes the Christian conception of one God and Father for all. That truth affords a higher conception, and you cannot disentangle the idea of religion from morality, and, after all, is not it scientific to connect them together? The one aim of science is to find some underlying

cause, which will express the great and ever-perplexing phenomenon of humanity. The more we study it the more we are convinced that the conception of human nature is incomprehensible without a first cause, and therefore it is only scientific to believe that ethics are unthinkable without a first cause too.

The Rev. F. A. WALKER, D.D.—My remarks in reference to Dr. Wace's admirable paper will only be confined, so to speak, to a side issue.

On page 13 Prebendary Wace has made a quotation from the Book of Job: "Where shall wisdom be found and where is the place of understanding?" He goes on to say "and when his eye has ranged nature in vain for an answer, he falls back upon the old solution, 'God understandeth the way thereof, and He knoweth the place thereof; for He looketh to the ends of the earth and seeth under the whole heaven.'"

I would, with due deference, supply one word, "hidden"; "and when his eye has ranged [*hidden*] nature in vain for an answer"—otherwise the common interpretation of that would be looking round at the tall trees, especially the ocean and crag. That, evidently, is not what Job had in mind; because in the same 28th chapter the keynote is *hidden nature* and not external nature. "There is a path which no fowl knoweth, and which the vulture's eye hath not seen. The lion's whelps have not trodden it, nor the fierce lion passed by it." It seems, therefore, that Job is referring to hidden nature, in which case his observations are in correspondence with his reference to wisdom. "It cannot be valued with the gold of Ophir, with the precious onyx, or the sapphire."

The Rev. JOHN TUCKWELL.—I think we all concur in thanking Dr. Wace for the admirable paper we have listened to and for his courage to put into print such an emphatic declaration that morality can only be efficiently enforced on the ground of religion, and indeed the Christian religion. But, at the same time, I think we ought to be quite clear about it and not allow ourselves to think that Christianity has invented the moral law, or given the moral law for the first time. That would be to lose sight of a great and important truth in connection with our own being and our relationship to our Creator. If the Divine Creator makes any being, apparently by that act He establishes some relation between that being and Himself. There are

obligations towards that being which He undertakes. There are obligations which that being owes to the Divine Creator.

I think, therefore, the sense in which the whole moral law and the Ten Commandments may be regarded is embodied in every nature—either in the nature of relationship to our Creator, or in the nature of our relationship to each other. When the Creator creates more than one being He establishes certain relationships between those two or more beings as the case may be, and therefore there are reciprocal duties and obligations resting on them. I should like also to recall the fact that it is impossible for us to go back to any period in human history where the moral law has not been sustained by religion and religious beliefs. Thousands of years before the giving of the moral law on Sinai all the principles of those Ten Commandments were known. It is very important, therefore, to bear in mind that there is no way of discovering a period in human history when morality and religion were absolutely separated. I understand that one of the objects of the Ethical Society is to discover some separation. It behoves all who are concerned in the future of our own country, as well as religious beliefs, to insist, with all the power we possess, on the absolute futility of maintaining anything like an efficient system of morals divorced from religion, and especially the highest religion known to man—the religion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Mr. MARTIN L. ROUSE.—I was much struck with the closing illustration given by Dr. Wace in his paper that slavery as well as polygamy and the ill-treatment of women flourished so under Mahomedanism and does not under Christianity.

I don't know whether it has ever struck you that it is only in Christian states that practically free governments have existed and Christianity, though after many years of struggle (perhaps not working up to its light), finally abolished slavery.

In regard to polygamy, though it was common in the days of old, yet the teaching of even the Old Testament is against it, as shown by the sad example of the ruin of Solomon.

Again, where is it, outside Christianity, that we get the condemnation of suicide? We have certainly the most enlightened people on this side of the world, who show a tremendous aptitude for [adopting all forms of Western civilization, and until lately it was a most common practice amongst them for a man, who had

in any way incurred dishonour, to commit the "happy despatch," as it was called, and it never occurred to their mind that it was wrong. I know Socrates speaks against it, for one of his pupils said, "If the after life is so happy why not commit suicide?" and Socrates said it was the greatest sin; because God, having placed us in this life, knows best what is for our good, and it would be the most daring presumption for us to presume to know better and to toss ourselves out of this life.

The Rev. Prebendary WACE.—I have only to thank the audience for the kind way in which they have received my paper, and those gentlemen who have spoken on it.

The PRESIDENT.—I think I need hardly propose a vote of thanks to Dr. Wace after the way in which his paper has been spoken of. I am sure we are all deeply indebted to him for bringing this paper before us. [Applause.]

The meeting then closed.

COMMUNICATIONS RECEIVED.

Lieut.-Colonel M. A. ALVES, R.E., writes:—

In offering a few observations on the subject introduced by Dr. Wace, I should like, first, to join in the vote of thanks which will, I feel sure, be unanimously voted to him for his paper.

In dealing with those who repudiate the Bible as the revelation, both of God's Ethical Standard, and of Christ as the Power of God to approach that standard in its completeness—I do not say to attain to its perfection during this lifetime—it is not of much use to quote Scripture to them. We must show to them some evidence that they cannot deny, in proof of ethics combined with, and as the result of, the Christian religion as revealed in the Word of God; and challenge them in their turn to show to us that complete ethics can be practised apart from that or any other religion. The proof must not be sought for amongst those who, by reason of gifts, possessions, surroundings, or well-balanced heads, etc., are raised above many of the common temptations of life, but amongst the unveneered mass of struggling humanity living amongst evil surroundings and temptations, morally weak

and phrenologically vicious by nature. Moreover, neither side must call in the assistance of the other to its aid.

The vast majority of "the classes" are bound to be more or less moral; otherwise they would very soon lose their social position amongst "the masses." They have more inward strength than "the masses," or they could not—as a body—either rise to, or long remain in, a higher position than that of these "masses."

Whilst I think that we have woefully departed from the teaching of John xvii, which, notably verse 21, seems to me to teach that the example of the elect, sanctified in the truth (verse 17), and united, was intended to be the great gospel sermon to the world, there can, I think, be no doubt that where the Christian religion has laid hold of anyone, some ethical improvement has been the result. Our many philanthropic agencies can bear witness to this amongst the naturally weak and immoral; and that, too, in the direction aimed at by Sir John Seeley, Professor Sidgwick, and Mr. Leslie Stephen.

We should, I think, work this for all that it is worth, and insist on all missionaries inculcating steady ethical improvement on every convert, especially on his weak side.

Better a few edified and ethically improved elect, than a vast mass of disorderly converts.

It is for the Ethical Society to show us that—apart from religion—they have either induced a number of people to sacrifice themselves for the improvement of the depraved, and with successful results, or that, solely by their writings and speeches, they have produced these results. Ask them for their first-ripe figs, and tell them that we do not want the fine fig leaves of their beautiful theories.*

21st May, 1900.

The Rev. R. C. OULTON, B.D., writes:—

In the first place I would premise that this is a most valuable paper, fair and convincing as regards doubters, as well as helpful to believers in supernatural religion. But Dr. Wace

* I have used the word "complete" in the sense of the development of every ethical quality in its proper relative proportion; and "perfect" in that of the full acquirement of all these qualities, rightly balanced.—M.A.

appears to me to make an over-statement in the following passage :
 "Some of the most vital principles of the moral law—such as the golden rule of doing as you would be done by—are so deeply embedded in human nature as to be *universally* acknowledged as a *general* rule of action."

Is this principle acknowledged by savage nations in warfare, which forms so large an element in their national or tribal life? Or was it generally acted upon in ancient warfare even among so-called civilized nations? In fact, morality seems to me very much a matter of education. While I fully and freely admit that all mankind has a conscience, I must at the same time hold that this conscience requires to be enlightened, among heathens and non-Christians by reason, and among Christians by the teachings of revelation. No doubt heathens and others have arrived in many respects at a knowledge of "the absolutely right." But this result is the product of reason acting on knowledge and experience. Granted that every man has a conscience or standard to which he submits actions for approval or disapproval, will he everywhere pass the same judgment on those actions? Surely not. It therefore appears to me that moral ideas cannot be regarded as innate.