IV.—PERFECTION AS AN ETHICAL END.

THE existence in human nature of a moral impulse or desire of right is the ultimate fact on which the science of Ethics depends for all its value.

The origin of this desire, which is to be found in different individuals in very different degrees of strength, has been accounted for in a variety of ways, but its claim to rank among the immediate springs of action has seldom been seriously disputed. It constitutes the motive power to which Ethics undertakes to act as guide, and ethical inquiries would lose at once all their practical interest if doubts were entertained as to its existence. The different views which have been taken of the *end* to which this desire should be directed have given rise to several distinct and separate "Methods of Ethics"—to use the phrase which Mr. Sidgwick has rendered familiar. One of these methods takes happiness—either individual or general—as its end (or that alone which is absolutely good), and pronounces everything else to be good only in the degree in which it tends to produce this happiness. There are certain rules of conduct on another view, the moral value of which can be intuitively judged of, and conformity to these rules is proclaimed to be the final test and standard of conduct.

By others, again, it is maintained that the end to be aimed at is a right balance of the inward dispositions and motives. Perfection, it is thought, will be reached when the appetites, affections, and desires shall have been brought by cultivation and repression to a certain desired degree of strength; though what this precisely is we are seldom clearly told.

Now, widely as these methods are seen to differ from each other, and various as are the ideals of life which underlie them, they have all this point in common, that they regard the "moral motive," or desire of right, as a *means* only to something other than itself.

It is a motive, they one and all assume, which will have fulfilled its purpose and ceased to exist whenever a certain definite state of things shall have been reached, whether this state of things be taken to be universal happiness, or conformity to certain absolute rules, or the establishment of a certain inward balance of motives.

Its value in the eyes of most moralists is therefore *relative*, not *absolute*, and differs in degree only and not in kind from that which is ascribed to systems of government and other human institutions. It is now pretty generally acknowledged that there is no such thing as an absolutely good form of government,

though there are still some persons who cling to the belief that the precise constitution needed for a particular country is a thing that can be determined on *à priori* principles.

The old notions of "absolute rights," and "the best form of government," which once had so much influence, are now rapidly dying out, and are giving place to the more rational view that the value of every human institution must vary with the state of society, and must in all cases be dependent on conditions of time and place.

Now the relative and temporary value which is thus ascribed to government is all that moralists are commonly willing to allow to the moral motive or desire of right.

Some ideal of life is framed, and they value this motive as a means of giving reality to it. They look forward in imagination to a time when men shall have outlived the need for any such controlling influence; when natural impulses, desires, and affections shall have attained their due and proportionate development, or when the "greatest happiness of the greatest number" shall have become an accomplished fact, instead of being as at present an unmeaning and deceitful phrase.

Now it seems to me that we should be taking a truer view of the relations of ethical phenomena and providing a more satisfactory basis for a system of Ethics if we were to reverse completely the order that is here maintained, and to take the desire of right or love of duty as the *end*, towards which all other motives, together with all acts bodily or mental, all institutions, and, finally, all life itself, are to stand in the position of *means*. I regard the desire of right as the only thing having absolute worth in the universe, and I believe that the moral value of everything else can be measured by the degree in which it tends to strengthen or impair this desire; my ideal of perfection being a state of things where it shall have vanquished and destroyed every meaner impulse of man's nature, and constituted itself the sole impelling force to which he yields obedience.

In order to make any practical use of such an ideal as this, and to justify our taking it as our ethical end, we must be able to show that it is one which is fitted to supply a guide and test of men's actions in their present state of imperfection. We must be able to show that all those acts and motives which we are accustomed to approve or condemn with reference to other ethical ends, have a definite value in relation to this end also. We must show, in short, that tendency to perfection is a test which is capable of being as universally applied as tendency to happiness, or any other standard by which the moral worth of actions and motives has commonly been tried. This is a point which has not unfrequently been neglected by those who have

before now insisted on the superiority of the moral impulse to all the other springs of action, and on its claim to supersede them in virtue of this superiority.

After stating their ideal of perfection, they have commonly made no attempt to suggest any means of attaining it, and have even at times made use of language which could imply that, in their opinion, no such means are needed. They have preached the necessity of acting solely out of regard for duty, and of yielding obedience to no inferior motive, as though this were advice that men had the power to realise in their present weakness and imperfection. To call in the aid of an inferior motive from sense of weakness or fear of falling, has been spoken of as making a compromise or "parleying" with sin,¹ and condemned as a mean evasion of the duties implied in the possession of a moral nature. Now, sentiments of this kind may possibly look well in a sermon or a poem, but they are very far removed from the region of practical life, and can obviously afford no satisfactory guide to conduct. The men who deliver them are for the most part wholly unable to act up to their spirit, and have probably never seriously considered what their advice, if put in practice, would amount to. It is easy to talk of "crucifying" the flesh and the affections, and of acting only from the pure law within, but, until we hear of a man whose whole life, from the time that his moral faculty first made itself felt, was passed in obedience to its promptings, we shall refuse to believe that advice of this kind can lead to any practical result, or do anything in fact but repel men by its extravagance. In the great majority of cases it would be simple mockery to tell a man groaning under the weight of evil habits to abandon his sin at once and act henceforth as his sense of duty shall dictate. Habits are not things that can be lightly and easily shaken off, and in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred a man's love of right and duty has no power to effect a sudden change like this, and to raise itself at once to the supreme control of life.

Dismissing, then, the idea that moral perfection is a thing which lies within the reach of mankind at the present stage of their history, and allowing that if it ever come at all, it must come as the slow result of a long process of development, we must set ourselves to examine into the general character of this process, and to test the worth of the things to which moral value is commonly thought to belong, by their tendency and power to aid it.

The change we are imagining, it may be well to repeat, is one from a state of things where men act partly out of regard for

¹ Abercrombie's *Culture and Discipline of the Mind*.

duty, and partly—and far more largely—from other motives, to a state of things where love of duty shall remain the sole impelling motive; and what we have got to do is to find out how this change can be most easily and swiftly brought about, and what are the different agencies that can be made to assist in the work.

In searching for an answer to this question it is natural in the first place to ask whether any means are known to exist by which the impulsive power of one motive can be taken from it and made over to another. Is there any process in the moral world answering to what is known in the physical world as the "transmutation" or "conversion of energy"? If it can be shown that what may be termed "moral energy" or motive power can be made to assume different forms in the same way that mechanical force can be converted into heat, and heat again into electricity, we shall be able to see at once what the general character of moral progress will be likely to be. We can see that it may be possible for love of right or duty, which at present is but one of many forms of impulse, to take to itself gradually the strength of all the rest, and raise itself in time to the position of sole ruler of life. We can see too that the amount of transmutation already effected may not unfairly be taken as the measure and standard of moral development. The practical question therefore is whether as a matter of fact any such means exist by which one motive can be deprived of its power, and another proportionately strengthened.

Now, I venture to think that we have all that is wanted to enable us to answer this question in the affirmative in the common tendency of *acts* of all kinds to strengthen the motives which give rise to them.

It has frequently been pointed out that motives gain in strength in exact proportion to the amount of action they occasion, and as action implies that one motive (or set of motives) has been successful in resisting another (or others), and, as defeat leads to loss of strength, on the same principle that success leads to increase of it,—the change in the balance of motives which accompanies action may not inaptly be compared with that which takes place when physical energy is destroyed in one of its forms and made to reappear in another.

When acts of kindness, for example, have been prompted by natural affection or benevolence, the power of these motives will invariably be found to have increased, and the selfish impulses which opposed them to have undergone a proportionate degree of weakening. When a fit occasion again presents itself for the exercise of benevolence, there will be found to be less difficulty in resisting the opposing forces and acting as the charitable im-

pulses may dictate. It is well known, again, that the impelling power of the appetites and passions is increased by every fresh act of indulgence, and that, if not checked in time by the opposition of other motives, there is danger of their becoming too strong for these latter, and mounting by their depression to the supreme control of life.

In the same way, the development of the moral impulse or love of duty can only take place at the expense of the other and inferior springs of action. Coming into existence at a later stage than the impulses and desires which have regard to self, it must win its way to power by gradually resisting and overcoming them; gathering strength by each successive conquest, just as certain cannibals are said to imagine that the strength of a conquered and digested foe becomes the possession of his conqueror.

In the state of things which we have taken as our ideal of perfection, the moral motive will have concluded its victorious career by subduing and depriving of their power those desires and motives even which in our present state of imperfection we rightly regard with reverence. The affections which sweeten life will then have ceased to rule it, and pleasure and happiness will be content to follow in the footsteps of duty, and claim no more to act as independent guides. Instead of being motives to action, they will remain only as its incidents and accompaniments, and will no longer exert the disturbing influence which at present draws so many from the path of duty.

Thus we see that our ideal perfection implies the final destruction by the love of duty of *all* the other motives by which mankind are at present swayed, and it may possibly seem to follow from this that there can be no real difference between these latter in point of moral value. This, however, is by no means the case, and if the theory I am advocating were to involve any such consequence it would rightly be put aside at once as carrying an absurdity upon the face of it.

I acknowledge that there is the utmost possible difference in moral value between the various motives by which men's conduct is governed, but, at the same time, I maintain that this value is *relative* and *temporary* only, and that *absolute* worth belongs to the pure love of right alone which in the end is intended to destroy them.

I will now proceed to state what appears to me to be the real ground of the difference which undoubtedly exists between the different springs of action in respect of their moral quality, and to explain shortly the nature of the service which in different degrees they have all the power to render. The love of duty, as I remarked before, is a motive which comes into operation at a

comparatively late period of life. It has no influence over the first years of infancy, and therefore by the time it begins to make itself felt many other motives will naturally have attained to a considerable degree of strength. They will have been enjoying a period of unrestricted liberty, in which they have been suffered to grow up and gather strength unchecked—so far at least as moral control is concerned. Accordingly, as the progress and development of the moral motive is no assured thing which has been fated and decreed beforehand, but is subject to the same laws which regulate the growth and decay of all other motives, there is grave reason to fear that, in its first attempts to overcome other impulses and assume the control of action, the love of duty may meet with a decided check, and that repeated failure and consequent loss of strength may lead in time to its final annihilation—the state of things which existed in early infancy being thus brought back again in all but its former innocence.

It is here, then, that the moral value of other motives comes first into view. The love of duty, whenever it finds that the task it has set itself is beyond its present strength, and that there is danger of it being borne down by the might of an opposing impulse (as, for example, an appetite which long indulgence has made strong), can spend part of its strength in summoning to its aid another motive whose tendency is opposed to that of the too powerful appetite.

It can do, in fact, a precisely similar thing to what is done when the assistance of natural forces (as those of wind or steam) is called in to aid in resisting other forces of nature by which men's existence is threatened.

Thus, a sense of self-respect, a regard for general opinion, or a thought of the distress which indulgence may bring upon others, may be called in by love of duty to aid in opposing the appetite in question, and the combined force of these motives may be sufficient to withstand the temptation which would have proved too much for love of duty had it stood alone.

On the principle stated above that motives are strengthened by the acts they give rise to, the resulting conquest in the case just given will weaken the force of the appetite and increase in the same proportion that of its conquerors. The strength which accrues to the moral motive will be less of course than what it might have gained if it had been strong enough to accomplish the whole task for itself. It will nevertheless have made a definite advance, whereas, if it had risked an encounter single-handed, it might have been worsted, and as an inevitable consequence weakened—part of its strength being taken from it and made over to the conquering appetite.

We see, then, from this example what is the general nature of the service which other motives can render to the moral motive or love of duty. They have it in their power to assist in its progress and development by equalising its work to its capacity. Their help is equivalent, in fact, to the postponement of part of a too difficult task to a more convenient season. They take to themselves part of the force which the moral motive is attempting to resist, and their value is greatest when the part thus taken is the amount precisely by which the task of duty was before in excess of its power.

If *more* than this be taken, the love of duty will perform less work than it might otherwise have done, and the time of its complete ascendancy will therefore be needlessly postponed.

If *less* than this be taken, the love of duty will sustain a defeat; part of its strength will pass from it to its conqueror; the sum total of force to be resisted and overcome in the future will be to the same extent increased, and the period which must elapse before perfection is finally reached will consequently be still further prolonged.

Moral progress, therefore, is seen to proceed by a series of compromises, and it is as the means of effecting these compromises that the motives, which as opposed to love of duty we may call "non-moral," are to be valued. Their goodness is founded on man's moral infirmity, which obliges him to have recourse to aids and means in the attempt to subdue the lower impulses of his nature. Too weak to mount at once to the supreme control of life, the love of duty "stoops to conquer," and avails itself of the assistance of inferior motives in proportion to the greatness of its need. As this need must be ever varying according to the amount of success or defeat before sustained, it follows that the "non-moral" motives can have no fixed and absolute value, but must always depend in the last resort upon conditions of time and place.

They have that passing value only which belongs to forms and systems of government, and it is as incorrect to attribute *absolute* moral worth to any motive but the pure love of right and duty as it would be to speak of "absolute and immutable rights," and "the natural liberties of mankind," after the fashion of eighteenth century politicians.

It follows again from this that experience alone can be our guide when we would judge of the extent to which our regard for duty requires to be aided by inferior motives, and to it alone must we look for the means of determining the precise time and manner in which this assistance should be rendered.

From the history of past failures and successes we form a general idea of the degree of strength which should belong to

different motives in order to enable the work of moral development to proceed most rapidly, and we are guided by this in deciding what part of our nature to cultivate most assiduously. We remember, for example, that, when temptation would otherwise have proved too strong for our weak sense of duty to resist, we have been saved from falling by the timely aid of the affections. The thought of bringing misery on some loved one has held us back from sin when nothing else could have availed to save us, and henceforth we cultivate these affections, not only for their gracious influence in sweetening life, but that they may be ever at hand to lend their aid when similar temptations beset us.

And in the same way with regard to the various other motives by which men's conduct is governed, experience points out to us the circumstances and conditions under which they are best able to afford assistance to the moral motive. It shows that at certain stages of a man's life particular desires attain to a dangerous degree of power, and suggests the means by which they can most successfully be met, and their gradual subjugation by duty be ensured.

For example, the opponents which duty has most reason to fear in youth are the appetites and passions, and its first energies should therefore in most cases be given to the cultivation of what Hume has somewhat inappropriately termed the "calm passions". In later life, again, the moral motive finds itself assailed by quite another set of adversaries whose influence is even more to be dreaded. Avarice and selfishness are motives which commonly gain in strength as life advances. In youth they are seldom very dangerous, being held in check by the spontaneous action of other impulses; but in after years the moral motive has no more formidable adversary to contend with. The cultivation of the domestic and social affections by acts of kindness and thoughtfulness for others will commonly be found the most effectual means of meeting these foes of duty, and it is of the utmost importance that the attempt to repress them should not be deferred till the character has formed and hardened round them.

Thus we see that motives of every kind have a different value at different periods of life, and in exactly the same way with regard to the larger life of the race, we see that their relative importance varies from age to age according to the kind and amount of service that is required of them. In early barbarous times man's feeble sense of duty has to struggle with rude and debasing passions, and a regard for simple justice is seen to be of such essential service in aiding in this contest that it is not unnaturally taken to be the highest, and in some cases the sole,

motive having moral worth. It covers, in fact, almost the whole field of morals, and is even identified at times with the moral motive to which it renders such invaluable assistance.

Mercy, benevolence and charity are motives which come to be esteemed only in later times when this contest has been decided in favour of justice. The relation in which they stand to this latter motive in respect of moral progress is exactly similar to that in which a constitutional government stands to an unlimited despotism. They succeed to the position which justice held before, as the ally of the moral motive or love of duty, and will retain this position and continue to have moral worth ascribed to them until such time as duty shall have gained sufficient strength to stand alone and take upon itself the sole direction of life. As, in our present state of imperfection, we have never enough of these motives to aid the love of duty in its work of conquest, it is only natural that we should be apt at times to forget their true nature and look upon them as having an *absolute* moral worth of their own.

In reality, however, their value is *relative* and *temporary* only, just as is that of the constitutional government to which I have compared them, and it will necessarily become less and less as the state of final perfection is approached. Our sense of duty requires aids by reason only of its weakness, and accordingly as it gains in strength, the value of such aids—whether supplied by ourselves or others—must, *pari passu*, be diminishing.

I say “whether supplied by ourselves or others,” because it is obvious that the work of adjusting and combining the “non-moral” motives to aid in the development of the moral motive is one in which men have the power to render valuable assistance to one another.

The value of every human institution rests ultimately on the power which men possess of calling out motives in others as well as in themselves, and on the fact that increased effect is given to this power by the co-operation which institutions imply. Co-operation and “division of labour,” it is important to bear in mind, are of no less importance in their moral than in their industrial aspect. Just as, in order to bring about the particular combination of natural forces which is needed for some industrial process, men are accustomed to unite their powers and thereby act with almost indefinitely greater effect, so—in the similar work of combining motives in order to enable the love of duty to raise itself to the position which of right belongs to it—it is of the utmost importance that men should not isolate their efforts and work each for himself, but that their united powers should be directed to the common progress and development of all.

It is important that this point should be clearly understood, as it is here that the theory I am advocating differs most essentially from another which in some respects it resembles.

It has not unfrequently been maintained that the moral quality of an act must be judged of by its effect on the inward motives and dispositions which make up a man's character; but in proceeding to apply this test it has been common to limit the attention to the particular motive or set of motives which prompted the act in question. This, however, is far too narrow a view to enable us to give a correct and decisive judgment. So long as any man's sense of duty stands in need of assistance from without, and has not sufficient strength to do its work alone; so long as mutual aid remains a thing to be hoped for, and mutual injury a thing to be feared—so long will it be necessary, in judging of the quality of an act, to take account of other things besides its effect on the agent. The strengthening in him of the motives which led him to act is always a point to be considered, but it is in no case the only point, and is in fact but one of many consequences, all of which must be allowed to have their due degree of influence when the final judgment has to be given. To take a simple example which will bring out my meaning more clearly, let us suppose that a man has contributed to a charity from selfish motives, such as a desire to stand well with his neighbours or to gain a reputation for philanthropy. How, on the principles I have just been laying down, is the morality of such an act to be judged of? As far as the man himself is concerned it is plain that no good result whatever can be expected to follow. On the contrary, having yielded to a selfish and worldly motive, he has strengthened its hold upon him for the future, and has made selfishness more than ever a part of his nature. The work which his sense of duty has to accomplish is thereby increased, and the time of its fulfilment deferred, and it may seem therefore as though we have no choice but to condemn his act as altogether bad.

It has, however, another set of consequences which we must not omit to notice, and which may be found to give it an entirely different complexion.

The money he has thus unworthily given may be applied to purposes which will make it easier for others to withstand temptation and enable *their* love of duty to develop itself at a rate which would otherwise have been impossible. Extreme poverty implies an amount of temptation which duty must always find it hard to overcome, and the good which is done by the gift in lessening this resistance and averting the risk of failure may more than outweigh the harm which is sustained by the moral character of the giver. In short, it is the increase or diminu-

tion of the sum total of love of duty which exists in the world that we must in all cases look to as our test of the moral value of actions, and it will not do to limit our inquiry to the immediate effect upon the agent.

So far as the agent is concerned, that act is of course best which is prompted solely by a regard for duty, as the strength of this motive is thereby directly increased. But, just as we have seen that acts prompted by bad motives may yet be pronounced good rather than bad upon the whole, so, on the other hand, acts prompted by pure desire of right may have to be condemned as bad in view of their general consequences; for the increased strength which love of duty has gained in one quarter may be less than the amount by which it has indirectly been diminished in another.

Thus a conscientious persecutor may cut off by his misdirected zeal for duty a life which was being guided by this motive no less than his own, and which was aiding besides by its example and influence in uplifting thousands to the purity it had itself attained.

The moral value of actions, again, will often have to be determined by results which will appear exceedingly remote. Thus, a certain amount of physical exercise may be held to be morally desirable because it leads to increase of strength and vitality, which again make it easier for love of duty to accomplish its appointed task. Everything, again, that tends to preserve life is *primâ facie* to be valued, as it is life alone and the power of acting implied in it which affords the opportunity for the moral faculty to develop itself. I say *primâ facie*, because I do not hold that life itself is always a thing to be valued and held in reverence. Its worth depends in all cases on the use that is made of it, and if this is base and unworthy—if instead of leading to increase of moral power, it is so employed as to extinguish this power or lessen the influence which it before possessed—I maintain that life is a curse and not a blessing to the world. We rejoice when a new life comes into the world, because we know what infinite hopes and possibilities lie within it, but when the tenor of this life is disclosed and is seen to be opposed to moral progress, the reason for our rejoicing is taken away, and we rightly esteem it no longer. Life, in short, is only a *means*, just as all other things are means except the righteous will of Him who made them, and the love of duty which is its reflection in men's minds; and to secure the sole dominion of this will over the whole field of action should be the ultimate end and object of all human endeavour.

And as we plainly have not strength to shake off at once the influence of inferior motives and guide our life by conformity to

this will alone, we must be content to mount by degrees and to make use of means and aids when our reason tells us that we cannot rise without them. These means consist chiefly, as was before remarked, in the regulation and adjustment of the "non-moral" motives by the moral. If skilfully employed and brought forward at the right moment and in the right degree of strength, the work of overcoming the former and mounting by their aid will be comparatively short and easy, and the final triumph of the divine over the human element of man's nature may be looked upon as assured.

If, on the other hand, no such proper order is observed—if the love of duty has no definite aim and plan for its development, but rushes madly at temptation whenever it meets it—if, without making use of the means and aids which lie around it, it attempts what is clearly beyond its strength—it may postpone indefinitely the day of its final triumph, and even render it doubtful whether such a day will ever come at all.

The course of men's moral progress, in fact, lies midway between two extremes. On the one hand, as every time he yields to inferior motives he strengthens them, and so puts off the time of their final subjugation by duty, their assistance should never be called in except when there is absolute need for it. Every needless resort to them has the effect of postponing the arrival of perfection. It implies that two or more acts are done when one would have been enough, and is therefore directly opposed to what may be called the first principle of moral economy.

For example, when love of duty and self-interest have combined to produce an act, the strength gained by the former motive will obviously be less than it would have been had duty been the sole impelling motive. Self-interest itself will remain to be struggled with and overcome, and it will be all the more formidable as an adversary of duty from the strength which it has gained as its ally.

The other and opposite danger which we have to avoid is that of attempting too much and imagining that our sense of duty can dispense at once with the aid of inferior motives. Just as some men are unduly impressed with a sense of their moral weakness, and are always casting about for other motives to back up and support their sense of right which they are afraid to trust alone, so in the opposite direction there are others who think that their sense of duty is above the need for such extrinsic aids, and who neglect in their haste to reach perfection the only means by which it can be attained.

They starve the affections and dwarf and impoverish their faculties in a vain attempt to exalt their moral nature and mount at once to a state of glorified perfection. The result of

this unnatural forcing soon, however, makes itself apparent when temptations and difficulties have to be faced, and such men will not unfrequently be found to have failed in the end for want of those very qualities which their zeal for perfection had taught them to despise.

These then are the two opposite dangers between which we have to steer our course. The ultimate effect of each is one and the same, and moral progress is almost equally retarded by them. Every fresh advance of knowledge is teaching us better how to avoid them. We learn gradually, and often as the result of bitter experience, how life can be made to yield the greatest increase of moral power, and how the opportunities of action which it affords can be turned to the best account.

We come to see that there is a value and use as means to perfection in many things which at first sight seem utterly purposeless, and we learn more and more, as time goes on, the changing conditions of time and place on which this value depends. We see that if rightly used there is a power for good in all created things, and that every motive and impulse of man's nature can be made to assist in the work of his final glorification, and in bringing about that state of things when love of right alone shall rule him.

To what purpose our moral energies are destined to be put if they shall ever have completed their present task and vanquished and subdued all inferior motives, we cannot even pretend to guess; but, if we believe that there is a real positive purpose underlying the work of the Deity in the universe, and that he is not merely engaged in removing difficulties of his own creation, it is only natural to hope that when we have brought our powers into harmony with his will we shall be allowed to employ them in the furtherance of his work.

THOMAS THORNELY.

V.—JEWISH MEDIÆVAL PHILOSOPHY AND SPINOZA.

THE ancient Jews cannot be said to have been a philosophic people. Their function in the world's history was religious rather than speculative, while philosophy was a later growth among them, and did not spring up till after the prophetic intuition had become dim, and the race had felt the influence of foreign surroundings. Despite their national exclusiveness, the Jews have always shown a wonderful power of assimilating the