VI.—DISCUSSION.

“SOME FUNDAMENTAL ETHICAL CONTROVERSIES.”

I.

By Professor T. FOWLER.

In Prof. Sidgwick's article, in the last number of *MIND*, entitled "Some Fundamental Ethical Controversies," he discusses two points, on which, in the Second Part of my *Principles of Morals*, I had expressed divergence from his views on the same subjects as stated in his *Methods of Ethics*. I wish to reply to his criticisms, or rather, in the light of what he has said, to re-state, for the sake of better understanding, my own opinions, as clearly and briefly as possible. And as, on most points of ethical theory, Prof. Sidgwick's views and my own are in general agreement, I need hardly say that my remarks will be free from any hostile bias.

The first and, as I conceive, less important point raised by Prof. Sidgwick refers to a passage in my *Principles of Morals*, pt. ii., ch. 9, pp. 329-31, in which I criticise an argument employed by him, with reference to the Free-Will controversy, in his *Methods of Ethics* (pt. i., ch. 5), to the effect that, at the moment of action, I am conscious of my power to choose between two alternatives. I had supposed that this argument was advanced as an attempt to resolve the antinomy of Free-Will and Determinism, or, at least, as a set-off against the formidable array of cumulative evidence in favour of Determinism which Prof. Sidgwick had just enumerated. But, in *MIND*, he informs his readers that "the argument did not aim at a *theoretical* solution of the difficulty, caused by the conflict between the 'formidable array of cumulative evidence offered for Determinism' and the Libertarian 'affirmation of consciousness in the moment of deliberate action': it aimed merely at a *practical* solution of the difficulty, by showing that for purposes of practical reasoning the two opposed arguments cannot really collide". I must own that I had regarded the argument as of the nature of a practical argument in a theoretical discussion, much like the argument of Bishop Butler (*Analogy*, pt. i., ch. 6) that, whatever their speculative opinions, men always act as if they were free. Thus viewed, it seemed to me, it could not be regarded as a decisive argument that, in the moment of action, a man seems to be conscious of the power of choice between two alternatives, if, in reflecting on the past or forecasting the future, he can regard the same or a similar action as entirely determined by pre-existing

causes. But Prof. Sidgwick's authority as to his own meaning is, of course, decisive. I must, however, plead in extenuation of my misunderstanding, that, without this clue being supplied by the writer, the mistake is one into which, as it seems to me, even a very careful reader may naturally fall. As to the merits of the question, I certainly cannot deny either that, in the moment of deliberate action, we feel ourselves free to choose between different alternatives, or that, in attempting to forecast the future, we usually assume that men will be guided by character, motives and circumstances. Hence, as I have stated in my book (*Principles of Morals*, pt. ii., pp. 331, 337-9), I entirely agree with Prof. Sidgwick on the unimportance of this controversy in its bearings on the regulation of actual conduct. But had, as I erroneously conceived, Prof. Sidgwick meant to appeal to our consciousness of the power of choice in the moment of action as an argument of weight in a theoretical discussion of Determinism, I think it would be at least counterbalanced by the consideration that, when we are not in the situation of having a practical decision forced upon us, but are able coolly to reflect on our past acts, we are generally able, by the exercise of a sufficient power of analysis, to detect the antecedent circumstances of character, motive, &c., on which our volitions depended.

Before dismissing this question, I may, perhaps, be allowed to remove a possible misapprehension as to my own views, which might be caused both by Prof. Sidgwick's article and by what I have myself said in the previous paragraph. My own ultimate conclusions are not in favour of the Determinist position. But, while recognising the unanswerable character of the arguments for the Determinist hypothesis, so long as we confine ourselves to the analysis of volitions, I equally recognise, to quote my own words (*Principles of Morals*, pt. ii., p. 336), that these arguments are "confronted by facts of almost hourly occurrence in the lives of us all which, on the hypothesis of their validity, seem to be inexplicable. Why should we praise or blame others,—why, on reflection, should we approve or disapprove of our own acts and dispositions,—if we regard both others and ourselves as merely and exclusively determined by antecedent circumstances? Surely both praise and blame, self-approbation and self-disapprobation, imply that the objects of them had the power of acting otherwise than they did, and, if of acting otherwise than they did, of being otherwise than they were. And, however it may be with regard to our praise and blame of others, which may possibly, in some cases, be modified, though they are certainly never extinguished, by a growing sense of the difficulties of conduct; yet it undoubtedly seems to be the fact that, with increasing knowledge and experience, both of ourselves and of the world outside us, we do not become less, but more, sensitive in the feelings and judgments with which, on reflection, we regard our own acts and habits. But, if these acts and habits were predetermined by the

concurrence of external and internal conditions, they surely were inevitable; and, if inevitable, how can they be the proper objects of approbation or disapprobation?" Here, it seems to me, in the present or any probable state of our knowledge, the question must be left. We may, indeed, conjecture that the Self, operating by laws of its own, unknown to us, has some power of self-determination, independently of circumstances; but, after all, this is merely a hypothesis, not only unsupported by positive proof, but, so far as we can foresee, admitting of no verification.

The more important point raised by Prof. Sidgwick, and that on which there appears to be a real difference between him and myself, is a question connected with the fundamental conceptions of 'right' and 'ought'. He regards these notions as "ultimate and unanalysable". On the other hand, I have expressly stated (*Principles of Morals*, pt. ii., p. 227) that I maintain the idea of right to be "explicable by the idea of good," and the word 'ought'—at least, in one of its applications—(I shall speak of another application presently), is, in the case of human agents, simply the verb corresponding with the substantive 'right'. As I seem to have misunderstood the exact position taken by Prof. Sidgwick under the former head, I think he may have similarly failed to perceive the exact position assumed by myself on the present question. To save space—and, if possible, to prevent any further controversy on a subject on which I can foresee that we shall probably not arrive at an agreement—I will simply content myself with stating here, as briefly and clearly as I can, my own conception of the proper relation subsisting between what may be called the fundamental ethical ideas—those of 'right,' 'good' and 'ought' (or 'obligation'). When we do a right act, or do as we ought, as, for example, when we tell the truth, or pay our debts, or practise temperance, we are, in the two former cases, preferring the greater good of others to the (often imaginary) lesser good of ourselves, in the last case, the greater good of ourselves to the (often imaginary) lesser good of ourselves. In all these and similar cases we always make conscious choice of the greater good or lesser evil. Thus, the acts of which we approve, which we ought to do, which we denominate right, fall under the more general conception of good acts—or, in other words, they are explicable by the idea of good. One great advantage of their being thus represented is that good and evil admit of degrees, and of comparison with one another, and are thus much more easily applicable to the measure of concrete actions than are more absolute conceptions, like right and wrong. But it may be said that, according to this mode of viewing virtuous acts, veracity, honesty, temperance, and the like, are only means towards the attainment of a further end, the general good of ourselves, or of society, or of both. But now arises the question whether the good is itself an ultimate idea, or whether it admits of being explained by reference to some still

more general conception ; and, again, whether we may not properly say that it is right, that we ought, that we are under an obligation, to pursue the greatest good, or to prefer the greater to the lesser good. With regard to the first question, I may reply, as I have done in my *Principles of Morals* (pt. ii., p. 264), that " the good of man, as a whole, may be conceived of as the development of the various parts of his nature in harmony with one another, and with the social and material medium in which he exists ". And, in particular cases, anything which promotes this development is good, anything which retards it or thwarts it is evil. Thus, the idea of good is carried still one step further back, and made dependent on our conception of the constitution of human nature. And beyond this step it would appear as if we cannot go, unless we quit the region of ascertainable fact, and indulge in speculations on the constitution and purposes of the Universe. But it remains to be asked whether the ideas of 'right,' 'ought,' 'obligation,' have any application to this connexion between the conception of 'good' and that of 'human nature'. Can we say that it is right, that we ought, or that we are under any obligation to pursue the greatest good, or to choose good rather than evil ? I think that we are undoubtedly justified in using all these expressions, though, as the word 'right' is here used in a somewhat unusual sense, it seems preferable to employ one of the other equivalents, appropriating the term 'right' to specific acts or classes of actions, which are only a means to the general good. But we now use these terms in a different sense, or rather in a different application. They were previously used in relation to the intermediate conception of 'good'. They are now used in relation to the ultimate conception of human nature itself, whose constitution, development and tendencies thus become, while we confine ourselves to the sphere of verifiable experience, the ultimate source of moral obligation. The ultimate obligation to morality then seems to me to reside, not in any abstract and unanalysable idea of 'ought,' 'right' or 'duty,' but in the very make and fashion of human nature, in the complexus of the several feelings, co-ordinated by the reason, and issuing in what we call the moral faculty. We think and feel that we 'ought' or 'are obliged' to do that to which our nature, as a whole, or the moral faculty, as its resultant and spokesman, prompts us ; and to say that we 'ought' or 'are obliged' to follow a certain course of action is the same as to say that it is imposed upon us by our nature, not, indeed, in its original condition, but in the stage of development to which it has now attained. Between specific courses of action and the ultimate obligation there is usually, in the case of reflective men, interpolated the conception of the greater good or lesser evil, but, when we come to ask why we should act in accordance with this conception, the only answer, it seems to me, which a moralist, as such, can give, is that we are impelled

(though, of course, not irresistibly impelled) to act thus by the very constitution of our nature. It is this theory which I have attempted to sketch in pt. ii. of my *Principles of Morals*, and specially in the 5th and 6th chapters. The examination of human nature, its various principles, developments and capacities, in their relation to one another, and to the material and social medium by which they are moulded, and which, in turn, they mould, or, in other words, the study of the human mind, and of the growth of man and society, alone seems to me to supply the material out of which an intelligible system of morals can be constructed, adequate to the practical needs of men, and capable of carrying equal conviction with other branches of knowledge.

II.

By L. A. SELBY-BIGGE.

In the last number of *MIND*, Prof. Sidgwick has done a thing for which, I am sure, many of his readers and admirers will be very grateful. He has taken three of his principal positions out of their original setting, and re-stated them simply and plainly to be judged on their own merits. It is much to be wished that other people who write large books would do the same thing; for one is often afraid of handling by itself any single position taken up in a large book, lest one should be doing the writer an injustice by viewing it out of relation to the system or argument of which it is a part or the purpose with a view to which it is maintained. Of the *Methods of Ethics* it is especially hard to be critical: its very virtues have made it peculiarly difficult to grasp, or, at least, to judge; there are so many candid admissions, so many able and eloquent statements of the other side, so little suppression of material facts, that many readers have professed respectful failure to entirely understand the author's views sooner than commit themselves to a treatment of it which they feel would be very possibly unfair and very probably incomplete. Few who have read the book have not learnt much from it; but, I think, there are also few who are quite certain what it all comes to. In *MIND*, however, Prof. Sidgwick has selected certain articles from his stock and placed them fairly on the counter by themselves, and asks us squarely, 'What is it you don't like in them, and what is it you don't understand?' I am sure I shall only be doing what Prof. Sidgwick wants if I try to answer his question as squarely as it is asked, confining myself to the first point on which he challenges the world—the Freedom of the Will.

Before I proceed to my special objections to Prof. Sidgwick's theory, I ought to confess that I do not quite understand what he means by a practical solution, which is all he claims to have

attained. When I talk of a practical solution I generally think of a solution '*per ambulationem simplicem*,' but I do not think that this is what Prof. Sidgwick means by a practical solution of the difficulties connected with the assertion of the freedom of the will. Does he mean such a solution as shall be sufficient for practical purposes and the conduct of life; a solution which shall protect us from being hampered and our actions paralysed, though not satisfying our intellectual curiosity; a solution which shall allow those whose lives have been disturbed by the speculative contradictions to go on doing as they used to do? But he seems hardly to think such a solution necessary—indeed, he tempts us to think that his practical solution is, that none is required, because out of doors no one is in the least troubled by the difficulties which assail him in his study, nor does anyone act in any way differently when he substitutes the creed of the Libertarian for that of the Determinist, or conversely. But he also, I believe, reaches another solution which, though not complete, is of dignity enough to be called theoretical. It does not show the antinomy between Necessity and Freedom to be itself necessary, but it does show that, though actual and perpetual, it does not produce a deadlock, because to each belongs a separate province: in other words, that, though the same action is necessary and free, it is so from different points of view. This solution, of course, stops short of showing why these two separate points of view exist, and so, I suppose, it is incomplete; but why it should be denied the name theoretical I cannot quite see. In this case, I am inclined to trace it to a general tendency in the author to undervalue the contributions of Kant to Ethics—a tendency (unconscious, I am sure) which shows itself further in a lack of precision in defining the limits of the two provinces of necessity and freedom, and also in an unnecessary exaggeration of the contradiction between them. Of this I shall speak again later.

I. My special objections are, first, to his treatment of the point at issue between Determinists and Libertarians as of no practical importance—that is, to his assertion that, except in one special case in which theological considerations are introduced, it will make no difference in our conduct whether we adopt one view or the other.

(a) In support of this position, he shows that, though the adoption of Libertarian views may throw some general doubt on the accuracy of the calculations we make about future actions, whether our own or those of others, and about means to ends, still it cannot in any way modify the details of those calculations: our confidence in them may be a little weaker, but they will remain the same. Now, with this statement I have no fault to find, except that Prof. Sidgwick understands by the Libertarian view the vulgar opinion that our actions are determined by no law at all, a view which stands contradictorily opposed to that of

the Determinist; whereas by the Libertarian view I understand the opinion that our actions are determined by moral laws, thus considerably reducing the antithesis between Determinism and Libertarianism. According to the latter acceptation of the term Libertarianism, its adoption could neither modify nor cast general doubt upon our calculations of future events, because actions, as events, are not in any way contemplated by it. However, I do not wish to press this, because I believe Prof. Sidgwick is not really quite sure in which sense he understands and accepts Libertarianism: indeed, it is this uncertainty, which I believe I can detect in his writings, which is the main article in my objections to his position.

(b) He shows that Determinism is always actually held in conjunction with Libertarianism, and that the latter, to a very great extent, depends on the former and uses its assumptions. To this, again, I have no objection, except the rather fundamental one just mentioned.

(c) But Prof. Sidgwick does not show that the *substitution* of Determinism for Libertarianism would have no considerable practical effects, and that is the point which I think he is bound to prove, if he is to justify his position. The fact that ordinary people do generally effect a compromise and establish a *modus vivendi* between two apparently contradictory theories, does not show that it is of no importance whether you adopt one to the exclusion of the other. It shows that you can get on by adopting both, simultaneously or alternately; but it does not show that you can get on equally well by adopting either. The fact that the happy inconsistency of the Determinist counteracts—and, indeed, conceals—the legitimate consequences of his theory, and, further, renders it harmless and even useful, is no reason why we should cease to combat it in works devoted to the theory of Ethics. The fact that every Determinist is also a Libertarian only shows that he does not carry out his theory, not that his theory involves no practically-important consequences: a theory may have most important consequences, even though no one practises it. The fact that those consequences are nowhere evident in private or public life may be a reason why the statesman should treat the theory lightly, but it is no reason why the moralist should do likewise. Of course, I should not think of denying that it is "quite possible to compose a treatise on Ethics which should completely ignore the Free-Will controversy" (*M. E.*, bk. i., chap. 5, § 1); but, as Prof. Sidgwick seems to admit (*ib.*, § 2), the meaning which you give, in your treatise, to "'ought,' 'responsibility' and similar terms" will clearly indicate which side you take in the controversy: you may ignore the conflict, but you will only be able to do so by assuming that one side or the other is decisively victorious.

But Prof. Sidgwick, in *MIND*, still more plainly admits the point for which I am contending. He says (No. 56, p. 477):—

"I am quite willing to admit that this conviction *may* be illusory : that, if I knew my own nature, I *might* see it to be predetermined that, being so constituted, and in such circumstances, I should act on the occasion in question contrary to my rational judgment. But I cannot conceive myself seeing this, without at the same time conceiving my whole conception of what I now call 'my' action fundamentally altered : I cannot conceive that, if I contemplated the actions of my organism in this light, I should refer them to my 'self'—*i.e.*, to the conscious mind so contemplating, in the sense in which I now refer them."

That is to say, if I thoroughly applied the Determinist theory without any admixture of the Libertarian, I should no longer regard myself as responsible for my actions in the same way as I do now ; I should no longer use 'ought' and 'desert' except in new significations (cp. *M. E.*, i. 5, § 2). Surely Prof. Sidgwick would not say that such a total alteration of the relations between my 'self' and my actions would not be a grave practical matter. I am obliged to say '*would not be*,' because I agree with Prof. Sidgwick that no one does apply the Determinist view rigidly and consistently, and that "I must use in thinking about action the only conception of human volition that is now possible to me . and this is strictly incompatible with the conception of my choice between rational judgment and irrational inclination as predetermined".

Prof. Sidgwick does, however, advance one definite argument in support of his position. He says (No. 56, p. 476) :—"I do not think that any determinist will argue that his conclusion either ought to have or ordinarily does have this paralysing effect on the practical reason" ; *i.e.*, that it does lead men "to abstain from the effort to act rationally, and consciously surrender themselves to the play of mere impulse". To this I reply, that we are agreed that it never does have this paralysing effect, but that, if we wanted an assertion that it ought to have it, we certainly should not go to the Determinist for it. The Determinist is not such a fool as to admit that his theory cuts at the root of all morality, and is hopelessly paradoxical. As we all know, he is much more alive to his own interest, and protests, on the contrary, that his view is indispensable to morality. In saying this, I do not wish to accuse the ordinary Determinist of dishonesty ; I only wish to point out that he is probably made of the same stuff as the Libertarian, and is no more than his opponent inclined to regard suicide by paradox as a duty.

II. Having now dealt with the first part of Prof. Sidgwick's "practical solution," *viz.*, that it does not matter which view we take, I come to the second part, *viz.*, that we all of us do and must use both principles, but that it is from different points of view that we do so. With this solution, so far as it goes, I entirely agree. But, in Prof Sidgwick's statement of it, I find a certain want of clearness, and even a certain amount of prejudice, sufficient to make me doubt whether I really hold the same solution as he does.

(a) In *MIND*, p. 475, Prof. Sidgwick says:—"When we are ascertaining . . . what choice it is reasonable to make between two alternatives of *present* conduct, it is as impossible for us to use Determinist conceptions as it is impossible for us to use Libertarian conceptions when we are endeavouring to forecast future conduct". This is slightly misleading, for it suggests that the two sets of conceptions do not collide only because the one applies to the future, and the other to the present. (The italics in the quotation are Prof. Sidgwick's own.) Of course, Prof. Sidgwick would admit that it is quite as possible to inquire what course of action *will be* or *was* reasonable, as what course *is* reasonable. So the antithesis might be better stated thus: 'When we ask what will happen in the future, we use determinist conceptions; when we ask what is reasonable, *i.e.*, what ought to happen in the future, we use libertarian conceptions'. Now this is exactly what I am contending for, and so Prof. Sidgwick may not unreasonably ask: 'Why then are you not contented, since this is just what I mean?' Unfortunately, I am still not quite sure that is what he means, though, perhaps, after what he said long ago (*M. E.*, i. 5, § 2), such uncertainty may seem to him sheer ingratitude.

(b) It is not really this, for in *MIND*, p. 479, I find him saying:—"I have restricted my consideration to the choice between the alternatives of 'rational' and 'irrational' conduct. It is, I conceive, this alone that concerns us, from an ethical point of view, not the possibility of merely indeterminate choice—of what Green calls an 'arbitrary freak of unmotivated willing'."

Now I am not sure of the meaning of this sentence. Does Prof. Sidgwick mean that freedom is to be affirmed only in the case of choice between alternatives, and not in the case of volition where no alternatives are suggested? Or does he mean that freedom is only to be affirmed where one of the alternatives is conceived of rational or right? It is to be observed that Prof. Sidgwick "restricts" himself to the latter case as being the only one of ethical importance, which seems to imply that he could give his argument a wider application, and could use his evidence to prove more, if only he chose to do so. In *Methods of Ethics* (i. 5, § 3) he seems to me to combine both positions. He contrasts the "cumulative evidence" for Determinism with "the immediate affirmation of consciousness in the moment of deliberate action . . . that I can now choose to do" what I now conceive as right or reasonable, "however strong may be my inclination to act unreasonably". It is just this "immediate affirmation of consciousness" which offends me, though, likely enough, I have already swallowed many camels. Is not this "immediate affirmation" equally present wherever there are alternatives of any kind, whether conceived of as good, bad or indifferent? Whenever I stop to reflect on any course of action, does not my "consciousness" always affirm my ability to choose it? 'And is

not this affirmation perilously like the product of an illusory mental experiment? Is it not just this evidence which Determinists have found it easiest to explain away? I should be very sorry to leave my Libertarian belief to rest on such a very small base, and it is because Prof. Sidgwick deliberately prefers the narrower to the wider base that I cannot accept him as my champion. Or is it that, while accepting the Kantian conclusion, he is unwilling to accept the Kantian evidence, and so tries to find some new evidence which shall save him from the necessity of treading in the Kantian footsteps?

(c) The last quotation from the *Methods of Ethics* contains a point which I think well deserves attention, viz., the alleged contrast between the cumulative evidence for Determinism and the solitary piece of immediate evidence for Libertarianism. Prof. Sidgwick gives some grounds for supposing that by this "cumulative evidence" he only means that the sphere which has been subjected to laws of nature has been continually widening; that laws have been discovered for phenomena previously regarded as capricious or fortuitous, while no one has tried to extend the limits within which Freedom obtains. But he seems also to imply that there is a real difference not only of quantity but also of quality in the evidence for the two positions. I do not like to express a general philosophical opinion very positively without drawing trenches of various kinds round me, but I am inclined to maintain this—that Liberty and Necessity were once and for all melted in the same pot by Hume, whose sagacity in this matter is beyond all praise; that since then their interests cannot possibly be divided; that if they are ever to be restored to us it must be by the same method. I should also be inclined to maintain that for neither Liberty nor Necessity is there the slightest direct or immediate evidence, but that for both of them there is the strongest possible indirect. Necessity is vindicated solely by the fact that all men make use of the conceptions of reality and illusion, truth and falsehood: Freedom, solely by the fact that all men make use of the conceptions of good and bad, ought and ought-not, right and wrong. Neither necessity nor freedom are 'empirical notions,' though they are abundantly vindicated by the fact that they are essential to and implied in those conceptions without which we should be neither rational nor moral. Whether freedom is or is not the *ratio essendi* of the moral law, the moral law seems to me most certainly the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom. That it does not seem to Prof. Sidgwick so certain is perhaps due to his appreciation of the clearness and sufficiency, for practical purposes, of the meaning given to the moral law by the Determinists, an appreciation producing forgetfulness of the fact that, as so interpreted, the moral law is not after all what ordinary people mean by the moral law (cp. *M. E.*, i. 5, § 2).

III. I am tempted in conclusion to say a few general words in

defence of Kant, undeterred by the fear of appearing old-fashioned or a barren formalist. I think that in this matter and all through the *Methods of Ethics* Kant has exercised a distinctly repellent influence over Prof. Sidgwick, and this repulsion is easily intelligible. Kant made a great deal more of the connexion between the moral law and freedom than he was warranted in doing, and his failure in developing this connexion is obvious. But I do not think that Prof. Sidgwick is the man who ought to be offended at this; he has himself so admirably distinguished between the two different questions "What ought I to do?" and "What is the meaning of 'I ought'?" that he should not be hard on Kant for having confused them, or rather for having thought that an inquiry into the latter question would enable him also to answer the former. Kant's merit in having elucidated the meaning of Duty is surely so conspicuous that we can afford to forget his attempt to deduce the duties. I do not claim for Kant in any way that his connexion of free with rational or disinterested action (though I do not interpret 'rational' in the same sense as Prof. Sidgwick) adds anything valuable to his theory, nor that his detailed explanation of Freedom is any more successful than that latterly attempted by Prof. Green, who seems to me to have been very near asserting that "psychological Freedom" which Kant made such fun of; but I do hold that in his definite assertion that the moral law is the sole and sufficient evidence for Freedom he was on ground a great deal surer than that on which the ordinary Determinist so confidently stands.

Perhaps it is this same repulsion which leads Prof. Sidgwick to underestimate the practical importance of the question. If it is by a keen sense of the grotesqueness of disputation on the freedom of the will that he is led to minimise its importance, I can sympathise; from the disputations of philosophers grotesqueness is seldom far distant, and we ought perhaps to be more afraid of it than we are. Of course, too, from one point of view no speculative discussion, and no speculative solution, is of practical importance, and this is especially true in Ethics, and in Ethics especially true of this dispute, where it is admitted by the one party that all men think themselves free, and by the other that if they think themselves free this is quite sufficient to render the moral law binding on them. But if speculative Ethics is of importance, and I believe it to be important even though we do not go to it for a rule of life, then in it I believe the question of the Freedom of the Will to be of primary importance.