

VI.—THE PROBLEM OF CONDUCT.

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MR. A. E. TAYLOR's book *The Problem of Conduct, a Study in the Phenomenology of Ethics* has been so long before the readers of MIND that it seems superfluous to offer a review of it in the ordinary sense. I propose therefore in what follows to do no more than touch upon the contents of its several chapters as a preliminary to some criticisms which an earlier perusal of it suggested to me and the reperusal at the request of the Editor has only served to confirm. This must be my excuse if I should here seem to fail to do justice to the substantial merits of a striking book—the courage and sincerity with which central problems are attacked and the brilliancy of the detailed expositions, amongst which that of the chapter on the "Goal of Ethics" and the last chapter carrying us "Beyond Good and Bad" are especially striking.

The Introduction defines the relation in which according to the writer Ethics stands to Metaphysics. Science in general is there defined as having for its aim the more and more adequate rendering of experience, in other words the freeing of our descriptions from the symbolic elements that so largely enter into scientific hypothesis. As contrasted with this, Metaphysics has both a critical and a constructive side. It is critical in that it tests the various theories and propositions which pass for true in every-day thinking and in science by the ideal standard of a pure or perfect experience; it is constructive in attempting to formulate the more general or formal conditions of experience. Should it then be claimed for any science as it is in Mr. Taylor's view by certain idealist writers for Ethics that it is dependent on and deducible from metaphysics, there are certain marks by which we may seek to test this claim, to wit: accurately defined limits and the absence of non-experiential elements which we cannot replace when desired by 'real' equivalents. Tested by this standard the claims of Ethics to rank as a deductive science founded on a metaphysical basis fall to the ground.

Though recommended to us by references to the authority of Avenarius and Cornelius the account here given of the logic of science will scarcely be recognised by those who accept what recent

epistemology has to say on the continuity between percept and concept, fact and hypothesis on the one hand, and between causal connexion and other forms of identity on the other. Is there, it may be asked, any "direct" experience of "identical recurring qualities or aspects within the general mass of otherwise undifferentiated organic consciousness" without admixture of concept or concept which is not in germ hypothesis and as such to be tested by the consistency it introduces into experience as a whole? Mr. Taylor in the latter part of his book seems to admit no other test than this and frequently alludes to it in express terms. The question which the reader will press is whether the test of self-consistency is identical with that of a "pure experience" upon which the emphasis is laid in the chapter before us. The too hasty identification of these divergent standards seems to me an obscurity from which the argument of the book never shakes itself wholly free.

The statement of the possible relations in which a Science may stand to Metaphysics raises a similar doubt. No science seems to be wholly deductive in the above sense; on the other hand none is wholly independent of Metaphysics. It is altogether a matter of degree depending on the relative concreteness of the subject matter. At the one extreme we have mathematics which may go its independent way, though this independence is at once challenged when the axioms of any particular system, e.g., Euclidean geometry, are questioned. At the other extreme we have Logic as now generally interpreted. Intermediate between them stand such sciences as Psychology whether in the "falsified" form with which the laboratory makes us familiar or in the more concrete form of ordinary text-books. Ethics one should have supposed as a science of the concrete forces on the student from the outset the question of the value of our ideals in relation to experience as a whole—practical, theoretic and æsthetic, and thus stands in a peculiarly close relation to metaphysics. To the failure to keep this clearly before him is due it appears to me a certain hesitancy in the writer's appreciation of the moral sentiment which in one passage is described as a subordinate section of the facts of experience, in another as the contrivance for bringing the actions of the individual into harmony with the permanent interests of the species and of himself as its representative. That Green, who is here referred to as a warning, occupied himself in the *Prolegomena to Ethics* with metaphysical discussions, as does Mr. Taylor himself, is due to the fact that in his view, as in Mr. Taylor's, certain metaphysical assumptions as to the character of our moral experience have stood in the way of the correct appreciation of the facts. Had Green been writing now when these assumptions have been largely abandoned he would have been among the first to welcome the author's admirable programme as at least an essential part of a future ethic; although so long as views such as those of the preceding pages were current he would have probably felt that there is still room for greater clearness as to the nature of self-determination

and obedience to law and that restatements of the results of the work of his generation may still not be wholly out of place in an ethical treatise.

Chapter ii., "Metaphysical Ethic Considered" submits to detailed criticism Green's doctrines of an ideally Best and of the Eternal Self in forms which we venture to think the reader may find some difficulty in recognising. On the former Green is represented as holding that you must in outline at least know the best toward which humanity is gravitating before you can compare one type of life or one form of society with another, and say "This is better than that". "Such," we are told, "is the theory expressed or implicit which is responsible for the arrangement and method of the *Prolegomena*". On carefully rereading the passage in Green referred to (*Prolegomena*, p. 180), I cannot find any justification for this interpretation. It seems to me, on the contrary, an express repudiation of any attempt at such an outline. What Green throughout emphasises is something quite different, viz., that human conduct is continually influenced by the ideal of a life in which elements that commonly fall apart, such as duty and happiness, self and other, truth and goodness are completely harmonised. We may differ as to the extent to which this harmony may be carried and as to the ultimate satisfactoriness and "reality" of ethical experience, but the importance of this ideal as a factor in moral consciousness is not likely to be denied, at least in a work like the present, the whole argument of which as I understand it rests upon this assumption.

I have a similar difficulty in accepting the interpretation of Green's doctrine of the Eternal Self as equivalent to the assertion of an unevolved and purely abstract subject of experience. Green's statements, it must be admitted, leave some room for doubt as to his view of the origin of human consciousness, but a careful study of the *Prolegomena* leaves, I think, no doubt that the "eternity" he speaks of is to be looked for not primarily in the absence of any traceable origin in time but in the character of human intelligence as a relating principle. As mental contents have their character determined by the whole in which they are elements so have actions: as in knowledge there is no resting-place short of the conception of a completely organised experience, so in conduct there is none short of the completely organised volition which is the counterpart of the ideal represented by civil society. To a writer holding this view it is not difficult to see how the character of this whole and not the descriptions of sociology must be the starting-point of moral as well as of political philosophy. Mr. Taylor speaks as though there was a difference in this respect between the *Prolegomena* and the *Lectures on Political Obligation*. But any difference of treatment is superficial. The theory of the Common Good, whatever its value, underlies both. Recent discussion has raised other issues and calls for a restatement of the

problem, but where discussion has hitherto shown itself fruitful it has taken the question up at the point where the idealism of the seventies left it. With all its ability Mr. Taylor's discussion leaves on the reader the impression of being to a large extent beside the point.

This impression is confirmed by the statement that Green "attributes to the inmost core of selfhood an absolutely unchanging character," an accusation which is sufficiently opposed to the whole tenor of recent idealism and which can only have found a place here through misunderstanding. It need hardly be said there is nothing in Green to support it. On the other hand many passages could easily be found (*e.g.*, *Works*, vol. ii., pp. 325-326) where such abstract identity is expressly repudiated.

The chapter on the "Roots of Ethics" begins the more constructive part of the Essay. Dispensing with the assumption of any implicit reference to a principle of organisation, it traces the moral sentiment in the spirit of Hume to its root in the feeling of approbation and disapprobation identified with satisfaction or disappointment arising from fulfilled or unfulfilled expectation. The discussion is a good one and may be said to bring the similar discussion in the *Inquiry* up to date. But it leaves a similar difficulty. Granted as an axiom of genetic psychology that there was a time when the distinction between ethical and other forms of disapprobation (*e.g.*, æsthetic) was unrecognised, whence could it spring except from some 'anoetic' difference in the content of these primitive undifferentiated judgments? Idealist writers have sought to find it in a germinal reference to the self and its achievements as 'will'. Mr. Taylor, so far as he touches on this "root" problem, seems to find it in the distinction of things and persons. This is a question of fact which we may be content to refer to the decision of the psychologist. I would suggest that while the latter distinction must doubtless be recognised before we can have moral judgment as we understand it we may have the distinction without moral judgment, and it would be difficult to prove that we may not have judgments which are essentially ethical without this distinction. The latter interpretation seems at any rate to be that of Mr. F. H. Bradley, who is quoted by the author as lending authority to his own view. It is true that in the note in *Appearance and Reality* to which reference is made Mr. Bradley speaks of approbation as the 'germ of moral consciousness, but he is careful to point out that not all approbation is moral but only such as contains a reference to the will or self, and to emphasise as the most important for ethics the factor which Mr. Taylor's account leaves in obscurity.¹

¹ I have perhaps misunderstood Mr. Taylor's meaning in this passage. Yet it is difficult to see on what other footing he could have treated the question consistently with the general psychological theory as to the relation of volition to feeling and presentation which he seems to adopt.

The difficulty here raised has to be faced more explicitly when we came to the question of the source of the appearance of absolute worth which attaches to qualities and actions approved by morality. This Mr. Taylor finds, in the first instance, in the comparative permanence and unconditionality of the pleasure or satisfaction they tend to secure. Character has greater worth than wealth or beauty, because the wants it satisfies more constantly recur and are more universally felt. But the question remains as to the source of this permanence and unconditionality, and as to the wants that are thus universal. Granted that you can speak of certain pleasures or satisfactions as permanent and unconditional (or as Plato would say 'real'), what is the ground of their comparative reality? Plato's answer, in spite of ambiguities, was that those satisfactions are real and permanent, which are a sign that the will has found realisation as a system of organised activities. In referring us to the standard of "the steady progressive satisfaction of an organised system of persistent wants" and again to "the formula in which an individual finds the most coherent and adequate account of his own most deeply rooted preferences" Mr. Taylor leaves it doubtful whether, in spite of the phenomenology of his preface, he does not arrive at a like idealistic conclusion.

The next chapter on the "Types of Virtue" brings us to the main object of this part of the book, the empirical proof that "there is no self-consistent highest category under which all the various phenomena of the moral life can be satisfactorily grouped". "As in the various theories by which we attempt to describe physical phenomena we find ourselves driven to assert now the complete inertia, now the spontaneous mobility of material elements, now the complete homogeneity of an all-pervading 'ether,' and again the presence in it of an infinite number of differential motions; now the instantaneous action of gravitation and again the dependence of all action upon a succession of impacts—so in our descriptive analysis of the phenomena of the moral life we are compelled to regard now self-assertion, self-satisfaction, self-development, and again the satisfactions of a wider whole as the two equally ultimate but quite irreconcilable poles between which our ethical practice is perpetually oscillating." The argument starts from the antithesis of the individual or intensive and the social or extensive Type of Virtue. Although as society progresses the paths of self-culture and of social duty seem to show a tendency to coincide, the coincidence can never be complete, for progress means the multiplication as well of the ways in which personal satisfaction may on occasion be

History has made us familiar with a presentational, admitted even by its most distinguished representatives to be a merely provisional because 'falsified' psychology; recent discussions have familiarised us with a volitional or concrete psychology resting on the recognition of will and feeling as fundamental factors; Mr. Taylor seems to adopt a compromise between them, retaining presentation and feeling as primary while treating volition as secondary and derivative.

sought at the expense of the community, as of the evils resulting from the gratification of merely personal desires. In chapter v. the same conclusion is brought home from the side of "Moral Ideals and Progress". As nothing is to be had for nothing, even the most successful effort after "self-realisation" must after all turn out to be a partial failure. On the other hand "social effort" necessarily involves "differential treatment"; the gain of one class the loss of another. Much, moreover, that goes by the name of progress is only apparent: human gain is animal loss; intellectual development, physical degeneration; improved conditions of life in one class, the exploitation of another. Even the moral gains of mercy, toleration, forgiveness mean a loss in courage, self-reliance, promptitude. Mr. Taylor does not assert on the ground of all this that moral progress is a delusion ("the voice of instructed mankind" declares against such a conclusion), but the signs of the times are not auspicious and we are left with the impression that this may be a prejudice.

So far as these conclusions are founded on empirical considerations we can hardly think them to have been satisfactory to Mr. Taylor himself. It would certainly be difficult to find support for them among expert writers on any of the subjects he mentions, industrial, ethical or educational. But the argument is fortified as we have seen by quite a different line of thought and in connexion with this raises a question of principle which is of fundamental philosophical importance.

Assuming it to be generally admitted among idealist writers (with whom as we have seen in spite of himself his argument allies the author) that morality falls short of the highest form of experience, as seems proved by the fact that its dialectic when followed as far as it can go leaves us at last face to face with contradiction, the question remains how far it carries us and how we are to conceive of its reality as affected by the fact that it cannot carry us to the end. Where Mr. Taylor departs from current idealism (unjustifiably we think) is first in finding contradiction and insolubility at the level of the individual and the social instead of at a point far beyond this popular antithesis; secondly (and partly as a consequence) in leaving us in obscurity as to the sense in which morality as commonly understood is real and valid at all.

From Plato downwards it has been the contention of idealism that beyond the antithesis of self and others a harmony is in principle attainable on the ethical level. In modern philosophy this point of view has been represented by Rousseau's General Will, Hegel's distinction between *Moralität* und *Sittlichkeit*, Green's Common Good and Mr. Bradley's Station and its Duties. The point at which morality shows itself to be relative and, judged by an absolute standard, unreal is not here but at the deeper level of the nature of the individual will itself. Mr. Taylor shows himself alive to the significance of this central conception of modern ethical theory in the later chapters, and it is the more surprising to find him labouring the lower contradiction in the

earlier. There seems the less justification for this as in doing so he separates himself in principle from Mr. Bradley whose lead he in general accepts. He recognises indeed that there is a difference between his own treatment and that of Mr. Bradley in his well-known chapter on "Goodness" in *Appearance and Reality*, but he sets it down as one of detail, apparently on the assumption that the doctrine of the latter work differs essentially from that of the *Ethical Studies*. There seems no evidence for such an assumption. It is true that in the earlier book the contradiction which leads beyond morality is that implied in an unrealised ideal in general ("If real how realise? if realise then not real"), in the later it is sought for in the ideal itself. But the elements that fall apart in the ideal are not the individual and society but self-assertion and self-sacrifice, the distinction between them being defined as one not of the contents which are used but of the different uses that are made of them. This is not the place for criticism of Mr. Bradley's doctrine. I wish merely to point out that it is different in principle from that in the text, where the contradiction is taken I think to be one of content.

Connected with this is the further difference that while in the writer's argument the emphasis falls on the irreconcilability of the elements Mr. Bradley never loses sight of the other side of the dialectic, viz., that in principle and actually the features that appear to be in contradiction must in the end coincide. True the 'end' is also the end of Goodness as such. But this only means that morality depends upon the belief in a unity which, if realised, would carry it into a region where without ceasing to be real it would cease to be 'morality'. Mr. Taylor would not, I think, deny this: the difficulty is to see how it is connected with the argument in the earlier chapters which aims at demonstrating a radical and irreconcilable contradiction.

The criticism on the Pleasure theory that follows in the chapter on "Pleasure, Duty and the Good," while in agreement on the whole with current idealism, parts company from it on the question of the possibility of a sum of pleasures. The disagreement as in some other points seems more verbal than real. Freed from the obscurity already noticed as to the sense in which 'permanence' of wants is to be taken and from the reference to finality of satisfaction which hardly seems compatible with his own argument Mr. Taylor's statement might have been taken from Green himself: "It is not a mere succession of satisfactions but a succession of satisfactions in which a permanent want finds an ever-widening realisation along the same lines that we really mean to make us contented. A mere series of satisfactions bound together by no unity of aim and marked by no progress would hardly be finally satisfactory to any one."

A more serious matter is the treatment that the conception of Duty receives in the remainder of the chapter. This of course is a

test question in any ethical theory and it is disappointing to find it discussed in what strikes one as the most cursory and unsatisfactory section of the book. The drift of the argument may be recalled from the statement that "Ultimately I ought to do this means the leaving of this undone would conflict with my deliberate judgment as to the type of life of which I approve and which I expect of myself". If all ideals are equally self-contradictory as the previous chapters have proved and none really more comprehensive as regards its content than another we can easily understand how a sense of obligation could only grow up in connexion with the formal attitude of the will towards any one of them. But is not some further explanation required on the fundamental point of the reason why self-reproach should attach to the attitude of inconsistency rather than to that of consistency with oneself? In such a welter of contradictions where the cultivation of a robust conscience seems the supreme obligation may not *pecca fortiter* be equally applicable where the sin is inconsistency as where it is anything else? The answer of idealism to such a doubt is I suppose that, as in the theoretic so in the practical world, progress and the 'permanent satisfaction' which the sense of it brings depend upon recognition of the inward pressure of an ideal of systematic self-expression as the deepest thing in life. Mr. Taylor as we have seen does not leave us without a hint of such a system, but he has been at no pains to develop it and thus leaves us without guidance at the critical point of the argument.

The concluding chapters on the "Goal of Ethics" and "Beyond Good and Bad" exhibit religion as the necessary refuge from the unsatisfactoriness of the moral life. As however they deduce this consequence not from the contradiction between the individual and social ideal but from the unsatisfactoriness of human life in general, considered as the realisation of a self defined in any terms that do not take account of its relations to an Absolute or all-inclusive experience,—they do not call for notice here. While adding to the reputation of the writer they do not add to the main ethical contention which it has been the object of these notes to criticise.

To summarise this criticism. The argument of the book seems to have had its origin in a certain impatience with what appears to the author an ill-timed self-complacency in the idealist philosophy of the time. Since the days of its establishment in English ethics by the *Prolegomena* and the *Ethical Studies* many things have happened. Progress has been rapid both in psychology and, thanks mainly to Mr. Bradley himself, in metaphysics. In view of these advances a revision of the current doctrine of self-realisation seems to Mr. Taylor to be required. If this were his whole contention there would be little to object to in his criticism. It may very well be true that the phrase 'self-realisation' is a little threadbare, and that a restatement of the whole position is called

for. But this is not that to which Mr. Taylor's argument directs us. It is a double-barrelled attack on the whole idealist position of an underlying unity of the social and individual will. On the one hand this unity is attacked from the point of view of empiricism : there is no trace of it in the form of feeling or judgment which lies at the root of ethics ; on the other hand it is attacked from the point of view of the absolute philosophy as essentially incapable of realisation. I have not considered it necessary to prove that these two points of view are not at any rate *prima facie* the same or reconcilable with one another. I have tried to show that the first indicates a certain failure on the part of the author to appropriate the results of the earlier idealist movement of our own time, while the mode of argument based upon the second equally fails to interpret the later. The aim of the earlier movement was not to pledge idealist ethics to a timeless self, but merely to the reality of moral distinctions. Later developments instead of invalidating this reality start from it as a datum, going on to investigate at what point it must itself become transformed into a form of consciousness which just because it is morality is also something more.