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The Establishment of Ethical First Principles

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VII.—NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ETHICAL FIRST PRINCIPLES.

I cannot but think that the readers of ethical treatises—the remark applies to Utilitarian and Intuitionist moralists alike—must often be perplexed by the manner in which their authors deal with the propositions which they present as first principles. They begin by declaring that first principles are, as such, incapable of proof, and then immediately proceed to make what at least an untutored mind can hardly distinguish from an attempt to prove them. The apparent inconsistency is indeed easy to explain; for all, or almost all, *soi-disant* ethical first principles are denied to be such by at least respectable minorities; hence we naturally expect our moralist not merely to propound his first principles, but also somehow to provide us with rational inducements for accepting them. Still, the dilemma in which he is placed is a somewhat serious one, and seems to me to deserve more systematic examination than it has yet received. On the one hand, it seems undeniable that first principles cannot stand in need of what is strictly to be called proof: they would obviously cease to be first principles if they were exhibited as dependent for their certainty on the acceptance by the mind of certain other truths. Yet, on the other hand, when we are dealing with any subject where there is a conflict of opinion as to first principles, we can hardly refuse to give reasons for taking our side in the conflict: as rational beings conversing with other rationals it seems absurd that we should not be able to explain to each other why we accept one first principle rather than another. And how can these reasons be valid if they do not prove the first principle which they (to use Mill's phrase) "determine the mind" to accept?

To find a way out of this difficulty we require, I think, to take Aristotle's distinction between logical or natural priority in cognition and priority in the knowledge of any particular mind. We are thus enabled to see that a proposition may be self-evident, *i.e.*, may be properly cognisable without being viewed in connexion with any other propositions; though in order that its truth may be apparent to some particular mind, there is still required some rational process connecting it with propositions previously accepted by that mind.

For instance, I may begin by regarding some limited and qualified statement as self-evident, without seeing the truth of the simpler and wider proposition of which the former affirms a part; and yet, when I have been led to accept the latter, I may reasonably regard this as the real first principle, and not the former, of which the limitations and qualifications may then appear accidental and arbitrary. Thus, to take an illustration from the subject of Ethics, with which I am here primarily concerned, I may begin by laying down as a principle that "all pain of human or rational beings is to be avoided"; and then afterwards may be led to enunciate the wider rule that "all pain is to be avoided"; it being made evident to me that the difference of

rationality between two species of sentient beings is no ground for establishing a fundamental ethical distinction between their respective pains. In this case I shall ultimately regard the wider rule as the principle, and the narrower as a deduction from it; in spite of my having been led by a process of reasoning from the latter to the former. Or again (as I have elsewhere argued)¹ I may start with the egoistic maxim that "it is reasonable for me to take my own greatest happiness as the ultimate end of my conduct"; and then may yield to the argument that the happiness of any other individual, equally capable and deserving of happiness, must be no less worth aiming at than my own; and thus may come to accept the utilitarian maxim that "happiness generally is to be sought" as the real first principle; considering the egoistic maxim to be only true in so far as it is a partial and subordinate expression of this latter.

This then is one species of the rational process that we are considering; by which we are logically led to a conclusion which yet when reached we regard as a first principle. We start with a proposition which appears self-evident; we reflect on it and analyse it into a more general proposition with a limitation; concentrating our attention on the limitation, we see that it is arbitrary and without foundation in reason; we deny its validity and substitute for our original principle the wider statement of which that affirmed a part.

There is another quite different process by which a similar result may possibly be reached. We may be able to establish some general criteria for distinguishing true first principles (whether ethical or non-ethical) from false ones; and may then construct a strictly logical deduction by which, applying their general criteria to the special case of ethics, we establish the true first principles of this latter subject. How far such a methodological deduction is actually in our power, I will presently consider. At any rate, I should maintain that there is no third way of establishing ethical principles. The premisses of our reasoning, when strictly stated, must, if not methodological, be purely ethical: that is, they must contain, implicitly or explicitly, the elementary notion signified by the term "ought"; otherwise, there is no rational transition possible to a proposition that does affirm "what ought to be". It may be true that in the development of human minds judgments of the former kind are found among the antecedents of the latter; e.g., a man may be actually led by contemplating purely physical facts to enunciate a moral law; but I know no way of exhibiting this process as logically cogent, and consequently valid for all minds.

This point will, I think, be easily admitted when it is considered in this abstract way; but I find it frequently ignored in current ethical arguments. *E.g.*, many writers seem to hold with Mill² that the psychological generalisation that all men desire pleasure can be used to establish the ethical proposition that pleasure is what we ought to aim at. In Mill's argument the paralogism is partly concealed by the

¹ Cf. *Methods of Ethics*, III. c. 13 and IV. c. 2.

² Cf. *Utilitarianism*, c. 4.

ambiguity of the word "desirable"; for if by "desirable" we merely mean what *can* be desired, the inference that pleasure is desirable because it is actually desired is obviously both irresistible and insignificant. But if we are seeking (as Mill is) for an ethical principle, from which practical rules may be deduced and which therefore must contain implicitly the notion "ought," I cannot see how we are logically to reach such a principle through the most extensive observation of what men actually desire. And the same may be said of all attempts to construct an ethical system on a basis of physical fact; or on the basis of any other kind of psychical facts except ethical beliefs. We may affirm *à priori* that there must be a gap in all such reasonings—where the notion "ought" is introduced—which does not admit of being logically bridged over.

Let us now examine the question above-reserved; *viz.*, whether it is possible to state any general characteristics by which true first principles may be distinguished from false ones; besides, that is, the characteristic of being self-evident to the mind that contemplates them. Such criteria would certainly be useful, if they can be found: since the history of thought makes it only too clear that the human mind, philosophic and unphilosophic, is liable to affirm as self-evidently true what is afterwards agreed to be false. No doubt the Cartesian condition of "clearly and distinctly conceiving" whatever we affirm to be self-evident affords a partial protection against such errors; by carefully conforming to it we may often avoid mistaking mere habitual assumptions, or beliefs inadvertently accepted on authority, for intuitive truths. But though this precaution is a valuable one, it is certainly not adequate: as an inspection of the first principles of Cartesian physics will sufficiently show. It is therefore important to examine what Reid and others have to offer in the way of further criteria. Of these there seem to be chiefly two which have obtained a wide currency and on which considerable stress has been laid by thinkers of more than one school; *viz.*, (1) Universality (or approximate universality) of acceptance,—“consent of learned and unlearned,” and (2) Originality, as inferred from the early date at which certain beliefs make their appearance in any particular mind. I propose to consider each of these separately.

First, however, I would observe that it makes a fundamental difference whether these or any similar criteria are used as supplementary to the characteristic of apparent self-evidence, or as substitutes for it. It seems to me a cardinal defect of Reid's philosophy that he leaves this difference in the back-ground, and does not always make it clear from which of the two points of view he is arguing. Regarded in the former light, I should quite admit the importance of the criterion of "consent," the logical value to any individual mind of the agreement with other minds in any given intuition. It may be thought, perhaps, that so long as any proposition presents itself as self-evident, we can feel no need of anything more, though we may afterwards come to regard it as false: since self-evidence, *ex vi termini*, leaves no room for any doubt that a supplementary criterion

could remove. But this view does not sufficiently allow for the complexity of our intellectual processes. If we have once learnt, either from personal experience or from the history of human thought, that we are liable to be mistaken in the affirmation of apparently self-evident propositions, we may surely retain this general conviction of our fallibility along with the special impression of the self-evidence of any proposition which we may be contemplating; and thus, however strong this latter impression may be, we shall still admit our need of some further protection against the possible failure of our faculty of intuition. Such a further guarantee we may reasonably find in "general consent"; for though the protection thus given is not perfect—since there are historical examples of untrue propositions generally accepted as self-evident—it at least excludes all such error as arises from the special weaknesses and biases of individual minds, or of particular sections of the human race. A proposition which presents itself to my mind as self-evident, and is in harmony with all the rest of my intuitions relating to the same subject, and is also ascertained to be accepted by all other minds that have been led to contemplate it, may after all turn out to be false: but it seems to have as high a degree of certainty as I can hope to attain under the existing conditions of human thought.

The case is very different when the argument from "consent" is used not to confirm but to override my individual judgment as to the self-evidence of any proposition. Even so it may afford a sufficient ground for a practical decision: certainly if I found myself alone *contra mundum*, I should think it more probable that I was wrong than that the world was, and such a balance of probability is enough to act on: but I could not treat the proposition in question as sufficiently known for purposes of scientific reasoning. For the argument establishing it would equally establish the defective condition of the individual intellect that failed to see its truth: and would therefore afford a general probability of error in any exercise of that intellect on the subject to which the proposition related.

Let us pass to consider the second of the above-mentioned criteria, Originality. It seems to me that the stress laid on this by Reid and other writers is chiefly due to a psychological assumption now almost exploded; *viz.*, that the human mind exists at birth in a condition which, though imperfect, in so far as undeveloped, is at least free from positive faults: in which, therefore, the exercise of its cognitive faculties, so far as it is capable of exercising them, must result in truth. It is hardly necessary at the present day to point out how entirely this assumption lacks scientific foundation: since not only is this original uncorrupted state of the human intellect nowhere given in experience, but we do not find any approximation to it as we trace back the history of any individual man, or of the human race generally, to its sources. Indeed there probably remain but few thinkers who conceive themselves in a position to urge the ascertained originality of any belief as positive evidence of its truth. There seem, however, to be still some who would apply the criterion negatively;

holding that if we can explain the derivation of an apparently self-evident belief, we thereby show its apparent self-evidence to be illusory. This view I propose briefly to consider.

The supposed explanation must consist in stating either (1) the physical or (2) the psychical conditions of the mental phenomenon which is said to be derived. Now on the physiological question I speak with all diffidence: but I believe that physiologists have no such knowledge of the bodily conditions under which true and false beliefs respectively are produced, as could possibly justify us in invalidating an apparently self-evident proposition on physiological grounds; except in the case of mental derangement revealed by physical symptoms, or of beliefs that are normally received through the operation of the organs of sense. A clairvoyant may have reason to distrust his visions because they come with his eyes closed; but I am aware of no similar grounds for discrediting ethical intuitions.

It will seem then that the explanation that is to invalidate the self-evidence of an apparent intuition must be psychological. Now it is universally held, by English psychologists at least, that we know Mind only as a series of transient phenomena—except so far as we are allowed to know the permanence, identity, and free causality of the subject of these phenomena; a point which does not now concern us. At any rate the psychological “derivation” of any belief or other mental phenomenon can be at most an account of the transient psychical facts—whether beliefs or merely feelings—which experience shows to be invariable antecedents of the phenomenon explained. We have no ground for supposing these antecedents really to persist in their consequent under a changed form, when they have apparently passed away. It is necessary to lay stress on this, because several writers of the Associational school assume the right of transferring chemical conceptions to psychical change; and regard mental phenomena as “compounded” of their antecedents just as a piece of matter is conceived to be composed of its chemical elements. I have never seen any justification for this procedure. Certainly the analogy of material chemistry fails to justify it. When the coexistence of the two antecedents oxygen and hydrogen is followed by the appearance of the heterogeneous matter called water, we have two distinct reasons for conceiving the oxygen and hydrogen to have a latent existence in the water; first that the weight of the water exactly corresponds to the weight of the oxygen and the hydrogen, and secondly that we can reverse the process of change and exhibit the water as the immediate antecedent of the oxygen and hydrogen. But neither of these reasons exist—nor any other that I am aware of—for attributing more compositeness to any mental phenomenon than we can discern in it by direct introspective analysis.

If then it be admitted that the so-called “explanation” of an apparent intuition can only consist in a statement of its antecedents, not its elements, we have to ask in what way such a statement can affect the question of its truth or falsehood. Some writers really seem to think that the mere fact of a belief having been caused is a ground

for distrusting it, unless we can show that its causes have been such as to make it true. But this doctrine lands us at once in universal scepticism; since the premisses of any such demonstration must be beliefs, which having been caused will themselves require to be proved true. Unless indeed it is held that the ultimate premisses of all reasoning are uncaused!—a paradox which I have no ground for attributing to the writers in question. Otherwise if all beliefs are equally in the position of having had invariable antecedents, it is obvious that this characteristic alone cannot serve to invalidate any of them.

If therefore an apparently self-evident proposition is to be discredited on account of its derivation, it must be not merely because, as a psychical phenomenon, it is the consequent of certain antecedents, but because it can be shown from experience that these particular antecedents are more likely to produce a false belief than a true one. I am far from denying that such a demonstration is possible in the case of some propositions that have been put forward as self-evident ethical principles: but I do not remember to have ever seen it systematically attempted.

HENRY SIDGWICK.

MR. BALFOUR ON TRANSCENDENTALISM.

I should like to say a few words about Mr. Balfour's paper on "Transcendentalism," which appeared in MIND XII. Mr. Balfour is a vigorous critic, but I do not think he is sufficiently familiar with Kant, or with any mode of thought which can, in Kant's sense, be called 'transcendental,' to make his criticism in this case very effective. I shall not therefore follow him through all the questions he discusses, but confine myself to a few leading points.

(1) Mr. Balfour's main stumbling-block is Kant's expression, '*Musskönnen*' (must be capable), and, like Schopenhauer, he thinks that the second word takes away all the force of the first. If it cannot be said that the object of knowledge *must* be thought as object to a conscious subject, but only that it must be *capable of* being so thought, this, he thinks, destroys the whole transcendental argument. "The rules which thought was supposed to impress on nature, according to which nature must be, because without them she would be nothing to us as thinking beings, these rules turn out after all to be of only subjective validity. They are the casual necessities of our reflective moments, necessities which would have been unmeaning to us in our childhood, of which the mass of mankind are never conscious, and from which we are absolved during a large portion of our lives" (MIND, XII., p. 489). Will Mr. Balfour carry out this argument to its legitimate consequences? Logicians tell us that a conclusive argument *must be capable of* being stated in logical form, and shown to be in accordance with logical laws. Will Mr. Balfour then maintain *either* that every one who reasons correctly knows these laws