



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Mind Association

The Theory of Evolution in its Application to Practice

Author(s): Henry Sidgwick

Source: *Mind*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Jan., 1876), pp. 52-67

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the Mind Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2246857>

Accessed: 16/09/2009 11:06

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=oup>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Oxford University Press and Mind Association are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Mind*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

against as involving a paralogism. It would avoid perplexity if he were frankly to assume or state his psychological premises, and, if necessary, indicate the kind of justification he would give of them.

J. VENN.

V.—THE THEORY OF EVOLUTION IN ITS APPLICATION TO PRACTICE.

CURRENT philosophical notions, characteristic of the most recently accepted system or manner of thought in any age and country, are apt to exercise over men's minds an influence which is often in inverse ratio to the clearness with which the notions themselves are conceived, and the evidence for the philosophical doctrines implied in their acceptance is examined and estimated. For any such notion may easily have different shades of meaning, and according to the relations in which it is used may imply many distinct propositions, which have no necessary connection with each other, and for which the evidence is very various, both in kind and degree: while yet, with whatever portion of this implication it may be employed, it is apt to carry with it the impressiveness and *prestige* which it naturally possesses as the last outcome of philosophical reflection. The fallacy of which we thus run a risk cannot be exactly classed among Bacon's "Idola Fori," or his "Idola Theatri," as it is neither due to the defects of popular language, nor to the defects of philosophical method: we must rather call it a hybrid between the two species, resulting from the communication between the *Theatrum* and the *Forum*, now much more fully established than it was in the time of Bacon. There would seem to be a peculiar danger of this fallacy in the practical conclusions deduced from the Theory of Evolution: as such deductions are various, complicated, and widely interesting, while they have not yet been systematically treated by any of the accepted expositors of Evolutionism. It is my object in the present paper to guard against this danger by distinguishing different propositions enforced or implied in the doctrine of Evolution as commonly accepted; and considering them severally in their bearing on Ethics, that is, on the Theory of Right or Rational Conduct. With this object, it will not be necessary to enter upon the fundamental question, whether the doctrine of Evolution is merely historical or properly philosophical: whether it merely gives us a probable explanation of the past, or such a justification of it as reason demands. In so far as I myself accept the doctrine, it is entirely on the

former view: but adequately to justify this position would require a separate essay. Nor, again shall I have occasion to pursue the notion of Evolution beyond the limits of organic life: as the influence on practice which any speculations as to the past and future motions of inorganic matter may have is obviously so slight and indirect that we need not take it into consideration.

I. The widest sense in which the term Evolution is used appears to be merely exclusive of Special Creation. Thus, Mr. Spencer says that in forming "a conception of the mode in which living bodies in general have originated we have to choose between two hypotheses,—the hypothesis of Special Creation and the hypothesis of Evolution." This latter hypothesis, as he immediately explains, is that "the multitudinous kinds of organisms that now exist, or have existed during past geological eras, have arisen by insensible steps, through actions such as we see habitually going on." Similarly, when Mr. Darwin speaks of "Evolution *in any form*," he seems to mean the general hypothesis just stated, in contradistinction to his own special hypothesis of Evolution by Natural Selection. It should be observed that in the above statement the production of living organisms out of inorganic matter is implicitly excluded from the hypothesis; for it is not held generally, nor by the writers to whom I have referred, that this is among the actions which we see habitually going on. What we do see is that living things change slightly in the course of their life, and also produce other living things somewhat different from themselves; the hypothesis, then, is that all the differences among living organisms, which we must conceive as having begun to exist at some point in the history of the organic world, have been produced by the accumulation of these slight differences. And without examining minutely the possibility of living things being brought to our planet from without, we may take it for granted that most of the living things that have existed on this earth have also begun to exist there.

Now in the controversial *mêlée* which has been kept up for half a generation about the "Darwinian Theory," it is sometimes forgotten that the hypothesis of Evolution, *in this wider and more general signification*, is sustained by an immense force of scientific presumption, independent of all special evidence. We cannot suppose, without contradicting the fundamental assumption on which all our physical reasoning proceeds, that an organism or any other material thing that has begun to exist, was not formed out of pre-existent matter by the operation of pre-existent forces according to universal laws; so that if we

do not suppose each new organism to be developed out of some pre-existing organism, we are forced to regard it as causally connected in some totally unknown way with inorganic matter; and this is an alternative which few will embrace. And, again, it is manifestly illegitimate to assume that any new organic form was produced suddenly, *per saltum*, and so in a manner of which experience affords us no example; until it is proved that it could not have been produced by the gradual accumulation of such slight variations as experience shows us continually occurring.

On this point I need not perhaps dwell long. It is more necessary to argue that the theory of Evolution, thus widely understood, has little or no bearing upon ethics. It is commonly supposed that it is of great importance in ethical controversy to prove that the Moral Faculty is derivative and not original: and there can be little doubt that this conclusion follows from the theory which we are now considering. For when we trace back in thought the series of organisms of which man is the final result, we must—at some point or other, it matters not where—come to a living being (whether called Man or not) devoid of moral consciousness; and between this point and that at which the moral faculty clearly presents itself, we must suppose a transition-period in which the distinctly moral consciousness is gradually being derived and developed out of more primitive feelings and cognitions. All this seems necessarily involved in the acceptance of Evolution in any form; but when it is all admitted, I cannot see that any argument is gained for or against any particular ethical doctrine. For all the competing and conflicting moral principles that men have anywhere assumed must be equally derivative: and the mere recognition of their derivativeness, apart from any particular theory as to the *modus derivandi*, cannot supply us with any criterion for distinguishing true moral principles from false. It is perhaps more natural to think that this recognition must influence the mind in the direction of general moral scepticism. But surely there can be no reason why we should single out for distrust the enunciations of the moral faculty, merely because it is the outcome of a long process of development. Such a line of argument would leave us no faculty stable and trustworthy: and would therefore end by destroying its own premisses. It is obviously absurd to make the validity or invalidity of any judgments depend on the particular stage in the process of development at which this class of judgments first made their appearance; especially since it is an essential point of the Evolution-theory to conceive this process as fundamentally similar in all its parts. And it may be further

observed that some of our most secure intellectual possessions are truths (such as those of the higher mathematics) of which the apprehension was not attained until long after the moral faculty was in full play.

All this is so evident, that what seems to need explanation is rather the fact that so much importance is commonly attached to the question as to the "origin of the moral faculty." I am disposed to connect it with that change in the common mode of regarding moral questions, which, in the history of English ethical thought, was effected by the influence of Butler. So long as the moral faculty was regarded* as really a faculty of "intuition" or rational apprehension of objective right and wrong, the history of these intuitions could seem of no more importance to the moralist as such than the history of our perception of space is to the geometer as such. But when the cognitive element of the moral consciousness fell into the background, and it came to be considered chiefly on its impulsive side, as a spring of action claiming a peculiar kind of authority, the validity of the authority seemed to depend on the assumption of an original legitimate constitution of human nature, and the proof that the moral impulse was derived seemed to afford at least presumptive evidence that its authority was usurped. For the old conception of Nature, used as supplying a practical standard (whether in Ethics, Politics or Theoretical Jurisprudence) always suggested a fixed and unchangeable type, created once for all, and therefore both original and in a certain sense universal notwithstanding numerous actual divergences. This latter notion has now entirely vanished from the regions of political and jural speculation, under the influence of the Historical method: in Ethics it still lingers: but the Theory of Evolution (which may be regarded as the final extension of the Historical method) is likely soon to expel it altogether from practical Philosophy.

II. Still reflection shows that the conception really essential to Butler's system, of a definite type or ideal of human existence by conformity to which conduct is made "right" or "good," is in no way irreconcilable with the doctrine which we are examining. In fact the term "Evolution" naturally suggests not merely a process of continual change, but one that brings into continually greater actuality or prominence a certain form or type, a certain complex of characteristics, which is conceived as having had a latent existence at the outset of the process. If, then, this type be regarded as in itself right or good, its

* As (*e.g.*) by Cudworth, Clarke, and the earlier orthodox moralists generally.

place in a moral system will correspond to that of the "Nature" of præ-evolutional writers. Either notion professes to meet the largest demands of the moralist, by establishing a clear and definite relation between "what is" and "what ought to be;" though the demands are met in a different way in each case. On the older view we have to ascertain the ideal of humanity, partly by tracing history backwards to the cradle of the individual or of the race, and partly by discerning and abstracting the permanent type amid the variations and imperfections of actual men and societies. On the newer view we see it gradually realised more and more as the process which constitutes the life of the universe goes on. In either case the duty of realising this ideal furnishes the supreme rule of conduct; though on the latter view we have the satisfaction of knowing that the normal operation of the Power manifested in the universe is continually producing, to an ever greater extent, the result which we rationally desire.

Here, then, in our analysis of the notion of Evolution, we have at length come upon an element of fundamental practical importance; though it is an element of which the presence is somewhat latent and obscure. Probably all who speak of Evolution mean by it not merely a process from old to new, but also a progress from less to more of certain qualities or characteristics. But that these characteristics are intrinsically good or desirable is more often implied than explicitly stated: otherwise it would be more clearly seen that this ethical proposition cannot be proved by any of the physical reasonings commonly used to establish the doctrine of Evolution. The truth is that the writers who have most occupied themselves in tracing the course of man's development have often not been practised in that systematic reflection on the play of their own moral faculty which is essential to clearness of thought in the discussion of ethical principles. In Comte's system, for example—and to Comte, perhaps, more than to any other single man, the triumph of the Historical Method in Politics is due—no clear reason seems to be given why the Progress, which is the end of the statesman and the philanthropist, should coincide with the Progress that the Sociologist has ascertained to be a fundamental fact of human history. It is certainly not from any blind confidence in the natural order of the Universe that Comte takes as a first principle of practice that we are to help mankind forward in the direction in which, speaking broadly, it tends to go. Yet this does seem to be his fundamental precept; for though he takes pains to show that an increase of Happiness attends on Progress, he never uses the production of Happiness as the end and criterion of proper moral and in-

tellectual culture. It is rather the "bringing into ever greater prominence the faculties characteristic of humanity" to which he bids us direct our efforts; while, again, the development which we find in human history is defined as "le simple essor spontané des facultés fondamentales toujours pré-existantes, qui constituent l'ensemble de notre nature." Such phrases remind us that we cannot take Comte as a representative of Evolutionism: and that his notion of development is transitional between the old doctrine of fixed types of human nature, and the new doctrine of a perpetual process of life, in which humanity, as we commonly conceive it, is but a stage accidentally marked off by the fact of our living now. A disciple of Mr. Darwin knows nothing of "always pre-existent fundamental faculties characteristic of humanity." In his view, as our ancestors were other and less than man, so our posterity may be other and more. If he includes in his conception of Evolution the notion of perpetual Progress in certain definite characteristics, these must evidently be characteristics which belong to all living things as such, though they appear with ever greater prominence as the evolution of life proceeds. Shall we then say that Progress consists in increasing complexity of organisation, or (to use Mr. Spencer's more precise phrase) in more and more "definite coherent heterogeneity" of changes in the living being correspondent to changes in its environment? But Progress thus interpreted seems no longer adapted to give us the ultimate end or first principle of Practice. For, though we sometimes use the terms "higher" and "lower organisms" in a way which might seem to imply that mere complexity of organisation is *intrinsically* preferable or desirable; still, perhaps, no one would deliberately maintain this, but only that it is desirable as a means to some further end. And this end would be commonly taken to be increase of Happiness; which most Evolutionists believe to be at least a concomitant of Progress. "Slowly but surely," writes Mr. Spencer, "Evolution brings about an increasing amount of happiness," so that we are warranted in believing that "Evolution can only end in the establishment of the most complete happiness." On this view, the Theory of Evolution in its practical aspects would appear to resolve itself into Utilitarianism, with the suggestion of a peculiar method for pursuing the utilitarian end. For, if nature is continually increasing Happiness, or the excess of pleasure over pain in the whole sum of sentient existence, by continually perfecting the "correspondence between life and its environment," this latter should perhaps be taken by us as the general means to the former end and the immediate object of our efforts.

III. A different view, however, is sometimes taken of the fundamental character of Evolutional ethics, which may be conveniently introduced by considering an ambiguity in the phrase I have just quoted. For the term "correspondence," or the nearly equivalent terms "adjustment" and "adaptation," as employed by Mr. Spencer and his disciples, appear to blend two different meanings; or, perhaps, to imply the necessary connexion of two distinct characteristics. They imply, namely, that the more exactly and discriminatively the changes in an organism represent or respond to the different changes in its environment, the more will the organism be "fitted to its conditions of existence" in the sense of being qualified to preserve itself under these conditions. But it seems that we cannot assume that this connexion will hold universally; for the responsiveness (*e.g.*) of an invalid's organism to surrounding changes is often more discriminating than that of a man in strong health, though less effective for self-preservation. Indeed, the common notion of "delicacy of organisation" blends the attribute of subtle responsiveness to external changes with the very opposite of strong and stable vitality. Having then to choose between discriminating responsiveness and tendency to self-preservation, an Evolutionist may take the latter as the essential characteristic of the well-being of an organism. And rising to a universal point of view, and considering the whole series of living things of which any individual organism forms a link, he may define "general good" or "welfare"—as Mr. Darwin does—to consist in "the rearing of the greatest number of individuals in full health and vigour [and with all their faculties perfect]* under the conditions to which they are subject." Here we have a very different notion from Happiness offered us as representing the ultimate end and standard of right conduct. Mr. Darwin, indeed, contrasts the two, explicitly rejecting "general happiness" as the standard, and thus distinguishes his ethics from Utilitarianism as commonly understood.

But can we really declare that when we apply the terms "good" or "bad" to the manner of existence of an organised being, we mean simply to attribute to it more or less of the tendency to self-preservation, or to the preservation of its kind? Certainly such a reduction of the notion of "well-being" to "being" (actual and potential) would be a most important contribution from the doctrine of Evolution to

* I have put this clause in brackets, because the term "perfect" implies some standard of "good" or "well-being;" and if this standard were different from that which the definition gives, the definition would be palpably faulty; while if it be the same, the clause seems superfluous.

ethical science. But it at least conflicts in a very startling manner with those ordinary notions of Progress and Development, which I have already noticed as combining ethical and physical import. For, in our use of these notions, it is always implied that certain forms of life are qualitatively superior to others, independently of the number of individuals, present or future, in which each form is realised. Whereas the doctrine above stated, if pressed to its logical results, would present to us all equally numerous species as *primâ facie* on a par in respect of goodness, except, indeed, that the older (and so generally the "lower," as we commonly estimate) would seem the better, in so far as we have more evidence of their capacity to exist under the physical conditions of our globe. A closer investigation would, of course, disclose many differences in the prospects of future existence enjoyed respectively by the different forms, but these would but rarely and accidentally correspond to the commonly recognised differences of lower and higher. And if we confine ourselves to human beings, to whom alone the practical side of the doctrine applies, is it not too paradoxical to assert that "rising in the scale of existence" means no more than "developing further the capacity to exist?" A greater degree of fertility would thus become an excellence outweighing the finest moral and intellectual endowments; and some semi-barbarous races must be held to have attained the end of human existence more than some of the pioneers and patterns of civilisation. In short, when fairly contemplated, the doctrine that resolves all virtues and excellences into the comprehensive virtue

"of going on, and still to be"

can hardly find acceptance. At the same time, we must admit that ζῆν (in Aristotelian phrase) is a necessary condition of εὔ ζῆν; and, since living at all has been a somewhat difficult task to human communities, until a very recent period in the history of our race, the most important part of the function of the moral sense has consisted in the enforcement of those habits of life which were indispensable to the mere permanent existence of any society of human beings. This seems to me the element of truth in Mr. Darwin's view, and in that hypothetical construction of the origin and growth of the moral sense with which he has connected it. We may admit further that any defect in the capacity for continued existence would be a fault in a social system which no excellences of a different kind can counterbalance; but this is a very different thing from saying that all possible improvement may be resolved into some increase of this capacity.

IV. If, then, the Well-being of living things is somewhat

different from their mere Being, however secured and extended in space, or time, what is the content of this notion "well" or "good?" I have elsewhere tried to show that the only satisfactory answer to this question is that of the old-fashioned Utilitarianism which Mr. Darwin and his disciples are trying to transcend. The only rational ultimate ground, in my opinion, for pronouncing any sentient being in a "good" condition, is that its condition is calculated to produce as great an amount as is under the circumstances possible of Happiness, that is, pleasant or desirable feeling or consciousness: taking into consideration not its own happiness only—for we have no rational ground for preferring this to any other happiness—but that of all sentient beings, present or future, on whose manner of existence it exercises any influence. If this be so, it only remains to ask how far the notion of Progress or Elevation in the scale of life, as understood by Evolutionists, supplies us with clear guidance to the right means for attaining this ultimate end. Now, no doubt, in comparing the happiness of man with that of the lower animals, or the happiness of civilised man with that of savages, we commonly assume that amount of happiness varies according to degree in scale of organisation. We do this because what we really mean by "higher life" seems, when we look closely at the notion, to be convertible with *more* life. As Mr. Spencer says, "we regard as the highest life that which shows great complexity in the correspondences, great rapidity in the succession of them, and great length in the series of them;" the two former characteristics supplying a measure of the intensive quantity of life lived in a given time, and the latter adding its extensive quantity. And the experience of mankind, as a whole—though there are not wanting individual dissentients—seems to support the belief that Conscious or Sentient Life is, speaking broadly and on the average, desirable; that some degree of pleasure is the normal state of sentient beings as such and pain abnormal. Thus it follows that the "higher" such a being stands in the scale of organisation, the happier it is, generally speaking. In accordance with this general principle we regard the exercise of more varied and complicated activities, the extension of sympathy with the pleasures and pains of others, the development of scientific and historical interests, of æsthetic sensibilities, &c.—which might all be brought under the general notion of "progress in the correspondence between the organism and its environment"—as involving generally an increase of happiness. Still, in so far as we pursue any of these elements of culture for their own sakes, our pursuit is closely guided and checked by experience of the pleasure derived from them; and it would

seem that this ought to be so. For, in the first place, the connexion above stated is not universal, as the more intense life may be intensely painful ; and, independently of this, the notions of Culture, Elevation of Life, or Perfection of Organisation are not sufficiently definite to be substituted for that of Happiness as the immediate object of rational pursuit ; indeed, the pleasure actually experienced seems often a better test of true development in any direction, than the latter (as otherwise estimated) can be of the pleasure that will ultimately accrue.

But the fact is that in the ordering of an individual man's life, Development or Perfection of Organisation scarcely comes into competition with Happiness as an end of action. For in this case we cannot alter the structure of the organism much or directly, but only to a slight extent by altering its functions ; and the functions of each civilised man are, in most cases, determined for him by a combination of imperious bodily necessities and fixed social relations, and are exercised not for their own sakes but in order to provide adequately some more indispensable means of happiness. It is rather when we pass from the individual human being to consider the far more modifiable social organism of which he forms a part, that it becomes of fundamental importance to know whether the doctrine of Evolution can guide us to the form of organisation most productive of happiness. For, if this be so, the efforts of the statesman and the philanthropist should be primarily directed to the realisation of this form, and empirical utilitarianism would be, to a great extent, superseded in the political art. The right social order would, no doubt, approve itself as such by the general experience of happiness resulting from it ; but it would become unscientific to refer to this experience as determining the settlement of great political questions.

Before, however, we consider if our knowledge of sociology is sufficiently advanced to enable us to define the political ideal, we must notice one fundamental difficulty in constructing it, which arises inevitably from the relation of the individual man to society. For the most prominent characteristic of the advanced development of any organism is the specialisation—or, as Mr. Spencer calls it, “differentiation”—of the functions of its different parts. Obviously the more this is effected, the more “definite coherent heterogeneity” will be realised in the organism and in its relations to its environment. But obviously too, this involves *pro tanto* a proportionally less degree of variety and complexity in the life of each individual member of the society whose functions are thus specialised ; and their life becoming narrow and monotonous must become, according to

our present hypothesis, less happy. This result has often been noticed by observers of the minute sub-division of labour which is a feature of our industrial progress : but the same sort of *primâ facie* conflict between individual and social development occurs in considering most of the great problems of modern politics ; such as the relations between rich and poor generally, the relations between governors and governed, and the relations of the sexes. Now, as it is the individual, after all, who feels pleasure and pain, it is clear that his development (or happiness) must not be sacrificed to attain a higher form of social organisation ; the latter end can only be sought within the limits fixed by the former ; the point then is to determine what these are. It may be thought, perhaps, that the history of past stages in the evolution of society will indicate the reconciliation or compromise between individual and social development to which the human race has gradually been working up. It would seem, however, that history rather shows us the problem than its solution. For, while a continually greater specialisation of functions is undoubtedly an ever-present feature of social development, we have to notice as proceeding side by side with this a continually fuller recognition of the rights and claims of the individual as such. And this, giving a point of view from which the elements of the community are regarded as equal and similar, considerably qualifies, and, to some extent, counterbalances the tendency to "heterogeneity" above noticed ; it is obvious, *e.g.*, that an ancient society with a fully developed caste-system, where the existence of the individual was absorbed in and identified with his social function, was, in some respects, more heterogeneous than our own, in spite of the greater differentiation of functions in the latter. Hence we have on the one hand an ever increasing social inequality, and, on the other hand, an ever profounder protest against this inequality ; and, whatever the right compromise between these conflicting tendencies may be, it does not seem possible to determine it by any deduction from the doctrine of Evolution.

For when we turn to examine the principles of social construction propounded by eminent sociologists, we see very plainly that any attempt to determine the political ideal by a scientific formula of Social Evolution must at least fail in obtaining that "consensus of experts," which is, to common men, the most satisfactory guarantee of scientific method. Those thinkers who are most confident of having discovered the law of progress seem hopelessly disagreed as to the next term in the series. For example, Comte teaches us that the "influence dispersive du principe de la spécialisation," tending in its

extreme form to a "sorte d'automatisme humain," must be met by a corresponding development of that "réaction nécessaire de l'ensemble sur les parties," which constitutes the proper function of government. "L'intensité," he says, "de cette fonction régulatrice, bien loin de devoir décroître à mesure que l'évolution humaine s'accomplit, doit, au contraire, devenir de plus en plus indispensable;" and actually, he holds, we find the two tendencies to specialisation and to central regulation developing, as progress goes on, so as to balance each other by a continually proportionate increase. And certainly the amount of regulation contemplated in Comte's Utopia would seem sufficient to counteract any conceivable development of centrifugal impulses. While Mr. Spencer is no less confirmed by sociological study in his opposite doctrine that the proper function of government is what he calls "negatively-regulative control," viz.: the prevention of mutual interference and the enforcement of free contracts among the members of a community. Mr. Spencer supports his ideal of organisation by a reference to biological analogies; but, here again, his view is diametrically opposed to that of our most eminent living morphologist.* In this diversity of opinion, it is perhaps premature to consider the practical results that would follow from our attaining really scientific prevision of the social relations of the future. But I must observe that it would still remain to be proved that the mere advance to a higher stage in social organisation is necessarily accompanied with a proportionate increase of happiness. Past history shows us the greatest differences in the prosperity of different nations on approximately the same level of social development; and it seems most reasonable to suppose that such prevision of social changes as we are likely to attain will rather define the limits within which the political art has to operate than furnish the principles of the art itself.

V. Hitherto, in considering the bearing of Evolutionism on the theory of right conduct, we have assumed that such conduct is to be not only objectively rational, or the best means of realising what is ultimately good; but also subjectively rational, consciously chosen by the agent as a means to this end. This, however, though in the view of most moralists it seems to be the ideal form of human action, is manifestly not the universal or even the most common form. Men are prompted to action by other appetites and desires far more frequently than by the desire to do what is reasonable or right:

* Cf. Professor Huxley's essay on "Administrative Nihilism."

so that some ethical writers even ignore the very existence of this latter motive, and regard human action as always stimulated by one or other of the more special impulses; including what are called "moral sentiments," or immediate unreflective likings and aversions for particular kinds of conduct, contemplated without reference to any ulterior end. Indeed the operation of such unreflective impulses appears to be the most prominent element in the common notion of "conscience": so that the denomination by the Utilitarian school of the common morality which they wish to supersede as "instinctive" or "sentimental" is not unfrequently accepted by other than Utilitarian Moralists. Now, if the doctrine of Evolution, in its application to the origin and growth of such instinctive impulses generally, and in particular of moral sentiments, is able to exhibit these as Nature's means of attaining that general happiness which is the conscious end of Utilitarian calculation; a reconciliation between "instinctive" and Utilitarian morality seems to be effected, which composes the long conflict between the two schools. This is, at any rate, the claim put forward by Mr. Spencer and other expositors of evolutionism.

In proceeding to examine the claim, we must first consider how this part of the Evolution doctrine is supposed to be proved. Two methods of proof have been put forward, fundamentally distinct, but yet not incompatible: in fact, so far from incompatible that one of them almost needs to be supplemented by the other. One method consists in the application to sociology of that hypothetical-deductive use of the theory of Natural Selection which has of late years been common among biologists of the Darwinian school. Moral sentiments, it is said, are impulses that tend to the maintenance of society: hence a tribe in which they were accidentally developed would tend to be victorious over other tribes in the struggle for existence: and thus moral sentiments would come to be a part of the essential characteristics of humanity: hence we may conclude that it was in this way that they were actually generated. It will be seen that this view of the moral sentiments is in immediate connection with that account of the Well-being of an organism which, distinguishing it from Happiness, reduces it (as I have already noticed) to Being actual and potential. In order therefore to harmonise it with Utilitarianism we require a further application of the same deductive method: as thus—Men are stimulated to actions and abstinences in proportion as they find these in the long run pleasurable and their opposites painful: therefore tribes, whose members derive the greatest balance of pleasure over pain from actions and modes of existence conducive to the preservation of the tribe will have a distinct advantage

in the struggle for existence : therefore the societies that in the long run survive will be so constituted that the maximum happiness of their members will be attained by conduct tending to the preservation of society. But even the most roseate optimism must admit that this double harmony between pleasant and preservative conduct, and between individual and universal well-being, is ideal and future : that it does not represent accurately the present, and still less the past experience of the human race. And hence (as Mr. Darwin himself has not failed to observe), the theory of natural selection has less explanatory efficacy here than it has in its usual biological applications. For in those the variations naturally selected are taken as accidental, or at least no explanation of them is necessary for the justification of the theory : we have only to assume generally a slight indefinite tendency to vary from the parental type in the propagation of life, and then the action of the environment will do the rest. But in the case of the sociological changes above-mentioned, this simple account of the matter is hardly admissible. For as the interest of the community continually involves more or less sacrifice of the individual, especially in the early stages of human history which the theory contemplates, any individual varying in the direction of morality would be liable to be cut off, and would fail to propagate his peculiar type.* We require therefore some further explanation of the tendency of human character to take this particular line of change. For it will hardly do to reply that a *tribe* which manifested this tendency would necessarily flourish : the chances are so very much against the production of a tribe of which the individuals accidentally combine to maintain an individually unprofitable variation in one special direction. This further explanation is found in the second method to which I referred, which is the one employed by Mr. Herbert Spencer. His theory, briefly given, is this : that experienced pleasures and pains produce secondary likings and aversions

* " It is extremely doubtful whether the offspring of the more sympathetic and benevolent parents, or of those who were the most faithful to their comrades, would be reared in greater numbers than the children of selfish and treacherous parents belonging to the same tribe. He who was ready to sacrifice his life, as many a savage has been, rather than betray his comrades, would often leave no offspring to inherit his noble nature. The bravest men, who were always willing to come to the front in war, and who freely risked their lives for others, would on an average perish in larger numbers than other men. Therefore it hardly seems probable that the number of men gifted with such virtues, or that the standard of their excellence, could be increased through natural selection, that is, by the survival of the fittest."—Darwin, *Descent of Man*, ch. v., p. 130 (2nd. ed.).

for pleasure-causing and pain-causing conduct, which from being habitual become organic and so capable of being transmitted to posterity: and that through the interdependence of interests that results from gregariousness and the interchange of emotions that results from sympathy, it is the common experience of *all* that practically operates in producing these derivative sentiments and habits; so that they ultimately appear as instincts tending to promote the interests of the community.

It appears to me that these two methods, taken together, furnish a highly plausible explanation of the development of morality in a race of animals gregarious, sympathetic, and semi-rational—such as we may conceive man to have been in the præ-moral stage of his development. But I fail to see how we are thus helped to a solution of the conflict between the Utilitarian and Intuitionist schools of Ethics: in so far, that is, as either school professes to supply not merely a psychological explanation of human emotions, but an ethical theory of right conduct. For, putting aside the discrepancy before noticed between General Happiness and the Preservation of Race, we are still left asking the question: what ought we to do when Moral Sentiment comes into conflict with the conclusions of Rational Utilitarianism? Granting that both are really akin and spring from the same root, which ought we to obey, Reason or Instinct? As far as I can see, the “reconciliation” proposed by Evolutionists results in a practical surrender on one side or the other; though it is not always clear on which side, and a plausible case may be made out for either. On the one hand it may be said that Moral Sentiments (or other derivative likings and aversions) constitute Nature’s guidance to Happiness; and that our power of calculating pleasures and pains is so imperfect as to make it really rational in the pursuit of happiness, to disregard the results of conscious calculation when they are clearly in conflict with any of these embodiments of unconscious reasoning and outgrowths of ages of experience. On the other hand it may equally be urged that the symbolical representation and comparison of experienced pleasures and pains which we call the exercise of practical reason, is only the final phase of that adaptation of the organism to its circumstances which in its earlier phases took place by the development of these secondary instincts: that, in short, if Instinct is really implicit (utilitarian) reason, it is better to perform the calculation explicitly. Certainly we can balance any statement of the sources of fallibility in utilitarian calculation by an equally impressive demonstration of the imperfections and misguidance of instinct.

It may perhaps be said that an Evolutionist theory does not profess to prove that Utilitarian and Intuitional Ethics coincide in detail, but only to afford them a broad general ground of reconciliation. But in this case it seems to me ethically superfluous, whatever historical interest it may have. For this general result may be much more easily and satisfactorily attained by a survey of men's actual moral sentiments, and a comparison of them with the conclusions of utilitarian calculation. The practical disagreements between different schools of moralists, though their magnitude and importance are perhaps commonly underrated—certainly bear a small proportion to their agreements: but a theory of the origin of morality which merely explains the latter can hardly be said to effect a settlement of ethical controversy.

HENRY SIDGWICK.

VI.—PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE.

I.—AS REGARDS THE SPECIAL SCIENCES.

DISTINCTIONS, not Definitions—such is and must be the primary basis of all Philosophy. Before you can give a definition you must know in general what you are about to define, that it is something proper to be defined, and has a real local habitation in the world of thought. You cannot set out to define, as a certain Scotch lawyer swore, “at large;” you cannot put up with *definitio vaga*.

It is different with what are called Systems of Philosophy. There the work of Distinction is supposed complete, and you begin with applying them to the phenomena; your country is already mapped, and you proceed to measure its divisions. Systems of philosophy which have not thoroughly done the preliminary work of distinction cannot be permanent. For instance, Spinoza begins with a definition of *causa sui*; “by Cause of Itself I understand that, the essence of which involves its existence; or again, the nature of which cannot be conceived except as existing.” Very good; but *is there* such a thing? Is such a thing possible to thought? There is at least one term here which calls for analysis. Essence may be considered to be sufficiently explained by being distinguished into the *nature* of anything as it is *conceived*. But Existence, what is that? Till we know that, we are ignorant whether any essence can possibly involve existence, whether putting “existence” into the definition of anything makes that thing to exist. There is a good deal of distinction-work to be done