



The Morality of Strife

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THE MORALITY OF STRIFE.

ALL who have thought earnestly on moral questions, and in particular have reflected on the causes of and the remedies for immorality, the failure to do what is right in themselves and others, must have recognized that the causes of this failure divide themselves naturally under two distinct heads. One set of such causes may be summed up in the general statement that men do not *see* their duty with sufficient clearness; the other set in the statement that they do not *feel* the obligation to do it with sufficient force. But there are great differences of opinion among thoughtful persons as to the relative importance of these different sources of wrong conduct. The commonest opinion, I think, is disposed to lay most stress on the latter, the defect of feeling or will, and even to consider the defect of intellectual insight as having comparatively little practical importance. It is not uncommon to hear it said by preachers and moralizers that we all *know* our duty quite sufficiently for practical purposes, if we could only spur or brace our wills into steady action in accordance with our convictions. And this is, I think, so far true that, if we suppose all our intellectual errors and limitations to remain unchanged, and only the feebleness of character which prevents our acting on our convictions removed, an immense improvement would undoubtedly take place in many departments of human life. But one result would accompany this which would certainly

not be an improvement, at least in its consequences. We all recognize the dangers of fanaticism ; but what is a fanatic ? I know no other answer than that a fanatic is a person who acts up to his convictions when they are opposed to the common sense of mankind. If, therefore, we suppose that the element of intellectual error in the causes of wrong action remains unchanged, while the element of feebleness of character, weakness of motive or will to do duty, is entirely removed, we must suppose fanaticism enormously increased ; and when we had to strike the balance of gain and loss to human happiness resulting from the change, I am not quite sure that we should find the gain so clear as is sometimes supposed.

Considerations of this kind have led some thoughtful minds to take an exactly opposite view, and to regard it of paramount importance to remove the intellectual source of error in conduct, holding with Socrates that the true good of each individual man is really consistent and harmonious with the true good of all the rest ; and that what every man really wants is his own true good, if he only knew what it was. But this view also is too simple and unqualified, since a man often sacrifices what he rightly regards as his true interest to the overmastering influence of appetite or resentment or ambition ; nor, I fear, if we measure human well-being by an ordinary mundane standard, can it be shown that what conduces to the earthly welfare of any one individual will always conduce to the earthly welfare of the rest. This idea of a universal and complete harmony of the interests—at least the earthly interests—of all human individuals belongs to an optimistic illusion as to human relations, which in the present age of the world has nearly faded away. If we confine our attention to this world alone, and suppose men's feelings and wants unaltered, we must admit that the utmost intellectual enlightenment would not prevent the unrestrained pursuit of private interest from being anti-social, anarchical, and disorganizing. Still, allowing all this, it seems to me that a very substantial gain would result if we could remove from men's minds all errors of judgment as to right and wrong, good and evil, even if we left other causes of bad conduct unchanged. Suppose, for in-

stance, that every one who is liable to drink too much had clearly present to his mind, in the moment of temptation, the full amount of harm that his insobriety was doing to his bodily health, his reputation, his means of providing for those dependent on him: some, no doubt, would drink all the same, but the majority of those not yet in bondage to the unnatural craving would draw back. Suppose, again, that any one who is wronging a neighbor saw as clearly as any impartial judge or friend would see the violation of right that he is committing: surely only a thoroughly bad man would persist in his wrong-doing. And thoroughly bad men are after all rare exceptions among the beings of mingled and checkered moral nature of whom the great mass of mankind consists, and who on the whole mean only to maintain their own rights and not encroach upon the rights of others,—though doubtless from a mixture of intellectual muddle with passionate impulse or selfish negligence they are continually liable to wrong others.

Improvement in moral insight, then, seems to me as much practically wanted as improvement in feeling and will; and perhaps the gain from the former, if taken alone, is less mixed with danger. But it is not my wish to decide whether, for moral improvement, we are most in need of a stronger impulse to do our duty, or of clearer insight as to what our duty really is. I have drawn attention to the distinction chiefly in order to make clear the aim of what I am about to say on the morality of strife. I shall not primarily seek to strengthen the *motives* to the performance of duty in this department of conduct, but to merely assist in the solution of certain intellectual difficulties which arise when we try to get a clear idea of duty.

In speaking of strife, I shall have primarily and chiefly in view that most intense form of conflict which we call war, in which masses of civilized men elaborately try to destroy each other's lives and incidentally to take each other's property. This is the strife which, from its fundamental nature and inevitable incidents, causes the most intense and profound moral aversion and perplexity to the modern mind. At the same time it seems to me that the deepest problems presented by war, and the deepest principles to be applied in dealing with them,

are applicable also to the milder conflicts and collisions that arise within the limits of an orderly and peaceful community, and especially to those struggles for wealth and power carried on by classes and parties within a state. Indeed, these latter—though conducted by the milder methods of debate and vote—often resemble wars very strongly in the states of thought and feeling that they arouse, and also in some of the difficulties that they suggest.

Now, in considering the morality of strife, the difference of opinion which I have been discussing as to the causes of wrong conduct meets us with especial force. Many will say, when they hear of moralizing war, that the moralist ought not to acquiesce in its existence; he ought to trace it to its source, in the lack of kindly feeling among human beings. Spread kindness and good will; make altruism predominate over egoism; and wars between states will come to an end among civilized men because there will be no hostile emotions to rouse them, while within states strife will resolve itself into a competition for the privilege of doing good to others. I do not deny that a solution of the problem of war for the world might be found in this diffusion of kindly feeling, if sufficiently ardent and universal. But for this effect the universality is necessary as well as the ardor. The increase of the "enthusiasm of humanity" in a moral minority, in a world where most men are still as selfish as now, would have no tendency to prevent strife; for if around us some are wronging others, the predominance of altruism, though it will diminish an individual's tendency to fight in his own quarrels, will make him more eager to take part with others who are wronged; and since, so long as we are human beings, our kindly feelings must flow more strongly in special channels, as they grow in intensity we shall only become more prompt and ardent to defend against unjust attacks the narrower communities and groups in which we take special interest. Increase of sympathy among human beings may ultimately do away with strife; but it will only be after a long interval during which the growth of sympathetic resentment against wrongs seems not unlikely to cause as much strife as the diminution of mere selfishness prevents. The Founder

of Christianity is recorded to have said that he "came not to bring peace on earth, but a sword," and the subsequent history of Christianity offers ample and striking confirmation of the truth of the prediction. And the same may be said, with at least equal truth, of that ardor for the secular amelioration of mankind which we find presented to us in these latter days as a substitute for Christian feeling.

For it is to be observed that, even among men as they now are, war or any other form of earnest strife is not usually—as cynics imply—a mere collision of passions and cupidities; it is a conflict in which each side conceives itself to be contending on behalf of legitimate interests. In the wars I have known, as a contemporary, this has been strikingly manifested in the sincere belief of religious persons generally—ordinary plain honest Christians on either side—that God is on their side. In the wars of ancient history, a people's belief in the special protection of the divinity was not equally an evidence of their belief in the justice of its cause, since each nation had its own deities who were expected to take sides with their worshippers; but in a war between modern Christian nations, worshipping the same God, the favor of heaven implies the justice of the cause favored; and it is sometimes startling to see that not only is each side convinced of its overwhelming claims to the favor of heaven, but it can hardly believe in a similar sincere conviction on the other side. Perhaps some of my readers may remember how, in the Franco-German war of 1870, the pious utterances of the Emperor William excited the derision of Frenchmen and their friends; it seemed to the latter not only evident that the invading Germans were brigands, but even impossible to conceive that they did not know that they were brigands. This strikingly shows how war among human beings, of the degree of rationality that average civilized humanity has at present reached, is normally not a mere conflict of interests, but also a conflict of opposing views of right and justice.

I must not exaggerate; I do not mean that in modern times unscrupulous statesmen have never made wars that were substantially acts of conscious brigandage, and have never

been applauded for so doing by the nations whom they led, who have suffered a temporary obscurity of their moral sense under the influence of national ambition. I do not say that this has not occurred; but I do not think it is the normal case, and I shall leave it out of account, partly because it does not seem to me to give rise to any moral problem which we can profitably discuss. The duty of resisting such unscrupulous aggression is simple; and, though there may be a question how far any nation is bound to intervene when it is not directed against itself, it is a question to which no general answer can well be given.

Similarly in any strife of parties and classes within a state, there is conflict of interests; not of bare interests, but interests clothed in the garb of rights, and in the main the garb is not hypocritically worn. The mass of human beings as we know them are too moral to enter into a struggle on behalf of interests which they know to be divorced from right and justice. I do not say that they are not easily led to believe that what is conducive to their interests is just,—men's proneness to such belief is proverbial,—but the belief is generally sincere; and though, again, in the heat of party conflict many things are done from passion and eagerness to win which are known to be wrong, these are deplorable incidents of party strife, they do not make up its moral texture. If, then, normal human strife is due not merely to colliding interests, but to conflicting views of rights, it would seem that we might hope to reduce it to comparative insignificance if we could only find and make clear the true definition of the rights in question. For though the interests of all individuals, classes, and nations are not harmonious, their rights are; that is the essential difference between the two. You cannot be sure of bringing disputants into harmony and peace by enlightening them as to their true interests, though you may in some cases; but you must do this if you can really and completely enlighten them as to their true rights, unless they are bad enough to fight on in conscious wrongful aggression. Such completeness of enlightenment, however, we cannot reasonably expect to attain; the complexity of human relations and the imper-

fection of our intellectual methods of dealing with them preclude the hope that we can ever solve a problem of rights with the demonstrative clearness and certainty with which we can solve a problem of mathematics. The practical question, therefore, is, how we can attain a tolerable approximation to such a solution.

To many the answer to this question seems simple. They would apply to the disputes of right between nations, and the disputes of right between classes and sections within the modern state, what I will call the *external* method of solution; *i.e.*, by referring the dispute to the judgment of impartial—and, if possible, skilled—outsiders, as the legal disputes of individual members of a civilized community are referred to arbiters, judges, and juries. I call this an external method, because it does not require any effect to be produced on the intellects and consciences of the disputants; they are supposed to remain in their one-sided and erroneous convictions, indeed they are almost directed to concentrate their attention on their own one-sided views, and—if I may so say—harden themselves in their one-sidedness, because their function in the process of settlement is to advocate their own case before the outside arbiter; they are not supposed to be convinced by his decision, but merely to accept it for the sake of peace.

The method takes various forms, according to circumstances. In the case of disputes between nations, it takes the form of a substitution of arbitration for war; the practical—or, if I may so say, the technical—problem comes to be how to get a wise and impartial court of international arbitration. A similar method is widely advocated for the settlement of the disputes between laborers and employers, within the limits drawn by the existing law, which have so long been a prominent feature of our present industrial condition. But in the still deeper disputes between classes and sections within a community, which tend to changes in the established legal order, the expedient commonly recommended is somewhat different; it consists in the construction of a legislature on the representative system, so adjusted and balanced that each class and section has enough representatives to advocate its claims, but

not enough to constitute it a judge in its own cause; the decision on any proposed change in laws or taxation affecting the interests of different sections in opposite ways is always to rest with the presumably impartial representatives of other sections. Now, I do not wish to undervalue the external method in any of these cases; I think the attention of statesmen should be seriously directed to making it as perfect as possible. But I am anxious to show that it is not safe to rely on it for a complete and final removal of the evils of strife.

Let us begin by considering the application of the external method—the reference of a dispute about rights and wrongs to an impartial arbiter—in the case of individuals living side by side in an orderly society. I certainly think it would be a gain if this method was applied more carefully and systematically than is at present the case. Of course the extreme of strife is prevented among orderly members of a state by the intervention of law; but many important conflicts among friends and relatives, causing much unhappiness, are beyond the sphere of law courts; and in many of those which must ultimately be decided by judges, if the conflicting parties do not come to terms, it would save much time and trouble and bitterness of feeling if they were terminated at an earlier stage. In all such cases it is much to be recommended that any one, before asserting rights or resenting wrongs offensively, should refer the questions at issue to the judgment of a competent and impartial outsider, if such can be found. But it is easy to see that this method in private quarrels is only of limited application. First, the occasion of strife may be too sudden; it may leave no opportunity for advice. Secondly, the difficulty of finding an arbiter of the requisite impartiality and sincerity is often insuperable. I say “sincerity” because there are so many amiable and delightful persons whose chief problem in a quarrel among their friends is to consider how far the general duty of veracity will allow them to sympathize alternately with both sides, and who generally solve the problem by treating this duty of veracity as very elastic. And among persons whose sincerity and zeal may be trusted, it may be very difficult to find one who is not likely from

nature or circumstances to have a decided bias in favor of one or other party. Taking everything into account, if the matter at stake is important, most men will feel that they cannot conscientiously, in justice to those whose interests are indirectly involved on either side, throw the final responsibility of deciding on any friend. However difficult it is for a man to be a fair judge in his own cause, he must face the difficulty.

With this analogy before our minds, let us turn and see how far arbitration is adapted to the solution of international strife. Let us place ourselves at the point of view of a nation that is being drawn into what it regards as a just war, according to the received principles of international justice. It is obvious that any serious and unprovoked violation of international duty must be held to give a state whose rights are violated a claim for reparation; and if reparation be obstinately refused, it would seem that—so long as states are independent—the offending state must be held to have a right to obtain it by force, with the aid of any other states that can be persuaded to join it. This exercise of force need not necessarily amount to war. For instance, if the property belonging to a state or any of its members has been unjustly seized by another state, reparation may be obtained by reprisals; but it is most probable that such reprisals, being resisted, will lead to the thorough-going appeal to physical force as a means of settlement, which we call war. Well, at this point it is asked, by many earnest philanthropists, “Why should not the offended state make a proposal to submit its claims to arbitration, and why should not the offending state be made, by the pressure of public opinion, to accept this proposal.” I cannot agree with those so-called practical men who waive this suggestion aside as out of the range of practical politics. I think that much may be hoped, in the way of reduction of the danger of war between civilized states, from improvements in the machinery of arbitration, and a more extensive adoption of the improved machinery; and I am most strongly in sympathy with the efforts* of those who keep urging these points on the attention of statesmen and of the public. But I think that

such efforts are more likely to attain the limited success which can alone be reasonably hoped, if those who urge them bear in mind the inevitable limitations of the applicability of arbitration to the conflicts of right between nations.

In the first place, the violation of right which leads to a conflict may be a continuing evil, which requires immediate abatement as well as reparation ; and the violence required for this abatement is likely to lead to further violence on the other side, so that the conflicting states may be drawn into the condition of war by a series of steps too rapid to allow of the delay necessary for arbitration, and which involve so many fresh grounds of complaint that the decision of the original dispute may easily sink into insignificance. But the second reason is more important. The interests at stake may be so serious that a state, believing itself able to obtain redress by its own strong hand, cannot reasonably be expected to run the risk of a wrong decision of the arbitrator, either from partiality or from other causes. Or, to keep closer to the moral problem actually presented, I should rather say that the government of a community cannot feel justified in thus risking the interests of the community intrusted to it. This will be especially likely to be the case where the quarrel is one that involves a conflict of principles, widely extended among civilized states, since in such case it will be difficult to find an impartial and trustworthy arbiter. Thus, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it would have been almost impossible to find such an arbiter in Europe in any quarrel between a Catholic and a Protestant state, and in the nineteenth century it would be almost impossible to find such an arbiter in any quarrel caused by the claims of a nationality struggling for independence. And even apart from conflict of principles, the ties of interest and alliance that bind nations together may render it difficult to find arbitrators whose absence of bias can be trusted when the interests at stake are grave.

Now, I think that history shows that minor violations of international rights—such as arbitration undoubtedly might settle—have rarely been the real *causes*, though they have often been the ostensible causes and the real *occasions*, of momentous wars.

The most serious wars of the European group of states have been the combined result of conflicting fundamental principles, religious or political, and conflicting national interests of great real or supposed importance; and where such conflicts arise arbitration is rarely likely to be an effective means of preserving peace, since the conflict of principles renders it difficult to find an arbiter whose decision both sides can sincerely acquiesce in as just, while the magnitude of the interests at stake must make acquiescence in an unjust decision appear a supine and cowardly abandonment of patriotic duty. Hence, though the international law which arbitrators can administer may be most useful in removing minor occasions of controversy and in minimizing the mischief resulting from graver conflicts, I do not see how it is to provide a settlement for the graver controversies which will enable us to dispense with war. This will perhaps appear more clearly if we reflect for a moment on the special difficulty of defining international rights and the manner in which opposite views of imperfectly defined rights tend to be combined with discordant interests,—partly from the absence of a central government of the community of nations, partly from the fewness of the members of the society of nations and to the consequent greater importance of an individual nation relatively to the whole society, partly from the difficulty of defining a nation and its imperfect unity and cohesion as compared with that of individual human beings, and partly, too, from the greater difference in degrees of civilization in the society of nations. The first of these causes renders necessary and legitimate an extension of the right and duty of self-defence, which it is very difficult to limit. War is not only obviously just against actual aggression, but when aggression is unmistakably being prepared, the nation threatened cannot be condemned for striking the first blow, if this is an important gain for self-defence. But this easily passes over into anticipation of a blow that is merely feared, *not* really threatened. Indeed, this enlarged right of self-protection against mere danger has often been further extended to justify hostile interference to prevent a neighbor growing strong merely through expansion or coalescence with other states,

without anything like aggression. Now, here I think that moral opinion may do something. It should set itself more steadily than it has done against this latter extension of the right of self-protection. Still, it is obviously difficult to define exactly the degree of alarm that would justify hostile action. It is still more difficult to decide, on any clearly just principles, how far the right of national self-preservation may be legitimately extended into the right to prevent interference with "national development,"—*e.g.*, if nation A appropriates territory over which nation B is hoping to extend its sway some time or other. At the same time, this is a cause of strife that we must, I think, expect to operate more intensely as the world gets fuller. With each successive generation the demand for expansion on the part of civilized nations is likely to grow stronger; and the more serious the interests involved, the more difficult it will be to obtain acquiescence in the rules determining the legitimate occupation of new territory, which must inevitably be to some extent arbitrary. And the question is complicated by the differences in grade of civilization, to which I have referred; for the nations most advanced in civilization have a tendency—the legitimacy of which cannot be broadly and entirely disputed—to absorb semi-civilized states in their neighborhood, as in the expansion of England and Russia in Asia and of France in Africa. As, I say, the tendency cannot be altogether condemned, as it often seems clearly conducive to the general happiness that the absorption should take place; still, it is obviously difficult to define the conditions under which this is legitimate, and the civilized nation engaged in this process of absorption cannot be surprised that other civilized nations think they have a right to interfere and prevent the aggression.

When we turn to the part of the earth tolerably filled with civilized nations,—to Western Europe,—it seems that the duty of avoiding substantial encroachment would be so clear that it could not be violated without manifest immorality, if only such nations had perfect internal unity and coherence. I do not see, *e.g.*, how any quarrel could easily arise between France and Spain—apart from collisions of interest in other

parts of the world—except of the minor kind which arbitration might settle, unless there was something like avowed brigandage on one side or the other. But we have only to look at Germany and Italy to see that even Western Europe is far from being composed of states of this type; and even if internal unity were attained for a time, it might always be broken up again by some new division.

I therefore think it inevitable that, at least for a long time to come, every nation in the most important matters—as individuals in matters not within the range of law courts—must to an important extent be judge in its own cause; it may refer some of its disputes to arbitration,—and I hope the number may increase,—but there are others which it cannot so refer, and it must be judge as to the limits of such reference. Other considerations might be adduced, tending to limit still further the normal sphere of arbitration in international controversies; *e.g.*, it might be shown that even where both sides in such a controversy are animated by an adequate and preponderant desire for peace, an acceptable compromise is often more likely to be attained by direct negotiation than by reference to an arbitrator. But it belongs to a political rather than an ethical discussion to dwell on points like these. I have said enough to show why even civilized nations, in which the majority are so far moral as to be sincerely unwilling to fight for a cause known to be wrong, cannot be expected to avoid war by arbitration, except to a very limited extent.

Where, then, the sphere of the external or political method of attaining international “peace with justice” ends, the special sphere of the internal or properly moral method begins; if we must be judges in our own cause, we must endeavor to be just judges. It appears to me, however, that there is hardly any plain duty of great importance in which civilized men fail so palpably as in this. Doubtless the impartiality required is difficult; but, as the Greek proverb says, “the difficult things are noble;” and I am persuaded that even the imperfect beings who compose modern nations might perform with more success the judicial function—which, in a modern state under popular government, has become, in some degree, the business

of every man—if national consciences could be roused to feel the nobility and grapple practically and persistently with the difficulties of the task. At any rate, the thoughtful and moral part of every community might fit themselves for this judicial function with more care, and perform it under a sense of graver responsibility than is now the case. I am not urging that they should keep coldly aloof from patriotic sentiment; when the struggle has commenced, it is doubtless right for most if not for all men to side with their country unreservedly; but at the earlier period, when the cloud of discord that is to cover the sky is as yet no bigger than a man's hand, it is surely the duty of all moral persons, according to their gifts and leisure, to make an earnest and systematic effort at an impartial view of the points at issue.

There are three stages in such an attempt, which are not always distinguished. First, we may endeavor to put ourselves in the opponent's place, carrying with us our own principles and views of right, and see whether, when we look at the opponent's case from the inside, there is not more to be said for it than appeared when we contemplated it from the outside. Secondly, if we have no doubt that our opponent is in the wrong, according to principles of right that we sincerely hold, we still have to ask ourselves whether we apply these principles not merely in claiming our rights, but also in practically determining the performance of our duties. For if there has been divergence between our actions and our principles, though it may not be a reason for abandoning a present claim,—for two wrongs do not make a right,—it is an argument for mildness and for a spirit of compromise. And, thirdly, if there seems to us to be a real difference of principles, then comes the most difficult duty of endeavoring to place ourselves in an impartial position for contemplating the different sets of principles, and seeing if there is not an element of truth in the opponent's view which we have hitherto missed. It is hard to bring a man to this when once the complex collision of principles and interests has begun; and it is still harder to bring a nation to it; but it is a plain duty imposed on us by reason, and it is the most essential part of the in-

ternal method of aiding the transition from strife to concord, without which the perfecting of the machinery of arbitration does not seem to me likely to achieve very great results.

My limits do not allow me to discuss in detail the various forms of strife carried on within an orderly modern community, from which destructive physical violence is approximately excluded. But, if space permitted, I think it might be similarly shown that, in the graver disputes between classes within a state, we cannot rely on the external method alone for realizing the social peace and concord which only justice—I do not mean ideal justice, but a fair human approximation to justice—can give. For the most skilfully adjusted representative system will not really protect us against a majority, formed by a combination of selfish interests, becoming practically judge in its own cause; and the belief in the natural right of the majority of any community to do what it likes is a political superstition which is rapidly passing to the limbo of such superstitions. The only hope of preventing strife within modern states from growing continually more bitter and dangerous lies in persuading the citizens, of all classes and sections, that it is not enough to desire justice sincerely; it is needful that they fit themselves, by laborious and sustained efforts to understand the truths mingled with opposing errors, for the high and deeply-responsible function, which democracy throws on them, of deciding and declaring social justice. Otherwise, I see no reason why the strife of sections within a community should not lead to war in the future, as it has done in the past.

HENRY SIDGWICK.