

THE
AMERICAN
PRESBYTERIAN AND THEOLOGICAL
REVIEW.

NEW SERIES. No. XXI.—JANUARY, 1868.

ART I.—MORAL PHILOSOPHY IN GREAT BRITAIN IN RELATION
TO THEOLOGY.

BY JAMES McCOSH, LL. D., Professor in Queen's College, Belfast, Ireland.*

Of all the departments of natural knowledge the science of the human mind comes nearest to religion; and of all the mental sciences Moral Philosophy stands in the closest relation to Christian Theology. The reason is obvious. It is the province of Moral Philosophy to unfold the laws of Man's Moral Nature; of his Motive Powers, generally, such as the Emotions, the Will, and particularly the Moral Faculty or Conscience. Now, the Christian religion is especially addressed to man's moral and spiritual nature. It comes to us as a revelation from God, unfolding and manifesting more fully to us the moral perfections of God, revealing the

* Dr. McCosh has favored us with the following article, which is the essay read by him before the Evangelical Alliance in Amsterdam. It has not yet been published in England. We hope soon to publish another article by Dr. McCosh on the Recent Improvements in Logic in Great Britain, with special reference to the views of J. S. Mill and others.—Eds.

means of reconciling man to his Maker and of renewing his soul in the likeness of God. Christian Theology, by which I mean a reflex, systematic exposition of the truths of God's Word, has ever conducted theologians, whether they wished it or no, into moral discussions; and Ethical Philosophy has, consciously or unconsciously, exercised an important influence upon the construction of systems of Divinity. The Christian religion has contributed new elements, in particular, all the evangelical graces, to ethics; and a high moral philosophy, specially a high estimate of the Law, has ever tended to foster high views of the justice of God, and deep views of the nature of sin, and of the necessity of an atonement. The two have thus acted and reacted upon each other. It may be instructive to consider the present relations of Moral Philosophy to Theology in Great Britain.

In Great Britain, as in France and Germany, we have two contending schools of Ethics. These correspond very much, though not altogether, to the two grand schools of philosophy which have divided Europe since the days of Descartes and Locke: I mean the Sensational or Experiential, and the *a priori* or Rational. The former of these was founded in our country by Hobbes, and has been continued by Hume, by Hartley and James Mill, and the living representative of it is Mr. John Stuart Mill. The other school has also had its representatives in Great Britain in such men as Cudworth, Clarke and Coleridge, and in the Scottish school of philosophers, embracing Reid, Stewart, and Sir W. Hamilton; none of them, however, except Coleridge, taking up such high *a priori* grounds as Descartes and Cousin in France, or Kant and Hegel in Germany. Neither of these schools has been in itself either Christian or anti-Christian. There have been believers and there have been unbelievers in both. The tendency of the one has been to materialism, and consequently to a disbelief of the doctrines both of natural and revealed religion. The tendency of the other has been, as we see in

Clarke and Kant, to rationalism; or, as we see in Spinoza and Hegel, to Pantheism.

In England it has been the tendency of all schools of philosophy to become ethical. The Sensational School has represented mankind as capable of being swayed by no other motives than those derived from pleasure and pain; its morality is utilitarianism, and its theology, if it has a theology, commonly omits the Eternal Justice of God and all the doctrines dependent on it. The other School has certainly been the most favorable to religion, or, at least, to a high theology. In standing up for something native and necessary in the mind, it ascribes to man a high moral capacity which at once perceives the distinction between good and evil. The most eminent ethical writer, belonging to this school, is Bishop Butler, whose *Sermons on Human Nature*, published in 1726, constitute an era in the history of Moral Philosophy in Great Britain. He established, that man has in his very nature and constitution a moral power, different from our selfish and benevolent affections; and that this power is not only in the mind, but declares itself to be supreme there. Our higher metaphysicians, particularly those of the Scottish School, have acknowledged their obligations to him and carried out his principles. Belonging to this school we have had, in the last age, Chalmers in Scotland, and Whewell in England, the latter, however, taking many of his views from the German School of Kant.

I hold that there is an inherent and essential distinction between good and evil, just as there is between truth and falsehood. Gratitude to God is as certainly a virtue, as that "things which are equal to the same thing are equal to one another" is a tru th. Rebellion against God is as certainly a sin, as that "two parallel lines will meet" is a falsehood. I believe that the mind sees at once, and intuitively, the distinction between truth and falsehood. This it does by means of a power which we call the moral reason or conscience. But

if there be such a power in man's nature, constitutional and heaven-implanted, it guarantees the existence of a Moral Governor. It points, too, to a day of judgment and final retribution. And if there be an essential, an indelible and eternal distinction between good and evil; and if sin be of evil desert and deserving of punishment, the questions are irresistibly pressed upon us: How is this sin, which God hates and must hate, to be forgiven? and how is man, who has committed the sin, and is conscious of guilt and sensible of alienation, to be reconciled to God? Human reason can give no intelligent, no satisfactory answer to this question. All its investigations only conduct into ever-thickening darkness and gloom, in which fears and doubts have their appropriate dwelling place. Who is worthy to open this sealed book, to unfold this mystery? When this question is put, all creation is silent and abashed. The depth saith it is not in me, and the sea saith it is not in me. The thoughtful mind is not satisfied till it hears God himself proclaim: "Deliver from going down to the pit for I have found a ransom!" The anxious spirit would weep, like John, till such time as it sees the lion of the tribe of Judah taking the book and breaking the seals. The Scripture doctrine of the Atonement thus fits in very beautifully, as was shown long ago by Anselm, to the holy character of God on the one hand, and man's felt wants on the other. I am sure that one of the most convincing evidences in behalf of the Christian religion is to be found in its adaptation to man as a sinner and alienated from God. This is felt by every one who knows the binding obligation of the law, and who feels that he has broken that law. Many eminent writers in our country, such as Butler and Chalmers, have dwelt much on this branch of the Christian evidences, and have expounded, in a reflex and philosophic manner, what every one conscious of sin spontaneously feels. Not only so, a lofty view of man's moral nature tends to produce orthodox theology. I am aware that systems of divini

should be constructed out of the Word of God, fairly and honestly interpreted. But divines who take low and inadequate views of the moral law, will ever be tempted to explain away those passages in which Christ is represented as truly a sacrifice for sin, and suffering in our room and stead, the just for the unjust. We find, in our country, that deficient views of the atonement have commonly been associated with imperfect representations of the Divine law, and of the evil desert of sin. On the other hand, a high ethical theory has ever tended towards an orthodox creed in all matters bearing on the Divine justice, on the punishment of sin, and the expiation of guilt through the righteousness and sufferings of the Son of God.

These statements will show what view Protestant divines in Great Britain are disposed to take of a specially French question, "Is there a morality independent of the Gospel?"

We answer at once, and without hesitation, that there is a morality prior to the Gospel, and in a sense independent of it. The Bible does not make human beings intelligent, it finds them so, and addresses them as such; it says, "we speak as unto wise men, judge ye what we say." Just as little does it make men moral and responsible agents; it finds them so, and speaks to them as such: "Why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right;" "which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another." The Scriptures do not profess to prove the existence of God; they assume it, and come to us as a revelation from God. Just as little do they propose to establish the reality of good and evil, or the distinction between them; they presuppose all this, and address all men as so far capable of knowing and appreciating it. We rejoice, therefore, in the demonstrations by such men as Kant in Germany, and Jouffroy, Cousin and Saisset in France, of an independent morality, of a morality having the sanc-

tion of our moral reason. We think it of great moment in dealing with educated or thinking men, to be able to appeal to the fundamental truths which these philosophers have shown, by an appeal to consciousness, to be in our very nature and constitution. We can say, as I once said to M. Cousin in a letter which I had occasion to write him, "You acknowledge that there is an indelible distinction between good and evil; and I ask you to consider and answer the question, how is sin to be forgiven and man to be reconciled to God?" You have no such lever in dealing with those who have espoused a low materialism and sensationalism in philosophy, and a narrow utilitarianism in ethics; and we must be on our guard against seeming to join them in their systems. For, as they are not prepared to allow that there is any thing in itself essentially evil, any thing requiring and demanding punishment, so you can not ply them with any argument fitted to convince them that they need a Saviour, or prepare them for attending to a supernatural revelation.

So far, we Protestants of England can not agree with those Roman Catholic writers of France (I believe they are not supported by the wiser men of their own communion), who deny an independent morality, and would throw us helplessly on the authority of the church. We believe in a moral law antecedent to the Gospel, a law which includes all men under sin, from which the Gospel remedy delivers us. We believe that this morality, shown on independent evidence to have a foundation in the nature of things, points to the need of a Redeemer, and thus furnishes valuable internal proof in favor of the Divine origin of Christianity. We are sure that this independent morality joins with the Word of God in condemning much that we find sanctioned by the authority of the Church of Rome.

But, on the other hand, while we stand up for a morality independent of the remedial system of salvation, we do not plead for a morality which renders the Bible unnecessary, or

which can justify the sinner apart from Jesus Christ. At this point we separate entirely from our mere academic philosophers, who uphold not only the independence, but what is a very different thing, the *sufficiency*, of an ethnic or natural morality. The opinion generally entertained by British Protestants has been expressed by Bacon: "As concerning Divine Philosophy or Natural Theology, it is that knowledge or rudiment of knowledge concerning God, which may be obtained by the contemplation of his creatures, which knowledge may be truly termed Divine in respect of the object, and natural in respect of the light. The bounds of this knowledge are that it sufficeth to convince of atheism, but not to inform religion." Stand up then for the need of a supernatural revelation. For first, the Bible gives us clearer views of God, and of duty, than the natural conscience does, and thus becomes one powerful means of rousing the moral monitor from its lethargy, and making it fulfil its proper office. The fact is, a just sense of sin, such as shuts us up unto the Saviour, is to a large extent produced by the application of the revealed law—for "by the law is the knowledge of sin"—always, however, of the law as applied to the conscience, and finding a response there. Secondly, and more particularly, the moral law, whether revealed by our moral nature or in the Scriptures, provides no remedy for the breach of the law; on the contrary, it leaves us helpless under the condemnation which it pronounces. The natural conscience thus leads us, when we follow its guidance, into darkness out of which it can not conduct us. It may prompt us to cry for the light, but does not itself supply the light. We should rejoice when the light is made to shine upon us from a higher region. Then, thirdly, mere natural ethics has not been able to furnish our youth with motives and strength to enable them to resist temptation, or save a community from falling into fearful immorality. As the result of the whole, the felt weakness of this independent morality school is making it give way be-

fore a sensational and materialistic philosophy, which threatens to have very extensive sway over the rising generation in Great Britain, as well as in France and Germany.

In the last generation, the generation now advanced in life and passing away from the stage of time, the *a priori* philosophy had considerable influence in England. It owed its influence largely to Coleridge, Whewell and others, who drew from the German philosophers who ramified from Kant. But, of late years, there has been a strong reaction against it, against its method, its spirit and its results. This has been brought about, to a great extent, by what I reckon the extreme positions which it has taken, in holding that the mind has *forms* or *norms*, which it imposes on things, instead of holding, as it ought, that the mind has cognitive powers, enabling it to know what is in things, to know, for example, that there is an essential good in certain actions, and an essential evil in others. The reaction has been furthered among religious people by the tendency of the *a priori* philosophy towards rationalism in some cases, and pantheism in others. Certain it is, that we have now in England a school with very considerable influence, which starts from Sensationalism, and tends toward Materialism.

That school has sprung partly from the British school of Hobbes, Hume and James Mill, and partly from the French school of M. Auguste Comte. I call it the British section of the school of Comte. The leader of it is Mr. John Stuart Mill, who has deservedly a high name in Political Economy and in Inductive Logic. He maintains that all our ideas are had originally from sensation, and are manufactured into their present form by the laws of the association of ideas: these laws being those of contiguity among, or resemblance between, objects presented to the mind from without, from an unknown external world, working, for anything we know, fortuitously or fatalistically. It is doubtful whether this philosophy allows of any logical proof of the existence of God, of the immortality of the soul, or of a day of judgment. I do not charge

Mr. Mill with being a materialist: his philosophy may rather be described as one of *nescience*; that is, he maintains we can know nothing as to the reality of things, either of mind or body. But the system tends towards materialism, and is, in fact, materialistic in the convictions of multitudes who can not appreciate the subtle distinctions of the founder of the school. It avowedly does away with all independent morality, and represents the conscience, and all our moral ideas and convictions, as formed out of sensations of pleasure and pain by means of associations which are determined by outward circumstances. The argument for the existence of a Moral Governor derived from the law in the heart, so powerfully urged by Kant and Chalmers, is entirely undermined: we are left without any proof of the existence of a moral government in this life; and of a world to come, we can know nothing.

It might be shown by an extensive induction from the history of the past, that the theology of an age has commonly had a philosophy suited to it. An elevated philosophy has tended to produce a lofty theology, while a high theology has been stimulating to a high philosophy; and, on the other hand, a low philosophy is apt to generate a meagre theology, while an inadequate theology is prone to lean on a low-toned philosophy. For some years we have had a disposition towards a negative theology in Great Britain, and now we have a negative philosophy corresponding to it and countenancing it. In theology we have an inclination to omit justice from among the attributes of God, and to deny the expiatory nature of our Lord's sacrifice for sin. And now we have a philosophy undermining independent and eternal morality, and throwing us back on pleasures and pains as the elements out of which such moral ideas and convictions as we have are formed. These two are running their course together, and we may look for an offspring partaking of the nature of both to proceed from their marriage union.

In a paper read in 1864 at the Conference of the British

Branch of the Evangelical Alliance, held in Edinburgh, I spoke of the period as one of transition in respect of religious thought and opinion, and I predicted that "people would not remain long in their present state of vagueness and vacillation." Opinion has progressed rapidly since that time, and we now see the issue clearly. Persons were then trying to stop half-way on the sliding scale; they are now made to perceive that they have there no steady footing; they must either remount to the top which they have left or sink to the base. We are now far beyond the age of the "Essays and Reviews" which made such a noise a few years ago. The writers of those papers are reckoned antiquated by younger thinkers, who have gone a great many steps farther on in the same direction. This advanced school is furnishing articles in our periodical literature; is seizing some of the tutorships and professors' chairs in our colleges; and is watching the examinerships in the competitive trials for public offices, which have won such influence over the reading and studies of our educated young men. Parents, ministers of religion, and thinking men generally, should watch with deep anxiety the effects of such a training. I happen to know that some of our youth have had their hearts wrung, till feelings more bitter than tears have burst from them, as they feel that they can not reconcile their old faith in Scripture with the sensational philosophy or materialistic psychology in which they are now instructed. "Before I attended these lectures," said a young man to me, "I thought I had a soul; but as I listened I was not sure whether I had a soul or not." Not a few of those who went up to the colleges with the view of entering the office of the ministry, have felt that they could not go on, and so have turned aside to other pursuits; some of them have become active contributors to our literary journals, and are writing against the old orthodoxy and all that is peculiar in Christianity, with the bitterness of personal animosity. Others, with their faith shaken, have entered the church only

to find how uncongenial the office is to them; and some of them have fallen before the temptations to which they were exposed, as they found themselves bound to articles which they had ceased to believe, and reading prayers into the spirit of which they could no longer enter.

And what is to be the moral influence exercised by such a training on our young men generally? There is a combined and systematic attempt in the present day to make the articles to be believed in as few as possible, both in ethics and theology. Some of the would-be leaders of opinion proceed upon, if they do not announce, the principle that we are to look solely to what we should do, and not trouble ourselves with what we are to believe. But it can be shown that men's practice has always, consciously or unconsciously, been swayed to a greater or less extent by their beliefs or convictions, not, it may be, by their formalized creed or professed belief, which may be formed for them, and may, I admit, have little hold of them, but, by their heart convictions, that is, their real beliefs. Surely, in the worship of God, and in all the service we pay Him, there must be belief in him. "He that cometh to God, must believe that he is, and that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him." In the very performance of the ordinary duties, there must, at the basis of it, be a conviction that the duty is binding on us. Undermine the conviction, and the performance of the duty will be apt to cease; or, if it is continued, it will be very much the effect of an old habit; and the habit will never be generated among the young, who have never had the conviction. I hold, then, that there is a very intimate connection between our faith and our works. There is such a dependence in the experience of individuals; and there certainly is such a consequence in the history of communities. I do not, for one instant, maintain that all infidels have been immoral; but it can be proven that a generation trained in infidelity has commonly become immoral. Train a generation to say that there is no essential distinction

between good and evil, no distinction except in the pleasure and pain which they may bring; undermine faith in God and in a judgment day, and you have left nothing to a large proportion of young men to enable them to resist the temptations of life.

But then we are constantly told that infidelity is not characterized in these times, as it was in former ages, by immoral practice. But those who argue thus forget that the new infidelity has not had time to bring forth its proper fruit and show its effects; these we can not discover till we have a generation trained under its influence. We all know what debasing and immoral consequences flowed from the prevalence of the Sensational Philosophy in France; but the results did not appear till at least half an age after the time of Condillac, the founder of the school. We can not see the full influence of the training to which our young men are now subjected, till the generation reared has had time to show itself to the world—that is, till the evil has been wrought; and those who have sown dragons' teeth, will be made to acknowledge their criminality and folly, only when they find that armed men have sprung up and are working havoc and destruction.

Is a young man, setting out in life with a belief only in what this philosophy allows, prepared to meet the temptations which will assail him, temptations to pride and self righteousness, temptations to vice? Is a generation so fed and nurtured, likely to maintain an elevated standard of purity and unselfishness, and to be in circumstances to resist the vanities and lusts to which mankind are prone? The negative philosophy and theology have not yet had time to work out their full effects; but I believe that we have already too abundant evidence that the moral corruption has begun to work among the upper and the educated classes, that is, the only classes who have, as yet, felt their influence. And if the influence has already been injurious in these circles, how deleterious must it be when it has had time to penetrate the whole of society,

and go down in its results, though of course not in its processes, to the lower orders. Meanwhile, what mean those exposures, in the pages of our highest literary journals, of the coarseness in manners, speech, and conduct of a certain circle of ladies and gentlemen belonging to our very aristocratic circles, showing a state of things to which we had nothing similar twenty, or even ten years ago. Whence the complaints of fast living among so many of our educated young men? Every one knows that the coarseness and licentiousness are associated with, I believe that they proceed from, a spirit of unbelief and scoffing; it is a matter of fact, that they exist in the classes where faith in Christianity has been undermined. Let me tell some of these journals, that they are chargeable, directly or indirectly, with helping to produce the very immorality which they cannot bear when it appears. They profess to wish to set forth a high moral standard, but they have done their best to destroy the beliefs from which alone a pure morality can proceed. They have cut down the tree, and they wonder that they have not the fruit; they have killed the hen, and are amazed that they can not have the golden egg. Some of them are smitten with an excessive admiration of Thomas Carlyle, (who again was greatly swayed by Goethe and the German pantheists), and they are great hero-worshippers, and are ever deploring that we have fallen on a low age, and have not the heroes of former ages. They forget that the heroes of bygone ages were all men of faith, and owed their courage and their eminence to their faith; which faith is now pictured by these writers in an odious light. Such men as Carlyle and Froude, belonging themselves rather to the past age but helping to form the present, have pronounced the highest eulogiums on Knox and others of our Protestant Reformers; but they jeer at the creed which made these men what they were, and, undermining the faith of the past, they do not profess to be able to furnish anything to take its place.

The question is pressed upon us: What is to be done to meet the evil?

In answering it, I confess that I do not expect the evil to be counteracted by the mediæval, or, as it calls itself, the catholic reaction, which has set in so strongly in the Church of England. I am aware that this church revival sets before it a very high moral model and has a strict discipline. But the tendency of the reaction is evidently toward the Church of Rome; and popery, so far from being able to wrestle with infidelity, has been generating it in all countries under its sway. The sceptic points to the unbelievable dogmas and intolerable pretensions of the Church of Rome with a sneer, and justifies himself in rejecting all religion; while the great mass of the people, standing at a distance and viewing the combatants, and not knowing what to believe, content themselves with securing as many as possible of the pleasures of this world. In Oxford, mediævalism and infidelity stand at this moment face to face, and the one tends to produce the other as they have long done on the Continent of Europe.*

(1.) In this contest, philosophy, more particularly ethical philosophy, has a work to do. It must show that the ideas and convictions which we have in regard to moral good, and the distinction between good and evil, can not be furnished by associated sensations; but are sanctioned by our very constitution, and the God who gave us our constitution. The process by which they affect to generate our moral beliefs, is like that of the old alchemists, who, when they put earth into the retort, never could get any thing but earth; and who could get gold only by surreptitiously introducing some substance containing gold. The philosopher's stone of this modern psychology, is of the same character as that employed in med-

* We know what influence has been exercised by the older movement in revival of confessional. I advise the friends of Oxford to look narrowly into the moral results of the later and infidel movement. I have trustworthy letters on this subject, but they are marked *confidential*.

iaeval physics. If they put in sensations only, as some do, they never have any thing but sensations, and a "dirt philosophy," as it has been called, is the product. If gold is got, as it has been by some, it is only because it has been quietly introduced by the person who triumphantly exhibits it. In opposing the error, it must be shown that we are under law to God, and the unbending nature of that law must be upheld at all hazards. You Hollanders know what havoc would be wrought in your industrious and prosperous country, if the ocean could but succeed in breaking down those dykes of yours, against which it is ever beating; and we admire excessively the skill and spirit you have shown in keeping up your defences. But vastly greater evils, personal and national, will rush in upon us like a flood, if we allow that law which God has set as our defence to be broken down. Again, that law must be used to show us that we need an atonement, and, as a schoolmaster, to shut us up unto Christ. We must see that in our theology there is ever a deep moral element. It must be farther maintained, in all our preaching, that we are specially under law to Christ, and bound to cultivate the evangelical graces of faith and repentance, and to exhibit the virtues of the Christian life, such as purity and self-sacrifice.

(2.) But the evil will never be cured by mere philosophy. It is to be met, as the wanderings and the sensualism of ancient Greece and Rome were, by an exhibition of Christ and his doctrine in all its attractiveness and purity. This was reckoned by the ancient Greeks, as it is still reckoned by the modern Greeks, as "foolishness;" but it is truly the "power of God;" a power from God, and a power in man, supplying motives, and giving him strength to enable him to conquer temptation and to rise to holiness of life. We have found, in our country, that in very proportion as the old faith of the gospel has been preached simply and faithfully by our ministers, and believed in by the people, so has been the elevation of moral tone and practice in the community. I would

fondly dwell on this subject; but the space allotted me is exhausted, and the general theme must come up in other papers.

I have thought fit to exhibit some of the false notions that have risen up, or are rising up, in our country. But I do not wish to leave the impression that I am speaking in a spirit of despondency or of fear. The English mind has always been peculiarly sensitive as to the practical tendency of every philosophic doctrine. It was in its bearing on morals that British thinkers, English and Scottish, first saw the defects of the philosophy of Locke. And when the British public begin to see that this new philosophy tends to undermine the fundamental principles of morals, it is certain that they will turn away from it with loathing. Its triumph is only partial in the present, and can only be temporary. And, as to speculative infidelity, I am here to certify that never were the churches of Great Britain in a state of greater liveliness, or better equipped for meeting the evil. Never were the Bible and good books so extensively read by the great body of the common people; and there can not be fewer than fifteen or twenty thousand ministers preaching the gospel of salvation, from sabbath to sabbath, in the pulpits of Great Britain and Ireland.

England owes to Holland a debt of gratitude which she can never repay, for affording an asylum to our Protestant liberties, when they had to flee from our own country. Nor can I, as a Scotchman, forget that for a hundred years, from the middle of the seventeenth to the middle of the eighteenth centuries, our theologians came over to Holland to learn wisdom from your great divines. And now if Holland, our most excellent neighbor and kind friend at all seasons, when our Protestant privileges were endangered, asks after the health (moral) of Great Britain, I am happy to be able to answer, "Thank God, we reckon our general health sound, and we hope to be able, without difficulty, to throw off these pestilent humors which are at present somewhat impairing our vigor."