THE UNITY OF NATURE.

By the Duke of Argyll.

VI.

ON THE MORAL CHARACTER OF MAN, CONSIDERED IN THE LIGHT OF THE UNITY OF NATURE.

The consciousness of unworthiness in respect to moral character is a fact as fundamental, and as universal in the human mind as the consciousness of limitation in respect to intellectual power. Both of them may exist in a form so rudimentary as to be hardly recognizable. The limits of our intelligence may be felt only in a dim sense of unsatisfied curiosity. The faultiness of our character may be recognized only in the vaguest emotions of occasional self-reproach. But as the knowledge of mankind extends, and as the cultivation of their moral faculties improves, both these great elements of consciousness become more and more prominent, and occupy a larger and larger place in the horizon of their thoughts. It is always the men who know most who feel most how limited their knowledge is. And so likewise it is always the loftiest spirits who are most conscious of the infirmities which beset them.

But although these two great facts in human consciousness are parallel facts, there is a profound difference between them; and to the nature and bearing of this difference very careful attention must be paid.

We have seen in regard to all living things what the relation is between the physical powers which they possess and the ability which they have to use them. It is a relation of close and perfect correspondence. Everything requisite to be done for the unfolding and upholding of their life they have impulses universally disposing them to do, and faculties fully enabling them to accomplish. We have seen that in the case of some animals this correspondence is already perfect from the infancy of the creature, and that even in the case of those which are born comparatively helpless, there is always given to them just so much of impulse and of power as is requisite for the attainment of their own maturity. It may be nothing more than the mere impulse and power of opening the mouth for food, as in the case of the chicks of many birds; or it may be the much more active impulse and the much more complicated power by which the young mammalia seek and secure their nourishment; or it may be such wonderful special instincts as that by which the newly hatched Cuckoo, although blind and otherwise helpless, is yet enabled to expel its rivals from the nest, and thus secure that undivided supply of food without which it could not survive. But whatever the impulse or the power may be, it is always just enough for the work which is to be done. We have seen, too, that the amount of prevision which is involved in those instinctive dispositions and actions of animals is often greatest in those which are low in the scale of life, so that the results for which they work, and which they do actually attain, must be completely out of sight to them. In the wonderful metamorphoses of insect life, the imperfect creature is guided with certainty to the choice and enjoyment of the conditions which are necessary to its own development; and when the time comes it selects the position, and constructs the cell, in which its mysterious transformations are accomplished.

All this is in conformity with an absolute and universal law in virtue of which there is established a perfect unity between these three things:—first, the physical powers and structure of all living creatures; secondly, those dispositions and instinctive appetites which are seated in that structure to impel and guide its powers; and thirdly, the external conditions in which the creature's life is passed, and in which its faculties find an appropriate field of exercise.

If Man has any place in the unity of Nature, this law must prevail with him. There must be the same correspondence between his powers and the instincts which incite and direct him in their use. Accordingly, it is in this law that we find the explanation and the meaning of his sense of ignorance. For without a sense of ignorance there could be no desire of knowledge, and without his desire of knowledge Man would not be Man. His whole place in Nature depends upon it. His curiosity, and his wonder, and his admiration, and his awe—these are all but the adjuncts and subsidiary allies of that supreme affection which incites him to inquire and know. Nor is this desire capable of being resolved into his tendency to seek for an increased command over the comforts and conveniences of life. It is wholly independent of that kind of value which consists in the physical utility of things. The application of knowledge comes after the acquisition of it, and is not the only, or even the most powerful, inducement to its pursuit. The real incitement is an innate appetite of the mind—conscious in various degrees of the mystery, and of the beauty, and of the majesty of the system in which it lives and moves; conscious, too, that its own relations to that system are but dimly seen and very imperfectly understood. In a former chapter we have seen that this appetite of knowledge is never satisfied, even by the highest and most successful exertion of those faculties which are, nevertheless, our only instruments of research. We have seen, too, what is the meaning and significance of that great Reserve of Power which must exist within us, seeing that it remains unexhausted and inexhaustible by the proudest successes of discovery. In this sense it is literally true that the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. Every new advance has its new horizon. Every answered question brings into view another question unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable, lying close behind it. And so we come to see that this sense of ignorance is not only part of our nature, but one of its highest parts—necessary to its development, and indicative of those unknown and indefinite prospects of attainment which are at once the glory and the burden of humanity.

It is impossible to mistake, then, the place which is occupied among the unities of Nature by that sense of ignorance which is universal among men. It belongs to the number of those primary mental conditions which impel all living things to do that which it is their special work to do and in the doing of which the highest law of their being is fulfilled. In the case of the lower animals, this law, as to the part they have to play and the ends they have to serve in the economy of the world, is simple, definite, and always perfectly attained. No advance is with them possible, no capacity of improvement, no dormant or undeveloped powers leading up to wider and wider spheres of action. With Man, on the contrary, the law of his being is a law which demands progress, which endows him with faculties enabling him to make it, and fills him with aspirations which cause him to desire it. Among the lowest savages there is some curiosity and some sense of wonder, else even the rude inventions they have achieved would never have been made, and their degraded superstitions would not have kept their hold. Man's sense of ignorance is the greatest of his gifts, for it is the secret of his wish to know. The whole structure and the whole furniture of his mind is adapted to this condition. The highest law of his being is to advance in wisdom and knowledge: and his sense of the presence and of the power of things which he can only partially understand is an abiding witness of this law, and an abiding incentive to its fulfillment.

In all these aspects there is an absolute contrast between our sense of limitation in respect to intellectual power (or knowledge) and our sense of unworthiness in respect to moral character. It is not of ignorance, but of knowledge, that we are conscious here,—even the knowledge of the distinction between good and evil, and of that special sense which in our nature is associated with it, namely, the sense of moral obligation. Now it is a uni-

versal fact of consciousness as regards ourselves, and of observation in regard to others, that, knowing evil to be evil, men are nevertheless prone to do it, and that having this sense of moral obligation, they are nevertheless prone to disobey it. This fact is entirely independent of the particular standard by which men in different stages of society have judged certain things to be good and other things to be evil. It is entirely independent of the infinite variety of rules according to which they recognize the doing of particular acts, and the abstention from other acts, to be obligatory upon them. Under every variety of circumstance in regard to these rules, under every diversity of custom, of law, or of religion by which they are established, the general fact remains the same—that what men themselves recognize as duty they continually disobey, and what according to their own standard they acknowledge to be wrong they continually do.

There is unquestionably much difficulty in finding any place for this fact among the unities of Nature. It falls, therefore, in the way of this inquiry to investigate how this difficulty arises, and wherein it consists.

And here we at once encounter those old fundamental questions on the nature, the origin, and the authority of the Moral Sense which have exercised the human mind for more than two thousand years; and on which an eminent writer of our own time has said that no sensible progress has been made. This result may well suggest that the direction which inquiry has taken is a direction in which progress is impossible. If men will try to analyze something which is incapable of analysis, a perpetual consciousness of abortive effort will be their only and their inevitable reward.

For just as in the physical world there are bodies or substances which are (to us) elementary, so in the spiritual world there are perceptions, feelings, or emotions, which are equally elementary—that is to say, which resist all attempts to resolve them into a combination of other and similar affections of the mind. And of this kind is the idea, or the conception, or the sentiment of obligation. That which we mean when we say, "I ought," is a meaning which is incapable of reduction. It is a meaning which enters as an element into many other conceptions, and into the import of many other forms of expression, but it is itself uncompounded. All attempts to explain it do one or other of these two things—either they assume and include the idea of obligation in the very circumlocutions by which they profess to explain its origin; or else they build up a structure which, when completed, remains as destitute of the idea of obligation as the separate materials of which it is composed. In the one case, they first put in the gold, and then they think that by some alchemy they have made it; in the other case, they do not indeed first put in the gold, but neither in the end do they ever get it. No combinations of other things will give the idea of obligation, unless with and among these things there is some concealed or unconscious admission of itself. But in this, as in other cases with which we have already dealt, the ambiguities of language afford an easy means or an abundant source of self-deception. One common phrase is enough to serve the purpose—the "association of ideas." Under this vague and indefinite form of words all mental operations and all mental affections may be classed. Consequently those which are elementary may be included, without being expressly named. This is one way of putting in the gold and then of pretending to find it as a result. Take one of the simplest cases in which the idea of obligation arises, even in the rudest minds—namely, the case of gratitude to those who have done us good. Beyond all question, this simple form of the sense of obligation is one which involves the association of many ideas. It involves the idea of Self as a moral agent and the recipient of good. It involves the idea of other human beings as likewise moral agents, and as related to us by a common nature, as well as, perhaps, by still more special ties. It involves the idea of things good for them, and of our having power to confer these things upon them. All these ideas are "associated" in the sense of gratitude towards those who have conferred upon us any kind of favor. But the mere word "association" throws no light whatever upon the nature of the connection. "Association" means nothing but grouping or contiguity of any kind. It may be the grouping of mere accident—the associations of things which happen to lie together, but which have no other likeness, relation, or connection. But this, obviously, is not the kind of association which connects together the different ideas which are involved in the conception of gratitude to those who have done us good. What then is the associating tie? What is the link which binds them together, and constitutes the particular kind or principle of association? It is the sense of obligation. The associating or grouping power lies in this sense. It is the centre round which the other perceptions aggregate. It is the seat of that force which holds them together, which keeps them in a definite and fixed relation, and gives its mental character to the combination as a whole.

If we examine closely the language of those who have attempted to analyze the Moral Sense, or, in other words, the sense of obligation, we shall always detect the same fallacy—namely, the use of words so vague that under cover of them the idea of obligation is assumed as the explanation of itself. Sometimes this fallacy is so transparent in the very forms of expression which are used, that we wonder how men of even ordinary intelligence, far more men of the highest intellectual power, can have failed to see and feel the confusion of their thoughts. Thus, for example, we find Mr. Grote expressing himself as follows: "This idea of the judgment of others upon our conduct and feeling as agents, or the idea of our own judgment as spectators in concurrence with others upon our own conduct as agents, is the main basis of what is properly called Ethical sentiment."[1] In this passage the word "judgment" can only mean moral judgment, which is an exercise of the Moral Sense; and this exercise is gravely represented as the "basis" of itself.

Two things, however, ought to be carefully considered and remembered in respect to this elementary character of the Moral Sense. The first is, that we must clearly define to ourselves what the idea is of which, and of which alone, we can affirm that it is elementary; and secondly, that we must define ourselves as clearly, if it be possible to do so, in what sense it is that any faculty whatever of the mind can really be contemplated as separable from, or as uncombined with, others.

As regards the first of these two things to be defined, namely, the idea which we affirm to be simple or elementary, it must be clearly understood that this elementary character, this incapability of being reduced by analysis, belongs to the bare sense or feeling of obligation, and not at all, or not generally, to the processes of thought by which that feeling may be guided in its exercise. The distinction is immense and obvious. The sense of rightness and of wrongness is one thing; the way in which we come to attach the idea of right or wrong to the doing of certain acts, or to the abstention from certain other acts, is another and a very different thing. This is a distinction which applies equally to many other simple or elementary affections of the mind. The liking or disliking of certain tastes or affections of the palate is universal and elementary. But the particular tastes which are the objects of liking or of aversion are for the most part determined by habits and education. There may be tastes which all men are so coustituted as necessarily to feel disgusting; and in like manner there may be certain acts which all men everywhere must feel to be con-

[1] "Fragments on Ethical Subjects," pp. 9, 10.

trary to their sense of obligation. Indeed we shall see good reason to believe that this not only may be so, but must be so. But this is a separate subject of inquiry. The distinction in principle is manifest between the sense itself and the laws by which its particular applications are determined.

The second of the two things to be defined—namely, the sense in which any faculty whatever of the mind can really be regarded singly, or as uncombined with others—is a matter so important that we must stop to consider it with greater care.

The analogy is not complete, but only partial, between the analysis of Mind and the analysis of Matter. In the analysis of Matter we reach elements which can be wholly separated from each other, so that each of them can exist and can be handled by itself. In the analysis of Mind we are dealing with one organic whole; and the operation by which we break it up into separate faculties or powers is an operation purely ideal, since there is not one of these faculties which can exist alone, or which can exert its special functions without the help of others. When we speak, therefore, of a Moral Sense or of Conscience, we do not speak of it as a separate entity any more than when we speak of Reason or of Imagination. Strictly speaking, no faculty of the mind is elementary in the same sense in which the elements of Matter are (supposed to be) absolutely simple or uncombined, Perhaps there is no faculty of the mind which presents itself so distinctly and is so easily separable from others as the faculty of Memory. And yet Memory cannot always reproduce its treasures without an effort of the Will, nor, sometimes, without many artificicial expedients of Reason to help it in retracing the old familiar lines. Neither is there any faculty more absolutely necessary than Memory to the to the working of every other. Without Memory there could not be any Reason, nor any Reflection nor any Conscience. In this respect all the higher faculties of the human mind are much more inseparably blended and united in their operation than those lower faculties which are connected with bodily sensation. These lower faculties are indeed also parts of one whole, are connected with a common centre, and can all be paralyzed when that centre is affected. But in their ordinary activities their spheres of action seem widely different, and each of them can be, and often is, seen in apparently solitary and independent action. Sight and taste and touch and hearing are very different from each other—so separate indeed that the language of the one can hardly be translated into the language of the other. But when from these lower faculties, which are connected with separate and visible organs of the body, and which we possess in common with the brutes, we ascend to the great central group of higher and more spiritual faculties which are peculiar to Man, we soon find that their unity is more absolute, and their interdependence more visibly complete. Ideally we can distinguish them, and we can range them in an ascending order. We can separate between different elements and different processes of thought and in accordance with these distinctions we can assign to each of them a separate faculty of the mind. We think of these separate faculties as being each specially apprehensive of one kind of idea, or specially conducting one kind of operation. Thus the reasoning faculty works out the process of logical sequence, and apprehends one truth as the necessary consequence of another. Thus the faculty of Reflection passes in review the previous apprehensions of the Intellect, or the fleeting suggestions of Memory and of Desire, looks at them in different aspects, and submits them now to the tests of reasoning, and now to the appreciations of the Moral Sense. Thus, again, the supreme faculty of Will determines the subject of investigation, or the direction of thought, or the course of conduct. But although all these faculties may be, and indeed must sometimes be, conceived and regarded as separate, they all more or less involve each other; and in the great hierarchy of powers, the highest and noblest seem always to be built upon the foundations of those which stand below. Memory is the indispensable servant of them all. Reflection is ever turning the mind inward on itself. The logical faculty is ever rushing to its own conclusions as necessary consequences of the elementary axioms from which it starts, and which are to it the objects of direct and intuitive apprehension. The Moral Sense is ever passing its judgments upon the conduct of others and of ourselves; whilst the Will is ever present to set each and all to their proper work. And the proper work of every faculty is to see some special kind of relation or some special quality in things which other faculties have not been formed to see. But although these qualities in things are in themselves separate and distinct, it does not at all follow that the separate organs of the mind, by which they are severaliy apprehended, can ever work without each other's help. The sense of logical necessity is clearly different from the sense of moral obligation. But yet as Reason cannot work without the help of Memory, so neither can the Moral Sense work without the help of Reason. And the elements which Reason has to work on in presenting different actions to the judgment of the Moral Sense may be, and often are, of very great variety. It is these elements, many and various in their character, and contributed through the help and concurrence of many different faculties of the mind that men are really distinguishing and dissecting when they think they are analyzing the Moral Sense itself. What they do analyze with more or less success is not the Moral Sense, but the conditions under which that Sense comes to attach its special judgments of approval or of condemnation to particular acts or to particular motives.

And this analysis of the conditions under which the Moral Sense performs its work, although it is not the kind of analysis which it often pretends to be, is nevertheless in the highest degree important, for although the sense of obligation, or, as it is usually called, the Moral Sense, may be in itself simple, elementary, and incapable of reduction, it is quite possible to reach conclusions of the most vital interest concerning its nature and its functions by examining the circumstances which do actually determine its exercise, especially those circumstances which are necessary and universal facts in the experience of mankind.

There is, in the first place, one question respecting the Moral Sense which meets us at the threshold of every inquiry respecting it, and to which a clear and definite answer can be given. This question is—What is the subject-matter of the Moral Sense? or, in other worda, what is the kind of thing of which alone it takes any cognizance, and in which alone it recognizes the qualities of right and wrong?

To this fundamental question one answer, and one answer only can be given. The things, and the only things of which the Moral Sense takes cognizance are the actions of men. It can take no cognizance of the actions of machines, nor of the actions of the inanimate forces of Nature, nor of the actions of beasts, except in so far as a few of these may be supposed to possess in a low and elementary degree some of the characteristic powers of Man. Human conduct is the only subject-matter in respect of which the perceptions of the Moral Sense arise. They are perceptions of the mind which have no relation to anything whatever except to the activities of another mind constituted like itself. For, as no moral judgment can be formed, and no moral perception can be felt, except by a moral agent, so neither can it be formed in respect to the conduct of any other agent which has not, or is assumed not to have a nature like our own—moral, rational and free.

And this last condition of freedom, which is an essential one to the very idea of an agency having any moral character, will carry us a long way on toward a farther definition of the subject-matter on which the Moral Sense is exercised. It is as we have seen, human conduct. But it

is not human conduct in its mere outward manifestations, for the only moral element in human conduct is its actuating motive. If any human action is determined not by any motive whatever, but simply by external or physical compulsion, then no moral element is present at all, and no perception of the Moral Sense can arise respecting it. Freedom, therefore, in the sense of exemption from such compulsion, must be assumed as a condition of human action absolutely essential to its possessing any moral character whatever. There can be no moral character in any action, so far as the individual actor is concerned, apart from the meaning and intention of the actor. The very same deed may be good, or, on the contrary devilishly bad, according to the inspiring motive of him who does it. The giving of a cup of cold water to assuage suffering, and the giving it to prolong life in order that greater suffering may be endured, are the same outward deeds, but are exactly opposite in moral character. In like manner, the killing of a man in battle and the killing of a man for robbery or revenge, are the same actions; but the one may be often right, whilst the other must be always wrong, because of the different motives which incite the deed. Illustrations of the same general truth might be given as infinite in variety as the varying circumstances and conditions of human conduct. It is a truth perfectly consistent with the doctrine of an Independent Morality, Every action of a voluntary agent has, and must have, its own moral character, and yet this character may be separate and apart from its relation to the responsibility of the individual man who does it. That is to say, every act must be either permitted, or forbidden, or enjoined, by legitimate authority, although the man who does it may be ignorant of the authority or of its commands. And the same proposition holds good if we look upon the ultimate standard of morality from the Utilitarian point of view. Every act must have its own relation to the future. Every act must be either innocent, or beneficent, or hurtful in its ultimate tendencies and results. Or, if we like to put it in another form, every act must be according to the harmony of Nature or at variance with that harmony, and therefore an element of disorder and disturbance. In all these senses, therefore, we speak, and we are right in speaking of actions as in themselves good or bad, because we so speak of them according to our own knowledge of the relation in which they stand to those great standards of morality, which are fact and not mere assumptions or even mere beliefs. But we are quite able to separate this judgment of the act from the judgment which can justly be applied to the individual agent. As regards him, the act is right or wrong, not according to our knowledge, but according to his own. And this great distinction is universally recognized in the language and (however unconsciously) in the thoughts of men. It is sanctioned, moreover, by Supreme Authority. The most solemn prayer ever uttered upon earth was a prayer for the forgiveness of an act of the most enormous wickedness, and the ground of the petition was specially declared to be that those who committed it "knew not what they did." The same principle which avails to diminish blame, avails also to diminish or extinguish merit. We may justly say of many actions that they are good in themselves, assuming, as we naturally do, that those who do such actions do them under the influence of the appropriate motive. But if this assumption fails in any particular case, we cannot and we do not, credit the actor with the goodness of his deed. If he has done a thing which in itself is good in order to compass an evil end, then, so far as he is concerned, the deed is not good, but bad, It may indeed be worse in moral character than many other kinds of evil deeds, and this just because of the goodness usually attaching to it. For this goodness may very probably involve the double guilt of some special treachery, or some special hypocrisy; and both treachery and hypocrisy are in the highest degree immoral. It is clear that no action, however apparently benevolent, if done from some selfish or cruel motive, can be a good or a moral action.

It may seem, however, as if the converse of this proposition cannot be laid down as broadly and as decidedly. There are deeds of cruelty in abundance which have been done, ostensibly at least, and sometimes, perhaps, really from motives comparatively good, and yet from which an enlightened Moral Sense can never detach the character of wickedness and wrong. These may seem to be cases in which the motive does not determine the moral character of the action, and in which our Moral Sense persists in condemning the thing done in spite of the motive. But if we examine closely the grounds on which we pass judgment in such cases, we hall not, I think, find them exceptions to the rule or law that the purpose or intention of a free and voluntary agent is the only thing in which any moral goodness can exist, or to which any moral judgment can be applied. In the first place, we may justly think that the actors in such deeds are to a large extent themselves responsible for the failure in knowledge, and for the defective Moral Sense which blinds them to the evil of their conduct, and which leads them to a wrong application of some motive which may in itself be good. And in the second place, we may have a just misgiving as to the singleness and purity of the alleged purpose which is good. We know that the motives of men are so various and so mixed, that they are not always themselves conscious of that motive which really prevails, and we may have often good reasons for our convictions that bad motives unavowed have really determined conduct for which good motives only have been alleged. Thus, in the case of religious persecution, we may be sure that the lust of power and the passion of resentment against those who resist its ungovernable desires, have very often been the impelling motive, where nothing but the love of truth has been acknowledged. And this at least may be said, that in the universal judgment of mankind, actions which they regard as wrong have not the whole of that wrongfulness charged against the doers of them, in proportion as we really believe the agents to have been guided purely and honestly by their own sense of moral obligation.

On the whole, then, we can determine or define with great clearness and precision the field within which the Moral Sense can alone find the possibilities of exercise—and that field is the conduct of men;—by which is meant not their actions only, but the purpose, motive, or intention by which the doing of these actions is determined. This conclusion, resting on the firm ground of observation and experience, is truthfully expressed in the well-known lines of Burns:—

> "The heart's aye the part aye
> Which makes us right or wrang."

And now it is possible to approach more closely to the great central question of all ethical inquiry:—Are there any motives which all men under all circumstances recognize as good? Are there any other motives which, on the contrary, all men under all circumstances recognize as evil? Are there any fundamental perceptions of the Moral Sense upon which the standard of right and wrong is planted at the first, and round which it gathers to itself, by the help of every faculty through which the mind can work, higher and higher conceptions of the course of duty?

(To be continued.)

PHYSIOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF GLYCERIN.—Chemically pure glycerine if injected under the skin of dogs proves fatal within twenty-four hours if the dose reaches 8 to 10 grms. per kilo. of the weight of the animal. The symptoms are comparable to those of acute alcoholism.—M M. Beaumetz and Audigé.