

## CHAPTER XV

### THE NEW ETHICS

BEFORE leaving the subject of these latter-day intellectual changes, a word must be said concerning the ethical questions involved. Of course when a religious faith has been shaken to its foundation, it is natural to suppose that morals must have been simultaneously affected. The relation of morals to literature is very intimate; and we must expect that any change of ideas in the direction of ethics would show themselves in literature. The drama, poetry, romance, the novel, all these are reflections of moral emotion in especial, of the eternal struggle between good and evil, as well as of the temporary sentiments concerning right and wrong. And every period of transition is necessarily accompanied by certain tendencies to disintegration. Contemporary literature in the West has shown some signs of ethical change. These caused many thinkers to predict a coming period of demoralization in literature. But the alarm was really quite needless. These vagaries of literature, such as books questioning the morality of the marriage relation, for example, were only repetitions of older vagaries, and represented nothing more than the temporary agitation of thought upon all questions. The fact seems to be that in spite of everything, moral feeling was never higher at any time in Western social history than it is at present. The changes of thought have indeed been very great, but the moral experience of mankind remains exactly as valuable as it was before, and new perceptions of that value have been given to us by the new philosophy.

It has been wisely observed by the greatest of modern thinkers that mankind has progressed more rapidly in every other respect than in morality. Moral progress has not been

rapid simply because the moral ideal has always been kept a little in advance of the humanly possible. Thousands of years ago the principles of morality were exactly the same as those which rule our lives to-day. We cannot improve upon them; we cannot even improve upon the language which expressed them. The most learned of our poets could not make a more beautiful prayer than the prayer which Egyptian mothers taught to their little children in ages when all Europe was still a land of savages. The best of the moral philosophy of the nineteenth century is very little of improvement upon the moral philosophy of ancient India or China. If there is any improvement at all, it is simply in the direction of knowledge of causes and effects. And that is why in all countries the common sense of mankind universally condemns any attempt to interfere with moral ideas. These represent the social experience of man for thousands and thousands of years; and it is not likely that the wisdom of any one individual can ever better them. If bettered at all it cannot be through theory. The amelioration must be effected by future experience of a universal kind. We may improve every branch of science, every branch of art, everything else relating to the work of human heads and hands; but we cannot improve morals by invention or by hypothesis. Morals are not made, but grow.

Yet, as I have said, there is what may be called a new system of ethics. But this new system of ethics means nothing more than a new way of understanding the old system of ethics. By the application of evolutionary science to the study of morals, we have been enabled to trace back the whole history of moral ideas to the time of their earliest inception, — to understand the reasons of them, and to explain them without the help of any supernatural theory. And the result, so far from diminishing our respect for the wisdom of our ancestors, has immensely increased that respect. There is no single moral teaching common to different civilizations and different religions of an advanced stage of development which we do not find to be eternally

true. Let us try to study this view of the case by the help of a few examples.

In early times, of course, men obeyed moral instruction through religious motives. If asked why they thought it was wrong to perform certain actions and right to perform others, they could have answered only that such was ancestral custom and that the gods will it so. Not until we could understand the laws governing the evolution of society could we understand the reason of many ethical regulations. But now we can understand very plainly that the will of the gods, as our ancestors might have termed it, represents divine laws indeed, for the laws of ethical evolution are certainly the unknown laws shaping all things—suns, worlds, and human societies. All that opposes itself to the operation of those universal laws is what we have been accustomed to call bad, and everything which aids the operation of those laws is what we have been accustomed to think of as good. The common crimes condemned by all religions, such as theft, murder, adultery, bearing false witness, disloyalty, all these are practices which directly interfere with the natural process of evolution; and without understanding why, men have from the earliest times of real civilization united all their power to suppress them. I think that we need not dwell upon the simple facts; they will at once suggest to you all that is necessary to know. I shall select for illustration only one less familiar topic, that of the ascetic ideal.

A great many things which in times of lesser knowledge we imagined to be superstitious or useless, prove to-day on examination to have been of immense value to mankind. Probably no superstition ever existed which did not have some social value; and the most seemingly repulsive or cruel sometimes turn out to have been the most precious. To choose one of these for illustration, we must take one not confined to any particular civilization or religion, but common to all human societies at a certain period of their existence; and the ascetic ideal best fits our purpose. From very early times, even from a time long preceding any

civilization, we find men acting under the idea that by depriving themselves of certain pleasures and by subjecting themselves to certain pains they could please the divine powers and thereby obtain strength. Probably there is no people in the world among whom this belief has not had at some one time or another a very great influence. At a later time, in the early civilizations, this idea would seem to have obtained much larger sway, and to have affected national life more and more extensively. In the age of the great religions the idea reaches its acme, an acme often represented by extravagances of the most painful kind and sacrifices which strike modern imagination as ferocious and terrible. In Europe asceticism reached its great extremes, as you know, during the Middle Ages, and especially took the direction of antagonism to the natural sex-relation. Looking back to-day to the centuries in which celibacy was considered the most moral condition, and marriage was counted as little better than weakness, when Europe was covered with thousands of monasteries, and when the best intellects of the age deemed it the highest duty to sacrifice everything pleasurable for the sake of an imaginary reward after death, we cannot but recognize that we are contemplating a period of religious insanity. Even in the architecture of the time, the architecture that Ruskin devoted his splendid talent to praise, there is a grim and terrible something that suggests madness. Again, the cruelties of the age have an insane character, the burning alive of myriads of people who refused to believe or could not believe in the faith of their time; the tortures used to extort confessions from the innocent; the immolation of thousands charged with being wizards or witches; the extinction of little centres of civilization in the South of France and elsewhere by brutal crusades—contemplating all this, we seem to be contemplating not only madness but furious madness. I need not speak to you of the Crusades, which also belonged to this period. Compared with the Roman and Greek civilizations before it, what a horrible Europe it was! And yet the thinker

must recognize that it had a strength of its own, a strength of a larger kind than that of the preceding civilizations. It may seem monstrous to assert that all this cruelty and superstition and contempt of learning were absolutely necessary for the progress of mankind; and yet we must so accept them in the light of modern knowledge. The checking of intellectual development for hundreds of years is certainly a fact that must shock us; but the true question is whether such a checking had not become necessary. Intellectual strength, unless supported by moral strength, leads a people into the ways of destruction. Compared with the men of the Middle Ages, the Greeks and Romans were incomparably superior intellectually; compared with them morally they were very weak. They had conquered the world and developed all the arts, these Greeks and Romans; they had achieved things such as mankind has never since been able to accomplish, and then, losing their moral ideal, losing their simplicity, losing their faith, they were utterly crushed by inferior races in whom the principles of self-denial had been intensely developed. And the old instinctive hatred of the Church for the arts and the letters and the sciences of the Greek and Roman civilizations was not quite so much of a folly as we might be apt to suppose. The priests recognized in a vague way that anything like a revival of the older civilizations would signify moral ruin. The Renaissance proves that the priests were not wrong. Had the movement occurred a few hundred years earlier, the result would probably have been a universal corruption. I do not mean to say that the Church at any time was exactly conscious of what she was doing; she acted blindly under the influence of an instinctive fear. But the result of all that she did has not proved unfortunate. What the Roman and Greek civilizations had lost in moral power was given back to the world by the frightful discipline of the Middle Ages. For a long series of generations the ascetic idea was triumphant; and it became feeble only in proportion as men became strong enough to do without it. Es-

pecially it remodelled that of which it first seemed the enemy, the family relation. It created a new basis for society, founded upon a new sense of the importance to society of family morals. Because this idea, this morality, came through superstition, its value is not thereby in the least diminished. Superstitions often represent correct guesses at eternal truth. To-day we know that all social progress, all national strength, all national vigour, intellectual as well as physical, depend essentially upon the family, upon the morality of the household, upon the relation of parents to children. It was this fact which the Greeks and Romans forgot, and lost themselves by forgetting. It was this fact which the superstitious tyranny of the Middle Ages had to teach the West over again, and after such a fashion that it is not likely ever to become forgotten. So much for the mental history of the question. Let us say a word about the physical aspects of it.

No doubt you have read that the result of macerating the body, of depriving oneself of all comfort, and even of nourishing food, is not an increase of intellectual vigour or moral power of any kind. And in one sense this is true. The individual who passes his life in self-mortification is not apt to improve under that régime. For this reason the founder of the greatest of Oriental religions condemned asceticism on the part of his followers, except within certain fixed limits. But the history of the changes produced by a universal idea is not a history of changes in the individual, but of changes brought about by the successive efforts of millions of individuals in the course of many generations. Not in one lifetime can we perceive the measure of ethical force obtained by self-control; but in the course of several hundreds of years we find that the result obtained is so large as to astonish us. This result, imperceptibly obtained, signifies a great increase of that nervous power upon which moral power depends; it means an augmentation in strength of every kind; and this augmentation again represents what we might call economy. Just as there is a science of political

economy, there is a science of ethical economy ; and it is in relation to such a science that we should rationally consider the influence of all religions teaching self-suppression. So studying, we find that self-suppression does not mean the destruction of any power, but only the economical storage of that power for the benefit of the race. As a result, the highly civilized man can endure incomparably more than the savage, whether of moral or physical strain. Being better able to control himself under all circumstances, he has a great advantage over the savage.

That which is going on in the new teaching of ethics is really the substitution of a rational for an emotional morality. But this does not mean that the value of the emotional element in morality is not recognized. Not only is it recognized, but it is even being enlarged — enlarged, however, in a rational way. For example, let us take the very emotional virtue of loyalty. Loyalty, in a rational form, could not exist among an uneducated people ; it could only exist as a feeling, a sentiment. In the primitive state of society this sentiment takes the force and the depth of a religion. And the ruler, regarded as divine, really has in relation to his people the power of a god. Once that people becomes educated in the modern sense, their ideas regarding their ruler and their duties to their ruler necessarily undergo modification. But does this mean that the sentiment is weakened in the educated class? I should say that this depends very much upon the quality of the individual mind. In a mind of small capacity, incapable of receiving the higher forms of thought, it is very likely that the sentiment may be weakened and almost destroyed. But in the mind of a real thinker, a man of true culture, the sense of loyalty, although changed, is at the same time immensely expanded. In order to give a strong example, I should take the example not from a monarchical country but from a republican one. What does the President of the United States of America, for example, represent to the American of the highest culture? He appears to him in two entirely different capacities. First

he appears to him merely as a man, an ordinary man, with faults and weaknesses like other ordinary men. His private life is apt to be discussed in the newspapers. He is expected to shake hands with anybody and with everybody whom he meets at Washington; and when he ceases to hold office, he has no longer any particular distinction from other Americans. But as the President of the United States, he is also much more than a man. He represents one hundred millions of people; he represents the American Constitution; he represents the great principles of human freedom laid down by that Constitution; he represents also the idea of America, of everything American, of all the hopes, interests, and glories of the nation. Officially he is quite as sacred as a divinity could be. Millions would give their lives for him at an instant's notice; and thousands capable of making vulgar jokes about the man would hotly resent the least word spoken about the President as the representative of America. The very same thing exists in other Western countries, notwithstanding the fact that the lives of rulers are sometimes attempted. England is a striking example. The Queen has really scarcely any power; her rule is little more than nominal. Every Englishman knows that England is a monarchy only in name. But the Queen represents to every Englishman more than a woman and more than a queen: she represents England, English race feeling, English love of country, English power, English dignity; she is a symbol, and as a symbol sacred. The soldier jokingly calls her "the Widow"; he makes songs about her; all this is well and good. But a soldier who cursed her a few years ago was promptly sent to prison for twenty years. To sing a merry song about the sovereign as a woman is a right which English freedom claims; but to speak disrespectfully of the Queen, as England, as the government, is properly regarded as a crime; because it proves the man capable of it indifferent to all his duties as an Englishman, as a citizen, as a soldier. The spirit of loyalty is far from being lost in Western countries; it has only changed in character, and it



is likely to strengthen as time goes on.

Broad tolerance in the matter of beliefs is necessarily a part of the new ethics. It is quite impossible in the present state of mankind that all persons should be well educated, or that the great masses of a nation should attain to the higher forms of culture. For the uneducated a rational system of ethics must long remain out of the question; and it is proper that they should cling to the old emotional forms of moral teaching. The observation of Huxley that he would like to see every unbeliever who could not get a reason for his unbelief publicly put to shame, was an observation of sound common sense. It is only those whose knowledge obliges them to see things from another standpoint than that of the masses who can safely claim to base their rule of life upon philosophical morality. The value of the philosophical morality happens to be only in those directions where it recognizes and supports the truth taught by common morality, which, after all, is the safest guide. Therefore the philosophical moralist will never mock or oppose a belief which he knows to exercise a good influence upon human conduct. He will recognize even the value of many superstitions as being very great; and he will understand that any attempt to suddenly change the beliefs of man in any ethical direction must be mischievous. Such changes as he might desire will come; but they should come gradually and gently, in exact proportion to the expanding capacity of the national mind. Recognizing this probability, several Western countries, notably America, have attempted to introduce into education an entirely new system of ethical teaching—ethical teaching in the broadest sense, and in harmony with the new philosophy. But the result there and elsewhere can only be that which I have said at the beginning of this lecture,—namely, the enlargement of the old moral ideas, and the deeper comprehension of their value in all relations of life.