



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## THE RELATION OF ETHICS TO EVOLUTION.

WITHIN the memory of the present generation a great change has come over our conceptions of nature, and it was to be expected that these altered conceptions should react on our views of conduct, with the result, as some think, of demanding a reassessment of moral values and a reconstruction of ethical science on the lines of evolutionary teaching. The history of ethics shows that it has been at all times very sensitive to the shock of those far-reaching events and discoveries by which old associations are loosened and the possibilities of speculation proportionately extended. When Zeno the Stoic substituted the conception of a world-wide community for the idealized city-state of Plato and Aristotle, he was more than probably translating the conquests of Alexander into theory. By placing the site of his Utopia in the New World, Sir Thomas More shows clearly enough that the discovery of America combined with the spirit of the classic Renaissance to suggest a complete reorganization of society. And it is interesting to observe that the new thought does not invariably work on the lines of the new experience, but may even attempt to reverse them. While Charles I. and his Parliament were disputing by arms for the right to coerce opinion, or at least the public expression of opinion, Milton was framing a theory of free speech equally remote from the views of either party. While a Jacobin tyranny was rising on the ruins of the old French monarchy, Wilhelm von Humboldt was preaching the gospel of individualism in his juvenile essays on "The Sphere of Government." Godwin's "Political Justice," written shortly afterwards without any reference to the work of his young German contemporary, is a still more thorough-going protest against every kind of coercion, whether exercised by the one, the few, or the many. Nothing could well be more opposed to the teaching of Rousseau, the great apostle of the National Convention; and Mary Wollstonecraft, in her "Rights of Woman," sets herself as energetically against Rousseau's scheme of female education

as her future husband sets himself against the polity of the "Contrat Social."

Neither the conquests of Alexander nor the discovery of America, neither the English nor the French Revolution, involved such a shock to old prejudices or threw open such a vista of new possibilities as the doctrine of organic transmutation. Had the dreams of alchemy been fulfilled they would have brought no such promise of boundless wealth and of perpetual youth.

But the relation between evolution and ethics is of a more specific sort than that which has existed between new experiences and old standards of conduct in the past. For, whatever may have been its origin among the Greeks, the theory of development, as revived in modern times, is distinctly an outgrowth of moral idealism. When philosophy had extended the notion of a supreme good from an individual to a universal possession, human history came to be viewed as the process by which that boon was being won, in other words as a process of gradual growth; and by a further generalization the human race itself was conceived as having been developed from a purely animal ancestry, and the higher from the lower animal types by virtue of the same efforts towards perfection that are now bearing us onward to our ultimate destination. No one, I think, who studies the writings of Mr. Herbert Spencer in their chronological order, can fail to observe that he began with the end, working down from an ideal of human perfection to the simplest forms of existence through the social, psychological, vital, and physical processes, of which it was to be the final result. And his endeavor to interpret evolution as a rearrangement of matter and motion, whether successful or not, aims at securing for our future hopes the guarantee of ineluctable necessity and scientific demonstration. And another great systematic thinker of the last generation, Edward von Hartmann, while on many points diametrically opposed to Mr. Spencer, agrees with him in this method of reading evolution by the light of its ethical end. Only the English optimist finds his end in the most complete expansion of life, while the German pessimist finds his in the absolute extinction of existence

itself. A Hegelian might use either system as an illustration of the principle that opposites tend to pass into one another. According to Mr. Spencer, who in this instance may be taken to express the general opinion of modern astronomers, human life, after attaining the greatest happiness of which its environment permits, must eventually come to an end with the planet on which it is borne—in other words, the worst that can happen is sure to come. On the other hand, the more complete extinction anticipated by Hartmann is from his point of view the best thing that can happen, and, as such, is the determining principle of progress. But this extinction may not, after all, be final. There is an even chance that the will to live may emerge once more from the annihilating equation with the will to die toward which it tends, to tread again the weary round of illusion and despair. And Mr. Spencer's conclusion leaves more than a hope that from the crash of dissolving worlds a new universe may be born.

In reading such speculations one thinks of the *Dies Irae*, with its appeal to the witness of psalmist and sibyl, or of the infinitely reiterated petition for our Father's Kingdom to come. And as the doctrine of an ideal end to be realized by the collective efforts of the human race was a nursling of Hebrew prophecy and Christian prayer, so also the optimistic interpretation first of human history, then of all history as a working out of that ideal, was a survival of the belief in an overruling Providence. But, in the judgment of many, evolution as a scientific law leaves no standing-ground for that belief. At any rate, modern science has definitely discarded the assumption that the world was constructed for our benefit, and it looks on nature as a system of forces, that moves round or moves on in complete disregard of our wishes or our hopes. In the language of the schools, teleology has everywhere been superseded by mechanical causation; and even those who hold that the teleological method may still be legitimately applied would explain it in an Aristotelian rather than in a Platonic sense; that is, they would say that the different parts of an organism existed for the sake of each other and of the whole, not for the sake of an external end or of an end that has not yet been

realized. It is, of course, true that when the evolution of life is explained by such causes as natural selection or adaptation to the environment, there seems to be an implication that vital development follows a certain direction and is impelled by forces having possibly an ethical value; but what that direction and value may be is still an unsettled and disputed question.

Let us assume for a moment that the question has been decided in a sense adverse to the hopes of the older prophets. We will suppose that the survival of the fittest acting in conjunction with the progress of material civilization tends to create a type of character as selfish as the Martians of Percy Greg's "Across the Zodiac," or a society as degraded as that foreshadowed in the romances of Mr. H. G. Wells. What will be the attitude of ethics in the face of her revolted daughter evolution? Must she reconsider her whole position, transform her standards, and appeal to new motives of action?

I must say that for my part I do not feel the necessity for any such change of front. Faith in the ultimate triumph of right over wrong was, as we have seen, inherited from religion; it was trust in the divine government of the world translated into the language of scientific philosophy. But even within the limits of theology such doctrines as that the moral law depends on the will of God, and that our compliance with it depends on the prospect of something that will happen after our death in a readjusted scheme of things, have never been allowed to pass without a protest from great numbers of believers. Much less need the independent morality of the present day suffer itself to be influenced by contingencies whose occurrence would only prove, what has long been known, that right is not always might. The masters of philosophy have not taught us to worship success, and we are not going to worship it even should it be presented to us under the garb of evolution. No scientific sociologist will maintain that, judged by reference to any principle of progress, the path of humanity through all past history has described a uniformly ascending curve; yet at no period, however dissolute or violent, have the ideal demands of righteousness been lowered; and the most inspiring examples of self-devotion from Homer's Hector

onwards, have ever been offered by the defenders of a hopeless cause.

A reference to the kindred science of æsthetics may put the point contended for in a clearer light. It is notorious that the advances of modern industry do not make for beauty. Our buildings, our costumes, our vehicles, our means of communication and of publicity, grow more hideous every day; and it is probable that the future holds possibilities of still greater horror in reserve. Yet the canons of good taste remain unaltered or develop by a logic of their own, in which the spectacles of common life take no share except as object-lessons in what to avoid; our appreciation of the old models is not less but if anything more keen than ever; nor is there any reason to believe that the instructed critics of future generations will fall below us in this respect. And even if we foresaw that beautiful things were doomed to utter disappearance or neglect among posterity, our love for them would not lose one jot of its intensity, nor would those among us who can create them work with diminished energy at their glorious tasks. But if numbers have no authority as against the laws of beauty, neither have they any authority as against the laws of right.

If so much be admitted, a somewhat unexpected consequence seems to follow. I have been reasoning on the assumption that evolution will bring about the substitution—at least among the mass of mankind—of a lower for a higher standard of conduct, and I have tried to show that our ethical attitude would not be affected by the prospect. Now let us reverse the assumption, or, in other words, let us return to the optimistic theory that evolution is tending towards a golden age, an age of relative if not quite absolute moral perfection. Does such a prospect place our present morality on any firmer foundation? I find myself compelled to answer that it does not. As regards the ethical standard, the supreme good, we are no better off than before, for in assuming the perfect goodness of the society that is to be, we assume that its members will act up to our standard of morality, whatever that may be. Our *summum bonum* is not the end because it will be realized, but it will be realized because it is the end. Perhaps, however, the doctrine of evolution, if it supplies no new principle of action, supplies

a new motive of action, and makes the performance of duty easier or more agreeable through the magnificent prospect that it opens up. An adherent of this school certainly has one great advantage over the philosopher in "Rasselas" who bids men live according to nature, and who, when the Prince of Abyssinia asks him what he means, can only say that to live according to nature is to coöperate with the general tendency of the present system of things; for if he has mastered Mr. Spencer's Ethics he is in a position to define that tendency with extreme precision. But he could not tell any more than Johnson's Stoic how the Prince's desire for felicity is to be gratified by coöperating with the present or, for that matter, with the future system. Indeed, not only are our actual burdens not lightened but they are even increased by an additional feeling of responsibility for the future of mankind. Of course he can appeal to whatever motives are ordinarily invoked on behalf of disinterested virtue. But these are equally available whatever theory of evolution we adopt, or even if we refuse to adopt any theory whatever. For my part, I can only imagine one additional inducement to be good which this view supplies, and that is the satisfaction of finding ourselves on the winning side. But unfortunately the same considerations that intervened to protect our moral fibre against the chill of despair must equally render it inaccessible to the stimulus of hope. We are pledged not to worship success, and righteousness must be no dearer to us in victory than in defeat. Nor is it by any means certain that the evolutionary forecast would have an invariably stimulating effect. If in moments of temporary disaster and despondency a vision of ultimate triumph may come to reanimate the drooping courage and to rally the broken lines of those who fight for the good cause, it is equally possible that a fatalistic confidence in the forces that ensure success without the aid of any particular individual may relieve them from the necessity of painful and gratuitous exertion.

Like historical optimism, this method of enlisting evolution on the side of conscience is in truth a survival of religious belief. We have so long been accustomed to regard the Will that creates and guides the universe as the source and sanction of

ethical distinctions that when a chain of mechanical causes has been substituted for that will, we are easily induced to accept the "stream of tendency" as a "power that makes for righteousness," or, like Wordsworth, "to recognize the soul of all our moral being in nature and the language of the sense." And, just as it has often been shown that an appeal to supernatural sanctions derogates from the perfect purity of the moral motive, so it may be urged with equal reason that to be moral because morality holds the winning cards is not to be moral at all.

So far I have discussed the relation between ethics and evolution from what some will call a very limited point of view. They will say that the pioneers of evolution have greatly underestimated the scope of their own discoveries or rather of the method that they have introduced into philosophy, that we have passed from a solid to a fluid régime of thought, and that in view of the boundless prospects opening before us a currency of even some millenniums fails to guarantee the perpetual validity of our moral values.

In considering the point thus raised, let me begin by calling attention to a truth which, simple and obvious as it may seem, is rather apt to be forgotten. Evolution is not a power any more than time, but an abstraction, a general expression for a variety of specific changes perfectly definite in their character, our knowledge of which is derived from and limited by experience. Now experience does not warrant the assumption that variability—for this rather than evolution would be the most appropriate term—is the ultimate law of things. Indeed it would be absurd to apply the name of law to a condition that would make law impossible. What modern science calls evolution is a law, but a secondary and derivative law, only intelligible as a phase of elementary masses and movements of which the properties are constant and the sum can neither be diminished nor increased. Walking has been defined, or rather described as a perpetual losing and recovering of one's balance, and that is precisely what evolution amounts to. It is a transition from one state of equilibrium to another, and a transition that cannot be eternally prolonged. And, therefore,

according to the only complete theory of it as yet offered—Mr. Spencer's theory—evolution has its limits. As the Germans say, good care is taken that the trees shall not grow into the sky. In the solar system a condition of stable equilibrium has long ago been reached. The changes still going on, on the earth's surface are due to forces whose intensity is continually diminishing and which must ultimately become exhausted. In living bodies, whose metamorphoses offer the very type and prerogative instance of evolution, it is a process of adaptation to the environment, and must cease when adaptation is complete, as there can be no vital competition when all are equally fit to survive, and no inheritance of acquired habits when the acquisition of new habits has become useless. Even now advance seems to take place almost solely along the lines of social development, and we may expect individuals to be modified, if at all, merely by becoming better adapted to the social state, in other words by becoming more moral, as morality is now understood—a result that will leave ethical science unchanged.

Admitting that there is no reasonable prospect of a fundamental change in the conditions of individual and social life, it may still be contended that ethical opinion, being subject like every other complex structure to the law of evolution, is in a state of perpetual flux, the certainties of one age melting away before the keener or bolder scrutiny of the next. Well, at any rate, such forebodings leave the position of ethics no worse than it has been since speculation on the subject first awoke. At an early period the different customs prevailing among different nations attracted the attention of Greek observers and suggested the theory that moral distinctions are not natural but conventional. In modern times the same argument based on a much wider range of experience has been employed, among others by Montaigne and Diderot, to justify the same scepticism; and Hume in one of his most entertaining essays has shown how widely the moral estimates of his own day differed from those of classical antiquity. Convictions based on mere habit and custom are always liable to such attacks, but ethical scepticism, like every other scepticism, while

most valuable as a protest against the principle of authority, is powerless as against the principle of reason. Our ethics need no more be affected by the discordant practices of uncivilized or half-civilized tribes than our physics are affected by their mythology. The physical sciences also have their history, their evolution; and the later stages of that history often show not merely a change but a complete reversal of earlier views. As regards stability, indeed, ethics seem to have a decided advantage over other branches of knowledge, due, no doubt, to greater familiarity with the facts and greater interest in their correct interpretation.

One more possibility remains to be examined. Let us suppose that the doctrine of evolution leaves our ethical standard and sanctions untouched, that we are still to conceive the collective interest of society all the world over, through all time, and with the inclusion of all sensitive beings, as the highest good—good for the whole by definition, and made good for each individual by processes about which we differ, but in whose outcome, under the form of obedience to law more or less voluntary, more or less complete, we are agreed—we ask ourselves to what extent our notions about the means for accomplishing this great end are affected by the doctrine of evolution. Is it not possible that in the light of our new knowledge certain laws hitherto supposed to be of absolutely binding obligation may have to be repealed as useless or mischievous to the supreme interests of humanity, seeing that we have not only to “coöperate with the present scheme,” but with the future scheme as well?

I am afraid that here also we get no clear answer or an answer dictated by the prepossessions of the inquirer. It is true that systems of individual life and of social organization more or less opposed to existing opinion have been confidently put forward as the logical consequence of a belief in evolution. But an impartial examination will show that in every instance the proposal is one that has long been current among advanced thinkers, so-called (often the most retrograde of mankind), and is now being switched on to evolution as a means of drawing attention or of recommending it to popular favor. And

as usually happens with such interested interpretations the appeals go to prove that the new doctrine can be invoked with equal plausibility on behalf of the most divergent programs. Wagons moving in opposite directions are hitched to the same star. Mr. Spencer argues from the facts both of biological and of social development that government will first be limited to the maintenance of social order and will then be gradually superseded by voluntary coöperation based on the universal recognition of proprietary rights. But then Mr. Spencer was an individualist before he adopted the development hypothesis; and there are those who, while they adhere to the general principles of his philosophy, hold that the state is destined to monopolize all the instruments of production and to direct the whole industry of the people. Imperialists anticipate and welcome a continuance of the process by which the huge political agglomerations of the present day have been formed, while positivists preach and predict the break-up of the existing Powers into small communities connected by a loose federal tie. A great majority hold that war is an un-mixed evil and bound to disappear with advancing civilization; but there are some among us who agree with Hegel in treating regularized slaughter as an invaluable moral tonic of which, fortunately for the higher interests of humanity, occasional doses will never cease to be dealt out.

In the sphere of private morality there is the same discordance of opinion, the same easy reference to evolutionary standards, the same utter absence of originality. Social progress leads towards monogamy, and towards unlimited freedom of divorce, or even total abolition of the marriage-bond. Seeing that the improvement of the race has so far been carried on by natural selection we are to give more scope to this beneficent agency by forbidding the propagation of the weak and sickly, by allowing the hereditarily diseased and incapable to die out, and by permitting or prescribing the painless extinction of unpromising infants—all in the name of evolution, but in obvious imitation of pre-scientific theory and practice. But the still numerous class who object to having human beings treated like a herd of cattle need not try to fight down

their amiable feelings. They will be told by the next speaker that the conscience of whose protests they are half ashamed is, from the evolutionary point of view, their safest guide, being the product of ancestral experiences of race-utility organized in the nervous system, or what practically comes to the same thing, in the social tissue by which they are surrounded; while the views they abhor may not uncharitably be ascribed to atavistic degeneration. Or, again, it may be suggested that their unreasoned revulsion from modern Platonism is a collateral product of sympathetic interests, which on the whole do far more good than harm, and to tamper with which would be to risk their entire eradication. On both sides the new arguments are after-thoughts that in the long run do but neutralize one another, leaving the motives by which conviction is really determined to work as before.

If the foregoing analysis can be trusted we are left with a negative conclusion. The doctrine of evolution from which so much had been hoped throws no fresh light on the problems of ethics, although perhaps the study of ethics throws some light on the evolution of that doctrine itself. But, apart from the gain of a lost illusion, our conclusion may count for that negation of a negation which implies a stronger assurance of positive truth. What some are apt to regard as a solvent of moral certainty seems powerless to loosen its cohesion. The lessons on which the world's choicest spirits have lived are not made obsolete by any modern discoveries; nor is there reason to believe that a reversal of moral values is, any more than a reversal of logical values, among the surprises which the future has in store.

ALFRED W. BENN.

FLORENCE, ITALY.