

# EVOLUTION AND ETHICS

AND OTHER ESSAYS

BY

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## PREFACE.

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THE discourse on "Evolution and Ethics," reprinted in the first half of the present volume, was delivered before the University of Oxford, as the second of the annual lectures founded by Mr. Romanes: whose name I may not write without deploring the untimely death, in the flower of his age, of a friend endeared to me, as to so many others, by his kindly nature; and justly valued by all his colleagues for his powers of investigation and his zeal for the advancement of knowledge. I well remember, when Mr. Romanes' early work came into my hands, as one of the secretaries of the Royal Society, how much I rejoiced in the accession to the ranks of the little army of workers in science of a recruit so well qualified to take a high place among us.

It was at my friend's urgent request that I agreed to undertake the lecture, should I be honoured with an official proposal to give it, though I confess not without misgivings, if only on account of the serious fatigue and hoarseness which public speaking has for some years caused me; while I knew that it would be my fate to follow

the most accomplished and facile orator of our time, whose indomitable youth is in no matter more manifest than in his penetrating and musical voice. A certain saying about comparisons intruded itself somewhat importunately.

And even if I disregarded the weakness of my body in the matter of voice, and that of my mind in the matter of vanity, there remained a third difficulty. For several reasons, my attention, during a number of years, has been much directed to the bearing of modern scientific thought on the problems of morals and of politics, and I did not care to be diverted from that topic. Moreover, I thought it the most important and the worthiest which, at the present time, could engage the attention even of an ancient and renowned University.

But it is a condition of the Romanes foundation that the lecturer shall abstain from treating of either Religion or Politics; and it appeared to me that, more than most, perhaps, I was bound to act, not merely up to the letter, but in the spirit, of that prohibition. Yet Ethical Science is, on all sides, so entangled with Religion and Politics, that the lecturer who essays to touch the former without coming into contact with either of the latter, needs all the dexterity of an egg-dancer; and may even discover that his sense of clearness and his sense of propriety come into conflict, by no means to the advantage of the former.

I had little notion of the real magnitude of

these difficulties when I set about my task; but I am consoled for my pains and anxiety by observing that none of the multitudinous criticisms with which I have been favoured and, often, instructed, find fault with me on the score of having strayed out of bounds.

Among my critics there are not a few to whom I feel deeply indebted for the careful attention which they have given to the exposition thus hampered; and further weakened, I am afraid, by my forgetfulness of a maxim touching lectures of a popular character, which has descended to me from that prince of lecturers, Mr. Faraday. He was once asked by a beginner, called upon to address a highly select and cultivated audience, what he might suppose his hearers to know already. Whereupon the past master of the art of exposition emphatically replied "Nothing!"

To my shame as a retired veteran, who has all his life profited by this great precept of lecturing strategy, I forgot all about it just when it would have been most useful. I was fatuous enough to imagine that a number of propositions, which I thought established, and which, in fact, I had advanced without challenge on former occasions, needed no repetition.

I have endeavoured to repair my error by prefacing the lecture with some matter—chiefly elementary or recapitulatory—to which I have given the title of "Prolegomena." I wish I could

have hit upon a heading of less pedantic aspect which would have served my purpose; and if it be urged that the new building looks over large for the edifice to which it is added, I can only plead the precedent of the ancient architects, who always made the adytum the smallest part of the temple.

If I had attempted to reply in full to the criticisms to which I have referred, I know not what extent of ground would have been covered by my *pronaos*. All I have endeavoured to do, at present, is to remove that which seems to have proved a stumbling-block to many—namely, the apparent paradox that ethical nature, while born of cosmic nature, is necessarily at enmity with its parent. Unless the arguments set forth in the *Prolegomena*, in the simplest language at my command, have some flaw which I am unable to discern, this seeming paradox is a truth, as great as it is plain, the recognition of which is fundamental for the ethical philosopher.

We cannot do without our inheritance from the forefathers who were the puppets of the cosmic process; the society which renounces it must be destroyed from without. Still less can we do with too much of it; the society in which it dominates must be destroyed from within.

The motive of the drama of human life is the necessity, laid upon every man who comes into the world, of discovering the mean between

self-assertion and self-restraint suited to his character and his circumstances. And the eternally tragic aspect of the drama lies in this: that the problem set before us is one the elements of which can be but imperfectly known, and of which even an approximately right solution rarely presents itself, until that stern critic, aged experience, has been furnished with ample justification for venting his sarcastic humour upon the irreparable blunders we have already made.

I have reprinted the letters on the "Darkest England" scheme, published in the "Times" of December, 1890, and January, 1891; and subsequently issued, with additions, as a pamphlet, under the title of "Social Diseases and Worse Remedies," because, although the clever attempt to rush the country on behalf of that scheme has been balked, Mr. Booth's standing army remains afoot, retaining all the capacities for mischief which are inherent in its constitution. I am desirous that this fact should be kept steadily in view; and that the moderation of the clamour of the drums and trumpets should not lead us to forget the existence of a force, which, in bad hands, may, at any time, be used for bad purposes.

In 1892, a Committee was "formed for the purpose of investigating the manner in which the moneys, subscribed in response to the appeal made in the book entitled 'In Darkest England and the

Way out,' have been expended." The members of this body were gentlemen in whose competency and equity every one must have complete confidence; and in December, 1892, they published a report in which they declare that, "with the exception of the sums expended on the 'barracks' at Hadleigh," the moneys in question have been "devoted only to the objects and expended in the methods set out in that appeal, and to and in no others."

Nevertheless, their final conclusion runs as follows: "(4) That whilst the invested property, real and personal, resulting from such Appeal is so vested and controlled by the Trust of the Deed of January 30th, 1891, that any application of it to purposes other than those declared in the deed by any 'General' of the Salvation Army would amount to a breach of trust, and would subject him to the proceedings of a civil and criminal character, before mentioned in the Report, *adequate legal safeguards do not at present exist to prevent the misapplication of such property.*"

The passage I have italicised forms part of a document dated December 19th, 1892. It follows, that, even after the Deed of January 30th, 1891, was executed, "adequate legal safeguards" "to prevent the misapplication of the property" did not exist. What then was the state of things, up to a week earlier, that is on January 22nd, 1891, when my twelfth and last letter appeared in

the "Times"? A better justification for what I have said about the want of adequate security for the proper administration of the funds intrusted to Mr. Booth could not be desired, unless it be that which is to be found in the following passages of the Report (pp. 36 and 37):—

"It is possible that a 'General' may be forgetful of his duty, and sell property and appropriate the proceeds to his own use, or to meeting the general liabilities of the Salvation Army. As matters now stand, he, and he alone, would have control over such a sale. Against such possibilities it appears to the Committee to be reasonable that some check should be imposed."

Once more let it be remembered that this opinion, given under the hand of Sir Henry James, was expressed by the Committee, with the Trust Deed of 1891, which has been so sedulously flaunted before the public, in full view.

The Committee made a suggestion for the improvement of this very unsatisfactory state of things; but the exact value set upon it by the suggestors should be carefully considered (p. 37).

"The Committee are fully aware that if the views thus expressed are carried out, the safeguards and checks created will not be sufficient for all purposes absolutely to prevent possible dealing with the property and moneys inconsistent with the purposes to which they are intended to be devoted."



In fact, they are content to express the very modest hope that "if the suggestion made be acted upon, some hindrance will thereby be placed in the way of any one acting dishonestly in respect of the disposal of the property and moneys referred to."

I do not know, and, under the circumstances, I cannot say I much care, whether the suggestions of the Committee have, or have not, been acted upon. Whether or not, the fact remains that an unscrupulous "General" will have a pretty free hand, notwithstanding "some" hindrance.

Thus, the judgment of the highly authoritative, and certainly not hostile, Committee of 1892, upon the issues with which they concerned themselves is hardly such as to inspire enthusiastic confidence. And it is further to be borne in mind that they carefully excluded from their duties "any examination of the principles, government, teaching, or methods of the Salvation Army as a religious organization, or of its affairs" except so far as they related to the administration of the moneys collected by the "Darkest England" appeal.

Consequently, the most important questions discussed in my letters were not in any way touched by the Committee. Even if their report had been far more favourable to the "Darkest England" scheme than it is; if it had really assured the contributors that the funds raised were

fully secured against malversation; the objections, on social and political grounds, to Mr. Booth's despotic organization, with its thousands of docile satellites pledged to blind obedience, set forth in the letters, would be in no degree weakened. The "sixpennyworth of good" would still be outweighed by the "shillingsworth of harm"; if indeed the relative worth, or unworth, of the latter should not be rated in pounds rather than in shillings. •

What would one not give for the opinion of the financial members of the Committee about the famous Bank; and that of the legal experts about the proposed "tribunes of the people"?

HODESLEA, EASTBOURNE,

July, 1894.

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## I.

# EVOLUTION AND ETHICS.

## PROLEGOMENA.

[1894.]

## I.

It may be safely assumed that, two thousand years ago, before Cæsar set foot in southern Britain, the whole country-side visible from the windows of the room in which I write, was in what is called "the state of nature." Except, it may be, by raising a few sepulchral mounds, such as those which still, here and there, break the flowing contours of the downs, man's hands had made no mark upon it; and the thin veil of vegetation which overspread the broad-backed heights and the shelving sides of the coombs was unaffected by his industry. The native grasses and weeds, the scattered patches of gorse, contended with one another for the possession of the scanty surface soil; they fought against the droughts of summer, the frosts of winter, and the furious gales which swept, with unbroken force, now from the Atlan-

tic, and now from the North Sea, at all times of the year; they filled up, as they best might, the gaps made in their ranks by all sorts of underground and overground animal ravagers. One year with another, an average population, the floating balance of the unceasing struggle for existence among the indigenous plants, maintained itself. It is as little to be doubted, that an essentially similar state of nature prevailed, in this region, for many thousand years before the coming of Cæsar; and there is no assignable reason for denying that it might continue to exist through an equally prolonged futurity, except for the intervention of man.

Reckoned by our customary standards of duration, the native vegetation, like the "everlasting hills" which it clothes, seems a type of permanence. The little *Amarella Gentians*, which abound in some places to-day, are the descendants of those that were trodden underfoot by the prehistoric savages who have left their flint tools about, here and there; and they followed ancestors which, in the climate of the glacial epoch, probably flourished better than they do now. Compared with the long past of this humble plant, all the history of civilized men is but an episode.

Yet nothing is more certain than that, measured by the liberal scale of time-keeping of the universe, this present state of nature, however it may seem to have gone and to go on for ever, is

but a fleeting phase of her infinite variety; merely the last of the series of changes which the earth's surface has undergone in the course of the millions of years of its existence. Turn back a square foot of the thin turf, and the solid foundation of the land, exposed in cliffs of chalk five hundred feet high on the adjacent shore, yields full assurance of a time when the sea covered the site of the "everlasting hills"; and when the vegetation of what land lay nearest, was as different from the present Flora of the Sussex downs, as that of Central Africa now is.\* No less certain is it that, between the time during which the chalk was formed and that at which the original turf came into existence, thousands of centuries elapsed, in the course of which, the state of nature of the ages during which the chalk was deposited, passed into that which now is, by changes so slow that, in the coming and going of the generations of men, had such witnessed them, the contemporary conditions would have seemed to be unchanging and unchangeable.

But it is also certain that, before the deposition of the chalk, a vastly longer period had elapsed, throughout which it is easy to follow the traces of the same process of ceaseless modification and of the internecine struggle for existence of living things; and that even when we can get no further

\* See "On a piece of Chalk" in the preceding volume of these Essays (vol. viii. p. 1).

back, it is not because there is any reason to think we have reached the beginning, but because the trail of the most ancient life remains hidden, or has become obliterated.

Thus that state of nature of the world of plants which we began by considering, is far from possessing the attribute of permanence. Rather its very essence is impermanence. It may have lasted twenty or thirty thousand years, it may last for twenty or thirty thousand years more, \*without obvious change; but, as surely as it has followed upon a very different state, so it will be followed by an equally different condition. That which endures is not one or another association of living forms, but the process of which the cosmos is the product, and of which these are among the transitory expressions. And in the living world, one of the most characteristic features of this cosmic process is the struggle for existence, the competition of each with all, the result of which is the selection, that is to say, the survival of those forms which, on the whole, are best adapted to the conditions which at any period obtain; and which are, therefore, in that respect, and only in that respect, the fittest.\* The acme reached by the cosmic pro-

\* That every theory of evolution must be consistent not merely with progressive development, but with indefinite persistence in the same condition and with retrogressive modification, is a point which I have insisted upon repeatedly from the year 1862 till now. See *Collected Essays*, vol. ii. pp. 461-89; vol. iii. p. 33; vol. viii.

cess in the vegetation of the downs is seen in the turf, with its weeds and gorse. Under the conditions, they have come out of the struggle victorious; and, by surviving, have proved that they are the fittest to survive.

That the state of nature, at any time, is a temporary phase of a process of incessant change, which has been going on for innumerable ages, appears to me to be a proposition as well established as any in modern history. Paleontology assures us, in addition, that the ancient philosophers who, with less reason, held the same doctrine, erred in supposing that the phases formed a cycle, exactly repeating the past, exactly foreshadowing the future, in their rotations. On the contrary, it furnishes us with conclusive reasons for thinking that, if every link in the ancestry of these humble indigenous plants had been preserved and were accessible to us, the whole would present a converging series of forms of gradually diminishing complexity, until, at some period in the history of the earth, far more remote than any of which organic remains have yet been discovered, they would merge in those low groups among which the boundaries between animal and vegetable life become effaced.\*

p. 304. In the address on "Geological Contemporaneity and Persistent Types" (1862), the paleontological proofs of this proposition were, I believe, first set forth.

\* "On the Border Territory between the Animal and the Vegetable Kingdoms," *Essays*, vol. viii. p. 162.



The word "evolution," now generally applied to the cosmic process, has had a singular history, and is used in various senses.\* Taken in its popular signification it means progressive development, that is, gradual change from a condition of relative uniformity to one of relative complexity; but its connotation has been widened to include the phenomena of retrogressive metamorphosis, that is, of progress from a condition of relative complexity to one of relative uniformity.

As a natural process, of the same character as the development of a tree from its seed, or of a fowl from its egg, evolution excludes creation and all other kinds of supernatural intervention. As the expression of a fixed order, every stage of which is the effect of causes operating according to definite rules, the conception of evolution no less excludes that of chance. It is very desirable to remember that evolution is not an explanation of the cosmic process, but merely a generalized statement of the method and results of that process. And, further, that, if there is proof that the cosmic process was set going by any agent, then that agent will be the creator of it and of all its products, although supernatural intervention may remain strictly excluded from its further course.

So far as that limited revelation of the nature of things, which we call scientific knowledge, has

\* See "Evolution in Biology," Essays, vol. ii. p. 187.