

RECENT DISCUSSIONS

IN

SCIENCE, PHILOSOPHY, AND MORALS.

BY

HERBERT SPENCER,

AUTHOR OF "FIRST PRINCIPLES," "THE PRINCIPLES OF BIOLOGY," "THE PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGY," ETC.

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. P R E F A C E .

THE present volume consists mainly of matter that is new to the American public. Three of the essays have not before appeared in this country, and two of the others, issued as a pamphlet, have had so small a circulation as to have been seen by but few readers. These several discussions have been drawn from Mr. Spencer at various times to correct misapprehensions and misrepresentations that have been made regarding the doctrines of his system of Philosophy. Some of them form valuable extensions of these doctrines, and all will be useful in promoting their right interpretation. Why the sixth article has been taken from another volume and included in this collection, requires a few words of explanation.

Seventeen years ago, Mr. Spencer published an elaborate Review article entitled "The Genesis of Science," in which he objected to Comte's views of the classification of the Sciences. Although Mr. Spencer's criticisms involved a radical dissent from the peculiar views of M. Comte, and what was held as fundamental in his philosophy, yet upon the publication of his own philosophical

system Mr. Spencer found himself ranked as a positivist and a follower of Comte. Against this he repeatedly protested in public letters; but the charge was so continually reiterated that at length he found himself compelled to make a more formal statement of the differences between himself and the French philosopher. The result of this was a pamphlet published in 1864, in which he followed the rejection of Comte's classification by the promulgation of his own view, and appended a detailed statement of the differences between his doctrine and the doctrines of M. Comte. Some of his views of classification having been adversely criticised by Mr. Bain and Mr. Mill, he has replied to their strictures in a new article in the present volume. The general question is one of great interest to scientific students; and, for the convenience of those who desire to form an intelligent judgment of Mr. Spencer's case, both as contrasted with that of Comte, and on its own independent merits, it has been thought desirable to incorporate the original article on "The Genesis of Science" in this collection. Though placed last, it should be read first by those not already familiar with the discussion.

The present revised edition of "Recent Discussions" contains six additional articles, and completes the first collection yet made of Mr. Spencer's miscellaneous essays.

NEW YORK, *September*, 1872.

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
I.—MORALS AND MORAL SENTIMENTS,	7
II.—ORIGIN OF ANIMAL-WORSHIP,	31
III.—THE CLASSIFICATION OF THE SCIENCES,	57
IV.—POSTSCRIPT—REPLYING TO CRITICISMS,	87
V.—REASONS FOR DISSENTING FROM THE PHILOSOPHY OF COMTE,	113
VI.—OF LAWS IN GENERAL, AND THE ORDER OF THEIR DISCOVERY,	137
VII.—THE GENESIS OF SCIENCE,	155
VIII.—SPECIALIZED ADMINISTRATION,	235
IX.—WHAT IS ELECTRICITY?	281
X.—THE CONSTITUTION OF THE SUN,	297
XI.—THE COLLECTIVE WISDOM,	311
XII.—POLITICAL FETICHISM,	319
XIII.—MR. MARTINEAU ON EVOLUTION,	329

I.

MORALS AND MORAL SENTIMENTS.

[FROM THE FORTNIGHTLY REVIEW, APRIL, 1871.]

MORALS AND MORAL SENTIMENTS.

IF a writer who discusses unsettled questions takes up every gauntlet thrown down to him, polemical writing will absorb much of his energy. Having a power of work which unfortunately does not suffice for executing with any thing like due rapidity the task I have undertaken, I have made it a policy to avoid controversy as much as possible, even at the cost of being seriously misunderstood. Hence it happened that, when, in *Macmillan's Magazine* for July, 1869, Mr. Richard Hutton published, under the title of "A Questionable Parentage for Morals," a criticism upon a doctrine of mine, I decided to let his misrepresentations remain unnoticed until, in the course of my work, I arrived at the stage where, by a full exposition of this doctrine, they would be set aside. It did not occur to me that, in the mean time, these erroneous statements, accepted as true statements, would be repeated by other writers, and my views commented upon as untenable. This, however, has happened. In more periodicals than one, I have seen it asserted that Mr. Hutton has effectually disposed of my hypothesis. Supposing that this hypothesis has been rightly expressed by Mr. Hutton, Sir John Lubbock, in his "Origin of Civilization," etc., has been led to express a partial dissent; which I think he would not have expressed had my own exposition been before him. Mr. Mivart, too, in his

recent "Genesis of Species," has been similarly betrayed into misapprehensions. And now Sir Alexander Grant, following the same lead, has conveyed to the readers of the *Fortnightly Review* another of these conceptions, which is but very partially true. Thus I find myself compelled to say as much as will serve to prevent further spread of the mischief.

If a general doctrine concerning a highly-involved class of phenomena could be adequately presented in a single paragraph of a letter, the writing of books would be superfluous. In the brief exposition of certain ethical doctrines held by me, which is given in Prof. Bain's "Mental and Moral Science," it is stated that they are—

"as yet nowhere fully expressed. They form part of the more general doctrine of Evolution which he is engaged in working out; and they are at present to be gathered only from scattered passages. It is true that, in his first work, 'Social Statics,' he presented what he then regarded as a tolerably complete view of one division of Morals. But, without abandoning this view, he now regards it as inadequate—more especially in respect of its basis."

Mr. Hutton, however, taking the bare enunciation of one part of this basis, deals with it critically; and, in the absence of any exposition of it by me, sets forth what he supposes to be my grounds for it, and proceeds to show that they are unsatisfactory.

If, in his anxiety to suppress what he doubtless regards as a pernicious doctrine, Mr. Hutton could not wait until I had explained myself, it might have been expected that he would use whatever information was to be had for rightly construing it. So far from seeking out such information, however, he has, in a way for which I cannot account, ignored the information immediately before him.

The title which Mr. Hutton has chosen for his criticism is, "A Questionable Parentage for Morals." Now, he has ample means of knowing that I allege a primary basis of Morals, quite independent of that which he describes and rejects. I do not refer merely to the fact that, having, when he reviewed "Social Statics,"¹ expressed his very decided dissent from this primary basis, he must have been aware that I allege it; for he may say that in the long interval which has elapsed he had forgotten all about it. But I refer to the distinct enunciation of this primary basis in that letter to Mr. Mill from which he quotes. In a preceding paragraph of the letter, I have explained that, while I accept utilitarianism in the abstract, I do not accept that current utilitarianism which recognizes for the guidance of conduct nothing beyond empirical generalizations; and I have contended that—

"Morality, properly so called—the science of right conduct—has for its object to determine *how* and *why* certain modes of conduct are detrimental, and certain other modes beneficial. These good and bad results cannot be accidental, but must be necessary consequences of the constitution of things; and I conceive it to be the business of Moral Science to deduce, from the laws of life and the conditions of existence, what kinds of action necessarily tend to produce happiness, and what kinds to produce unhappiness. Having done this, its deductions are to be recognized as laws of conduct; and are to be conformed to irrespective of a direct estimation of happiness or misery."

Nor is this the only enunciation of what I conceive to be the primary basis of morals, contained in this same letter. A subsequent paragraph, separated by four lines only from that which Mr. Hutton extracts, commences thus:

"Progressing civilization, which is of necessity a succession of compromises between old and new, requires a perpetual readjust-

¹ See *Prospective Review* for January, 1852.

ment of the compromise between the ideal and the practicable in social arrangements: to which end, both elements of the compromise must be kept in view. If it is true that pure rectitude prescribes a system of things far too good for men as they are, it is not less true that mere expediency does not of itself tend to establish a system of things any better than that which exists. While absolute morality owes to expediency the checks which prevent it from rushing into Utopian absurdities, expediency is indebted to absolute morality for all stimulus to improvement. Granted that we are chiefly interested in ascertaining what is *relatively right*, it still follows that we must first consider what is *absolutely right*; since the one conception presupposes the other."

I do not see how there could well be a more emphatic assertion that there exists a primary basis of morals independent of, and in a sense antecedent to, that which is furnished by experiences of utility; and, consequently, independent of, and in a sense antecedent to, those moral sentiments which I conceive to be generated by such experiences. Yet no one could gather from Mr. Hutton's article that I assert this; or would even find reasons for a faint suspicion that I do so. From the reference made to my further views, he would infer my acceptance of that empirical utilitarianism which I have expressly repudiated. And the title which Mr. Hutton gives to his paper clearly asserts, by implication, that I recognize no "parentage for morals" beyond that of the accumulation and organization of the effects of experience. I cannot believe that Mr. Hutton intended to convey this erroneous impression. He was, I suppose, too much absorbed in contemplating the proposition he combats to observe, or, at least, to attach any weight to, the propositions which accompany it. But I regret that he did not perceive the mischief he was likely to do me by spreading this one-sided statement.

I pass now to the particular question at issue—not

the "parentage for morals," but the parentage of moral sentiments. In his version of my view on this more special doctrine, Mr. Hutton has similarly, I regret to say, neglected the data which would have helped him to draw an approximately true outline of it. It cannot well be that the existence of such data was unknown to him. They are contained in the "Principles of Psychology;" and Mr. Hutton reviewed that work when it was first published.¹ In the chapter on The Feelings, which occurs near the end of that work, there is sketched out a process of genesis by no means like that which Mr. Hutton indicates; and had he turned to that chapter he would have seen that his description of the genesis of the moral sentiments out of organized experiences is not such a one as I should have given. Let me quote a passage from that chapter:

"Not only are those emotions which form the immediate stimuli to actions thus explicable, but the like explanation applies to the emotions that leave the subject of them comparatively passive: as, for instance, the emotion produced by beautiful scenery. The gradually increasing complexity in the groups of sensations and ideas co-ordinated, ends in the co-ordination of those vast aggregations of them which a grand landscape excites and suggests. The infant taken into the midst of mountains is totally unaffected by them; but is delighted with the small group of attributes and relations presented in a toy. The child can appreciate, and be pleased with, the more complicated relations of household objects and localities, the garden, the field, and the street. But it is only in youth and mature age, when individual things and small assemblages of them have become familiar and automatically cognizable, that those immense assemblages which landscapes present can be adequately grasped, and the highly aggregated states of consciousness produced by them, experienced. Then, however, the various minor groups of states, that have been in earlier days severally produced by trees, by fields,

¹ His criticism will be found in the *National Review* for January, 1856, under the title "Atheism."

by streams, by cascades, by rocks, by precipices, by mountains, by clouds, are aroused together. Along with the sensations immediately received, there are partially excited the myriads of sensations that have been in times past received from objects such as those presented; further, there are partially excited the various incidental feelings that were experienced on all these countless past occasions; and there are probably also excited certain deeper, but now vague, combinations of states, that were organized in the race during barbarous times, when its pleasurable activities were chiefly among the woods and waters. And out of all these excitations, some of them actual, but most of them nascent, is composed the emotion which a fine landscape produces in us."

It is, I think, amply manifest that the processes here indicated are not to be taken as intellectual processes—not as processes in which recognized relations between pleasures and their antecedents, or intelligent adaptations of means to ends, form the dominant elements. The state of mind produced by an aggregate of picturesque objects is not one resolvable into propositions. The sentiment does not contain within itself any consciousness of causes and consequences of happiness. The vague recollections of other beautiful scenes and other delightful days which it dimly rouses, are not aroused because of any rational coördinations of ideas that have been formed in by-gone days. Mr. Hutton, however, has assumed that in the genesis of moral feelings as due to inherited experiences of the pleasures and pains arising from certain modes of conduct, I am speaking of reasoned-out experiences—experiences consciously accumulated and generalized. He altogether overlooks the fact that the genesis of emotions is distinguished from the genesis of ideas in this: that whereas the ideas are composed of elements that are simple, definitely related, and (in the case of general ideas) constantly related, emotions are composed of enormously complex aggregates of elements which are never

twice alike, and that stand in relations which are never twice alike. The difference in the resulting modes of consciousness is this: In the genesis of an idea the successive experiences, be they of sounds, colors, touches, tastes, or be they of the special objects that combine many of these into groups, have so much in common that each, when it occurs, can be definitely thought of as like those which preceded it. But in the genesis of an emotion the successive experiences so far differ that each of them, when it occurs, suggests past experiences which are not specifically similar, but have only a general similarity; and, at the same time, it suggests benefits or evils in past experience which likewise are various in their special natures, though they have a certain community of general nature. Hence it results that the consciousness aroused is a multitudinous, confused consciousness, in which, along with a certain kind of combination among the impressions received from without, there is a vague cloud of ideal combinations akin to them, and a vague mass of ideal feelings of pleasure or pain that were associated with these. We have abundant proof that feelings grow up without reference to recognized causes and consequences, and without the possessor of them being able to say why they have grown up; though analysis, nevertheless, shows that they have been formed out of connected experiences. The familiar fact to which, I suppose, almost every one can testify, that a kind of jam which was, during childhood, repeatedly taken after medicine, may become by simple association of sensations so nauseous that it cannot be tolerated in after-life, illustrates clearly enough the way in which repugnances may be established by habitual association of feelings, without any idea of causal connection; or rather, in spite of the knowledge that there is no causal connection. Similarly with pleasurable emotions.

The cawing of a rook is not in itself an agreeable sound—musically considered, it is very much the contrary. Yet the cawing of rooks usually produces in people very pleasurable feelings—feelings which most of them suppose to result from the quality of the sound itself. Only the few who are given to self-analysis are aware that the cawing of rooks is agreeable to them because it has been connected with countless of their greatest gratifications—with the gathering of wild-flowers in childhood; with Saturday-afternoon excursions in school-boy days; with midsummer holidays in the country, when books were thrown aside, and lessons were replaced by games and adventures in the fields; with fresh, sunny mornings in after-years, when a walking-excursion was an immense relief from toil. As it is, this sound, though not causally related to all these multitudinous and varied past delights, but only often associated with them, can no more be heard without rousing a dim consciousness of these delights, than the voice of an old friend unexpectedly coming into the house can be heard without suddenly raising a wave of that feeling that has resulted from the pleasures of past companionship. If we are to understand the genesis of emotions, either in the individual or in the race, we must take account of this all-important process. Mr. Hutton, however, apparently overlooking it, and not having reminded himself, by referring to the “Principles of Psychology,” that I insist upon it, represents my hypothesis to be that a certain sentiment results from the consolidation of intellectual conclusions! He speaks of me as believing that “what seems to us now the ‘necessary’ intuitions and *a priori* assumptions of human nature, are likely to prove, when scientifically analyzed, nothing but a similar conglomeration of our ancestors’ *best observations and most useful empirical rules.*” He