

RIGHT AND WRONG :

THEIR RELATION TO MAN'S ULTIMATE END. IS THE NORMA OF
MORALITY ABSOLUTE OR RELATIVE?

WHETHER we consider man singly and apart from his relation to other beings, or whether we view him in connection with the whole order of beings,—of which he is a unit,—it is equally evident that he exists on account of a certain end, which directs and gives a character to all his actions. If our knowledge of man as tending to a final end is to be anything more than generic, it is plain that our consideration of him cannot stop with those properties which he possesses in common with the mineral, vegetable, or animal nature. Although man has action in common with these three grades of being, yet it is not on this account, but by reason of his specific nature as a human being, that he tends to an end differently from irrational creatures. The brute animal can tend to a sensible and material end, but it cannot know its nature as an end; and it cannot accordingly deliberate upon and devise means for its accomplishment. The case is different with man; he can tend to an end rationally known to be such, deliberate upon the best means to accomplish it, and finally, he can choose freely the measure he deems best fitted to secure his purpose. As a still further exercise of his power of freedom, he can pass by the best means, and knowingly select those ill adapted to attain the object in view; or lastly, he may reject the means altogether, and not choose at all.

Here it may be asked, with what class of actions is morality concerned? And, first, let us see what is the meaning of this word. Morality, the abstract term derived from moral, denotes nothing else than an aspect under which we view certain actions, founding our view, however, on an objectively real and unchangeable basis. When we consider the human body in its structural arrangement, and as a physical organism subject to waste and repair, we are within the domain of physiology; but when we view the human organism as the medium through which a spiritual substance communicates with the external world, and as the inseparable companion even of the soul's most abstract thought, or, in other words, when we consider the body in its relation to the soul, we are no longer taking a physiological view of the inferior part of our nature, but we have entered into the province of psychological science, whose grade of abstraction is higher, and whose nature consequently is superior to the concrete and physiological aspect.

Similarly when we view the actions of man merely as physical effects proceeding from him as their principle, or when we regard man even as the most perfect natural agent, as the one in whom proportionately the greatest mechanical efficiency is secured with the least expenditure of power, we then have matter competent for physics or natural science; but when we are engaged with ethical science, we lay aside the physical character of man's action and pass to a different sphere, wherein indeed the action still proceeds from man as its principle, but with this peculiarity, that his character as principle is then understood, and along with this understanding is the capability of becoming or of not becoming thus related to any given act. The subject of such action then understands its nature, *i. e.*, its relation to him as his effect, and he is free to elicit it or not. Being aware of the character of his action, the principle that elicits it must know more or less determinately its proper effect; and action has a moral value not so much as action precisely, but as productive of an effect which is the end of the action.¹ In other words, the action must be directed by the agent to a certain term which specifies it, or gives it its moral denomination; and the characteristic of rational action is that the agent is self-motive in respect to the end, whereas creatures that have not reason tend to an end as extrinsically moved to it,—not intrinsically,—since they do not know its nature as end.²

¹ "Actio aliquando dicta effectus, quatenus est ab agente, tamen magis proprie est via ad effectum." "Action is sometimes termed an effect, inasmuch as it is from an agent, yet, more properly, it is the way to the effect."

² "Tamen considerandum est, quod aliquid sua actione vel motu tendit ad finem dupliciter. Uno modo sicut seipsum ad finem movens ut homo. Alio modo sicut ab alio motum ad finem: sicut sagitta tendit ad determinatum finem ex hoc quod movetur a sagittante qui suam actionem dirigit in finem. Illa ergo quæ rationem habent seipsa movent ad finem, quia habent dominium suorum actuum per liberum arbitrium quod est facultas voluntatis et rationis. Illa vero quæ ratione carent, tendunt in finem propter naturalem inclinationem quasi ab alio motu, non autem a seipsis cum non cognoscant rationem finis: et ideo nihil in finem ordinare possunt, sed solum in finem ab alio ordinantur: nam tolu irrationalis natura comparatur ad Deum sicut instrumentum ad agens principale; et ideo proprium est nature rationalis ut tendat in finem quasi se agens vel ducens in finem. Nature vero irrationalis quasi ab alio acta vel ducta, sive in finem apprehensum sicut bruta animalia: sive in finem non apprehensum sicut ea quæ omnino cognitione carent." St. Thom., I, 2, Q. I., Art. 2, conclus. "Yet it must be remembered that anything by its action or motion tends to an end in two ways: in one, as moving itself to an end, as man. In the other way as moved to an end by another: as the arrow tends to a determinate end, because it is set in motion by the archer who directs its action to an end. Those beings, therefore, that have reason move themselves to an end because they have dominion over their acts in virtue of free judgment, which is a faculty of the will and of the reason. But those beings that have not reason, tend to an end on account of natural inclination as moved by another, not by themselves, since they do not apprehend its nature as an end. Hence they are unable to direct another to an end, but are themselves directed thereto; for the whole of irrational nature is referred to God as instrument to principal agent. It is, then, the peculiarity of rational nature to tend to an end as

The plant, by the physical law of its nature, tends to perfect vegetable life by means of growth from intussusception of food; and its action, though immanent and vital, is invariable and uniform. The animal, although moved to its end by extrinsic agency,—similarly to the plant,—yet enjoys a specifically higher life, whereby it tends to an end that is in some manner known; differently from the plant, it can apprehend and sensibly know this or that concrete object as materially such; *v. g.*, the dog can sensibly discriminate between his master and other men. But the faculty of the dog to know stops with the singular and sensible thing; it can indeed apprehend concrete and material relations, but not as such; it apprehends them as sensible things.¹ To know an end formally as such, that is, not merely to know this or that object, but to perceive in it the quality of desirability, or the character which presents it as an object fit and good for appetite, simply transcends the sphere of sensible and organic cognition, and is peculiar to immaterial and intellectual knowledge. Man, as endowed with reason, can know an end not only in its physical nature and properties, but he can also perceive it as an object having a relation to his rational appetite, or to his will. He can then judge and determine for himself freely whether or not he will choose or reject the object; and it is only when this judgment and self-determination in respect to an end are the principles of the action that man can be styled a moral being. The action is then properly called a human action, for as the term “human” expresses the specific note by which man is different from other beings, so, a human action is one which is elicited by man in virtue of his specific perfection; and it consequently differs from other action, whether of man himself or of irrational animals, in this, that it is exercised obediently to rational command. This is the perfection peculiar to a human act; for not all action even of man’s intellect and will can most properly be called human, since much action of these faculties is necessitated, and only those acts are human which are done *obediently* to reason, or over which man has *rational dominion*.

Having considered the nature of a human or moral action somewhat analytically, it will be conducive to clearness to view the subject, with Herbert Spencer, as a whole, and this whole is called conduct. Returning mentally upon the matter under consideration we may ask, of what is this whole which we call conduct composed,

moving or directing itself to it; and the characteristic of irrational nature is to be moved or directed by another to an end which is apprehended, as is the case with the brute animal, or to an end that is not apprehended, which is the condition of those beings that are without knowledge entirely.”

¹ “Finem apprehendunt sed non rationem finis.”

and what is its extent? Reflection upon the meaning of this word will make plain (1) that conduct is with most propriety and by the best English writers applied to that which has a moral character; it is a term which most properly belongs to man when acting completely and specifically as a human being. By analogy to its primary meaning, it may be used to express actions of a different kind when considered in their entirety; for instance, it might be said that a ship's conduct in a storm was admirable, her behavior was all that could be desired. It is evident, however, that these expressions are figurative, and do not manifest the primary signification of the words conduct and behavior. Herbert Spencer¹ thus answers the question, how shall we define conduct: "It is not co-extensive with the aggregate of actions, though it is nearly so. Such actions as those of an epileptic fit are not included in our conception of conduct; the conception excludes purposeless actions." And in recognizing this exclusion "we simultaneously recognize all that is included. The definition of conduct that emerges is either acts adjusted to ends, or else the adjustment of acts to ends, according as we contemplate the formed body of acts or think of the form alone. And conduct, in its full acceptance, must be taken as comprehending all adjustments of acts to ends, from the simplest to the most complex, whatever their special natures, and whether considered separately or in their totality."

The conception (of conduct) undoubtedly excludes purposeless actions; for conduct can be made up of those actions only which are done for an end or purpose. But by whom is the purpose intended? Is it intended by the agent who then and there acts? If so, our conception of conduct is true. If the purpose is not intended by the agent that then and there acts, its operations cannot be called its conduct; it is the exertion of merely physical forces in their own degree and kind. There is a final purpose or an ultimate end manifested in the action of every being, even in that of minerals, *v. g.*, the stone which becomes loosened from the side of the cliff falls to the earth obediently to the law of gravitation, and the law of gravitation itself but subserves an ulterior purpose in the economy of the universe. There is design exhibited in the complicated functions of vegetable life, and equally perceptible is the unifying influence of a final purpose in the varied phenomena of animal existence. To apply the word conduct, however, to the operations of merely physical causes—how visible soever in all of which is a purpose—would surely be an inapt use of the term; there is an essential constituent of conduct yet wanting, and this is, that the purpose on account of which such action is done is un-

¹ Data of Ethics, chapter i.

known to them as the directive principle of their action, and must be referred to a being who is extrinsic and superior to them, viz., to the author of their natures. The Duke of Argyle,¹ with much clearness of language, thus draws the line between the actions of animals and their knowledge of such action: "But this adjustment (between bodily organs and corresponding instincts) would be useless unless it were part of another adjustment between the instincts and perceptions of animals and those facts and forces of surrounding nature which are related to them and to the whole cycle of things of which they form a part. In those instinctive actions of the lower animals which involve the most distant and the most complicated anticipations, it is clear that the prevision which is involved is a prevision which is not in the animals themselves. They appear to be guided by some simple appetite, by an odor or a taste, and they have obviously no more consciousness of the ends to be subserved, or of the mechanism by which they are secured, than the suckling has of the processes of nutrition. The path along which they walk is a path which they did not engineer. It is a path made for them, and they simply follow it. But the propensities and tastes and feelings which make them follow it, and the rightness of its direction towards the ends to be obtained, do constitute a unity of adjustment which binds together the whole world of life, and the whole inorganic world on which living things depend." The purpose, then, which is visible in animal action, is not in the animals themselves, but in the being who framed their nature; their action, therefore, cannot properly be called conduct. Conduct essentially is applicable to those actions only which are performed by an agent on account of an end which is known as such, and intended by himself; it is there the behavior of a *person*. Such action is peculiarly the agent's own work; his dominion or ownership is complete, and it is, therefore, imputable to him, or he is accountable for it. To sum the matter up, conduct in strictness is applied to the action of that being only who is intelligent and free. A distinction becomes necessary, therefore, in the following proposition of Mr. Spencer: "Complete comprehension of conduct is not to be obtained by contemplating the conduct of human beings only; we have to regard this as a proof of universal conduct—conduct as exhibited by all living creatures."²

Now there is a true respect under which we may speak of universal conduct, of which that of human beings is a portion only. When we contemplate the action of all creatures as giving evidence of a purpose which exists in the mind of an intelligent being, then

¹ The Unity of Nature, published in the Contemporary Review for October, 1880.

² Data of Ethics, chapter i.

the actions of all creatures as his effect are in a true sense imputable to him as principal agent, and as manifestations of his power and intelligence they become, in some manner, the conduct of this intelligent being. Since conduct is necessarily a predicate only of an agent that is intelligent and free, and since man is the only being of such a kind in the visible world, human language recognizes this truth, and refuses to employ the word as a predicate proper to any nature lower than man's. The inference, then, is, that to define conduct as "the adjustment of acts to ends," is to leave unsettled the relation which the adjustment bears to the being whose action is in question. Does the being adjust its own actions to an end known as such, or are its acts adjusted to an end for it by an extrinsic and superior being? Conduct requires a *self-adjustment* of acts to an end whose character as end is known; the adjustment cannot be performed by proxy, or else the action sinks to the merely physical, which is the case with the actions of all natures lower than the human.

It will be in place here to consider more specially what is the end of conduct or of human actions; for it admits of no rational doubt that there is an ultimate end which terminates either expressly or implicitly the action of all creatures. Let us now examine what definitely this end is. It may be stated at once that the object to which every being tends, or which is aimed at in the action of every being, is good.¹ Good is essentially the object of appetite; it is that which is simply and for its own sake desirable. Since good is the object to which every being tends, and since beings are of different natures, it is plain that the good, as the object of appetite, will vary according to the nature of the being whose term it is. In other words, the good which is the term of every being's action must be such as befits the specific nature of the being, and ultimately perfects it; for example, the musician, as such, does not aim at producing a beautiful painting, nor does the portrait painter, as such, endeavor to compose exquisite music; and accordingly the ultimate perfection of the one is not that of the other, though a good object is that to which both in their respective characters tend. In brief, the essential end of every being must be duly proportioned to the specific nature of the being. And as a human or moral action differs in its essence from one that is merely physical or natural, it follows that the essential object of the one is different from that of the other, although both objects agree generically in this, that they are good. The final end, then, which is the ultimate perfection of a being, is proportioned to the being's nature, and it is reached in a manner proper to the being itself.

¹ Bonum est quod omnia appetunt.

This is the distinction made by the schoolmen, and it is clear and precise. They admitted that the ultimate end of all actions is good, and hence the same *objectively*; but the obtaining of the end constituting final perfection was proportioned to the nature of the being; in other words, the possession of that ultimately perfecting good was according to the being's own essence.¹

The means by which rational natures come into possession of their essential end constitute the matter about which morality is concerned; and this as reduced to formulæ directive of the conduct of these beings, *i. e.*, as prescribing the use of some and forbidding the use of other means, takes the shape of law; hence law is "an ordinance of reason," "a rule of conduct," etc.

The good to which man tends, as to the final perfection of his nature, is called the chief or supreme good, and the possession of it is styled beatitude or perfect happiness, which, to use the words of Mr. Spencer, is the "end underived from any other end." It is that which alone is adequate to meet the requirements of our nature; not even virtue, which possesses a participated perfection, can be the chief end of human aim, for virtue in the last analysis is only a means to an end, and if this were withdrawn, although the intrinsic distinction between right and wrong would yet remain, independent of consequences,—the proper course to be observed by a rational nature,—still there would not always, in such supposition, be an efficient incentive for virtuous action; for man, as now constituted, is not gifted with perfect insight into the true nature of things, and the human will is not always impervious to the seductive influence of pleasure inconsistent with reason.

¹ St. Thomas, I. 2, Q. 1, Art. 8, concl. : "Respondeo dicendum quod sicut Philosophus dicit in s, Met., finis dupliciter dicitur, scilicet cuius et quo, id est ipsa res in qua ratio boni invenitur, et usus sive adeptio illius rei : sicut si dicamus quod motus corporis gravis finis est vel locus inferior ut res ; vel hoc quod esse in loco inferiori, ut usus : et finis avari est vel pecunia ut res, vel possessio pecuniæ ut usus. Si ergo loquamur de ultimo fine hominis quantum ad ipsam rem quæ est finis : sic in ultimo fine hominis omnia alia conveniunt ; quia Deus est ultimus finis hominis et omnium aliarum rerum. Si autem loquamur de ultimo fine hominis quantum ad consecutionem finis sic in hoc fine hominis non communicant creaturæ irracionales, nam homo et aliæ rationales creaturæ consequuntur ultimum finem cognoscendo et amando Deum, quod non competit aliis creaturis quæ adipiscuntur ultimum finem in quantum participant aliquam similitudinem Dei, secundum quod sunt vel vivunt, vel etiam cognoscunt." "An end, as Aristotle says, may be viewed under two respects, viz., merely as an object or thing wherein the character of good is found, and also as an object to be reached or possessed : just as the end to which a heavy body in its motion tends, is a lower place, as an object, and as an object to be reached or possessed it is *being in* a lower place ; or, as the end of a miser is money as an object, and as an object to be attained it is the possession of money. Hence, if we speak of man's ultimate end merely as an object, there it is the same for him and all other creatures ; but if we speak of it as to its possession, irrational creatures do not share in it, since rational creatures attain their ultimate by knowing and loving God."

It was just said that even were the true end of human aim withdrawn, were there no essential end for man's nature,—as there is,—even then the distinction between a right and wrong would not be obliterated; for we must conceive the inherent rectitude of certain actions and the intrinsic evil of others to be so seated in the very nature of things, that if we put the impossible case in which no reward would ultimately crown virtue, and no punishment visit the wrongdoer, even then the moral character of human actions as right or wrong would not be effaced, and the right would still be worthy and the wrong unworthy of our rational nature's observance.¹ Morality as belonging to the speculative and absolute order we rightly conceive to be founded in the intrinsic essences of things in such a manner as to be simply independent of reward or punishment, happiness or unhappiness; these are necessary consequences of good and bad actions, but being effects, and hence secondary, our consideration cannot rest in them for the ultimate and absolute reason of things. They are indeed causes in one sense, since in the present order of providence, they are the last *practical* motive for the performance of virtue and for the avoidance of vice; but for philosophical analysis we must proceed to the causes of these effects, happiness and unhappiness, reward and punishment, and this brings us to the *a priori* order of the essences of things, to which there is nothing ulterior; here we are within the sphere of metaphysical truth, on which ultimately rests the difference between right and wrong, and from which results the simply final and immutable norma of morality. And just as we cannot say that the final reason of mathematical truths is to be found in the advantages resulting from their practical application, so neither can we say that the essential truths of the moral order are such *ultimately* because of the benefits accruing from their observance. But when we leave the order of speculative truth, and enter the sphere of the practical, then we must take into account the results of good and evil actions, their character of producing happiness or unhappiness, and in this sphere the end, the *summum bonum*, is supreme. Our moral actions having, of necessity, good as the term of their tendency, are performed on account of an ultimate end, whose possession renders us perfectly happy, and perfect happiness, therefore, becomes practically the final rule of our actions.

¹ Cicero (lib. 2, de Finib.) has this expressive sentence: "Quod tale est ut detracta omni utilitate sine ullis præmiis fructibusque percipsum possit jure laudari." "What is intrinsically right (*honestum*) is such that were all utility removed it could of right be praised for itself alone, even without reward."

And Aristotle has the following: "That then is honorable which, while it is an object of choice on its own account, is commendable also, or which, being good, is pleasant simply because it is good. But if the honorable be this, virtue must necessarily be honorable, for being good it is commendable." 1 Rhet. chap. ix.

In this connection let us view a theory current with some writers on the last motives of moral actions. The following is from Mr. Spencer: "And yet cross-examination quickly compels every one to confess the true ultimate end. Just as the miser asked to justify himself is obliged to allege the power of money to purchase desirable things as his reason for prizing it, so the moralist, who thinks this conduct intrinsically good and that intrinsically bad, if pushed home, has no choice but to fall back on their pleasure-giving and pain-giving effects. To prove this, it needs but to observe how impossible it would be to think of them as we do if their effects were reversed."¹

To follow out this reasoning, we should say that the chemist who thinks gold intrinsically different from silver, if pushed home, has no choice but to allege the different specific gravity of the two metals, their difference of malleability and color, and other properties peculiar to each respectively. Now, the different effects of these metals, or the properties peculiar to each, are certainly a reason why the two metals are different: furthermore, they are the only means by which we arrive at a knowledge of their difference at all: yet the difference of specific gravity, of malleability, color, etc., are not the *final* reason why gold and silver are intrinsically distinct. This is presupposed to such properties, and is to be found *ultimately* in the difference of essential nature which exists between the two metals. The inherent essence of gold is different from the inherent essence of silver, and consequent upon this are the distinct essential properties which belong to each. Similarly, to make the final reason why this conduct is intrinsically good and that intrinsically bad consist in their different effects as producing happiness or unhappiness, is without doubt to state a reason, nay, the *last practical* reason, why the two sets of actions are different, but we have not then arrived at the absolutely ultimate reason for such distinction. This is to be obtained only from a consideration of right and wrong as composed of those essential relations whose terms are the intrinsic essences of things. This view prescind from the merely practical, and places the question in the order of speculative and necessary truth, which is absolutely immutable.

The reasoning, then, employed in the passage quoted above while true under a respect, yet is not without difficulty from a philosophical standpoint. Objection must be raised also to the assumption that man's present life is his final and only state. If this were true, if man's moral actions had no bearing on any other condition of things than the present, no practical reason could be assigned for the performance of many actions which are now called

¹ Data of Ethics, chapter iii.

virtuous; pleasure-giving and pain-giving effects would then be an important element in shaping the conduct of many. Although virtue is the means by which we arrive at perfect happiness,—which is our last end,—yet it does not always meet with reward on this earth, nor is vice here always punished, and unless there be a time when the equality of justice is established between things, there would be no adequate sanction for the moral order. As a truth, however, that can be shown by natural reason, man's present life is not his final state; he is destined for something beyond and above the present and transitory order, and if a future and permanent condition of things be ignored, the problem of present existence becomes incapable of solution; if man's destiny were "of the earth earthly," the application of the moral law would require considerable modification.

As a fact, however, human nature is differently constituted; there is an end which is the befitting and final complement of our being, and this end is none other than beatitude, perfect happiness; hence, practically that action is morally good which is conducive to this end, happiness, and that action is morally wrong which averts us from it. Our end is the practical standard to which we refer our moral actions. The truth of this matter is peculiarly well stated by Aristotle, and the following reflections from his *Ethics* on the natural destiny of man are unanswerable: "In fine, we call that completely perfect which is always eligible for its own sake, and never on account of anything else. Of such a kind does happiness seem in a peculiar manner to be; for this we always choose on its own account and never on account of anything else. But honor, and pleasure, and intellect, and every virtue we choose partly on their own account (for were no further advantage to result from them, we should choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, because we suppose that we shall attain happiness by their means; but no one chooses happiness for the sake of these, nor in short for the sake of anything else."¹

Not only did this eminent philosopher conclude that perfect happiness was the essential destiny of man, but his reasoning as to what precisely constitutes perfect happiness is acute and profound; so true, indeed, are his arguments, that although subjected to the keenest disputation of scholastic ages they withstood the test, and were finally adopted as incontrovertible. Viewing our human nature as composed of matter and spirit substantially united, he inquires whether man's ultimate end—which is beatitude—can consist of a life shared in common with either the vegetable or the

¹ Bk. I., chap. vii.

animal. This he answers in the negative; since, were it true, then both the vegetable and the animal could acquire beatitude. He concludes, therefore, that man's ultimate end must consist essentially of that life which distinguishes him from irrational creatures, viz., the rational life, the life of an intelligent being. Now, since every being is perfect, in so far as it is in act or operation, *i. e.*, removed from a state of mere potentiality, it follows that beatitude, or man's final perfection, will consist essentially of intellectual operation, and not of this merely, but of such a kind as is elicited "according to perfect virtue," or "with the highest excellence." The befitting and adequate object, however, of intellectual activity transcends the finite, and is nothing less than the infinite. The constituents of beatitude, or of man's natural destiny, are first, the most perfect object, and second, the most perfect possession of that object. In brief, beatitude consists in the most perfect exercise of man's noblest faculties in regard to the most perfect object.

Such was the teaching of Aristotle, and thus also was he understood by a kindred mind; St. Thomas of Aquin, who is at once representative of the scholastic doctrine, and whom a natural aptitude, perfected by rigid discipline, had rendered thoroughly conversant with the writings of this illustrious pagan.

After observing generally that beatitude consists of action or operation as opposed to a dormant and inactive state, St. Thomas reasons thus: "Since beatitude implies ultimate perfection, according to which different beings capable of acquiring beatitude attain to different degrees of perfection, it is necessary to distinguish different applications of this term. To God, beatitude is essential, because His existence is His operation, and He Himself is the object of His own happiness. In the angels, beatitude is ultimate perfection as arising from that operation by which they are united to uncreated good, and this is their sole and unending action. Man in the present state of existence is ultimately perfected by the operation which unites him to God, but this is not continuous, and consequently it is not the sole action of man since it is interrupted: and, accordingly, perfect beatitude cannot be attained in the present life. Hence, Aristotle calls the beatitude of this life imperfect, and finally concludes thus: 'We call them blessed as men.'"¹

¹ "Ad quantum dicendum quod cum beatitudo dicat quandam ultimam perfectionem, secundum quod diversæ res beatitudinis capaces ad diversos gradus perfectionis pertinere possunt: secundum hoc necesse est quod diversimode beatitudo dicatur. Nam in Deo est beatitudo per essentiam quia ipsum esse ejus est operatio ejus, quia non fruitur alio sed seipso. In angelis autem beatitudo est ultima perfectio secundum aliquam operationem qua conjunguntur bono increato; et hæc operatio est in eis unica et sempiterna. In hominibus autem secundum statum præsentis vitæ est ultima perfectio secundum operationem qua homo conjungitur Deo: sed hæc operatio nec continua potest esse, et per consequens nec unica est, quia operatio interscissione multi-

From the explanation of St. Thomas, and from the sentences cited above, it is plain that when Aristotle says beatitude is an operation of the soul according to virtue, he is not considering virtue under its moral aspect, but as a quality or physical perfection superadded to intellect to enable it to elicit its most perfect operation in respect to that object whose possession renders us blessed. Intellectual action, as assisted by this perfecting quality, is the highest of its kind, and the intellect is then said by Aristotle to act according to virtue. This being the case, the objection raised by Mr. Spencer to Aristotle's view of our ultimate end is not well founded. The author of the *Data of Ethics* is of opinion that Aristotle places virtue as the supreme end of human actions, defines happiness in terms of virtue, *instead of* defining virtue in terms of happiness. This is, however, a misunderstanding of Aristotle's meaning. The mind of the Grecian philosopher was too acute to place moral virtue, however ennobling, as the final end of our being; he saw and taught clearly that virtue is a means to an end, not the end itself, and hence he says: "We choose (the virtues) partly on their own account (for were no further advantage to result from them, we should choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, because we suppose that we shall attain happiness by their means; but no one chooses happiness for the sake of these, nor in short for the sake of anything else."¹ Now, when he says that man's chief good is "an operation of the soul according to perfect virtue," he is using the term virtue in the sense of a positive perfection, which renders the action of the soul in which it is present more excellent than it would otherwise be.² Since, ignorant of revelation, he had no conception of a supernatural beatitude divinely illumining man's intellect, but regarded this perfection or virtue as something naturally acquirable by exercise and repeated action, it was, therefore, a habit which gave facility and excellence to the action of which it was part of the cause. Upon truths of the necessary and unchangeable order the views of Aristotle have received little or no subsequent improvement, and his sayings in these matters are regarded by St. Thomas—the greatest mediæval doctor—as conclusive.

There is a tendency in the writings of Mr. Spencer, and others of the same school, to reduce the moral order to the physical; to

plicatur, et propter hoc, in statu præsentis vite perfecta beatitudo ab homine haberi non potest. Unde Philosophus in I. Ethic ponens beatitudinem hominis in hac vita, dicit eam imperfectam, post multa concludens: 'Beatos autem dicimus ut homines;' sed promittitur nobis a Deo beatitudo perfecta quando erimus sicut angeli in cælo,' etc.—I. 2, Q. 3, Art. 2.

¹ Eth., Bk. I., chap. vii.

² "Est autem virtus nihil aliud quam in se perfecta et ad summum perducta natura." (Cic. de Seg., 1, 8.)

regard the one as differing perhaps from the other, but only in degree, not in kind. Now, while there is some analogy between the two, arising partly from internal and partly from external reasons, yet in the final analysis there is an essential difference between the two orders. There is analogy in this respect, that, while action of some sort forms the subject-matter with which both are concerned, and since all of our knowledge is derived either directly or implicitly from the senses,¹ the manner of thought and the predicates which we apply to moral and abstract matters all give evidence of their sensible origin; yet while this is true, while we clothe even the most abstract thought in sensible imagery, still we are aware that such thought is then but imperfectly representative of its object, whose adequate conception would strip the mental term of the last vestige of material coloring. Furthermore, the term of all action, whether physical or moral, is good, and therefore in general the same; still what is morally good, and what is good only physically, are as such specifically different, so much so in fact, that what is physically evil is sometimes morally good, and *vice versa*. To confound these two orders, so essentially distinct, is to destroy the dignity of our rational nature, and to eliminate entirely the element which gives meaning to the terms right and wrong; to ignore this distinction is to divest morality of its intrinsic and absolute character, to make of it something relative and variable with its incidental effects.

A little reflection upon this subject will make plain (1) that the moral rectitude of an action cannot be estimated properly by its consequences considered merely physically and as related to man's present condition; and (2) what is morally evil² cannot be appropriately defined by its physical effects, which are oftentimes good. The moral character of an upright action results finally from its being done freely in accordance with an absolute and unalterable standard, and an action that is wrong is such finally, because of a defection from this same standard, which is the ultimate law of morality. This standard or norma may be viewed either as it is in itself or objectively, or it may be considered as informing the intellect of a rational being. Objectively considered, it is nothing else than that order which arises from the natures of things as intrinsically related to God, and to free and intelligent creatures. Objects possess in the last analysis a certain moral character, and

¹ "Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu."

² Evil is here spoken of as a cause, but properly it is only a quasi cause, since it is never a cause *per se*, but always *per accidens*. "Malum agit in virtute boni deficientis, si enim nihil esset ibi de bono, neque esset evis neque agere posset: si autem non esset deficientis, non esset malum, unde et actio causata est quoddam bonum deficientis: quia secundum quid est bonum, simpliciter autem malum." I. 2, Q. 18, A. 1, ad. 1.

being thus constituted, they have, both to themselves and to intelligent beings, essential and immutable aspects or relations, which form the objective basis of the moral order. It is evident, therefore, that the principles of morality are absolutely immutable in the same sense that the natures of things are immutable.

There is to be considered also the second aspect of the moral order, viz., as known by and perfecting an intelligent being. As a perfection of the divine intellect it gives rise to the eternal law; and communicated to the creature's intellect, it becomes substantially the natural law. Our reasons, whose nature it is to know the truth, and which are themselves perfect as faculties from the hands of their author, necessarily give their assent to the evident truths of morality, whose reception is at once congenial and universal; and the upright dictate of our rational nature as enunciating the immutable principles of morals is certain and authoritative. Our reasons do not create, but simply declare, the right and the wrong, as the mirror does not make but reflects the image thrown upon its surface. The enunciation of moral matters is, however, put forth in a manner peculiar to the intellect whose characteristic it is to base its primary cognition on sensible objects, and gradually to rise to the conception of things wholly supersensible and abstract. And of such kind are the general truths of morality.

If the foregoing argument be true, the following question may occur: Even granting that there is an essential and intrinsic distinction between right and wrong, whence arises my obligation to observe it? I may admit the abstract and speculative truth of the position just advanced, but this would not settle the practical question of duty. To answer this satisfactorily, it is necessary to notice a characteristic of obligation in general.

An obligation is something which an intelligent being owes; it is, of its nature, a debt. Now the cause or reason of a debt is, to use a legal term, a consideration; and as it is impossible to conceive an effect without a cause, so is it impossible to conceive an obligation strictly such without some good either received or to be received which is the cause of the obligation. The consideration or the good which founds the debt we call obligation may not actually be received, as would be the case, for instance, where the artist engages to produce a portrait for a certain sum of money. The good which originates the obligation in the artist to execute the given work is not actually received, but it is something certainly to be received, and upon its receivable quality depends the entire obligation to perform the undertaking. This being true, the answer to the question proposed above may be short and effectual. I am obliged, in the strict sense of the term, to do right, because I am the actual and expectant recipient of a good which

is fully commensurate with the obligation originated; practically, my duty is to do right because I thereby acquire my supreme good, the ultimate perfection of my being, and by failure to do what is right, I miss my final end; in addition to this there is also punishment in store for the wrongdoer, which is likewise part of the sanction set upon morality.

Although there is presupposed to obligation a correlative good which founds it, or gives it its stringent character, yet what is right should be done, and what is wrong should be avoided even were actual obligation destroyed; right and wrong are logically anterior even to the obligation to observe the one and avoid the other; what is right is absolutely befitting to a rational nature, and what is wrong is unbecoming. However, to do the right for its own sake, and to avoid the wrong simply because it is such, is a concept really above the practical order, and is more abstract than the ordinary motive of human beings, who require the accession of rewards and punishments effectually to determine their course of action in the right path. Examined, however, speculatively, or in a purely philosophical light, what is right ought to be done simply because it is right, and what is wrong avoided because it is wrong; but the usual manner of conceiving obligation is as a derivation from law, which supposes a superior who can bind the will.

In expounding the utilitarian and intuitive theory of morals, Mr. Lecky¹ has some remarks well worthy of consideration. According to him, "a theory of morals must explain, not only what constitutes duty, but also how we obtain the notion of there being such a thing as duty. It must tell us not merely the course of conduct we ought to pursue, but also what is the meaning of this word 'ought,' and from what source we derive the idea it expresses." And farther on he says: "If we ask what constitutes virtuous and what vicious actions we are told (by those who base morals upon experience) that the first are those which increase the happiness or diminish the pains of mankind, and the second are those which have the opposite effect. If we ask what is the motive to virtue we are told that it is an enlightened self-interest."

This last remark contains the pith of the doctrine maintained by one school of moralists in regard to the motive for virtue. Is the motive for virtue an enlightened self-interest? This question we cannot readily answer either in the affirmative or the negative.

All the action of man, whether physical or moral, is on account of an end which is good, and in respect to this end his action is necessitated, not free; the sphere of morality, therefore, or of man's free actions, does not embrace the simple and indeterminate good

¹ Hist. Europ. Morals, vol. i., chap. i.

which is the essential object of the will. Morality is concerned only about the means to this end. Now, if by an enlightened self-interest be meant the possession of that good which is the term of man's actions and which constitutes bliss, then it may be granted that an enlightened self-interest is the last practical motive for virtue. But the language would then be inaccurate, because there are other and more appropriate terms to express this idea. If, however, by enlightened self-interest as the motive for virtue it be meant that virtue is such only in so far as it is conducive to man's temporal well-being, then the assumption is not true; and, indeed, in the ordinary sense, this proposition would reduce virtue to something variable and relative, since what in my view may be only enlightened self-interest may be really injustice to another; the right, consequently, becomes nothing more than my view of what is to my material interest.

Right is something independent of my opinion of it, and wrong is still such, even though I thought it right; the intrinsic distinction between the two would be as much a truth of the intelligible order, even were no creatures in existence, just as it would still be true, whether we understand it or not, that parallel lines can never meet.

It was previously stated that man's final end must consist essentially of the most perfect operation of his superior faculties in regard to the most perfect object. Let us here examine the reasons upon which this statement rests, and see, moreover, whether it is a truth discoverable by natural reason. For this purpose, let us look at the manner in which the subject is treated by Aristotle. The seventh chapter of his *Ethics*¹ begins thus: "If happiness be an energy according to virtue, it is reasonable to suppose that it is according to the best virtue; and this must be the virtue of the best part of man. Whether, then, this best part be the intellect or something else, which is thought naturally to bear rule and to govern, and to possess ideas upon honorable and divine subjects; or whether it is itself divine, or the most divine of any property which we possess; the energy of this part according to its proper virtue must be perfect happiness; and that this energy is contemplative has been stated. This also would seem to agree with what was said before, and with the truth; for this energy is the noblest; since the intellect is the noblest thing within us, and of subjects (objects) of knowledge, those are noblest with which the intellect is conversant."

Aristotle assumes in this argument (because he has demonstrated it previously) that happiness is sought for its own sake, and that

¹ Book X.

all other things are sought on account of happiness. Noticing, with his usual acuteness, this principle of our nature, he proceeds to determine what happiness essentially is. Since man alone of the beings on this earth is susceptible of happiness, it must be in virtue of a superior principle which elevates him above other terrestrial beings: this principle is his rational nature, the soul, whose noblest faculty is intellect. Beatitude, then, or perfect happiness, is an activity of the soul, especially as eliciting its most perfect operation, which is the contemplation of truth: its action, as in this manner perfected, is *according to virtue, i. e.*, is elicited under the influence of a permanent quality acquired by repeated acts in regard to the same object, thus enabling the power to operate with promptness and facility. Placing contemplation of the truth as the highest action of which man is capable, the Grecian philosopher next considered the nature of the truth which contemplation regards. Evidently this must be truth of the most perfect order; it must adequately satisfy the capacity of man's intellect for knowing, that is, it must leave nothing ulterior and more worthy to be sought after, it must, in short, be supreme truth. Having carried the argument to its final conclusion, the philosopher has the following significant passage descriptive of a perfectly happy or blessed life: "But such a life would be better than man could attain to; for he would live thus not so far forth as he is a man, but as there is in him something divine.¹ But so far as this divine part surpasses the whole compound nature, so far does its energy surpass the energy² which is according to all other virtue. If, then, the intellect be divine when compared with man, the life, also, which is in obedience to that, will be divine when compared with human life. But a man ought not to entertain human thoughts as some would advise, because he is human, nor mortal thoughts because he is mortal; but as far as it is possible, he should make himself immortal, and do everything with a view to living in accordance with the best principle in him; although it be small in size, yet in power and value it is far more excellent than all. Besides, this would seem to be each man's 'self,' if it really is the

¹ The translator, R. W. Browne, M.A., has here selected the following happy quotation from Cicero: "Vitæ autem degendæ ratio maxime quidem illis placuit quieta, in contemplatione et cognitione posita rerum; quæ quia Deorum erit vitæ simillima sapienti visa est dignissima, atque his derebus et splendida est eorum et illustis oratio." "The manner of life most pleasing to them (the Stoics) was the quiet one consisting in the contemplation and knowledge of things: it seemed the most worthy of a wise man, because it was most like the life of the gods; and in this matter their language is both beautiful and remarkable."

² "Energy" would seem not to express the meaning of the term *ἐνέργεια* as well as operation or action. St. Thomas, who understood Aristotle's mind thoroughly, translates this word by "operatio;" "Sed contra est quod Philosophus dicit in I. Ethic. quod felicitas est *operatio* secundum virtutem perfectam." I. 2, Q. 3, Art. 2.

ruling and better part. It would be absurd, therefore, if a man were to choose not his own life but the life of some other thing. And what was said before will apply now; for that which peculiarly belongs to each by nature is best and most pleasant to every one; and consequently this life, according to intellect, is most pleasant if intellect especially constitutes man. This life, therefore, is the most happy."

Aristotle's language here embodies a true and profound conception of man's nature and destiny; his reasoning, at all times acute, is admirable in this matter, which is naturally somewhat obscure, and being nearly related to the practical affairs of life, it is liable to be tinged with prejudice, which sways the will and darkens the understanding. The dignified views of this enlightened pagan, so free from the gross and materialistic theories of many of his contemporaries, would do honor to the Christian philosopher; and, indeed, the lustre of truth which shines through his pages casts into the shade the systems of many philosophers who pass by that name. It seems to have been the peculiar merit of this remarkable man to look at things with the calm eye of reason, and to build a system of thought only after mature reflection and searching analysis; the generalizations proposed by him in speculative matters have remained undisturbed, because they state with precision the necessary predicates of all being, the intrinsic nature of man, and the true character of his ultimate end. Unlike his illustrious teacher, the genius of the poet never overshadowed the accuracy of the philosopher; and while the writings of the one are admired for their beauty, those of the other are studied for the truth.
