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Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

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HENRY LORD BROUGHAM (1778-1868).
After K. Bowyer.

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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TRUTH AND CONDUCT.

BY M. JAY FLANNERY.

THE bulletin-board of a church which I pass every day on my way down-town has held for several months the legend, "Truth is given to us to translate into conduct." This may be the saying of some prophet or seer whose words are the commonplace knowledge of every person with any pretensions to literacy, but in me they awaken no response of literary memory or association. So far as I know they may be original with this particular pastor as the expression of his moral philosophy.

But the philosophy expressed in these words is not original; in fact, it is the philosophy of common sense, the thought of practically every man who has made any effort whatever to render explicit his vague ideas of ethics, and the implicit thought of all who have made no such effort. The idea that truth, a fixed law of ethics, is first given, and that conduct slowly brings itself into conformity with this law, is all but universally accepted. Does not the whole of history teach this lesson? Were not ethical systems, the bibles of the world, works containing the highest expressions of ethical truth couched in language the most apposite and beautiful, among the earliest productions of man? Do not the old prophets, of all nations and races, express conceptions of moral duty of a character so high that the prophets of to-day find it impossible to improve on what their predecessors of olden times have left them, and spend their time in the study and exposition of the ancient scriptures? Surely, he is a very rash man who would set himself up against what is practically the unanimous opinion of mankind. It is the order of the moral world, says the philosophy of common sense, that the principle comes first and that its application follows.

In this view, truth is something which comes to man from

some outside source; adapted, no doubt, in some way to his nature, but made *for* him and not *by* him. It is something which exists external to him, has existed without him from all eternity, and would continue to exist to all eternity were he wiped out of existence. To its making he contributes nothing, and no effort which he can put forth will affect it one iota. The kingdom of moral principles is an autocracy, in which the subject has no part in the making of laws, and in which his only function is to obey. Though we live in a political democracy, and some of us are looking forward to an industrial democracy, in our thinking on moral and religious subjects we still live in the old autocratic world of the ancient prophet. We do not realize how his ideas of God and the moral law were formed on the only model of government and law known to him, the despotisms of his time. And when we find him making *right* the will of a god, responsible in no way to the subjects of the law, a god pronouncing sentence for the infraction of a law which was the mere expression of his pleasure, we fail again to realize that the prophet has in mind the autocratic rulers of his own day. The fact is, that it was impossible for him to think otherwise in a world where civil law was, in theory at least, the expression of a despot's will. Nor do we realize how much our own thinking in morals and religion is colored by our knowledge of the records of those times and by our acceptance of them as something too sacred to be examined in the light of our moral and religious notions of to-day.

In opposition to this old and still almost universally accepted belief in the precedence of truth to conduct, it is my desire to set what modern philosophy teaches to be the true order of the moral life—that truth is the product, not the cause, of ethical conduct. In the realm of ethics, as in all other realms, truth is made by man in the workshop of his every-day life. The principles which actually direct a man's moral life are not the precepts and maxims found so often on his tongue, the teaching of parents and other instructors, whose deeds do not exemplify their words. No doubt these precepts have value when they are of the homely sort and have grown out of the actual conditions of life, and are, further, not in advance of the cultural stage reached by his family and community. Probably this last condition is involved in the preceding ones. But, however his soul may glow with the feeling that his life is being influenced by noble ideals, his conduct and his evident satisfaction with his conduct show that these maxims cannot be understood in any wide sense, but that their meaning is limited by his own moral

experience and by the moral stage which the group to which he belongs has attained.

The mistake made by all moral idealists is that because moral truths are stated in general terms (as of necessity they must be) they are understood and accepted in some general and therefore pure and noble sense. This feeling, that because one can use a general term he really understands it to some infinite limit, is common to all departments of one's mental life, and the objection urged by those who demand that all learning by children shall, wherever possible, be by contact with things and not simply from books or the *ipse dixit* of the teacher, is justified by this weakness of human intelligence. Because a man holds ever before him some high ideal which he has found expressed in beautiful language by prophet or poet, is no guarantee that, in his actual contact with the world, his conduct will be better than that of the hind who knows no poetry but does know life. In fact, the chances are that the better instructed man will be the worse practical moralist. It is one of the commonplaces of criticism that those who make noble professions do not live better lives than their non-professing neighbors. The layman will sometimes be shocked to find that the minister will be guilty of a meanness and trickery which he, though making no such profession as does his clerical friend, would not be guilty of. For some reason contact with high moral ideals does not always make the minister a happy exemplar of his own teaching. Only as he has experience in actual commerce with men is his moral life strengthened, or rather, created. This is no attack upon a great profession, for ministers themselves sorrowfully confess the surprising shortcomings of many of their brethren.

This is true of all persons who live a life of seclusion or semi-seclusion. One of the arguments often urged in favor of giving the right of suffrage to woman is that her influence on political life would be for good. Is not woman better than man? Has she not been kept pure and unspotted from the world, while man has been subjected to moral pollution in the ugly world of business and politics? Even the anti-suffragists use as their strongest argument the awful warning that woman's pure soul will be soiled by the dirty ways of the world, so that she will become as bad as man. This superstition of woman's superior morality is one of the worst stumbling-blocks in the way of her progress. In the home, which has been her peculiar sphere, woman has developed a strong sense of domestic moral values, but her inexperience of the outside world has, until recently, made her insensitive to moral distinctions in

business and in the treatment of working people which are perfectly obvious to men of a rather coarse type. It is well known how apparently refined and sympathetic women will drive hard bargains and seem utterly indifferent to the hardships of those who do their menial service or cater to their wants in shop or store. There are noble exceptions, of course, but the truth is in the statement, and it is easier, as a rule, to make a man see the harshness and injustice involved in much of our industrial system than to make a woman see them. And this not because they profess different codes, but because woman has not yet *made* her moral code for the world outside her home. And she never will, or can, make it in the seclusion of the home. Not till she has had her opportunity in the world of strife beyond the four walls which have hitherto limited her world, can she become the moral equal of her mate. The soil on his garments is not an evidence of pollution, but of the fact that he is doing his part to make a living code in actual contact with his fellows. This may be one of the unforeseen benefits of this accursed war, that through it woman may be compelled to rise to the moral heights already reached by man.

Real moral truths, those which actually affect the life of the individual, are *made* by him, not imposed from without or from above. They are made first by the atmosphere in which the child grows up; not by the preaching of his mentors, but by the life they live. With this cultural inheritance he goes out into life and there remakes it in conflict with other men. In the dirt and noise of the street and the shop practical habits and practical ideals are worked out, and these, and not the superfine sentiments of the nursery, make him the moral being he really is. It is not denied that moral ideals somewhat in advance of his present moral state are formed by every man who is growing in moral stature. But these cannot be much in advance if they are to have any real influence on his life. They are merely "working hypotheses" used to assist in taking the next step. They must be stated in general terms, and this may deceive even their makers into believing that they express very high notions of abstract goodness. But if their makers interpret them in this sense, these ideals lose their value, and their possessor becomes a dreamer and not a doer, or passes his ideal life in one world and his actual life in another.

Let us consider a general rule of conduct which comes to us from a hoary antiquity and is made weighty by the authority of a Teacher whom we all profess to reverence. It is the Golden Rule, "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye

even so unto them." Surely, here is a principle clearly stated, and of whose meaning there can be no question. And yet there is practically no agreement among men of different generations, or among men of the same generation, as to its practical application. And it is not meant here that the difficulty is that men do not try to live up to it. Even if they did try, they would not agree as to what constitutes living up to it. But it is not certain that they do not try. It is true, of course, that most men have a feeling that they are not living the moral law as they should, but that is not because of the violation of general principle, but because there is in the mind of every person who is growing morally a vague feeling of the next step in advance. This is true in the intellectual as well as in the moral world. It is a question whether the feeling of the infinite, not the mathematical construction but the intellectual haunting, means more than that which is just beyond the intellectual grasp. At least this is certainly the case in the moral realm. One's feeling for the moral perfection apparently expressed by a principle is simply a vague apprehension of the next step.

In the days before the Civil War a slave-holder explained the Golden Rule as applied to the relation between master and slave to mean, not that the master was bound by it to set the slave free, simply because the master desired freedom for himself. To him slavery was a divine institution, and the Rule simply meant that he should treat his slave as one who served by divine decree and as he (the master) ought to wish to be treated had he had the misfortune to be born subject to that decree. In our industrial system there are many things which seem to some of us not consonant with a right interpretation of this Rule. But there seems no question that the employer, in most instances, does not see anything wrong with the relation. It is easy to accuse him of hypocrisy, but the chances are that he is not conscious of anything of the sort. His actual relations with the workers may be on a higher plane than are ours, and it is almost certain that, were we in his place, without his practical experience, our conduct toward the workers would not be as high as his. It is impossible for us to interpret a general principle in advance of our moral experience.

But it may be said that the general truth is there in advance and that we only slowly learn what it means. Truth is eternal and eternally the same, we are told, and we simply discover it. As we look back we see a gradual progress toward a higher and still higher conception of the meaning of moral precepts, and this, we are told, is simply our gradual discovery of a meaning which was there from

all eternity. But who put a meaning into them, and what purpose does it serve? If God put it there in the beginning, why did He waste this value, since it is of no use to man till he puts meaning into it for himself? Why isn't it as high a conception of God to believe that He made it possible for truth to be the final product—so far as there can be anything final in human life—of the relations of men to each other? Why isn't the belief that truth is eternally being made as good and pure a belief as its opposite?

And think of the democracy of it! We are not the subjects of any autocratic power in our moral natures, but are the makers of our own moral destiny. It seems to me a most inspiring philosophy to be able to say with William James: "There is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance. We all help to determine the content of ethical philosophy so far as we contribute to the race's moral life. In other words, there can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics, until the last man has had his say." (*The Will to Believe*, p. 184.)

Man is the measure and the maker of all things human, and without him is not anything made which hath been, or shall be made. No autocrat dictates to him what his character or ideals shall be. The world of morals is a true democracy.

THE SOCIETY FOR THE DIFFUSION OF USEFUL KNOWLEDGE.

BY JAMES CARLILE.

IN the autumn of the year 1826 Henry Brougham propounded to Matthew Davenport Hill the idea of a society to be formed for the purpose of publishing works of an instructive character at cost price. Davenport Hill sought about for a publisher who would undertake the work under the auspices of the proposed society, and he bethought himself of young Charles Knight, the son of a Windsor bookseller, who had himself made a small venture in the direction of periodical literature. Hill wrote to Charles Knight to come to town, and took him one evening in November to Brougham's chambers in Lincoln's Inn.

To the end of his very long life Charles Knight retained a vivid impression of that evening's conversation. Brougham was