

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF SYMPATHY.

A LAY SERMON.

BY C. L. VESTAL.

FOR a long time there has broadened and deepened for me the significance of this term *sympathy*. Familiar it is to everybody, as far as mere dictionary definitions go, but in its individual and sociological content it is only beginning to be recognized here and there. Of course we occasionally find a rare personality which, by its deep understanding and appreciation of sympathetic values, has gathered around it a few disciples, and there is formed a center from which the leaven of social sympathy radiates, and it is well that we sometimes try to give expression to our conception of its meaning for us. So for a little space I ask sympathy while I try to put into words something of the content—for me—of the term sympathy. And if you find in my ideas a differing from your own interpretation of this subject, I beg of you to remember that in delineating a new concept it is often difficult to find a word expressing the precise shade of meaning one is after. Therefore take to yourselves the privilege of editing my vocabulary.

My aim is to show the principle involved in what we commonly understand as sympathy is not limited to men and women, is not even limited to life as a whole, but is a universal, cosmical one, one which the physicist would call a fundamental attribute of ether. By the principle of sympathy in the ether I mean that inherent force or energy which makes it get together into centers of condensation and become morphous, that is, to take on form, and thereby make creation. As our human sympathy—by which I mean response to mood and feeling—binds us together, so the cosmic sympathy in the ether coagulates it, so to speak, into atoms, the atoms into molecules, and then the molecular motion becomes shortened, curtailed, into stars and sun and planets and satellites without number. After that we have the marvelous combinations of the atoms and molecules

into the forms of life, "from monad to man," as the old phrase so comprehensively puts it. All these, as science would have us believe in the present stage of knowledge, are only the manifestations, morphisms, of the primal etheric substratum. And the great motive principle which prompts it I wish to call the cosmic sympathy. It is the all-permeating network of love threads which binds together creation in what we call a universe, which entitles it to be called cosmos instead of chaos.

This cosmic sympathy takes as many forms as do nature's creative forces, for it is the motive power of all. It matters not whether that upon which it operates be organic or inorganic, its content is in general the same—to make for an easier, less frictional activity for all the multiplying motions of the universe. It is manifest in the affinity of the chemist's hypothetical atom as surely as in the closest of human ties. And when the atoms combine to make the molecules of life we see the working of the same eternal principle, the total number recognizing, as it were, the need for consideration for each other in order to form a harmonious whole. When we come on up the scale into human society there is apparent the same all-potent law. The fact that social combinations are formed primarily upon a utilitarian basis does not derogate in the least either the strength or nobility of the principle itself. The essential thing in this connection is the feeling of need by one individual toward all the others. It is manifest first in the composition of life itself. As we begin to ascend the ladder of evolution it branches as does the tree of life, and in the higher forms it becomes more and more definite and specialized. But it matters not whether as physicists and astronomers we call it gravitation, or as chemists we call it affinity, or as biologists we call it life-intelligence, soul, or as philosophers we content ourselves with calling it the Great First Cause, or in a religious mood we call it God—as men and women in social relations we know sympathy to be a part of it.

Now if this sympathetic principle runs throughout all things, making them a unity, a universe, it means not only that each form of life is an organism in itself, but that the order of life to which it belongs is an organism no less. Not only, then, are human societies and groups organisms here and there and yonder, but the whole of humanity is an organism also. Further, the organism reaches out to include not only human life, but all life—the whole biotic scheme. And since investigation is showing more and more that the great gap which was once thought to separate the organic from the inorganic does not exist, we shall have to extend our or-

ganic plan over the whole world, so as to include geology as well as biology. From this it would logically have to be extended over the whole solar system, and at last over every other solar or stellar system. Why not? Perhaps the whole figure does sound somewhat fantastic, but I verily believe there is more truth than poetry in it. For if all things be at bottom a unity, as our whole modern method of thought and action seems to assume, then the idea of the cosmos as a vast organism is not so far-fetched as it might at first glance seem.

Although in seeking the origin of the sympathetic principle we must look for it coevally with that of the universe, yet as evolution proceeded the manifestation of this sympathy became higher and more definite. It holds together the ether in atoms and molecules, and these in the various forms of being—"the heavens and the earth and all that in them is." When life began to appear on the surface of the deep the cosmic sympathy was manifesting itself more completely than before, and has so far been in that form something of a bafflement to science. As life developed, sympathy rose more and more into prominence with it. Following it more closely along its way toward human consciousness, perhaps we find its first emphatic recognition by life at the evolutionary point where sex appears. Here it begins to bear a faint resemblance to that response of uplift and aid which we know as human sympathy. Sympathy begins where society begins, for social life of any kind or degree is impossible without it. But society proper arises with the appearance of sex. When two individuals must remain together for a time in order to fulfill the law of race preservation, that means the beginning of association. Moreover, when each one is dependent upon the other for the satisfaction of a primal need, there must of necessity be some degree of consideration for each by the other, and that means the manifestation of sympathy, crude, we might call it, but replete, nevertheless, with more than all the possibilities to which our highest society has yet attained. As the organism rose in the scale of social development experience may have taught it that whatever affected its partner might have a similar effect in kind upon itself, or, more likely, deprive it of that other. Thereby the principle of sympathy was enforced. This may be called the first, and also the less important, lesson learned by the life germ. The second and more important was that whatever affected its partner would have not only an effect upon itself, but would also affect the offspring, that is, the race, as well. The ratio of importance between these two lessons may be roughly expressed as that between the individual as such and

that of the race as a whole. It is the principle of sympathy which insures the operation of the law of the greatest good to the greatest number. The two sexes in the lower forms have consideration for each other because they must have for a progressing race result. In other words, the feeling of sympathy arose to make the individual help to look out for the future of his race. It became an instinct long before it reached man, and it is no less an instinct with him. Any human who has it not is to be pitied. He is what the French, in their drawing-room language, would call *de trop*. He has no place in the world of men and women.

To analyze a little more closely the part sympathy plays in human affairs we must begin farther back than the direct manifestation of it. I shall not be misunderstood in asserting that a certain large form of selfishness is at the basis of all life, from bottom to top. The old axiom says that "self-preservation is the first law of nature." The individual must be preserved, at least until after it has exercised the reproductive function, if the whole race is to survive. But the idea I wish to emphasize here is, that just in this lies the perfectly natural origin of egoism. It is obvious that the individual must make self the first consideration for a time. Beginning in the impulse to food-getting, this primal egoism gradually increases in complexity with the growing demands of the evolving life, until it reaches the height of supreme arrogance and unfeeling selfishness which we see in the darker aspect of the commercial world. In itself it is a necessary factor in human activities, but it may and does easily become exaggerated, perverted, until, instead of becoming the salvation of the race, it is a worm eating at its heart. It is this perversion of it which has given rise to the social question, the distribution of wealth, with all its conflicts between labor and capital, its heartrending contrasts between the criminally rich and the inefficient poor, between "conspicuous waste" and obscure starvation, and labor paid according to "the law of the lower limit." And yet the unperverted principle is one of the fundamental conditions of existence.

It goes without saying that the second most fundamental law of life is that of reproduction. Though the individual does survive, it must reproduce its kind if life as a whole is to continue. But this very act invariably requires of the parent some sacrifice on the part of self. Part of the adult is given up to form the young. Even in the lower creatures which may reproduce simply by fission, as in the bacteria, where the individual simply breaks in two, this sacrifice obtains, for the individual as such absolutely ceases to exist. It is no

longer one, but two, neither one of which is the parent. In this case I wish to emphasize the idea that any action which requires of the individual any sacrifice of self, or any part thereof, for another, has in it the element of altruism. So we see that both these impulses, the primal egoism and the primal altruism, are inextricably bound up with the very prerequisites of the continuance of life. It is this primal altruism, beginning in the impulse to reproduction,—which every living organism nearing adulthood manifests at some time or other,—which is responsible in the main for the social institutions of marriage and family, the home, the school, and much of the product of creative art—not only the more technical arts in the esthetic sense, but also the more utilitarian arts, as architecture and manufacture. But like the primal egoism, this primal altruism may become degenerated, perverted, so as to work destruction. To cite a conspicuous example: it is a combination of the perversion of both these instincts which makes the social evil of prostitution.

But the relations of these two instincts must in some way be adjusted. Moreover, there is an attempt at such adjustment throughout all forms of life. In the lower orders this attempt is very crude, as when, for example, the female cod lays several million eggs annually, perhaps five or six of which eggs may hatch young which will come to maturity. What an enormous waste, because of the undeveloped state of the sympathetic principle! To show how much more efficient the human adjustment must be: Alexander Sutherland, who has written what may be considered a very scholarly work, *The Origin and Growth of the Moral Instinct*, has made a very careful, and withal a very conservative mathematical estimate, in which he decides that if the human race were subjected to the same rate of destruction as are fish, simply by other fish, in the sea every second of time, it would be absolutely wiped out of existence in the space of four seconds! So we see that our adjustment between these two principles must be not only strong, but must not have quite so much lost motion as this shows. Now in human society I conceive that adjustment to be accomplished by the principle of sympathy. Sympathy is the fulcrum which maintains such balance as there is between these two primal impulses. It is the check which keeps each one from exercising itself to the destruction of the other as evolution progresses. It is gradually lessening that tremendous waste in the preservation of the species which characterizes all the lower orders, and the human itself not a little.

It seems to me that the thing to strive for in all this is to seek to make the higher and nobler manifestations of sympathy more and

more reflex and instinctive. Undoubtedly that is the safest and surest way. Men and women will not act without some end in view. We are part and parcel of the universe, and therefore it is entirely impossible that any one of us should perform an act which has not in some way, in some degree, consciously, subconsciously, or unconsciously, an effect upon himself. Both these motives for action there must be, so surely as we are of the universe as well as in it. Let us suppose that we are face to face with a given situation. Just a moment of introspection will convince us that we are experiencing a painful or pleasurable nervous state, the degree varying with the intensity of the stimulus. So perhaps we will put ourselves into the circumstances of the moment and cooperate altruistically with another to whose mood we are responding, because we see that, though it may cost us some sacrifice, we shall be made much more uncomfortable by "conscience" if we do not. Or perhaps judgment comes in and we are thus made to deliberately choose the less of two evils. In this case we have the primal egoism, which in general always takes the line of least resistance, becoming, in its external manifestation an act of altruism. And this brings out the essential difference between egoism and altruism: the first has always to do with motive, the second with action. So the question is not, can the selfish motive be entirely evolved out of existence, but it is, which of these two impulses shall be most manifest in action? An intelligent selfishness may result in actions of the greatest benefit to society. Since in the universal order of things both these motives must exist, the end to strive for is to seek to make the altruistic phase more and more instinctive.

And I thoroughly believe that this is being done. In spite of the greed and corruption which appear like dirty foam upon the surface of our national life, there has been an increase of emphasis upon the sympathetic principle. I believe that our world is still on the course of evolution, and that the era of devolution has not yet set in. There is scarcely space here to enter into a citation of examples, but they are to be seen all around in the society of to-day. What I do wish to give are a few of the general reasons which have brought about this increased sympathy with the cosmic outlook, in recent years.

The first thing which comes to our minds is the fact that some years ago man discovered that his relations to the animal world below him were those of ancestral kinship. Naturally from this he saw himself in a new light. He began to see that he had some things by virtue of heredity which he had been wont to regard as gifts of the Evil One. He began to see that his brother man had

some defects for which he should be sent to the hospital rather than to the gallows. To his astonishment he began to harbor the suspicion that every imagination of his heart was not evil continually. Gradually he is coming to believe that instead of having irrevocably fallen he is inevitably rising, and that it lies with him to increase or retard the rapidity of that rise. He is learning to believe in a God of law rather than a God of caprice. He was perhaps somewhat shocked to find that in all scientific probability he was better than his ancestors, ethically and religiously as well as mentally and materially.

But with all this knowledge of his metazoic, yes, of his protozoic, ancestry, he has not been content. He forthwith began to desire something deeper. He began to be curious as to what he was made of. So he put himself in a testtube, and found that the same carbon, the same hydrogen, the same oxygen and nitrogen, which go to make up the earth and air and water about him also go to make up his own body cells. And not only the cells of his body, but also the cells of all organisms of which he has any awareness. Here was a revelation indeed. But even with this he was not satisfied. He made an instrument called a spectroscope, experimented with it a bit here on the earth, then turned it toward the heavens, and discovered that these same elements are scattered in tremendous quantity throughout celestial space—in star and sun and world without limit. Here was the climax of all revelations. Here is the point at which man discovered that he is not only in this universe, but of it as well. Here is the starting-point for an all-embracing sympathy with every bit of environment which impinges itself upon us.

It is in proportion as we look away beyond the confines of our little world-nest to our kinship, not only with all humanity, though that is the noblest and highest, but with all created things, that we find our God. For are we not literally of the same ancestry with it all? We have no special peculiarity of origin upon which to pride ourselves. Whatever peculiarity may appertain to us has its basis in form and not substance. We are made in the image of God, yes, but so is all the rest of creation. It is in a recognition of this that there lies the truest sympathy, the sympathy which enables us to judge the conduct of man to man more understandingly, that is to say more sympathetically. We have no valid reason for believing that our world is other than just one of a vast family, just a child of one generation, of which there have been countless predecessors, each evolving and cooling to devolve again, each capable of reproducing its kind only, like the seed, by commingling once more with

its parent cosmic dust. And perhaps each, in its own history of birth and decay, will evolve a form of its own matter, having the characteristic which we have presumed to arrogate to a special type of evolutionary product, and called life. And this life will, by that very characteristic, be endowed with an insatiable curiosity to find out whence it came and whither it goes. Therefore it will begin at the very bottom of the ladder of experience and work its way toward the top, with infinite, sickening, though perhaps not disproportionate loss, until mayhap it will finally, in all its millions of generations, evolve to a realization of its own insignificance in space and time. Though it may be that such a recognition at first almost overwhelms one with a desolate sense of humility, yet it is the door which leads into the light of the inner meaning of it all, until once in we feel like exclaiming, with a gesture inclusive of the whole universe: "See who and what are my fathers and mothers, my brothers and sisters! Yonder dimmest, most distant star is of one substance with me, and the tiniest ant beneath my feet is a fellow creature in very truth! I have found GOD, the Great Eternal Sympathy!"