

MORALS AND POLITICS.

THE spectator admitted to the laboratory of a Lavoisier or a Faraday, who should choose the moment when some great discovery seemed imminent to compose himself to slumber, would sacrifice a smaller opportunity of advantage than he who permits the agitations of the last few months to recede into the past without gaining from them some clearer decision on the connection of the two subjects named in our title. It has been one of those occasions—so much, we believe, both parties to the great controversy of our day would allow—when the complications of the political world have, as it were, thinned away and allowed some principles of a higher order to shine through them. We do not suppose that the original difference of view between Home Rulers and Unionists will fail to reappear in all decisions arrived at by either party, for it is fundamental. But the two may so far combine as to determine the common principles from which they draw different conclusions, and disentangle the permanent elements of their controversy from that which belongs to the characters of individuals, and the exigencies of particular circumstances. And this is the aim of the present essay.

Both sides will agree in regarding these events and discussions as evidence of a change in public feeling of great importance and far-reaching influence, both in public and private life. It has manifested the existence of a moral standard which may be described as the complete inversion of that which was dominant in antiquity, and kept its place during the greater part of the 1,900 years which divide us from antiquity. We seem so far to have changed the gradation of blame as to have altered the whole scope of morality. If we put it briefly, we may say that the code of the woman seems to have superseded the code of the man. "Immorality" has come to be applied in an exclusive sense, to that part of immoral action by which woman is always the sufferer, and sometimes the innocent sufferer; it is, on the other hand, almost cut off from application to that realm of life in which women have hitherto taken no part—the realm of politics. The

first half of our assertion is obvious. "A moral man," we all know, is a description that commits itself to a moral guarantee only in one particular direction. But many will demur to the assertion that in our day morality is divorced from politics. Much of what is most obvious does not look like this—looks like the very opposite. Probably there never was a period, during the life-time of any person now living, when so much indignation was excited by any political question whatever, and that equally on both sides, as during the last few years, and especially the last few weeks. To say that most of this indignant feeling should be called anti-political rather than political may appear a mere quibble. Nevertheless, that is exactly what we aim at showing here.

There is a perplexing tendency in human nature by which a strong enthusiasm passes, like a treacherous ally, from a particular cause to its opposite, and, kindled in its passage to that glow of vehemence which is characteristic of destructive as opposed to constructive action, seems to reassert in a purer form some principle which in truth it lives to oppose. Nothing is more religious in its tone than much polemic against religion; nothing more antagonistic to anything that our fathers would have recognized as a polity than the spirit which most gives animation to the political world of our day. All zeal takes the mould of what it opposes. The whole energy of the Home Rule movement, on English soil, is derived from an expenditure, in an inverse direction, of the stored-up energy of many generations of political thinkers and workers. We repeat, on English soil. Among Irishmen, no doubt, it is something very different, partly better, partly worse; if any of this anti-political spirit mixes with it, the intrusion may be called an accident. But if the English leaders of the Home Rule Party set themselves to confront the idea of a polity, they would, we are convinced, lose all popular English support, at all events that (and it is of that alone we are now speaking) which gives the movement its fervour.

Politics, we ought never to forget, *takes its start* from the idea of a polity. It does not gather up into itself every possible moral consideration concerning the welfare of a number of people, it is inseparably bound up with the idea of a State. This is the idea against which the spirit dominant in our time makes war. The lines of cleavage along which popular feeling directs its structural energy are all lateral; in concerning itself with the interests of classes, it loses sight of the claims of a nation. Not that the two interests are incompatible, not that a good Government will not attend to both, not that there may not be many occasions on which the former need is the more pressing of the two. But still

it is necessary to politics that the idea of the State shall be ultimate. And when it is conceded, as in our day it is more and more conceded, that all association should be voluntary, that the limits of a State are an open question, a strong desire on the part of any set of people to remove themselves from its jurisdiction being a legitimate object at least for consideration, then, by whatever name you designate the zeal which furthers this claim, you should not, if you are attempting any exact expression, call it political. If it become dominant it makes the very idea of a polity unintelligible.

This view of political feeling may be tested by the watchwords of a popular enthusiasm always roused, it will be found, by the name of that virtue which, on political ground, is impossible. When Mr. Asquith, in a late address, pleaded for a *generous* measure of Home Rule, he at once struck the true key-note of unthinking sympathy (and such must always be the sympathy of the majority) and pronounced condemnation, from a political point of view, on any possible national act to which the epithet could be applied. See how such an action looks in the past! The historian of France, in recording an instance of abnegation in the saintly Louis IX., by which a part of his dominions was surrendered, under no stress of war but only from a sense of duty, to a rival, pauses to remark upon the calamity to that nation whose king earns the title of saint by acts which mar his title to that of ruler. The people transferred from a good to a bad rule protested in vain against the transference, in which their interests should have been the primary consideration, and in which they went for nothing. Historic parallels need some change of symbolism in order to fit each other, and we must, if we have any historical feeling, compare the *people* of that day with the *minority* of this. But it remains true in every age that the virtue of political life is justice. Generosity belongs to individual relation. Where it is urged on a *people* it will generally happen, as certainly was the case with Mr. Asquith's hearers, that those whose enthusiasm was raised by the idea of generosity were those whose interests were not attacked by the transaction which was supposed to display it. Generosity implies sacrifice; whose is the sacrifice made in favour of a generous measure of Home Rule? But, indeed, this question, though all-important with regard to the political issue, may be treated from our point of view as secondary. The loyal Irish minority have as little the right to act with generosity in this matter as the English populace have the power. One generation has no more right to sacrifice the interests of its successors than one race has to sacrifice the interests of another race. When a Government has secured the interests of justice, as far as it can

ascertain them, it has done its best to give every class, every race and every generation all that generosity could give them. When it aims at generosity to any, it is certain to inflict injustice on some, and perhaps on all.

There is a strange oblivion of this truth in strictly political life, but everybody sees it in all private relation which approaches political life in its character. Imagine, for instance, a father urged to make a will in favour of one of his children, and suppose the suggestion to take the form of an appeal to his generosity; there is not, surely, anyone capable of making a will at all with so little understanding as to be deceived by such an appeal. "Generous!" a man of sense would retort; "how can I be generous in apportioning advantages in which I shall have no share?" To allow the idea of generosity to influence the mind of a testator is to guarantee the perpetration of injustice. Everybody feels this about the only action of private life which may be compared to legislation, yet, strange to say, the moment we get on legislative ground this principle, though never questioned by thinkers, is constantly ignored by orators and sometimes implicitly denied by party leaders. And nothing is so popular in public expressions as an appeal to the virtue which they can by no possibility elicit. Those who have never to pay the price of generosity, retain their eagerness to incur the debt.

But perhaps it is not from the watchwords of enthusiasm that we best trace the course of moral feeling. The canons of logic coincide in many respects with those of art; in both alike the shadows indicate more exactly than the lights the outline of the object which it is desired to depict. If we seek thus to give an outline to the political creed of our day, we shall discover a tendency not so much to change the importance of what our fathers called treason, as to invert its moral significance. In former days it was no more thought necessary to prove the excellence of a Government before punishing treason than to prove the excellence of an individual before punishing murder. Now, the *prima facie* aspect of what was the heaviest accusation known to our fathers is something self-sacrificing and heroic; it always produces a vague general belief that someone is making an unselfish endeavour to free his country from oppression. If popular feeling does not quite get so far as to claim admiration for every such attempt, any shadow of blame which it involves is of the very lightest character. Any attempt to put it down with a strong hand is a sin against liberty. Coercion is a name that does duty for an argument. Yet coercion is no more than the self-assertion of the State. It is a

term which in its ample scope gathers up some of the worst exercises of human activity, and some of the best; all that we can say about it in a positive sense is that, where a polity is, there coercion follows as its shadow. Of course the leaders of the movement know this, and are perfectly aware that, if it were successful, coercion would go on just as much as it does now, only that the persons coerced and those who exercised coercion would change places. And where this fact and all that it involves is kept in view, we do not deny that the movement may be called political, but what we are certain of is that all the popular English sympathy which attends it depends on the power to forget this side of the question, and regard the whole movement as one for making people free to do what they like. And so far as these words describe the movement, its animus is not political, but anti-political.

This anti-political spirit characteristic of our day is, we have said, the very inversion of the ideal of antiquity, and, except that the complication with religion brings in a different element, it is not much nearer the feeling of mediæval Europe. As a political creed it doubtless takes its start from the French Revolution, but its appearance on English soil, so far as our knowledge goes, is far more recent. We recall it first in a plea for leniency to the Fenian convicts, about three-and-twenty years ago, on the ground that they ought to be considered in some sense prisoners of war. Nobody wants to punish prisoners of war. Their detention, with all its inevitable disadvantages, is a measure of precaution, not in any sense an expression of displeasure, and any suffering inflicted on them, as an end and not a means, would be condemned universally. When anyone goes on to urge that an immunity from any penal infliction, similar in kind if less in degree, may be claimed for those who are *not* prisoners of war, he leaps from a truism to what would, in former ages, have been regarded as an extravagant paradox. The belief that insurrection was not only a danger which the State was at liberty to suppress, but a crime which it was bound to punish, had been an axiom as undisputed as the right of self-defence in an individual; it was still the firm belief of most people, and the plea we recall was at the time felt insignificant. Yet it had the significance of the first piece of wet sand that marks the turning tide. Ought the difference between respect for the hero and indignation with the criminal to depend on the accident of success or failure? Should not admiration of success imply sympathy in failure? So, perhaps, many a reader of the newspapers asked himself even at that time, and a larger number now would answer the questions in the affirmative. If they are right, there is an end of politics properly so-called. A

State which is ready to split itself up into any number of new States can only be called a polity in the sense that a creature so low down in the organic scale as to propagate itself by fissiparous division can be called an animal. We do not say that this of itself settles the question of the rightness of this change. To many minds, we fully concede, this decay of what is in its strict sense political feeling, presents itself as a stage in our moral evolution whereby some higher form of society than the polity is dawning on the world. The substitution of social for strictly political interests appears to such minds as an ascent into a region where the horizon widens, and limitations are seen in relation to a larger field of interest. We even conceive that they might support such views by much reference to history; as the life of the nation, they might say, has succeeded to the narrow city-life of antiquity, so in our time a preparation is seen for an analogous transformation, by which something as much wider than the nation is to form our standard of unity as Great Britain is wider than Athens. And whichever way the controversy of our day be settled, it will have shown that to many of what are called the most advanced minds of the age, the political phase of civilization seems about to make way for one which is to be animated by broader principles of association, and more generous springs of action.

If the foregoing considerations have any force, they will have made clear why the question as to sexual relation is joined with the question as to social principle, not only by the dramatic events of a particular winter, but by the perennial laws of human nature. A certain claim, hitherto ultimate and paramount, has almost disappeared from the moral horizon of a large portion of mankind; a vast force of indignation, hitherto absorbed in its service, is set at liberty for other aims. The relation of man and woman takes up the interest lost from the relation of State and subject. We have reached the antipodes to the classic theory of morals. Our moral scale is that theory inverted. The actions we extrude from the scope of morality then occupied the centre of morals. When the things that were damnable become innocent, the things that were innocent become damnable. Private life, with Greece and Rome, was the sphere of the indifferent; Pericles might enthrone a mistress in the place of his repudiated wife, Cato might lend his wife to a friend, Cicero might repudiate his, after thirty years' wedlock, to marry an heiress, and we hear hardly a word of blame from any quarter. For an offence against the State, on the other hand, there was no pardon. Invert this code of the ancient world, and we have that of our own day. We have reached it somewhat suddenly, it is true. The century of Sir Robert Walpole seems, in this respect, nearer a past from

which it was separated by two millenniums, than a future from which it was separated by a hundred years. But the extreme contrast of our own day and the ages of classic antiquity does, nevertheless, sum up the tendencies of both, on the whole. Towards this goal we have been travelling throughout our progress, though it is a sharp turn which has brought it in view at last.

The events of the present winter seem as if they were the plot of some well-constructed novel, carefully arranged to disentangle the comparison of these two standards from all irrelevant matter.* Its hero has not, in private life, committed any irregularity which would have marred the career of any political leader in Athens or Rome; while in public life, if we could imagine any Athenian or Roman to have had to confess to similar acts of encouragement to a province in revolt, his apologists would have been limited to those who were prepared to take up arms against the State whose authority was threatened.† The greatest men of antiquity could as little have understood the sympathy as the reprobation meted out to him. They would have thought Edinburgh, in conferring the freedom of her city upon him, was formulating an implicit desire for war with England; as to the feeling which demanded his deposition from the leadership on account of his adultery with his friend's wife, it would have been quite inexplicable to them. Of course, they could perfectly well have understood indignation on the part of the friend himself, but to discover private wrong converted into public crime would have seemed to them something altogether irrational and bewildering.

The standard of the ancient and the modern world are also, we have said, the standards respectively of man and woman. We should in our own time find plenty of confusing cross-lights to blur this distinction; but the apportionment which assigns to one sex a special interest in condemning the offences of public life, to the other a like interest against those which concern the home, is at once obvious and fundamental. Good women do not condemn many kinds of dishonesty which very imperfect men will not commit, while a sacrifice of private to public interests, if it entail hardship on those dear to her, is what only an exceptional woman can see as plain duty. And, on the other hand, men admit to their company those who are rigorously excluded from female

* Perhaps it may be objected that, to make this strictly the case, Mr. Parnell should have told no lies; his deposition may conceivably be regarded as the separation rather from an untrustworthy colleague than from an adulterer. But it must be remembered that he had already avowed to the Special Commission his intention to mislead Parliament, when his offences against political morality were compared to those of an applewoman who stops up the pathway.

† Of course we must imagine Mr. Parnell an Englishman to keep the analogy true; in any sense in which the Irish members are not Englishmen, Cicero was not a Roman.

society, and many a man would feel a shock at finding his own estimate of certain offences confirmed by his wife. But if we look not only to what is unquestionable and obvious, but to inchoate tendencies, manifested by numerous though not yet unmistakeable signs, we shall discern the approach of a new spirit which, while it at first sight seems to embarrass and blur this apportionment of two ideals, does really hold a clue to the true meaning of the latest ideal. We refer to the fact, which we may describe, we believe, in the words of Mr. Gladstone, in one of his literary notices, that people are beginning to lose faith in marriage. It is, we are told, a fact that might be illustrated by statistics; we are very sure that it is one which signs of more pregnant force are not lacking to establish. In truth, the interest in man's relation to woman, which, as we have said, has superseded the interest in his relation to the State, does not incorporate that conception of fidelity which belonged to it, nor hold at bay the spirit of reaction which has disorganized the world of politics. As the new "enthusiasm of humanity" has shown itself in contempt for the idea of a polity as a framework too narrow for universal brotherhood, so the new enthusiasm for the woman's ideal has shown itself in an analogous contempt for the institution of the legitimate family. The sanctity of marriage, imperilled in former days only by the forces of cruelty and lust, is attacked in ours by the hosts of a specious philanthropy, and of a fantastic aspiration after something higher than purity.

It is ill to despise these foes, on the ground that they can deceive no one who does not seek excuse for license. They have on their side facts so hideous that the recoil from them seems like concession of all claims made by those who bring them forward. Marriage, alas! is not the only medium through which man unites himself with woman. How many a wife, if she knew upon whom her husband's caresses had first been lavished, would feel that she could endure them no more! Sometimes, perhaps, she has a partner, where she is unconscious even of a predecessor; in either case she may be regarded as the member of an aristocracy against which the reforming ardour of our day directs its zeal, as against every other aristocracy. For the idol of a democracy—Equality—there seems always this to be said, that if you could really ensure it, you would enlist an enormous force on the side of the reforming energies of the world. If the wife were forced to share the degradation of the mistress she has displaced, the seducer might perhaps find his next triumph more difficult. And when all ties between man and woman stand on one level, whatever be the wretchedness of those who know only the most

fugitive and external, they will at least lose that opprobrium which comes from the neighbourhood of a class which casts them into icy shadow. They will venture into the light of day, they will be at liberty to make themselves felt as a power, they may obtain whatever alleviation is possible to distinct recognition, and the alliance with those whose happiness it has been hitherto to ignore their existence. Let it not be thought that this is our argument. God forbid that in the endeavour to represent fairly those who are doing the Devil's work, we should confuse our own protest against it! But the spirit which, while attacking all woman's dearest interests, seems to itself to be attacking only the immunities of a privileged class, in order to force the indignation of the virtuous to run in the same channel with the possible regrets of the vicious, is not the only instance of a zeal eager to destroy a partial good which the zealots deem themselves working to establish in its completeness. "Away with this wretched pretence of righteousness!" is the cry of many who sincerely seek to make the world more righteous. They may keep the sincerity of their endeavour, but their followers will not. They will discover too late that it is at the bidding of Satan they have cast themselves from the pinnacle of the Temple, that He who gives his angels charge to watch over the security of his servants works no miracle to save from ruin those who break with his teaching in the past.

The study of classic antiquity shows with hideous plainness what is the character of that civilization, which dwelt exclusively on the male side of life, which had no reverence for weakness, no compassion for suffering, no honour for purity. Must it be the fate of our day to exhibit a correspondent moral mutilation? When "morality" means purity, so that the woman's view of man exhausts all that is to be said about him, and the selfish, the cruel, the deceitful, may all be "moral," supposing they lack one particular temptation or resist it—when the State recedes, like an abandoned mistress, and the interests of the domestic hearth eclipse the destiny of nations—when loyalty to an unchosen claim vanishes like a dream, and the variations of preference, alike in public and private life, settle the coherence of every union—then let it not be thought that we keep tenderness, compassion, and purity. They grow out of the mutual relation of woman's life to man's life. They do not survive an isolation of the womanly ideal. No cruelty is like that of cowardice, no purity is possible where there is no fortitude, no abiding tenderness where there is no truth. The whole vitality of womanly virtue depends on its response to manly virtue; cut off from that, it withers and dies.

We will not dread for our country so great a calamity as this divorce, though the hour be full of menace. We believe that the eclipse of manly virtue is allowed to show us how fugitive, without it, is womanly virtue; how nearly allied are the security of the family and the State; how surely, apart from reverence for bonds deserted by pleasure, kindly feeling allies itself with license, and makes way for every foe to purity. We look for the re-emergence of the man's ideal, and a true human righteousness.

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