

# LESSONS OF MATERIALISM.

## A Lecture

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

SUNDAY LECTURE SOCIETY,

ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE,

ON

SUNDAY AFTERNOON, 6th APRIL, 1879,

BY H. MAUDSLEY, M.D.,

*Professor of Medical Jurisprudence, University College, London.*

[Reprinted from the "FORTNIGHTLY REVIEW," by kind permission of the  
Editor.]

---

London :

PUBLISHED BY THE SUNDAY LECTURE SOCIETY.

1879.

PRICE THEEPENCE.

## SYLLABUS.

---

The doctrines of Materialism and Spiritualism.

Why Materialism is looked upon as inferior and degrading.

Every function of mind dependent upon organization.

Milton an avowed Materialist.

Materialism not inconsistent with the belief of a future life, but inconsistent with the doctrine of a contempt of the body.

The human body the last and greatest product of organic development.

Differences of size and development between the brain of the lowest savage and that of an ordinary European.

Corresponding differences of intellectual and moral capacities.

The reign of law in human evolution.

The reign of law in human degeneracy.

Morality the essential condition of complex social development.

Intellectual and moral lessons of Materialism.

## LESSONS OF MATERIALISM.

---

IT is well known that from an early period of speculative thought two doctrines have been held with regard to the sort of connection which exists between a man's mind and his body. On the one hand, there are those who maintain that mind is an outcome and function of matter in a certain state of organization, coming with it, growing with it, decaying with it, inseparable from it: they are the so-called materialists. On the other hand, there are those who hold that mind is an independent spiritual essence which has entered into the body as its dwelling-place for a time, which makes use of it as its mortal instrument, and which will take on its independent life when the body, worn out by the operation of natural decay, returns to the earth of which it is made: they are the spiritualists. Without entering into a discussion as to which is the true doctrine, it will be sufficient in this lecture to accept, and proceed from the basis of, the generally admitted fact that all the manifestations of mind which we have to do with in this world are connected with organization, dependent upon it, whether as cause or instrument; that they are never met with apart from it any more than electricity or any other natural force is met with apart from matter; that higher organization must go along with higher mental function. What is the state of things in another world—whether the disembodied or celestially embodied spirits of the countless myriads of the human race that have come and gone through countless ages are now living higher lives—I do not venture to inquire. One hope and one certitude in the matter every one may be allowed to have and to express—the hope that if they are living now, it is a higher life than they lived upon earth; the certitude that if they are living the higher life, most of them must have had a vast deal to unlearn.

Many persons who readily admit in general terms the dependence of mental function on cerebral structure are inclined, when brought to the particular test, to make an exception in favour of the moral feeling or conscience. They are content to rest in the uncertain position which satisfied Dr. Abercrombie, the distinguished author of the well-known *Inquiry concerning the Intellectual Powers*, who, having pointed out plainly the dependence of mental function on organization, and, as a matter of fact which

cannot be denied, that there are individuals in whom every correct feeling in regard to moral relations is obliterated, while the judgment is unimpaired in all other relations, stops there, without attempting to prosecute inquiry into the cause of the remarkable fact which he justly emphasises. "That this power," he says, "should so completely lose its sway, while reason remains unimpaired, is a point in the moral constitution of man which it does not belong to the physician to investigate. The fact is unquestionable; the solution is to be sought in the records of eternal truth." And with this lame and somewhat melancholy conclusion he leaves his readers impotent before a problem, which is not only of deep scientific interest, but of momentous practical importance. The observation which makes plain the fact does not, however, leave us entirely without information concerning the cause of it, when we pursue it faithfully, since it reveals as distinct a dependence of moral faculty upon organization as of any other faculty.

Many instructive examples of the pervading mental effects of physical injury of the brain might be quoted, but two or three, recently recorded, will suffice. An American medical man was called one day to see a youth, aged eighteen, who had been struck down insensible by the kick of a horse. There was a depressed fracture of the skull a little above the left temple. The skull was trephined, and the loose fragments of bone that pressed upon the brain were removed, whereupon the patient came to his senses. The doctor thought it a good opportunity to make an experiment, as there was a hole in the skull through which he could easily make pressure upon the brain. He asked the boy a question, and before there was time to answer it he pressed firmly with his finger upon the exposed brain. As long as the pressure was kept up the boy was mute, but the instant it was removed he made a reply, never suspecting that he had not answered at once. The experiment was repeated several times with precisely the same result, the boy's thoughts being stopped and started again on each occasion as easily and certainly as the engineer stops and starts his locomotive.

On another occasion the same doctor was called to see a groom who had been kicked on the head by a mare called Dolly, and whom he found quite insensible. There was a fracture of the skull, with depression of bone at the upper part of the forehead. As soon as the portion of bone which was pressing upon the brain was removed the patient called out with great energy, "Whoa, Dolly!" and then stared about him in blank amazement, asking,



“Where is the mare?” “Where am I?” Three hours had passed since the accident, during which the words which he was just going to utter when it happened had remained locked up, as they might have been locked up in the phonograph, to be let go the moment the obstructing pressure was removed. The patient did not remember, when he came to himself, that the mare had kicked him; the last thing before he was insensible which he did remember was, that she wheeled her heels round and laid back her ears viciously.

Cases of this kind show how entirely dependent every function of mind is upon a sound state of the mechanism of the brain. Just as we can, by pressing firmly upon the sensory nerve of the arm, prevent an impression made upon the finger being carried to the brain and felt there, so by pressing upon the brain we can as certainly stop a thought or a volition. In both cases a good recovery presently followed the removal of the pressure upon the brain; but it would be of no little medical interest to have the after-histories of the persons, since it happens sometimes after a serious injury to the head that, despite an immediate recovery, slow degenerative changes are set up in the brain months or years afterwards, which go on to cause a gradual weakening, and perhaps eventual destruction, of mind. Now the instructive matter in this case is that the moral character is usually impaired first, and sometimes is completely perverted, without a corresponding deterioration of the understanding; the person is a thoroughly changed character for the worse. The injury has produced disorder in the most delicate part of the mental organization, that which is separated from actual contact with the skull only by the thin investing membranes of the brain: and, once damaged, it is seldom that it is ever restored completely to its former state of soundness. However, happy recoveries are now and then made from mental derangement caused by physical injury of the brain. Some years ago a miner was sent to the Ayrshire District Asylum who, four years before, had been struck to the ground insensible by a mass of falling coal, which fractured his skull. He lay unconscious for four days after the accident, then came gradually to himself, and was able in four weeks to resume his work in the pit. But his wife noticed a steadily increasing change for the worse in his character and habits; whereas he had formerly been cheerful, sociable, and good-natured, always kind and affectionate to her and his children, he now became irritable, moody, surly, suspicious, shunning the company of his fellow-workmen, and

impatient with her and the children. This bad state increased; he was often excited, used threats of violence to his wife and others, finally became quite maniacal, attempted to kill them, had a succession of epileptic fits, and was sent to the asylum as a dangerous lunatic. There he showed himself extremely suspicious and surly, entertained a fixed delusion that he was the victim of a conspiracy on the part of his wife and others, and displayed bitter and resentful feelings. At the place where the skull had been fractured there was a well-marked depression of bone, and the depressed portion was eventually removed by the trephine. From that time an improvement took place in his disposition, his old self coming gradually back; he became cheerful again, active and obliging, regained and displayed all his former affection for his wife and children, and was at last discharged recovered. No plainer example could be wished to show the direct connection of cause and effect—the great deterioration of moral character produced by the physical injury of the supreme nerve-centres of the brain: when the cause was taken away the effect went also.

Going a step further, let me point out that disease will sometimes do as plain and positive damage to moral character as any which direct injury of the brain will do. A fever has sometimes deranged it as deeply as a blow on the head; a child's conscience has been clean effaced by a succession of epileptic convulsions, just as the memory is sometimes effaced; and those who see much of epilepsy know well the extreme but passing moral transformations which occur in connection with its seizures. The person may be as unlike himself as possible when he is threatened with a fit; although naturally cheerful, good-tempered, sociable and obliging, he becomes irritable, surly, and morose, very suspicious, takes offence at the most innocent remark or act, and is apt to resent imaginary offences with great violence. The change might be compared well with that which happens when a clear and cloudless sky is overcast suddenly with dark and threatening thunder-clouds; and just as the darkly clouded sky is cleared by the thunderstorm which it portends, so the gloomy moral perturbation is discharged and the mental atmosphere cleared by an epileptic fit or a succession of such fits. In a few remarkable cases, however, the patient does not come to himself immediately after the fit, but is left by it in a peculiar state of quasi-somnambulism, during which he acts like an automaton, doing strange, absurd, and sometimes even criminal things, without knowing apparently at the time what he is doing, and certainly without remembering in the least what he

has done when he comes to himself. Of excellent moral character habitually, he may turn thief in one of these states, or perpetrate some other criminal offence by which he gets himself into trouble with the police.

There are other diseases which, in like manner, play havoc with moral feeling. Almost every sort of mental derangement begins with a moral alienation, slight, perhaps, at the outset, but soon so great that a prudent, temperate, chaste, and truthful person shall be changed to exactly the opposite of what he was. This alienation of character continues throughout the course of the disease, and is frequently found to last for a while after all disorder of intelligence has gone. Indeed, the experienced physician never feels confident that the recovery is stable and sure, until the person is restored to his natural sentiments and affections. Thus it appears that when mind undergoes decadence, the moral feeling is the first to suffer; the highest acquisition of mental evolution, it is the first to witness to mental degeneracy. One form of mental disease, known as general paralysis, is usually accompanied with a singularly complete paralysis of the moral sense from the outset; and a not uncommon feature of it, very striking in some cases, is a persistent tendency to steal, the person stealing in a weak-minded manner what he has no particular need of, and makes no use of when he has stolen it. The victim of this fatal disease is frequently sent to prison and treated as a common criminal in the first instance, notwithstanding that a medical man who knows his business might be able to say with entire certitude that the supposed criminal was suffering from organic disease of the brain, which had destroyed moral sense at the outset, which would go on to destroy all the other faculties of his mind in succession, and which in the end would destroy life itself. There is no question in such case of moral guilt; it is not sin but disease that we are confronted with; and after the victim's death we find the plainest evidence of disease of brain which has gone along with the decay of mind. Had the holiest saint in the calendar been afflicted as he was, he could not have helped doing as he did.

I need not dwell any longer upon the morality-sapping effects of particular diseases, but shall simply call to mind the profound deterioration of moral sense and will which is produced by the long-continued and excessive use of alcohol and opium. There is nowhere a more miserable specimen of degradation of moral feeling and of impotence of will, than the debauchee who has made himself the abject slave of either of these pernicious excesses.

Insensible to the interests of his family, to his personal responsibilities, to the obligations of duty, he is utterly untruthful and untrustworthy, and in the worst end there is not a meanness of pretence or of conduct that he will not descend to, not a lie he will not tell, in order to gain the means to gratify his overruling craving. It is not merely that passion is strengthened and will weakened by indulgence as a moral effect, but the alcohol or opium which is absorbed into his blood is carried by it to the brain and acts injuriously upon its tissues: the chemist will, indeed, extract alcohol from the besotted brain of the worst drunkard, as he will detect morphia in the secretions of a person who is taking large doses of opium. Seldom, therefore, is it of the least use to preach reformation to these people, until they have been restrained forcibly from their besetting indulgence for a long enough period to allow the brain to get rid of the poison, and its tissues to regain a healthier tone. Too often it is of little use then; the tissues have been damaged beyond the possibility of complete restoration. Moreover, observation has shown that the drink-craving is oftentimes hereditary, so that a taste for the poison is ingrained in the tissues, and is quickly kindled by gratification into uncontrollable desire.

Thus far it appears, then, that moral feeling may be impaired or destroyed by direct injury of the brain, by the disorganizing action of disease, and by the chemical action of certain substances which, when taken in excess, are poisons to the nervous system. When we look sincerely at the facts, we cannot help perceiving that it is just as closely dependent upon organization as is the meanest function of mind; that there is not an argument to prove the so-called materialism of one part of mind which does not apply with equal force to the whole mind. Seeing that we know no more essentially what matter is than what mind is, being unable in either case to go beyond the phenomena of which we have experience, it is of interest to ask why the spiritualist considers his theory to be of so much higher and intellectual and moral order than materialism, and looks down with undisguised pity and contempt on the latter as inferior, degrading, and even dangerous; why the materialist should be deemed guilty, not of intellectual error only, but of something like moral guilt. His philosophy has been lately denounced as a "philosophy of dirt." An eminent prelate of the English Church, in an outburst of moral indignation, once described him as possibly "the most odious and ridiculous being in all the multiform creation;" and a recent writer



in a French philosophical journal uses still stronger language of abhorrence—"I abhor them," he says, "with all the force of my soul. . . . I detest and abominate them from the bottom of my heart, and I feel an invincible repugnance and horror when they dare to reduce psychology and ethics to their bestial physiology—that is, in short, to make of man a brute, of the brute a plant, of the plant a machine. . . . This school is a living and crying negation of humanity." The question is, what there is in materialism to warrant the sincere feeling and earnest expression of so great a horror of it. Is the abhorrence well founded, or is it, perhaps, that the doctrine is hated, as the individual oftentimes is, because misunderstood?

This must certainly be allowed to be a fair inquiry by those who reflect that no less eminent a person and good a Christian than Milton was a decided materialist. Several scattered passages in *Paradise Lost* plainly betray his opinions; but it is not necessary to lay any stress upon them, because in his *Treatise on Christian Doctrine* he sets them forth in the most plain and uncompromising way, and supports them with an elaborate detail of argument. He is particularly earnest to prove that the common doctrine that the spirit of man should be separate from the body, so as to have a perfect and intelligent existence independently of it, is nowhere said in Scripture, and is at variance both with nature and reason; and he declares that "man is a living being, intrinsically and properly one and individual, not compound and separable, not, according to the common opinion, made up and framed of two distinct parts, as of soul and body." Another illustrious instance of a good Christian who, for a great part of his life, avowed his belief that "the nature of man is simple and uniform, and that the thinking power and faculties are the result of a certain organization of matter," was the eloquent preacher and writer, Robert Hall. It is true that he abandoned this opinion at a later period of his life; indeed, his biographer tells us with much satisfaction that "he buried materialism in his father's grave;" and a theological professor in American college has in a recent article exultantly claimed this fact as triumphant proof that the materialist's "gloomy and unnatural creed" cannot stand before such a sad feeling as grief at a father's death. One may be excused, perhaps, for not seeing quite so clearly as these gentlemen the soundness of the logic of the connection. On the whole, logic is usually sounder and stronger when it is not under the pressure of great feeling.

The truth is that a great many people have the deeply-rooted

feeling that materialism is destructive of the hope of immortality, and dread and detest it for that reason. When they watch the body decay and die, considering furthermore that after its death it is surely resolved into the simple elements from which all matter is formed, and know that these released elements go in turn to build up other bodies, so that the material is used over and over again, being compounded and decomposed incessantly in the long stream of life, they cannot realise the possibility of a resurrection of the individual body. They cannot conceive how matter which has thus been used over and over again can remake so many distinct bodies, and they think that to uphold a bodily resurrection is to give up practically the doctrine of a future life. It is a natural, but not a necessary conclusion, as the examples of Milton and Robert Hall prove, since they, though materialists, were devout believers in a resurrection of the dead. Moreover, there are many vehement antagonists of materialism who readily admit that it is not inconsistent with the belief in a life after death. Indeed, they could not well do otherwise, when they recollect what the Apostle Paul said in his very energetic way, addressing the objector to a bodily resurrection as "Thou fool," and what happened to the rich man who died and was buried; for it is told of him that "in hell he lifted up his eyes, and cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame." Now if he had eyes to lift up and a tongue to be cooled, it is plain that he had a body of some kind in hell; and if Lazarus, who was in another place, had a finger to dip in water, he also must have had a body of some kind there.

Leaving this matter, however, without attempting to explain the mystery of the body celestial, I go on to mention a second reason why materialism is considered to be bad doctrine. It is this: that with the rise and growth of Christianity there came in the fashion of looking down on the body with contempt as the vile and despicable part of man, the seat of those fleshly lusts which warred against the higher aspirations of the soul. It was held to be the favourite province of the devil, who, having intrenched himself there, lay in wait to entice or to betray to sin; the wiles of Satan and the lusts of the flesh were spoken of in the same breath, as in the service of the English Church prayer is made for "whatsoever has been decayed by the fraud and malice of the devil, or by his own carnal will and frailness;" and all men are taught to look forward to the time when "he shall change this vile body and make



it like unto his glorious body." It was the extreme but logical outcome of this manner of despising the body to subject it to all the penances, and to treat it with all the rigour, of the most rigid asceticism—to neglect it, to starve it, to scourge it, to mortify it in every possible way. One holy ascetic would never wash himself, or cut his toe-nails, or wipe his nose; another suffered maggots to burrow unchecked into the neglected ulcers of his emaciated body; others, like St. Francis, stripped themselves naked and appeared in public without clothes. St. Macarius threw away his clothes and remained naked for six months in a marsh, exposed to the bite of every insect; St. Simeon Stylites spent thirty years on the top of a column which had been gradually raised to a height of sixty feet, passing a great part of his time in bending his meagre body successively with his head towards his feet, and so industriously that a curious spectator, after counting one thousand two hundred and forty-four repetitions, desisted counting from weariness. And for these things—these insanities of conduct may we not call them—they were accounted most holy, and received the honours of saintship. Contrast this unworthy view of the body with that which the ancient Greeks took of it. They found no other object in nature which satisfied so well their sense of proportion and manly strength, of attractive grace and beauty; and their reproductions of it in marble we preserve now as priceless treasures of art, albeit we still babble the despicable doctrine of contempt of it. The more strange, since it is a matter of sober scientific truth that the human body is the highest and most wonderful work in nature, the last and best achievement of her creative skill; it is a most complex and admirably constructed organism, "fearfully and wonderfully made," which contains, as it were in a microcosm, all the ingenuity and harmony and beauty of the macrocosm. And it is this supreme product of evolution that fanatics have gained the honour of saintship by disfiguring and torturing!

These, then, are two great reasons of the repugnance which is felt to materialism, namely, the notion that it is destructive of the hope of a resurrection, and the contempt of the body which has been inculcated as a religious duty. And yet on these very points materialism seems fitted to teach the spiritualist lessons of humility and reverence, for it teaches him, in the first place, not to despise and call unclean the last and best work of his Creator's hand; and, secondly, not impiously to circumscribe supernatural power by the narrow limits of his understanding, but to bethink himself that it

were just as easy in the beginning, or now, or at any time, for the omnipotent Creator of matter and its properties to make it think as to make mind think.

Passing from these incidental lessons of humility and reverence, I go now to show that materialism has its moral lessons, and that these, rightly apprehended, are not at all of a low intellectual and moral order, but, on the contrary, in some respects more elevating than the moral lessons of spiritualism. I shall content myself with two or three of these lessons, not because there are not more of them, but because they will be enough to occupy the time at my disposal.

It is a pretty well accepted scientific doctrine that our far-distant prehistoric ancestors were a very much lower order of beings than we are, even if they did not inherit directly from the monkey; that they were very much like, in conformation, habits, intelligence, and moral feeling, the lowest existing savages; and that we have risen to our present level of being by a slow process of evolution which has been going on gradually through untold generations. Whether or not "through the ages one increasing purpose runs," as the poet has it, it is certainly true that "the thoughts of men are widened with the process of the suns." Now when we examine the brain of the lowest savage, whom we need not be too proud to look upon as our ancestor in the flesh—say a native Australian or a Bushman—we find it to be considerably smaller than an ordinary European brain; its convolutions, which are the highest nerve-centres of mind, are decidedly fewer in number, more simple in character, and more symmetrical in arrangement. These are marks of inferiority, for in those things in which it differs from the ordinary European brain it gets nearer in structure to the still much inferior brain of the monkey; it represents, we may say, a stage of development in the long distance which has been traversed between the two. A comparison of the relative brain-weights will give a rude notion of the differences: the brain-weight of an average European male is 49 oz.; that of a Bushman is, I believe, about 33 oz.; and that of a Negro, who comes between them in brain-size, as in intelligence, is 44 oz. The small brain-weight of the Bushman is indeed equaled among civilised nations by that of a small-headed or so-called microcephalic idiot. There can be no doubt, then, of a great difference of development between the highest and the lowest existing human brain.

There can be no doubt, furthermore, that the gross differences

which there are between the size and development of the brain of a low savage and of an average European, go along with as great differences of intellectual and moral capacities—that lower mental function answers to lower cerebral structure. It is a well-known fact that many savages cannot count beyond five, and that they have no words in their vocabulary for the higher qualities of human nature, such as virtue, justice, humanity, and their opposites, vice, injustice, and cruelty, or for the more abstract ideas. The native Australian, for example, who is in this case, having no words for justice, love, mercy, and the like, would not in the least know what remorse meant; if any one showed it in his presence, he would think probably that he had got a bad bellyache. He has no words to express the higher sentiments and thoughts because he has never felt and thought them, and has never had, therefore, the need to express them; he has not in his inferior brain the nervous substrata which should minister to such sentiments and thoughts, and cannot have them in his present state of social evolution, any more than he could make a particular movement of his body if the proper muscles were wanting. Nor could any amount of training in the world, we may be sure, ever make him equal in this respect to the average European, any more than it could add substance to the brain of a small-headed idiot and raise it to the ordinary level. Were any one, indeed, to make the experiment of taking the young child of an Australian savage and of bringing it up side by side with an average European child, taking great pains to give them exactly the same education in every respect, he would certainly have widely different results in the end: in the one case he would have to do with a well-organized instrument, ready to give out good intellectual notes and a fine harmony of moral feeling when properly handled; in the other case, an imperfectly organized instrument, from which it would be out of the power of the most patient and skilful touch to elicit more than a few feeble intellectual notes and a very rude and primitive sort of moral feeling. A little better feeling, certainly, than that of its fathers, but still most primitive; for many savages regard as virtues most of the big vices and crimes, such as theft, rape, murder, at any rate when they are practised at the expense of neighbouring tribes. Their moral feeling, such as it is, is extremely circumscribed, being limited in application to the tribe. In Europe we have happily got further than that, since we are not, as savages are and our forefathers probably were, divided into a multitude of tribes eager to injure and even extirpate one another from motives

of tribal patriotism; but mankind seems to be far off the goal of its high calling so long as, divided into jealous and hostile nations, it suffers national divisions to limit the application of moral feeling, counts it a high virtue to violate it under the profaned name of patriotism, and uses the words "humanitarianism" and "cosmopolitanism" as crushing names of reproach. There is plainly room yet for a wider expansion of moral feeling.

Now what do the discoveries of science warrant us to conclude respecting the larger and more complex brain of the civilised man and its higher capacities of thought and feeling? They teach us this: that it has reached its higher level not by any sudden and big creative act, nor by a succession of small creative acts, but by the slow and gradual operation of processes of natural evolution going on through countless ages. Each new insight into natural phenomena on the part of man, each act of wiser doing founded on truer insight, each bettered feeling which has been developed from wiser conduct, has tended to determine by degrees a corresponding structural change of the brain, which has been transmitted as an innate endowment to succeeding generations, just as the acquired habit of a parent animal becomes sometimes the instinct of its offspring; and the accumulated results of these slow and minute gains, transmitted by hereditary action, have culminated in the higher cerebral organization, in which they are now, as it were, capitalised. Thus the added structure embodies in itself the superior intellectual and moral capacities of abstract reasoning and moral feeling which have been the slow acquisitions of the ages, and it gives them out again in its functions when it discharges its functions rightly. If we were to have a person born in this country with a brain of no higher development than that of the low savage—destitute, that is, of the higher nervous substrata of thought and feeling—if, in fact, our far remote prehistoric ancestor were to come to life among us now—we should have more or less of an imbecile, who could not compete on equal terms with other persons, but must perish, unless charitably cared for, just as the native Australian perishes when he comes into contact and competition with the white man. The only way in which the native Australian could be raised to the level of civilised feeling and thought would be by cultivation continued through many generations—by a process of evolution similar to that which lies back between our savage ancestors and us.

That is one aspect of the operation of natural law in human events—the operation of the law of heredity in development, in



carrying mankind forward, that is, to a higher level of being. It teaches us plainly enough that the highest qualities of mind bear witness to the reign of law in nature as certainly as do the lowest properties of matter, and that if we are to go on progressing in time to come it must be by observation of, and obedience to, the laws of development. But there is another vastly important aspect of the law of heredity which it concerns us to bear sincerely in mind—its operation in working out human degeneracy, in carrying mankind downwards, that is, to a lower level of being. It is certain that man may degenerate as well as develop; that he has been doing so both as nation and individual ever since we have records of his doings on earth. There is a broad and easy way of dissolution, national, social, or individual, which is the opposite of the steep and narrow way of evolution. Now what it behoves us to realise distinctly is that there is not anything more miraculous about the degeneracy and extinction of a nation or of a family than there is about its rise and development; that both are the work of natural law. A nation does not sink into decadence, I presume, so long as it keeps fresh those virtues of character through which it became great among nations; it is when it suffers them to be eaten away by luxury, corruption, and other enervating vices, that it undergoes that degeneration of character which prepares and makes easy its over-throw. In like manner a family, reckless of the laws of physical and moral hygiene, may go through a process of degeneracy until it becomes extinct. It was no mere dream of prophetic frenzy that when the fathers have eaten sour grapes, the children's teeth are set on edge, nor was it a meaningless menace that the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generations; it was an actual insight into the natural law by which degeneracy increases through generations—by which one generation reaps the wrong which its fathers have sown, as its children in turn will reap the wrong which it has sown. What we call insanity or mental derangement is truly, in most cases, a form of human degeneracy, a phase in the working out of it; and if we were to suffer this degeneracy to take its course unchecked through generations, the natural termination would be sterile idiocy and extinction of the family. A curious despot would find it impossible, were he to make the experiment, to breed and propagate a race of insane people; nature, unwilling to continue a morbid variety of the human kind, would bring his experiment to an end by the production of sterile idiocy. If man will but make himself the

subject of serious scientific study, he shall find that this working out of degeneracy through generations affords him a rational explanation of most of those evil impulses of the heart which he has been content to attribute to the wiles and instigations of the devil; that the evil spirit which has taken possession of the wicked man is often the legacy of parental or ancestral error, misfortune, or wrong-doing. It will be made plain to him that insanity, idiocy, and every other form of human degeneracy is not casualty, but defect which comes by cause; that it is just as much the definite consequent of definite antecedents as any other event in nature; and that these antecedents many times are within human controul, being the palpable outcome of ignorance or of neglect of the laws of moral and physical hygiene. Let me illustrate by an example the nature and bearing of this scientific study.

I will take for this purpose a case which every physician who has had much experience must have been asked some time or other to consider and advise about: a quite young child, which is causing its parents alarm and distress by the precocious display of vicious desires and tendencies of all sorts, that are quite out of keeping with its tender years, and by the utter failure of either precept, or example, or punishment to imbue it with good feeling and with the desire to do right. It may not be notably deficient in intelligence; on the contrary, it may be capable of learning quickly when it likes, and extremely cunning in lying, in stealing, in gratifying other perverse inclinations; and it cannot be said not to know right from wrong, since it invariably eschews the right and chooses the wrong, showing an amazing acuteness in escaping detection and the punishment which follows detection. It is, in truth, congenitally conscienceless, by nature destitute of moral sense and actively imbued with an immoral sense. Now this unfortunate creature is of so tender an age that the theory of Satanic agency is not thought to offer an adequate explanation of its evil impulses; in the end everybody who has to do with it feels that it is not responsible for its vicious conduct, perceives that punishment does not and cannot in the least reform it, and is persuaded that there is some native defect of mind which renders it a proper case for medical advice. Where, then, is the fault that a human being is born into the world who will go wrong, nay, who must go wrong, in virtue of a bad organization? The fault lies somewhere in its hereditary antecedents. We can seldom find the exact cause and trace definitely the mode of its operation—the study is much too complex and difficult for such exactness at



present—but we shall not fail to discover the broad fact of the frequency of insanity or other mental degeneracy in the direct line of the child's inheritance. The experienced physician seldom feels any doubt of that when he meets with a case of the kind. It is indeed most certain that men are not bred well or ill by accident any more than the animals are; but while most persons are ready to acknowledge this fact in a general way, very few pursue the admission to its exact and rigorous consequences, and fewer still suffer it to influence their conduct.

It may be set down, then, as a fact of observation that mental degeneracy in one generation is sometimes the evident cause of an innate deficiency or absence of moral sense in the next generation. The child bears the burden of its ancestral infirmities or wrongdoings. Here then and in this relation may be noted the instructive fact, that just as moral feeling was the first function to be affected at the beginning of mental derangement in the individual, so now the defect or absence of it is seen to mark the way of degeneracy through generations. It was the latest acquisition of mental evolution; it is the first to go in mental dissolution.

A second fact of observation may be set down as worthy of consideration, if not of immediate acceptance, namely, that an absence of moral feeling in one generation, as shown by a mean, selfish, and persistent disregard of moral action in the conduct of life, may be the cause of mental derangement in the next generation. In fact, a person may succeed in manufacturing insanity in his progeny by a persistent disuse of moral feeling, and a persistent exercise, throughout his life, of those selfish, mean, and anti-social tendencies which are a negation of the highest moral relations of mankind. He does not ever exercise the nervous substrata which minister to moral functions, wherefore they undergo atrophy in him, and he runs the risk of transmitting them to his progeny in so imperfect a state, that they are incapable of full development of function in them; just as the instinct of the animal which is not exercised for many generations on account of changed conditions of life, becomes less distinct by degrees and in the end, perhaps, extinct. People are apt to talk as if they believed that insanity might be got rid of were only sufficient care taken to prevent its direct propagation by the marriages of those who had suffered it or were like to do so. A vain imagination assuredly! Were all the insanity in the world at the present time clean swept away to-morrow, men would breed it afresh before to-morrow's to-morrow by their

errors, their excesses, their wrong-doings of all sorts. Rightly, then, may the scientific inquirer echo the words of the preacher, that however prosperous a man may have seemed in his life, judge him not blessed before his death: for he shall be known in his children: they shall not have the confidence of their good descent. In sober truth, the lessons of morality which were proclaimed by the prophets of old, as indispensable to the stability and well-being of families and nations, were not mere visions of vague fancy; founded upon actual observation and intuition of the laws of nature working in human events, they were insights into the eternal truths of human evolution.

Whether, then, man goes upwards or downwards, undergoes development or degeneration, we have equally to do with matters of stern law. Provision has been made for both ways; it has been left to him to find out and determine which way he shall take. And it is plain that he must find the right path of evolution, and avoid the wrong path of degeneracy, by observation and experience, pursuing the same method of positive inquiry which has served him so well in the different sciences. Being pre-eminently and essentially a social being, each one the member of one body—the unit, that is, in a social organism—the laws which he has to observe and obey are not the physical laws of nature only, but also those higher laws which govern the relations of individuals in the social state. If he make his observations sincerely and adequately in this way, he cannot fail to perceive that the laws of morality were not really miraculous revelations from heaven any more than was the discovery of the law of gravitation, but that they were the essential conditions of social evolution, and were learned practically by the stern lessons of experience. He has learnt his duty to his neighbour as he has learnt his duty to nature; it is implicit in the constitution of a complex society of men dwelling together in peace and unity, and has been revealed explicitly by the intuition of a few extraordinary men of sublime moral genius.

As it is not a true, it cannot be a useful, notion to foster, that morality was the special gift to man, or is the special property, of any theological system, and that its vitality is in the least bound up with the life of any such creed. Whether men believed in Heaven and Hell or not, in Jupiter or in Jehovah, in Buddha or in Jesus, they could not fail to find out that some obedience to moral law is essential to social evolution. The golden rule of morals itself—"Do unto others as ye would have others do unto you"—was perceived and proclaimed long before it received its highest

Christian expression.\* We ought to be just and to confess the truth: there were good Christians in the world before Christ. It is not, indeed, religious creed which has invented and been the basis of morality, but morality which has been the bulwark of religions. And as a matter of fact it is too true that morality has suffered many times not a little from its connection with theological creeds; that its truths have been laid hands on and used to support demoralising superstitions which were no part of it; that doctrines essentially immoral have been even taught in the name of religion; and that religious systems in their struggles to establish their supremacy have oftentimes shown small respect to the claims of morality. Had religion been true to its nature and function, had it been as wide as morality and humanity, it should have been the bond of unity to hold mankind together in one brotherhood, linking them in good feeling, good-will, and good work towards one another; but it has in reality been that which has most divided men, and the cause of more hatreds, more disorders, more persecutions, more bloodshed, more cruelties than most other causes put together. In order to maintain peace and order, therefore, the State in modern times has been compelled to hold itself practically aloof from religion, and to leave to each hostile sect liberty to do as it likes so long as it meddles not by its tenets and ceremonials with the interests of civil government. That is the present outcome of a religion of peace on earth and goodwill among men! On the whole it may be thought to be fortunate for the interests of morality that it is not bound up essentially with any form of religious creed, but that it survives when creeds die, having its more secure foundations in the hard-won experience of mankind.

The inquiry which, taking a sincere survey of the facts, finds the basis and sanction of morality in experience, by no means

\* There appears to be no doubt that Confucius, among others, has the clearest apprehension of it and expressly taught it; and the Buddhist religion of perfection is certainly founded upon self-conquest and self-sacrifice. They are its very corner-stone: the purification of the mind from unholy desires and passions, and a devotion to the good of others, which rises to an enthusiasm for humanity, in order to escape from the miseries of this life and to attain to a perfect moral repose. "Let all the sins that have been committed fall upon me, in order that the world may be delivered," Buddha says. And of the son or disciple of Buddha it is said, "When reviled he revileth not again; when smitten he bears the blow without resentment; when treated with anger and passion he returns love and good-will; when threatened with death he bears no malice."

arrives in the end at easy lessons of self-indulgence for the individual and the race, but, on the contrary, at the hardest lessons of self-renunciation. Disclosing to man the stern and uniform reign of law in nature, even in the evolution and degeneracy of his own nature, it takes from him the comfortable but demoralising doctrine that he or others can escape the penalty of his ignorance, error, or wrong-doings either by penitence or prayer, and holds him to the strictest account for them. Discarding the notion that the observed uniformity of nature is but a uniformity of sequence at will which may be interrupted whenever its interruption is earnestly enough asked for—a notion which, were it more than lip-doctrine, must necessarily deprive him of his most urgent motive to study patiently the laws of nature in order to conform to them—it enforces a stern feeling of responsibility to search out painfully the right path of obedience and to follow it, inexorably laying upon man the responsibility of the future of his race. If it be most certain, as it is, that all disobedience of natural law, whether physical or moral, is avenged inexorably in its consequences on earth, either upon the individual himself, or more often, perhaps, upon others—that the violated law cannot be bribed to stay its arm by burnt-offerings nor placated by prayers—it is a harmful doctrine, as tending directly to undermine understanding and to weaken will, to teach that either prayer or sacrifice will obviate the consequences of want of foresight or want of self-discipline, or that reliance on supernatural aid will make amends for lack of intelligent will. We still pray half-heartedly in our churches, as our forefathers prayed with their whole hearts, when we are afflicted with a plague or pestilence, that God will “accept of an atonement and command the destroying angel to cease from punishing;” and when we are suffering from too much rain we ask him to send fine weather “although we for our iniquities have worthily deserved a plague of rain and water.” Is there a person of sincere understanding who, uttering that prayer, now believes it in his heart to be the successful way to stay a fever, plague, or pestilence? He knows well that, if it is to be answered, he must clean away dirt, purify drains, disinfect houses, and put in force those other sanitary measures which experience has proved to be efficacious, and that the aid vouchsafed to the prayer will only be given when, these being by themselves successful, the prayer is superfluous. Had men gone on believing, as they once believed, that prayer would stay disease, they would never have learned and adopted sanitary measures, any more than the savage of Africa,



who prays to his fetish to cure disease, does now. To get rid of the notion of supernatural interposition was the essential condition of true knowledge and self-help in that matter.

Looking at the matter in the light of scientific knowledge, it is hard to see how any one can think otherwise. However, one may easily overrate the depth to which such knowledge goes in the general mind: at best it is but a thin surface-dressing. Only a few days ago, on opening a book at random, I hit on the following extract from a sermon on the *Miracles of Prayer*, by a well-known clergyman:—

“But we have prayed, and not been heard, at least in the present visitation. Have we deserved to be heard? In former visitations it was observed commonly how the cholera lessened from the day of public humiliation. When we dreaded famine from a long-continued drought, on the morning of our prayers the heaven over our head was of brass; the clear burning sky showed no token of change. Men looked with awe on its unmitigated clearness. In the evening was a cloud like a man’s hand; the relief was come.”

This is from a sermon preached by no mean citizen of no mean city; it was preached at Oxford, in 1866, and the preacher was Dr. Pusey, who goes on to say that it describes what he himself saw on the Sunday morning in Oxford, on returning from the early communion at St. Mary’s, at eight. The change occurred in the evening. A good instance, one would be apt to say, of a very common fallacy of observation and reasoning—the fallacy that an event which happens after another necessarily happens in consequence of it! But what I would point out is, that if Dr. Pusey’s interpretation of the matter be true, all our scientific knowledge of the order of nature has no stable foundation; it is no better than a baseless fabric, which has come like wind and like wind may go. And most certain it is that if such views were universal, the result would be to carry us back straight to the ignorance and barbarism which prevailed in Europe before the Reformation and the dawn of modern science. Consider how much it means, that a man of Dr. Pusey’s culture and eminence should so little apprehend the fundamental principles of modern science, should be so blind to the conception of the reign of law in nature; consider again how the great majority of the people are in his case, and that the torch of modern science is after all really carried by some hundred men or so in Europe and America, and would be pretty nigh extinguished by their simultaneous deaths; and consider, lastly, that we have everywhere in our midst a most complete and powerful organisation which, holding that all truth has been given into

the keeping of the church from the beginning, and cannot be either added to or taken from, is truly a gigantic and unsleeping conspiracy against the human intellect;—consider these things fairly, I say, and then ask yourselves soberly whether modern progress is so stable and assured a thing as we are apt to take it for granted it is. For my part, I would not give much for it if the Roman Catholic Church had its way for fifty or a hundred years. In all ages of the world, I make no doubt, there have been a few persons with too much insight to accept the fables which have satisfied the vulgar, but who dared not utter their thoughts, or, uttering them, were quickly extinguished; the torch of knowledge has been again and again lit and again and again put out; and truth never will be made secure until it has been driven down into the hearts of the masses of the people by a right method of education from generation to generation.

Many persons who could not confidently express their belief in the power of prayer to stop a plague or a deluge of rain, or who actually disbelieve it, still have a sincere hold of the belief of its miraculous power in the moral or spiritual world. Nevertheless, if the matter be made one simply of scientific observation, it must be confessed that all the evidence goes to prove that the events of the moral world are matters of law and order equally with those of the physical world, and that supernatural interpositions have no more place in the one than in the other; that he who prays for the creation of a clean heart and the renewal of a right spirit within him, if he gets at last what he prays for, gets it by the operation of the ordinary laws of moral growth and development, in consequence of painstaking watchfulness over himself and the continual exercise of good resolves. Only when he gets it in that way will he get the benefit of supernatural aid; and if it rests in the belief of supernatural aid, without taking pains to get it entirely in that way, he will do himself moral harm; for if he cannot rely upon special interpositions in the moral any more than in the physical world, if he has to do entirely with those secondary laws of nature through which alone the supernatural is made natural, the invisible visible, it needs no demonstration that the opposite belief cannot strengthen, but must weaken, the understanding and will. It is plain that true moral hygiene is as impossible to the person who relies upon his fetish to change his heart in answer to prayer, as sanitary science is impossible to the savage who relies upon his fetish to stay a pestilence in answer to prayer.



So far from materialism being a menace to morality, when it is properly understood, it not only sets before man a higher intellectual aim than he is ever likely to reach by spiritual paths, but it even raises a more self-sacrificing moral standard. For when all has been said, it is not the most elevated or the most healthy business for a person to be occupied continually with anxieties and apprehensions and cares about the salvation of his own soul, and to be earnest to do well in this life in order that he may escape eternal suffering and gain eternal happiness in a life to come. The disbeliever might find room to argue that here was an instance showing how theology has taken possession of the moral instinct and vitiated it. Having set before man a selfish instead of an altruistic end as the prime motive of well-doing—his own good rather than the good of others—it is in no little danger of taking away his strongest motive to do uprightly, if so be the dead rise not. Indeed, it makes the question of the apostle a most natural one: "If, after the manner of man, I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me if the dead rise not?" Materialism cannot hesitate in the least to declare that it is best for a man's self and best for his kind to have fought with the beasts of unrighteousness, at Ephesus or elsewhere, even if the dead rise not. Perceiving and teaching that he is essentially a social being, that all the mental faculties by which he so much excels the animals below him, and even the language in which he expresses his mental functions, have been progressive developments of his social relations, it enforces the plain and inevitable conclusion that it is the true scientific function, and at the same time the highest development, of the individual, to promote the well-being of the social organization—that is, to make his life subserve the good of his kind. It is no new morality, indeed, which it teaches; it simply brings men back to that which has been the central lesson and the real stay of the great religions of the world, and which is implicit in the constitution of society; but it does this by a way which promises to bring the understanding into entire harmony with moral feeling, and so to promote by a close and consistent interaction their accordant growth and development; and it strips morality of the livery of superstition in which theological creeds have dressed and disfigured it, presenting it to the adoration of mankind in its natural purity and strength.

**"The Pathology of Mind."** By H. MAUDSLEY, M.D. Being the Third Edition of the Second Part of the "Physiology and Pathology of Mind," recast, much enlarged and re-written. In 8vo, price 18s.

*By the same Author.*

**"The Physiology of Mind."** Being the First Part of a Third Edition revised, enlarged, and re-written, of "The Physiology and Pathology of Mind." Crown 8vo, 10s. 6d.

**"Body and Mind :"** An Inquiry into their Connection and Mutual Influence, specially with reference to Mental Disorders. Second Edition, enlarged and revised, with Psychological Essays added. Crown 8vo., 6s. 6d.

Macmillan & Co., London.

---

---

## SUNDAY LECTURE SOCIETY.

To provide for the delivery on Sundays in the Metropolis, and to encourage the delivery elsewhere, of Lectures on Science, —physical, intellectual, and moral,—History, Literature, and Art; especially in their bearing upon the improvement and social well-being of mankind.

PRESIDENT.—W. B. Carpenter, C.B., LL.D., M.D., F.R.S., &c.

VICE-PRESIDENTS.

Professor Alexander Bain.

James Booth, Esq., C.B.

Charles Darwin, Esq., F.R.S., F.L.S.

Edward Frankland, Esq., D.C.L.,  
Ph. D., F.R.S.

James Heywood, Esq., F.R.S., F.S.A.

Sir Arthur Hobhouse, K.C.S.I.

Thomas Henry Huxley, Esq., LL.D.,  
F.R.S., F.L.S.

Herbert Spencer, Esq.

W. Spottiswoode, Esq., LL.D., P.R.S.

John Tyndall, Esq., LL.D., F.R.S.

---

---

### THE SOCIETY'S LECTURES

ARE DELIVERED AT

ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE,

*On SUNDAY Afternoons, at FOUR o'clock precisely.*

(Annually—from November to May).

TWENTY-FOUR Lectures (in three series), commencing SUNDAY, the 2nd of November, 1879, will be given.

Members' £1 subscription entitles them to an annual ticket, transferable (and admitting to the reserved seats), and to eight single reserved-seat tickets, available for any lecture.

For tickets, and for the Lectures published by the Society, of which lists can be obtained on application, apply (by letter enclosing cheques, post-office orders or postage stamps) to the Hon. Treasurer, WM. HENRY DOMVILLE, Esq., 15, Gloucester Crescent, Hyde Park, W. The Lectures can also be obtained of Mr. J. BUMPUS, Bookseller, 158, Oxford Street, W.

Payment at the door:—ONE PENNY;—SIXPENCE;—and (Reserved Seats) ONE SHILLING.

---

KENNY & Co., PRINTERS, 25, CAMDEN ROAD, LONDON, N.W.