

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

THE FREE-WILL CONTROVERSY.

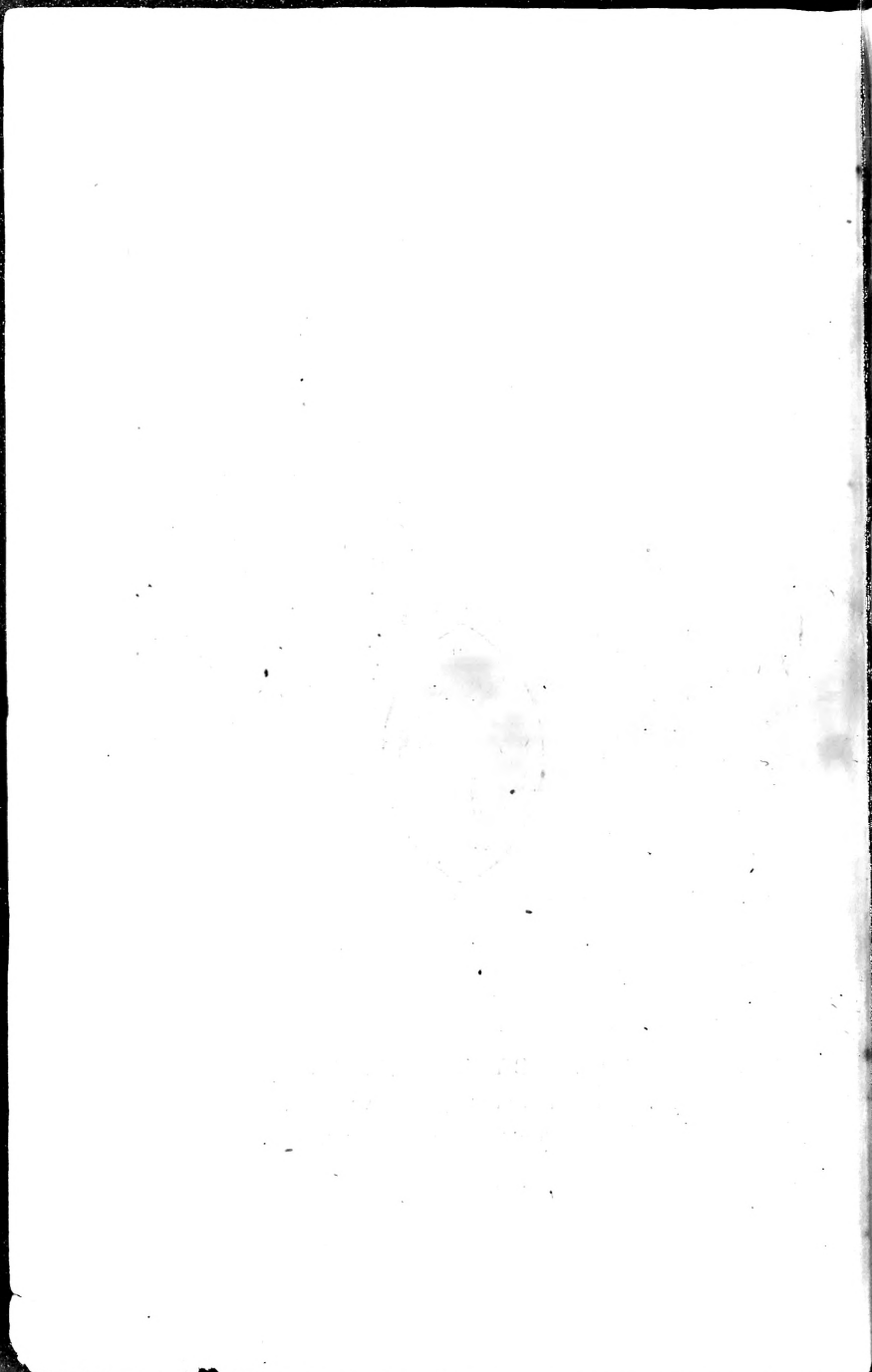
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ON THE FREE-WILL CONTROVERSY.

WHATEVER may be thought of the interest and importance hitherto attaching to the Problem of the Human Will, whether regarded as the subject of religious or of metaphysical disputation, it is certain that at no period in its history has it come forward with such weighty and urgent claims to the serious attention of all thinking men, as in our own immediate times. Emerging into notoriety some fourteen hundred years ago, in the celebrated Pelagian controversy concerning human freedom, it was not until the middle of the seventeenth century that it escaped from the dark and bewildering mists of theological discussion, into the higher and serener atmosphere of purely philosophical enquiry. For our own time was reserved the further step which it was destined to take, and whereby it has descended from the remoteness of abstract speculation, to take its place among the importunate problems of practical life, challenging with an ever increasing emphasis the exertion of our highest efforts in its solution.

Tremendous as were the issues that hung upon the decision of the theological phase of the Free-Will controversy, it must not be supposed that these issues were any of them of a distinctively practical character. Terrible and repugnant as it might well seem to be forced to regard man "as incurably wicked—wicked by the constitution of his flesh, and wicked by eternal decree—as doomed, unless exempted by special grace

which he cannot merit, or by any effort of his own obtain, to live in sin while he remains on earth, and to be eternally miserable when he leaves it,—to regard him as born unable to keep the commandments, yet as justly liable to everlasting punishment for breaking them,"*—nevertheless these, and all other such conclusions of theology, left the men by whom they were entertained, for all practical purposes pretty much in the same position as that in which they found them. We do not observe that the possession of a fatalist creed exercised any blighting or paralysing influence on the active nature of the great leaders on the Calvinistic side: indeed, if we are to believe Mr Froude, "they were men possessed of all the qualities which give nobility and grandeur to human nature,—unalterably just when duty required them to be stern, but with the tenderness of a woman in their hearts; frank, true, cheerful, humorous, as unlike sour fanatics as it is possible to imagine any one."

However stupendous, then, the questions involved in the Arminian controversy concerning Human Freedom, this much is certain, that these questions had, one and all of them, little or no bearing upon the conduct of men in this present life. As far as external behaviour went, you would have had no grounds for distinguishing between Libertarian and Calvinist,—between the man who believed himself to be the arbiter of his own destiny, and the man who regarded himself as a mere puppet in the hands of an irresistible and unyielding external Power. In a word, the differences which separated the Calvinist from the Arminian were theological, not moral,—points of belief, and not of practice. In matters involving considerations purely ethical,—good or evil, virtue, responsibility, wrongdoing—the two antagonistic parties met on common ground.

While it is thus manifest that the theological phase

* Froude, "Short Studies," vol. ii. p. 3.

of this great controversy is open to the charge of a want of practical interest, it must at the same time be allowed that the Problem of the Will, when viewed in the aspect which it presents to us of the present day, comes home to men's business and bosoms with a cogency and force which are unquestionable. The main controversy now-a-days lies between those who uphold the Principle of Determinism, or the uniformity of Sequence between motive and action, on the one hand, and the defenders of the metaphysical theory* of Free-Will, on the other. The Determinists maintain (to use the words of one of the ablest of their number)† that "an invariable sequence exists between the sum of motives present in the mind of a given individual, and the action (or attempted action) which follows;" and that consequently the phenomena of human volition constitute a legitimate subject for scientific explanation, calculation and prediction. Thus the great department of human action is brought under the sway of the law of causation; and as a necessary result following the recognition of the correlation between mental and cerebral changes, the vast principle of the transformation and equivalence of forces is seen to embrace and pervade, not only the action, organic and inorganic, of the external world, but also the widely-extended field of volitional agency, whether individual or in the aggregate.‡ It may readily be imagined how numerous and how momentous are the results of the application of this Determinist principle or doctrine to the subjects of morality and education; but its importance does not rest on this alone. It is made the basis of a science of politics or sociology, which, applying the laws of mind to the scientific explanation of the

* We say metaphysical theory, as opposed to the practical feeling of freedom, which, as J. Stuart Mill points out, (*Logic*, Bk. vi. ch. ii.) is in no wise inconsistent with the Determinist, or (as it is often improperly called), the Necessitarian theory.

† See *Westminster Review* for October 1873.

‡ Cf. Herbert Spencer's work "On the Study of Sociology," p. 6.

actions of mankind in the aggregate, seeks thereby to arrive at a system of general principles for the guidance of the politician. Nay more,—this principle is at the very root of the science of Psychology itself; for if we refuse to acknowledge uniformity of succession in the phenomena of volition,—if we believe that the normal action of motives is liable to be at any time neutralised and superseded, in a manner wholly irregular and unforeseeable by us,—then indeed the attempt to establish any even approximate general principles or laws of the association and reproduction of ideas becomes as absurd as it would be to set about developing a science of mechanics “on a planet where gravitation was liable to fits of intermission.” Annihilate the principle of Determinism, and Mental Science becomes the baseless fabric of a vision.

Thus it is quite clear that the principle of Determinism, if admitted to be true, carries with it practical results of wide and deep importance. To the Determinist, the ordinary notions of responsibility and punishment will appear to be merely the vague and unreal products of the imagination; virtue will be simply good luck, and vice misfortune, while punishment will be regarded simply as a means to an end—the end being the reformation of the criminal and the protection of society. For him, the science of education opens a prospect of unlimited advancement in the condition of the individual; while Sociology, through the long vista of future years, gives glimpses of a coming golden age. He is possessed with the idea “of the gradual development of the human mind—of the spiritual unity of the human race;” and throughout the troubles and anxieties that attend the fluctuating and often apparently retrogressive movement of his day, he is sustained and cheered by a firm belief in the mighty “human organism, fraught with the vast results of ages, and big with a life which stretched over myriads of years,”*

* *Westminster Review* for October 1860, p. 308.

ever slowly growing more and more unto the light of perfect day.

It need hardly be said that all this is absolutely incompatible with the Libertarian's creed. He believes that the phenomena of volition are marked out in the strongest manner from all other phenomena whatever; that whereas by reason of the uniformity of sequence which is permitted to prevail in the material world, the whole of the vast department of physical phenomena forms a legitimate subject for scientific explanation and prediction, the individual and collective action of mankind, on the contrary, admits neither "scientific calculations before the fact," nor "scientific explanations after the fact." His theory maintains that there is inherent in man a mysterious power, completely independent of motives, and capable of acting *against* the preponderance of them—"as if" (to quote the words of Dr Carpenter), "when one scale of a balance is inclining downwards, a hand placed on the beam from which the other scale is suspended, were to cause that lighter scale to go down." It arrogates for man a faculty of undetermined *Choice*, called forth indeed into active operation on the presentation of some motive or motives to the mind, but in no wise conditioned or coerced by their influence. This notion of an undetermined power of choice is regarded by those who hold the doctrine of Free Will as a necessary factor in our common emotions of admiration, disapprobation, and contrition. "If there is no free choice" (says Mr Froude), "the praise or blame with which we regard one another are impertinent and out of place."

Of course, those who maintain this theory *ipso facto* deny the possibility of the sciences of Psychology and Sociology, together with the fair hopes which they hold out to us. Mr Froude talks of the time "when the speculative formulas into which we have mapped out the mysterious continents of the spiritual world shall have been consigned to the place already thronged

with the ghosts of like delusions which have had their day and perished"—thus contemplating the possible collapse of Psychology at some future day. He scouts at the notion of a science of History (*i.e.*, a social science developed after the Deductive or Historic method) so long as "natural causes are liable to be set aside and neutralised by what is called volition." True, men are "at least half animals, and are subject in this aspect of them to the conditions of animals. So far as those parts of man's doings are concerned, which neither have, nor have had, anything *moral* about them, so far the laws of him are calculable. . . . But pass beyond them, and where are we? In a world where it would be as easy to calculate man's actions by laws like those of positive philosophy as to measure the orbit of Neptune with a foot-rule, or weigh Sirius in a grocer's scale."

After what has been already said, it will be readily admitted that the decision of the Free Will question at the present day, carries with it results of no small practical importance, and that it is manifestly incumbent on us to put forth our best efforts in the attempt to solve it. In some quarters, indeed, our endeavours would meet with small encouragement. Many persons—notably, Professor Huxley—believe that the battle between Libertarian and Necessitarian is destined for ever to remain a drawn one. But it is only right that before we acquiesce in so disheartening an opinion, we should ourselves review with some carefulness the controversy as it stands at present, and try to find out whether after all the battle does not afford us indications, however faint, of a definite issue.

"The advocate of Free Will appeals to conscience and instinct—to an *à priori* sense of what ought in equity to be. The Necessitarian falls back upon the experienced reality of facts."* It is admitted on all hands that the testimony of experience is in favour of

* Froude, "Short Studies," vol. i. p. 4.

necessity. Thus even Mr Mansel writes:—"Were it not for the direct testimony of my own consciousness to my own freedom, I could regard human actions only as necessary links in the endless chain of phenomenal cause and effect."* This fact, when taken in connection with the extremely unique and exceptional nature of the Free Will theory (according to which there is, as Herbert Spencer says, "one law for the rest of the universe, and another law for mankind"), seems fully to justify the enquiry whether in thus denying the universality of the law of uniform Succession, men may not be under the influence of some bias which misleads their judgment. Now, it is a well known fact that the universality of this law has often been denied, both in ancient and in modern times, the supposed exceptions to it being always some one or other of the more mysterious and apparently unpredictable phenomena of nature. Thus Sokrates denied that Astronomy or Physical Philosophy in general were fit subjects for human study, maintaining that these two departments were under the immediate and special control of the gods. We are all familiar with that type of the pietist which sees the handiwork of an all-wise and doubtless retributory Providence in each of the petty accidents of life—so long as these be advantageous to himself or calamitous merely to his neighbour.† This attitude of mind is well illustrated by the following story, which Dean Stanley relates as having been told of a late dignitary of the Church by himself:—"A friend," he used to relate, "invited me to go out with him on the water. The sky was threatening, and I declined. At length he succeeded in persuading me, and we embarked. A squall came on, the boat lurched, and my friend fell overboard. Twice he sank,

* "Metaphysics," p. 168.

† "Think ye that those eighteen upon the tower of Siloam fell," is the characteristic lesson of the Gospel on the occasion of any sudden visitation. Yet it is another reading of such calamities which is commonly insisted upon.—"Essays and Reviews," p. 365.

and twice he rose to the surface. He placed his hands on the prow, and endeavoured to climb in. There was great apprehension lest he should upset the boat. *Providentially* I had brought my umbrella with me. I had the presence of mind to strike him two or three hard blows over the knuckles. He let go his hand, and sank. The boat righted itself, and we were saved." Mr Huxley reminds us of the vast difference between our mode of accounting for the Great Plague and the Great Fire which devastated London in the 17th century, and that which recommended itself to our ancestors.* It can hardly be asserted even of the most cultivated classes of this country, that there prevails amongst them a unanimous belief in the uniformity of physical phenomena. The Prayer Book of the Established Church of England still contains prayers for rain and for fair weather; and a public Thanksgiving was celebrated not long since on the recovery of the heir to the Throne from a dangerous illness; though in this latter case (as Herbert Spencer points out) a different interpretation of the issue would seem to be indicated by the conferring of a baronetcy upon the attendant physician. The doctrine of a particular providence, as it is preached from our pulpits, while conceding the prevalence of law in all those phenomena which are familiar and thoroughly understood, maintains that in the as yet unexplained mysteries of nature (such as the changes of the weather, the process of deliberative thought, &c.), the Deity may and does direct the course of nature according to his pleasure. We see then that there is, and always has been, in the human mind a tendency to refer all the apparently irregular and unforeseeable phenomena of nature to the agency of some free and unconditioned power. Viewed in the light of this fact, the undoubtedly complex and (to all appearance) variable nature of volitional action

* "Lay Sermons: Essay on the Advisableness of Improving Natural Knowledge."

assumes at once a deep significance in the explanation of the origin of the Free Will hypothesis.

Another influence modifying our conceptions of the will is to be found in the conservative power which language exercises over our thoughts and beliefs. It is notorious that the Libertarian theory can claim a far higher antiquity than its rival; indeed, even during the period in which speech was in process of formation, some conception more or less crude of Indeterminism must have prevailed amongst mankind. This conception has by means of language become fixed and crystallised in the general mind, to such a degree that it is only by means of a considerable effort, and after some practice, that we can entertain the notion of an unbroken sequence of antecedent and consequent in the world of human action. Thus it is seen that a potent influence on the side of the Free-Will theory is constantly at work in the language of every-day life.

Here too we must call attention to the unfortunate complication which has been introduced into the Problem of the Will by the general adoption of the figure embodied in the terms "*Freedom* of the Will," "*Necessity*," and others of like nature. This metaphor originated with the Stoics, who declared the virtuous man to be *free*, the vicious man to be a *slave*. It was subsequently adopted, and applied in a similar sense, by Philo Judæus and the early Christian Fathers. It need hardly be said that this figure was addressed to the heart rather than to the understanding; "as regards appropriateness in everything but the associations of dignity and indignity" says Professor Bain, "no metaphor could have been more unhappy. So far as the idea of subjection is concerned, the virtuous man is the greater slave of the two."* The epithet "free" was subsequently adopted by those who controverted the Predestinarian theories of Augustine. This theologian taught that all men were the slaves of some

* Bain, "Mental and Moral Science," p. 398.

external constraining power—the elect being subject to irresistible grace, and the reprobate to original sin. As opposed to this notion of *external compulsion*, the term Free-Will had a definite intelligible meaning. Augustine maintained that for every man there existed a certain class of motives, the due operation of which in arousing him to volitional action was hindered by some external force—that the elect were restrained from sinning, and the reprobate from doing what was good. This was evidently to *suspend* volitional action, quite as much as it is suspended when men are thrown into prison; and in opposition to this notion, any conscious being “under a motive to act, and not interfered with by any other being, is to all intents free;” * and this moreover is the only meaning which can possibly be attached to the word Freedom. But, most unhappily, after the emergence of the theory of determinism in the writings of Hobbes and his followers, this term “Freedom of the Will” was borrowed from the ancient theological controversy by the opponents of the new philosophical system, and, carrying with it all the inveterate and potent associations of dignity which had belonged to it in its former employment, thus introduced an emotional bias of immense force into the question now at issue. The Determinists were called *Necessitarians*, and their antagonists were men who upheld the *Freedom* of the Human Will. In consequence of the associations attaching to these words, necessity and freedom, it came to pass that “the doctrine of causation, when considered as obtaining between our volitions and their antecedents, was almost universally conceived as involving more than uniform sequence. . . . Even if the reason repudiated, the imagination retained, the feeling of some more intimate connection, of some peculiar tie, or mysterious constraint exercised by the antecedent over the consequent. Now this it was which, considered as applying to the human will, conflicted with men’s consciousness

* Bain, “Mental and Moral Science,” p. 398.

and revolted their feelings. They were certain that, in the case of their volitions, there was not this mysterious constraint. They felt, that if they wished to prove that they had the power of resisting the motive, they could do so (that wish being, it needs scarcely be observed, a *new antecedent*;) and it would have been humiliating to their pride, and (what is of more importance) paralysing to their desire of excellence, had they thought otherwise. But neither is any such mysterious compulsion now supposed, by the best philosophical authorities, to be exercised by any other cause over its effect. Those who think that causes draw their effects after them by a mystical tie, are right in believing that the relation between volitions and their antecedents is of another nature. But they should go further, and admit that this is also true of all other effects and their antecedents. If such a tie is considered to be involved in the word necessity, the doctrine is not true of human actions; but neither is it then true of inanimate objects. It would be more correct to say that matter is not bound by necessity, than that mind is so."*

There is a further emotional influence tending to foster the belief in Free-Will which must be briefly noticed here. It is manifest that when men claim to have a direct consciousness of liberty, they are thinking, not so much of their past conduct as of their future and yet unrealised volitions. With regard to the past, as has already been remarked, most persons are ready to admit that experience proves their actions to have uniformly followed some preponderating motive. Now the contemplation of a man's past history does not, in the majority of cases, bring with it any keen emotions of pride or satisfaction; too often it is but the record of the conquest of temporary fleeting solicitations of the present over the permanent interests embodied in our more comprehensive and ideal motives. Hence the belief that our course of action will be pretty much the

* J. S. Mill, "Logic," Bk. vi., Chap. ii., § 2.

same in the future as it has been in the past is one which administers a heavy blow to our feelings of self-satisfaction and of power ; and we are apt under the influence of these feelings to imagine that in our future course of life the higher and more permanent aims will, through the operation of our hitherto inactive power of Free Choice, predominate over the more sensual and transient motives,—“the fleeting actualities of pleasure and pain.” Here also, then, it is evident that the notion of an undetermined Will finds strong support in the natural instincts of emotion.

In concluding this portion of our subject, it will be necessary to call attention to a well-known infirmity of thought, which plainly operates in favour of the persistence of Libertarianism. We allude to the strong tendency existing in the mind to objectify, or ascribe separate existence to, its abstractions. “Mankind in all ages have had a strong propensity to conclude that wherever there is a name, there must be a distinguishable separate entity corresponding to the name ; and every complex idea which the mind has formed for itself by operating upon its conceptions of individual things, was considered to have an outward objective reality answering to it. Fate, Chance, Nature, Time, Space, were real beings, nay, even gods. In ancient times to the vulgar and to the scientific alike, whiteness was an entity, inhering or sticking in the white substance : and so of all other qualities.”* Language favours this fallacious tendency of the mind ; the abstract name (“alike the facility and the snare of general expression,” as it has been aptly described), is generally understood to denote something more than the bare fact of similarity between a number of objects, some mysterious entity *whereby* they resemble each other as they do, and which resides in each and all of them. We are inclined to believe that for every name there must be a corresponding thing. In this

* Mill, “Logic,” Bk. v., Chap. iii., § 4.

manner, after that men had found it convenient to frame a general term which should embrace all volitional phenomena, the constant employment of this term (velle "to will,") easily generated a belief in some mysterious entity or power, underlying all volitional action, and originating within itself all those effects of "deliberating, weighing, and choosing," which constituted the most obvious common element originally embodied in the abstract idea of Will. Just as the Eleatic Philosophy taught that a peculiar entity or substance, τὸ εἶν or Oneness, inhered in all things which are said to be *one*, so did men frame for themselves "the conception of an underlying substantive power, the will, from which all single acts of volition were supposed to emanate."*

Having now enumerated some of the principal psychological causes for the wide and early prevalence, and the long continuance of the doctrine of Free-Will, we will now proceed to pass in review some of the definitions of freedom which have been advanced by the upholders of this doctrine. In doing so, we shall pass over without comment the theological phase of the controversy, as conducted on principles, and proceeding by a method wholly alien to the spirit of scientific enquiry, and we shall commence with a notice of Descartes, who may be said to be the first of the purely philosophical libertarians.

Descartes was a cotemporary of Hobbes, the first philosopher who consistently taught and believed the doctrine of Determinism. It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that in writing on the subject of the Will, Descartes had any conception of this doctrine in his mind; for the pamphlet in which Hobbes made known his system to the world was not published until

* *Westminster Review*, July 1871. Whoever desires to attain to an adequate conception of the various causes of the genesis and persistence of Libertarianism, cannot do better than read the masterly article on the subject contained in this number of the Review.

after the year 1655, while the writings in which Descartes' opinions concerning the Will are chiefly found, appeared at Paris in the year 1641. As might have been expected, then, Descartes' doctrine of Free-Will was set up in opposition, not to Determinism, but to that system of Necessitarianism or Fatalism with which Bishop Butler deals in his Analogy, and which, it need hardly be said, is altogether distinct from and incompatible with the Determinist theory. Accordingly, Descartes' definition of Freedom is such as might be conscientiously adopted by the most scrupulous of Determinists. "The power of will," he says, "consists in this alone, that in pursuing or shunning what is proposed to us by the understanding, we so act that we are not conscious of being determined to a particular action by any external force.* This is a perfectly truthful, though inadequate, definition of the Will, and it is with strict justice that Descartes replies to Hobbes (who had remarked on the passage quoted above, that it assumed, without proving, the doctrine of Free-Will); "I have assumed or advanced nothing concerning Freedom, save that which we experience to be true every day of our lives, and which the light of nature plainly teaches us."* That Descartes was not far off from Determinism in his views is seen from his remarks on Indifference. "In order to be free," he says, "it is not necessary that I should be indifferent as to the choice of one or other of two contrary things. Nay, rather, the more I incline towards one thing (whether because I see clearly that right and truth agree in it, or because God has so ordered the course of my feelings), with so much the greater *freedom* do I make my choice and adhere to that thing. And assuredly the grace of God and my natural understanding, far from diminishing my freedom, augment it and strengthen it rather; so that the indifference which I feel when I am not led away on one side more than on the other by

* Quatrième Meditation.

† Troisième Response.

the influence of any motive, is the lowest kind of liberty, and indicates rather a defect in knowledge than a perfection of the will. For if I always knew clearly what was true and what was good, I would never have to go to the trouble of deliberating what decision and what choice I should make; *and so I should be perfectly free without ever being indifferent.** According to Descartes, then, "every sentient being, under a motive to act, and not interfered with by any other being, is to all intents free;"† and thus "the fox impelled by hunger, and proceeding unmolested to the poultry yard, would be a free agent."‡ But this, it needs hardly be said, is precisely the teaching of Determinism. Indeed Descartes has fallen short of that system merely in so far as he has admitted the conception of a liberty of indifference. This is, of course, to give a double sense to the word liberty, and so to confuse the question not a little. But we have already seen that on this point Descartes speaks with hesitation, and we may safely agree with Professor Bain in regarding him as "willing to give up the liberty of indifference," while anxious to establish the internal feeling of freedom.

While Descartes is thus to be regarded merely as the exponent of the popular practical feeling of liberty protesting against the paralysing creed of *fatalism*, or of an overruling and irresistible external power which guides men's actions irrespective of their will; Clarke, Price, and Reid, on the other hand, have each framed definitions of Freedom, having special reference to, and combating, the doctrine of Determinism. Clarke and Price agree in making freedom to consist in a power of *self-motion* or self-determination, which in all animate agents, is *spontaneity*, in moral agents, is *liberty*. How, they asked, can it be supposed that motives are the immediate cause of action? It is true that our faculty

* Quatrième Meditation.

† Bain, "Mental and Moral Science," page 398.

‡ Bain, "Mental and Moral Science," p. 398.

of self-determination is never called forth into action save on the presentation of some end or design to the mind. But it is unmeaning to make such ends or motives the physical causes of action. "Our ideas may be the occasion of our acting, but are certainly not mechanical efficient." "If," says Clarke, "every action of man is to be regarded as determined by some motive, then either abstracted notions (*i.e.* motives) have a real subsistence (which would be Realism), or else what is not a substance can put a body in motion."* According to Leibnitz, the will is to be compared to a *balance*, whose motion one way or another is determined by the weights in the scales (the motives). In the opinion of Clarke and his followers, however, the true comparison would be to a hand placed on either side of the beam, and determining the motion of the scales irrespective of, and possibly in opposition to, the preponderance of weights.

In thus assimilating Spontaneity and Freedom, Clarke and Price laid themselves open to the severe criticism of Sir W. Hamilton, who writes (note to Reid on "The Active Powers") :—"The Liberty from *Co-action or Violence*—the Liberty of *Spontaneity*—is admitted by all parties; is common equally to brutes and men; is not a peculiar quality of the Will; and is, in fact, essential to it, for the will cannot possibly be forced. *The greatest spontaneity is the greatest necessity.* Thus a hungry horse, who turns of necessity to food, is said, on this definition of liberty, to do so with freedom, because he does so spontaneously; and, in general, the desire of happiness, which is the most necessary tendency, will, on this application of the term, be the most free. The definition of liberty given by the celebrated advocate of moral freedom, Dr Samuel Clarke, is in reality only that of the liberty of spontaneity."

But while Clarke and Price, by incautiously identi-

* For an explanation of the misconception involved here, see Bain "Mind and Body," pp. 76, 132.

ying spontaneity and liberty, were guilty of confusing together the freedom of self-determination with the freedom which is opposed to external constraint (*i.e.*, the "liberty from co-action" of Hamilton, Reid is careful to withhold from the brute creation the possession of any faculty analogous to our volitional power. Reid, Clarke, and Price, however, unite in regarding this power as a faculty of *self-determination*. "By the liberty of a Moral Agent," says Reid, "I understand a power over the determinations of his own will." "A free agent," says Clarke, "when there is more than one perfectly reasonable way of acting (*i.e.*, when there is a perfect equilibrium of motives), has still within itself, by virtue of its self-motive principle, a power of acting." This notion of a self-determining agent has been critically examined both by Edwards and Hamilton, a brief outline of whose remarks on the subject will next be given.

Edwards starts by proclaiming the inconceivability of such a notion as that of self-determination. The Will, he says, is said to determine its own acts. Now, it is manifest that it can do this solely by means of an act of volition; for (to quote Hamilton's words) "it is only through a rational determination or volition that we can freely exert power." But if this be so, then it follows that every free volitional act requires a preceding volition to constitute it free; and so on *ad infinitum*. This evidently is to bring the matter to an absurdity. If it be answered that the act of determining the volitional action, and the act of willing, are one and the same, then the obvious rejoinder is, that a free action is determined by nothing, and is entirely uncaused. Self-determinism, therefore, is a misnomer, and the correct name for such a creed is *Indeterminism*. Now Indeterminism teaches that the actions of our will do not originate in any causes. It therefore contradicts the law of causality. But if this law be made void, then the foundation of all reasoning—nay, the only possible proof for the existence of God—will have vanished; and there will remain nothing save the

fleeting thoughts present to our consciousness, of the existence of which we can be certain.*

Nor is Sir William Hamilton less emphatic when he exposes the inconsistent and inconceivable character of Reid's definition of Freedom. "According to Reid," he writes, "Moral Liberty does not merely consist in *doing what we will*, but in the power of *willing what we will*. For a power over the determinations of our will supposes an act of will that our will should determine so and so. . . . But here question upon question remains (and this *ad infinitum*)—Have we a power (a will) over such anterior will? And until this question shall be distinctively answered, we must be *unable to conceive the possibility of the fact of Liberty*."

To those Libertarians who endeavoured to evade the charge of denying causality by affirming that the person was the cause of his volitions, Hamilton puts the question:—"Is the person an *original undetermined* cause of the determination of his will? If he be not, then he is not a *free* agent, and the scheme of Necessity is admitted. If he be, in the first place, it is impossible to *conceive* the possibility of this; and, in the second, if the fact, though inconceivable, be allowed, it is impossible to see how a *cause, undetermined by any motive*, can be a *rational, moral, and accountable cause*."

But while Sir William Hamilton insisted so unsparingly on the inconceivability of the liberty of a moral agent as defined by Reid, and on the fact that, if conceived, it could only be conceived as morally worthless, it is nevertheless notorious that he regarded this

* "To show that any doctrine contradicted the law of cause and effect was, Edwards conceived, a perfect *reductio ad absurdum*. He did not anticipate that anyone would impugn the universality of cause and effect." Some Libertarians, endeavouring to save the law of causation by a verbal quibble, asserted that the soul was the cause of its volitions. "Edwards answers, that this may explain why the soul acts at all, but not why it acts in a particular manner. And unless the soul produce diverse acts, it cannot produce diverse effects, otherwise the same cause, in the same circumstances, would produce different effects at different times."—Bain, *Mental and Moral Science*, page 417.

definition as correct, and that he was a strenuous upholder of the doctrine of self-determination. Hamilton adopts a peculiar attitude towards the controversy of the Will, and his positions on this subject cannot be understood without a reference to his general philosophical system. In this system a very prominent place is assigned to what he calls the Law of the Conditioned, which is expressed thus:—"All that is conceivable in thought lies between two extremes, which, as contradictory of each other, cannot both be true, but of which, as mutual contradictories (by the Law of Excluded Middle), one must." This law Hamilton illustrates by adducing our conceptions of Space and Time. "Space must be bounded or not bounded, but we are unable to conceive either alternative. We cannot conceive space as a whole, beyond which there is no further space. Neither can we conceive space as without limits. Let us imagine space never so large, we yet fall infinitely short of infinite space. But finite and infinite space are contradictories; therefore, although we are unable to conceive either alternative, one must be true and the other false. The conception of Time illustrates the same law. Starting from the present, we cannot think past time as bounded, as beginning to be. On the other hand, we cannot conceive time going backwards without end; eternity is too big for our imaginations. Yet time had either a beginning or it had not. Thus 'the conditioned or the thinkable lies between two extremes or poles; and these extremes or poles are each of them unconditioned, each of them inconceivable, each of them exclusive or contradictory of the other.'"

To apply this doctrine to the subject of the Will; the two unconditioned extremes or poles are here represented by the contradictory doctrines of Determinism and Casualism (or the self-determinist theory of Liberty). These two contradictory schemes are

* Bain's Compendium of Mental and Moral Science, Appendix B, p. 68.

equally inconceivable. "For, as we cannot compass in thought an *undetermined cause, an absolute commencement*—the fundamental hypothesis of the one; so we can as little think an *infinite series of determined causes—of relative commencements*,—the fundamental hypothesis of the other. The champions of the opposite doctrines are thus at once resistless in assault and impotent in defence. The doctrine of Moral Liberty cannot be made conceivable, for we can only conceive the determined and the relative.* All that can be done is to show, (1.) That, for the *fact* of Liberty, we have immediately or mediately, the evidence of consciousness; and (2.) that there are, among the phenomena of mind, many facts which we *must* admit as actual, but of whose possibility we are wholly unable to form any notion." Thus according to Hamilton, the inconceivability of the self-determinist scheme is counterbalanced by a co-equal inconceivability in the doctrine of determinism, and the scale is turned in favour of self-determinism by the testimony, mediate or immediate, of consciousness.

If Sir William Hamilton has displayed no small stringency in his destructive criticisms upon the definitions of Freedom coming from Clarke and Reid, and has thus saved his adversaries a considerable amount of trouble by vigorously demolishing his friends, his own peculiar doctrines, on the other hand, have been subjected to an examination no less searching and no less destructive, by the illustrious philosopher recently gone from among us, John Stuart Mill. In one of the concluding chapters of his masterly work, the "Examination of Sir W. Hamilton's Philosophy," Mill enters upon a minute and exhaustive discussion on the subject of the Will, and of the Libertarian theories of it. After severely censuring Hamilton for his attempt to give a fictitious importance to his doctrine of Freedom by representing it as affording the

* It has already been pointed out that Hamilton rejects the evasive quibble that the soul is the cause of our volitions.

only valid argument in support of the existence of God, he proceeds:—"Let us concede to Hamilton the co-equal inconceivability of the conflicting hypothesis, an uncaused commencement and an infinite regress. But this choice of inconceivabilities is not offered to us in the case of volitions only. We are held, as he not only admits but contends, to the same alternative in all cases of causation whatever. But we find our way out of the difficulty, in other cases, in quite a different manner. In the case of every other kind of fact, we do not elect the hypothesis that the event took place without a cause: we accept the other supposition, that of a regress, not indeed to infinity, but either generally into the region of the unknowable, or back to a universal cause, regarding which, as we are only concerned with it in relation to what it preceded, and not as itself preceded by anything, we can afford to make a plain avowal of our ignorance." Now why do we thus, in all cases save only our volitions, accept the alternative of regress? "Apparently it is because the causation hypothesis, inconceivable as he" (Hamilton) "may think it, possesses the advantage of having experience on its side. And how or by what evidence does experience testify to it? Not by disclosing any *nexus* between the cause and the effect, any sufficient reason in the cause itself why the effect should follow it. No philosopher now makes this supposition, and Sir W. Hamilton positively disclaims it. What experience makes known, is the fact of an invariable sequence between every event and some special combination of antecedent conditions, in such sort that wherever and whenever that union of antecedents exists, the event does not fail to occur. Any *must* in the case, any necessity, other than the unconditional universality of the fact, we know nothing of. Still this *a posteriori* "does," though not confirmed by an *a priori* "must," decides our choice between the two inconceivables, and leads us to the belief that every event within the phenomenal universe, except human

volitions, is determined to take place by a cause. Now the so-called Necessitarians demand the application of the same rule of judgment to our volitions. They maintain that there is the same evidence for it. They affirm as a truth of experience that volitions do, in point of fact, follow determinate moral antecedents with the same uniformity and . . . with the same certainty as physical effects follow their physical causes. . . . Whether they *must* do so, I acknowledge myself to be entirely ignorant, be the phenomenon moral or physical; and I condemn accordingly the word *necessity* as applied to either case. All I know is that they *do*."*

The testimony of experience, then, which is admitted on all hands to be in favour of (so called) Necessity, is that on which the Determinists ground their system. The Libertarians, on the other hand, agree in claiming the evidence of consciousness as making for their side. "We have by our constitution," says Reid, "a natural conviction or belief that we act freely." In his notes to Reid's essay on the Active Powers, Hamilton hesitates between regarding the sense of freedom as an ultimate datum of consciousness, and treating it as involved in our consciousness of the law of moral obligation or responsibility; in his lectures on Metaphysics, however, he speaks of it more plainly as a fact of which we are directly conscious. Is it really the case, then, asks Mill, that the admitted testimony of man's universal experience, is hopelessly at variance with the testimony of his consciousness? If this be so, then is the mental philosopher in an unenviable plight indeed. But let us examine more nearly what is meant by the testimony of consciousness. "To be conscious of free-will, must mean, to be conscious before I have decided that I am able to decide either way. Exception may be taken, *in limine*, to the use of the word consciousness in such an application. Consciousness tells me what I do or feel. But what I am *able* to do,

* "Examination of Sir W. Hamilton's Philosophy," p. 500.

is not a subject of consciousness. Consciousness is not prophetic; we are conscious of what is, not of what will or can be. We never know that we are able to do a thing except from having done it or something equal or similar to it. . . . If our so-called consciousness of what we are able to do is not borne out by experience, it is a delusion. It has no title to credence but as an interpretation of experience, and if it is a false interpretation it must give way." Our so-called consciousness of, or belief in, freedom, therefore, must be an interpretation of our past experience, *i.e.*, with regard to foregone acts of deliberation and choice, we must be conscious that we could have decided the other way; "but, the truth is, not unless we preferred that way. When we imagine ourselves acting differently from what we did, we think of a change in the antecedents, as by knowing something that we did not know. Mill therefore altogether disputes the assertion that we are conscious of being able to act in opposition to the strongest present desire or aversion."*

Having in this manner pointed out the error of those who claim the testimony of consciousness in support of the Freedom or Indeterminateness of the will, Mill proceeds to consider the other position assumed by Hamilton, *viz.*, that the fact of freedom is involved in our consciousness of moral obligation or responsibility. To quote Hamilton's words:—"Our consciousness of the moral law, which, without a moral liberty in man, would be a mendacious imperative, gives a decisive preponderance to the doctrine of freedom over the doctrine of fate. We are free in act, if we are accountable for our actions." Now this is the main argument of the Indeterminist; it seeks to establish the doctrine of free-will by representing it as inextricably involved in the common conception of accountability or moral desert, so that the two must stand or fall together. There is not a writer on the side of Libertarianism who has not dwelt with emphasis upon this argument.

* Bain, "Mental and Moral Science," p. 427.

Thus Reid writes, "Let us suppose a man necessarily determined in all cases to will and to do what is best to be done; he would surely be innocent and inculpable. But as far as I am able to judge, he would not be entitled to the esteem and moral approbation of those who knew and believed this necessity. . . . On the other hand, if a man be necessarily determined to do ill, this case seems to me to move pity, but not disapprobation. He was ill because he could not be otherwise. Who can blame him? Necessity has no law." "If there is no free choice," writes Mr Froude, "the praise or blame with which we regard one another are impertinent and out of place."* "Man," says Hamilton in another place, "is a moral agent only as he is unaccountable for his actions—in other words, as he is the object of praise or blame; and this he is only inasmuch as he has prescribed to him a rule of duty, and as he is able to act, or not to act, in conformity with its precepts. The possibility of morality thus depends on the possibility of liberty; for if a man be not a free agent he is not the author of his actions, and has, therefore, no responsibility,—no moral personality at all."

Now, in order to determine whether freedom from causation is involved in the notion of moral responsibility, we shall be obliged to subject that notion to a careful analysis. What, then, is meant by the feeling of responsibility? Simply a conviction that if we committed certain actions, we should deserve punishment for so doing. A sense of responsibility is precisely identical with a sense of the justice of punishment. Now, punishment presupposes Law, of which it is the sanction, *i.e.*, to ensure obedience to which it is inflicted on the disobedient. Accountability, then, or responsibility, involves a sense of the justice of Law; and the question before us resolves itself into this—Is it necessary to assume that human voluntary action is undetermined by any moral antecedents, in order to

* Quoted before on p. 7.

justify the institution of law and punishment? So far is this from being the case, that (to use the words of Herbert Spencer) "if there is no natural causation throughout the actions of incorporated humanity, government and legislation are absurd. Acts of Parliament may, as well as not, be made to depend on the drawing of lots or the tossing of a coin; or, rather, there may as well be none at all." * The exigencies of human society require that restrictions should be placed upon the conduct of the individuals who together make it up; this justifies the institution of Law. The justification of Punishment absolutely necessitates the assumption that men's actions follow the law of cause and effect. "Unless pain, present or prospective, impels human beings to avoid whatever brings it, and to perform whatever delivers from it, punishment has no relevance, whether the end be the benefit of the society, or the benefit of the offender, or both together." † It may be asked—"Is it just to punish a man for what he cannot help? Certainly it is, if punishment is the only means by which he can be enabled to help it. Punishment is inflicted as a means towards an end—that is to say, if our volitions are not determined by motives, then punishment is without justification. If an end is justifiable, the sole and necessary means to that end must be justifiable. Now the Necessitarian theory proceeds upon two ends—the benefit of the offender himself and the protection of others. To punish a child for its benefit, is no more unjust than to administer medicine." ‡

Such is a brief outline of Mill's answer to the position of Hamilton, that freedom is involved in our consciousness of moral responsibility. Those who wish to examine the arguments on both sides in detail, will find them in the 26th chapter of Mill's "Examination of Sir W. Hamilton's Philosophy," and in the admir-

* "Study of Sociology," p. 46.

† Bain, "Compendium," p. 404.

‡ Bain, "Compendium," p. 428.

able remarks on "Liberty and Necessity," contained in the 11th chapter of Bain's "Exposition of the Will," to be found in his invaluable "Compendium of Psychology and Ethics." We have seen that in demolishing this position of his opponent, Mill has established the very opposite principle, viz., that the doctrine of Determinism is necessarily implicated in the notion of moral agency or responsibility. This, however, does not hinder but that there should be some truth in the assertion that the common notion of responsibility involves in it the hypothesis of a free and undetermined will. For, according to the common conception of moral desert, there is inherent in *moral* evil or wrong-doing a heinousness and a perniciousness quite unique, irrespective of its consequences; and it is obviously difficult to reconcile with this view the hypothesis of a will determined by the strongest motive, seeing that the peculiar pravity which is the essential characteristic of moral evil ought in the natural course of things to exercise a deterring influence stronger than any counter-influence arising from the prospect of possible advantage to be gained thereby. Accordingly, the notion of a free and undetermined will, raised above the influence of motive, and resolving on a course of wickedness in spite of the dissuasive considerations suggested by the horrible nature of wrong-doing, was called in to explain the phenomena of man's moral frailty; and this notion soon generated a conception of punishment as of a kind of vengeance, rightly and duly inflicted upon the ill-doer, without regard to any beneficial results accruing to himself or to society. Now, this vague notion of the nature of punishment is wholly incompatible with the definition of it which has been already given, and which is admitted on all hands to embody some at least, if not all, of the elements contained in the positive signification of the word "punishment." On the Determinist theory of volition, therefore, the vulgar notions of virtue and of vice, as qualities to be lauded and reprobated irrespective of

their consequences, as well as the conception of punishment as a righteous retribution for ill-doing, apart from any consideration of the useful ends to be served by it, must disappear altogether. Virtue is "a great happiness, but no merit in the vulgar sense of the term;" and vice is "a great misfortune, but no demerit." *

We have now concluded our review of the great controversy of the Will. Starting with the consideration of the question as it stands at the present day, we saw how numerous and how momentous are the practical issues involved in its solution. We then went on to enquire whether any, and if so, what psychological or other causes there were, which would exercise a disturbing influence in the decision of this question, and, as a result, we found that there were many and potent emotional and other agencies at work in generating and fostering the belief in an indeterminate will. Finally, we have passed in review the leading definitions of Free-Will which have been advanced on the side of Indeterminism, and have given a brief outline of the destructive criticism of these definitions which has proceeded from Edwards, Hamilton, and Mill successively. We have seen that our consciousness, which has been so triumphantly appealed to by the supporters of free-will, does not in truth, when closely interrogated, yield any evidence whatever in favour of that doctrine; and that the testimony of experience, which is universally regarded as a sufficient ground for the belief in the law of causality as holding throughout the phænomenal universe (volitional acts alone being excepted), is admitted by everybody to be altogether in favour of Determinism, *i.e.* of the law of causality as extending over the field of human action also. We have noticed, however, that the theory of Determinism involves the sacrifice of the common notions of moral excellence and depravity; and it is precisely here (as has been shown by the writer in the *Westminster Review*) that the strength of Libertarianism lies. Men are indignant when it is insinuated

* *Westminster Review*, October 1873, p. 311.

that the popular beliefs with regard to merit and demerit, responsibility, and punishment, are in great part the products of lying imagination. They refuse to allow any moral excellence to actions performed unconsciously under the constraining influence of unreflecting love or sympathy. Mr Mivart declares that "acts unaccompanied by mental acts of conscious will directed towards the fulfilment of duty" are "absolutely destitute of the most incipient degree of real or formal goodness."* According to Reid, a man necessarily determined by the constitution of his nature to will and to do what is best to be done, "would not be entitled to the esteem and *moral approbation* of those who knew and believed this necessity." "What was by an ancient author said of Cato, might indeed be said of him :—*he was good because he could not be otherwise*. But this saying if understood literally and strictly is not the praise of Cato, but of his constitution, which was no more the work of Cato than his existence." Now, in the first place, be it remarked that this view of moral excellence, as involving free and undetermined choice of the good, excludes not only the man who does good without thinking about it, but the Deity also, from the category of beings possessed of a claim to our moral approbation. We are compelled to think of God as *necessarily* good; to attribute to Him the power of moral evil is, as Hamilton has pointed out, to detract from his essential goodness. Precisely in the same sense as Cato was said to be good, because he could not be otherwise, so is God declared to be, in virtue of his nature, necessarily determined to goodness. "As Euripides hath it, *ἐὶ θεοὶ τι δρῶσιν ἀισχρὸν, οὐκ εἰσὶν θεοί.*"† According to the Libertarian definition of moral excellence, then, we shall be obliged to deny that God possesses any moral attributes at all, or else to detract from his essential goodness by admitting the possibility of his becoming

* "On the Genesis of Species," quoted by Huxley, "Critiques," &c. p. 287.

† Hamilton, note to Reid's Essay on the Active Powers.

evil; and it need hardly be said that this is a corollary of their doctrine from which most Libertarians would recoil with horror. But, not to press this point any further—can it be possible that we are to regard all actions prompted by unreflecting sympathy and affection as “absolutely destitute of the most incipient degree of real or formal goodness?” Surely not; the unanimous verdict of mankind forbids it. The perfect ideal of a virtuous character is that of the man whose actions invariably have for their spring and source an instinctive feeling of sympathy for his fellow-men, irrespective of any selfish considerations. Or do Mr Mivart and those who agree with him think to persuade us that the mother who rushes forward to save her child’s life at the sacrifice of her own—that a Howard and a Nightingale, whom the importunate promptings of their inner nature urge irresistibly forth from the refinements and the pleasures of domestic life, to all the horrors and miseries of an existence passed in the midst of prisons, lazar-houses, and hospitals—that these are creatures devoid of any “title to our esteem or moral approbation?” Such a doctrine only requires to be fully and definitely stated, in order to be instantly and unequivocally repudiated.

Our space will not permit us to enter upon a consideration of the various collateral arguments urged by the two sides of this great controversy of the will. For a full account of these, the reader is referred to the admirable “History of the Free-Will Controversy,” to be found in Professor Bain’s *Compendium of Mental and Moral Science*. We will merely add, in conclusion, that the Determinist hypothesis has always been practically recognised by men in their dealings with one another. It has been already shown that the institution of Law presupposes the fact of a uniform connection between pain and the action necessary to avoid it, that is, of the law of uniform succession in our acts and their moral antecedents. Nor does the conduct of individuals towards one another show less clearly the

conviction of such a principle of uniformity. For example (to quote an instance from J. Stuart Mill), "Men often regard the doubt what their conduct will be, as a mark of ignorance of their character, and sometimes even resent it as an imputation."* Indeed, not only is prevision concerning the conduct of others constantly necessary, in virtue of the interdependence of human beings aggregated in society; it is also no less easy and sure than the prevision of physical phenomena. "If, in crossing a street, a man sees a carriage coming upon him, you may safely assert that, in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand, he will try to get out of the way. . . . If he can buy next door a commodity of daily consumption better and cheaper than at the other end of town, we may affirm that, if he does not buy next door, some special relation between him and the remoter shopkeeper furnishes a strong reason for taking a worse commodity at greater cost of money and trouble."† Finally, what logical justification of sympathy can there be—how is it possible to reconcile reason and fellow-feeling, save on the hypothesis of determinism? Is it not in this creed that we find the strongest incentive to mercy, charity, long-suffering—to "hatred of the sin, and yet love for the sinner;" in a word, to all that is highest and noblest in the character of man as a social being? May the day soon come—and perhaps it is not far distant—when a public and practical recognition shall be given to this great principle, and when the popular sanction shall establish a basis and a system of psychology so fruitful in beneficial result, not only in Legislation, but in the Sciences of Morality and Education also. This paper will not have been written in vain, if it should arouse any to the earnest and sincere examination of the great subject with which it has dealt.

* Mill, "Logic," Book VI., chapter ii., § 2.

† Spencer, "Study of Sociology," page 38.

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