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CONTENTS OF CURRENT NUMBER.

	PAGE
CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES—	
The Ethical Problem	379
Letter from Rome.....	L. L. 380
Austria-Hungary and the Balkan Confederation.....	380
The Decline of the Drama.....	382
Lord Lansdowne and Mr. O'Brien.....	W. H. Cross. 383
"The Times" on the Parnell Letter.....	383
To H. L. (Poem).....	May Austin. 383
CORRESPONDENCE—	
The Parnell Letter.....	Goldwin Smith. 383
QUEEN'S JUBILEE PRIZE COMPETITION—AWARD OF PRIZES	
	384
TOPICS—	
The Governor-General's Visit	384
Mr. O'Brien.....	384
Interprovincial Trade.....	384
The Iron Duties.....	384
Principles of the <i>Labour Reformer</i>	384
Mr. Gladstone on Coercion.....	385
A Verdict for the Parnellites.....	385
Mr. Goschen's Budget.....	385
European Politics.....	385
Rapid Transit.....	386
THE SHADED SPOT (POEM)	386
	Minnie Forsyth Grant.
SCENES IN HAWAII	387
	E. S.
AUTHOR, ARTIST, AND ACTOR	388
SOME MISCELLANEOUS BOOKS	388
"LOHENGRIN" AT PARIS.....	388
GEOLOGY AND MINING IN CANADA	389

THE ETHICAL PROBLEM.*

ARE we coming any nearer to the settlement of the problem of Ethics? Is there such a thing as right and wrong, as distinguished from the expedient and the inexpedient? And if so, what is the ground of the distinction, and how shall we ascertain the law of righteousness? These questions will be variously answered. But on certain points we may speak with some assurance. We know the conditions of the problem much better. We have heard what has to be said in support of theories the most diverse. We are coming to see that some of these seemingly contradictory theories are not absolutely irreconcilable; and, on the whole, in spite of the evolutionary Ethics of Mr. Herbert Spencer, we may say that the intuitional side has gained more than it has lost, and has gained even among those who fail to recognise it as a completely satisfactory account of the facts of our moral life.

Dr. Peabody, the author of the book before us, has contributed some excellent remarks in detail on the subject which he handles. His book may be useful to those who have not the time or the inclination to study works of larger extent, and of a more technical character. We cannot truly say that he has advanced the scientific treatment of Ethics, or that he has contributed any new criticisms of the theories which he has examined, or that he has brought the historical account of the different systems up to the time at which he publishes. Many important works, and some important theories, seem to be utterly unknown to him.

The arrangement of the book has certain recommendations, and, as far as we know, it is original. There are good reasons for considering the subject of Liberty first of all; for unless we are free, we are neither moral nor immoral. Accordingly, Dr. Peabody devotes his first chapter to the subject of "Human Freedom." He is quite right, at any rate, to make this point clear. If the necessitarians are right in holding that a kind of fate rules all our life and actions, or if the determinists are right in saying that all our actions are absolutely determined by circumstances, then there is no such thing as morality in the sense of involving responsibility. Some of the arguments used by Dr. Peabody are good and highly probable. When, however, he says that the consciousness of freedom implies the reality of freedom, he is using an argument which the other side would not admit, and which his own side will seldom urge. If he were to say, I feel myself responsible, I blame myself when I go against the dictates of my conscience, I hold others to be blameworthy when they act wrongly, therefore I must be free, and others must be free, he would be using an argument, the force of which could scarcely be rebutted. It is substantially the argument of Kant: I am morally bound to do a certain thing, therefore I must possess the power to do it.

With regard to the argument against human liberty drawn from the foreknowledge of God, it has always appeared to the present writer that a very simple answer may be given: Is it in the power of God to make creatures morally free? Few persons will give a negative answer to such

* Moral Philosophy: a series of lectures by Andrew P. Peabody, D.D., LL.D., Emeritus Professor of Christian Ethics in Harvard University. (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1887.)

a question. But, if so, the freedom of man and the foreknowledge of God are compatible, for we cannot imagine Him without foreknowledge.

Dr. Peabody, speaking of the "Ground of Right," says: "Were I to say, The right is what it is fitting to do; the wrong, what it is unfitting to do, I might seem to be uttering a truism; yet, in my belief, I should be announcing the fundamental principle of moral philosophy—a principle, too, which has by no means the universal, or even the general, consent of ethical philosophers." We do not entirely disagree with these statements, but we object to their vagueness. One might suppose that Dr. Peabody was writing not merely before Janet and Sidgwick and Stephens, but even before Bishop Butler. The writer does not make it clear whether he is referring to what Butler calls the "abstract relations of things," or to "the particular nature of man, . . . its several parts, their economy or constitution;" and this imperfect analysis prevents his discussion from being clear and convincing.

In illustration of an imperfectly enlightened conscience, he says: "I remember when there were devout and philanthropic distillers and vendors of intoxicating liquors in Massachusetts, and when our best Churches did not consider such a calling as a disqualification for the office of deacon." No doubt this was very terrible, and Dr. Peabody will be distressed to hear that such persons still exist in an imperfectly enlightened country, called England. Perhaps when "over there" they become better acquainted with the public opinion of Massachusetts, they may grow wiser. "With such reversals of the best public opinion," says the worthy Emeritus Professor, "who can say that a century hence the enslaving of domestic animals and the slaughtering of beasts for food may not be regarded on good grounds as unfitting, and therefore wrong?" Who, indeed! The author himself does not expect it; but we are quite prepared for a "Beef and Mutton Prohibition Society," although not, perhaps, for its universal success.

With regard to the authority of conscience, we are substantially in agreement with the author. He says, "It is always to be relied on (we should prefer to say, obeyed), and always liable to deceive." The remarks on this subject are generally good, although it receives a far more complete treatment in Janet's "Theory of Morals," noticed some time ago in these columns. On the subject of the *rationale* of love to our neighbours, the author is painfully vague. "Why should we not love them?" he asks. "Who can say? Equally little can we say why we should love them." On this point much obscurity arises from imperfect analysis. Even Bishop Butler is slightly hazy in his treatment of benevolence. But Dr. Peabody might have found help from his great fellow-countryman, Jonathan Edwards. In the ethical sense, benevolence is good will, and it is not difficult to give reasons for it, whether we assume the intuitional, the theological, or the utilitarian point of view.

Many of the author's remarks on utilitarianism are good; but he does not seem to recognise the amount of truth which is contained in this theory. He refers to Bentham quite properly; but we see no reference to Mr. Sidgwick's "Methods of Ethics," or Mr. John Mill's "Utilitarianism," works on this subject which cannot, with any propriety, be ignored. The utilitarian and the intuitionalist are, each on his own ground, unsailable; and the reconciliation must be sought in some deeper truth from which they both derive their origin. That fundamental and eternal truth can be found only in the being, the nature, the character of God. We quite agree with Dr. Peabody when he refuses to recognise the *will* of God as the *ground* of morals. This were to make moral distinctions arbitrary. But it is different with the nature of God. That is the eternal ground of all being, and in some sense the whole creation is a manifestation of that nature. Now, since God is in His own nature perfect holiness and perfect blessedness, and the laws of the universe are but a reflection of the laws of the Divine Being, it is impossible that blessedness should be disconnected from conformity to law, and, in moral beings, from holiness.

The longer this theory is considered, the more does it seem to the present writer that it will prove satisfactory, and indeed the only satisfactory solution of this vexed question. We hold that the claims of utilitarianism are unquestionable. The common conscience of mankind asserts the validity of intuitionalism: nor is this entirely denied by utilitarians like Mr. Sidgwick and the late Mr. Mill. But two truths cannot be irreconcilable; and we believe that these find a complete reconciliation in the manner we have now indicated.