

WHAT IS PROBABILISM?

PART I.

CASUISTRY.

(The MONTH, London, June, 1888, p. 185.)

It defines the limits of wrong-doing.

Casuistry is the study of cases of conscience. Its aim is to define the exact limits and frontiers of wrong-doing. The casuist says to a man: "Thus far mayest thou go, but no further: another step is wickedness." He does not invite him to go even so far. To fix a mark on the ice by way of showing that it is unsafe to go beyond, is not any recommendation of the ice immediately short of that mark to the special attention of skaters. He is a useful man who places such marks on the ice, provided he lays them judiciously, neither assuming the objects of his care to be as light as gossamer nor as heavy as wagons. So we might have thought the casuist to be a useful man, and one entitled to public favour and consideration. But in fact he is very unpopular, he and his art. If we might define it according to the ordinary English estimate of it, we should say: Casuistry is the art of minimising and teaching others to minimise moral obligations as well in speculation as in practice.

A Misconception.

Sir James Mackintosh, for example, writes thus:—"The tendency of casuistry is to discover ingenious pretexts for eluding that rigorous morality and burdensome superstition, which in the first ardour of religion are apt to be established, and to discover rules of conduct more practicable by ordinary men in the common state of the world.