

## *THE PARADOX OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS.*

GALATIANS VI. 1-5.

PERHAPS the various systems of moral philosophy which have divided the minds of men may be classified under two great heads — those whose centre is the personal, and those whose centre is the sympathetic. There are some which have professed to base morality upon the good of the individual, in other words, to make self-interest the ground of moral action. There are others which have striven to eliminate altogether the idea of self-interest, and to find the basis of morality in the love of universal being. Between these extremes there are many schemes of reconciliation, which seek to harmonize the interests of the individual with the disinterested love of universal being; yet it does not seem to us that any of these schemes are pre-Christian, or apart from Christian influence. It is not alone in matters theological that Christianity has been a reconciling power; where-soever it has penetrated it has brought unity out of diversity, and the sécular as well as the sacred world has profited by the breaking down of its walls of partition. To the moral region, as to all other regions, there has come a form of eclecticism which has exhibited itself rather in the meeting, than in the compromise, of extremes; but the bond which has effected this union is nothing less than Christianity itself.

“Bear ye one another’s burdens, for every man must bear his own burden,” are the striking words in which is conveyed the fact that Christianity has joined the poles of moral opposition. The conjunction of the poles does not at first sight strike the mind as natural; it has all the effect of a paroxysm, and all the force of a paradox. There have been men impressed with the weight of their own burden, and there have been men chiefly impressed with the weight of the burden of others; but it does not naturally occur to either of these that there is any possibility of a logical connection between them. How little such a connection occurs to the common thoughts of men will only be fully seen when we revert to the time when Christianity was not yet a power in the world. If we would see how strongly the Christian atmosphere has contributed to produce the idea of a possible union between self-interest and the interest of others, we must strive to approach the moral world ere yet it had received the Christian atmosphere; we must endeavour to view it in its unaided condition, and study its efforts to work out the problem alone. The result of that study will inevitably be the conviction that the pre-Christian world did not solve the problem, and the clearer recognition of the fact that the connection between the individual and the race is a direct product of the Christian consciousness.

There may be said to be three great national types of morality in the ancient world — the philosophic Greek, the Buddhist, and the Jew. The Greek was occupied solely with the question how a man was to bear his own burden. Great as was the difference between the Stoic and the Epicurean, they were at one

in this, that the leading aim of both was the securing of individual happiness. They sought that happiness in different, in some respects in opposite, ways; yet the object they sought was essentially the same. The Epicurean started with the pursuit of personal enjoyment, and professed to find his goal in that balance of the sensuous pleasures which produces an equable calm. The Stoic started with the revulsion from personal enjoyment, and professed to find his happiness in that devotion to abstract virtue which disregards alike life's pleasures and its pains. Yet, unconsciously to themselves, the Epicurean and the Stoic had met: what the one called personal enjoyment was simply what the other called virtue. The Epicurean tried to balance the pleasures of the senses, and received as his reward the sense of an unruffled calm; the Stoic tried to be indifferent to life's pleasures and pains, and he called that Epicurean calm of indifference by the exalted name of virtue. There was no practical divergence in their morality; they both had one goal, and that goal was self-preservation. How a man was to bear his own burden, how he was to save his soul alive, and how he was to preserve his individual dignity and avoid his individual dangers, was the all-absorbing question in the moral meditations of the Greek. Even the lofty morality of Platonism is only lofty on this one side—the aspiration of the individual soul after the preservation of its own individual purity. Its virtues never rise into the region of self-sacrifice; its precepts never soar beyond the duties of self-restraint. The nearest approach they make to the love of the human brotherhood is in the inculcation of bare justice between man and man; they see not

yet that generosity transcends justice. To be prudent, to be temperate, to be brave, to be incapable of yielding to the seduction of material things, are the only moral heights to which the Greek mind, in its highest moral representative, has ever dared to aspire: the element of self-seeking shuts out the element of sacrifice, and through all its precepts there runs the one refrain, "Every man must bear his own burden."

Exactly at the opposite remove from the Greek stands the ethical life of the Buddhist. If the refrain of Greek morality is, "Every man must bear his own burden," the refrain of Buddhist life is, "Bear ye one another's burdens." The moral peculiarity of Buddhism is its search for brotherhood. It is this quest which has made it a missionary power in the world, which has prompted it to break down caste and to proclaim the universal priesthood of humanity. Yet here we find the very opposite error to that which had influenced the Greek mind. The Greek, in his devotion to individualism, forgot the interests of brotherhood; the Buddhist, in his devotion to brotherhood, forgot the interests of individualism. His aim was essentially the sacrifice of self, and he contemplated that sacrifice as in itself an end. He viewed it, not as the Christian views it—as a source of spiritual enrichment to the life of the individual soul, but as a gulf of nothingness into which the individual soul might empty out its individuality. Self-sacrifice was to the Buddhist a means of suicide, and he welcomed it because it *was* a means of suicide. He was weary of his own personality, and he wanted above all things to get rid of it. His efforts to live for others were prompted chiefly by his desire to die. That desire of death was the only

one which he permitted himself to indulge. He held that man had reached the crown of his being when he was able to wish that he might wish for nothing. Goaded on by that impulse of self-recklessness, the Buddhist plunged into the sea of human brotherhood, and succeeded in bringing to the shore many a shipwrecked and drowning mariner ; yet his efforts to save life were dictated by the conviction that life was not worth saving, and his work for the good of others was prompted by the despair of his own.

Between these two extremes of the Greek and the Buddhist the Jew stands as an intermediary, or rather as one who attempts without success to mediate. The morality of Judaism is, philosophically speaking, an effort at reconciliation between Greek individualism and Indian self-forgetfulness. It strives to give prominence to both. It prescribes to the personal life a definite number of duties which it holds to be necessary to warrant his membership in the Jewish commonwealth ; but, on the other hand, it sets apart in its Decalogue a distinct table of duties which it considers to be binding upon one man towards another. Here there is at least an attempt to meet the two sides of the great problem. It must be confessed, however, that, in defining the relations of man to man, the code of Judaism is by no means so complete as in defining the duties of man to himself. Its individualism is stronger than its humanism. If we take the second table of the Decalogue as an exhibition of the impersonal side of Jewish ethics, we shall be struck with the fact that, with one exception, there is no positive duty demanded from man to man. In the Chapter of Galatians which we have made the basis of this inquiry,

St. Paul declares that the bearing of one another's burdens is the fulfilling of the law of Christ. He evidently uses the expression "law of Christ" in antithesis to the law of Moses. He clearly implies that the law of Moses never reached the positive stage of burden-bearing; it only attained the negative stage of abstaining from injury. It did not formally enjoin a man to do good to his neighbour; it confined him to the injunction not to hurt his neighbour. The virtuous man in relation to others was he who could keep the precepts of the law, beginning with the words, "Thou shalt not." It was reserved for another religion to inculcate a morality of love, whose precepts had the positive ring, "Thou shalt." The one solitary exception is that commandment which exhorts to the honouring of parents; yet even this does not reach to the conception of burden-bearing, while the promise of personal profit which is attached to its performance brings back the precept within the range of individual interests. Whatever of absolute morality may be implied in the Jewish law, there is expressed in that law only one half of the "categorical imperative" which legislates to the conscience its code of human brotherhood. It emphasizes the fact that man must cease to do evil, but it does not formally express the precept that he must learn to do well. The great problem which divided the heathen world still remains unsolved, and the duty which the individual owes to himself has as yet found no satisfactory point of union with the duty which he owes to his brother.

That reconciliation which Judaism failed to effect has at length been worked out by Christianity. Here, for the first time, a really successful effort has been

made to strike the balance between self-preservation and self-forgetfulness. In the first five Verses of this Sixth Chapter of Galatians we are introduced to an ethical scheme whose very conception indicates the deep spiritual insight of its author. It seems to us that in this remarkable passage the Apostle has embodied his views in three distinct principles, which yet combine to produce the unity of the Christian life. First, in opposition to the Greek spirit of individualism, he declares that the spiritual are the most sympathetic. Second, in opposition to the Buddhist spirit of self-annihilation, he declares that the sympathetic are the most self-reflective. Third, as a bond of final and permanent union between these, he declares that the pain of self-reflection is removed by the sense of sympathy. At each of these in succession we must briefly glance.

1. The Apostle affirms that the spiritual man, that is, the man of the highest individuality, is he whose life is least contained within himself, who is most sympathetic towards others. "If a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are *spiritual* restore such an one in the spirit of meekness." The language is not such as we should have expected. It might have been thought that St. Paul, in seeking out helpers for the fallen, would have appealed to those whom he knew to be themselves in the same condemnation. It might have been expected that he would have used such language as this: "Ye who yourselves have been overtaken in a fault, ye who know what it is to be tempted, I appeal to you to shew some charity to those who have surprised the world, and surprised themselves, by a sudden fall from virtue." But St. Paul knew better. He was

far too deep a discerner of human nature not to see that the fallen have no sympathy with the fallen, that purity alone can pardon, that the spiritual alone can restore. The Christian paradox is here, after all, only a paradox to the worldling. The moment a man becomes spiritual, he becomes conscious of the fact that his want of spirituality constituted his want of charity. Sin is selfishness, and selfishness is one-sided individualism. A bad man cannot love even badness, unless it be in his own breast. He hates in others the sins which he himself holds most dear; he would most severely punish in others the fault for whose committal he claims a special license. St. Paul practically tells the fallen not to go to the fallen for sympathy, but to seek forgiveness from those who are not in their own condemnation. The spiritual, he says, alone can restore; for they alone are able to place themselves in thought on a level of equality with those whose wounds they bind. The act of restoration demands the "spirit of meekness" in him who performs it; it demands that the restorer should not throw down his pardon from the summit of a lofty eminence, but that he should himself first descend from the eminence, and, standing upon the common soil of brotherhood, hold out his hand to lift the fallen.

It will be seen that the Apostle claims for this principle an essentially Christian origin. To carry it out is in his view to "fulfil the law of Christ." It is the law of Christ because it is the life of Christ. If the spirit of charity, the ability to bear the weaknesses of others, is proportionate to the amount of spirituality in him who is called to bear them, it follows indisputably that the most successful of all burden-bearers must be



the Son of Man. It is announced, as a distinguishing feature of the Son of Man, that He has power to forgive sins. There is more emphasis laid on his passive than on his active power, more stress put on his ability to bear than on his ability to do. And the reason is plain : his passive power is the special proof of his spirituality. It is just because his nature is the purest of all natures that his charity is the most outflowing of all charities : containing within Himself all perfections, He bears within Himself every burden of the imperfect. If we place, as a mere ethical study, the figure of the Master over against the figure of the disciples, we shall find that the prominent difference between them consists in their ideal of power. The disciples habitually reverence the power which manifests itself in action ; they seek the twelve thrones on which they may judge the world, and aspire to sit in the kingdom at the right and left hand of the Father. The Master, on the other hand, idealizes the power of suffering ; He seeks no greater glory than to bear the sins of humanity, aspires to no higher crown than the love inspired by sacrifice. The difference is not one upon the surface ; it implies even more than it reveals. It is neither more nor less than the difference between spirituality and selfishness. Where a man's ideal is, there his heart will be ; for his ideal is only the measure of his heart seen outwardly. He who reverences active power reverences his own individuality in opposition to the individuality of others ; he who desires the good of others proves by the very breadth of the desire that his own individual nature is enriched by the element of love. The Son of Man, because he is the Son of Man, because his own individual nature is

the highest of all, because He is the purest spiritual existence which the world has yet seen, is the existence of all others most accessible to the impure. The writer to the Hebrews says that the High Priest of the Christian faith is One who can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, although Himself without sin: he might have said, *because* Himself without sin. According to the Christian system, it is just the sinlessness of the Son of Man which makes Him a successful sin-bearer, just the sinfulness of the sons of men which makes them unable to bear sin. The thought runs like a thread through the whole Gospel narrative. Christ forgives those special forms of evil which are most alien to his nature, and which his disciples cannot forgive, because they are the forms most akin to their own. They come to the gates of a Samaritan village which, in the spirit of intolerance, are closed against them. The disciples see in that intolerance a picture of their own narrowness and bigotry; but the recognition adds to, instead of palliating, the sin. They are for no half measures, no tempering of justice with mercy. They desire to express their indignation by the exaction of a full and adequate penalty, and will be satisfied with nothing less than the descent of the avenging fire from heaven. But there is one spirit among them whose nature is absolute tolerance. The Son of Man has never from the beginning harboured within his heart one thought of Jewish bigotry: to Him alone of all that company the intolerance of Samaria is an alien thing. Yet of all that company He alone has mercy for the intolerant. Perfect charity alone is willing to spare the uncharitable. The disciples, recognizing their own image in

another, are ready to consume it with the fire of the Inquisition; the Son of Man, beholding in that other the image contrary to his own, finds in the very contrariety a remembrance of the truth that He has not come to destroy, but to save. If, again, we pass from the gates of the Samaritan village into the precincts of the sacred Temple, we shall find an illustration of the principle which is not less marked, and not less remarkable. A woman detected in a life of impurity is brought up for judgment: her accusers are a company of men whose merit consists in the fact that they have *not* been detected. This is clearly the conclusion which is meant to be conveyed by their inability to respond to the challenge, "He that is without sin, let him cast the first stone at her." Every man of that company is conscious in his heart of the same impurity, and therefore every man of that company is clamorous against the manifested image of his own sin. But in the midst of the Temple there stands the solitary figure of the Son of Man, solitary by its contrast of stainlessness. Here alone there is a heart to which the sin of this woman, whether in its thought or in its manifestation, is absolutely alien, a nature which is utterly foreign to the slightest taint of impurity, and utterly unconscious of any participation in the moral stain. Yet it is from this heart alone that there proceeds a voice of mercy. The undetected participants in the detected woman's sin are eager to annihilate the detection by destroying the object that reveals it; the Son of Man, from the pure depths of his unstained soul, looks out upon the victim of a guilty world's judgment, and restores her in the spirit and in the words of meekness: "I do not condemn thee: go, and sin no more."

We have studied to present these incidents without embellishment or ornament. We have done little more than reproduce in synonymous terms the simple and graphic narratives of the Christian portraiture. The character of that portraiture is indeed so manifest that it speaks for itself better than any apologist can speak for it. And the whole burden of its voice is the delineation in detail of what Paul concentrates in a paradox. That the most self-developed mind is the mind least self-contained, that the purest soul is the soul most forbearing to the impure, that the most spiritual life is everywhere the most sympathetic life, is the burden of the Pauline morality, and the concentrated essence of the Gospel narrative. In the very utterance of this paradox Christianity has overleaped at one bound the limits of Greek individualism, and has placed the goal of human ethics in the relation of man to his fellow-men.

2. But there is another side to the problem, which Christianity has not left untouched, and which in this Sixth Chapter of Galatians St. Paul has not failed to notice. If the religion of Christ is opposed to that Greek individualism which consists in providing entirely for self-interest, it is equally opposed to that Buddhist universalism which consists in losing sight of self-interest altogether. If the Apostle repudiates the notion that man as a moral being should live for himself, he equally repudiates the notion that his moral life for others should be prompted by the desire for self-extinction. On the contrary, he distinctly holds and clearly states that, if the spiritual are the most sympathetic, the sympathetic are, in their turn, the most self-reflective; in other words, that the individual

truly gains his life in the very process of losing it. "Restore such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering *thyself*, lest thou also be tempted. Let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another." The idea here is that the man who is best able to bear the sins of others is he who is best able to measure his own moral stature; and for this very reason, that he measures his stature, not by those shortcomings of others which he needs to pardon, but by the exalted height of absolute purity itself. Let us try to enter into the inward process of St. Paul's reasoning; there is always more in the mind than in the actual writing of this Apostle. He asks in effect: What is the reason that men of a low spiritual stature are unable to bear away, or in any measure to condone, the faults of others? And in effect he answers: Because they rejoice in these faults. They experience a pleasure in the sight of a badness more glaring, or at least more openly manifested, than their own, because in such an open manifestation they seem to find a contrast to themselves. In comparing their own evil with the more patent evil of others, they experience an imitation of the sense of virtue which is all the more pleasant from its novelty; and they are naturally unwilling to throw a veil over that vision of a brother's deformity which enables them in comparison to appropriate to themselves the attribute of beauty. But, says St. Paul: Why adopt such a relative standard of measurement? Why not "prove your own work, and have rejoicing in yourself alone?" At present you are only "rejoicing in another;" you are deriving a base counterfeit of the sense of virtue from comparing your badness with the worse badness

of your neighbour. Why not try to get the sense of virtue itself by plunging into the depths of your own consciousness, and bringing up thence the pearls of absolute purity? You are proud of your lamp because it outshines the neighbouring candle: why not take it into the blaze of sunshine, and measure its power by the light of infinite heaven? You can then be proud of it for its own sake. By a mere standard of human comparison you may think yourself to be something when you are nothing. "Let a man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another."

It must be confessed that there is here a fine touch of Pauline irony. The irony lies specially in the word "rejoicing." When a man really proves his own work, what does he prove it to be? Dust and ashes. The most spiritual are the least self-congratulatory. It has been the universal experience of Evangelical Christendom, that those who have exhibited the highest manifestations of the Christian life have been those whose self-estimate was the lowest and the most humble. It has even not unfrequently happened that the men to whom the world pointed as the shining lights in its firmament have precisely at the moment of their shining been most doubtful of their lustre. We can find no more remarkable example of this than that of Paul himself. If there ever was a man whose life was thoroughly harmonized with the Divine life, it was the Apostle of the Gentiles; his whole being was one continuous self-surrender, and no truer epitaph could be written on his memory than those words in which he described his life-long experience: "We are always delivered unto death." Yet this man, whose life was

so hid with Christ in God, who counted all things but loss for the excellency of Christ's glory, who esteemed all the afflictions of time to be light and momentary when weighed against the vision of union with Christ, is the man who of all others has left on record the profoundest traces of spiritual conflict. At the very moment when he is the greatest living representative of the power of Christianity, he is so unconscious of his power that we find him breaking forth almost into the utterances of despair: "If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead;" "There is a law in my members warring against the law of my mind;" "The flesh lusteth against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh;" "I am unworthy to be called an apostle;" "Oh! wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this body of death?" On a first view such utterances, coming from such a quarter, can be nothing but startling. They strike the superficial mind as the manifestations of a wavering confidence; they are, in truth, the evidences of a very advanced Christianity. The more spiritual a man becomes, the more he becomes subject to a very painful sense of self-contemplation. As a man whose frame has been subjected to the ravages of a fever never fully realizes these ravages until he has reached the stage of convalescence; as a man whose mind has been sunk in ignorance never fully realizes that ignorance until he has been confronted by the lamp of knowledge; so the life which has been spent in spiritual darkness can only begin to perceive its darkness when there strikes upon its vision the first rays of morning. So far is the Buddhist from being philosophically correct in holding the goal of spirituality to be the vanquishing of indivi-

dual desire, that the very converse is the philosophical truth. The goal of spirituality is the intensification of individual desire, the awakening of the individual to a deeper and a more painful apprehension of how far he has come short of the infinite glory. Saul of Tarsus, before he has seen the light, is thoroughly self-satisfied; after the strictest sect he has lived a Pharisee; touching the righteousness of the law he feels himself blameless; he has, in truth, not yet known himself. Saul of Tarsus, after he has seen the light, falls to the earth, crushed by the vision of his own individual darkness, and the more familiarized his eye becomes to the light, the more intense becomes his sense of the darkness; he finds himself in losing sight of his selfishness; and he finds himself to be sunk in the shadows of death. The most spiritual are the most self-reflective, and the self-reflection is a great pain.

3. Is there any alleviation of this pain? is there any refuge which the individual can find from the oppression of his own individuality? This is the final question suggested by the passage before us, and apparently the final question suggested in the spiritual experience of St. Paul. And he answers it by a final paradox: "Bear ye one another's burdens, for every man shall bear his own burden." The pain of self-reflection can only be removed by sympathy. "You," he says, "have a burden of your own to bear, and a burden which by no possibility can be transferred to another—the burden of individual responsibility. There is a very solemn sense in which you are alone in the universe. You carry about within you something which marks you off from all mankind, which you must bear through life and through death, which no surrounding multitude



can hide, and which no brotherly affection can lighten : it is the weight of having a responsible soul. Beneath that weight you may at times be crushed, and may be disposed to sink under your burden. At such times there remains but one refuge. Remember that the same solemn burden is borne by every man. Try to enter into sympathy with that sense of individual responsibility which is pressing on the lives of those around you. Your personal feeling of that pressure should serve as a gate to your sympathy. Should you succeed in realizing this common care of humanity, should you succeed in entering into sympathy with the moral burden of your brother man, the moral burden of your individual life will in that moment fall from you ; in the very act of realizing the bitterness of universal pain, the sting of individual sorrow will cease to wound." Such is the thought in the mind of the Gentile Apostle, and its application to religious life needs no comment. A thousand times, in periods of religious revival or in seasons of mental depression, we are confronted by men professing to have lost sight of the shore to which they steered. They believed themselves to be united to Christ, but a cloud has hid from them the object of their faith. They ask for an evidence of their own steadfastness, for a personal test by which they shall know that they are not castaways ; if possible, for a revivifying of that feeling which once constituted their joy. The answer of St. Paul to such is the answer he gave to his own misgivings, and practically the same answer which the Founder of Christianity gave to the misgivings of his earliest followers—the exhortation to work. " If any man shall do the will, he shall know of the doctrine," is the sublime direction of the Master

into the way of personal conviction. It is only another way of saying that faith without works is dead, that the service of humanity in the life of action is necessary to give value to the life of contemplation. And so, taking up the refrain, the Apostle of the Gentiles declares that the soul can only learn its riches in the act of expending them. To the man who has lost the freshness of his first personal convictions, and who is oppressed with the load of his inevitable burden, he suggests the remembrance that the burden is inevitable for all. He bids him forget his individual discomfort, in so far as his discomfort is only individual; he bids him remember his individual pain, in so far as that pain is the heritage of universal humanity. "Bear others' burdens," he says, "and you shall bear your own. Feel your inevitable union with the race, and your inevitable individual sorrow will cease to be intolerable. Make the realization of your own responsibility the starting-point of your sympathy with the personal and untransferable struggles of each individual soul, and in the process the struggle of your own soul shall lose its torment, and the weight of your own burden shall lose its pain. Without diminishing its actual quantity, it shall cease to be a load when it is lifted by the arm of love. Taking upon you the Master's yoke of humanity, every other yoke shall become easy. You will get back the personal peace when it ceases to be sought for purely personal ends. 'Bear ye one another's burdens, and every man shall bear his own burden,' without an exhaustive effort or an overmastering pain."

GEORGE MATHESON.