

## ARTICLE III.

## HEREDITY AND DEPRAVITY.

BY STUART PHELPS, PH.D., LATE PROFESSOR IN SMITH COLLEGE,  
NORTHAMPTON, MASS.

[NOTE. — It is due to the author of this article to state the fact that the undersigned has been accustomed for several years to interchange with him criticisms and revisions of work in preparation for the press, each *editing* the work of the other. The present article was found among his manuscripts, in a form adapted only to delivery in the lecture-room in the Theological Seminary at Andover. To adapt it to the pages of a Review, it needed some rhetorical changes, and the elimination of a few paragraphs chiefly of an illustrative character. In making the requisite alterations, no other liberty has been taken than that which he had been wont to authorize. The materials and the general structure of the article have not been disturbed; and it needs hardly to be said that the philosophical opinions advanced are his own. — AUSTIN PHELPS].

“THE churches teach,” so runs the Augsburg Confession, “that after the fall of Adam all men propagated according to ordinary generation are born with sin; that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence; and that this disease or original depravity is truly sin, damning and bringing eternal death upon those who are not regenerated by baptism and the Holy Spirit.”

“Christians,” teaches the Formula Concordiae, “ought to regard that hereditary disease by which the whole nature of man is corrupted as a specially dreadful sin; and, indeed, as the first principle and source of all other sin.”

“By this sin,” declares the Confession of English Protestantism, “they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of the soul and body. They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation.”

“All moral qualities,” writes a modern physician, “are transmissible from parent to child; with this important addition, that in the case of vicious tendencies or habits the simple practice of the parent becomes the passion, the mania, the all but irresistible impulse of the child.” Yet the professor of golden speech tells us that “moral chaos began with the idea of transmissible responsibility.”

These quotations from ecclesiastical authorities on the one side, and from medical authorities on the other, suggest the theme of the present article, viz. The Relation of Heredity as a Principle in Psychology to Depravity as a Doctrine in Theology.

Historically we have had a twofold development of that which is really a single principle. Christian theology, starting with a doctrine of original sin, invented the principle of imputation to defend that doctrine. Its process was constructive and its results arbitrary. The common sense of mankind was recognized at some points and ignored at others. Psychology was allowed to testify only when its testimony made for the predetermined verdict. The discussion is among the commonplaces of theological history. One reads it with feelings both of admiration and of sadness — of admiration for the ingenious logic of some of the world’s master-minds, and for the intrepid honesty which sought logical consistency in the *debris* of shattered instincts and the darkness of clouded intuitions; yet with sadness at the waste of force in reasoning which perverted fact and contradicted consciousness.

From the theological standpoint the doctrine is now regarded either as “a fundamental doctrine of all religion,” or as a fossil exhumed from buried ages, according to the school of thought which the believer represents. From the popular standpoint it is regarded as a technicality of dogmatism with which the masses of men have no concern, and which, if it must be discussed at all, should be relegated to the theological lecture-room. The common conscience does not respond to it, for the common sense cannot believe it. Popular interest

in it, therefore, even as a question in theology, is well-nigh obsolete. Let a preacher experiment with it, and he arouses no interest but that of curiosity or of oppugnation. Even the vocabulary of the controversy will fall upon ignorant ears. One might nearly as well use in the pulpit the hieroglyphics of the turf as the once revered technicalities of theology in the discussion of "original sin." Practically, in its ancient forms of statement, the doctrine of inherited depravity is a dead issue. A wise preacher will ignore it, as he would any other relic of the schools which live thought has outgrown or outworn.

Yet, by the side of this theological departure, another principle has been slowly evolving, — rather, the same principle in an entirely different environment, and with very diverse theological sequences. Essentially physiological, it has grown to its present proportions with that calm indifference to theological corollaries which has always characterized medical science. Never has an experienced physician lived who did not *see* the inheritance by the child of the physical qualities of its progenitors. A doctrine of heredity has been, from Galen downward, an axiom of medical theory. One would as soon think of wasting time in a refutation of the solar theory of "Brother Jasper," as in demonstration of the fact, always and everywhere patent, of physical heredity. Who except the statisticians and the victims are now interested enough either to prove or to question it, in the inheritance of red hair, or a sixth finger, or a drawing speech, or a consumptive diathesis? These natural events disturb us no more than the growth of a rosebud from a rosebush, or of an apple from an apple-graft.

But the principle puts on a new phase when we talk of an inherited soul, of a birthday gift of the elements of character. What would Calvin have thought, if he had been told that under the law of chances the fact that he was a divine renowned the world over was proof that the chances were twenty-eight in the hundred that he sprang from illustrious parentage; and that a modern psychological insurance com

pany would take the risks on the literary fame of his brothers and sisters at thirty-six in the hundred; of his children, at forty in the hundred; and that, furthermore, they would reckon the chances of fame to his grandfather at twenty, to his uncle at forty, to his nephew at four, to his grandson at sixteen, to his great grandfather at four, to his grand-uncle at four, and to his first cousin at eight, in the hundred; while his unfortunate great grandson must wait in vain for even the one hundredth chance for a place on the scroll of famous men. Marvellous indeed is the science of modern statistics in its showing of this law of heredity and the laws related thereto. The whole problem of free-will is still shivering in the cold grasp of the tabular mathematics of crime. And now even the realm of personality is invaded. Poets and statesmen are foretold before birth, as one would speculate upon the progress of blooded horses.

Yet only the statistical part of this science is distinctively modern. We must go back to Aristotle, and beyond him to the Laws of Manu, for the first statement of psychical inheritance. The ancient Hebrew, in quoting his familiar proverb of the sour grapes and the children's teeth, meant by it so much more and so radically other than inherited nerves, that the rebuke and warning of the prophet became necessary to his moral training. It would be instructive to trace the growth of the principle of psychical heredity from the first fortuitous observations of it, to its vague generalizations, through curious theological contortions, straightened out by the common sense of prophetic proverbs, till we reach its modern formulation in scientific psychology. But we must be content here with results only.

Modern psychology teaches a doctrine of heredity which, coming from the realm of psycho-physics, assumes as established the following principles, viz.

1. The principle of epigenesis is accepted as proved, except in one school of dogmatic theology. This principle, first formulated by Wolff in his *Theoria Generationis*, holds that the whole being of man, body and soul alike, is originated

in or at the time of the act of generation. Over against this is the theory, so much used and abused in theology, that in the production of the new individual there is only an unfolding, an "evolution," in the original sense of the term. Speaking of embryonic men, Maupertius says: "They are only little statues enclosed one within another, like those works of the lathe in which the carver shows his skill with the chisel by making a hundred boxes shut up one within another." This doctrine of the pre-existence of germs modern science has thrown aside, regardless of the consequences to creeds and confessions. The theology which now builds itself upon a doctrine of evolution as contrasted with epigenesis is unscientific because untrue to facts which science holds as proved beyond reasonable doubt.

2. Admitting this origination of the new being in generation, psycho-physics claims and proves that there are well-defined principles of physical inheritance. Science long ago abandoned the attempt to prove heredity; it busies itself now only with the exceptions to the law. Any statement of details of law at this point would be in advance of actual discovery. But Ribot is very safe when he asserts as general principles that specific characteristics are always transmitted both in the lower animal and in man; that the characteristics of the race and of the variety are also hereditary; and that purely individual characteristics are often transmitted.

In further subdivision we are taught that heredity manifests itself in three forms. The direct form is that in which the offspring develops the peculiarities of the parent, as where a child resembles father or mother in features, in form, in involuntary motions. The reversional form, or atavism, is that in which a leap is made over one or more generations and then a suspended characteristic reappears, as where the stammering of a father omits his child and appears again in his grandchild. We are told that atavism occurs in the silkworm after the lapse of a hundred generations. Indirect heredity subsists between individuals and their ancestors in an indirect line; as between nephew and uncle. But this seems to be but a modification of atavism.

In the simplest of English the principle amounts to this : that we all receive our bodies, with all their peculiarities of form and tendency, from our parents. The apparent exceptions are coming into line under the common law so rapidly now that we may feel perfect confidence in the establishment of physical heredity as a universal principle. Our bodily organism, then, though not strictly pre-existent, takes on its individuality as an ancestral inheritance.

3. To this modern science adds a third principle : that the characteristics of the soul are also either wholly, or in part, an inheritance. We are brought up here very suddenly against the question of the soul's relation to the body. We have four theories to choose from, of the embryology of the soul.

Of these, one is that the first progenitor of the race contained in his own being the germs of all souls through the long line of his posterity to its end. The entire human race existed in him, to be in the lapse of the ages drawn out, generation after generation, like the apartments of a telescope of indefinite length. This theory — traducianism, so called — is as ingenious as its sequence is atrocious. Its theologic outcome is to add to our already sufficiently weighted consciousness of guilt, by piling upon it the accumulations of depravity in the ancestral line back to its beginning. But it is a theory which hardly deserves, and surely does not receive, a respectful hearing from modern embryology. This science does not give to it the dignity of serious discussion.

A second theory, equally extreme and equally repugnant to the common sense of men, is that no such thing as a soul exists to be accounted for ; that when we have explained the origin of the bodily organism, the mission of science in the matter is ended. For, what is thought but molecular action ? What is character but the arrangement and concatenation of cells ? This materialism underlies the psychology of Herbert Spencer and his school, and is distinctly avowed by Haeckel and Maudesley. We can safely leave its refuta-

tion to its own admissions. It is one of those speculations in philosophy which act the scorpion in the circle of fire.

Passing over these two theories, extreme to absurdity, we find two others which are more moderate. One of these holds that the soul begins to exist with the body, and from the body derives all its determinations to action: hence that the soul *is* what the bodily organism makes it. This reduces itself of course ultimately to the theory that all the characteristics of the soul are inherited, because determined by an inherited organism. This theory appears in three forms: in that of an agnostic dualism, soul and body being recognized as distinct substances, yet with no attempt to explain the introduction of the soul into the body; in that of a theistic dualism, which resorts to a special creation or emanation to account for the presence of the characterless unit of psychical force, to be determined in its nature by the physical influence; and again in the form of an agnostic monism, which, as in Clifford's theory of "mind-stuff," considers both soul and body as forms of the same mysterious substance, and thus virtually involves the generation of the soul as well as the body. The first or second of these forms is held by more than one fatalistic theologian. The third is probably the theory of Bain, who seems to resolve will-power into an ultimate mechanism of nerve action.

A fourth theory holds that the soul begins to exist with the body, but that it has to some extent at least its own independent qualities. This might be denominated a theory of modified spontaneity. "The facts of physical heredity," says Wundt, "make it highly probable that, could we reach the initial point of the individual life, we should find there an independent germ of personality which cannot be determined from without, inasmuch as it precedes all external determination." This theory, in a more or less definite form, is substantially held by Ulrici, Lotze, Calderwood, James, and many others. But the whole question of physical heredity as a part of psychology, is so novel that one may search in vain many even recent publications in this depart-

ment to find positive expressions of opinion on the subject. Many seem unwilling to accept inevitable corollaries from their own premises. Some protest against the doctrine of absolute inheritance, yet defend that of spontaneity only negatively. Intuitional psychology has yet before it the task of formulating a doctrine of the embryology of the soul which shall cover all the discovered facts of science and yet be true to the universal facts of consciousness. It is far easier to criticise "germ" and "gemmae" theories than to provide a substitute less open to objection. May it not be that we reach here, as at so many other points of psychological research, very early in our investigation, the great mystery of an expressed thought of God?

The present state of pronounced opinion on this subject involves either expressly or by implication the following conclusions, viz. that neither anthropology nor metaphysics has yet proved the fact of absolute inheritance, or the absurdity of partial spontaneity; that the *tendency* of the investigation is to discover new difficulties in the way of the explanation of the soul's individuality on the hypothesis of absolute inheritance; yet, on the other hand, that the metaphysics of spontaneity has not been satisfactorily justified by the facts of evolution. We may say, then, that the theory of Wundt is supported by the facts so far as they are known; but that the theory needs further investigation and adjustment. If we admit this theory as defensible, we must admit that spontaneity can be only partial; for the facts of psychical inheritance are sufficiently numerous to be roughly classified into principles.

Physical heredity involves the inheritance of all those original qualities, capacities, predispositions of the soul which are in their nature determined directly by the physical organism. This is, of course, pre-eminently true of the feelings. Inherited antipathies and ambitions are too well-known to need illustration. Love, hate, courage, fear, gentleness, cruelty, avarice—the catalogue of inherited feelings is co-extensive with the range of sensibility. It may seem an

extravagant statement, but common observation will sustain it, that all the determinations of feeling which characterize infantile being are direct or indirect inheritances.

So also may original tendencies of thought and opinion be an ancestral gift. Are there not men whose children, apart from all appreciable force of education and the atmosphere of home, must by sheer force of inherited tendency start on their thought-life as sceptics in their drift, if not in pronounced opinion? When every molecule in the paternal brain bears the shape of a point of interrogation, it would border on the miraculous if we should find the exclamation sign of faith in the brain-cells of the child. A wise teacher will take courage from the secondary results of his work in the offspring of his pupils. To the third and fourth generation he may trace the results of his fidelity.

President Bascom is right in his assertion that the more purely volitional an act is, the less is the probability of its being transmissible. At any point along the line of succession will-power may claim its independence and refuse to take on the thought of another. The determinist who discusses heredity will only wind about himself the more closely as he proceeds the bonds which strangle his individuality. But the believer in the autocracy of the power which is fashioned in the image of its Maker will be thronged with evidences of unique, independent, creative power in each and every soul. Heredity stops when it has asserted that the sensibilities which move the will may be themselves determined by the impulse of a nervous centre which is inherited. Beneath those sensibilities and above them is the regal power which determines itself and decrees character.

Leaving out of the question all metaphysical principles, settled and unsettled alike, the psychological doctrine of heredity may be summed up in six general principles. First, the bodily organism in its original structure is an absolute inheritance, in its generic and specific or racial determinations; and also with all reasonable probability in its individual characteristics. Secondly, the theory of a limited spon-

taneity in the individual soul has so far withstood all attacks, and still holds its own as the most reasonable and adequate explanation of the facts. Thirdly, yet the soul inherits all those original characteristics which are naturally determined by the inherited bodily organism. It thus inherits all its "instinctive" predispositions in feeling. Fourthly, the soul inherits also many, perhaps all, of its original tendencies in thought. Fifthly, heredity cannot explain the origin of those elements of character which are the direct results of pure volition. Sixthly, we derive, therefore, the principle that responsibility for character is limited to those qualities of the soul which are undetermined by this immense inheritance and are the products of intelligent volition.

Such is in brief the outline of a doctrine which is only just beginning to work its way into our standard treatises on psychology. It is beyond the purpose of the present discussion to treat of the very vital part which this doctrine must play in all future theories of instinct, of intuition, and of the origin of knowledge. Practically it must revolutionize the whole study of the original constitution of the human mind. But the present object limits the discussion to the relation of the doctrine of heredity to a single theological tenet. With that relation in view, the general principle has been presented at some length, that it may be fairly before us as the basis of theological reasoning.

Yet in approaching its theological bearings one feels as those modern critics of logic do, who complain of the syllogism because, indeed, it adds nothing new to the premises! With the facts admitted, is not the conclusion self-evident? Psychology as thus developed vindicates triumphantly the old Greek anthropology in Christian doctrine, as against the later Latin discussions of the same principles.

As thus developed modern psychology, through its doctrine of heredity would reduce to absurdity any and every hypothesis of pre-natal sin. This it does by its denial of pre-natal existence. If any utterance claiming the authority of inspiration teaches that all men, or any man, personally sinned

in Adam — teaches it not in figure of speech which may mean anything or nothing, but in sober fact with which the common sense of men has to do — all that this psychology has to say in response is: “So much the worse for the authority of such inspirations.” Upon the common sense of men that theory was always an outrage, and psychology only echoes the decision of common sense in pronouncing it absurd as a scientific hypothesis. Consciousness in all men protests against it as an insult. Conscience the most morbid has failed to discover justification of it in its own vagaries. The instinct of justice in every man revolts from its pretensions. Indignant will denounces it as treasonable to the rights of character. Wrought into a system of dogmatics it produces moral chaos, deadens sensibility to right and wrong, and confuses reason hopelessly. It removes theology summarily from the list of rational beliefs. Even mysticism, which can cover the deformity of almost any self-contradiction, fails to shield this from deserved contempt. Saintliness of character in its believers does not protect it from the shafts of ridicule. It comes back to us to-day only as one of those curiosities in which theology, like other sciences, has indulged itself by contortions of reason which wise men mourn over and sceptics laugh at. To all this testimony of the common conscience and common sense embryology lends the dignity of an inductive science to whose conclusions the interpreters of the inspired word must give attention.

Further, psychology through its doctrine of heredity, teaches that there is no such thing as a transmitted depravity of will. On this point Clement and Origen were better psychologists than Augustine and Calvin. It is marvellous that this form of determinism, so far-reaching and so fatal in its consequences, should have become so thoroughly ingrained in our traditional theology. The genius of Abelard gave the title *Sic et Non* to his collection of the self-contradictions of the fathers. The time has come for the modern critic to proclaim the *Sic et Non* of the modern schoolmen, by disclosing their monstrous syncretism of necessity and freedom.

“An inherited depravity of the will” must mean one of two things. It means either no will at all, or else a will doomed by a creative Power which cannot in any human sense of the word be called just. Inherited defects in nerves, in lungs, in liver, we can understand and reason about. We can admit them and account for them without stultifying our moral sense. But if I am to be held responsible for an inherited quality of will which “disables it to all good,” I must appeal from the justice of the Creator to the superior justice of the creature. Man’s whole moral nature must be reconstructed before such a doctrine can stand the test even of the instincts of a child. Here again psychology comes to the support of common sense, by proving that there is *no* inheritance of a determined will-power. It teaches us that the power which was made to be supreme in the inner soul *is* supreme. The ancestral sins of a thousand generations have not emasculated its strength or directly tarnished its purity. Cyril only uttered the dictum of consciousness when he said: “There is no kind of souls that are either sinful or righteous by nature”; and the authority of consciousness is now seconded by the repetition of the truth as an inference of physical science.

The modern scientist renders an unconscious service to theology by his theories of persistence of force and conservation of energy. These are, only in materialized, forms the standard Christian doctrines of divine immutability and divine omnipresence. The scientist seems equally unconscious of the alliance he offers to theology in the point now under discussion. For the heredity of the physical organism, with its results in psychical disposition, aids us to a true interpretation of the churchly doctrine of depravity. That is to say, psychology teaches with irresistible emphasis the doctrine of the inheritance of depraved conditions of body and depraved tendencies of mind. What is this but the old Greek doctrine of the corruption of the *σῶμα* and of the *ψυχή*, as taught by the Alexandrine school? The fact is established beyond reasonable dispute that, while there is

no pre-natal sin, and no inherited depravity of will, still there is a positive inheritance of many, perhaps most, of the elements which underlie character. The human will stands in act in its royalty, the image in miniature of the self-determining First Cause; but beside and around and under it we find a "raw material" of character—a natural disposition of soul upon which the will-power must work, and with which it must often enter into deadly conflict for supremacy. Thus, and only thus, character must grow.

A rational theory of ethics therefore places that raw material outside of the sphere of personal responsibility. The will has not created it, but has found it. The man is born to it; he is no more responsible for it than for the color of his eyes. For its depraved condition he is no more accountable than for a club-foot or a diseased heart. Psychology, more humane and more just than some types of theology have been, traces the responsibility not forward to the growing man, but backward to dead parents and grandparents, to a forgotten or unknown ancestry, to rivers, mountains, temperatures, accidents of location, and revolutions of government—to anything and everything in the ancestral and historic line and in material nature which has coacted in the formation and the conformation of the individual man. He starts in life the resultant of innumerable forces, yet supreme over them all. He begins to be as both subject and sovereign—subject if he wills to yield, sovereign if he wills to rule. He must be what he wills to be, no other, no better, no worse.

Things minute and seemingly insignificant, as well as things vast and potent, enter into the making of a man. The long, sharp nose of his grandfather may make to him, or rather in him, all the difference between success and failure in his career as a merchant. The width of his father's forehead may make him a statesman or a hod-carrier. The pulsation of his mother's blood may drive him into the church or into the grog shop. The character of a certain gentleman was once described as a cross between the traditions of the Reformed church and New Jersey apple-jack.

We do not scruple to relieve the man from responsibility for this raw material of character, when illustrated in small things and on a narrow scale ; but he is no more responsible by the tests of psychological science when that material appears on a grand scale and in things sublime and sacred. At both extremes and all along the line between these elements of character are ours by no choice of our own until we will to make them such. The bare existence of them involves no sin on our part. Sin may lie back of them in our ancestral history, but it stops short of the point at which a new individual begins to be. From that point onward it may be misfortune, not sin, till the will-power of the new being adopts them as its own superior in the growth of character. Heredity thus explains depravity, so far as any product of a free being admits of explanation ; but heredity is not depravity. Psychology reasserts and proves the facts which theology has sometimes ignored.

Involved in what has been already said is a further principle which the history of theological opinion has by no means exalted to the place claimed for it in the Christian Scriptures. It is that the inheritance of good, as well as of evil, tendencies is the birthright of the human soul. Herein psychology is more philosophical than theology has been. It does not stop with the dark side of the picture. Theology has often claimed that both vicious tendencies and vice itself are transmitted from father to child. It has been self-deceived by its use of the phrase "vicious tendencies" and its equivalents. It has understood the phrase to mean not only tendencies *to* vice, but tendencies *of* vice as well. Vice has been lodged at the beginning as well as at the end. Meanwhile theology has often been silent as to the double working of the principle of transmission. The inheritance of virtuous tendencies has been overlooked, if not denied. Psychology has recognized the phenomenal facts in both directions, and has thus preserved the equilibrium of science.

Psychology, therefore, authorizes us to teach not, indeed,

the inheritance of virtue any more than of vice, but the inheritance of *tendencies* to both. The raw material of character submitted to the sway of the sovereign will is often a carefully and laboriously fashioned product of generations of ancestral virtue. Virtuous parents live in the moral conditions transmitted in the *make* of their offspring. Accumulations of good from the dead and buried past often through the birth-hour of a child. In the Divine plan of the universe nothing is contrived to work evil only. Neither does this principle of heredity work evil only. Its possibilities of good are immeasurably vast, limited only by the range of a human will. It has been estimated that twenty out of every hundred eminent clergymen are the sons of mothers eminent for their religious character; and one may safely venture the guess that ninety out of every hundred are the sons of Christian mothers. This is heredity. Is it depravity?

It will be observed, then, that while modern psychology eliminates from theology the doctrine of "original sin" in its traditional modes of statement and defence, yet it retains a doctrine of depravity, and supports it by an overwhelming array of psychical facts. Modern psychology presents the doctrine, also, not as standing alone, a solitary and inscrutable mystery of guilt foreordained and inevitable, but as the result only of the abuse of a grand system of inheritance, originated by divine benevolence for good only, and capable of good beyond the reach of human conception. It is not claimed that this modification of depravity removes all the difficulties involved in the doctrine; but it does immensely relieve those difficulties, and bring the whole conception into harmony with the teachings of modern science. It also formulates the doctrine so as to deliver it from the revolt of the human reason, and commend it to the common sense of men.