

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE II.

THEORY AND PRACTICE OF MORAL VIRTUE.

BY REVEREND JAMES LINDSAY, D.D., IRVINE, SCOTLAND.

AN uneasy feeling comes to one at times that moral virtue has not yet come to its own in the Christian world of to-day. Alike in theory and practice, Christian virtue seems to suffer greatly because thought is so seldom turned to direct meditation on the basal worth of the natural virtues — the cardinal virtues of the Greeks. Aquinas thought these philosophical virtues — temperance, fortitude, wisdom, justice — were acquired, while the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love were inspired. But Aristotle had already pointed out most clearly that moral theory exists only for the sake of practice, saying that “we study ethics not that we may know what virtue is, but that we may become good men; otherwise there could be no advantage in it whatsoever.” Plato had previously declared, in the “Republic,” that ethical virtues “are like qualities of the body, which, not being in us at first, are put into us by training and habit”; and, in the tenth book of the “Laws,” that “there are in us certain virtues; therefore God possesses fully all virtue.”¹ There is a thoughtless assumption that, in Christianity, such a direct cultivation of these former virtues is unnecessary — superseded by the possession of higher and later virtues in Christianity. The “theological” virtues are supposed to make the ancient contemplation of moral excellences or *âperai* no longer needful. It is not seen that this is to have fallen from Christianity itself.

¹ Leg. 900 D.

Pauline Christianity, at any rate, was wider and wiser, and did not think it superfluous to present a splendid range of distinctively virtuous objects before men — things true, grave, righteous, pure, lovable, attractive — bidding them “think” on “these things.” Pauline virtue is not a virtue of *right doing* merely, such as Aristotle inculcated, but a virtue so interior as to consist in *right thinking*. Our right thinking will issue in our virtue being, in terms of a true Aristotelian idea, a good “habit of choice.” The vague and complicated definitions of virtue given by various recent ethical writers, both British and American, seem to have but little practical advantage, after all, over such views of virtue as those of Jonathan Edwards and those New England philosophers who took it broadly to consist in choice of the good of being.

The natural virtues wait to be grandly subsumed in Christian virtue, not thoughtlessly neglected or despised. The transcendent worth of moral virtue waits to be seen in the prismatic blending of sevenfold virtue in the Christian ideal. To Aristotle, virtue was the most natural of all things, yet finely does he discriminate between being virtuous by nature — which man is not — and becoming virtuous, which man can become through self-determination, in conforming to the true law of his nature. Thus nature has only made us *for* virtue, but we ourselves must make ourselves virtuous. The well-being or welfare signified in the Greek *εὐδαιμονία* comes clearly short of that character of necessity and universality which marks the life of virtue as we to-day understand it. The life of virtue is, in Aristotle's view, the life of right reason or *ὀρθὸς λόγος*. It is his conscious accord with this *λόγος* or law that makes the virtuous man's actions right. These, as virtuous, are free from excess or defect; they can neither be added to, nor subtracted from, without spoli-

ation; they conform to a law of symmetry. They are, further, the outcome of a free and rational choice, which loves the right for the right's sake. Such are some of the marks of Aristotelian virtue at least. The chief of virtues, to Aristotle, is "higher justice," which is not a part, but the whole of virtue; complete, in an absolute sense, it is not, but in relation to one's neighbor; so ideal a virtue is such justice, that neither evening nor morning star is so lovely as this supreme quality of personal life. No wonder, these thoughts of Aristotle being true, Hesiod should have declared that "Justice is the virgin daughter of Zeus," or that Plotinus should have pronounced virtue to be without a master (*ἀρετὴ ἀδέσποτος*). Courage, also, was a great virtue to the ancients; De Maistre said the Romans showed profound wisdom in making force and virtue synonymous terms. Virtue, conformity to moral idea, was, to Plotinus, the prime good of the soul, but virtue was to him of the nature of form — vehicle or basis of beauty. It is in the Stoic theory of virtue, as represented, say, in an Aurelius, that we find the inwardness of virtue really brought out, and its absolutely self-sufficing character set forth. Virtue is to Aurelius superior to life's varying fortunes. Primarily cosmic is virtue to him: it is something due to the universe or God. We are free to be moved only from within: the good man, as lord of his own life, is such a king among men as had not been dreamed. Hence Boëthius, later, was to enjoin on the Middle Ages "the consolations of Philosophy," which consisted in "the superlative worth of conscience and virtue."

What we have seen to be true of moralism is not less true of spiritualism. The spiritualism, for which we have been made, is ours only through faith and obedience. This spirituality may be reached by the path of moral feeling and appre-

hension, for the ethical holds within its reach ultimate spiritual reality. Virtue is, as Malebranche said, "a habitual, free, and dominating love of the immutable order." But the full and effective moralism of Christianity rests upon a spiritual basis not always remembered or provided for. No finer insistence on moralistic virtue has been made in modern times than by Emerson. But his "cathartic virtue" will be most fully realized only where spiritual cleansing and renewal have been known. This, for the reason that the prior consciousness of moral failure must be relieved, before true and perfect freedom for the attainment of moral virtue can be gained. The heart, transformed by such experiences, will emerge from the deeps of regret, to make, with mighty passion and sublime hope, for the steeps of virtue. For it has sustaining power behind it to make its aims at virtue effectual. The path of rectitude thus securely laid, we may then go on to point out that man's deepest need and greatest beatitude is to walk in this way—the way of personal rectitude. Then, and only then, has Emerson's fine apostrophe to Virtue gotten real power and place for man,— "Virtue, I am thine: save me: use me: thee will I serve, day and night, in great, in small, that I may be not virtuous, but virtue." What new lights will then flash, and what ethical splendors settle, on such insistences as that "the essence of greatness is the perception that Virtue is enough," and that "strength enters just as much as the moral sentiment prevails"! There is no greater mistake than to suppose the practice of virtue to be an unilluminated result of power of will—will unlighted by faith. Faith is an essential factor in our moral development; foredoomed to failure is every philosophy that does not recognize the fact. The universe in which we are set is so framed as to make the largest possible demand on our rational faith. No caricatures

or misconceptions of such a faith must keep us from having the insight to perceive, and the courage to maintain, its reasonableness and necessity. Always upon such faith must the practice of moral virtue very largely depend, and we do well to remember, with Plato, that the risks in such ventures of faith are noble. We needs must have a well-nigh boundless faith in the rightness and worth of virtue, and the untold possibilities of its attainment, ere its practice shall become for us the imperative necessity it should. It is the lack of such faith that makes what Matthew Arnold calls our "struggling, task'd morality," a morality without wings. What, however, forms the especial ground of my contention now is, that there is loss to-day because religious men vaguely trust to the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love, carrying with them, in due power and proportion, all lower and more purely human virtues. With what result? That men in all spheres — civic, commercial, academic, ecclesiastical — find it only too easily compatible with religious pretensions to act with a disregard of these human and inferior virtues — justice, benevolence, veracity, honesty, chastity, honor, etc., — of which an enlightened pagan would have been ashamed. It is the weakness of human nature, we are told in easy excuse; but the point just is, that there is *no* excuse for Christianized human nature remaining deplorably behind pagan thought and practice in matters of moral virtue. It does not seem to me enough to make insistence on the good or virtuous will as the one thing ethically needful: there seems need to reinstate the purely human or natural virtues in their place of honor or importance, so that we shall even think less of any religious faith, or hope, or love, which does not in its outworking incorporate or reinforce them. It is the virtuous *mind* we need, even before the virtuous *will*: when we have learned to "*think* on these

things" and to love them, we shall certainly do them. Therefore, says the author of "Comus,"

"Love Virtue; she alone is free,
She can teach you how to climb
Higher than the sphery chime;
Or, if Virtue feeble were,
Heaven itself would stoop to her."

There is just the trouble; Heaven seems all unheeding of the troubles of virtue; Nature seems blindly indifferent to her trappings and defeats. But this moral indifference of Nature, Bagehot used to argue, was a necessity to such a being as man, affording the only fair field for morality, with no bribes to virtue. Maeterlinck reminds us that the indifference of Nature to our moral actions does not prove that she has no morality or equity of her own, or that there is no morality but ours. Rightly enough he insists on the need to let our consciousness — with its certitudes as to virtue — speak, howsoever force may seem to belong to the immensities and destinies of the universe. By these, within ourselves, we must abide; to these we must be loyal: these alone are for us consistent, coherent, and fruitful. It is this absolute and indefeasible worth of virtue, we are now concerned to maintain; and it will do an infinite deal more for us, in the practical outworking of life, than Royce's rather formal and futile moral maxim of "loyalty to loyalty," which only too easily leaves men mere loyal partisans — a poor enough result, and common enough, even in philosophy. Not so with loyalty to virtue; she is no shade; she is neither a half-good nor a half-good; her worth is beyond question; her value beyond compute; her credentials are complete; her assurances of the highest. It may be foolish, rather dangerous, to challenge virtue to whet the sword of individual resolve and personal moral initiative, for so to speak is to show that we do not

know the hidings of virtue's power. To be loyal to virtue is to be loyal to no empty formal precept, but to that which is destined for true and needful warfare, and designed for true and universal welfare.

We are sometimes told that there must be no insistence on moral virtue merely on the ground that it makes for perfection of our personal character. Well, and of what worth will our activity for others be, if there is no inner force of virtue in us, as we seek to be perfect, even as the one Father in heaven is perfect? A mechanical and unfruitful activity it will be. Has virtue no worth in itself that we must seek it only for the sake of others? Because we love virtue as good in itself, it does by no means follow that moral virtue must remain in us subjective, personal, selfish. The potentialities of virtue are too great for that. The thinkers who fear such issue forget that the highest we can give to others is what we *are*. They forget the matchless power of ethical virtue — its strange, unexampled power of triumph in and over human life. Christianity found its supreme power precisely in the sublimity of its appeal to the ideal in man — to his unattained and unfulfilled ideals — for the primacy of its appeal is to character rather than conduct. The realization of virtuous character instantly influences and inspires conduct — a form of perfection which is obligatory upon all. Character, fashioned by a sense of the peerless and intrinsic worth of virtue, is a dynamic force which will not fail, in well-regulated forms, to issue in exterior activity. For character just consists in the habitual direction and attitude of the will. And it includes all the elements of our actual consciousness, whether attention, or emotion, or desire. In Christian virtue, the will gives fundamental direction, and the Kantian emphasis on a

good will we accept, remembering that, the "tree" being "good," its "fruit" will also be "good." But that is not the whole case, for too often it is overlooked that man's unique distinction is, that he has the power to choose and say which "tree" he will be. The will by which he so chooses is part of his actual consciousness, and it is the totality of his actual consciousness that makes him the "tree" good or bad. The will is never passive, not even in the case of those to whom the dogma of negation is so dear that they fancy they believe nothing apart from "knowledge." The supremacy of the will, in our virtuous seeking of essential good, can be recognized by us without ignoring those intellectual and emotional elements that accompany volitional attitude or working. Those ancient moralists were already right, when they so deeply felt, and so strongly insisted on, the need of faith and reverence to the practice of virtue. They rightly held the beauty of goodness to be an enkindling active principle within us; hence we find Plutarch saying of Pericles, that "virtue has this peculiar property, that at the same time we admire her conduct, we long to copy the example. The goods of fortune we wish to enjoy, virtue we desire to practise; the former we are glad to receive from others, the latter we are ambitious that others should receive from us."

We have not, in moral practice, got beyond the unconditional character of the moral imperative, whose pressure does so much to unify our chaotic experience. Virtue, as virtue, is moral. To love virtue is to love truth practical. By reason of our virtuous consciousness, truth does not come to us as to her own, and her own receive her not. Great strength and tranquillity accrue to the total force of personality from direct reflection upon, and express cultivation of, things that are just, noble, pure, and morally lovely. We may well feel, with

Malebranche, that "strength and freedom of mind, which consist in being disposed to seek and follow truth, and to accept it solely on evidence, are virtues and cardinal virtues." It must seem strange that the Christian man — who should be more than ever man — should often be deficient in those lowly human virtues which mark man as man, and which, possessed in high degree, are capable of making spiritual result in man more perfect and entire. Yet, to add to their faith virtue, in this sense, is so deep and precise a need of to-day, that nothing can make up for the want of it. Not until this has been realized will the consciousness of moral personality stand out as the sovereign fact in experience. Not without this can the moral hero — crown of the moral universe — come. Such power of virtue is the combined result of the force of will and of attachment to moral truth — an attachment which at once raises and transforms the will. The direction and aim of our moral endeavors should be towards *being* rather than *doing*; our call is to will-direction more than to specific deeds. It still remains true that, as Emerson says, "in a virtuous action, I properly *am*." It need not be denied that a virtuous life, in deep and solid sense, can never be easy. To be virtuous is to obey. We obey, not only because there is that which is higher than our will, but also because our obedience is always less from habit or instinct — less from external standard before us, and more from reason or inward law. Our virtues are too often only accidental, temperamental, and negative — too seldom the fruit of a principle working continually within us. Our striving must be towards reaching a plane whereon virtue will be to us only a pleasure. "Blessedness is not the reward of virtue," says Spinoza, "but virtue itself." Happiness is thus in virtue, and need not be sacrificed to it. And it is *virtue*, not *virtues* merely, that we seek; a consciousness

steeped in, or saturated with, virtue; of such virtue the nourishment is truth. But theory of duty is not virtue; virtue must be swallowed up of affection. Such virtue will be quickener of intellect and of civilization, for it is, as Joubert said, "the health of the soul," and "gives a flavor to the smallest leaves of life."

The strength of moral virtue, which has been the subject of our insistence, must be drawn from the unseen and invisible. If we add virtue to our faith, it is because faith is the root of our virtue. If we distinguish Virtue from mere will, we can still, with Epictetus, be "bold in things beyond the Will, fearful in things subject to the Will." If any man will do the Will, he shall know the Doctrine. No mere knowledge can, as Socrates supposed, constitute virtue; intellectual theory cannot supply moral power; knowledge may be guide or condition of virtue, but is neither its source nor its essence. It was Aristotle who brought out what a dominant feature of all virtue is moderation, and this moderating view of the function of knowledge throws us back upon the importance of ethical will and purpose. Such will and knowledge form the highest virtue — a virtue whose overplus of power makes sure advance towards ideal ends. We have seen the moral ideal involved in such virtue to be nothing exterior or immobile, but an internal and immanent need of moral ascent and progression. For human life has nothing more real than such ideal, calling, as it does, for the virtue of courage to seek truth, and nothing but the truth.