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## ARTICLE V.

## THE SPRINGS OF BENEFICENCE.

BY O. W. FIRKINS, MINNEAPOLIS, MINN.

THE object of this paper is an informal inquiry into the nature of the motives prompting men to beneficent or charitable acts, and the ascertainment of the extent to which disinterestedness prevails in human conduct.

An obvious distinction, liable like many such truths to be obscured by its very obviousness, must be noted at the start. When we speak of an unselfish character, we do not imply the unselfishness of all its acts and motives; we do not even imply the unselfishness of most of them. The character of men consists of a large, primitive, inner circle of self-love or self-regard, around which, in the course of time, an outer ring, a band or margin as it were, of unselfishness insensibly forms. In unselfish characters the margin is broad, not with respect to the inclosed circle, but in relation to the width of the same margin in other minds. The assertion that we are unselfish does not mean that we do more for our neighbor than for ourselves, but that we do more for him than he does for his neighbor or for us.

I shall not discuss the reality of unselfishness, and shall be happy to relinquish to the controversialists the task of proving that man is or is not capable of a strictly disinterested act. Granting that, from the point of view of the analyst, a man can act only to please himself, there remains a trenchant distinction, not only for the man in the street but for the analyst himself when he is off duty or off guard,

between the pleasures derived from the feeding of one's self and the feeding of a hungry dog or child. The distinction is one which no confluence or convergence of terms can efface or diminish; and, in the present unsettled state of nomenclature, may be expressed, for simple-minded people, in the old terms. We need not wrangle with the New-Yorker who classes Minnesota and Oregon together under the general title of the West, but it is well to remind him that the term does not abolish one of the thousand or more miles between Oregon and Minnesota, and that the fact that the States are on the same side of the Mississippi River does not blot out the almost equally weighty fact that they are on opposite sides of the Rocky Mountains. The main point is that men are capable of deriving pleasure from the contemplation of the pleasure of their fellow beings, in the absence of any other benefit, direct or indirect, to themselves.

Nobody, of course, supposes that all the pleasure which the happiness of others affords us is disinterested, or that all the acts we perform to induce that happiness are unselfish. Nature has willed that we should help each other; but she has been far too shrewd to rely solely on our benevolence for the accomplishment of this necessary end. With a quiet cynicism which would have done honor and given pleasure to La Rochefoucauld, she has seen to it that plenty of selfish motives should be on hand to cooperate with our disinterestedness in the fulfillment of its many tasks. With a good nature as pronounced as her cynicism, she has permitted, even encouraged, us to credit ourselves and each other with motives of unmixed generosity, but she never trusts any valued point in the comfort or welfare of others to these precarious guarantees. There are two simple tests that we may apply to the disinterestedness of our nominally unselfish

actions, two tests of which the stringency is appalling and the results are disheartening and contumelious. The first is the degree of pleasure we should take in the service to our friend, if its author were unknown; the second is the amount of interest we should feel in the act, if it were rendered by another than ourselves. One shudders to think of the terrific reduction in the sum total of beneficence that would result from a law making all kindness anonymous; yet the disinterested motives would remain as powerful as ever.

When we render services for pay, our conduct is obviously selfish; when we give presents in the hope of requital, the motive is equally clear; when we render services or give presents for the sake of the embellishment of our own image in the mind of the beneficiary — for gratitude, in other words — the selfishness is less clear, but equally certain. The exercise of skill in beneficent acts often makes their performance little better than an indulgence of self-love.

Parents have unselfish feelings toward their children, but when people measure the extent of this unselfishness by the exertions and sacrifices which are made to nourish and preserve offspring, the mixed nature of human motives is overlooked. Men make large exertions and sacrifices to save houses and recover slaves, yet nobody conceives of these actions as disinterested. Children are possessions,—possessions of inestimable value,—and our grip upon them shows a tenacity peculiar to those feelings in which our self-love and self-forgetfulness unite. One can imagine the indignant horror with which most parents would repel the proposition to make their children noble, beautiful, and happy, at the cost of eternal separation, in intercourse, name, and feeling, from themselves. A like contract was in effect offered, or rather forced upon, the devout parents of an older generation, who

foresaw for their dying children a future of cloudless purity and joy. No degree of faith ever made the forecast welcome.

Emerson, on board a ship, remarks that "that wonderful *esprit de corps* by which we adopt into our self-love everything we touch makes us all champions of her sailing qualities." A man in modern society is a unit in many organizations, and his amiable proneness to take an interest in his town, his state, his country, his college, his guild, his church, may be set down by the unthinking to the account of pure benevolence. But this state of mind often denotes less the emancipation from self than the ramification of self into new territory. We feel that we are stockholders in the power, the merit, the reputation, of the bodies of which we form a unit, and our *esprit de corps* is an eagerness for dividends. There are persons who cannot shake hands even once with a great man of letters without feeling forever after what business men would call an "equity" in all his epigrams and felicities. We cannot, however, deny to this frame of mind a certain relative dignity and breadth which affiliates it, after a fashion, with real unselfishness. An annexation on one side which is attended by no privations on the other, an appropriation which involves neither spoliation nor monopoly, is a form of self-love which may serve as a fit stepping-stone to self-mastery and self-sacrifice. There is even a certain greatness in that self-esteem to which—to specify one instance—the glory of nations is a contributor.

It is certain, therefore, that much—to speak frankly and modestly, the greater part—of what we call regard for others is merely self-love in masquerade. The fact is unpalatable for our vanity, which, unlike all other despots, is pained by the knowledge of the extent of its empire. But after every concession has been made, there remains in the

heart of man an unassailable and ineradicable remnant of real interest in the welfare of his fellows. The rigor — I had almost said the ferocity — of the tests, the compass of the devastation which they work in our complacent sense of our own high-mindedness and generosity, emphasize, as nothing else could do, the authenticity and significance of that part of human nature which survives the test and escapes condemnation. There are “little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love”; and the left hand sometimes ignores the bounty of the right. Men who sacrifice the weal of their fellows to their own would almost invariably prefer a third course which required the sacrifice of neither. A father in a dungeon or on a desert would sincerely rejoice in the knowledge that his children were prosperous. Our self-love and our sympathy intersect and interlace each other at every point; a course of action prompted by the one suggests and provokes the manifestations of the other. Ministration to others becomes the occasion of acts which provide repasts for our vanity, and the pursuit of our own good involves us in situations which serve as bugle calls to our generosity.

We have admission *gratis* to our own consciousness, or rather perhaps, if recent theory is to be accepted, admission to its upper story. Our readiness to act in our own behalf is the result of this intimacy with our own sensations. It is only through this vivid self-realization that we become intelligently and efficiently selfish; we cannot be trusted to watch over our own interests unless they form a distinct and vivid element in consciousness. Now we cannot assist, in the French sense, at the consciousness of another; and it is this psychic disability, rather than any moral perversion, that is the source of our instinctive self-engrossment. Had

we a latchkey to our neighbor's mind and the will to use it, there seems no reason why we should not value his welfare as highly as our own. It is a little hard to tell whether it is the moral avertedness on our part that produces the imaginative exclusion, or whether it is the imaginative barrier that is the cause of the moral aloofness; in plain Saxon, whether we fail to see because we do not look, or whether we do not look because we cannot see. Cause and effect are probably reciprocal.

Our only means of entrance into our neighbor's mind is by way of our own imagination, and the question of unselfishness, as is well known, is largely a question of the extent and the exercise of our imaginative power. Young children are entirely selfish, not from any vice of nature, but purely from the inability to shape for themselves any image of the contents of another's mind. Animals are selfish for the same reason, except where the needs of the species have evolved the instincts of mutual service; and all stolid and savage natures are selfish with respect to those parts of human experience which demand quickness or culture for their apprehension. It may be doubtful whether even motherhood itself attains practical unselfishness except through the mediatorship of the imagination. Parents are merciless where they are unintelligent; and a sensitive child often receives its cruelest wounds from a parent who is perhaps at the same time sacrificing his own pleasure or shortening his own life to provide it with sustenance and education. Animosities and antipathies can usually be maintained only by the refusal to represent or dramatize in our own minds the actual state of our enemy's consciousness, and for this reason many hatreds fail to survive the test of familiar contact between the antagonists.

Imagination is largely a question of memory, that is, of experience. We understand what we have undergone, and variety of experience means range of sympathy. The old are more sympathetic than the young, not from any superiority of nature, but from the fact that their past affords them the key to many phases of life which are inaccessible to their juniors. It is a happy provision in a world in which happy provisions are not likely to lose distinction through superabundance, that old age which permits, where it does not require, the leisure of spectatorship should be supplied with the resources which make spectatorship fruitful. Minds of liberal range and great imaginative power, however, are less dependent on the contributions of experience, or, rather, they are able to put a much smaller amount of actual experience to a far greater variety of imaginative use. A poet can sympathize with a botanist's attitude toward a linden tree much more fully than a botanist with a poet's. A scholar who has never hunted can understand a hunter's interest in the chase far better than a hunter who has never studied can understand a scholar's interest in books.

The foregoing paragraphs suggest the inference that we cannot be equally interested in all the parts or phases of the welfare of the same person. The equality of two interests or pleasures for the subject by no means implies their equality for the friendly onlooker. In benefactions we seek to arcuse in our friends sensations which are not only agreeable to them, but also interesting to ourselves. Hundreds of persons would give a small boy a quarter to procure his admission to a circus who would not think of bestowing the same sum to aid him in the purchase of a slate. An artisan rarely presents a paper cutter even to his scholarly son; a worldling seldom gives bibles even to a devotee. In the pleasure which

we cause and in the pleasure of those who are near to us we are conscious of a certain property, and beneficence is often the attempt to recover for ourselves, by reflection, or, if we please, by proxy, the enjoyments which in their direct form are momentarily out of reach. The pleasures of others serve a like end with the memory or the forecast of pleasure.

The quasi-personal enjoyment which we take in certain sights and facts suggests one or two pregnant inquiries. A boy riding in a dusty railway coach on a hot August day is conscious of a thrill of pleasure at the sight of the white bodies of half a dozen laughing bathers in the lake that hems the track. Is this a disinterested pleasure? Would it be felt most keenly by a sympathetic boy? The story of a street waif who has fallen heir to millions is told and heard with enjoyment by the news-loving section of a whole metropolis. The emotion is apparently sympathetic. Is it keenest, however, in disinterested and self-sacrificing natures, in the pastor spending himself on the distresses of his parishioners, in the volunteer nurse in the pest-laden hospital in the slums? Is it not, on the contrary, felt with peculiar gusto by the blackleg whose pocket bulges with the proceeds of the swindled rustic's year of faithful toil, and by the money-lender carrying off in his wagon the stove of the penniless widow whose payments have fallen into arrear? Does such a satisfaction imply in most cases anything better or anything more than the increased distinctness and likelihood which the actuality of another's experience imparts to the possibility, or the mere image, of a like contingency in our own lives? The occurrence becomes enjoyable after its transfer in imagination to ourselves.

So strongly are we affected by the nature of the pleasure that it will often counteract the adverse pull of kinship or af-

fection. A farmer often feels more interest in his servant's fishing rod than in his daughter's piano: an artist may be more stirred by his protégé's wish to study painting than by his son's aspirations to the bar. An interest in the sensations will sometimes overcome hostility to the individual. Many men would gladly share fire and food with a chilled and hungry enemy; the case of Roderic Dhu and Fitz-James finds an instant response in the hearts of the generous and the selfish alike. I knew of a case in which a person who took a strong interest in the theater presented a matinée ticket to a woman of whom she scarcely spoke without acerbity. It is quite possible to divide another's consciousness into districts or cantons, and to be simultaneously friendly to some regions and hostile to others.

One of the humbling facts in life is the extent to which our sympathies even for sore need and keen pain, operating as they do through the imagination, become subject in a measure to all the chances, crotchets, and caprices to which that erratic faculty is itself subject. Considerations of the most extraneous and irrelevant kind are allowed to control the amount of our sympathy for cases in which extent of suffering alone has the right to regulate pity. We are deceived by youth, good looks, intelligence, or distinction; the conformity of the spectacle to the criteria which the novel and the stage have taught us to regard as appropriate or attractive has much to do with the evocation of sympathy. The depth of the impression which mere tears make upon men is often absurdly out of proportion to the depth of the source from which they emanate in women. The dramatic concomitants are influential. The victim of a conflagration, a collision, or, better yet, an earthquake, is viewed with an interest which we never accord to the results of common-

place sickness or persistent hard times. Even the eye has its promptings for the heart. The picturesque looping of a dress, the effective disposition of a mass of hair, may wheedle us into undeserved or disproportioned pity. It is quite possible to succumb to these irrationalities in almost the very act of protesting against their enslavement of our weaker brethren. George Eliot begins one of the Lowick chapters in "Middlemarch" by refusing to talk about Dorothea in preference to her husband, on the ground that youth and good looks engross an undue share of human sympathy; she thereupon resolutely devotes some four pages to the analysis of Mr. Casaubon, after which hardy exhibition of superiority to the vulgar point of view, she naïvely resumes the exploitation of Dorothea. The insistence of the novel and the play on good looks, high birth, social glamour, heroic temper, or angelic sweetness, in the persons in whose sorrows it tries to interest us, is melancholy proof of the unresponsiveness of human nature to the appeal of bare, undecorated misery.

An interest in sensations tends to create an interest in individuals; in fact, the search for excitement, the craving for stimulus, one of the most ingrained and insatiable of human appetites, often carries us, almost against our will as it were, outside of the inclosure of our self-love. Were the interest in our own lives uniformly intense, the temptation to egotism would be irresistible; but nature has taken care to checker our lives with dull hours, and even to make our own periods of tedium coincident with periods of tension in the lives of others. A supper or marriage in our own household undoubtedly interests us more than a supper or marriage at our neighbor's, but the most selfish of us find that a marriage in a neighbor's family interests us more than a supper in our own. By another of nature's cynical and cun-

ning stratagems, unselfishness becomes the path to entertainment, and our love of diversion commits us to an interest in others. There is a suggestive corollary from this fact. Self-concentration is base only when the real drama, the larger interest, is exterior to ourselves. The preponderance of import shifts perpetually from self to neighbor and from neighbor back to self; and as it is right for attention to follow the first of these shifts, it is not wrong that it should conform to the second. It is a little like the case of the children who remain at home as long as the organ man and the monkey are in front of the family gate, but who follow the procession from house to house as the center of mirth makes its way down the street. We should all find something contemptible in the act of a man who should sharpen a pencil or pare his finger nails at the moment when, in plain sight, a lost child was restored to a weeping and rejoicing mother; but it is not base to be primarily interested in ourselves on occasions when the superiority of our claim is established by the attentiveness of others. For this reason a self-absorption which would be degrading in old age is quite pardonable in youth. Age in its care for youth and youth in its care for itself are both in a sense obeying the same law—the claim of the livelier action and the keener suspense to the larger measure of attention.

There is one respect in which the imagination is unequal to the task of inciting the will to acts of benevolence. Occasions for service to others, like occasions for egotism, are prone to present themselves in files. But the imagination abhors regularity; unless, after a marked interval, it rarely responds twice, with equal briskness, to the same occasion; it demands variety, novelty, intermission. The problem is solved by the interposition of habit. The transformation of

conduct into mechanism by continued and methodical repetition is apparently quite independent of the selfish or disinterested quality of the act. Generosity becomes automatic as readily as self-seeking. Unselfish habits will outlast the benevolence in which they took their rise, and will, almost certainly, survive in some cases the conversion of benevolence into ill-will. Men will faithfully labor for the support of wives their companionship with whom has shrunk to dreary alternations of harsh bickering and sullen silence. Antipathies can grow up in households without prejudice to the performance of the mutual services which habit has rendered congenial. It is an interesting, though not on the whole a degrading or depressing, thought that a large part even of those unselfish acts which had their origin in unselfish impulse are accomplished without any kindling or stirring of the doer's heart. Emotion is costly, and the thrift of nature refrains from demanding that we be interested in every case where she asks us to be helpful. A curious irony marks one of the results of this fact. The moral luxury of beneficence is reserved for the impulsive, that is to say, for the occasional and relatively infrequent giver; a lover of paradox would carry the thought a step further and affirm that it is only the selfish man who enjoys the fervors of generosity.

The appeal to the springs of beneficence, therefore, may be reinforced by two antithetical traits or circumstances: by rarity, if it has the imagination as an auxiliary; and by frequency, if it has habit for its ally. It follows that among the unselfish acts of greatest difficulty are those which come too seldom to acquire the facility of routine, yet too often to maintain the inspiration of novelty. The jealousy with which we watch the diminishing intervals between the visits of the familiar but irregular mendicant, and the embarrassment of

the pulpit in the growing frequency of incidental or occasional appeals are illustrations of this equivocal and irritating middle state.

Custom, social or national, is almost as powerful as personal habit in the facilitating or obstructing of benevolence. There are circumstances in which it is more powerful than disposition or character. Fifteen years ago in America fairly selfish men rose to give up their seats to women standing in the street car; to-day fairly generous men keep their seats. Fifteen years ago unselfish women retained their hats in the theater; to-day selfish women take them off. Yet the degree of hardship imposed by the retention of seats in the one case or hats in the other has been in no way observably altered by the lapse of fifteen years. The remarkable thing is the fact that neither the ease with which a custom imposes itself nor the readiness with which it is obeyed has much to do with its alignment for or against the side of reason and humanity. In the mental transcript which we make of our neighbor's consciousness the italics are not our own but society's. We are not bound to infer, of course, that the impulse toward kindness is wholly conventional because we permit convention to define its channels, any more than we are bound to conclude that the play instinct is entirely social, because we allow custom to select the games.

The comparative ease with which we perform the kind acts and the sacrifices enjoined by custom might suggest that in the establishment and extension of beneficent custom lay the chief hope for the moral progress of mankind. Such movements are no doubt up to a certain point effective and praiseworthy, but it is easy to overrate their utilities. Custom can persuade men to do remarkable things, but the number of these remarkable things which it can persuade

them to do is limited by the constitution of the human mind. It is the direction of self-sacrifice rather than its amount that is obsequious to the dictates of custom. The impulse towards kind acts in human nature is limited; its power to force itself to the unwilling performance of kind acts is also limited; and the growth of beneficent customs is subject in the end to these limitations. Coercion at one point means contumacy at another. The man whom reluctant compliance with the social code has impelled to the relinquishment of his seat in the street car to the tired woman is likely enough, when he reaches home, to visit his suffering upon his wife in abuse of the toughness of the mutton chops. The mutual strain which family life imposes upon its members is often materially aggravated by reaction from the suavities and genialities enforced by the presence of guests. We hardly needed Mr. Kipling's stories to convince us that the brothel and the public house find their account in the slackening of that spring whose tension carried the soldier unwaveringly through the hail of bullets to the foot of the redoubt. Custom may transform practices, but it cannot renovate men; or at any rate, it can do so only with an extreme slowness intolerable to the solicitors of quick results. Men's moral capital, whether in the form of disinterested impulse or of conscientious self-direction, resembles other capital in the slowness with which it accumulates, and the practical fixity of its total at a given time. The part of wisdom is neither to expect nor to seek sudden or striking enlargements of its amount, but rather to see that nothing lies idle or goes to waste, and to insure the discretion of the investments. The moral unthriftiness which in ascetic and puritanic epochs has led to a pitiable waste or a cruel misuse of the power of self-bestowal and self-discipline must find its wholesome cor-

rective in the sense and charity of a less robust but more enlightened age.

A survey of the race as a whole with reference to the humane and kindly virtues will dismay no one except the pessimist, and discourage no one except the poltroon. There is no want, indeed, of material for stricture. When we look at the vast areas of life which belong to selfishness, as it were, in fee simple; when we look, moreover, at the fashion in which it honeycombs and undermines the domains of its rival; when, above all, we survey the pitiful tissue of chicane by which we nourish in ourselves and others the convention of a feigned disinterestedness, we are ready enough to surrender the whole human family, ourselves included, to the diatribes of the misanthrope. But, on the other hand, it only needs a little charity in our judgment to disclose the charity in those we judge. When we look at the little handful of red and creased flesh, immersed by nature in its own sluggish and muddy consciousness, and reflect that this is the provision with which we set out on the path of life; when we consider that the threshold of every mind remains throughout life impassable to the direct approach of any other, and that communion is feasible only through the clumsy and obstructed circuit of the senses, the extent to which we succeed finally in domesticating ourselves in the minds of our fellow men becomes ground for admiration and wonder. Our kindness is as inexpugnable as our egotism; if men are selfish in their very charity, they are good-natured—even generous—in their very greed. When all is said and done, human nature turns out to be fairly good if we do not ask too much; and the fact that we do, and always shall, ask too much is the final confirmation of its goodness.