

## ARTICLE V.

## THE EMOTIONAL AND ETHICAL IN RELIGION.

BY THE REV. JOHN MILTON WILLIAMS, CHICAGO, ILL.

THE term "religion," though largely used in a wider sense, is defined with sufficient accuracy as conformity to obligation, and made a synonym of virtue, holiness, meritoriousness, benevolence, or moral love.

The human soul, constituted of three generic faculties, is capable of but three generic exercises: thinking, feeling, willing, exhausts its capabilities.

While the intellect is essential to rational existence and moral agency, its exercises are not distinctive elements of religion, inasmuch as they are common to both the good and the bad. The worst man as clearly apprehends his obligation to do right as the best, and perhaps as clearly perceives what is right; and probably there are no truths believed by the latter which the former may not believe, and possibly none "the evil one" does not believe. Strictly intellectual phenomena, then, may be dismissed from our inquiries.

The question upon which I venture a few suggestions pertains to the relation of the sensibility and will—the emotional and ethical—to virtue; a question which assumes importance in both its theoretical and practical bearings, and constitutes one of the chief points of controversy between two great schools of theology.

The Calvinist gives a clear and adequate, but not generally accepted, answer to our question. He makes the emotional the primary element of virtue, and the ethical an emanation, or outflow, from it. I think all Calvinists will

concur in this statement. President Dwight holds that "Adam, antecedent to his first moral act, was propense to the exercise of virtuous, rather than sinful volitions," and that this propensity, or relish as he terms it, was *essential holiness*—holiness so complete and perfect, that, had Adam died before his first moral act, he would have died a perfectly holy man. He also regards this relish as the source whence Adam's virtuous volitions flowed, and as "the reason they were virtuous rather than sinful." By reason of the fall, he claims, this holy disposition was displaced, and a corrupt disposition, which was true and properly sin, substituted. Regeneration, he claims, consists in a partial restoration, by a divine interposition, of this holy relish. His language is: "In regeneration the same thing is done, by the Spirit of God, for the soul which was done for Adam, by the same Divine Agent, at his creation. The soul of Adam was created with a relish for spiritual objects. The soul of every man who becomes a Christian is renewed by the communication of the same relish. In Adam this disposition preceded virtuous volitions. In every child of Adam who becomes a subject of virtue, it produces the same effects."<sup>1</sup>

The view of this able theologian, making emotion the primary element of virtue, and action or conduct its mere expression or outflow, is the general, if not universal, Calvinistic belief. Is this view sustained by the word of God or the facts of moral science? Let us glance at a few of the latter:—

1. Human feelings and emotions are matters of amazing importance, and do, and must, exert an amazing influence over the life and conduct of the subject. It is probably true that all absolute evil and all absolute good are phenomena of the sensibility, and are comprehended in this one word "feeling." Other things are relatively valuable, such as existence, knowledge, virtue, etc.; but, to say the least, it is

<sup>1</sup> Theology, Vol. ii. p. 418.

doubtful, whether any of these are valuable *per se*. Let us suppose existence but an experience of disappointment and suffering. Who would not gladly lay down the burden of being as worse than a worthless thing? Did knowledge meet no want, subserve no uses, afford no gratification; were it simply an inlet of sorrow, who would desire it? "It were better," says the apostle, "not to know the way of righteousness," the most valuable of all knowledge, "than, knowing it, to turn back from the holy commandment,"—clearly intimating that knowledge is valuable only when used for its appropriate ends. The same is true of virtue. The value of any and all these lies in their contributions to well-being; and what is well-being,—call it happiness, felicity, enjoyment, what we will,—but a state of the sensibility? The universal sensibility is pretty evidently the great reservoir into which all other streams flow, and their value must be measured by the contributions they make.

Many, I am aware, dissent from this view, and assure us that intelligence, rectitude, power, are more valuable than mere enjoyment. Give us, is their language, honor, position, influence; and, if necessary, we willingly suffer. But such language, even if true, only expresses a preference for the gratification which comes of knowledge, elevation, etc., and is but an acknowledgment that thirst for these endowments is their stronger passion, and is perfectly consistent with the theory that the only absolute ultimate good is located in the sensibility. If this is so, it follows that well-being, or, as Edwards puts it, "the good of being in general," is the only worthy object of pursuit for its own sake, and that the choice of it, or benevolence, is the fulfilling of the law, and the whole duty of man. This is not a logical deduction simply; it is an intuitive certainty. No man ever conceives of obligation other than to do good.

2. Feelings of every kind and degree are admittedly *in-*

never in themselves can be, either sinful or holy. Avarice, ambition, covetousness, revenge, are morally wrong, it is conceded, and patience, resignation, fortitude, are right; but the rightness and wrongness of these complex phenomena inhere exclusively in the voluntary element they involve, never in the emotional.

Nor is it denied that emotions are fair *criteria* of moral character, and probably afford the Christian his chief evidence of acceptance with God. The sensibility of one in harmony with the divine law is in harmony with the great trend of things, and, like a well-tuned instrument, responds in music to the touch of almost any finger. Gratitude, longings for purity of heart, and peace of conscience, are indigenous in such a soil; while, in a heart out of harmony with God, such emotions may possibly be aroused for a season, but they are exotics, having, in the most favoring circumstances, but a brief and sickly life.

Nor is it denied that moral beings have more or less indirect voluntary control over their feelings; and to this extent, and no farther, are they responsible for them. To hold one responsible for that over which he has, and has had, no control, is glaringly unjust. The theory that obligation ever transcends ability is too obviously false to need contradiction. We are therefore compelled to relegate the theory that any relish which may have been concreated in our first parents was in itself either holiness or holy; or that any disease or disability which may be congenital with the child is sinful; or that any change in the sensibility constitutes regeneration, to the category of absurdities.

3. In no circumstances and in no hour of life should feeling be accepted by moral beings as their pilot or their guide. Here lies man's chief peril. Subjection to feeling I take to be sin in its essence. It is the crime of the drunkard, of the sensualist, and of all who transgress the divine law. It would not be a transgression of the divine law, were there

no higher interest to be subserved or imperilled. The lower animal yields to his strongest inclination, probably must do so, and commits no sin. He is oblivious to anything higher or more valuable than his individual and present gratification. But man is endowed with reason, within whose purview lie the amazing interests of other beings to whom he is related, and for whose welfare he is measurably responsible; also the awful idea of obligation. Reason, conscience, whose revelation is the divine law, make him a debtor to the Greek, and to the barbarian, and to every other intelligence God has made; and nothing less than the devotion of his whole being to the general welfare can meet this claim, and pay this infinite debt. This is all the obligation which rests upon a moral being; it is the fulfilling of the law.

Our personal feelings and interests are a part, though relatively infinitesimal, of the universal good, and should have their appropriate influence in the conduct of our life. But lest we jeopard higher interest, our every act should be submitted to the arbitration of reason and judgment, enlightened by such helps as God has provided. The interests with which we are connected are too vast to be imperilled by yielding the leadership, for a single hour, to blind impulse. He who makes a choice, not because he *sees* it right, but simply because he *feels* like making it, imperils interests infinite. A transgression of the divine law in such a moral system as this, involves guilt no geometry can measure.

The wise mariner, thankful for any aid he may receive from careering winds, will not allow his bark to be driven aimlessly by them, but keeps steadily in view his compass and destination; so the wise mariner, on the sea of life, heads his bark toward the moral pole-star, and makes what progress he can, whether gales are propitious or adverse. The difference between the lost and the saved is that one commits himself to the control of winds and tides, the other to the guidance of compass and chart. Intelligence, en-

lightened by whatever truth lies within his reach, is the pilot of the one, and the blind forces of impulse and passion are the pilot of the other.

In perfect antagonism to these facts, the Calvinistic theology makes a renewed sensibility primarily holiness, and the choices and conduct proceeding from it obedience to God, and all the obedience God requires. In other words, it ignores man's moral nature, subjects him to the law which governs the lower animal, and accounts subjection to the emotional nature—that which constitutes sin in its essence—as holiness.

The question, then, What is the relation of emotion to virtue? is already answered. Emotion is a usual accompaniment of virtue, but constitutes no part of it. Virtue is integral and complete without it. A virtuous mind from which it is entirely excluded, is none the less virtuous. No one claims that emotion is a constituent element of *sin*. The wicked man does not cease to be wicked, though for a season he is destitute of feeling. If emotion is not essential to sin; why should it be deemed essential to holiness? Evidently both sin and holiness lie deeper in the human soul than emotion, are not necessarily swayed by its fluctuations, and are integral and perfect without it.

It follows that the *ethical* or *voluntary* is the one only essential element of religion. In other words, a moral being is, and can be, either blame or praise worthy in nothing but his voluntary states and exercises. This is a first and necessary truth, a *practical* denial of which would convict a man of insanity, and a *theoretical* denial is rarely heard outside

“not that principles derive their goodness from actions, but actions from principles whence they proceed. So that an act of choosing that which is good is no farther virtuous than that it proceeds from a good principle, or a virtuous state of mind. . . . There is no virtue in a choice which proceeds from no virtuous principle.”<sup>1</sup> “The common feeling and judgment of mankind,” says Dr. Charles Hodge, “carry moral distinctions back of choices, and must do so, unless we deny that virtue ever can commence, for there can be no virtue in a choice which proceeds from no virtuous principle.”<sup>2</sup> This is true of all executive choices and volitions. One cannot intelligently pronounce an act, whether it be taking life or giving all one's goods to feed the poor, either right or wrong, without knowing the motive or principle whence it proceeds and from which it borrows whatever of moral character it possesses. But the vital question, in reference to which clear distinctions are more important than almost anywhere else, is, What is this *something* back of actions which determines their character? Is it something *involuntary* or something *voluntary*? Is it a state of the sensibility or of the will? Is it feeling or purpose? Can there be any doubt that it is the latter? that every moral being is in possession of a generic ultimate *choice*, lying back of all other choices and volitions, which dominates his life and determines his character? That the choice of the welfare of God's kingdom for its own sake, as the end of pursuit, is holiness in its essence, and the source of all right action? and that the choice of self-gratification for its own sake is the source and essence of all sin, irrespective of the influence by which they are secured? That by the one or the other every moral being is controlled?

and must lack the stability and safeguards which come of being rooted down in the nature of man; and that a regeneration, consisting primarily in a change of choice, makes it possible one hour to be a saint, the next a sinner,—to-day to be an angel, to-morrow a devil,—and is not consistent with the doctrine of perseverance of saints. This objection comes from those who put moral character in the emotions and affections, than which the winds are not more inconstant.

It is conceded that human choices, even when ultimate, are liable to more or less fluctuations, especially in their early incipency; and had the Christian no other reliance, he could entertain but feeble hopes of final victory. But, let me ask, What unorganic change in the human soul is more permanent than that of *ultimate choice*? Is there anything in mental phenomena more abiding? One year ago a youth, under the pressure of intense emotion, formed the purpose to devote his future, with all its wealth and possibilities, to the service of his Heavenly Father. In which of these two exercises, let me inquire, did the moral element inhere? Which proved the more permanent and controlling over his life, the emotional or the voluntary? The next morning his feelings had entirely subsided. He was not conscious of the slightest emotion, but his purpose was there unchanged; and since that hour feelings have come and gone, like sunshine and shadows variegating the landscape, but his *purpose* remains, and when a thousand years have passed it will only have grown in strength. These heavens will pass away sooner.



acter. It also gives us a clear conception of what constitutes *regeneration*, and of the nature of the divine influence by which the change is secured.

2. By making the great imperative of the divine law, not good feeling, but *good willing* simply, it affords infinite relief to those who are vainly struggling to exercise *emotional* love toward God, their neighbor, and their enemies, under the apprehension it is what the law requires. It repudiates the assertion, "No man is able by himself, or by any grace received in this life, perfectly to keep the commandments of God," and confirms the inspired declaration, "His commands are not grievous." It denies that the imputed righteousness of Christ can be made to supplement the defective righteousness of believers, and that his obedience to the divine law may be substituted for their own.

3. This theory of virtue greatly clarifies the doctrine of the enmity of the unrenewed heart to God. The average sinner, so far from entertaining hostile emotions toward his Maker, is conscious of occasional kindly, reverent, and grateful feelings toward the great benefactor, and he believes, if he does not love God, he is at least friendly toward him; and certainly, if the moral element inheres in feeling, it is difficult to prove he is not. But his difficulty vanishes the moment he reflects that moral character resides exclusively in the voluntary nature, and it is in this sense only that the charge of hostility to God is preferred. He should, however, know that hostility of the will is real enmity—enmity in its worst and most criminal form. Whom, let me ask, do we account as enemies? Whom do we fear? Certainly not those who entertain unkind feelings toward us, nothing more. From such we apprehend no danger. Unkind feelings are not enmity, nor are they essential to enmity in its deadliest form. He is an enemy, and he only, whose ends and purposes antagonize our interests, be his feelings friendly or hostile. It is he who lies in wait, more to be dreaded

than the coiled rattlesnake, to decoy our feet, or those of our children, into the saloon, the gambling hell, or into dens of deeper infamy, whatever his motives or emotions. A murderer, in the State in which I reside, confessed, I think at the gallows, that after the fatal blows were inflicted, the dwelling robbed, he lingered behind his accomplices, and ministered water to his expiring victim. Here pity and murder blended. The murderer deprecated the necessity of shedding the blood, of perhaps his friend, to get his gold. But his kindly feelings only deepen our sense of the strength of a depravity which could overcome such a barrier. It is precisely in this sense that every unconverted man is an enemy of God. The language of his heart is, "This man shall not rule over me." He is on the side of the rebellion, and opposes his life and influence against a consummation God sacrificed his Son to secure. "He is an enemy by wicked works," and it is no thanks to him that God has a friend or loyal subject in his domain. "He who is not with me," says the Master, "is against me."

4. This theory of virtue sets in a clear light the doctrine of *total depravity*—a doctrine largely unpopular because largely misapprehended. The doctrine does not import that every sinner has inherited a nature totally corrupt and offensive to God. No sentiment can be more untrue. Nor does it import that every sinner is as bad as he can be, nor necessarily that he is very bad. Nor does it deny that the human soul, made in the divine image, is wondrously grand and beautiful, more to be admired and valued than any other thing God has created. The doctrine simply means that man in his unconverted state is totally destitute of that element which constitutes holiness, and this every one who has a true conception of what that element is, must concede. But if the moral element resides in emotion, the doctrine is not true. Man's emotions are not totally depraved: the wickedest often experience feelings which the saint might

covet. The ancient Jews, while awfully wicked, took delight in approaching unto God, as a nation that did righteousness. To their ear the teaching of their prophets was "like a very lovely song, of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument." If holiness attaches to feelings, every man has a share of holiness. Sin and holiness are mixed in human character in every conceivable proportion. There is none so good as not to be in possession of something bad, or so bad as not to have something good. There is no clear line of distinction between saint and sinner. They differ in degree only, and this difference here does not warrant the difference in their destinies hereafter taught in orthodox creeds.

I shall not be understood to say that the Christian is perfect, or in any case reaches perfection in this life. In intellectual and emotional culture, the most advanced come infinitely short of it. My meaning is that all moral character lies in *intention*, and intention, in its nature, is *perfect*. Though as knowledge increases, and the soul expands, it will be more and more embracing in its range and grasp, still, at any given time, it is either wholly right or wholly wrong. A mixed intention is not possible.<sup>1</sup>

It is objected that faith, or believing in Christ,—*par excellence* the Christian grace,—is an *intellectual* exercise; therefore the moral element does not reside exclusively in voluntary phenomena. This is certainly a misapprehension of the nature of saving faith, and one of which the enemies of Christianity have not been slow to avail themselves. Such men as Robert Dale Owen and Robert Ingersol hold up the Bible to the reproach of dooming men in hell forever for

Manifestly, saving faith is, like honesty, truthfulness, chastity, temperance, *a state of the will*, differing from an intellection as action differs from an opinion. Let us, for illustration, suppose a man is in distress for money; that his neighbor offers him, on reasonable terms, all he needs; that he *fully believes*, and knows, the money is ready for him, but he resolves he will have no business transactions with his neighbor. That *belief* is not faith: it is a mere opinion, and affords no relief. His distress, let us suppose, increases until he voluntarily gives up his prejudice, accepts the offer, and *relies* upon his neighbor. Then his anxiety is gone, his mind is at rest. That is purely a *choice*, a state of the will, yet it is *faith* in its essence. A similar state of the will toward the Christ of Nazareth and his promises is the faith which brings pardon and life to the soul. "With the *heart* man believeth unto righteousness." This voluntary exercise involves submission and obedience to the divine will, and is but another name for holiness.

5. This view of virtue possibly throws light upon the problem of the infant dead. The little one comes into the world as blameless as the little lamb that sports in the field, and is detained in this vestibule of being to make for itself a character, and determine its place and work in the world for which it was created. It travels its way, neither praise nor blame worthy, until it reaches the crisis hour, when the awful idea of obligation and accountability takes possession of its mind. There its way divides into two paths. Over the one is written the word "*ought*," and over the other the words "*ought not*," and its attitude toward God and the universe is determined by the choice it makes. If life here is too brief to reach that point, it will reach it in the life to come, and there, as it would have done here, had its life been prolonged by its own choice, it will decide its position in the government of God. But we may, I think, commit the little treasure dust to dust, in the glad assurance

that the tender Shepherd will carry it in his bosom to fountains of living waters. He allows us to place the badge of his family on its brow in the assumption that it is a member, and will so be trained as forever to remain a member, of his household; and we reason, that what he requires and expects parental faithfulness to do here, infinite love can and will do there, and that no bitter tears need be shed over these "blossoms of being seen and gone."

6. Relegating the moral element exclusively to the domain of the will, as has been intimated, wonderfully simplifies religion both as a theory and a duty. It unloads Calvinistic theology of an enormous amount of useless lumber. It drops out Adam entirely, except as an historical personage, and all our alleged complicated relations to him. It denies the imputation of Adam's sin, or of Christ's righteousness, or of any guilt or any merit, except what pertains to one's own conduct. It relieves the Christian of all anxiety about occult sin and of the necessity of constant watchfulness over his emotions, and requires of either saint or sinner only an honest endeavor trustingly to do the will of God as revealed in his conscience and in the Sacred Word. What is of more importance, it corrects a prevalent, and in thousands of cases fatal, misapprehension as to what is pure and undefiled religion, and what is the change which puts the soul in possession of it. To make "the saving change" primarily a change of feeling, or to measure one's piety by his excitement, or by the strength of his emotions, is a grave error. The ocean is no deeper or more able to bear its burdens when billows are on its bosom than when the sea and sky are all tranquillity. It is no exaggeration to say that a large percentage of the false hopes and the spurious religion, in and out of the church, comes of assigning moral character to the sensibilities. A late writer well says: "The single comprehensive reason of spiritual decline in the individual is that conversion has touched his *desires*, but has not touched

his *will*. The will is the fundamental faculty in the upbuilding of character. When the will has chosen Christ with its full might, the culture of character is as natural as the growth of a plant from its seed. When the *desires* only are toward the acceptance of Christ, the warmth of spiritual zeal soon declines." The difference ordinarily between a true and a spurious religion is, one is primarily the religion of *will*, the other of the *sensibility*.

7. Our subject affords some hints for the pulpit. If the views presented in this article are correct, its great trend of thought should be *ethical*. To a marvellous extent this is the character of the sacred oracles. The Bible is a volume of ethics making for righteousness. Righteousness is the theme at which its rays are all focalized. A more ethical teacher than the Christ of Nazareth never opened his mouth; and more ethical discourses never fell from human lips than from those of his inspired followers. "My little children, these things I write unto you, that ye sin not," assigns the final cause of revelation.

Appeals from the pulpit to hopes and fears and feelings are in order; yet there is an evident possibility of making them too prominent to secure the best pulpit results. As man is a moral being, appeals to his conscience and reason are most conducive to high, manly, Christian character. Obligation, accountability, guilt, duty, the claims of God and of a universe of moral beings, capable, like himself, of suffering and enjoyment, reach his deepest nature, and are most conducive to holy living. The historic Christ is a grand theme. But if it be the historic in distinction from the *essential*, as is too often the case, he will be to careless im-