ARTICLE II.

OBERLIN'S CONTRIBUTION TO ETHICS.

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HISTORY has been making its record for two-thirds of a century since two men[1] with no resources but their own moral earnestness chose the spot where Oberlin now stands for the location of a great enterprise of Christian education. The forest about them was savage in its trackless growth, and still more forbidding in its undrained clay soil. In what contrast to-day are the substantial business blocks of Oberlin, the streets of tasteful homes, the many beautiful college buildings! These things suggest how great a contribution those pioneers were making to the material development of their country. They would have said their aim was wholly religious. They thought of material things only as means for helping reach higher ends. In carrying out their spiritual aims how powerfully did they also contribute to material transformations! The hiding of their power was in their intense ethical spirit. The ceremonies of religion were of little interest to them compared with its duties. They were positive and aggressive in their ideas of right and wrong; as far as possible removed from the flabby morals of those who can find no stronger objection to profanity than that it is "bad form." They led the early community in signing a covenant that looked toward a strenuous regulation of life's minutest acts by moral precepts. Food, dress, even the color of the houses, were to be regulated not by taste, but by duty.

[1] Mr. Philo P. Stewart and John J. Shipherd; see "Oberlin: the College and Colony," by President James H. Fairchild, Chap. i.

Earnest men were they, such as the world has not seen in too great number. If they were open to the charge of narrowness, if they were in danger of refusing sentiment a place in human life and a share in determining human duty, nevertheless they laid a solid ethical foundation on which has been built a far richer and more varied structure than they had vision of.

They had little conscious interest in æsthetics. Indeed they were not without fears that the beautiful would prove an enemy of the useful and a temptation from a consecrated life. There were phrases in their covenant about "observing plainness and durability in the construction of houses and furniture," that came near to a formal declaration of war on beauty. Nevertheless these men could not do their work, inspired by high spiritual ideals, without giving an impulse to all ennobling ideals. With their own hands they built "Slab Hall," which met a primary need of the school at that time, but was not a thing of beauty. The later college buildings, so beautiful without sacrifice of utility, had been impossible without that rude "Slab Hall." That was the homely cradle in which was nurtured an unrecognized spirit of culture that would not suffer the consecration of Oberlin's founders to confine itself to the realm of utility, but carried it into the whole life, including adornment and art.

The connection of music with religious worship brought Oberlin almost from the beginning into touch with one of the fine arts, and in the department of music Oberlin early and preëminently contributed to æsthetics. The influence in this direction of Professor Allen's culture was strengthened by President Finney's fine musical ear, and the intelligent delight in harmony of Professor Morgan and Professor Cowles. Music, already enlisted in the service of religion, was found to be a valuable recruit also for the temperance struggle and the war against human slavery.

Who that heard it can ever forget how Professor Allen's abolition adaptation of the "Marseillaise" stirred the blood! It followed inevitably that music for its own sake, music as a means and form of personal culture, came to be more and more esteemed. An enumeration of what Oberlin has contributed in this field to the progress of the United States would be longer than Homer's catalogue of the Grecian ships. It is not my purpose to make such a catalogue, nor to rehearse the inspiring list of men and women from Oberlin who have enriched not only our own national life, but also the life of the world, by making practical inventions and scientific discoveries, by organizing industries and advancing medicine, by ennobling political life, elevating the legal standard and contributing to literature and art, by developing our educational systems and revivifying the pulpit, by infusing new energy into missionary work, at home and abroad, and entering heartily into whatever task has offered a chance for bettering the conditions of human life. The contribution of Oberlin in all these fields has been great enough to be worthy of extended separate treatment. To many of these fields the original founders were comparatively indifferent. They were supremely concerned about questions of duty, but their concern about duty set in motion all that followed. I wish to set forth the importance of Oberlin's contribution to ethics as underlying all she accomplished. The history of her past and the hopes of her future alike are rooted in her ethics.

The religion of Oberlin from the first was intensely ethical: it concerned actions far more than feelings. No actions were unimportant. Duty pertained to the whole life. There was a disposition to allow appetite no weight in determining what to eat and drink, nor to give taste any influence in deciding what to wear and how to build. At first, little was left to the individual judgment and con-

science, and the community sometimes laid a crushing hand on sacred human sentiments. From 1836 to 1844 by public vote those who died in Oberlin were buried in rows in the order of their death. A community that thus prohibited family lots in its burial-place, needed enlightenment in ethics. It was failing to recognize the dignity of the individual man. It was in danger of crushing out personality and defacing essential lineaments of the divine image in human nature.

The correction came through discussions that were primarily theological. Extremely Old School views of human inability, of election, and of reprobation were current at this time. Protests in the Oberlin community against extreme conclusions on these subjects led to eager debate over the powers of the human will, the extent of responsibility, the nature of virtue, and the foundation of obligation. The residents of Oberlin in those early days were much given to discussion. How should they learn what was good, how decide what things to hold fast, unless they proved all things? Great audiences could be gathered day after day for the consideration of any unsettled question that really touched life. These questions were of great variety. The whole community was long and more than once absorbed in discussion of the vast humanitarian and political question of human slavery. At another time the question was the exegetical one whether Prophet Miller rightly interpreted Scripture in predicting that the world would end in 1843. At another time vegetarian theories were vigorously debated with extended experimental tests. The community showed its essential saneness by the sensible conclusions it almost invariably reached.

By far the most important of these early discussions was on the apparently dry and unimportant subject of the nature and grounds of moral obligation. This was in 1839. The chief speakers were President Mahan and Professor

J. P. Cowles, the one representing intuitive rightarianism and the other rational utilitarianism. To the question, "Why ought I to love my neighbor?" President Mahan answered in substance, "Because I perceive intuitively that it is right." Professor Cowles answered differently, "Because my love will be useful to my neighbor." The rightarian theory left the different virtues as *disjecta membra* with no vital bond uniting them, with no certainty that they could be made harmonious, with no absolute assurance of their universal validity. With Stoic indifference to the sensibilities, it admitted no necessary connection between virtue and happiness and, if logically carried out, made love as cold as the glittering pinnacles of an iceberg. On the other hand, utilitarianism gave the happiness of sentient being sufficient place, but judged the moral quality of an act by its results instead of its intent, putting off the day of certain judgment till the consummation of all things. For not until the end of time can any but the Omniscient know all the results of any act. The theory left virtue only a relative quality, and could give no sufficient account of the absolute imperative that reverberates through the soul in the "ought" and "ought not" of the moral law. Throngs gathered to listen, and Professor Finney as presiding officer listened most intently of all. He was alert not for the victory of either side, but to get the truth. His keenly analytic mind could not be satisfied with either theory by itself. At the end of the debate he had combined the truths maintained by both speakers in the comprehensive theory that moral beings intuitively see and affirm the obligation to choose the welfare of all sentient existences. *I ought to love my neighbor because his welfare is valuable.*

This was simply a clear statement of the truth that had been groped after, but not firmly grasped, by the Edwardses, father and son. They and their New England

successors, while often talking of benevolence or love as the essence of all virtue, did not distinguish carefully between love as a feeling and love as a voluntary act of choice. Kindred discussions in other parts of the country turned more to special and sometimes formal theological points and less to ethics. At Oberlin the ethical element was dominant from the beginning and became a controlling force in the life and thought of the school.

Just about the time of the discussion between President Mahan and Professor Cowles, the *Oberlin Evangelist* was founded, with Professor Henry Cowles as editor, and found widely diffused sympathy with the type of thought to which it gave voice. It soon secured five thousand subscribers scattered over the northern United States. Its twenty-four thin folio volumes, extending from 1839 to 1862, are the main quarry for a history of early Oberlin life and thought, and should not be overlooked by any one who would understand the history of the United States in the middle of the century. Its theology is permeated with the ethical purpose of commending the religion of the Bible to every man's conscience in the sight of God. Its dealing with practical questions shows the insistent yet kindly purpose of bringing individuals and communities up to the right standard of conduct in love toward God and man.

Another publication dealing with similar topics was the *Oberlin Quarterly Review.* This lived only from 1845 to 1849, but its four volumes help much in understanding the development of ethical theory at Oberlin. President Mahan and Professors Finney, Fairchild, Thome, and Hudson were frequent contributors. William Cochran's elaboration of the theory of the "Simplicity of Moral Action," appeared in the Quarterly, but was left uncompleted at his untimely death in 1846.

Still a third Oberlin publication should be mentioned as

showing the persistent ethical spirit of the place. In November, 1858, the *Oberlin Students' Monthly* appeared. Its title-page announced that it was "devoted to religion, politics, and literature." The two complete volumes and the thin half volume abruptly terminating in April, 1861, when enlistment in the Union Army so thinned the ranks of the school, are filled with contributions from faculty, alumni, and students of all grades. While there are many sprightly things in the Monthly, its contents fully justify the title-page in using the word "religious," if we take the word on its ethical side. This *Students' Monthly* did not eschew even the theoretical side of ethics. My own views of free-will received in boyhood a never-forgotten impression from a student's article in the first volume. In another number a Preparatory student entered the lists to reply to an article by a theological student on the "Entireness of Moral Character."

The interest in Moral Philosophy was not quenched by the Civil War. During that exciting period, Professor James H. Fairchild was still elaborating and setting in due order the principles which Professor Finney had outlined after the great debate of 1839. Professor Fairchild's lectures on Moral Philosophy, given to the Senior class in its last term, were considered the greatest attraction of the college course. An invitation to a Senior party in those days would have been hardly thought in good form without some phrase suggesting "the good of being" or the discussion of "the foundation of moral obligation" as the ostensible end of the gathering. One young woman, if not more, of the class of 1865, reproduced in her teaching the next year Professor Fairchild's lectures, though they had not yet been put into print. Oberlin alumni went forth thoroughly indoctrinated with this philosophy, and in agreement with its spirit they carried with them into life a marked degree of unselfish devotion to the good of

others. They have justified Paul's declaration that love is the fulfilling of the law, by a remarkable record of usefulness. The whole history of Oberlin has illustrated its theory of morals, and that theory has been a determinant factor in Oberlin's influence.

A comparison may make this clearer. The great historic example of the transformation of thought by the study of ethics is in the work of Socrates. When he began to search for the universal element in duty, new life was given to Greek philosophy. The significance of Socrates is less in what he himself clearly enunciated than in the new interest he gave to all later thinking by his absolute confidence in man's power to know some things surely. The things of which Socrates affirmed certainty were few, and were internal rather than external. But his few ethical certainties made a firm standing-ground for advance. The schools of philosophy after his time may almost be described as efforts to provide a metaphysical background for the ethics of their great master. To estimate what the world owes to the moral science of Socrates would call for a comprehensive survey of Plato and Aristotle, and all the later thinkers who have sat at their feet. Before Socrates the Greek world resounded with the fruitless logomachy of the sophists, equally worthless whether elaborating fantastic cosmogonies, without foundation of scientific observation, or in light-minded skepticism declaring all our perceptions illusions, and denying all possibility of knowledge, and obliterating all moral distinctions. Since Socrates, the stream of thought has swept on not without here and there a skeptic bark stuck fast in the shallows on the right hand or on the left, but bearing along on its main current fleets richly laden for the physical and spiritual needs of the human race.

A Socratic zeal for intelligent virtue burned in that forest community at Oberlin. More than any other force its

impulse set Oberlin forward in all departments of thought and life, and has kept thought within the boundaries of good sense. The investigation of the nature and power of the will was not abstract theorizing. It fixed a cornerstone from which the human mind can run its lines out over the wide domain of life's possibilities, and chart that domain with confidence. The will in man shows that he has a power of choice. Let us not be enticed into a sophistical dispute about words by the question whether this is a power of contrary choice. The positive statement is sufficient that man can choose between diverse solicitations of the sensibilities, and more than that, he can refuse all that the sensibilities urge upon him and choose a rational end, set before him by his intelligence. Fundamental in the Oberlin ethics is this recognition of the vital power of the human will. The will is not a mere balance to weigh counter motives. Man is neither the plaything of circumstances nor the sport of pre-natal influences. Man is alive. He is a positive force. He is the creator of his own moral character.

The theological significance of this position can hardly be overestimated. It involves a theology that can be preached. Implying man's ability to repent, and therefore his responsibility to turn at once to righteousness, it is central in the best form of the New School theology, which has been defined as "an attempt so to state the doctrines of the gospel that the sinner shall have no excuse for not immediately leaving his sins and accepting salvation."

Incidentally from the right understanding of the will and the recognition that moral character in the exact sense applies only to the ultimate choice, there was worked out the doctrine of the simplicity of moral action which was so important a force in holding Oberlin back from the mingled puerilities and extravagances of so-called perfectionism.[1] The clear perception that virtue is subjective,

[1] See J. H. Fairchild in Congregational Quarterly, April, 1876.

is a matter of intention in the act, not of results that come after the act, is a constant corrective of the tendency to bitter and censorious judgments. This showed itself in the way Oberlin with all its intensity of anti-slavery feeling was not drawn into denunciation of the churches nor into abstention from political action.

The end which man ought to choose with his will is the good of all sentient being. This love goes out comprehensively toward every existence in the universe from the lowest creature with sensibility to God himself. We may give happiness to beast and bird in their measure; we may please God, who created us in his own image. The inclusiveness of this end, universal well-being, forbids all jesuitical making the good of our own clique, or party, or church, the justification of false words and cruel deeds. The recognition that means, as well as ends, have their place in morals is a purifying force in trade and politics. Lowly life is ennobled, and the commonest acts of love transfigured, by the perception that anything that is done for any sentient being is part and parcel of the virtue which is the glory and beauty of all holy existences. A will choosing the right end puts one into fellowship with all the saints and angels and with God himself.

These moral ideas and this devotion to the universal law of love were widely diffused through the *Oberlin Evangelist*, and were propagated with warm personal enthusiasm by the preachers and lecturers that went out from Oberlin, as well as by the hundreds of Oberlin students who every winter vacation taught in the schools of Ohio and adjoining States. Space permits only an allusion to the influence of these ethical principles in the important matter of opening the paths of the higher education for women. Nor is there need of more than alluding to the tremendous force of Oberlin in arousing the conscience of the nation to political righteousness. Her citizens and stu-

dents had refused to obey the iniquitous Fugitive Slave Bill and had suffered fine and imprisonment for conscience' sake. None showed more eager loyalty to the nation than did they when thronging to enlist for the twofold purpose of saving the nation and setting free the slave. But for the influence Oberlin had been putting forth for a quarter of a century in the Northwest, it may well be questioned whether the issue of that struggle would have been such a triumph for equal rights.

Closely connected with the recognition of the vital power of choice in man's will is the almost equally important recognition that man is alive in his intelligence; that through sense perception he knows the external world; that through reason he knows necessary truths; that his processes of thought are essentially reliable and yield knowledge. The soul of man considered as intelligent is something more and other than a sensitive plate to record passing impressions. It is an active power to perceive and know and think. Socrates, according to Plato, did not understand this. He resorted to the hypothesis of preëxistence to account for our certainty in regard to mathematical truths. He abandoned the study of the physical world as incapable of yielding certain knowledge. It was nearly two thousand years before physical research recovered from this blow at the hands of a false psychology. Oberlin's ethical studies were protracted and profound enough to bring her thought out to a clear psychology of the intellectual and the emotional as well as the moral powers of man, and thus keep her disciples in eager touch with all science as well as open to the refining influences of æsthetics.

Many philosophies have professed to differentiate the intellect, the sensibilities, and the will; but too often in the elaboration the sensibilities have been suffered to encroach upon or even overwhelm one or both of the others. Locke,

or at least many of his successors in the sensational school of philosophy, allowed the intellect no function but to record and tabulate sensations on the sensorium. The sensibilities on this scheme push the intellect aside until there is no place found for intuitions, and displace the will, sometimes even defining it as the strongest desire. Man in this conception is only a highly organized automaton, not a living soul. Jonathan Edwards, while not of this school in regard to the intellect, did leave the will bound hand and foot by the sensibilities.

The Oberlin ethics contributes to both clearness of thought and practical wisdom by leading out to a right understanding of the relations of the intellect, sensibility, and will. They are powers of the one soul. They are united in varying proportions in every definite act of the soul, yet they are clearly distinguishable. In developing the complete man they are all to be regarded. A right education must train broadly the intellect, must cultivate wisely the sensibilities, must strengthen uprightly the will.

The bearing of correct ethical thought on the best life of society and on the highest personal development of individuals is scarcely more important than its relation to the general course of philosophy. The clearly chosen position that man's will is a power of free choice and man's intellect a power of perception and thought, stands impregnable and foursquare against the assaults of false philosophy. We hurl off the motley hosts of materialism by showing man's reaction on his environment. At another bastion the subjective idealists throng up under their transcendental banner of mingled cloud and rainbow. They would have us believe that the external world is only the efflux of man's soul and that there is no standard of conduct but each individual's impulse. They cannot disturb our position that man knows the external world through

his God-given powers of perception and thought and that he has the God-given power of knowing his duty and doing that duty. We smite them with the universal validity of moral law. We put them to flight with an array of necessary truths that man understands and accepts because he is in God's image.

The strength and glory of the Oberlin system is in its deductive character. Like mathematics it is worked out logically from definitions and axioms. It is far removed from superficial empiricism. It is not satisfied with any fact until the relation of that fact to a universal law is understood. It embraces the moral universe, reaching to every being with a moral nature as Newton's theory of gravitation reaches to every mass and particle of material existence. It unifies by a common principle the highest virtues of an archangel and the acts of good-will put forth by a little child. Love comprehends them all. Love seeks the satisfaction of all sentient existences. That satisfaction is valuable in itself. Love is the choice of the good of being. This is at once definite and all-comprehensive. Its application to details (which is also its verification) calls for as varied and fascinating studies as the application of the Copernican astronomy and Newtonian physics to the hourly positions of the planets and their moons. But each detail of moral life is taken out of the realm of the special and artificial. The orbit of human duty need not be "with cycle and epicycle scribbled o'er." The falsity of the Ptolemaic astronomy was indicated by its needing to bring in so many special forces to account for facts. The Oberlin ethical theory appeals to philosophic minds by its simplicity. Love is sufficient definition of every particular virtue, and refusal to love defines every sin. All the complications of moral life in every detail come under the law of love. Contrast with this definiteness the vague, unsatisfactory phrases which abound in

books on ethics. One talks of "fulness of life" as the end of a good choice and the test of character. What is fulness of life? Is it the eager exercise of all the powers, the gratification of all the desires, the plethora of all the capacities? Is it not rather the harmony of all these by their subordination to some true end of life with intelligent purpose? If it be said that self-restraint and control of appetite are necessary to avoid the crippling of life, and that fulness of life means permanent welfare, the remark reduces morals to shrewdness by putting results in the place of intention, and, moreover, involves the absurdity of bidding us find out what we hit before we take aim. Another question to be asked concerning the phrase is, Whose fulness of life is meant? That of the individual is one thing, that of his race may be quite another, and that of the universe still another. There is such a thing as a "sacrifice hit" on the ball-ground when the individual gives up a point for himself in order that his side may score. No doubt, fulness of life for the individual is generally the result of virtue, but sometimes virtue shows itself in readiness to give up life, as when Daniel's friends said, "Our God is able to deliver us; but if not, we will not worship thy gods, O King."

Many beautiful things said by moralists are unsubstantial as an iridescent dream because they have no definite meaning behind them. Take, for example, the declaration that man's true aim is "the perfection of self through self-devotion." The statement is attractive by its paradoxical form, which seems to appeal to egoism in "the perfection of self" and to altruism in "self-devotion." But what do the words mean? What is perfection of self? To what is self to be devoted? How can we aim at perfection which in the last analysis must be a quality of the aim itself? How is self-devotion conceivable with perfection of self as the end which this very devotion seeks?

Cleared of absurdities, and informed with meaning, the phrase is nobly inspiring. Self-devotion to the true end is the highest moral perfection, and leads to the perfection of the whole nature. He that loseth his life for a worthy object shall save it. The moral being that is self-devoted to the good of all sentient existences shall attain unto the highest things forever.

Oberlin's contribution to ethics has not yet been duly appreciated. The time since its enunciation has been one of unusual absorption in the tremendous material development of the world and in speculations connected with Darwin's studies in natural history. Since the publication in 1859 of Mr. Darwin's epoch-making book "The Origin of Species," a generation of thinkers has been occupied with the problems for which the Darwinian theory offers solution. Never before has the world seen such a movement in the science of living things. Biology, like a century plant, has suddenly opened out the fairest blossom of all in the garden of the sciences. For a time there was comparative neglect of ethics, then this very movement produced a perverted ethics. The surprising reach of the "struggle for existence," and the "survival of the fittest," in explaining animal and vegetable forms led men to attempt the explanation of spiritual things in the same way. The method has been of great service in many departments of historical study, but in ethics an evolutionary theory has appeared as empty of true ethical contents as would be the study of the migration of fishes in the sea or of the course of swirling autumn leaves. As President Schurman has so keenly suggested, evolutionary ethics is only utilitarianism with preservation in the place of pleasure.[1] Like a Nile-flood, evolution has swept over the fields of ethical thought. It has buried everything for a season in its fertilizing waters. No vestige of man's real moral na-

[1] Ethical Import of Darwinism, p. 125.

ture remains in sight; nothing but a simulacrum of moral nature in certain sentiments and impulses. But the moral nature cannot be forever buried. It will reappear in vigor the more manifest through the enrichment of thought by evolutionary theories. Ethical studies are certain soon to resume their normal importance, for conduct is still the main concern of life. When that time comes, the value of what Oberlin has contributed to the science of duty, which is the highest of all sciences, will be recognized.

The distribution of Oberlin alumni in educational institutions and in the ministry gives wide diffusion to her influence. Wherever her sons and daughters are scattered abroad, in whatever spheres of activity they are occupied, they have opportunity to exemplify her theories. They have been and will be increasingly an efficient and pervasive force for hastening the realization of the brotherhood of man. They are also in position to exert a directing and regenerating influence on thought, instilling into the minds about them fundamental principles of truth that shall develop intellectual clearness, breadth, and sanity. Impressions made on souls are deeper and more enduring than what can be printed in books. At the same time it is to be wished that many more books of Oberlin philosophy were coming from the press. The world's ear is more open than for a generation to the exposition of Oberlin's distinctive thought in its varied applications. Here is work for profound metaphysical thinkers, broad scholars, and literary artists to command attention again to these great themes, and bring unity into ethical thought, as Newton bound in one the physics of the earth and the heavens and as Kepler's restatement of Copernicus brought unity to astronomy.