

ARTICLE IX.

THE LAW OF VERACITY: A STUDY IN
PRACTICAL ETHICS.¹

BY PROFESSOR GABRIEL CAMPBELL.

IN the interpretation of the development of the race a fact at once remarkable and anomalous comes to view, namely, the varying recognition and valuation of Truth. At all times and everywhere the acclaim is so unanimous, the commendation of truth so imperative, it may well be designated a racial impulsion. When, however, we pass definitely from theory to practice the divergence in valuing is as marked as was the unanimity.

This has been interpreted as an outcome of our partial, our progressive evolution. Spinoza's account of Evil in the world as resultant of man's limitations, is admirable for its simplicity. But clearly it is too simple. In the ethical opinion of sundry barbaric civilizations we find truthfulness holding its maximum rank; while in our own most enlightened communities it encounters difficulties seemingly for the moment insurmountable. One of the most subtly perplexing problems of our modern applied ethics is this, Does there exist for us a Law of Veracity, or only a convenient, conventional maxim? In other words, Is Kant's pronouncement "To speak the truth is my bounden duty" a result of genuine vision, or is this merely Kantian mysticism, as some of his followers claim? Here then is our question.

Let us summarize a few prominent ethnic peculiarities in the appreciation of a Law of Veracity. Among the ancient Egyptians there was a singularly unsophisticated blending of

¹A paper read before the American Philosophical Association, in Princeton, New Jersey, December 30, 1903.

speech and life: no distinction between what a man says and what he is. For admission to a future happy world it is only requisite that the soul before the judges repeat moral maxims, declare I have not falsified. The word stood for the deed and the life.

In China a distinguishing between speech and deed becomes apparent. Who can compute the effect upon Chinese life of the confession by their great moralist Confucius that he himself failed upon occasion to conform his conduct veraciously to his words?

There develops in India a remarkable antithesis. The oldest codes condemn falsehood in strongest terms. A hero who will not lie is immortalized. And yet, it is in evidence that there were likewise evolved methods of deception as deftly systematic as a cancerous disease.

So far as we can ascertain, the Scandinavians appear to have been worshipers of veracity. No place in their Valhalla for a liar.

Among the Greeks and Romans, while Socrates is willing to die rather than live a life not according to truth, and Cicero denounces mendacity unqualifiedly, while Plato rises to the declaration that the Divine nature is incapable of falsehood, still, the gods themselves of those civilizations were, as a rule, deceivers, fabricators of words which were not according to the hidden desire; and the gods were idealized humanity. It should be added that the Greeks at the zenith of their enlightenment surpassed the ethical development of their own Pantheon, which represented the ideation of an earlier era.

Among our modern nationalities Christianity has of course dominated Ethics, but the advance in veracity is still dubious. Although Christ was recognized as the Truth—a mouth without deceit, in this, his transcending characteristic, his followers do not immediately follow. Even the saintly Jerome must be chastened in the valuing of truth by the more saintly Augustine. A society of professed representatives of the life of Jesus give the term Jesuit an ambiguous import.

In Germany, Kant who maintains the unmeasurable value

of truthful speech is but the rational evolving of his predecessor Leibnitz. Leibnitz embraces intrinsically the apology for Kant. Recently in the University of Berlin, Dorner, my old instructor, doubtless also teacher of some of my readers, —Dorner has stood with his characteristic four-square irresistible sincerity, to advocate the priceless valuation of truthfulness. And some who may be also members of the Philosophical Society of the German Capital, the most able and cosmopolitan of philosophical societies, will agree that what has made Germany the Fatherland of philosophic thinking, is the unsurpassed candor of the search of her sons for truth's treasures.

Of course the Fatherland has her divided house. Rothe and Lotze limit the sovereignty of truthfulness, and have their following. But the Critical thinking beyond the Rhine surpasses the more politic régime in empirical England, where a utilitarian morality has tended to price and compromise even Truth itself. While we must grant Macaulay's contention that English veracity has held England's power in India, and that Dymond may stand with Kant and Dorner, while Scott commands admiration by raising a monument in Scotland to one who would not lie to save a life, nevertheless it is likewise to be told that English Philosophy in its peculiar way has influenced English development.

In America, Trumbull, who on no account would justify a lie, refuses to be delivered from a rebel prison at the price of a falsehood—his life available but not his conscience. But has the morale of our public life in the twentieth century risen greatly above the politic level, the conventional standards, of the era of Confucius? From this ethnic survey let us pass to observe the development of veracity in professional fields. And first in Jurisprudence.

The civil law has been and is a most decisive harbinger of truthful speech. It demands "Truth, nothing but the truth." Perjury is a crime, a heinous crime. The courts frequently rectify even a failure of conscience. A professedly Christian man refuses to pay a stipulated sum because the promise

was spoken, not written. His word was worth less than his ink. A civil process requires him to validate his agreement. An attorney's oath of admission to the bar includes the avowal to shape his conduct in honest conformity to law and evidence. Indeed our National Constitution forbids any State to enact a law impairing the obligation of contracts. Recognizing the fact, as Chancellor Kent asserts, that "human laws are not so perfect as the dictates of conscience," and that equity is more extensive than civil jurisdiction, it is equally certain that the administration of courts of justice is more exacting than the ordinary private administration of men's moral motives. Even in the religious field the exactions of truthfulness are less rigorous than in Jurisprudence.

Religion has developed, still develops, without full vision of its ethical implications. Judaism with its command, "Thou shalt not bear false witness," is, notwithstanding, a historical medley of inconsistencies. While in apostolic days there were those who incurred a capital penalty for false witness, even the theologians of later time have been prone to regard truth-speaking as having its price, greater or less. Sidgwick bewails the lack of veracity among ministers. His charges, I believe, are exaggerated, certainly as applied to this country. But alas, that it should at all be true that religion's teachers cannot be trusted. This tirade, however, against "clerical veracity" reveals a humorous aspect when we consider Sidgwick's own laxity of valuations, and that too in the role of professor of Ethics. He would justify falsehood to forestall social annoyance—"Not at home" replacing not wanted. It would be excusable in diplomacy when the good of the country demands. Of course in case of detective police continual deception becomes indispensable. Under guise of warfare every form of falsification has been justified. Finally the physician is to be commended who can conserve the mental balance by necessary specious assurances. These dicta of Professor Sidgwick have been only too popular, representative as they are of the antipodes of the strictly Kantian regimen.

From this survey of the objective world, historic and professional, we come to the subjective and practical inquiry. What are the internal facts? What of man's equipment and environment? Man is a creator. He may fancy, imagine, construct an entire world, an unreal cosmos. His freedom, says Hegel, permits him to disport, to develop, to handle this creation at will. He may make it his refuge. The fictitious, the false, may proffer unlimited possibilities. He is deceived—he deceives. How can civilization bring man, thus creative and free, to recognize the sovereignty of Truth? The problem before the world. Let us note sundry conditions of a requirement of truthfulness.

A man's business is his own. Here we may speak in terms of the civil law. In normal cases he is not obliged to divulge. Proper concealment is his right. Farther, he will be misunderstood. Of course he should not aim to be. He must accept the inevitable. It is not man's primal duty to explain. But, it is claimed, Necessities may meet and over-match a regimen of veracity. For instance, it cannot prevail in war. But warfare exhibits the ethics of the savage. Might makes right. Its evolution, however, is suggestive. Deception, we find, is resource proportionately as no real art of war has developed. Let warfare become science and its success appears in meeting facts—hard facts. Truthfulness, "the word of honor" among soldiers, more and more commands devout respect. To violate a flag of truce is unpardonable. Neither soldier nor civilian takes special pride in the capture of Aguinaldo so far as it was mendacious. Evidently warfare fully, properly developed becomes exacting, a mastery of verities.

But, says a spirit of chivalry, We may lie to defend a woman's honor. If a woman's reputation has no securer foundation than falsehood it is dubiously worthy of the sacrifice. Indeed it is further claimed that in courtship lovers are not expected to speak truthfully. Unfortunate evolution of affection verily. Must then the "true love" be relegated to the realm of poets and the era of the troubadour? Heaven forbid!

How lamentably does wedded life suffer from lack of conscience. The marriage vow of fidelity for better or for worse too often becomes a veritable figment. Notwithstanding the solemn pledges, how numerous the newly-wedded begin to speculate as to incompatibilities. Divorce follows divorce. There is forsooth an open question as to incompatibility. Is such speculation compatible with the most sacred vows to love, honor, and cherish? The untruthfulness of matrimonial compacts is the bane, a most alarming menace of our would-be Christian civilization.

Still, it is added, we are justified in false assurances to the sick. Nay, nay. There are truths that are healing. Can we prescribe? Or are we mere imbeciles? And shall we add mendacity to our imbecility? Shall our sick friend be temp-est-tossed as to what to believe? Or perfectly trustful and confident? Shall our friend be prepared for the real, for the worst, or cajoled by specious fictions to the gates of the unseen? There is an increasing demand that physicians, so far as they speak, speak veraciously. Recently an able practitioner lost his field because his patients lost their faith.

Finally comes the test case. May we lie to save a life? In any event the evidence would, at the best, be merely probable—not to say doubtful,—that truth would be fatal. Shall we presumptuously falsify? Moreover, whatever impairs health endangers life. Shall we discount truth accordingly? But, what risk? Any risk? To me, to you, to some one? Is it not every time more or less an open question? And we become a prey under a theory of discount. Eternal quandary—unlimited travesty—confusion worse confounded. The rule is unworkable.

Doubtless veracity calls for brain power and courage. Man is rational because and before he is moral. The spherical cerebrum that enables complete inhibition is the equipment of his freedom. "God cannot lie." He knows. Intelligence cannot lie. A writer in the first century said, "They that be drunken are drunken in the night." May we not write in the twentieth century, They that make lies make lies in the night?

All deception reacts, impairs the vision. The vision impaired, the choice enslaves. The deceiver is deceived. There can be complete vision, full freedom, only in a perfect moral system. Trendelenburg declares, "It is conscience that preserves the might of the will."

Man's refuge indeed is in an ideal world. The True is in perfect affiliation with the Beautiful, the Right, and the Good. With all its shams the age is inheriting and developing the truth,—Truth in its all-pervading, all-commanding reality. Our country is safe when the soldier is ready to offer his life in its defense. Can Ethics stand with a lesser loyalty? The civil law conserves society saying "Nothing but the truth." Can religion accept a lower standard? Already the genuine expositor is heralded as a high critic, not because of his scholarship expressly, but of his sincerity. Let other critics, loving truth equally, with higher vision and broader scholarship, follow him, and he descends to the common level.

Our business life must develop in terms of the real, the genuine, the true. The goods that hold the market are to be equal to the sample. Wundt says we have reached one stage of progress toward Kant's prediction of a perfect kingdom. When the yea of a promise becomes valid, as binding as an adjuration; when our religious faith in God becomes as well, faith social, political, faith in man, we shall have reached another stage of development. It was the Nazarene who said "The Truth shall make you free."