

## ARTICLE V.

## IS "PROVERBS" UTILITARIAN?

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It is in all sober truth a difficult affair to dissociate one's self from one's deep-lying convictions, even in the attempt of being entirely impartial. In search for truth, nothing may be sacred but the truth; yet the content and nature of truth must be necessarily received through the inquiring agent. In a disquisition the "personal equation" enters in as an important factor as to the grouping and relating of the facts of our observation. I therefore will frankly admit that, while putting the question, the answer is already determined for me. The idea is conceivable that God should in his own Word—the perfect rule of faith and practice—address his ethical commands on a basis of exchange for human merit. In that sense we would have a kind of bartering morality resulting from God's inducement to lead men to good action, supposing man capable of good action, and the good action still remaining such, when determined from the hope of reward anticipated in the doing. However, the absolute authority of the command would be endangered when service was bought by the promise of favor.

The Jewish law in its legalistic constructions assumed subsequently a most marked utilitarian aspect. The pharisaic interpretation of *a good living* enters into the idea of *a good life*. They would not seriously strive to be good, unless this was advantageous to them. God's commands are conditioned by the demands of those to whom they are addressed. But the Sovereign God who created all things unto himself, the God

of mercy and of absolute holiness, has, as a matter of fact, to disappear before such interpretation.

Our inquiry, therefore, is rather the consideration of the passages and seeming tenor of the book which would tend to create the impression that the book of Proverbs was utilitarian in its ethics. We would show that the Utilitarian school finds no authority in the Bible. There is no appeal to the "prudential motives," only a seeming appeal to the *utility* of the good. We therefore do not take the book of Proverbs as an ordinary collection of epigrammatic wisdom, subject it to a close survey as to its moral flavor, and then conclude what from the first is uppermost in the estimate, and determines the procedure, namely, that it is free from utilitarian ethics, in spite of seeming indications of expediency. The Bible having still authority for us, we turn to it for instruction and for correction, not to correct and rectify. But we would know, and so try to explain. This is our aim in this article.

There is a very fine work on the Proverbs by one of the many spiritual divines of Scotland. It does not especially bear on our subject, since it is a sort of running homily on the different texts of the book. Its title, however, is suggestive for our consideration. It is, "Laws from Heaven for Life on Earth," by William Arnot. This furnishes us with the key to the seeming discrepancies from divine commands in the repeated references to reward and punishment as considerations for good and evil conduct. The Christian system is often likewise laid along the surface of common life, without removing it thereby from its foundations in the doctrine of grace. The authority of the instructions is divine, though the form is transparently human. As one Divine Spirit inspires, so there is unity in the whole, however varied the details of God's word. Indeed, we *assume* the same unity in his world. We

must therefore reasonably proceed on the same basis in the Bible, even if apparent contradictions would be seen which defied explanation. Human reason is only true to its nature in confiding in the infinite, limitless reason of its source when it suspends conclusions in regard to unsolvable mysteries.

At the beginning of our theme we direct attention to the appeal which guards against utilitarianism. In Proverbs i. 7 it says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction." The royal preacher founds knowledge and wisdom in *the fear of the Lord*. The appeal is *not* to the consideration of self, which hedonistic, utilitarian, or worldly prudential and rational respectability is bound to take. No: the emphatic declaration right at the beginning of the sermon of counsels is, wherever you are under the fear of the Lord you are under the right guidance. Not consideration of utility, but fear of God Almighty, is the appeal, motive, and wisdom of Solomon's counsels.

There is also the evident fact from the statements in the Nineteenth Psalm, that "the law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul": that "the fear of the Lord is clean": whereas "the *judgments* of the Lord are true and righteous altogether"; they are more to be desired than gold, they are sweet; but, "*moreover, by them is thy servant warned.*" These texts contain the two facts which we find in the book of Proverbs side by side. The judgments of the Lord are true. It is a comforting conviction, sweet indeed, that God, even God, holds the balances of this world as a judge. He is righteous altogether, his laws operate in perfect wisdom and justice. If the transgressor will only see, he must find that his way is hard because it is not God's way. It is written in the very essence of this world that evil runs out, before long it

must fail. In a modern phrase of American life, one might say, "It does not pay" to discard God's commands. It is poor policy: only "fools despise wisdom and instruction."

Reading life's experiences in most sober fashion, we see that evil will not stand. The mills of the gods grind slowly, but exceedingly small. Since God is on the throne, there must be retributive and punitive justice. And this is no idea of a judgment *ab extra*, in judge-like fashion, after it is all over with sinning and blundering. Nay, sin inevitably and intrinsically stores up the wrath of God; for he presides over this very world-order, and its laws work his sovereign will. *Therefore* "by them is thy servant warned." If we but want to observe, we may see the workings of God's law, and our souls may be converted. Even in the face of overwhelming adversity, if but observing and obeying God's commands, the potent declarations of the Twenty-third Psalm sound in our ears: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

With the acknowledgment, then, of these two well-known facts,—namely, that virtue will be rewarded, and that vice is disintegrating, entailing disaster,—we have the problem clearly before us. We perceive at once that the crux of the problem lies in the *connection* of these facts to our behavior as moral motives. The human consideration of ethical life too aptly brings in the dependence of our doing good upon the rewards which are to follow; and, likewise, the avoidance of evil, only because it spells ruin to the evil-doer. Only, in the second place, it is remembered that God regulates it so, because he wants us to do the expedient and right thing. Our limited, finite wisdom and insight blunderingly finds out the right way.

We find throughout the Bible the alternatives between good and evil conduct contrasted. It is the inevitable reaction of the constitution of the world upon the ways of behavior. Men have at all times reflected on these issues. Even our blessed Saviour concludes the Sermon on the Mount with the parable of the building by a foolish man, as contrasted with the building by a wise man. Had He utilitarian motives,—He, who was a man of sorrows, faithful unto death?

The Proverbs take a practical turn, they move in the social sphere; and, in consequence of this, they deal specifically with the doings between man and man. And because of this application to the concrete living in this world of every-day life, they lay stress on the social side. But that sufficient stress is laid on the motive is evident in the affirmation "Keep thy *heart* with all diligence." The instruction makes much of the negative aspect of right living in emphasizing constantly the disastrous consequences and folly of wrong-doing and sin, which is continually contrasted with the good results of righteous living. This is the practical aspect, the convincing method of approach. As, indeed, we start so naturally our warning to an erring brother: "My dear friend, this will not do. This will go crash in the end"; yet the final appeal is to the justice of a governing God, overruling human relations and affairs. So the doctrine of rewards comes in, but Proverbs insists on the justice of God, and so lays the foundation for his love. The right, then, is not interchangeable with the expedient, though the rule will prove ultimately the expedient, because of a just God doling out justice. Proverbs, therefore, present an *objective and absolute system of ethics*.

Indeed, the thought of Revelation would imply both these characteristics. Right is right, however disadvantageously it may issue. You are not to judge according to your views of

expediency, for in particular cases you cannot establish the expediency at all. Rather, we are to believe, that, since it is so on the whole, the right must be expedient in the end, even in particular; because God orders right, and a just God will buttress his commands as beneficent to the observing agent. In the end you therefore rely on God's will. This final appeal to God's sovereign will, which makes the ethics objective, renders them also beyond the reach of utilitarianism. The motive is no more utility, but God's will. If the will of God is the rule of morality, then any amount of resorts to a doctrine of temporal rewards does not endanger the ethical nature of the Proverbial ethics, since it does not end in these prudential motives. Malan, in "Notes on the Proverbs," collects thousands of parallels from the wisdom literature of other religions, which goes to show that the appeal is a very natural and practical one. In fact, one may well find occasion to admire the deep insight into the practical nature of ethical behavior, whilst not endangering the high motive which must always be reserved for any true morality. This emphasis we find in Proverbs iv. 23: "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are all the issues of life." The *heart* must be applied to wisdom, iii. 4: Mercy and truth must be bound about the neck; yea, *written upon the table of the heart*; "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart." Here is evidently no appeal to things without. The prudential motive of utilitarian ethics has quite another ring. As Bruce remarks truly in "The Ethics of the Old Testament," "The ethics of the Old Testament cannot be charged with eudæmonism, nor with filling out the conceptions of moral good by means of utilities alone. It does allow room for these utilitarian values, but the external blessings are of worth only, when they are conjoined with the higher blessings of God's favor and pres-

ence." But it is to be borne in mind above all things, that the "ways of man are before the eyes of the Lord, and he weigheth carefully all his paths." And in the enumeration of six evil things reference is made to the Lord: "There be six things which the Lord hateth" (vi. 16). In viii. 13 it is said, again, that "the fear of the Lord is to hate evil"; ver. 36: "He that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul: all they that hate me love death." The constant and predominant reference to the Lord shows that, indeed, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." We find these references throughout the book: x. 3, 22, 24, 27; xi. 1, 4, 20; xii. 22; xiv. 27; xv. 3, 16; xvi. 11; xx. 12, 33; xxi. 1, 2, etc. These references prove the beautiful statement of Professor W. S. Bruce: "In the Old Testament people did not dream of making themselves the judges of virtue. The foundation of virtue was not laid in any study of man's moral nature and capacities [significant in its bearing on the concreteness of Jewish ethics]. But in the ethical conception of God, whose character and will had been made known to them, both in words and deeds of grace, they found the one grand and positive principle of all moral life. It was owing to this cause that Hebrew ethics never fell into powerless empiricism, or a dreamy, unpractical philosophy of virtue." God speaks, and man must obey. The will of Jehovah is the one ethically good thing for Israel, for it is the will of the covenant God, who has chosen them to be the people of his own possession.

In Dr. Oort's "Kommentaar op de Spreuken," we see how even radical theologians admit that expediency as a motive is not to be allowed in the wisdom of one who has inclined his ear unto these teachings. In his discussion of the moral standpoint of the writer of Proverbs, Oort says: "That the

prophet, the priest, and the wise man of antiquity became gradually supplanted by the scribal legalist has been the moral death to Judaism." Oort wants to see these reflections in the book of Proverbs, as these new-schooled *zeit-geschichtliche* Bible exegetes want to find, on *a priori* grounds, the time-spirit reflected even in the Bible. This we may admit in a negative way; not, however, in a positive way, as this would bring the Bible teaching within time conditions, a product of the wisdom of the ages, of man.

He argues that the writer indeed uses rather low incentives to stimulate men to virtue, but we have shown that this is not the ethical appeal of Proverbs. It is rather the argument from the standpoint of the one to whom it is addressed. Oort admits, however, that the way of life is found in the fear of the Lord and true wisdom—such as results from the application of the heart (compare ii. 19; iii. 22; iv. 22, 23; v. 6; vi. 23; viii. 35; ix. 6, etc.); whilst the ways of sin and folly lead to death (compare ii. 18; v. 5; viii. 36; ix. 18). The punishment of sinners consists in poverty and shame (compare iii. 35; iv. 19; vi. 33) and total destruction (i. 26; ii. 22; v. 23). Yet he concludes his discussion of the Proverbs by saying that the author was *not* a sober, rational man, who, after coolly considering the pros and cons of the way of sin and of virtue, then presented his conclusions as in favor of the good. Our Bible-critic overthrows his assumptions by adding: "From the glow wherewith the writer gives his exhortations it is at once evident that he had *not* given himself to the consideration that righteousness and the fear of the Lord as such mean great blessings as contrasted with the miserable life of sin. In the time of Proverbs, Judaism had not arrived at its rabbinical corruptions. The author is a kindly dispositioned man of the law." In conclusion, Oort even states that the two fatal re-



sults of rabbinical legalism—formality and eudæmonism—were not at all to be found in these teachings *in a direct way*. Proverbs holds not merely the wisdom of ethics, but also the earnest reproof of loving exhortations (see i. 23, 24, 30; vi. 23; xxix. 1, etc.).

The Old Testament knows of no abstract ethics; it does not contain a system of ethics spun out after a logical method, as our modern times issue forth its argued codes of morals. Old Testament ethics enters into life in a very definite and concrete manner: it is in constant touch with actual life. Is it, therefore, not to be expected, as a matter of course, that its wisdom should include the words of reproof and the references to the blessings of a virtuous life? It is a terrible thing to see how life's experiences are lost upon the majority of men. Although they have lived, as the phrase runs, the folly is still upon them, and is the awful habit of vice—in the midst of the ruin they have wrought to themselves and others. Of this fact Proverbs takes particular notice, and the urgent appeal to stand in the fear of the Lord is reinforced by the assurance that God is on the throne; that he holds the balances is only too evident. Out of life's experiences may be gathered a wisdom unto life eternal. Therefore we should apply our hearts to wisdom. Evidences show us that no one less than God awaits our decision, and that an inevitable judgment attends our conduct. This circumstance was certainly not to be left out in a concrete, direct appeal to the doings of men, and in no way introduces eudæmonism in the Bible code, which is typically characterized by the "thou shalt" of old. The corresponding subjective, "I ought," to be sure was worked out in the legalism of pharisaic contrivance after a utilitarian fashion. But this is outside of the Scripture canon in the Haggadai of the Scribes.

In conclusion, the opinions of a Roman Catholic Bible exegete, Dr. Elster, of the monastery Loccum, concur in the universally exalted view, which the Old Testament, though in incomplete form, teaches as much as the New, namely, that "with God is the fountain of life." "Wenn wir den eigenthümlichen Begriff 'Leben,' wie er im Buch der Proverbien hervortritt, und seine Kehrseite den 'Tod' genauer ins Auge fassen, so ergibt sich leicht, dass diese Begriffe prägnanter Art sind, dass 'Leben' hier ein Sein bezeichnet, dass sich darin als ein wahrhaftes erweist, dass es nie zerstört werden kann, wie umgekehrt der 'Tod' in unserem Buche nicht etwa einen Wechsel der 'Erscheinungsform, sondern eine wesentliche Auflösung und Vernichtung bezeichnet 'Leben' bezeichnet in den Sprüchen das menschliche Dasein, insofern dasselbe sich zu seinem wahren Ziel vollendet, insofern das Individuum sich zu einer ethischen Gestalt von ewiger Bedeutung entwickelt hat." "In the way of righteousness is life" (xii. 28), "The righteous hath hope in his death" (xiv. 32). Is all this not in perfect accord with the saying of the Master, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly"? And is it not the wisdom unto life eternal to apply our hearts to this truth, even the truth as it is in Jesus?