

XX. Of Ethics in general

(1) We proceed now to that knowledge which considereth of the appetite and will of man: whereof Solomon saith, *Ante omnia, fili, custodi cor tuum: nam inde procedunt actiones vitæ*. In the handling of this science, those which have written seem to me to have done as if a man, that professed to teach to write, did only exhibit fair copies of alphabets and letters joined, without giving any precepts or directions for the carriage of the hand and framing of the letters. So have they made good and fair exemplars and copies, carrying the draughts and portraitures of good, virtue, duty, felicity; propounding them well described as the true objects and scopes of man's will and desires. But how to attain these excellent marks, and how to frame and subdue the will of man to become true and conformable to these pursuits, they pass it over altogether, or slightly and unprofitably. For it is not the disputing that moral virtues are in the mind of man by habit and not by nature, or the distinguishing that generous spirits are won by doctrines and persuasions, and the vulgar sort by reward and punishment, and the like scattered glances and touches, that can excuse the absence of this part.

(2) The reason of this omission I suppose to be that hidden rock whereupon both this and many other barks of knowledge have been cast away; which is, that men have despised to be conversant in ordinary and common matters, the judicious direction whereof nevertheless is the wisest doctrine (for life consisteth not in novelties nor subtleties), but contrariwise they have compounded sciences chiefly of a certain resplendent or lustrous mass of matter, chosen to give glory either to the subtlety of disputations, or to the eloquence of discourses. But Seneca giveth an excellent check to eloquence, *Nocet illis eloquentia, quibus non rerum cupiditatem facit, sed sui*. Doctrine should be such as should make men in love with the lesson, and not with the teacher; being directed to the auditor's benefit, and not to the author's commendation. And therefore those are of the right kind which may be concluded as Demosthenes concludes his counsel, *Quæ si feceritis, non oratorem dumtaxat in præsentia laudabitis, sed vosmetipsos etiam non ita multo post statu rerum vestrarum meliore*.

(3) Neither needed men of so excellent parts to have despaired of a fortune, which the poet Virgil promised himself, and indeed obtained, who got as much glory of eloquence, wit, and learning in the expressing of the observations of husbandry, as of the heroical acts of Æneas:

“Nec sum animi dubius, verbis ea vincere magnum
Quam sit, et angustis his addere rebus honorem.”

And surely, if the purpose be in good earnest, not to write at leisure that which men may read at leisure, but really to instruct and suborn action and active life, these Georgics of the mind, concerning the husbandry and tillage thereof, are no less worthy than the heroical descriptions of virtue, duty, and felicity. Wherefore the main and primitive division of moral knowledge seemeth to be into the exemplar or platform of good, and the regiment or culture of the mind: the one describing the nature of good, the other prescribing rules how to subdue, apply, and accommodate the will of man thereunto.

(4) The doctrine touching the platform or nature of good considereth it either simple or compared; either the kinds of good, or the degrees of good; in the latter whereof those infinite disputations which

were touching the supreme degree thereof, which they term felicity, beatitude, or the highest good, the doctrines concerning which were as the heathen divinity, are by the Christian faith discharged. And as Aristotle saith, “That young men may be happy, but not otherwise but by hope;” so we must all acknowledge our minority, and embrace the felicity which is by hope of the future world.

(5) Freed therefore and delivered from this doctrine of the philosopher’s heaven, whereby they feigned a higher elevation of man’s nature than was (for we see in what height of style Seneca writeth, *Vere magnum, habere fragilitatem hominis, securitatem Dei*), we may with more sobriety and truth receive the rest of their inquiries and labours. Wherein for the nature of good positive or simple, they have set it down excellently in describing the forms of virtue and duty, with their situations and postures; in distributing them into their kinds, parts, provinces, actions, and administrations, and the like: nay further, they have commended them to man’s nature and spirit with great quickness of argument and beauty of persuasions; yea, and fortified and entrenched them (as much as discourse can do) against corrupt and popular opinions. Again, for the degrees and comparative nature of good, they have also excellently handled it in their triplicity of good, in the comparisons between a contemplative and an active life, in the distinction between virtue with reluctance and virtue secured, in their encounters between honesty and profit, in their balancing of virtue with virtue, and the like; so as this part deserveth to be reported for excellently laboured.

(6) Notwithstanding, if before they had come to the popular and received notions of virtue and vice, pleasure and pain, and the rest, they had stayed a little longer upon the inquiry concerning the roots of good and evil, and the strings of those roots, they had given, in my opinion, a great light to that which followed; and specially if they had consulted with nature, they had made their doctrines less prolix and more profound: which being by them in part omitted and in part handled with much confusion, we will endeavour to resume and open in a more clear manner.

(7) There is formed in everything a double nature of good—the one, as everything is a total or substantive in itself; the other, as it is a part or member of a greater body; whereof the latter is in degree the greater and the worthier, because it tendeth to the conservation of a more general form. Therefore we see the iron in particular sympathy moveth to the loadstone; but yet if it exceed a certain quantity, it forsaketh the affection to the loadstone, and like a good patriot moveth to the earth, which is the region and country of massy bodies; so may we go forward, and see that water and massy bodies move to the centre of the earth; but rather than to suffer a divulsion in the continuance of nature, they will move upwards from the centre of the earth, forsaking their duty to the earth in regard of their duty to the world. This double nature of good, and the comparative thereof, is much more engraven upon man, if he degenerate not, unto whom the conservation of duty to the public ought to be much more precious than the conservation of life and being; according to that memorable speech of Pompeius Magnus, when being in commission of purveyance for a famine at Rome, and being dissuaded with great vehemency and instance by his friends about him, that he should not hazard himself to sea in an extremity of weather, he said only to them, *Necesse est ut eam, non ut vivam*. But it may be truly affirmed that there was never any philosophy, religion, or other discipline, which did so plainly and highly exalt the good which is communicative, and depress the good which is private and particular, as the Holy Faith; well declaring that it was the same God that gave the Christian law to men, who gave those laws of nature to inanimate creatures that we spake of before; for we read that the elected saints of God have wished themselves anathematised and razed out of the book of life, in an ecstasy of charity and infinite feeling of communion.

(8) This being set down and strongly planted, doth judge and determine most of the controversies wherein moral philosophy is conversant. For first, it decideth the question touching the preferment of the contemplative or active life, and decideth it against Aristotle. For all the reasons which he bringeth for the contemplative are private, and respecting the pleasure and dignity of a man's self (in which respects no question the contemplative life hath the pre-eminence), not much unlike to that comparison which Pythagoras made for the gracing and magnifying of philosophy and contemplation, who being asked what he was, answered, "That if Hiero were ever at the Olympian games, he knew the manner, that some came to try their fortune for the prizes, and some came as merchants to utter their commodities, and some came to make good cheer and meet their friends, and some came to look on; and that he was one of them that came to look on." But men must know, that in this theatre of man's life it is reserved only for God and angels to be lookers on. Neither could the like question ever have been received in the Church, notwithstanding their *Pretiosa in oculis Domini mors sanctorum ejus*, by which place they would exalt their civil death and regular professions, but upon this defence, that the monastical life is not simple contemplative, but performeth the duty either of incessant prayers and supplications, which hath been truly esteemed as an office in the Church, or else of writing or taking instructions for writing concerning the law of God, as Moses did when he abode so long in the mount. And so we see Enoch, the seventh from Adam, who was the first contemplative and walked with God, yet did also endow the Church with prophecy, which Saint Jude citeth. But for contemplation which should be finished in itself, without casting beams upon society, assuredly divinity knoweth it not.

(9) It decideth also the controversies between Zeno and Socrates, and their schools and successions, on the one side, who placed felicity in virtue simply or attended, the actions and exercises whereof do chiefly embrace and concern society; and on the other side, the Cyrenaics and Epicureans, who placed it in pleasure, and made virtue (as it is used in some comedies of errors, wherein the mistress and the maid change habits) to be but as a servant, without which pleasure cannot be served and attended; and the reformed school of the Epicureans, which placed it in serenity of mind and freedom from perturbation; as if they would have deposed Jupiter again, and restored Saturn and the first age, when there was no summer nor winter, spring nor autumn, but all after one air and season; and Herillus, which placed felicity in extinguishment of the disputes of the mind, making no fixed nature of good and evil, esteeming things according to the clearness of the desires, or the reluctance; which opinion was revived in the heresy of the Anabaptists, measuring things according to the motions of the spirit, and the constancy or wavering of belief; all which are manifest to tend to private repose and contentment, and not to point of society.

(10) It censureth also the philosophy of Epictetus, which presupposeth that felicity must be placed in those things which are in our power, lest we be liable to fortune and disturbance; as if it were not a thing much more happy to fail in good and virtuous ends for the public, than to obtain all that we can wish to ourselves in our proper fortune: as Consalvo said to his soldiers, showing them Naples, and protesting he had rather die one foot forwards, than to have his life secured for long by one foot of retreat. Whereunto the wisdom of that heavenly leader hath signed, who hath affirmed that "a good conscience is a continual feast;" showing plainly that the conscience of good intentions, howsoever succeeding, is a more continual joy to nature than all the provision which can be made for security and repose.

(11) It censureth likewise that abuse of philosophy which grew general about the time of Epictetus, in converting it into an occupation or profession; as if the purpose had been, not to resist and extinguish perturbations, but to fly and avoid the causes of them, and to shape a particular kind and course of life to that end; introducing such a health of mind, as was that health of body of which Aristotle speaketh

of Herodicus, who did nothing all his life long but intend his health; whereas if men refer themselves to duties of society, as that health of body is best which is ablest to endure all alterations and extremities, so likewise that health of mind is most proper which can go through the greatest temptations and perturbations. So as Diogenes' opinion is to be accepted, who commended not them which abstained, but them which sustained, and could refrain their mind *in præcipitio*, and could give unto the mind (as is used in horsemanship) the shortest stop or turn.

(12) Lastly, it censureth the tenderness and want of application in some of the most ancient and reverend philosophers and philosophical men, that did retire too easily from civil business, for avoiding of indignities and perturbations; whereas the resolution of men truly moral ought to be such as the same Consalvo said the honour of a soldier should be, *e telâ crassiore*, and not so fine as that everything should catch in it and endanger it.

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