

Review

Reviewed Work(s): The Aesthetic Element in Morality, and its Place in a Utilitarian Theory of Morals. by Frank Chapman Sharp

Review by: Josiah Royce

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Age—an age when science and art and religion will cease to exist for their own sake, and will appear only in popular manuals, in ethical and religious congresses, and in tawdry exhibitions. I do not much fear this. But to prevent it, I would suggest that in such series as this it is desirable to make the connection pretty clear between the practical application of ideas and the ideas themselves, which can be mastered only by hard study. Reference to the great philosophic masterpieces should be kept well forward. It should be clearly understood that they are not to be in any way superseded. Otherwise, there might, I confess, be a danger that philosophy may be killed by its expositors, as Universities may be killed by their “Extension.” But I do not intend this as an oblique criticism on Mr. Bosanquet. He, as he says of the “great philosophers” (p. 181), “knows his way in both worlds safe enough.” Whether he deals with philosophy or with practical problems, whatever he touches he adorns. But I tremble to think what might happen if some one else should seek to wield his wand without his magic. The ordinary clumsy person must think what he is doing; he cannot afford to be unconscious of his principles. But perhaps I am falling into a Cassandra vein. I really only want to express the hope that the other volumes of this series may be as good as the first. It is, in one of Mr. Bosanquet’s own phrases, “a beautiful book;” and I trust that all the readers of this JOURNAL will study it carefully.

J. S. MACKENZIE.

TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE.

THE *ÆSTHETIC* ELEMENT IN MORALITY, AND ITS PLACE IN A UTILITARIAN THEORY OF MORALS. By Frank Chapman Sharp, Ph.D. New York: Macmillan & Co., 1893. Pp. 123.

Dr. Sharp’s skilfully but still somewhat obscurely written dissertation deals with a topic often neglected in modern, but above all neglected in the most recent ethics, so far as concerns any express recognition of its importance. It is true that one of Dr. Sharp’s principal theses is that this neglect is in large part *only* apparent. In modern ethics, “Shaftesbury, Schiller, and Herbart will,” says Dr. Sharp, “at once occur to every reader in this connection, but they are by no means the only representatives of this type of thought, for the phenomena which they perceived and were therefore able to point out and describe have served as the real foundation of a very large number of attempts to vindicate the

worth of virtue, although only too often their originators have been but half conscious of this fact."

To develop this thesis, Dr. Sharp begins by insisting upon the fundamental distinction in ethics between those who, with the Utilitarians, lay stress upon the work effectively done, or likely to be done, by a given type of character, as the test of the excellence of this character, and those who, with Kant and with all other "Intuitionists" (for Dr. Sharp throughout chooses to use this unhappy word as a collective name for all who are not Utilitarians), "attribute an *intrinsic* worth to character apart from and independently of its value, either as a sign or a source of something else." The distinction as thus insisted upon is a poor one, since it omits all those ethical writers who, although by no means Utilitarians, do unquestionably decline to recognize any abstractly "intrinsic worth" in a character apart from its power "to do work." And Dr. Sharp appears, throughout his essay, to be almost wholly unaware of the very existence of this large, varied, and surely not unrepresentative group of moralists. However, the distinction once made, Dr. Sharp continues: "The Utilitarian values character merely as a source of actions useful to society; the Intuitionist, on the other hand, values it for itself—that is to say, for its beauty . . . When intrinsic worth is attributed to character, the quality affirmed of it is no other than beauty" (page 5). In consequence, Dr. Sharp proposes, it would seem, to class all his Intuitionists as consciously, or unconsciously, defenders of an æsthetic ethics,—*i.e.*, as reducers of the good to the beautiful.

This thesis, once overlooking the defectiveness of the classification, is an attractive one, and leads, later on, to interesting analyses. Dr. Sharp, in developing his subject, next proceeds to a not unskilful preliminary discussion of the "Theory of Altruism," which, for reasons later explained, he finds it necessary to dispose of in advance. For one cannot discuss "the good" unless one first defines in what sense my private good can be opposed, if at all, to the general good. With the use of arguments that are in part rather tediously familiar to all readers of this literature, our author first explains (pp. 11-17) that "the object of desire is always pleasure (or freedom from pain)." He then explains that nevertheless, owing to the way in which "the unconscious and involuntary plays a part, to an extent varying in the individual cases in all conscious volition" (p. 19), our voluntary actions are, as a fact, not wholly under the control of the desire for pleasure. The latter

is sure to predominate only when we deliberate with care; but in that case indeed, if we look over the whole of life, "happiness will seem to be the equivalent of good" (p. 21), a result which Dr. Sharp supposes to be "practically independent of any particular theory of the will."

But now it does not follow, so our author next reasons, that to desire happiness is to desire *my own* pleasure. "*The idea of a possible pleasure tends to arouse the desire to see it attained.* Of this law, egoism, or the desire for our own happiness, and altruism, or the desire for others' happiness, are but special cases" (p. 24). The reasoning upon this topic constitutes, in fact, the not unskilful exposition already referred to, and Dr. Sharp holds, much as Wundt has maintained, that no "indirect" origin for Altruism is psychologically needed. In this one can certainly agree without hesitation. Later, in the same chapter of his essay, Dr. Sharp, in further discussing the relations of Egoism and Altruism, approaches, but does not quite consciously face, the considerations which have led those moralists who are neither "Intuitionists" nor Utilitarians to the now fairly familiar observation that this whole distinction of Egoism and Altruism is not only psychologically indifferent as to its origin, but ethically quite unimportant as to its results, so that, in fact, *no* significant moral activity is definable as essentially *either* egoistic or altruistic. The stress laid by Utilitarians upon the categories of Ego and Alter is, as Wundt has already in effect pointed out, merely a survival of the doctrine of the individual soul-substance as an ultimate and unconquerably separate entity. One gets rid of the soul-substance in psychology, but remains its victim in ethics, just as, with regard to the will, one learns in psychology to respect the enormous complexity of the mechanism of volition, but remains in ethics still the prey of an old-fashioned and abstract simplification, which identifies the "desirable" with the "pleasurable." As a fact, two intimate and devoted friends, while they give themselves over to the business of their friendship, are neither egoistic nor altruistic in the sense in which those two words are opposed to each other in meaning. Each of the friends is devoted to their concrete life together, to their talk, work, co-operation,—to all for which *both* of them are at once essential. Each friend lives, not "in the other," as other, but in that which is *theirs*. In such a case neither I nor you can be the container of the end. It is We who contain this end,—we *as* the two of us.

But Dr. Sharp does not quite reach this point of view, and stops

short, after all, with the "everybody to count as one,"—a most pernicious formula. In a healthy social function *nobody* counts as one; everybody is, at the very least, "twinned." Still, this old Utilitarian formula, with a few restrictions as to its application, being once in hand, Dr. Sharp returns to these complications of life which have led the Intuitionist to lay stress upon other tests of the good than the foregoing. The current special rules of morality are, from the Utilitarian point of view, efforts to conform the individual to the general welfare; but their complexity, and some other and, as Dr. Sharp seems to hold, some heretofore ill-defined fact about them, has given the Intuitionists great influence in maintaining that the current moral rules have still some deeper meaning than their utilitarian value. This other, this ill-defined fact, which has led the Intuitionists to get such influence is, so Dr. Sharp maintains (p. 43), "the aspiration born of admiration, love, or respect for a definite ideal of character" to which these Intuitionists have appealed. Their opponents have replied by asking how it is that if a virtuous character is known only by the fact that it is ideally admirable in itself, apart from its effects, virtue does still, as a fact, produce happiness. And hereto the Intuitionists have indeed had no appeal but to a sort of pre-established harmony. In view of this helplessness of the Intuitionists to explain the utility of their ideal virtues, which are not to be defined as idea because of their utility, but which miraculously prove to be useful despite their non-utilitarian definition, and in view also of the actual influence and plausibility of this paradoxical notion of the Intuitionists, Dr. Sharp proposes to solve the problem of the whole situation by proving that the utilitarian ideal of the good working qualities of character will of itself explain why such qualities should appear as ideally admirable, apart from their utility, just as the Intuitionists make them. And the proof depends upon the thesis that the moral beauty of a character is, as it were, the phenomenon of its utility—a phenomenon which, as resulting from an appeal to the disinterested æsthetic admiration of the observer, will make this observer forget the utility which is at its basis, and will so tend to make him regard this beauty as an end in itself. Thus, on the basis of a modern Utilitarianism, Dr. Sharp can still make good a sort of return to Shaftesbury.

In order to succeed in this enterprise it is "necessary to show that beauty in conduct arises according to the general laws of æsthetics," and that the conditions for our finding such beauty are

“supplied by altruistic conduct” (p. 49). To this investigation Dr. Sharp devotes Chap. III. of his essay, entitled “An Analysis of Moral Beauty.” In conduct, as elsewhere, the sublime (pp. 54–68), the skilful (p. 68), the united in plan (p. 70), the symmetrical (p. 72), the harmonious (p. 73), the peacefully self-possessed or idyllic (p. 75 *seq.*), have all of them a power to arouse æsthetic admiration. In all these cases, except the last, beauty and rightness of conduct may in some respects conflict; but, on the whole, altruism, in Dr. Sharp’s opinion, will so often coincide with the sort of action which excites admiration in the beholder that “the connection between beauty and universal utility presents no mysteries” (p. 89). But of course it does not follow, as the Intuitionists have, in Dr. Sharp’s opinion, virtually held, that the beautiful character is as such the good, but it follows only that utility of character will very often appear as beautiful (cf. p. 91). The “æsthetic element in morality,” considered in a following chapter on “The Æsthetic Method in Ethics,” is unsatisfactory by itself (p. 100). Viewed in its true relation to Utilitarianism it becomes explicable. The essentially æsthetic distinction between “high and low” satisfactions is a case to which Dr. Sharp then applies his method (p. 108 *seq.*). In the concluding chapter of the essay, stress is laid upon the way in which the “pressure of other wills” (*i.e.*, the force of social suggestion as brought to bear upon individuals) tends, in the fashion which Adam Smith long ago pointed out, to convert the æsthetic judgments as to the worth of altruistic conduct into interests which impose themselves upon the individual in the form of moral obligation.

So much for this not altogether novel but decidedly ingenious analysis. As the present reviewer has no disposition to defend the Intuitionists of Dr. Sharp’s classification from the due exposure of the abstractness of their ideals, the chief criticism to be made on this dissertation is the one implied in several of the foregoing remarks. As a fact, no account of the æsthetic element in morality can be complete which fails to take account of the beauty possessed by those forms of conduct which, being moral, are essentially neither egoistic nor altruistic.

JOSIAH ROYCE.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY.