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978-1-108-00453-4 - From Comte to Benjamin Kidd: The Appeal to Biology or Evolution for Human Guidance

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Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

Science offers to supersede religion as guide to conduct—In form of *theoretical* sociology—Appealing to biology and evolution—Sociology distinguished from politics—From economics—From social philosophy—Akin to evolutionary ethics—Our point of view ; morality taken for granted.

WHEN the French garrison left Rome in 1870, fears were openly expressed that anarchy would break out, but the Italian troops were promptly marched in, and all went quietly. Religion is supposed to be a retreating force in modern life, and many, even of those who are no friends to religion, suffer grave apprehensions as they look forward to a state of society emancipated from all religious restraint ; but others tell us that science will find a remedy. Religion may go off duty, but science will take its place. Never was this conception more confidently advanced, or with more elaboration, than in the first founding of sociology under its present name.

We must clear the ground, however, by a distinction. It is theoretical sociology that we have in view,—a coherent, deliberate body of doctrines, making, among other claims, the startling claim which we have noted above. Much that goes under the name of sociology is matter of quite a different kind. We may call it practical sociology, and we may describe it as a some-

what formless mass of good intentions. In detail it offers many valuable suggestions; scientifically it is a thing of naught. If we were foolish enough to busy ourselves with it in this discussion we should be embarking on unknown waters, possibly upon a shoreless sea. We shall therefore take nothing to do with practical sociology. It is the science or alleged science of sociology that claims our attention.

One outstanding feature of this science is its connection with biology. In the early days of modern history, mathematics stood out in sharp and isolated relief as a well-finished and well-formulated science. Hence an impression got abroad that other sciences were to be perfected by treatment on mathematical lines. Spinoza's *Ethics*, with its array of definitions, postulates, and axioms, and with its pedantic series of syllogisms, is only the most celebrated and most notable among many similar attempts. In our time, biology seems to have cast a like spell upon the minds of not a few. It is biology nowadays which threatens to invade and annex every province of thought. Already in Auguste Comte, the founder or the godfather of sociology, biology counts for a great deal, and subsequent evolutionary speculation has enlarged its claims to infinity. If we achieve anything in this essay, it will probably be in the way of finding a definition (or a cluster of definitions) for the fascinating term "evolution," and in forming an estimate of the value which it, or which they, may possess as affording guidance to human conduct.

Let us further clear our thoughts before beginning our investigation by endeavouring to "place" sociology, provisionally, in relation to other kindred sciences.

In contrast with *Politics*, sociology deals with the

informal or unintended¹ results of human association. In ancient days the line of division scarcely existed. The conception of a *natural growth* had never been applied to society. Speculation in early times was exceedingly sanguine, and counted upon refashioning society at its pleasure. We have learned from age-long experience that human nature is not so easily tamed or managed, even by those who try to manage it for its own good. We turn away incredulously from stories of a lawgiver who stamped his own personality and ideas upon many generations. Perhaps we go too far in our recoil from the ancient belief in the powers of the wise man. He may not always have been a myth; his results might even be repeated. And yet, essentially, we are in the right. "All the world," as we say, is wiser than anybody in the world. To take a more definite example, the House of Commons is alleged to possess better taste than any one of its members. Our modern attitude is partly fatalism, but it is partly religious faith.

A second science may be thought of, which deals with the objective and involuntary tendencies of social conduct—economics or political economy. This was on the ground before modern sociology, and Comte, who gave the latter science its name, and claimed to be its author, regarded economics as a fragment of social science, wrongly studied in isolation from the rest, and therefore resulting in mistaken practical conclusions. In point of fact, one of the great difficulties or ambiguities of sociology arises no less plainly in economics. How make the transition from study of

¹ Compare Mr. Mallock's definition of evolution as "the reasonable sequence of the unintended" (*Aristocracy and Evolution*, p. 97), quoted in our closing chapter.

facts to maxims for conduct? In other words, is political economy an art or a science? The accepted view nowadays regards political economy as a science—the science of wealth; and in spite of Comte's protest, it is recognised as a distinct science, independent, in a sense, of sociology; and that, mainly because more definite conclusions are possible in regard to wealth than in regard to the wider social interests of mankind. On the other hand, it is fully recognised that, if you wish to frame maxims for conduct, you have to take much into account besides the economic tendencies of action. And it is also confessed that in its "palmy days" political economy had identified itself with a system of individualism—with a hard doctrine of individual rights, more especially rights of property—which may well be thought a menace to the public interests. Nevertheless—such is the irony of circumstances!—practically the same system has reappeared in all its stringency in the form of Mr. Herbert Spencer's sociology.

Thirdly: Professor Mackenzie's *Introduction to Social Philosophy* adds another distinction—that of social philosophy in contrast with social science. Sociology claims to rank as a science; Mr. Mackenzie, who is entitled to respect, both on his own account and as representing generally the position of the great Hegelian or Idealist school, conceives that there are philosophical positions presupposed in social science which need separate discussion. In consequence or partly in consequence of this, Mr. Mackenzie's book does not aim at giving us a body of social doctrines, but at vindicating on philosophical grounds what he regards as wholesome social principles. The main significance of this, we think, is as follows, that, in contrast with the school which

seeks to reduce social well-being to a problem in science, in analogy as far as may be to physical science and in close connection with it, there is another school, not less attached to a doctrine of corporate well or ill, which finds the highest authority in regard to human conduct in metaphysics.

Fourthly: we might speak of the relation of sociology to ethics. But here the floods threaten to break loose and drown us. Here we come face to face with the question already mentioned—the question of the transition from science to art; from noting how things happen to declaring how they ought to happen. Without enlarging further upon that topic at this stage in our discussion, we may at least call attention to the fact that historically there has been a very close kinship between sociology and ethics. Their problem is almost, if not altogether, the same; the answer formulated is sometimes labelled “sociology,” at other times “ethics,” as on shipboard the jam is sometimes described as raspberry, sometimes as plum, sometimes, it may be, as guava, yet in all you taste the monotonous flavour of apple, or of burnt sugar. Not less alike to each other are evolutionary ethics and evolutionary sociology. Thus—to anticipate for a moment—sociology was originally formulated by Comte as the true guide to conduct, the new authority, destined to supersede both ethics and religion.—He modified this position in later days, as we shall see, but only within limits, and at the outset it was announced as we have given it.—Sociology offered to guide man with the help of biology; society was an organism; man was a member in the organism; a part, not the whole; essentially dependent on the whole, and bound to serve its interests. This conception reappears in Mr. Spencer; he works out its

suggestions in his own way, which is not Comte's; but still he appeals to the analogy between society and an organism; and he calls the discussion sociology. But when we turn to Mr. Leslie Stephen's *Science of Ethics*, we meet with identically the same discussion. True, Mr. Stephen prefers the expression "social tissue" to the expression "social organism," but the difference is essentially one of detail, and does not affect the question before us. We are still working the biological analogy, yet, if you please, this is ethics we are working at. The brand, no doubt, is different; the liquor is the same. Spencer has elsewhere and in different form his discussion of ethics; Stephen's ethics run parallel, not to Spencer's ethics, but to Spencer's sociology. Again, Professor Alexander's *Moral Order and Progress* is, as the name implies, an ethical discussion, yet the author finds it impossible to discuss the problems of personal ethics apart from the relation of the individual to society, and his book is penetrated throughout with biological and evolutionary suggestions, most of all with the Darwinian struggle for existence. But such suggestions meet us at every hand in modern sociological discussions; nay more, such suggestions it was the professed business of sociology to supplement and apply to human life. It is plain, therefore, that sociology and ethics, as sociologists generally conceive of sociology and of ethics, cannot be separated from each other. Some forms of ethical thought will wander far from the line of treatment proper to us in this essay. But, wherever you have these two things—an interpretation of *duty* as the debt which man, the individual, owes to society; and secondly the appeal to phenomenal fact as the only safe or real authority—there sociology and ethics must necessarily approach, intertwine, or even coalesce. And

therefore it would mutilate a study of sociological theories, not to include in our review those ethical systems which are plainly of the same house and lineage.

Every argument proceeds upon certain assumptions ; and it may be as well to confess at the outset what is to be assumed in the following essay, viz. the trustworthiness of the moral consciousness, or the reality of the distinction between right and wrong. This test will not be formally set aside, except by a few wild thinkers ; but it may be objected that assumptions ought to be vindicated, ought to be justified. Very true ; our test needs justification by philosophy, and we believe that philosophy can do the necessary work, but not here. We cannot incorporate *en passant* a body of metaphysical prolegomena to ethics. We must be allowed to let our point of view stand as an assumption.

Looking at matters thus, although we seek to learn from the theories reviewed, and especially from the interesting and valuable details which they have collected, yet our analysis will necessarily to a large extent be hostile.

First, we ask whether the various theories agree with each other ? And on this Mr. Benjamin Kidd, himself a sociologist, tells us that the sociologists are hopelessly divided in their attempts to furnish practical guidance. The science was to have been founded by Comte fifty years ago and more ; Mr. Kidd seems to think it still needs founding by a new recurrence to biology. It is plain, therefore, that the appeal to fact has not yet done for the study of society what it promised to do. Neither theologians nor metaphysicians could have been more hopelessly at issue among themselves than the votaries of fact have been and still are. Secondly, we ask

whether each author is so much as self-consistent? Thirdly, we ask, granted that we learn some fresh truth, is it taught us authoritatively by science, whether by the science of biology or by some other? or has natural science merely suggested parables to the moral judgment? These formal or logical tests pretty well clear the ground. A remainder of our theories, however, is overthrown (fourthly) by the final test, by the touchstone of the moral consciousness.

Positively our argument can hardly be said to go beyond this point, that if biological clues are to afford guidance for human conduct, they must be supplemented by clearer moral and religious light, and in philosophy by some scheme of metaphysical evolutionism, marking a transition perhaps from "Darwin" to "Hegel."

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PART I

COMTISM, WITH SOME SCATTERED PARALLELS

CHAPTER II

COMTE'S LIFE AND THE PRINCIPLES OF HIS TEACHING

Comte as founder—His life—His books—The term “Sociology”—“Statics” (cf. Spencer)—“Dynamics”—Divisions of the *Polity*—Comte's religion—The term “Positive”—Four authorities superseded—Comte on psychology—And on ethics—Law of the three stages—Criticism—Transition to the study of Comte's relation to science—He repudiates dogmatic atheism and materialism—His scale of values in the hierarchy of the sciences—Spencer's criticism.

ALONE perhaps of all sociologists, Comte may claim to have his life studied, however briefly, as an integral part of the gospel he teaches.

Auguste Comte was born at Montpellier in 1798. He was early distinguished for his mathematical ability ; also for a refractoriness to authority, which led to his expulsion from the Polytechnic School of Paris. In 1818 he met St. Simon the socialist, and became for six years his close friend and disciple ; but the alliance was broken off by a violent quarrel, never to be healed. In 1825 he married. The union proved conspicuously unhappy, and ended in a separation in 1842. In 1826 he began lectures upon his system of philosophy ; and though they were interrupted for a time by an attack

of insanity, the lectures attracted great attention. Between 1830 and 1842 they were published in six volumes under the title of *System of Positive Philosophy*. While working for fame or usefulness by developing his system, Comte worked for bread and butter by the exercise of his mathematical talent, mainly in the service of that Polytechnic School from which he had been expelled in his student days. His eminence as a heresiarch cost him his connection with the school; and thereafter he lived by his earnings as a private tutor, or by the gifts of his devoted disciples. In 1845 he became acquainted with his Egeria, a lady named Clothilde de Vaux, with whom he fell passionately in love, and to whom he looked back with passionate regret till his death in 1857, the lady having lived only one year after making acquaintance with Comte. There was no stain on their friendship, though it was the occasion of a good deal of folly upon Comte's part. In his later years, 1851-54, Comte published the second part or second form of his system, the *Positive Polity*.

We do not attempt to mention other works, but it is necessary to say something about the *Philosophy* and the *Polity*. The earlier treatise, the *Philosophy*, was an encyclopedia of scientific knowledge, as it then existed, crowned with the first rough sketch of the science of sociology. It was condensed in an English translation by Harriet Martineau, a translation which was afterwards retranslated into French, as being an improvement upon Comte's own statement. This may be called our English tit-for-tat in exchange for Dumont's relation to Bentham. The book was recently republished in English, when an able reviewer¹ protested against the absurdity of offering the reading public the

¹ In the *Manchester Guardian*.