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Frances Power Cobbe

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CHAPTER I.

THE CANON OF RELIGIOUS DUTY.

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It is not the concern of the moralist, but of the psychologist, to investigate the fundamental principle of the Religious Sentiment in the human soul. That sentiment may be, in its germ (as Schleiermacher has affirmed), a mere "sense of dependence." More accurately defined (as by Schenkel), it may be "a sense of dependence ethically induced."* In its perfect form it would seem to be best described as "*the sense of absolute dependence united with the sense of absolute moral allegiance,*" the Being on whom we depend being recognised as possessing the Right to claim, as well as the Power to enforce, our absolute obedience.

In whatever depths of our nature the religious sentiment may find its source, it is, however, sufficiently patent that the duty which it entails upon us is a real and actual one, not lying hidden among the obscure and vague feelings of the heart, but rising to the surface of speech and action, and demanding even the highest place among our recognised affections. Through that sentiment we have received intimation of, and have entered into relation with a Being who, *when* so recognised, acquires in the nature of things a whole series of claims upon us. Had we no such sentiment, our understandings might possibly have worked out inductively the "hypothesis of a God," though it is far more probable they would have utterly failed to do so. But the "Great

* "A mere feeling of dependence still falls short of any *moral* element which is never wholly absent from religion. Hence Schleiermacher's view decidedly needs correction on the ethical side. Not till it is ethically induced—not, that is to say, till it arises from a function of the conscience—does the feeling of dependence properly pass into religion. And if we may say that there is no religion void of the element of dependence, we must, on equal grounds, affirm that there are (absolute) feelings of dependence which do not fall within the province of religion."—Article "Abhängigkeitsgefühl," by Dr Schenkel, in the *Real Encyclopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, quoted in the *Westminster Review*.

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First Cause," even if thus brought within the field of our philosophy, and recognised further to be necessarily a perfect moral Being, would have remained for ever on the outside of our consciousness and beyond the sphere of human duty, had He not given to our souls an organ to perceive Him—a sentiment which can love our unseen Father. Possessed of this religious Sentiment, our religious Duty follows of necessity; nay, it follows that all duty acquires a religious obligation, and man becomes, before all other characteristics, a religious being.

In the first place, religion is ethically incumbent on all moral agents, because the absolute holiness of God constitutes Him their moral King and Master. This truth, in a certain vague manner, is so commonly recognised that there seems almost a degree of irreverence in attempting to show the grounds of that divine authority which in our ordinary consciousness precedes any abstract morality, and is itself the sanction of all right. Nevertheless, for religion's own sake it is most needful that we apprehend truly its real basis, whereon alone we may build such a faith as shall include all duty and all love, and shall exclude alike all idolatrous worship of the imperfect, and all demonolatrous dread of evil power or evil wisdom. God Himself, in making us rational creatures, has implicitly rested his title to our allegiance on His own moral perfection, for to such perfection alone is it lawful for such creatures to bow. He has given us natures which can regard with no veneration even Omnipotence itself, if represented as united with the moral attributes of a fiend. We must know that God Himself is righteous before those hearts which he has made can adore Him. He deigns to receive no servile homage. Further, a religion which shall be identified with sound morality must recognise distinctly, not only that God is *good*, and so deserving our love and reverence, but that He is *infinitely* good, and so entitled to our absolute fealty and obedience. We must not regard Him (as a finite being, however *virtuous*, must be regarded) as a fellow-subject of the necessary law. He resumes the whole of it in His own absolute *holiness*, and therefore rules us as King. His will is co-ordinate with all right; He is the impersonation thereof; Himself the eternal Living Law. No ethical limits exist to His jurisdiction over us, for it is conterminous with morality

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itself. Inasmuch as any act is right, in so far it is God's command; inasmuch as it is God's command, in so far it is right.

According, then, to this first grand view of the case, it appears that ALL duty, whether towards ourselves, our neighbour, or more immediately to God, is properly in strict ethics *Religious Duty*.

But beside this primary relation of moral subjects to our King, whereby all our duties acquire religious character, we stand in several other most intimate relations to God, and from the union of all necessarily arises the special duty which constitutes the third great branch of practical morality. This directly and exclusively RELIGIOUS DUTY, comprehending the actions and sentiments due by man immediately to his Maker, is the subject of the present book. We must briefly review the nature of these human and Divine relations before investigating the principle of the obligations which are their ethical result.

“Man owes all to God.” It is a common kind of phrase. We rarely pause to consider what it includes. Physically, he owes Him life, here and hereafter, his body and his soul, all his past, present, and future possessions. Intellectually, he owes Him all he knows, all he can ever know,—the mental powers by which he acquires knowledge, and the instruction which men, books, and nature have given him. Morally, he owes Him freedom,—the vast and wondrous power of his own will to choose the right and reject the wrong; and he owes Him the inward grace and outward moral providence by which he is continually assisted in so doing. All these are his debt to God in the one character of his *Creator*, and a religion of *gratitude* necessarily founds itself upon them. But God is man's *Judge* as well as his Creator. To Him it pertains to uphold the moral law throughout the universe of which he is King. Every breach of that law must be an offence against Him, as every act of obedience to it is one of obedience to Him. The sins we have committed during our lives, even those which were most directly offences against our neighbour or ourselves, were also so truly sins against God, that the cry of penitence (overlooking the lesser in the enormity of the greater offence) is almost justified, “Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned,

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and done this evil in Thy sight." We are thus placed before our Judge in a different position from that which we should have held had we not broken His laws. It is true that He knows no "wrath," that his goodness remains for ever unchanged while acting in accordance with His justice in executing the retribution, which is also correction. Nevertheless, *we* have become criminals before Him. To our religion is added, then, a third element beside moral allegiance and gratitude,—that of *contrition*. And lastly, God is something else to us beside Creator, Benefactor, Teacher, Helper,—something else beside Moral King and Judge. He is also the *End* and Aim of our whole being. We are created on purpose that we may know the ineffable glory and bliss of loving and adoring Him. We are moral beings, because such alone can apprehend his moral perfection; we are immortal, and eternity will not be long enough to learn all His goodness, and grow more fit to worship it. In Him, and to Him, and for Him are all things that we are or ever shall be,—all the duty, glory, and joy of our everlasting existence.

These things being so, the relation of man to God being such as I have described, the task seems no difficult one to discover some *maxim* which shall express, at once, all the multitudinous rights of action and sentiment thence arising, the *axiom* which shall embody all our own past and present intuitions of religious duty. Whenever these relations in which we stand to God have come out clearly before our minds or hearts, when we have studied His works and thought of Him as Creator, when we have striven for the right and looked to Him as Helper, when we have sinned and recognised that he was our Judge, when we have rejoiced in our human affections and thanked Him as our Father, when we have mourned beside the dead and turned to Him who alone is Lord of Death and Life, what are the *intuitions* which have come to us concerning the *right* tribute owed to Him? Indifference, hatred, fear, irreverence, thanklessness, or thanks of lip service? Such ideas are absurd. Probably not one of them, save fear, has ever even presented itself to a human mind, far less commended itself as necessary and universal. Supposing that fear *has* sometimes seemed the fitting tribute from the powerless to the Omnipotent, will it

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stand the test of Necessity? Can we imagine no hour of joy, no paradise of blameless delights, wherein some other sentiment, save dread, should move the heart of the blessed towards the Benefactor? Has it ever been our own sole intuition that we should *fear* God? When we have awakened from our sins to abhor and renounce them, and turned in contrition, and yet in infinite hope of succour and restoration, to the Father of the Prodigal, was our cry one of slavish fear? Only in the most immature and partial religious experience can this sentiment have suggested itself at all, and even here it could never be recognised by the mind as of universal obligation, as a necessary result in all time and space, and under every varying condition of the whole compound relation of man to God. But if fear cannot be accepted, nor bear the test of a sentiment of universal obligation, and if indifference, or irreverence, or thanklessness, be too obviously absurd to deserve consideration, what sentiment is there remaining which can possibly apply to the case? There is but one, and that is *love*. The canon of Christ offers the definition of man's religious duty,

THOU SHALT LOVE THE LORD THY GOD WITH ALL THINE
HEART, AND SOUL, AND STRENGTH.

This answers to the intuitions which have sprung in all our hearts in life's most living hours. And *this* finally approves itself as the one sole "*law fit for law universal*," the only principle which we can represent to ourselves as applicable to every case, holding good for all creatures for ever.

Love is claimed from us by the perfections we perceive in our Creator and the benefits we receive from Him, and it is actually the only reciprocation possible under the circumstances. It is the sole *reality* in that return of debt which the eternal right requires should be made to such a benefactor as God; and it ought to be the germ of every outward religious service or sacrifice which *with* that love, and springing from it, is holy and good, and, *without* it, is worthless and insulting. It is true that objections have been sometimes made to the propriety of ranking the love of God, as, literally speaking, a moral *duty*. "Love," it is argued, "is an emotion which is called forth by the presentation of loveable objects,

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and its nature is necessarily free, and unconstrained by the rigid mandates of the moral will." In discussing the duty of love to our neighbour, I shall have occasion to expose some of the errors of this view, which, if fully carried out, would strike at the root of all morality, inasmuch as it would forbid the attempt to regulate those Emotions, which are not only the springs of our outward actions, but are themselves *inward acts*, far more closely connected than any external ones, with our progress towards that virtue of rational souls which is the ultimate fulfilment of the moral law. It will be sufficient in this place to remind the reader, that from the first page of this essay I have assumed as the indispensable postulate of all sound ethics, that the *sentiments* of all rational free agents possess a moral character no less real and necessary than their actions. And if this be so, the love of God must stand in the very foremost rank of those sentiments which are eternally and necessarily right for man to feel.

We may prove the same truth negatively. The hypothesis is absurd that the performance of any number of outward *actions* of respect, obedience, or worship, would fulfil the duty of spiritual beings towards the Lord of Spirits, while unaccompanied by any *feelings* of gratitude, trust, or adoration. We, ourselves, who can but little discern the inward movements of our brothers' hearts, and who can and do receive benefit from outward actions performed in our favour, though unaccompanied by genuine sentiments in the actor, even we disdain the offering of respectful but insincere words, unloving benefits, and heartless eye-service. How doubly monstrous then it is to think of outward duty towards God, otherwise than as the manifestation of *sentiments* on which the value of those outward acts depends, as shadows depend on substance! There is here no distinction of subjective and objective duties, no question of acts having an external legality divisible from the internal morality of their motives. God can be benefited by nothing that the whole created universe can do. There is no virtue or happiness of *His* to be aided or produced by the children of earth. Our position is clear. We owe Him our all, and we must pay that debt to Him with LOVE, or pay it with MOCKERY.

We *ought* then to love God. It is a hateful and odious

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thought, that of a moral being receiving such benefits as we receive, and recognising such perfections as we recognise, and yet feeling no love for the Good and Holy One. Does any man still reply that whatever he *ought* to do, he *cannot* love at word of command? Let him ponder a little Who it is that he is commanded to love. Cannot he, indeed, love *that* Being? Does he feel that he must wrench his nature with some terrible violence, to *make* himself love the All-adorable Lord of Love and Goodness? Questions like these are rank absurdities applied to the religious duty of a worshipper of the true God. So long as men believe that the Deity has displayed in human history a multitude of characteristics repugnant to their natural ideas of justice and goodness, so long there is perfect reason in the complaint that they are commanded to love that which, from the constitution of their hearts, they cannot love. But the case is reversed the moment we gain the blessed faith, that whatever *we* feel to be just and good, *that*, and infinitely more than that, is God—that whatever we feel to be unjust and evil, *that* He never has been nor will be. To love God now is merely to love that which *we feel to be lovely*—our own ideal of all amiable and venerable attributes. Thus the “command” to love God issuing, as it does, from our own true self, is simply the legitimation and consecration of our highest spontaneous affections, not the forcing of them into unnatural channels. As has been often said, it is much more the permission, “Thou *mayest* love thy Lord,” than the command, “Thou *shalt* love Him.” Here is the culminating point of humanity and morality, and the result is a sublime and transcendent harmony. But, on the other hand, it is not *only* a permission. So weak are we, so easily led away by our lower interests, that we continually cease to think of God’s claims to our love, cease to cherish our holy affections, cease, perhaps, to live in such wise as that we *dare* to love God. Then comes in the command, “Thou *shalt* love the Lord.” It is a *duty* incumbent on us to do so. He has a right to it, our nature is in disorder and degradation without it, the eternal law of the universe is unfulfilled till we do it. It is, indeed, a privilege, a birthright, but tremendous is our sin if we relinquish or renounce it!”

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One objection, however, to the whole doctrine of religious duty (and more especially to that of religious worship or service) may possibly have presented itself to the reader. "We may owe service," it might be said, "to any being whom such service can benefit. For example, we owe personal duty to ourselves, and can actually benefit our own natures; we owe social duty to our neighbours, and can contribute in reality to their welfare. These are intelligible duties, because their performance actually tends to a good result. But how can we owe a duty to a Being whose holiness and happiness cannot be increased? God does not want either the love in our hearts or the outward acts by which we display it. Our thanks, adoration, faith, can no more make Him happier or better than our blasphemy, sacrilege, or atheism could injure Him. Unless, then, as a mere branch of personal duty, as an artifice for increasing our own sentiments of gratitude and reverence, what is the meaning of a religious duty? Why should we do service to One who cannot be served by anything we can do?*

Here comes in one of the grand distinctions between dependent and independent morality, between a system of ethics which assumes the right to be merely the shortest path to the useful, and a system which proclaims it to be the sacro-sanct necessary obligation of all rational free agents. If "right" and "useful" were really convertible terms, it would be impossible to find any warrant for religious services of love and thanksgiving other than in the direct mandates of the Being to be worshipped; and these, if accepted as veritable, could, on the assumption in question, be only supposed to be issued for the benefit and educational training of the worshipper. Such, indeed, is the aspect given to their cultus by many Churches (especially of the Evangelical class), and the result is undoubtedly a lowering of the conception of worship from its proper character of the most sublime office of which man is capable, to the rank of a

* "Inter Deistas quidam fuerunt, licet perpauci numero, qui omnem cultum etiam internum rejecerunt, asserentes Deum nihil de illo curare, religiosisque actibus non moveri."—*Angladis Ethica*, Pars ii. Dis. 1.

It is necessary often to *state* objections and difficulties preparatory to demonstrating the true ground of doctrines, but it is not always necessary to attribute every possible error to an actual flesh and blood heretic.

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mere method of improvement, little, if at all, above that of listening to sermons or reading books of divinity. Further, the worship which is consciously self-educating and nothing more, is, from that very circumstance, disqualified, in a great measure, from that purpose itself. A man who should offer thanks to the Giver of his happiness solely because he hoped, in accordance with the laws of his mind, to increase his own virtue by such spiritual gymnastics, such a man's self-prospective thanksgivings would possess little or no warming or elevating power, even if his system permitted him to seek his virtue as an end in itself, and not merely the means of his admission to Paradise. Each great branch of human duty has its own independent claims as a separate law of the eternal right. A man's own virtue is the end of his creation. "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect" is the first law of his being, which can be postponed to no other. But as it is not merely to warm his own benevolent affections that he is bound to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, so neither is it merely as an excitement of his sentiments of gratitude and veneration, that he is bound to offer thanksgiving and adoration for the infinite blessings and perfections of his Creator. He is bound to worship because it is *right* that such a being as man should worship such a being as God. It is as much a part of eternal justice that the rational recipient of unnumbered benefits should return gratitude to his benefactor, as it is a part of justice that a murderer should be punished. It is Right, necessarily and immutably Right, antecedently to all consideration of additional benefits to be obtained by such gratitude for the creature, or the expression of a desire for it by the Creator.

In the first place, then, as I have said, worship is demanded abstractedly by the eternal moral law. We have sufficient intimation of this truth by intuition; nay, the recognition of it seems to have long preceded the evangelical idea of worship as merely the "means of grace." Heathens, in very low stages of religious development, have counted *thanksgiving* as a debt obviously due to their invisible benefactors,—to Jupiter the Liberator, to Phœbus Epicurius, to Æsculapius the Healer. All ancient liturgies, Jewish and Christian, are full of that