

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-03682-5 - Works of Thomas Hill Green: Volume 3: Miscellanies and Memoirs

Edited by R.L. Nettleship

Excerpt

[More information](#)

MISCELLANEOUS WORKS.

VOL. III.

B

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-03682-5 - Works of Thomas Hill Green: Volume 3: Miscellanies and Memoirs

Edited by R.L. Nettleship

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE FORCE OF CIRCUMSTANCES.

THE mere phrase 'force of circumstances' seems to remind us that there is some want of harmony between ourselves and the outer world. Such an expression would be unintelligible to a child, for it implies the consciousness of some law external to us 'warring against the law of the mind,' which in childhood is as yet undeveloped. Our new existence seems then to fit so exactly with existing things that the delights of sense are inseparable from those of the intellect, our whole being is absorbed in external objects, and we have no feeling of the gulf that is fixed between ourselves and that complicated power, the result of human action from the first foundation of the world, which assumes at one time the form of an irresistible compulsion to sin, at another that of the moral law of society. But meanwhile the yoke is forming whose weight we are soon to find so heavy. The senses become more gross as our mental sight becomes more refined, our habits grow in strength and complexity as our perception of the law which ought to regulate them attains greater definiteness, and external suffering gets its first strong hold on us just when we are beginning to discover that this world is not our home. What terms ought we then to make, and what do we habitually make, with this power which is foreign to us, and yet asserts its dominion over our inmost souls? In other words, how are mankind in general affected by circumstances, and how is the good man affected by them?

Looking at men as separate individuals, we may consider them as severally the centres of a system of external powers which widens as we contemplate it till it seems almost coincident with the universe. We may pass from the 'portions of matter in which we are more nearly interested' to the whole physical world around us, and from our own past actions and habits to the morals of all generations of men.

To regard this vast environment merely as the outcome of the workings of the human mind, seems nearly as far from the truth as to regard ourselves as its creatures or its slaves. Its true influence on us is to raise our thoughts in various ways to the spirit in whom 'we live and move and have our being,' while it teaches us at once that he made us and not we ourselves, and that he made us after his own likeness.

When the unconsciousness of childhood has passed away, and the growing man, from the discovery that nature will not always suit his will or fancy, begins to realise practically the difference between 'the subject' and 'the object,' he naturally speculates on the relations between himself and the outer world. Such speculation is not confined to philosophers. The language we hear from religious people on the one hand, about the fleeting objects of sense, and from men of the world on the other, of the unsatisfactoriness of everything but material facts, shows how thoroughly it is inwoven with practical life. It often divides the life of the individual into two distinct states, not indeed definitely marked off, but each constantly recurring. At one time he asks himself what would be left to him if he were cut off from the outer world but inoperative powers, unsatisfied tendencies, capability without realisation; at another, turning his thoughts inward, he wanders in the mazes of his own consciousness, till 'housed in a dream' he loses all sense of the reality of life. By degrees he learns the true reconciliation between the opposing states of consciousness. He finds that though in himself he has nothing more than barren powers and tendencies, yet it is not in the outer world that truth and reality lie. This outer world is no independent existence, but a means through which his own mind is evermore communicated to him, through which the deity, who works unseen behind it, pours the truth and love which transform his capabilities into realities.

It is in the circumstances of physical nature that this lesson is most plainly written. We find on the one hand that the purely *a priori* notions which we form of the order of the physical universe do not correspond with facts afterwards discovered, while on the other hand our examination of phenomena does but evoke laws which have previously been latent in our minds—which have only to be suggested to us, and we recognise at once their fitness and necessity.

THE FORCE OF CIRCUMSTANCES.

5

The law of gravitation, for instance, once discovered, commends itself to us as a proper inmate of the mind, with a certainty which belongs to no mere result of generalisation from external facts. It is not a material, but a mental law, capable of being expressed in mathematical formulæ, and thus essentially differenced from anything like a botanical classification. But even when we describe it as 'a law previously latent in our minds,' we are still speaking rather phenomenally than correctly. More truly it is a law of that divine mind which began to be communicated to us with the first mother's smile, with the first flash of sunlight on our opening eyes. The joy of the religious naturalist, when, after weary observation and generalisation, that knowledge of law which to him is liberty breaks like the day on his soul, is no vain triumph at the discovery of some hidden treasure of his own mind. It is like the feeling with which we catch sight of the handwriting of a friend, when wide seas roll between him and us. Thus we see that the human mind is not the only real existence, but that it is the creation of a higher mind, which has surrounded it with hidden signs and wonders that it may learn at once its greatness and dependence; its greatness, as being itself a creative power, and its dependence, as being unable to put this power forth till its author evokes it by giving it an object in the works of his own hands. It is a similar lesson which the good man learns from the power of external nature in all its aspects. He finds that it is only what he gives to it that he receives from it, but yet by some mysterious affinity it evokes what he has to give, and then it bears witness with his own spirit that what he gives is not his own, but inspired from above. There is no chasm between man and nature. Each, we may truly say, is a reasonable soul, one as being the living receptacle, the other the apt channel, of the influx of divinity.

But when we pass from external nature to those circumstances with which sin seems to be inseparably blended, the lesson is written in less plain characters. We seem no longer masters but slaves, unable to free ourselves from the chains of cause and effect with which the sins of our fathers and our own past actions bind our present life. As soon as we awake from the slumbers of childhood, when we were 'alive without the law,' to a sense of its full requirements, 'the

days gone by return upon us' with all the terrors of a forgotten fear, and make us feel that, however it may be in thought, in act it is impossible to separate the present from the past. The spiritual law of which we are conscious witnesses to us that we are properly free, but the antagonistic law which regulates the universe seems irresistibly dominant. At last we find that reconciliation is possible. The chain of cause and effect cannot be shuffled off, but it may bind us to heaven instead of to earth; the force of circumstances cannot be evaded, but it may become a power of good instead of evil. To admit that a given combination of circumstances must produce a certain effect on a given state of mind is not to deny the mind's freedom, for the effect may be a resistance, not a submission to circumstances. The same craving of sensual appetite will move one man to a surrender of the mind to the body, another to humility and self-abasement. The effect in both cases might be known beforehand, if we knew the secret state of the two minds; but the good man, by manifesting the power of the creative spirit to bring good out of evil, asserts the freedom which the other abdicates. He is indeed still a slave, yet no longer the slave of the world, but of him 'whose service is perfect freedom.' In the same spirit he meets all the shocks of circumstance. Bodily suffering has always been considered by religious men as chastisement from a father's hand, which curbs the overweening conceits of their childish assurance; and even the infection of past sin, which they cannot wholly purge away, becomes part of their spiritual training. It is not those who talk most boastfully of the independence of their spirits who have really rid themselves of the yoke of circumstances. Such men implicitly confess that they are still kicking against the pricks, still trying to avoid the inevitable influence which we may wholly transmute but cannot put aside. The best men will confess that their performance falls far short of their promise, and that, whatever may be their spiritual exaltation in their private moments, yet in their dealings with the world their old habits return, and combine with an imperfect social morality and the cares of this life to drag them down again to the earth. But 'when they are weak, then are they strong.' The common doctrine, which connects the sense of sin with the confidence of salvation, has often been denounced by theologians; but it seems to have its root in the truest

THE FORCE OF CIRCUMSTANCES.

7

feelings which bind earth to heaven. When the force of circumstances has lost that hold on the spirit which cuts it off from communion with God, it will still limit our power in action, and prevent our outward walk and conduct from answering exactly to the motions of our purified will, and thus our very imperfections may win us to that child-like dependence on God which is only another aspect of the assurance of salvation. The end of our life-long struggle is a state analogous to that in which we rested before it began, but our final repose does not arise from unconsciousness of the law, but from reconciliation with it. The solid walls of circumstance which shut in our energies stand firm as ever; but instead of chafing against them we see them reflecting the brightness of our deliverer's coming.

But there are few who attain to this final conquest. The greater portion even of the better sort of men are in a kind of middle state, half the creatures and half the creators of circumstances. These are the men who 'bow themselves in the house of Rimmon' in remembrance of the true God, who always 'go with the multitude,' often 'to do evil,' but yet have an indistinct feeling that in conforming to the customs of men they are doing their duty in a state to which God has called them. To such men their worldly environment is not merely 'of the earth, earthy,' but has in some degree the character of a divinely-appointed discipline. Better than those who exalt themselves against God by quarrelling with his universal law, they acquiesce contentedly in things as they are, often, indeed, as slaves to them, when they yield passively to their influence, yet sometimes as free creative spirits, when they read in them the living law of a supreme creative spirit, whose will is also theirs. It is on minds of this stamp that favourable circumstances seem to exercise an independent influence for good. The question often arises, how far that improvement in the outward life of man, which we commonly understand by 'civilisation,' has been accompanied by a corresponding growth in spiritual religion. There are times when it seems as if the corruption of the world contributed to the purity of the church, and the more adverse the circumstances, the mightier the spiritual power which transmutes them. Have we now amongst us the strength to earn a martyr's glory, or have the charms of this world, purer now than of old, divided the love of men whose sole

affections in days of grosser wickedness would have been set on things above? In answer to this it may be said that the faith of a martyr, being that highest creative energy which deals with circumstances as it will, is unaffected by altered times. It operates alike on the lofty and the low, not more in the momentous struggles of good and evil than in the quieter traits of an ordinary life. But it is different with those weaker spirits who follow very much as circumstances lead, and yet are able at favourable times to recognise in them the law of God. They can only exercise this measure of free power when its object is specially adapted to evoke it. They cannot ordinarily raise themselves above the earth, but the purer the character of earthly influences the lighter is the bondage which they have to suffer. And great as is the power of the renewed spirit to bring strength out of weakness and to make the chains of old habits the signs of its newly-won freedom, yet, lest we should suppose that evil of any kind can ever lose its character, we always find that the victory is least complete when the influence of circumstances which has to be overcome is in itself peculiarly evil. In men who, late in life, have shaken off their habits of sin, we often see a narrowness of view, a lingering remembrance of their former bondage, which tinges all the aspects of former life. Those circumstances which seemed most mixed up with their old sin they can never regard as other than unclean. The lesson of their past life is too terrible for them to contemplate; and the effects of their past actions, which constantly reappear, instead of confirming their freedom by teaching them dependence on God, have still something of their old enslaving influence, for they revive that tormenting fear which is next of kin to bondage. Half the sphere of human thought and action is still dark to them, incapable of manifesting the divine goodness.

When we turn our thoughts from such characters as we have hitherto been contemplating to the state of mankind at large, we seem to pass from victory over circumstances, approaching or complete, to an unresisting submission to them. Looking at men individually, we find that they are, for the most part, in greater or less degree, the slaves of their own passions, or of the evil influences in which they have been born and bred; when we regard them as nations, they seem to be the victims of an uncontrollable destiny. When we

THE FORCE OF CIRCUMSTANCES.

9

speak of the progress of a nation, we do not mean any free progressive energy of the national mind, but a certain regular succession of circumstances, to which the nation is forced, by a resistless attraction, evermore to conform itself. Feudality passes into plutocracy, local characteristics and provincial governments are merged in a general centralisation, not by any process of mental development, but by bare force of circumstances. Political constitutions seem often the result merely of physical geography, the cause, rather than the effect, of the temper of the people. Without coal a country cannot pursue manufactures to any great extent, and without manufactures, with a population of scattered agriculturists, can it ever be fit for self-government? Can insular England ever be subject to military tyranny, and can Austria, overhung by Russia and without a seaboard, ever be free from it? If we turn to influences less purely physical, the bondage is still the same. The combined motions of a mass of minds, working and counter-working, form a complex external power, which is by no means analogous to any one of its component parts, and is carried along the path of necessity, to which past crimes or old usage bind it, by a sort of inherent compulsion. If once the national mind quit this path, it is only to be carried away, as in the French Revolution, by an involuntary madness. The recognition of the laws of political economy is in itself an admission that men have no control over the results of their own combined energies, which operate in a system as independent of human will as that which regulates the motion of the heavenly bodies. But does this force of circumstances, affecting nations so variously, cause any inequality of good and evil among them, or does it press with equal intensity on all, differing in its results only so far as it is modified by the spiritual freedom of ten righteous men in this city, and twenty in that? If we look at the state of European nations, it would seem that the effect of external influences upon them, though various, has not been unequal, and that their political constitutions have been alike as powers of evil, but very different in the amount of living beneficial power which they have received from men who were raised above them. The spiritual energy of the liberated few introduces an element of good into the force to which the many are subject. We see everywhere, in the abolition of serfdom, in the reconciliation of nations, in the

general recognition of personal equality, how Christianity, as an external influence, has lightened the worldly burden of multitudes who were ignorant of its inward power. The men whose souls its positive truths have liberated exercise a negative influence in removing the most oppressive evils from the outward circumstances of life. From time to time, in a crusade or reformation, their enthusiasm opens some new spring of national life, which in its turn mingles with the onward stream of national progress. But they must themselves be wholly free from the dominion which they only modify for others. It is one of the effects of our fondness for excessive generalisation that we identify the reformers of bygone days too much with the spirit of their age, and seldom sufficiently appreciate the independence of their position or the isolated eminence of their greatness. The world is ever claiming as its own those who have indeed been in it but not of it. The very essence of a true reformer consists in his being the corrector and not the exponent of the common feeling of his day. The breath of his life is inspired from above, not drawn up from below. Those flashes of religious enlightenment which from time to time break on the slumbers of mankind often resemble in their history the discoveries of scientific truth. The wants of the age, or some unknown influences from above, set the minds of thinking men in motion, they know not whither, till at last the master mind among them reaches the wished-for light, and reflects it on his fellows. Immediately they recognise it as that after which they have been striving, while the world at large finds its darkness broken, but knows not whence the light has come. It has its own way; its antagonistic forces work along the winding pathway of 'human progress,' but they move on a different plane from the spiritual energy which animates the true reformer. Its rival parties adopt him as their own, or cast him from them, as may suit their purpose; but he is fulfilling a work which they know not of, a work which has many points of contact with the political and social movements of the day, but which is yet distinct from them both in origin and end. He must needs be raised above that atmosphere of circumstances, on which he throws the light of his own being, penetrating even to those who still wander beneath it.