LESLIE STEPHEN

SOCIAL RIGHTS AND DUTIES

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The following chapters are chiefly a republication of addresses delivered to the Ethical Societies of London. Some have previously appeared in the *International Journal of Ethics*, the *National Review*, and the *Contemporary Review*. The author has to thank the proprietors of these periodicals for their consent to the republication.

L. S.

THE AIMS OF ETHICAL SOCIETIES.[1]

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I am about to say a few words upon the aims of this society: and I should be sorry either to exaggerate or to depreciate our legitimate pretensions. It would be altogether impossible to speak too strongly of the importance of the great questions in which our membership of the society shows us to be interested. It would, I fear, be easy enough to make an over-estimate of the part which we can expect to play in their solution. I hold indeed, or I should not be here, that we may be of some service at any rate to each other. I think that anything which stimulates an active interest in the vital problems of the day deserves the support of all thinking men; and I propose to consider briefly some of the principles by which we should be guided in doing whatever we can to promote such an interest.

We are told often enough that we are living in a period of important intellectual and social revolutions. In one way we are perhaps inclined even to state the fact a little too strongly. We suffer at times from the common illusion that the problems of to-day are entirely new: we fancy that nobody ever thought of them before, and that when we have solved them, nobody will ever need to look for another solution. To ardent reformers in all ages it seems as if the millennium must begin with their triumph, and that their triumph will be established by a single victory. And while some of us are thus sanguine, there are many who see in the struggles of to-day the approach of a deluge which is to sweep away all that once ennobled life. The believer in the

old creeds, who fears that faith is decaying, and the supernatural life fading from the world, denounces the modern spirit as materialising and degrading. The conscience of mankind, he thinks, has become drugged and lethargic; our minds are fixed upon sensual pleasures, and our conduct regulated by a blind struggle for the maximum of luxurious enjoyment. The period in his eyes is a period of growing corruption; modern society suffers under a complication of mortal diseases, so widely spread and deeply seated that at present there is no hope of regeneration. The best hope is that its decay may provide the soil in which seed may be sown of a far-distant growth of happier augury. Such dismal forebodings are no novelty. Every age produces its prophecies of coming woes. Nothing would be easier than to make out a catena of testimonies from great men at every stage of the world's history, declaring each in turn that the cup of iniquity was now at last overflowing, and that corruption had reached so unprecedented a step that some great catastrophe must be approaching. A man of unusually lofty morality is, for that reason, more keenly sensitive to the lowness of the average standard, and too easily accepts the belief that the evils before his eyes must be in fact greater, and not, as may perhaps be the case, only more vividly perceived, than those of the bygone ages. A call to repentance easily takes the form of an assertion that the devil is getting the upper hand; and we may hope that the pessimist view is only a form of the discontent which is a necessary condition of improvement. Anyhow, the diametrical conflict of prophecies suggests one remark which often impresses me. We are bound to call each other by terribly hard names. A gentleman assures me in print that I am playing the devil's game; depriving my victims, if I have any, of all the beliefs that can make life noble or happy, and doing my best to

destroy the very first principles of morality. Yet I meet my adversary in the flesh, and find that he treats me not only with courtesy, but with no inconsiderable amount of sympathy. He admits—by his actions and his argument—that I—the miserable sophist and seducer—have not only some good impulses, but have really something to say which deserves a careful and respectful answer. An infidel, a century or two ago, was supposed to have forfeited all claim to the ordinary decencies of life. Now I can say, and can say with real satisfaction, that I do not find any difference of creed, however vast in words, to be an obstacle to decent and even friendly treatment. I am at times tempted to ask whether my opponent can be quite logical in being so courteous; whether, if he is as sure as he says that I am in the devil's service, I ought not, as a matter of duty, to be encountered with the old dogmatism and arrogance. I shall, however, leave my friends of a different way of thinking to settle that point for themselves. I cannot doubt the sincerity of their courtesy, and I will hope that it is somehow consistent with their logic. Rather I will try to meet them in a corresponding spirit by a brief confession. I have often enough spoken too harshly and vehemently of my antagonists. I have tried to fix upon them too unreservedly what seemed to me the logical consequences of their dogmas. I have condemned their attempts at a milder interpretation of their creed as proofs of insincerity, when I ought to have done more justice to the legitimate and lofty motives which prompted them. And I at least am bound by my own views to admit that even the antagonist from whose utterances I differ most widely may be an unconscious ally, supplementing rather than contradicting my theories, and in great part moved by aspirations which I ought to recognise even when allied with what I take to be defective reasoning. We are all amenable to one great influence. The vast shuttle

of modern life is weaving together all races and creeds and classes. We are no longer shut up in separate compartments, where the mental horizon is limited by the area visible from the parish steeple; each little section can no longer fancy, in the old childish fashion, that its own arbitrary prejudices and dogmas are parts of the eternal order of things; or infer that in the indefinite region beyond, there live nothing but monsters and anthropophagi, and men whose heads grow beneath their shoulders. The annihilation of space has made us fellows as by a kind of mechanical compulsion; and every advance of knowledge has increased the impossibility of taking our little church—little in comparison with mankind, be it even as great as the Catholic Church—for the one pattern of right belief. The first effect of bringing remote nations and classes into closer contact is often an explosion of antipathy; but in the long run it means a development of human sympathy. Wide, therefore, as is the opposition of opinions as to what is the true theory of the world—as to which is the divine and which the diabolical element—I fully believe that beneath the war of words and dogmas there is a growth of genuine toleration, and, we must hope, of ultimate conciliation.

This is manifest in another direction. The churches are rapidly making at least one discovery. They are beginning to find out that their vitality depends not upon success in theological controversy, but upon their success in meeting certain social needs and aspirations common to all classes. It is simply impossible for any thinking man at the present day to take any living interest, for example, in the ancient controversies. The "drum ecclesiastic" of the seventeenth century would sound a mere lullaby to us. Here and there a priest or a belated dissenting minister may amuse himself by threshing out once more the old chaff of dead and buried

dogmas. There are people who can argue gravely about baptismal regeneration or apostolical succession. Such doctrines were once alive, no doubt, because they represented the form in which certain still living problems had then to present themselves. They now require to be stated in a totally different shape, before we can even guess why they were once so exciting, or how men could have supposed their modes of attacking the question to be adequate. The Pope and General Booth still condemn each other's tenets; and in case of need would, I suppose, take down the old rusty weapons from the armoury. But each sees with equal clearness that the real stress of battle lies elsewhere. Each tries, after his own fashion, to give a better answer than the Socialists to the critical problems of to-day. We ought so far to congratulate both them and ourselves on the direction of their energies. Nay, can we not even co-operate, and put these hopeless controversies aside? Why not agree to differ about the questions which no one denies to be all but insoluble, and become allies in promoting morality? Enormous social forces find their natural channel through the churches; and if the beliefs inculcated by the church were not, as believers assert, the ultimate cause of progress, it is at least clear that they were not incompatible with progress. The church, we all now admit, whether by reason of or in spite of its dogmatic creed, was for ages one great organ of civilisation, and still exercises an incalculable influence. Why, then, should we, who cannot believe in the dogmas, yet fall into line with believers for practical purposes? Churches insist verbally upon the importance of their dogma: they are bound to do so by their logical position; but, in reality, for them, as for us, the dogma has become in many ways a mere excrescence—a survival of barren formulæ which do little harm to anybody. Carlyle, in his quaint phrase, talked about the exodus from

Houndsditch, but doubted whether it were yet time to cast aside the Hebrew old clothes. They have become threadbare and antiquated. That gives a reason to the intelligent for abandoning them; but, also, perhaps a reason for not quarrelling with those who still care to masquerade in them. Orthodox people have made a demand that the Board Schools should teach certain ancient doctrines about the nature of Christ; and the demand strikes some of us as preposterous if not hypocritical. But putting aside the audacity of asking unbelievers to pay for such teaching, one might be tempted to ask, what harm could it really do? Do you fancy for a moment that you can really teach a child of ten the true meaning of the Incarnation? Can you give him more than a string of words as meaningless as magical formulæ? I was brought up at the most orthodox of Anglican seminaries. I learned the Catechism, and heard lectures upon the Thirty-nine Articles. I never found that the teaching had ever any particular effect upon my mind. As I grew up, the obsolete exuviæ of doctrine dropped off my mind like dead leaves from a tree. They could not get any vital hold in an atmosphere of tolerable enlightenment. Why should we fear the attempt to instil these fragments of decayed formulæ into the minds of children of tender age? Might we not be certain that they would vanish of themselves? They are superfluous, no doubt, but too futile to be of any lasting importance. I remember that, when the first Education Act was being discussed, mention was made of a certain Jew who not only sent his son to a Christian school, but insisted upon his attending all the lessons. He had paid his fees, he said, for education in the Gospels among other things, and he meant to have his money's worth. "But your son," it was urged, "will become a Christian." "I," he replied, "will take good care of that at home." Was not the Jew a man of sense? Can we suppose that the mechanical repetition of a

few barren phrases will do either harm or good? As the child develops he will, we may hope, remember his multiplication table, and forget his fragments of the Athanasian Creed. Let the wheat and tares be planted together, and trust to the superior vitality of the more valuable plant. The sentiment might be expressed sentimentally as easily as cynically. We may urge, like many sceptics of the last century, that Christianity should be kept "for the use of the poor," and renounced in the esoteric creed of the educated. Or we may urge the literary and æsthetic beauty of the old training, and wish it to be preserved to discipline the imagination, though we may reject its value as a historical statement of fact.

The audience which I am addressing has, I presume, made up its mind upon such views. They come too late. It might have been a good thing, had it been possible, to effect the transition from old to new without a violent convulsion: good, if Christian conceptions had been slowly developed into more simple forms; if the beautiful symbols had been retained till they could be impregnated with a new meaning; and if the new teaching of science and philosophy had gradually percolated into the ancient formulæ without causing a disruption. Possibly the Protestant Reformation was a misfortune, and Erasmus saw the truth more clearly than Luther. I cannot go into might-have-beens. We have to deal with facts. A conspiracy of silence is impossible about matters which have been vehemently discussed for centuries. We have to take sides; and we at least have agreed to take the side of the downright thinker, who will say nothing that he does not believe, and hide nothing that he does believe, and speak out his mind without reservation or economy and accommodation. Indeed, as things are, any other course seems to me to be impossible. I have spoken,

for example, of General Booth. Many people heartily admire his schemes of social reform, and have been willing to subscribe for its support, without troubling themselves about his theology. I will make no objection; but I confess that I could not therefore treat that theology as either morally or intellectually respectable. It has happened to me once or twice to listen to expositions from orators of the Salvation Army. Some of them struck me as sincere though limited, and others as the victims of an overweening vanity. The oratory, so far as I could hear, consisted in stringing together an endless set of phrases about the blood of Christ, which, if they really meant anything, meant a doctrine as low in the intellectual scale as that of any of the objects of missionary enterprise. The conception of the transactions between God and man was apparently modelled upon the dealings of a petty tradesman. The "blood of Christ" was regarded like the panacea of a quack doctor, which will cure the sins of anybody who accepts the prescription. For anything I can say, such a creed may be elevating—relatively: elevating as slavery is said to have been elevating when it was a substitute for extermination. The hymns of the Army may be better than public-house melodies, and the excitement produced less mischievous than that due to gin. But the best that I can wish for its adherents is, that they should speedily reach a point at which they could perceive their doctrines to be debasing. I hope, indeed, that they do not realise their own meaning: but I could almost as soon join in some old pagan ceremonies, gash my body with knives, or swing myself from a hook, as indulge in this variety of spiritual intoxication.

There are, it is true, plenty of more refined and intellectual preachers, whose sentiments deserve at least the respect

due to tender and humane feeling. They have found a solution, satisfactory to themselves, of the great dilemma which presses on so many minds. A religion really to affect the vulgar must be a superstition; to satisfy the thoughtful, it must be a philosophy. Is it possible to contrive so to fuse the crude with the refined as to make at least a working compromise? To me personally, and to most of us living at the present day, the enterprise appears to be impracticable. My own experience is, I imagine, a very common one. When I ceased to accept the teaching of my youth, it was not so much a process of giving up beliefs, as of discovering that I had never really believed. The contrast between the genuine convictions which guide and govern our conduct, and the professions which we were taught to repeat in church, when once realised, was too glaring. One belonged to the world of realities, and the other to the world of dreams. The orthodox formulæ represent, no doubt, a sentiment, an attempt to symbolise emotions which might be beautiful, or to indicate vague impressions about the tendency of things in general; but to put them side by side with real beliefs about facts was to reveal their flimsiness. The "I believe" of the creed seemed to mean something quite different from the "I believe" of politics and history and science. Later experience has only deepened and strengthened that feeling. Kind and loving and noble-minded people have sought to press upon me the consolations of their religion. I thank them in all sincerity; and I feel—why should I not admit it?—that it may be a genuine comfort to set your melancholy to the old strain in which so many generations have embodied their sorrows and their aspirations. And yet to me, its consolation is an invitation to reject plain facts; to seek for refuge in a shadowy world of dreams and conjectures, which dissolve as you try to grasp them. The doctrine offered for my

acceptance cannot be stated without qualifications and reserves and modifications, which make it as useless as it is vague and conjectural. I may learn in time to submit to the inevitable; I cannot drug myself with phrases which evaporate as soon as they are exposed to a serious test. You profess to give me the only motives of conduct; and I know that at the first demand to define them honestly—to say precisely what you believe and why you believe it—you will be forced to withdraw, and explain and evade, and at last retire to the safe refuge of a mystery, which might as well be admitted at starting. As I have read and thought, I have been more and more impressed with the obvious explanation of these observations. How should the beliefs be otherwise than shadowy and illusory, when their very substance is made of doubts laboriously and ingeniously twisted into the semblance of convictions? In one way or other that is the characteristic mark of the theological systems of the present day. Proof is abandoned for persuasion. The orthodox believer professed once to prove the facts which he asserted and to show that his dogmas expressed the truth. He now only tries to show that the alleged facts don't matter, and that the dogmas are meaningless. Nearly two centuries ago, for example, a deist pointed out that the writer of the Book of Daniel, like other people, must have written after the events which he mentioned. All the learned, down to Dr. Pusey, denounced his theory, and declared his argument to be utterly destructive of the faith. Now an orthodox professor will admit that the deist was perfectly right, and only tries to persuade himself that arguments from facts are superfluous. The supposed foundation is gone: the superstructure is not to be affected. What the keenest disputant now seeks to show is, not that the truth of the records can be established beyond reasonable doubt; but that no absolute

contradiction in terms is involved in supposing that they correspond more or less roughly to something which may possibly have happened. So long as a thing is not proved false by mathematical demonstration, I may still continue to take it for a divine revelation, and to listen respectfully when experienced statesmen and learned professors assure me with perfect gravity that they can believe in Noah's flood or in the swine of Gadara. They have an unquestionable right to believe if they please: and they expect me to accept the facts for the sake of the doctrine. There, unluckily, I have a similar difficulty. It is the orthodox who are the systematic sceptics. The most famous philosophers of my youth endeavoured to upset the deist by laying the foundation of Agnosticism, arbitrarily tagged to an orthodox conclusion. They told me to believe a doctrine because it was totally impossible that I should know whether it was true or not, or indeed attach any real meaning to it whatever. The highest altar, as Sir W. Hamilton said, was the altar to the unknown and unknowable God. Others, seeing the inevitable tendency of such methods, have done their best to find in that the Christian doctrine, rightly understood, the embodiment of the highest philosophy. It is the divine voice which speaks in our hearts, though it has caught some accretion of human passion and superstition. The popular versions are false and debased; the old versions of the Atonement, for example, monstrous; and the belief in the everlasting torture of sinners, a hideous and groundless caricature. With much that such men have said I could, of course, agree heartily; for, indeed, it expresses the strongest feelings which have caused religious revolt. But would it not be simpler to say, "the doctrine is not true," than to say, "it is true, but means just the reverse of what it was also taken to mean"? I prefer plain terms; and "without doubt he shall perish everlastingly" seems to be an

awkward way of denying the endlessness of punishment. You cannot denounce the immorality of the old dogmas with the infidel, and then proclaim their infinite value with the believer. You defend the doctrine by showing that in its plain downright sense—the sense in which it embodied popular imaginations—it was false and shocking. The proposal to hold by the words evacuated of the old meaning is a concession of the whole case to the unbeliever, and a substitution of sentiment and aspiration for a genuine intellectual belief. Explaining away, however dexterously and delicately, is not defending, but at once confessing error, and encumbering yourself with all the trammels of misleading associations. The more popular method, therefore, at the present day is not to rationalise, but to try to outsceptic the sceptic. We are told that we have no solid ground from reason at all, and that even physical science is as full of contradictions as theology. Such enterprises, conducted with whatever ingenuity, are, as I believe, hopeless; but at least they are fundamentally and radically sceptical. That, under whatever disguises, is the true meaning of the Catholic argument, which is so persuasive to many. To prove the truth of Christianity by abstract reasoning may be hopeless; but nothing is easier than to persuade yourself to believe it, if once you will trust instinct in place of reason, and forget that instinct proves anything and everything. The success of such arguments with thoughtful men is simply a measure of the spread of scepticism. The conviction that truth is unattainable is the master argument for submitting to "authority". The "authority," in the scientific sense of any set of men who agree upon a doctrine, varies directly as their independence of each other. Their "authority" in the legal sense varies as the closeness of their mutual dependence. As the consent loses its value logically, it gains in power of coercion. And

therefore it is easy to substitute drilling for arguing, and to take up a belief as you accept admission to a society, as a matter of taste and feeling, with which abstract logic has nothing to do. The common dilemma—you must be a Catholic or an atheist—means, that theology is only tenable if you drill people into belief by a vast organisation appealing to other than logical motives.

I do not argue these points: I only indicate what I take to be your own conviction as well as mine. It seems to me, in fact, that the present state of mind—if we look to men's real thoughts and actions, not to their conventional phrases—is easily definable. It is simply a tacit recognition that the old orthodoxy cannot be maintained either by the evidence of facts or by philosophical argument. It has puzzled me sometimes to understand why the churches should insist upon nailing themselves down to the truth of their dogmas and their legendary history. Why cannot they say frankly, what they seem to be constantly on the verge of saying—Our dogmas and our history are not true, or not "true" in the historical or scientific sense of the word? To ask for such truth in the sphere of theology is as pedantic as to ask for it in the sphere of poetry. Poetical truth means, not that certain events actually happened, or that the poetical "machinery" is to be taken as an existing fact; but that the poem is, so to speak, the projection of truths upon the cloudland of imagination. It reflects and gives sensuous images of truth; but it is only the Philistine or the blockhead who can seriously ask, is it true? Some such position seems to be really conceivable as an ultimate compromise. Put aside the prosaic insistence upon literal matter-of-fact truth, and we may all agree to use the same symbolism, and interpret it as we please. This seems to me to be actually the view of many thoughtful people, though for obvious

reasons it is not often explicitly stated. One reason is, of course, the consciousness that the great mass of mankind requires plain, tangible motives for governing its life; and if it once be admitted that so much of the orthodox doctrine is mere symbolism or adumbration of truths, the admission would involve the loss of the truths so indicated. Moral conduct, again, and moral beliefs are supposed to depend upon some affirmation of these truths; and excellent people are naturally shy of any open admission which may appear to throw doubt upon the ultimate grounds of morality.

Indeed, if it could be really proved that men have to choose between renouncing moral truths and accepting unproved theories, it might be right—I will not argue the point—to commit intellectual suicide. If the truth is that we are mere animals or mere automata, shall we sacrifice the truth, or sacrifice what we have at least agreed to call our higher nature? For us the dilemma has no force: for we do not admit the discrepancy. We believe that morality depends upon something deeper and more permanent than any of the dogmas that have hitherto been current in the churches. It is a product of human nature, not of any of these transcendental speculations or faint survivals of traditional superstitions. Morality has grown up independently of, and often in spite of, theology. The creeds have been good so far as they have accepted or reflected the moral convictions; but it is an illusion to suppose that they have generated it. They represent the dialect and the imagery by which moral truths have been conveyed to minds at certain stages of thought; but it is a complete inversion of the truth to suppose that the morality sprang out of them. From this point of view we must of necessity treat the great ethical questions independently. We cannot form a real alliance with thinkers radically opposed to us. Divines tell us that we

reject the one possible basis of morality. To us it appears that we are strengthening it, by severing it from a connection with doctrines arbitrary, incapable of proof, and incapable of retaining any consistent meaning. Theologians once believed that hell-fire was the ultimate sentence, and persecution the absolute duty of every Christian ruler. The churches which once burnt and exterminated are now only anxious to proclaim freedom of belief, and to cast the blame of persecution upon their rivals. Divines have discovered that the doctrine of hell-fire deserves all that infidels have said of it; and a member of Dante's church was arguing the other day that hell might on the whole be a rather pleasant place of residence. Doctrines which can thus be turned inside out are hardly desirable bases for morality. So the early Christians, again, were the Socialists of their age, and took a view of Dives and Lazarus which would commend itself to the Nihilists of to-day. The church is now often held up to us as the great barrier against Socialism, and the one refuge against subversive doctrines. In a well-known essay on "People whom one would have wished to have seen," Lamb and his friends are represented as agreeing that if Christ were to enter they would all fall down and worship Him. It may have been so; but if the man who best represents the ideas of early Christians were to enter a respectable society of to-day, would it not be more likely to send for the police? When we consider such changes, and mark in another direction how the dogmas which once set half the world to cut the throats of the other half, have sunk into mere combinations of hard words, can we seriously look to the maintenance of dogmas, even in the teeth of reason, as a guarantee for ethical convictions? What you call retaining the only base of morality, appears to us to be trying to associate morality with dogmas essentially arbitrary and unreasonable.

From this point of view it is naturally our opinion that we should promote all thorough discussion of great ethical problems in a spirit and by methods which are independent of the orthodox dogmas. There are many such problems undoubtedly of the highest importance. The root of all the great social questions of which I have spoken lies in the region of Ethics; and upon that point, at least, we can go along with much that is said upon the orthodox side. We cannot, indeed, agree that Ethics can be adequately treated by men pledged to ancient traditions, employing antiquated methods, and always tempted to have an eye to the interest of their own creeds and churches. But we can fully agree that ethical principles underlie all the most important problems. Every great religious reform has been stimulated by the conviction that the one essential thing is a change of spirit, not a mere modification of the external law, which has ceased to correspond to genuine beliefs and powerful motives. The commonest criticism, indeed, of all projectors of new Utopias is that they propose a change of human nature. The criticism really suggests a sound criterion. Unless the change proposed be practicable, the Utopia will doubtless be impossible. And unless some practicable change be proposed, the Utopia, even were it embodied in practice, would be useless. If the sole result of raising wages were an increase in the consumption of gin, wages might as well stay at a minimum. But the tacit assumption that all changes of human nature are impracticable is simply a cynical and unproved assertion. All of us here hold, I imagine, that human nature has in a sense been changed. We hold that, with all its drawbacks, progress is not an illusion; that men have become at least more tolerant and more humane; that ancient brutalities have become impossible; and that the suffering of the weaker excites a keener sympathy. To say that, in that sense, human nature

must be changed, is to say only that the one sound criterion of all schemes for social improvement lies in their ethical tendency. The standard of life cannot be permanently raised unless you can raise the standard of motive. Old-fashioned political theorists thought that a simple change of the constitutional machinery would of itself remedy all evils, and failed to recognise that behind the institutions lie all the instincts and capabilities of the men who are to work them. A similar fallacy is prevalent, I fancy, in regard to what we call social reforms. Some scheme for a new mode of distributing the products of industry would, it is often assumed, remedy all social evils. To my thinking, no such change would do more than touch the superficial evils, unless it had also some tendency to call out the higher and repress the lower impulses. Unless we can to some extent change "human nature," we shall be weaving ropes of sand, or devising schemes for perpetual motion, for driving our machinery more effectively without applying fresh energy. We shall be falling into the old blunders; approving Jack Cade's proposal—as recorded by Shakespeare—that the three-hooped pot should have seven hoops; or attempting to get rid of poverty by converting the whole nation into paupers. No one, perhaps, will deny this in terms; and to admit it frankly is to admit that every scheme must be judged by its tendency to "raise the manhood of the poor," and to make every man, rich and poor, feel that he is discharging a useful function in society. Old Robert Owen, when he began his reforms, rested his doctrine and his hopes of perfectibility upon the scientific application of a scheme for "the formation of character". His plans were crude enough, and fell short of success. But he had seen the real conditions of success; and when, in after years, he imagined that a new society might be made by simply collecting men of any character in a crowd, and inviting

them to share alike, he fell into the inevitable failure. Modern Socialists might do well to remember his history.

Now it is, as I understand, primarily the aim of an Ethical Society to promote the rational discussion of these underlying ethical principles. We wish to contribute to the clearest understanding we can of the right ends to which human energy should be devoted, and of the conditions under which such devotion is most likely to be rewarded with success. We desire to see the great controversy carried on in the nearest possible approach to a scientific spirit. That phrase implies, as I have said, that we must abandon much of the old guidance. The lights by which our ancestors professed to direct their course are not for us supernatural signs, shining in a transcendental region, but at most the beacons which they had themselves erected, and valuable as indications, though certainly not as infallible guides, to the right path. We must question everything, and be prepared to modify or abandon whatever is untenable. We must be scientific in spirit, in so far as we must trust nothing but a thorough and systematic investigation of facts, however the facts may be interpreted. Undoubtedly, the course marked out is long and arduous. It is perfectly true, moreover, as our antagonists will hasten to observe, that professedly scientific reasoners are hardly better agreed than their opponents. If they join upon some negative conclusions, and upon some general principles of method, they certainly do not reach the same results. They have at present no definite creed to lay down. I need only refer, for example, to one very obvious illustration. The men who were most conspicuous for their attempt to solve social problems by scientific methods, and most confident that they had succeeded, were, probably, those who founded the so-called "classical" political economy, and represented

what is now called the individualist point of view. Government, they were apt to think, should do nothing but stand aside, see fair-play, and keep our knives from each other's throats and our hands out of each other's pockets. Much as their doctrines were denounced, this view is still represented by the most popular philosopher of the day. And undoubtedly we shall do well to take to heart the obvious moral. If we still believe in the old-fashioned doctrines, we must infer that to work out a scientific doctrine is by no means to secure its acceptance. If we reject them we must argue that the mere claim to be scientific may inspire men with a premature self-confidence, which tends only to make their errors more systematic. When, however, I look at the actual course of controversy, I am more impressed by another fact. "Individualism" is sometimes met by genuine argument. More frequently, I think, it is met by simple appeal to sentiment. This kind of thing, we are told, is exploded; it is not up to date; it is as obsolete as the plesiosaurus; and therefore, without bothering ourselves about your reasoning, we shall simply neglect it. Talk as much as you please, we can get a majority on the other side. We shall disregard your arguments, and, therefore—it is a common piece of logic at the present day—your arguments must be all wrong. I must be content here with simply indicating my own view. I think, in fact, that, in this as in other cases, the true answer to extreme theorists would be very different. I hold that we would begin by admitting the immense value of the lesson taught by the old individualists, if that be their right name. If they were precipitate in laying down "iron laws" and proclaiming inexorable necessity, they were perfectly right in pointing out that there are certain "laws of human nature," and conditions of social welfare, which will not be altered by simply declaring them to be unpleasant. They did

an inestimable service in emphatically protesting against the system of forcibly suppressing, or trying to suppress, deep-seated evils, without an accurate preliminary diagnosis of the causes. And—not to go into remote questions—the "individualist" creed had this merit, which is related to our especial aims. The ethical doctrine which they preached may have had—I think that it had—many grave defects; but at least it involved a recognition of the truth which their opponents are too apt to shun or reject. They, at least, asserted strenuously the cardinal doctrine of the importance of individual responsibility. They might draw some erroneous inferences, but they could not put too emphatically the doctrine that men must not be taught to shift the blame of all their sufferings upon some mysterious entity called society, or expect improvement unless, among other virtues, they will cultivate the virtue of strenuous, unremitting, masculine self-help.

If this be at all true, it may indicate what I take to be the aim of our society, or rather of us as members of an ethical society. We hold, that is, that the great problems of to-day have their root, so to speak, in an ethical soil. They will be decided one way or other by the view which we take of ethical questions. The questions, for example, of what is meant by social justice, what is the justification of private property, or the limits of personal liberty, all lead us ultimately to ethical foundations. The same is, of course, true of many other problems. The demand for political rights of women is discussed, rightly no doubt, upon grounds of justice, and takes us to some knotty points. Does justice imply the equality of the sexes; and, if so, in what sense of "equality"? And, beyond this, we come to the question, What would be the bearing of our principles upon the institution of marriage, and upon the family bond? No

question can be more important, or more vitally connected with Ethics. We, at any rate, can no longer answer such problems by any traditional dogmatism. They—and many other questions which I need not specify—have been asked, and have yet to be answered. They will probably not be answered by a simple yes or no, nor by any isolated solution of a metaphysical puzzle. Undoubtedly, a vast mass of people will insist upon being consulted, and will adopt methods which cannot be regarded as philosophical. Therefore, it is a matter of pressing importance that all people who can think at all should use their own minds, and should do their best to widen and strengthen the influence of the ablest thinkers. The chaotic condition of the average mind is our reason for trying to strengthen the influence, always too feeble, of the genuine thinkers. Much that passes itself off for thought is simply old prejudice in a new dress. Tradition has always this, indeed, to say for itself: that it represents the product of much unconscious reasoning from experience, and that it is at least compatible with such progress as has been hitherto achieved. Progress has in future to take place in the daylight, and under the stress of keen discussion from every possible point of view. It would be rash indeed to assume that we can hope to see the substitution of purely rational and scientific methods for the old haphazard and tentative blundering into slightly better things. It is possible enough that the creed of the future may, after all, be a compromise, admitting some elements of higher truth, but attracting the popular mind by concessions to superstition and ignorance. We can hardly hope to get rid of the rooted errors which have so astonishing a vitality. But we should desire, and, so far as in us lies, endeavour to secure the presence of the largest possible element of genuine and reasoned conviction in the faith of our own and the rising generation.

I have not sought to say anything new. I have only endeavoured to define the general position which we, as I imagine, have agreed to accept. We hold in common that the old dogmas are no longer tenable, though we are very far from being agreed as to what should replace them. We have each, I dare say, our own theory; we agree that our theories, whatever they may be, are in need of strict examination, of verification, it may be, but it may be also of modification or rejection. We hope that such societies as this may in the first place serve as centres for encouraging and popularising the full and free discussion of the great questions. We wish that people who have reached a certain stage of cultivation should be made aware of the course which is being taken by those who may rightly claim to be in the van. We often wish to know, as well as we can, what is the direction of the deeper currents of thought; what genuine results, for example, have been obtained by historical criticism, especially as applied to the religious history of the world; we want to know what are the real points now at issue in the world of science; the true bearing of the theories of evolution, and so forth, which are known by name far beyond the circle in which their logical reasoning is really appreciated; we want to know, again, what are the problems which really interest modern metaphysicians or psychologists; in what directions there seems to be a real promise of future achievement, and in what directions it seems to be proved by experience that any further expansion of intellectual energy is certain to result only in the discovery of mares' nests.

Matthew Arnold would have expressed this by saying that we are required to be made accessible to the influence of the Zeitgeist. There is a difficulty, no doubt, in discovering by what signs we may recognise the utterances of the

Zeitgeist; and distinguish between loyalty to the real intellectual leaders and a simple desire to be arrayed in the last new fashion in philosophy. There is no infallible sign; and, yet, a genuine desire to discover the true lines in which thought is developing, is not of the less importance. Arnold, like others, pointed the moral by a contrast between England and Germany. The best that has been done in England, it is said, has generally been done by amateurs and outsiders. They have, perhaps, certain advantages, as being less afraid to strike into original paths, and even the originality of ignorance is not always, though it may be in nine cases out of ten, a name for fresh blundering. But if sporadic English writers have now and then hit off valuable thoughts, there can be no doubt that we have had a heavy price to pay. The comparative absence of any class, devoted, like German professors, to a systematic and combined attempt to spread the borders of knowledge and speculation, has been an evil which is the more felt in proportion as specialisation of science and familiarity with previous achievements become more important. It would be very easy to give particular instances of our backwardness. How different would have been the course of English church history, said somebody, if Newman had only known German! He would have breathed a larger air, and might have desisted—I suppose that was the meaning—from the attempt to put life into certain dead bones. And with equal truth, it may be urged, how much better work might have been done by J. S. Mill if he had really read Kant! He might not have been converted, but he would have been saved from maintaining in their crude form, doctrines which undoubtedly require modification. Under his reign, English thought was constantly busied with false issues, simply from ignorance of the most effective criticism. It is needless to point out how much time is wasted in the defence of