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ART. I.—THE THEOLOGICAL SYSTEM OF EMMONS.

THE WORKS OF NATHANIEL EMMONS, D.D. Edited by JACOB IDE, D.D.
Boston: Congregational Board. 6 vols.

MEMOIR OF NATHANIEL EMMONS; with Sketches of his Friends and Pupils.
By EDWARDS A. PARK. Boston: Congregational Board of Publication.
1861. 8vo, pp. 468.

PROFESSOR STUART of Andover once wrote an essay in the *Biblical Repository* to show that Arminius was not an Arminian. And eminent divines are now busy with the inquiry whether Dr. Emmons was an Emmonsite. Did he really hold to those definite and peculiar views which are popularly associated with his venerable name? Or, are his sharp doctrinal statements to be taken in a feminine rather than a masculine sense? to be called metaphorical and not literal, popular and not exact, Biblical in contrast with scientific? Of course, all that is necessary to make out that Dr. Emmons was not an Emmonsite, is to interpret his definite formulas in an indefinite sense, for the essence of his system is in its definiteness. Keen logic and exegetical skill can do very much with such a flexi-

ble material as human speech. Words are susceptible of a great variety of significations. Interpret all the leading terms in a very general sense, and it can easily be shown, that the most extreme men, when rightly understood, really mean just about what common mortals are always saying. A trifling difference of phraseology is all that is left. And perhaps this is the way in which theological controversy is to come to an end, viz. by interpreting everybody indefinitely. If the whole region is levelled, no mountains are left. But whatever may be in store for us in the indefinite future, it is hard to overcome our prejudices as to the past, and still more difficult to reverse the verdict of history. There are, to be sure, some signal instances of a revision and reversal of contemporary judgments. We might admit, with Hegel, that Aristotle was a profounder metaphysician than Plato; with Müller, that Augustine held to human freedom in its profoundest sense; with Cousin, that Pascal was subject to the torture of doubt; Mohammed may not have been a mere impostor, nor Cromwell a fanatical rebel, nor Henry VIII. a cruel tyrant; but still we must confess that we find it difficult to believe, that the "Wise Teacher and Royal Preacher of New England" (as the Rev. Thomas Williams calls Emmons) did not hold certain very distinct and even peculiar views upon divine efficiency, human exercises, submission, justification, and the grounds of the rewards of Paradise. And in fact, it seems to us, that just so far as the peculiarities of his system are explained away, Emmons himself is explained away. Another personage takes the place of that simple, venerable, and rigid form. The three-cornered hat, small-clothes, and bright knee-buckles are replaced by a loose coat, flowing pantaloons, and a soft and easy hat of modern material and fabric. Just so far as he is thus modernised, he forfeits the special rank which has been ascribed to him in the development of New England theology. If his distinct and distinctive propositions are reduced to the terms of a less severe system, his reputation as a clear and logical thinker also suffers detriment. For this emasculating process has chief respect to the vital points of his theory, those upon which he thought and preached most

constantly and urgently. His "consistent Calvinism" is contained in them. Here he claimed to be Calvinistic, and not merely "Calvinistical" or "Calvinisticalish." It has been intimated, that if he had lived now, he would have expressed himself in the modified modes of his apologists; but the proper business of an expounder of Emmons, is with Emmons as he was, and not with Emmons as he might have been under the light of our "improved" ethics and theology.

We propose, then, in vindication and elucidation of his real system, to present its characteristic features, in comparison and contrast with the earlier and later forms of New England theology, and particularly to show the conditions under which alone it can be considered as a self-consistent scheme of divinity. Incidentally it may appear, that those cannot be considered as valid Emmonsites, who discard the radical features of his system; and that those who retain only his "exercise" scheme, and who deny his "divine efficiency" theory, deny that which alone made, or can make, the exercise scheme consistent with genuine Calvinism. It is reported that a distinguished preacher once said to the venerable recluse, "Well, Dr. E., you and I agree, that all sin and holiness consist in exercises." "Yes," was the quick and searching response, "but we differ as to where the exercises come from."

After the full account given by our valued contributor, Dr. Pond, in the last number of this Review, we need add but a few words about Dr. Emmons's life and his most recent biography. The Memoir of Emmons, by Dr. Park, exhausts the subject, leaving nothing to be desired in the general portraiture of the man, his ways and surroundings. It is the most entertaining, ingenious and finished piece of ecclesiastical biography which New England has as yet sent forth in honor of her religious patriarchs. Minute divisions and subdivisions, sections and subsections, and even the aid of numbers and letters, give an almost mathematical accuracy to the arrangement of the book, as if it were written in the demonstrative method. The details are elaborated with nicety; the lights and shades are handled with consummate skill; the general as well as the particular relations of the theologian and his

theology are unfolded and set in their place. Careful logic and practised criticism watch over all the details, and fit each part of the narrative into its appointed place. If the object were to represent the Franklin divine, with needed explanations, as being upon the whole the best type of New England theology, polity, ethics, and practical divinity — that object could not have been more felicitously and acutely attempted. His chief biographer has certainly failed in his main purpose, if the reader is not convinced that Dr. Emmons is the Coryphæus of modern Congregationalism, as a system of independency in polity, and as a theory of exercises in ethics. The resources of English adjectives are put to a severe test in the contrasted descriptions, and varied encomiums, of his multiform traits of character. His idiosyncracies and his large humanity, his habits as a pastor and student, his peculiarities of dress, manner and conversation, his theological system in all its ramifications, and his style and method as a cogent preacher of divine truth, are set forth in such an attractive exposition, that even those who dissent most strongly from his prominent speculations must still reverence and admire and love the man. And even though it may not be made evident that he is a better and truer representative of the substantial orthodoxy of New England, than is Edwards, or Bellamy, or Smalley, or Dwight, or Hopkins, or Woods; all candid readers will confess, that in clearness of statement, consistency of logic, tenacity of phraseology, and especially in sharp and curt sayings, he is surpassed by none of his peers. He defined more sharply, and stuck to his definitions better, than any preceding New England divine. Though he wrote no formal body of divinity, but only sermons or essays in the homiletic form, he undoubtedly had a system thoroughly thought out, and carefully stated to obviate objections. Herein was his superiority; and it is of this very superiority that he is robbed, when he is interpreted as speaking more concisely than precisely, more intensely than plainly, more nervously than perspicuously, on the distinguishing features of his scheme. And to subject him to the metaphorical method of interpretation is peculiarly inapt, for he himself is the most

literal of our divines; his main positions are put as tight and tough, as clear and clean, as language can make them. He interprets every body else in the most literal and obvious sense; he never allegorizes. Scripture he explains with the simplicity of a child, and talks of the most supernatural themes as other people talk about men, and trees, and daily events. He holds to verbal inspiration, and literal interpretation, where others are staggered, or take refuge in a double sense. But he knew nothing about a double sense. He tried to say just what he meant; and if he had meant to say what his interpreters allege, he undoubtedly would and could have used the very words which they substitute for his strict formulas.

Dr. Emmons was the keenest of the old school divines of New England, and in some points the forerunner of its new school. He believed in the divinity of Christ, the Incarnation, and the Trinity — rejecting however, in opposition to Hopkins, the eternal generation of the Son, and even stigmatizing it as “eternal nonsense”. He carried divine sovereignty to its acme, while he maintained that man has natural ability to frustrate the divine decrees. He pressed the divine efficiency to an extreme which few Calvinists have dared to do, making it extend, as creative, to all events and all the acts of the creature, sin not excepted; and at the same time he held to the entire freedom and responsibility of the creature. So strictly did he believe that the glory of God is the great end of creation, that he also asserted that sin is necessary to the greatest good, and that a willingness to be lost is the chief test of regeneration. His ethical theory enforced an impartial and disinterested benevolence as the essence of true virtue, — a benevolence so comprehensive as to include all the good of all beings, and so disinterested that all self-love, if not repudiated, is merged in this universal good-will. Of the “five points” of the Calvinistic system, excepting that of a limited atonement, he was so constant an advocate, that they formed the staple of his Sunday afternoon inferences from his Sunday morning’s discourses. The decrees he declared to be the fundamental doctrine of “the Gospel”; he *proved*, that “it is absolutely necessary to approve of the doctrine of reprobation,

in order to be saved" (ii, 402). He held that depravity, in consequence of Adam's sin, is universal and total; that the Holy Ghost literally creates in the renewed a new heart and a right spirit; and that those thus renewed will persevere to the end, obtaining however the blessedness of heaven as a reward of their obedience, and not of Christ's. And thus does Emmons hold, as no one ever did either before or since, some of the extreme positions of both old school and new school. He is a supralapsarian Calvinist in all that concerns God, and the boldest of theorists in all that concerns human activity, carrying ethics and anthropology to the most startling results. He said of himself, at the age of ninety-three: "I go with the old school of New England divines half way, and then turn round and oppose them with all my might. I go with the new school half way, and then turn round and oppose them with all my might."

The essential points of his system are contained in three words—God, *efficiency*, *exercises*. The formula of his distinct and comprehensive scheme may perhaps be said to be this—*God by direct efficiency produces all events and exercises for his own glory*. Efficient and final causes are the metaphysical factors of his theory; the material and formal causes (as Aristotle would call them) he neglects or denies. On the one hand is an absolute decree, on the other hand are events and volitions; and the nexus between them is the immediate agency of God. And yet he says volitions are free, because God makes them free—it is their nature to be free; and man is responsible for them because they are his. Each volition is as distinct as an atom; it is, and must be, either wholly holy or wholly sinful; and as holy or sinful, it is inherently worthy of reward or penalty. The moral and personal being of every child of Adam, begins with these volitions—and, in fact, all that we know or can conceive about the soul, is that it is identical with its exercises. Some of the theological bearings and consequences of these extraordinary positions will come out in the sequel; but no one read in the history of theology can fail to recognise their peculiar character and scope. They indicate a mind of unusual keenness and penetra-

tion, subtle and scholastic, clear and consecutive. Emmons is, in fact, the schoolman of New England divinity; like the scholastics in logical acumen and fearless questionings; like them, too, in shrinking from no possible results of his logic; like them, in neglecting induction, and making deduction the royal road to truth; unlike them in his strong moral convictions and practical vigor of statement and appeal; and yet, again, like some of them—most resembling John Scotus Erigena, in the universality of his view of God's agency, bordering sometimes on consequences akin to pantheism—yet not pantheistic, for no theologian ever had a deeper sense of God's personal being and will, and of his entire distinction from the creature; no theologian ever pressed the idea of creation from nothing more sharply and even exclusively. Some of the recent attempts at elucidating his theology do not adequately emphasize these bolder and profounder aspects of his theory; his apologists seem anxious to smooth them over, to palliate them, to adapt them to the tastes of an enfeebled divinity, to a popular craving for the humanities and ethics—as if the substance of theology were to be found in moral philosophy, its adjuncts and inferences. But Emmons himself had no such weaknesses. He was every whit a theologian; and his moral philosophy and psychology (the latter rather barren at the best) were the handmaids and servitors of his lordly divinity. Such expounders hardly do full justice to the "grand old man"; they have not caught the inmost spirit and vital sense of his system.

The position of Dr. Emmons in the theological systems of New England is worthy of careful consideration. Isolated and peculiar* as he seems to be, his scheme is vitally interwoven with antecedent theories, and it has affected subsequent speculations. Intimate relations of affiliation or contrast con-

* The late Dr. Woods, of Andover, in his essay on the Theology of the Puritans (p. 13) says: "Dr. Emmons considered himself as an innovator on the settled theology of New England. He professedly dissented from several of the doctrines contained in the Catechism, and Confession of Faith, and in the writings of Edwards. He often mentioned the fact, that but a few, comparatively, embraced his peculiar views. He hoped it would not always be so".