

**DENYER THEOLOGICAL PRIZE
ESSAY, 1859. ON THE USE
AND ABUSE OF THE PROVERB,
"CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME"**

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Denyer Theological Prize Essay, 1859. On the Use and Abuse of the Proverb, "charity begins at home" by T. H. Stokoe

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T. H. STOKOE

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DENYER THEOLOGICAL PRIZE ESSAY, 1859.

ON

THE USE AND ABUSE OF THE PROVERB,

“Charity begins at Home.”

BY THE

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“*ἡ ἀγάπη οὐκ ἀρχεται ἐν ἡμῶν, ἀλλ’ ἐν τοῖς οἴκοις.*” — 1 COR. XIII. 13, 8.

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141. b. 106.

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An Essay, &c.

THE charge of corrupting philosophy by the use of language is one which must always possess a certain amount of truth, and one to which the English writer is far more liable than was his Greek predecessor, since the instruments with which he has to work are both fewer and of a ruder kind; the phraseology which he possesses for the communication of his thoughts is at once less copious and less clear. The inadequacy of the words of ordinary language for the purposes of philosophy, is a difficulty which is well known and felt by all the students of that science, in its various forms; while, on the other hand, they are met by the no less perplexing fact, that it is impossible to render their exoteric discourses and writings intelligible otherwise than by the employment of such ordinary terms. Such is the dilemma in which they are placed: they must either teach their readers, as it were, a new language, or they must be content to use words and phrases which are far from being adapted to the conceptions they are designed to represent.

It is the moral philosopher, who most of all is exposed to these difficulties,—who, being concerned with the matter of every-day life, is most of all constrained to clothe his thoughts in such commonplace language,—who, treating of principles and duties which pertain unto all, in which all feel that they are concerned, and the discussion of which they therefore consider should be carried on in terms such as all can understand,—is thus especially withheld from introducing any innovation in diction; while the ordinary terms relating to the subject with which he deals are, in many cases, already perverted from their proper meaning by misapprehension or prejudice*.

And nowhere perhaps does he meet with such glaring misapplication of language, nowhere, as we might naturally

* Vid. Mackintosh's *Progress of Ethical Philosophy*, Introduction, pp. 1, 2.

expect, is such confusion of words and ideas, and consequent corruption of truth, so common and so clearly discernible, as in those cases where it is attempted to embody some abstruse ethical principle so plainly and exclusively in the every-day language of the people at large, as to render it "familiar in their mouths as household words." Such attempts are many (may we not say *most*) of those popular maxims which are termed proverbs. They are often "thorns in the side" of the moral philosopher; perverting, sometimes by design, but far more frequently by misapprehension, the primary and fundamental truths which form the very root and basis of his system; calling good evil, and evil good; putting bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter; so that many, as he feels, will by means of these come to the perusal of his works with distorted sight and perverted minds, whose errors, on the one hand, it is his duty to correct, while, on the other, he must be on his guard against too abruptly opening their eyes, lest some prejudice should be aroused, some favourite weakness rudely exposed, and so they should at once close their ears in anger to all the rest of his instructions.

And yet let it not be supposed that we intend hereby to utter a sweeping invective against *all* proverbs, and to declaim universally against their use. The example of the divinely inspired and "wisest of men," who embodies the greater part of his teaching in these homely maxims, itself furnishes a strong precedent in favour of their employment. But there is no argument in their support which can have such weight with the true Christian as the frequency with which our blessed Lord Himself makes use of them in those discourses, the words of which are "the spirit and the life;" both availing Himself of those already in vogue among the Jews, and applying them to the new truths of the Gospel, and also, as it seems, often inventing them Himself, as a means of bringing His doctrines more forcibly home to the hearts of his hearers^b.

^b In St. John xvi. 29, the word is used, in our translation, in the opposite sense, to denote a dark saying; but here the Greek should rather be translated 'parable,' as in the margin,—*ὅτι οὐκ ἐπέφησε λαλεῖν, καὶ παραβολὰν ὀμιλεῖν λέγει.*

The generality of proverbs do indeed express, at least in their design, sound moral teaching, and answer to the description of them given by Camden, as "concise, witty, and wise speeches, grounded upon long experience, and containing for the most part some useful caveat;" or to the still more terse and striking definition of a proverb, as "the wit of one man, and the wisdom of many." But may it not in some sense be said of proverbs, as it has been said of words, that they are "the counters of wise men, but the money of fools." Nothing, indeed, can be more useful and salutary than these maxims usually are in their design, enforcing, as they do, the great truths of morality in terms which strike home at once to the hearts of all, even of those of the meanest capacities; or conveying some precept in a way less direct, though eventually perhaps still more touching and effective, through the medium of some homely metaphor, which is readily and universally intelligible. Yet how often, in the hands of the unwary, does a misapprehension of their meaning result in the firm implanting of a wrong principle, and so in the production of a permanent effect upon the character and life: and how many men do we meet with, who make these, and these alone, their stock-in-hand (as we may term it) of morality; on whose lips some proverb is ever ready, conveying at best but a partial truth, sometimes so utterly misapplied as to declare a complete falsehood, which may thus, by wilful perversion, act as a salve to the guilty conscience, and be a cloke not only for 'negligences,' but even for the commission of actual sins.

Among the many proverbs open to such misapplication, there is perhaps none more commonly thus abused than the one before us^c. In its primary intention, it contains a most sound and wholesome truth: it enforces the preservation of that order and harmony which emanate from the great Author of our being Himself; it seeks but to maintain those natural ties of kindred and acquaintance, which He designed to be the result of the grouping of mankind into families and neighbourhoods, and to draw more firmly around us

^c "Be just before you are generous" is a kindred proverb, equally salutary in its design, equally liable to abuse.

those bands of love and friendship, the principle of which He Himself hath implanted in our breasts. In the different acceptations of which it is capable, according as we narrow or extend the sphere of our 'at home,' it may be said to teach the duty of proper self-love and respect, and the sanctity of the family ties; or even, to take a wider range, the virtue of patriotism, and the sympathetic bond of Christian brotherhood. But while declaring that our charity must *begin* at home, it is far from implying that it must *end* there; while enforcing the existence of prior claims upon our love and affection, it is far from running counter to the great duty of universal benevolence, or denying that these sympathies should be so expanded as to embrace in a weaker form and inferior degree the whole human race. And yet this proverb is frequently perverted into a cloke for the most utter selfishness, a plea for ingratitude and hardness of heart, an excuse for the violation of His great command, who hath required that as He hath loved us, so we should also love one another.

But the proverb before us is *peculiarly* liable to such abuse, from the double meaning of that term which it proposes, in some sense, to explain, the twofold nature of the virtue expressed thereby; or rather perhaps we should say, the two distinct virtues to which the term charity is applied, (distinct partly in operation, though identical in origin,) of both of which it may be understood to declare the proper sphere, wherein they ought to be primarily and mainly practised. The word charity, which is our translation of the Greek *ἀγάπη*, and the Latin *caritas*, primarily and more properly denotes, like these, not almsgiving alone, but that spirit of universal good-will or benevolence which is itself the source and fount of such liberality, and of which almsgiving is one great proof⁴. Charity is, properly speaking,

⁴ Thus the virtue of liberality is regarded by St. John as the one great mode of the operation and proof of the existence of brotherly love. "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world's goods, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and in truth." 1 St. John iii. 16-18. Yet are they distinct virtues in their exercise, insomuch that, as

not a collection of good *deeds*, but a state and disposition of the heart. It is the *principle* which calls these good deeds into action; the source and fount from which they flow; the tree which, itself rooted firmly in the ground of faith, and watered there by the dews of heaven, brings forth necessarily the fruits of love. But since it is by such deeds of kindness especially that charity outwardly manifests itself, the name of the tree has been commonly appropriated to the fruits; the term which properly denotes the affection itself has been narrowed so as to be confined to these results thereof*. It is with reference to this narrower use of the term 'charity,' that the proverb is most frequently abused, so as to furnish an excuse for the grudging heart and niggard hand of those who, having this world's goods, and seeing their brother have need, by shutting up their bowels of compassion from him, shew plainly that the love of God dwelleth not in them.

Before proceeding to discuss further the question, in what sense and how far it is true that "Charity begins at home," it may be well to analyze the proverb before us, and collate all the possible interpretations of which it seems capable.

The word 'charity' denotes, as we have seen, either love,

St. Paul implies, a man may give all his goods to the poor, and yet be devoid of true charity. Liberality may exist without true charity; but charity, itself the offspring of faith, is sure to bring forth, as its natural fruit, liberality. Cf. St. James ii. 15, 16.

* Such confusion or error in words may arise in two ways: either when a word has its original meaning extended, so as to be predicable in a wider sphere, and used in a loose and vague sense; or when it is made more specific and comprehensive, and employed in a narrower application than was its original design. Charity, used to denote almsgiving, is an instance of the latter.

The Greek *ἐλεημοσύνη* furnishes an exactly parallel case, our word 'alms,' derived from it, retaining this secondary meaning. "The word for pity (*ἐλεημοσύνη*) came to signify the evidence of pity which is given by bounty to the poor. It had this signification among the Jews. So St. Matt. vi. 1,—"Take heed that ye do not your *alms* before men to be seen of them*." The word *alms* is contracted from *ἐλεημοσύνη*, as is the case with the corresponding words in other European languages, (Italian, *Elemosina*, *Limosina*;—Spanish, *Limosna*;—Old Fr., *Almosne*, *Aumosne*;—Anglo-Saxon, *Elmesn*, *Elmes*)." — *Whewell's Elements of Morality*, vol. i. p. 306, § 497.

* *προσέχετε τὴν ἐλεημοσύνην ὑμῶν μὴ ποιεῖν, κ. τ. λ.* Cf. St. Luke xi. 41, xii. 55; Acts iii. 2, ix. 36, x. 2, 4, 31, xxiv. 17.

affection, benevolence ; or almsgiving, liberality. The phrase 'at home' also is capable of different explanations, and may be regarded as referring to, according as we extend or limit its sphere of predication, either ourselves, our family and household, our relatives, or all who possess any marked and distinguishing bond of union with us. While the verb 'begins' must be taken as equal to 'has its first origin,' 'its primary and proper sphere.'

Combining, then, these various interpretations of its component words, the principal and most palpable interpretations which the proverb itself may bear seem to be these :—

1. Love or affection has its origin in ourselves.
2. Love is rightly bestowed first upon ourselves.
3. Benevolence proceeds from, or is coincident in principle with, self-love¹.
4. Love is primarily and chiefly bestowed (or is to be bestowed) on those most nearly connected with us, or on those who have some bond of union with us.
5. We are bound first of all to assist by the practice of almsgiving, or other good deeds, our own kindred, neighbours, or those otherwise connected with us.

The first of these, a sense in which the proverb is never perhaps actually employed, is of course in some measure true. It traces the stream of benevolence and love back to its fount in the human heart, but carries not its principle further to the source from which that fount is itself supplied; marks not that heaven-sent rain and dew without which the fount would soon be dried up, and the stream cease to flow. For the Gospel teaches us that love to God is the principle and origin of that love to man whereby we shew our gratitude to Him, and that this love to God itself is but the faint reflection of that wondrous mercy which He, in the scheme of redemption, displayed to us. Thus is it true, in a peculiar sense, that "peace on earth and good-will towards men" are blessings showered from heaven upon the

¹ This possible meaning is too forced to demand any special notice, but the question how far benevolence is identical in origin and connected in operation with self-love, will incidentally enter into many parts of our discussion.