

RA1596

HUMAN DEPRAVITY.

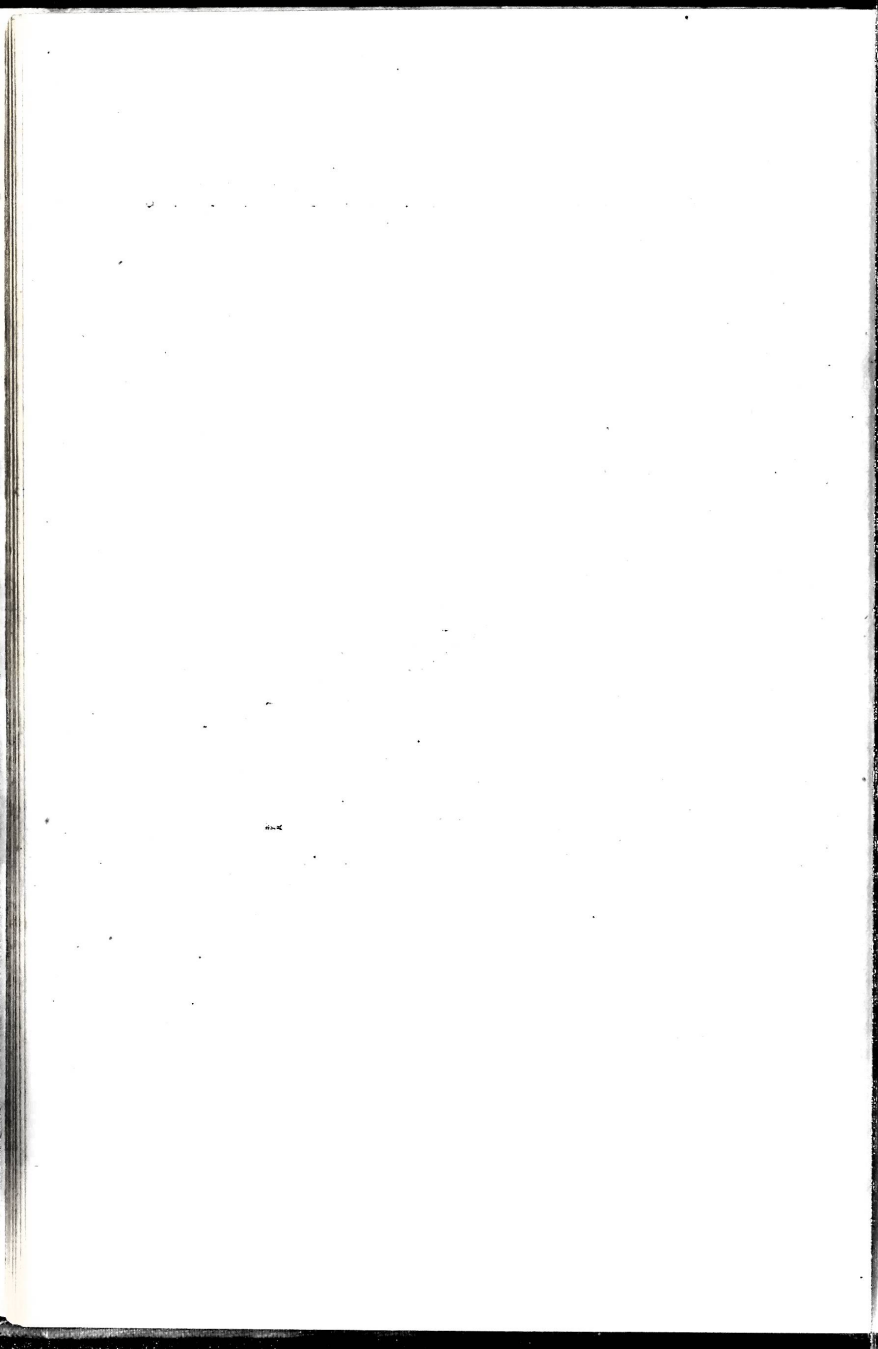
BY

REV. JAMES CRANBROOK.



PUBLISHED BY THOMAS SCOTT,
NO 11, THE TERRACE, FARQUHAR ROAD,
UPPER NORWOOD, LONDON, S.E.

Price Threepence.



HUMAN DEPRAVITY.

I PROPOSE to discourse to you this evening upon the subject of Human Depravity. The notion lies at the base of the whole structure of orthodox doctrine. If the notion be false, the whole structure falls to the ground. I believe it is entirely false. Human nature *is not depraved, but imperfect*. This difference is a vital one. It affects the whole question of education, of the treatment of the ignorant and of criminals. It is not for the sake of the dogmatical notion, but for the sake of the practical application, that I discuss it. You may consider the text to be Acts xvii. 29—"Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God." I purpose examining some of the phenomena of this so-called depravity, and pointing out their real character. First, however, it will be desirable briefly to glance at the development of the doctrine in some of its early stages.

The doctrine of Human Depravity is not a doctrine of the Old Testament. The oldest passage generally quoted to prove it is the 51st Psalm, 5th verse. But that verse proves nothing of the kind. It is the passionate language of penitence done into a rhythmical or poetical form; and no one who comprehends criticism would quote such language to prove a doctrine. There are many passages, indeed, which confess to universal sinfulness; but universal sinfulness is not the same thing as universal depravity. Universal sinfulness

merely implies that none have attained to absolute perfection of nature, that the laws of God are only imperfectly comprehended by us, and that present interests often overpower the thought of higher and future good. But universal depravity means "the corruption of man's nature, whereby he is utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto *all* that is spiritually good, and *wholly inclined* to all evil, and that continually." And such a state the Old Testament does not recognise; it only recognises the fact we all admit—universal imperfection or sinfulness. Thus in 1st Kings viii. 46, it is said "If any man sin against thee, for there is no man that sinneth not;" and in Psalm cxliii. 2—"Enter not into judgment, for in thy sight shall no flesh living be justified,"—both of these passages confessing what we would all confess, but neither of them supporting what I strenuously deny, the doctrine of Human Depravity. And that will be found to be the case with all the passages found in the Old Testament bearing upon the subject. Nor is there the least foundation for the doctrine in the narrative of the third chapter of Genesis as it stands alone. At whatever period that narrative was written, and from whatever source it was derived, it says nothing about the race becoming depraved. It does not even say that by eating of the fruit Adam and his wife learned to know good and evil. The serpent promised them that if they ate of the fruit they should be as gods, knowing good and evil, but the promise was merely a bait held out to induce them to disobey the alleged divine command. The penalty threatened was death, but, as the serpent foretold, they did not die, at least until many years after. The only curse pronounced upon them was physical; the serpent was henceforth to crawl on the ground and eat dust; the woman was to suffer as she entered upon the greatest joy of a woman's life, and to be subject to her husband; and the man was to find work a toil and a sorrow until he died. That is

all that the narrative says, and out of that I defy any one to construct the doctrine of universal depravity.

But after the Babylonian captivity a great change took place in Jewish theology and speculation. During the captivity, and afterwards, they came into contact with a much more advanced culture than their own, and it began to tell upon their thinking. The Persians, as we know, had long speculated upon the origin of evil. The Jews entered into the speculation, and in a mystical interpretation of their sacred books sought to solve the alleged mystery. Accordingly it is in the 2d book of Esdras that we have the first distinct notice of the doctrine—iii. 5-8,—"And gavest a body unto Adam, without soul, which was the workmanship of thine hands, and didst breathe into him the breath of life, and he was made living before thee; and thou leddest him into Paradise, which thy right hand had planted before ever the earth came forward; and unto him thou gavest a commandment to love thy way, which he transgressed, and immediately thou appointedst death unto him and in his generations; . . . and every people walked after their own way and did wonderful things before thee, and despised thy commandments." And again in the 21st verse—"For the first Adam, bearing a wicked heart, transgressed and was overcome, and so are all they who are born of him. Thus infirmity was made permanent, and the law (also), in the heart of the people, with the malignity of the root, so that the good departed away and the evil abode still." And once more in iv. 30—"For the grain of evil seed hath been sown in the heart of Adam from the beginning, and how much ungodliness it hath brought up unto this time? and how much shall it yet bring forth until the time of the threshing come?" But you will observe that in both these passages there is the very unorthodox supposition that Adam fell because the seed of evil had previously been sown in his heart, so that the question of the origin of evil is not in the least solved by them.

These speculations concerning *the origin and nature of evil* thus originated amongst the Jews continued through several centuries, and were debated with great zest. About the time of Job they were especially connected with certain philosophical notions respecting spirit and body, and the prevalent idea—or what soon after became the prevalent idea—was, that all sin arises from or is due to our material bodies, to “the flesh,” as it is called. The flesh is essentially evil, corrupts and holds the spirit in subjection, and needs to be subdued, conquered, and triumphed over by all who would rise to their true relations to God. To be “in the flesh,” to “walk after the flesh,” to be “born of the flesh,” was considered as constituting a state of sin and helpless depravity. To become the Sons of God we must be “in the spirit,” “walk after the spirit,” and “be born of the spirit”—in other words, the spirit must rise out of her depressed and degraded state and rule the body. These notions very early passed into the christian church, and the discussion of them greatly agitated the various parties into which it was divided. Especially were they pressed with great vigour and logical consistency by the Gnostics. At first the so-called Orthodox party resisted them, and seem to have endeavoured to hold by the simple practical teaching of Christ as it maybe gathered from the synoptical gospels. But they could not resist the spirit of the times—they themselves entered into it, the doctrine became more and more fully elaborated, until at last the defining mind of Augustine gave it the form which has since been held as essentially correct and orthodox.

Of course this was not done without protest. Amongst others, Pelagius stood up to vindicate human nature against the aspersions of a philosophy falsely so called. But he had no chance in fighting against the whole tendency of the thinking of the times, and in fighting, too, whilst he himself was unconsciously

hampered by that tendency. Many have risen up against it since; but it is only now that men have learned to bring all doctrines to the test of facts, and to receive nothing but what can be verified by experience and observation, that they generally have become strong enough and free enough to throw off the incubus of a doctrine which is as practically mischievous in matters of education as it is misrepresentative of the moral government of God. Let us enquire then into the alleged Depravity of Human Nature, and ascertain upon what facts it rests. The statement of it is very clear. Our first parents "became dead in sin and wholly defiled in all the faculties of and parts of soul and body. They being the root of all mankind, the same death in sin and corrupted nature were conveyed to all their posterity. From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgression.—"Confession of Faith," chap. vi.

Now, without argument, I ask you as a plain matter of fact, Is that true? I ask you parents if it be true of your bright and lovely little children? I ask you to look upon their merry and happy faces as they are playing around you, and say—Do they show by word or deed, that they are defiled in all the faculties or parts of soul and body? If they be utterly indisposed, disabled and opposed to *all* good and wholly inclined to *all* evil;—That is what the doctrine says they are. In the name of the tender caresses they bestow upon yourselves: in the name of the love and fondness they show for each other: in the name of the intelligence and comprehension of good and evil often appearing at very early periods: in the name of all that is lovely about childhood, and which led the glorious Christ to make it the type of the spirit which belongs to the Kingdom of Heaven? I answer those questions for you with all indignant negation. They

utterly indisposed, disabled and opposite to all good ! Some of the most beautiful forms of goodness may be seen in the child's life. Oh what would many a one give who has been led far wrong by the temptations of the world, if it were possible to return to the sweet innocency of their childhood !

But let us become more special. This depravity must be shown in two forms of action especially—the religious and the moral. The words of the definition I have quoted include more, they include also physical actions. I may have occasion to refer to that by and by ; but for the present I confine our attention to the religious and the moral. *First*, then, in religion do men universally show themselves utterly indisposed, disabled, and opposite to all good? I maintain that when religion is understood in its true sense, on the contrary they are inclined to, able for, and naturally on the side of religion ; that the feeling of religion springs up spontaneously in every human heart ; that it has ever been one of the most powerful and moving forces of mankind ; and that it is only when other and sinister influences have been brought to bear upon a man that he ceases, if he ever ceases, to be the subject of religion. For I am not going to allow any one to hash up a compound of speculations in philosophy, of dogmas in theology, of pseudo-facts in history, mingled in definite or indefinite proportions with sickly sentiments and unnatural emotions, and call the belief of and surrender of one's spirit to that the only true religion. That with me is not religion at all. Religion is the feeling of deep reverence, awe, wonder, and worship, which the manifestation of God to the soul through anything which seems to us practically infinite excites within us. And such manifestations are being continually made to every human being from the early days of childhood, and almost as frequently find the responsive feeling. For it is not necessary to the existence of the feeling of religion that the great

Being whose manifestation of himself awakens it should be named or even thought of by the soul, and much less that he should be thought of correctly. It is enough that when, in the darkness of the night, or in the rolling thunder of the clouds, or in the beautiful face of the clear sky, or in whatever form He makes the awful mysterious presence of His power and glory felt, the soul respond in reverence, awe, and worship. Nor is it necessary that the worship, the reverence and awe find for themselves an utterance. The deeply moved spirit, wondering and feeling itself humbled before a power it does not, perhaps cannot, comprehend, has in itself the very essence of religion,—the life of all that has been grandest, noblest, and most devout in all the services which ever were offered unto God. And will any one tell me that children, savages, heathen, Jews, and Mohammedans, as well as the purest and most cultivated or most evangelical of Christians, are not the subjects of this feeling? They would be contradicting the most patent facts if they did. Nay, more, will any one tell me that even men whose lives we all condemn—that outcasts of all kinds, that the most abject and the most debased—are not sometimes the subjects of it? They would be asserting what they could not prove if they did. *The great God is nearer all His children than men's theories would allow us to imagine.* And many and many is the time that the lowest and most debased are momentarily warmed into a higher life as His glory passeth by. But even tried by the false standard of attendance in places of worship, the race, as such, proves itself religious. Men are never found absenting themselves from such places, whether they be enclosed by a circle of Druidical stones or by a Gothic pile, until they have intellectually outgrown the forms of belief associated with the worship, or, according to the anomaly of the world's history presented by Protestant countries alone, have been wickedly thrust out by neglect and supercilious-

ness, as have the very poor in these countries. Save in these exceptional cases, men and women everywhere crowd the worship where worship is offered. We in our gross ignorance and silly pride may call all such worship false, and the religion utterly worthless; but the loving Father of us all never despises the simplest offering of the heart. I say, then, that when the facts are examined they prove that, so far as religion is concerned, man is not utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good. From the early periods of his childhood to his dying hour he is ever susceptible of the profoundest religious feeling when brought unto the presence of the infinite. And it is only because the feeling loses its bloom under the dust of the world, or gets sickened by the false notions of God thrust upon us, or sometimes, alas! gets corrupted through evil practices, that all do not rise to the higher and more perfect expression of it as life wears away. The higher and more perfect expression of it! But who shall say what that is? Possibly it is murmured in the heart, where none but God can hear.

Let us pass on now to the second class of actions wherein man's depravity is supposed to be shown,—the Moral. He is "utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil." In the larger Catechism the word spiritual is inserted before good, though not before evil. It is evident, however, that moral action is included in the term, because many of the texts quoted to prove it refer to moral actions,—such as deceit, venom, slander, and a disposition to murder. Our inquiry now then is this—in moral actions does every man show himself to be wholly bad and inclined to all evil? I need not answer the question in that form; and yet that is the only form in which it strictly comprehends all that is stated in the doctrine. It would be a waste of time to show how utterly untrue that is, because all of you at once must feel it to be so. Let us rather spend a

minute or two in answering what is a fair question from the other side. "If men are not wholly depraved, how do you account for it that all men sin, and sin from the early periods of life? Does not the universality of sin prove that there must be a universal depravity or taint of nature?" Now, a recollection of what sin is makes the answer to this supposed difficulty very simple indeed. Sin is simply a violation of law—a doing of something not in accordance with, or a not doing of something required by, the laws or conditions of our well-being and happiness. That is virtually the definition of sin given by the New Testament itself. And most certainly it is the only definition which is clear and comprehensive of all that is required. Well, then, if sin be this—a transgression of the laws of our well-being and happiness—it is not difficult to explain the fact of universal sinfulness. For, 1st, these laws are numerous, complicated, and sometimes difficult of apprehension. They are by no means all settled and determined yet. As we have been twice told lately by two most gifted lecturers in the Philosophical Institution, when we come to apply the historical method to questions of morals we shall be astonished to find how many received axioms have been handed down to us by traditions from east and west which have no basis of rational authority whatsoever. And if this be still our state, it is not wonderful that men who lived before Justinian, in the childhood of the world, should have lived in the violation of laws unknown to or misunderstood by them, but of which we see the existence and action more clearly. And as with the race, so with the individual; all controversy about innate ideas apart, as a matter of fact we know that it is only slowly children learn what the moral laws are, and that the larger number of their sins is committed through pure ignorance. But this ignorance, however, is due not to depravity, but simply from want of capacity to comprehend, or time to learn. Wait, and the

evil will correct itself. But then there is also another consideration to be taken into account. I mean cases where the law is known, but where conflicting motives lead to its violation.

Now, perhaps we shall best be able to comprehend these cases by taking our instance, first of all, from a case where the evil is purely physical. To remain long in a badly ventilated room, crowded with persons, is most mischievous in its tendency to health: sometimes persons have laid the foundation of permanent disease by it—disease which has hastened their death. People know this, and yet are constantly doing it. The interest of a popular sermon or lecture, of some extraordinary exhibition, or a dinner-party or a ball, will be quite sufficient to tempt them to remain on and on, notwithstanding the mischief they know they are doing to themselves. Now, I suppose you would not say their doing so shows the depravity of their nature, but rather that it indicates the want of training and discipline which would compel them to give the rational motives at all times the sway over their actions. They are yielding to a present gratification at the expense of an inquiry which, not being pressing and immediately apparent, they do not feel. A man whose intellectual and moral nature is thoroughly trained, always yields to that which is best upon the whole and in the long-run. He, therefore, would not hesitate a moment as to what his action in such a case should be. Now this principle explains, I think, nearly the whole of the cases of conscious moral wrong-doing. Men, for the sake of the present satisfaction, forego the higher good—they do so not because they are innately depraved but because they have not been trained to live as rational and moral beings. I said the principle explains *nearly* the whole of the cases. It does not explain the whole. For there are some conditions of mind no training, no discipline, would correct of their tendencies to special evils—

at least no training that our imperfect knowledge of Ethology or the science of the formation of character makes us acquainted with. But these are abnormal cases—cases of disease we need now scarcely take into account. As a general rule, give the knowledge of the law, and the training which leads a man habitually to act upon rational and moral motives, and he will do right. The want of the knowledge, or of the training, or of both, is a sufficient explanation of the evil in the world without a resort to the degrading doctrine of human depravity.

But now, as I said, I have discussed this question, not for the sake of the theological questions, but for the sake of the practical question of popular education and the reformation of the pauper and criminal classes of the community. I believe the dogma of human depravity has done unspeakable mischief in these matters. It has induced all sorts of false and injurious methods in the treatment of these classes. Men might go on for ever discussing such dogmas so far as I am concerned, and if they felt happy in it I would never say one word to disturb them. But when I see them bringing these dogmas into practical action, and ruling education by them, ruling the treatment of the degraded and criminal classes by them, I must not, dare not withhold my protest. If the principles I have expounded to-night be correct, then these classes are not to be educated, reformed, civilized, Christianised by some air breathed from heaven upon their darkened souls—by some semi-miraculous, mysterious operation superinduced by theological exhortations, but by quietly and patiently teaching them how God's established laws are affecting their whole life ; by showing them how all their happiness is dependent upon their obedience to these laws ; and by encouraging them, helping them, strengthening them to form those habits of obedience which will lift them above present temptations to go astray. What we have to deal with is

not a mass of seething putrescence which none but the re-creative power of God can reform, but ignorance which needs to be instructed, and habits of self-indulgence, and of yielding up everything to an immediate gratification, which need to be replaced by habits of self-control, prudence, and the higher virtues. And this is a work within the range of human intelligence and perseverance, and which, if rightly carried on, will prove effective in the worst cases. None are completely beyond its reach. The old may not have time left in life to learn all that would make the remainder of their days bright as sunlight, and they may be beyond the power of much reformation of habits,—although even with them something may be done,—but there is no reason but what is found in our ignorance, our apathy and indifference, why the young should not be rescued out of that slough of despond circumstances have sunk them in, and made thoughtful, virtuous, useful members of society.

It is upon this point, therefore, I wish all that I have been saying to-night to be made to concentrate. There can be no doubt about the degradation of the classes to which I am referring. But it is a degradation which arises from ignorance, from ill-formed habits, and from physical as much as from moral causes. Civilization, knowledge, purer and more refined manners and modes of life, have been acting upon the classes above them for generations, and removing these classes into regions of life not only where they have lost all sympathy for them, but where the betrayal of ignorance in uncouth expressions and the habits retained amongst the lowest classes are felt to be perfectly disgusting. These last are degraded because the others have been elevated. But what is it that at this moment makes the real difference between the one and the other? It is simply the larger knowledge and the better-formed habits of the higher classes. Let the knowledge be communicated, and the

better habits formed, and they will be raised to the level on which these higher classes stand. If men be left to their ignorance, how can they do otherwise than wander in all sorts of errors? And if no care be taken in teaching habits of rational self-government and control, how can they be expected to become otherwise than the creatures of impulse, carried away by appetites, passions, and every passing desire? And yet people cry out about the evidence such things give of the depravity of human nature, and the evils into which it runs!

The depravity of human nature! Remember this, all evil is nothing but the negation and absence of some special good. Supply the good and the evil of itself ceases, as does space when it becomes occupied with matter. Give light, and darkness disappears. Teach, expound, unfold the truth, the whole facts of life, the laws of rational, moral, and religious well-being; lead men to act according to what their knowledge tells them will be the best and most happy upon the whole, and by so doing you will conquer their "depravity," and make that future we all so long for speedily dawn, when all our fellow-countrymen, at least, shall live rational, virtuous, and Christian lives.

I hope we here shall be able to attempt something of this work, and shall not be satisfied merely ourselves to enjoy the blessing of light God sends us. For myself I fully believe that if we went amongst the most degraded of these classes and told them of God's great goodness and love, and how he has placed all men under conditions of life in which happiness is only to be had by conformity with his laws, and that it is possible for them and all men to conform with these laws, calling upon them earnestly and reverentially to rise and take possession of the great inheritance of good within their reach, we should not preach in vain. But certainly, however little or much success we might meet with thus, the children must be rescued,

taught and trained aright. No sectarianism, no theological dogmas, no notions about political, social, or parental rights, must stand in the way of that. Their future wholly depends upon their education, (in the wide sense of the term) and educated they must be. I call upon you all therefore to join your voices in swelling the cry which is beginning to rise from different parts of the land, that some wise, liberal, comprehensive measure of education shall be formed which shall render it impossible for any child within these realms to be left a prey to the ignorance and vicious habits which constitute the only depravity we have to dread.

But I cannot close without saying that especially those who are parents should with gladsome steps return to their homes under the influence of these truths we have been considering. It shows them that they will meet there around their hearths—not mournful objects the sight of whom will make their hearts bleed, “the children of wrath and of the devil;”—but bright angels of the house, the offspring of God, sent in the buoyancy of their innocency to make their parents’ hearts young again; and who only need wise and judicious training and instruction in order to have opened before them a course through life glorious in its intelligence, its virtue, its nobleness, its divineness. Yes, we are all the offspring of God—hold fast by and be true to that fact, and it will set us on the right track to be blessed ourselves, and to be made wheresoever we go a blessing.