

Editorial: Eclectic Eugenics

'If another book such as this comes to be written in a hundred years from now, I wonder how many of these questions will then be regarded as settled—and settled rightly.' The chapter in which these words were printed—exactly fifty years ago—is entitled 'Some Current Questions'. The author plausibly supports his tentative expectation that the scene will continue to shift:

If a book such as this were being written in England a hundred years ago, and if the writer wished to discuss some of the issues which then occupied the minds of thoughtful and public-spirited people, he would have to consider a number of matters which are not topics of discussion today. They are for us dead controversies; the arguments, the disputes, the passions they aroused are a matter of history. They are settled questions.

We may take a few instances. The duel—a conspicuous example—has been already mentioned. A hundred years ago people were still debating whether negro slavery could be justified; whether men ought to be hanged if found guilty of any one of a large variety of crimes besides murder; whether child offenders should be sent to the ordinary prisons; whether discipline in the army and navy should be maintained by flogging. It was still an open question in all classes of society whether drunkenness was to be regarded as a vice or as an amiable foible, a matter rather for laughter than for censure. People argued whether it was better that the children of the working-classes should remain illiterate, or whether schools ought to be provided for them. If they were provided, would it be right for the law to punish parents who sent their children to work and not to school? Should Nonconformists be admissible to the Universities? And should burial in the old churchyards be allowed to them; or should the law insist that they should still be buried only in separate cemeteries? Ought a man to be excluded from Parliament because he was a Jew?

The author of these words was then the Rt Hon. Sir Herbert Samuel, GCB, GBE, MP. Later he was to be Lord Samuel. Earlier, in 1925, he had been one of the thoughtful and public-spirited people who founded the Royal Institute of Philosophy, which reaches its Diamond Jubilee this year. His book *Practical Ethics* was published in the Home University Library. The title page has an epigraph from *The Sayings of Confucius*: 'If the things be kept simple, we shall seldom lose our way'.

Editorial

The author of *Practical Ethics* was right to think that times would have changed by 2035. Already in 1985 some of his preoccupations seem quaint. The Liberals and liberals of today would not expect a Liberal or liberal statesman to trumpet ‘the recognition that the physical material of the race can and should be improved. The science of eugenics must take an increasingly important place among the social sciences. As was said by Sir Francis Galton, its pioneer, “We of the living generation are the dispensers of the natural gifts of our successors, and we should rise to the level of our high opportunities”.’ They may be more favourably surprised, or at least merely bemused, to see a chapter on ‘Man and Animals’ in which the notion of ‘Animal Rights’ is rejected only on the basis of doubts about the general notion of natural rights. The case for the humane treatment of animals is built instead on the results of evolutionary theory and research: ‘the discovery that man is not the product of a special act of creation and separate in kind from the lower animals, but is allied to them physically and in some degree mentally, has given rise to a certain sense of kinship, and with it to a feeling of greater sympathy’.

The philosophical framework is eclectic. Whitehead is invoked several times, but there is also a pragmatist streak (‘to think is to do’). F. C. S. Schiller is called to testify that ‘It is precisely our doubtful beliefs that loom so large in our intellectual landscape, for it is upon these that mental activity is actually engaged’. Samuel notes that ‘this sometimes gives rise to the false impression that all beliefs are doubtful, that everything is still a “question” with its two sides, either of which may perhaps be right’. No liberal can live long with the thought of uncertainty, especially about how other people should behave. The authentic note is prophetically struck by the question ‘Ought it to be regarded as immoral to build an ugly house?’

Samuel endorses Matthew Arnold’s view that ‘Many are to be made partakers of well-being, true; but the ideal of well-being is not to be, on that account, lowered and coarsened’. He does not quote the prediction of the same sage inspector of schools that the main effect of universal elementary education would be to ensure that rude inscriptions on walls would be nearer the ground and better spelt.