BELGIUM AS THE TEACHER OF THE NATIONS.: PROFESSOR ROYCE PREDICTS A ...
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BELGIUM AS THE TEACHER OF THE NATIONS.

Professor Royce Predicts a New Sense of International Duty and a Rapid Recovery After the War.

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The article which follows is, in part, a paper prepared for a gathering of teachers of philosophy at Harvard University in honor of Professor Maurice de Wulf of the University of Louvain.

Wherein lies our best ground for hope that out of the present crisis we are to be led nearer toward the goal that the great community of mankind is consciously or unconsciously seeking to attain? In answering this, time requires me to be very brief. But let me mention one memory which has of late brightened a good many sad hours for me when I think of the social transformation which recent decades have seen, and compare them with the changes through which we are now passing.

About a quarter of a century ago South America was passing through that series of international conflicts and of internal revolutionary struggle, one phase of which culminated in those troubles of the Argentine Republic which led in Europe to the failure of the Barings. We in the United States, nearly all of us, believed at that time that there was little hope of seeing the republics of South America reach any position in which international peace, so far as the mutual relations of those republics were concerned, could become more frequent or more stable. Most of us supposed that those republics were thenceforth doomed to a series of wars and revolutions whose end was not definable and not to be hoped for.

But of late years, when in various voyages in tropical waters I have chanced to meet ambitious, vigorous, and reasonably well cultivated young South Americans, representatives sometimes of commercial firms, interested sometimes in engineering, and sometimes in social problems, I have heard from such young men (especially in case they were Peruvians, or Chileans, or citizens of Argentina) comments whose tone was both clear and confident. Such men like to say that civilization now finds its most secure home in the southern republics of South America, where international peace and the avoidance of revolution are rapidly coming to be used as normal and natural events, expressing not only what humanity needs, but what civilized humanity is henceforth normally to get.

The opinion of such young South Americans is sometimes expressed with naïveté. Their pride is doubtless somewhat exaggerated. But it is such men that at this moment no doubt are tempted to speak of uncivilized Europe.

I do not know how long this stage of South American civilization, in which peace with honor seems, for the time, the normal event, will continue. But when one remembers the year 1890, and recalls the failure of the Barings, and the seeming hopelessness of the South American situation, one tends to be inspired with a certain hope that Europe also may find its way out of the bad dreams, of the delirious wars and absurdities in which at the moment it lives, into the new light of reason, of liberty, and of wisdom. We cannot predict this result, but the South American republics that in 1890 we pitied and despised for their unreasonableness and for their evil passions—they give us a right to some hope for Europe.

And we in this gathering may also look for hope in another direction. In 1871, when the book of Swinburne's called "Songs Before Sunrise" was first printed, not only did Europe mourn the dead of 1870 and 1871, and not only did its captives and martyrs seem to demand from the poet the question, "What of the night?" but European civilization knew almost as little of Japan as it now knows of how to keep the peace, or of how to acquire international freedom. We who sit about this table well know how deeply the new Japan, of whose wisdom and of whose ideals we have learned only since that time, has transformed our own view, not only of what Oriental civilization has meant and may mean, but of what place its ideas and ideals are likely to occupy in the civilization of the future. Humanity's whole idea of itself had been transformed since 1870 through an understanding—an understanding still no doubt in its infancy—concerning the true relations between the civilization and the thought of the West and the East. This new insight today enters into our life. It helps us to become, in a measure to remain, both humane and rational.

The world where such transformations can so swiftly occur, and where such powers for good and for reason are so manifestly at work, we have a right to hope, not only for present escape from the power of the spoiler, not only for early release from the might of death, oppression, and inhumanity in the form in which that might is now displaying itself, but for a rapid and real growth in the wisdom which philosophy seeks, and which it is our privilege as students of philosophy to defend, and, as far as in us lies, to teach. * * *

However the present war results, and whatever be the efforts made after the war to preserve the future peace of the nations, there is one consequence of the war to which, as I believe, we may look forward with reasonable confidence. The war will teach the nations, and, as far as possible, humanity at large, to take a new interest in the ancient ethical idea of duty, and to get a new insight into what the meaning of that idea of duty is. * * *

For some reason until recently the nations have not been guided, in their dealings with one another, by the idea of duty. Sometimes the nations have been fond of each other. Sometimes they have quarreled. But to do their duty as nations to one another, and to humanity, has heretofore been little of their concern. Therefore, as I strongly hope, this war, by the very vastness of the calamities through which it leads, will bring the nations to a new consciousness which will awaken the much-needed international conscience, the long-sought but, after all, thus far little effective sense on the part of the individual nation: "We owe our duty to humanity, and consequently to our fellow nations." We owe this duty, because if each nation has its own life, and its own irrevocable past, it does unwisely if it so acts that afterward, if wise, it must regret its past, and must repudiate the principles which have thus far guided its course of action. After this war, when Europe, alas, is more a house of the dead than ever before, and when the wreck of the highest human good has been greater than ever before, we may well believe that the new consciousness of duty which will result will influence nations as well as individuals. Thus the unexampled tragedies of the times may well teach humanity new lessons about what national and international duties are. Philosophers are interested in whatever teaches such lessons.

But not only the tragedies of our times may teach us new lessons as to what international duty is, the deeds of our times include acts which give us new examples never known before of how a nation, facing a great crisis, can be guided mainly or solely by the idea of duty—that is, of its duty as a nation to other nations and to mankind. Emerson's classic word about how Duty speaks to the Youth is in the minds of all of you. Emerson wrote that word, addressing it to the generation of youth to which belonged the heroes whose names are now written on the tablets of Memorial Hall. Emerson wondered how the delights and distractions, the sports and the noisy occupations of youth, could be so interrupted by the divine messages which bore the word of duty to the youth of America, that the still small voice of duty sent forth the youth of our country "to hazard all in freedom's fight"—

> So nigh is grandeur to our dust,
> So close is God to man,
> When Duty whispers low, "Thou must,"
> The Youth replies, "I can."

Emerson found this divine efficacy of the voice of duty, when it spoke to the heroic youth of our civil war, something miraculous.

It is a most hopeful sign that in our day, and during the present war, there was a moment when the voice of duty spoke low, but with divine power, not merely to an individual, or to any mere collection or mass of individuals, but to a nation, to a nation heroic and noble beyond the measure of what the wit of man has heretofore viewed as possible.

In the Autumn of 1914 "so nigh was grandeur to our dust, so close was God to man, that when Duty whispered low, 'Thou must,'" that hero nation, Belgium, replied; "I can," and so, in Emerson's words, was nerved "to hazard all in freedom's fight"—a fight not only for the life of a nation, but for the life of humanity. Thus a nation has appeared, as perhaps never before, in the light of a suffering servant of the Lord among the nations.

With strong assurance, then, we may look forward to two results of this war in which all philosophers will be interested. The tragedies of this war will arouse a new international conscience, a new sense that a nation has a duty as much as a man. The great example of Belgium will show to the world, as never before, what a nation can do when, in a grave crisis, it faces and does its duty, both to other nations and to humanity. * * *

With reverence for Belgium and its heroic citizens, with high hopes for their future, with honest, hearty, and enduring indignation against their enemies, I venture to inscribe myself their friend in the cause of liberty and of humanity.

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