

ARE THE JAPANESE IMPERSONAL?

FEW phases of the Japanese character have proved so fascinating to the philosophical writer on Japan as that of the personality of this Far Eastern people. From the writings of Sir Rutherford Alcock, the first resident English minister in Japan, down to the last publication that has come under my eye, all have something to say on this topic. One writer, Mr. Percival Lowell, has devoted an entire volume to it under the title of "The Soul of the Far East," in which he endeavors to establish the position that the entire civilization of the Orient, in its institutions, such as the family and the state, in the structure of its language, in its conceptions of nature, in its art, in its religion, and finally in its inherent mental nature, is essentially *impersonal*. One of the prominent and long resident missionaries in Japan once delivered a course of lectures on the influence of pantheism in the Orient, in which he contended, among other things, that the lack of personal pronouns and other phenomena of Japanese life and religion are due to the presence and power in this land of pantheistic philosophy preventing the development of personality.

The more I have examined these writings and their fundamental assumptions, the more manifest have ambiguities and contradictions in the use of terms become. I have become also increasingly impressed with the failure of advocates of Japanese "impersonality" to appreciate the real nature of the phenomena they seek to explain. They have not comprehended the nature or the course of social evolution, nor have they discovered the mutual relation existing between the social order and personality. The arguments advanced for the "impersonal" view are more or less plausible, and this method

of interpreting the Orient appeals for authority to respectable philosophical writers. No less a philosopher than Hegel is committed to this interpretation. The importance of this subject, not only for a correct understanding of Japan, but also of the relation existing between individual, social, and religious evolution, requires us to give it careful attention. We shall make our way most easily into this difficult discussion by considering some prevalent misconceptions and defective arguments. I may here express my indebtedness to the author of "The Soul of the Far East" for the stimulus received from his brilliant volume, differ though I do from his main thesis. We begin this study with a few quotations from Mr. Lowell's now classic work.

"Capability to evolve anything is not one of the marked characteristics of the Far East. Indeed, the tendency to spontaneous variation, Nature's mode of making experiments, would seem there to have been an enterprising faculty that was early exhausted. Sleepy, no doubt, from having got up betimes with the dawn, these inhabitants of the land of the morning began to look upon their day as already far spent before they had reached its noon. They grew old young, and have remained much the same age ever since. What they were centuries ago, that at bottom they are to-day. Take away the European influences of the past twenty years, and each man might almost be his own great-grandfather. In race character, he is yet essentially the same. The traits that distinguished these peoples in the past have been gradually extinguishing them ever since. Of these traits, stagnating influences upon their career, perhaps the most important is the great quality of "impersonality."* "The peoples inhabiting it [the northern hemisphere] grow steadily more personal as we go West. So unmistakable is this gradation that we are almost tempted to ascribe it to cosmical rather than to human causes. . . . The sense of self grows more intense as we follow the wake of the setting sun, and fades steadily as we advance into the dawn. America, Europe, the Levant, India, Japan,

* P. 14.

each is less personal than the one before. We stand at the nearer end of the scale, the Far Orientals at the other. If with us the 'I' seems to be the very essence of the soul, then the soul of the Far East may be said to be 'Impersonality.' *

Following the argument through the volume we see that individual physical force and aggressiveness, deficiency of politeness, and selfishness are, according to this line of thought, essential elements of personality. The opposite set of qualities constitutes the essence of impersonality. "The average Far Oriental, indeed, talks as much to no purpose as his Western cousin, only in his chit-chat politeness takes the place of personalities. With him, self is suppressed, and an ever-present regard for others is substituted in its stead. A lack of personality is, as we have seen, the occasion of this courtesy; it is also its cause. . . . Considered a priori, the connection between the two is not far to seek. Impersonality, by lessening the interest in one's self, induces one to take an interest in others. Introspection tends to make a man a solitary animal, the absence of it a social one. The more impersonal the people, the more will the community supplant the individual in the popular estimation. . . . Then, as the social desires develop, politeness, being the means of their enjoyment, develops also." †

Let us take a look at some definitions:

"Individuality, personality, and the sense of self, are only three aspects of the same thing. They are so many various views of the soul, according as we regard it from an intrinsic, an altruistic, or an egoistic standpoint. . . . By individuality we mean that bundle of ideas, thoughts, and day-dreams which constitute our separate identity, and by virtue of which we feel each one of us at home within himself. . . . Consciousness is the necessary attribute of mental action. Not only is it the sole way we have of knowing mind; without it there would be no mind to know. Not to be conscious of one's self is, mentally

* P. 15.

† Pp. 88, 89.

speaking, not to be. This complex entity, this little cosmos of a world, the 'I,' has for its very law of existence, self-consciousness, while personality is the effect it produces upon the consciousness of others." *

The more we study the above definitions, the more baffling they become. Try as I may, I have not been able to fit them, not only to the facts of my own experience, which may not be strange, but I cannot reconcile them even to each other. There seem to me inherent ambiguities and self-contradictions lurking beneath their scientific splendor. Individuality is stated to be "that bundle of ideas, thoughts, and day-dreams which constitute our separate identity." This seems plain and straightforward, but is it really so? Consciousness is stated to be not only "the necessary attribute of mental action" (to which exception might be taken on the ground of abundant proof of unconscious mental action), but it is also considered to be the very cause of mind itself. Not only by consciousness do we know mind, but the consciousness itself constitutes the mind; "without it there would be no mind to know." "Not to be conscious of one's self is not to be." Do we then cease to be, when we sleep? or when absorbed in thought or action? And do we become new-created when we awake? What is the bond of connection that binds into one the successive consciousnesses of the successive days? Does not that "bundle of ideas" become broken into as many wholly independent fragments as there are intervals between our sleepings? Or rather is not each fragment a whole in itself, and is not the idea of self-continuity from day to day and from week to week a self-delusion? How can it be otherwise if consciousness constitutes existence? For after the consciousness has ceased and "the bundle of ideas," which constitutes the individuality of that day, has therefore gone absolutely out of existence, it is impossible that the old bundle shall be resurrected by a new consciousness. Only a new bundle can be the product of a new consciousness. Evidently there is trouble somewhere. But let us pass on.

* Pp. 203, 204.

"The 'I' has for its very law of existence self-consciousness." Is not "self-consciousness" here identified with "consciousness" in the preceding sentence? The very existence of the mind, the "I," is ascribed to each in turn. Is there, then, no difference between consciousness and self-consciousness? Finally, personality is stated to be "the effect it [the "I"] produces on the self-consciousness of others." I confess I gain no clear idea from this statement. But whatever else it may mean, this is clear, that personality is not a quality or characteristic of the "I," but only some effect which the "I" produces on the consciousness of another. Is it a quality, then, of the other person? And does impersonality mean the lack of such an effect? But does not this introduce us to new confusion? When a human being is wholly absorbed in an altruistic act, for instance, wholly forgetful of self, he is, according to a preceding paragraph, quite impersonal; yet, according to the definition before us, he cannot be impersonal, for he is producing most lively effects on the consciousness of the poor human being he is befriending; in his altruistic deed he is strongly personal, yet not he, for personality does not belong to the person acting, but somehow to the person affected. How strange that the personality of a person is not his own characteristic but another's!

But still more confusing is the definition when we recall that if the benevolent man is wholly unconscious of self, and is thinking only of the one whom he is helping, then he himself is no longer existing. But in that case how can he help the poor man or even continue to think of him? Perfect altruism is self-annihilation! Knowledge of itself by the mind is that which constitutes it! But enough. It has become clear that these terms have not been used consistently, nor are the definitions such as to command the assent of any careful psychologist or philosopher. What the writer means to say is, I judge, that the measure of a man's personality is the amount of impression he makes on his fellows. For the whole drift of his argument is that both the physical and mental aggressiveness of the Occidental is far greater than that of the Oriental; this characteristic, he asserts, is due to

the deficient development of personality in the Orient, and this deficient development he calls "impersonality." If those writers who describe the Orient as "impersonal" fail in their definition of the term "personal," their failure to define "impersonal" is even more striking. They use the term as if it were so well known as to need no definition; yet their usage ascribes to it contrary conceptions. As a rule they conceive of "impersonality" as a deficiency of development; yet, when they attempt to describe its nature, they speak of it as self-suppression. A clear statement of this latter point may be found in a passage already quoted: "Politeness takes the place of personalities. With him [the Oriental], self is suppressed, and an ever-present regard for others is substituted." "Impersonality, by lessening the interest in one's self, induces one to take interest in others." In this statement it will be noted the "*self is suppressed*." Does "impersonality" then follow personality, as a matter of historical development? It would so appear from this and kindred passages. But if this is true, then Japan is *more* instead of less developed than the Occident. Yet this is exactly the reverse of that for which this school of thought contends.

Let us now examine some concrete illustrations adduced by those who advocate Japanese impersonality. They may be arranged in two classes: those that are due wholly to invention, and those that are doubtless facts, but that may be better accounted for by some other theory than that of "impersonality."

Mr. Lowell makes amusing material out of the two children's festivals, known by the Japanese as "Sekku," occurring on March 3 and June 5 (old calendar). Because the first of these is exclusively for the girls and the second is exclusively for the boys, Mr. Lowell concludes that they are general birthdays, in spite of the fact which he seems to know that the ages are not reckoned from these days. He calls them "the great impersonal birthdays"; for, according to his supposition, all the girls celebrate their birthdays on the third day of the third moon and all the boys celebrate theirs on the fifth day of the fifth moon, regardless of the actual days on which they may have been born. With regard to this under-

standing of the significance of the festival, I have asked a large number of Japanese, not one of whom had ever heard of such an idea. Each one has insisted that individual birthdays are celebrated regardless of these general festivals; the ages of children are never computed from these festivals; they have nothing whatever to do with the ages of the children.*

The report of the discussions of the Japanese Society of Comparative Religion contains quite a minute statement of all the facts known as to these festivals, much too long in this connection, but among them there is not the slightest reference to the birthday feature attributed to them by Mr. Lowell.†

Mr. Lowell likewise invents another fact in support of his theory by his interpretation of the Japanese method of computing ages. Speaking of the advent of an infant into the home he says, that "from the moment he makes his appearance he is spoken of as a year old, and this same age he continues to be considered in most simple cases of calculation, till the beginning of the next calendar year. When that epoch of general rejoicing arrives, he is credited with another year himself. So is everybody else. New Year's day is a common birthday for the community, a sort of impersonal anniversary for his whole world." Now this is a very entertaining conceit, but it will hardly pass muster as a serious argument with one who has any real understanding of Japanese ideas on the subject. The simple fact is that the Japanese does not ordinarily tell you how old the child is, but only in how many year periods he has lived. Though born December 31, on January 1 he has undoubtedly lived in two different year periods. This method of counting, however, is not confined to the counting of ages, but it characterizes all their counting. If you ask a man how many days before a certain festival near at hand he will say ten where we would say but nine. In other words, in counting periods the Japanese count all, including both the first and the last, whereas we omit the first. This as a custom is an interesting psychological problem, but it has

* Cf. chapter viii.

† See the *Rikugo Zasshi* for March, 1898.

not the remotest connection with "personality" or "impersonality." Furthermore, the Japanese have another method of signifying the age of a child which corresponds exactly to ours. You have but to ask what is the "full" age of a child to receive a statement which satisfies our ideas of the problem. The idea of calling New Year's day a great "impersonal" birthday because forsooth all the members of the community and the nation then enter on a new year period, and of using that as an argument for the "impersonality" of the whole race, is as interesting as it is inconclusive.

Much is made of the fact that Japanese art has paid its chief attention to nature and to animals, and but little to man. This proves, it is argued, that the Japanese artist and people are "impersonal"—that they are not self-conscious, for their gaze is directed outward, toward "impersonal" nature; had they been an aggressive personal people, a people conscious of self, their art would have depicted man. The cogency of this logic seems questionable to me. Art is necessarily objective, whether it depicts nature or man; the gaze is always and necessarily outward, even when it is depicting the human form. In our consideration of the æsthetic elements of Japanese character* we gave reasons for the Japanese love of natural beauty and for their relatively slight attention to the human form. If the reasons there given were correct, the fact that Japanese art is concerned chiefly with nature has nothing whatever to do with the "impersonality" of the people. If "impersonality" is essentially altruistic, if it consists of self-suppression and interest in others, then it is difficult to see how art that depicts the form even of human beings can escape the charge of being "impersonal" except when the artist is depicting himself. If, again, supreme interest in objective "impersonal" nature proves the lack of "personality," should we not argue that the West is supremely "impersonal" because of its extraordinary interest in nature and in the natural and physical sciences? Are naturalists and scientists "impersonal," and are philosophers and psychologists "personal" in nature? If it be argued that art

* Cf. chapter xv.

which depicts the human emotions is properly speaking subjective, and therefore a proof of developed personality, will it be maintained that Japan is devoid of such art? How about the pictures and the statues of warriors? How about the passionate features of the Ni-o, the placid faces of the Buddhas and other religious imagery? Are there not here the most powerful representations possible of human emotions, both active and passive? But even so, is not the gaze of the artist still *outward* on others, *i. e.*, is he not altruistic; and, therefore, "impersonal," according to this method of thought and use of terms? Are European artists who revel in landscape and animal scenes deficient in "personal" development, and are those who devote their lives to painting nude women particularly developed in "personality"? Truly, a defective terminology and a distorted conception of what "personality" is, land one in most contradictory positions.

Those who urge the "impersonality" of the Orient make much of the Japanese idea of the "family," with the attendant customs. The fact that marriage is arranged for by the parents, and that the two individuals most concerned have practically no voice in the matter, proves conclusively, they argue, that the latter have little "personality." Here again all turns on the definition of this important word. If by "personality" is meant consciousness of one's self as an independent individual, then I do not see what relation the two subjects have. If, however, it means the willingness of the subjects of marriage to forego their own desires and choices, because indeed they do not have any of their own, then the facts will not bear out the argument. These writers skillfully choose certain facts out of the family customs whereby to illustrate and enforce this theory, but they entirely omit others having a significant bearing upon it. Take, for instance, the fact that one-third of the marriages end in divorce.* What does this show? It shows that one-third of the individuals in each marriage are so dissatisfied with the arrangements made by the parents that they reject them and assert their own choice and decision. According to the argument for "impersonality" in marriage, these recalcitrant,

* Cf. chapter xxiii. p. 329.

unsubmissive individuals have a great amount of "personality," that is, consciousness of self; and this consciousness of self produces a great effect on the other party to the marriage; and the effect on the other party (in the vast majority of the cases women), that is to say, the effect of the divorce on the consciousness of the women, constitutes the personality of the men! The marriage customs cited, therefore, do not prove the point, for no account is taken of the multitudinous cases in which one party or the other utterly refuses to carry out the arrangements of the parents. Many a girl declines from the beginning the proposals of the parents. These cases are by no means few. Only a few days before writing the present lines a waiting girl in a hotel requested me to find her a place of service in some foreign family. On inquiry she told me how her parents wished her to marry into a certain family; but that she could not endure the thought and had run away from home. One of the facts which strike a missionary, as he becomes acquainted with the people, is the frequency of the cases of running away from home. Girls run away, probably not as frequently as boys, yet very often. Are we to believe that these are individuals who have an excessive amount of "personality"? If so, then the development of "personality" in Japan is far more than the advocates of its "impersonality" recognize or would allow us to believe.

Mr. Lowell devotes three pages to a beautiful and truthful description of the experience known in the West as "falling in love." Turning his attention to the Orient, because of the fact that marriages are arranged for by the families concerned, he argues that: "No such blissful infatuation falls to the lot of the Far Oriental. He never is the dupe of his own desire, the willing victim of his self-delusion. He is never tempted to reveal himself, and by thus revealing, realize. . . . For she is not his love; she is only his wife; and what is left of a romance when the romance is left out?" Although there is an element of truth in this, yet it is useless as a support for the theory of Japanese "impersonality." For it is not a fact that the Japanese do not fall in love; it is a well-known experience to them. It is inconceivable how any-

one at all acquainted with either Japanese life or literature could make such an assertion. The passionate love of a man and a woman for each other, so strong that in multitudes of cases the two prefer a common death to a life apart, is a not uncommon event in Japan. Frequently we read in the daily papers of a case of mutual suicide for love. This is sufficiently common to have received a specific name "joshi."*

So far as the argument for "impersonality" is concerned this illustration from the asserted lack of love is useless, for it is one of those manufactured for the occasion by imaginative and resourceful advocates of "impersonality."

But I do not mean to say that "falling in love" plays the same important part in the life and development of the youth in Japan that it does in the West. It is usually utterly ignored, so far as parental planning for marriage is concerned. Love is not recognized as a proper basis for the contraction of marriage, and is accordingly frowned upon. It is deemed a sign of mental and moral weakness for a man to fall in love. Under these conditions it is not at all strange that "falling in love" is not so common an experience as in the West. Furthermore, this profound experience is not utilized as it is in the West as a refining and elevating influence in the life of a young man or woman. In a land where "falling in love" is regarded as an immoral thing, a breaking out of uncontrollable animal passion, it is not strange that it should not be glorified by moralists or sanctified by religion. There are few experiences in the West so ennobling as the love that a young man and a young woman bear to each other during the days of their engagement and lasting onward throughout the years of their lengthening married life. The West has found the secret of making use of this period in the lives of the young to elevate and purify them of which the East knows little.

But there are still other and sadder consequences fol-

* Buddhism is largely responsible for the wide practice of "joshi," through its doctrine that lovers whom fate does not permit to be married in this world may be united in the next because of the strength of their love.

lowing from the attitude of the Japanese to the question of "falling in love." It can hardly be doubted that the vast number of divorces is due to the defective method of betrothal, a method which disregards the free choice of the parties most concerned. The system of divorce is, we may say, the device of society for remedying the inherent defects of the betrothal system. It treats both the man and the woman as though they were not persons but unfeeling machines. Personality, for a while submissive, soon asserts its liberty, in case the married parties prove uncongenial, and demands the right of divorce. Divorce is thus the device of thwarted personality. But in addition to this evil, there is that of concubinage or virtual polygamy, which is often the result of "falling in love." And then, there is the resort of hopelessly thwarted personality known in the West as well as in the East, murder and suicide, and oftentimes even double suicide, referred to above. The marriage customs of the Orient are such that hopeless love, though mutual, is far more frequent than in the West, and the death of lovers in each other's arms, after having together taken the fatal draught, is not rare. The number of suicides due to hopeless love in 1894 was 407, and the number of murders for the same cause was 94. Here is a total of over five hundred deaths in a single year, very largely due to the defective marriage system. Do not these phenomena refute assertions to the effect that the Japanese are so impersonal as not to know what it is to "fall in love"? If the question of the personality of the Japanese is to be settled by the phenomena of family life and the strength of the sexual emotion, would we not have to pronounce them possessed of strongly developed personality?