THE SCIENCE OF ETHICS.*

MR. LESLIE STEPHEN'S latest work is a substantial octavo of some five hundred pages, in all external features of its making a companion to his admirable *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, noticed by us on the appearance of its well-deserved second edition. No reader of any of Mr. Stephen's writings will fail to expect or to find in *The Science of Ethics* the acuteness of thought, the honesty and felicity of expression, and the attractive sense of reality and of nearness to the subject, which have marked all his criticism. The intellectual sympathy, too, which extends so far in his history as to do loving justice to Bishop Butler, while the author's own views are plainly much more those of David Hume, is very marked in this volume In his lively preface — "a preface," he says, "is generally the most interesting, and not seldom the only interesting, part of a book" — he gives a brief history of his ethical views. Brought up a utilitarian of the school of J. S. Mill, he thought, on first consideration of Darwin's great work, that no particular reconstruction of his own doctrines in morals was necessary. But study of Mr. Herbert Spencer's works, and later of the eighteenth-century moralists, led him to a determination to set forth his views, in order "to begin at the beginning . . . and trudge steadily through the alternate platitudes and subtleties into which every moralist must plunge." The result is a work which can safely be pronounced the most important contribution to the evolutionary theory of ethics yet made in the English language. Rev. Minot J. Savage's *Morals of Evolution*, a reprint of a course of sermons, is as vigorous, but it lacks the independence and individuality of thought which are here. For Mr. Stephen, though a great admirer of Mr. Her-

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bert Spencer, differs from him "in various ways," and stands at a different point of view. In fact, Mr. Stephen's method is the only proper one for the moralist who has acquainted himself with the whole history of thought upon ethics, and then, surveying the province from within (the only fruitful process, if morality is a human product), has been led to reconstruct his theory to accord with certain great principles of the growth of human society here taken for granted.

Morality, according to our author, is a recent phenomenon in the history of the race, the family being an immediate and primitive relation preceding all conscious generalization which is the basis of ethical thought. The wider, less immediately instinctive relations are recognized at a certain comparatively high stage of evolution, when society begins to form and the construction of "social tissue" becomes necessary. This happy phrase marks the predominant idea of the work. "Social tissue" is built up of men, and every society is composed of it. Its cells are men, formed under social pressure to the shape and nature required to make them healthy constituent parts of society. The history of moral progress is the history of society, developing through the changing power which it can exert upon individuals. The moral law defines some of the most important characteristics developed in the individual by this social pressure, to correspond to the conditions of existence of society. Morality is of course natural; but the one precept of the law of Nature is, "Be strong," which may be divided into "Be prudent" and "Be virtuous," virtue being the health of the individual necessary to make a healthy society. The family becomes the main, as it is the fundamental, organ of morality, and supplies a field for teaching and learning nearly every virtue. These virtues constitute a morality eternal and immutable, so long as the essential conditions of human life remain as they are. But the point at which the moral law first distinctly emerges is where it is expressed by the precept, "*Be* this," not "*Do* this," clearly declared. This command is "a characteristic of all the great moral revolutions." The section on Morality as Internal expands this thought in a fine manner, emphasizing the stage of man's evolution in which he can appreciate the main importance of watching and correcting the disposition. Utilitarianism looks too much at the specific consequences of actions; while a more direct and easy method is to judge the inward impulse, as all the highest moral teachers have taught.

We have noted but a few points in a work of great acuteness and equal fairness of thought. Unless Mr. Spencer completes his Principles of Morals on a much different plan from that followed in his *Data of Ethics*, Mr. Stephen's book will remain, for some time at least, the nearest appearance to a Science of Ethics from the evolutionary point of view that we have. He neglects altogether too much the influence of great men in changing the moral ideas of their fellows and determining ethical progress. His mind is perhaps too distinctly literary, rather than scientific, to give the close and severe statement most fit for a final treatise. There is room indeed in this field, as he says, for the laborers of many generations to come. But the laborer of the present generation should henceforth write with no small gratitude to Mr. Stephen for his stimulating essay.