BROWNING’S ETHICAL POETRY.¹

BY H. B. CHARLTON, M.A.,
PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER.

FOR once in a way, I make no apology for my subject to-day; whatever one’s notion of the nature of poetry may be, even if one takes the extreme view that poetry is an art for its own sake, one cannot pretend to know Browning’s poetry without grappling with its ethical content. For all its content is directly or indirectly ethical. His abiding concern is with men and women, and his main interest is in seizing on incidents crucial to the development of their souls. The world of man meant intensely for him, and to find its meaning was his meat and drink. Nor was it a mimic star of Rephan, where weak and strong, the wise and the foolish, right and wrong, are merged alike in a neutral Best. He watched the figures of earth’s men and women straining in circumstance until they revealed their spirits’ true endowments impelling them or the right way or the wrong way to their triumph or undoing. He saw living as a ceaseless spiritual activity, a process of man in the making; and incessantly he sought for clues to the best means by which man best makes himself. He was indeed an impassioned and deliberate moralist. He had convictions about the nature of goodness and of right conduct. The world recognised in him the gifts of the poet, the insight and the outsight of a poet; and gifts must prove their use. He felt it his duty to himself, to man, and to God to speak out what he had apprehended of the ways of achieving human worth. These apprehensions are the stuff to which I now invite your attention.

Though my handling of them will be that of an amateur unversed in the language and technique of philosophy, I venture to add one personal note in justification of my subject as the

¹ An elaboration of the lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on the 14th of October, 1942.
theme of a Rylands lecture. On my own Browning shelves are two volumes standing cover to cover; and the author of each was formerly a Governor of the John Rylands Library. One is a volume, *Notes to Selections from the Poems of Robert Browning*, published by the National Home Reading Union in 1897; and amongst the most illuminating of its contents are essays by a great mind, my own revered first teacher, Professor C. E. Vaughan. The other is Professor C. H. Herford's *Robert Browning*, written in 1905; and Herford was my first academic chief and my immediate predecessor in the Chair at Manchester. For both of these scholars and thinkers Browning was a moral prophet. I feel therefore that I need no other sanction for choosing this subject, though by naming Vaughan and Herford to you in natural piety, I give you easy means for measuring my own inadequacy to walk where they walked before me.

Approaching Browning’s ethical poetry, then, we must ask ourselves: (1) what is it that we are seeking from it; (2) when we have found it, what validity for our moral sense does it possess, and (3) where particularly in the vastness of his poems shall we find what we seek?

What do we seek in Browning’s ethical poetry? We seek from it Browning’s notion of virtue, that is, since virtue is etymologically “man-ness,” that way of living which is most becoming to man, enabling him most fully to realise the scope of his nature as man. What, in fact, is a good man, and how does man become the best he may? How much of his becoming is determined by his natural character, and how much is controlled by his moral choice? As these questions depend on a whole metaphysic and, in view of the metaphysical categories of Browning’s day, on a theology, how far are Browning’s answers to the ethical question dependent on an acceptance of his version of metaphysical and theological truth? That is, can one adopt Browning’s ethical propositions without accepting also his metaphysical and, particularly, his theological doctrines? In fact, although we may discover that Browning’s idea of human goodness is closely bound up with Browning’s own idea of God and of Christ, does it yet constitute a feasible notion of goodness
without those links? These, it would appear, are the various issues raised. For convenience, they may be resolved into two major questions. When, in Browning's view, is a man a good man; and why does Browning determine that under those circumstances man is good?

Turn then to the other problem. When we have answered these two questions, what validity has his decision for us? Our judgment of the moral quality of a particular act implies two quite distinct conditions, one psychological and the other speculative or philosophical. First, we must know what the seeds of the act were, what impulses impelled it and then to what extent volition compelled it. Secondly, when the will has realised itself in act, we must see that outcome as part of a universal goodness. Now to what extent is a poet particularly competent to satisfy these two conditions? To meet the first of them, has he any special gift for probing personality, diagnosing its instinctive impulses and tracking its purposes unsure? Some assurance here is easy. One way by which a man may enter into the personality of another and realise such full sympathy that he really feels the other's feelings and thinks his thoughts, is by the exercise of imagination: and it is imagination which is the poet's primary gift. There are poets, of course, whose imagination preferably explores aetherial regions. But in all of them at times, and in some of them by regular predilection, imagination occupies itself with the mystery of man himself. These are the poets whom the world calls its dramatists. Now Browning had most of the dramatist's qualities, and by virtue of them he has cunning in detecting men's impulses and seeing their motives clear. He fulfils then the first of the conditions making for valid judgment.

Is he provided with similar guarantees for satisfying the second condition? Having securely diagnosed all the contributory forces preceding the realised act, has he particular skill for fitting the particular act into a pattern of universal truth? It is the old problem of the poet's status as philosopher. That, in turn, involves the old Platonic differentiation between mediate and immediate avenues to reality; and that has resolved itself into a partly specious discrimination between the
relative values of intuition and of reason, or of head and heart, in the search for truth; or, on the other hand, into an also partly specious identification of truth and knowledge. Only a professed philosopher can put this problem in its proper terms. But to a lay mind, knowledge of truth is awareness of reality; and human awareness operates through all the sentient elements of the human personality. In the broad and simple sense we are aware of things by their impact on any of the components of our person and personality. We are aware of heat by sensations through our skin. But apparently we only know heat when our reason can phrase a formula for it in terms of physical science. But is not science in this sense merely a part of complete knowledge, that part, namely, which is demanded by one function of reason, the function which German philosophers called "understanding"? And is not the awareness to which understanding remains unsusceptible nevertheless part of a fuller knowledge which a larger reason must recognise? The larger reason must, of course, impose final conditions; for instance, in denying that "understanding" must always be satisfied, it may well insist that it shall never be flatly affronted. There must, perhaps, be no bald "credo quia impossibile est," or at least only a well-qualified one. But again, only a philosopher can rightly phrase the terms of the awareness which properly embraces all varieties of knowledge. This, however, seems a safe assertion. All through time, man has found that in the infinitely wide stretch of the unknown, his instinct impels him to seek knowledge of those which elude his "understanding," but of which some sort of satisfying awareness seems to be provided by his intuition. And, conscious of himself as a complex organism, he has taken as faith that which gave most gratification to the larger number of the more dominant elements in his consciousness, when that gratification has not positively required a denial of the function of any other of these elements of consciousness. On these grounds, poets have been called seers; they have been held to reveal truth. The hypersensitive sensitiveness which makes them poets has provided them with immediate or intuitive awareness of some unity of which they cannot mediately or rationally demonstrate the unifying
components in the language of understanding. As Browning puts it, they have been apt to rise

From the gift looking to the giver,
And from the cistern to the river,
And from the finite to infinity,
And from man’s dust to God’s divinity.

So, to the question of the validity of Browning’s propositions on ethical problems, the answer is that, if as poet he can present his apprehensions in a manner which compels in us the same organically-complex gratification as was his, they are also truth for us at that moment. Whether they remain truth for us depends on a multitude of other conditions. But they have become a permanent part of our awareness, truth they were, and truth they again or even permanently may be.

And now to the last of these preliminaries. Knowing what we seek in Browning’s ethical poetry, and having enquired into the validity of what we may therein find, where in the huge bulk of his works are we most likely to discover that which we seek? Browning’s traffic was almost exclusively with men and women, all discovering their own souls. All his poems are stuffed with moral matter. But we want him most of all at those times when the gifts which confer authority on his findings were most vitally operative. It is as poet that he stands. What made him poet was precisely the peculiar sensitiveness of the non-ratiocinative elements in his faculties of awareness, and the consequent susceptibility of his intuitions and of his imagination. We want him therefore whilst these elements of his consciousness are functioning harmoniously with his reason, or without protest from it, and not when a decline in their vigour had allowed reason, now shrunk for safety to “understanding,” to overcome their authority in the total partnership of awareness. Now it is universally agreed by critics of all shades of opinion that Browning the poet grew to his own from the beginnings of Pauline, Paracelsus and Sordello through the tentative dramas of the early forties into the dramatic lyrics and monologues of the 1842 and 1845 volumes until he became his complete artistic self in the Men and Women of 1855; that the first faint signs of
decline are in the 1864 *Dramatis Personaee*, and, although with compensations splendidly apt to our immediate purpose, in *The Ring and the Book*, of 1868/9; that after *The Ring and the Book*, though his output of verse was vast, the poetic prerogative had faded before the demands of a more formally philosophic purpose. With increasing avidity his reason demands reasons and is no longer satisfied with inbreakings, through the venting of a brace of rhymes, of the sudden truth herself. Inspiration gives way to dialectic; poetic creation becomes versified argumentation and therefore addresses itself mainly to "understanding" at the expense of such conviction as had previously satisfied a larger reason. Hence we shall find more clearly what he has caught, as distinct from what he has thought, of the moral process called living in those of his poems, the dramatic lyrics and monologues, which are best represented in the 1842, 1845, 1855 and 1864 volumes. But, admitting this, we shall find a special usefulness in *The Ring and the Book*; and particularly because its plan involves much argumentation as part of its essential poetry.

As Browning's imaginative vision burned less brightly, he was thrown back on argument conditioned by formal logic. His confidence in his vision became less, and greater became the need to restore his convictions by ratiocination. Greater too became his despair at doing so, so great in fact that he came to deny the possibility of knowledge in that sense. Indeed, in one of the earlier of his later philosophic and argumentative poems, *La Saisiaz* (1878), he was led to complete agnosticism, though not, of course, to religious unbelief:

```
. . . Conjecture manifold,
But, as knowledge, this comes only—things may be as I behold,
Or may not be, but, without me and above me, things there are;
I myself am what I know not—ignorance which proves no bar
To the knowledge that I am, and since I am, can recognise
What to me is pain and pleasure: this is sure, the rest—surmise.
If my fellows are or are not, what may please them and what pain,—
Mere surmise: my own experience—that is knowledge, once again.
```

To this Browning, then, a poet's own experience is the whole of his truth and knowledge. But truth caught by poets can only
be transmitted poetically, that is, as an experience, an immediate vision, communicated by the poet's poetry. Yet man must reason about it, if he is to think at all, and he must think about it if he is to relate it to his other experiences in the same or in other kinds. So the poet's truth, although itself an apprehension of fancies which break through language and escape, must submit to partial translation into the only verbal currency by which systematic thinking is possible. Fortunately, the scheme of *The Ring and the Book* projected by Browning's still vital imagination, included a figure whom the poetic idea compelled to make his intuitive findings amenable to his thought: the Pope in it sums up and justifies by discourse the convictions reached by his and Browning's poetic insight. He thus becomes the authentic expositor of Browning's ethical system. It is not so much that the Pope expounds doctrines only to be found in *The Ring and the Book*, for in all Browning's poetry there is an overwhelming uniformity in the main tenets enunciated. For instance: that life is not a condition of static being, but a perpetual becoming, a process, an unceasing growth; that a man's reach should exceed his grasp; that most failure is most success; that triumph is by trial, temptation a purifying fire; that quiescence is the great refusal, courage a primary duty; that love is best, the cause, the purpose, and the richest mode of living. These all will recognise as typical of Browning's moral judgments, to be found by almost random picking from a hundred of his shorter poems. But in *The Ring and the Book* these pronouncements are built into a system, explanations and implications pursued, and justification attempted. The speaker of them in *The Ring and the Book* is the Pope, and dramatically in him the moral is but part of the religious problem; naturally also he fits his morals into a Christian pattern. But so also did Browning in the bulk of his works. Hence, the Pope (unlike all Browning's other dramatic figures except those for whom independently a similar prerogative can be claimed) may not unreasonably be held to speak the mind of Browning, especially as some of his utterances are patently inappropriate to a historic Pope of this Pope's day. In effect, then, it is to the book of the Pope in *The Ring and the Book* that we turn for the most
comprehensive and most authoritative expression of Browning's ethical notions. What further he himself tells us in his subsequent poems is only partially relevant, and indeed often essentially misleading, for it is largely concerned with intellectual difficulties encountered in his own later-day criticism of his earlier convictions after the means by which he had reached conviction were no longer at his service.

But before appealing to the Pope, let us look at three shorter poems, *The Grammarian's Funeral*, *The Statue and the Bust*, and *Rabbi ben Ezra*. With a strict limitation of the word ethical, these are the three which would probably be first chosen as Browning's most exclusively ethical poems, because the issues of religion, or particularly of the Christian religion, which are usually intertwined so inseparably in Browning's ethical thought, are woven far less prominently into their ethical pattern. And each of them is remarkable in that it may appear to propound a point or points of view not at once compatible with major articles of Browning's usual creed. For instance, *The Grammarian's Funeral* appears to glorify an indifference to the world and its moments, and to exalt an ascetic absorption in book-learning which is out of tune with Browning's zest for the vigour and variety of human experience. *The Statue and the Bust* appears to be a flagrant exaltation of adultery, and a claim for so much relativity in moral values that the difference between good and evil disappears: doctrines curious in the mouth of a poet who idealised love, found lust "Hell's own blue tint," and saw the sole possibility of a moral life in the antagonism of good and evil. *Rabbi ben Ezra*, amidst much that chimes with Browning's usual note, makes particular use of the Old Testament image of the potter and his clay; and this Hebrew symbolism of the omnipotence of God and the impotence of man accords ill with the individualist Browning's sense of man's share in his own spiritual making.

But a good deal of the apparent inconsistency arises from an error against which Browning continually protested. He is a dramatic poet, and usually his poems are the expression of opinions dramatically proper to the character who speaks them. It is never safe to assume that Browning thinks as his characters
think; nor that he tacitly approves the moods and opinions he attributes to them. We see him

gather men and women,
Live or dead, or fashioned by (his) fancy,
Enter each and all, and use their service,
Speak from every mouth—

but in what he makes them say, he denies that he reveals himself:

Hardly shall I tell my joys and sorrows,
Hopes and fears, belief and disbelieving.

Sometimes even the wariest critics distort both poem and doctrine by forgetting Browning's warning. For instance, in the brilliant and profound exposition of Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher, which Professor (afterwards Sir) Henry Jones published in 1891, one of Browning's most dramatic lyrics is shorn of its essential dramatic substance to provide quotations which even for the philosophic argument are the poorer because they diminish the range of Browning's out sight; they hide his perpetual consciousness of the philosophic limitations of formal statement in the pursuit of truth. The poem is A Woman's Last Word. Sir Henry Jones quotes the three stanzas—"Be a God and hold me", etc., to "Laying flesh and spirit In thy hands". He cites these three stanzas to vindicate the proposition that for Browning "True love is always an infinite giving which holds nothing back". On other counts and with other corroborative evidence, the general proposition may be voted. But the philosopher should have been arrested by his judicial use of 'true', and the Browning exponent should have been warned by the striking crescendo in values implicit in the first of the quoted stanzas:

Be a God and hold me
With a charm—

rising, in the speaker's mind, to a more transcendent plane of worth in the greater adjuration:

Be a man and fold me
With thine arm!

One should catch at once the temperament and character of a speaker who speaks thus. And one should remember that to
read Browning's poems right one should always ask the preliminary question: who speaks this and what sort of person is he or she; and in what circumstances is he or she speaking? Browning is an adept producer; his gift for giving the mind the prod which suggests the necessary answers is sheer dramatic genius. The Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister, for example: the mind aroused to its association with the devout cloistered life in Spain, one of the homes of Catholicism, and then the impact of the first lines—"Gr!—there go, my heart's abhorrence, Water your damned flower-pots, do I!" Or The Lost Mistress; the title, invoking traditional associations of a broken heart, intensified by the first words—"All's over then", but followed at once by the uncannily right excitement of speculative psychology—"Does truth sound bitter as one at first believes?" So, in this poem, A Woman's Last Word. The proverbial woman, das ewig-Weibliche, 'everywoman', but only the every woman of common belief. That, indeed, is what the poet depicts; but the afterthought prompted by his picture is like so much of Browning, a challenge to the common faith. She is speaking after a prolonged spell of bickering, nervously exhausted:

Let's contend no more, Love,
Strive nor weep:
All be as before, Love,
—Only sleep!

The hunger for the impersonal quietude of unconsciousness prompts the most revealing flashes of her clinging infatuation. All the pother is because they acted as intelligent folk must act, and put their feelings and thoughts into words—

What so wild as words are?
I and thou,
In debate, as birds are.

They should have remembered that they two, building their nest in a romantic paradise, had contracted out of the cosmos into a universe of two, and that, around their nest, cosmos lurked everywhere with hostile intent:

I and thou,
In debate, as birds are,
Hawk on bough!
Why, even the twittering of sweet nothings would be too dangerously loud, for the enemy, the whole world other than themselves, is about them ready to pounce: 'hawk on bough'.

See the creature stalking
While we speak!

The only sure refuge is absolute quiet:

Hush and hide the talking
Cheek on cheek.

The attitude 'cheek on cheek' is a superbly dramatic situation; there indubitably speaks the woman whose next words are

What so false as truth is,
False to thee?

She will swear that black is white at his bidding, if that is the only way to 'cheek on cheek' bliss. Yet she must seem to be a reasonable being; and so

Where the serpent's tooth is,
Shun the tree:

There is, in fact, biblical authority that some ways to knowledge are forbidden; they are the wiles of Satan. And his Satanic astuteness decks these wiles in innocent-seeming allurements:

Where the apple reddens,
Never pry—

for that is how the serpent undid Eve. This, indeed, is this woman's paradise, a Garden of Eden built just for two in a world where all else are birds and beasts of prey. Hence her ecstatic subversion of all moral and theological values:

Be a god and hold me
With a charm—

passing into the climacteric

Be a man and fold me
With thine arm!
This is the "cheek on cheek" sentiment in rapturous exaltation. To earn it and to hold it, she will forswear everything, body and soul, decency, morality, truth and individual personality:

Teach me, only teach, Love!
As I ought
I will speak thy speech, Love,
Think thy thought:

it will be a duty to deny truth in utter prostration of self:

Meet, if thou require it,
Both demands,
Laying flesh and spirit
In thy hands.

But to such a sentimental woman, such complete surrender is in mere prospect the occasion of absolute nervous exhaustion; and so

That shall be to-morrow,
Not to-night,
I must bury sorrow
Out of sight.

And in any case, the hawk cannot hear silence, and hawks are forgotten in the sentimental anaesthesia induced by sweet warm tears:

—Must a little weep, Love
(Foolish me I)
And so fall asleep, Love,
Loved by thee.

In this magnificently dramatic representation of abject self-surrender, the giving away of the one human ground of certainty, consciousness of self, it is clear that Browning is depicting one way of love, but a way which is the opposite of all that love which is

Creative and self-sacrificing too
And thus eventually God-like,

as, once more, our surest mentor, the Pope of The Ring and the Book will tell us.

So, turning to A Grammarian's Funeral, let us heed Browning's injunction that his art is dramatic. The funeral hymn is chanted by the devoted students of an old grammarian professor whose corpse they are carrying to its last resting-place in an appropriate
grave on the mountain summit. He has instilled into them a passionate fervour for book-learning; they have the right humility in their reverence for him, and youth's unlimited belief in the possibilities of the new learning, as well as a youthful academic contempt for illiteracy and an implicit assumption that worth is measured by ability to avoid false quantities in classical verse. They are the stuff from which All Soul's recruits its fellows and provides with means for entering on their real education. The Grammarian himself is a type of the scholars through whose grammatical labours it became possible for Europe to reach an intellectual rebirth. When the buried MSS. of Greece were gradually exhumed in the fifteenth century, they were hieroglyphs in an unknown tongue. The long labour of deciphering, of making out grammars and dictionaries so that men might read them, was the work of such as this grammarian. It was not for them to see the light; it was theirs to provide the papers which in the next generation would kindle a fire in the heat and the glare of which a new Europe would build itself on ancient humanism. In the main, they knew not what they did; and it was by their desiccation that later generations found matter to instil new life. But with allowable dramatic licence Browning permits his grammarian, and to a less extent his faithful disciples, to have some faint but fervent intimation of their rôle in the schemes of Providence.

They set out carrying the coffin, leaving the haunts of the unlettered multitude of common mortals, in the 'common crofts' and 'vulgar thorpes', who, knowing neither Latin nor Greek, can have no soul beyond a cow's or a sheep's, and no care therefore but the mean maintenance of their own bodies.

Leave we the common crofts, the vulgar thorpes
Each in its tether
Sleeping safe on the bosom of the plain,
Cared-for till cock-crow!

The 'unlettered plain' is no fit burial-place for the Grammarian; they seek a cemetery symbolically as far from this as possible. So

Seek we sepulture
On a tall mountain, citied to the top,
Crowded with culture!
The cities are, of course, symbols of the mind, the shapes of things to come from the new intellectual gospel of culture (spell this *kultur* and at once the dangers inherent in book-learning and philosophic literalism and pedantry are patent). So humbly and reverently,

> Our low life was the level's and the night's,
> He's for the morning!—

they begin the ascent:

> This is our master, famous, calm and dead,
> Borne on our shoulders.

As they climb, their scorn for the vulgar mass of men increases, and all men’s simple common-sense plans, like building roofs to keep the rain out, are despised as low-minded. Nay, even the prudential mother-wit which recognises that spring time will be followed by winter is taken to signify a contemptible meanness of spirit.

> Sleep, crop and herd!
> Sleep, darkling thorpe and croft,
> Safe from the weather!
> He, whom we convoy to his grave aloft,
> Singing together,
> He was a man born with thy face and throat,
> Lyric Apollo!
> Long he lived nameless; how should spring take note
> Winter would follow?

Ascending still, they exultingly recall their master’s career.

Tied to his study, lo

> ‘The little touch, and youth was gone’.

But ‘cramped and diminished’, he did not seize on the chance to plead that he had done his share and others must now replace him; on the contrary, he addicted himself still more avidly to his crippling task—

> Cramped and diminished,
> Moaned he, ‘New measures, other feet anon!’
> ‘My dance is finished?’
> No, that’s the world’s way: (keep the mountain-side,
> Make for the city!)
> He knew the signal, and stepped on with pride
> Over men’s pity;
> Left play for work, and grappled with the world
> Bent on escaping.
That is, he called for more and more manuscripts to decipher (and here Browning insinuates something greater than grammar as a grammarian's justification):

"What's in the scroll", quoth he, "thou keepest furled?"
"Show me their shaping"
"Theirs who most studied man, the bard and sage,—"
"Give!" So, he gowned him,
Straight got by heart that book to its last page:
Learned, we found him.

But of course he paid for his zeal by bodily affliction:
Yea, but we found him bald too, eyes like lead,
    Accents uncertain.
"Time to taste life", another would have said,
"Up with the curtain!"

Still the grammarian went on:
"Grant I have mastered learning's crabbed text,
    Still, there's the comment."

So long as there remained something unread, he would go on reading; until he had gathered all books had to give, he would persist solely in reading. For his disciples, this is a superb illustration of a dedicated life, though, tyro-like, their moral generalisations about it hardly fit into Browning's sense of the exigencies and duties of living.

O such a life as he resolved to live,
    When he had learned it,
When he had gathered all books had to give!
    Sooner, he spurned it.
Image the whole, then execute the parts—
    Fancy the fabric
Quite, ere you build, ere steel strike fire from quartz,
    Ere mortar dab brick.

The grammarian's peculiar grace
    —That before living, he'd learn how to live—

Browning does not usually hold up as a worthy way of life; for, as here, it involves a very un-Browning-like contempt for Time and Time's circumstances.

Others mistrust and say, "But time escapes;"
"Live now or never!"
He said, "What's time? Leave Now for dogs and apes!"
"Man has Forever."
So the studies went on—and brought with them disease and ill-health, the stone and wasting:

Back to his book then: deeper drooped his head:
*Calculus* racked him:
Leaden before, his eyes grew dross of lead;
*Tussis* attacked him.

But nothing diverted him: back to his grammar, or as these linguistic disciples magniloquently and magnificently put it—

He (soul-hydroptic with a sacred thirst)
Sucked at the flagon.

And the end came:

So, with the throttling hands of death at strife,
Ground he at grammar;
Still, through the rattle, parts of speech were rife:

as he was dying, he cleared up difficult points about Greek conjunctions and enclitics. So ended the man who "decided not to Live but Know". As a scheme of life, it is such as Paracelsus had discovered to be not only tragic, but frustrate; and generally Browning finds little manhood in those to whom, as to his grammarian, life's lure is pale. Even so, as a temporary ideal for undergraduates—and it is put here as the creed of a body of undergraduates, the grammarian's pupils—it has its palpable advantages. To turn ruthlessly from the pleasures of life during the three or four years given to a University course is part of the moral and intellectual profit of education: or at least, it might be. In effect, however, Browning contrives to insinuate more familiar and more striking moral implications more or less as accidental by-products of the particular system pursued by the ascetic grammarian. The students applaud—and properly applaud—the wide scope of the grammarian's alleged vision (though grammar as the main-spring of a Renaissance is what only later historians may see, and grammarians themselves are the worse grammarians when they pretend to see it): and they phrase their approval by formulating an economical ideal which seems only to be better than the vulgar herd's penny-wisdom which they had scorned because it ensures bigger profits in the end:
Oh, if we draw a circle premature,
  Heedless of far gain,
Greedy for quick returns of profit, sure
Bad is our bargain!

But morally—and dramatically—the trait which secures their, and Browning's, most enthusiastic recognition is one which almost seems forced into the picture. They see in this decrepit book-worm (and who but they with any dramatic truth could have seen it?), an example of the decisive audacity, the courageous seizing of a desperate main chance which is for Browning always the mark of the spiritual hero:

He would not discount life, as fools do here,
  Paid by instalment.
He ventured neck or nothing—heaven's success
  Found, or earth's failure.

To distinguish this act of moral bravery from a mere gambler's bravado means, for these students at all events, and perhaps for Browning also, that the argument must leap from morals to religion:

Was it not great? did not he throw on God,
  (He loves the burthen)—
God's task to make the heavenly period
  Perfect the earthen?

That low man seeks a little thing to do,
  Sees it and does it;
This high man, with a great thing to pursue,
  Dies ere he knows it.
That low man goes on adding one to one,
  His hundred's soon hit:
This high man, aiming at a million,
  Misses an unit.
That, has the world here—should he need the next,
  Let the world mind him.
This, throws himself on God, and unperplexed,
  Seeking shall find him.

The Statue and the Bust requires less exposition, largely because it is narrative and not dramatic. The poet, Browning, is telling the story, and though he dramatises it in the telling,
he acts throughout as commentator and mentor in his own proper person. The ethical notions promulgated are the poet's own, and have not to be disentangled from the mind and personality of his dramatic creations. Briefly, its story is this. Years ago, a leading citizen of Florence, the Duke's political agent, brought from the south his new young bride. On the afternoon of her arrival, from the window of her new home, she saw the Grand Duke ride past the house. He too, had a glimpse of her. They fell in love at a glance. At that evening's ceremonial reception each felt confirmed in the impression; and though overt communication was impossible, their manner was sufficient to arouse the husband's jealousy. So he decided to keep his wife a prisoner in their home. But both she and the Grand Duke, without each other's connivance, determined to fly at once to each other. She, however, delayed for a day, until her father had gone back to the south, and the Duke put off immediate action, because he needed next day the husband's political help. But every succeeding day provided some such motive for deferring the decisive action; and in the meantime, she saw him ride by from the window of her domestic prison, and he saw her face at the window. "So weeks grew months, years": in middle age, the lady, seeing silver in her hair, determined to place an image of herself on the cornice of her house; similarly the duke had an equestrian statue of himself set up in the square facing the house. Both felt that these would appropriately symbolise the futility of their lives.

To the lady;

"What matters it at the end?"
"I did no more while my heart was warm"
"Than does that image, my pale-faced friend."

"What is the use of the lip's red charm,
"The heaven of hair, the pride of the brow,
"And the blood that blues the inside arm—"

"Unless we turn, as the soul knows how,
"The earthly gift to an end divine?
"A lady of clay is as good, I trow."
The Grand Duke's conscious motive was similar, but more cynical:

John of Doway shall effect my plan,
Set me on horseback here aloft,
Alive, as the crafty sculptor can,

In the very square I have crossed so oft;
That men may admire, when future suns
Shall touch the eyes to a purpose soft,

While the mouth and the brow stay brave in bronze—
Admire and say, "When he was alive
"How he would take his pleasure once!"

And it shall go hard but I contrive
To listen the while, and laugh in my tomb
At idleness which aspires to strive.

That is the tale, and Browning proceeds to moralise on it. In the telling of the outward facts he has also dramatised the actors, and it is on such mortals as he conceives them to be that he passes judgment. To let oneself fall in love with another man when one has a husband, or to fall in love with another man's wife may of course be a mortal sin. But he is not for the moment concerned with moral principles. He is concerned with an episode which affected two human beings. What he observed was this. There was a Duke whose early life had been a merely mechanical routine existence:

The Duke rode past in his idle way,
Empty and fine like a swordless sheath,

the mere simulacrum of a man. There was a lady, who despite her formal marriage had not yet given signs of having been so stirred in heart that those near her could note it. But now their eyes met.

And lo, a blade for a knight's emprise
Filled the fine empty sheath of a man,—
The Duke grew straightway brave and wise.

He looked at her as a lover can;
She looked at him, as one who awakes;
The past was a sleep, and her life began.
For the first time, both felt roused to realise their personality in the achievement of a purpose. Yet, as the story tells, they allowed the prompting which had stirred them to this realisation to sink into nullity. It is these two persons, and any others in their particular place, whom Browning proceeds to judge. On all counts, they failed; now that they are dead

They see not God, I know
Nor all that chivalry of his,
The soldier-saints who, row on row,
Burn upward each to his point of bliss—
Since, the end of life being manifest,
He had burned his way thro' the world to this.

The failure was in the first instance due to the fact that they lacked the strength of impulse to follow the course their instinct opened for them. As the weeks grew months and years

Gleam by gleam
The glory dropped from their youth and love,
And both perceived they had dreamed a dream;
Which hovering as dreams do, still above:
But who can take a dream for a truth?

In fact they had not lived, they had but dreamed of living. And though right living is the test of human goodness, it can only be reached by those who have started to live at all. So these two had not attained the qualification to begin a course of which the object is to achieve goodness. In their stage of probation it was first necessary to display possibilities out of which a moral life might or might not be fashioned. They failed their matriculation examination and were thus disqualified from embarking on the discipline to moral graduation. This matriculation need not overlap the curriculum of the degree course. The mental capacity suited to a study—say of Law or Theology—may well be evinced at this matriculation stage by a test in Latin:

a crime will do
As well, I reply, to serve for a test,
As a virtue golden through and through,
Sufficient to vindicate itself
And prove its worth at a moment's view!
The aptitude and promise of the athlete are displayed just as much whether the prize for which he runs is a blue riband or a gold cup.

Must a game be played for the sake of pelf?
Where a button goes, 'twer an epigram
To offer the stamp of the very Guelph.

For the immediate purpose, a golden sovereign is only the same as a button except that some inscription has been stamped on it—but, and again for its immediate purpose, the presence or absence of the stamp is quite irrelevant—

The true has no value beyond the sham;
As well the counter as coin, I submit,
When your table's a hat, and your prize a dram.

When your game is cards, with the top of a hat as the improvised table for an informal hand, and with the understanding that the winnings will pay for drinks round, then anything, matches, notches or buttons will serve as counters. But the test, the game, is the same as if sovereigns were used:

Stake your counter as boldly every whit,
Venture as warily, use the same skill,
Do your best, whether winning or losing it,

If you choose to play! is my principle.
Let a man contend to the uttermost
For his life's set prize, be it what it will!

The Lady and the Duke had chosen to play their questionable game; they had proved themselves lacking in the qualities without which success in the noblest games is impossible.

The counter our lovers staked was lost
As surely as if it were lawful coin;
And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost

Is—the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin,
Though the end in sight was a vice, I say.
You of the virtue (we issue join)
How strive you? De te, fabula!

That is the whole issue of this poem. The test is not of achieved goodness or badness, but of capacity which may be the begin-
nning of goodness; the ability to strive. If, moreover, you still reproach

'But delay was best,
For their end was a crime'—

you are led into the larger ramifications of Browning's doctrine of the moral possibilities of love.

There is no good of life but love—but love!
What else looks good, is some shade flung from love,
Love gilds it, gives it worth.

It is the life-breath of the soul,—the air in which the soul may be invigorated to exercise its own spiritual purification.

Beneath the veriest ash, there hides a spark of soul,
Which, quickened by love's breath, may yet pervade the whole
O' the grey and, free again, be fire, of worth the same,
Howe'er produced for, great or little, flame is flame.

The beginnings of love may be mere brute appetites, but it is an appetite if brutish yet a truth. Rising gradually in man to desires excited by sensuous beauty, it climbs from the mere liking of the eye and ear to the true longing of the heart that loves. As a physical sensation, love and lust are mechanically similar:

there is passion in the place,
Power in the air for evil as for good,
Promptings from heaven and hell as if the stars
Fought in their courses for a fate to be.

But as a moral experience, love and lust are poles apart. Lust takes all for its own gratification, love gives all for the good of the beloved. This is the love, which in man's degree, is God's own spirit; and love is for Browning the greatest attribute of God. But that is a topic to develop in a survey of Browning's religion.

Turn now to Rabbi ben Ezra, remembering that once again Browning is speaking dramatically, that is, letting Rabbi ben Ezra utter ben Ezra's sentiments independently of whether they are Browning's or not. The subject could have suggested itself easily at any time from the stock of Browning's rabbinical lore, and its oriental imagery echoes biblical phrase and picture. But Browning must have been prompted to his particular choice
by a recent publication, destined to become famous. Even more than Browning’s poem, it is steeped in oriental image and phrase, but it uses them to generate a sentiment and a morality anathema to Browning. *Rabbi ben Ezra* appeared in 1864. In 1859 Fitzgerald had published anonymously his poem *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Much of its fatalistic hedonism is imaginatively expressed in the play of images of bowls and cups, and thence of potter and clay. Isaiah’s and Jeremiah’s sense of God’s omnipotence—“we are the clay, and thou our potter”, “Behold as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand”—produces other sentiments in Omar—pity for man’s helplessness, and anger against God’s tyranny:

> For in the Market-place, one Dusk of Day,
> I watched the Potter thumping his wet Clay;
> And with its all obliterated Tongue
> It murmured—‘Gently, Brother, gently, pray!’

> With Earth’s first Clay They did the last Man knead,
> And then of the Last Harvest sow’d the Seed:
> Yea, the first Morning of Creation wrote
> What the Last Dawn of Reckoning shall read.

> Oh, Thou, who didst with Pitfall and with Gin
> Beset the Road I was to wander in,
> Thou wilt not with Predestination round
> Enmesh me, and impute my fall to Sin?

> Oh, Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make,
> And who with Eden didst devise the Snake;
> For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man
> Is blacken’d, Man’s Forgiveness give—and take!

The allegory carries Omar into speculative and theological questioning: “who is the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?” Can God be as immoral as he seems to be?

> ‘Surely not in vain
> My Substance from the common Earth was ta’en,
> That He who subtly wrought me into Shape
> Should stamp me back to common Earth again.’

> Another said—‘Why, ne’er a peevish Boy,
> Would break the Bowl from which he drank in Joy;
> Shall he that made the Vessel in pure Love
> And Fancy, in an after Rage destroy?’
None answer’d this; but after Silence spake
A Vessel of a more ungainly Make:
‘They sneer at me for leaning all awry;
What I did the Hand then of the Potter shake?’

Hence, for Omar

How long, how long, in infinite Pursuit
Of This and That endeavour and dispute?
Better be merry with the fruitful Grape
Than sadden after none, or bitter, Fruit.

‘Ah, fill the Cup’—and snatch the one joy in the one moment
which is man’s life:

One Moment in Annihilation’s Waste,
One Moment, of the Well of Life to taste.

Ah, Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would we not shatter it to bits—and then
Remould it nearer to the Heart’s Desire?

Rabbi ben Ezra is Browning’s retort to this trend of oriental
philosophy and ethic, and Browning’s use of the image of the
potter and his wheel seems to be chosen to draw attention to the
opposition, even though in some ways it distorts the underlying
ideas of his own beliefs. The Rabbi’s creed is not presented as
a purely rational structure. It is not just an abstract logical
philosophy. He is ruminating rather than thinking; he is
expressing experience rather than analysing argument. In a
way, his sense of life is rather aesthetic than intellectual. He
recalls his accumulative apprehensions of life, feels them to
fit into a pattern, and then allows his reason to expound the
relations within the pattern and his imagination to conjecture
its other implications. The radical sense is that of a harmony
composed of the balance of opposites—youth and age, body and
soul, earth and heaven, man and God. The ethical outcome of
this prevailing mood is an apprehension of life as a preparation
for immortality; and the bulk of the poem is the Rabbi’s
enunciation of the kind of conduct in life which best realises
this purpose.

The structure of the poem is magnificently poetical. It
does not follow the inevitable course of logical argumentation.
It starts with a frame of mind, and continues the rumination as the prevailing mood prompts, filling the interstices between the affirmations with subsidiary argumentation where necessary. But, as a dramatic poem, it is primarily an expression of affirmations and not of proofs. They are the affirmations of a man in whom living has led to certain beliefs; and these are stated at the outset to be taken as clues to the mood of the man who is uttering them. The whole poem follows aesthetically and dramatically from the data of the first of its stanzas:

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand
Who saith “A whole I planned,
“Youth shows but half; trust God; see all nor be afraid.”

That is what the Rabbi has come to believe; life is planned by a benevolent God for man’s greater good. The rest of the poem shows how the believer reconciles the apparent contradictions in the experience of living and how he perceives from them the outlines of man’s duty.

An attempt to summarise the poem will only produce a series of statements torn from the mood which gives them their poetic validity; but it will at least draw attention to the main ethical tenets. The brief years of youth are given to exhilarating excitements, hopes and fears which never achieve the top of aspiration. But these rebuffs are its real achievement; for doubt and disappointment are the sparks which disturb our clod, stimulants to effort, and so to a realisation of man’s lot as creative:

Nearer we hold of God
Who gives, then of His tribes that take, I must believe.

Moreover, the disappointment of failure is in itself evidence that man is something more than animal—because animals and the animal in man are obviously capable of satisfaction:

For thence,—a paradox
Which comforts while it mocks—
Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:
What I aspired to be
And was not, comforts me;
A brute I might have been, but would not sink i’ the scale.
The animal, the body, arms and legs alone, cannot provide all the spirit needs for its joy. Yet our sense of the exquisite interplay of sense and spirit, body and soul, induces an actual awareness that life is a perfect divine plan; hence the incomplete satisfaction of soul, contrasted with the easy satisfaction of body, awakens a presumption of other occasions for its completion. Even as man, one may enlarge the mutual co-operation of body and soul:

Let us not always say
"Spite of this flesh to-day
"I strove, made head, gained ground upon the whole!"
As the bird wings and sings,
Let us cry "All good things
"Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more now than flesh helps soul!"

And so the intuitive conviction is strengthened; age comes into the plan to grant youth's heritage. The first experiences of age in this rôle are sufficient to suggest still further extensions of the plan—and to cause the whole of mortal life to be apprehended as one part in a still wider plan. In the meantime, the occupation of age will be more with spirit than with flesh, intellectual rather than physical experiences, sifting values of life rather than continuing experiments in living. In its turn this act of passing judgment reinforces the conviction that human life is part of a harmonious order:

So, still within this life,
Though lifted o'er its strife,
Let me discern, compare, pronounce at last,
"This rage was right i' the main,
"That acquiescence vain:
"The Future I may face, now I have proved the Past."

This confidence is not full knowledge, but it is sufficient for man's degree. His expectation of what age would be has justified his hopes.

"Thou waitedst age: wait death nor be afraid."

Moreover, within limits of such certainty as enable men absolutely to know the right hand from the left, one may certainly know what on earth is Right and Good. If such confidence has in fact (as it had in the Rabbi) reached complete
conviction, then man may and must trust his own judgment though

Ten men love what I hate,
Shun what I follow, slight what I receive;
Ten, who in ears and eyes
Match me: we all surmise,
They this thing, and I that: whom shall my soul believe?

Hence, though out-voted, he can propound methods of moral assessment which would justify his standard of values against the majority's—

Not on the vulgar mass
Called 'work', must sentence pass—

but "all instincts immature, all purposes unsure" are essential factors in the assessment.

Thoughts hardly to be packed
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through language and escaped;
All I could never be,
All, men ignored in me,
This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.

At this point

"Ay, note that Potter's wheel,
That metaphor!"

Ben Ezra has traversed the ethical matter of the poem. He now rounds off his doctrine by formulating the metaphysical or theological implications which were implicit in the first stanza of the poem. It is here that he takes up Omar's heresies:

Ay, note that Potter's wheel,
That metaphor! and feel
Why time spins fast, why passive lies our clay,—
Thou, to whom fools propound,
When the wine makes its round,
"Since life fleets, all is change; the Past gone, seize to-day!"

He sees the Potter's wheel as "the dance of plastic circumstance, this Present", and time and circumstance are the machinery just meant to give man's soul his bent, try him, and turn him forth, sufficiently impressed. For the moment, in stressing the function of circumstance, to stir man into activity, he slides
over the impassiveness of clay and the fact that the grooves impressed on it by the wheel are not only sufficient, but final and entirely without the active co-operation of the material: for the moment, that is, the consciousness of God annuls the other consciousness which is no less integral in Browning’s thought, the consciousness of self. The metaphor makes man entirely a creature without creative power in himself: and that is contrary to Browning’s full awareness of life’s elements. So he gives to the clay an incongruous knowledge of its own purpose, and an equally incongruous capacity to participate in its own unending making. But before reaching the last stanza, the clay as clay has been pushed out of our immediate realisation, and as symbol of man’s flesh it enables the Rabbi to utter his final conclusion in a stanza of benign confidence:

So, take and use Thy work;
Amend what flaws may lurk,
What strain o’ the stuff, what warpings past the aim!
My times be in Thy hand!
Perfect the cup as planned!
Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same!

Such is the ethic pronounced by Rabbi ben Ezra. In general, it comprehends the main articles of Browning’s own beliefs. But not inappropriately in a dramatisation of the Rabbi, there are some aspects of Browning’s sense of life which cannot be brought out in this context. There is, for instance, no mention of the ethic of human love. That, however, as well as much more explicit commentary on morality in general, will be found in the book of the Pope in The Ring and the Book.

I remind you of the story of the poem. In Florence, in 1860, Browning picked up, on a second-hand bookstall, an Old Yellow Book. It was mainly a collection of documents about a murder trial in 1698. This was the tale they told.

In 1693 an impoverished nobleman, Guido Franceschini, married a young girl, Pompilia, the real or supposed daughter of two obscure Roman citizens, apparently with the hope of acquiring their small property. He lived unhappily with her in his gloomy poverty-stricken castle at Arezzo for over three years. He said she was an unfaithful wife, she said he was a
vicious and cruel husband. In April, 1697, she ran away to join her putative parents and was escorted by a young priest Caponsacchi. Her husband pursued her and had the two of them arrested on a charge of adultery. In September the appropriate Court heard the charge; without definitely finding them guilty, it imposed a sort of precautionary detention on both. In December Pompilia gave birth to a child in her parents' home. On 2nd January Guido and four accomplices secured admission to the house, and killed his wife and her parents (Pompilia surviving her wounds for four days). By an oversight of his the murderer was detected, arrested and tried. For him it was pleaded that the birth of the child outraged his honour and justified the murder; for her it was held that the child was his, that the fact of realising that she was to bear a child had first prompted her flight, and that as soon as the child was born, Guido, now assured of the entailed inheritance, could put his wife out of the way finally. On 18th February the court convicted Guido and his associates. As one who had taken minor orders, he exercised his benefit of clergy and appealed to the Pope. The Pope dismissed the appeal and Guido was executed.

In the book of the Pope, we find him just as he has reached his judgment, but before sounding the bell and sending the verdict to Guido, he ruminates on the parts all the actors, including himself, have played in the story. He sits there in his little simple sanctum—

Suddenly starting from a nap, as it were,
A dog-sleep with one shut, one open orb,—

he speaks—

—The Pope's great self,—Innocent by name
And nature too, and eighty-six years old,
Antonio Pignatelli of Naples, Pope
Who had trod many lands, known many deeds.
Probed many hearts, beginning with his own,
And now was far in readiness for God—

He cried of a sudden, this great good old Pope,
When they appealed in last resort to him,
"I have mastered the whole matter: I nothing doubt."
He has been reading the records of the papacy, particularly a chapter which makes him realise that papal infallibility does not exempt him from all the moral human responsibilities involved in reaching major decisions. He is giving a fallible man’s verdict. As a mere man he is judging. Yet with full cognisance of this fallibility, he is in no wise irresolute, and he chooses to rely on his human and not his papal authority.

But be man’s method for man’s life at least!
Wherefore, Antonio Pignatelli, thou
My ancient self, who wast no Pope so long
But studiedst God and man, the many years
I’ the school, i’ the cloister, in the diocese
Domestic, legate-rule in foreign lands—
Thou other force in those old busy days
Than this grey ultimate decrepitude—
Yet sensible of fires that more and more
Visit a soul, in passage to the sky,
Left nakeder than when flesh-robe was new—
Thou, not Pope but the mere old man o’ the world,
Supposed inquisitive and dispassionate,
Wilt thou, the one whose speech I somewhat trust,
Question the after-me, this self now Pope,
Hear his procedure, criticize his work?

So as a mere old man of the world, without reliance on the mystical illumination of his papal enthronement, he gives the grounds of his judgment. In Guido he finds “this black mark”, that he believes in just the vile of life, low instinct, base pretension. A crucial test is the motive for his marriage:

He purposes this marriage, I remark,
On no one motive that should prompt thereto—
Farthest, by consequence, from ends alleged
Appropriate to the action: so they were;
The best, he knew and feigned, the worst he took.
Not one permissible impulse moves the man,
From the mere liking of the eye and ear,
To the true longing of the heart that loves,
No trace of these: but all to instigate,
Is what sinks man past level of the brute
Whose appetite if brutish is a truth.
All is the lust for money.

So Guido is trafficking in human instincts, in particular the instinct through which man has reached love and thence begun
to know morality and God, merely to secure a material and worse than brutish comfort. He is vile to the core. He shames manhood.

Pompilia, on the same grounds of assessment, is perfect in whiteness. It was not given to her to know much, speak much, to write a book, to move mankind, but in purity and patience, in faith held fast despite the plucking fiend, in right returned for wrong, most pardon for worst injury, she showed herself a symbol of human goodness. She bore the discipline of duty to her parents, to her husband, and to the law until she realised a sanction more compelling than all these; and then she accepted the new obligation and lived as entirely for its imperative demands as previously she had lived for the lesser duties. Morally, she rose from law to law, promoted at one cry o’ the trump of God to the new service, not to longer bear, but henceforth fight, be found sublime in new impatience with the foe. Knowing herself mother-elect, she felt the inexorable demands of what the Pope calls God and fools call Nature; she accepted the obligation laid on her, to save the unborn child, as brute and bird do, reptile and the fly, even tree, shrub, plant and flower of the field, all in a common pact to worthily defend the trust of trusts, life from the Ever Living. The call was authentic to the experienced ear of the good and faithful servant. She had realised by compelling instinct that love transcends itself in service, and that by sacrificing self and the world’s or the church’s general law, she would fulfil the law which according to the idiom is life’s or Nature’s or God’s. She realised self in self-sacrifice.

Caponacchi, the priest, the warrior-priest, is proved next to Pompilia in worthiness. Much there had been amiss in his routine life—

This masquerade in sober day, with change
Of motley too—now hypocrite’s disguise,
Now fool’s costume:—

but in the end he had responded with such championship

Of God at first blush, such prompt cheery thud
Of glove on ground that answers ringingly
The challenge of the false knight,
that he had displayed himself the hero—

How throughout all thy warfare thou wast pure,
I find it easy to believe—

Pompilia's predicament had aroused in him an instinctive sense of active duty, and the doing of it—the championship by nominal elopement of just such a girl—had exposed him in his ardour to other human temptations—

perchance

Might the surprise and fear release too much
The perfect beauty of the body and soul
Thou savedst in thy passion for God's sake.

The trial was indeed sore, and the temptation sharp. But all the greater was the moral opportunity.

Thank God a second time!
Why comes temptation but for man to meet
And master and make crouch beneath his foot,
And so be pedestal in triumph? Pray
"Lead us into no such temptations, Lord."
Yea, but, O Thou whose servants are the bold,
Lead such temptations by the head and hair,
Reluctant dragons, up to who dares fight,
That so he may do battle and have praise.

In judgments like these of the Pope on Pompilia and Caponsacchi, there is the fundamental principle of Browning's ethical belief. Man is a potential spiritual energy; his energy is distinct from the beasts when by one of the major episodes of common life, say, on the one hand, the threat of great danger, or, on the other, the falling in love, he is overwhelmed with a strong compulsion to do something which is not immediately for his own gratification, but is palpably for the good of another. He has become human; he has recognised to philanthropon as man's primary instinct. He has learnt love, which is the impulse of God. The insight comes to him in those stresses of circumstance when his whole nature is wrought to vitalising activity, when his insight and outsight, his blood and his heart, his nerves and his mind, his body and his soul are roused to simultaneous operation. The faculties of awareness in his whole sentient being unite as one instinct to direct his immediate action in the decisive emergency. For humanity at large, the falling in love,
and especially for woman, the intimations of motherhood, are nature's most powerful moments of such stresses. They become compulsions in which self is sublimated in service. They are realisations of the spirit of love; and love, which springs from God as the divine way of binding creator to creature, is the sole way of joining humanity in a progressive spiritual community.

Because Browning had such a direct sense of life as a moral experience, his artistic interest is in crucial moments, not in the repetitive routine of habit; in conflict rather than in placid concord; in apparent failure rather than in obvious success, in endeavour rather than in attainment; in action rather than in rest, in earth rather than in heaven. The most symbolic incident of the moral life is temptation. But in all such decisive moral moments, the normal encouragements of law and custom, warmth by law and light by rule are superseded as by the advent of the authoritative star, mysterious unacknowledged powers o’ the air, and uncommissioned meteors, and the deepest instinct of natural man leaps out into prompt response. In one form or another, that instinct is ‘love’. Caponsacchi leapt as if stung by the first summons—‘Play the man!’ and the response immediately shaped itself as ‘pity the oppressed’.

As is proper, the Pope continues his ruminations to build the articles of his ethical code into a full religious system. In the main, however, his moral judgments have been the outcome of his experience amongst men; and whatever their religious implications—which must be pursued on some other occasion—they presuppose as a conviction based on the wisdom of an old man of the world, that one of the deepest instincts of the mass of men is a preference for seeing their fellows happy rather than miserable. Whatever other sanctions Browning’s ethical doctrine aspires to, it can always plead this humanitarian or humane basis. If that were not so, his whole sense of the moral life would be a ludicrous perversion, capable of exalting mere might into goodness. So, too, his fundamental belief in the overwhelming significance of the moments, the flashes struck from midnights, the fire-flames noondays kindle, when this or that natural impulse insists on play unstifled: unless long experience of men justifies a trust in the humane springs of human
life, this confidence in impulse at the auspicious moment would be the warrant for licentious anarchy. Browning knows this, of course. Yet he is in no wise irresolute: with full confidence he accepts Caponsacchi as the fit symbol of exalted human worth:

For see this priest, this Caponsacchi, stung
At the first summons—"Help for honour's sake
"Play the man, pity the oppressed!" No pause,
How does he lay about him in the midst,
Strike any foe, right wrong at any risk,
All blindness, bravery and obedience!—blind?
Ay, as a man would be inside the sun,
Delirious with the plenitude of light
Should interfuse him to the finger-ends—
Let him rush straight, and how shall he go wrong?

Such then is Browning's conception of the noble life. It is the creed of a man who was ever a fighter in the soul's crusade; never slothful, mawkish or unmanly, never aimless, helpless, hopeless, but

One who never turned his back but marched breast forward,
Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
Sleep to wake.

It is a creed which somehow seems conspicuously English. It sounds like an echo in the nineteenth century of the clarion-call of Milton. It is the assertion in ethics of those values which, in the domain of politics, were impelling Englishmen to construct, in the routine of corporate life, a social idea and mechanism which reconciled law and liberty, individual and state, in a body politic which is the English Constitution. The terms change; independence renames itself as individualism; freedom is reason then, and conscience now; but both epochs see the only moral life as the same experience—an exercise of free choice where there is knowledge of good and evil. Remove freedom, remove evil, and morality has been destroyed. Wherefore life is an invigorating adventure in personal responsibility and that is the one way in which man can at one and the same time save his own soul and the soul of humanity. As in Shakespeare, as in Sordello, self realises itself not in selfishness but in deliberate selflessness. Where Shakespeare, Milton and Browning are, an Englishman may claim that he too need not fear to be.