CHAPTER I

THE CHIEF PRINCIPLE OF MORALS

§ 1. A man is virtuous who has such qualities that he can live a good life as a member of society. This is not a definition, but a description. It does no more than express the opinion that virtue is an attribute of persons, and that it belongs only to those who live a social life.

Virtue, then, is primarily and directly personal, and exists in the minds of men; but moral quality may also be manifested secondarily by institutions. We can speak of institutions as 'morally good,' if they are so constituted as to increase the welfare of the citizens, and to give opportunity for the exercise of virtue by those who take part in them. Institutions are very powerful in their influence upon the individual. It is not difficult to live virtuously when one's way of life is determined by morally good institutions. This is what social reformers hope from the

future; and this is what justifies the zeal with which they labour to change the present state of things. On the other hand, a virtuous life is difficult for any one who is brought closely into contact with and compelled to work under bad institutions; such, for example, as the close oligarchy of Venice, the court of Louis XV of France, or an unreformed city-corporation in eighteenth-century England.

Moralists are not agreed as to what is the chief element in virtue. Most of them hold that virtue is not a simple quality, but is composed of elements. But they are not agreed as to its composition, nor as to the relative importance of the elements. The present essay, without going so far as a complete analysis of virtue, attempts to identify its chief element.

Whatever the chief element in virtue may be, it must be a natural human motive; that is, one which impels men to act, apart from deliberate reflection. If this is not so, we must hold that unreflecting men cannot be virtuous; which

seems to me intolerable. We ought not to acquiesce in any ethical theory which denies moral value to the vast majority of mankind.

A natural motive can be transformed into a principle, if it is reflected upon and deliberately approved. For example, unreflecting persons such as children often act benevolently, from mere good-nature. The same persons when grown up may act with equal benevolence, but thoughtfully and approving that line of conduct 'on principle.' The chief element in virtue must be a natural motive which is acted upon by all kinds of men, usually without reflection; but in men of developed intelligence with reflection, as a principle. And this is the chief principle of morals.

The moral principle which is of paramount importance for the individual must be equally important for institutions. If in their moral improvement men show more and more the working of the chief principle of morals, so must the institutions under which they live.

The best-known theories of the chief moral principle which have been put forward are those of Perfection, Moral Law, Reason and Benevolence. None of them seems to me convincing; the best does no more than recognize a subordinate element of moral virtue.

The theory of the present essay is that the chief principle of morals is appreciation of what is good in man. A man is actuated by this motive when he appreciates human characters, acts and institutions as intrinsically valuable, apart from any selfish gain of his own. Sometimes I shall speak of this sort of appreciation as 'human valuation.' For shortness sake I call this moral principle the principle of human value. This is the element which is indispensable to virtue; there are other elements in virtue, but without this one a man cannot be virtuous. It manifests itself also in institutions; and the presence of that element in them is the chief reason why we call institutions morally good.

A few examples will show how I think that

human minds manifest human valuation: a boy who admires the powers of some boyish leader; the same boy a few years older who reveres his mother as a pattern of all the gentler virtues; a man who, reading the story of the last days of Socrates, does homage to the law-abiding spirit which made him refuse to escape from custody; a man who appreciates his native state as an excellent political institution, in the spirit in which Pericles spoke of Athens in his Funeral Speech; an Englishman who admires the genius and charm of the French nation, though he does not wish to be anything himself but an Englishman. If these admirations or valuations are sincere, they manifest themselves in action. Such acts may be done without reflection; but, when they are done with full consciousness and approval of the motive prompting them, they are done on principle; and then they exemplify the chief principle of morals.

Before proceeding I must consider briefly a preliminary difficulty. Surely not all elements

of human nature are excellent or valuable. How do we know, then, what elements are good and what are not? There is in mankind, for example, a strain of cruelty; not present in all men, but certainly in a great number, as we see from the prevalence of teasing in children. Why do we disapprove of it? The question is evidently a very big one. I will deal with it only so far as my immediate purposes require.

As a matter of practice men rely mainly upon the moral standard of the society to which they belong, in deciding what personal qualities are valuable. Human communities work out moral standards suitable to their circumstances, as they work out standards of justice or of politeness. As circumstances vary at different times and in different places, we must not be surprised if standards disagree. But, in regard to any given standard, we may feel pretty sure that it tends upon the whole to promote the welfare of the society which has fashioned it. The main elements of human welfare are well known, though

perhaps indefinable; they are physical health and strength, good understanding, artistic excellence and, most of all, moral excellence, which, as I hold, consists mainly in human valuation. Here, some one may object, is a logical circle; an agent is morally good when he appreciates human excellence, and human excellence consists largely in moral goodness. But it will be found that we always commit a logical circle when we try to explain the nature of an ultimate quality: the circle would appear just as much, if we tried to define health, or intelligence, or consciousness itself.

But, though persons rely for moral guidance mainly upon the current standard, they have also an individual power of criticism. In a country where the people are of limited intelligence and economic conditions are stationary, there is very little criticism; simple people conform to their moral standard without reflection, just as they speak their native language. But, in countries which have become progressive,

men criticize. Their criterion is always conduciveness to human welfare, usually the welfare of the society to which they belong. When a certain level of culture has been reached, acute minds see how more welfare may be attained by developing the principles of conduct which have already been found to be successful.

And now for a word on method. How is my theory to be proved? It cannot be proved. It can only be supported; and this must be done by appeals to experience. A theory about morals is primarily psychological. It must give an account of processes which go on in the minds of persons. One who advocates such a theory as this of human value, must hold that his own moral consciousness works in this way and that the generality of men are like him. In order to support his theory he must review classes of facts; he must show, for example, that by the help of the theory we can understand social and political institutions in their relation to morality; and that we can understand the qualities of

character which are called the virtues, and the order of their appearance in society. The establishment of any philosophical theory must be a work of time. It must lie for a considerable season before the world; many men must consider it, and try to understand their experience by the help of it. If the theory gives men more help than any of its rivals, it may be regarded as established; though, of course, it may always be superseded later on by some other theory which is still more illuminating. Any one who demands a short and simple way of proving philosophical theories, does not understand what is possible or desirable in such a case.

Any dialectical proof of an ethical principle can serve merely for purposes of occasional discussion. If a proof of the principle of human value were attempted, it might, perhaps, run somewhat as follows. All agree that Socrates was a good man, and that one admirable feature in him was his law-abidingness. Now why is this quality admirable? Because it conduces to pre-

serve the state. Why preserve the state? Because the state is necessary to the welfare of the citizens. Why consider the welfare of one's fellow-citizens, or of any other set of men? Because there is something excellent in them which entitles them to claim our consideration and service. And so we might argue about the other virtues, the primitive virtues of the tribe and the domestic virtues of a later stage. They all tend towards the development of human bodies and minds. Now, if it is morally good that men should be developed, there must be something in them which is intrinsically worth developing. If men have, as the thorough-going pessimist affirms, no more value than swine, there is no merit in working for them; except with a view to some ulterior purpose. And, for man, there cannot be anything ulterior to mankind.

If human valuation is the chief element of virtue, we can give a formula of moral progress both for individuals and for societies. Moral progress must always consist in a greater pre-