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Frances Power Cobbe

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AN

ESSAY ON INTUITIVE MORALS.



PART I.

THEORY OF MORALS.

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**THE Science of Intuitive Morals treats of the Theory and Practice of the Moral Law, deduced exclusively from certain necessary Truths possessed intuitively by the Human Mind.**

**The Theory of Intuitive Morals teaches —**

- 1st. **What is the Moral Law.**
- 2nd. **Where it is to be found.**
- 3rd. **That it can be obeyed.**
- 4th. **Why it is to be obeyed.**

**The Practice of Intuitive Morals teaches —**

- 1st. **Social Duty.**
- 2nd. **Personal Duty.**
- 3rd. **Religious Duty.**

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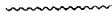
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## CHAPTER I.

## WHAT IS THE MORAL LAW.



· · · · · “ἄγραπτα κἀσφαλῆ θεῶν  
νόμιμα. · · · · ·  
οὐ γάρ τι νῦν γε κἀχθές, ἀλλ’ αἰεί ποτε  
ξῆ ταῦτα, κοῦδεὶς οἶδεν ἐξ ὄτου ἴφάνη.”

Σοφ. Ἄντιγ. 454.

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THE Sentiments and Actions of all Rational Free Agents possess a certain character peculiar to them as such. All creatures, rational and irrational, experience sentiments and perform actions which may be properly qualified as strong or weak, durable or transient, useful or injurious. But it is exclusively to those of Rational free agents that we apply the terms Right or Wrong, Good or Evil, Virtuous or Vicious. The ideas symbolised by these words refer to the *moral* character of the sentiments or actions in question; and this moral character (according to the universal sense of mankind) can only be attributed when the subject or agent is Rational, — that is, cognisant of such character in his sentiments and actions; and morally Free, — that is, capable of determining such character.

This moral character of good or evil is a real, universal, and eternal distinction, existing through all worlds and for ever, wherever there are rational creatures and free agents. As one kind of line is a straight line, and another a crooked line, and as no line can be both straight and crooked, so one kind of action or sentiment is right, and another is wrong, and no action or sentiment can be both right and wrong. And as the same line which is straight on this planet would be straight in Sirius or Alcyone, and what constitutes straightness in the nineteenth century will constitute straightness in the ninetieth millenium, so that sentiment or action, which is right in our world, is right in all worlds; and that which constitutes righteousness now will constitute righteousness through all eternity. And as the character of straightness

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belongs to the line, by whatsoever hand it may have been traced, so the character of righteousness belongs to the sentiment or action, by what rational free agent soever it may have been felt or performed.\*

\* "The distinction of right from wrong is discerned by reason, and as soon as these words are defined, it becomes evident that it would be a contradiction in terms to affirm that any power, human or divine, could change their nature, or, in other words, make the same acts to be just and unjust at the same time."—CUDWORTH *On Eternal and Immutable Morality*.

"La Justice est un rapport de convenance qui se trouve réellement entre deux choses; ce rapport est toujours le même quelque être qui le considère, soit que ce soit Dieu, soit que ce soit un ange, ou enfin que ce soit un homme."—MONTESQUIEU, *Lettres Persanes*, p. 83.

"All the relations of all things to all must have been always present to the Divine Mind, even before the things themselves existed. The eternal *different* relations of things involve a consequent fitness or unfitness in the application of things one to another, with a regard to which the will of God always chooses, and which also ought to determine the wills of all rational creatures. These eternal differences make it fit for the creatures so to act; they lay an obligation on them so to do, separate from the will of God, and antecedently to any prospect of advantage or reward. Nay, wilful wickedness is the same insolence and absurdity in morals, as it would be, in natural things, to pretend to alter the relations of numbers, or to take away the properties of mathematical figures."—MACKINTOSH'S *Abstract of the Doctrines of Clarke*. Both Mackintosh and Whewell remark the fallacy of the last assertion. Clarke overlooked the fact that into wilful wickedness there enters another element beside mere knowledge of right and wrong. To say that wrong is right is the same absurdity as to pretend to alter the relations of numbers; but to do wrong, knowing it to be wrong, is not an absurdity, but a sin. Absurdity is the error of the intellect,—wickedness, of the will. But it more concerns me here to remark that the terms used by Clarke of "fitness" and "unfitness," to characterise moral distinctions, are very exceptionable, and have tended somewhat to discredit the truth of that distinction on which I am insisting. The fact is that all analogies fail us, and only introduce confusion when we apply them to the distinction between moral good and moral evil, which is one entirely *sui generis*, and without parallel in the material world. Even the use of the term "right,"—whose felicity of metaphor has caused it to be so consecrated to moral purposes by the universal consent of mankind that such use of it is more familiar to us than its primary signification of straightness,—even the use of this word has not been unproductive of error. In the last century we find Tucker (a moralist of some note, author of "The Light of Nature Pursued,") blundering as follows:—"Right belongs to lines, being the same as straight in opposition to curved or crooked. From hence it has been applied, by way of metaphor, to rules and actions which, lying in the line of our progress to any purpose we aim at, if they be wrong they will carry us aside, but if they conduct by the nearest way, we call them right. Therefore, the very expression of 'right in itself' is absurd; because things are rendered right by their tendency to some end; so that you must take something exterior into the account, in order to evince their rectitude." "It is curious," observes Whewell, "that his own illustration here did not at least cause some scruple in his mind, for in truth we do not 'take anything exterior into account' to determine whether a line be straight or crooked. Its reference to some given point may decide whether it be in the *right direction*, but it is straight in virtue of the necessary relations of space altogether independent of direction."—*Hist. of Moral Philosophy in England*.

Hooker is not altogether exempt from the same error:—"Goodness in actions is like unto straightness; wherefore that which is done well we call right.

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And of this distinction language affords a reliable exponent. When we have designated one kind of figure by the word Circle, and another by the word Triangle, those terms, having become the names of the respective figures, cannot be transposed without transgression of the laws of language. Thus it would be absurd to argue that the figure we call a circle, may not be a circle; that a "plane figure, containing a point from which all right lines drawn to the circumference shall be equal," may not be a circle but a triangle. In like manner, when we have designated one kind of action as Right, and another as Wrong, it becomes an absurdity to say that the kind of actions we call Right may, perhaps, be Wrong. If a figure be not a Circle, according to *our sense* of the word, it is not a Circle at all, but an Ellipse, a Triangle, Trapezium, or something else. If an action be not Right, according to our sense of the word, it is not Right at all, but, according to the laws of language, must be called Wrong.

It is not maintained that we can commit no error in affixing the name of Circle to a particular figure, or of Right to a particular action. We may at a hasty glance pronounce an ellipse to be a circle; but when, with rule and compasses, we have proved the radii to be unequal, needs must we arrive at a better judgment. Our error was caused by our first haste and misjudgment, not by our inability to decide whether an object presented to us bears or does not bear a character to which we have agreed to affix a certain name. In like manner, from haste or prejudice, we may pronounce a faulty action to be Right; but when we have examined it in all its bearings, we ourselves are the first to call it Wrong. On this topic, of what, in moral judgments, is fallible and what possesses mathematical certainty, I shall have much to say hereafter. My object at present is to convince the reader

For as the straight way is most acceptable to him that travelleth, because by it he cometh soonest to his journey's end, so that in actions which do lie nearest between us and the end we desire, must needs be the fittest for our use. Besides which fitness for our use, there is also in rectitude, beauty; as, contrariwise, in obliquity, deformity; and that which is good in the actions of men doth not only delight as profitable, but as amiable also.—*Eccles. Pol.*, i.

Of the inadequacy of this popular simile of physical beauty to moral rectitude, I shall speak hereafter.

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that, if he admit the grand postulate of the eternal moral distinction of actions, he may carry into the future steps of the inquiry concerning it, a security in the general meaning of the terms of human language applied to that distinction.

But what is this distinction of Right and Wrong practically considered? Is it not that of actions which are Right for a Rational free agent to do, or wrong for him to do? When we attempt to analyse the terms, we find that their essential significance is that of *obligation* to do the right and refrain from the wrong. We cannot sever the idea of such obligation from the distinctions, or think of the moral character of actions as we can of the æsthetic or dynamic, with no concomitant sense of moral obligation. All the axioms of the science of ethics translate themselves spontaneously into the imperative mood: "It is right to speak truth" means "Speak truth;" "It is wrong to be cruel" means "Be not cruel." All our terms for moral distinctions and moral obligations are interchangeable. That which is "right" is what we "ought" to do; that which it is our "duty" to do, is what is good or virtuous. And this idea of obligation not only responds to, but exhausts the idea conveyed by the moral distinction. When we have said that an action "ought" to be performed, we have rendered to the full the meaning of its appellation of Right, Good, or Virtuous. Any other characteristics it may possess are not moral, and are not involved in these terms.

Thus, then, moral Distinctions resolve themselves into moral Obligations, whereby all rational free agents are bound in the nature of things to do and to feel those actions and sentiments which, according to these eternal distinctions, are right, and to refrain from those which are wrong. This may also be proved negatively. If there were no moral beings in existence, nothing could be right or wrong in any world. Nothing could be done right, for there would be no one to do it. Nothing could be known to be right, for there would be no one to know it. But if, in a universe inhabited only by brutes, moral distinctions could not exist, it is plain that they now have their existence only in the moral natures of God and his rational creatures. We here arrive at the

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important conclusion that Right and Wrong are things in the minds of Moral Agents, and are eternal, because coeval with the existence of such beings, of whom God is chief.

Further : minds capable of being the subjects of moral distinctions assume their respective characters, inasmuch as their sentiments and actions correspond with one or the other. If they do and feel Right, they are Virtuous ; if they do and feel Wrong, they are Vicious. Ultimately, then, all moral distinctions resolve themselves into the Virtue or Vice of Rational Free Agents.

This Obligation to do and feel all Right actions and sentiments, and to abstain from those of an opposite character, constitutes the Moral Law. It has been often represented as of a double nature, — declaratory and imperative ; teaching us what is right, and commanding us to do right. This distinction, however, becomes superfluous when we recognise the truth on which I have above insisted,—that the essential property of a right action is, *that it ought to be performed by a rational free agent*, and that there is no possibility of severing the idea of Right from that of Obligation. The Moral Law is the simplest of all things, It is the result solely of the nature of the action and the nature of the agent. These two terms being given, the obligation of the rational free agent to perform the right action results necessarily in the nature of things. We call this moral obligation the “law,” and a law it truly is—the basis of all other laws; but it is needful to guard against the errors of applying to this underived law the analogies of human derived legislation. The authority of the human lawgivers, the rewards and punishments with which their codes are enforced, the end of utility at which they mostly aim, — none of these things belong to the simple Moral Law. That law is a bare obligation grounded on the nature of things, and standing out all the more grandly in its naked dignity when divested of extraneous authority, of a protective system of rewards and punishments, or of any end of utility whatever. Even the Virtue of rational beings, into which, as I have said, moral Right resolves itself in the last analysis, even this Virtue we must not regard as if it were the end for whose production the Moral Law might be considered as a contrivance.



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That law is no system of technical rules for the attainment of a condition of purity, benevolence, and piety. If there were not an intrinsic excellence in those acts and sentiments, distinguished as morally right, there could be nothing excellent in the condition of soul uniting them all. It would be arguing in a vicious circle to affirm "the Moral Law is made to produce virtue," and "virtue consists in obedience to the law." The Moral Law is not *made* at all. It exists necessarily in the nature of things founded on distinctions properly belonging to the actions and sentiments of rational beings, as the distinctions of equality and inequality belong to numbers, and the distinctions of straightness and crookedness belong to lines. It is not the standard of Right, which is, or can be, shifted so as to conduce to our beatification; it is our Virtue which must be fitted to meet that standard.

Human virtue, then, is the end of the Moral Law, only in the sense that it is its impersonation and fulfilment—the concrete form of its abstraction.

And this human virtue, like that eternal Right which it impersonates, is a real and positive thing—not a mere negation of vice. Both etymologically and philosophically, "wrong" means "wrung" from, "divergent from" the right. Right is the positive, wrong merely its negation. It is no less inaccurate to say, "Whatever is not wrong is right," than to say, "Whatever is not cold is heat." In each case we must say, "The negative of right is wrong;" "The negative of caloric is cold." It may seem that this distinction is merely a logical quibble; but it has vast practical weight. So long as we look on right as the mere negation of wrong, we can never comprehend its affirmative importance, its energy, reality, and vitality. To "do no harm" becomes our aim, not to "do good and be good." The evil of the world lies on us like an incubus, for we think *it* the reality; and love, and truth, and purity merely the absence of hatred, falsehood, and corruption. Like the clown, who believes that cold and darkness are something positive, and not merely the negations of caloric and light, we give to evil an affirmative existence,—nay, a personified one. We believe that the universe contains not only One absolutely good, but also One absolutely evil; not only a God, but a

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Devil. But these are visions of the night. The universe has indeed a Sun of light and heat, but it has no sun with rays of darkness and frost. "Evil," as saith the brave old oracle, "is more frail than nonentity."\* It is evanescent, a negation ever dwindling before the growing reality. Human virtue is a real thing, the strength and goodness of an immortal spirit. Human vice is its temporary subtraction of weakness and evil. Virtue is the "plus," vice the "minus," of the great arithmetic of the world. The eternal Right is the true law of our being; to obey it is normal, to disobey it, abnormal. There is no "broad road to destruction," from which to keep our feet would make us virtuous. There is a "narrow way," the divergencies from which radiate in every direction and to every distance, and the first step in such divergency is Wrong.

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Hitherto I have spoken of the obligation of man to obey the eternal Right, considering such obligation, as it is truly founded, simply on the nature of moral actions and moral agents. I have affirmed such obligation as the fundamental postulate of sound ethics, a necessary truth given in the nature of man, and incapable of demonstration as the axioms of geometry.

But though it be thus possible, and, for argumentative purposes, useful, to contemplate man standing alone in the universe with this bare abstract obligation to perform the right and eschew the wrong, it is, nevertheless, impossible to obtain a just idea of his moral condition, without taking into consideration that the abstract law of right is resumed in One righteous Will, towards whom he stands in all the complicated relations of creature to Creator.

We have seen that human virtue is the concrete of the abstract law. The question which next concerns us is: What relation does that virtue bear to the will of God?

Now, concerning the attributes of the Deity, from which

\* Proc. de Prov., Cory's Fragments.