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Frances Power Cobbe  
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### An Essay on Intuitive Morals

Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904) was an Irish writer, social reformer and activist best known for her contributions to Victorian feminism and women's suffrage. After the death of her father in 1857, Cobbe travelled extensively across Europe before becoming a leader-writer addressing public issues for the London newspaper *The Echo* in 1868. She continued to publish on the topics of feminism, social problems and theology for the rest of her life. These volumes, first published anonymously in 1855, introduced Cobbe's theistic religious beliefs, which blend a belief in Divinity with Immanuel Kant's idea of freedom of will, in which a person's moral imperative is independent of outside authority and provides proof of the existence of God. Cobbe discusses Kant's moral philosophy, explaining the religious beliefs which formed the basis for her later discussions of Christianity. Volume 1 contains her ideas on the origin of morality. For more information on this author, see [http://orlando.cambridge.org/public/svPeople?person\\_id=cobfr](http://orlando.cambridge.org/public/svPeople?person_id=cobfr)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frances Power Cobbe

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

# An Essay on Intuitive Morals

*Being an Attempt to Popularise Ethical Science*

VOLUME 1: THEORY OF MORALS

FRANCES POWER COBBE



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[More information](#)

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AN  
ESSAY  
ON  
INTUITIVE MORALS,  
BEING  
AN ATTEMPT TO POPULARISE ETHICAL  
SCIENCE.  
PART I.  
THEORY OF MORALS.

LONDON:  
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Frances Power Cobbe

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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LONDON  
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## ADVERTISEMENT.

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THE present volume of this Essay treats solely of the Theory of Morals. It may perhaps be followed by another which shall develop the principles herein stated in their application to Practice. That branch of Ethics called Politics will not be taken into consideration in either volume.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02026-8 - An Essay on Intuitive Morals, Volume 1

Frances Power Cobbe

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE.

## ERRATA.

- Page 49., note \*, for "The truth is, that they," read "The truth is, *not* that they."
- „ 79., note ¶, for "Dial Tyr" read "Dial. Try."
- „ 99., note, line 6., for "The Irishman Pelagius, who with Celestius the Briton," read "The Briton Pelagius, who with Celestius the Irishman."
- „ 125., line 25., for "from we" read "for we."
- „ 131., line 1., for "with, and filling the soul" read "with vital power, and filling the soul."
- „ 170., NOTE. Since printing this Book I find that Robertson, Jortin, and White, as well as Hallam, have all availed themselves before me of this quotation of Mosheim from St. Eligius. It deserves to be reckoned among the curiosities of literature, since it has been proved to be, after all, a most nefarious garble of the original. In the sermon of the saintly Goldsmith the words extracted do *not* form a continuous and entire "description of a good Christian," but are simply fragments of a long and excellent delineation of a character holding the weightier matters of the law in quite as much reverence as those externals of which alone the quotation takes note. — See "Maitland's Dark Ages," p. 100. *et seq.*, and "D'Acheri Spicilegia," vol. ii. p. 96.



Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02026-8 - An Essay on Intuitive Morals, Volume 1

Frances Power Cobbe

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE.

No Preface would be needed by a book which should effectually supply a great want, or give adequate utterance to a great truth. Perhaps none will be able to plead the apology of an Essay which must fail to accomplish either of these noble aims.

It cannot surely be questioned but that we want a System of Morals better than any of those which are current amongst us. We want a system which shall neither be too shallow for the requirements of thinking men, nor too abstruse for popular acceptance; but which shall be based upon the ultimate grounds of philosophy, and be developed with such distinctness as to be understood by every one capable of studying the subject. We want a System of Morals which shall not entangle itself with sectarian creeds, nor imperil its authority with that of tottering Churches; but which shall be indissolubly blended with a Theology fulfilling all the demands of the Religious Sentiment,—a Theology forming a part, and the one living part, of all the theologies which ever have been or shall be.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02026-8 - An Essay on Intuitive Morals, Volume 1

Frances Power Cobbe

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

We want a system which shall not degrade the Law of the Eternal Right by announcing it as a mere contrivance for the production of human Happiness, or by tracing our knowledge of it to the experience of the Senses, or by cajoling us into obeying it as a matter of Expediency; but a system which shall ascribe to that Law its own sublime office in the universe, which shall recognise in man the faculties by which he obtains a supersensible knowledge of it, and which shall inculcate obedience to it on motives so pure and holy, that the mere statement of them shall awaken in every breast that higher and better Self which can never be aroused by the call of Interest or Expediency.

It would be in itself a presumption for me to disclaim the ability necessary for supplying such a want as this, nor have I ever contemplated it as possible that I could do so. In writing this book I have aimed chiefly at two objects. 1st. I have sought to unite into one homogeneous and self-consistent whole the purest and most enlarged theories hitherto propounded on ethical science. Especially I have endeavoured to popularise those of Kant, giving the simplest possible presentation to his doctrines regarding the Freedom of the Will and the supersensible source of our knowledge of all necessary Truths, including those of Morals. I do not claim, however, even so far as regards these doctrines, to be an exact exponent of Kant's opinions; neither do I profess in giving the name of INTUITIVE to this Scheme of Morals to apply the word in a strictly scientific sense according to any one psychological system. For an avow-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02026-8 - An Essay on Intuitive Morals, Volume 1

Frances Power Cobbe

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE.

vii

edly Popular Treatise I have taken a word in itself popular, which yet seems to convey with sufficient accuracy the idea of that purely mental element or subjective factor of thought which is admitted universally by transcendental schools to form a constituent of all human knowledge, and to be both base and superstructure of deductive science. 2ndly. I have sought (and this has been my chief aim) to place for the first time, as the foundation of ethics, the great but neglected truth that the End of Creation is not the Happiness, but the Virtue of Rational Souls. I believe that this truth will be found to throw most valuable light not only upon the Theory, but upon all the details of Practical Morals. Nay, more, I believe that we must look to it for such a solution of the "Riddle of the World" as shall satisfy the demands of the Intellect while presenting to the Religious Sentiment that same God of perfect Justice and Goodness whose ideal it intuitively conceives and spontaneously adores. Only with *this* view of the Designs of God can we understand how His Moral attributes are consistent with the creation of a race which is indeed "groaning in sin" and "travailing in sorrow;" but by whose Freedom to sin and Trial of sorrow shall be worked out at last the most blessed End which Infinite Love could desire. With this clue we shall also see how (as the Virtue of each Individual must be produced by himself, and is the share committed to him in the grand end of creation) all Duties must necessarily range themselves accordingly—the Personal before the Social—in a sequence entirely different from that which is conformable

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02026-8 - An Essay on Intuitive Morals, Volume 1

Frances Power Cobbe

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

## PREFACE.

with the hypothesis that Happiness is “our being’s end and aim;” but which is, nevertheless, precisely the sequence in which Intuition has always peremp-torily demanded that they should be arranged. We shall see how (as the bestowal of Happiness on man must always be postponed by God to the still more merciful aim of conducing to his Virtue) the greatest outward woes and trials, so far from inspiring us with doubts of His Goodness, must be taken as the strongest evidences of it, and of the glory of that End of Virtue to which they are subservient. We shall see how at this very hour while grief spreads a flood of tears over our land, while tens of thousands of noblest hearts lie cold in their Crimean graves, how God the Good One has permitted that all this woe should come upon his creatures, has left to its tyrant author the Freedom he has misused to work it, and has brought out, through sorrows and agonies untold, Love, Generosity, Fortitude, Patience, and Piety, such as without them neither we nor those noble sufferers would ever have known; VIRTUES which have hallowed this world, and which the Martyrs shall carry with them through all the worlds to come.

I cannot hope that I have succeeded in these two designs of producing a Self-consistent System of Ethics, and of setting forth the great doctrine of the true End of Creation. To digest and systematise an immense body of philosophy, such as that of Ethics, would require an extent of learning and a grasp of thought which no labour would enable me to attain. To explain popularly, and yet accurately, the Metaphysic of Morals would demand a lucidity of

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02026-8 - An Essay on Intuitive Morals, Volume 1

Frances Power Cobbe

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE.

ix

expression after which, I fear, I have often striven unsuccessfully. To speak in any way worthily of the solemn themes of the Eternal Law, and of the Designs of God, would ask for better gifts than learning or eloquence — gifts whose deficiency I must much more deeply deplore. Yet, with the consciousness of all these imperfections, I have thought it well to give such labour as was in my power to this particular work, and for this reason : — I do not believe that the experience of any human mind is ever solitary, but that the truths which have proved of vital importance to one must be of value also to many. I believe, therefore, that the solutions of my own difficulties must be the solutions of the questionings of other hearts no less anxious than was mine ere those solutions were found. In a word, I have written this book because, if it had been in my hands in youth, it would have been to me a help such as I should account myself most blessed to be allowed to give to one of my fellow-creatures.

I know that it will be said that it would be better to have no help at all than such as this. My book will be condemned by some for advancing new religious views, which *must* be false because we have no evidence that the Apostles held them ; and it will be condemned by others for going back to old metaphysics, which *must* also be false because Fichte and Schelling and Hegel have lived since Kant. What can I say ? I admit, sincerely, that I am convinced there must be many errors left behind in the large field I have attempted to traverse. I am convinced that (especially in the metaphysical part) there are

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02026-8 - An Essay on Intuitive Morals, Volume 1

Frances Power Cobbe

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

PREFACE.

many errors of logic, and errors in comprehension of the great masters whose views I have endeavoured to explain. In the face of profound books like those of the Germans, or of such English ones as those of Hamilton or Mill, a book of this kind seems an impertinence ; yet, as it is the very depth and greatness of the really philosophic works which exclude them from popular perusal, and as it is the main design of this one to make Morals a *Popular Science*, perhaps some indulgence will be shown to a superficiality whose absence would neutralise the only utility it can hope to achieve. I can but repeat what I said above — This philosophy, these arguments, these metaphysics, all imperfect though they be, have been of true practical value to my own mind ; and, if so, there must needs be many other minds not so far different as to be incapable of deriving advantage from them.

It would seem that there is an epoch in the life of every thinking man in which the religious dogmas learned in childhood, and with them all Religion and Morality, are involved in temporary Scepticism. It is well that it should be so ; for by such process only can our Faith acquire the higher value of a possession earned by our own toil over that which we inherit without exertion.

“ The road to Resolution lies through Doubt.” \*

The simple credence of the child, though so often

\* Quarles

Tennyson also says,

“ There is more Faith in honest Doubt,  
Believe me, than in half the creeds.”

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02026-8 - An Essay on Intuitive Morals, Volume 1

Frances Power Cobbe

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE.

xi

lauded and coveted, is useless, or at best hazardous, for the man. He must himself "hew out of the solid marble of life" a Faith which shall resist the summer's heat and winter's storm, while the snowy image of infancy melts away in the first beams of the sun. But, needful though it be, this transition through Scepticism, this "journey across the howling wilderness of Doubt to the new, firm lands of Faith beyond,"\* is a fearfully dangerous one. We cannot sit still in our libraries to work out the great problems of existence with calmness and security. During all the months and years of that dread task, we are compelled to *live*, to feel, and act, as well as to think and study. Nay, the work is commonly forced upon us at the very time when life is most vigorous within us, and the passions of youth are struggling to free themselves from every bond. At this crisis there is nothing we so much want as a sound Morality whose fetters no alchemy of sophistry can dissolve. We want to be assured that the Conscience which speaks to us is a real voice, and that it has a right to be heard. We want to ratify our Intuitions in the court of the Intellect, and to be convinced that there are other realities and a still surer knowledge than those which our strong senses can feel or teach. Till we have found some great Law which has a right to regulate our actions, we are in no condition for other inquiries. The slave of Impulse can never be the liege Servant of Truth, nor can any of our Mental faculties perform their functions aright while our Moral Nature is in a state of anarchy.

\* T. Carlyle.

I hope that this book may in a measure meet the necessities of this solemn period of life ; that there may be some whose doubts it may resolve, and whose confidence in the certainty of Moral Truths it may increase. I hope that there may be some who will bear from its perusal the conviction that Philosophy has no lesson more sure, nor Religion any doctrine of more Divine authority, than that Voice of INTUITION which ever speaks in their hearts of the Infinite Goodness of our Father in Heaven, and of the awful Sanctity of that Eternal Law which is impersonate in His righteous Will.

London, February, 1855.