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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 2 contains her ideas on religious and moral duty. For more information on this author, see http://orlando.cambridge.org/public/svPeople?person_id=cobbfr

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An Essay on Intuitive Morals

Being an Attempt to Popularize Ethical Science

VOLUME 2: PRACTICE OF MORALS

FRANCES POWER COBBE



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AN ESSAY
ON
INTUITIVE MORALS:

BEING
An Attempt to Popularize Ethical Science.

PART II.
PRACTICE OF MORALS.
BOOK I.—RELIGIOUS DUTY.

LONDON:
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ADVERTISEMENT.

THE First Part of the present Essay has already appeared. It contains the *Theory* of Intuitive Morals. The present volume commences the second, or *Practical* part of the same subject, and is devoted to the discussion of RELIGIOUS DUTY. This portion of the Essay had been intended to form the conclusion of the whole, but for various reasons it is now published before the books on PERSONAL and on SOCIAL DUTY. The latter, when published, will form a third and final volume, completing an ethical treatise, Theoretical and Practical.

PREFACE.

THE treatise on Religious Duty contained in the present volume is designed as a contribution towards a vast object—the development of Theism as a Religion for the Life no less than a Philosophy for the Intellect. Hitherto the latter task has necessarily engaged chief attention, but now that Free Thought has sufficiently vindicated itself, it would seem that the time has arrived when Free Feeling also may begin to trace out the fresh channels into which a wider and purer faith will henceforth cause it to flow. No pretension can be made in this book to accomplish such a purpose in any way adequately, far less exhaustively. It will be the endless, happy work of better minds, better ages, better worlds than the present, to follow out to its consequences the doctrine of the Absolute Goodness of God, and demonstrate all which that creed demands from us of love and veneration, all its sanctions for us of trust and joy. These pages contain only such

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simple results of the great truth as the writer yet perceives. At best, they may show a few paces of the path of Right immediately before us; a faint gleam of that Paradise ever descried through the strait vista of Duty.

N., *April 9th*, 1857.

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AN

ESSAY ON INTUITIVE MORALS.

PART II.

Practical Morals.

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INTRODUCTION

TO

PRACTICAL MORALS.

THE first Part of the present Essay was devoted to the discussion of the *Theory* of Intuitive Morals. Endeavour was therein made to propound and to demonstrate the true answers to the four great questions :—

- What is the Moral Law ?
- Where it is found ?
- That it can be obeyed ?
- Why it should be obeyed ?

This second Part of the work will aim at the application to *Practice* of the principles maintained in the preceding volume.

The *method* on which such practical application must proceed (according to the system developed in the *Theory*, Chapter II.), will be briefly as follows :—

For each of the great departments of Duty a fundamental Canon will be sought ; and from thence will be deduced the subordinate propositions of that branch of morals. Such deductions though, of course, logical, must make no pretension to that chain of consecutively evolved demonstrations, of which the accuracy of its terminology renders Mathematical Science alone susceptible.

The great departments of Duty, each of which must be thus separately treated, are three in number.

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Man, the only finite moral agent of whom we have cognizance, occupies three distinct moral positions, according as we consider him as a Creature of God, as a Social being, or as a Free Rational Personality.* Each of these stations has its own moral obligations and special class of Duties. In due place I shall endeavour methodically to demonstrate the true Canons of these Religious, Social, and Personal obligations; for the present it may suffice to propose provisionally three maxims, whose claims to be so ranked will be recognised as deserving the first consideration. Should it appear, on further investigation, that these maxims actually express the necessary universal principles of the eternal Right, it will not be deemed surprising that to him who, of all our race, best fulfilled the conditions under which Inspiration is granted to man, it should have been given most perfectly to render in human speech God's universal Lessons of Righteousness.

As a *Creature of God*, as the infinitely indebted, the entirely dependent Liege-subject, Pupil, and Child of a Being who is above his actual service, but whom, as his Moral Lord, he is bound to obey in all things—man has Religious Duties.

Their Canon is,

“THOU SHALT LOVE THE LORD THY GOD WITH ALL THINE HEART.”

As a *Social being*, as the fellow-creature of sentient beings whose Happiness he may produce, and of Moral beings towards whose Virtue he may conduce—man has Social Duties.

Their Canon is,

* “We hold three relations, the first to the Divine Source of all things, the second to those among whom we live, the last to ourselves.”—MARCUS ANTONINUS, B. viii. 27.

“A Sikh should set his heart on three things—on God, on charity, and on purity (Nam. Dan. Ishnan).”—*The Tunkha Nameh*.

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“THOU SHALT LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR AS THYSELF.”

As a *Free Rational Personality*, as a being self-legislative of the eternal Law, bound in his very nature to do the Right, and capable of Virtue—*i. e.*, of the Finite Impersonation of Righteousness—man has Personal Duties.

Their Canon is,

“BE PERFECT EVEN AS THY FATHER WHO IS IN HEAVEN IS PERFECT.”

Now, in this great Trinity of duties, the omission of any one is a most fatal heresy. Ascetics have deemed that all virtue dwells in Religious and Personal Duties. They have, consequently, attempted to ascend alone into heaven, leaving their brethren unaided below—and their presumption has met its due overthrow in madness and confusion.* Utilitarian Moralists, on the other hand, have reserved Religious and Social Duties, but omitted Personal Duties, merging Truth and Purity into matters of Social convenience. And if their system were ever logically carried out, the result would be the destruction of the Virtue of Each in the pursuit of the Happiness of All. Secularists, again, retain Personal and Social Duties, rejecting the Religious. Thus, all Virtues are left acephalous. We are called on to love all Goodness, except absolute Goodness; to be grateful for all benefits, except for the sum of all our joys; to seek every help in our progress, except that of Omnipotence. The result is inevitable; the virtue so pollarded may *live*, indeed, but can never flourish in its rightful beauty and grandeur. Personal duty, the very Root of morality, whence it draws its life in the ultimate Ground of our nature—if we cut *that*, our Virtue dies. Social Duties, the fruitful branches which we spread out to all our race, and which

* See the appalling collection of cases in Zimmermann, vol. ii. A hospital was early erected at Jerusalem for monks and hermits driven mad by solitary asceticism.

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bring back the dews of heaven to nourish our own hearts' cores—if we lop off *these*, our Virtue becomes a useless trunk, hideous and solitary. Religious Duty, the Crown of all, the living bud shooting ever upward, and bearing with it in its growth the entire Tree—if *this* be shorn away our Virtue stands a stunted wreck.

Practical Ethics, then, must include the definition of Personal, of Social, and of Religious Duties; and these are sufficiently distinct from one another to permit of their being treated separately. Nevertheless, while dealing with one class, it must be borne in mind that however solemn are its obligations, the fulfilment of them will be utterly incomplete without simultaneous attention to both the other classes of Duties. Nay, more, that no one special Personal Duty is wholly independent of Social Aspects; nor any Social Duty of Religious Obligation. In many cases there may be question, whether a particular Duty involves more closely Personal or Social Duty, and whether it should be classed under one or the other head. In deciding to place it under that which involves the weightiest obligation, I shall not, however, exclude myself from reference to its secondary claims on our observance.

Such being the three grand departments of human Duty, Practical Intuitive Morals will be naturally divided under the three heads of PERSONAL DUTY, SOCIAL DUTY, and RELIGIOUS DUTY.

The method of treating these various topics is next to be considered. This will necessarily be determined by those views of the positive nature of Virtue which belong to true Morality. These are of such importance to the right comprehension of all that is to follow, that I shall be forgiven for repeating the statement of them in Vol. i. p. 10.

Human Virtue, like that eternal Right which it impersonates, is a *Positive* thing, not a mere *Negation* of Vice. Both etymologically and philosophically “Wrong” means

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“*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.” A very large amount of practical error has arisen in the world from the neglect of this truth.* Civil Law necessarily confines itself, with a few trifling exceptions, to the *forbidding* of criminal acts. It commands men *not* to Murder or Steal, but issues no mandates as to the performance of the *affirmative* duties of Beneficence. By a grievous mistake, the Moral Law has been commonly represented as confined to the same limits. The result has been, that the energy, reality, and vitality of Virtue has been little apprehended, and Vice has been made the standard of Virtue, instead of Virtue being fixed as that point below which all is Vice. If we imagine that *not to do wrong* constitutes Virtue, we shall measure all our actions against the extremes of crime into which we might fall, instead of against the heights of Virtue into which we ought to climb. To “*do no harm*” will become our aim, not “to be good and to do good.” The evil of the world will lie 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 things positive, and not merely the negations of Caloric and Light, we shall give to Evil an Affirmative existence; nay, perhaps a personified one. We

* A great part of the peculiarity of Christ’s morality seems to have been this substitution of an affirmative for a negative code. For the ten commandments (of which nine are negatives) He substituted “*Love the Lord thy God,*” “*Love thy neighbour as thyself.*” And for the rabbinical Golden Rule—“Whatever you would *not* wish your neighbour to do to you, do it not to him” (*Talmud*, quoted by Ridly Herschel)—Jesus gave “*Whatever ye would,*” &c. Isocrates (in *Nicoc*) gives the negative rule, and Confucius (Maxim xxiv., Lun-Yu) both one and the other.

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shall believe that the universe contains not only one absolutely Good, but also one absolutely Evil; not only a God but a Devil.

But all these delusions vanish before the advance of true science. Evil is no more a Positive thing than Cold and Darkness. The universe has a Sun of light and heat, but it has no Sun whose rays are darkness and frost. Human Virtue is a reality, the strength and goodness of an immortal spirit. Human Vice is its temporary subtraction of weakness and evil. 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.*

I have repeated this postulate thus clearly, because in the ensuing treatise it will guide most importantly the method of discussion. In each case of Social, Personal, and Religious Duties, I shall commence by endeavouring to prove what is the *Right* Sentiment or Action, and then show the relative guilt of all offences and faults *measured by their defalcation from that Right*. Thus the treatment of Duty will differ essentially both from that of Aristotle, which makes Virtue the mean ($\tau\omicron \mu\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\omicron\nu$) between two Wrongs, and that of modern moralists who have made it the negation, or at best the Antithesis of the opposite Wrong. I conceive that these methods are altogether unscientific and injurious. They are unscientific, whether like Aristotle's, they seek a Mean between two Vices, each assumed to be Positives, (a process

* *Int. Mor. Theory*, p. 11.; MOZLEY, *Augustinian Doctrine of Predestination*, p. 171; JOSEPH MAZZINI; *Duties of Man*.

Proclus says, "Let no one, therefore, say that there are precedaneous productive principles of evil in nature, or intellectual paradigms of evil as there are of good; or that there is a malific soul, or an evil-producing cause in the gods; nor let him introduce sedition or eternal war against the First God. For all these things are foreign from the science of Plato, and being more remote from truth, wander into barbaric folly and gigantic mythology."—*Theol. Plato*, B. i., c. 27.

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altogether analogous to that by which he assumed that both Lightness and Heaviness were Positives, thereby vitiating entirely his Statics and Dynamics;) or, like the modern moralists, seek the opposite of a Vice assumed to be a Positive (a process equivalent to one which should construct a theory of Heat on the assumption that Cold was a Positive). And these methods are also practically injurious in both cases. The laws of mind by which we acquire a knowledge of ethical distinctions, are so framed that it is only when we are seeking the very best line of conduct we can possibly pursue, that Intuition ever issues its revelations with complete distinctness. To seek for a Duty by examining our consciousness of what we ought *not* to do, or even what is barely allowable, is utterly vain; and the result of such tentatives is to leave us in a state of hesitation and uncertainty. The mind is disabled and even the Will paralyzed by the presentation of ideas so erroneous and so chilling as that of Evil the Reality, and Goodness merely the Absence thereof.

Proceeding, then, by the opposite method, and establishing in each case the fundamental Affirmative Canons—

Love the Lord thy God with all thine heart;

Love thy neighbour as thyself;

Be perfect as thy Father in heaven;

I shall thenceforth (as I have said) mark all sins simply as greater or less delinquencies from these standards of Duty. To obey these Canons is Right, and *all* disobedience of them is Wrong.

Disobedience, however, has two very distinct characters, of which too little notice has been commonly taken. If Virtue be, as I have insisted, the *Plus* in the great arithmetic of the world, there is also its logical antipart—Non-Virtue, or Fault, as well as its complete antithesis and contravener—actual Offence. Virtue may be thus symbolized as = + *a*,—non-Virtue, or the non-performance of the Law, as = O—and

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direct contravention of the Law, as = — *a*. These three classes of action have very important practical distinctions, and hold good in all the fields of human duty. In Social Duty, for instance, it is obvious how different will be the principles and actions of two men who both disobey the Law of Benevolence, but of whom one is simply Indifferent to the welfare of his neighbour, and does him neither harm nor good; and the other Hates him and does him all the hurt in his power. In Personal Duty likewise, while regardless of the Law of perfecting our natures, it is possible either merely to neglect self-Improvement or actually to pollute or destroy ourselves by Unchastity or Suicide. And in Religious Duty, between the negative faults of Thanklessness and Worldly-mindedness, and the positive offences of Blasphemy and Perjury, there lies an immense variation in the scale of guilt.

A distinction so radical as this ought, I conceive, to find prominent place in a practical treatise on Morals, and I shall, therefore, in all cases adopt an arrangement suitable to its full exhibition. I shall do this the more gladly, also, because it appears that in actual life Faults are infinitely more common than Offences. For once that we actually Injure our neighbour, we all of us neglect continually to seek his welfare. In Religious matters, while Indifference is the prevailing sin, any positive act of insult towards God is comparatively rare. And, above all, as regards Personal Duty, the leading feature of the moral condition of the majority is unconcern, *Acedia* (as the old moralists called it) carelessness as regards our moral perfecting, rather than any affirmative injuring of ourselves. Our common Personal faults are, Indolence, Discontent, Procrastination, and to these we yield with hardly any remorse. When our desires would lead us further into positive and active transgression, into Drunkenness, Unchastity, or Falsehood, then we start and recognise the precipice on whose edge we stand. But the

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easy downward slope of negative derelictions, which leads no less certainly to moral ruin, we neither shrink from nor even observe.

Very necessary is it then that the moralist should mark with sharpest line, that great eternal distinction which divides *all* sins, whether of Omission or Commission, from the one sole path of Right, and while recognising the variations in their degrees of guilt, demonstrate the evil of *both*. In the treatment of Personal and Social Duties this distinction will appear with greatest force, and though in most cases of Religious Omissions it is only to be shown by contrasting the Duty and the Fault, yet, even here, it will not be without use.

The plan of this Book will thus be arranged as follows:—

For each of the three classes of Duties, the fundamental Canon will, in the first place, be ascertained. This being done, all actions and sentiments belonging to that order will be ranged either as

OFFENCES, which *Oppose* the Law (sins of commission.)

FAULTS, which *Neglect* the Law (sins of omission.)

OBLIGATIONS, whose observance is the *Fulfilment* of the Law (Virtues.)

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