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Cambridge University Press
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William Paley
Frontmatter
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The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy

WILLIAM PALEY



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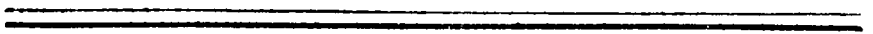
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M O R A L A N D P O L I T I C A L

P H I L O S O P H Y .



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T H E

P R I N C I P L E S

O F

M O R A L A N D P O L I T I C A L

P H I L O S O P H Y.

BY WILLIAM PALEY, M.A.
ARCHDEACON OF CARLISLE.

L O N D O N :
PRINTED FOR R. FAULDER, NEW BOND STREET.
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T O

THE RIGHT REVEREND

EDMUND LAW, D. D.

LORD BISHOP OF CARLISLE.

M Y L O R D,

HAD the obligations which I owe to your Lordship's kindness been much less, or much fewer, than they are; had personal gratitude left any place in my mind for deliberation or for enquiry; in selecting a name which every reader might confess to be prefixed, with propriety, to a work, that, in many of its parts, bears no obscure relation to the general principles of natural and revealed religion, I
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should have found myself directed by many considerations to that of the Bishop of Carlisle. A long life, spent in the most interesting of all human pursuits, the investigation of moral and religious truth, in constant and unwearied endeavours to advance the discovery, communication, and success of both; a life so occupied, and arrived at that period which renders every life venerable, commands respect by a title, which no virtuous mind will dispute, which no mind sensible of the importance of these studies to the supreme concerns of mankind, will not rejoice to see acknowledged. Whatever difference, or whatever opposition, some, who peruse your Lordship's writings, may perceive between your conclusions and their own, the good and wise of all

[iii]

all persuasions will revere that industry, which has for its object the illustration or defence of our common Christianity. Your Lordship's researches have never lost sight of one purpose, namely, to recover the simplicity of the gospel from beneath that load of unauthorized additions, which the ignorance of some ages, and the learning of others, the superstition of weak, and the craft of designing men, have unhappily for its interest heaped upon it. And this purpose, I am convinced, was dictated by the purest motive; by a firm, and, I think, a just opinion, that whatever renders religion more rational, renders it more credible; that he, who, by a diligent and faithful examination of the original records, dismisses from the system one article, which

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contradicts the apprehension, the experience, or the reasoning of mankind, does more towards recommending the belief, and, with the belief, the influence of Christianity, to the understandings and consciences of serious enquirers, and through them to universal reception and authority, than can be effected by a thousand contenders for creeds and ordinances of human establishment.

When the doctrine of transubstantiation had taken possession of the Christian world, it was not without the industry of learned men that it came at length to be discovered, that no such doctrine was contained in the New Testament. But had those excellent persons done nothing more by their discovery,

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covery, than abolished an innocent superstition, or changed some directions in the ceremonial of public worship, they had merited little of that veneration, with which the gratitude of protestant churches contemplates their services. What they did for mankind was this, they exonerated Christianity of a weight which sunk it. If indolence or timidity had checked these exertions, or suppressed the fruit and publication of these enquiries, is it too much to affirm, that infidelity would at this day have been universal? I do not mean, my Lord, by the mention of this example to insinuate, that any popular opinion which your Lordship may have encountered, ought to be compared with transubstantiation, or that the assurance with which

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we reject that extravagant absurdity, is attainable in the controversies in which your Lordship has been engaged ; but I mean, by calling to mind those great reformers of the public faith, to observe, or rather to express my own persuasion, that to restore the purity, is most effectually to promote the progress of Christianity ; and that the same virtuous motive, which hath sanctified their labours, suggested yours. At a time when some men appear not to perceive any good, and others to suspect an evil tendency, in that spirit of examination and research which is gone forth in Christian countries, this testimony is due not only to the rectitude of your Lordship's views, but to the general cause of intellectual and religious liberty.

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That your Lordship's life may be prolonged in health and honour; that it may afford whilst it continues an instructive proof, how serene and easy old age can be made, by the memory of important and well intended labours, by the possession of public and deserved esteem, by the presence of many grateful relatives; above all by the resources of religion, by an unshaken confidence in the designs of a "faithful Creator," and a settled trust in the truth and in the promises of Christianity, is the fervent prayer of, my Lord,

Your Lordship's dutiful,
Most obliged,
And most devoted servant,

WILLIAM PALEY.

Carlisle,
Feb. 10, 1785.

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P R E F A C E.

IN the treatises that I have met with upon the subject of *morals*, I appear to myself to have remarked the following imperfections—either that the principle was erroneous, or that it was indistinctly explained, or that the rules deduced from it, were not sufficiently adapted to real life and to actual situations. The writings of Grotius, and the larger work of Puffendorf are of too *forensic* a cast, too much mixed up with the civil law, and with the jurisprudence of Germany, to answer precisely the design of a system of ethics—

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the direction of private consciences in the general conduct of human life. Perhaps, indeed, they are not to be regarded, so much as institutes of morality, calculated to instruct an individual in his duty, as a species of law books and law authorities, suited to the practice of those courts of justice, whose decisions are regulated by certain general principles of natural equity combined with the maxims of the Roman code: of which kind, I understand, there are many upon the continent. To which may be added, concerning both these authors, that they are more occupied in describing the rights and usages of independent communities, than is necessary in a work which professes not to adjust the correspondence of nations, but to delineate the offices of domestic life. The profusion also of classical quotations, with which many of their pages abound, seems to me a fault from which it will not be easy to excuse them. If these extracts be intended as decorations of style, the composition is overloaded with ornaments of one kind. To any thing more than
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ornament they can make no claim. To propose them as serious arguments; gravely to attempt to establish or fortify a moral duty by the testimony of a Greek or Roman poet, is to trifle with the attention of the reader, or rather to take it off from all just principles of reasoning in morals.

Of our own writers in this branch of philosophy, I find none that I think perfectly free from the three objections which I have stated. There is likewise a fourth property observable in almost all of them, namely, that they divide too much the law of nature from the precepts of revelation; some authors industriously declining the mention of scripture authorities, as belonging to a different province, and others reserving them for a separate volume: which appears to me much the same defect, as if a commentator on the laws of England should content himself with stating upon each head the common law of the land, without taking any notice of acts of parliament; or should chuse to give his readers the common law in one book,

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and the statute law in another. “ When the obligations of morality are taught,” says a pious and celebrated writer, “ let the sanctions of Christianity never be forgotten; by which it will be shewn that they give strength and lustre to each other; religion will appear to be the voice of reason, and morality the will of God.” *

The *manner*, also, in which modern writers have treated of subjects of morality, is, in my judgment, liable to much exception. It has become of late a fashion to deliver moral institutes in strings or series of detached propositions, without subjoining a continued argument or regular dissertation to any of them. This sententious, apothegmatizing style, by crowding propositions and paragraphs too fast upon the mind, and by carrying the eye of the reader from subject to subject in too quick a succession, gains not a sufficient hold upon the attention, to leave either the memory furnished, or the understanding satisfied.

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* Preface to the Preceptor, by Dr. Johnson.

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However useful a syllabus of topics, or a series of propositions may be in the hands of a lecturer, or as a guide to a student, who is supposed to consult other books, or to institute upon each subject researches of his own, the method is by no means convenient for ordinary readers; because few readers are such *thinkers* as to want only a hint to set their thoughts at work upon; or such as will pause and tarry at every proposition, till they have traced out its dependency, proof, relation, and consequences, before they permit themselves to step on to another. A respectable writer of this class * has comprized his doctrine of slavery in the three following propositions.

“ No one is born a slave, because every one is born with all his original rights.”

“ No one can become a slave, because no one from being a person can, in the language of the Roman law, become a thing, or subject of property.”

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* Dr. Ferguson, author of “ Institutes of Moral Philosophy,” 1767.

(vi)

“ The supposed property of the master in the slave, therefore, is matter of usurpation, not of right.”

It may be possible to deduce from these few adages such a theory of the primitive rights of human nature, as will evince the illegality of slavery; but surely an author requires too much of his reader, when he expects him to make these deductions for himself? or to supply, perhaps, from some remote chapter of the same treatise, the several proofs and explanations, which are necessary to render the meaning and truth of these assertions intelligible.

There is a fault, the opposite of this, which some moralists who have adopted a different, and, I think, a better plan of composition, have not always been careful to avoid; namely, the dwelling upon verbal and elementary distinctions, with a labour and prolixity, proportioned much more to the subtlety of the question, than to its value

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and importance in the prosecution of the subject. A writer upon the law of nature,* whose explanations in every part of philosophy, though always diffuse, are often very successful, has employed three long sections in endeavouring to prove, that, “permissions are not laws.” The discussion of this controversy, however essential it might be to dialectic precision, was certainly not necessary to the progress of a work designed to describe the duties and obligations of civil life. The reader becomes impatient when he is detained by disquisitions which have no other object than the settling of terms and phrases? and, what is worse, they, for whose use such books are chiefly intended, will not be persuaded to read them at all.

I am led to propose these strictures, not by any propensity to depreciate the labours of my predecessors, much less to invite a comparison between the merits of their performances and my own, but solely
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Dr. Rutherford, author of “Institutes of Natural Law.”

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by the consideration, that, when a writer offers a book to the public upon a subject, in which the public are already in possession of many others, he is bound by a kind of literary justice, to inform his readers distinctly and specifically, what it is he professes to supply, and what he expects to improve. The imperfections above enumerated are those which I have endeavoured to avoid or remedy. Of the execution the reader must judge, but this was the design. Concerning the *principle* of morals it would be premature to speak; but concerning the manner of unfolding and explaining that principle, I have somewhat which I wish to be remarked. An experience of nine years in the office of a public tutor in one of the universities, and in that department of education to which these chapters relate, afforded me frequent occasion to observe, that, in discoursing to young minds upon topics of morality, it required much more pains to make them perceive the difficulty, than to understand the solution; that, unless the subject was so drawn up to a point, as to present the
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full force of an objection, or the exact place of a doubt, before any explanation was entered upon; in other words, unless some curiosity was excited before it was attempted to be satisfied, the labour of the teacher was lost. When information was not requested, it was seldom, I found, retained. I have made this observation my guide in the following work; that is, upon each occasion I have endeavoured, before I suffered myself to proceed in the disquisition, to put the reader in complete possession of the question; and to do it in the way that I thought most likely to stir up his own doubts and solicitude about it.

In pursuing the principle of morals through the detail of cases to which it is applicable, I have had in view to accommodate both the choice of the subjects, and the manner of handling them, to the situations which arise in the life of an inhabitant of this country, in these times. This is the thing that I think to be principally wanting in former treatises, and, perhaps, the chief advantage which

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will be found in mine. I have examined no doubts, I have discussed no obscurities, I have encountered no errors, I have adverted to no controversies, but what I have seen actually to exist. If some of the questions treated of appear to a more instructed reader minute or puerile, I desire such reader to be assured that I have found them occasions of difficulty to young minds; and what I have observed in young minds, I should expect to meet with in all who approach these subjects for the first time. Upon each article of human duty, I have combined with the conclusions of reason, the declarations of scripture, when they are to be had, as of co-ordinate authority, and as both terminating in the same functions.

In the *manner* of the work, I have endeavoured so to temper the opposite plans above animadverted upon, as that the reader may not accuse me either of too much haste, or of too much delay. I have bestowed upon each subject enough of dis-

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fertation to give a body and substance to the chapter in which it is treated of, as well as coherence and perspicuity; on the other hand, I have seldom, I hope, exercised the patience of the reader by the length and prolixity of my essays, or disappointed that patience at last, by the tenuity and unimportance of the conclusion.

There are two particulars in the following work for which it may be thought necessary that I should offer some excuse. The first of which is, that I have scarcely ever referred to any other book, or mentioned the name of the author whose thoughts, and sometimes, possibly, whose very expressions I have adopted. My method of writing has constantly been this; to extract what I could from my own stores, and my own reflections in the first place; to put down that; and afterwards to consult upon each subject such reading as fell in my way: which order, I am convinced, is the only one whereby any person can keep his thoughts from sliding into other men's
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trains. The effect of such a plan upon the production itself will be, that whilst some parts in matter or manner may be new, others will be little else than a repetition of the old. I make no pretensions to perfect originality: I claim to be something more than a mere compiler. Much no doubt is borrowed; but the fact is, that the notes for this work having been prepared for some years; and such things having been from time to time inserted in them, as appeared to me worth preserving; and such insertions having been made, commonly, without the name of the author from whom they were taken, I should, at this time, have found a difficulty in recovering these names with sufficient exactness to be able to render to every man his own. Nor, to speak the truth, did it appear to me worth while to repeat the search merely for this purpose. When authorities are relied upon, names must be produced: when a discovery has been made in science, it may be unjust to borrow the invention, without acknowledging

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knowledging the author. But in an argumentative treatise, and upon a subject, which allows no place for discovery or invention, properly so called; and in which all that can belong to a writer is his mode of reasoning, or his judgment of probabilities; I should have thought it superfluous, had it been easier to me than it was, to have interrupted my text, or crowded my margin with references to every author, whose sentiments I have made use of. There is, however, one work to which I owe so much, that it would be ungrateful not to confess the obligation; I mean the writings of the late Abraham Tucker, Esq; part of which were published by himself, and the remainder since his death, under the title of “The Light of Nature pursued, by Edward Search, Esq.” I have found in this writer more original thinking and observation upon the several subjects that he has taken in hand, than in any other, not to say, than in all others put together. His talent also for illustration is unrivalled. But his thoughts are
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diffused through a long, various, and irregular work. I shall account it no mean praise, if I have been sometimes able to dispose into method, to collect into heads and articles, or to exhibit in more compact and tangible masses, what, in that otherwise excellent performance, is spread over too much surface.

The next circumstance for which some apology may be expected, is the joining of moral and political philosophy together, or the addition of a book of politics to a system of ethics. Against this objection, if it be made one, I might defend myself by the example of many approved writers, who have treated, *de officiis hominis et civis*, or, as some chuse to express it, “ of the rights and obligations of man, in his individual and social capacity,” in the same book. I might alledge also, that the part a member of the commonwealth shall take in political contentions, the vote he shall give, the counsels he shall approve, the support he shall afford,

or