

# THE ETHICS OF HERCULES

*A Study of Man's Body as the Sole  
Determinant of Ethical Values*

BY

ROBERT CHENAULT GIVLER, PH.D.

*Professor of Philosophy in Tufts College*



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# THE ETHICS OF HERCULES

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DEDICATED  
TO  
THE THOUSAND MEN  
OF MY GENERATION  
WHOSE THOUGHT I HAVE THE HONOR  
OF MAKING ARTICULATE.

*"Waste not free energy; treasure it and make the best use of it."*

WILHELM OSTWALD, *"The Imperative of Energetics."*

## PREFACE

This book deals with ethics as a strictly natural science, and particularly as a branch of mechanistic psychology. It regards the realm of ethics as coterminous with the arena of human activity, and holds that the problems of conduct, being exclusively man's problems, are to be solved by the methods of applied science. Moreover, since human conduct is in the last analysis dependent upon the postures and manœuvres of our muscle-fabric, he who would understand ethics must first comprehend something of the mechanics of the human organism. Indeed, this book attempts to show, not only that ethics and physiology can no longer be studied apart from one another, but also that it is the structure and functions of the human body which have determined just what our ethical values are.

Such a program is not strictly original, for the student of philosophy will readily find its antecedents. Nevertheless, while many ethical writers have heretofore given numerous intimations of a mechanistic scheme in ethics, yet usually as they proceed to discuss what are called higher things, they seem to forget that it is the human body which performs every human action, even those deeds which

move us most profoundly. No such faltering, we trust, will be found in these pages. Indeed, it may be stated at the outset that one of the fundamental conceptions from which this book originated is that the well-being of the physiological organism is the final criterion of whatever is ethically valuable.

The title, "The Ethics of Hercules," is doubly symbolical. Those who have heard of this ancient hero will immediately recognize the emphasis which is placed upon that type of personality who with strength, skill, and persistence works out the problem that lies nearest at hand. Moreover, Hercules the valiant, the thoroughbred who never once shirked from his task, is here contrasted with Cinderella, the patron goddess of all those ineffectual dreamers, who, instead of balancing their ethical books day by day, whimper after the supernatural, and cultivate an inner life of subterfuge and disorder. We hold here that no man can have freedom given to him, but that he must earn it by positively constructive, honest efforts to adjust himself to and gain control of his environment. The motto of Cinderella is, "Where you are not, there is happiness," while the motto of Hercules is, "Friends lost, something lost; honor lost, much lost; pluck lost, all lost."

The realization that in all science many false starts are made before a single true one is achieved, makes for caution and vigilance. Seeing, however, that the trend of ethical thought has been continu-



ally growing more and more mechanistic, it seems not unlikely that we are at the beginning rather than at the end of a chapter in the empirical science of human nature. If this book utters no more than the first sentence of that chapter, the effort will not have been in vain.

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# THE ETHICS OF HERCULES



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

It would be an impertinence for an amateur in physiological science to assert that the significance of ethical values can be understood only through a study of the mechanics of the human body, were not the ethical implications of physiology so numerous, so compelling, and so plainly apparent. Ever since anatomists and physiologists first began to demonstrate that all the vital functions of man were dependent upon his intimate structure; and more recently that conduct and thought are in the strictest sense of the term functions of man's flesh, they have been laying the foundations,—even if unconsciously,—of a scrupulously natural science of ethics. The purpose of this book is to attempt the formulation of such a science.

There is little need to state that any proposal to deal with ethics in a thoroughly naturalistic manner will be met with considerable resistance. Although it has been everlastingly recognized that human conduct is the direct product of human bodies, especially as is evidenced by our bestowal of rewards and punishments on individually specified persons,

nevertheless, the opinion still widely prevails that a man and his actions are two such different things that the former cannot be defined in terms of the latter. Against this naturalistic or mechanistic view,—that a man *is* what he *does*,—several classes of people tenaciously hold contradictory opinions.

There are, for example, those who consider ethics as the humble handmaid of what is curiously termed “revealed religion,” and who consequently hold that all the knowledge necessary for the conduct of life has long ago been vouchsafed us by Infallible Wisdom. To such persons it is of no importance that human nature has actually altered to such an extent as to make it necessary to find new solutions even for ancient problems; nor does it seem to occur to them that the homage devoted to the past may often be simply a pleasant way of escape from the intellectual responsibilities of the present. A mechanistic ethics plans to undermine the notion that the ethical truth of one generation is necessarily sufficient for the problems of the generation that succeeds it, and aims to supersede it with the view that man’s progress is dependent, not upon his ability to escape from his problems, but rather upon his ability to analyse and solve them.

Again, there are those who regard ethics solely as a subject for philosophical discussion on the basis of an ideal never illustrated by any one man, but only conceived in abstract terms. “How should the ideal man behave?” is the sole burden of their

discussion. Even the mechanist hesitates to condemn this esthetic attitude toward conduct too severely. For it is well known that thinking may involve preparation for action, and that consequently he who thinks out the best course of conduct in advance may be more likely to act accordingly when a real problem is to be solved. On the other hand, the human body and brain are so constructed that all fanciful romancing is necessarily tinged with delusion to such an extent that he who conceives an ideal apart from the actual is bound to lose his orientation. And the sequel of this loss is everywhere manifest in purely philosophical discussions about ethics. In the effort to extricate themselves from the verbalism in which they are entangled, ethical theorists have invariably either rejected the world as evil, or else they have dug themselves in under a mountain of meaningless words. To all such persons a mechanistic ethics seeks to restore a glimpse of the reality they have sought in vain, by showing that the highest ideals need not be in any way fictitious.

Resistance to a naturalistic ethics may also be expected from those biologists and physiologists who regard the human body essentially as a corpse animated by a psyche. These people are known as vitalists, and their number is very great. The customary gloom of these men is doubtless derived from their attitude toward the human body, which they know best either in the form of specimens

preserved in alcohol, or microscopic slides of slaughtered tissue. Now, to be sure, such objects of intense study do not of themselves yield an adequate picture of a living, thinking man. But these morphologically-minded persons, instead of pertinaciously remembering what manner of organism they have slain for research, and instead of keeping ever in mind that all human tissues actually die while performing their normal functions, deem it somehow necessary to postulate a vital, that is, an immortal principle, which makes the organism *go*. A more perverse logic does not arise even in the realms of theology. Oddly enough, the conversation of these men is not so happy as their metaphysic might indicate. "No, no," they will repeat in a plaintive outcry, "you can never find the secret of life." The sentiment underlying such a remark is not difficult for even a casual student of psychology to detect. Moreover, logicians know that when a man states a problem in terms of a mystery, and seeks thereby to hinder the search for its solution, he commits an error which has been called "the fallacy of initial predication."<sup>1</sup> Obviously, indeed, we have already found out fully a thousand of the secrets of living matter,—for instance, its principal chemical ingredients, its dependence upon oxygen, its optimal temperature, its rate of dying with different vital organs removed, and the like,—and so when a vitalist speaks of "*the Secret of Life*,"

<sup>1</sup> R. B. Perry, "Present Philosophical Tendencies," p. 127.



he simply shows that he is still a worshipper of magic. Although the way of intellectual progress lies in another direction, yet, since the majority of mankind court mystery as a way of escape from the "despotism of fact," the vitalist can be expected to lead a voluble resistance against a mechanistic ethics. Nevertheless, even he can perhaps be induced to recognize that although Psyche does seem to regulate Homo, yet it is always the structure of Homo that determines what manner of function he shall manifest. And if the mechanist can elicit this admission from the vitalist, he can at least maintain his chief contention. Otherwise, seeing that the mechanists are on the whole younger men than the vitalists, nature's own slow processes will have to soften the asperities of this conflict.

Having thus begun our outline of a mechanistic ethics by stating the chief points of its disagreement with certain traditional ways of thinking, let us now proceed to establish without interruptions the foundations upon which this science of human conduct is to be built. And first a word as to its antecedents.

All modern scientific thinking, which is essentially a pertinacity of attention,—a dogged following upon a clue sagaciously intuited,—is our heritage from ancient Greek thought, and particularly from Socrates. And it is quite a significant, though oft-forgotten fact, that while almost all our scientific inquiry has been directed toward the conquest of