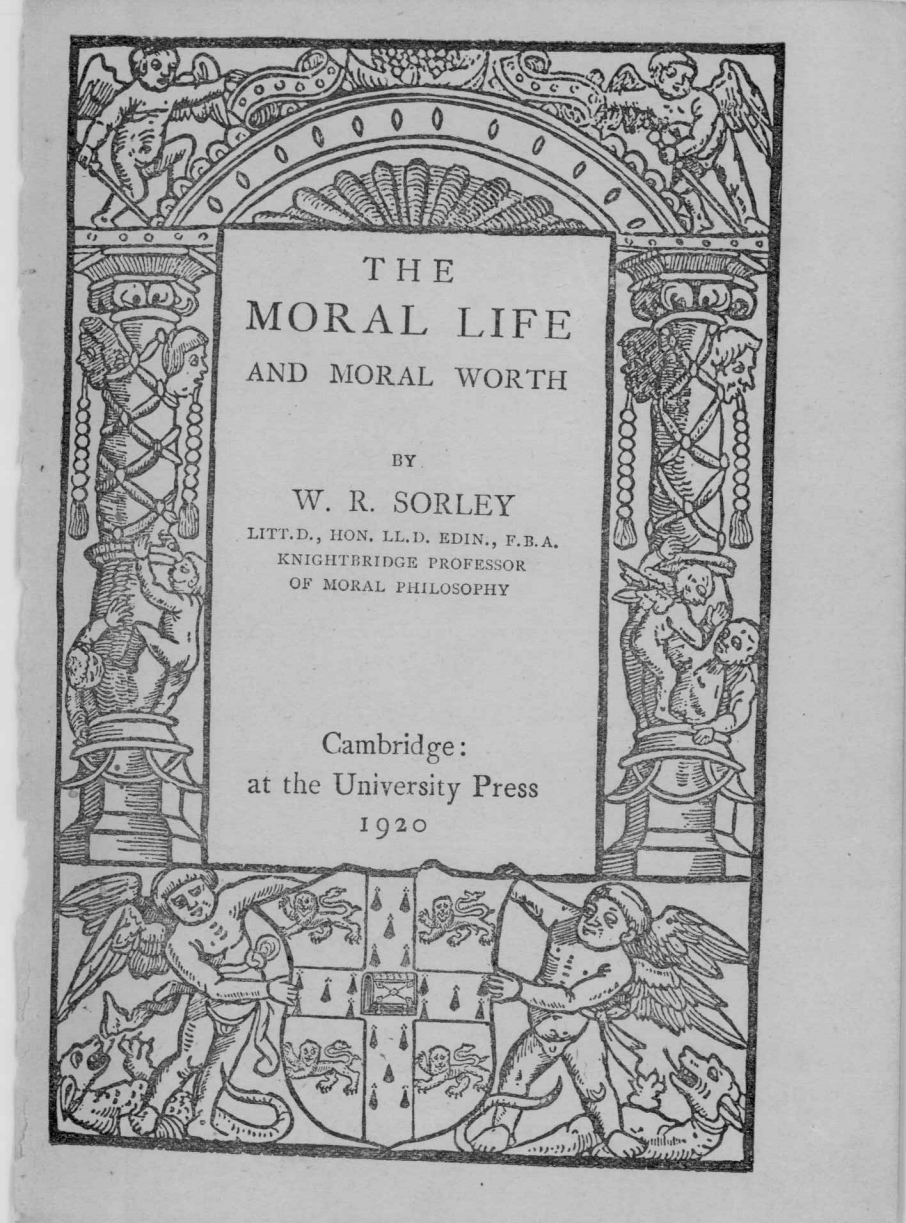
The book cover features a highly detailed, black-and-white line-art border. At the top, two winged cherubs are shown in profile, one on the left and one on the right, appearing to support a decorative archway. Below the arch, the border is composed of vertical panels. On the left, a figure is depicted holding a staff or scepter. On the right, another figure is shown in a similar pose. The bottom section of the border is the most complex, featuring a central shield with a heraldic design of a lion passant guardant. This shield is flanked by two large, winged figures, possibly angels or personifications of virtues, who are shown in dynamic, active poses. The entire border is set against a light-colored, textured background.

THE
MORAL LIFE

—
W. R. SORLEY

The book cover features a highly decorative border. At the top, two winged cherubs (putti) are shown, one on the left holding a staff and one on the right holding a bunch of grapes. Below them is a large, stylized shell or fan-like motif. The central text is framed by two tall, classical columns. Each column is topped with a caryatid-like figure and has a figure climbing it. The bottom of the cover is a wide band containing a central shield with a coat of arms, flanked by two winged figures holding banners. The shield is divided into four quadrants, each containing a different heraldic symbol: a lion passant guardant, a dragon passant, a lion passant guardant, and a dragon passant. The entire design is rendered in a detailed, engraved style.

THE
MORAL LIFE
AND MORAL WORTH

BY

W. R. SORLEY

LITT.D., HON. LL.D. EDIN., F.B.A.
KNIGHTBRIDGE PROFESSOR
OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Cambridge:
at the University Press
1920

*“Les plus grandes choses n'ont besoin
que d'être dites simplement.”*

LA BRUYÈRE.

*With the exception of the coat of arms at
the foot, the design on the title page is a
reproduction of one used by the earliest known
Cambridge printer, John Siberch, 1521*

PREFATORY NOTE

THE purpose of the following pages is to give a popular account of the nature of goodness in human life. They are not specially addressed to the philosophical student, but to the wider public interested in the subject: for moral philosophy is the quest of a few, but morality is every man's affair. Nor is the book an essay in casuistry. Cases of conduct are infinite in number, and hardly two of them are the same; general rules fit them awkwardly. But morality is a spirit manifested in life, not a body of rules; and this point of view is marked by the title *The Moral Life*.

W. R. S.

September 1911.

22269

v

First Edition, 1911

Second Edition, 1913

Third Edition, 1920

CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFATORY NOTE	v
CHAP.	
I. THE MORAL LIFE	1
II. TEMPERANCE	26
III. COURAGE	46
IV. WISDOM	62
V. SOME OTHER PERSONAL VIRTUES	70
VI. JUSTICE	86
VII. BENEVOLENCE	115
VIII. RELIGION AND THE MORAL LIFE	126
NOTES	141
INDEX	145

THE MORAL LIFE

AND MORAL WORTH

CHAPTER I

THE MORAL LIFE

Two questions, distinct from one another in kind, may be asked about the moral life. One of these is a question of fact and history, the other is a question of validity or of worth. The conduct of man is distinguished from the behaviour of animals by the presence of moral ideas. These ideas appear in the way in which he regards conduct and the character which issues in conduct: some things are approved by him and called good; others he disapproves and calls bad. When we inquire into the origin of moral ideas, or trace their connexion with the physical and social environment, or follow the stages in their development from their earliest to their present form, we are occupied with the historical question. But behind this question lies another of equal or greater interest. The historian may be able to tell us what kind of life was held to be good at any time, and how the ideas about the

good life have varied or developed ; but when he goes on to say whether the life called good was really good or not, he is no longer a mere historian ; he has raised the question of the validity of the ideas which he records, and of the worth of the life which he describes. In doing so he has passed to a new point of view, which is not that of the historian but that of the moralist. It is from this latter point of view that the moral life will be regarded in the following pages. Their purpose is to give an account of the characteristics of human life which are good or praiseworthy and which are commonly described by the term virtue.

With the history of morality we are not directly concerned ; but a few sentences on its method and results will lead up to the consideration of the moral life from the point of view of its value or worth. The varieties of moral conduct and moral codes have long been a commonplace of reflective writers. The differences are not merely in modes of conduct ; they affect the ideas and judgments of men. One race or one age condemns what has been approved by another. "There is nothing just or unjust," said Pascal, "which does not change its quality with a change of climate. Three degrees of latitude overturn the whole science of law." The qualities most admired are those that suit the circumstances of a people. Where war is the common business,

courage is accounted the chief among the virtues ; a settled society looks for justice in the social order ; in the industrial state honesty and straightforward dealing are praised and approved, even by those who do not practise them. There is a similar variety in the faults which are condoned. In the words of Macaulay, " Every age and every nation has certain characteristic vices, which prevail almost universally, which scarcely any person scruples to avow, and which even rigid moralists but faintly censure. Succeeding generations change the fashion of their morals with the fashion of their hats and their coaches, take some other kind of wickedness under their patronage, and wonder at the depravity of their ancestors."

The remarks of Pascal and Macaulay are merely illustrations of a view expressed by many writers in different periods. They observe the varieties of moral ideas, and occasionally hint at a cause for the variation. With Pascal it is climate ; Macaulay speaks of it as a mere fashion. There is no attempt to bring all the facts together and look at the process as a whole. To do this has been the work of quite recent times. Great stores of knowledge have been accumulated regarding the customs and ideas of races, civilised and uncivilised, and the theory of evolution has put into our hands a clue for understanding this material. In this way a scientific history of

morals has arisen. Much still remains matter of conjecture ; but it is possible to state certain results with a fair degree of confidence.

In the first place, we are able to affirm that, so far as our evidence goes, morality in some form has always been a factor in human life. Men are never without some consciousness of a distinction between good and evil, between things that are to be done and things that are to be avoided. This conclusion has been disputed, it is true, but only because too narrow an interpretation has been put upon morality. The savage may not have the same abstract notions as the civilised man, and he may approve what the latter condemns, but he is not therefore without a conscience. A single case will illustrate the point: "Mr Howitt once said to a young Australian native with whom he was speaking about the food prohibited during initiation, 'But if you were hungry and caught a female opossum, you might eat it if the old men were not there.' The youth replied, 'I could not do that ; it would not be right' ; and he could give no other reason than that it would be wrong to disregard the customs of his people." The particular prohibition has nothing to do with morality, as the civilised man understands morality, but to the savage it was a moral prohibition, which his conscience enforced, irrespective of any actual command or probable penalty: "the customs of

his people " were for him the measure of right and wrong.

This points to a second conclusion which may be drawn from the historical study of morality. In early societies there is no distinction between custom and morality ; the customs of the tribe are reflected in the individual conscience, and exercise a regulating influence upon individual conduct. Nor is there any law or any morality outside this customary rule. Every part of it tends to have the same sanctity for members of the tribe. There are no defined punishments for disobedience ; but breach of the most trivial rules may be visited with the severest consequences. When some of these customary requirements are laid down as positive commands and enforced by penalties for nonconformity, law is beginning to take an independent position ; when portions of it are regarded as authoritative for their own sake and not simply because they are customary, morality and custom are coming to be distinguished. But in the beginning these distinctions did not exist. In the tribal stage of society men show little independence of character, and they are not given to reflection. They are social—or tribal—to the core ; " they think in herds " ; and they follow the tradition of the tribe as their rule of right and wrong.

We enter more debatable ground if we seek, in the third place, to estimate the amount of difference

that actually exists, or has existed, between the moral codes of different communities. The great diversity of moral ideas is the thing that strikes one first and most forcibly. Cruelty, intemperance, cowardice, untruthfulness, disregard of human life, have all been practised, at one time or another, by one people or another, without remorse and without rebuke. Perhaps there is no precept of the moral law that could stand the old test of universal assent — “always, everywhere, and by all men.” These things cannot be explained away. At the same time they are only one part of the story of morality. It is easy to magnify the differences. Vices may be acquiesced in without being held to be virtues. The coward may still admire bravery, the liar truth, the intemperate man self-restraint, although he condones his own lack of the virtue. Further, we must remember that early morality is tribal morality; to understand the moral attitude of the members of a tribe, we must look to the conduct which they approve between man and man within the tribe, and not to their behaviour towards strangers or enemies. Looking from this point of view, Dr Westermarck sums up the results of his inquiry into the history of moral ideas in the following words: “When we examine the moral rules of uncivilised races we find that they in a very large measure resemble those prevalent among

nations of culture. In every savage community homicide is prohibited by custom, and so is theft. Savages also regard charity as a duty and praise generosity as a virtue—indeed, their customs concerning mutual aid are often much more stringent than our own; and many uncivilised peoples are conspicuous for their aversion to telling lies. But at the same time," he goes on to add, "there is a considerable difference between the regard for life, property, truth, and the general well-being of a neighbour, which displays itself in primitive rules of morality and that which is found among ourselves."

Perhaps it is not too much to say that the whole difference results from the primitive identification of morality with tribal custom. The progress of moral ideas depends upon their emancipation from the rule of custom. For this rule both limits their application and obscures their meaning. Early moral rules are limited in their application. All duties are regarded as duties to the tribe and within the tribe; and it is only by slow stages that the bonds of tribe and nation have been broken, and that moral ideas have come to be recognised as having universal validity. And the same cause has obscured the meaning of morality. Early morality consists in adherence to custom; by consequence it concentrates attention upon actions rather than

upon character, upon the external manifestations of life rather than upon its inward nature. The emphasis has to be changed—motive and intention, rather than overt act, have to be accentuated—in order to bring out the true nature of morality. The progress of morality thus involves its gradual emancipation from the external rule of custom and, at the same time, an increase and deepening of the reflective factor.

These notes on the history of morality lead up to our present subject. Morality is internal; it belongs to the inner life. And this is the mark which distinguishes it from the law of the land and the conventions of society. These affect a man from without, direct or limit his activity, and prescribe its sphere. Their operation is external; and they do not touch him at every point: beyond the range of the actions which they require or forbid there are wide tracts of conduct to which the laws are indifferent or which they are unable to cover. Further, they take account only of things done. There is an inner circle of personal life which a man claims as his own, and into which neither positive law nor social rule is able to penetrate. Morality is not limited in this way. It rests on a consciousness of the difference between good and evil; this consciousness influences the springs of action in a

man's own nature; it works from within outwards, and is capable of affecting every part of his life.

Law and morality, however, are closely connected. They were undifferentiated in their origin, and their subsequent history has been one of constant interaction. Moral ideas guide the legislator, and the moralist has imitated the form and methods of the jurist. Morality has been often presented as a system of rules for conduct, or duties: the conception of moral law has been taken as fundamental. Nor need objection be taken to this course, provided we bear in mind that the moral law is not imposed by an external authority, and does not depend for its validity on sanctions or penalties. At the same time, when duty or the moral law is made the fundamental conception, there is nearly always a tendency to fix attention primarily on a man's actions rather than on the man himself, on his conduct rather than on his character, on what he does rather than on what he is. Morality is expressed in the imperatives "do this," "abstain from that"; and we examine a man's conduct to see whether the law has been kept. Provided what is required be performed, and what is forbidden avoided, we are apt to rest content. Yet it is possible that the man of exact performance may remain untouched by the spirit of morality. No

correctness of conduct gives by itself the unity and completeness of the moral life. And this is acknowledged both by the plain man and by the philosopher. Though he have kept all the commandments from his youth up, a man feels that something is still lacking. He asks which is the greatest commandment; he seeks some comprehensive duty which will contain all the others, and in fulfilling which he may have the assurance that he is a good man. The philosopher, also, tries to reduce the varied detail of duty to a single principle, which will express the inward meaning of morality and the ways in which it applies to life.

This unity of principle has been sought in different ways. Sometimes the method has been external, and a general formula has been given for the results which were held to be worthy of attainment; "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" is a formula of this sort. At other times the principle of duty has been found in an attitude of the will itself; and the good will—that is, a will in harmony with the moral law—is said to be the only unqualified good. A view akin to this latter is a consequence of the doctrine that morality is internal. Goodness does not consist in a succession or collection of acts, which we must seek to describe by some general formula. It is a life, which expresses itself in conduct but which has its source in volition. Duty

is the law of the moral life ; but the moral life itself is realised in character.

A man's character is made both for him and by him. It is based on his inherited powers and tendencies. It is developed by his experience, including under "experience" both the systematic training which is called education and the countless influences which the mature as well as the growing mind receives from physical, social, and mental surroundings. These influences meet with and operate through an internal factor which modifies the whole product. This is the individual will. Heredity provides the basis of character. The environment gives the external conditions in which it must live and grow by assimilation of experience and adaptation to the circumstances of life. But the selection of material and the mode of adaptation depend upon the nature of the man as a voluntary agent. The man himself is a factor in producing his own character. It is through his volition that one action is performed, another left undone ; one career chosen, another passed by. And these acts and omissions, in their turn, modify the character of the man to whom they were due. The disputed question about free-will need not trouble us here. It is enough that a man's own volitions are an important factor in forming his character, and that this voluntary factor makes praise or blame appropriate in judging him.