

THE THEORY OF GOOD AND EVIL

A TREATISE ON MORAL PHILOSOPHY

BY

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TO THE MEMORY
OF
MY TEACHERS
THOMAS HILL GREEN
AND
HENRY SIDGWICK

PREFACE

THE scope of the present work is perhaps made sufficiently obvious by the title-page. It is an attempt to deal with the chief topics usually discussed in books bearing the title 'Moral Philosophy' or 'Ethics.' It is on a rather larger scale than the books generally described as 'Textbooks,' or 'Introductions,' and is occupied to some extent with difficulties and controversies which can hardly be called 'elementary.' Still, I have in writing it had chiefly before my mind the wants of undergraduate students in Philosophy. I have endeavoured, as far as possible, to assume no previous acquaintance either with ethical or with general Philosophy: but it has not, in all parts of the work, been possible to avoid alluding to the arguments and objections of writers whose systems cannot be fully explained or examined in a book like the present. That is especially the case in Book II, which is largely occupied with replies to objections and with the criticism of views more or less opposed to my own. Even there I have endeavoured to make the drift of my argument intelligible to readers who have not read the works criticized. But those who want a short and fairly elementary treatment of the subject might perhaps read Book I by itself, or pass at once from Book I to Book III. That book deals in part with metaphysical questions which do not admit of an altogether 'popular' treatment; this section of the work would no doubt be better understood by a student who has read enough to know in a general way the meaning of the metaphysical problem, but I hope it will not be found wholly unintelligible to those who may make their first acquaintance with it in these pages. Advanced students are more likely to complain that I have touched upon many great questions, not specially belonging to the ethical branch of Philosophy, in a way which must appear unsatisfying to those who are well versed in them, and dogmatic to those who do not agree with me. I would venture

in reply to such a criticism to plead that the necessity of touching upon difficult questions without getting to the bottom of them is to some extent inseparable from any treatment of Ethics which does not form part of a complete course or system of Philosophy: and the difficulty is increased when one wishes to avoid allusiveness and technicality of a kind which would necessarily render the book perplexing and uninstructional to a student beginning the subject, or to the general reader who may take some interest in the ethical and religious aspects of Philosophy without wishing to embark upon an elaborate course of Logic, Psychology, and Metaphysic.

The idea prevails among some Philosophers that Moral Philosophy is a particularly 'easy' branch of Philosophy. I believe that it is easier than other branches of Philosophy in the sense that its more elementary problems can be discussed with less technicality, and can be understood more readily at a first reading by persons of ordinary ability and education. For this reason it seems to me a peculiarly good subject for the student of Philosophy to begin upon, although logically it might well be considered to come rather at the end than at the beginning of a philosophical course. But, though the controversies which range round the words 'Utilitarianism' and 'Intuitionism' can be understood and discussed almost without reference to metaphysical problems, the ultimate question of Moral Philosophy—the meaning and nature of the ideas 'good,' 'right,' 'duty'—is after all the ultimate question of all Philosophy, and involves all the others. I am very far from thinking that I have got to the bottom of all the difficulties involved in that fundamental problem: upon some of them I am aware that I have hardly touched in these pages. Nor is there anything very original in such a solution of them as I have been able to offer: and yet I am not aware that, in English at any rate, there is any systematic treatment of them, written from anything like my own point of view, to which I could point as altogether meeting the wants of the class of readers for whom this book is chiefly intended. Neither of the great writers to whom I feel I owe most in the special department of Ethics—the late Professor Sidgwick, and the late Professor T. H. Green whose lectures and

private classes I used to attend as an undergraduate—can well be regarded as having said the last word upon the subject by students of a generation later who have profited not merely by the criticism which each of them supplies upon the other, but by the general progress of Philosophy since the first appearance of Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics* (1874) and of Green's *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1883). Since the last-mentioned date the supposed easiness of this branch of Philosophy, or the superior attractiveness of Logic and Metaphysic, has led perhaps to a certain unwillingness to write separate treatises on Ethics, at least among those who take what one may call a constructive view of the subject¹. But the period—almost a quarter of a century—which has elapsed since the death of Green has been a period of great philosophical activity, and (I venture to think) of great philosophical progress, and there has been much incidental treatment of ethical questions in the works both of English and of foreign Philosophers. There seems therefore room for a fresh systematic treatment of the main problems of Moral Philosophy in what I will venture to call (in spite of great differences both of opinion and of temperament) the spirit which animated both of them.

Among more recent writers I have learned most perhaps from those from whom I differ most. I have so frequently criticized the writings of Mr. F. H. Bradley that I should like to say that, fundamentally as I dissent from his ultimate position, I believe that no one has a deeper sense than myself of personal obligation to his brilliant writings, or a deeper appreciation of the stimulus which he has given to philosophical progress, not only in his own

¹ I should wish to speak with respect of three short English textbooks—Professor Muirhead's *Elements of Ethics*, Professor Mackenzie's *Introduction to Moral Philosophy*, and Bishop d'Arcy's *Short Study of Ethics*; but none of them can be said to represent exactly my own point of view. I feel more sympathy on the purely ethical, though not on the metaphysical, side with a quite recent work—Mr. Moore's very powerful essay, *Principia Ethica*, which appeared when my own work was practically finished. Professor Paulsen's *System of Ethics* is an admirable and very attractive book, which represents on the whole a point of view not unlike my own, but it hardly touches upon many difficulties which have attracted much attention in England.

University of Oxford, but throughout the English-speaking world and beyond it. Unfortunately, Ethics seems to me precisely the side of Philosophy on which his influence has been least salutary. I trust that, while criticizing him with freedom, I have not failed in the respect that is due to perhaps the most original of contemporary thinkers.

With regard to my criticism of the able work of Professor A. E. Taylor (*The Problem of Conduct*), I should wish to explain that the recent number of the *Philosophical Review* in which he withdraws his view about the merely 'apparent' character of evil did not come into my hands till the whole of my criticism was printed and some of it had been finally passed for the press, though I had not failed to notice the change of tone already traceable in his *Elements of Metaphysics*. I can only therefore express my regret for having devoted so much space to the criticism of a position which its author has abandoned.

It is useless for an author to offer apologies for the defects of a book which he is not compelled to write. In explanation of such deficiencies of the present work as may arise from the absence of a more exhaustive knowledge of the literature bearing upon this and cognate subjects, I may, however, be allowed to plead, for the information of persons unacquainted with our English system of University teaching, that Oxford College Tutors are very far from possessing the leisure of a German or an American Professor, and that they have to choose between publishing imperfect work and not publishing at all. They may perhaps console themselves with the reflection that the method of individual teaching by means of essays and conversation gives them opportunities of appreciating the real wants of students which are hardly accessible to teachers who see their pupils only in the lecture-room. I have a strong feeling that the progress of knowledge, especially in the region of Philosophy, is often retarded by an excessive shrinking from criticism, and by an indefinite postponement of publication in the hope of more completely satisfying an author's ideal.

The following articles which have already appeared in various periodicals have been freely made use of with the kind permission of their editors:—'Professor Sidgwick's Utilitarianism'

(*Mind*, 1885); 'Dr. Martineau and the Theory of Vocation' (*Mind*, 1888); 'The Theory of Punishment' (*The International Journal of Ethics*, 1891); 'The Limits of Casuistry' (*International Journal of Ethics*, 1894); 'Justice' (*The Economic Review*, 1891, 1892); 'Can there be a Sum of Pleasures?' (*Mind*, 1899); 'The Ethics of Forgiveness' (*International Journal of Ethics*, 1900); 'The Commensurability of all Values' (*Mind*, 1902). Some of the earlier articles have been largely re-written: others are reprinted with little change.

Dr. McTaggart of Trinity College, Cambridge, has kindly read through the whole of my proofs, and I am much indebted to his criticisms and suggestions. For assistance and advice in dealing with parts of the work I am similarly indebted to Mr. C. C. J. Webb of Magdalen College, Oxford, and several other friends, nor must I omit to mention the help of my wife in the final revision.

H. RASHDALL.

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