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Problems of Conduct

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**TO THE DEAR TWO WHOSE INTEREST IN
PROBLEMS OF CONDUCT FIRST AWAKENED
MINE AND WHOSE EAGERNESS TO KNOW
AND DO REMAINS UNDIMMED BY THE YEARS
MY FATHER AND MY MOTHER**

PREFACE

This book represents in substance a course of lectures and discussions given first at the University of Illinois and later at Wesleyan University. It was written to meet the needs both of the college student who has the added guidance of an instructor, and of the generalreader who has no such assistance. The attempt has been made to keep the presentation simple and clear enough to need no interpreter, and by the list of readings appended to each chapter, to make a self directed further study of any point easy and alluring. These references are for the most part to books in English, easily accessible, and both intelligible and interesting to the ordinary untrained reader or undergraduate. Some articles from the popular reviews have been included, which, if not always authoritative, are interesting and suggestive.

The function of the instructor who should use this as a textbook would consist, first, in making sure that the text was thoroughly read and understood; secondly, in raising doubts, suggesting opposing views, conducting a discussion with the object of making the student think for himself; and, thirdly, in adding new material and illustration and directing the outside readings which should supplement this purposely brief and summary treatment. The books to which reference is made in the lists of readings, and other books approved by the instructor, should be kept upon reserved shelves for the constant use of the class in the further study of questions suggested by the text or raised in the classroom.

It will be noticed that the disputes and the technical language of theorists have been throughout so far as possible avoided. The discussion of historical theories and isms¹ is unnecessarily bewildering to the beginner; and the aim has been rather to keep as close as possible to the actual experience of the student and the language of everyday life. Far more attention is given than in most books on ethics to concrete contemporary problems. After all, an insight into the fallacies of the reasoning of the various ethical schools, an ability to know what they are talking about and glibly refute them, is of

less importance than an acquaintance with, and a firm, intelligent attitude toward, the vital moral problems and movements of the day. I have prayed to be saved from academic abstractness and remoteness, and to go as straight as I could to the real perplexities from which men suffer in deciding upon their conduct. The purpose of a study of ethics is, primarily, to get light for the guidance of life. And so, while referring to authors who differ from the views here expressed, I have sought to impart a definite conception of relative values, to offer a thread for guidance through the labyrinth of moral problems, and to effect a heightened realization of the importance and the possibilities of right living.

It is necessary, indeed, in order to justify and clarify our concrete moral judgments, that we should reach clear and firmly grounded conclusions upon the underlying abstract questions. And the habit of laying aside upon occasion one's instinctive or habitual moral preferences and discussing with open mind their justification and rationality is of great value to the individual and to society. Hence the first two Parts of this volume take up, as simply as is consonant with the really intricate questions involved, the history of the development of human morality and the psychological foundation of moral obligations and ideals. The exposition of the meaning of right and wrong there unfolded serves as a basis for the sound solution of the confused concrete issues, private and then public, which are discussed in the remainder of the volume.

An introductory outline of any subject must inevitably be superficial. To explain all the discriminations that are important to the specialist, to justify thoroughly all the positions taken, to do adequate justice to opposing views, would require ten volumes instead of one. And though there is a crying need of scholarly and elaborate discussion of the endless problems of morality, there is a prior need for the student of surveying the field, seeing what the problems are, how they are related, and what is approximately certain. The impression left by many ethical treatises, that everything is matter for dispute and no moral judgments are reliable, seems to me unfortunate; I have preferred to incur the charge of dogmatism rather than to fall into that error to offer a clear cut set of standards, to which exception will be taken by this critic or that, rather than to hold out to the student a chaos of confused possibilities.

No originality of viewpoint is claimed for this book. Its *raison d'être* is simply to provide a clearer, more concrete, and more concisely comprehensive view of the nature of morality and its summons to men than has seemed to me available. I have drawn freely upon the thoughts of ethical teachers, classic and contemporary. These ideas are, or ought to be, common property; and it has been impracticable to trace them to their sources and offer detailed acknowledgment. Nothing has been presented here that has not first passed through the crucible of my own thinking and experience; and where the sparks came from that kindled each particular thought I am sure I do not know.

Portions of chapters xxi and xxix have appeared in the *Forum* and *North American Review* respectively; to the editors of these periodicals my thanks are due for permission to reprint.

DURANT DRAKE.

MIDDLETOWN, CONN, August 3, 1914.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTORY.

What is the field of ethics? Why should we study ethics?

PART I. THE EVOLUTION OF MORALITY

CHAPTER I. THE ORIGIN OF PERSONAL MORALITY... How early in the evolutionary process did personal morality of some sort emerge? What were the main causes that produced personal morality? How far has the moralizing process been blind and how far conscious?

CHAPTER II. THE ORIGIN OF SOCIAL MORALITY... How early was social morality developed? By what means was social morality produced? How has morality been fostered by the tribe?

CHAPTER III. OUTWARD DEVELOPMENT-MORALS... What is the difference between morals and non-moral customs? What, in general, has been the direction of moral progress? What definition of morality emerges from this? Is moral progress certain?

CHAPTER IV. INWARD DEVELOPMENT-CONSCIENCE... What are the stages in the history of moral guidance? Out of what has conscience developed? What is conscience now? What is the value of conscience?

CHAPTER V. THE INDIVIDUALIZING OF CONSCIENCE... Why did not the individualizing of conscience occur earlier? What forces made against custom-morality? Conservatism vs. radicalism. What are the dangers of conventional morality?

CHAPTER VI. CAN WE BASE MORALITY UPON CONSCIENCE... What is the meaning of "moral intuitionism"? Do the deliverances of different people's consciences agree? If conscience everywhere agreed in its dictates, could we base morality upon it? What is the plausibility of moral intuitionism?

PART II. THE THEORY OF MORALITY

CHAPTER VII. THE BASIS OF RIGHT AND WRONG... What is the nature of that intrinsic goodness upon which ultimately all valuations rest? What is extrinsic goodness? What sort of conduct, then, is good? And how shall we define virtue?

CHAPTER VIII. THE MEANING OF DUTY... Why are there conflicts between duty and inclination? Must we deny that duty is the servant of happiness? Does the end justify the means? What is the justification of justice and chivalry?

CHAPTER IX. THE JUDGMENT OF CHARACTER... Wherein consists goodness of character? Can we say, with Kant, that the only good is the Good Will? What evils may go with conscientiousness? What is the justification of praise and blame? What is responsibility?

CHAPTER X. THE SOLUTION OF PERSONAL PROBLEMS... What are the inadequacies of instinct and impulse that necessitate morality? What factors are to be considered in estimating the worth of personal moral ideals? Epicureanism vs. Puritanism. What are the evils in undue self-indulgence? What are the evils in undue self-repression?

CHAPTER XI. THE SOLUTION OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS... Why should we be altruistic? What is the exact meaning of selfishness and unselfishness? Are altruistic impulses always right? What men-

tal and moral obstacles hinder altruistic action? How can we reconcile egoism and altruism?

CHAPTER XII. OBJECTIONS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS... Do men always act for pleasure or to avoid pain? Are pleasures and pains incommensurable? Are some pleasures worthier than others? Is morality merely subjective and relative?

CHAPTER XIII. ALTERNATIVE THEORIES... Is morality "categorical," beyond need of justification? Should we live "according to nature," and adjust ourselves to the evolutionary process? Is self-development, or self-realization, the ultimate end? Is the source of duty the will of God?

CHAPTER XIV. THE WORTH OF MORALITY... Morality as the organization of human interests. Do moral acts always bring happiness somewhere? Is there anything better than morality?

PART III. PERSONAL MORALITY

CHAPTER XV. HEALTH AND EFFICIENCY... What is the moral importance of health? Can we attain to greater health and efficiency? Is continued idleness ever justifiable? Are competitive athletics desirable? Is it wrong to smoke?

CHAPTER XVI. THE ALCOHOL PROBLEM... What are the causes of the use of alcoholic drinks? What are the evils that result from alcoholic liquors? What should be the attitude of the individual toward alcoholic liquors? What should be our attitude toward the use of alcoholic liquors by others?

CHAPTER XVII. CHASTITY AND MARRIAGE... What are the reasons for chastity before and fidelity after marriage? What safeguards against unchastity are necessary? What are the factors in an ideal marriage? Is divorce morally justifiable?

CHAPTER XVIII. FELLOWSHIP, LOYALTY, AND LUXURY... what social relationships impose claims upon us? What general

duties do we owe our fellows? Are the rich justified in living in luxury? Is it wrong to gamble, bet, or speculate?

CHAPTER XIX. TRUTHFULNESS AND ITS PROBLEMS... What are the reasons for the obligation of truthfulness? What exceptions are allowable to the duty of truthfulness? In what directions are our standards of truthfulness low? The ethics of journalism.

CHAPTER XX. CULTURE AND ART... What is the value of culture and art? What is most important in cultural education? What dangers are there in culture and art for life? Should art be censored in the interests of morality?

CHAPTER XXI. THE MECHANISM OF SELF-CONTROL... What are our potentialities of greater self-control? A practicable mechanism of self-control. Various accessories and safeguards.

CHAPTER XXII. THE ATTAINABILITY OF HAPPINESS... The threefold key to happiness: I. Hearty allegiance to duty. II. Hearty acquiescence in our lot. III. Hearty appreciation of the wonder and beauty in life. Can we maintain a steady under glow of happiness?

PART IV. PUBLIC MORALITY

CHAPTER XXIII. PATRIOTISM AND WORLD-PEACE... What is the meaning and value of patriotism? How should patriotism be directed and qualified? What have been the benefits of war? What are the evils of war? What can we do to hasten world-peace?

CHAPTER XXIV. POLITICAL PURITY AND EFFICIENCY... What are the forces making for corruption in politics? What are the evil results of political corruption? What is the political duty of the citizen? What legislative checks to corruption are possible?

CHAPTER XXV. SOCIAL ALLEVIATION... What is the duty of the State in regard to: I. Sickness and preventable death? II. Poverty and inadequate living conditions? III. Commercialized vice? IV. Crime?

CHAPTER XXVI. INDUSTRIAL WRONGS... In our present organization of industry, what are the duties of businessmen: I. To the public? II. To investors? III. To competitors? IV. To employees? What general remedies for industrial wrongs are feasible?

CHAPTER XXVII. INDUSTRIAL RECONSTRUCTION... Ought the trusts to be broken up, or regulated? What are the ethics of the following schemes: I. Trade-unions and strikes? II. Profit-sharing, co-operation, consumers' leagues? III. Government regulation of prices, profits, and wages? IV. Socialism?

CHAPTER XXVIII. LIBERTY AND LAW... What are the essential aspects of the ideal of liberty? The ideal of individualism. The ideal of legal control. Should existing laws always be obeyed?

CHAPTER XXIX. EQUALITY AND PRIVILEGE... What flagrant forms of inequality exist in our society? What methods of equalizing opportunity are possible? What are the ethics of: I. The single tax? II. Free trade and protection? III. The control of immigration? IV. The woman's movement?

CHAPTER XXX. THE FUTURE OF THE RACE... In what ways should the State seek to better human environment? What should be done in the way of public education? What can be done by eugenics? What are the gravest moral dangers of our times?

PROBLEMS OF CONDUCT

INTRODUCTORY

What is the field of ethics?

To know what exists, in its stark reality, is the concern of natural science and natural philosophy; to know what matters, is the field of moral philosophy, or ethics. The one group of studies deals with facts simply as facts, the other with their values. Human life is checkered with the sunshine and shadow of good and evil, joy and pain; it is these qualitative differences that make it something more than a meaningless eddy in the cosmic whirl. Natural philosophy (including the physical and psychological sciences), drawing its impartial map of existence, is interesting and important; it informs us about our environment and ourselves, shows us our resources and our powers, what we can do and how to do it. Moral philosophy asks the deeper and more significant question, What SHALL we do? For the momentous fact about life is that it has differences in value, and, more than that, that we can MAKE differences in value. Caught as we are by the irresistible flux of existence, we find ourselves able so to steer our lives as to change the proportion of light and shade, to give greater value to a life that might have had less. This possibility makes our moral problem. What shall we choose and from what refrain? To what aims shall we give our allegiance? What shall we fight for and what against?

For the savage practically all of his activity is determined by his imperative needs, so that there is little opportunity for choice or reflection upon the aims of his life. He must find food, and shelter, and clothing to keep himself warm and dry; he must protect himself from the enemies that menace him, and rest when he is tired. Nor are most of us today far removed from that primitive condition; the moments when we consciously choose and steer our course are few and fleeting. Yet with the development of civilization the elemental burdens are to some extent lifted; men come to have superfluous strength, leisure hours, freedom to do something more than merely

earn their living. And further, with the development of intelligence, new ways of fulfilling the necessary tasks suggest themselves, moral problems arise where none were felt before. Men learn that they have not made the most of their opportunities or lived the best possible lives; they have veered this way and that according to the moment's impulse, they have been misled by ingrained habits and paralyzed by inertia, they have wandered at random for lack of a clear vision of their goal. The task of the moralist is to attain such a clear vision; to understand, first, the basis of all preference, and then, in detail, the reasons for preferring this concrete act to that. Here are a thousand impulses and instincts drawing us, with infinite further possibilities suggesting themselves to reflection; the more developed our natures the more frequently do our desires conflict. Why is any one better than another? How can we decide between them? Or shall we perhaps disown them all for some other and better way.

Man's effort to solve these problems is revealed outwardly in a multitude of precepts and laws, in customs and conventions; and inwardly in the sense of duty and shame, in aspiration, in the instinctive reactions of praise, blame, contentment, and remorse. The leadings of these forces are, however, often divergent, sometimes radically so. We must seek a completer insight. There must be some best way of solving the problem of life, some happiest, most useful way of living; its pursuit constitutes the field of ethics. Nothing could be more practical, more vital, more universally human.

Why should we study ethics?

(1) The most obvious reason for the study of ethics is that we may get more light for our daily problems. We are constantly having to choose how we shall act and being perplexed by opposing advantages. Decide one way or the other we must. On what grounds shall we decide? How shall we feel assured that we are following a real duty, pursuing an actual good, and not being led astray by a mere prejudice or convention? The alternative is, to decide on impulse, at haphazard, after some superficial and one-sided reflection; or to think the matter through, to get some definite criteria for judgments, and to face the recurrent question, what shall we do? In the steady light of those principles. [Footnote: Cf. Matthew Arnold,

Essays in Criticism, vol. i: "Marcus Aurelius," opening paragraph: "The object of systems of morality is to take possession of human life, to save it from being abandoned to passion or allowed to drift at hazard, to give it happiness by establishing it in the practice of virtue; and this object they seek to attain by presenting to human life fixed principles of action, fixed rules of conduct. In its uninspired as well as in its inspired moments, in its days of languor or gloom as well as in its days of sunshine and energy, human life has thus always a clue to follow, and may always be making way towards its goal."

(2) In addition to the fact that we all have unavoidable problems which we must solve one way or another, a little familiarity with life, an acquaintance with the biographies of great and good men, should lead us to suspect that beyond the horizon of these immediate needs lie whole ranges of beautiful and happy living to which comparatively few ever attain. There are better ways of doing things than most of us have dreamed. The study of ethics should reveal these vistas and stimulate us to a noble discontent with our inferior morals. [Footnote: Cf. Emerson, in a letter to Fraulein Gisela von Arnim: "In reading your letter, I felt, as when I read rarely a good novel, rebuked that I do not use in my life these delicious relations; or that I accept anything inferior or ugly."] Such a forward look and development of ideals not only adds greatly to the worth of life but prepares a man to meet perplexities and temptations which may some day arise. It pays to educate one's self for future emergencies by meditating not only upon present problems but upon the further potentialities of conduct, right and wrong, that may lie ahead, and building up a code for one's self that will make life not only richer but steadier and more secure.

(3) Another advantage of a systematic study of ethics is that it can make clearer to us WHY one act is better than another; why duty is justified in thwarting our inclinations and conscience is to be obeyed. Not only is this an intellectual gain, but it is an immense fortification to the will. There comes a time in the experience of every thinking man when a command not reinforced by a reason breeds distrust, and when until he can intelligently defend an ideal he will hesitate to give it his allegiance. Morality, to be depended upon, must be not a mere matter of breeding and convention, or of

impulse and emotion, but the result of rational insight and conscious resolve. To many people morality seems nothing but convention, or an arbitrary tyranny, or a mysterious and awful necessity, something extraneous to their own desires, from which they would like to escape. To be able to refute these skeptics, expose the sophisms and specious arguments by which they support their wrongdoing, and show that they have chosen the lesser good, is a valuable help to the community and to one's own integrity of conduct. Too often the people perish for lack of vision; an understanding of the naturalness and enormous desirability of morality, together with an appreciation of its main injunctions, would enlist upon its side many restless spirits who now chafe under a sense of needless restraint and seek some delusory freedom which leads to pain and death. Morality is simply the best way of living; and the more fully men realize that, the more readily will they submit themselves to the sacrifices it requires.

(4) Finally, a study of ethics should help us to see what are the prevalent sins and moral dangers of our day, and thus arouse us to put the weight of our blame and praise where they are needed. Widespread public opinion is a force of incalculable power, which is largely unused. Politics and business, and to a far greater extent than now private life, will become clean and honest and kind just so soon as a sufficient number of people wake up and demand it. We have the power to make sins which are now generally tolerated and respectable, so odious, so infamous, that they will practically disappear. There are certain of the older forms of sin which the race in its long struggle upward has so effectually blacklisted that only a few perverts now lapse into them; we have execrated out of existence whole classes of cruelty and vice. But with the changing and ever more complex relations of society new forms of sin continually creep in; these we have not yet come to brand with the odium they deserve. Leaders of society and pillars of the church are often, and usually without disturbance of conscience, guilty of wrongdoing as grave in its effects, or graver, than many of the faults we relentlessly chastise. On the other hand, many really useful reforms are blocked because they awaken old prejudices or cross silly and meaningless conventions. The air is full of proposals, invectives, causes, movements; how shall we know which to espouse and which to reject, or