

PREFACE

THIS volume, which is offered for the use of college and university classes, has grown out of the author's experience in trying to introduce students to the fundamental problems of ethics. It is hoped, however, that the book may make an appeal to a wider circle of readers—to men and women of various callings to whom neither convention nor authority seems to offer satisfactory answers to the insistent problems of the moral life. If such readers do not feel an interest in the more technical questions of philosophy, they are certainly concerned with those universal human problems that arise out of all genuine experience in the business of living. The titles and divisions of chapters will indicate the portions of the work best suited to individual readers. The attention of the general reader may, however, be called to Chapter VII, the World of Values, to Chapter VIII, Individual and Social Values, and also to the discussions of Moral Law, Freedom, and Morality and Religion. Several sections of this last chapter are devoted to the problem of evil. Contemporary events have served to make this problem keenly felt in many quarters where its significance has, in the past, been slighted or ignored.

The appearance of another book in the field of ethics may seem to demand justification by the presence of features that distinguish it from the many able works already extant. The most obvious characteristic of the present work is suggested by its title. All the problems of morality are here treated as problems of value. The principle of value is carried through from the first chapter to the last, where it is applied to the questions of religion. All human activities, it is shown, are judged to be good or bad, better or worse,

Pour le philosophe . . . il ne doit pas y avoir dans la conduite un seul élément dont la pensée ne cherche à se rendre compte, une obligation qui ne s'explique pas, un devoir qui ne donne pas ses raisons.

Guyau.

are less tangible forms of indebtedness for which specific acknowledgment cannot so easily be made—the early guidance of teachers, the discussions with colleagues, and the almost unconscious influence of academic associations. I shall always feel deep gratitude to Dr. E. Benjamin Andrews for an initial impulse to the study of philosophy, and to Professor James Seth of Edinburgh University for valued instruction in the period of graduate study. The happy relations, continuing unbroken through many years, with President W. H. P. Faunce and Professor E. B. Delabarre in the department of Philosophy in Brown University have been full of encouragement. I am especially indebted to Dr. Alexander Meiklejohn, President of Amherst College, for discussions, often of almost daily occurrence, during a close comradeship of fifteen years at our *Alma Mater*.

During a year spent at Berkeley, California, in the final preparation of this volume, I received many kindnesses, and not a few helpful suggestions, from colleagues in the department of philosophy, and from former pupils now teaching in the University of California.

My thanks are due to my daughter, Mrs. C. D. Mercer, and to several friends for kindly assistance in proof-reading at a time when circumstances made it impossible for me to give undivided attention to this part of the work. To my colleague, Professor Alfred H. Jones, I am especially grateful for many valued criticisms made both in the manuscript and proof. But my chief indebtedness has been to my daughter Helen, whose untiring devotion, clear insight, and rare enthusiasm for these problems have made possible the completion of the work at this time.

WALTER GOODNOW EVERETT.

BROWN UNIVERSITY,
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objects which have caused them pain or injury. Reflection, however, unhesitatingly excludes all activity of unconscious objects from the field of moral conduct.

There is also general agreement that the actions of animals are not properly moral. The mediæval practice of punishing animals, in the same manner in which human beings were punished for like offenses, has passed away as men have come to a clearer understanding of the differences between human and brute intelligence. Animals are believed to exhibit the germs of moral feeling, and their behavior doubtless throws some light upon certain problems in the evolution of conduct. But we know so little of the processes of animal consciousness, and those that bear resemblance to moral feeling in man are so rudimentary, that we are justified in excluding animal conduct from our investigation. The field of conduct to be examined is, therefore, at once narrowed to human conduct.

Not all human action, however, is of moral import, and the elimination of activities which are not significant for morality must be carried further. There are large classes of involuntary activities which are excluded from the sphere of moral judgment. These vary from unconscious reflex and automatic actions, like the beating of the heart or the movements of the eyelids, to conscious motor responses to external stimuli, as when one withdraws the hand from contact with a hot iron or starts at a sudden flash of light. Similarly the action of an epileptic in a fit, or of a patient under the influence of an anæsthetic, is no part of moral conduct. What is here excluded from the sphere of morality indicates by implication what is to be included within that sphere. Only voluntary action, action that is willed, is properly subject to moral judgment. But a still further requirement seems to be made in order that conduct may be judged as morally good or bad; it must be not merely voluntary, but intelligently so. Intellectual disability commonly excludes even

voluntary action from the field of moral conduct. Children under a certain age, idiots, and the insane, are not held, in modern civilized communities, to be fully responsible. The history of jurisprudence, which in an important way reflects the moral sentiment of different peoples and periods, shows great diversity of opinion concerning the limits of responsibility as affected by intellectual disability.¹

This is strikingly exhibited in the treatment of the insane. Among some peoples, the ancient Egyptians for example, these unfortunates were freed from responsibility for their acts, and even treated with a measure of religious veneration, whereas among other peoples they have been punished for misdemeanors or crimes with the greatest severity. The passing of the belief in possession by demons, and the recognition of insanity as pathological, have done away, among the more enlightened nations, with both of these extremes, and have placed the mentally diseased in the class of the morally irresponsible. The nicer questions that arise concerning degrees of responsibility under intellectual disability cannot here be discussed. Nor can we consider the still more difficult questions of the possible limitation of responsibility in cases of drunkenness and of temporary loss of mental balance due to other causes. The final conclusion reached is that ethical conduct is limited to the purposive, or willed, acts of normal and intelligent human beings.

But are all such acts of moral significance, or are some morally indifferent? At first glance it would seem that there is a relatively large class of indifferent acts, and this is certainly the popular view. It is also held by many students of morality. Herbert Spencer, while recognizing that "conduct with which morality is not concerned, passes into conduct which is moral or immoral, by small degrees and in countless ways," at the same time says that "from hour to

¹ See Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*, Vol. I, Chap. X.

temperament, which represents the active tendencies, aptitudes, or tastes of the individual, apart from the modifications effected by the play of external forces and the growth of an inner, organizing intelligence. Such original endowment is in many ways profoundly significant for the acquired character, but it is the material out of which the character is fashioned, not the character itself.

II. ETHICS A SCIENCE OF VALUE

Acts that are consciously purposive, or willed, have another very important aspect; they are directed towards ends. In this fact lies their meaning. The same is true even at the lower level of instinctive action. By unreflecting instinct the animal is guided to its appointed goal. But in man there supervenes upon this blind procedure the consciousness of ends, the debate over competing interests, and the possibility of error and long wandering in the search for his true goal. If we consider for a moment the immediate ends that we pursue from hour to hour, they appear almost numberless, so varied are human desires and interests. It is clear, however, that they are not equally important; some are less, others more, comprehensive and significant. The lesser ends are constantly referred to the greater, and become means in relation to them. There is, indeed, a hierarchy of ends in which can be seen an ascending gradation from the least to the most important. We count "the life more than meat, and the body than raiment." And we also recognize that even bodily life itself may be preserved at a price which we should be unwilling to pay.

Now the principle which determines the subordination of one end to another is always that of value. Estimates of value fix for us the place of each element in a system of human ends. And a system of human ends, too, necessarily implies a view of the interests of life as a whole, unified by the idea of value. Whether we consider the material factors

of life such as wealth and bodily well-being, or the more ideal interests of science, art, and religion, or even the accepted principles of right conduct, like truthfulness, justice, and benevolence, each factor will be found to take its place at last in a system of ends according to the estimate of its worth. Here, in the idea of value, the appreciation of good, we have reached the most universal and significant element in conduct, the very nerve of moral thought and action.

The idea of value is, therefore, the basal conception of ethics. No other term, such as duty, law, or right, is final for thought; each logically demands the idea of value as the foundation upon which it finally rests. One may ask, when facing some apparent claim of morality, "Why is this my duty, why must I obey this law, or why regard this course of action as right?" The answer to any of these questions consists in showing that the requirements of duty, law, and right tend in each case to promote human welfare, to yield what men do actually find to be of value. If, as we here maintain, the idea of value occupies the primary position in moral thought and action, the definition of ethics should be constructed around this idea as a center. The task of science in any field may be described as the attempted unification of knowledge within that field. By the aid of a central concept science seeks to organize all its observed facts into a harmonious system. In accordance with this view of science, ethics attempts to unify the facts of conduct by means of the idea of value.

If a more formal definition is desired, it may be said that ethics is the science of values in their relation to the conduct of life as a whole. Ethics might be called the science of comparative values because every moral choice is a selection of a greater or a less value, positive or negative, according to the nature of the choice as good or bad, better or worse. Fearing to impair the absolute authority of morality, thinkers have often been unwilling to recognize the relative char-