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Page 2

ON RIGHT AND WRONG

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ON RIGHT AND WRONG

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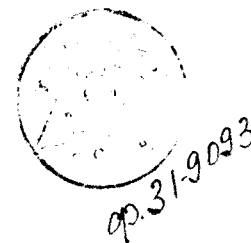
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BY

WILLIAM SAMUEL LILLY

Τοὺς ἄρα πολλὰ καλὰ θεωμένους, αὐτὸ δὲ τὸ καλὸν μὴ ὁρῶντας
μηδ' ἄλλω ἐπ' αὐτοῖς ἀγῶντι δυναμένους ἔπεσθαι, καὶ πολλὰ δίκαια,
αὐτὸ δὲ τὸ δίκαιον μὴ, καὶ πάντα οὕτω, δοξάζειν φήσομεν ἅπαντα,
γινώσκειν δὲ ὧν δοξάζουσιν οὐδέν. Μὴ οὖν τι πλημελήσομεν
φιλόδοξους καλοῦντες αὐτοὺς μᾶλλον ἢ φιλοσόφους, καὶ ἄρα ἡμῖν
σφόδρα χαλεπανοῦσιν, ἂν οὕτω λέγωμεν ;

PLATO.



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1890

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TO THE REV. MANDELL CREIGHTON,

CANON OF WORCESTER,

*Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History
in the University of Cambridge.*

MY DEAR CREIGHTON,

In writing your name here, with your kind permission, I desire not merely to offer you a token—poor and inadequate, as I know full well—of personal regard and esteem. I wish also to avail myself of an opportunity to testify my appreciation of, my gratitude for, your fruitful endeavour to raise the character of historical studies in this country. You have done much to take away the reproach, too long and too justly attaching to English scholarship, for the inadequacy of its methods and for the scantiness of its achievements, in this important field of intellectual activity. And it is a deep satisfaction to me that the chief scene of your labours is in my own University, which is so fortunate as to number you among her adopted sons.

But, to say the truth, there is yet another feeling, besides friendship and gratitude, which has led me to offer you this book. Some years ago you did

me the honour of inviting me to contribute to the organ of higher historical criticism, called into existence by you to supply a grievous want in our periodical literature. It would have been a great gratification to me to associate myself, in however small a way, with your work. It is a cause of much regret to me that I have been able to offer you only one paper for the *English Historical Review*, and that of the nature of a mere personal explanation. The present volume must plead as my excuse. Great as are our national shortcomings in the domain of history, they are assuredly far greater in the domain of moral philosophy. "The oracles are dumb:" or if they speak at all, it is "in words deceiving." "O, psychologie, garde-toi de physiologie!" exclaimed Maine de Biran, more than half a century ago. That is precisely what psychology has quite failed to do, either in his country or in ours. It is a most astonishing, a most disheartening sign of the times, that people are supposed to be entitled to speak with authority upon questions of ontology or ethics, merely because they happen to have attained some degree of eminence in some branch of physical science. They may not have read a single metaphysical text-book. Nay, they may be ignorant of the meaning of the commonest philosophical terms. Or—but that is the accomplishment of

a select few—they may possess "just enough of learning to misquote." No matter. They pose as moral philosophers, upon the strength of their achievements in cerebral mensuration or in the dynamics of matter. And their pretensions are allowed, not only by ignorant and foolish "general readers," whose suffrages largely determine public opinion, but even by accredited and authoritative teachers, whose office it is specially to represent the claims, and to guard the rights of moral philosophy. The consequences have been unspeakably disastrous, both in speculation and in practice. I remember the late M. Caro once remarked to me, "La morale de nos jours, c'est une morale de commis-voyageur." This witness is true.

In such a condition of things, it appeared to me a duty to do what little I could to vindicate the true method in ethics. There is only one true method. In the following pages, I have endeavoured to exhibit it, and to point out some of its more important practical applications. It has been well observed by the illustrious Trendelenburg: "Es ist eine alte und immer junge Aufgabe, welche zu keiner Zeit in der Wissenschaft ruhen darf, die Grundlagen, auf welchen Sitte und Recht stehen, von welchen Werth und Unwerth des Lebens abhängen, aus dem Schwanken der Meinungen und Strebungen in eine festere Lage zu bringen."

Such is the task to which I have sought to make my humble contribution in this book. But, unlike Trendelenburg in his *Naturrecht auf dem Grunde der Ethik*, I am not writing for readers trained in philosophy. Such a class of readers can hardly be said to exist in England. My object has been to present a practical treatment of a practical subject, to intelligent and thoughtful men of the world. Hence I have sought to say what I had to say as concisely as might be. I have also endeavoured to avoid, as far as possible, technical expressions, and modes of thought not likely to be familiar save to philosophical students. I am well aware that my pages have thereby lost in precision, and, consequently, in value to scholars like yourself. I feel confident, however, that you will pardon that defect, if—which I earnestly hope—my treatment of my subject commends itself to you, as likely to promote a more intelligent appreciation, generally, of topics involving the moral life and death of men and of nations.

But instead of the letter which I proposed to write when I sat down, I am inflicting upon you a dissertation. “Verbum non amplius addam.”

I am, my dear Creighton,

Very truly yours,

W. S. LILLY.

ATHENÆUM CLUB.

March 25th, 1890.

SUMMARY.

CHAPTER I.

THE CRISIS OF ETHICS.

	PAGE
The idea of Right has hitherto been venerated by mankind at large, as supersensuous, absolute, divine. Rights have been held to rest upon an ethical sanction, and that upon noumenal truth	1
In the present day the principles upon which the concepts of Right and Wrong have been based, are more than questioned, and the old ethical doctrines are falling into discredit. We are living in a moral crisis	4
Which must be attributed to the advance of Materialism in the general mind	7
There are many varieties of Materialism: for example the late Professor Clifford, Professor Huxley, and Mr. Herbert Spencer, represent three different types	8
But all agree in restricting our knowledge to the phenomenal universe, of which consciousness and will are for them fortuitous or necessary products: they teach that the laws of thought are, in the last resort, only sensations, or induced tendencies of the nervous system; they express the entire man by matter: his intellectual and moral being as well as his corporal frame	14