

**THE MEANING OF
GOOD; A
DIALOGUE**

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The meaning of good; a dialogue by G. Lowes Dickinson

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G. LOWES DICKINSON

**THE MEANING OF
GOOD; A
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THE MEANING OF GOOD

THE MEANING OF GOOD & A DIALOGUE

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DEDICATION

How do the waves along the level shore
Follow and fly in hurrying sheets of foam,
For ever doing what they did before,
For ever climbing what is never clomb!
Is there an end to their perpetual haste,
Their iterated round of low and high,
Or is it one monotonous of waste
Under the vision of the vacant sky?
And thou, who on the ocean of thy days
Dost like a swimmer patiently contend,
And though thou steerest with a shoreward gaze
Misdoubtest of a harbour or an end,
What would the threat, or what the promise be,
Could I but read the riddle of the sea!

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PREFACE

AN attempt at Philosophic Dialogue may seem to demand a word of explanation, if not of apology. For, it may be said, the Dialogue is a literary form not only exceedingly difficult to handle, but, in its application to philosophy, discredited by a long series of failures. I am not indifferent to this warning; yet I cannot but think that I have chosen the form best suited to my purpose. For, in the first place, the problems I have undertaken to discuss have an interest not only philosophic but practical; and I was ambitious to treat them in a way which might perhaps appeal to some readers who are not professed students of philosophy. And, secondly, my subject is one which belongs to the sphere of right opinion and perception, rather than to that of logic and demonstration; and seems therefore to be properly approached in the tentative spirit favoured by the Dialogue form. On such topics most men, I think, will feel that it is in conversation that they get their best lights; and Dialogue is merely an attempt to reproduce in literary form this natural genesis of opinion. Lastly, my own attitude in

approaching the issues with which I have dealt was, I found, so little dogmatic, so sincerely speculative, that I should have felt myself hampered by the form of a treatise. I was more desirous to set forth various points of view than finally to repudiate or endorse them ; and though I have taken occasion to suggest certain opinions of my own, I have endeavoured to do so in the way which should be least imprisoning to my own thought, and least provocative of the reader's antagonism. It has been my object, to borrow a phrase of Renan, 'de présenter des séries d'idées se développant selon un ordre logique, et non d'inculquer une opinion ou de prêcher un système déterminé.' And I may add, with him, 'Moins que jamais je me sens l'audace de parler doctrinalement en pareille matière.'

In conclusion, there is one defect which is, I think, inherent in the Dialogue form, even if it were treated with far greater skill than any to which I can pretend. The connection of the various phases of the discussion can hardly be as clearly marked as it would be in a formal treatise ; and in the midst of digressions and interruptions, such as are natural in conversation, the main thread of the reasoning may sometimes be lost. I have therefore appended a brief summary of the argument, set forth in its logical connections.

ARGUMENT

BOOK I.

I. After a brief introduction, the discussion starts with a consideration of the diversity of men's ideas about Good, a diversity which suggests *primâ facie* a scepticism as to the truth of any of these ideas. 1-6

The sceptical position is stated ; and, in answer, an attempt is made to show that the position is one which is not really accepted by thinking men. For such men, it is maintained, regulate their lives by their ideas about Good, and thus by implication admit their belief in these ideas. 6-19

This is admitted ; but the further objection is made, that for the regulation of life it is only necessary for a man to admit a Good for himself, without admitting also a General Good or Good of all. It is suggested, in reply, that the conduct of thinking men commonly does imply a belief in a General Good. 19-26

Against this it is urged that the belief implied is not in a Good of all, but merely in the mutual compatibility of the Goods of individuals ; so that each whilst pursuing exclusively his own Good,

may also believe that he is contributing to that of others. In reply, it is suggested (1) that such a belief is not borne out by fact; (2) that the belief does itself admit a Good common to all, namely, society and its institutions. PAGES
26-28

In conclusion, it is urged that to disbelieve in a General Good is to empty life of what constitutes, for most thinking men, its main value. 29-32

II. The position has now been taken up (1) that men who reflect do, whatever may be their theoretical opinion, imply, in their actual conduct, a belief in their ideas about Good, (2) but that there seems to be no certainty that such ideas are true. This latter proposition is distasteful to some of the party, who endeavour to maintain that there really is no uncertainty as to what is good.

Thus it is argued :

(1) That the criterion of Good is a simple infallible instinct. To which it is replied that there appear to be many such 'instincts' conflicting among themselves. 32-38

(2) That the criterion of Good is the course of Nature; Good being defined as the end to which Nature is tending. To which it is replied that such a judgment is as *a priori* and unbased as any other, and as much open to dispute. 38-47

It is then urged that if we reject the proposed criterion, we can have no scientific basis for Ethics; which leads to a brief discussion of the nature of Science, and the applicability of its methods to Ethics. 47-51