

**ON THE PHILOSOPHY
OF ETHICS: AN
ANALYTICAL ESSAY**

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On the Philosophy of Ethics: An Analytical Essay by Simon S. Laurie

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ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF ETHICS

AN ANALYTICAL ESSAY

BY

SIMON S. LAURIE,

AUTHOR OF 'FUNDAMENTAL DOCTRINE OF LATIN SYNTAX, BEING AN
APPLICATION OF PSYCHOLOGY TO LANGUAGE.'

EDINBURGH

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1866.

INTRODUCTION.

THAT a man *ought* to will and do the right, the good, the approvable, the virtuous act, is the common starting-point of all writers on the principles of morality. The question round which discussion has mainly turned is, How shall a man know that the act presumed to be right, good, and virtuous, is really so? What test or touchstone shall be applied to the willing and acting of men whereby the rightness or wrongness, the goodness or badness, of a motive or act shall be revealed? In other words, 'What is the measure or criterion of acts or states of the will in respect of rightness?' This mode of putting the question is, it seems to me, preferable to the more usual phrase, 'What is the Criterion of morality,' because the word 'morality' is of varying and indefinite signification, and may be so used as to confound, if not sometimes to beg, the question at issue: at the same time, as it is legitimate to substitute the word 'acts,' in its larger and proper meaning, for 'states of the will,' the question may be also put thus:

'What is the criterion of rightness in acts?'

That the question is an important one in its psychological relations, no less than in its practical bearing on human life and duty, is evident from the interest attached to the discussion of it from a remote past till now.

It involves prior questions as to the nature and circumstances of the being whose acts we desire to test. It presumes that we already have a psychology, if not completed, at least approximately correct in all essential respects. And not only so: it also presumes a general consent on anthropology; for we cannot afford to omit from our argument the physical relations, ethnological influences, and outward history of the race. With these *data* we may approach the specific moral question. The answer to it will of necessity react on our presumed anthropology, not merely completing it, but giving it a fresh significance by shedding light on its phenomena. An anthropology (which term is used as comprehending psychology) happily exists ready to our hand, not certainly completed in the scientific sense, even as regards those phenomena which lie outside the moral sphere, but adequate to our purpose, because furnishing a classification of the phenomena of receptivity and activity, which, as a popular statement, obtains the general assent.

That man feels, knows, and wills; that with the knowing, the feeling, and the willing, there are associated phenomena of consciousness, which we designate as pleasure and pain; that pleasure and pain belong

to the active as well as to the receptive feelings ; that these feelings may be fairly viewed under the various denominations—physical, appetitive, social, æsthetic, moral, and religious ; that by ‘moral’ feelings are designated certain internal phenomena which arise in consciousness, in association with the doing of the just, the right, the benevolent, and the beautiful act ; that by ‘religious’ feelings are designated those internal phenomena which arise when the individual contemplates the idea of God, and his own relations to Him. These statements regarding the nature of man receive the general assent, and thus we are enabled to enter on the question of the ‘Criterion of a man’s acts’ without waiting for a complete analysis of his nature ; nay, such an analysis is seen to be impossible until this question as to the principles of morality has itself been considered. The ultimate nature, the genesis, the simplicity or complexity of the phenomena, which have been enumerated, are subjects of separate inquiry, coming, it is true, within the proper sphere of a treatise on morals, but not obstructing the discussion of the introductory question as to the test, measure, or criterion of the right or wrong in acts or states of will.

There are substantially only two answers attempted to the primary question in morals, though both have been presented in forms modified by the idiosyncrasy of their expounders, or the circumstances of the times in which they were promulgated.

(1.) That the only criterion of acts is their tendency to promote the happiness or well-being of mankind, is the thesis of one school of thought.¹ This thesis by implication seems to affirm that the character of an act can be known, and the criterion applied, only by following the act into its consequences, immediate and remote, on all mankind whom it can possibly affect. The extreme form of this theory is aptly called Utilitarianism. In its extreme form, however, it misrepresents itself. Its position seems to me to be adequately stated by John Austin as follows :—

‘Inasmuch as the goodness of God is boundless and impartial, He designs the greatest happiness of all His sentient creatures ; He wills that the aggregate of their enjoyments shall find no nearer limit than that which is inevitably set to it by their finite and imperfect nature. From the probable effects of our actions on the greatest happiness of all, or from the tendencies of human actions to increase or diminish that aggregate, we may infer the laws which He has given, but has not expressed or revealed.

‘Now the tendency of a human action (as its tendency is thus understood) is the whole of its tendency ; the sum of its probable consequences in so far as they are important or material ; the sum of its remote and collateral as well as of its direct consequences, in so far as any of its consequences may

¹ Although Utilitarianism and ancient Epicureanism have a substantial basis of resemblance, they are not to be confounded.