

THE THEORY OF ABSTRACT ETHICS

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The Theory of Abstract Ethics by Thomas Whittaker

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THOMAS WHITTAKER

Author of The Neo-Platonists

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PREFACE

THE present work is the result of long reflections, but was actually called forth by Professor Juvalta's *Old and New Problem of Morality*, to which my attention was drawn by Mr Benn's review in *Mind* (January, 1915). The instantaneous impression made by the review, in spite of the reviewer's disagreement with the author, was, "This is the doctrine of which I was in search." Though "awakened from dogmatic slumber" by Renouvier (*Mind* and the *Critique Philosophique*, 1887), I had for long continued the attempt to derive the ethical law of justice from "ends" or "goods." This is of course the tradition of English ethics; and my own resistance to Renouvier's Kantianism was only one expression of the effort of English thought to avoid the "*a priori*." The *a priori*, however, in some sense, cannot be avoided. English Experientialism, largely justified though it was and is, must inevitably be modified in the end by the Continental Rationalism that found its most powerful expression in Kant.

On this, I am glad to find myself in agreement with Mr Bertrand Russell, whose case is, I think, similar to my own. That is to say, he has been brought to this position, not by the desire to find support, denied by English philosophy in its unofficial tradition, for extra-philosophical convictions, but by the force of intellectual

necessity. Still, having arrived at a modified view, we must "follow the argument"; and, if a metaphysical doctrine emerges that is more in harmony with the moral aspirations of mankind, we must not refuse to consider it out of a kind of willed austerity. There is, I think, something of this in Mr Russell. For my own part, whether on one side or the other, I decline to accept any limitations but those of necessity. As I refuse to decide for a doctrine simply on the ground that it is good for us to believe it, so also I refuse to bar out the consideration of it simply on the ground that we cannot arrive at scientific certainty.

The acceptance of an element of *a priori* law in ethics has at the present time a very distinct practical bearing. If by reflective thought, without reference to ends egoistic or altruistic, we recognise in ourselves and others rights which it is ethically wrong that any force should suppress, then, even in the hour of a defeat supposed final in the universe, the idea of right would still affirm itself: "Victrix causa deis placuit, sed victa Catoni." In the words with which Juvalta closes his treatise: *Liberum esse hominem est necesse; vivere non est necesse*. This once recognised, we have an ethical doctrine that enables us to judge of political systems. For the moralist, States no longer present themselves as mere competitive organisms the value of which is perhaps to be determined by their survival in evolution. It is not to be denied that the judgment of the moralist may help to determine which shall survive and which shall perish, or that the result of historical evolution may ultimately coincide with the moral judgment of mankind. This, however, does not affect the moral question itself. Even ultimately

successful iniquity would none the less be iniquity. If we hold that wrong will not finally triumph, that belief springs from a metaphysical conviction subsequent to our ethical position, and on which this did not depend and can never come to depend for its ethical validity.

"The primary and fundamental values of every moral system," to adopt Mr Benn's statement of Professor Juvalta's general position, are "Liberty and Justice." These, I have always held, furnish the link between ethics and politics. The only change of attitude I have to indicate here is the definite recognition in them of an ethically *a priori* element. From this point of view, I am not in the least moved to scepticism by Mr Benn's objection that "there are great systems of morality in which neither liberty nor justice, as we understand them, find a place. They might be sought for in vain in a recent manifesto signed by the representatives of German art, intellect and religion¹." The reply may very well be, in the words of Heraclitus, "One is ten thousand to me, if he be the best." Kant outweighs them all; and we know what his judgment would have been. The appeal is not to general consent, but to reflective thought. In the light of this, there is no reason why we should call such systems "systems of morality" at all. A code of conduct adapted to promote efficiently the organic life and expansion of an aggregate, but recognising no ultimate ground save a Collective Will, never seemed to me to

¹ After writing this Preface, I heard with regret of the death of Mr Benn (on the 16th of September, 1916). To avoid any misunderstanding, I must add that I do not suppose Mr Benn disagreed with me in personal opinion on the actual question: the difference that I take to be implied concerns the judgment we have the right to pronounce as moral philosophers.

deserve the name of morality in the proper sense. It might easily be the code of a band of robbers. And, as a matter of fact, a criminal State is not a new thing in history. Its punishment also will not be a new thing. Assyria at last became too intolerable for the ancient East, as the Kingdom of Prussia may have become too intolerable for the modern West.

Kant, as will be seen in Chapter VI of the present Essay, has by anticipation discussed the actual case, and has passed a somewhat lenient judgment. Briefly, it amounts to this, that the other nations are entitled to secure themselves henceforth by abolishing the institutions of the military monarchy, but not by destroying the offending State. Whatever may be thought of this judgment, it will not be denied that it is remote enough to be dispassionate.

T. W.

November 1915