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THE ARISTOTELIAN  
SOCIETY. VOL. V**

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NEW SERIES.—VOL. V.

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*Containing the Papers read before the Society during the  
Twenty-Sixth Session, 1904-1905.*

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# PAPERS READ BEFORE THE SOCIETY,

1804-1805.

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## I.—MORAL OBJECTIVITY AND ITS POSTULATES.

*By* HASTINGS RASHDALL.

### I.

A CURIOUS revolution seems of late to have taken place in the attitude of the higher speculative Philosophy towards Morality. There was a time when all idealistic or spiritualistic Philosophy, whatever its attitude towards Religion and Theology, was regarded as the unswerving ally not merely of practical Morality but of what may be called the theoretical claims of the Moral Law. Kant used Morality to build up again, as he thought on firmer foundations, the spiritual structure which the critical Philosophy had speculatively overthrown. The idealistic Philosophers who followed him, amid all divergencies, were agreed in this—that Morality is rational and moral obligation no mere subjective experience of the human mind. Even Hegel, though his attitude towards evil, his thoroughgoing vindication of things as they are—from the Universe at large down to the Prussian Constitution in Church and State—paved the way for moral scepticism, still believed that Religion, as he conceived it, was the ally, the natural complement and crown, of Morality, and he did not quarrel with the Christian teaching about the love and goodness of God. Still more intimate was the association of an enthusiastic belief in the Moral Law with a philosophical Theology in the minds of more or less Hegelian English Idealists like Green. At the present day there are many



indications of a revolt against this attitude of mind. We have Mr. Bradley demonstrating the non-morality of the Absolute and (though it may be in a moment of not too serious petulance) vindicating the existence of human error on the ground of the diversion which the spectacle of it affords to an Absolute who is not human enough to love though he is human enough to be amused. By not a few speculative writers the claim of Morality to be a revelation of the ultimate nature of things is treated with something like contempt, while Religion receives a somewhat patronizing recognition just on account of its alleged superiority to mere Morality, even if our new Idealists do not (like Professor Taylor) actually repudiate the old claim of Morality to be rational and talk of placing it upon a purely psychological foundation—that is to say, in plain words, reducing it to a particular kind of human feeling: while if we turn to an entirely different philosophical quarter, we find Morality wounded in the house of its friends. Professor James, the avowed defender of the position that we may believe whatever we find it edifying to believe, still makes Morality consist merely in feeling. Of writers more decidedly inclining to Naturalism, like Höfding and Simmel, it is of course only to be expected that they should treat Morality as merely a peculiar kind of human feeling of little or no objective or cosmic significance.

In this state of philosophical opinion I trust it will not be unsuitable to attempt, in the sketchy and inadequate way which alone is possible in an hour's address, to discuss these questions—(1) Whether Morality is essentially rational; (2) what we mean by its being rational; (3) what implications this rationality, if accepted, carries with it as to the ultimate nature of things.

## II.

I have not time here to defend the position that the ultimate moral judgment is a judgment of value. Particular judgments

as to what it is right to do are, it seems to me, ultimately judgments as to the means to be adopted with a view to some end that is judged to be essentially good or intrinsically valuable. And if the action is really right, it must tend towards the realization of the greatest good that it is possible for a given individual under given conditions to promote. The idea of value is an ultimate conception or category of human thought. Like other ultimate conceptions, it cannot be defined or explained in a way which shall be intelligible or satisfactory to minds destitute of the idea. "The absolute end," "the end which it is reasonable to pursue," "that which has value," "that which it is right to promote," "that which has intrinsic worth," and "that which we approve," are synonyms for the term "good." The clearness with which he expresses this idea of the unanalysable character of "the good" is one great merit of the late Professor Sidgwick's ethical writings, and that idea has recently received an impressive restatement in Mr. Moore's *Principia Ethica*—all the more valuable on account of Mr. Moore's repudiation of Hedonism; though I can only describe as preposterous Mr. Moore's claim that the idea of an indefinable good was an original discovery of Henry Sidgwick. Certainly it is the last claim he would have made for himself.

How can we prove that the judgment of value is essentially rational, and is not merely a mode of feeling? The task is as difficult as that of meeting the argument of a writer who should contend that the ideas one, two, three are mere feelings. The contention could only be met by a thorough examination of the whole fabric of knowledge; in short, by a refutation of Sensationalism in all its forms from the time of Heraclitus to that of Hume or of Professor James. The best way of meeting the contention in a limited space will be simply to try and make plain what we mean by the assertion that Morality is rational; and this may perhaps best be done by asking what difference it makes whether we regard moral judgments as truly rational, or put them down as mere modes

of feeling, and then going on to remove some of the misconceptions which have prevented the recognition of this truth.

(a) Feeling is essentially a subjective thing. When I say that a doctor's gown is red, and a colour-blind man says that it is green or grey, neither of us is in the wrong. It really is as much a fact that it is green to him as that it is red to me and other normal-sighted persons. If, therefore, the proposition "this is right" means merely this gives certain persons a particular kind of feeling called a feeling of approbation, the same act may be right and wrong at the same time. A bull-fight excites lively feelings of approbation in most Spaniards, and lively feelings of disapprobation in most Englishmen. From the "moral sense" point of view neither of them is in the wrong. True, you may insist with the Moral Sense writers on the specific, *sui generis* character of the idea of moral approbation; but (since Hume) it ought to be evident that the merely specific character of a feeling can be no ground for assigning it a superiority over any other feeling. It may give me a disagreeable twinge of the Moral Sense to tell a lie, but, if I happen to prefer putting up with a feeling of disapprobation to the pains of the rack, no possible reason can be given why I should not follow my own bent and accuse an innocent man to the relief of my own pain. The only kind of objectivity which a Moral Sense theory can give to the ethical judgment is by an appeal to public opinion. You may mean by a bad act an act which causes feelings of disapprobation in the majority. From this point of view it becomes evident that (as Hume explicitly taught\*) acts are not approved because they are moral: they are moral because they are approved. And from this position it must follow that a man who is in advance of public opinion is, *eo ipso*, immoral. Of course constructive Moralists of the Moral Sense School, like Hutcheson, would not accept this conclusion. They really

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\* Cf. Alexander, *Moral Order and Progress*, p. 150 sq.