

**A PHILOSOPHICAL INTRODUCTION  
TO ETHICS: AN ADVOCACY OF THE  
SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLE IN ETHICS  
FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF  
PERSONAL IDEALISM**

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A philosophical introduction to ethics: an advocacy of the spiritual principle in ethics from the point of view of personal idealism by W. R. Boyce Gibson

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# A PHILOSOPHICAL INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS

*AN ADVOCACY OF THE SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLE  
IN ETHICS FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF  
PERSONAL IDEALISM*

BY

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## PREFACE

The series of lectures of which this book is composed was in the first instance delivered as an Inter-Collegiate Course at Westfield College, University of London, during the Michaelmas term, 1903. Apart from an occasional rearrangement of the subject-matter the lectures remain practically in the form in which they were originally given.

My sincerest thanks are due to Prof. G. F. Stout for kindly reading through the proof-sheets and for suggesting some important improvements.

## SYLLABUS

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**SUBJECT:** A Philosophical Introduction to Ethics; an advocacy of the spiritual principle in Ethics from the point of view of Personal Idealism.

**LECTURE I.:** Introduction.

"The Problem of Conduct." Prof. Taylor's rejection of the spiritual principle in Ethics.

**LECTURES II & III.** "The Problem of Conduct" continued. The Scientific and the Philosophic points of view. Prof. Taylor's position in the light of concrete idealism.

**LECTURE IV.** "The Prolegomena."—Green's defence of the spiritual principle in Ethics. Expository statement.

**LECTURES V & VI.** "The Prolegomena" continued. Formal Epistemology and the concrete analysis of experience.

**LECTURE VII.** "The Prolegomena" concluded. Criticism of Green. Self-consciousness. The Eternal Self. The "Otherness" of God.

**LECTURE VIII.** The spiritual principle in Ethics. Constructive Statement. Pragmatism as Concrete Personal Idealism.

**LECTURE IX.** Constructive Statement continued. The true Prolegomena of Moral Philosophy; a philosophical logic and a philosophical psychology.

**LECTURE X.** Constructive Statement concluded. Ethics and Metaphysics. Absolute and Personal Idealism.

## PREFACE TO INTRODUCTION

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Does Ethical Science render superfluous a Philosophy of Morals? No, for the spiritual element in any moral fact, though pre-supposed by Ethical Science, is yet necessarily ignored on methodological grounds. In Moral Philosophy, on the other hand, the spiritual element is duly recognised as the dominating factor in conduct. From the point of view of Personal Idealism it is the individual's own inviolate spiritual experience which is the central fact in Moral Philosophy and in our human philosophy generally.

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## INTRODUCTION

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In the following pages an attempt is made to justify the existence of a Moral Philosophy. Ethical Science, in the opinion of many distinguished writers, renders superfluous any philosophy of Morals. The metaphysically-minded gleaner—so we are bidden believe—who counts on what the inductive reapers in these fields of research can legitimately spare, will find nothing but chaff at his disposal, and had better spare himself the ungrateful labour.

This repudiation of the metaphysician by his inductive colleague is no doubt extremely genuine, nor has the latter as a rule any inkling that like the proverbial dog



in the manger he is warning the former off material he can never utilize himself. Is there any *fact* of morality, argues Mr. Leslie Stephen, outside the scope of a pure science of Ethics, and do not these facts possess in themselves a definite moral significance which is quite independent of whatever ultimate meaning may be attributed to them by metaphysicians. "The great forces which

The Science of Ethics govern human conduct," he eloquently writes, "are the same that they always have been and always will be. The dread of hunger, thirst and

p. 461. cold; the desire to gratify the passions; the love of wife and child or friend; sympathy with the sufferings of our neighbours; resentment of injury inflicted upon ourselves—these and such as these are the great forces which govern mankind. When a moralist tries to assign anything else as an ultimate motive, he is getting beyond the world of realities." These are forceful words, and were the metaphysical moralist really seeking for a substitute that should replace our human fears and loves, our sympathies and resentments by motives more desirable and more potent, his would indeed be a hopeless and superfluous quest. But even though there be nothing else, nothing to add to the list of moral motives, Philosophy has yet, in the same field as Science and upon the same material, its own important task to perform: that namely of strengthening and deepening the import of these same facts by pointing to the spiritual element present in them all, but beyond the self-limited purview of scientific insight. When the fact puts on its invisible cloak, Science detects no difference, and can therefore never suspect that the cloak makes any difference to the fact. A philosophical analysis is needed to prove that the fact in its invisible vesture is a fact transfigured, snatched from the realm of mechanism into that of teleology, and from the outwardness into the inwardness of our individual experience.

It is in truth the supreme function of philosophy to give a worthier meaning to the facts of life by revealing within them the presence of Spirit. It aims primarily at detecting and elaborating certain instruments called Categories, the more potent of which when applied to the interpretation of facts have precisely that transfiguring



influence over them which has just been referred to. To what extent it succeeds in thus enriching the meaning of life, and thereby justifying its suzerain's claim over the science of conduct, must be left for the sequel to disclose.

The term "Spiritual principle" as used in the pages that follow stands primarily for the unifying agency in personal experience, and should in all cases be teleologically understood as an end or ideal which, as expressive of the person's inmost nature, tends to regulate and consolidate the whole developing life. It is that final cause in immediate personal experience which is so constitutive of it that to deny its felt presence is precisely to deny the possibility of such experience. We leave it to the context to elucidate any more specific and derivative meanings with which the term may be invested.

One more point comes within the legitimate scope of this Introduction. The philosophical standpoint adopted has been identified with that of Personal Idealism and this may need a brief word of explanation. Defining Idealism generally as the doctrine which finds the ultimate reality of the universe in spiritual life, and its end in the perfecting thereof, the differentia of Personal Idealism is its insistence that such ultimate reality can be sought or reached in and through our own personal experience, and in no other way. It lays emphatic stress on "the infinite significance and value of the ethical life," and claims, in the words of one of its most distinguished representatives, that "here only in the life of ethical endeavour is the end and secret of the universe to be found." Its view-point is personal, teleological, concrete—concrete in the truest idealist sense, and such is the view-point maintained and developed throughout the present volume.

With regard to the disposition of our argument, we may characterize it as the dialectical attempt to reach a constructive solution through a critical consideration of the various difficulties which the subject-matter naturally offers. This criticism centres round two typical and opposed views concerning the problem of the philosophical idea in Ethics, the views developed in the "Prolegomena to Ethics" and the "Problem of Conduct"

respectively. Of these, the former stands to the constructive sequel rather as a prop, the latter rather as a foil. The argument is thus developed partly through opposition, partly through sympathetic elaboration. I hasten to add that my radical disagreement with Prof. Taylor's main contention in no way diminishes the respect I feel for his work. The "Problem of Conduct" is a book that commands, and will continue to command attention and respect, through the directness and sincerity with which all the most vital issues are faced, the ability with which these issues are handled, and the clear, fresh and interesting way in which they are presented to the reader.\* And it has the additional attraction to the present writer of coming from the pen of an old school-fellow and class-mate.

As regards the attitude taken towards the author of the "Prolegomena," it is essentially that of the Personal towards the Absolute Idealist, an attitude, in the main, of friendly though emphatic difference. What the difference precisely amounts to, will, I hope, be made clear as the argument proceeds.

As it is always well to hear an opponent's case first, I have opened the enquiry by considering Prof. Taylor's unambiguous rejection of the spiritual principle in Ethics.

\* Cf. especially ch. viii., on "Beyond Good and Bad."