

**THE AESTHETIC ELEMENT
IN MORALITY AND ITS
PLACE IN A UTILITARIAN
THEORY OF MORALS**

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The Aesthetic Element in Morality and Its Place in a Utilitarian Theory of Morals by Frank Chapman Sharp

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FRANK CHAPMAN SHARP

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BY

FRANK CHAPMAN SHARP, PH. DR.

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INTRODUCTION.

"The habit of the Greek mind in estimating the value of moral nobleness and elevation of character by their power of gratifying and impressing a spectator," (Sully) has not been confined exclusively to the Hellenic race, or to the few centuries comprised under the term classical antiquity. Even in savage tribes, the military hero, and the wise and good ruler cannot but be the objects of direct respect and admiration, while even in the most matter-of-fact society that modern industrialism has ever succeeded in producing, a simple reference to the to be sure oftentimes fulsome praise of the obituary notice will show that the man of principle is valued for something else besides his mere usefulness as a machine for grinding out happiness. And this is true not only of the moral judgments of every day life, in ethical theory too it will be found that the aesthetic element, far from being a peculiarity of the Greek systems, has played a very important part ever since the paradoxes of Hobbes set earnest men thinking once more about the nature of virtue. The names of Shaftesbury, Schiller and Herbart will at once occur to every reader in this connexion, but they are by no means the only representatives of this type of thought, for the phenomena which they perceived and were therefore able to point out and describe, have served as the real foundation of a very

large number of attempts to vindicate the worth of virtue, although only too often their originators have been but half-conscious of the fact. Just where such theories belong in the history of ethical thought, a brief survey of the field will enable us to discover.

Moral systems may be divided into two great classes, *teleological* (to use a happy term introduced by Prof. Paulsen) and — if we may venture upon another innovation in terminology — *deontological*. The former looks upon all morality as the product of an ideal, the latter as having its essence in the feeling of obligation; the one starts out from the idea of the good, the other from the idea of "ought" or duty; the one is interested before all else in the inquiry as to the worth of the various possible ends of human activity, the other as to the origin and validity of the idea of obligation. Among representatives of the former class, two different sorts of ideals have been proposed, the one by the Utilitarians — the egoistic and the altruistic — who present as the final end of action the happiness of the individual, or of mankind respectively; the other by those who hold up character as the proper end, or as it is sometimes termed self-culture, or self-realization. This is identical with what the Eighteenth Century called *perfection*, but the term is extremely objectionable as substituting for the name of a definite quality, a word which merely signifies the agreement of things in general with any ideal that may have been previously formed of them. Among recent writers this position has been championed by Prof. Paulsen where the ideal in question is presented as recommending itself purely on its own merits, and by the late Thomas Hill Green, who backs it up by metaphysical considerations which give his system a touch of the deontological. Of the second class,

some writers go out from the bare consciousness of obligation, of which type of thought we regard Butler as the purest example. He has been followed by the great body of Scotch thinkers, and all of them, despite any protestations they may make to the contrary, and despite all the ingenuity they may at times employ to conceal the fact from themselves and others, are as thorough-going Nominalists as was ever Duns Scotus or William of Occam. The other sub-species of the genus "moralist" may properly be called the realistic deontologists. They have the keenest perception of the worth — of the "infinite worth" — of virtue, but hold, each in his own way, that its value is inextricably bound up with, or dependent upon the notion of *ought*. In the case of a Kant this view takes form in the position that morality is only definable by means of the idea of obligation; with a Martineau, in the assertion that the fundamental fact of the moral experience is the consciousness of an obligation to prefer certain excellencies of character to any other good.

Of the four schools into which ethical thinkers thus appear to be divided, we have said the second and the last lay special weight upon the worth of character, but the distinctive peculiarity of this position lies not so much in the fact that character is valued as in the *kind of value* attributed to it. For both Butlerism and Utilitarianism take the greatest possible interest in the character of the individual, the former because in it alone can be found the pledge of complete submission to the demands of duty, the latter because it is the source of all he does, and although accidents will happen, and an act sometimes have a result which could not be foreseen, yet after all, in the great majority of cases good intentions result in useful actions.

We do not call a piece of machinery bad and ship it out of the factory because the production it has just turned out chances to be ruined in the next room in finishing it off. Thus it is that in judging a piece of machinery we ask first of all whether it can be relied upon to do good work, and this same principle holds for the Utilitarian estimate of men. But what distinguishes the other view from such a one as this is, that it attributes an *intrinsic* worth to character apart from and independently of its value, either as a sign or a source of something else. In order to complete our general survey of the field of ethical philosophy, it will accordingly be necessary to inquire wherein this worth is held to consist.

At the very outset of such an investigation we find ourselves face to face with the difficulty that an extremely large number of moralists are far from clear as to the true nature of their own position. This makes any such attempt as here proposed almost equivalent to writing a history of ethics. We shall therefore confine ourselves in this place to bare statements, leaving for the body of our treatise the justification of the views here advanced. We remember that the war has always been waged between the Utilitarians and the Intuitionists (the latter a name applied collectively to all who are not the former). Perhaps then we can set about to obtain an answer to our question in no better way than to find out what some well-known combatant of the latter party regards as the distinguishing characteristic of the position he champions, as opposed to that of the other side. Says Mr. Lecky: "It will probably appear to many of my readers that (the) two concessions — that we have the power of recognizing a distinction of kind in our pleasures, and that we have a perception of beauty

in our actions — make the difference between Mr. Mill and intuitive moralists not very much more than verbal." And this is not an isolated statement of some irresponsible individual. It is quoted as here given by one who is without doubt the most eminent living representative of this school, Dr. Martineau, and stamped with the authority of his approval as being a "perfectly reasonable judgment"¹. Now if we are willing to admit that the well-known doctrine of a difference of quality among pleasures is only another product of the aesthetic point of view — a proposition which will be considered at length in another place² — we have here the whole thing in a nutshell. The Utilitarian values character merely as a source of actions useful to society; the Intuitionist on the other hand values it for itself — that is to say, for its beauty. An exhaustive statement of the points at issue between the two schools this cannot quite claim to be, for it omits all mention of the great contests that have been carried on over the idea of obligation, and ignores the fact that for one party — the followers of Butler — this is the beginning, middle, and end of morality. However it may serve as a statement of the fact that when intrinsic worth is attributed to character, the quality affirmed of it is no other than beauty.

How large a number of our readers will be ready to agree with this proposition upon its bare statement we are unable to say. We shall however have frequent occasion to return to it in the following, where we shall not as here confine ourselves to dogmatic statements and where we hope to succeed in throwing some perhaps

¹ See *Types of Ethical Theory* II: 307.

² See below, Chapter IV.