

**THE CONTROL OF IDEALS:  
A CONTRIBUTION TO THE  
STUDY OF ETHICS**

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The Control of Ideals: A Contribution to the Study of Ethics by H. B. Van Wesp

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# THE CONTROL OF IDEALS

*A Contribution to the Study of Ethics*

By H. B. VAN WESEP



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## PREFACE

In the few chapters that follow I have aimed at writing a reconstruction book dealing with first principles and concerned primarily with the matter of war prevention. Just as after an influenza epidemic it is one thing for a nation to regain its health and another thing to prevent future outbreaks, so after a war it is one thing to restore the piping times of peace and another thing to learn by what steps to avoid future conflicts. This book deals with principles of prevention rather than methods of cure.

The only way to outgrow war is through education; and the problem is one not so much of each man educating his neighbour, as of each man educating himself into independence of certain powerful traditions and ideals that apparently make war inevitable. The crux of the situation is the personal problem of changing our attitude toward ideals. The attitude aimed at is expressed in the phrase that "we can afford to laugh a little at our own ideals and hold them no less dear."

The root of modern wars lies in the clash of ideals. Along with numerous scientific inventions and theories, the constructive imagination of man has, during the last few centuries, been throwing off a



mass of conflicting ideals. Our varying dreams of power, acquisition, beauty, culture, liberty, and what not have gained such a terrific hold on us that for them millions gladly lay down their lives.

The remedy is not fewer ideals but the control of ideals. Imagination and its ideals should be subjected to laws much in the same way that Aristotle long ago subjected ideas and the whole realm of reasoning to the laws of logic. A few of these laws, more particularly the fundamental one that dreams are not greater than the dreamer, or in other words that human life is prior to human ideals, I have tried to lay down.

The book falls into two parts: the first section takes up the origin, nature, and function of human ideals; the later chapters develop a theory of the supreme worth of the individual and of human life. This theory does not involve acceptance of any of the recent variants of socialism or anarchy. I have worked ahead on the well-established basis of individualism.

As a contribution to ethics, this book represents an attempt at a fresh approach to some old problems. The aim has been to limit the discussion to fundamental issues connected with the prevention of war. Abstruse and hackneyed terms peculiar to ethics or economics have been avoided, as the book is intended to appeal first of all to the average intelligent reader with no special training in technical terminology.

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The book is not a complete practical ethics nor a metaphysics of ethics. It calls for a further statement on the detailed application of the principles laid down—a task which, however, is outside the scope of this short work.

My thanks are due to Professor R. M. Wenley of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Michigan for his kindness in accepting the time-consuming task of reading the manuscript of one of his former students. I am especially indebted to him for the thorough manner in which this was done, and for his many helpful suggestions and emendations. I also wish to acknowledge my debt to the contagious enthusiasm with which Alieda van Wesep has served as my public in the preparation of this book to which she has contributed numerous valuable hints and ideas. It is impossible, of course, to acknowledge in detail my indebtedness to printed sources, but an exception should be made in the case of the published works of Professor Warner Fite of Princeton, one of the first and foremost expounders of individualism in America.

H. B. VAN WESEP.

New York, April 8, 1920.

