

**RULES FOR LIVING: THE ETHICS
OF SOCIAL COOPERATION.
AN ABRIDGEMENT OF THE
FOUNDATIONS OF MORALITY**

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Rules for Living: The Ethics of Social Cooperation. An Abridgement of the Foundations of
Morality by Henry Hazlitt & Bettina Bien Graves

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HENRY HAZLITT & BETTINA BIEN GRAVES

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*An Abridgment of
The Foundations of Morality*

by Henry Hazlitt

Edited by Bettina Bien Greaves

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BBG



Introduction

“Everything that serves to preserve the social order is moral; everything that is detrimental to it is immoral.”

—LUDWIG VON MISES, *Liberalism*

This book is an abridgment of Henry Hazlitt’s *The Foundations of Morality* (first edition, 1964; second edition, 1972). In his 1963 Preface to that book, Mr. Hazlitt wrote that he believed progress in ethics was no less possible than in other branches of knowledge and thought. He hoped to contribute something to our understanding of ethics and morality by bringing together the teachings of other disciplines, especially economics and jurisprudence.

Hazlitt was an economic journalist of note, the author of the best-selling *Economics in One Lesson* and business columnist for *Newsweek*. Countless editorials and book reviews by him had been published in the *New York Times* and other newspapers. His familiarity with economics led him to reject the thesis of many moral philosophers that the interests of the individual and the interests of society were in opposition. His studies in the field of human action had convinced him that “modern economics had worked out answers to the problems of individual and social value of which most contemporary moral philosophers still seem quite unaware.” Thus, he believed that ethical theory had a great deal to learn from modern economics. Ethical theory could also learn from jurisprudence, especially respecting “the immense importance of acting in strict accordance with established general rules.”

“When the rightly understood interests of the individual are considered in the long run,” Hazlitt wrote, “they are found to be in harmony with and to coincide (almost if not quite to the point of

identity) with the long-run interest of society. And to recognize this," Hazlitt wrote, "leads us to recognize conduciveness to social cooperation as the great criterion of the rightness of action, because voluntary social cooperation is the great means for the attainment not only of our collective but of nearly all our individual ends." This reasoning led Hazlitt to agree with his close friend and mentor, the Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises, quoted above, that the criterion for making moral judgments was simply whether or not it fostered or hindered social cooperation. To Hazlitt, however, the ethical implications of this position called for further elaboration than Mises gave them in his many economic writings. Hence *The Foundations of Morality*.

This abridgment attempts to include the most important themes presented by Hazlitt in *The Foundations of Morality*. It is not intended to supersede the longer work. It is offered to those who are interested in the conclusions derived from exploring the age-old philosophical controversy over morality. Of course readers who wish to pursue these issues further may refer to the longer work.

—BETTINA BIEN GREAVES

Foreword

Any sensible policy position presupposes understanding the reality that the natural and social sciences investigate. It also presupposes value judgments— notions of good and bad, desirable and undesirable, right and wrong. Ethics thus enters not only into private lives but also into public policy. But what is the grounding of ethics?

For many decades, utilitarian ethics has undeservedly had a bad press, not least in libertarian circles. It draws scorn as the mindset of crass, grasping, unprincipled people. It supposedly invites government hyperactivity aimed at maximizing some misconceived aggregate welfare. The critics would instead ground ethics and policy in noble and intuitively obvious principles such as unswerving respect for human dignity and natural human rights.

In this hostile intellectual atmosphere, Henry Hazlitt forthrightly and courageously avows a utilitarian ethics (although he did seek a more attractive label, perhaps cooperatism). Two classical-liberal think tanks, earlier the Institute for Humane Studies and now FEE, also deserve admiration for keeping his book in print. Hazlitt does not scorn human dignity and rights—of course not. But precisely because they are important, those values deserve a solid grounding than mere intuitions reported in noble-sounding language. The inviolability of rights rests, he says, “not . . . on some mystical yet self-evident ‘law of nature’ . . . [but] ultimately (though it will shock many to hear this) on utilitarian considerations.” [p. 112 in this abridgment] Utilitarian philosophers can give reasons, grounded in reality, for respecting cherished values and the standard precepts of morality.

The bare facts of objective reality cannot by themselves provide this grounding. Some fundamental value judgment (or conceivably