

THE LAWS AND LIMITS OF RESPONSIBILITY

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649409600

The Laws and Limits of Responsibility by Edward White

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EDWARD WHITE

**THE LAWS AND
LIMITS OF
RESPONSIBILITY**

THE
LAWS AND LIMITS
OF
RESPONSIBILITY.

THE MERCHANTS' LECTURE FOR JUNE, 1884.

BY

EDWARD WHITE,

Author of "Life in Christ," "The Mystery of Growth," "The
Minor Moralities of Life," and the Merchants' Lectures on
"Certainty in Religion," and "Genesis the
Third, History not Fable."

ELLIOT STOCK, 62, PATERNOSTER ROW.

1884.

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LECTURE I.

A Man is Responsible for the whole extent of his Influence.

"If fire break out, and catch in thorns, so that the stacks of corn, or the standing corn, or the field, be consumed therewith: he that kindled the fire shall surely make restitution."—*Exod.* xxii. 6.

THE three chapters in the book of Exodus following the twentieth consist of detailed applications to actual life of the general principles of the Ten Commandments, specially of the laws of the second table. The rights of property are defended in the twenty-second chapter, and the text above may be considered as the law of fire insurance under the Mosaic dispensation. The destructive consequences of any conflagration, whether caused by incendiarism or through carelessness, are to be remedied and compensated by the liability of the whole estate of him who kindled the flame. This would operate so as to fix an intense and watchful gaze upon every spark of

fire, as an element full of danger to the neighbours, full of danger also to the man who trifled with their property. The law was a constant lesson to the people on vast responsibility for the consequences of their conduct—a commentary on the awful consequences of failing to “love their neighbours as themselves.” God’s law thus showed them that Omnipotence identified itself with every just claim, and would insist on compensation for every wrong inflicted.

This ancient law brings into view for modern men the general doctrine of liability for the consequences of our actions and neglect. It is a doctrine founded on fact—the fact that human action carries with it results of enormous magnitude to our fellow creatures, and therefore involves responsibilities of appalling import. God alone knows all the consequences of our actions; it is but imperfectly that we can apprehend them. This, however, is no reason why we should not try to awaken in ourselves and others an ever-deepening sense of our accountableness, so as to “bring every work into judgment” before the tribunal of conscience, antecedently to its performance.

Nothing is more difficult than to raise in most

men's minds a vivid sense of the wide-spreading results of their own character and conduct. They readily acknowledge the responsibilities of others, but not their own. There is an inveterate tendency to minimize in their own case the importance of the individual, and the effect of his actions. Such persons say of themselves what Peter and Andrew said of the "few small fishes" of Bethsaida,—“What are they among so many? With millions of other agents all around us, most of them no better than we are, what does it signify specially how we behave ourselves, what we say or do, or neglect to do or say?” Men never take so modest a view of their own individuality as when the object is to set forth the insignificance of their own contribution to the “evil that is in the world.” But such calculations are founded on a signal delusion. No numbers can diminish the terrible efficacy of each perverse will that goes with the multitude to do evil. It is a force that is multiplied into all the rest. A man never ceases to bear some remainders of the image of God, of an angel fallen from the sky; and a great nature cannot throw off the necessity of doing actions which mightily affect other beings. The most commonplace sinner has a power of mischief in him which might suffice to

sadden the blessed as they look upon it; for if angels rejoice at one repentance, they must surely sorrow over the spectacle of the ruin caused by many sinners who are "destroying much good."

There are some who, crushed under the weight of such responsibility, find a refuge from care in a desperate philosophy of necessity; or, at least, in the wish that they had been made, like other animals, to be impelled by instinct alone. But what is it that hinders the persuasion that we are so impelled? Is it not the ineradicable sense of free agency of wide compass, under a moral law written on the heart? Strange that the regret over this conscious necessity of constantly choosing between good and evil, and, therefore, over this power of going wrongly, should come chiefly from those who tell us that, in their opinion, we are descended from the animal races. Had we been, as they say, so descended—and had we been the production of a blind and unconscious Nature—surely we should have resembled the animals in the possession of a similar constitution, impelled in all useful directions by imperative instincts which never fail of their purpose, and limited in their action by corresponding restraints. Surely this awful human endowment of free agency in all directions looks as if there were