

# **THE PRINCIPLES OF MORAL SCIENCE**

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The principles of moral science by Walter McDonald

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**WALTER MCDONALD**

**THE PRINCIPLES OF  
MORAL SCIENCE**



THE PRINCIPLES  
OF  
MORAL SCIENCE

An Essay

BY THE  
REV. WALTER McDONALD, D.D.

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## PREFACE.

IN this book I have endeavoured to state, in language as clear and simple as the subject permits, the Principles of Ethics that have been handed down by a tradition of many centuries in the Catholic schools of theology and philosophy.

I shall not be surprised to find the success of the attempt questioned and denied by many, if not most, of those who have spent the best part of their lives in the study of the great Catholic writers on morals. I admit, nay claim, that some important conclusions at which I have arrived differ from those of the ordinary handbooks on Human Acts, Laws, and Conscience, and are not to be found in any published treatise with which I am acquainted. If it were otherwise, I should not have thought of writing or publishing.

Very soon after I began to teach Moral Theology, I noticed a considerable difference between the principles of the science as explained in the treatise on Human Acts, and the less general conclusions reached later on, when dealing with particular virtues. As time advanced this difference seemed to increase rather than diminish, and I resolved to try whether I could not formulate the principles so that, while perfectly reasonable in themselves and breathing the spirit of the School, they might stand the test of being brought into comparison with all the less general, and therefore more easily ascertained, conclusions of moral science. Unless forced by what I deem compelling reasons I have not ventured to advocate a new form of statement: the reader must decide for himself whether the reasons that appeal to me so strongly are as conclusive as I deem them.

Those who have begun the study of moral theology or ethics by reading the treatise on Human Acts, may be disposed to think that the treatise in question, with which all our hand-books commence, was developed and put into its present shape before the special treatises that come later on and deal with particular virtues, such as charity, religion, chastity, or justice; and that these special treatises are practical applications of more general principles previously formulated. The reverse is true. The treatise on Human Acts is a synthesis of conclusions previously deduced when dealing with special virtues. Hence the natural order is to test the more general principles by applying them to the solution of special cases, somewhat as the student of nature tests a law by seeing whether it harmonizes with observed facts or even with previously ascertained less general conclusions. It may be, of course, that these less general conclusions are not true, or that the facts have not been correctly observed, or that the observation has not been sufficiently exhaustive. If, however, you are satisfied that the special conclusions are true, while you cannot make them square with the more general principle or law, nothing remains but to give this principle or law a new shape, so that it may be brought into harmony with the other ascertained results of science.

Now, I have not been induced to write this book by any desire to correct the commonly received teaching on the special virtues. This teaching I consider reasonable, as a rule; and whenever I have expressed a preference for a different view, it will be found, I think, that the opinion so favoured is backed by the weight of considerable authority. The difficulty that I found in the treatise on Human Acts is entirely due, I imagine, to an incorrect, because incomplete, synthesis of these special conclusions; and my aim throughout has been to show how the prin-



ciples as here set forth, and they alone, are true to nature, in the sense that it is only in this form they can be made to square with some important less general conclusions which all regard, or should regard, as reasonable.

As my object has been to explain and defend a definite system of moral science,—that, namely, which has been taught for centuries in the Catholic schools,—I have not thought it advisable to complicate the exposition by minute comparison with the details of other more or less antagonistic systems. Whoever has once got a clear notion and firm grasp of the truth, will not, in my opinion, be easily deceived by error. I have, indeed, considered it useful, with a view to a clearer statement of the Scholastic system, to contrast it with Utilitarianism as explained by Mill, with the evolutionary ethics of Spencer, and with Kant's philosophy of duty. I have not taken the doctrines of these writers at second-hand, and hope I have done them no injustice. Possibly I should have dealt in the same way with the system of Hegel as explained and advocated by recent writers, represented by Professor T. H. Green; but, to tell the truth, I have not found the works of these philosophers at all illuminating.

I feel that to make this treatise complete it would be necessary to add a fourth book,—on the Principles of Specification. I have been working on this part of the question at intervals for several years, and have found it difficult but extremely interesting. It was necessary, first of all, to get a clear notion of the nature of species, in substances and especially in accidents. As qualities, such as sciences and virtues and vices generally, are the most important accidents that call for specification, I found it useful, to say the least, to determine, in the light of modern chemistry, physics, and physiology, the nature of qualities. This enabled me to deduce the

principles of specification ; and I have attempted more than once a scheme or *catalogue raisonné*, in which, by means of diagrams somewhat like genealogical tables, the natural groupings and affinities of the various virtues and vices might be represented. The entire subject is so full of difficulties that I have not yet succeeded in harmonizing all the parts even to my own satisfaction. If, however, this treatise should meet with approbation from those who are competent to judge, I think it may be possible within a short time to complete it by publishing the results of my attempts to formulate a theory and scheme of specification of virtues and vices.

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