

THE DATA OF ETHICS

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The Data of Ethics by Herbert Spencer

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HERBERT SPENCER

**THE DATA
OF ETHICS**

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BY
HERBERT SPENCER.

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PREFACE.

A REFERENCE to the programme of the "System of Synthetic Philosophy," will show that the chapters herewith issued, constitute the first division of the work on the *Principles of Morality*, with which the System ends. As the second and third volumes of the *Principles of Sociology* are as yet unpublished, this instalment of the succeeding work appears out of its place.

I have been led thus to deviate from the order originally set down, by the fear that persistence in conforming to it might result in leaving the final work of the series unexecuted. Hints, repeated of late years with increasing frequency and distinctness, have shown me that health may permanently fail, even if life does not end, before I reach the last part of the task I have marked out for myself. This last part of the task it is, to which I regard all the preceding parts as subsidiary. Written as far back as 1842, my first essay, consisting of letters on *The Proper Sphere of Government*, vaguely indicated what I conceived to be certain general principles of right and wrong in political conduct; and from that time onwards my ultimate purpose, lying behind all proximate purposes, has been that of finding for the principles of right and wrong in conduct at large, a scientific basis. To leave this purpose unfulfilled after making so extensive a preparation for fulfilling it, would be a failure the probability of which I do not like to contemplate; and I am anxious to preclude it, if not wholly, still partially. Hence the step I now take. Though this first division of the work terminating the Synthetic Philosophy, cannot, of course, contain the specific conclusions to be set forth in the entire work; yet it implies them in such wise

that, definitely to formulate them requires nothing beyond logical deduction.

I am the more anxious to indicate in outline, if I cannot complete, this final work, because the establishment of rules of right conduct on a scientific basis is a pressing need. Now that moral injunctions are losing the authority given by their supposed sacred origin, the secularization of morals is becoming imperative. Few things can happen more disastrous than the decay and death of a regulative system no longer fit, before another and fitter regulative system has grown up to replace it. Most of those who reject the current creed, appear to assume that the controlling agency furnished by it may safely be thrown aside, and the vacancy left unfilled by any other controlling agency. Meanwhile, those who defend the current creed allege that in the absence of the guidance it yields, no guidance can exist: divine commandments they think the only possible guides. Thus between these extreme opponents there is a certain community. The one holds that the gap left by disappearance of the code of supernatural ethics, need not be filled by a code of natural ethics; and the other holds that it cannot be so filled. Both contemplate a vacuum, which the one wishes and the other fears. As the change which promises or threatens to bring about this state, desired or dreaded, is rapidly progressing, those who believe that the vacuum can be filled, and that it must be filled, are called on to do something in pursuance of their belief.

To this more special reason I may add a more general reason. Great mischief has been done by the repellent aspect habitually given to moral rule by its expositors; and immense benefits are to be anticipated from presenting moral rule under that attractive aspect which it has when undistorted by superstition and asceticism. If a father, sternly enforcing numerous commands, some needful and some needless, adds to his severe control a behaviour wholly unsympathetic—if his children have to take their

pleasures by stealth, or, when timidly looking up from their play, ever meet a cold glance or more frequently a frown; his government will inevitably be disliked, if not hated; and the aim will be to evade it as much as possible. Contrariwise, a father who, equally firm in maintaining restraints needful for the well-being of his children or the well-being of other persons, not only avoids needless restraints, but, giving his sanction to all legitimate gratifications and providing the means for them, looks on at their gambols with an approving smile, can scarcely fail to gain an influence which, no less efficient for the time being, will also be permanently efficient. The controls of such two fathers symbolize the controls of Morality as it is and Morality as it should be.

Nor does mischief result only from this undue severity of the ethical doctrine bequeathed us by the harsh past. Further mischief results from the impracticability of its ideal. In violent reaction against the utter selfishness of life as carried on in barbarous societies, it has insisted on a life utterly unselfish. But just as the rampant egoism of a brutal militancy, was not to be remedied by attempts at the absolute subjection of the ego in convents and monasteries; so neither is the misconduct of ordinary humanity as now existing, to be remedied by upholding a standard of abnegation beyond human achievement. Rather the effect is to produce a despairing abandonment of all attempts at a higher life. And not only does an effort to achieve the impossible, end in this way, but it simultaneously discredits the possible. By association with rules that cannot be obeyed, rules that can be obeyed lose their authority.

Much adverse comment will, I doubt not, be passed on the theory of right conduct which the following pages shadow forth. Critics of a certain class, far from rejoicing that ethical principles otherwise derived by them, coincide with ethical principles scientifically derived, are offended by the coincidence. Instead of recognizing essential likeness they enlarge on superficial difference. Since the days of perse-

cution, a curious change has taken place in the behaviour of so-called orthodoxy towards so-called heterodoxy. The time was when a heretic, forced by torture to recant, satisfied authority by external conformity: apparent agreement sufficed, however profound continued to be the real disagreement. But now that the heretic can no longer be coerced into professing the ordinary belief, his belief is made to appear as much opposed to the ordinary as possible. Does he diverge from established theological dogma? Then he shall be an atheist; however inadmissible he considers the term. Does he think spiritualistic interpretations of phenomena not valid? Then he shall be classed as a materialist; indignantly though he repudiates the name. And in like manner, what differences exist between natural morality and supernatural morality, it has become the policy to exaggerate into fundamental antagonisms. In pursuance of this policy, there will probably be singled out for reprobation from this volume, doctrines which, taken by themselves, may readily be made to seem utterly wrong. With a view to clearness, I have treated separately some correlative aspects of conduct, drawing conclusions either of which becomes untrue if divorced from the other; and have thus given abundant opportunity for misrepresentation.

The relations of this work to works preceding it in the series, are such as to involve frequent reference. Containing, as it does, the outcome of principles set forth in each of them, I have found it impracticable to dispense with re-statements of those principles. Further, the presentation of them in their relations to different ethical theories, has made it needful, in every case, briefly to remind the reader what they are, and how they are derived. Hence an amount of repetition which to some will probably appear tedious. I do not, however, much regret this almost unavoidable result; for only by varied iteration can alien conceptions be forced on reluctant minds.

June, 1879.

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