

**PRINCIPLES AND
PRACTICE OF MORALITY:
OR, ETHICAL PRINCIPLES
DISCUSSED AND APPLIED**

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Principles and Practice of Morality: Or, Ethical Principles Discussed and Applied by Ezekiel
Gilman Robinson

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BY

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PREFACE.

A NEW text-book on Morals may justly be challenged to prove its right to appear in an already over-crowded community of similar treatises. The only answer that in this case can be given is, that the book has been made for a service which no one of its predecessors could be persuaded to render. It embodies the lectures its author has given to his classes in Ethics, and is, what it purports to be, distinctively a text-book. It touches existing controversies only so far as is necessary for the elucidation or defence of its own positions. The aim has been to condense rather than to expand its discussions, and to diminish rather than to multiply its pages. Numerous references to authors, with foot-notes and statements of controverted points, have been purposely omitted. One of the easy, and one of the useless things in a text-book on morals at the present day, is to accumulate such references and notes. Too many of them distract the student's attention, and often bewilder him. Well-read teachers make little or no use of them; teachers who are not well-read commonly lack the time or inclination to look up the references for their own information. Most of what the author has thought it necessary or desirable to say respecting the various schools of moralists and their methods may be found in the somewhat lengthened Chapter III. of Part II. Division IV. on "The Ultimate Ground of Obligation."

To have anything like a clear understanding of existing ethical controversies, one must know the ethical treatises that have appeared within the last fourteen years.

When Prof. Sidgwick published the first edition of his *Methods of Ethics*, in 1874, — it has been called an “epoch-making book,” — English speaking moralists were grouped under two general classes, known as intuitionists and utilitarians or derivativists. Prof. Sidgwick in criticising these two classes handled a two-edged sword, cutting keenly into “egoistic hedonism,” but turning the sharper edge on “intuitionism.” His own theory he styled “universalistic hedonism.” In 1876, two years after the appearance of the *Methods of Ethics*, Mr. F. H. Bradley published his *Ethical Studies*, consisting of an application of Hegelian principles to ethical questions. In 1878 appeared Herbert Spencer’s *Data of Ethics*, giving the methods and fundamental principles of the Ethics of Evolution. In 1882 Mr. Leslie Stephen, with the same purpose as Mr. Spencer, but seeking it by a different method, published his *Science of Ethics*. In 1883 appeared Prof. T. H. Green’s posthumous but elaborate and able *Prolegomena to Ethics*, giving the Hegelian view of the ethical controversy started by evolutionary ethics. In 1885 appeared Dr. James Martineau’s *Types of Ethical Theory*, 2 vols., on the intuitional side; and the same year was published in this country Pres. Porter’s *Elements of Moral Science*, in a modified way on the utilitarian side. In 1887, *Principles of Morals*, by Prof. Fowler of Oxford, was published (*Introductory chapters* by Profs. Wilson and Fowler had appeared in 1886), maintaining that ethical ideas and principles originated in the progressive expe-

rience of the race and have been historically developed. The treatise is distinctly utilitarian.

Of the various and conflicting theories of these writers, three have been worked out by methods wholly foreign to those of both the older intuitionists and the older utilitarians. (The first, in the order of time, was the Hegelian. This theory while resting all on consciousness, and making man to be a part of nature, and his consciousness a manifestation of the Divine Mind of the universe, finds the standard of right for every individual man in the moral laws recognized in his time and in the community of which he is a part. The second, was the evolutionary, which supposes all moral ideas and moral sentiments to have been naturally evolved out of a pre-intelligent as well as a pre-moral state of the race. The third, which styles itself the "historical method," maintains "that morality is the result of constant growth," "the result of the constant interaction of the primary feelings of our nature."¹ This last-named theory has some noticeable points of affinity, and apparent agreement, with the evolutionary theory.

Evolutional ethics assumes and "historical" ethics implies, that the explanations they give of the process by which moral laws and their sanctions have become known are also explanations of the process by which these have been originated. But grant, if we will, that evolution and historical development have made the race aware of the existence of moral distinctions, this by no means proves that experience has created the distinctions. Neither of these theories accounts for the origin of the feeling of oughtness; neither do they explain the imperativeness with which recognized moral law always

¹ See Prof. Fowler's Preface.

speaks to the human heart. Experience can tell what has been; can help us to conjecture what may be; it can never tell what ought to be. No cautious moralist will be in haste to construct his moral system on any basis yet furnished by natural science. Nor need any one take alarm at the threatened supplanting of "metaphysical ethics" either by "historical ethics" or by the long ago christened but yet unborn "scientific ethics."

In treating of morals, with any semblance of either science or philosophy, we must deal with moral phenomena as we would with any other phenomena that are indubitably real. No theory of their origin has anything to do with their reality, or with the trustworthiness of our explanation of them. The laws of Astronomy have nothing to do with any theory of the origin of our planetary system. If the nebular hypothesis could be demonstrated with mathematical precision to be true, the science of astronomy would remain precisely what it now is. Geology is none the less a science because of uncertainty as to the origin of many of the facts with which it deals. The simple question with both Astronomy and Geology is, can these sciences explain their facts and phenomena, and so explain them as to give us co-ordinated and systemized principles and truths? And precisely so is it with Ethics in dealing with the moral facts and phenomena of man. Can it so explain these as to draw from them a self-consistent system of moral truths and precepts? If it can, it matters little what may be our theory of the origin of the phenomena; whether man came into being by direct creative power, and his knowledge of moral distinctions by intuition, or both were slowly evolved through countless ages out of materials that were neither intelligent nor moral.

But if in attempting to account for the origin of moral phenomena they are robbed of the one characteristic of them all, viz. an imperativeness of command to every human being, it is not so much a science or a philosophy of morals that is given us, as it is a compound of prudential considerations made up of generalizations from natural science, partly scientific and partly metaphysical.

The value of a historical method, in the true sense of the terms, in a science or a philosophy of morals, can hardly be over-estimated. Like every other science or department of philosophy, that of morals can be best understood only through a knowledge of its history. This history is interwoven with the whole general history of philosophy, — indeed, with the history of mankind. Special histories of ethical systems also abound.¹

But it should not be forgotten that there can be no strict science of morals in the same sense of the word science as there can be a science of physiology, or even of psychology. Strict science fulfils its whole task in simply telling what is. A full account of morals must not only tell what is, which is all that science

¹ Of these it will suffice to mention Mackintosh's well-known *Dissertation on the Progress of Ethical Philosophy*; The latter half of Prof. Bain's *Mental and Moral Science*; Prof. Sidgwick's very condensed *Outlines of the History of Ethics*; and in contrast, Maurice's very diffuse and undigested *Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy*; Prof. Courtney devotes Part 2d of his *Constructive Ethics* to a historical survey and criticism of German and English moralists. On Ethics in England, may be mentioned Whewell's *Lectures*; Prof. S. S. Laurie's *Notes, Expository and Critical*; Wilson and Fowler's *Principles of Morals*, Part I. "Introductory Chapters," with a pronounced utilitarian bias. In addition to these special histories may be mentioned histories of Philosophy, specially, for Grecian ethics, Zeller's *Greek Philosophers*, Prof. Jowett's translation of *Plato's Dialogues* and Sir A. Grant's *Ethics of Aristotle*. Many side-lights to the history of Ethics are also furnished in the history of Christianity and of Christian doctrines, and in certain special histories, such as Lecky's *History of Rationalism* and *History of European Morals*, and Leslie Stephen's *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*.