

FRAGMENTS ON ETHICAL SUBJECTS

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GEORGE GROTE

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INTRODUCTION.

WHEN Mr. Grote's vast collection of MSS. came to be thoroughly examined, there were discovered several Essays in Ethics, which appeared to be sufficiently consecutive and complete to be given to the world.

The work on Plato afforded him opportunities for discussing various points of Ethical theory; and he turned these opportunities to good account: but in none of his published writings had he treated systematically of the questions relating to Morals, in the form that they usually assume in the treatises of modern writers.

Ethical Philosophy formed, all through life, one of his chief lines of study. He had followed its development, both as to its theoretical foundations and as to its practical or preceptive details, in ancient and in modern times. His own views may possibly have been shaped by his early contact with James Mill; but they were matured by his

own independent meditations. Mr. Grote belonged to the Utilitarian school; and in the statement of the doctrines, as well as in the arguments used, there is much that is common to all its disciples; yet his superior erudition, together with his great powers both as a reasoner and as a writer, impart a welcome freshness to his handling of the subject in these papers.

The first Essay—On the Origin and Nature of Ethical Sentiment—raises the Psychological question of Ethics, the mental foundations of the sentiment of right and wrong. After giving the elements that enter into the sentiment, he defines it generally as a sentiment of regulated social reciprocity, as between the agent and the society wherein he lives. This is the *Form*, which it presents in every grade of its development. There are also in the *Matter*, some points of capital uniformity, which he enumerates; but account has also to be taken of the original and inherent diversities between one age or country and another. He urges strongly the bearing of this fact on the theory of an Instinctive Moral Sentiment; and meets the objection, urged against the derivation theory, that it tends to weaken the authority of the ethical motive.

The second Essay—Philosophy of Morals—is a short discussion of the Moral Standard. The author takes his ground upon the juridical view of Morality, brought into prominence by Bentham and Austin, and illustrates it with great force. He enquires into the meaning of the “supremacy of conscience,” and connects it, under all its disguises, with a reference to external authority. He urges the essential *reciprocity* of obligation and right, and criticises Kant’s theory of the moral feelings.

The third Essay—Ancient Systems of Moral Philosophy—goes no farther than to advert to the defectiveness of the ancient systems in making their starting-point the *summum bonum*, or the happiness of the individual. The real end of morality being, not to make the individual happy, but to protect one man from another man, the theory of the *summum bonum* had to be stretched and interpreted to contain a reference to the welfare of others. The author shews that the adherence to this starting-point was the cause of much of the perplexity and confusion of ideas that we find in the ancient moralists; not even excepting Aristotle himself.

The fourth Essay—Idea of Ethical Philosophy—is the fullest in its handling of the several topics

brought forward. The author repeats the social bearings of Obligation, viewing society as the immediate source of the ethical sanction; but indicates that there is a farther enquiry—on what does Society itself proceed in framing its enactments? and this conducts to the question of how far utility or happiness is the ultimate end.

The second part of the Essay is occupied with tracing at some length the growth of ethical ideas in the child; while, in the third part, the author goes fully into the nature and meanings of Moral Approbation and Moral Disapprobation.

The two concluding Essays, had they been discovered in time, would have been included in the 'Aristotle.' They are the fruit of long and laborious study, and, so far as they extend, embody the writer's matured views upon the Ethics and the Politics: the two treatises whose omission from his published exposition of the Aristotelian philosophy has been most regretted.

The fifth Essay—On the Ethics of Aristotle—falls naturally into two divisions: the first treats of Happiness; the second of what, according to Aristotle, is the chief ingredient of Happiness, namely, Virtue. On Aristotle's own conception of

Happiness, Mr. Grote dwells very minutely; turning it over on all sides, and looking at it from every point of view. While fully acknowledging its merits, he gives also the full measure of its defects. His criticisms on this head are in the author's best style, and are no less important as regards Ethical discussion than as a commentary on Aristotle.

His handling of Aristotle's doctrine of Virtue is equally subtle and instructive. Particularly striking are the remarks on the *Voluntary* and the *Involuntary*, and on *προαίρεσις*, or *deliberate preference*. The treatment of the Virtues in detail is, unhappily, more fragmentary; but what he does say regarding Justice and Equity has a permanent interest.

The concluding Essay—The Politics of Aristotle—must be studied in connection with the preceding. Although but a brief sketch, it is remarkable for the insight which it affords us into the most consummate political Ideal of the ancient world.

A. B.

