

**A REVIEW OF ARISTOTLE'S SYSTEM  
OF ETHICS: A PRELECTION READ  
BEFORE THE VICE-CHANCELLOR,  
AND COUNCIL OF THE SENATE,  
FEB. 16, 1867**

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**E. M. COPE**

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A PRELECTION

READ BEFORE THE VICE-CHANCELLOR,  
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FEB. 16, 1867.

BY

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TO

THE REV. WILLIAM HEPWORTH THOMPSON,

MASTER OF TRINITY COLLEGE,

THIS PRELECTION

IS RESPECTFULLY AND AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED,

BY ONE WHO ASPIRED TO SUCCEED

TO THE VACANT CHAIR

WHICH HE HAD SO WORTHILY OCCUPIED.

## ADVERTISEMENT.

THE following Essay is a Prelection delivered in accordance with the requirements of the University Statute by the author as a Candidate for the vacant office of Regius Professor of Greek.

It is printed exactly as it was read, with the exception of one very trifling addition, though it certainly requires many more to make it in any degree complete. But it was thought that it would not be fair to the other candidates to make it assume a more favourable aspect when published, than it presented when actually delivered before the Electors, who had to decide upon their comparative qualifications.

Allowance must be made on this score for omissions, many of which are due solely to the necessity of reducing its length within certain prescribed limits, an hour only being allowed for the recitation. Such as it is, it was found too long to be delivered in the time allowed, and only about two-thirds of it were actually recited. Of all else I accept the responsibility.

E. M. COPE.

TRIN. COLL. March 11.

THE object that I have proposed to myself in this Essay is to take a review of Aristotle's Ethical system, for the purpose, first of examining and describing its most salient points, its peculiar and distinctive features, and secondly of comparing these with other and especially the Stoic and modern views on some moral questions. The time is short, and the subject long, even when reduced within these limits. Many things must be omitted which would properly find a place in such a review: many others hastily and briefly sketched which ought to be treated in detail: and questions raised and suggested rather than argued and definitively settled. A review of the leading and peculiar features of Aristotle's Ethical system would have been appropriately introduced by some notices of what his predecessors had effected in the same line of research; a few words should have been bestowed upon the earliest abortive attempts at moral speculation, as they appeared in the mathematical and numerical philosophy of the Pythagoreans; upon Socrates, the real founder of moral philosophy who, to use the words of Cicero, "first called down philosophy from the skies,"—where she had been wandering, lost in the overwhelming problems of cosmical speculations—"and planted her in cities, and led her even into men's houses, and forced her to inquire into life and manners and into things good



and evil"—who first, that is, commenced the study of human relations, of social and moral problems: attention might have been usefully recalled to the services which Socrates rendered to systematic and scientific reasoning by the suggestion of the only true philosophical method, the first conscious application of inductive reasoning in the formation of general conceptions; as was first pointed out by Aristotle and enforced by Schleiermacher in his once famous essay on the worth of Socrates as a philosopher<sup>1</sup>—a true and genuine service which has been of late somewhat obscured by the ingenuity of Mr Grote, in his eagerness to exhibit him as a Sophist and a dialectician: three of his disciples might have claimed a brief notice, Aristippus and Antisthenes and Plato: and it would have been interesting to trace the changes of opinion of the last of these three, more especially on the nature of virtue and the means of imparting it, through the vacillations of his earlier dialogues, till in his mature years his views became finally and definitely fixed, as represented in the Republic and Laws—all this and more,

*spatis exclusus iniquis*

*Prætereo, atque aliis post commemoranda relinquo.*

and I must pass on at once to the examination of Aristotle's own system.

The first question that occurs to us to ask on the subject is, to which of the two great schools of Moralists does Aristotle belong. Is he one of those who would regulate human action, I am quoting from Dr. Whewell, Lect. on Hist. of Mor. Phil., Introd., by an internal principle or relation, as Conscience, or a Moral Faculty, or Duty, or Rectitude or the superiority of Reason to Desire (the last is meant for Plato); or on the other hand does he side with those who estimate actions by their consequences, who assert some external object as happiness or pleasure or utility or the greatest happiness of the greatest number to be the true

<sup>1</sup> Translated by Dr. Thirlwall in the second volume of the Philological Museum, p. 538.

end of human action? These two schemes may be described respectively as Independent, and Dependent or Utilitarian Morality. The one makes the rule of right depend upon or look to something external and objective, something to be sought, to aim at (like a σκοπός or mark, as Aristotle has it), instead of regarding it as proceeding from an *internal* principle, which looks to nothing beyond itself, which tells us to do what is right because it *is* right, and for no other reason, and is thus *independent* of all external objects and motives. To this cardinal distinction I shall frequently have to recur. We shall be better able to answer this question when we have examined some of his leading doctrines; meanwhile we may decide at once that a Moralist who pronounces happiness, however understood, to be the sole end and the prevailing motive of all human action, must belong to that school which looks to consequences or utility, in some form or other, as the moral standard. Of those internal principles or relations spoken of by Dr. Whewell as characteristic of the Independent Morality, Conscience is certainly not recognised in Aristotle's system. The *προαίρεσις*, which is distinctive of all moral action is certainly not Conscience. It is something more and something less. It is a combination of *ἄρεξις* the impulsive principle, the only origin in us or motive of action, (de Anima III. 10.)—we have no single word to express it. Sir W. Hamilton calls it the Conative faculty—and an intellectual element, *διάνοια*. A concise definition of it is given in de Mot. Anim. c. 6. *ἡ προαίρεσις κοινὸν διανοίας καὶ ἀρέξεως, ὥστε κινεῖ πρῶτον* (the ultimate, original, mover) *τὸ ἀρεκτὸν καὶ τὸ διανοητὸν, οὐ πᾶν δὲ τὸ διανοητὸν ἀλλὰ τὸ τῶν πρακτῶν τέλος.* The *προαίρεσις* is therefore confined to, as it is characteristic of, moral action, of which it is the primary stimulant or impelling cause in *the human subject*: the ultimate cause of motion is the *object*, *τὸ ἀρεκτὸν καὶ τὸ διανοητὸν*, agreeably to the Aristotelian principle that the ultimate cause of motion in general must be itself at rest. This will throw some light upon the question how far the Aris-

totelian psychology recognises the free will, and how far *προαίρεσις* is identifiable with it. But it is plain at all events that this is not Conscience: Conscience does not deliberate: and it is rather in the nature of a guide and director, and acts as a check, quite as much or more than as an impelling cause, of action—some external stimulant or motive, as Aristotle says, excites the desire; Conscience either as an innate principle, or as a habit acquired by observation or education, *dictates a course of action*. The office of conscience is well enough described in Pope's hymn,

What conscience dictates to be done  
Or warns us not to do  
This teach me more than hell to shun  
That more than heaven pursue.

Butler calls Conscience, Reflexion; but this is plainly a mistake. If Conscience were nothing but Reflexion, which is merely Aristotle's preparatory *βούλευσις*, it would certainly not have the supreme and predominating authority over the rest of the elements of our constitution that he ascribes to it. It must at the very least have a power of decision and determination as well. Nor again is a Moral Faculty recognised, at least in the sense intended—*φρόνησις*, the practical wisdom which determines the standard of moral action, points out to us the distinction between good and evil, and enables us to discern the means to the right end, (Eth. Nic. Bk. VI.) comes perhaps nearest to it; of Duty we shall have to speak hereafter, it is *not* explicitly acknowledged as a principle of action, though this is often incidentally implied: if Rectitude means what is right in itself, and needs nothing else to make it so, this does appear in the shape of *τὸ καλόν*, but only once or twice and that in contradiction to the leading principle, that the universal *τέλος* is happiness—of this also hereafter—and lastly, the superiority of Reason to Desire, as a moral principle, is Plato's doctrine and not Aristotle's: though of course as a *fact* Aristotle would not have denied it.