

**WHAT OUGHT I TO DO? AN  
INQUIRY INTO THE NATURE AND  
KINDS OF VIRTUE: AND INTO THE  
SANCTIONS, AIMS, AND VALUES  
OF THE MORAL LIFE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649732920

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Cover @ 2017

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VALUES OF THE MORAL LIFE

BY  
GEORGE TRUMBULL LADD, LL.D.

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10/11/16

LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.  
FOURTH AVENUE & 36TH STREET, NEW YORK  
LONDON, BOMBAY, CALCUTTA AND MADRAS  
1915

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## PREFACE

THE question, What can I know? differs most conspicuously from the one which it is now proposed to consider, in respect of the point of view from which the latter must be surveyed and the nature of its answer determined. This difference is plainly expressed, or at least irresistibly suggested, by the very terms in which the two questions must be couched before they can be laid side by side for purposes of comparison. It is not, however, the difference between **Knowing** and **Doing**, great as this at first blush appears to be. **Knowing** is itself a species of doing; and there is little or no high-class conscious doing which does not incorporate into the very body of the activity — be it one of a rather low-class muscular sort, so far as external appearances go — a large element of accompanying cognitive activity. **Knowing** how to do is not often a completely finished achievement before the deed itself begins to be done; it is oftener an essential part of the deed itself.

The difference to which we have just referred as most conspicuous is, however, expressed in the two words "can" and "ought." The latter word introduces a distinction which, as some prefer to

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hold, sets apart a certain kind of doing from all other kinds; but, as we incline to believe and hope to make clear, the feeling of obligation ("I ought") properly applies to that aspect of all human activity which fitly claims to receive and which in fact does receive, the title *conduct*, in the more precise meaning of this term. But, of course, what I ought to do depends in large measure, if not absolutely, on what I can know; and on the other hand, what I can know, by no means infrequently depends upon whether I do, or not, what I ought to do. Knowledge and duty can no more be divorced than can knowledge and deed. And the more we extend the idea of duty over the domain of deed, the more do the problems of knowledge and the problems of morals become interrelated and interdependent. Thus we may be led on to speak of what ought to be, and what ought not to be, with respect to the mental imagery, the secret thoughts, the suppression or the indulgence of the passions, of the emotions and the sentiments, even before they have eventuated in any form of doing which others can observe.

It is quite impossible, then, to discuss the two questions, What can I know? and, What ought I to do? as though they were, either in nature or in practice, and whether considered chiefly for theoretical satisfaction or for the guidance of life, without almost constant reference back and forth. And yet the distinction involved in the two words

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“can” and “ought” remains all through the discussion in unabated force. It persists, indeed, in such a way as to instigate many sharp and even rancorous debates between ability to know and obligation to do. It is in the light of the full-orbed and well-illuminated conception of personality that all these debates must be regarded; it is in the same light that the many difficult problems involved must find their solution, if solution, complete or partial, is to be found at all. For knowledge and faith, duty and hope, are all inter-related processes of the one rational nature of man. And so, perchance, by discourse about duty we may lead the mind from the assurance of knowledge to some of the comforts of believing and the privileges of hope.