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*A Manual of Moral
Philosophy*

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PREFACE.

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This book has been prepared, particularly, for the use of the Freshman Class in Harvard College. The author has, at the same time, desired to meet the need, felt in our high schools, of a manual of Moral Science fitted for the more advanced classes.

In the preparation of this treatise, the author has been at no pains to avoid saying what others had said before. Yet the book is original, so far as such a book can be or ought to be original. The author has directly copied nothing except Dugald Stewart's classification of the Desires. But as his reading for several years has been principally in the department of ethics, it is highly probable that much of what he supposes to be his own thought may have been derived from other minds. Of course, there is no small part

of the contents of a work of this kind, which is the common property of writers, and must in some form reappear in every elementary manual.

Should this work be favorably received, the author hopes to prepare, for higher college-classes, a textbook, embracing a more detailed and thorough discussion of the questions at issue among the different schools—past and present—of ethical science.

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CHAPTER 1.

ACTION.

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An act or action is a voluntary exercise of any power of body or mind. The character of an action, whether good or bad, depends on the intention of the agent. Thus, if I mean to do my neighbor a kindness by any particular act, the action is kind, and therefore good, on my part, even though he derive no benefit from it, or be injured by it. If I mean to do my neighbor an injury, the action is unkind, and therefore bad, though it do him no harm, or though it even result to his benefit. If I mean to perform an action, good or bad, and am prevented from performing it by some unforeseen hindrance, the act is as truly mine as if I had performed it. Words which have any meaning are actions. So are thoughts which we purposely call up, or retain in the mind.

On the other hand, the actions which we are compelled to perform against our wishes, and the thoughts which are forced upon our minds, without [pg 002] our own consent,

are not our actions. This is obviously true when our fellow-men forcibly compel us to do or to hear things which we do not wish to do or to hear. It is their action solely, and we have no more part in it than if we were brute beasts, or inanimate objects. It is, then, the intention that gives character to the action.

That we commonly do what we intend to do there can be no doubt. We do not act under *immediate* compulsion. We are, therefore, free *agents*, or actors. But are our intentions free? Is it in our power to will otherwise than we will? When we choose to perform an act that is just or kind, is it in our power to choose to perform an act of the opposite character? In other words, is the *will* free? If it be not so, then what we call our intentions are not ours, but are to be attributed to the superior will which has given direction to our wills. If God has so arranged the order of nature and the course of events as to force my will in certain directions, good or evil, then it is He that does the good or evil which I seem to do. On this supposition God is the only agent or actor in the universe. Evil, if it be wrought, is wrought by Him alone; and if we cannot admit that the Supreme Being does evil, the only alternative is to deny the existence of evil, and to maintain that what we call evil bears an essential part in the production of good. For instance, if the horrible enormities imputed to Nero were utterly bad, the evil that was in them is chargeable, not on Nero, but on God; or if it be [pg 003] maintained that God cannot do evil, then Nero was an instrument for the advancement of human happiness and well-being.

What reasons have we for believing that the human will is free?

1. We have the direct evidence of consciousness. We are distinctly conscious, not only of doing as we choose, but of exercising our free choice among different objects of desire, between immediate and future enjoyment, between good and evil. Now, though consciousness may sometimes deceive us, it is the strongest evidence that we can have; we are so constituted that we cannot refuse our credence to it; and our belief in it lies at the basis of all evidence and of all knowledge.

2. We are clearly conscious of merit or demerit, of self-approval or self-condemnation, in consequence of our actions. If our wills were acted upon by a force beyond our control, we might congratulate or pity ourselves, but we could not praise or blame ourselves, for what we had done.

3. We praise or blame others for their good or evil actions; and in our conduct toward them we show that we believe them to have been not merely fortunate or unfortunate, but praiseworthy or blameworthy. So far as we suppose their wills to have been influenced by circumstances beyond their control, we regard them with diminished approval or censure. On the other hand, we give the highest praise to those who have chosen the good amidst [pg 004] strong temptations to evil, and bestow the severest censure on those who have done evil with virtuous surroundings and influences. Now our judgment of others must of necessity be derived from our own consciousness,

and if we regard and treat them as freely willing beings, it can only be because we know that our own wills are free.

These arguments, all derived from consciousness, can be directly met only by denying the validity of consciousness as a ground of belief. The opposing arguments are drawn from sources independent of consciousness.

1. The most obvious objection to the freedom of the human will is derived from the power of motives. It is said, We never act without a motive; we always yield to the strongest motive; and motives are not of our own creation or choice, but are brought to bear upon us independently of our own action. There has been, from the creation until now, an unbroken series of causes and effects, and we can trace every human volition to some anterior cause or causes belonging to this inevitable series, so that, in order for the volition to have been other than it was, some member of this series must have been displaced.

To this it may be answered:—

(a) We are capable of acting without a motive, and we do so act in numberless instances. It was a common saying among the Schoolmen, that an ass, at equal distances from two equal bundles of hay, [pg 005] would starve to death for lack of a motive to choose either. But have we any motive whatever in the many cases in which we choose—sometimes after the vain endeavor to discover a ground of preference—between two equally valuable, beautiful, or appetizing objects, between two equally pleasant routes to the same terminus, or between two equally agreeable

modes of passing a leisure day or hour? Yet this choice, made without motive, may be a fruitful cause of motives that shall have a large influence in the future. Thus, on the route which one chooses without any assignable reason, he may encounter persons or events that shall modify his whole plan of life. The instances are by no means few, in which the most decisive results have ensued upon a choice thus made entirely without motive.

(b) Motives of equal strength act differently on different temperaments. The same motive, when it stands alone, with no opposing motive, has not the same effect on different minds. There is in the will of every human being a certain reluctance to action—in some greater, in others less—corresponding to the *vis inertiae* in inanimate substances; and as the impulse which will move a wooden ball may not suffice to move a leaden ball, so the motive which will start into action a quick and sensitive temperament, may produce no effect on a person of more sluggish nature. Thus, among men utterly destitute of honesty, some are tempted by the most paltry opportunities for theft or fraud; others, not one whit more [pg 006] scrupulous, have their cupidity aroused only by the prospect of some substantial gain. So, too, some sincerely benevolent persons are moved to charitable actions by the slightest needs and sufferings; others, equally kind and generous, have their sympathies excited only on grave occasions and by imperative claims. Motives, then, have not a determinate and calculable strength, but a power which varies with the previous character of the person to whom they are addressed. Moreover, the greater or less susceptibility to motives from

without is not a difference produced by education or surroundings; for it may be traced in children from the earliest development of character. Nor can it be hereditary; for it may be found among children of the same parents, and not infrequently between twins nurtured under precisely the same care, instruction, and discipline.

(c) External motives are not the causes of action, but merely its occasions or opportunities. The cause of the action already exists in the character of the agent, before the motive presents itself. A purse of gold that may be stolen without detection is an irresistible motive to a thief, or to a person who, though not previously a thief, is covetous and unprincipled; but the same purse might lie in the way of an honest man every day for a month, and it would not make him a thief. If I recognize the presence of a motive, I must perform some action, whether exterior or internal; but whether that action will be in accordance with the motive, or in the opposite direction, [pg 007] is determined by my previous character and habits of action.

(d) The objection which we are considering assumes, without sufficient reason, that the phenomena of human action are closely analogous to those of motion in the material world. The analogy fails in several particulars. No material object can act on itself and change its own nature, adaptations, or uses, without any external cause; but the human mind can act upon itself without any external cause, as in repentance, serious reflection, religious purposes and aims. Then again, if two or more forces in different directions act upon a material object, its motion is not in the

direction of either, or with the momentum derived from either, but in a direction and with a momentum resulting from the composition of these forces; whereas the human will, in the presence of two or more motives, pursues the direction and yields to the force of but one of those motives. We are not, then, authorized to reason about the power of motives from the action of material forces.

(e) Were the arguments against the freedom of the will logically sound and unanswerable, they would be of no avail against the testimony of consciousness. Axioms, intuitive beliefs, and truths of consciousness can be neither proved nor disproved by reasoning; and the reasoning by which they seem to be disproved only evinces that they are beyond the range and reach of argument. Thus it may be maintained [pg 008] with show of reason that motion is impossible; for an object cannot move where it is, and cannot move where it is not,—a dilemma which does not disprove the reality of motion, but simply indicates that the reality of motion, being an intuitive belief, neither needs nor admits logical proof.

2. It is urged against the freedom of the human will that it is inconsistent with God's foreknowledge of future events, and thus represents the Supreme Being as not omniscient, and in that particular finite and imperfect.

To this objection we reply:—

(a) If human freedom and the Divine foreknowledge of human acts are mutually incompatible, we must still retain the freedom of the will as a truth of consciousness; for if we

discredit our own consciousness, we cannot trust even the act of the understanding by which we set it aside, which act we know by the testimony of consciousness alone.

(b) If the acts of a freely willing being cannot be foreknown, the ignorance of them does not detract from the perfectness of the Supreme Being. Omnipotence cannot make two and two five. Omnipotence cannot do what is intrinsically impossible. No more can Omniscience know what is intrinsically unknowable.

(c) If God's foreknowledge is entire, it must include his own acts, no less than those of men. If his foreknowledge of men's acts is incompatible with their freedom, then his foreknowledge of his [pg 009] own acts is incompatible with his own freedom. We have, therefore, on the theory of necessity, instead of a Supreme Will on the throne of the universe, mere fate or destiny. This is equivalent to the denial of a personal God.

(d) It cannot be proved that God's foreknowledge and man's free will are incompatible with each other. The most that we can say is that we do not fully see how they are to be reconciled, which is the case with many pairs of undoubted truths that might be named. But while a perfect explanation of the harmony of the Divine foreknowledge and human freedom is beyond the scope of our faculties, we may explain it in part, from our own experience. Human foreknowledge extends very far and with a great degree of certainty, without abridging the freedom of those to whom it relates. When we can foresee outward events, we can often

foretell, with little danger of mistake, the courses of conduct to which they will give rise. In view of the extent and accuracy of human foresight, we cannot pronounce it impossible, that He who possesses antecedent knowledge of the native constitution of every human being, and of the shaping circumstances and influences to which each being is subjected, may foreknow men's acts, even though their wills be entirely free.

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CHAPTER II.

THE SPRINGS OF ACTION.

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There are certain elements of the human constitution, in part natural, in part acquired, which always prompt and urge men to action, without reference to the good or evil there may be in the action, and without reference to its ultimate effects on the actor's well-being. These are the Appetites, the Desires, and the Affections.

Section I.

The Appetites.

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The Appetites are cravings of the body, adapted, and undoubtedly designed, to secure the continued life of the individual and the preservation of the species. They are common to man with the lower orders of animals, with this difference, that in man they may be controlled, directed, modified, in part suppressed, while in brutes they are uncontrollable, and always tend to the same modes of gratification.

Appetite is intermittent. When gratified, it ceases for a time, and is renewed for the same person nearly at the same intervals, and under similar circumstances. It is, while it lasts, an uneasy, even a painful sensation, and therefore demands prompt relief, and leads [pg 011] to action with a view to such relief. It is also a characteristic of appetite that its indulgence is attended, not merely by relief, but by positive pleasure.

The appetites are essential to the well-being of men, individually and collectively. Were it not for the pain of hunger and thirst, and the pleasure of gratifying them, both

indolence and engrossing industry would draw off the attention of men from their bodily needs; nourishment would be taken irregularly, and with little reference to quality; and one would often become aware of his neglect only too late to arrest its consequences. A similar remark applies to the appetite designed to secure the preservation of the species. But for this, it may be doubted whether men would willingly take upon themselves the cares, labors, responsibilities, and contingent disappointments and sorrows involved in the rearing of children.

In a life conformed to nature, hunger and thirst recur only when the body actually needs the supply which they crave. But stimulating food, by the reaction that follows strong excitement of any portion of the nervous system, may create hunger when there is no need of food, and in like manner not only intoxicating, but highly stimulating liquids, may occasion an excessive, morbid, and injurious thirst.

Appetite is modified by habit. There is hardly any substance so offensive that it may not by use become agreeable, then an object of desire, and, at length, of intense craving.

[pg 012]

The craving for repose and that for muscular action, though not classed among the appetites, have all their characteristics, and serve similar ends in the economy of human life. After a certain period of activity, rest is felt as a bodily necessity, as food is, after long fasting; and in like manner, when the wearied muscles have had their due

repose, there is an irresistible tendency to their exercise, without reference to any special employment or recreation. It is by the alternation of these tendencies that the active and industrious are saved from the ruinous consequences of overtasked limbs or brain, and that the indolent are urged to the reluctant activity without which health and life itself would be sacrificed.

The appetites, being mere bodily impulses, and being all liable to excess or misdirection, need the control of the will, and of the principles of action by which the will is determined and regulated.

Section II.

The Desires.

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The Desires are distinguished from the Appetites, first, in their not originating from the body; secondly, in their not being necessarily intermittent; and thirdly, in their tendency to increase indefinitely, often through the whole of life, and to gain strength by the attainment of their specific objects. If classified by their objects, they might seem too numerous to be specified; but they may all be embraced under the [pg 013] titles of the Desire for Knowledge, for Society, for Esteem, for Power, and for Superiority. These all may be traced, in a more or less rudimentary form, in the inferior animals. Many of these animals show an active curiosity. Many are gregarious in their native state, and most of the domestic animals delight in the society of their kind; some take manifest pleasure in human society; and the instances are by no means rare, in which animals, by nature mutually hostile, become strongly attached to each other, and render to each other the most friendly services. The dog, the horse, and the cat evidently crave the esteem of human beings, and show tokens of genuine grief when they incur rebuke or discern tokens of disapproval. The dog maintains with

watchful jealousy his own authority in his own peculiar domain; and in the chase or on the race-ground the dog and the horse are as emulous of success as their masters.

1. The Desire of Knowledge. This in the human being is manifested with the earliest dawn of intelligence. The infant is busy with eye and hand throughout his waking hours; and that the desire of knowledge is innate, and has no reference to the use that is to be made of the things known, is manifest from the rapid growth of knowledge in the first years of life, before the child has any distinct conception of the uses of objects, or any conscious capacity of employing them for his own benefit. It may be doubted whether in any subsequent year of life so much knowledge is acquired as during the first year. The [pg 014] child but a year old has learned the nature of the familiar objects of the house and the street, the faces and names of a large number of relatives, domestics, and acquaintances, the regular succession of seasons and events in daily domestic life, and the meanings of most of the words that are addressed to him or employed concerning him and the objects around him. In more advanced life this desire grows by what it feeds on, and never ceases to be active. It assumes, indeed, different directions, in part determining, and in part determined by, condition, profession, or employment. Even in the most idle and frivolous, it is strong, often intense, though its objects be worthless. Such persons frequently are as sedulous in collecting the paltry gossip of society as the naturalist in acquiring the knowledge of new species of plants or insects, and as

ingenious in their inferences from what they see and hear as the philosopher in his inductions from the facts of science.

Not only in infancy, but through life, knowledge is sought evidently for its own sake, and not merely for its uses. But a very small part of what one knows can be made of practical utility as to his own comfort or emolument. Many, indeed, voluntarily sacrifice ease, gain, position, in the pursuit of science or literature. Fame, if it accrues, is not unwelcome; but by the higher order of minds fame is not pursued as an end, and there are many departments of knowledge in which little or no reputation is to be attained. Then, too, it is not the learner, [pg 015] but the teacher, not the profound scholar, merely, but the able expositor, speaker, or writer, who can expect a distinguished name; while there are many who content themselves with acquiring knowledge, without attempting publicity. Nor yet can benevolence account for the love of knowledge. Many, indeed, make their attainments the property of others, and are zealous in diffusing their own scientific views, or in dispensing instruction in their own departments. But there are also many solitary, recluse students; and it may be doubted whether, if a man who is earnestly engaged in any intellectual pursuit were shut out entirely from human society, and left alone with his books or with nature, his diligence would be relaxed, or his ardor abated.

2. The Desire of Society. This, also, is manifested so early as to show that it is an original, and not an acquired principle. Little children dread solitude, crave the presence of familiar faces, and evince pleasure in the company of

children of their own age. A child, reared in comparative seclusion and silence, however tenderly, suffers often in health, always in mental vigor and elasticity; while in a large family, and in intimate association with companions of his own age, the individual child has the fullest and most rapid development of all his powers. There is, indeed, in the lives of many children, a period when the presence of strangers is unwelcome; but this state of feeling—seldom of long duration—can in most instances be traced to some sudden fright, harsh voice, or imagined neglect or unkindness.

[pg 016]

The natural course of human life proves that man is by the necessity of his nature a social being. The young of other animals are at a very early period emancipated and forsaken by their parents, while the human child has many years of dependence, and is hardly prepared to dispense with the shelter and kind offices of his native home, when he is moved to create a new home of his own.

There is no pursuit in life in which a community of interest fails to give added zest and energy. There is no possible ground of association on which societies are not formed, and the trivial, fictitious, or imaginary pretences on which men thus combine, meet, and act in concert, are manifest proofs of a social proclivity so strong as to create reasons for its indulgence where such reasons do not already exist. Even in science and in the most abstruse forms of erudition, men of learning seek mutual countenance and encouragement, and readily suspend their solitary research and study for the opportunity of

intercommunication on the subjects and objects of their pursuit. The cases in which society is voluntarily shunned or forsaken are as rare as the cases of congenital disease or deformity; and for every such instance there may generally be assigned some grave, if not sufficient, cause. Religious asceticism has, indeed, induced many persons, especially in the early Christian ages, to lead a solitary life; but the *cœnobites* have always vastly outnumbered the hermits; *monasteries* (solitary abodes) have become *convents* (assemblages); and those who [pg 017] are shut out from the rest of the world find comfort in social devotion, in the common refectory, and in those seasons of recreation when the law of silence is suspended. For prisoners solitary confinement has been found deleterious both to body and mind, and this system, instituted with philanthropic purpose, and commended on grounds that seemed intimately connected with the reformation of the guilty, is now generally repudiated as doing violence to human nature. Even for the insane, society, with judicious classification and restriction, is an essential part of curative treatment, and the success of asylums, as compared with the most skilful and humane private treatment, is due in great part to the social element.

It cannot be maintained that the desire of society results from fear, and from the felt need of mutual protection; for it exists in full at the most fearless periods of life, and among those who are the least timid, and is equally manifest in the strong and the weak, in those who can proffer and in those who might crave protection.