Constructive ethics, a review of modern moral philosophy in its three stages of interpretation, criticism, and reconstruction

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CONSTRUCTIVE ETHICS.
CONSTRUCTIVE ETHICS

A REVIEW OF MODERN MORAL PHILOSOPHY
IN ITS THREE STAGES OF INTERPRETATION, CRITICISM, AND RECONSTRUCTION

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By the same Author.

THE METAPHYSICS OF JOHN STUART MILL.
STUDIES IN PHILOSOPHY.
STUDIES NEW AND OLD.
THE LIFE OF J. S. MILL.
STUDIES AT LEISURE.
PREFACE.

As I tried to explain in the preface to the first edition of this book, my object in writing these pages is to give my readers an Introduction to what I conceive to be the proper and final form of Moral Philosophy—a system of Constructive Ethics. It was necessary to my purpose to show that the history of Moral Philosophy itself invites a reconstruction on the lines of that particular theory of ethical data which I have called indifferently Rationalism or Idealism. To this system, so far as I can read the phenomena, the early interpretative systems, as well as the critical systems of a crude and disappointing Utilitarianism, appear to be preliminary. If I am right in supposing that the progress of thought is a gradual transition from an ambitious and premature attempt to decipher ethical facts through a period of criticism, to a reconstruction of morals on a metaphysical and indeed an ontological basis, then it would seem clear that the ethics of the future, whatever other features they may contain, need not be merely interpretative,
and must not be exclusively critical. It was further necessary to choose amidst the various schemes of reconstruction for that which answered best the conditions of the problem. Was the reconstruction to be made from the side of science, and from the recognized characters of an objective material order? Or was it to proceed from a particular world-theory which assumed a force or agency in things, to be called 'Will' with Schopenhauer, or 'the Unconscious' with von Hartmann? Reasons are advanced in the following pages for disbelieving in either alternative. The only system which remained was that which was inaugurated by Kant, developed by Fichte, illustrated and perhaps temporarily arrested by the brilliant vagaries of Schelling, and completed, at all events in characteristic features, by Hegel. Whether the details of the Hegelian system be or be not accepted, the contention of the present work is that a properly constructed system of morals can only be reared on the foundation of Absolute Idealism.

A further apology is perhaps needed for what some critics might term the slightness, but what the author prefers to call the terseness, of some of the criticisms made on rival theories. In some cases the fault is no doubt the author's own; in other cases, where points have been abundantly treated by other well-known writers, a repetition, which could but go over the main features of a tolerably familiar story, has appeared wholly unnecessary. Nor have these pages been in any way overburdened with references to
other works, an omission for which the author can crave no indulgence, as it has been purposely designed.

Nevertheless, the obvious remark which this work suggests is that it either goes too far or not far enough. Such a criticism is more easily made than answered; for probably no author has ever completed a book without a profound scepticism of its value and the necessity of its publication. My object has been twofold. In the first place, I have desired to exhibit in a fairly popular form the chief characteristics of the different stages through which modern moral philosophy has passed. In the second place, it has been my intention to suggest the proper basis on which alone a satisfactory ethical system can be reared. For I believe that Ethics must be Rationalistic, and that they must repose on a metaphysical system designed to elucidate the full contents of an Absolute or Universal. To this Absolute or Universal I have not hesitated to ascribe the name of God, believing that thus alone can the character of the moral law be discovered, and the force of the moral ideal acknowledged as the life-aim of rational creatures.

October 1895.
ERRATA.

p. 30, for Frankenstein read Frankenstein
p. 58, for ethics presuppose read ethics presupposes
p. 68, for becomes plain read become plain
p. 78, for Pythagoreanism read Pythagoreanism
p. 130, l. 12, for doctrine of stationariness read defect of stationariness
p. 147, l. 28, with the motive, dele with
p. 171, for ethics depend read ethics depends
p. 229, for ὑπόκεισθαι read ὑποκέισθαι
p. 234, note, for p. 139 read p. 359
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