The theory of morals

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THE

THEORY OF MORALS

BY

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TRANSLATED FROM THE LATEST FRENCH EDITION

NEW YORK

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

1883
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Franklin Press:
RAND, AVERY, AND COMPANY,
BOSTON.
PUBLISHERS' NOTE.

This work, translated by Miss Mary Chapman, under the supervision of President Noah Porter of Yale College, from the latest edition of Professor Janet's La Morale (Paris, 1874), is published by arrangement with and under the authority of the author.

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IN my Elements of Morals, published some years ago [1869], I sought to present such of the clearest and most useful results of moral science as would be accessible to all minds, especially those of the young. I avoided all delicate discussions and too abstruse researches. In the volume which I now publish, and which has only a few pages in common with the other, I have, on the contrary, endeavored to go back to first principles, and to define, with some precision, the fundamental ideas of morals; finally, to present a systematic and well-connected exposition of them; not forgetting, however, the wise precept of Aristotle, that one should expect from any science only that degree of exactness of which it is capable.

While I have not neglected to consult my predecessors,¹ and to draw inspiration from their researches, I have done every thing in my power to add something to them. I believe that I have introduced, or brought back, into the science, some elements which have been too much neglected; that I have elucidated some difficulties; offered some solutions and suggested some subjects for investigation. I do not think that I have done every thing that can be done, but I believe that I have done my best.

¹ Not to mention too many names, I will refer merely to the celebrated work Du Devoir by M. Jules Simon; La Science Morale by M. Renouvier; La Philosophie du Devoir by M. Ferraz; La Morale pour tous by M. Ad. Franck; La Morale Indépendante by Mme. C. Coignet; Principes de la Morale considérée comme Science by M. E. Wiart; La Morale Psychologique by M. Herrenschneider (C. rendus de l’Ac. des sc. mor. et pol., 1871).
The development of my principles, and the arguments supporting them, will be found in the succeeding chapters; but it seemed to me well to collect them first in a sort of anticipatory synthesis, so that those who have read the book might see their unity, and those who are about to read it might more readily perceive this. Still, I demand that judgment should not be passed upon bare formulas, but should be suspended until they are explained by development or discussion.

My fundamental principle is, that moral good presupposes a natural good which is anterior to it, and serves as its foundation.

If all the objects of our actions were indifferent in themselves, as the Stoics claim, it would be impossible to understand why we should be under obligation to seek for one rather than for another, and the moral law would be void of all content.

These natural goods, anterior to moral good, and which are to become the objects of choice, are not to be estimated according to the pleasure which they procure for us, but according to an intrinsic character, which I call their excellence, and which is independent of our way of feeling.

It was from this point of view that the ancients very justly divided goods into three classes—exterior goods, corporeal goods, and the goods of the soul—and that they regarded the goods of the soul as superior to those of the body, and the latter as superior to external goods.

The most excellent thing in man is, then, the excellence of his soul, of the highest and best part of his nature—his personality; that is, his reasonable will.

But the excellence of personality does not consist merely in itself; it consists also in its union with the personality of other men—that is to say, in fraternity—and also in its devotion to impersonal goods, such as the beautiful, the true, and the holy.

This ideal excellence of the human person is what is called perfection, and we may say with Wolf that good is perfection.

But, though I make a distinction between good and pleasure, it does not follow that pleasure is not a good. For I admit with
Aristotle, that pleasure is inseparable from action, that the noblest action gives the noblest pleasure, and that perfection is in itself a source of happiness. It is in this sense that I would say with Aristotle, Malebranche, Leibnitz, etc., that good is happiness.

A good for man must be his own good: the Utilitarians saw this clearly. It would be a contradiction that any being should be under obligation to pursue an end contrary to his nature. All laws have for their object the advantage of the subjects to whom they are laws. Could moral law alone be a detriment to those whom it commands? It is impossible to admit this. In such a case it would be a law of tyranny, not of justice and of love.

Thus good is also happiness. But happiness is not what Bentham would make it—a calculation, a choice, a combination of pleasures. It is the highest joy, the purest pleasure, adequate to the highest excellence.

The doctrine of perfection, and the doctrine of happiness, which are at base identical, do not exclude the doctrine of duty. Duty is the law which requires us to strive for our own perfection—that is to say, our true happiness.

As there is a true happiness and a false one—the former resulting from the excellence of our nature, the latter from our satisfied sensibility—it is clear that there may be an obligation to seek for that which is true, and sacrifice that which is false. This is what all moralists mean by contrasting true and false goods, and advising men to strive for the first, and not the second.

As man naturally desires good, one part of his nature desires true good, and the other desires also the appearance of good. Now, the will which desires the true good commands the will which desires apparent good: this command is moral obligation. Thus I admit with Kant the autonomy of the will, as the legislative principle of morality.

Although the law is obligatory in itself, it is so for us only in so far as we know it, and to the extent to which we know it. Thus I accept this principle of Fichte's morality: "Obey that conviction of your duty which you actually have." In other words, Obey
your conscience. But this rule implies as a postulate, that each
one shall do his utmost to bring his actual conscience into the
state of an absolute conscience, which would be identical with
the law itself.

Since natural and essential good is the basis of duty, I admit
with Kant that moral good is, on the contrary, its consequence.
This justifies the double proposition, Duty consists in doing good:
Good consists in doing one’s duty. In other words, duty consists
in striving after that which is naturally good; and an action
which is morally good is the one which is performed for the sake
of duty.

In my opinion, as in that of Kant, the domains of good and of
duty are absolutely equivalent. I agree with him, that to desire
to rise above duty is moral fanaticism. But this liberty which I
deny as existing beyond the moral law, I find within the limits of
the law itself; and I admit the existence of a moral initiative,
which cannot change the law in any way, but which constantly
creates and modifies the means of fulfilling it.

In accordance with these principles, I reject the received dis-
tinction between definite and indefinite duties. In my opinion, no
duty can be indefinite in the sense that one may fulfil it or not ac-
cording as he pleases. Thus every duty is definite as to its form;
but, in their application, duties are definite or indefinite according
to the objects which compose their subject-matter.

From what has already been said, it will be seen that I do not
agree with Kant that virtue is merely the force of resolution. It
is more than that; and Aristotle was correct in saying that “the
virtuous man is he who finds pleasure in performing virtuous acts.”

By means of virtue man acquires a certain value, in addition
to that which he had received from nature. We say, then, that
he has merit. Merit is, therefore, the value which a man adds to
himself by the constant, or even the passing, effort of his will.
Demerit is the contrary. It is not merely the absence of merit;
it is a loss, a diminution, an abasement.

Thus the words merit and demerit do not represent to my mind