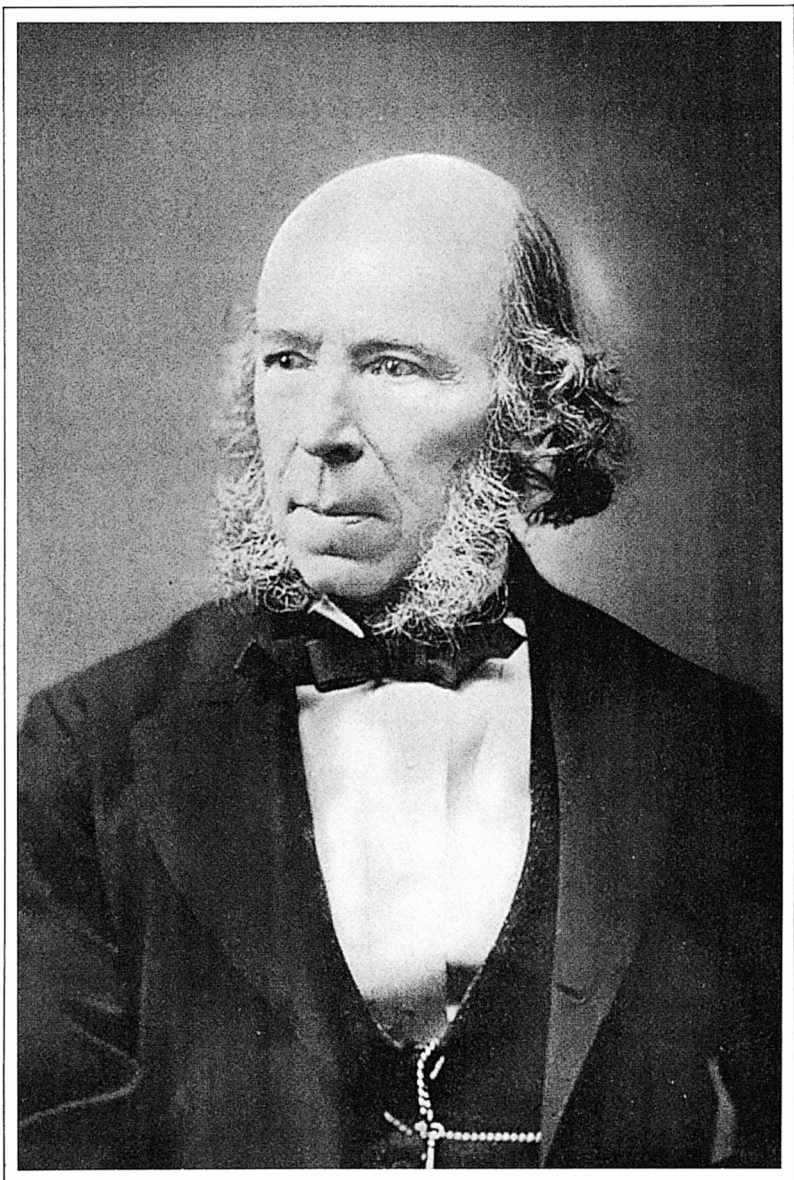


THE PRINCIPLES OF ETHICS



HERBERT SPENCER

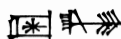
THE PRINCIPLES OF ETHICS

HERBERT SPENCER

Introduction by Tibor R. Machan

In Two Volumes

Vol. I



Liberty Fund

INDIANAPOLIS

1978

This book is published by Liberty Fund, Inc., a foundation established to encourage study of the ideal of a society of free and responsible individuals.



The cuneiform inscription that serves as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word "freedom" (*amagi*), or liberty. It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

This edition of *The Principles of Ethics* follows the text of the edition published in New York in 1897 by D. Appleton and Company.

Frontispiece photograph: Bettmann Archive, Inc.

© 1978 by Liberty Fund, Inc. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form. Brief quotations may be included in a review, and all inquiries should be addressed to Liberty Fund, Inc., 8335 Allison Pointe Trail, Suite 300, Indianapolis, Indiana 46250-1687. This book was manufactured in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Spencer, Herbert, 1820–1903.

The principles of ethics.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Ethics. 2. Ethics, Evolutionary. I. Title.

BJ1311.S75 1977 170 77-1274

0-913966-33-9 Set (HC)

0-913966-76-2 Volume I (HC)

0-913966-74-6 Volume II (HC)

0-913966-34-7 Set (SC)

0-913966-77-0 Volume I (SC)

0-913966-75-4 Volume II (SC)

01 00 99 98 97 C 7 6 5 4 3

01 00 99 98 97 P 7 6 5 4 3a

CONTENTS OF VOLUME I

Herbert Spencer: A Century Later, by Tibor R. Machan	9
General Preface	23
Preface to Volume I	29
Preface to Part I	31

PART I THE DATA OF ETHICS

1. Conduct in General	37
2. The Evolution of Conduct	43
3. Good and Bad Conduct	57
4. Ways of Judging Conduct	81
5. The Physical View	99
6. The Biological View	111
7. The Psychological View	137
8. The Sociological View	165
9. Criticisms and Explanations	183
10. The Relativity of Pains and Pleasures	205
11. Egoism Versus Altruism	217
12. Altruism Versus Egoism	231
13. Trial and Compromise	249
14. Conciliation	271
15. Absolute and Relative Ethics	287
16. The Scope of Ethics	309
Appendix to Part I	317

PART II THE INDUCTIONS OF ETHICS

1. The Confusion of Ethical Thought	339
2. What Ideas and Sentiments Are Ethical?	357
3. Aggression	371
4. Robbery	383
5. Revenge	393
6. Justice	401
7. Generosity	411
8. Humanity	423
9. Veracity	433
10. Obedience	443
11. Industry	455
12. Temperance	467
13. Chastity	481
14. Summary of Inductions	497

PART III THE ETHICS OF INDIVIDUAL LIFE

1. Introductory	509
2. Activity	517
3. Rest	525
4. Nutrition	531
5. Stimulation	539
6. Culture	545
7. Amusements	555
8. Marriage	563
9. Parenthood	575
10. General Conclusions	585
References	593
Index to Volume I	601

Herbert Spencer: A Century Later
By Tibor R. Machan

Classical liberalism, with its focus on individual political and economic liberty, brought millions a better life than they would have had under the influence of other systems of thought. Capitalism, where consistently implemented, has been better for people than all the alternatives known to mankind. History and common sense bear this out, despite relentless allegations to the contrary from left and right.

But the classical liberals never developed a theoretically sound ethical base for their political and economic system. Herbert Spencer is the most formidable among those who have made the effort.

What Spencer did for libertarianism is what Marx did for communism—provide it with what was to be a full-blown scientific justification, on the model of proper science prominent in his day.

Neither thinker succeeded. But while Marx is hailed everywhere as a messiah (in secular garb)—even as his theories are being patched up desperately to fit the facts—Herbert Spencer, a better scientist, and in his moral and political theory far more astute than Marx, is widely dismissed as a foolhardy fellow or crude Darwinian.

Much has occurred since Spencer's time, and the free so-

ciety now enjoys a better theoretical base than ever. It is philosophically well grounded today, and eventually this may come to be recognized and have an impact on concrete political and economic affairs. We can, nevertheless, learn a great deal from Herbert Spencer, which is why the reissue of what he deemed his most important work is such a welcome event.

Triumph and Disappointment: Spencer's Life

Born in Derby, England, on April 27, 1820, Spencer was from the start an unusual individual among intellectuals. Of Quaker parents, Spencer grew up with an undistinguished educational background. He had no formal classical or humanist education, nor did he acquire literary sensitivities as so many of Great Britain's luminaries did. Instead Spencer started his studies in the sciences, mostly technology and mathematics. He even embarked on an engineering career at first, in 1837, in the railway industry. But this merely served to increase his intellectual curiosity within the various scientific fields. The enthusiasm he had for an understanding of nature along scientific paths led him at times to pursue odd roads of inquiry, ones that started off with great optimism only to end in disrepute—for example, phrenology.

Spencer's first intellectually creative work was a series of lectures published in *The Nonconformist*, entitled "The Proper Sphere of Government," in which the seeds of his subsequent thinking are clearly contained. Here Spencer demonstrated his confidence in the all-pervasive character of certain kinds of natural laws, scientific principles the ignorance of which can only spell destruction for us.

Although it is known that Spencer had occasional romantic attachments, including a relatively long-lasting one with the novelist George Eliot (Marian Evans), Spencer's personal life consisted almost exclusively of pursuing his philosophical and scientific studies. During most of his life he suffered from a nervous ailment for which doctors could find no explanation, and what we know of his life testifies to a case of total

dedication, bordering on the obsessive, to the completion of work Spencer set out to accomplish in his thirties.

As for social life, the opportunity always existed. Spencer attained popularity early in his life, shortly after the publication of *Social Statics* in 1850. He soon became world-famous and was read by both professionals and lay people. His influence is still evident throughout the fields of biology and sociology, even when he is not explicitly acknowledged.

Though Spencer's evolutionism is different from and broader than Darwin's, the two theories are often identified in journalistic and polemical treatments of various related topics. In the area of social theory Spencer's thought developed much further than Darwin's, and while Darwin's evolutionism was theoretically superior to Spencer's in the field of biology, Spencer was ahead of his time in some of his extensions of the evolutionist ideas. For example, in the history of the development of scientific concepts, Spencer's principle of evolutionism could be made to apply in ways later alleged by Collingwood and today defended by Thomas S. Kuhn, in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962), and Stephen Toulmin, in his *Human Understanding*, vol. 1 (Princeton, 1972). (Toulmin regards Spencer's view as "providentialist." But the pattern of development, whatever its explanation, is Spencerian throughout Toulmin's discussion of the growth of scientific ideas.) Then also, the famous behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner invokes the evolutionist scheme in his discussion of the survival of different cultures, thus employing an idea, rejected in its individualist application, to make a collectivist point.

Spencer's friends included John Stuart Mill, Thomas Huxley, Beatrice Webb, and others, all of whom discussed Spencer in their works. He was admired by thousands, including the American industrialist Andrew Carnegie; A. E. Taylor, Josiah Royce, and David Duncan wrote books about him. But in the later years of his life Spencer lost not only his stature but also a good deal of his optimism, vigor, and confidence, so that his second edition of *Social Statics* omitted the crucial chapter "The

Right to Ignore the State," and he changed some of his libertarian views. Most striking was his apparent abandonment of the universality of his social and political theory. He could declare late in his life that "the goodness of these or those institutions is purely relative to the nature of the men living under them."

There is not room here to explore why this indefatigable man relented on certain crucial elements of his doctrine late in his life, while at the same time he refused to yield to objections that had the fullest possible scientific backing. Anecdotes abound on Spencer's good-spirited stubbornness. He would at times construct elaborate explanations of minute phenomena and upon finding that his factual assumptions had been mistaken, he would laugh heartily but not readily abandon his stance. Yet on other occasions he would encourage the most detailed, minuscule research experimentation and recording so that scientists far into the twentieth century still relied on the facts his work brought to light.

Beatrice Webb said of Spencer, after the latter's declining last years had become an object of some discussion and speculation, that he had "a nature with so perfect an intellect and little else—save friendliness and the uprightness of a truth-loving mind." It is hardly surprising that such an individual would give up some of his most controversial ideas when the theoretical basis underlying most of what he believed began to receive severe and widespread scientific opposition. It is a pity. Because, if anything, it was Spencer's normative convictions that can still be shown, even better than in his own times, to deserve full confidence. Had Spencer realized this, he might have lived out his life with justifiable pride.

Spencer's Principles of Ethics

During his time Spencer achieved prominence and a degree of influence that prompted Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes to say in one of his opinions that "The 14th Amendment does not enact Mr. Herbert Spencer's *Social Statics*," referring to

Spencer's advocacy of laissez-faire economics. Spencer's ethical writing, however, did not become influential and is today mentioned mainly as part of a certain phase of philosophical explorations in moral theory. Yet Spencer produced some valuable insights in substantive moral theory. It is often pointed out, probably justly, that Spencer's attempt to achieve a fusion between the scientific—in his case, evolutionist—and ethical regard toward human affairs was unsuccessful. In essence the charge is simply that to take a scientific perspective in Spencer's sense implies determinism of the sort that excludes the very possibility of genuine human choices; and without the possibility of genuine human choices, the content of any ethical system must be meaningless. For example, if it be taken as true that each individual should strive to achieve happiness in life, then it must be true that each individual has a genuine choice in the matter of so striving or not so striving. But if individual behavior is governed by the complex lawful relations that govern less-evolved entities, then no choice as to what he will do is possible, so ethics is meaningless.

This criticism was placed before Spencer in some of the letters commenting on his ethical writings, and the Appendix of the present edition includes his replies. Hardly any serious student of ethics could fail to appreciate the significance of the issue being posed, and Spencer's efforts to meet the critics are of much more than academic interest. It is possible that had not the currents of thought in the last century been under the powerful sway of collectivist ideals even before Spencer produced his ethical and social philosophy, it would be the collectivist efforts at fusionism that would have succumbed under the pressures of the type Spencer faced. Marxism contains both claims as to its scientific character and claims of distinctly ethical or moral character. The same can be said of prominent contemporary thinkers like B. F. Skinner and Karl Menninger, to name but two.

What differentiates Spencer from these fusionists, then, is not the fusionism but the specifically ethical content of his

thought. It is no secret that the bulk of ethical commentary, whether from the pulpit, editorials, the campaign trails, or the stages from which the oratory of commencement exercises rings forth, urges upon human beings acts of self-sacrifice. In this respect there is nothing revolutionary about Marxism, for example. Marx also places before us the ideals of self-sacrifice—his condemnation of the Lockean human-rights tradition consisted mainly of dismissing such rights as vehicles of selfishness. Spencer, however, advocated egoism. And his ethics could not be faulted for being of the hedonistic egoist variety, such as those of Jeremy Bentham and even John Stuart Mill. Instead, Spencer developed what he called a *rational* utilitarian moral theory. Omitting from consideration for now the difficulties of Spencer's fusionist efforts, we cannot deny that the substance of Spencer's ethical writings deserves extensive study. We have here a brilliant theory in which the mutually compatible selfish goals of individuals are demonstrated to be the proper end of human conduct. The principles that would further this goal are the principles of *rational* utilitarianism, gleaned through a consideration of the self-consistently enhancing course of conduct possible for human beings to undertake.

In developing his humanistic egoism, Spencer critically evaluates some of the greatest moral philosophers in Western history. His assessment of Aristotle is superb, especially since his own ethical views are probably closest to this great Greek thinker's own moral point of view. Spencer rightly perceives an idealistic tendency in Aristotle's conception of the happiness that is the goal of the moral life for every individual. He points out that Aristotle's ideas are "allied to the Platonic belief that there is an ideal or absolute good, which gives to particular and relative goods their property of goodness." Against this intrinsicist conception of good, Spencer makes the counter proposal that the virtues "are united by their common relation to [happiness]; while they are not united by their inner natures." What with the simplistic renditions of Herbert Spencer's philosophy that we can encounter in the

caricatures of this man's intellectual contributions, hardly anyone is prepared for the complex philosophical explorations that Spencer's *Principles of Ethics* offers in such plentitude.

It should be noted that most moral philosophers either are concerned only with the consequences of conduct or focus exclusively on the purity of motives for action. Yet both the consequences and the grounds of action are of moral significance, and Spencer shows his awareness of this in his advocacy of rational utilitarianism. Actions should reap benefits, but they can do so only if rationally guided, if they are principled.

Spencer's egoism, unlike that of Hobbes, does not begin by conceiving of the ego—the individual—as a bundle of passions purposelessly striking out to sustain itself in motion. This is the type of egoism that is accepted by many economists and promptly ridiculed by most moral philosophers. So it is no wonder that egoism has become not only an absurd moral theory but almost a synonym for “immorality.” Its Hobbesian version allows for callous, inconsiderate, or cruel conduct. By focusing on this variety of egoism—which, you will recall, means individualism—critics can throw out the baby with the bathwater. They can reject the importance of the individual for ethical purposes on grounds that the conception of the individual on the Hobbesian model is invalid and leads to absurd consequences. If we are all motivated by drives fixed within us by nature, pushing us toward self-aggrandizement qua purely passionate, unreasoning animals, then we will undoubtedly end in mortal combat with each other just a few steps down the social path. Such an ethics does imply dog-eat-dog, the caricature of the ethical base of laissez-faire capitalism.

Spencer will have none of this, and his discussion is highly illuminating. Unfortunately, it is mostly dismissed as a desperate attempt to rationalize capitalism with Victorian mores. And because of its problematic philosophical base, the charge rings true enough. (Never mind that charges of a similar type

could be made against virtually any other thinker, and that Spencer's own life does not demonstrate the slightest undue loyalty to either capitalism or the customs and etiquette of his times.) What we find in Spencer's egoism is a system ensuring the prospects of compatibility of interests among intelligent, good people, which should indicate why understanding ethics along egoistic lines makes very good sense. This is one reason why, of all of the many volumes Spencer produced, his ethical writings are the most valuable and unorthodox. It is furthermore an advantage in these works that Spencer is concerned, not to defend his ethics via his evolutionary science, but to work out the dynamics of an ethical position.

A note is due here about certain developments in the classical liberal conception of society following Spencer's notable efforts to give that conception a firm base. Why has liberalism changed its colors in our day? How could a term used for a free society in which government had as its proper role the protection and preservation of individual rights, take on a virtually opposite meaning?

Unfortunately Spencer must take part of the blame for this turn of events. Classical liberals accepted, willy-nilly (and deliberately in Locke), that human beings are free and responsible for most of their conduct. This implied that under conditions of political freedom, the suffering people experience can ordinarily be said to be their own fault. This idea made the desirability of government along classical liberal lines quite intelligible.

But in Hegel and Marx, for example, the idea that human beings are free in the sense specified above lost out to a total determinism. After Kant accounted for free will by reference to something fundamentally mysterious—the unknowable thing-in-itself—it was not surprising that those with a scientific bent rejected the idea altogether. But the notion *freedom* was kept in use following the substantive change. And it is easy to understand the sense in which it began to be used by considering such expressions as “free from hunger,” “free from ignorance,” “free from hardship,” and “free from temp-

tation." Liberalism changed, then, because the underlying idea of human nature changed, leaving intact only a distorted idea of human freedom. Since most individualists *and* most collectivists believe that humanity is evolving, gradually or by leaps and bounds, toward a full maturation or the realization of human nature in some final social order, freedom was interpreted as the condition whereby progress toward this end is least impeded—that is, whereby all people can surge toward their final emancipation. The only freedom that makes sense by this account is freedom from our deprived conditions, freedom from our impediments, whether economic, psychological, spiritual, or whatnot. Since the earlier liberals convinced most people that government was established to protect and preserve the liberty or freedom to which we all have either a natural or a utilitarian right, it was consistent now to demand that the "rights" identified by this distorted conception of freedom receive government's equal protection.

Spencer helped this development by flatly rejecting the idea of human freedom of the will and endorsing a variety of progressivism (which he modified, but not sufficiently to escape the charge of being a prophet of eventual utopia). What he failed to realize is that without the fact of human choice clearly demonstrated, the ideal of political and economic liberty makes no sense at all. This ideal means that people *should* act so as not to violate one another's rights. But that implies that they have a choice. Spencer was challenged on this point and his attempts to cope with the issue—for example, in his Appendix C—fell short, because he always thought that any concession would commit him to some form of mysticism, the bane of a scientist.

There is, however, nothing unscientific about accepting the possibility, even the actuality, of freedom of the human will—indeed, it would be antiscientific to preclude it. Not science, but certain philosophical premises that many scientists accepted have led to the idea that science and free will contradict each other.

What is lamentable is that, while Spencer was constantly

challenged on this issue, Marx and his disciples were being honored for philosophical achievements despite their constant conflation of science with values and evaluations. Even today, such European intellectual luminaries as Sartre proclaim themselves to be Marxists, refusing to admit the fatal flaw in Marx, while they and their admirers will not give Spencer their respect.

Fortunately, some of this is changing. One of the best brief eye-openers on Herbert Spencer is Robert L. Carneiro's introduction to his edition of selections from Spencer's *Principles of Sociology: The Evolution of Society* (Chicago, 1974). J. D. Y. Peel's *Herbert Spencer: The Evolution of a Sociologist* (New York, 1971) is another valuable source on this often-forgotten genius. Both authors focus mainly on Spencer's sociology, however, and barely mention the insights he can contribute to the study of ethics.

Many of those who today embrace Spencer's political convictions fail in a different respect from those who ignore Spencer. They omit from consideration the serious inadequacies in Spencer's ethical and political theories. I have mentioned the most significant problem with Spencer's ethics. His politics suffers from yet another crucial difficulty. Spencer believes that although we all have natural rights, these rights do not take effect or come into existence before the emergence of the full development of human nature and society. Here, too, Spencer shares elements of Marxism. Marx rejected moral issues as irrelevant to societies in which human nature has not fully matured. He rejected the idea of natural rights as inapplicable in a precommunist society (and presumably unnecessary in communism). Spencer took a utilitarian perspective on rights, and although he insisted on regarding them as natural rights, he allowed their neglect until the time society would evolve into its most mature manifestation.

It seems to me that no one need humble himself before another to such an extent that the latter's theoretical problems are ignored in the process of paying him homage. Spencer

would be the last one to accept such unqualified, blind compliments. What we need not do, on the other hand, is reject Spencer's numerous insights in the area of substantive ethics. Here his ideas were more independent of his evolutionist system than in other areas. Here he often relied on common sense to shed light on what simply could not be developed from what he regarded as scientific principles. And with his commitment both to the importance of human life and excellence and to political and economic liberty, what Spencer had to offer us in his ethical discussions can enhance our understanding of life in freedom, whatever our own arguments for the value of such a life.

These are some ideas, I believe, that are worth keeping in mind as we encounter Herbert Spencer's ethical writings. It should be added that Spencer was not only a keen systematic thinker but also an uncompromisingly thorough and honest man. He lived only for his ideas, so that even his *Autobiography* consists mainly of an interpretive history of one person's life in terms of the theoretical framework he had developed. For those who value the ideals Spencer defended, it is gratifying that Spencer himself made every effort to live by them, to integrate them into his own concrete existence. There is much in Spencer's thought that is philosophically and scientifically unacceptable; but read critically, as all serious works should be, Spencer provides us with an intellectual adventure rarely matched, especially in our own epoch. The study of Spencer's ethics can shed needed light on some of the intricacies of what is demonstrably the best perspective on the ethical and political aspects of human life, namely, the morality of rational self-interest and the politics of the free society.

Fredonia, New York
January 1978

THE PRINCIPLES OF ETHICS

GENERAL PREFACE

The divisions of which this work consists have been published in an irregular manner. Part I was issued in 1879; Part IV in 1891; Parts II and III, forming along with Part I, the first volume, were issued in 1892; and Parts V and VI, concluding the second volume, have now, along with Part IV, been just issued. The reasons for this seemingly eccentric order of publication, primarily caused by ill health, will be found stated in the respective prefaces; which, by those who care to understand why the succession named has been followed, should be read in the order: Preface to Part I; then that to Part IV; Preface to Vol. I; and then that to Vol. II.

The preservation of these respective prefaces, while intended to account for the anomalous course pursued, serves also to explain some repetitions which, I fancy, have been made requisite by the separate publication of the parts: the independence of each having been a desideratum.

Now that the work is complete, it becomes possible to prefix some general remarks, which could not rightly be prefixed to any one of the installments.

The ethical doctrine set forth is fundamentally a corrected and elaborated version of the doctrine set forth in *Social*

Statics, issued at the end of 1850. The correspondence between the two is shown, in the first place, by the coincidence of their constructive divisions. In *Social Statics* the subject matter of morality is divided into parts which treat respectively of Private Conduct, Justice, Negative Beneficence, and Positive Beneficence; and these severally answer to Part III, Part IV, Part V, and Part VI, constituting the constructive portion of this work: to which there are, however, here prefixed Part I, The Data, and Part II, The Inductions; in conformity with the course I have pursued throughout *The Synthetic Philosophy*. In *Social Statics* one division only of the ethical system marked out was developed—justice; and I did not, when it was written, suppose that I should ever develop the others.

Besides coinciding in their divisions, the two works agree in their cardinal ideas. As in the one so in the other, man, in common with lower creatures, is held to be capable of indefinite change by adaptation to conditions. In both he is regarded as undergoing transformation from a nature appropriate to his aboriginal wild life, to a nature appropriate to a settled civilized life; and in both this transformation is described as a molding into a form fitted for harmonious cooperation. In both, too, this molding is said to be effected by the repression of certain primitive traits no longer needed, and the development of needful traits. As in the first work, so in this last, the great factor in the progressive modification is shown to be sympathy. It was contended then, as it is contended now, that harmonious social cooperation implies that limitation of individual freedom which results from sympathetic regard for the freedoms of others; and that the law of equal freedom is the law in conformity to which equitable individual conduct and equitable social arrangements consist. Morality, truly so called, was described in the original work as formulating the law of the "straight man"; and this conception corresponds with the conception of absolute ethics, set forth in this work. The theory then was, as the theory still is, that those mental products of sympathy constituting what is called the "moral sense," arise as fast as men are disciplined into social life; and