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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

IN presenting a study which makes use of the questionnaire, I am well aware that this method is at present viewed in some quarters with decided disfavor. That there is genuine warrant for such an attitude I do not hesitate to admit. But the criticisms urged affect at bottom not so much the method itself as its uncritical employment on the part of certain persons whose zeal outruns their discretion. That, in itself, it is sound and capable of bringing forth good fruit is demonstrated—if in no other way—by the results obtained by Sir Francis Galton in his studies of imagery and other allied phenomena. Its value in any particular case, therefore, is not to be hastily prejudged, but is rather to be determined by an examination of what it is set to do, the care with which returns are sifted, the precautions used against possible sources of error, and the relation established between data and conclusions. Nothing would be more fatal to the future of ethics than a general condemnation before a hearing of all studies of the moral life that employ the questionnaire. For, if we are to solve the problems of our science, we simply must begin in some way or other to study the moral life about us in its concreteness. Contemporary economics must point us our way. Economics began its career with the production of analytic treatises of which “The Wealth of Nations” is the typical example. Data were obtained partly from introspection, partly from observation, more or less careful, of that part of the industrial world with which circumstances had happened to make the author acquainted. About the middle

of the last century the Germans introduced the historical and comparative methods, greatly to the enrichment of the science. Within the last twenty years certain representatives of the present generation of economists have turned to an exhaustive investigation of some one field in order to determine by direct observation what the phenomena of the production and distribution of wealth in that particular area actually are. Ethics has reached the second stage in a similar course of development. It is now high time that it passed into the third. Such a statement represents no disparagement of the methods first applied. Can one not learn from both Boehm-Bawerk and Hadley? It goes without saying that you can not understand the present except in the light of the past, the here except in the light of the distant. It goes without saying that you can not get along without the help of introspective analysis at every turn. But in ethics, as in economics, it still remains true that the data supposed to be supplied by observation must be subjected to every test conceivable, that the accidental and purely individual elements must be carefully distinguished from the universal, and that in ethics the moralist must not expect to find any satisfactory solution for the majority of his problems solely by the examination of his own consciousness, debauched as he is by his study of theories and mad as he has been made by much learning.

It is a problem of the kind just referred to that is here proposed. The question whether moral judgments are the product of custom and kindred forces is at once one of fundamental importance for theory and practice, and one that can never be decided by an appeal to introspection. Our minds are now, as has just been said, too artificial, they have lost entirely their original *naïveté*. Memory can as little be depended upon because our recollections of our moral attitudes before we began philosophizing must necessarily be sketchy and inadequate, to say nothing of the possibilities in the way of distortion of the picture through prejudices which are the product of the intervening years. There is but one alternative. We must study those persons about us who are still in the naive stage as far as moral self-consciousness is concerned. The method employed in the following study may perhaps not be the best one possible. If so, another must be found. For the problem will either be

solved in some such way as is here indicated or it will remain unsolved.

The study which follows is an examination of the moral consciousness of a small group of young men and young women connected with the University of Wisconsin. Reasons are offered, however, for believing that the results obtained hold for a large section of the American and presumably, therefore, of European society. But no conclusions are drawn from our data as to the relation of custom and the moral code among semi-civilized or still more primitive peoples. I trust my readers will exhibit a similar conservatism with regard to inferences in the reverse direction. Some of them will doubtless approach this study with very definite views of the place of custom in primitive morality. I hope they will not allow such views to prevent them from making an impartial examination of the material here presented. Of course the unity of the race creates a certain presumption that the fundamental forces at work at one stage of development will be found at all the other stages also. But this general presumption can not be final in a matter like that which is before us. Let it be assumed for the sake of argument that moral judgments are entirely unreasoned at the lower end of the scale of human existence. It will be admitted by everybody, I suppose, that they are largely, if not entirely, reasoned among the most intelligent and thoughtful members of the most highly civilized communities, laymen as well as philosophers. This being granted, nothing but actual investigation can determine how far down the scale this insight extends. The evidence adduced concerning any particular social group must therefore be allowed to stand or fall on its own merits.

In the investigation reported in the following pages, I have received from friends in the University of Wisconsin assistance which it is a great pleasure to acknowledge. Mr. Maxwell Otto, the present fellow in philosophy, has made contributions upon two special phases of the problem which are credited to him in their place. He has also contributed much for which I am able to make only this general acknowledgment. My colleagues, Professors McGilvary and Bode, have helped me very materially with criticisms and suggestions during the progress of the work

and in the preparation of the manuscript. I wish also to thank Professors R. A. Moore and D. H. Otis of the College of Agriculture for the aid they have given in bringing me into personal contact with the students under their charge. Professor Moore in particular had special opportunities of enlisting the interest of these young men. He treated the work as if it had been his own, and it is due largely to his enthusiasm and activity that I am able to present the data obtained from this source.