

THE
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GREEN'S THEORY OF THE MORAL MOTIVE.

A SOMEWHAT peculiar difficulty seems to attend the discussion of ethical theory, on account of its characteristic relation to action. This relation gives rise, on one side, to the belief that ethics is primarily an 'art.' Ethics is so much the theory of practice that it seems as if its main business were to aid in the direction of conduct. This being premised, the next step is to make out of ethics a collection of rules and precepts. A body of rigid rules is erected with the object of having always some precept which will tell just what to do. But, on the other side, it is seen to be impossible that any body of rules should be sufficiently extensive to cover the whole range of action; it is seen that to make such a body results inevitably in a casuistry which is so demoralizing as to defeat the very end desired; and that, at the best, the effect is to destroy the grace and play of life by making conduct mechanical. So the pendulum swings to the other extreme; it is denied that ethics has to deal primarily or directly with the guidance of action. Limited in this way, all there is left is a metaphysic of ethic:—an attempt to analyze the general conditions under which morality is possible; to determine, in other words, the nature of that universe or system of things which permits or requires moral action. The difficulty, then, is to find the place intermediate between a theory general to the point of abstractness, a theory which provides no help to action, and a theory which attempts to further action but does so at the expense of its spontaneity and breadth. I do not