George Grote wrote relatively little on the issues of moral philosophy. In the *Fragments on Ethics* there are four posthumously published essays on systematic ethics, at least three of them written in the 1840’s. Late in life, as part of a never completed major work, Grote wrote a long essay on Aristotle’s ethics, and a briefer one on Aristotle’s politics. These contain almost no expressions of Grote’s own views.\(^1\) He contributed to Alexander Bain’s *Mental and Moral Science* some extended remarks on William Whewell’s philosophical ethics.\(^2\) Aside from John Stuart Mill’s attack on it, this is one of the very few nineteenth-century discussions of Whewell’s elaborate anti-utilitarian theory.\(^3\) To the same volumes Grote also contributed expositions of the Stoic and Epicurean theories.\(^4\) In *Plato and the other Companions of Sokrates* (1865) there are numerous summaries of and remarks on Plato’s moral philosophy, mostly neutral, sometimes giving Grote’s assessment explicitly, sometimes simply allowing it to be inferred.

Grote avowed himself a utilitarian and was much influenced by Bentham and James Mill. He was the pseudonymous editor, “Philip Beauchamp,” who turned Bentham’s drafts into the anti-religious *Influence of Natural Religion on the Temporal Happiness of Mankind* (1822). The book contains almost nothing philosophical, being rather an essay on the psychology and sociology of religious belief. It is thoroughly Benthamite in temper, and never considers

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1. The essays are in Grote’s *Fragments on Ethical Subjects; being a selection from his posthumous papers*, ed. Alexander Bain (London: John Murray, 1876). The dating comes from M.L. Clarke, *George Grote. A Biography* (London: Athlone Press, 1962), 132, n. 3, who dates only the first three essays. The fourth is enough like them to allow us to suppose it was written at about the same time. Grote’s few comments in footnotes to the 1872 edition of James Mill’s *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* do not touch on moral philosophy.


3. Grote makes a few references to Whewell’s ethics in *Plato and the other Companions of Sokrates*, 3 vols (London: Murray, 1865). He also shows himself to be very knowledgeable about modern moral philosophy: he refers, for example, to Malebranche, at the time almost unknown in Britain.

the possibility that God’s justice might be wholly distinct from his benevolence. The author therefore never raises any question about relations between these two moral attributes.5

Grote’s systematic essays are thus the main sources for an understanding of his theoretical views on moral philosophy. They are concerned with issues debated among British moral philosophers in the first few decades of the nineteenth century. One main topic was the origin of moral feelings and ideas. The other was the criterion of morality. The two topics were held to be closely connected. I begin with a brief sketch of the issues as Grote would have known them.6

The modern search for the origins of our ideas started as an empiricist enterprise. It was begun by Locke’s extensive account of his theory of knowledge in his 1689 *Essay on Human Understanding*. Locke aims to show that there is no possibility of extending our knowledge on any basis other than experience. He begins by arguing that our ideas themselves are all derived from experience. This entails the rejection of “innate ideas,” ideas supposed to be part of the mental equipment with which God creates our minds. Locke offers accounts of our main ideas showing how they can be obtained from sensory or emotional experience. Our complex or definable ideas, like the idea of an apple, can all be shown to be composed of simple ideas, which cannot be defined and can only be acquired by experience of what they are ideas of. Thus a person born blind can have no idea of red. Locke’s argument is basically constituted by his accounts of complex ideas that might seem at first not to be made up of experiential simple ideas. Our ideas of space, time, number, shape, God, good, and right, for example, are all explicable as derivative from experiences.

Locke thinks that one consequence of this view is that experiential evidence must be offered to support any claim to knowledge. Even obvious truths such as that $2 + 2 = 4$ result from observing innumerable times that two groups of two objects result in a group of four objects. We therefore do not just “see” that $2 + 2 = 4$. And because moral ideas, like all others, are complexes derived from experience, there can be no valid claim that we “just know” that promises ought to be kept or that superior powers ought to be obeyed.

One of Locke’s later critics, Richard Price, argues against this view. He claims that reason is itself a source of simple ideas—of number, space, and time, for

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