



## *Intuitive Morals* in Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904)

Alison Stone  
Lancaster University

Cobbe's ethical theory in the two-volume *Essay on Intuitive Morals* from 1855 and 1857 synthesises Kantianism, Theism and intuitionism and is anti-utilitarian. Cobbe starts from the concept of duty. A duty is something one is obliged to do or refrain from doing. Such obligations are binding on all rational agents. A duty, then, is equivalent to an imperative or law. In its concept, a law requires a law-giver, and a moral law requires a supremely good law-giver – God. 'The abstract law of right is resumed in One righteous will' (1864: vol. 1: 12). God, then, has created us as rational agents able and required to follow the moral law.

God has also created us finite, ever-susceptible to temptation; this is the necessary condition of our having the freedom to choose to act dutifully. Being finite, too, we can suffer or be happy. Given all the foregoing, we can deduce that the moral law is: (1) to love God; (2) to love one's neighbour as oneself, i.e. to foster others' happiness – for God, being good, does not want anyone to suffer needlessly; (3) to strive to be perfect like God, so in practice to do our duty for duty's own sake. Yet despite God's supreme goodness, the world is full of suffering, imperfection and wrongdoing. There must therefore be an afterlife in which our souls continue to develop morally until ultimately complete virtue and happiness are reached.

Cobbe differs from Kant in several ways. Whereas his ethics begins from freedom, Cobbe's begins from duty, and she treats the moral law as God's command, making religion and morality co-extensive (1864: vol. 1: 193). Cobbe also claims that the concepts of duty, God and immortality and their immediate implications are known intuitively, by which she means both immediately and a priori.

### **Primary Sources:**

Cobbe, Frances Power 1864. *An essay on intuitive morals*, new edition, vol. 2. London:

Trübner.

**Secondary Sources:**

Peacock, Sandra J. 2002. *The theological and ethical writings of Frances Power Cobbe, 1822-1904*. Lewiston CA: Edwin Mellen, 55-63.

Mitchell, Sally 2004. *Frances Power Cobbe: Victorian Feminist, Journalist, Reformer*. Charlottesville VA: University of Virginia Press, 78-82.

**Keywords:**

Immanuel Kant, Theism, utilitarianism, intuitionism, duty, immortality