

THE GEOMETRY OF ETHICS

By Dr. Edwin E. Slosson

You may, if your arithmetic is erratic, add up a column of figures a dozen times and get different sums. Only one is correct. It is necessarily the same about the more complicated problems of life, only we cannot see it so clearly. Elementary mathematics is the only science man has mastered so he can put real confidence in the results of his ratiocination.

Science, which aims at certainty, approaches it by the method of trial and error, thousand of trials, thousands of errors, before and approximation to the truth is attained. Truth is one; falsehoods are infinite.

Nine-tenths of the ideas that come into our heads are wrong. The object of education is to select the one that is right.

Nine-tenths of the impulses that beset us are wrong. The task of civilization is to suppress the nine.

No matter how complex the problem, there is never more than one right answer, one right way out, one straight and narrow path, hard to find, and hard to follow, one road leading out of the maze of many false turns; all the others are blind alleys or paths that return upon themselves.

It is an axiom of plane geometry that there can be only one straight line connecting two points. From the point where we are to the point where we wish to go, there is only one short straight road, all the other possible paths are more or less divergent and devious.

The rules of conduct are as invariable and absolute as the rules of geometry. The only difference is that we cannot see so clearly in ethics as in mathematics. The falling of a fog makes our road obscure but does not alter its length or direction.

There is only one best move in a game of chess, whether we know what it is or not. There is only one wisest action in any emergency, whether we know what it is or not.

There are no indifferent actions, no equivalent choices. It may seem a matter of indifference which street you turn down in your morning stroll, but that is because you do not know what fate awaits you around the corner. If you turn down First Street you may be run over by an automobile. If you turn down Second Street you may meet a man who will make your fortune. If you turn down Third Street you may catch a fatal microbe. If you turn down Fourth Street you may see the girl you want to marry.

If you knew, you could choose. But all the streets look equally inviting and not knowing which is the best you leave it to "chance". You toss up a penny, but it is not a matter of chance which face of the penny falls uppermost for that is determined by the inevitable interaction of the forces of gravitation and rotary momentum.

Even if you could know what lay before you on each of the optional avenues, you would not necessarily be able to select the best. It may be that Second or Fourth Streets would lead you to more unhappiness than First or Third. Not knowing

which is the most fortunate road you would be grateful if on that morning you should find all the others blocked by signs of "Street closed. Detour". You would be glad to be forced into good fortune if you could not find your own way. Nobody wants freedom of choice except in those cases where choice would lead him toward his goal, whatever that may be.

Nobody has a right to do wrong. Nobody but a congenial idiot would claim such a right and nobody but an incorrigible criminal would want to exercise it.

Every sane man wants to do what is for his best interests and every good man wants to do what is for the best interests of others as well.

There can be no two opinions about this. The only thing we disagree about is as to what is for the best interests of ourselves and society. This is due solely to our ignorance for if we all knew always what was best to do, we should of course all want to do it. But because we don't and can't always know, we have to allow considerable latitude as to thought and action, the more latitude in those fields where there is the more uncertainty. There is obviously but one course that ought to be pursued or would be pursued if we could know in advance the outcome of all our options.

STORKS, BLIVVERS OF AIR, MAKE LONG FLIGHTS

Though a slow flier the stork of European housetops is a patient one, and makes long journeys, according to Frederick C. Lincoln of Washington, who addressed the American Ornithologists' Union. The normal summer home of the European white stork is in Holland and north Germany; its winter quarters are in South Africa for the most part, although many of them remain in the lower Nile valley as well.

Birds bearing northern European identification bands on their legs have been reported in one or two isolated instances from Central Africa. This has led some bird students to believe that they cross the Sahara desert in a non-stop flight, or rest only in the oases; but Mr. Lincoln is inclined to discount this theory and to hold that these scattered cases represent wanderers from the regular route down the eastern side of the dark continent.

Storks, Mr. Lincoln said, are apparently the "flivvers" among birds, averaging only about thirty-five miles a day, a distance that a blue-winged teal covers in forty minutes.

STUDY GAME BIRDS OF ALASKAN TUNDRAS

The work of a scientific expedition that crossed Alaska to study birds on the shores of the Arctic Ocean was recently related by Herbert W. Brandt of Cleveland to the American Ornithologists' Union at Pittsburgh.

The party went from Seward, their port of entry into Alaska, to Fairbanks by rail, and then struck out overland by dog sledge to Hooper Bay. They traveled 850 miles in forty days, twenty of which were very stormy, and encountered temperatures as severe as 30 degrees below zero. Hooper Bay, their base for the study of water birds, can be reached by boat only during July and August.