



Social Ethics: Sociology and the Future of Society

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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First serialized in 1914, *Social Ethics* attempts to convince readers that individualist ethics have failed to make the world a safe place for children, and that we cannot progress to a fully social ethics unless we understand the morality of collective action from a specifically sociological point of view. Gilman argues that in order to be fully progressive, ethics must shift from its traditional focus on individual behaviors to the structure, morality, and outcomes of social or group actions. The social ills she addresses in her attempt to advocate for a reexamination of our ethics include topics still relevant today: militarism, waste, religious intolerance, conspicuous consumption, greed, graft, environmental degradation, preventable diseases, and patriarchal oppression in its numerous manifestations. Hill and Deegan's purpose in recovering this forcefully argued book from obscurity is to show not only that Gilman's central arguments remain largely valid and cogent today, but also that Gilman is a major and substantive contributor to the shape and importance of sociology in its formative years.

Traditional ethics, Gilman argues, fail to resolve the enduring problems facing society because our received ethical systems are invariably and mistakenly founded on individualist rather than social logics. The shape of our collective future, if it is to be progressive and morally responsible, depends fundamentally on adopting a sociological perspective, and our guiding principle must be to make the world a safe and nurturing place for babies and children. Anything less, in Gilman's view, is morally degenerate. In their carefully considered introduction, Hill and Deegan locate Gilman's personal and professional sociological identity within a network of influential and collegial sociologists, and relate *Social Ethics* to Gilman's interests in evolutionary thought, Fabian economics, feminist pragmatism, and the cognate work of Thorstein Veblen. The publication of *Social Ethics* in book form recovers an important theoretical treatise for a new generation of students, scholars, and fans of Gilman's Herland/Ourland saga.

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