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Living in an Ethical Society. William Godwin's Triadic Concepts of Justice-Honesty-Equality

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Abstract

The most characteristic aspect of William Godwin's major work, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), is undoubtedly his interest in the social system and the fundamental principles that help the individual to lead an ethical life. In addition to his critique of a government that systematises the suppression of individual freedom through laws, Godwin explores the essential aspects of human behaviour in society and highlights its foundations, namely the principles of justice, honesty, and equality. A century earlier, in *The Social Contract* (1762), Rousseau had observed the following: “The passage from the state of nature to the civil state produces a very remarkable change in man, who substitutes justice for instinct in his conduct, and gives to his actions a moral quality which was previously lacking”. As can be seen, the principle of justice was thus closely linked to the principles of ethics which were to guide the behaviour of human beings. Indeed, the history of ideas since the eighteenth century shows that the two concepts have been intertwined. They have figured prominently in the thinking of philosophers who considered them essential to the development of the individual and society. This presentation is a reflection on some of the key concepts in Godwin's work that may be relevant to modernity.

Keywords: honesty, justice, equality, rights, self-determination, virtue.